

From Women's Liberation to Gender Equity

A half century on: are we making progress?

2023 Colin Tatz Oration

By

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Ladies and Gentlemen
Members of the Tatz Family

I am honoured that Plus 61J Media would consider me a suitable candidate to deliver the 2023 Colin Tatz Oration, and, I'd especially like to thank Michael Visontay for his persistence in pinning me down to accept the invitation.

I did not ever meet Colin Tatz, more the result of geographical distance than political or ideological difference. I was a student in Adelaide, and he was a teacher in Melbourne and, later, Armidale. By the time he arrived at Macquarie I was living in Canberra and then New York. There was no opportunity for our paths to cross.

But of course, I knew about him and his work, knew him to be one of the 'good guys' when it came to the issues I cared about.

His own passions of course were Australian Aborigines, about whom he wrote many books, sport, and Aborigines and Sport, as well as the topic of genocide. These interests no doubt reflected his personal history of having emigrated from South Africa, and it was his great gift to Australia that he researched and wrote so perceptively and with such fervour on topics that continue to need our urgent attention.

Following his death, at the age of 84, in 2019, the CEO of the Sydney Jewish Museum, Norman Seligman, noted that Tatz had played an important role in the museum's programs, conducting many seminars and workshops: 'All his endeavours were infused by his passionate quest for tikkun olam – for a just and fairer society resting on democratic values, social justice and human rights'.

Following the dismal results of the recent referendum on The Voice, many of us are feeling not only upset but pessimistic about the future of race relations in this country. So it was interesting, while researching Tatz's work, to come across this comment in an article he wrote, about the Voice, in 2017 in *The Conversation*, where he asked: What new administrative creature lurches toward Canberra in 2018 or 2019?

'If it is to have no executive, political and financial authority,' he wrote, 'and if its decisions have always to be "wise" and "logical" in governmental eyes, then we are in for another expensive and doomed instrument.'¹

We will never know what stance he would have taken on the 2023 government referendum, but it is difficult to imagine that he would have been happy about the massive No vote.

I can find no evidence that Colin Tatz had any particular interest in women's issues and the subjects that I am going to address tonight, but he had at least read Doris Lessing's *The*

¹ Colin Tatz, Australia has ignored black viewpoints before why would a constitutional voice be any different?' *The Conversation* 3 August 2017 <https://theconversation.com/australia-has-ignored-black-viewpoints-before-why-would-a-constitutional-voice-be-any-different-81816>

Golden Notebook which was something of a bible for we women's liberationists in the 1970s. Even though the book had been published in 1962, it spoke with remarkable prescience to the issues of independence and freedom that the women of my generation aspired to. I suspect, however, that Tatz was more likely to be interested in Lessing's views on race relations in Rhodesia than he was in her feminism.

Even so, I hope that he would be interested in the quandaries and struggles that we continue to have in achieving the independence and freedom that Lessing's female characters yearned for.

THE advertised title of my talk – 'From Liberation to Equity' – is of course an abbreviation. The full title is 'From *Women's* Liberation to *Gender* Equity' with the words 'women' and 'gender' doing the heavy lifting in a way that 'revolution' and 'equity' perhaps could not. What I want to explore this evening is how and why we have landed on this dilution of the description of what we women want. Have we become less ambitious or are we just adjusting to reality? Does anyone even talk about 'liberation' anymore?

In fifty years, we have gone from demanding women's liberation to asking for gender equity. From insisting on free 24 hour childcare and abortion on demand to fretting about unconscious bias and outdated gender norms.

Not that these are not worth complaining about, but have we lost our anger and our outrage? Have we lost our passion? Are we being too polite? - to steal a phrase from the famous Glen Tomasetti song (and title of Wendy McCarthy's recent memoir) *Don't be too polite girls!* Is equity too tame an ambition when once we wanted liberation?

Or does it, paradoxically, set a more accurate pathway to dealing with the unfinished business of the second wave of feminism? Let's remember our basic demands: that we control our bodies and that we are economically independent.

This is the conversation we need to be having – still! – because we are not there yet. In many respects we might be going backwards and that is both alarming – and dangerous – for women.

