

International Women's Day 2021



A Snapshot of What Women Want Addressed in 2021



Australian Centre for Leadership for Women (ACLW)
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Introduction

To mark International Women's Day 2021, leading women in Australia were invited to respond to the question:

Given the issues women continue to face in Australia, what would you like to draw attention to on International Women's Day 2021, and what is one way to address this?

I would like to thank the women who accepted this invitation and shared their views and insights. They are:

- Louise Milligan
- Eva Cox AO
- Professor Shirley Randell AO
- Michelle Toms
- Felicity Reynolds
- Dr Gabrielle McMullin
- Natasha Stott Despoja AO
- Aloma Fennell
- Moira Rayner

Their powerful responses have been reproduced below. I have also included my response to this question.

The responses show that while women acknowledge that strides have been achieved and that there are many women to thank for this, there is an acute awareness that women continue to face unfair, inequitable and biased mindsets and treatment.

Covid19 has deepened existing gender inequalities and highlighted that the integration of a gender perspective is critical to understanding the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on women.

In 2021, 46 years since the first International Women's Day was celebrated by the UN, women in Australia are still underrepresented in leadership, feel unsafe and are devalued in workplaces, including in the Australian Parliament. The ramifications of gender inequality continue to be compounded for women of all ages, when it intersects with discrimination based on other factors such as race, age, class, sexuality, abilities and immigrant status.

Several strategies have been proposed as to how to address the concerns raised and the type of leadership that is needed to lead substantive structural and cultural reform for gender equality.

With an emergent positive attitudinal shift in both women's and society's perceptions about women's equality and human rights, there is also emerging a collective voice questioning power structures and calling for women and men who advocate for women, to work in solidarity to lead the change for a new normal for a safe, equal and equitable workplace for all.

Dr Diann Rodgers-Healey
Director
Australian Centre for Leadership for Women (ACLW)

Louise Milligan

Investigative reporter for the ABC TV Four Corners program, Award winning Journalist and Author

I would like to address the terrible treatment that largely female (and child) complainants receive in the court system when they find themselves making complaints of sexual crimes. We cannot continue to treat people who summon immense courage in this way. One way to fix this, for which I have argued passionately in *Witness*, is to grant them a lawyer who can help advise them about how to manage this and who can ensure that they are not subjected to improper questioning or breaches of their human rights in court.

Eva Cox AO

Founding member of the Women's Electoral Lobby, Research Fellow at Jumbunna at the University of Technology, Sydney, Convenor of the Women's Equity Think Tank (WETTANK)

There are two separate views on the equality benefits of more women in leadership positions:

The first, currently dominant, is the rights of women to equally share the benefits of joining elite leaderships, e.g. high pay, status and power. This is primarily a numbers game, aiming for processes of selection so more women are chosen.

The second (quite rare) was based more on assumptions of 2nd Wave feminists, that more (feminist) women in senior decision making would ensure the de-gendering of values and ideas. Therefore, leadership would include fair representation of social goals, not just macho economic values. This would eliminate macho distortions of what matters. An example is valuing unpaid work as being as essential to social wellbeing as paid work.

There have been assumptions that just numerical equality will change the content and or processes of decisions taken. However, this has not worked, given the evidence that structures of organisational power and control, ensure those who succeed are judged on existing, primarily masculine values and little serious structural change fails to occur.

So we need to develop programs on unbiased values and culture changes so skills, targets, values and outcomes needed for good leadership lose their gender biases.

Can we do it? I hope so!

Professor Shirley Randell AO

International Gender Equality Specialist & International Development Technical Advisor

The global theme of International Women's Day 2021 is 'Women in Leadership' and this is particularly important for Australia this year. We have just gone through an amazing 12 months of dealing with the global pandemic here in our country. We have observed amazing women leaders as Premiers, Ministers of Health, Interpreters for people with hearing disabilities, front-line workers, teachers, nurses, and community volunteers who have done crucial work behind the scene. Many women have continued to lead in shaping the minds and character of our children through education, caring for older loved ones, and keeping families together.

This IWD in 2021 we must now focus on political leadership given the influence our politicians exert on economic, social and cultural power. We have celebrated the leadership of women presidents of countries like New Zealand, Germany, Finland, Iceland. We long for our own political leaders to lead with vision, boldness, humanity, dignity, care and empathy for the common good. We yearn for them to commit to the deep reforms needed in this country around climate change, gender equality, aged care, mental health, our labour market, and justice for First Nations people. We need political leaders who don't shy away from difficult issues, who understand the need to be accountable and transparent, who value fairness, honesty and integrity.

