

**Shifting Power:  
We changed the world, now what's different?**

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Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour for me to have been invited to address you today and, especially, to have been introduced by no less a figure than Joan Kirner, whom we all love for the trails she has blazed – especially for women in politics. Thank you Joan. Thank you for the introduction, and thank you for all you done for those who have come after you.

Last week in *The Australian* newspaper, the columnist Janet Albrechtson described me as an “aging activist”.

She meant it as an insult.

I wonder which bit of “aging activist” I am meant to be insulted by. Is it the “aging” bit? Or the “activist” bit? Neither are insulting because both are true. Although I think I would prefer to call myself an “ancient warrior”. Somehow it sounds nobler: a combination of the “ancient mariner” and the Greenpeace flagship, the “Rainbow Warrior”.

Either way, as someone who took part in her first political action in 1965, I can scarcely deny that I am now 45 years older than I was then. Nor can I claim to have hung up my protest weapons (although they have changed somewhat over the years).

I sometimes think that it would be nice to sit back and let the injustices of the world pass me by. But I am not that sort of person. When I see something wrong, I want to do something about it.

TODAY I WANT to reflect on some of the changes we made happen over the past few decades. I want especially to look at changes that improved women’s opportunities and, hence, enabled them to take a measure of control over their lives.

Let’s look back a generation - to 1975.

That was International Women’s Year, the year that galvanized many women in this country into action.

If I can just give you a quick snapshot of that era (the precise figures for 1975 were not always readily available:

- In 1972 women were just 32.7 per cent of university students<sup>1</sup>
- In 1973 women comprised 33 per cent of the workforce, and around 57 per cent of women in the workforce were married. There had been a rapid rise in the numbers of married women in employment after the lifting of the 'marriage bar' in 1967.
- In 1972 the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission awarded women equal pay for equal work, formally ending the 25 per cent legislated disparity between men's and women's wages; it meant that teachers, for instance, and journalists were to be paid the same regardless of sex. In 1974 women were awarded an equal minimum wage, to be phased in over two years.
- The pill had been on the PBS just two years earlier, in December 1972, by the newly elected Whitlam government in one of its first acts. It was one which was to greatly reduce the cost of oral contraceptives and thus make them more widely available.
- Although abortion was still on the criminal statutes in most states, both Victoria and New South Wales had legally sanctioned abortion as a result of two judicial rulings (the Levine in NSW and Menhennit in Victoria)
- There was just one woman in the House of Representatives and only four women in the Senate. (In the election in December that year two more women, including Susan Ryan who would be Labor's first woman cabinet minister, would join the Senate but Joan Child, the sole woman in the lower house lost her seat).
- There were no women in Gough Whitlam's ministry
- South Australia introduced sex discrimination legislation, the country's first
- The federal government provided only minimal funding for child care

Apart from these stats it is worth remembering the cultural landscape of the time. You hardly saw a woman of authority on television: women could not read the news because their voices

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<sup>1</sup> Alison L Booth and Hiau Joo Kee *The University Gender Gap in Australia: A Long-run Perspective* Australian National University, June 2009  
<http://econrsss.anu.edu.au/Staff/aboorth/pdf/EducHistoryFinalJune09a.pdf>

were considered too high pitched – and no one would take seriously what they announced. On the other hand, women were considered the *only* ones who could read the weather – and they had to do it in bikinis!

When we compare our lives today with what it was like then, we have to acknowledge that the changes have been profound. Women are everywhere and where they are absent, say from the boards of top ASX listed companies, this is now a source of complaint.

To quickly compare the stats with the 1970s:

- Women are now a majority of students, and graduates, from university
- Women are 45.6 per cent of the workforce, with a labour force participation rate of 58.8 per cent (higher than it was but well below that of women in comparable economies); in 2001 57.5 per cent of women with children under 12 were in the workforce<sup>2</sup>, a figure that has been rising steadily over the years
- Today there are 68 women in federal parliament; comprising 27.3 per cent of the House of Representatives and 35.5 per cent of the Senate

Quite a difference!

