

## **Dear Feminism: Interrogating the myth of Australian women's gender equality and critiquing feminism's role in Australia's inability to achieve it**

Australia lives in a haze of cognitive dissonance when it comes to gender equality for women and girls.<sup>1</sup> As an egalitarian and social justice advocate living in Australia, I find this both perplexing and hugely frustrating. On the one hand we know that in Australia, women remain underrepresented in key leadership and STEM roles, that a gender pay gap for women still exists, and that women continue to be at increased risk of gendered violence.<sup>2</sup> When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Australia in early 2020, government bodies were openly concerned about the women and children who would be forced to isolate at home in unsafe domestic situations.<sup>3</sup> The Australian Human Rights Commission, among others, reports on the measurable reality of ongoing disadvantage for and discrimination against Australian women.<sup>4</sup> Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Kate Jenkins, summarises: "Australia has, at times, made concerted efforts to pursue equality, but nevertheless Australian women continue to suffer unacceptably elevated levels of violence and financial disadvantage over their lifetime".<sup>5</sup> Yet talking about gender inequality for and discrimination towards women has become an extremely uncomfortable subject in general conversation, and a contested topic in academic circles. It has become a kind of taboo. If gender inequality for Australian women is real, why can't we talk about it? The answer is complicated and nuanced, and I argue necessitates challenging a movement that many Australians hold sacrosanct: we must critique feminism's paradoxical role in Australia's historical journey towards achieving gender equality for women.

First wave feminism emerged in Australia in the middle of the nineteenth century and focused on suffrage (giving women the right to vote). Second wave feminism, emerging in the United States of America in the 1960s, grew out of first wave feminism and the civil rights movement. Second wave feminism, which arrived on the world stage in 1970, widened the scope of social concerns to include the 'radical' idea that women should be considered equal to men in matters additional to voting. Two seminal texts were published this year: *The Female Eunuch* by Australian Germaine Greer; and *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* by American Shulamith Firestone. In the same year in Britain, the women's liberation movement infiltrated and protested the Miss World pageant in London, which further propelled the movement's aims and brought discussion around gender equality for women into people's homes via mainstream media.

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<sup>1</sup> For brevity, from hereafter I shall refer to gender equality for women only, though girls are included.

<sup>2</sup> "Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence in Australia, 2018," Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Government, accessed 2 March, 2021, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/domestic-violence/family-domestic-sexual-violence-in-australia-2018/summary>.

<sup>3</sup> "Gendered Impact of COVID-19," Workplace Gender Equality Agency, Australian Government, accessed 3 March, 2021, <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gendered-impact-of-covid-19>.

<sup>4</sup> "Face the Facts: Gender Equality 2018," Australian Human Rights Commission, accessed 4 March, 2021, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/face-facts-gender-equality-2018>.

<sup>5</sup> Kate Jenkins, "Opening address," Beijing Platform for Action at 25: Progress, Retreat and the Future of Women's Rights, 3 December 2020, Australian Human Rights Commission, accessed 3 March, 2021, <https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/speeches/beijing-platform-action-25-years-progress-retreat-and-future-womens-rights>.

Ameliorating women's status as a minority consequently became a key focus for policymakers in Australia. The Sex Discrimination Act was passed in 1984, followed by the Anti-Discrimination Act in 1991. In 1995, Australian delegates attended the Fourth World Conference for Women and signed the Beijing Platform for Action, along with 188 other countries, pledging to strive to achieve gender equality for women in Australia by 2015.<sup>6</sup> That Australian policymakers considered achieving gender equality for women within a twenty-year period to be an achievable goal, reveals an admirable confidence. However, despite some change in the area, this goal was never achieved, and the idea was ultimately abandoned. How could such a well-supported global imperative stall so badly?

