Why the Apparent Advances of Equality for Women in Australia Have Not Translated into Real Parity in the Workplace

Shirley L. Young

Despite Australia having been a leader in social reforms, particularly in the area of workers rights and improvements for women, now in 2013 it ranks poorly compared with other industrialized countries, especially Europe, in the area of women in the workplace. (Summers, p100). How and why this has come about is the subject of Ann Summers book “The Misogyny Factor”. In it she argues that from an economic rationalist viewpoint, increased numbers of women in the workforce contribute to the betterment of the society as a whole, significantly increasing Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as well as providing greater opportunity for individual fulfillment for women. Ms Summers argues that it is the “misogynist factor” that has impeded the progress of equality for women in the workforce in Australia, despite the early reforms of the 20th century and most significantly policies introduced by the Whitlam Labour government in 1972.

World War II had a significant impact on women’s opportunities in the workplace: both as to what was expected of them and what they came to see themselves as able to do. At the commencement of the war Prime Minister Robert Menzies lead
the United Australia Party, a conservative government traditionally aligned with and reliant on the Country Party, from April 1939 to August 1941. Prime Minister Arthur Fadden lead a Coalition government from 29 Aug to Oct 1941 when he lost the position to the Labor Party, lead then by John Curtin. Curtin governed for a significant period of the war from October 1941 to August 1943. This position was cemented with a landslide victory in August and the party retained power until July 1945. Ben Chifley continued to lead the party until December 1949. (Nugent, 2002)

Curtin was a strong proponent of women’s equality and was quoted as saying: “I see no reason why a woman should be paid less than a man for the same work”. His wife Elsie Curtin had come from a political family background. She would discuss politics with her father and joined the Social Democratic Foundation when she was 17. She took a lifelong interest in politics and social issues. The war provided the opportunity for women to take a part in the workplace like never before. With that came a degree of economic independence not previously available to them. Due to the depletion of able-bodied men in the workforce, in 1941 the Federal Government gave its approval for women to join the armed services. Nonetheless, many of the tasks done by service women were in traditionally feminine roles such as nursing, cooking, cleaning and typing. By mid-1943 there were over 46,000 Australian women in the services. This from a population at the time of just over 7 million. ("John curtain’s legacy,"2005)

However women were not only confined to the more traditional roles. Between 1939 and 1943 women’s participation in the workforce increased by 31% and they were to be found in factories and farms as well as the more traditional areas of nursing and teaching, particularly in the country areas. Despite these changes women’s opportunities were limited by the number of men enlisting and the pace at which manufacturing and war-generated industries were expanding. Women going
into non-traditional employment, for example in munitions factories, received better pay and welfare benefits than those in the so-called traditional areas like clothing, textiles and food processing. During the period of 1943 (Nugent, 2002) labor shortages were extreme as Australia introduced conscription and many people were sent into the area of the Pacific with concerns about the threat from Japan. Both men and women were leaving, so on the home front there was a shortage of resources and labor. At the commencement of the war there had been few policies to control the workforce and direct its production energies. A few jobs, such as engineering and munitions production, were reserved. That is people occupying these professions were prohibited from enlisting. That was about the extent of government control.

In 1942 the government introduced the Directorate of Manpower, which significantly changed the demographic of the workforce. Workers were moved from “non-essential” industries to those directly engaged in the war effort. Women were appealed to directly to increase the labor force but even that was not enough, although under the same act they were precluded from moving from traditional jobs to the better paid war work, such as munitions factories. Even women in these non-traditional areas doing “men’s work” were getting only 60 – 90% of men’s wages. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007)

In the factories, women were often subjected to discriminatory practices or not supported. Places were often unhygienic, lacking in basic facilities such as cafeterias or separate women’s toilets. Interestingly women received little support from the unions with regard to working conditions, despite their sometime efforts at protest. (Together: 2013) For example, women at the Reliance Manufacturing Company had to protest and get their own publicity before the union reluctantly came in with a factory inspector to try and get improved conditions.

