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The Accidental Feminist: When lived experience collides with the myth of a post-feminist world **by Emily Maguire**

In the last year or so Australia has witnessed a few rip-roaring public examples of misogyny. There's the ever reliable Sam Newman who molested a mock-up of a female journalist, then a few months later, alluded to his wish to ejaculate over a female politician. There was Troy Buswell, the WA opposition leader who admitted to snapping a colleague's bra-strap and sniffing a female staffer's chair. There was the campervan hire company Wicked Campers brought to public attention for their delightful slogans such as 'Women are like banks – once you withdraw you lose interest' and 'If God was a woman, sperm would taste like chocolate.'

Something all these cases have in common – apart from their cringe factor – is that the misogyny was called out and the perpetrators publicly condemned. But the attention given to high-profile, obvious cases like these obscure the fact that most sexism women face every day is so subtle that both victims & perpetrators often fail to notice it. And when I say 'victims' & 'perpetrators' I acknowledge that most of us are both.

The thing is, feminism has been amazingly successful. We have equal pay legislation and laws against sexual harassment & discrimination. We have relatively easy access to contraception and abortion services. Women can borrow money and buy a house without a man's co-signature and husbands no longer have legal permission to rape their wives.

And, even better, we know that most of the time we don't need to appeal to legal protections or legislated rights. We know that most men would no sooner sexually harass a colleague or rape their wife than they would purchase a slave or beat their kids. Laws have changed *and* attitudes have changed. Both are important.

But they haven't changed enough. They haven't even changed as much as most people think they have. True, outright, unashamed, officially sanctioned sexism is rare. But the social and economic structures in which we live are threaded with sexist policies and attitudes, and they're so deeply ingrained, so insidious, that those of us who point them out risk sounding like conspiracy theorists. Or whiners. Or victims. Or god-forbid, man-haters.

Cathy Tinsley, of Georgetown University, conducted research in which participants were asked to comment on the performance of executives seen negotiating various work-related situations. Tinsley found that female executives were viewed negatively for displaying the same behaviour that was judged appropriate when displayed by the men. What's really interesting about Tinsley's research is that she went back and spoke to the respondents about their reactions and found that most were surprised that they'd judged the women more harshly. They had no idea they were responding to the person's gender until the difference in assessments was pointed out to them.

Also significant is that women were as likely as men to criticize the female executives. As Tinsley writes: 'This is not a gender war; women are not fighting men. They are fighting our culture, our prescribed set of norms that constrain their behaviour into a rigid set of "appropriate" categories.'¹

Tinsey's statement holds as true outside of the boardroom as in it: gender based injustice is rarely a matter of terrible men intentionally insulting or oppressing women but of a society clinging either unwittingly or unquestioningly to outdated gender stereotypes.

Many of us born after the success of the 1970s women's liberation movement were raised to think of ourselves as 'people not genders'. We grew up believing that being female would not affect our opportunities or choices. We rejected the idea that women were oppressed and if we thought about feminism at all it was as an historical movement with no relevance to our futures.

There's a fantastic expression I heard a year or two ago: it takes life to make a feminist.

This has been true for me & for many of the 30-something women I know. Genuinely believing that sexism was dead we moved into the worlds of work & marriage & motherhood & got a hell of

a shock. We realised that personal declarations of gender blindness are no defence against a world that insists on defining women by their sex. We realised that the ‘limitless’ choices women have today are oddly less limitless than the choices of men. We realised that political, economic, sexual, professional, social & domestic equality is far from realised & that post-feminism is a media myth. We realised that, quite accidentally, we had become feminists & it was life that was to blame.

For some women it happens much sooner; for others it takes, well, a lifetime. In any case, I want to speed up this process

To demonstrate how everyday misogyny & institutionalised sexism can affect the opportunities & choices of women, I want to tell you a story. It’s not a true story in the strictest sense of the word – I’m a novelist first & the habit of inventing people is hard to shake – but it’s true in its particulars. Everything that happens in this story has happened in real life, to real women I’ve interviewed.

We begin with a 5 year-old girl walking through the gate on her 1st day of school. I’m going to call her Edith, in honour of the first woman to be elected to an Australian parliament. Young Edith, like her namesake, is Anglo-Australian, middle-class, healthy and able-bodied, so she is, by world standards, extremely privileged. She doesn’t know this – all she knows is she’s walking into a world full of new friends & learning & adventure and the idea that the kids wearing cute green dresses should be treated differently to the kids wearing cute grey shorts doesn’t occur to her.