BUT we are still not there. In many respects we have gone backwards from where we were in the 1980s which was the decade of the Great Leap Forward for Women in Australia.

I think we can characterize the past forty years for women in terms of the political leadership of the time:

**The Whitlam era** was brief but it saw an avalanche of change: the position of women's advisor created, the pill made cheaper, child care funded, anti-discrimination legislation introduced (but not passed because of the premature dismissal of the government).

**The Hawke/Keating era** saw huge progress for women: sex discrimination and affirmative action legislation, massive expansion of child care places and a rebate to help with costs,

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.apa.org.au/upload/2004-3A\\_Baxter.pdf](http://www.apa.org.au/upload/2004-3A_Baxter.pdf)

women's advisory bodies in every federal department, the Women's Budget Program – to name just some

**The Howard era** saw women's equality stall and in many respects go backwards. As I have outlined in great detail in my book *The End of Equality*, Howard used policy quite ruthlessly to achieve his ideological goal of encouraging mothers to stay out of the workforce. He downgraded the Office for the Status of Women, reduced the Sex Discrimination Commissioner's powers, abolished the Women's Bureau and all the departmental advisory bodies, encouraged the privatization of child care – with disastrous results: witness the ABC Learning debacle.

**The Rudd era** so far has been disappointing. There are four women in Cabinet, the child care rebate was increased to 50 per cent and gender pay equity is legislated for in the Fair Work Act. But the Office for Women is still in the welfare department, rather than the political powerhouse of Prime Minister and Cabinet where it belongs. The administrative arrangements for women's policy are fractured and illogical. The Equal Opportunities for Women in Employment Agency (EOWA) was inexplicably and irrationally moved from the Employment portfolio, which was its natural home to the welfare portfolio. Although EOWA has been subject to a major review in late 2009 and early 2010, so far nothing has happened. A large number of us were involved in submissions and consultations around this review. A strong view emerged that the government should upgrade EOWA and give it greater powers. Both the Henry Review and the 2010 Budget have passed without any indication of the government's response to these views. All that Tanya Plibersek, the Minister for the Status of Women, will say is that the government will announce its response "soon".

The government recently betrayed us on child care, when it announced the cancellation of 260 centres that were to be built in school grounds to help end the "double drop-off". The paid parental leave scheme is better than nothing but falls far short of being equitable and will leave some women worse off. There are fewer women heads of department in Canberra than there were under Howard. There will be fewer Labor MPs after the 2010 election.

A year ago I gave another speech in Melbourne, this time to the Victorian Premier's Women's Summit, in which I talked about the GFC.

The Gender Fairness Crisis.

I want to talk about it again today because while Australia might have emerged relatively unscathed from the Global Financial Crisis, the Gender Fairness Crisis is actually worsening. Particularly when it comes to women's pay.

In Victoria in 2009 women on average earned 83.4 cents for every dollar earned by men.<sup>3</sup> There had been only a marginal improvement in the past quarter-century with the Australia-wide gap narrowing from 18.5 per cent in May 1984 to 17.4 per in May 2009.<sup>4</sup> I remember that in 1984, when I head of the Office of the Status of Women and used to go round the country giving speeches on all the wonderful things the government was doing for women, I used to quote this figure to show that the gap was narrowing. It had been close to 30 per cent some years earlier. I expected the gap to continue to narrow, and for this to happen relatively quickly. I was wrong.

We know that the pay gap starts from the moment women leave university, with female graduates earning on average \$2,000 pa less than male graduates. When it comes to the professions, women are far worse off. A House of Representatives inquiry into pay equity in 2009 heard evidence that women lawyers are among the least fairly treated of all women.