Though there were likely multiple influencing social factors, I argue that the primary issue was the rise of intersectional feminist theory. Intersectional feminist theory holds that talking about women as a group (which is required in order to discuss gender equality for women) assumes 'sameness of experience' and is therefore inappropriate if the group includes women of certain intersectional identities. Intersectionality as a concept first appeared in 1989, as voiced in the United States of America by Kimberle Crenshaw in her essay *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* (six years before Australia signed the Beijing Platform for Action). Intersectional feminist theory grew out of Crenshaw's initial theory of intersectionality and gained traction until it became the dominant train of feminist thought in academic circles. Chronologically, by the time the wheels of Australian policymaking had turned sufficiently in order to commit to substantially improving conditions for women, feminism as the primary influencing social movement had changed its agenda.

The concept of intersectionality was embraced in Australia as it gave voice to women who suffered persecution and discrimination due to the effects of colonial and heteronormative hegemonic structures. The tenets of queer theory, which developed in the early 1990s out of gender studies and its predecessor women's studies, linked well with those of intersectionality.<sup>7</sup> Intersectional feminist theory and queer theory were and continue to be a powerful combination, championing minority voices according to difference. Consequently, the second wave feminist goal of achieving gender equality for women fell out of fashion, and improvement in the area slowed.<sup>8</sup> In 2000 the gender pay gap for Australian women began to grow rather than diminish, in 2006 Australia's global ranking for gender equality for women started to fall, and in 2011 the Australian Government released its *National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children 2010-2022*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Fourth World Conference on Women," UN Women: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women, accessed 3 March, 2021, <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Marsh, "Art and feminism: Generations and practice," *Artlink* 37, no.4 (December 2017): 12.

<sup>8</sup> Marsh, "Art and feminism: Generations and practice," 12.

<sup>9</sup> "The National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Their Children," Women's Safety, Department of Social Services, Australian Government, accessed 2 March, 2021, <https://www.dss.gov.au/women/programs-services/reducing-violence/the-national-plan-to-reduce-violence-against-women-and-their-children-2010-2022>.

An analysis of *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* reveals a key assumption in intersectional feminist theory, that it is women's *experiences* rather than any objective measurable reality that is of highest importance and relevance: "the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating 'women's experience' or 'the Black experience' into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast."<sup>10</sup> In intersectional feminist theory, the personal (the experience) is of more importance than the statistical, and by extension, the individual is of more importance and relevance than the group. Here intersectional feminist theory contradicts itself as it seeks to improve the lived experiences of a particular *group* of women – those with intersecting identities.

In *Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex*, Crenshaw uses her theory of intersectionality to illustrate how the US legal system at the time did not recognise the added discriminatory identity of 'black' when considering cases of sex discrimination involving African American women. To do this, Crenshaw adopts the binary of 'black' and 'white' to refer to women of African American or Caucasian American ethnicity. Her assertion is that having colonial origins, US laws and court systems had been built to deal with 'white' women only: "The court's preference for 'against females' rather than 'against Black females' reveals the implicit grounding of white female experiences in the doctrinal conceptualization of sex discrimination".<sup>11</sup> What is interesting is that despite being written in 1989 (only 32 years ago), Crenshaw chooses to use an ethnicity binary rather than a less provocative and more inclusive ethnicity spectrum (that could have included First Nation's American, Hispanic American, Chinese American, or Immigrant American women, for example). Crenshaw's deliberate choice, to focus on the provocative black/white binary, together with her challenge to what she called 'white feminism', is hugely significant, and has arguably had lasting impact on intersectional feminist theory and, by extension, the struggle to achieve gender equality for women.

The impact of this unhelpful binary is still seen in Australia today, a postcolonial nation, where the erroneous belief exists among some that 'white' women cannot have intersectional identities other than with LGBT identity. The reality is that any person can have intersectional identities.<sup>12</sup> The understanding and acceptance of LGBT identity has been increased through the combined forces of intersectional feminist theory, queer theory, social and other media, and legislation.<sup>13</sup> Other

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<sup>10</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," University of Chicago Legal Forum, vol. 1989: Iss.1, Article 8: 140, accessed 3 March, 2021, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1052&context=ucf>.

