

# Daughters of the revolution

In a documentary without a script

Wendy McCarthy

**FOR** five years from 1970 I pushed a stroller, with a baby or two or three, in passionate street marches with hundreds of other women. As our voices grew stronger it was easy to believe that the future would deliver equity and equality for women. With the assurance of a youthful true believer I told Edna Ryan, one of my heroines who had been at the forefront of many battles, that I was confident 24-hour child care was just around the corner. She responded that if my three children's children had access to quality child care it would be a miracle.

I was shocked that she could think that. I now know she was right about the complexity of providing quality child care across Australia. It is a dream yet to come true.

1975 was International Women's Year; the luxury tax had been removed from the contraceptive pill and family planning was federally funded, there was an office of women's affairs, political parties were listening, the *Girls, School and Society* report was underway. Government was addressing the agenda of feminism. We were on a roll. Gender roles were changing: in the words of the posters, 'Girls can do anything.'

The balance sheet is positive in terms of the change agenda of the women's movement, but the cultural change that maintains it has not happened – women are still falling short. So forgive me for being fatigued by well-known men and women discovering the issue of gender. I do not want to become a grumpy old woman, but I am having some challenging moments.

Women might be prime minister, governor-general, governors, premiers and heads of key interest groups, but discussions about targets and quotas, women on boards, work-life balance and affordability of child care feel like reruns of old conversations. Rather like shopping for clothes and all you see are things you have worn before. Many of my friends are now working grandmothers. This was not part of our original ambition – we could not contemplate being old – but what did we really change and what have our daughters inherited?

I RUN A mentoring practice with my daughter, and corporations seeking advice on how to mentor women for leadership often approach us. The companies complain that although they hire the best graduates – that means 60 per cent are female – within a decade the proportions change and women vacate the leadership and promotion track. ‘How do we retain and develop this talent?’ they ask.

Despite decades of progress, and high-profile women in political life, women are under-represented as senior leaders in many sectors. The word frequently used to describe women’s progress is ‘glacial’. Many of the women who join such firms after they graduate, these daughters of the revolution, have not been victims of discrimination – but at the point when they could lead they choose not to. As a group they are reluctant to organise and agitate for change. While recognising that every generation needs to do its own thing, I worry that they may squander the fruits of feminism.

The early women’s movement framed female participation as a rights issue. Policies for equal employment opportunity were developed and, particularly in the public sector, they helped significant numbers of women gain senior jobs. In general, though, these guidelines have not delivered as much as we hoped they would – and, while this does not mean they should be abandoned, they are not sufficient to deliver women leaders.

Change for women has not occurred in the way those of us who campaigned so hard imagined it would. The early assumptions that the glittering prizes would be ours if we followed conventional male pathways have not proved correct. Leadership cultures have been slow to respond to the aspirations and styles of female leadership. Yet women notice, and the new political role models – Quentin Bryce, the first female Governor-General and Commander-in-Chief of the Defence Force; Julia Gillard as Prime Minister; Anna Bligh, Kristina Keneally and Lara Giddings as state premiers – have remarked on the spontaneous messages they have received from women expressing delight at their appointments. They provide strong images for all women, and are particularly influential for young women who watch and see how to be a political leader, while others worry more about what these leaders wear than what they say.

Educational achievement stands out as the remarkable success of the past forty years. More girls than boys complete secondary school, and female graduates now outnumber males in most faculties. Law, medicine and business, once the provinces of young men, now have more young women who consistently outperform their male peers. The lack of educated women for leadership roles is no longer a supply issue. There are plenty of suitably qualified female candidates, so the question remains: why are they not selected?

Women still struggle with leadership issues and career paths, for there are few role models to choose from. The systemic barriers have been removed, but many cultural barriers remain. Understanding them helps us appreciate the context of young women's aspirations and achievements.

I GREW UP in Australia of the 1950s, when words like 'career' and 'leadership' were not part of a polite girl's vocabulary. A leader was a male hero directing from the front, military-style, the antithesis of a well-raised girl, who learned to wait to be asked to dance and not be bold or pushy. This remains a powerful cultural imprint for women today.

Few girls of my age would have thought that leadership was a suitable role for a woman. There were hardly any significant female leaders. Princess Elizabeth became Queen Elizabeth in 1952, but her role was a product of birth. Olympic athletes like Marjorie Jackson, Betty Cuthbert and Shirley Strickland were local role models in a sporting nation – physical skill was more highly regarded than brains even for women. It took years before we understood and valued Shirley Strickland's intellectual and academic achievements.

Teaching was considered a suitable occupation before marriage. For many girls the only way to attend university was by winning a secondary-teacher's scholarship, which provided four years of university education and a five-year bond. The bond could be waived after three years, with no penalty, if a female teacher married. Male teachers could not waive their bond when they got married. This confirmed the cultural expectations that work, let alone a career, was not the norm for women. The message was clear: marriage was a woman's full-time career.

I obediently did the right thing and married after three years. Like many young Australians we immediately left for London, and we spent the next three years working and travelling. That experience changed me forever. I realised that the Australian model of women was not universal but a cultural invention of our own. I also realised that there were better role models.