Although 56 per cent of law graduates are women, by the time they are aged 40 only 25 per cent of Australia's practising lawyers are women. One reason for the drop-off is the appalling gap in earnings. Women lawyers suffer a 62 per cent pay gap. And it starts in the first year. The Law Council of Australia has revealed that in 2007 in New South Wales male graduates were paid \$70,300 while women received only \$63,500.<sup>5</sup> This earnings gap is entrenched right at the start and continues to widen the longer

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<sup>3</sup> *Supporting the Victorian Community to Reduce the Pay Gap* Statement by women's Affairs Minister Maxine Morand 1 September, 2009

<sup>4</sup> *Review of the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999 Issues Paper* Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Office for Women 2009 p. 4

<sup>5</sup> Sue Dunlevy, "Women lawyers not equal" *Daily Telegraph* 12 August, 2009 p. 3

the women stay in the profession. Is it any wonder that women get discouraged and leave?

It seems the higher up you go in an organisation, the worse the pay discrimination is. A 2006 report from EOWA revealed that women CEOs receive only 67 per cent of male CEOs salaries, while Chief Financial Officers are even worse done by, getting just 49 per cent of the salaries of their male counterparts.<sup>6</sup>

But the most startling statistic of all is the one that tells us that in Australia in 2010 there is a million dollar penalty to being a woman.

Recent research shows that if current earning patterns continue, the average 25-year-old male starting work today would earn \$2.4 million over the next 40 years while the average 25 year old female would earn \$1.5 million.<sup>7</sup> Over a lifetime of working, a woman will earn almost one million dollars less than a man. How fair is that?

The consequences of this gender pay divide is that women not only have less money than men during their working lives but that they are two and half times more likely to live in poverty in their old age than men. How fair is that?

We have a Gender Fairness Crisis.

Across the board, women lag when it comes to occupying leadership positions, and are disadvantaged in almost every area of Australia life. This disadvantage is summed up in *Gender Equality Stats 2009*, a document released by the Sex Discrimination Commission, Elizabeth Broderick, to mark the 25th anniversary of the introduction of the federal Sex Discrimination Act. Australia ranks 17 in the Global Gender Gap index, according to the document and women's representation at all levels of leadership, state and federal, private and public sectors, is low and falling. Women are also more prone to be victims of violence, to suffer sexual assault and to be pitifully provided for when it comes to retirement.

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<sup>6</sup> Catherine Fox, "Female executives working for half pay" *Australian Financial Review* January 25-28, 2008 p. 9 Read the report: [http://www.eowa.gov.au/Australian\\_Women\\_In\\_Leadership\\_Census/2006\\_Australian\\_Women\\_In\\_Leadership\\_Census/Top\\_Earner\\_Report/FINAL\\_REPORT.pdf](http://www.eowa.gov.au/Australian_Women_In_Leadership_Census/2006_Australian_Women_In_Leadership_Census/Top_Earner_Report/FINAL_REPORT.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Cassells, R. Miranti, R. Nepal, B and Tanton, R (2009) *She works hard for the money: Australian women and the gender divide* AMP/NATSEM Income and Wealth Report, Issue 22

Second, the compounded effect of reduced earnings means that women's economic well-being will deteriorate as they get older. We know that women managers earnings tend to stagnate when they reach their 40s. Yet women are likely to work well into their 60s. Women's superannuation is already much lower than men's and this gap will increase markedly as the gender pay gap widens.

The Queensland government has calculated that by 2019, on average, women will have half the amount of superannuation that men have.<sup>8</sup> Today, half of all women aged between 45 and 59 have \$8000 or less in superannuation. This means that, despite the vast increase in women's workplace participation, their reduced earnings means that many women will face old-age in penury.

At present the average superannuation payout for men is \$110K, compared with \$37K for women. This is another indicator of the gender fairness crisis in this country.

The third reason for concern about the widening gap in women's earnings is what it means for women's status generally.

It must be a mark of the low status of women that such discrimination can exist and persist.

Despite the existence of state and federal agencies that are meant to monitor women's status (Human Rights Commission, EOWA, the Office for Women, to name just a few), despite the fact there have been numerous parliamentary inquiries in recent years into various aspects of women's status, and despite constant findings by these bodies that inequality and discrimination exists, nothing is done. Nothing happens.

In fact, things are getting worse. Again.

