



Australian Women

Women in Australia by Norman Mackenzie

Review by: Thelma Hunter

The Australian Quarterly, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Mar., 1963), pp. 79-84

Published by: [Australian Institute of Policy and Science](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20633853>

Accessed: 02/02/2014 20:39

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Australian Institute of Policy and Science is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Australian Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

AUSTRALIAN WOMEN

It is a truism that the practice of the law may differ widely from the letter. Administrative, institutional and cultural factors may combine to retain customary forms of behaviour which run counter to legal requirements. The widely differentiated rôle of men and women in our society provides an outstanding example of the discrepancy between legal forms and institutional practice.

As in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, under Australian law the sexes have equal rights and obligations. A few discrepancies remain in this country but these are likely to disappear within the next decade. However, in all three countries there are in practice widespread inequalities. Moreover, such comparative studies which exist suggest a trend towards uniformity in the rôle of women in many industrialised countries. America is not the feminist Utopia it is frequently, though fallaciously, thought to be. The pattern of economic, political and social participation is broadly comparable to that in the United Kingdom and, surprisingly, Australia. More significantly, the forces which determine the respective patterns are essentially similar. This is not to deny differences in the extent or magnitude of their participation in each country, though these, too, tend often to be exaggerated.

The broad structure and thesis of Norman Mackenzie's *Women in Australia*¹ could therefore be applied to an analysis of women in U.S.A., U.K. and probably to a number of other industrialised countries. Details and quantities would differ but the common elements would remain. Mr. Mackenzie's approach is nevertheless unique. In the U.K. and U.S.A., where much more research has been conducted on the status of women it is more usual to find monographs or books on particular aspects rather than a comprehensive analysis, within a single volume. Moreover, the author has, in certain areas, virtually pioneered a virgin field so far as Australia is concerned. In others he has meticulously sifted out the secondary sources, many of them extremely obscure, and integrated the whole into the first major exposition and analysis of the political, economic and social position of women in Australia. This arduous task was accomplished

* Department of Government, University of Sydney.

¹ *Women in Australia*, by Norman Mackenzie. (F. W. Cheshire Pty. Ltd., Sydney, 1962. pp. 407.)

during a twelve month visit to Australia and presented as a report to the Social Science Research Council of Australia who sponsored the project.

The author has amassed a vast quantity of material to substantiate his major thesis that the rôle of men and women is in practice widely differentiated. To cite only a few of his numerous factual examples. More boys than girls stay on at school at each of the years beyond minimum leaving certificate level. In practice though not in theory a different curriculum is available to each sex. Thus before their University course begins the sources from which professional women can be recruited for occupations other than teaching are severely limited. Within the universities women tend to concentrate mainly in the Arts faculties. Their postgraduate experience is much less than that of men. Add to this the tendency towards earlier marriage and, for professional women the picture is clear. It is hardly likely that by the age of twenty-four those who have survived the pitfalls, more often by good luck than good judgment, will have had sufficient experience to qualify for positions of seniority or responsibility, assuming these were readily available. Here is an important contributory factor to the paucity of women in the higher rungs of the professional ladder. As for those who metaphorically fall by the wayside at the earliest possible leaving age, by far the majority are concentrated in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations in industry and in the white collar occupations. In political life the picture is even more sombre. In party politics their rôle as members at the Federal, State and local level is minimal. Over the entire period since women have been eligible to sit in Australian parliaments only a fraction of one per cent have been women. In local government the proportion is even smaller and the unimpressive peak total of one hundred was reached in 1960.

Nor are women to be found at executive level within the extra parliamentary machines. Their rôle, though important in certain respects, is essentially subsidiary. Women are to be found mainly relegated to auxiliary bodies concerned with social and money raising activities, rarely with the formulation of policy. Moreover, the signs and rate of change are slight.

Altogether it is a gloomy prospect. Nor does the Australian feminist, unlike her British and American counterpart have a heyday which she may nostalgically recall. For the most part she has passively acquiesced in legal reform rather than acting as its motive force. The story of women's suffrage is of course the classic example.

The non-Australian is likely to be particularly intrigued by the fact that Australian women were given the vote earlier than women in any other country except New Zealand—and without a suffrage movement comparable to that in the United Kingdom and U.S.A. To the least tepid feminist the answers are likely to be disappointing. Possibly the democratic political climate of the early colonies was, as Mr. Mackenzie stresses, vital to the principle of egalitarianism. In terms of practical politics the facts only partly bear out this proposition. It would appear, rather, that Women's suffrage became a pawn in the traditional game of party politics. The machinations and personal wranglings of politicians on the issue point to the decisive elements. The composition of the electorate, the abolition of plural voting and the balance of party strength were the significant consideration rather than the democratic political principle of egalitarianism. As to the motivation and influence of the Women's Movement itself, the ardent support of a dedicated minority is not in doubt. There is, nevertheless, much to suggest that its driving force was the desire to raise standards of public morality rather than the political principle of votes for women. And for the vast majority of women the vote in Australia was secured well ahead of any expressed need or public demand.