But what was important about this period was that women came to realize for the
first time that the product of their labor was important for the economy and necessary for the lives of the fighting men. As one worker put it:” Producing the perfect bullet was essential for functional guns and less deaths of husbands, brothers and sons” (Australian Bureau of Statistics). It was also a time when women began to find a voice. From 1941 women’s groups began to seek representation on government committees governing housing, rationing and other areas of daily life. Their requests were largely unsuccessful. The few achievements included Mary Ryan, a member of the Country Women’s Association (CWA) being appointed to the Commonwealth Housing Commission 1 in 1943 and Kathleen Best becoming Assistant Director of Women’s Re-establishment in 1944. Also in 1943 the largest women’s conference then held in Australia, the Australian Women’s Conference for Victory in War and Victory in Peace, gave the representatives a forum to articulate their desire for equal status and equal opportunity as well as improvements in health, education and child care. In the arena of politics, 1943 saw Enid Lyons as a Member of the House of Representatives as a Senator in the first female representation in Federal parliament. Despite these achievements, and women’s views that they would not return to the mundane life at home in unpaid work, it was expected that married women would voluntarily resign and vacate their paid work positions in favour of men.

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for example, it was the first to bring in the eight-hour day, acknowledging that leisure time as well as rest after work time was an entitlement for workers. It also introduced conciliation and arbitration as a method for fairly deciding wages and managing disputes between workers and employers. Referencing women specifically, Australia was one of the first places in the world to give women the right to vote, introduced in 1894 and 1899 in the states of South Australia and Western Australia respectively, and nationally in 1901. (Summers, p.215) In addition it was the first to grant child endowment, the widow’s pension and allow women officers in the police force.

These early reforms were enhanced by specific policies when the Whitlam Labour government came to power in 1972. This was an active and challenging time throughout the industrialized world as the burgeoning Women’s Movement, catalysed by the publication of Betty Friedan’s “The Feminine Mystique” (Friedan, 1963), began to debate and address the seemingly universal issue of economic disparity of women’s equality in the workforce. This in addition to challenging entrenched social mores and attitudes to women, work and family.

In spite of these early reforms, in 2013 women are still paid significantly less than men, they are still viewed as having the main responsibility for raising children, their rate of participation in the workforce is well behind men’s and the upper echelons of major organizations are still overwhelmingly male. The current debate of whether or not women can “have it all”, that is to say manage a successful career and be a wife and mother, is erring towards a definite “no”. Summers notes that this question “can women have it all” is never framed for men: that they can be fathers, husbands and have a successful career is a given. (Summers, p67) In early 2013 Nicola Roxon, the first attorney-general, suddenly resigned the post citing a desire to spend more time with her young daughter as the reason. She noted with some irritation that the
attention the media gave to this had never been something her male colleagues had had to contend with. (Summers, p74)

Rather than implying that men’s roles as fathers, husbands and careerists are less difficult or demanding than those of women, or that for men too they are in some way competing roles, the argument is increasingly that women must choose one or the other. The choice to be childless and pursue a career is often portrayed in the media as being unfeminine, unfulfilling and a betrayal of women’s primary purpose: that of breeding and raising children. This would imply that men’s jobs as fathers and husbands are either not as demanding as the complementary parenting or partnering roles ascribed to women, or do not carry the same weight or responsibility as they do for women. Why, one wonders, should this be the case? Or for women who have both children and a career, those two roles are perceived to be in competition with each other, and a women must always be taking time and energy from one to give to the other. In the workplace this implies that she is contributing less or is not completely committed to her job in the same way as her male counterparts, and in the case of her home occupation, that she is in some way neglecting or deficient in her parental and home caretaking duties. For men fatherhood, although desirable and garnering its own status, is not considered a fulltime occupation in competition with his work life. For women however, home responsibilities are seen as a full-time occupation and hence a continuous distraction to work commitments. The implication is that women’s ‘wife and mother’ duties are a responsibility that should take precedence over their workplace duties, or at least genuinely compete with workplace responsibilities because of the importance of these roles for women. It is a woman’s primary duty to be a caretaker and raise children. Any deviation from this atavistic stereotype is likely to result in disapproval from a range of sources.

