

Women in Society

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In July 2010, the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs provided the following facts in relation to women's place in Australian Society at that time. Notably the following information came to light:

Women in Politics

- Across Australia, there were more than 250 female parliamentarians, an average 35.9 per cent representation of women in federal, state and territory parliaments;
- National parliament consisted of 68 women, 30.1 per cent of all federal parliamentarians;
- Australian had its first female Prime Minister, a female Deputy Opposition Leader, and the first female Governor-General;
- Of the eight State and Territory Premiers or chief Ministers at that time, two were women.

Women on Australian Government Boards (July 2010)

- Women represent 33.4 per cent of sitting members in 529 Australian Government boards and bodies;
- Women hold 20.3 per cent of Chair and Deputy Chair roles on Australian Government Boards.

Women in Public Service (July 2010)

- In 2008 – 2009 there was a total of 93,683 women in the Australian Public Service (APS), representing 57.8 per cent of the workforce;
- Women held 37 per cent of all Senior Executive position, an increase of one percentage point from 2006;
- There were three female department heads in the APS.

Women in Local Government (July 2010)

- 51 per cent of local government employees were women, yet only 20% of senior managers are women and only 7 per cent of chief executives or general managers are women;
- 30 per cent of elected representatives in local government were women.

Indigenous Women (July 2010)

- 2.3 per cent of women identify as Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islander;
- The median age of death in 2008 was 84 for all Australian women. In comparison, the median age at death for Indigenous women has been

estimated as more than 20 years younger, at between 53.5 and 64 years;

- Indigenous women are 35 times more likely to be hospitalised due to family violence related assaults than other Australian females;
- Four Indigenous women represent electorates in the Northern Territory and NSW elected its first female Indigenous Minister in 2003;
- The first Australian Indigenous woman to be elected to a United Nations body, Ms Megan Davis, will become a member of the UN's Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

Living Arrangements (July 2010)

- In 2007, lone mothers headed 86 per cent of one-parent families;
- Women account for around 52 per cent of people living alone, this figure increases with age;
- The number of women receiving Commonwealth Rent Assistance in Australia in December 2009 was 760,069 (63 per cent), compared to the number of men which was 416,646 (37 per cent);
- In 2008, almost a quarter of women receiving Rent Assistance received Parenting Payment – Single, and around a fifth received the Age Pension.

Family (July 2010)

- In 2006, almost 58 per cent of women aged 15 years and over were in a registered marriage or de facto relationship;
- Just over 12 per cent of women aged 15 and over were divorced or separated;
- In 2006, 35 per cent of women spent 15 hours or more per week on unpaid domestic work; compared to around 12 per cent of men;
- Women make up 94 per cent of people receiving the Parenting Payment – Single;
- In 2008, 91 per cent of Child Support recipients were women;
- Women are more likely than men to volunteer and on average volunteer more hours over a year. In Australia 36 per cent of women are volunteers, compared with 32 per cent of men.

The federal Office for Women advises the Government on issues and policies affecting women in Australia. The above information is taken from a fact sheet published by that Office in about July 2010.

It is interesting to note the ever evolving role of women in Australian society over the last decade. It is clear from the statistics above that women are becoming more and more involved in politics, the law, industries and other areas that have traditionally been seen as within the realm of men.

Although the increase in women's participation across the board in Australian society has been slow, the positive is that it is on the rise. It would be interesting to consider statistics in say another three or five years to see if this increase continues. Feminists will no doubt agree that this is a positive development and women's participation and the general acceptance of women's role and input in all aspects of Australian industries, politics, governance, the law and the like is probably long overdue.

The real issue on this topic is whether or not the participation of women in Australian society will continue to rise, decline or plateau in the next decade and beyond. Taking nothing away from men who see themselves as sensitive new age guys ("snags") who are confident that they too can run a household, hold down a full time job, look after the children, supervise homework and have "Me" time, I think it is fair to say that traditionally, the tasks as a homemaker and primary carer for children have always fallen on the



women in our society.