As of February this year, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, women on average earned 18 per cent less than men. This was 1.5 per cent less than they had earned a year earlier.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> [www.women.qld.gov.au/resources/focus-on-women/](http://www.women.qld.gov.au/resources/focus-on-women/)

<sup>9</sup> Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency *Equal Pay Day Fact Sheet*

In other words, while women earned around 83.5 cents for every dollar earned by men last year, this year their earnings have dropped back to 82 cents. That's lower than it was in 1984.

Equal Pay Day this year will be on September 4 – three days later than it was in 2009. Equal Pay Day is an initiative of EOWA and it is the day on which women's pay catches up with men's. In 2010, women have to work an extra 66 days to earn the same amount as men.

If we drill down into these pay figures, they are even more alarming. The gender pay gap in the private sector is 21.7 per cent (compared with 12.1 per cent in the public sector). It is 29.3 per cent in the financial and insurance services sector, which is perhaps not surprising in that testosterone-fuelled world.

But I was surprised – and I suspect you will be too – to learn that in the “health care and social assistance” sector – the one where many of you are employed – the gender pay disparity is 29 per cent.

Given that the overwhelming majority of the employees in this sector are women, this figure suggests that the men who work in this sector are paid very handsomely indeed. I suppose that would be because although this is a female-dominated sector, it is still largely run by men.

It turns out that if you want equal pay – or something approaching it in Australia in 2010 – you had best go work in “transport, postal and warehousing” where the gender pay gap is *only* 6.5 per cent.

I find it so sad that forty one years equal pay was first legislated in this country, not only is there still a gender pay gap but that it is widening.

I NOW WANT to share with you a new form of activism that I am about to embark upon. It is one that I think will be of interest to many of you because I understand that you have been doing workshops on how to do online fund-raising. My new initiative is a related activity.

It involves the book that I published in 1975 and which, many people tell me, had a profound effect on them. I was blamed for marriages breaking up! I was also given credit – way more than I

deserve – for women finding the courage to follow their dreams which, in some cases, meant leaving marriages that had been contracted on the basis of inequality.

I am referring of course to *Damned Whores and God's Police* my first book and the one of which I am still the most proud.

I continue to be amazed at how often people – still! - talk to me about that book and tell me how it helped them in their lives.

Just last week I was contacted by Shirley Walker, author of the wonderful book *The Ghost at the Wedding*. Shirley and I were on a panel together at the Sydney Writers' Festival. And she got in touch with me afterwards:

"It was great to meet you again," she said in an email, "and I'm so pleased that you met my daughter Brenda [Walker, author of the very moving *Reading by Moonlight* which is an account of the solace she gained from books while being treated for breast cancer]. She is of the generation which grew up with *Damned Whores and God's Police*. You are a much loved and respected figure to them and of course to my colleagues and myself who used and appreciated it as a teaching text".

I am sure Shirley won't mind me telling you that she is in her 80s. Her age is relevant only to illustrate that this book has been read by, and had an influence on, people across a very wide span of ages.

Over the past three decades I have become accustomed to people of my generation telling me what that book meant to them. But in recent years I have been both startled and gratified to hear younger people telling me that their mothers studied it at university, and that they themselves read it at school.

Soon, I expect that I will have even younger people telling me that their grandmothers read it!

But it is not so easy for this young generation to read it themselves.

In fact, I was contacted just two days ago by a young woman who says she wants to become a "feminist writer and researcher" and wanted to read the book but was frustrated that she could no longer find a copy.

Two years ago, Penguin Books decided it no longer wanted to keep *Damned Whores* in print. It had had a good innings – it was continuously in print for 33 years, but I have to admit that I was disappointed.

And I was puzzled.

People were still buying it. Still talking about it. The book had been judged in 2003 as one of the ten books that had shaped sociological discourse in Australia by the Australian Sociological Association. So why would you take it out of print?

If Penguin could keep *The Lucky Country* in print, why not *Damned Whores*?

Was this another example of women and women's perspectives being overlooked and ignored?

Whatever the reason, I decided to take control of the situation. I got the rights back from Penguin and began to look at how I might keep the book alive in some form or other.