For men however, the question of whether or not to make a choice between
being a good father and good at their job is never raised. There is no implication that these two roles are in conflict with one another or that a man may not be able to competently carry out one at the expense of the other. Whilst the role division of breadwinner and family caretaker may have been a good economic model in earlier times, putting aside the issue of personal satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) for both women and men when social expectations were more rigidly set, it is not an appropriate economic model for men and women in Australia in the 21st century, and indeed for much of the 20th century.

Economic rationalism alone, Summers argues, would be reason enough for women to be better represented in the workplace. (Summers, p177) By facilitating women’s ability to take up full-time employment in the workplace in equal proportional representation with men, including the costs to support such a move such as childcare, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) would increase by 13%. (Natsem, 2010). So why is it that this has not happened?

During the 1960’s the women’s movement in Australia, was energized and optimistic about the changing opportunities for women. The thought was that once legal barriers had been removed and with some changes to social attitudes, equality would be a natural consequence of these changes. An example of a law at the time that seriously impacted women was the one that required female public servants to resign upon getting married. (Sheridan) Of course, no such law applied to men. The women’s movement, naively Summers argues, assumed that the fairness engendered by equality was a universal desire and although the pathway to get there would be a challenge, the end result was a desired benefit for society as a whole. This was not correct.

In 1983 The Sex Discrimination Act was introduced to the federal government. The act gave legal enforcement to the policy of no discrimination based on gender,
ethnicity, religious belief or sexual orientation, in employment. There was fierce opposition to the legislation, in particular non-discrimination based on gender. Claims were made that it would destroy the family, take away all femininity from women, and all kinds of other absurd claims. Some elements of the society were actively opposed to the “fairness” of equality for women in the workplace. This was an important element the women’s movement had not taken into consideration. (Summers, p232).

In 2012 women’s issues were back on the agenda in a way they had not been since 1972, when the newly elected Whitlam government took the women’s lobby seriously and for the first time they were given a voice in government. The policies stemming from that time had been eroded or not resulted in the desired changes and 2012 saw a rise in activism reflecting women’s dissatisfaction with the lack of change. Reaction to the expressions of everyday sexism were debated, anger and grief over the rape of young women in Melbourne and Delhi were widely expressed, and the country’s first female Prime Minister made a speech in the federal parliament denouncing misogyny and sexism, which was widely viewed throughout the world on Youtube. (Daily Life: Dec, 2012)

Social media too allowed large numbers of women, especially young women, to express their dissatisfaction with the situation of inequality. Facebook, Twitter and personal blogs saw an outpouring of commentary on all manner of issues relating to being a woman today in Australia, including the increasing violence against women and unequal pay and other workplace disparities. Two new online publications, Women’s Agenda and Daily Life (Summers, 132) were begun and published daily articles about women’s contemporary issues. Summer’s book is a response to this grass roots movement of dissatisfaction, and a new atmosphere of openness particularly by young women, to understanding why it is the aspirations of the early
women’s movement have not been achieved.

Summer’s gives three criteria as a measure of success that have yet to be achieved: inclusion, equality and respect. She goes on to explain the importance of these indicators:

“Until women are included in all areas of our society, until we are treated equally and with respect once we are there, we will not have succeeded in what I call the equality project”. (Summers, p137) And she says it is the “misogyny factor” that has impeded the progress begun in the 1960’s and resulting in the continued inequality of today.

The “misogyny factor” as defined by Summers is:

a set of attitudes and entrenched practices that are embedded in most of our major institutions (business, politics, the military, the media, the church, academia) that stand in the way of women being included, treated equally and accorded respect.