In 2020 we have celebrated four amazing women leaders in Australia who were acknowledged as Australians of the Year in all four categories, each one demonstrating amazing leadership in their field of work and influence. Our National Press Club invited the overall Australian of the Year, Grace Tame, to speak at their IWD 2021 event. This Tasmanian activist and survivor of sexual assault gave a powerful address detailing the critical steps that need to be taken to inform pivotal change in eradicating sexual abuse, following the emergence a litany of allegations in recent weeks. Grace is showing amazing leadership in calling for survivors to be bold and courageous in sharing their truth as their power. Together we must recognise that we now have a platform on which to lead by standing with survivors in solidarity and support to bring political change.

Michelle Toms

Youth Development Officer, Local Council

Given the issues women continue to face in Australia I would like to draw attention to our ability to use our voices. We have voices, loud and proud voices. Unfortunately, we are not given empowerment to use these voices and when we do, we are often shut down by certain groups of people in power. I am a woman, I am a black woman, being proud comes with my culture – but why do I still feel the need to walk on eggshells or second guess my own opinions or thoughts? “Is this right” “Do I really think this?” are words I say to myself more often than not.

There are many outcomes that can come from women not using their voices:

- Gender pay gap
- Societal roles / careers
- Domestic violence
- Sexual harassment and sexual / physical violence

When women speak up about these issues, when women finally use their voices we are told that we are just “sooking”, or “get back to the kitchen” with a laugh, a smirk and a “I am only joking” immediately after.

While these outcomes are not important to a large group of people in Australia, they are affecting women’s mental health and everyday lives. If I could give advice to anyone at a young age, it would be to practice using your voice because I have no doubt, we will need it later on. Be as loud as you can as often as you can. Speak your truth. Do not hide in the face of adversity.

Felicity Reynolds

Director, Australian Alliance to End Homelessness

Perhaps IWD 2021 is an opportunity to reflect on how far we have come. How far attending to the rights of women have advanced human rights around the world. Whilst also understanding there is more to do and in many places much more to do.

There remain some places in our world where women are still owned by their male relatives, places where women do the bulk of all work and yet earn much less than men.

Places where women have fewer choices regarding their education, their life partner and many other things.

But all that said, there are fewer places where this is the case. Fathers no longer own their daughters. Heterosexual marriage is slowly becoming a negotiated partnership rather than a master/servant transaction. There remains the ongoing problem of domestic violence. But that is now a crime, unlike a century ago. There are now services that can assist women and police who can arrest men.

There are now many more women who can have access to paid employment and there are more of us who hold positions of leadership in our governments and other institutions. As I said, we're not there yet. But let's acknowledge how far we have come, let's thank all the women who came before us and risked a great deal to fight for our human rights. In some places in the world there are women today who still risk a great deal when they speak up about women's rights.

When I hear young women say 'I'm not a feminist' it annoys me. But when I think about it, I wonder if young women taking for granted the choices they have is not such a bad thing. I have always proudly proclaimed I am a feminist, but perhaps it is also ok for women to assume they have every right to take education, opportunity and choice for granted.

That said, on IWD 2021 let's reflect on the things that have been achieved and the things yet to be achieved. Let's thank the many named and nameless women who have made it possible to not call yourself a feminist but still take for granted every opportunity and life choice that previous generations of feminists helped us to now be able to take for granted.

Dr Gabrielle McMullin

Vascular Surgeon and Director

It is 6 years since the furore I created on International Women's Day in 2015 when I stated that the safest option for a female surgical trainee was to give in to demands for sexual favours from male supervisors if she wished to succeed in her career.

The howl of outrage from the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) was followed by anonymous reports by dozens of female surgical trainees about sexual harassment and their fear of making formal complaints. As a result, the RACS set up an External Advisory Group to examine the extent of sexual harassment, bullying and discrimination experienced by all surgeons and trainees in Australia and the results were damning.

It is extremely disappointing then that the very same culture has just been exposed at the heart of our democracy in Parliament House. Two years ago, a young, ambitious woman, was preyed on by a man who plied her with alcohol, took her to a ministerial office and raped her. She was then faced with a decision that faces far too many women in far too many work places. Should she report the crime which will almost certainly lead to the end of her career or should she pretend that it never happened and keep quiet?

