

Damned Whores and God's Police four decades on

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Rose Scott Women Writers Festival

Sydney Women's Club

Friday 16 September 2016

Thank Wendy Michaels and Rose Scott Women Writers Festival for inviting me.

Thank Lyndall Ryan for her launch. Lyndall and I shared a house in Annandale in the early 1970s when I had just started writing this book and shed was working on her opus about the Tasmanian Aboriginals. The house should be marked with a plaque!

And thanks to Kathy Bail my publisher for having the insight and the courage to bring this book back into print – AND in such a handsome edition. I did not think I would ever love an edition more than the first but I think I have to say this one wins.

It is big and beautiful and is attracting a lot of attention from younger women – which is of course what we hoped for.

Tweet last week:

“I don’t normally read books this thick that aren’t about wizards but this one’s a banger”

In Canberra a few weeks ago, I did a session with Jennifer Bott who used to run the Australia Council among many other accomplishments in her distinguished career. She made the point in introducing me that because this book is too big to fit into a brief case, she had to carry it around.

It was, she said, a great conversation starter at airports and other public places! So well done Kathy. And thank you!

If I had to summarise in a few words how life has changed for women in Australia since 1975 when I first published *Damned Whores and God’s Police* I would say this: We have changed a lot. But we have not changed enough.

Who would have thought that 41 years after the book was first published we would be here tonight, still talking about it?

I have very mixed feelings about the fact that we are!

The Australia I wrote about in the early 1970s has not changed totally beyond recognition, but I expect young people today might be astonished to learn what life used to be like for women. Even as late as 1975, when this book was first published, there were so many things women were unable to do. Some of these

restrictions were self-imposed cultural restraints but in many cases they were the result of an absence of laws to enforce equality.

Even though in 1975 we were three years into the Whitlam government—the first federal government to commit to and legislate for women’s equality—there was still no federal anti-discrimination legislation. Nor were there any state laws outlawing discrimination. It seems almost unbelievable today, but until the late 1970s it was perfectly legal for women in Australia to be treated as inferiors.

Jobs were classified by sex and advertised as being for ‘Men & boys’ or ‘Women & girls’. There was rarely any overlap between the offerings, which meant that women were excluded from even applying for many positions.

And there were certainly no laws governing how women were treated in the workplace. Women had no legal redress if, for instance, the boss asked you to sit on his knee to take dictation. Like many terms I used in the book, or situations I described, ‘taking dictation’ is now archaic. For those of you who have never heard of it, let me explain: It meant you had to write down, usually in a special language known as short-hand, the words the boss – who was, of course, a man - wanted written in a letter or other document which you would then type, on a machine called a typewriter, for him to sign.

The people who did this work were called ‘typists’. There also used to be a special term to describe the place where the typists – all of whom without exception were women – used to sit. They were lined up in rows at their desks in a configuration that was referred to as ‘the typing pool’. Along with many other totally sexist jobs, this one thankfully no longer exists. Bosses have had to learn to type. Even if only so they can text.

People of my generation might remember sardonically many of these details of the bad old days – and be eternally thankful that they are over. It is difficult not to seethe with anger, even all these years later, when recalling the multitude of ways in which we were humiliated and degraded. I found it quite illuminating myself when I re-read my book before I wrote the new Introduction and was reminded just how bad the everyday constant, and institutional, denigration of women used to be. (Although the television series *Mad Men* is a painfully accurate reminder).

WHEN we compare then and now, the changes are impressive. Parts of the book read rather like an historical archive. It is a snapshot of how things were: in 1975, and in the convict, colonial and other periods that I wrote about.

There are many instances in the book of archaic language and usage.

'Gay' meant something different then. We used the term 'domestics' to refer to violence in the home. It was standard to use the term 'Blacks' rather than Indigenous Australians.

Reading the book today is like taking an historical excursion, in time and place, but also into how we talked and the things that mattered to us back then. The language we used was just one of the many realities of the time. It seems extraordinary today but in the mid-1970s we did not use terms like 'domestic violence', 'sexual harassment', 'date rape' or 'glass ceiling' – let alone 'same-sex marriage' - because they had not yet been coined. We had not yet given names to some things even though they certainly existed. It is quite amazing that I devoted almost a page in the book to the setting up of Elsie Women's Refuge in 1974 and never even used the word 'violence', let alone 'domestic violence'.