In using this definition, Summers is not conforming to a strict dictionary meaning of misogyny such as a ‘hatred of women’, too often used pedantically to exclude men based on their being married or having daughters or a mother (as most do). She argues that the misogyny she is describing goes beyond the attitudes of a few individuals and is rather an ordered pattern of behaviour. In her words: “systemic beliefs and behaviour, predicated on the view that women do not have the fundamental right to be a part of society beyond the home”. (Summers, p143) It is possible for a man to have women in his life and express discriminatory attitudes; the two most common diversionary arguments being motherhood and merit but these are just reasons reverting to an earlier historical time and are not applicable to the economic and social conditions of today’s world. Of course it is not only men who often hold these prejudicial attitudes but women too. Whilst Summers acknowledges
this she is at a loss to explain it.

If misogyny is the theoretical expression of women’s inferiority, then sexism is its practical partner, working synergistically to give the rationale for the attitudes and behaviour of the misogynist. Sexism, like racism and discrimination based on sexual orientation, ascribes qualities to people based on a single inherited and unchangeable characteristic - that is a person’s gender, race or sexual orientation – without regard to their individuality and is then used as the basis for treating them differently and unfavourably. For example when a woman is disregarded as being ‘fragile’ or ‘hysterical’ or ‘emotional’ or ‘sentimental’ or ‘aggressive’ or ‘a bitch’ her claimant is utilizing stereotypes about women that attempt to typecast the whole sex and are then used to justify discrimination against them. So the behaviour of women is considered to be predetermined by sexual stereotypes and is then used as the looking glass through which to judge them. (Summers, p154)

Summers acknowledges that genuine change for society as a whole and women in particular, can only come with the help of men. As the current gatekeepers of economic power and social mores, it is imperative that men be a part of affecting the change for women’s equal inclusion in their social condition and the betterment for the common good.

Recent statistics for the Australia Day awards are illustrative of the poor value accredited to women’s contribution to Australian society according to Summers. The awards are given out annually by the government to acknowledge large numbers of individual Australians’ contribution to the community. On the 26\textsuperscript{th} January, 2013 the Order of Australia honours were given out to 571 people, of those only 146 were women – approximately 25\%. The orders are ranked and there were no women who received the AC (the Companion of the Order of Australia) – the highest of the honours awarded. That year the Australian of the Year was awarded to Ita Buttrose
for her contribution to magazine publishing and editing. This had not been awarded to a woman for 8 years, and she is one of only four to receive it in the last 20 years.

In the first 31 years of the awards, women had fared somewhat better at a time when women’s equality seemed to be taken a little more seriously. From 1961 – 1992 seven women had been named Australian of the Year, or eight if you include the award given to the music group The Seekers, of which Judith Durham was the female member. (Summers, 179). These statistics seem confounding when you consider it is more than a 100 years since women got the vote and 40 since Gough Whitlam first put women’s equality on the national agenda by declaring in his campaign speech that his government would introduce anti-discrimination legislation and equal pay for women.

Further, this disproportionate representation of women’s social contribution was reflected in a poll conducted by the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s (ABC) news analysis website The Drum where the question was asked: *146 women, compared to 425 men, received Australia Day honours. Do we need a new system to ensure parity?* 2934 people contributed to the poll and the results were startling: 59 percent voted ‘no’ and a minority of 41 percent voted ‘yes’. The poll was taken in the same issue as an article published by Summers detailing the statistics for the honours list since its time of inception and arguing for the prejudicial nature of the criteria for selection, highlighting its inherent devaluing of women’s social contribution. Thus voters were not doing so from a place of ignorance or without some understanding of the issue. Summers therefore concludes that those who voted ‘no’, that is not to change the system, agree with the bias and do not want equality of the sexes in Australia, or perhaps do not highly value the contribution women make to the nation. Summers argues this is a clear illustration of the misogyny factor in operation.

