

Original Paper

Feminism Is Still Relevant in Australia

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Received: June 25, 2021

Accepted: July 10, 2021

Online Published: July 15, 2021

doi:10.22158/sss.v2n3p26

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sss.v2n3p26>

Abstract

Feminist movements had been pervasive in the 20th century. It helped women to earn civil rights globally, welcomed by most civilized citizens. Then in the 21st century, it seems to have no reason to exist since there are no apparently observable and unpleasant unequal treatments towards women. Feminism, hence, is regarded as a word of the past by some people.

Nevertheless, it is not the fact. By studying the situation in Australia, women in this nation have become the study object. Working opportunities in politics and business have been counted, combined with the study of relevant government policies towards different gender. The male's changing attitude towards female in gender role has also exposed the socialization process in Australia. Through close scrutiny, it is found that feminism is still very much relevant in Australia.

Keywords

Feminism, Australia, opportunity

1. Introduction

In 2002, John Howard, the then prime minister of Australia claimed that “we are in the post-feminist stage” (Summers 21), apparently implying that feminism was not relevant any longer in the country. However, the reality is just the opposite.

In this article, through analysing why there is always only a small number of women at the top level of both politics and business, checking some of the government policies which have led to more women staying at home and having less opportunities to work, and examining the social phenomenon of baby bust, eventually the conclusion is reached that in Australia, men and women still have no equality of occupational opportunities, not to mention the equality of opportunities on the whole.

Also, feminism, according to the Longmen Dictionary, is “the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men.” This indicates that feminism is not simple about the equality of opportunities, but about the general equality between men and women, which cannot be gained without two other elements beside the women's own efforts—the government support and the changing attitude

of men towards the redefinition of the gender role. At present, Australia, lack of both of these elements, still has a long way to go for the gender equality, and feminism is definitely relevant in the country.

2. Inequality of Opportunities in Gender

The first and most obvious factor that shows the inequality of opportunities between Australian men and women is the small proportion women take up at both the top of the business and the politics. On the part of the business, “according to a census .of the board memberships and senior management of Australia’s top 200 listed companies, conducted by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, only 8.2 percent of board seats were occupied by women” (Summers 174). On the part of the politics, in the parliament of 2003, “women in Cabinet only covered 11.7%” (Summers 213). In both cases, the representation of women is seriously insufficient, but why? Does it have something to do with women’s personality, capability, or just the inequality of opportunities?

Supposed it is the concern of the women’s personality that blocks their way up. This possibility is at once eliminated when the toughness and strong will of Margaret Thatcher, the first prime minister of Great Britain, come across one’s mind. Then supposed it is the doubt of the women’s capability that hinders their promotion. This possibility is also wiped away by the great ability of Margaret Jackson as a brilliant corporate executive. Running out of excuses about either the personality or the capability of women, the only thing left is the inequality of opportunities.

To some, the existence of this unfair situation is named “the glass ceiling” (Mackay, “Advance Australia...Where” 35). It is a form of barrier that stops the qualified people to further advancement, invisible because of its transparency. However, still it is there, deterring women from promotion to the top jobs. To others, rather than the glass sailing, the situation is described as the “wooden doors, which are being increasingly slammed in their faces and block women’s vision of what really goes on in the corridors of power” (Summers 174). No matter glass or wood, one point definitely affirmative is that to a large degree, women are shut out of the top leaderships of both corporations and the parties and government, clearly showing the inequality of opportunities between men and women.

3. Government Policies and Gender Role

Apart from the most obvious indication of unequal opportunities mentioned above, other indications also appear among some of the government polices, such as the baby bonus and the childcare policy of John Howard government. Through carefully examining, both of these policies are found that, no matter what were the government’s original intentions of their implementation, part of the effects is trapping women at home after child’s birth and reducing their chance to return to the workforce, and thus these policies themselves suggest the inequality of opportunities between men and women.

Baby bonus is a policy that was supposed to be a financial assistance to the Australian families. It was announced by the John Howard in 2001 during his election campaign, with the name of “the First Child Tax Refund”. The bonus was to “consist of a repayment of the amount of tax paid in the previous year of

the child's rate averaged over 5 years, so that 1/5th of the tax paid is refunded each year. The maximum rate of refund will be \$2500 per year, while the minimum rate will be \$500 per year. However, where the parent returns to the workforce within 5 years of the birth of child, their entitlement will be reduced" ("Bills Digest," par. 4).