Now, Edith has spent a lot of time playing with her cousins & her favourite things to do are: wrestling, rumbling & making messes with anything mud-like in texture. But on her 1st day at school she learns these are activities for the kids in grey shorts not the kids in green dresses. After school she asks a furious question of her parents: why did you make me be a girl? Girls are boring.

Her parents are heartbroken. They realise that in trying to raise a gender-blind girl they may have inadvertently contributed to the message that girls are not as good as boys. For example, they’ve always taken care to point out that Disney princesses do nothing but whine and look pretty and isn’t that dull? Wouldn’t she rather be off having adventures? But rather than hearing a criticism of

Disney, little Edith has heard a criticism of girls. And where her parents always steered her away from lacy, frilly dresses because they get in the way of physical play, Edith has internalised the disdain for such clothing and applied it to the kindergarten dress up box: princess dresses equals female equals bad. Comfy clothes and superhero costumes equals boy equals good.

Anyway, with the help of her teacher & parents, Edith learns to compromise. She learns to play shops with the girls at school & save the wrestling for when her cousins visit on the weekends.

A few years on, Edith goes to watch one of her boy cousins play footie. She listens to the coach & some of the parents shouting at the players & notices something weird: when people want to insult the boys they call them girls. She starts paying attention in other situations & realises that all of the worst insults are related to being female: Girly. Sissy. Pussy. Skirt. She learns that the absolute worst swear word you could ever, ever say is slang for female genitals.

The other terrible, terrible insult boys use is 'gay'. Around the beginning of high school Edith works out that the kind of person who uses 'gay' as an insult is the kind of person who links homosexual men with femininity and thinks femininity is bad: Nancy, pansy, swish when you walk, talk in a high voice, care about fashion and shoes? Gay. Feminine. Same thing. All bad.

It's kind of interesting, but not really something to worry about. They're just words.

Jump forward. Edith is now 16. Ask her whether she's a feminist & she'll laugh at you. Her access to education, to travel, to any career she wants is exactly the same as the boys in her class. In fact, the girls she knows are smarter, more assured & more mature than the boys. Anyone bitching about sexism needs a reality check: ever heard of poverty, global warming, whale slaughter?

Well, yes, okay, if you're going to push the subject, there're a few small gender related things that bother her. She's uncomfortable, for example, in sex ed class. The teacher talks as though the boys – many of whom are great friends of Edith's – are beasts, unable to control their raging, powerful sex drives & as though Edith & her girlfriends need to be sexual gatekeepers for these boys. This is at odds with Edith's experience, yet lots of people seem to agree that this is the way things are.

In the movies and on TV women are always fighting off men and men are always coming up with schemes to get women to have sex with them. If it's a comedy, the schemes are wacky; if it's a drama the schemes are violent. Either way, sex education, telly, the movies, jokes told by drunken uncles at family barbeques, comments made by religious leaders on the news – it all adds up to men being voracious animals chasing sex at any cost and women having to be always on alert lest they send out the wrong signals, fail to keep the all powerful male sex drive in check.

Of course, being straight, Edith doesn't even notice that the gay girls at her school are receiving an even more confusing message from sex education and the wider culture: since female sexuality is passive and defensive, since it's always a reaction –positive or negative – to male desire, lesbians must never have sex? That must be why the teacher never bothers with detailing safe sex procedures for lesbians – everyone knows sex only happens when there's a penis involved.

Anyway. Edith, having gotten over her childhood belief about what boys and girls can do, now plays footy with her mixed-sex group of friends. There's one boy in particular that she really likes. She wonders why he doesn't make a move on her – isn't that what boys do? Maybe she's not sexy enough?

She starts buying *Cosmopolitan*, going for leg waxes, eyebrow waxes, bikini waxes, fake tans, highlights, manicure, pedicure. She buys cleansing gel, toner, day & night moisturiser, eye cream & exfoliating scrub. She gets up 20 minutes earlier each day to make-up her face so it looks natural – tinted moisturiser, subtle eye make-up, cream blush, lip gloss. One night she peeks inside the bathroom cabinet of the boy she likes: she sees pimple gel, electric shaver, toothpaste & toothbrush & feels ashamed she has to try so hard to get him to like her while she likes him exactly as he is.