For the feminists of the 1970’s the goal of parity in the workplace for women
seemed a simple one and the steps needed to achieve it clearly outlined. Legislation and other barriers to equality had to be taken away, further, measures that promoted equality needed to be put into place, as well as the specific needs of women acknowledged. Anti-discrimination laws would be central to removing the barriers to equality. Women would be given equal opportunity to education, jobs and remuneration. Importantly, they would have reproductive control by having access to birth control and abortion. Necessarily childcare and other supports necessary for women to combine participating in the paid workforce and having children. Equality would be a consequence of ending the traditional notion that women’s only place was in the home, in addition to promoting the alternate idea that women should participate fully in all areas of society.

Forty years later Australia is not even close to achieving this goal. The question Summers poses is what could explain this lack of success given the clarity of the goal and the step-by-step action plan outlined to achieve it. The changes, she argues, are logical, rational and just. They are beneficial to not only women personally but would be of great economic advantage to the nation as a whole.

Despite the overall benefits, challenges to implementing the necessary reforms as the feminists saw them, would be equally difficult. A profound restructuring of most institutions would be necessary to transform the unequal basis on which most of them had been conceived and continued to operate. It would mean that prior to attempts to introduce reforms, taking on deeply-held attitudes and practices founded on the notion that women had no legitimate role outside the domestic arena. It meant challenging these attitudes in major social institutions such as business, media, the military and the church. It also meant attempting to end long-held privilege based on the inequality of the sexes; privilege that would be threatened by the large-scale entry of women into these organizations and institutions. Despite this, there
were distinct national economic benefits, as well as individual ones, to be gained. (Summers, p200)

Whilst the government has at times been the architect of large projects for the national good, it seems the social engineering of a more equitable state for women is more difficult to implement. The Snowy Mountains Scheme was a huge construction project undertaken for the betterment of the nation. It involved rerouting several rivers and flooding towns in order to create a huge hydro-electricity system that would provide irrigation water to dry farmlands across half the country. It was completed in just 25 years. In earlier times the Overland Telegraph was a major projected successfully implemented and now the National Broadband Network is under construction. Summers proposes that the idea of social engineering something like equality for the sexes is distasteful to Australians and that to date, the framework for women’s equality has been phrased in terms of rights, fairness and entitlements. But, she opines, this has not been successful and perhaps another approach is long overdue.

Summers played an active and instrumental role in the early Australian women’s movement of the 1960’s. She believes that what they failed to take into account at that time was actual opposition to the “idea of equality”. Their chosen strategy path of legislating to prevent discrimination against women and to challenge the sexist assumptions that women should stay bound to traditional roles was, clearly, not enough.

World War II had a significant impact on women’s opportunities in the work place: both as to what was expected of them and what they came to see themselves as able to do. At the commencement of the war Prime Minister Robert Menzies lead the United Australia Party, a conservative government traditionally aligned with and reliant on the Country Party, from April 1939 to August 1941. Prime Minister
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Curtin was a strong proponent of women’s equality and was quoted as saying: “I see no reason why a woman should be paid less than a man for the same work”. His wife Elsie Curtin had come from a political family background. She would discuss politics with her father and joined the Social Democratic Foundation when she was 17. She took a lifelong interest in politics and social issues. The war provided the opportunity for women to take a part in the workplace like never before. With that came a degree of economic independence not previously available to them. Due to the depletion of able-bodied men in the workforce, in 1941 the Federal Government gave its approval for women to join the armed services. Nonetheless, many of the tasks done by service women were in traditionally feminine roles such as nursing, cooking, cleaning and typing. By mid-1943 there were over 46,000 Australian women in the services. This from a population at the time of just over 7 million (ref)