In the past fifty years a lot has changed for women. There are no longer legal impediments to any ambition we might harbour. We have very high levels of education in this country. There are few jobs we cannot aspire to (even if we have trouble getting some of them). The lives of women of my generation are infinitely better than those of my mother's let alone my grandmother's.

Surely, we have made good progress.

And yet.

Our employment rate is persistently lower than men's. As of February 2023, data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) indicates that men's workforce participation is at 71.9 per cent compared to 62.8 per cent for women. Twenty years ago, it was 56.6 per cent per

cent. So it has improved, while men's has remained relatively steady, but we still have a way to go to equal men's participation.

We persist in having the highest rate of part-time employment in the OECD. (No matter our age, fewer than 50% of those of us in employment work full-time, according to data collected by the Women's Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) from the companies reporting to it²). The ABS paints a rather different picture, however. Its data, which is based on the entire population (rather than just those companies that report to WGEA) shows that a majority of women are in full-time employment except in the age groups 15-19, 20-24 and 60-64.³

When it comes to earnings, we are paid 22.8% less than men according to the latest figures from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency.⁴ Many women spend their entire salaries on childcare. We retire with less superannuation. And, as we read constantly in the news, women aged over 50 are at greater risk of homelessness than any other group.

So, when it comes to our economic situation, women are a long way from achieving what we used to call 'women's equality'. Let alone gender equity.

(In case you were wondering what the difference is between 'equality' and 'equity': according to the Australian Human Rights Commission 'Equality is recognising that, as human beings, we all have the same value. This means we should all have the same rights'. Legally in Australia we are entitled to be treated equally. Equity, on the other hand, 'is about achieving equal outcomes'. It means taking account of the fact that we don't all start from the same place and that sometimes we need to be treated differently in order to enjoy equality.)⁵

The recently released report of the federal government's Women's Economic Equality Taskforce (WEET) has estimated, according to its Chair Sam Mostyn, that the value of the Australian economy would increase by \$128 billion if 'the persistent and pervasive barriers to women's full and equal participation in economic equality' were removed.

In other words, although the Taskforce used the word 'Equality' in its title, its recommendations were all about equity, about what needed to be done to give women a chance at equality.

It is startling that in 2023 we still need to be having this conversation. You would think that women's employment would be one of the easier issues to address and reform. Isn't it totally straight-forward? Enable women to take any job for which they are qualified, pay them the same as men doing that or comparable work, make childcare accessible and affordable, and ensure women don't suffer financially when they take time away from the workforce to have babies.

How simple is that?

² <https://www.wgea.gov.au/data-statistics>

³ ABS Labour Force Australia, Detailed (66291.0.55.001) Table 01. Labor force status by Age, Social Marital Status and Sex.

⁴ <https://www.wgea.gov.au/data-statistics>

⁵ <https://humanrights.gov.au/lets-talk-about-equality-and-equity>

Not simple at all as it turns out, and I want to spend some time examining just why this is.

Back in the 1970s, before we realized just how complex the fight would be, and how hard the resistance, I think we would have been astonished by Sam Mostyn's finding. Even though we railed against the patriarchy and 'male chauvinism' – the term we used before 'sexism' was invented – I think that we assumed we could succeed. Our demands were reasonable. (Well, maybe not free abortion on demand, but we also campaigned for jobs and for equal pay. I remember one of the first actions of the Women's Liberation Movement in Adelaide when we first got started, in 1969, was to march in support of nurses demanding higher pay.)

We were encouraged by some early victories to believe that if we had a good case, governments would respond.

The Whitlam government came to power in 1972 and some of its earliest actions were in response to our demands: intervening in the Arbitration Commission to support the case for equal pay; removing the luxury tax on contraceptives; making the Pill available on the PBS; funding family planning clinics and, later, women's refuges, health services and rape crisis centres. Appointing women to key positions they had never occupied before, setting precedents, giving us hope. For example, in December 1972 Whitlam appointed Elizabeth Evatt as the first female Deputy President of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, what had till then been an exclusively male institution.

