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Gender Equality in Australia

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KRITI BAMI, JUL 28 2011

Historically, Australia's social structure contributed to significant differences in opportunity and outcome between the genders, resulting in prejudice and discrimination against more women than men over time. With the increase in women's rights over the past one hundred and fifty years, Australia was shown to be a world precedent when it became the second country to give women the vote in 1902. As the socially constructed roles of males and females began to change, women found themselves gaining more leverage in areas such as family, education and work. However, there are still elements of gender inequality prevalent in contemporary Australian society, despite setting a precedent to the rest of the world in terms of voting rights. The nature of Australian society is intrinsically built to have systematic gender based discrimination within it, which gives rise to biased attitudes within many fields. Within this essay, the Sex Discrimination Act will be used as a basis to analyse and evaluate the relative gender equality within the realms of sexual harassment, the Australian labour force and Australian politics. It is imperative to note, however, that gender equality and inequality within the country are not exclusive to, or limited to, these fields.

The Sex Discrimination Act of 1984 went some way towards increasing gender equality in Australia. The Act prohibits the discrimination on the basis of sex, marital status, pregnancy or potential pregnancy in a variety of areas within Australian public life. Areas which are covered by the act include work, accommodation, education, the provision of goods, facilities and services, the activities of clubs and the administration of any Commonwealth laws and programmes. Amongst a variety of other things, the Sex Discrimination Act seeks to eliminate discrimination involving the dismissal of employees with familial responsibilities and to eliminate cases of sexual harassment in areas of public activity (Australian government, 2010). This Act embodies the principle of recognition and acceptance within the Australian community of the equality between the two different genders. In June 2010, the government introduced the Sex Discrimination Amendment Bill 2010 to amend the Sex Discrimination Act to, amongst other things, extend the protection from discrimination on the grounds of family responsibilities to both women and men in all areas of work, and to provide greater protection from sexual harassment for students and workers. There has been significant progress in reducing direct sex discrimination since 1984, when the Sex Discrimination Act was passed by the Australian Parliament. However, the application of the Act over a quarter of a century has highlighted some serious limitations with its current form and content. It is clear that progress on achieving substantive gender equality in Australia has stalled, and the Sex Discrimination Act is currently limited in its ability to proactively address this problem.

Discrimination, harassment and violence against women based on their gender is a key marker of gender inequality within Australia, and highlights the way in which women are unable to equally contribute to and benefit from economic, social, cultural and political life. Although there are some cases of discrimination against men, out of the 472 complaints made under the Sex Discrimination Act between 2006 and 2007, 87 percent came from women (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2007). Although some complaints came from men, the distinct disproportion of women claiming discrimination shows that violence against women remains a major human rights issue facing Australia. In addition to this, research has found that nearly one in three Australian women have experiences violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime, which not only shows the way in which gender inequality is still prevalent within Australian society, but also costs the economy \$500 million a year because of the effects of violence on the employees of Australian businesses. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005) Thus, it is evident that harassment and violence against women plays a key contribution towards the lack of gender equality in Australia, which causes not only social problems, but also monetary problems within the country.

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Gender inequality in the labour force is an issue which has received widespread coverage over the past two decades as women have struggled to overcome social, cultural, and institutional barriers in their attempts to achieve the same opportunities and rights as men within the workplace. The composition of the labour force in Australia has seen significant changes over the last three decades as an increasing number of females have been accepted in to the labour force due to changing obstacles and perceptions of the gender. Between the years of 1978 and 1996, female participation in the labour force rose from 43.7 percent to 53.7 percent, with females being 42.99 percent of the total labour force (Department for Employment, 1996). At first sight, therefore, it may appear that gender inequality in the workforce has been significantly reduced over the last thirty years; however, this argument is far too simplistic and fails to take into account the gender spread over varying labour types. One of the most important aspects of Australian gender inequality is the very low percentage of women in high status, well paid managerial positions; women represent only 26 percent of all managers (Sharma, 1998: 70). Whilst this shows evidence of a cultural change towards women, it will still take a long time for evolutionary change to even up the balance in managerial jobs.

