PUBLIC SECTOR BOARD COMPOSITION IN AUSTRALIA:
LEADING THE WAY

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1. Introduction

The position of women on the boards of public sector authorities, corporations and committees in Australia can best be understood by placing contemporary board membership data into a social, economic and political context. The major impetus for the appointment of women onto public sector boards has resulted both from a recognition of the advantages of membership diversity and a thirty-five year period of women's policy development accompanied by women's increased participation rates in employment and education.

However, as a brief overview of women's policy development indicates, the major gains made as a result of legal advances and employment and educational opportunities, have not resulted in significant women's advancement into the upper echelons of decision-making in either the public or private sectors of the economy.

This chapter provides data on public sector board membership and draws some comparisons with private sector boards in Australia as well as some overseas data.

2. Women's policy development - a background.

There is a great deal of literature on women's policy development in Australia and much of it relates to the period from 1972 when, under a Labor government, an adviser on Women's Affairs to the Prime Minister was first appointed. It has been argued that a resurgence of feminism co-incided with the Labor Party coming into office after a period of twenty-three years (Curthoys 1994; Dowse 1983; 1984; Draper, 1991; Encel and Campbell, 1991; Eisenstein 1985; 1991; 1996; Farrer, 1993; 1997; Franzway, 1986; Franzway et. al., 1989; Kaplan, 1996; Mercer, 1975; Reid, 1987; Sawer, 1989; 1993; Simms, 1981; Simms and Stone, 1990; Summers, 1975; 1979; 1991; Yeatman, 1990) and

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that, at least in the 1970s and early 1980s, women's policy development was facilitated by reformist governments in each of the States and by the ratification of international covenants such as the ILO Convention 111 (1973), ILO Convention 103 (1973), ILO Convention 100 (1974), and the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1983). (Conroy, 1989a; Sawer in Stetson and Mazur, 1995).

In 1963 the Women's Bureau was established within the federal Department of Labour and National Service to advise on the needs of women in the workforce; in 1966 the marriage bar was removed for women in the federal public service, and in 1969 the concept of equal pay for equal work was handed down by the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission. In 1972 the decision was extended to include equal pay for work of equal value and in 1974 equal minimum award wages were legalised. (Conroy, 1989a; Farrer, 1997)

Other milestones which are significant to women's policy development and progress are included in Appendix 1. However, against these are the problems which seem to mitigate against women's progress. The 1972 equal pay decision has never been fully implemented as women's jobs have not been systematically re-evaluated; there is still the assumption that the male life course is the norm; particular legislation aimed at redressing inequalities has been found to be ineffective necessitating protracted reviews; and patriarchal ideology still pervades in the major decision-making bodies such as parliaments, corporations (public and private), trade and industry associations, and boardrooms (Farrer, 1997; Hartmann and Spalter-Roth, 1996).

At the State level of government, women's advisors were appointed in Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania in 1976; in New South Wales in 1977; in the Northern Territory in 1982; in Western Australia in 1983; the Australian Capital Territory in 1985; and in Queensland in 1990. Women's policy units were established within the Premier's or Chief Minister's departments and consultative/advisory councils were appointed soon after. (Mason, 1994; Sawer, 1990a, 1990b).

Some States have their own anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation and most provide information centres and have set up departmental women's advisors. Each women's policy unit produces annual reports on their activities and most provide women's budgets and action plans. (Jordan 1992; Mills, 1981; Sullivan, 1993a; 1993b; Warhurst, 1981).

The most significant 'machinery' used apart from specific legislation and adoption of international covenants has been the women's advisors, women's policy units, advisory councils and information centres as well as women's budgets, national conferences and a network of women inside departments. This Australian model (also referred to as the 'wheel of women's affairs' or 'centreperiphery model') was developed by the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) and the first femocrats. Analysis of the women's movement and its influence on federal and State governments since 1972 has been well documented by Sawer (1984; 1989; 1990a; 1990b; 1991; and 1998; and Sawer and Groves 1994a; 1994b).