The Whitlam government did not last long enough to implement some of its promises, anti-discrimination legislation for instance, but the Fraser government, despite its rhetoric and our fears, did not turn the clock back. He even advanced it in a key area by introducing family allowances. These payments were a radical redistribution 'from the wallet to the purse', of the old child endowment, which used to be paid to the father. It now went straight into women's own bank accounts. (We were allowed to have those by then although we still could not borrow money without a male signatory as I found when I tried to buy a house in Canberra in 1980.)

The Hawke and Keating government were even more responsive than Whitlam had been. We got the Sex Discrimination Act (albeit with some reservations that I will come to), childcare was federally funded (although initially just a meagre 30,000 places) and, under Keating, was made affordable via a tax rebate and, as I used to report in speeches I made while heading the Office of the Status of Women in the Hawke government in the mid-1980s, the pay gap was narrowing so fast that equal pay was just a few years ahead.

We were making progress.

What we did not realize was that progress was not the marker we thought it was. Nor did we fully understand the insidious forces lurking in the weeds, just waiting to subvert the gains we thought we had made.

We were measuring progress but we did not think about the bigger picture. About whether we were succeeding. Not just us individuals but as a sex. Or, as we would say today, a

gender. Individual progress is not only not enough, it can be deceptive in making us think we are doing better than we actually are.

This important distinction was laid out in a landmark speech in 2011 by Hillary Clinton when she was US Secretary of State in an address to the APEC Women and the Economy Summit. The meeting was held in San Francisco and was said to include the largest gathering of foreign diplomats to gather in that city since the founding of the United Nations 66 years earlier.

As Secretary of State Clinton was a great champion for women's economic progress. It is said that she required every desk officer in the State Department to know the fertility rate of every country they were responsible for. The fertility rate of course is an important measure of women's economic status. Generally speaking, the higher the fertility rate, the lower is women's economic status.

In her speech to the APEC delegates Clinton laid out the tremendous economic gains being made by women in many APEC countries. Then she said:

So the promise is clear. What then is the problem? If women are already making such contributions to economic growth, why do we need a major realignment in our thinking, our markets and our policies? Why do we need to issue a declaration from this summit? Well, because evidence of progress is not evidence of success.⁶

She was referring to the uneven rates of development in different countries. Women were not progressing everywhere so success could not be claimed. And she pointed to the benefits that would follow if women had greater access to the economy. 'The World Bank finds', Clinton said, 'that by eliminating discrimination against female workers and managers, managers could significantly increase productivity per worker by 25 to 40 per cent. Reducing barriers preventing women from working in certain sectors would lower the productivity gap between male and female workers by a third to one half across a range of countries'.

It didn't happen. Despite the advocacy of the most powerful woman in the world, from the most powerful nation on earth, despite the palpable economic benefits for whole nations that would have followed. It didn't happen then, and it is still not happening as was attested to by the very similar remarks made by Sam Mostyn in her report when she calculated the Australian economy would benefit to the tune of \$128 billion if barriers to women's participation were removed.

We have to ask ourselves: why? Why are nations not acting in their self-interest by opening up opportunities for women and thus growing their economies to the benefit of all? What is stopping them?

⁶ <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/20092013clinton/rm/2011/09/172605.htm>

In particular, why is Australia so recalcitrant? We who used to have such a stellar record in improving wages and conditions for workers – male workers mostly – why are so behind today?

Partly it is the result of government policies.

Even the well-intentioned ones sometimes have unforeseen consequences. (Let's hope they were unforeseen rather than intended.)

In 1983 the Australian government ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which provided an international legal basis for the ground-breaking Sex Discrimination Act which was introduced in 1983 and enacted on 1 August 1984. But in ratifying CEDAW the government insisted on two reservations, i.e. notifying the UN that there were two provisions in the Convention that it intended to disregard.

The two reservations were in respect of women in the armed forces, and paid maternity leave. Both these reservations were to have a detrimental effect on women's employment, making them at odds with the underlying intention of the Act itself.

