

What young women want

Stephen Lunn, The Australian , 5 March 2008

Young women in particular see it as a little more than an anachronism.

Yet some of the big issues feminists have long championed -- equal pay for equal work, affordable child care, the fight against the undervaluing of women acting as unpaid carers for ageing relatives and the underreporting of domestic violence and sexual assault -- remain high among the concerns of Australian women.

These conflicting findings are gleaned from a new survey published today by the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission. Released ahead of the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day on Saturday, Women, Rights and Equality offers a fascinating snapshot of what women want in a survey of females that covered issues including their attitudes to the workplace, work and life balance, maternity leave, domestic violence and sexual assault.

One thing they don't want is to be wife, mother, worker, carer, cleaner -- the archetypal superwoman -- which the report describes as "an unsustainable, unrealistic expectation that just places more pressure on women to make the juggle and complexity of life work seamlessly". Despite recognising women shouldn't have to bear the brunt of the work-home life balance, women admit most still do.

"It appears that many women still attempt to meet the myriad demands on their time by trying to ... do it all," the report finds.

"Women provide the majority of care for children, older parents and dependants with a disability, with 69 per cent of Australian adults believing that women are obligated to provide this care," it concludes. "As a result women are often unavailable for full-time work or indeed any work outside the home."

The survey, based on six focus groups comprising women young and old, married and single, rich and poor, and from English and non-English-speaking backgrounds, also found women didn't need to look too far for their inspiration. Forget Naomi Wolf, Margaret Thatcher, Hillary Clinton and Julia Gillard. "Virtually all women nominated their mother as role models," the report finds.

"Often mothers were seen as doing it tough, being very giving of themselves, providing support and comfort as well as the values by which their children should live their lives. They are seen as having made sacrifices to ensure their children had a better life than they had."

But it is women's antipathetic perceptions of feminism that will be likely to cause the biggest stir.

"Feminism is seen as having a damaged brand image," the report finds. While older women, those in their 40s and 50s, maintain an understanding of the legacy of feminism and view it positively, "younger women (under 30) ... see it as something of an anachronism whose job is largely done".

"Many women, younger and older, associate the term with stereotypes: radical or militant women who want to be men. There is also some confusion about what feminism means. They feel uncomfortable in describing themselves as feminists even if they can see some of the positives delivered by the movement." The report goes on to conclude that "the term feminist appears to have outlived its usefulness and indeed seems to be experiencing a backlash. It is timely to remind ourselves that without feminists, women in Victoria would not have received the vote 100 years ago."

Helen Szoke, chief executive of the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, agrees feminism is suffering from a bad brand image, but encourages women not to give up on the sisterhood.

"I think we should reclaim the word. At the moment it may be associated with stereotypes but we should link it to the positive advantages it has provided for women and not resile from it," Szoke says. "As late as 1966 women in

Victoria were still stopped from working in the public service after they got married. The feminist movement has achieved a great deal and there is still a great deal to do."

Political scientist Women's Electoral Lobby spokeswoman Sarah Maddison is blunt about the disregard among women for feminism.

"Feminism is one of the most profoundly misunderstood social movements of our time. Take the myth of bra burning. No bras were burned, yet this myth persists. The stereotype that all feminists are angry, man-hating, humourless and hairy-legged: again nonsense," Maddison says.

In 1968, 400 women under the name of New York Radical Women demonstrated at the Miss America beauty pageant, filling a "freedom trash can" with bras, high-heeled shoes, false eyelashes, girdles, curlers, hairspray, make-up and corsets. They couldn't get a protest permit, so no burning or even breast baring was done. "The fact that feminism has put issues like paid maternity leave, child care, equal pay, domestic violence, even contraception out there on the political radar is something that is often conveniently forgotten," Maddison adds.

"Regardless of whether women want to identify as feminists or not, the reality is there are huge numbers of women engaged in feminist struggles by any other name, whether it be better child care in their local community, or to push for equal pay to their male colleagues, or to get women and children out of detention centres. Those are feminist struggles."

Among the under-30s there is agreement that feminism is not a concept they readily warm to.