Still, though, boys are only a tiny part of her life. In every other way life is great & compared to the opportunities her mum & grandma had at her age, Edith is living the feminist dream.

Then she gets her first job (she has to find some way to pay for all that beauty crap) Thursday nights and weekends in a newsagency. One night as she's helping the boss lock up, he grabs her around the waist and tries to kiss her. When she says no, he steps away but crankily tells her she

shouldn't wear such short skirts if she doesn't want things like this to happen. On her next shift, he grabs her arse and tells her that she looks even hotter in jeans.

Now, despite all the warnings about men & their beastly desires, Edith really didn't expect something like this to happen at work. Partly because she knows there are laws against sexual harassment, but mostly because her boss is only thirty or so. Didn't men like that retire back in the dark ages when people still thought Benny Hill was funny?

Edith doesn't realise that her experience is far from unusual. According to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission around 30 percent of women (and 7 percent of men) report being sexually harassed at work.ⁱⁱ When Elizabeth Broderick, the federal sex discrimination commissioner, conducted her nationwide listening tour recently, she heard about sexual harassment in every state, industry and workplace that she visited. She wrote in her report that 'sexual harassment appears to be present across all levels of the workplace... In some industries it was reported to be the norm and many fear it would be nearly impossible to wipe out. Victims of sexual harassment justifiably fear making a complaint will only lead to further victimisation - the idea that a complaint made to an employer could be resolved positively was considered a 'fairy tale' by some, and an outcome for many victims of sexual harassment was instead to leave their workplace or even change career paths if they worked in a small industry.'ⁱⁱⁱ

But Edith hasn't read that report, so she doesn't know any this. She doesn't know, either, that young women starting out in the workforce are particularly vulnerable. She doesn't even know for sure whether what happened *is* harassment and if it is she doesn't know what to do about it – who do you complain to when the boss is the harasser? It's not like she wants to go to the police over something like this.

One of her close friends was raped last year by a bloke they both know and when *she* went to the police it was excruciating. They treated her like a criminal, like a slut. They asked her the same questions over & over - what she was wearing & how much she drank & how many boys she'd

had sex with. She had to have a medical examination that hurt as much as the rape had & it was all for nothing since the evidence of intercourse didn't prove forced sex & the guy was never charged.

Edith's heard similar stories from other girls – not surprising given that 1 in 5 Australian women over 15 are victims of sexual violence. It's also not surprising that none of the girls Edith knows have seen their rapists jailed. 80% of rapes aren't reported to police in the first place. Of those that are, police investigate 90%. In 65% of the investigated cases a suspect is identified, but charges are made against only 20%. Of that 20%, only 60% end up in court, where the conviction rate is 35% - which is, by the way, half that of all other criminal matters. That's a lot of percentages, I know. I'll simplify: of the total number of rapes committed in NSW, only 1% end in a conviction.^{iv}

Also on Edith's mind as she decides what to do about her boss is a news report she read recently that said that 1 in 6 Victorians agreed that 'women often say no to sex when they mean yes' and just over one in ten believed that women who are sexually harassed should sort it out themselves.^v

Edith can't imagine going through even a tenth of what her friend who was raped went through. She can't imagine battling all those nasty attitudes, standing up to all that judgment over an attempted kiss and a couple of sleazy comments. She resigns from her job. It's just simpler.

Anyway, she's 18 & at uni now. There's too much to be excited about to dwell on unpleasant situations. There's an active feminist group on campus but, if anything, they turn Edith away from the cause. Sure she agrees with a lot of the things they say, but she thinks they pay too much attention to petty things – high heels & body hair & whether someone's called chairman or chairperson. And they're always so angry! She doesn't understand why they can't be more positive. There are lots of good things about being female and in terms of academic success women at Edith's uni are totally kicking arse!

Fast forward again. First fulltime job and again, it seems that Edith is on exactly equal footing with the young men starting out. There are, though, some 'minor' issues. For one thing, the pervasive message that she doesn't look good enough is not just getting more intense but she's learning that it might have consequences beyond her own self-esteem.