However women were not only confined to the more traditional roles. Between 1939 and 1943 women’s participation in the workforce increased by 31% and they were to be found in factories and farms as well as the more traditional areas of nursing and teaching, particularly in the country areas. Despite these changes women’s opportunities were limited by the number of men enlisting and the pace at which manufacturing and war-generated industries were expanding. Women going into non-traditional employment, for example in munitions factories, received better pay and welfare benefits than those in the so-called traditional areas like clothing,
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was essential for functional guns and less deaths of husbands, brothers and sons” (Australian Bureau of Statistics) It was also a time when women began to find a voice. From 1941 women’s groups began to seek representation on government committees governing housing, rationing and other areas of daily life. Their requests were largely unsuccessful. The few achievements included Mary Ryan, a member of the Country Women’s Association (CWA) being appointed to the Commonwealth Housing Commission\(^2\) in 1943 and Kathleen Best becoming Assistant Director of Women’s Re-establishment in 1944. Also in 1943 the largest women’s conference then held in Australia, the Australian Women’s Conference for Victory in War and Victory in Peace, gave the representatives a forum to articulate their desire for equal status and equal opportunity as well as improvements in health, education and child care. In the arena of politics, 1943 saw Enid Lyons as a Member of the House of Representatives as a Senator in the first female representation in Federal parliament. Despite these achievements, and women’s views that they would not return to the mundane life at home in unpaid work, it was expected that married women would voluntarily resign and vacate their paid work positions in favour of men.

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These early reforms were enhanced by specific policies when the Whitlam Labour government came to power in 1972. This was an active and challenging time throughout the industrialized world as the burgeoning Women’s Movement, catalysed by the publication of Betty Friedan’s “The Feminine Mystique”, began to debate and address the seemingly universal issue of economic disparity of women’s equality in the workforce. This in addition to challenging entrenched social mores and attitudes to women, work and family.

In spite of these early reforms, in 2013 women are still paid significantly less than men, they are still viewed as having the main responsibility for raising children, their rate of participation in the workforce is well behind men’s and the upper echelons of major organizations are still overwhelmingly male. The current debate of whether or not women can “have it all”, that is to say manage a successful career and be a wife and mother, is erring towards a definite “no”. Summers notes that this question “can women have it all” is never framed for men: that they can be fathers, husbands and have a successful career is a given. (Summers, p) In early 2013 Nicola Roxon, the first attorney-general, suddenly resigned the post citing a desire to spend more time with her young daughter as the reason. She noted with some irritation that the attention the media gave to this had never been something her male colleagues had had to contend with. (Summers, p74)
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Claims were made that it would destroy the family, take away all femininity from women, and all kinds of other absurd claims. Some elements of the society were actively opposed to the “fairness” of equality for women in the workplace. This was an important element the women’s movement had not taken into consideration. (Summers, p232).

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“Until women are included in all areas of our society, until we are treated equally and with respect once we are there, we will not have succeeded in what I call the equality project”. (Summers, p137). And she says it is the “misogyny factor” that has impeded the progress begun in the 1960’s and resulting in the continued inequality of today.

The “misogyny factor” as defined by Summers is:
a set of attitudes and entrenched practices that are embedded in most of our major institutions (business, politics, the military, the media, the church, academia) that stand in the way of women being included, treated equally and accorded respect.

In using this definition, Summers is not conforming to a strict dictionary meaning of misogyny such as a ‘hatred of women’, too often used pedantically to exclude men based on their being married or having daughters or a mother. She argues that the misogyny she is describing goes beyond the attitudes of a few individuals and is rather an ordered pattern of behaviour. In her words: “systemic beliefs and behaviour, predicated on the view that women do not have the fundamental right to be a part of society beyond the home”. (Summers, p143) It is possible for a man to have women in his life and express discriminatory attitudes; the two most common diversionary arguments being motherhood and merit but these are just reasons reverting to an earlier historical time and are not applicable to the economic and social conditions of today’s world. Of course it is not only men who often hold these prejudicial attitudes but women too. Whilst Summers acknowledges this she is at a loss to explain it.

