

**RSA President's Lecture
RSA Great Room, Thursday 28 April 2022**

**Gender, Learning & Leadership
Hon Julia Gillard AC**

Thankyou Andy and your Royal Highness for those kind words. It is a pleasure to join you all here tonight and I am honoured to be invited to make a contribution as the RSA further develops its work on its Cities of Learning program. You could have no better leader of that work than Tom Kenyon.

Let me start tonight with a disclaimer. I wish I could stand before you full of upbeat news about how well our world is going and the competent, committed, and collaborative approach being taken globally to solve our hardest problems.

Unfortunately, I can't do that because I really don't want you to conclude that I have been downing cocktails since breakfast. It's never a great review if the audience walks away saying, 'well at least she seems like a happy drunk.'

Instead, stone cold sober, tonight I want to be explicit about the challenges we face and to explore our failure to have the best leaders in place as we confront them. Specifically, I will be tackling the way in which gender inequality, which holds back the talent of half the population, intersects with contemporary geo-politics, community attitudes, and learning. I will also venture some ideas for change.

Let's start with geo-politics and citing the key challenges we face as a global community, which I will do as a quick and depressing list.

First, we face a crisis of globalisation. Economists, businesses, and the foreign policy establishment use to dream big dreams about the positive power of globalisation. Many imagined a more peaceful future believing countries connected by trade, supplies chains, and tech would not fight. Thinker and writer Tom Friedman described how countries which both had McDonalds would not go to war.

Now all of this has been unmasked as illusion. Instead, we face the nightmare of a land war being fought in Europe while current foreign policy critiques divide the world into contending blocks of democracies versus autocracies.

Concerningly, we come to this debate worried about the fragility of democracy, including contemplating how social media is corroding the glue which holds societies together. In the US mad claims about a stolen election, and investigations into the subsequent storming of the capital continue.

Loss of faith in the ability of democracies to deliver social mobility exacerbates these concerns.

While all this is happening the climate change crisis continues, with the malfunctioning of democratic and global politics making it harder to reach the real solutions which would save us from the most catastrophic consequences.

Of course, all this is well known to you, but let me now invite you to look through a different lens at the geo-political backdrop to our discussions today, that of gender inequality.

Let's start with women in political leadership, where we find that of the 193 UN member states, currently only 15 have women leaders with executive power, well under 10%.

How does this play out as the world meets to try and resolve the huge challenges that we confront? The result in the UN General Assembly is obvious and we should note that the United Nations has never been led by a woman.

But what of the structures like the G20 or G7?

The G20 this year is scheduled to be held on the beautiful island of Bali in November. Indonesia as the host has maintained its invitation to President Putin to attend despite pressure from the US and others to rescind it. Time will tell how this will play out, but it is close to impossible to imagine President Biden and other democratic leaders attending a summit in the company of the man they are understandably describing as guilty of war crimes.

If, against these expectations, the G20 did meet in its usual format, then it would gather the leaders of Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, the Republic of Korea, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Turkey, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the European Union around one table. Spain is also invited as a permanent guest and the heads of the World Bank and IMF attend. The only women around the table will be Ursula Von Der Leyen of the EU and Kristalina Georgieva of the IMF.

If, as seems likely, the difficulties facing the G20 put more of a spotlight on the June meeting of the G7, which will be held in Germany, then the only woman in attendance will be Ursula.

Having looked up at global structures, let's now look towards our communities. In the lead up to International Women's Day this year, IPSOS, the noted global polling company, in partnership with the Global Institute for Women's Leadership, conducted and released the results of a survey of over 20,000 people in 30 countries on gender attitudes.

It found that one in five Britons think feminism does more harm than good, while three in 10 feel traditional masculinity is under threat today – the highest among eight western European nations surveyed. One in six people in the UK think men have lost out in terms of economic and political power or socially as a result of feminism, with men (24%) three times as likely as women (8%) to feel this way.