Marie Claire in June 2007 reported on UK research that indicated ‘a ¼ of employers admitted they were more likely to hire a woman who wore make-up than one who didn’t’.^{vi} In the feature, titled ‘How Does Your Make-up Affect Your Career’, the magazine tested the findings for itself, by presenting a woman in 6 make-up guises, ‘from underplayed to overstated’, to a panel of recruitment ‘experts’. With no make-up & tied back hair, she was given a score of 12/30. With lots of make-up her score was only slightly better: 14/30. The ‘winning look’, with a score of 27/30, had blow-dried hair, visible but subtle eye make-up & natural-looking lipstick. It’s probably unnecessary to add that there was no hair & make-up test for prospective male employees.

And, yeah, Edith can & probably should stop reading magazines whose career advice consists of make-up tips, but the thing is, even if she avoids all the glossy mags, she will, like every other woman in our society be bombarded with beauty advice from the minute she wakes up to the minute she closes her eyes at night.

The morning news broadcast includes a segment on the safety of botox which *everyone* is getting; the side of the bus has an ad about slimming down in 6 weeks; her manager tells her about a conditioning spray that will fix that frizz problem; her assistant says she has to try this new diet; the newspaper has a lift-out summer detox guide, the evening news repeats the morning’s botox story and adds one about a new scientific study about the evolutionary basis of men’s preference for women with small waists. Edith would have to institute a total media blackout, work from home and be a hermit socially to escape the message that a woman is never okay as she is. There is always something about her that could be made better, thinner, prettier, smoother, neater, sexier.

And I mean a total media blackout - that *Marie Claire* make-up story was repeated, not literally, but in spirit in the London newspaper *The Times*. That’s a proper newspaper, right? And there it was - the very important news report telling us that 64 per cent of company directors said that women who wore make-up look more professional and 18 per cent of directors said that women who do not wear make-up ‘look like they can’t be bothered to make an effort’^{vii}

Now, although this was in a generally respected newspaper it was in the ‘life and style’ section, so I guess women who don’t want to be lectured on how much eyeliner to wear could just skip that section. But you know what’s really annoying? Because of the way so-called ‘women’s issues’ are marginalised by the mainstream media, a woman who avoids all the beauty and fashion stuff and only reads the news, business and analysis sections may actually miss out on useful information.

A recent example: *The New York Times* ran a piece in May, about the gender imbalance in science, engineering and technology.^{viii} The report detailed the ways in which women are routinely harassed, demeaned, held back and pushed out in these industries which maintain, according to one researcher, a ‘pervasive macho culture.’ It was an important and useful article that discussed real world strategies and solutions to the problem and didn’t mention high heels or make-up even once.

So what’s the problem? Well, the article – which, I’ll repeat had nothing whatever to do with clothing, make-up, dieting or beauty – was in the Fashion & Style section of the paper. How many of the people who really needed to read that report – the macho men of science and engineering, their managers and human resources people - regularly read Fashion & Style, do you think?

But sorry, hey, this is trivial stuff, right? Let’s get back to our girl’s career progression.

So Edith’s doing well, wearing the right amount of make-up, dressing for success as well as, of course, working the same or longer hours as her colleagues. She’s getting increasingly complex assignments & feeling like a valued, respected part of the team. And then a male colleague with the same workload & duties has a few too many drinks at the Christmas party & lets slip his salary.

Edith is shocked that this bloke’s earnings are 15% higher than hers. She does some detective work & discovers that she – the only female in her team – earns less than every other member. This seems unfair, but she knows gender-based pay discrimination is illegal and so it must really be – as her boss & her inner voice of doubt tell her – that she’s just not worth as much, for one reason or another.

She feels this pay difference as a personal failing, not realising that she's perfectly typical, that the Australian Bureau of Statistics reports that women's full-time earnings in this country in 2007 were on average only 84 percent of male full time earnings. Bad enough, but the worst thing is that this is *down* a percentage point from 2005. The pay gap between men and women in Australia is actually widening.^{ix}

Let's step back & have a broader look at the pay gap. There's loads of research on this – here & in the US & UK where the gap is 23% & 17% respectively. But there's no definitive answer or simple explanation. It seems likely that only a small part of the gap is due to flat out, overt sexism – that is, a manager deciding to pay a woman less than a man for the same job. This is illegal, of course, but it's only detectable where there's an award rate or in salaried positions where the choice to pay a woman less can be explicitly linked to gender – so it does still happen. But rarely.

