

How would you describe the relationship between social movements and social policy outcomes? What impact, if any, have Social Movements had on the policy directions or governments and Corporations in Australia? Use one social movement as an example to discuss the relevance / effectiveness of actions taken by citizens and organisations in order to affect outcomes on policy issues.

In 1877, Charlotte Elizabeth McNeilly went to court in Sydney in an attempt to gain a divorce from her husband, who had, she said, terrorised her and their five children over a period of several years. Moreover, when she had tried to earn her own living as a teacher, he had confiscated her earnings, which under law he was entitled to do. (Lakes 1999 page 2)

Without the women's movement campaigning for change, married women today may still face the same injustices. We will start by getting a better understanding of what social movements and social policies are before looking specifically at the women's movement and focusing on the enormous impact this movement has had in shaping contemporary Australian society.

Touraine, (2002), defined social movement "as organized conflicts or as conflicts between organized actors over the social use of common cultural values." Generally, a social movement is a group that forms, and collectively, they fight for change. They are generally formed from civil society, that is, a non-political group, with common goals, aiming for some kind of change in society. The women's movement, for example, fighting for equal pay, or the environmentalist group, fighting to save a forest. As Burgman (2003 page 4) states, "A social movement generally makes demands upon the state, but it

usually makes these demands from within society rather than from within the institutions of the state.”

A social movement then, may have a goal of changing social policy. What then, is social policy? Fenna (1998) states social policy is concerned with the distribution of wealth and the life of the community, with the welfare state being at the centre of social policy. Australia, for example operates under a welfare state. This is basically where government provides a large range of services, designed to support all members of society. Some examples include medicare, unemployment benefits and education. Now that we have a general understanding of social movements and social policy, let us focus specifically on the women’s movement and the impact they have had over the years.

In a discussion with Touraine, (2002), about the importance of social movements, when talking about the Women’s Movement, he stated that “The women’s movement is so important that if there are some places in the world where elements of social movements exist it is everywhere, in all countries and parts of the world, where the women’s movement exists, where the status of women appears to be the most important reason for opposing some trends.”

The rights of women in Australia have definitely improved since white colonisation over 200 years ago. When white settlers first arrived in Australia, the British laws were generally accepted as law here. Legally, married

women at this time had very little rights. In fact, when a woman married, she became totally under her husbands control. If she earned money, it belonged to her husband. The husband only had to provide his wife with food, shelter and clothing. Even when a woman had children, they belonged to her husband. In his will, the husband could appoint guardianship of the children to anyone he pleased. He also didn't need to leave his wife any property. (Oldfield 1994) Women banded together, and the women's movement was formed. Through endless campaigning, petitions and protests, laws slowly changed, acts have been introduced and slowly the rights of women have improved.

If we look at the impact the women's movement has had on influencing policy, we can see that the campaigning has resulted in many wins. These include:

political rights; mothers' custody rights; age of consent legislation; infant and maternal welfare centres; women's hospitals; maternity benefits; the appointment of women JPs, police and magistrates; the appointment of women to juries; the criminalisation of rape in marriage; government-subsidised child care centres; the establishment of female refuges and rape crisis centres; the supporting parent's benefit; equal pay; and affirmative action programs. (Lake 1999 page 15)

Let us look now specifically at the right to vote, women and work and child care.

Using petitions in their fight for the right to vote seemed to be successful for the women's movement. In 1894, a bill in South Australia was to be debated, and a petition containing 11 600 names was presented hoping this would help to pass the bill. Success was achieved, with women in South Australia gaining the right to vote. This was followed by Western Australia in 1899, New South Wales in 1902, Tasmania in 1903, Queensland in 1905 and finally Victoria in 1908. (Oldfield 1994). Women could now have a say in electing politicians to office. Having the right to vote could be useful in many ways. If there were a politician running for office that didn't promote women's issues, or look at ways to give women the equality they are after, then with women being able to vote, it could mean that this politician would lose the election to someone who did focus on women and bringing about equality. After the success in winning the right to vote, the next step was to fight for the right to be elected to parliament. Whilst this was granted to South Australian women at the same time they won the right to vote, it took longer for other states, with New South Wales and Queensland allowing this in 1918, Western Australia in 1920, Tasmania in 1921 and finally Victoria in 1923. (Oldfield 1994)

