

THE INDEPENDENT AUSTRALIAN WOMAN

An American psychologist, Mrs Graham Bell, said she wondered how Australian men and women ever got together enough to get married. But it is not true that Ordinary Australians fail to recognise the value of women. Any man will tell you they are indispensable for packing picnic-baskets, and for keeping other women company while you are drinking with their husbands (Pearl, 1959, p. 35).

Ignoring the implication that ‘Ordinary Australians’ are male, objectifying women as Other, the above quote satirically reflects the gendered society of mid-twentieth century Australia in which women’s value is weighted according to their usefulness to men. In this chapter, the genealogy of independent women in Australia will be discussed, from eighteenth century European settlement to the early twenty-first century, which may clarify the above perception. Section 5.1 continues examination of the genealogy of independent women focussing on Australia from the beginning of European settlement before assessing their situation in the early twenty-first century (Section 5.2).

While I talk about Australian women, I am very aware of the difference in experience and relational practices between Australian women of Aboriginal and of non-Aboriginal descent, both at the time of European settlement and in the twenty-first century. I will acknowledge here that the below discussion is of women’s experience in the dominant (i.e., Western) culture to continue within the parameters of the previous chapter that limit my curiosity to Western tradition. I also respect the sensitivities of Aboriginal women who are the custodians of “women’s business” in their culture and whose authoritative knowledge of marriage practices deserves separate attention.

5.1 The First Two Hundred Years

The first 192 European women arrived in Australia with the First Fleet of convicts in 1788. Convict women were transported less for heinous crime than to provide sexual services to the far greater number of men in the new land, a policy perpetuated by the British government into the nineteenth century (Dixson, 1999; Summers, 2002). To

implement this policy, offending women were treated more harshly than men by the British justice system with every woman aged less than 45 years who was healthy enough to make the journey so committed. The treatment of convict women *en route* to Australia was a portent of the degradation that was to come. A study found that only one fifth of those sent to Tasmania (one of the two destinations for women, Sydney being the other) had been prostitutes in Britain but the conditions of the journey and their reception in the colony ensured the universality of their sexual exploitation just to survive.

It was Lt Ralph Clark of the First Fleet who coined the term *damned whores* to describe the female transportees (Summers, 2002) and the appellation stuck to nearly all women in Australia for the better part of a century. Even the first waves of women migrants, brought to enter domestic service, were subject to similar abuse by men and authorities who provided no support or protection on their arrival (Dixson, 1999; Gothard, 2001; Summers, 2002). The situation was so bad that convict women opted to stay in the infamous Women's Factories, established as both prison and workplace, rather than take their chances in town, although an establishment such as the Parramatta Factory regularly took on the appearance of a cattle yard with men visiting to select a woman for immediate sexual service or cohabitation (Summers, 2002).

The end of transportation in 1852 (Gothard, 2001) brought women, both convict and free migrant, some relief from the overt contempt with which they had been enfolded since European settlement. The idealised British bourgeois family became a linchpin of capitalist endeavour with wives located much higher on the social ladder (Farrell, 2001). Married couples and eligible single women were a priority for assisted passage although, unlike other outposts of the Empire, Australia was reluctant to receive Britain's surplus middle-class women. Instead, working-class women were required to provide domestic service for the newly privatised domestic sphere (Gothard, 2001). For the women themselves, work was the main factor in their decision to migrate, rather than to find a husband. Ironically, given its first decades, while other colonies emphasized the availability of eligible men to attract single women migrants, Australia did not (Gothard, 2001).

In the early years in New South Wales, emancipated female convicts and free women were able to apply for land grants, both in towns where they could begin businesses and in the country where they could also apply for convict farm labour (Farrell, 2001). Sometimes, spinsters and their widowed mothers selected adjacent blocks to create a substantial family holding (Grimshaw, 1986). Wives had greater rights than those in England, being able to act for absent husbands or trade in their own right if they were married to convicts. Women were registered in a broad range of occupations from merchants, printers, miners and brick-makers (as were their Roman counterparts two millennia earlier) to confectioners and shopkeepers. Yet the assumption of the respectable family model that prevailed in the Mother Country saw the loss of this promising independence. The ideological imperative encased middle-class wives in domesticity, protected from the public sphere. As Farrell puts it “daughters and granddaughters of women who earlier farmed or operated businesses in their own names were, from the mid-nineteenth century, expected to become decorative adjuncts by which their husbands’ successes could be measured” (Farrell, 2001, p. 125).