By the time we returned I knew that the classroom was my natural habitat and looked forward to a teaching career. I presented myself to the New South Wales Department of Education as a teacher with six years' experience. I was also newly pregnant, and after I told the interviewer the tone immediately changed. The clerk explained slowly, perhaps in recognition of my new brain tissue, that I could only be a casual teacher and my overseas experience would not be recognised. This meant I would be paid the same as a new graduate. He explained that although the marriage bar no longer applied, it was neither wise nor possible for me to make more than a casual commitment. After all, I was to be a mother.

It was my first confrontation with the intractable thinking and policy contradictions of the state. The commitment to the education of women of academic merit had been made and expressed by the scholarship. It recognised the need for skilled and dedicated teachers, but allowed women to return to their profession only as casuals, which meant they could not become principals. The message about leadership may have been implicit, but it was clear.

As I left the interview after agreeing to be a casual, feeling even foolishly grateful for the job, I wondered how a child-centred business could discriminate against motherhood but not fatherhood.

This double standard became a call to action for many and the reason such a large number of activists in the women's movement were teachers. They represented the biggest group of educated women, and they experienced discrimination first-hand.

The women of that era are now the tribal elders, but our daughters in their forties are making decisions that often surprise us. Problems that we thought had been addressed are re-emerging. Maternity leave is a good example. It was on the women's movement's first shopping list and this year, thirty-six years later, paid maternity leave became a right.

Yet I still see women struggling and walking away from work, deciding it is all too hard. Child care remains problematic, part-time work limited. As many women took the advice to establish their career, births are occurring later; paradoxically, it is more difficult to take long leave from a high-level position, so motherhood presents an exquisite dilemma.

This is typical of the cases we confront in our mentoring practice. A client I will call Mary was expecting her second child. She no longer felt highly valued at work following the birth of her first child, eighteen months earlier. The quality of the work was lower, and because she worked fewer hours she felt marginalised, no longer part of the team she loved.

At the placement interview, Mary expressed concern about accepting a mentor; she thought it highly unlikely that she would return to work after the birth of her second child. I stressed that this was precisely the right time for a mentor, as it would give her time to think about herself (a luxury for women with small children) and take a longer view. Even if she felt undervalued, her company was declaring its wish to retain her by investing in the program.

Mary decided to accept the offer, and after three years with a mentor (and another baby) she now feels valued and works part-time in a creative way. Maintaining the mentor relationship during maternity leave has subsequently become company policy, and made a difference to the retention and return-to-work rates. It has also increased their loyalty to a company that seems to care about families.

Mary is grateful that with her mentor she was able to find the reflective space that enabled her to consider her options and speak up for them. 'The main benefit is that I have a much more heightened awareness of steering my own career, rather than just waiting for things to happen to me.'

The mentor was one of my peers, an older woman, who encouraged Mary's career. We also had mentors who wanted us to inherit more than they had – and to value the social contract that went with a government-provided tertiary education. There was always an older woman in my early professional life, to encourage me to take risks and be prepared to change.

The daughters of the revolution have inherited new dilemmas and many see themselves as we did: in a documentary without a script. I ponder this as I see smart, savvy young women opting for the mummy track despite maternity leave, unable to comprehend the reality and consequences of women's increased longevity.

I wonder why they opt for full-time wifedom when the odds for enduring marriages are not good, especially in unequal relationships with one income. I am surprised at the 'new' decision to change your name and take the name of the man you married in your thirties after you have established your own 'brand'. When I raised this with the fabulous young women at our family Christmas they said, as I did in 1964, 'It's better for the children'; or, 'He wanted me to.' In my head I screamed, 'Take a long view – reconsider.'

AS THE NEW teacher in the school staff room I listened to my well-educated women colleagues discussing Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* with extraordinary passion. Friedan had identified the frustration and sense of worthlessness of women who were university-educated but trapped in suburbia. My colleagues were primarily casual employees but considered themselves lucky to have a good job, while recognising that aspiring to become a principal was only for unmarried women. They had come to terms with their lot, and were committed professionals, yet they were also ambivalent and yearned for something different.

In 1964, in the staff room of a girls' high school, it was hard to imagine what a successful life might look like. A decade later, consciousness-rising through Women's Liberation and the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) had changed the way we saw the world. Most activity was directed towards government leadership and, through the 1970s and 1980s, equal-opportunity guidelines and government machinery of equity improved the education and careers of many women. We were encouraged to think that such change was inevitable and incremental, and linear.

I no longer believe in its inevitability. It has not delivered in the way I had hoped and expected; the cultural barriers remain impermeable.

In those days women's groups kept busy with housekeeping matters such as equal pay, maternity leave, family planning and the education of girls, and spent little time thinking about leadership. The WEL and Women's Liberation and many of the not-for-profit government organisations they influenced experimented with organisational structures. The pyramid hierarchical model was dismissed, and flatter structures were created. Leadership was to be everybody's business and all were encouraged to gain experience in key positions.