We know that a largish part of the gap is due to informal caregiving which is still, overwhelmingly, women's work and which I'll speak more about later. I'm not only talking about childcare – although that's a huge part of it – but other forms of unpaid care, such as eldercare or caring for family members with disabilities. Around 70 percent of Australia's 2.6 million family carers are women and the majority of those women hold down paid jobs in addition to their unpaid caring duties.^x Time spent caring means less time in the workplace which – although it may well mean women work more hours total – still translates as lower income.

Note also that all the figures are based on full-time work, though, so the difference caused by fewer hours at work is down to men working overtime not women working part-time or casual jobs. On a related note, there's the fact that many of our lowest paid professions are dominated by female workers: nursing, teaching, retail, cleaning and paid child or eldercare.

Another contributor to the pay gap problem – but one that mostly operates in higher status, white-collar jobs - has to do with negotiation. US academics Linda Babcock and Sarah Laschever recently published their research on women and pay negotiation in a book unambiguously titled 'Women Don't Ask'. I'll quote from their findings: 'By not negotiating a first salary, an individual

stands to lose more than \$500,000 by age 60—and men are more than four times as likely as women to negotiate a first salary rather than simply accept what is offered.’^{xi}

So the straightforward solution then would be to tell women starting out to ask for more money. Except, no. Babcock & Laschever also found that ‘...many companies’ cultures penalize women when they do ask - further discouraging them from doing so. Women who assertively pursue their own ambitions and promote their own interests may be labelled as bitchy or pushy.’

A couple of recent studies that back this up. Catalyst in the US, found that most senior-level executives believed women were better at stereotypically feminine ‘caretaking’ skills & men were better at stereotypically masculine ‘taking-charge skills.’ In other words, men are better at managing & women are better at supporting them. In addition, the male executives (but not the females) said that men are better problem-solvers than women. As the report pointed out, most senior managers are men & so their bias was likely to have a stronger hold on workplace culture.^{xii}

A 2006 report by the US National Academy of Sciences came to a similar conclusion, finding that women are underrepresented in top positions in the academy and professions not because of ‘a lack of talent’ but because of ‘unintentional biases and outmoded institutional structures’. This study noted that ‘continuous questioning of women’s abilities and commitment’ and the rewarding of ‘traits such as assertiveness that are socially less acceptable for women to possess’ were common.^{xiii}

This last point is interesting in light of some research into workplace harassment reported in 2007. The University of Toronto study found that women who display ‘masculine’ traits such as assertiveness, independence and ambition were more likely to be targets of workplace harassment than more conventionally ‘feminine’ women. The findings contradict the common advice given to women entering male dominated workplaces to adopt the behaviour and style of their colleagues in order to fit in. The research suggests that such cultures penalise ‘feminine’ women with lack of workplace recognition and punish ‘masculine’ women with harassment.^{xiv}

What is a woman who just wants to do her damn job and be rewarded fairly to do? If she senses the unspoken rule that women shouldn't be, as the Canadian study put it, 'uppity' then she might attempt to be less confrontational, more conciliatory. She might follow former sex discrimination Commissioner, now NSW MP Pru Goward's advice to work on making her voice 'less shrill'.

But then, being conciliatory & quietly spoken her male colleagues may see her as not serious & not leadership material. Their perception that this is the way women are will be reinforced. The next woman who acts uppity will suffer the consequences of bucking cultural expectations.

Back to Edith who has concluded that there's nothing she can do but continue to work harder and smarter than everyone else. To take on extra assignments, help colleagues with their workload, volunteer for committees, attend networking events and self-fund extra study. Eventually, surely, she'll be rewarded.

And then, just as she is beginning to make some progress, she discovers she is pregnant. This is fantastic news. She's almost thirty now and – as the newspapers, current affairs shows, women's magazines and well-meaning relatives keep telling her – women who leave it too long to get pregnant will end up barren and heartbroken.

She sits down with her partner to talk about how they'll split the childcare. He's keen to take on an equal share of the parenting, but the thing is, she's entitled to maternity leave – & unlike 53% of Australian women, Edith will even be paid for some of it. Her partner, on the other hand, while legally entitled to paternity leave, can't be said to have easy access to it. No man at his company has ever taken more than a few days off for the birth of their kids & he doesn't see why he should be the one to set a precedent when she can take the leave without comment & with pay. So, no question, Edith will be responsible **for caring for their child** for at least the first 12 months.

This isn't a problem really. After all, as the parent who'll be physically giving birth and the one with the capability to breast feed, Edith is more likely to need that first year off than her partner.