We did not use the term 'gender', let alone 'gendered'; we did not talk about 'gender equality' the way we do now. We had yet to discover 'the gender pay gap'; instead we talked about 'equal pay'. We also talked about 'women' and 'sex' and 'sex roles' and other terms that have fallen into disuse today.

We did not use the term 'equality'. We preferred 'liberation' to 'feminism'. In the early 1970s we called ourselves 'women's liberationists' and got annoyed when the media dumbed it down to 'women's libbers'. When we did refer to ourselves as feminists, it was always qualified by another word. We were 'radical feminists' or 'socialist feminists' or 'lesbian feminists'. We felt feminist was a rather incomplete description.

I decided not to update this language in this new edition of the book. Not only would it have required me to completely rewrite the book but, more importantly, it would undermine the context and thus the authenticity of what I wrote in the early 1970s. We need to understand how it was then, partly so we can see how much we have changed.

WE ARE ENTITLED to take pride and comfort from the barriers that have been broken and the triumphs of individual women in expanding the possibilities for all of us: the first prime minister or state premier, governor -general, high court judge, CEO of a major corporation, the first football umpire or chemical engineer.
¹ Or the first woman to ride the winner of the Melbourne Cup.

¹ See the *Time Line of Achievements by and for Australian Women 1788-2015* at the end of this book for a comprehensive list of legal, economic and other changes and the 'firsts' by individual women.

All of these triumphs were over the horizon in 1975. It was only with the laws designed to end legal discrimination against women that they even became possible.

In the 1970s, 80s and 90s – some states were slower than others – we saw the passage of various anti-discrimination laws that were intended to provide a legal basis for equality. These included the landmark federal *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* which outlawed discrimination against women, on the grounds of their sex (as we used to say then, rather than gender), marital status or condition of pregnancy, in employment, in education and the provision of goods and services.

It is almost impossible to convey today just how hard-fought that legislation was, how formidable the opposition to it was and how much changed once it finally became the law of the land - and, over the decades since, has been amended and strengthened.

With discrimination finally against the law, things changed - big and small. A small example: the signs on the toilet doors in the federal parliament had to be repainted. Women or Men—instead of Senators or Members. A bigger one: Deborah Wardley, seeking a job with the now defunct, Ansett Airlines, won an anti-discrimination action which took four years and went all the way to the High Court before she was eventually employed as a commercial pilot in 1979.

But these laws have not solved everything.

Despite numerous laws and court decisions stipulating equal pay, women continue to be paid an average of 18 per cent less than men. A 2012 NATSEM report calculated that over her lifetime a 25-year-old woman with post-graduate qualifications would earn \$2.49 million whereas the man who sat beside her in class would, over his lifetime, earn \$3.78 million.²

One in three women have no superannuation.

BECAUSE WE HAVE BECOME SO preoccupied with measuring change, we may have lost sight of some of the important concerns I tried to address when I wrote this book. These days we are preoccupied with 'how far have we come' and, its corollary, 'how far we have left to go'. Of course, I agree that we need to measure progress, and to call attention to backsliding and backlash. I have done this myself in subsequent books, namely *The End of Equality* (2003) and *The Misogyny Factory* (2013). I felt it was necessary to write these books because our progress has been so uneven; it was important to document the many ways our

² AMP.NATSEM, *Income and Wealth Report. Smart Australians: Education and Innovation in Australia* Issue 32, October 2012 p. 32

previous gains were under threat. But I never wanted this running the ruler over legal, economic, political and other easily measurable forms of progress to be the only way we looked at ourselves.

If we only do that, we lose sight of the truth.

I think it is widely agreed that *Damned Whores and God's Police* told a truth that all of us recognized, and that is why the book lasted so long and why it continues to resonate today, even while it was out of print for so long. It confronted us with something we knew to be true. It was an uncomfortable truth but it explained a lot of things.

But today we do not talk so much about what in the book I called the 'invisible barriers'—the ways women limited **themselves** and collaborated with the culture of oppression. We need to resume that conversation because while we might have made major changes and mapped a path to full equality, I am not sure if we have sufficiently reinvented ourselves.