In *Making Women Count* (UNSW, 2008) Marian Sawer relates a story that, as a participant in the national WEL conference in January 1973, I can verify. WEL groups from all over Australia were asked to prepare papers on how the lobby should be organised. The NSW branch presented an argument that won the day, despite the opposition of those from Canberra: 'We are determined to avoid having leaders – either convenors or permanent spokeswomen – or any form of power hierarchy. Like many other radical feminist organisations, in setting up a structure we want to move on from competitive masculine power politics, involving aggression and back-stabbing to true egalitarianism.'

The thinking behind this was both instinctive and reactive, as women sought to find new structures of accountability, and the voices of community-based groups grew louder and more confident. It was also profound, because it assumed implicitly that leadership could be learned and that the best learning came from shared experience. It recognised leadership as a position on a continuum, and that people could move from leader to follower and back again. This is the conscious and subconscious inheritance of many leading women, and it continues to influence the way they do business.

After the shopping list of concessions and policy changes was fulfilled, women emerged or were anointed as leaders and had to grapple with new paradigms of behaviour while trying to hold on to the values so eloquently expressed by Mahatma Gandhi: 'we must be the change we wish to see.' Leadership remains an unresolved issue as women seek both to lead and influence change. As Leonie Still pointed out in her 1994 study of leading women, it is hard, if not impossible, to be a change agent when you are relatively powerless in an organisation.

THE WORLD BANK is fond of saying that education is the best contraceptive in the world, but the pill is a close second. Australian women of my generation were keen to take it and make it what it remains: the contraceptive of choice. I remember the day, in March 1964, that I swallowed my first oral contraceptive, thoughtfully provided by a friend. I was twenty-two, in love and had already survived one unplanned pregnancy. The idea that I could control my fertility by taking a pill that protected against pregnancy, unrelated to the sexual moment, was breathtaking.

Many women of my age will remember visiting the underground abortion clinics: furtive phone calls from public telephones to arrange the visits, driving to distant suburbs, passing through double doors after pre-paying cash for the operation. It was humiliating, shameful and degrading – an experience to bury in the deep recesses of consciousness. It was our fault, and if infertility followed it was punishment we would bear. Nobody counselled us; that was not part of the package. We did not know we had a right to it.

Creating public debate about abortion, contraception and childbirth choices was my passion. In the 1960s the Childbirth Education Association lobbied hospitals and doctors to allow fathers to be present at birth, and for natural childbirth. It is hard to imagine that birthing would ever return to an event involving only a woman, her doctor and nurse. It has become something for the extended family. Our gift to our daughters was the reproductive choices we did not have, so it is now possible to choose whether to be pregnant and whether to continue with an unplanned pregnancy.

We did not anticipate the demographic shift that followed. My mother was eighteen when I was born, I was twenty-six when my daughter was born and her first child was born when she was thirty-two. The exquisite symmetry is that each of us bore the last of our three children at the age the next generation began.

Margaret Sanger, the American social reformer and founder of the birth-control movement, said in 1883, 'No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body. No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether or not she will be a mother.' The words remain true even as the unanticipated consequences of access to birth control, IVF and abortion continue to play out.

HOW DID THE F-word become so scary, despite gender being back on centre stage and women holding important public positions? I often hear the chorus 'I am not a feminist, but' – followed by a litany of concerns that sound like gender issues yet are not identified that way. That feminism still makes sense comes as a shock to those who for the first thirty years of their lives have been one of the boys, or at least not hampered by being female. It is the shock of noticing that your voice is not heard, or discovering you are paid less than your male peers.

It is often suggested that this happens because 'women lack ambition'. When I was a young woman having a job that could become a career seemed ambitious. Anna Fels, in her April 2004 *Harvard Business Review* article 'Do Women Lack Ambition?', wrote: 'I came to realise that although the articulate, educated group of women I interviewed could cogently and calmly talk about topics ranging from money to sex, when the subject of ambition arose the level of intensity took a

quantum leap...the women hated the word as it implied egotism, selfishness and self-aggrandisement or the manipulative use of others for one's own ends.' In their words, 'It's not about me; it's the work,' and, 'I hate to promote myself.'

Fels concluded that women refuse to claim a central purposeful place in their own stories, shifting the credit elsewhere and shunning recognition; without earned affirmation, long-term learning and performance are rarely achieved. Ambitions are both the product of and, later on, the source of affirmation.

Women now experience the most powerful social and institutional discrimination during their twenties and early thirties, after they have left the educational system and begun pursuing their dreams – and ambitions. This obstacle occurs at precisely the age when women are likely to marry and have children. At this point they must decide whether to try to hold on to their ambitions, downsize them or abandon them altogether. Often a young woman must make this decision when she is learning to be a parent, with its attendant pleasures, fears, insecurities and exhaustion.

As with the past obstacles women have faced, the current ones are stressful, confusing and painful. Institutional changes and cultural norms lag behind social realities. The lack of adequate social support, ongoing career opportunities and financial protection for women who provide child care is the contemporary phase of women's long struggle for equal rights.

My own experience is that we do not identify our ambitions until later in our professional lives, when children have been raised, sexual identity has settled, and the capacity to manage relationships and do the things described as feminine are no longer in doubt. It is often then that the mastery and resilience required for mature leadership is within our reach.

Creating the demand for that leadership is the challenge.

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