There should never be a decision for the “victim”. Women experiencing sexual violence need to be helped through a criminal proceeding with anonymity if wanted; assured that they will keep their jobs and always be congratulated and admired for exposing criminal behaviour.

The focus by the media should be on the perpetrator of the crime. The perpetrator should be charged and then endlessly interviewed about how they could possibly have thought that their behaviour could be acceptable in a “civilised” society.

Natasha Stott Despoja AO

Chair, Our Watch & Member of UN's Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

This day is a chance for us to commemorate the progress we have made as a society in when it comes to opportunities for women and girls, but I want us to think of IWD as a call to action: a yearly reminder of the confronting challenges that remain in achieving gender equality.

This day seeks to recognise the role we all play – as women, men, non-binary and gender diverse people - all of us, working in collaboration and across that which sometimes divides us to create a world where women and girls everywhere have equal rights and opportunities.

I particularly want to draw attention to the scourge that is violence against women and children, be it in our homes, on our streets, in our workplaces or in our parliaments.

The past few weeks have been confronting, triggering, upsetting for many. As a lifelong advocate for gender equality and a passionate promoter of more women in politics – we need all our diversity and difference reflected and represented - I am angry that progress has been slow, that women still feel unsafe and we are still under-represented in all our decision-making institutions.

It is time for men to give up their seats – literally – and share power. Bring on quotas for parliament.

We know that more women in government lead to policies that better address violence against women and children. There are many other reforms required, including structural and policy reform, but cultural change is critical to preventing violence. I know this takes time, but I am getting impatient. We cannot go on with the current rates of violence and abuse. This national emergency must be addressed.

It is also time for our leaders to set the standard and model ethical, equal, healthy and respectful relationships themselves.

It is time for change.

This IWD is a time for reflection and care, for action and change.

I commend those brave survivors who have come forward and I send them (and anyone who is feeling traumatised and triggered) solidarity and support.

Aloma Fennell

National President, Older Women's Network Australia

The Older Women of Australia require ongoing recognition for their ongoing and significant contributions to our society the majority of which are voluntary contributions such that enable our society to continue.

As a member of the Global Alliance for the Rights of Older persons (GAROP), it is well recognised that older women have been treated with complete disregard. COVID-19 has provided significant evidence of gaps in the protection of older women. Non-discrimination needs to be a right in itself including the right to work, health, life care and support, freedom from violence (elder abuse) and neglect and participation as full members of society.

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A UN Convention on the rights of older persons would help ensure that all older women are treated in a fairer and more just way, including in public health, responses to future pandemics and in "aged care facilities". We need to challenge community attitudes and behaviours towards older women, challenge norms and constructions to recognise our contributions and enable us to live fairly and freely as equals, as older women.

Moira Rayner

Senior lawyer, conciliator, mediator and educator & (fmr) Victoria's Commissioner for Equal Opportunity

What should women leaders be focusing on, this new year? A damned good question, and I speak as a lawyer (49 years post admission), academic (easily disposed of, as a part-time employee), immigrant (NZ), and now older woman, who has a clearer view of where we are now, compared with how I thought we would be, all those optimistic years ago.

After I went to my first Domestic violence conference, in 1985. I was a late 'feminist', after exposure to a legal profession satisfied with excluding women like me from the advantages of a parochial legal 'market' which appointed men to powerful positions based on their likeability. I was never 'likeable'. I was always 'difficult' where my male friends were vibrant, strong, can-do and club-able. And appointed to positions on word of mouth from powerful men in tribal powerful positions. Not that they thought of it that way.

In 2021, after a god-awful year under a world pandemic, women in Australia have been seriously, detrimentally affected in the world of cultural and climate change. We know, or I do, that we are destroying the environment we were raised in, by cultural choices led by unacknowledged privilege, individualism, the pursuit of profit and comfort, and misinformation. The world's once-leader in human rights and democracy, the USA, has been led by a madman for 4 dreadful years. There are 19 ecosystems on the verge of collapse due to climate change, in our own country, and nothing is being done about it.