The core argument of the book was that Australian women had been defined and constrained by stereotypes that both prescribed and proscribed certain ways of behaving. I drew on Australian history to find the terms 'Damned Whores' and 'God's Police' so that the classic madonna/whore dualism resonated with our own story and our own experience.

My argument was that women in Australia had been kept in check by the God's Police stereotype, both by the ways women were deemed by society to see motherhood and family as their ultimate aspiration, and by the social exclusion they suffered as a result of being castigated as a Damned Whore if they refused.

I wrote:

The major impediment to female rebellion, and that which keeps women physically and psychologically bound to their family-centred roles has been the absence of any cultural tradition which approved of women being anything else.

We should be asking: is this still true today?

Are Australian women still constrained by the social imperatives of motherhood?

Are women expected to fit everything else they do around this, still primary, role as mothers?

Are most, if not all, of the measures ostensibly designed to promote equality in the workplace in effect measures to make it easier for women to add this economic role onto their, still primary, role as mothers?

In other words, women are expected to do more but men are not required to change. Are flexible work policies all about making it easier for *women* – not men - to juggle kids and jobs? Why does the cost of childcare invariably come from the woman's salary? Do women feel guilty about being in employment? Do men?

We have not fully confronted these fundamental questions.

We have not said: women might be the ones who bear the children, but their entire lives should not be defined by that one capability. We have changed a lot but we have not changed this.

We are ready for women to do more, so long as they first of all fulfil their primary role. There is still no expectation, let alone demand, that men's employment lives ought to suffer the same disruption when they have children as women's inevitably do. Women themselves do not expect or demand this of the fathers of their children. Why not?

Many, if not most, women still accept, deep down, that it is their role to be God's Police.

They believe they are responsible for the emotional as well as the physical running of the family; it is their job to manage and monitor and, where necessary, censor the behaviour of their husbands and their children. And there is wide consensus that this is the way things should be. Many women today want to add to, and modernise, the God's Police role rather than redefine, let alone abandon, it completely.

I am struck by how many women today aged in their 30s and 40s with big, full-time jobs and two or three children have chosen to take on additional domestic roles such as baking, sewing, preserving or other time-consuming (and, I would argue, unnecessary) tasks that once fully occupied women who had no choice but to be what we today like to call 'domestic goddesses'.

Why do these women feel the need to do this? Is it atonement for not being full-time mothers? It is to demonstrate that their economic role outside the home does not come at the cost of domestic accomplishments? Is it to head off criticism that they are neglecting their nurturing roles? How to explain the often torrid criticisms of working mothers by their stay-at-home counterparts over such issues as tuckshop rosters? Why on earth do so many women feel so compromised or defensive simply because they are exercising their option to pursue equality?

There is little or no public discussion about these problems.

Of course it is true that women do have more choices today. We can decide to not marry, to not have children, to live openly in a same-sex relationship, to live

happily alone – ‘spinster’ is another word that has, thankfully, pretty much disappeared from our vocabulary. Our choices – whatever they are - are more likely to be accepted than was the case four decades ago. But we have not overcome the dualism.

We have not disavowed that motherhood is still the central, preferable and most admired option for women. We might not overtly punish women who are not mothers but we have our ways of letting them know they have fallen short of the ideal. For instance, by calling them ‘deliberately barren’³, as a Liberal Party Senator accused Julia Gillard who was then the Deputy Leader of the Labor Party and about to become Deputy Prime Minister.

We still differentiate between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women. Emily Maguire, the novelist, examined this proposition in *Princesses and Porn Stars* (2008) and concluded that the stereotypes have not vanished, they have merely been updated:

Young women are told they can be and do anything, yet in the eye of the media and mainstream culture the choices are still either/or. You can be a mother or have a proper career. You can have orgasms or respect. You can be independent or adored.

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This conclusion is depressing because it confirms the enduring nature of these cultural shackles.

And it has been recently re-confirmed. Take the example, again, of Julia Gillard when she became our first female prime minister in 2010. This was a significant milestone in the march of Australian women towards equality but, it turns out, as a nation we were incapable of embracing it. Instead, Gillard was subjected to a sordid and disgraceful barrage of pornographic, sexist and misogynist commentary from the Opposition, the media, members of her own party, and the general public which undermined her legitimacy and succeeded in generating such wide-spread doubt about her ability to govern that she was unceremoniously dumped by her party⁵.