<sup>11</sup> Crenshaw, "Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex," 144.

<sup>12</sup> "Understanding Intersectionality," Victorian Government, accessed 3 March, 2021, <https://www.vic.gov.au/understanding-intersectionality>.

<sup>13</sup> "About Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Intersex Discrimination," Australian Human Rights Commission, accessed 3 March 2021, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/lgbti/about-sexual-orientation-gender-identity-and-intersex-status-discrimination>.

intersectional identities for women can include ability, mental health, physical health, poverty, homelessness, incarceration, abuse, and age.<sup>14</sup>

So-called 'white' women can even experience intersectionality on the *basis* of ethnicity – consider the Australian 'white' woman who is told she has no agency because she has inherited the legacy of postcolonial guilt. Viewed through an egalitarian lens, this silencing can be understood as is a kind of reverse racism, and illustrates the potential risks associated with focussing on people's *differences* rather than their commonalities. It is also the unfortunate collision of two *theories*, as opposed to truths, put into practice – in this case intersectional feminist theory and postcolonial theory.

In her essay's closing remarks, Crenshaw admits to aiming to "undermine potential collective action" through her intersectional theory.<sup>15</sup> I interpret this to mean in a legal sense, in reference to the US legal system's lack of inclusion of African American women at the time. However, the evidence points to Crenshaw having achieved that goal in a much broader sense, for a period of over three decades now: because adhering to the tenets of intersectional feminist theory has meant that collective action for gender equality for women has been undermined.

The willingness for people to accept the tenets of a posited theory in preference to educating themselves as to the undisputed facts in the gender equality for women problem partly explains the situation Australia finds itself in today. It is the same phenomenon we see eventuating globally in regard to social media and so-called 'fake news', a topic which was explored in The Conversation's *Crisis and Denial* online forum in 2020.<sup>16</sup> During the forum, cognitive scientist Stephan Lewandowsky explained that it is very difficult to challenge a dominant ideology, even if that ideology has no basis in fact, such as with a conspiracy theory.<sup>17</sup> The challenger runs the risk of appearing to be the one who has it wrong. A herd mentality is enacted, often with an unfortunate absence of logic.

There are multiple beliefs and behaviours that evidence Australia's cognitive dissonance in regard to gender equality for women. The obvious one is the ability to ignore the paradoxical nature of intersectional feminist theory – that ameliorating conditions or achieving gender equality for all women would benefit those women who experience intersectionality. Another is assuming that 'by now', being a developed society, we should have already achieved gender equality for women – after all, what woman wants to acknowledge that she is effectively a second-class citizen in twenty-first century Australia? Yet another is to deny that women were ever a minority in the first place.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Understanding Intersectionality," accessed 3 March, 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Crenshaw, "Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex," 167.

<sup>16</sup> The Conversation's forum *Crisis and Denial* was broadcast online from 6:30-7:45pm AEST on Thursday 18 June 2020 and was chaired by The Conversation's Editor and Executive Director Misha Ketchell, with guest speakers Professor Stephan Lewandowsky, Professor Julie Leask, and Dr Carmen Lawrence.

<sup>17</sup> Stephan Lewandowsky, *Crisis and Denial*, 18 June 2020.

<sup>18</sup> In *Crisis and Denial*, Stephan Lewandowsky discussed the concept of 'organised denial', of which refusing to believe that women are or ever were a minority is an example.

Add to these a social hypersensitivity around the risk of offending others, particularly those with intersectional identities, and the result is a perpetuation of the myth of gender equality for Australian women, which by extension discourages or disallows discussion around the existence of any real inequality.

