

## **Equality of sexes battle has stalled: researchers**

### **Aust no longer world leader**

By Danielle Cronin

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Hard-won gains in gender equity are under threat in Australia, which was once a world leader in the effort to establish equality between the sexes. This is a key finding from a new report *How well does Australian democracy serve Australian women?* published by the Australian National University and prepared for the Democratic Audit of Australia.

The report's co-author, Sarah Maddison from the University of NSW, said yesterday the findings were "very depressing". "The report, as a whole, paints a very clear picture of a country that's gone from being a world leader in the pursuit of gender equality to one that has completely dropped the ball really in some fundamental areas."

Dr Maddison and Emma Partridge a social researcher at the University of Technology Sydney came up with the "damning" findings after evaluating gender equity in four critical areas.

Dr Maddison said, "This report raises some serious concerns about the failure of both successive decades of feminist activism and varying levels of government commitment to achieve a more substantive gender equality.

"Australia was once a world leader in struggles to increase women's influence over decision-making; in promoting gendered analysis of public policies to ensure equal benefit for women; in enshrining the principle of deliberative democracy through a well-funded and oft-consulted women's NGO sector; and in a national commitment to legislative and policy innovations designed to enhance women's human rights and civil liberties.

"Today, after a decade of Federal Government overtly hostile to these goals, Australia's standing as a leader in the struggle for gender equality is much diminished." The researchers examined the legislative framework intended to eliminate discrimination against women and policy machinery to monitor the impact of public policy on women.

"There has been a real dismantling of women's policy and the mechanisms for measuring the impact of public policy on women," Dr Maddison said. The researchers looked at the level of female representation in the parliaments, judiciary, local government and on public-sector boards.

Almost one in three federal parliamentarians were women up 10 per cent in a decade but only a handful were in senior roles. The ACT Legislative Assembly had one of the highest proportions of female MPs. Contrary to widespread belief, women were not better represented in local government than in state or federal governments in Australia. Women were also under-represented in the judiciary, upper echelons of the private sector and on public-sector boards. The researchers also assessed if women's non-government

groups were consulted and supported in their relationships with government. They discovered these groups had been increasingly excluded from policy debates in the federal sphere.

Dr Maddison said, "Combined with the effective silencing of the women's non-government sector, it means that the real impact of public policy on women is hidden. "It's difficult to tell how budget changes and legislative changes such as industrial relations reform impact on women when there has been systematic dismantling of the mechanisms designed to evaluate if women were getting a fair deal."

Dr Maddison considered South Australia as the only state "doing the right thing by women", but NSW showed little or no commitment to gender equality. "The ACT is not doing a terrific job, I'd have to say." The territory still had a women's advisory body, but had provided only \$100,000 for the women's grants program.

"There is a real need for Australian women to become vocal again about gender equality. "The gains made by the women's movement are under threat, and it is up to women to once again convince political leaders that there is an electoral benefit to protecting and promoting gender equality."

Dr Maddison will present the findings when she delivers the Pamela Denoon Lecture at the ANU on March 7 the eve of International Women's Day.