

CHAPTER 8

An unfinished project

A broader range of women are now identifying as feminists, showing that 'feminists' come in many forms and may hold quite different beliefs and values.

There has been considerable progress towards equity for women and girls in different spheres of Australian life. Many of the legislative, regulatory and cultural barriers that blocked the paths of women have been removed. Women's achievements in education, science, business, the professions, sports, and the social, cultural and community spheres are increasingly recognised. This progress is the result of the hard work, commitment and struggle.

Despite decades of action by women and successive governments and agencies, gender equity remains an unfinished project. Bursts of change and achievement have been interspersed with lags, gaps, stalls, roadblocks, detours and u-turns. Some commentators observe that despite the progress that we have made

— or maybe because of it — there has been a swing away from gender equality.

Persistent gender inequalities are difficult to name and challenge, as 18-year-old Jemimah Cooper explained in an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. She described an incident in her Year 12 history class when she and her classmates were asked whether they thought sexism still existed:

And everyone around shook their heads, citing equal access to education, and votes, and work. But there's still something, isn't there? Something more malicious and less easily defined. Like once my friend told me she wishes she were a boy, because girls are 'worthless'. Or when my brothers tell me to cook dinner for them because 'I'm a woman'. Or when you ever express maybe not wanting to get married or have children, there's nothing but shock or derision from the adults around you.

It's bizarre. The more I think about it, the more I realise how deep-rooted these issues are. And even as I write this, I'm reluctant to, because in some weird way, I don't want to be categorised as a feminist myself, I want to be seen as easygoing by guys my own age. I certainly don't want to kick up a fuss. But I'm sick of feeling as if wanting equality between genders is some massive ask, which designates you as angry and demanding. Because it shouldn't be — it should just be the norm.¹³⁴

Jemimah's experience points to the challenge in confronting deeply held and often unconscious, cultural beliefs. These biases mean that women and men are judged differently for the same behaviour. Sexist ideas limit young women's and girls' opportunities because they shape what is thought to be possible or appropriate on the basis of stereotypical understandings of gender.

Reclaiming feminism

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines feminism as 'Advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of women'. Yet feminism is often associated with 'man-hating' and other negative traits, and it is frequently observed that Australian women — particularly young women — are reluctant to identify themselves as feminists.

This discomfort with the 'F word'¹³⁵ has several sources. In part, feminism is criticised and challenged because any calls for women's equality are perceived as a threat by people (both men and women) who benefit from existing inequalities. Writing about a 'backlash' against feminism in the United States, Susan Faludi argued in 1993 that such resistance to women's rights and feminism is not new:

Indeed, it's a recurring phenomenon: it returns every time women begin to make some headway towards equality, a seemingly inevitable early frost to the brief flowerings of feminism.¹³⁶

It has also been observed that opponents and critics often misunderstand or misrepresent what 'feminism' is. For example, it may be believed that feminists want all women to behave like men (by devoting themselves to a career rather than family care) while being unsupportive of full-time motherhood or other life choices. Alternatively, it may be believed that feminists want to oppress men, rather than achieve equity between the sexes. These assumptions are based on an erroneous notion that all feminists agree on what 'equality' means and how to achieve it.

Feminism has always been a contested concept, reflecting different values and the diverse experiences of women. While some feminists do argue that equality can only be achieved if women participate in paid work and public life in the same manner as men, others have sought greater recognition and support for women's mothering roles, and still others have argued that equality can only be achieved if women and men share equally in both care-giving and paid work. These arguments are often referred to as the sameness/difference debate.

As Maureen Ramsay points out, an emphasis on difference runs the risk of justifying discrimination and exclusion. On the other hand, a focus on equal rights ignores the differences between women and men. Ramsay argues:

If difference is exaggerated without reference to this wider social context, then attention is diverted from the pre-existing social and economic inequalities and power differences which cause the actual differences between men and women and form the need to change the material conditions which give rise to them.¹³⁷

It is for this reason that we refer to gender equity, which does not mean that we have to be the same.

Some researchers have found that some young women do not identify with the concept of feminism because they do not think it is relevant to their lives. These young women associate feminism with earlier struggles like the suffragettes' efforts to win the vote for women, believing that such feminist activism is 'outdated' and no longer necessary because equality has been achieved. In this volume, we have demonstrated the many ways in which this is not the case.

Despite some women's reluctance to identify as 'feminists' — and complaints from some older feminists that young women do not appreciate the achievements of their feminist mothers and grandmothers and are failing to carry on their work — many young women are concerned about gender equity and choice. For example, Mission Australia reported that young women 'ranked equity and discrimination as the top issue facing the country' in its 2013 Youth Survey.¹³⁸

Some researchers have argued that feminism is actually no less popular than it was in the 1970s (which is commonly considered to be the heyday of feminism) and that contemporary feminist activism has simply taken new forms, such as Internet activism through blogs, Facebook and online petitions. In addition, many young women continue to participate in more traditional activities like political campaigns and protests.

Current manifestations of feminism have sometimes been criticised on the basis that gender inequality tends to be viewed as a personal issue that women can (and should) solve individually. This is a problem because it means that the social, economic and political dimensions of inequity are ignored, and responsibility for equality (and inequality) is placed with individual women. In this book, we have highlighted the many structural factors that affect girls' and women's inequality, and in the following sections we identify both personal and policy changes that could lead to greater equity for girls and women.

It seems that the latest 'backlash' against the term 'feminist' is receding, at least in some ways. In recent years, more and more celebrities and public figures have claimed the 'feminist' tag, including Beyoncé and Emma Watson. Such announcements have been met with criticism that these women are not 'proper' feminists because their behaviour or words do not promote a particular vision of gender equity, or seem

to be counter-productive or damaging to women in some way. While some of these criticisms may be valid, a broader range of women are now identifying as feminists, showing that 'feminists' come in many forms and may hold quite different beliefs and values. As noted above, this is nothing new; there has never been a single, unified feminist agenda. Feminism has always been characterised by change and by robust debate between people who consider themselves to be feminists. Ideally, such debates lead to new ideas, innovative approaches and a more inclusive feminism.