

# NO! NOT EQUAL

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

*Inequalities tend to be cumulative and compounding, casting shadows across the lives of women and girls from the early years, through the school years, adolescence, the prime working and reproductive years, and into retirement and later life.*

'There were six of us kids and Mum lost nine children so she had a pretty fair share of hard times. So from the age of nine I took on the responsibility of the younger four while Mum worked afternoon shift; by the time I was eleven I pretty well knew the run of the house, I used to just about do everything, I used to do most of the housework, nearly all the cooking and most of the upbringing of the children. It was hard because after school Mum was working and Dad would come home in one of his states; he'd be drunk and I had to protect them from a lot. I used to hide them away so they didn't see or hear.' — A young woman reflecting on her childhood in *Paying the Price for Sugar and Spice*, 1985<sup>1</sup>

In many ways, Australian women's and girls' lives are very different to those of their mothers and grandmothers. Women are better educated, have more choice about their family lives and are more likely to be in paid work. Some of the major inequalities that existed between men and women have been challenged and there have been many firsts — including a first female prime minister, governor-general and attorney-general, as well as several state premiers.

On many indicators, Australia appears to be doing well. For example, Australia is ranked fifth out of 128 countries on the Women's Economic Opportunity Index 2012, which measures women's economic advancement.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, persistent inequalities remain in many areas of public and private life. They affect health, safety, personal relationships, and women's and girls' ability to build sustainable livelihoods. Inequalities tend to be cumulative and compounding, casting shadows across the lives of women and girls from the early years, through the school years and adolescence, the prime working and reproductive years, and into retirement and later life.

One of the main consequences of gender inequity is that women are more vulnerable to poverty and financial hardship throughout life. Nobel Prize winning economist Amartya Sen recognised that 'within every community, nationality and class the burden of hardship often falls disproportionately on women'.<sup>3</sup> Sen pointed out that poverty is not just about

a lack of money. Other factors narrow opportunity and create deprivation.

Drawing on Sen's work, the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research developed a set of indicators to measure 'social exclusion' – the extent to which individuals experience 'multiple, overlapping problems, such as unemployment, poor health and inadequate education, which stop them fully participating in society'.<sup>4</sup> The monitor shows that women are much more likely to experience social exclusion than men. Gender, race, age, parenting status, disability and other structures of inequality work together to shape an individual's experience of social exclusion and disadvantage, so the impacts of gender inequalities differ — and are often worse — for women who also experience other forms of inequality.

In this publication, we focus on education, employment and family life to illustrate the interconnected factors that underpin the persistence of gender inequity in Australia. We recognise that other factors such as health and housing security or homelessness also have major impacts on the lives of women and girls. In a slim volume such as this, we have had to make some choices about what to include and exclude. In each section we briefly review some of the facts and consider some explanations for progress or lack of it. In the conclusion we pull together the evidence to argue

for a renewed focus on equity for women and girls, and we suggest some ways forward.

Throughout the text we draw on research conducted by the Brotherhood of St Laurence to illustrate the lived experiences of gender inequity. In boxes such as the one above, we highlight excerpts from this research — some of it conducted 20 or 30 years ago — to underline how little things have changed, despite progress on many fronts. We provide endnotes for key sources of data and have also included a list of useful websites for up-to-date facts and figures.