"I don't view feminism with any particular negativity, but I can see society looks at it as a bit of a taboo subject," says Canberra public servant Krista Zacharias, 22.

"I think that feminists decades ago were seen as troublemakers going against the norm in society. And even today women don't want to be associated with that negativity, even though they may agree with what's being fought for.

"I do agree that women my age might take what's been achieved for granted. It's so easy for us now to walk into full-time work and we don't really understand that a generation or two ago it was much harder for women to get the opportunity for full-time work."

Melbourne mother Jenny Shakespeare, 29, is on maternity leave from her full-time job as a business consultant for a large corporation. She associates feminism with "something too extreme". "I think the aims of feminism should be more in the middle, trying to achieve equality for men and women rather than women being the new men," Shakespeare says. "Women are still women and men are still men. Women still have the children and men can't do that, and I don't think women would want to lose the role of carer in their family."

One area of agreement is the critical role mothers play in the ambitions and lives of all women, whether they be 18 or 68. "(While) older women felt that younger women were more likely to hold up celebrities like Paris Hilton or Britney Spears as role models, those women aged 18-25 were just as likely to talk about their mothers as being their role models," the report finds.

Zacharias has high praise for the role her mother, Clare, plays in her life. "She certainly put us, my brother and me, before what she wanted. Even now, my grandmother lives with us, so Mum works full time as a primary school teacher, looks after my grandmother, and because I'm going into a new part of my career out of uni and into the work force, she's still there to give me advice. Dad's great and really helps out, but Mum's the general, does the cooking and cleaning, and still brings home the schoolwork she hasn't finished during the day. It's amazing how she does it. If I can be half the mother she is when I have children, that will do me fine," she says.

Shakespeare's mother stayed home from the age of 21 to look after four children. "She's happy with her choices, but now she's retired to all intents and purposes, she might have liked to have done something for herself, I think.

"She's certainly advised me that it's a good idea to keep something that's yours, apart from being a mother."

Szoke believes the importance placed on mothers by the young women of today has its foundations in the feminist movement.

“I see it as one of the successes of feminism. These women have seen their mothers and aunts, probably not involved in militant public action but certainly involved in cultural change, such as in how families work, within workplaces, and within community services such as child care.”

Szoke says the report notes younger women are also learning from their mothers what not to do and how to better balance their lives.

The report cites social researcher Mark **McCrindle**, who says: “Generation Y is less likely to tolerate inflexible work conditions in the same way that previous generations of women have. Gen Y have seen their parents pay for their standard of living through stress, broken relationships, long hours and health concerns and want more out of their lives.”

Overall, the new report finds women struggling to find any real balance between their multiple roles. “For most women, the pace of life, particularly the constant juggling, often leaves them feeling depleted of energy and stressed. Juggling work and children was seen as particularly challenging for most women,” it finds.

Szoke says there is a clear message for women that emerges from the survey. “Women can no longer try to fit themselves within the system. Instead, we need changes to the system to accommodate the demands and needs of modern women,” she says. “Those changes have to be structural, such as paid maternity leave and a much more proactive acceptance of family responsibility by employers, (corporations) and governments.”

She nominates women forced to work fixed hours as the area most in need of structural change. “There are major issues for those who don’t have flexibility in their work, for instance those in the retail, hospitality, banking and health sectors.”

The report cites workplace culture as “one of the most significant challenges that we face in terms of achieving real equality of opportunity”.

Despite concern over the word feminism, the survey found a hostile response to the lack of equity in pay between men and women. “Over 90 per cent of workplaces with more than two-thirds female employees have average hourly pay at less than \$18 per hour. In contrast, only 72 per cent of male workplaces have an hourly rate of less than \$18,” the report says.

It is an issue Deputy Prime Minister Gillard highlighted earlier this week when she noted the fight for equal pay for women “hasn’t been won”.

“It is felt that the only way this will ever be corrected is when there are enough women in senior, decision-making positions to create enough momentum for change. Younger women were often unaware of pay inequality and found it difficult to understand how systemic it was,”