It is far from apparent that feminine opinion has moved radically from its position of acquiescence. There are some murmurings of discontent but these remain largely confined within certain women's organisations such as The League of Women Voters, The Women's Political Alliance and business and professional women's associations. On the whole Australia's more vocal and active women are to be found in a wide range of exclusively women's groups with objectives largely, if not completely, unconnected with the removal of practical inequalities. For example, relatively few women see activity in local government or in State and Federal party politics as useful as participation in the Country Women's Associations, the Red Cross or the local school's Mother's Club. Moreover, within these groups, they may more easily find opportunities for leadership and status not available elsewhere. Not surprisingly, therefore, many genuinely prefer to maintain the *status quo*. And, at times, they have come in conflict with specifically feminine groups bent on reform.

Historically, many women's organisations have arisen from the need to concentrate opposition to certain inequalities. But the segregated group itself may, paradoxically, help perpetuate the social, economic and political division of labour between the sexes which

they deplore. There is considerable overlap in membership of these organisations. Moreover, their number and variety tends to dissipate the potentially strong bargaining power of women. Worse, it may remain dormant. It is significant, for example, that all five women senators have been elected on a party ticket; and that the overwhelming majority of women selected as candidates in Federal and State elections have been active members of the party rank and file. In the employment field the few women who have reached positions of high responsibility have done so mainly in open competition with men. All this strongly suggests that a more certain and direct approach to equality is by participation with men, wherever possible, in mixed functional social and political groups.

To this must be added a further criticism of sex segregated groups. The assumption of many associations which aim at practical equality, one which is often explicitly stated, is that there is a woman's point of view as such, as distinct from her viewpoint as a member of her professional trade union or political group. They argue that the aim of equality should be to secure complementarity of a 'male' and 'female' point of view rather than the principle of egalitarianism in itself. No doubt the idea of a uniquely feminine point of view is interesting psychologically. But insistence upon equality on the basis of this specularise hypothesis is more likely to arouse suspicion than support. Historically Vida Goldstein's repeated failure to secure electoral success provides a classic example of the consequences of this form of sex chauvinism. And, as Mr. Mackenzie aptly confirms "the fringes of Australian politics has ever since been littered with wreckages of this kind, doomed to failure because they made this feminine misconception their point of departure." A recent example is the rapid demise of the Women for Canberra movement. Another is the idea of a Woman's Bureau on the pattern of the American bureau. The need for research and dissemination of knowledge on problems of women's employment is not in doubt. Whether this should be accomplished by a separate administrative body, in all probability under the direction of female public servants, is another matter. Well intentioned enthusiasts may well find that they are yet another sex segregated group preaching to the converted. Above all, the composition of such a bureau, if it comes into existence, should be determined by qualifications and experience in the entire field of industrial relations.

Clearly any reformist group and particularly a minority one, must take account of the economic and political realities of the

societies they may wish to change. Feminists seem unlikely to do so so long as they shelter behind the false security of all-female groups. The question of equal pay is a case in point. For many weary years the issue reappeared on the agenda of numerous women's organisations. It was not until the Australian Council of Trade Unions took up the case (not invariably on grounds of social egalitarianism—they are often more interested in job and salary protection) that the movement really made progress. In New South Wales, the joint efforts of The Labour Council, The Public Services Association and The Union of Teachers and Public Servants, all of them mixed groups, led eventually to the so called 'Equal Pay' Legislation in 1958.

Difficulties of implementing the principle, however, are greater than Mr. Mackenzie suggests. To date, the Courts in their interpretation of the act have been emphatic in their view that the N.S.W. Government did not envisage any radical departure from traditional methods of wage fixation. The legislation provides for equal pay where the Commission is satisfied that "male and female employees are performing work of a like nature *and of equal value*" (Sect. 3(1)). But where work is proven to be the same, and it is by no means easy to show this, *the value* attached to it by the Commission may be different and the equal pay provision of the Act will not apply. Moreover it is of first importance that the courts' interpretation of value so far as women's wages are concerned, retain the social principles which have for years confused Australian wage policy. The capacity of industry to pay a particular wage which has introduced a more conventional economic valuation of male wages, does not apply to female wages. To these the courts continue to apply the traditional criterion that the needs of women employed on "women's work" is seventy-five per cent of the male basic wage. This ensures that the equal pay provisions of the Act are inapplicable to women employed in occupations which are "essentially or usually female occupations", that is, to the vast majority of jobs on which women are employed.²

Detail of this kind is, often with good reason, difficult to include in a general survey of the type undertaken by Mr. Mackenzie. And there are inevitably other areas where, on the evidence conclusions are bound to be speculative. Mr. Mackenzie is always careful to distinguish between conclusive and speculative evidence. Indeed, he

² For elaboration of this point see "Industrial Courts and Women's Wages in Australia". Thelma Hunter, *The Economic Record*, Vol. 38, No. 84, Dec., 1962.

pointedly underlines the areas where further research is required. What effect does religion, age and social class have upon attitudes towards working women and married women in particular? What effect does the suburban sprawl and the consequent isolation of many married women have on their participation in economic and political life? How does the tendency towards earlier marriage and the greater life expectancy of women (a point which Mr. Mackenzie hardly mentions) affect the family and the working life of women? If women now have for a variety of reasons, demographic, economic and social, a dual rôle to play in society how can social policy facilitate its execution?

It may be that there are no clear cut solutions to the dilemma of woman's situation. At the same time, the possibilities of compromise solutions are unlikely to present themselves without considerably more insistence by policy makers and women themselves. It is no longer possible to argue that too little is known. Mr. Mackenzie's analysis of the female situation provides more than ample ammunition for the social reformer. For the academic he has given direction to research in the field for many years ahead.