And in our own 'democratic' political system, we have seen the Australian Parliament become exposed by a hotbed of public sexual misconduct by Australian men. We have been unambiguously reminded that women may comfortably be described as sluts, while powerful men are entitled to the presumption of innocence. That women have become 'liberated' from fellow-feeling for the dismissed and undermined in public life, at the worst possible time. It is time for change. Democratic conventions based on expectations of civilised conduct have

become piss-weak and readily ignored. Checks and balances by tribunals, courts, FOI and other public accountability mechanisms have been stacked, betrayed, ignored and excoriated by powerful men and ambitious individual women, and this has become normalised. The Australian parliament has been exposed as a viper's nest of misogyny and bullying. An "alleged" rape victim, or three - 'alleged', if you will - has been let down by police indolence, political persuasion and governmental negligence in protecting the rights of ministerial appointees. Women in potentially powerful positions, on both sides, have pretended to be agnostic and 'not a feminist' in response to strong persuasions.

Under the extraordinary pressures of infection, lockdowns, inapt and inept responses and ideological conundrums, the pandemic of COVID19 has made women's employment, far more than men's, participation and rewards to go dramatically south. Older women have become impoverished and homeless, and Jobseeker for the older unemployable women, bereft of employed chaps support, has left them humiliatingly living in cars and on other people's coaches. Large corporations have profited from Jobkeeper that didn't actually need, and been allowed to remain on the public teat. Women's work has been part-time, casual and undervalued.

Women from minority religious and cultural groups have been sidelined by professional versions of 'feminism' that has led individuals to perceive, at times, that they are powerful because they have 'succeeded' in terms of individual progress, without the necessary backing of other women whose diverse experience and values have left them exposed to exploitation. Insecure employment lacking the rights protected by the Fair Work Act has encouraged exploitative profit-makers to leave women high and dry, in a deluge of opportunistic removal of what rights they should have.

Eva Cox - my long-term friend - was and is right. Until women of the middle class and the favoured professions accept that 'feminism' is necessary, and means lifting other women and excluded groups with the ambitious individuals - to support all women, whatever their disability, culture, religion, parental status, sexual orientation, carer status and 'race' - not just our preferred personal relationships and connections. We must not collaborate with injustice. Climate change, colonialism and the collapse of the "normal: are each calling us to act, as women, as a powerful force for the good of all women, for the whole planet, and for the salvation of all sentient beings. The corporations won't look after us, women as individuals. Now is the time for cooperative, collaborative and ethical action by women for women to make the world a better place. '

Dr Diann Rodgers-Healey

Director, Australian Centre for Leadership for Women (ACLW)

Australia has for decades acknowledged it has a responsibility to prevent sexual assault and domestic violence through policy, legislative and public service reform.

The Government had responded positively to the National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces Respect@Work Report released on 5 March 2020, saying that it “will now take the time to carefully consider the report and its recommendations” and that it “is committed to ensuring Australian workplaces are safe and free from sexual harassment.”

Such a commitment in relation to Ms Higgins alleged experience of rape would have required the government to ensure maximum support for her well-being and safety then and now, support to assist her to lodge a complaint against the perpetrator, and as her employer, investigate, lodge and pursue a complaint at its own initiative with the Australian Federal Police, thereby taking the burden off her. Pursuant to an investigation, it would also dismiss the perpetrator on grounds of the crime of rape; address the gap in standards of conduct and behaviour, and safety in the workplace for women; and all tiers of management would have enforced zero tolerance for all forms of sexual harassment in Parliament; and put in place an effective system for monitoring all forms of sexual harassment and dealing with those responsible. Education and training to recognise the impact of power relations in Parliament, and the drivers and impacts of sexual harassment in line with the principles of Change the Story as outlined in the AHRC Respect@Work Report, would have followed.

Such a substantive commitment would visibly and unequivocally build a culture of trust and respect and demonstrate that the Government is serious about eliminating workplace behaviours and attitudes that enable systemic sexual harassment occurring in Parliament.

The government could go further in ensuring that the SDA is amended to allow “the Sex Discrimination Commissioner to commence self-initiated investigations for alleged breaches of the SDA, without requiring an individual complaint.”

To overturn the existing culture in Parliament that privileges male power and agency, and silences the voices and agency of women, the Prime Minister’s leadership is critical in meaningfully addressing this. It requires a willingness to be gender aware in analysing the status quo and developing strategies for structural change that go beyond symbolic change to the institutional and operational level. To ensure Parliament is exemplary in this, requires responsible leadership by government to uphold the standards that it sets for the nation, be accountable against these

standards, and purposefully demonstrate that valuing women is the only way forward for a gender equal workplace.