We will next look at women and work. In the past, once women were married, they were no longer counted in the workforce. In fact, as mentioned above, if a woman did attempt to work and earn her own money, their husband was legally entitled to take her wages. If a woman was in the workforce, her earnings would generally be well under that of her male counterparts. The women's movement campaigned for many years in an attempt to change the rules and inequalities with regards to women in the

workforce. We have seen a dramatic increase now regarding women and employment. As at January 2004, women comprised 44% of total employment, compared to 1964, at which time they comprised only 28%. (EEO 2004)

There once was a marriage bar, which restricted women from working. Basically this meant that once a female were married, she was no longer legally allowed to remain in the workforce. "Until 1966, Section 49 (2) of the Commonwealth Public Service Act read: 'Every female officer shall be deemed to have retired from the Commonwealth service upon her marriage...'" (Sawyer 1996 page 7) In 1966, the bar that was on married woman working as permanent employees in the Federal Public Service was lifted. (EEO) As the figure below shows, the participation of married women in the workforce has steadily increased.

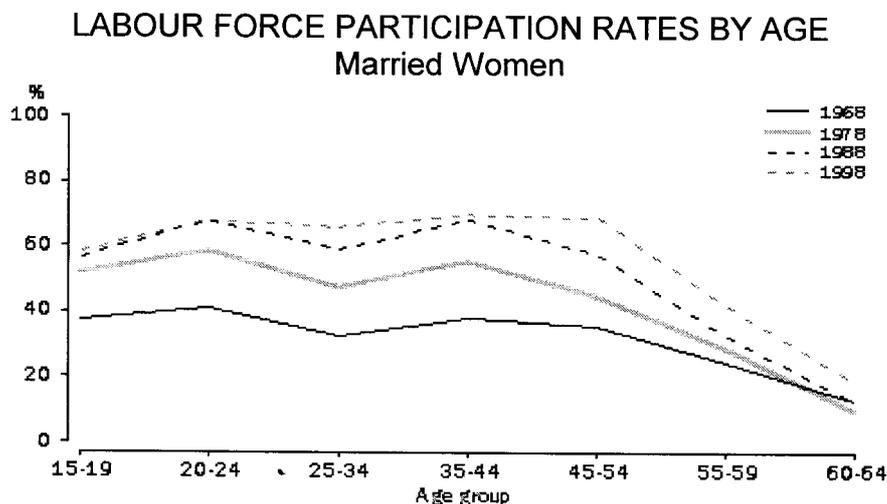


Fig. 1 (ABS 2000)

So now married women are free to enter the workforce. The next fight for the women's movement was to gain equal pay. We can see that this was a fight

that took a long time. In 1912, a minimum wage for women's work was set in the first Federal Arbitration award for women. Until 1950, this was 54% of the males' rate. In 1950, the Federal Arbitration court changed this to 75%. In 1958, the first equal pay for equal work was introduced under some awards, and in 1969, this became equal pay for equal work as a whole. Finally, in 1972, this was extended further and became equal pay for work of equal value, and was to be fully in practice by 30 June 1975. (EEO) If we look at the graph below, we can see that women as a whole, are still earning less than men, however, we must also look at the factors that could bring this about, including the fact that women may be more likely to undertake part time work and women may also take a break in their careers to have a family. However, even taking account the above, just the fact that the women's movement enabled brought about the introduction of equal pay for equal work, has been an achievement, allowing women to pursue a career should they wish, knowing their pay will not be lessened simply for the fact that they are female.