So she takes 12 months leave. But then what? The cost of good childcare is frightening & the thought of leaving the baby in dodgy, cheap care is unbearable. Difficult decisions must be made.

I strongly believe that how parents organise their family life is none of anyone else's damn business. Decisions about managing childcare and careers should always be made by the adults involved, according to what is best for their family. But what is worth talking about in terms of societal gender roles is the context in which these decisions are made.

In researching my book I talked to a whole bunch of highly educated, professional women who had given up work after their babies were born. Many of them told me they didn't work outside the home anymore because their after-tax salary would barely cover the cost of full-time childcare. 'It's not worth it,' they all said. I don't know exactly how much these women or their husbands earned, but it was obvious they weren't deducting half – or indeed any – of the childcare cost from their husband's salary. The calculation seemed to be: $\text{Woman's Salary} - \text{Childcare} = \text{Might as Well Stay Home}$. Shouldn't it go: $\text{Family Income} - \text{Childcare} = \text{New Family Income if we Both Decide to Work?}$

An article about working mothers which appeared in the *Age* in January 2006 had the same weird blind spot. While the article thoroughly examined the various reasons women give for returning to full or part time work versus staying home with their children, their partners were mentioned only in passing. The article included analyses of four mothers' financial situations, including her income, less tax, travel costs and childcare costs. Income earned by the fathers was conspicuously absent from the equations. The unspoken assumption throughout was that childcare is a woman's responsibility whether she's doing the caring herself or hiring someone else to do it.

This whole work/childcare discussion too often rests on the flawed premise that only women have children. But most people are, or will be, parents. It's ridiculous then that most workplaces are structured as though nobody is a parent & public institutions – particularly schools – are structured as though no parent has a job. And whenever an argument is made for better parental leave provisions or increased work-hour flexibility or subsidised childcare, we get the same old horror-

struck responses: the economy will suffer, small businesses will collapse, companies will stop hiring women at all, a generation of delinquents will run wild while their mothers are off pursuing their careers. It's as though those selfish, greedy women are ruining everything for everyone.

But – this needs to be repeated until everyone gets it – men are parents too. If they're not as concerned about juggling childcare and work as women and if they're not held as responsible for their children's welfare as women, then they should be! And those who, like me, are not parents and never intend to be must recognise that the children of our colleagues will one day be our employees, our politicians, economists, plumbers, teachers and doctors – our future.

Again, family planning is a private issue, but the construction of a society that makes it difficult for the majority of parents to manage work and family responsibilities is a matter of public concern. A 2004 Monash University study, titled *What Women (and Men) Want: Births, Policies and Choices* concluded that while government or workplace policies didn't singularly influence the decisions couples made about fertility, they did 'form the landscape in which women and men negotiated their choices about families, work and life.' And, according to the authors of that report 'many women ended up lowering their expectations about what both governments and employers would provide in supporting their fertility decisions'.^{xv}

Now, as anyone who has ever tried to get out of something by doing a crappy job knows, fostering low expectations is a fantastic way to ensure that not much will be asked of you in the future. If women have low expectations of their workplaces & governments, they'll struggle through on their own, not bothering to agitate or even ask for a better deal from the workplace or society.

Which is exactly what Edith does after a few years as a stay-at-home mother to her 2 kids, who are now school age. It's not just that she misses the mental stimulation of work, but she worries about money. She trusts her husband & they're happy enough, but what if something happened to him? She knows that without a job, she is – as Betty Friedan put it – one husband away from welfare.

The fear is not an unreasonable one. American researcher Ann Crittenden contends that 'motherhood is the single greatest risk factor for poverty among American women', and several

studies have shown that professional women who return to full-time work after time off or a period of part-time work suffer a substantial and ongoing cut in pay and responsibility. In Australia, women overall have significantly less money saved for their retirement than men.

Responding to concerns about Australia's low level of women's workforce participation and earnings (about 84 percent of men's, you'll recall) John von Doussa, the president of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission was blunt: 'Women – he said - are getting punished for the simple fact that they, genetically, are those with the function to produce the next generation'.