If misogyny is the theoretical expression of women’s inferiority, then sexism is its practical partner, working synergistically to give the rationale for the attitudes
and behaviour of the misogynist. Sexism, like racism and discrimination based on sexual orientation, ascribes qualities to people based on a single inherited and unchangeable characteristic - that is a person’s gender, race or sexual orientation – without regard to their individuality and is then used as the basis for treating them differently and unfavourably. For example when a woman is disregarded as being ‘fragile’ or ‘hysterical’ or ‘emotional’ or ‘sentimental’ or ‘aggressive’ or ‘a bitch’ her claimant is utilizing stereotypes about women that attempt to typecast the whole sex and are then used to justify discrimination against them. So the behaviour of women is considered to be predetermined by sexual stereotypes and then used as the looking glass through which to judge them. (Summers, p154)

Summers acknowledges that genuine change for society as a whole and women in particular, can only come with the help of men. As the current gatekeepers of economic power and social mores, it is imperative that men be a part of affecting the change for women’s equal inclusion in their social condition and the betterment for the common good.

Recent statistics for the Australia Day awards are illustrative of the poor value accredited to women’s contribution to Australian society according to Summers. The awards are given out annually by the government to acknowledge large numbers of individual Australians’ contribution to the community. On the 26th January, 2013 the Order of Australia honours were given out to 571 people, of those only 146 were women – approximately 25%. The orders are ranked and there were no women who received the AC (the Companion of the Order of Australia) – the highest of the honours awarded. That year the Australian of the Year was awarded to Ita Buttrose for her contribution to magazine publishing and editing. This had not been awarded to a woman for 8 years, and she is one of only four to receive it in the last 20 years.

In the first 31 years of the awards, women had fared somewhat better at a time
Why the Apparent Advances of Equality for Women in Australia Have Not Translated into Real Parity in the Workplace (Young)

when women’s equality seemed to be taken a little more seriously. From 1961 – 1992 seven women had been named Australian of the Year, or eight if you include the award given to the music group The Seekers, of which Judith Durham was the female member. (Summers, 179). These statistics seem confounding when you consider it is more than a 100 years since women got the vote and 40 since Gough Whitlam first put women’s equality on the national agenda by declaring in his campaign speech that his government would introduce anti-discrimination legislation and equal pay for women.

Further, this disproportionate representation of women’s social contribution was reflected in a poll conducted by the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s (ABC) news analysis website The Drum where the question was asked: 146 women, compared to 425 men, received Australia Day honours. Do we need a new system to ensure parity? 2934 people contributed to the poll and the results were startling: 59 percent voted ‘no’ and a minority of 41 percent voted ‘yes’. The poll was taken in the same issue as an article published by Summers detailing the statistics for the honours list since its time of inception and arguing for the prejudicial nature of the criteria for selection, highlighting its inherent devaluing of women’s social contribution. Thus voters were not doing so from a place of ignorance or without some understanding of the issue. Summers therefore concludes that those who voted ‘no’, that is not to change the system, agree with the bias and do not want equality of the sexes in Australia, or perhaps do not highly value the contribution women make to the nation. Summers states this is a clear illustration of the misogyny factor in operation.

The goal of parity in the workplace for women seemed a simple one and the steps needed to achieve it clearly outlined. Legislation and other barriers to equality had to be taken away, further, measures that promoted equality needed to be put into place, as well as the specific needs of women acknowledged. Anti-discrimination
laws would be central to removing the barriers to equality. Women would be given equal opportunity to education, jobs and remuneration. Importantly, they would have reproductive control by having access to birth control and abortion. Necessarily childcare and other supports necessary for women to combine participating in the paid workforce and having children. Equality would be a consequence of ending the traditional notion that women’s only place was in the home, in addition to promoting the alternate idea that women should participate fully in all areas of society.

Forty years later Australia is not even close to achieving this goal. The question Summers poses is what could explain this lack of success given the clarity of the goal and the step-by-step action plan outlined to achieve it. The changes, she argues, are logical, rational and just. They are beneficial to not only women personally but would be of great economic advantage to the nation as a whole.