A second important consideration in the Australian labour market is the inequality in the share of full time and part time employment between men and women. The proportion of employed males in full time employment is 89 percent with only 11 percent in part time positions; this is in contrast to the proportions for employed females with only 58 percent of employed females working in full time positions, with 42 percent working part time (Women at Work, 1998: 43). The large proportion of females working in part time positions has substantial amounts of impact on distribution of income and wealth between the two genders. Part time positions have a tendency to offer lower payments and fewer safeguards such as job security. In the case of casual work, which comprises two thirds of all part time positions, there are few standard employment entitlements such as annual sick and parental leave. This can lead to the insecurity of the worker and the erosion of rights and benefits associated with permanent employment, meaning that more women belong to the peripheral group of employees rather than the elite core.

A final significant issue that females face in the labour market is re-entering the workforce after leaving for maternity reasons. A recent study into the reasons for ceasing last full time jobs found that 63 percent of females left on their own accord, compared with only 38 percent of males who left willingly, with maternal considerations being a major factor being these figures (Women at Work, 1998: 45). The study also found that over 41 percent of women whose most recent break from work has been for a period of more than 3 months took the break either for the birth of a child or to care for children. Females have a tendency to encounter more difficulties in re-entering the workforce than males, with 70 percent of women re-entering the labour force into a different job. This career break for maternity reasons can be associated with a downward shift to jobs with lower skill requirements, and lead to the employer perception that females are less able than their male counterparts, as well as providing a metaphorical "glass ceiling" upon the jobs that females may obtain in the Australian labour market.

In the political arena, although Australia currently has its first female prime minister, women are still grossly underrepresented in Australian parliament. Over the past 30 years, female representation in Australia's parliaments has increased. While there has been a great deal of rhetoric from both sides of politics about the pre selection of women candidates and issues such as "quotas", their representation in both federal and state politics is still disproportionately low. Despite the unrepresentative numbers of women in Australian politics, the legitimate election of Julia Gillard to the post of Prime Minister in 2010 showcases the overall opinions of the Australian public towards women within political society. Not only has a woman managed to rise to the highest role in Australian politics, behind Governor General, but she is also a woman living in a de facto relationship (Arndt, 2010). The acceptance of a woman living with a partner in a non-marital relationship shows significant steps forward for gender bias in Australian society. However, despite this, the fact that her de facto relationship became national news during her election campaign shows that the society still sees issue with the case. It is questionable whether a man living with a female partner but unmarried would have attracted the same amount of media attention during their election campaign. However, it is still a success for the female suffragette movement which argues that women should be judged upon their merits, not their gender; Gillard is a clear success of this movement in Australia.

A key research aimed at investigating the success of the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 was the Listening Tour conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 2008. The findings from the tour supported

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the need for a national gender equality agenda to achieve full and equal participation for both men and women in all spheres of life (Broderick, 2008: 4). A number of policy and policies were provided to address the issues that participants raised within the Tour; of these the most important was the need for education in order to change the attitudes of society towards women and build additional skills. Educating the community on the values of unpaid work and educating employees and employers about the struggles that many women and men face to balance paid and unpaid work was seen to be a major factor which would push Australia further towards gender equality (Broderick, 2008: 5). Underpinning these ideas appears to be the message that gender inequality in Australia is a deep rooted and pervasive phenomenon that will not be addressed without a significant attitudinal change within society.

Whilst there are far fewer examples of overt gender-based discrimination in Australia, the progress towards true substantive gender equality has clearly stalled. The key barrier within Australia to achieving substantive gender based equality is systematic gender based discrimination, defined as practices which are been absorbed into the institutions and structure of Australian society which have a discriminatory effect. Examples of such discrimination have been outlined above such as the gap between women's and men's earnings due to inflexible work practices, and systems which condone sex discrimination and sexual harassment. Despite the fact that Australia did set world precedents in accepting women as valuable members of society, addressing these inequalities is the key way in which Australia can move towards having true gender equality.

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