So, Edith goes back to work. It's hectic & it's hard, but that's life, right? Except, to make it all harder, she's still working in the same low-level position she held before the kids were born, while the men she worked with back then are now several steps further up the ladder & climbing fast. She knows that this is fair enough – after all, they've been busy climbing that ladder while she's been at home – but it frustrates her that on their desks are pictures of their own gorgeous, well-cared for, much loved children. These men - once her contemporaries - earn more, have more superannuation, & better future career & earning prospects than she does. And they have kids, too!

How did it happen that they ended up 'having it all' – parenthood and a successful career – while she didn't? The answer is obvious – these men have wives. Edith realises that this is where she's gone wrong – she became a wife instead of getting herself one.

Or, perhaps it went wrong long before that, back at school when she accepted the glib statement that girls can do anything boys can do. She accepted that & went forward as if it was true & never worried about how gendered assumptions operating in the workplace & wider society might affect her, because we're living in post-feminist times. And yes, she had many choices that women of previous generations have not had & it's true, she loves being a mother and doesn't for one second regret that choice, but. But. The fact remains that the context in which she made that choice – and all her other choices – was very different to that of those boys she started off as perfectly equal to.

It takes life to make a feminist.

It's important to acknowledge that Edith is – as I said right at the start of her story – about as privileged as a woman gets in this world. Her life experience is an easy ride compared to that of many women not just in repressive societies where girls are routinely mutilated & women stoned, not just in comparison to women in developing nations where lack of basic health-care creates heartbreakingly high maternal death rates, but right here in Australia.

For example, many Indigenous women in remote communities struggle daily to keep themselves & their children safe from violence. They struggle for basic access to housing, education, employment & healthcare. Female immigrants & refugees although often located in urban areas, also struggle - because of language, cultural & sometimes economic barriers - to access the most basic services. Both groups have their difficulties compounded by racism.

Many women in low paid, so-called unskilled jobs don't have access to sick pay or even un-timed toilet breaks, let alone paid maternity leave. Same-sex attracted women face both officially sanctioned discrimination & societal homophobia. Women with disabilities deal with a whole world of issues to do with bodily autonomy, healthcare & access to education & employment.

The point isn't that all of these women's problems are caused by sexism; it's that sexism hurts everybody & it hurts minorities, the marginalised & the otherwise disadvantaged the most. If women like Edith are struggling with institutionalised sexism, what hope for women who could never in a million years afford not to work or to pay for childcare? What hope for women without the language skills or understanding of Australian bureaucracy to make an anti-discrimination complaint or negotiate better working conditions?

The existence of women confronting multiple injustices sometimes leads critics to accuse feminists of betraying these women by concentrating on trivialities. Time spent worrying over sexist ads is time we could spend stopping genital mutilation, they say. This criticism is, frankly, bullshit.

First, it's designed to make us shut-up and take it. Like as long as something worse is happening somewhere we have no right to complain about what is happening here in front of us. The message - crudely paraphrased – is 'stop bitching about petty crap and think yourself lucky you don't get

beaten and raped for leaving the house.’ Anyone who thinks women should be grateful for being treated like a human being is not on the side of social justice, I promise you.

Second, so-called little things - sexist language, media objectification of women –create the context in which serious, life-affecting oppression and injustice occur. If we want to end gender based violence, injustice & oppression we have to dismantle the societal structures & thought patterns that allow them to occur. It’s impossible to imagine a society without domestic violence as long as we still have a society where wives are portrayed – even in dumb advertisements or jokes – as the property of their husbands. It’s impossible to imagine a world without female genital mutilation as long as women’s sexual autonomy is still considered threatening.

Look at it this way – if you are *less* seriously affected by misogyny than many other women, you are in a much stronger position to do something about it. The absolute worst thing you can do is ignore sexism in your own world because you see worse examples in other worlds. The worst thing you can do is accept that sexism is okay as long as it’s not the kind that ends in mutilation or death.

And you know, paying attention to sexism and calling it out when we see it is not just important if we want to see long-term, world-wide change, it can also make an immediate difference to the psychological and emotional wellbeing of individual women.

I often hear young women say something along the lines of ‘I don’t let sexist pigs bother me. They’re ignorant dinosaurs. I ignore them.’ Which is a good attitude – I’m all for ignoring sexist dinosaurs. The problem is that the sexist beliefs of others hurt us the most – in terms of our self-image - when we *don’t* know about them. There’s quite a bit of research on this but I’ll just run you through one recent study out of Leiden University to show what I’m talking about.