Australia, along with the United States, were the only two countries then that refused to legislate for paid maternity leave, as it was called then. This meant that women lost income for the period they were out of the workforce after having a baby. I do not have the figures to hand as to how many women this affected but we can be sure it was many thousand. And it was worse than just losing the salary for the three or six or nine months they opted to take leave for. Women also lost seniority, they fell behind their male colleagues in superannuation as their employer was not bound to contribute for an employee who was not receiving salary, and – in far too many cases and in total breach of the law – many women were fired during their maternity leave.

This still happens today. I know several women, each of them in senior executive positions, whose jobs were abolished while they were on what is now paid parental leave, effectively sacking them.

The armed forces reservation had an equally negative impact on women's employment. The Sex Discrimination Act required the Defence Department to abolish the special women's services – the WRANS, WRACS etc – and to integrate women into the general armed services. The Cabinet agreed to Defence's supplication that women only be allowed to serve in jobs that were not 'combat' or 'combat related'.

There were 17,500 job classifications in total in the armed forces and I was on the IDC that had to go through every single one of these job classifications to determine whether the job was 'combat' or 'combat related' or whether women could be allowed to apply for it. You would be amazed how many defence jobs were 'combat related'. Women could not even be cooks in the army. Just in case the kitchen had to be deployed near a combat zone. (Not a remotely likely possibility in 1986 you'd have to say). By the time we had finished, there were fewer jobs for women in the armed services than had been available to them in the separate women's services.

So much for ending discrimination.

There were other forces lining up to keep women out of employment, or to make it as difficult as possible for them to have jobs.

One of the arguments I had to contend with when I ran the Office for the Status of Women was that married women were taking the jobs of teenage boys – and therefore had to be stopped. Given that Australia had – and still has – one of the most gender segregated workforces in the world, this was a risible suggestion, without any basis in fact whatsoever but that did not stop employers from mounting campaigns and throwing up roadblocks for women.

But the most surprising, and the most formidable, opposition we faced in trying to improve women's economic opportunities came from within the bureaucracy and, worse, the cabinet itself.

One of the biggest battles was around a tax deduction that was called the 'dependent spouse rebate' and which we women fervently opposed because it was in fact a monetary reward to men whose wives did not work. Each year during the budget process we tried to get it abolished. It would have saved a lot of money as well as removing an obstacle to women entering employment. Every year, our proposals were blocked. Not by the federal opposition but by the highest levels of the bureaucracy. In those days all but one of them were men, and in every single case, their wives did not work outside the home.

Talk about self-interest overcoming the requirement (then) for public servants to give impartial advice.

But it was the federal cabinet itself that was the most frustrating, and disappointing, opponent. When Prime Minister Hawke announced in his 1984 election policy speech that he would fund 30,000 childcare places, there was uproar from several of his Cabinet colleagues because this policy had not been presented to cabinet in advance. One minister in particular, the Minister for Finance, made it his life's purpose to get the policy cancelled. He did not succeed altogether but he got it cut back very substantially, again with implications for women who could not take jobs unless they could find childcare.

The same minister refused to fund the agency that would administer the new Affirmative Action laws that were designed to encourage employers to hire more women. He was eventually over-ruled by the PM but not without a long and bitter and time-wasting fight that revealed the depths of antagonism to women working among some of Bob Hawke's senior colleagues.

But if we thought things were difficult then, we had no idea what was in store for us when John Howard was elected in 1996.

It was Howard that broke us, destroyed our politics and, I would argue, fractured us irretrievably as a country. We had the evidence of his impact on multicultural and race policies on October 14.

When it came to women working, Howard was determined to turn back the clock, and to ruthlessly enforce his 'white picket fence' view of where he thought women belonged. I have written a whole book that details the destruction Howard wrought⁷, so tonight I will just outline a couple of the most egregious and damaging.

First Howard dismantled the institutional structures designed to advocate for women's employment. He shut down the Women's Bureau that had been established in 1963 by his political mentor Bob Menzies to track women's employment, especially equal pay, the Sex Discrimination Commissioner was forced out of her job to be replaced by Howard's buddy Pru Goward, and the Office of the Status of Women had its budget and reputation slashed.