³ Dan Harrison, “Barren” Gillard blasts Heffernan’ *The Age* 2 May, 2007
<http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/barren-gillard-blasts-heffernan/2007/05/02/1177788183427.html>

⁴ Emily Maguire *Princesses and pornstars* Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2008 p.4

⁵ I documented the sexual vilification of Julia Gillard in a speech to the University of Newcastle that was widely read: *Her Rights at Work. The political persecution of Australia’s first female prime minister* 2012 Human Rights and Social Justice Lecture. University of Newcastle 31 August 2012
<http://www.annesummers.com.au/speeches/her-rights-at-work-the-political-perseucution-of-australias-first-female-prime-minister/>

In her 2014 memoir, Gillard herself drew on the damned whores and God's police stereotypes to describe the situation she found herself in as prime minister:

*It felt to me as prime minister that the binary stereotypes were still there, that the only two choices available were good woman or bad woman. As a woman wielding power, with all the complexities of modern politics, I was never going to be portrayed as a good woman. So I must be the bad woman, a scheming shrew, a heartless harridan or a lying bitch."*⁶

No further evidence is needed that the stereotypes persist well into the 21st century.

IF WE still have God's Police then we must also have their opposite, the bad women. So who are today's Damned Whores?

In 1975 I identified prostitutes, lesbians and women in prison as replacing the female convicts as the modern-day Damned Whores. They were then seen as The Other. They had transgressed. They were repudiated for their sexuality or for flouting other norms of society. They were spurned for not being the way women were supposed to be: subservient, submissive, dependent.

Despite our claims to champion equality, and for all the progress we have made, we still punish women who are outspoken or contrarian, who step outside the modernised notion of God's Police. So who are today's bad girls?

You might argue that when young women today march in Slut Walks, asserting their right to dress as whores once might have, this category does not make much sense any more. In fact, the opposite is true. It seems that the numbers and types of women who are today treated as The Other, as transgressors, as modern day damned whores, is large and growing.

It is women online expressing provocative opinions – or, often, even any opinions.

It is women occupying public spaces and asserting their rights to define their issues and themselves.

⁶ Julia Gillard *My Story* Sydney, Knopf, 2014 pp 106-7

It is women campaigning to keep abortion rights, or arguing for equal representation in every area of society.

In fact, perhaps the easiest way to identify today's damned whores is by the opposition they generate and by the sexualised nature of much of that opposition.

'Slut-shaming' – attacking women on sexual grounds, real or invented – epitomises the new weapon against women. It is new but it is also depressingly familiar to attempt to degrade women on sexual grounds.

It confirms how entrenched the stereotypes still are.

These stereotypes have also adapted to new realities.

One of the most reviled groups of women in Australia today are those who cover their faces and their bodies. That the woman in the hijab or the burkha is, ironically, seen by as more transgressive than the woman who walks semi-naked down the street to 'reclaim the night' is one measure of the persistence, and the evolution, of the damned whore stereotype.

The alarming increase in violence against women, so much of it fatal, is another measure.

IN 1975 I HAD NO idea that my analysis would resonate in the way it did.

It is certainly not something that I could have imagined while I was struggling to write the book.

In my autobiography *Ducks on the Pond* I described my fears as I tried to write. I was afraid I could not finish it, I was afraid that no one would read it but most of all I was afraid that I was not up to the task which I had set out for myself which was nothing less than to rewrite our history and our sociology so we could understand the place that women had been assigned in our national story.

Did I have the courage to 'take on' the grand old men of Australian history and literature? To attack them for what we used to call their 'male chauvinist' assumptions and to provide some markers towards a different story, one that shone a light on the mostly neglected achievements of women and which also asked why women had been so often overlooked in the past.

In the end I found it in myself to do so and it was an important – and lasting – lesson, for me and, I hope, for others.

I learned to be brave. I learned to shuck off the timidity that prevents so many of us from standing up and fighting.

In mid-September 2014 in Melbourne Quentin Bryce, our first female Governor-General, told a group of schoolgirls: 'Be bold, be bold, be bold'.⁷ This is the most important advice women of my generation can give to the young.

Whether it is to ask for that pay rise, or that promotion, or that book review writing assignment, or to lobby politicians or hold one's own in an argument with male colleagues, we have to be brave, we have to learn to take risks and we have to be confident about ourselves. And whenever we are wrong (as we sometimes will be), or make mistakes or suffer serious setbacks, we have to just get up and keep going.

