

Discrimination Divas

JANET ALBRECHTSEN

NOT SO long ago, feminists the world over reviled Miss Universe contests and the like. Driven by two parts ideology and, perhaps, one part envy, they bemoaned how beautiful women in high heels would strip down to their bikinis or glide around in evening gowns. It was, they said, evidence that women were still playing roles assigned to them by a sexist society. That some women might choose to do so swayed few feminists. Back then, nothing was too frivolous for feminism's anti-choice ideology.

What a relief, then, that the Miss Universe contest came and went recently without the usual feminist angst-fest. Not even a home-grown winner from Newcastle, the stunning Jennifer Hawkins, could lure our feminist anti-fashionistas out. These days, feminists are even strapping on their own soul-destroying instruments of torture, high heels. So has feminism matured?

The best that can be said is that feminists in our midst are now more discerning in choosing their targets of disdain. And the enduring favourite for discrimination divas is the workplace. That women are not in the workplace in equal numbers to men, that they do not earn the same as men, that they have not risen to the top in equal numbers can mean only one thing: women are still victims of a sexist society.

The orthodox view says that the feminist revolution has stalled. The statistics at the starting gate are promising enough. Women are pouring out of universities in greater numbers than men. But down the track, the picture is apparently bleak. After all, these highly educated women were the ones who were meant to have taken on the world.

But where are they? Very few are judges in our courtrooms, partners in law firms or silks at the bar. Very few are in our boardrooms or running our big companies.

In support of this thesis, we are presented with a range of raw numbers. For example, recently, newspapers ran headlines such as 'Women still poorer in economy boom', 'Women's pay falls further behind', 'Women's wage inequality grows'.

The best that can be said is that feminists in our midst are now more discerning in choosing their targets of disdain. And the enduring favourite for discrimination divas is the workplace

Behind these headlines was the story that the wage gap between men and women had grown by a further \$80 a week. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, average weekly earnings for men are \$894 and \$582 for women.

The message is clear enough. Women are victims of pay discrimination. Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward told one newspaper that equality will only move from an idea to reality when the pay gap closes. In Britain, the Equal Opportunity Commission is

using savvy marketing to get the message across, handing out beer coasters that say 'What's a nice girl like you doing in a pay gap like this'.

But raw numbers rarely support the sort of simple story that discrimination divas would have us believe. Look at the law. As women embark on a legal career, pay packets are more or less equal. A wage gap begins to appear when you compare women and men aged 30–34. In 2001, women in that age bracket earned 81 per cent of their male peers. Over time, with each decade, that wage gap increases, so that by her fifties, a female lawyer is earning 72 per cent of her male colleagues.

So is the pay gap a case of genuine discrimination or is it dogma? The mere fact that one group of people earns less than another is not, of itself, evidence of discrimination.

A finding of discrimination depends on a great deal of detail that numbers like these simply do not tell us. Dr Anne Daly, associate professor of economics at the University of Canberra, says that they don't tell us anything about how differently men and women work, the sorts of areas they work in, whether they work in high-fee grossing areas, or what level of commitment in terms of hours they put in.

All of these variables matter when you compare earnings of men and women at this later career point. But we never hear about them when feminists peddle their tale of discrimination woe.

So let's add some detail. Sociologist Catherine Hakim is now well-known for her research into women's preferences. Her research reveals that only 20 per cent of women treat their jobs as the primary focus of their lives.

REVIEW

By contrast, 60 per cent of men describe themselves as work-centred. Thus for every woman who regards work as the centrepiece of their lives, there are three men. So men and women are not competing in equal numbers. Yet some feminists illogically believe that equality for women means a 50/50 per cent ratio in the workplace—at all levels.

A few months ago, the *Australian Financial Review* magazine, *Boss*, added some more detail. It pointed to statistics that show how, overall, women work fewer hours than men. It concluded that ‘as long as that remains true, it means that women’s chances of reaching parity in the corner office will remain remote’.

Let me suggest that choice is the detail that old-style feminists are reluctant to include in their big picture of discrimination. Many professional women are choosing to work less or not at all. The *New York Times* called it the opt-out revolution. Some will say that these are all rich, have-it-all, women; women lucky enough to make choices. But that is precisely the point. These are the women who perhaps should have taken on the world, climbed the ladder, made partner, taken silk. But they didn’t. These are the women who can afford to employ full-time nannies or pay for five-day-a-week child-care if they wish. But they haven’t.

And the trend to work part-time goes beyond professional women. As of May 2004, of 1,026,000 women in the work-force, married or partnered with children under the age of 15, 622,000 work part-time and 404,000 work full-time. By contrast, for men in that same category, almost 1.5 million work full-time and 93,000 work part-time. Some will say that this is evidence of a stalled revolution, of women being excluded from full-time work.

The alternative view is that the boom in part-time work is a blessing for women. In the Labour Force Survey for May 2004, women working part-time were asked if they wanted

to work more hours. An overwhelming majority of women—by a factor of 4 to 1—said ‘No thanks’. That may explain why the proportion of women aged 15–64 working full-time has changed very little since the mid-60s.

Old-style feminists will dress up numbers in simplistic terms as bad news, as evidence of discrimination. But for every negative slant, there is a positive one. It is not just a case of the glass being half full. Sometimes the other angle, for example the one about women’s choices, is a more truthful one. Unfortunately, that

**Let’s not forget how
old-style feminists
deride those who make
different choices.
Feminists like to label
those who stay at
home with children as
‘conservative’, and it is
not meant as a
compliment**

doesn’t get much of a run in the media because those doing the writing tend to be the ones who also try to sell us discrimination dogma.

The details behind the raw numbers suggest that women’s preferences for part-time work, or just less work or different work, with its inevitable consequences for promotion and pay packets, is a voluntary act, not the result of patriarchal oppression.

And if we are to talk frankly about discrimination, let’s not forget how old-style feminists deride those who make different choices. Feminists like to label those who stay at home with children as ‘conservative’, and it is not meant as a compliment.

A few years ago, when the International Social Science Survey of 15,000 Australians revealed that two-thirds of the general population believe it’s best for young children if their mothers care for them full-time, Adele Horin used the ‘c’ word three times when reporting the ISSS results in a news item in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Personally, I don’t mind the conservative moniker at all. But I can tell you that the women I know who choose to stay at home are hardly conservative. God forbid, many of them wouldn’t vote for John Howard in a pink fit. But the sisterhood’s condescension for those who make different choices runs deep.

Along the same lines, old-style feminists tell tired old stories about a collective ‘duty to gender’. Upon her appointment as Victoria’s first female Chief Justice, Marilyn Warren announced that when the big job offer comes, ‘there is a duty to accept. A duty to gender’.

Well, only if you believe that being a member of a group and a proponent of an agenda is more important than being true to your own preferences, having a duty to one’s self. It strikes me that this has always been feminism’s failure.

If there is a duty to one’s sex, surely it is to allow women to choose. It is a large and offensive presumption that the ‘duty to gender’ is a duty to put work at the centre of one’s life.

Most women get on and do what they want, oblivious to this rigid agenda of working hero stereotypes and discrimination dogma. Constrained neither by the 1950s’ picket fence nor the 1970s’ feminist shackles, many young women now enjoy genuine choice when it comes to having and raising children. That is feminism’s success. But you won’t hear it from the discrimination divas.

Janet Albrechtsen has a doctorate in law from the University of Sydney and has practised commercial law.

She writes a weekly column for The Australian. This piece is from a talk given at an IPA Melbourne Dialogue.

IPA