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OFFICE OF THE STATUS OF WOMEN

MAGAZINE ARTICLE

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AUTUMN IN PARIS

In the Autumn of 1983 I was in Paris. My purpose was to attend the 22nd Session of the General Conference of Unesco. The Australian Delegation was led by Senator Susan Ryan. Ambassador Whitlam, again in the corridors of power, moved between sessions, indulging his well known passion for detail. Mrs Margaret Whitlam was also a member of the Delegation. The sessions were more interesting than usual because the rumours were already abroad that the United States was about to pull out of Unesco. Good work was done in the sessions dealing with educational, scientific and communications policies. My brief took me into the sessions on human rights, prejudice, racism and apartheid and the status of women.

This is not a full report on a Unesco Autumn in Paris. For the first time, the Australian Delegation report will be tabled in Federal Parliament. Readers who are interested can get the details. But in the course of the preparation of the Australian brief for the Delegation, and subsequently at the Paris meeting, I was able to see more clearly than ever before the context in which we in Australia are developing laws, policies and social attitudes concerning the status of women. This perception was shared with the representatives of the world community at Unesco. Reforms in our society affecting the status of women are not to be seen as a one-off project and an end in themselves. Rather, these reforms should be viewed as a species of a wider genus than strikes at unjustified discrimination, in whatever form it shows its ugly face. Women may be the largest group in a society such as Australia's to suffer unwarranted discrimination. Removal of such discrimination, affecting such a very large group of our population, clearly deserves priority attention. Hence the establishment of the Office of the Status of Women and other initiatives of succeeding governments to reverse unjustified discrimination. But it is vital, as it seems to me, that women, fighting for an end to discrimination against them on the grounds of their status, should become a vanguard for asserting the same principle for other groups in our community.

These other groups may be fewer in number, less readily identifiable, less vocal and articulate, even less popular with the general community. But the great move for the enhancement of the status of women in Australian society should be a forerunner for our national concern with the genus of which discrimination against women is a leading species. The genus is the tendency in every society to stereotype individual human beings and to prevent them from flourishing on their merits as individuals. The grounds of stereotyping and of consequent discrimination may vary. The catalogue is a long and sorry one. But it is vital to see the policy initiatives for the improvement of the status of women in the context of a concern to improve the status of all those who suffer from unwarranted discrimination.

#### SHABBY LIST

The shabby list of grounds of human discrimination were well expressed by Mrs Whitlam in her speech, on which we worked together, for the session of the Unesco General Conference on a new major program dealing with the status of women. It was the first time this program had been on the Unesco agenda. Addressing the context for tackling the subject, Mrs Whitlam said this:

There is a need for a clear-sighted appreciation of the conceptual setting of discrimination against women. This is a point made previously by Australia. In our view it is essential to perceive discrimination on the grounds of gender or race as species of a wider concept. I refer to discrimination based on stereotyping, which prevents men and women from reaching their fulfilment. This is true when the discrimination is based on gender. It also applies to discrimination on other grounds such as:

- . socio-economic group;
- . handicaps — physical or mental;
- . marital status;
- . sexual orientation;
- . religious views or lack of religion;
- . language and culture;
- . political affiliation or lack of it.

Of course, it is vital to have an action program. Also, as between the grounds of discrimination, priorities must be fixed for attention. It is hard to think of a larger group than women as the subjects of discrimination and disadvantage. For this reason Australia assigns high priority in the world forum as it does in initiatives at home.

THE BASIC ENEMY

The reference to an earlier Australian statement was a reference to my assertion of the same point in the Unesco session dealing with the elimination of prejudice, intolerance, racism and apartheid. Discussion in that session was dominated by legitimate African concern about the legalisation of stereotyping under South Africa's apartheid laws. But the point was made, to an audience not entirely receptive I suspect, that those who preach with proper fervour against apartheid must search for the fundamental reason as to why racial prejudice is unacceptable. That fundamental reason is the same one that explains the unacceptability of gender-based discrimination. It is a disregard of individual qualities and capacities and an imposition on human beings, in all their variety and whatever their individual capacity and inclination, of rigid preordained roles and models. Many people, locked into their own legitimate concerns about cruel discrimination that has affected them or their families give laudible support to initiatives, international and national, against racism or against gender-derived discrimination. This human tendency to isolate special interests is understandable. As well, it is impossible to feel strongly about everything and to know the special sting of particular forms of discrimination, if you are not on the receiving end. A person who does not have a family member who is intellectually handicapped, and who has had little experience with these people, may not be sensitive to the ways in which laws, policies and social attitudes discriminate in such cases. We have recently seen, in the moves for the removal of legal discrimination on the grounds of male homosexual conduct in New South Wales, the introduction of other provisions which are not neutral on sexual orientation but preserve features of discrimination. Federal legislation in Australia, partly for constitutional reasons, has taken the approach of tackling particular categories of discrimination. So we have the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1984. These statutes provide an agenda for immediate action.

But it may be hoped that the success of these laws, tackling particular topics of discrimination, will be aggregated to a wider concern about the basic enemy. That enemy is the lamentable inclination of humanity to learn prejudice and to adopt limiting preconceptions of the ability of individuals to flourish as themselves, without the inhibitions imposed by the stereotypes and prejudices that seek to limit human development.

And that is why it is my hope, both in world organisations such as Unesco and in our national policies in Australia, that we will see the improvement of the status of women not as an end in itself. It is a vanguard policy for a more tolerant and humane approach to individual variety and human survival.

It has the advantage of affording a positive notion which rather negative expressions such as 'anti-discrimination' do not provide. But it is, and must be seen to be, a part only of a wider mosaic which it is our obligation to put together. That mosaic is concerned with ending discrimination on whatever unjustifiable grounds and advancing a pluralistic and tolerant community, accepting human differences and not using them as a ground to diminish fellow human beings.

Women, as the most numerous and most persistent category of widespread unjustifiable discrimination, should lead our society to a recognition that improvement in the status of women is merely the first step on the long march to removing unwarranted discrimination, in whatever ugly form it manifests itself.