We need to know that despite the palpable gains of the past forty years, our fight is far from over. It is not just that we still have so much unfinished business: equal pay, equal representation in parliaments and elsewhere, freedom from violence. To name just a few of our important issues.

The frightening reality is that there are forces in Australia, and globally, who would strip away what we have already won. In the US we see a massive regulatory assault being mounted at state level to undermine or even totally prevent women exercising their constitutional right to abortion as set down by the US Supreme Court 1973 decision *Roe v. Wade*.

It is sobering to realise that there has not been a UN conference on women since the landmark conference in Beijing in 1995 because of the realistic fear that the principles of the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action⁸, especially those pertaining to women's reproductive rights, would not be re-affirmed today. In other words, if there were to be a new global conference of women, as there used to be every five years between 1975 and 1995, we would lose ground. So for twenty years, we have stood still or been required to use other mechanisms, such as the Millennium Development Goals or, now, the Sustainable Development Goals, to maintain the global women's agenda.

What this means is that young women are going to have to take up that fight, and keep it going. They are going to have to fight to keep what we already have – what they grew up assuming was unassailable and irreversible - and they are going to have to fight to enable us to keep moving forward. They are going to

⁷ 'Be bold, be bold, be bold: Dame Quentin Bryce's advice for high school girls' *Women's Agenda* 18 September, 2015

<http://www.womensagenda.com.au/talking-about/top-stories/be-bold-be-bold-be-bold-%E2%80%93-dame-quentin-bryces-advice-for-high-school-girls/201509186282#.VftxQ2SeDGd>

⁸ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf>

need to be brave and to be bold and they certainly can't afford to be polite! This is not a job for God's Police.

The fight has become not just necessary but urgent because of the shocking increase in violence against women in Australia, more and more of it fatal. The Counting Dead Women site on the Destroy the Joint Facebook page put the number of women killed in Australia in 2015 at 79.

In 52 weeks 79 women died violent deaths –80 per cent of them at the hands of their current or former partners.

[So far in 2016 – we are in week 37 - 48 women have been killed.]

In addition, we know that every three hours around Australia a woman is hospitalised with injuries inflicted by a partner or family member. We count the deaths but we not yet found a way to count the injuries, including the permanent physical and psychological wounds.

There is no doubt that this violence is due to a great many men being unable to accept women as equals or as independent beings. For these men, women belong- and should stay – in the preordained and subordinate roles the stereotypes laid out for them.

As Rosie Batty, the 2015 Australian of the Year and a tireless campaigner on the issue of family violence, has pointed out, we cannot address violence without addressing gender inequality.

This is a startling, and sobering, assessment.

I could never have made such an assertion back in 1975.

We had not yet made those kinds of connections. As I have already indicated, it was difficult back then to even speak about violence. It was beyond comprehension that we could have seen a causal connection between women's inequality and the rise in violence against women.

This book reflected the coming together of research and activism.

I spent many hours in libraries, reading documents and doing all kinds of primary and secondary research in order to understand the country and why and how it so deeply embodied and reflected masculine values. I also spent a great deal of time as an activist in the women's movement and the resident action movement that was active in inner Sydney in the early 1970s. I was

involved in setting up Elsie Women's Refuge, the Sydney Rape Crisis Centre, the founding of *Refractory Girl*, the first women's studies journal as well as numerous speakouts, meetings, marches and demonstrations.

I worried how my activism was taking me away from my writing and I was criticised by sister activists for running away from that work to bury myself in the library but in the end I realised that the two things were both essential to developing the framework for understanding Australian history and society. Each edition of the book – 1975, 1994, 2002 and now 2016 – similarly reflected that interaction between my research and my activism.

I see the book as a living thing that has helped us to understand who we are and why we are the way we are. The activism provides the test cases of what we need to do to change, to complete our journey to equality by renouncing the stereotypes and enabling all women to flower as unique individuals able to participate fully and equally in all that society has to offer.

By focussing on the practical as well as the theoretical, we develop a greater understanding of *what* we need to change, as well as *why* it needs to.

Realising this ought to motivate us to start on the path to the deep cultural change that is necessary if we are going to subvert and destroy the stereotypes rather than merely continue to modernise them.