Women’s employment opportunities and wages were significantly lower than men’s, justified on the basis that single women were simply marking time until marriage when they would withdraw from the paid workplace and that they would likely spend any surplus on luxury items. Caroline Chisholm, who had worked tirelessly to attract single women to Australia, to improve the sex ratio and civilise the country’s heavily masculine ethos, argued against a self-supporting wage level for women so as to discourage single women from staying that way and men from relying on their wife to support a household (Summers, 2002).

Unlike Britain where the bulge of unmarried women made independent living socially viable, if not altogether easy (Cooper, 2001; Holden, 2007; Horstman, 1985; Hudson, 1995; Vicinus, 1985), the continuing excess of men meant this did not become an acceptable option for Australian women. Approximately 82.5% of all women were married at the 1891, 1901 and 1911 censuses (Summers, 2002). The married women of the middle-classes used their exclusion from the paid workforce to redirect their energies to social reform: to advocate temperance, to argue against unilateral prosecution of prostitutes, to advocate contraception, and to agitate for women’s

suffrage (Grimshaw, 1986). Yet Dixon (1999) argues that the residue of earlier attitudes towards them had left Australian women *per se* with an impaired self-concept that militated against their replication of the women's movement that was active elsewhere. Nonetheless, women's suffrage had been achieved at the Federal level by 1908, earlier than in Britain.

World War One (WWI) brought any progress to women's full independence to an end. Denied participation in active duty (other than as nurses) or war work, maternity and morality epitomised the ideal Australian woman, the latter expressed nationalistically through persuading or shaming men into enlisting (Shute, 1995). Women's opportunities for paid employment did increase, partly because of the growth in feminised work in the new light industrial, office and service areas such as banking and the public service. However, it was accompanied by complaint from men that women were taking their jobs, concern about women's neglect of hearth and home for freedom and independence, and the temptation posed to men of a mixed-sex workplace (Lake & Damousi, 1995). Shute (1995) argues that WWI enshrined masculinity as the Australian character, setting back women's aspirations for half a century.

Certainly, by the early 1920s women were under pressure to return to the home. Women's magazines that had featured stories about the workplace now dampened career aspirations, focussing instead on domestic skilling while promoting the stopgap jobs young women could take while waiting on marriage (Cameron, 1982). The only emancipatory advances of the decade were acceptance of women's greater freedom of movement in public places and acknowledgement of female sexuality, although the sexual revolution that characterised the flapper decade overseas did not reach Australia (Summers, 2002).

Fluctuation in women's participation in the paid workforce continued over the next few decades, with first the Depression then World War Two (WWII) favouring increased employment before labour force economics reasserted male privilege. For example, the 1933 census recorded a 27.9% increase in female breadwinners as men's jobs disappeared (Summers, 2002). One driver for the increase may have been the discriminatory relief policies that denied women any public support when a domestic

service position was available, anywhere, under any conditions (Bremner, 1982). Instead of women's involuntary assumption of breadwinner status being supported, public discourse such as the editorial position assumed by the *Australian Women's Weekly* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* blamed working women for the loss of men's jobs and for the Depression (Bremner, 1982). Agitation for equal pay brought no beneficial outcome, with the Arbitration Court maintaining the ideological formula of the basic women's wage being about 54% that of men's, itself calculated at a level sufficient to support a family even though it was acknowledged to be inadequate. The least disadvantaged demographic was the single male who was assured of the family-support rate while single women and women with dependents were not. Women activists mobilised to provide accommodation, re-training and charitable support to the most disadvantaged women (Summers, 2002).