Therefore, to get the full amount, the mother has to be out of the workforce for five years, which is such a long period of time that the mother would find it most difficult to resume her original work, or even find a job, in a fast-paced world. Being an outside of the workface means the mother not only missing the chances to acquire a great sum of knowledge, keep updated and abreast of trends, but also doomed to face the inevitable staff changes in most enterprises. Unless the mother in her maternal leave indeed has the working capacity that hardly anyone else's could surpass, it is unlikely that her position would be retained, and thus her opportunities to resume it would be largely lessened. Actually, from the moment that this choice of staying to receive the bonus or going back to work was laid right in front of the mothers, the policy, deliberately or not, caused inequality of working opportunities.

Also, the childcare policy of John Howard results in having more women stuck at home. Through all these years, the Childcare has been paid by both the government and the parents. "In its first four years, however, the Howard Government stripped \$850 million from the child care budget and froze indexation of Child Care Assistance" ("Short changed again," Par. 21). Also, the Childcare Cash Rebate was "significantly reduced from 30 percent to 20 percent" ("Health pubs budget," par. 8). So the part that the parents shoulder became heavier and heavier, and finally led to more women stayed at home because of the unaffordable cost of childcare

Beside inequality detected from the government policies, some other factor is also located in the social phenomenon of baby bust, which genuinely reflects the women's realization of the sacrifices of their occupations after having babies and the serious social problem of unfair treatments to the working mothers, which apparently shows the inequality of opportunities between men and women.

Baby bust is "the phenomenon of a dramatically declining birth rate" (Summers 44). The study of the total fertility rate by Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that "from 1961 when the fertility rate reached the peak of 3.6, it has constantly decreased. Until 1999, it was in the lowest level of 1.75 in the latter half of the twentieth century. Then "until 2007, the fertility rate was only 1.93, but was still claimed to be the highest in the last 25 years" (Australia's Total Fertility Rate," par. 1). What has happened to the Australian women? Are they so indulged in their own life that they become selfish and unwilling to be parents? The study of professor Chilla Bulbeck shows the reality is the other way. Around, and "more than 80% women still long for having their own babies" (Note 1).

Then, probably the explanation of the sharp contrast between the willingness of the majority of women to have babies and the fact of much fewer babies is born should be that the sacrifices of society asking women to do for having babies, especially in the aspect of employment, are simply too much for women to accept. As known, and most women in Australia prefer to have a job, and "the overall participation rate of women, whether in full-time job or part-time job, was 66.1 percent in 2003"

(Summers 161), and has been growing ever since. Thus, it is likely that women would think over the consequences of having babies. With the unfavourable government policies for they back to workforces serves as part of the reasons to keep their hesitated to make the choice of giving birth, there must be some other serious social problems, such as the discrimination for the working mother, that effectively made women decide to postpone or even not give the birth of their children. Therefore, this baby bust actually shows the seriousness of the inequality of opportunities.

4. Conclusion

In all, no matter from the aspect of the proportion of women as the leaders in politics or business, the government policies, or from the social phenomenon, the equality of opportunities between men and women is still out of reach, let alone the total equality that may leads to the final disappearance of feminism. However, both of the government support and the changing attitude of men towards the redefinition of the gender role, the two indispensable factors to achieve the equality between men and women, are still far from satisfactory.

As for the government policies, the ones above have already made the case clear that the support from government needs enforcements, even though the government has been changed from the leadership of John Howard to that of Kevin Rudd. As for the changing attitude of men towards gender role redefinition, there is still “the widespread failure of Australian men to adapt their behavior to match the redefinition of gender roles. Even though they are beginning to adapt to the emerging realities of the New Woman, it is still fair to characterize the typical Australian male response as being a dim awareness that something has gone wrong with his life” (Mackay, “Reinventing Australia” 35). As a matter of fact, “direct, open, frank and well-intentioned discussion about the changing role of women between men and women still appears to be a relatively rare event” (Mackey, “Reinventing Australia” 47). The simplest fact to show their attitude is the fact that as known, it is still unusual for the husbands to help with housework.

Thus, both the government support and the total change of men’s attitude are in shortage, and the conclusion can be drawn as that the gender equality has not been achieved yet and it seems that feminism would still exist in this country for quite a while.

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Note 1. The diagram is adopted from professor Chilla Bulbeck’s lecture notes of *Intimate gender relations*.