Internationally, when asked if they agree with the statement that gender inequality exists, 45% of people do not. Perhaps unsurprisingly, men are more likely to dismiss gender inequality than women.

Looking globally at violence against women, around one in six (15%) agree with the statement that women who say they were raped, or otherwise sexually abused, often make up or exaggerate these claims, with men (20%) twice as likely as women (10%) to hold this view.

Right now, you may be thinking, that's dreadful but there will be an age skew with these attitudes dying out. Yet the survey shows younger people are more likely to agree with victim-blaming statements. For example, around one in five Gen Z (18%) and Millennials (19%) agree that violence against women is often provoked by the victim, compared with 14% of Gen X and 11% of Baby Boomers.

My own nation, Australia, came out particularly badly in these survey measures. For example, in Australia 28% of men agreed women often falsely allege or exaggerate claims of rape and abuse. In addition, 19% of Australian men, said it was a woman's obligation to have sex with her boyfriend or husband even if she didn't feel like it.

And Australia was second highest in the world, behind only Malaysia, when asked if it was acceptable to use sexist or misogynistic language online, with 23% of men saying it was alright and a broadly similar number agreeing it was acceptable to share intimate images of a woman online without her consent.

Finally, using our gender inequality lens, let's remind ourselves that year after year statisticians show that women disproportionately number amongst those living in poverty.

With a sense of urgency, we should be asking ourselves and each other, why is it still as bad as this? Or perhaps even, why doesn't rage against gender inequality fill our channels of public discourse every day?

Maybe, just like research shows people at a function overestimate the number of women in a room and they overestimate for how long women talk, we all collectively overestimate how much progress is being made.

Or is it that crises in our world fly so thick and fast we can't sustain attention on the circumstances of women and girls? To take one example of this phenomenon, it seems our eyes and minds have largely moved on from tracking what is happening in Afghanistan with the Taliban's exclusion of girls from school.

But really, the most profound question is what are we going to do about it?

That squarely brings us back to the RSA and its thinking around learning. Understandably and admirably, you are conceiving of this agenda as a pro-equity one. Tom Kenyon in his piece *Learn, Unlearn, Relearn* stresses this with the words:

‘We cannot afford people leaving school thinking they have failed at learning. If a student has not gained five ‘good’ GCSEs after 11 years of direct classroom instruction, how do we support their learning differently? Is it a question of pedagogy or passion? How do we ensure that the foundational skills of modern learning – literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy – are seen as rights for all?’

You are also working to identify gender barriers.

However, let me offer some additional thoughts on how to embed an approach that is pro gender equality in our shared learning agenda.

First, for many years I have been focussed on the global inequity that condemns hundreds of millions of children, mostly girls, to no schooling, or very poor-quality schooling.

Domestic expenditure on education is projected to fall on average 8% as a result of current economic dislocations with two thirds of poorer countries reporting cutbacks. At the same time, projections show overseas aid to education may fall by \$2 billion per year from its 2020 peak.

Advocacy for the right of every child to an effective school education must be at the centre of our work.

Second, and broadening our approach from schooling to all forms of learning, unlearning, and relearning, we need to embed a gender equality perspective into everything, from the design of cities to the development of AI to the support of childcare to the future of work.

Basically, we need to re-engineer the many structural barriers that hold women back in a world that has historically been made for men.

And if that isn't enough to be getting on with, we have to reboot our brains and get out of them the sexist stereotypes that also hold women back.

Let me give you an example of each. On weekdays when the weather is good enough to be outside, at almost any suburban park in the United Kingdom you would likely see a gathering of women with prams. A mothers' group on an outside coffee and play catch up. A moment of sharing while caring. The same would be true in Australia.

Yet take yourself to Norway and you will encounter groups of men with prams doing exactly the same thing. What's different? The answer is a system of parental leave that means both partners have to use it or lose entitlements to a decent amount of paid leave. Male and female couples tend to use both entitlements and stagger them, so the mother stays home for the stint of full time caring after the baby is born and the father for the second.