Howard then set about his agenda of making it financially difficult, if not impossible, for mothers to work: he abolished Keating's Childcare Tax Rebate, he cut back spending on childcare, thereby reducing its availability, he made changes to the tax and family payments systems that ensured that women would effectively pay as much as 100 per cent taxes on their earnings. It meant that two-income families were severely penalised. Who would want to stay in employment under such conditions?

John Howard bragged about this: 'We've eliminated the bias that used to exist against single income families. We've effectively introduced income-splitting'.⁸

Howard's view was reinforced by Professor Peter McDonald from the ANU who said the overall bias [in the new policies] is in favour of pushing women out of employment'.⁹ Putting it more graphically, McDonald said, '...the largest payment that an Australian mother can obtain from government goes to those who leave the workforce at the birth of their first child and never return'.¹⁰

There have been some important changes since this: Gordon Bilney the Labor Minister for Defence Personnel from 1990 to 1993, forced Defence to open up first combat related and, later 'combat' jobs to women. There are few jobs in the military that women are forbidden to apply for, it's just that the numbers who do apply are not high. Now do they stay long. I guess that's what years of discrimination and harassment produce: a workplace not many people want to be part of.

Jenny Macklin and Julia Gillard introduced a limited form of Paid Parental Leave in 2011, allowing eligible mothers 14 weeks pay on the minimum wage; the scheme was later – twelve years later! – extended to include men and just a few weeks, the Albanese government extended it to 20 weeks with the intention to expand it eventually to 26 weeks. Welcome as these extensions are, the low rates of pay and the continued refusal to include

⁷ Anne Summers (2003) *The End of Equality*. Random House, Sydney.

⁸⁸ *The End of Equality* p. 150

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

superannuation means that taking this leave imposes a severe economic penalty on employed women.

Subsequent governments have largely left in place the Howard tax and payments policies with their ongoing impact on making it uneconomic for women to work full-time, or even work at all. This shows up in the high, and growing, figures for part-time work.

We have to hope that the present government, the first Labor government since 2013, will try to right some of these wrongs. Setting up WEET was a positive first step, but its recommendations need to be adopted if we are to see any actual change.

IT'S NOT JUST tax policies, childcare policies, PPL policies and the gender pay gap that are keeping women out of the workforce. It's also individuals, almost exclusively men, and they are using violence to do so.

As already mentioned, Australian women's overall participation rate is 62.8 per cent. My report *The Choice* found that that 50.8 per cent of the single mothers who were in my study were not working at the time of the violence. A further 15.2 per cent took time off work while they were experiencing the violence.¹¹

This is disturbing and deeply under researched phenomenon.

We know from the ABS Personal Safety Survey 2016 that of women who experienced partner violence in the past twelve months, 56 per cent were in employment. We just don't know much about that employment experience – or its consequences. Did they leave their jobs because of it? Did they reduce their hours and, consequently, their earnings?

My current research project entails using data from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health and HILDA to try to document the impact of this violence on women's employment. We have only just got started and have no results to share with you yet but will have early next year we hope.

I find it bewildering that there is practically no work on this topic because it has such severe consequences for the women involved as well as for society. We claim to be concerned about the extent and severity of domestic violence and yet we pretty much ignore these women and the impact this violence has on their economic as well as physical well-being.

There are at least two ways in which violence can impact on women's employment.

A woman can be actively prevented from working by her partner. That is financial abuse, a form of domestic violence. Analysis by Deloitte Access Economics puts the number at

¹¹ *The Choice*. P. 36

70,300 of women who were prevented by their partner from working in 2020.¹² And in the same year 86,300 women had their income controlled or completely withheld by their partner.

In addition, many women who are experiencing violence at home find it difficult to continue working. They may have physical injuries that are disfiguring or embarrassing; they may find it difficult to be punctual or to concentrate on their work (often because their partner is harassing them at work via phone or text or even making a physical appearance). Many women are physically and emotionally exhausted and simply cannot continue to work. Even more so when their earnings are confiscated by their partner, and they cannot enjoy any kind of economic benefit from their labour. We do not yet have the numbers of women who have left their jobs for these reasons, but we hope to be able to obtain them.