Despite the overall benefits, challenges to such reforms would be equally difficult. A profound restructuring of most institutions would be necessary to transform the unequal basis on which most of them had been conceived and continued to operate. It meant that prior to attempts to introduce reforms, taking on deeply-held attitudes and practices founded on the notion that women had no legitimate role outside the domestic arena. It meant challenging these attitudes in major social institutions such as business, media, the military and the church. It also meant attempting to end long-held privilege based on the inequality of the sexes; privilege that would be threatened by the large-scale entry of women into these organizations and institutions. Despite this, there were distinct national economic benefits, as well as individual ones, to be gained. (Summers, p200)

Whilst the government has at times been the architect of large projects for the national good, it seems the social engineering of a more equitable state for women is more difficult to implement. The Snowy Mountains Scheme was a huge construction
project undertaken for the betterment of the nation. It involved rerouting several rivers and flooding towns in order to create a huge hydro-electricity system that would provide irrigation water to dry farmlands across half the country. It was completed in just 25 years. In earlier times the Overland Telegraph was a major projected successfully implemented and now the National Broadband Network is under construction. Summers proposes that the idea of social engineering something like equality for the sexes is distasteful to Australians and that to date, the framework for women’s equality has been phrased in terms of rights, fairness and entitlements. But, she opines, this has not been successful and perhaps another approach is long overdue.

That sexism and misogyny are alive and well in Australia was most poignantly illustrated in 2012 when the then Prime Minister, Julia Guillard, responded to a speech made in parliament by the then opposition leader, Tony Abbot with regard to personal comments made about her. In a speech that flashed across the world via social media she stood up and castigated the opposition leader and media for the unrelenting sexism directed to her, a woman holding the country’s highest political position. Interestingly it was responses of support and praise throughout the world that bolstered the groundswell of Australian women and men cheering for the Prime Minister, and not the local press and political commentators who continued to vilify Guillard, despite her refusing to be a victim of comments that would never have been directed toward a male politician. Guillard acknowledged that comments made had been offensive and sexist in nature and that she would not tolerate this misogynistic behaviour by being silent. The speech was a profound rallying point not just for Australia, where opinions ran the full spectrum of denunciation to absolute support, but throughout the world. Australian women, as exemplified by the prime minister, were no longer prepared to tolerate sexism or misogyny – in the workplace or any
other sphere of their lives. As Summers puts it: women were standing their ground and identifying sexism and saying: this has got to stop.

How this newfound consciousness of Australia’s situation will pan out is difficult to tell, as is how it may affect the workplace demographic in Australia. It is however now an issue back on the national agenda, and a new generation of women and men will be challenged to shape their future community with a view to creating equality where it is yet to exist.

This comes at a time when the world is in a profound state of change and the suitability of current, mainstream economic models are being challenged. Climate change is having an erratic and pervasive effect in all areas of the world where, aside from the devastating cost of lives, destruction of land and resources is creating a permanent and ongoing economic burden that existing structures were, in most cases, not designed for. Population increase, poverty, refugees and large scale migration throughout much of the developing world is also creating challenges both within those areas and for developed countries supplying aid or assimilating refugees. Developed countries too are challenged in the mainstream workplace where aging populations are placing a greater burden on dwindling workforces.

Although some of the issues discussed are uniquely Australian, changes in workforce demographics, such as Japan with its aged population needing greater support from an increasingly smaller labour force (Obe, 2014), the issue of women’s participation in the workforce is becoming an important consideration for many countries. The conditions under which women are encouraged into the workforce and the support structures put in place, for example childcare and flexible hours, will in some cases need additional social engineering to break down prejudices and patterns of behavior in order to achieve a successful outcome. The Australian experience shows that the need to directly address attitudes contrary to the notion
that equality for women is inherently fair and their ability to participate actively and equally in the workforce is directly linked to the national good, will be pivotal in the success of an improved economy.
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