Between the Depression and WWII, women in the paid workforce were invariably single, deserted or poor (Beaton, 1982). However, the onset of WWII offered more opportunities than WWI had done for women's participation in the war effort. By 1944, 49,000 women were active across the three armed services, 3,000 had joined the land army, and women's employment had again increased, this time by 35% (Summers, 2002). However, equal pay remained elusive with employers going to extraordinary lengths to ensure the pool of cheap female labour continued, even reclassifying previously male jobs if they had to or simply refusing to pay the wage rates approved by the wartime Women's Employment Board (Beaton, 1982). The low wages that continued to be paid for women's traditional work areas failed to attract sufficient workers and the Manpower Committee, established at the beginning of WWII to manage labour resources, used its powers to direct women into the low-paying jobs that they had rejected. All childless women aged between 18-45 years had to register and, if unemployed, or refusing to work in essential industry, the armed forces, or land armies, could be conscripted into, and redeployed within, the workforce. The foremost women's magazine of the day, the *Australian Women's Weekly*, threw itself into confirming the call for women's labour by redirecting its editorial focus from hearth and home to the benefits of paid employment for women, coinciding with the appointment of its Chair to the manpower committee (Wright, 1973).

Post WWII, Australia and the rest of the Western world underwent an ideologically-driven process of returning society to the “traditional” one-income, nuclear family model of social organisation (Lake & Damousi, 1995; Summers, 2002). The same publications that had eulogised paid employment during WWII now focussed on marriage and domesticity (Beaton, 1982), despite research showing women’s reluctance to return to pre-war conditions (Wright, 1973). This situation continued until the liberation movements of the 1960s when all women, rather than primarily the single and disadvantaged, again reasserted their right to economic participation. The liberation movement, and the growth of the consumer society, were instrumental in women’s return to the paid workforce in growing numbers during the final decades of the twentieth century. Not only were women wanting to participate in the paid workforce, the family needed two incomes to purchase the goods increasingly deemed necessary for a comfortable life, and industry needed a deeper labour pool from which to draw staff for emerging recreational, commercial and professional services.

As discussed earlier, patriarchy’s adaptation to women’s financial independence that reduced the marriage imperative was a return to that of similar circumstances in previous centuries. “Society’s contempt for the single woman, especially the economically secure single woman, that most blatant contradiction to the idea that women ought to be married and dependent, is revealed in the ways it tries to remove that independence” (Summers, 2002, p. 494).

5.2 The Early Twenty-First Century

Across millennia, when circumstances have allowed greater choice, women have welcomed the opportunity for self-sufficiency. In twenty-first century Australia, the fundamentals of neoliberalism have relaxed previously gendered social inequities so that women may exercise greater choice about their life options. This is evident in Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data that show that, at any one point across the lifespan, at least 32% of all women aged 15 years and older categorise themselves as being independent (across all single categories; range 32.37-99.42%) in 2006 (Figure 5.1), an increase from about 29.5% in 2001 and about 26.5% in 1996¹ (ABS, 2007a)

¹ It should be noted that the ABS’ census data do not record *de facto* relationships, and a significant number (23.7%) of individuals identifying as being single include those in committed sexual relationships who live apart by choice or circumstance (Headey & Warren, 2008).

(Figure 5.2). Further, the combined single categories of *separated*, *divorced*, *widowed* and *never married* women have overtaken *married* women to be the majority. The percentage of always-single women increased more than the other combined single categories, up by 9.52% in 2001 and a further 3.89% in 2006.