Female/Male Average Weekly Earnings Ratio

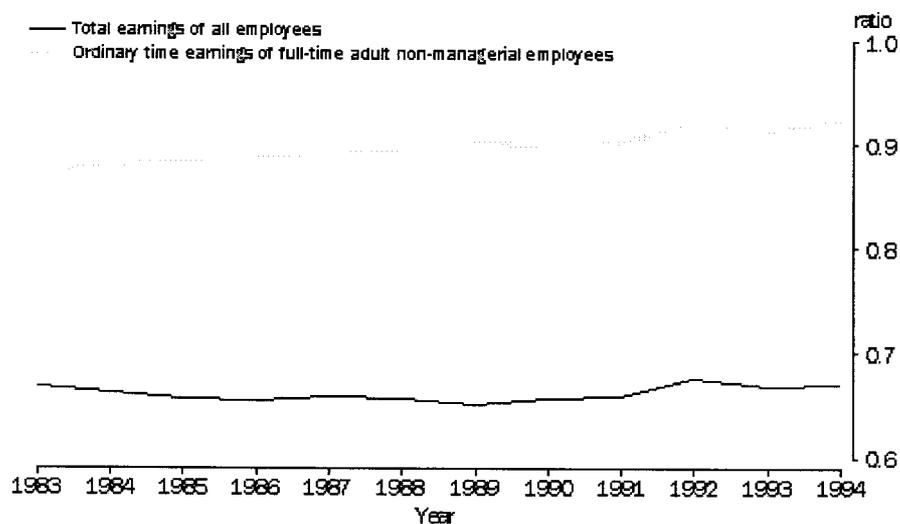


Fig 2. (ABS 2001)

With these achievements being made for women and work, this leads to more campaigns being fought by the women's movement. There needed to be provisions made for women choosing to work, and have a family. Things like maternity leave, government funded childcare places, using your sick leave to care for ill dependants and family friendly employment, which allows women to balance work and family are all issues that have been addressed by the women's movement, with many significant changes happening in this field.

In 1973, the Maternity Leave Act was introduced providing maternity leave for Federal Public servants. In 1979, a standard was set that provided provisions in all awards for 52 weeks unpaid maternity leave to be offered to women. (EEO) This is a major achievement. If a woman were to embark on a career, then decide to have a child and wish to take time off work to care for the child before choosing to return to the workforce, in the past, there would be no guarantee that her job would still be available to her when she chooses to return. With the above being achieved, women could now choose to start a family without the worry of having to look for work, or start again in her career when the time comes to return to work.

Of course, having a family and choosing to continue working does raise the issue of who will care for the children while you are at work, and even, what happens when the children are ill? There has been a strong demand placed on the government to fund childcare places so that parents can work. "In 2001, the Australian Government funded 500 000 places, more than double

the 208 000 places in 1993.” (ABS 2004) We also look at the issue of caring for ill dependants and the impact on work. There has been a lot of talk on the issue of balancing work and family, and in the past, it is generally women who face discrimination in the workplace when they tried to both work, and raise a family. The International Labour Organisation Convention 156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities (ILO 156), held in 1990, talked about enabling workers with family responsibilities who are employed, or who wish to be employed, to do so without discrimination and without conflict between their employment and their family responsibilities. Also, in 1994, the Industrial Relations Commission introduced family leave. This allows workers to access their sick leave to care for their dependants. (EEO)

While there may still be some injustices today with regards to women and equality, the above has shown the dramatic improvement that Australian women have achieved since the time of white settlement. In fact, women of today may generally take for granted all the things available to them, such as work and education opportunities, the right to vote, equality within marriage and so on – a society very different to the society the women’s movement sought to change. With injustice still occurring however, the role of the women’s movement is far from over. The next phase of the women’s movement could see further demands on workplace equality, with emphasis on gaining a larger percentage of women in management positions, or higher numbers in male dominated industries.

To conclude then, with a better understanding of what social movements, and looking specifically at the women's movement in more detail, we have been able to see how a social movement is able to effectively influence policy within Australian society. The women's movement specifically has helped to bring about equality for women. Campaigning has seen women win the right to vote, achieve greater equality in the workplace and has also seen a greater emphasis on government subsidised childcare places, and family friendly workplaces, to enable women to balance work and family effectively.

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