The researchers set up mock job interviews, during which women were asked sexist questions, such as, 'Do you sometimes dress sexily in order to get someone else to do something for you?' & 'Do you think it will be difficult for you to combine a career with a family?' All the candidates were then rejected. One group was told they’d given the wrong answers, the other group that they were rejected because they were women.

The women who were openly rejected on gender grounds didn't have a problem. They knew that they were rejected because of their gender and not because of their skills. Their reaction then focused on the interviewer, the perpetrator of the discrimination. But the women who were supposedly rejected because they had given wrong answers looked for the reason for their rejection in themselves, which resulted in a low self-image and poorer performance in follow-up IQ tests.^{xvi}

Think about the implications: someone discriminates against you because of your gender, you don't know that's what's happened so you blame yourself, your confidence takes a knock, you perform poorly, which means the perpetrator of the discrimination is justified in assuming women can't perform well and, you will probably come away with the same idea: I really suck.

This, in a nutshell, is why I write and speak about sexism. It's not about being politically correct or looking for reasons to be upset, but about helping women direct their anger at the people or institutions that deserve it rather than at themselves.

So what do we do? First we pay attention: we watch the way women or girls are treated differently to men & boys & we ask in each instance: why & does it matter? We listen to the stories of women – all kinds of women with all kinds of experiences. And we listen to the experiences of men & ask the same questions: where does gender fit in here? Are the differences inherent or imposed?

Second, we talk about the things we've heard & observed & experienced: we tell our friends about the things that bother us. We find out if they're bothered by them too. We try to discover whether our personal problems are being experienced by others and if so, whether that's because of societal attitudes or government or workplace policy. We ask our friends and colleagues – is it just me?

Third, we speak up. For ourselves and for other women. We speak up at uni, at school, at home. We write letters or arrange protests or start blogs or join activist organisations. We volunteer to teach migrant women English or to help out at a women's shelter or tutor disadvantaged teenagers. We use our money or time or skills or voices to make things better.

And we help others to understand how sexism works. That gender-based inequality is a systemic problem—it's not a bloke telling a sexist joke on television over here and a sleazy boss groping his secretary over there – it's an institutional problem endemic to the whole culture and it will take a society wide shift in attitudes toward gender roles to make a difference.

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ⁱⁱ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, '20 Years On: The Challenges Continue, Sexual Harassment in the Australian Workplace', 2004.

ⁱⁱⁱ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 'Gender equality: What matters to Australian women and men', The Listening Tour Community Report, July 2008.

^{iv} NSW Rape Crisis Centre, Annual Report 2005-06, http://www.nswrapecrisis.com.au/Resources/Annual_Report_2006.pdf

^v 'Two Steps Forward, One Step Back: Community Attitudes to Violence Against Women', Vic Health, October 2006, http://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/assets/contentFiles/CAS_TwoSteps_FINAL.pdf

^{vi} 'How Does Your Make-up Affect Your Career', *Marie Claire*, June 2007

^{vii} Lesley Everett, 'Make-up gets noticed in the boardroom,' *The Times*, November 29 2007

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^x Carers Australia Fact Sheet, <http://www.carersaustralia.com.au/images/stories/Carers%20fact%20sheet%20-%202003%20statistics.pdf>; The Economic Value of Informal Care,' Access Economics, August 2005, <http://www.carersaustralia.com.au/images/stories/Access%20Economics%20study%20full.pdf>

^{xi} Linda Babcock and Sarah Laschever, *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*, Princeton University Press, 2003

^{xii} Jeanine Prime, 'Women "Take Care," Men "Take Charge:" Stereotyping of U.S. Business Leaders Exposed' *Catalyst*, October 2005

^{xiii} Committee on Maximizing the Potential of Women in Academic Science and Engineering, National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering and Institute of Medicine 'Beyond Bias and Barriers: Fulfilling the Potential of Women in Academic Science and Engineering,' National Academies Press, 2006

^{xiv} Jennifer L. Berdahl, 'The Sexual Harassment of Uppity Women,' *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 92, No. 2, 2007.

^{xv} Jane Maree Maher, Maryanne Dever, Jennifer Curtin and Andrew Singleton, 'What women (and men) want: births, policies and choices,' School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University, October 2004

^{xvi} Sezgin Cihangir, *The Dark Side of Subtle Discrimination: How targets respond to different forms of discrimination*, Leiden University, June 2008