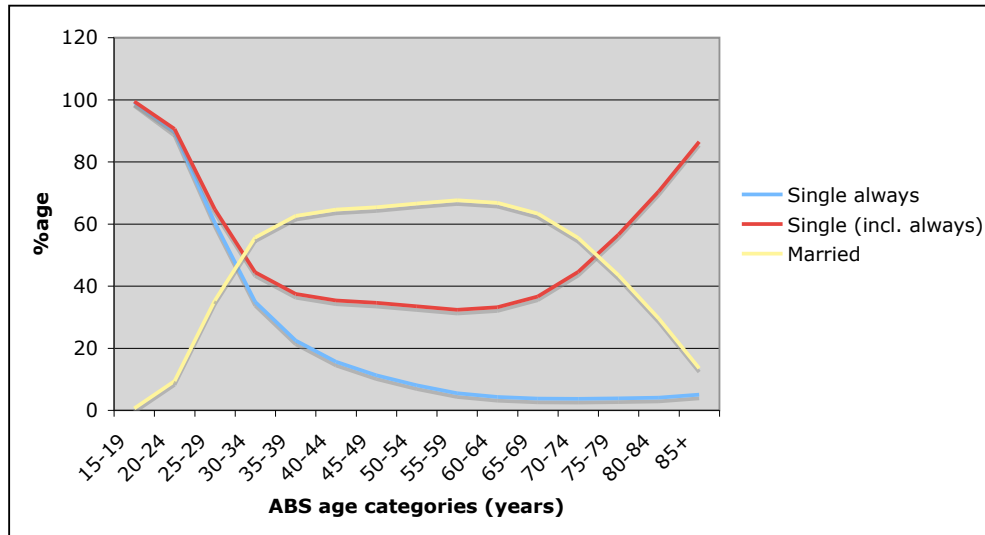


Figure 5.1. Australian women's marital status by age, 2006

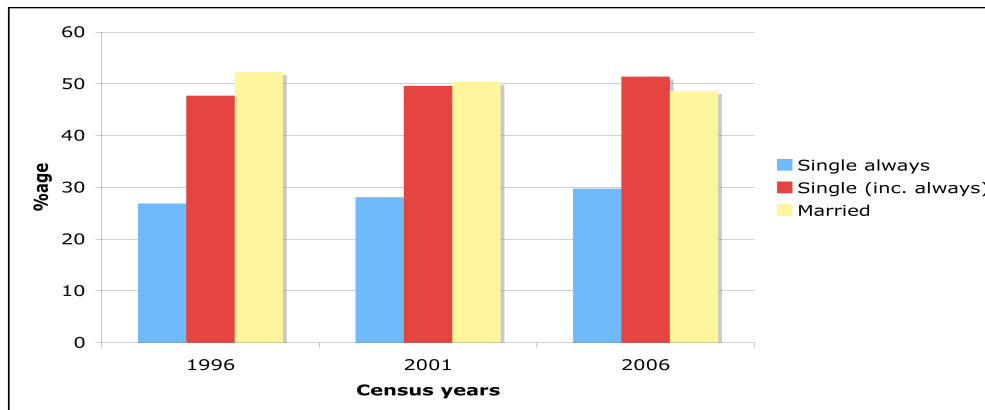


Figure 5.2. Australian women's marital status, 1996-2006

In 2006, nearly a quarter (24.36%) of all household types accommodated one person (ABS, 2007b). The single-person household is reported to be the fastest growing household type (de Vaus, 2004a; Mackay, 2005) (Figure 5.3) with almost one in 10 people living on their own (de Vaus, 2004a).

ABS 2009 data show slightly decreasing fertility for most age groups from a 30-year high the previous year, with 35% of births ex-nuptial. "The proportion of ex-nuptial

births has been increasing since the 1950s, and has risen strongly over the past three decades” (ABS, 2010a, p. 13) although the percentage of those without acknowledged paternity has decreased.