The myth of gender equality means that Australian women continue to suffer in a society that does not demonstrably value gender equality. What is more, society at large suffers. By continuing to treat around half the population as secondary, we are not drawing on our full intellectual or creative potential and society becomes duller and less rich as a result.<sup>19</sup> It is also a human rights abuse. As a nation, Australia knows that women do not have gender equality, but can't openly argue for it because adhering to the tenets of intersectional feminist theory means that we must not run the risk of offending women with intersectional identities. So we tell ourselves that things are getting better for women, and try not to think about it too much.

If we could go back in time and start over, I would suggest that the response to Crenshaw's criticisms of second wave (so-called 'white') feminism should have been demonstrably egalitarian: "Feminism has no colour." I wonder what difference this would have made to the struggle for gender equality for women in Australia and around the world in the years following. However, the response from 'white' feminism proponents in the United States of America was to accept the criticism and the blame. Feminism as a movement has been divided ever since and consequently has become considerably weakened. It has suffered substantial brand damage and its aims are unclear.<sup>20</sup> The adage, "united we stand, divided we fall", applies both in regard to feminism as a movement, and in terms of the struggle for gender equality for women.

Social progress is not linear – it often ebbs and flows, sometimes retrograding significantly. This concept is obvious to us as Australians when we observe US politics, but we seem to have much more difficulty perceiving it in our own country. The concept of non-linear social progress applies to the issue of gender equality for women in Australia. It is incorrect to assume that conditions are automatically improving for women simply because time passes by. Positive change only occurs if it is demanded, if an individual or group speaks out against dominant ideologies and practices, and more equitable solutions are agreed upon. This is how battles for gender equality issues for women were fought and won in the past.

Though gender equality for women in Australia is slowly improving statistically, our global ranking has been falling since its peak in 2005. We are currently sitting at 44<sup>th</sup> place, while neighbouring

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<sup>19</sup> "2016 Census QuickStats," Australian Bureau of Statistics, accessed 4 March, 2021, [https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census\\_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/036](https://quickstats.censusdata.abs.gov.au/census_services/getproduct/census/2016/quickstat/036).

<sup>20</sup> Aruna D'Souza, "'Float the Boat!': Finding a Place for Feminism in the Museum," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 66.

New Zealand ranks 6<sup>th</sup>, and Iceland maintains its lead in first position.<sup>21</sup> The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is yet to be fully understood, but it has been forecast to adversely affect conditions for Australian women for a period of years, even decades.<sup>22</sup>

Gender inequality for women persists in Australia and is measurable, proving that women still have and have always had minority status in this country.<sup>23</sup> Feminism as a social vehicle has become weakened and lacks the efficacy to incite positive change for women in Australia. Furthermore, in a social fabric that values difference over commonality, intersectional feminist theory disallows discussion of the topic of gender equality for women. Hypersensitivity towards people with certain intersectional identities causes others to be denied agency. Australia's cognitive dissonance in regard to the reality of gender inequality for women means that, in many circles, talking about the issue has become a taboo. This taboo is further enabled by the perpetuating myth that we already have gender equality for women.

I argue that the most effective way to improve conditions for Australian women and girls is to lay feminism to rest as anachronistic, thereby letting go of the tenets of intersectional feminist theory, and to adopt the philosophy of egalitarianism. An egalitarian philosophy considers all members of society to be equal and deserving of respect, regardless of their identifiers. It focusses on the sameness of a shared humanity rather than on difference, and champions social justice for all. How would this egalitarian rebuilding of society be achieved? Primarily through re-education.

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<sup>21</sup> "The Global Gender Gap Report 2020," World Economic Forum, accessed 4 March, 2021, <https://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2020/>.

<sup>22</sup> Kate Jenkins. "Advancing Gender Equality Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic," Senate Select Committee on COVID-19: Public Hearing, September 22, 2020, Australian Human Rights Commission, accessed 4 March, 2021, <https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/speeches/advancing-gender-equality-beyond-covid-19-pandemic>.

<sup>23</sup> "Face the Facts: Gender Equality 2018," accessed 4 March, 2021.