

Why Women's Activism?

Women's organising, particularly *autonomous* organising, is still needed.

There is often a perception that the women's movement will 'stop', when equality is 'won'. Many people believe this is already the case. But discrimination and oppression have two faces – structural and attitudinal. Structural oppression is both local and global and involves many institutions from judicial, to educational, to industrial, medical and political etc. Some gains, in some countries, have been made in some of these male dominated, (i.e. patriarchal) institutions.

Attitudes however, are much, much harder to alter and fundamentally, in asking men and women to change their attitudes towards each other, (and the roles they play in society), necessarily involves some people giving up power – something the powerful do not voluntarily do. So if power is to be more equally and equitably distributed among genders, (and among races, religions, sexualities, abilities) power needs to be *fought for*, not asked for nicely.

Generally speaking, the saying goes that while my sisters continue to struggle in poverty and oppression, I am not truly liberated. So internationally, and domestically, the fight to achieve equal rights for women, (for healthcare, for working rights, for education, for sexual and reproductive freedoms), is NOT over. And though different in terms of the challenges for developed and developing countries (and between the classes), they are nonetheless crucial and in fact essential to justice in the personal and political lives of women.

In a country like Australia that uses phrases like, "post-feminism" the smokescreen of equality is highly superficial when actually looking closer at the lives of women. To see the continually high levels of domestic violence, of unreported and unquantified sexual assault, the growing levels of "underemployed" women living in poverty due to the casualisation of many service and caring jobs, the de-valuing/poor pay of "women's work" or female dominated sectors (read: teaching, nursing etc) and of the impact of debt on women, makes the term "post-feminism" seem farcical. Let alone the stark and equally disturbing threats to the lives and livelihood of women in countries who still refuse them education, contraception, health care, economic rights and in many cases enslave them to the world of sexual trafficking.

Nelson Mandela's words are equally applicable to the feminist movement when he says

"the truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road. For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

Think, that if women HAD achieved equality during the "bra burning" years:

- Why does Australia still have the most gender segregated workforces in the OECD world? (women teach, care, serve, while men are the CEOs, judges, dentists, engineers, scientists...)
- Why, would trades and labour councils still have to be running pay equity test cases with their respective industrial relations commissions to show how women in certain industries still earn less than men in other, equally skilled but not valued, industries?
- Why, are women still discredited and disbelieved when they come forward with sexual assault allegations? And then people wonder why reporting of rape is so low?!
- Why is the Howard Government adamantly against a Paid Maternity Leave Scheme and instead favours encouraging women back into the home during child rearing years WITHOUT a guarantee BACK into the paid workforce?
- Why, does the AEU still have to run seminars on superannuation for women who are facing the prospect of a retirement in near poverty because of lack of adequate superannuation...? The list goes on.



For so many of these issues, they are industrial issues. The blurring of women's working and personal lives, or of political issues that used to be characterised with the slogan, 'the personal IS political', illustrate how so much of the struggle for women's equality is or should be bound up in the work of their union.

Unfortunately, the history of the union movement and of its campaigns has been inextricably linked to protecting the rights of the permanent, full-time (traditionally male) workforce.

Hence, it has taken some time to convince unions that what happens once workers leave the workplace can and does have just as much impact on their working lives and capacity to work as does 'work-time', in the strictest sense. However, in addressing or attempting to understand HOW such interfacing impacts the lives of working women, some unions have misunderstood the demand for women's voice as a potentially alienating or destabilising force for the rest of their membership.

It takes the **strategic and autonomous organising** of women alone to fashion their own campaigns on priority issues in the journey for equality, and to have ownership over those goals. It is then appropriate, however, that unions as a whole conduct the implementation of these with the support of men, ensuring unions take responsibility for equality and anti-discrimination activities.

Andrea Dworkin, put it best by saying:

*"men who want to support women in our struggle for freedom and justice should understand that it is not terrifically important to us that they learn to cry; it **is** important to us that they stop the crimes of violence against us."*

In the AEU's Branches and Associated Bodies women's employment rights and women's union participation has been steadily advanced due to an active, committed and predominantly female membership. However, whilst 70% of the union's membership is women, and most have formal affirmative action rules in some positions, there can be other structural challenges our union should consider.

