

## **Does gender still matter? Yes it does!**

*This is an edited extract from a speech Eve Mahlab gave at BMW Edge on November 10, 2008 at Melbourne Conversations, a series of regular, free discussions exploring popular issues and themes. This conversation was titled 'Does Gender Matter Nowadays?'*

Just ask the many women of my age and older who are eking out their final years in poverty. Why are they poor? Because today, it is assumed that people have income from superannuation. But until 20 years ago some superannuation schemes did not even allow women to join, so these women have no retirement savings and we all know about the paucity of the old age pension for singles, most of whom are women. And then ask the women who are approaching retirement age today --and whose super payout will be 1/3 that of men's because they have spent their workforce life in casual or part time work.---- Why?----- Because society gives the responsibility for caring for the young and the elderly to women. This responsibility, which women to their credit accept hampers their ability to work full time and leaves many poor.

Even if women do the same work as the guys and work full time, we earn 20% less.

Because of our caring responsibilities, we women do not have the mobility, or the time to organize or network or work on our careers in order to compete with the guys for higher better paid positions. It is estimated in the UK, (we don't have figures for Australia) that the 20% wage difference between men and women over a lifetime amounts to the equivalent of \$600,000.

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Just ask the students in public schools who are being short-changed on their education because the whole teaching profession is in crisis. Why? Because teaching is regarded as a women's profession, and thus rewarded accordingly with low wages. As a result, there has been a large-scale exodus of women from the teaching profession and to this day it is no longer attractive as a career option. The same is true for nursing, another occupation which pays relatively low wages.

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Just ask any of the 1 in 10 Australian women who have been the victims of violence. The newspapers often report on violence against men but women are 3 times more likely to be injured by violence, 5 times more likely to need medical attention and 5 times more likely to fear for their lives.

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Just ask the women in developing countries where women and girls form the majority of the poor and hungry, where 10 million more girls than boys miss out

on a primary education and where out of every 10 young people living with HIV/AIDS 8 are female and where 13% of maternal mortality rates are caused by unsafe abortion. Yet our own government continues to ban aid to countries that offer advice about safe abortion.

Ask Kofi Annan, Secretary general of the United Nations who said, "Let us invest in women and girls". We know from study after study that there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls and women. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity, lower infant and maternal mortality, improve nutrition, promote health -- including the prevention of HIV/AIDS -- and increase the chances of education for the next generation.

Ask Mohamud Yunus who loaned \$27 to some poor women farmers in Bangladesh to get them out of the clutches of moneylenders. An initiative that developed into the micro credit movement, which lends to the poor, 94% of whom are women and which is estimated to have lifted 40 million families out of poverty before the financial meltdown.

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Just ask the women who live in religiously observant communities- Catholic, Muslim, Jewish or Hindu. All traditional religions are patriarchal which means that it is men who have made the rules, men who interpret them and men who are given the power as head of the family. That is not to say that all men abuse their power or that strong women cannot transcend their relative powerlessness. It merely represents an added burden and many of the less educated women in these communities aren't even aware that in Australia our secular legal system gives them remedies respecting their human rights

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Just ask all the women who are going to become unemployed during this recession because there are going to be huge job losses in retail, in banking, in finance, in insurance, all high employment areas of women - and then look where the government's financial stimulus will be going - into infrastructure, i.e. building and construction and into the automobile industry- industries that are overwhelmingly male dominated.

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Just ask the women executives, scientists, lawyers, bankers, farmers and town planners who are struggling to participate in the public discourse and to have some influence in the big decisions affecting our country in politics, business and the professions.

The opinion of women no matter how expert or how appropriate is rarely sought. Don't be fooled by the few outstanding high profile women who have broken through the glass ceiling. Most do so if they apply themselves to the male agendas and don't advocate for women and families. In the top 200 companies, women hold less than 1 in 10 board positions. In Australian Federal Parliament,

only 1 in 4 Members of Parliament is female, and in the Queens Birthday Honours, which are meant to recognize those who make a contribution to the community, only 4 women out of 30 people were recognized in the top 2 categories. This is incidentally because both women and men tend to nominate men.

It is when women dare to compete with men for the top jobs that gender really kicks in. Experiments show that women vying for leadership roles are automatically assigned 2 labels. The first is to be seen as nice and warm but incompetent, the second is to be seen as competent but unpleasant - aggressive, tough, unfeminine. One need only look at the intense scrutiny - even venom - with which Hillary Clinton or Sarah Palin's candidacy in the US presidential campaign were treated or that directed at Julia Gillard during our own recent elections. And God help a woman who makes a mistake. Few are given second chances.

Gender does matter nowadays. The problem is that too many people, including women, believe it doesn't.

So our leaders and the media increasingly speaks in ungendered terms---about young Australians, youth, the poor, the homeless, migrants and it is getting increasingly difficult to get a gender breakdown about anything.