What I want to share with you today is an exciting new venture that is very much in the spirit of the kinds of projects that many of you are already involved with or are planning.

I had thought that perhaps I could publish *Damned Whores* as an e-book and take my chances in the brave new digital world. But then I met Sarah Taylor – who is here today – and she came up with a much better idea.

What I am about to tell you has not yet been publicly announced, and there are still a few elements that are being fine-tuned, but we are hoping to launch W4W in July.

W4W stands for Words for Women. It is an Australian based global initiative that is designed to use the sale of women's words to empower women in Indigenous communities in Australia and women entrepreneurs in the Asia-Pacific region.

This is how it will work.

W4W will connect women's storytelling with online methods of transfer and monetary exchange, creating a new force promoting and providing practical support to the global economic advancement of women. It will kick off with my donation of the copyright of *Damned Whores and God's Police*. It will be the first of

a number of books by prominent women, which will be available for sale in digital form.

The proceeds of these sales will then be distributed by the W4W to women entrepreneurs in the form of micro-loans. We hope to work in partnership with IWDA ([www.iwda.org.au](http://www.iwda.org.au)), that stellar Melbourne-based organization, to identify women in need of loans to develop businesses. We will also work with an online delivery mechanism such as Kiva ([www.kiva.org](http://www.kiva.org)) to get the money to the women and to enable donors to track the use to which their funds are being put.

The idea is that my book *Damned Whores and God's Police* will continue to do what it has always done: to inform and inspire people, especially women, in ways that might help them towards more independent lives. But it will be linked to a very practical philanthropic activity that will have the potential to totally transform the lives of really disadvantaged women.

Sarah and I see W4W as a "virtuous circle" whereby each participant in the process receives and creates value for the next participant. I see W4W as giving expression to my belief that self-respect is central to the global advancement of women.

When women attain self-respect it leads to their being respected by others. They are respected for their achievements and for themselves. We all know how important economic security is to self-respect. If we are dependent on others, it erodes our confidence and disempowers us. Economic self-sufficiency, on the other hand, empowers us and gives us that self-respect that is the foundation on which so much else rests.

We all know the stories of how micro-credit has transformed the lives of women in developing countries – and how these transformations have helped families and whole villages. W4W proposes to provide another example of this – but with one crucial difference: the money will come from women writers donating their words to empower other women.

The stories women tell, the words we write, the culture we share, the businesses we create can all be linked together in a powerful stream of change - and it can be achieved in the ways woman have always connected - by gathering together and sharing our

stories, supporting and guiding one another with wisdom.

I propose to invite leading women writers from around the world to donate the Intellectual Property (IP) of at least one of their works for a specified time to W4W. During that time, the proceeds of selling these works will be used by W4W to empower less privileged women.

We are often criticized for being “cushy western feminists” who do nothing to help really disadvantaged women in developing countries. We hope that W4W will be a thriving example of women – in this case, women writers – of the First World using their privilege in a very practical and realistic way.

We will start small but intend to build W4W into a global philanthropic venture that will include the words of some of the world’s best-known women.

We will start by facilitating loans to Australian women but as we grow we will expand our loan facilities to women in developing countries, especially in this region.

We already have great interest from several potential partners but while we grow we also need a visionary person, or foundation, to underwrite us and we are hoping that one or more of you here today might wish to be involved.

Next year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday of International Women’s Day and we plan to use that day – March 8 – to hold a very special event involving W4W. If you want more information, please speak to Sarah or I today or check out my website ([www.annesummers.com.au](http://www.annesummers.com.au)) where I will post regular updates.

W4W represents a different form of activism from the kind I was involved in in 1965.

As I look back over the years, I see that I have been active in the women’s movement, the anti-war movement, the environmental movement, in government and in NGOs. Lately I have begun working with business as it is there – rather than with government – where the action for improving women’s employment opportunities currently is.

It is interesting to observe the changing ways of changing the world. That is the subject of a whole other talk.

For now, I will conclude by thanking you for inviting me here today and for listening to the words of an ancient warrior.