We have all evolved and women are getting out becoming more involved in other aspects of society. For some women, such involvement is in addition to their traditional roles as the homemaker and primary care giver. For some women, the question may become a choice between pressure from an independent and satisfying career, or a happy and busy home life. Both roles have their respective, albeit different pressures, but nonetheless it is sometimes difficult to juggle and balance both well enough so that the women in such situations

Women in the Judiciary (July 2010)

- At the Australian Government level of the judiciary, three out of the seven federal High Court Justices were women;
- In the Federal Court, eight out of 49 judges are women;
- In the Family Court, 12 of the 35 judges of the Family Court (including the federal Family Court of Western Australia) were women, and the Chief Justice of the federal Family Court was a woman;
- Of the 59 Federal Magistrates, 20 were women;
- Therefore 28.6 per cent of judicial officers in the four federal courts were women, an increase of 2.6 percentage points from 2006.



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can have both a happy home life and the satisfaction of a successful career. For some women, the choice between one or the other may be an explanation as to why the statistics of women in Australian society as referred to above has not increased dramatically and continued to increase significantly over the last decade.

The practice of law and the legal industry is not particularly sympathetic to female practitioners, unless of course you are your own boss. There are great expectations and pressures that come with a legal practice and the expectation of most partners is that a practitioner, female or male, would put their job before their personal or family commitments. In addition, younger female practitioners who have yet to have a family but do wish to explore this option may find it difficult to negotiate between ongoing legal practice and having sufficient time to have children and children / family time.

However the philosophy of law firms in relation to female employees and practitioners has also no doubt evolved, slowly but surely. A lot of law firms have become more flexible towards female staff members with families or about to have families. Generally there is more effort to accommodate female staff members who have other personal and family commitments and there is more willingness on the part of partners of law firms to accommodate more flexible working arrangements for their female practitioners. Such flexibility

has helped in the retention of female lawyers in the legal industry; however, the pressure of work and need to perform continues irrespective of the flexible working arrangements. Perhaps it is the inherent pressure and expectations on all lawyers, including female practitioners, that ultimately make it less attractive for women to return to work in the law if or when they have a young family.

Juggling is always difficult; personally I have never been very good at it. Further, I think that it takes a certain type of personality, focus and commitment for anyone, including women to want to become lawyers and practise in the legal arena. There are external pressures to perform and succeed as well as a personal desire to do well and be the 'best'. A practise in the law always contains an adversary element, even in the purely commercial practice, the competition to do well amongst one's peers is always there, simmering in the background. All of these elements come together to make it difficult for legal practitioners, especially women lawyers, who may have to juggle a career, work, homework, children, spouse and 'me' time.

I recall when my daughter was younger and going to primary school, she used to ask me, "mum, the other kids mums come and collect them from school, why don't you pick me up from school like them?" She asked this a few times over her primary school years and I was quite taken aback the first time. I thought about her question, and

the real answer was I enjoyed my work, and would probably rather be at work (most of the time) then go to school regularly to pick her up when school finishes. Don't worry, she did not have to get home herself or alone, she had a great Carer who was absolutely wonderful. I was very fortunate to have the Carer that I did for my daughter, as it gave me the peace of mind to stay and work and (most of the time) be productive. Women (and men) with children will know how hard it is to leave your children with another person, even if they are the best Carer in the world, as you want to be sure they are safe and well looked after. To trust another person with one's children is very difficult. My daughter's Carer was magnificent, she allowed me to return to work knowing that my daughter would be safe and sound.

I have been very lucky in my work, I have been in the same employment for almost 18 years, the motto at my workplace is work to live and I have always fitted my family within my career. It is not only my bosses of the past that have been very understanding, that would probably not have been enough for the balls to keep juggling, the people I work with have always been helpful and supportive. Of course my family has also always been behind me and my career, sometimes to their detriment but still they were always there for me. On reflection I am sure I have been luckier than most both as a woman in the legal practice and as a mother at home, and the overall balance have helped keep all my balls juggling! ●