Key questions to ask here include:

- Are women in positions of leadership within the union AND within the profession?
- Why aren't women across the AEU branches and associated bodies, as well as most other unions in Australia, in the positions responsible for money? i.e. how many General Secretaries are women?
- How many women are on enterprise bargaining teams?
- What provisions fall off bargaining claims first?
- Who gets elected to conference? If Federal Conference did not have an affirmative action policy, who would be represented?
- With a member density of around 90%, and women being the majority within the profession and the union, what percentage of the membership are actually ACTIVE within the union? Why? Who?
- Which other officer position, or executive portfolio area in many Australian unions needs to constantly justify its existence with the same ferocity as the Women's Officer does year in year out?

The point about structural, as opposed to attitudinal, change is that it can be acknowledged as no-one's 'fault' but everyone's responsibility to rectify, once the inequality is exposed. Hence, feminists aren't blaming their male comrades when running campaigns to increase women's activism and participation in the union, because it's understood that traditionally trade unions have been designed, evolved and run by men. But, as a result, structures and processes have reflected the reality of men's lives, and not women's, and hence change must be made to accommodate others' realities – asking women to simply keep 'doing their best' to make the triangle fit the circle won't help.

It's like trying to catch the most amount of fish in an ocean where all the fishermen are catching dolphins in their nets. You can either refuse to use the same nets, and not catch as much fish, or you play their game and try to compete, knowing full well the means don't justify the ends.



Feminists argue that they neither want to compete on an unfair playing field, nor play the game men invented – in short we'd rather go vegetarian than fish at all! But how women want to change that culture, and what changes would actually sufficiently re-involve or re-orient women's participation in union, and hence the cultural shifts needed, aren't simple propositions.

Research undertaken in the area of women's contemporary involvement in their union, in our union, is few and far between, making it harder to identify/quantify the sorts of changes that may assist. Unfortunately, the reasons for this lack of documentation can sometimes be attributed to the very problems we wish to address through the Women's Activist Kit. That is, 'women's issues', have slipped from the community radar as the women's movement as a whole has been affected by stagnancy, multiple backlashes and the challenge that any diverse, political movement has in representing the interests of those involved, (despite the many layers of privileges and discrimination that exists even *within* the movement as well as from outside it).

So unfortunately, recent research on women's participation is scarce in many unions. What does exist, however, identifies for us significant areas for focus and some, luckily, are 'easier' attitudinal challenges rather than complex structural ones – there are those too however.

The NSW Teacher's Federation, has an annual memorial award, the Eric Pearson Study Grant. This grant provides for the extensive and international research into an area of industrial and professional relevance to the Teachers Federation as a union and/or a group/groups of members. The sorts of issues canvassed can range from current campaigns around reconciliation, privatisation of education, staffing of schools and colleges, class sizes, teacher workload and stress, multiculturalism / racism, violence, casualisation of teaching, equity issues, poverty, restructuring and reorganisation of education, specialist areas in education etc.

In 2004, for the first time in over 20 years, research on gender (that is women's interaction with their union) was awarded the Eric Pearson Study Grant – the recipient being Ms Sui-Linn White.

Broadly speaking, Sui-Linn's research discovered commonalities in the challenges unions are facing around the world in addressing the concerns of women and the involvement of their membership. These include the traditional **measurements and interpretations of activism** that have thus been less inclusive of women's responsibilities and participation styles, developing **fully inclusive recruitment and organisational strategies**, and **increasing the involvement** of a to date under-accessed/under-utilised section of the membership to build union strength. And again, these issues are much deeper than any quota rules or numbers of women in leadership could possibly address alone.

The next section of this Kit, **Contemporary Challenges for Women and Unions**, discusses in more detail, what these issues encompass and possible interpretations of solutions to the challenges.

Luckily, where trade unions often differ from other organisations which have inherited patriarchal structures, is that they have identified that their organisational approach has been less inclusive of women, (and indeed other marginalised sections of their membership like Indigenous members, members from non-English speaking backgrounds, bi-sexual lesbian gay intersex and transgender members and non-teaching staff) and they are taking measures to address this. This has, and can only be done by making a serious commitment to ensure that women's perspectives, experiences and participation styles are supported and facilitated.