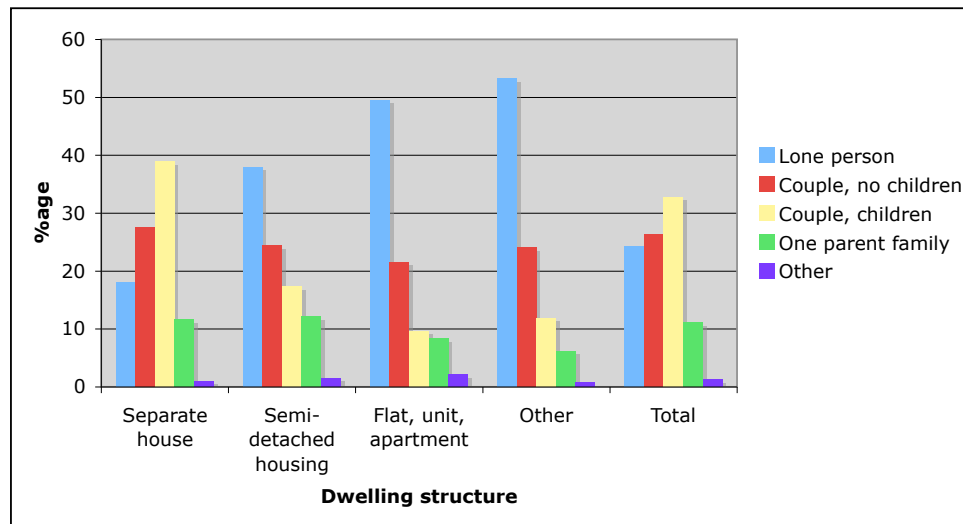


Figure 5.3. Dwelling type / family type, 2006

While many of these babies are born to *de facto* couples so are ineligible for registration as a nuptial birth, an increasing number are born to women who choose to bear and raise children alone². Arguably, it is the freedom brought by financial independence that enables women to satisfy their maternal aspirations without committing to a possibly unsatisfactory interdependence with the child(ren)’s father.

The independent demographic might be thought, if not normative, to be a significant social group rendered eligible by its sheer numbers for a respected place in contemporary culture. However, as with other numerically strong “minorities”, perceived deviance from dominant ideological norms of contemporary culture brings reduced status and marginalisation in public discourse (DePaulo, 2007; Reynolds, 2008) that will be investigated in Study 1.

The gender gap in average weekly earnings continues, associated with a gendered workforce that still sees women predominantly in the service industries and men

² Details of the Australian organisation *Solo mums by choice* and an American equivalent *Choosing single motherhood* may be found at www.smcaustralia.org/ and www.choosingsinglemotherhood.com/, respectively.

employed in the higher paying technical and trades areas (FaHCSIA, 2009)³.

However, current national economic demands make women's paid workforce participation fundamental to national productivity and growth which, in turn, leads to their greater financial independence and a lower incidence of interdependence as women find less need to seek financial security through marriage.

Concomitant with this, and coupled with the success of third-wave feminism that has been coopted to serve the interests of neoliberalism (McRobbie, 2009), women have greater visibility in public affairs as evidenced, at the time of writing, by the top of the Australian political tree being populated by women: HRH Queen Elizabeth as head of state, Quentin Bryce as her representative Governor General, and Prime Minister Julia Gillard. Of these women, Ms Gillard has the least conventional domestic arrangements, choosing not to formalise her interdependence. Her failure to do so, or to have children, or to attend to feminine domestic duties such as having a full fruit bowl on her kitchen table were regularly cited early in her tenure as evidence of her distance from the electorate (Trinca, 2010). More recently, a television series parodying her private life was aired by Australia's public broadcaster with content offensive to political friend and foe, and to much of the viewing public (Vaughan, 2011). Much of the content referenced the Prime Minister's purported sexuality, a common discourse about women whose domestic arrangements do not comply with those mandated by patriarchal ideology. While the private lives of female parliamentarians invariably attract greater interest than their male peers (Drabsch, 2007; Lawrence, 1999; Ustinoff, 2005), anxiety about women without conventional family lives who seek leadership roles are most likely to sustain vituperative comment (Fitzherbert, 2005).

5.3 Conclusion

At the beginning of European settlement, migrant women were positioned by the discourse of institutional power relations as utility to the male pioneers, in many cases involuntarily, of this new frontier (Hunt, 1986). Women's relational independence became possible in the service of expanding the early colonial economy before being lost to the nascent model of the patriarchal nuclear family imported from Britain. The

³ Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

overtly masculine ethos of European settlement in Australia continued through subsequent centuries with policies, such as those determining a minimum wage, designed to discourage women's financial, and concomitant relational, independence.

Despite institutional disadvantage, women have taken advantage of every opportunity for achievement. Following the pattern of their forebears across the centuries, when circumstances have allowed greater public participation, women have seized the opportunity, welcoming self-sufficiency that patriarchy perceives as threat to its model of social organisation. Its response is discursive management of women's life choices, such as those evident in popular culture and public policy, that seeks to regulate women's freedom to choose within a range of acceptable options (McRobbie, 2009).

The next section of the thesis comprises the studies of public, private, and academic discourse about independent women. In Chapter 6, I examine public discourse that frames the possibilities available to independent women before reporting the negotiation of those positions in the private discourse of independent women in Chapter 7. The findings of those studies will be referred to in discussion of academic discourse in Chapter 8.