I regard this an urgent and important contribution to the task of reducing violence against women in this country.

TO CONCLUDE, I would like to return to Hillary Clinton's observation and say that we cannot talk of progress, let alone success, when it comes to violence against women.

In fact, this violence may well turn out to be a barometer of our success in achieving gender equality. It is a far more integral measure of our progress that we had previously imagined.

Violence against women is now firmly on the political agenda of federal, state and territory governments in a way that would have been unimaginable thirty years ago.

Indeed, when I worked for Paul Keating as Prime Minister in 1992 and our research started showing us that women considered domestic violence as the issue they cared most about, and wanted the government to act on, we were shocked. We also had no idea what to do. It was a state issue, we thought. But that was not good enough. Women across Australia were demanding that we 'do something'. They still are.

We women's liberationists were slow to understand how critical an issue this was. It was not until 1974, a full five years after we burst onto the political scene, that we confronted the violence so many of us had experienced in our own lives - the rapes, the assaults, the beatings - and realized that no issue exemplified 'the personal is political' more than violence against women. Once we'd had that 'lightbulb moment' we jumped in, feet first and took radical steps to at least try to help women who had been subjected to such violence.

1974 was the year we were galvanised into action: we opened Elsie Women's Refuge in Glebe, Australia's first modern refuge for women and children escaping domestic violence, we opened the Leichhardt Women's Health Centre, where women could go for non-judgemental medical treatment and advice on all matters including the impacts of violence, and we opened the Sydney Rape Crisis Centre.

¹²

<https://www.commbank.com.au/content/dam/caas/newsroom/docs/Cost%20of%20financial%20abuse%20in%20Australia.pdf>

Governments eventually responded by funding these services, although never adequately, and the battle for secure funding continues for Australia's estimated 800 women's refuges. But in addition, we now have our second National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022-2032 which has been signed onto by every government in Australia. It replaces the previous ten-year plan which aimed to 'reduce' – rather than 'end' – violence against women. It was never evaluated so we can't judge how effective it was but as we look around us, we'd have to say it didn't do much.

The current Plan 'outlines what needs to happen to achieve the vision of ending violence in one generation'¹³. On paper it looks good, or at least plausible, setting out the four 'domains', or elements of the Plan: prevention, early intervention, response, recovery and healing.

But it is flawed, in my view, for its stated assumption that we cannot end violence until we achieve gender equality. It should be the other way round.

We have only to look at countries with greater gender equality than Australia, the Nordic countries for example, to realise the fallacy of this assumption. These countries all have much higher rates of domestic and family violence than Australia does.¹⁴

So what are we to do?

If ever gender equity were needed in order to address a systemic issue that is costing women their safety, their health, including their mental health and, too often, their very lives. And often those of their children as well. Then this is a potent example.

Let's recall what we mean by gender equity: it's putting in place measures that will compensate for the barriers women experience in striving for equality. Hillary Clinton put it in terms of women's economic progress helping enrich nations.

I think we need to expand that to consider what measures we need to put in place to prevent the various kinds of abuse that make up contemporary domestic and family violence.

We need to recognise that 'domestic violence' is no longer just, or even mainly, about physical violence. The repertoire of forms of abuse available to perpetrators have been more extensive, more sophisticated and immensely more cunning and calculated than the traditional notion of a single incident of physical violence directed at the woman.

As a consequence we need different strategies to address each of these different forms. We might have to recognize that different men employ different methods, or that some men start with apparently simple harassment but escalate quickly to far more serious forms of abuse.

¹³ <https://www.dss.gov.au/ending-violence>.

¹⁴ *The Vice* p. 13

We need to know who these men are and that means extending our focus, and our research, away from just concentrating on the women and children and looking also at the men who commit these crimes.

The police, especially in Victoria, are already doing valuable work in this area, and I intend my project to be expanded next year to include trying to measure these men and their crimes.

There is a lot riding on it, and I could talk about it all night, but I hope that I have given you a flavour of the challenges we face – still, now more than ever – to deliver on one of the two most basic demands of women’s liberation: economic independence.