The result? More equal patterns of domestic labour care have been observed in such households five years later and there is less likelihood that workplaces create a 'mummy track' in which women who have taken maternity leave are seen as less serious about their careers.

This is a structural intervention through government policy with multiple positive ramifications for gender equality.

Another structural intervention can be effective equal worth policies that allow jobs to be re-evaluated and orders made about fair remuneration to address the historic biases against what has been thought of as women's work.

Organisations can make structural interventions too, whether its gender-blind recruitment practices, bespoke analysis of what is preventing women getting to leadership levels in equal numbers, and smart policies defining what merit is.

Let me give a real-world example that is pertinent right now. Many businesses are embracing what has been learnt about the benefits of virtual work during pandemic lock downs. That's all to the good and for some occupations may mean a better and more balanced future for work and family life. However, if all that is done is the offering of flexibility, while assessments of merit for promotion still tend to be based on office presenteeism, we may well wake up in five years' time in a working world where men disproportionately go to the office, women tend to work from home, and men are enjoying greater access to career advancement.

As complex as this kind of structural work is, the reboot of our brains may be harder. Research studies constantly show that all of us, every one of us, including young people, have embedded in our brains gender stereotypes, which associate competence and command with men and tend to see male leaders as likable, whereas women are associated with empathy and nurturing and we tend to see female leaders as nasty, because being in charge offends our stereotyping.

On the competence point, a very persuasive study was conducted at North Carolina State University, which had a wholly online course taught to four different classes by a male lecturer and a female lecturer. As a result of the particular way this course was delivered, students never met or saw the teacher. This enabled the male teacher to teach one class disclosing his true identity and the female teacher to teach another class disclosing her true identity. But for classes three and four they effectively switched genders, with the woman teaching the course pretending to be the man and vice versa. When the male teacher's performance was evaluated by students, he was marked down by those who believed him to be a woman compared with those who believed him to be a man. The female teacher scored better with those who believed her to be male compared to those who thought she was a woman. Obviously, the calibre of his and her teaching did not change; the only thing that did was the students' perception of their gender.

On the stereotypes of empathy and nurturing, a study of the male-dominated field of engineering found that a confident male engineer would gain influence in his organisation, but for a woman to do the same, confidence alone was not enough. She would need to be seen as competent and caring as well.

Academic researchers Laurie A. Rudman and Peter Glick have conducted experiments on attitudes towards women and men and have shown that a nice, considerate woman is just seen as conforming to expectations, so her behaviour does not generate a positive reaction from her employer, whereas a man will get a good response because he will be seen to have gone above and beyond usual behavioural norms. Indeed, being seen as a helpful colleague has been shown to correlate with employment promotions for men but not women.

To this kind of pervasive sexism, what has been our response to date?

While many political parties, businesses, civil society groups, and education institutions are trying to do the deep work, we know that too much energy and money is being wasted on interventions like one off rounds of unconscious bias training, which do not have a positive impact. Alternatively, money is spent on empowerment courses for women, which proceed from the basis that if the woman only lent in all would be different, not recognising that what she is being asked to lean in to is a world that is wired to repudiate a woman as a bossy bitch who pushes hard for her own career advancement.

Any learning change agenda has to take into account what the evidence says about what works to counter gender bias. At the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at King's College London, which I chair, our mission is to get into the hands of decision makers the tool kits that truly make a difference. We want to short circuit through advocacy and action the more than 130-year time frame currently predicted for ending gender inequality globally.

Achieving that will be complex. There is no one tool, no one change that will make all the difference. I remember Al Gore, when he was first bringing climate change to global attention, was given to using the phrase 'there is no silver bullet, but there is silver buckshot.' Now this might be the kind of analogy one comes up with when you come from a nation with too many guns, but I think it does have resonance in the gender debate. We have to be working on many levels and in many ways to truly make deep change.

I urge you to double down on designing your learning solutions with gender and other forms of discrimination at the centre. That would be a powerful contribution worthy of this great institution.

I thank you.