Does funding for indigenous causes go to women and men equally? How much of government funding for sport goes to women? Do philanthropic old boys donate as much to their daughter's schools as their son's? Do solutions for the homeless take into account that nearly half the homeless are women who often have small children or cannot go to male dominated refuges for fear of sexual assault or exploitation?

There are still too few women, expressing our sensibilities, reflecting our experiences, arguing that the outcomes, which may even seem equal, are in fact inequitable or inappropriate because we women are different. We are smaller physically, we earn less, we live for longer but above all because we are still the primary carers - responsible for the young, boys and girls - the future human capital of our society.

If society fails to support and nurture us, it undermines our ability to raise the next generation of Australians. No amount of social workers, counsellors, teachers or police, will compensate for harassed, stressed or poor, trapped or unfulfilled mothers.

It is time for another wave of feminism. The first got us the vote. The second gave us more access to decently paid work rather than the unpaid home duties in which we had previously been trapped. We must now move into policy and decision making roles at all levels

The challenge now is to apply a gender lens to all the public activities that affect our society. To demand that men seek out appropriate women to share the task of making the decisions affecting our families, our community, our society, the future of our country and the world.

In our local very well run fish and chip shop, there is a notice that reads, "Do you want to talk to the man in charge or the woman who knows what's going on?"

Men and women are equally talented. But most men design big top down solutions. Women, because of their caring experience know what's going on. Their different approaches means that for a true balance both are needed. Both are needed equally.

Links:

*Women, employment, wages & superannuation*

<http://www.womensactionalliance.com.au/superannuation.html>

<http://www.docs.fce.unsw.edu.au/fce/Research/FERRIS%20Shauna.pdf>

[http://www.unicef.org/factoftheweek/index\\_39100.html](http://www.unicef.org/factoftheweek/index_39100.html)

<http://laborsta.ilo.org>

<http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P1-2225328.html>

<http://endofmen.wordpress.com/2008/04/14/women-in-their-40s-earn-20-per-cent-less-than-men-the-same-age-study-claims/>

<http://www.computerweekly.com/Articles/2001/03/08/178816/research-shows-women-earn-18-less-than-men.htm>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2004/jan/14/genderissues.pay>

[http://www.hreoc.gov.au/sex\\_discrimination/programs/gender\\_gap.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/sex_discrimination/programs/gender_gap.html)

<http://www.understandingmoney.gov.au/Content/consumer/Publications/womensreport.aspx>

[http://www.ofw.facsia.gov.au/publications/understanding\\_money.htm](http://www.ofw.facsia.gov.au/publications/understanding_money.htm)[http://www.ofw.facsia.gov.au/publications/experiences\\_planning/Womens\\_experiences\\_of\\_paid\\_work\\_final\\_report\\_\(+survey\).pdf](http://www.ofw.facsia.gov.au/publications/experiences_planning/Womens_experiences_of_paid_work_final_report_(+survey).pdf)

[http://www.ofw.facsia.gov.au/downloads/pdfs/women\\_and\\_super.pdf](http://www.ofw.facsia.gov.au/downloads/pdfs/women_and_super.pdf)

<http://www.pay-equity.org/info-time.html>

[http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial\\_opinion/oped/articles/2005/10/09/the\\_wage\\_gap/](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2005/10/09/the_wage_gap/)

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2006/jun/04/discriminationatwork.genderissues>

*Women and violence*

[http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/world-news/one-in-ten-brit-women-are-victims-of-domestic-violence\\_1007031.html](http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/world-news/one-in-ten-brit-women-are-victims-of-domestic-violence_1007031.html)

<http://www.whiteribbonday.org.au/media/documents/Factsheet%205%20-%20What%20is%20violence%20against%20women.pdf>

<http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/ipv/>

[http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/~media/ProgramsandProjects/MentalHealthandWellBeing/DiscriminationandViolence/PreventingViolence/ResearchSummary\\_VAW.ashx](http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/~media/ProgramsandProjects/MentalHealthandWellBeing/DiscriminationandViolence/PreventingViolence/ResearchSummary_VAW.ashx)

*Women, poverty and disease*

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/world/women-left-behind-in-battle-against-poverty/2008/03/08/1204780127222.html>

<http://amajuba.gov.za/hiv/AIDS>

[http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/publications/unsafeabortion\\_2003/ua\\_estimates03.pdf](http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/publications/unsafeabortion_2003/ua_estimates03.pdf)

[http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/reports/BB18\\_HIV.pdf](http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/reports/BB18_HIV.pdf)

<http://womenandaids.unaids.org/documents/factsheetzimbabwe.pdf>

<http://www.thebody.com/content/art11437.html>

[http://www.grameenfoundation.org/what\\_we\\_do/](http://www.grameenfoundation.org/what_we_do/)

<http://www.gdrc.org/icm/grameen-yunusbio.html>

<http://pib.myiris.com/speech/article.php3?fl=010615171723>