

Australia's performance on gender equality – are we fair dinkum?

Written by Fiona McGaughey, Lecturer, Law School, University of Western Australia

On [International Women's Day](#) this year, Australia hit the headlines for all the wrong reasons. Not only did we [fail to support](#) a United Nations (UN) motion that called for greater accountability for human rights violations against women and girls, but comments made by our prime minister provoked international outrage.

The UN resolution proposed “policies and legislation that respect women and girls’ right to bodily autonomy”. Perhaps Australia refused to support this motion because some of its domestic laws effectively maintain sex discrimination against women.

Abortion is still restricted and even criminalised in some circumstances, in some Australian states, which impinges on women’s capacity to access [safe reproductive healthcare](#) .

Read more: [*Crowd-mapping gender equality – a powerful tool for shaping a better city launches in Melbourne*](#)

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Scott Morrison, at an International Women’s Day event, generated controversy by [saying](#) :

We’re not about setting Australians against each other, trying to push some down and lift others up. We want to see women rise but we don’t want to see women rise only on the basis of others doing worse.

In contrast, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, a “proud feminist” stated:

When we exclude women, everyone pays the price. When we include women, the whole world wins.

Following [international media coverage](#), Morrison sought to clarify his earlier remarks:

What I was saying yesterday is I don't want to see this agenda pursued by setting women against men. No. Australian against Australian. No. I want to bring all Australians together to focus on this. That's what I'm fair dinkum about.

How Australia measures up

Fair dinkum though, these developments are disappointing. Australia was one of 47 states [elected](#) to a seat on the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) for a 2018-2020 term. It currently has real potential to contribute to global progress on women's rights.

Indeed, one of the five "pillars" of [Australia's bid](#) for a HRC seat was gender equality. Foreign Minister Marise Payne [recently reiterated Australia's commitment](#) to these pillars in her speech to the HRC.

We can measure whether Australia has demonstrated its commitment to its voluntary pledges as a member of the HRC in a number of ways. We can assess whether Australia's public statements at the council address its objectives.

In 2018, gender equality was the most consistent theme of [Australia's statements](#) before the council. Australia promoted gender equality through statements on violence against women, female genital mutilation, discrimination against women and women's rights.

On this measure, then, Australia performed well.

Read more: [Backlash and gender fatigue. Why progress on gender equality has slowed](#)

In recent years, Australia has at times [reacted with hostility](#) to constructive critique from the UN human rights bodies.

But in June 2018, in response to a report from the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, then Foreign Minister Julie Bishop struck a more diplomatic tone. Bishop thanked the special rapporteur for her report and [commented](#) :

Independent scrutiny, transparency and accountability are critical to upholding the human rights of all people and Australia welcomes such scrutiny. Australia is carefully considering the Special Rapporteur's recommendations and appreciates the opportunity to make a preliminary response today.

In this area, then, Australia also appears to be doing better.

A poor record in Indigenous communities

But in the same statement, Australia acknowledged the following:

The Special Rapporteur noted particular concerns regarding the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. We acknowledge and regret that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women experience violence at higher levels than non-Indigenous Australian women. We must do better.

Indeed, the [special rapporteur](#) called on the Australian government to make policy in this area *with*

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– rather than for – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. She noted that current [policy](#) settings are insufficient to address the “institutional, systemic, multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination” experienced by Indigenous women and girls.

On top of that, Australia is falling down on its commitments in terms of how it responds to the human rights performance of other countries. The [Universal Periodic Review](#) process, administered by the HRC, scrutinises each UN state's behaviour on cycles of four and a half years. According to a public [database of recommendations](#), only 4% of Australia's recommendations to other states related to gender equality.

Far fewer of Australia's recommendations - 0.6% - related to its commitment “pillar” of Indigenous rights.

Read more: [***Parents can promote gender equality and help prevent violence against women. Here's how***](#)

Plenty of room for improvement

Gender equality is one of many areas in which Australia's public discourse is poorly served by a [lack of comprehensive human rights protection](#) in our domestic law.

From the prime minister's public comments to Australia's diplomatic behaviour, there is considerable room for improvement if we are to be “fair dinkum” about gender equality.

Having secured a place on the HRC as a defender of gender equality, Australia ought to be beyond immature statements that depict women's equality as necessarily diminishing men's capacity or rights in society.

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Fiona McGaughey has previously received a bursary from Graduate Women (WA). She is a board member of two not-for-profits- the Australian Council for State School Organisations Inc. and Australia New Zealand Third Sector Research.

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Authors: Fiona McGaughey, Lecturer, Law School, University of Western Australia

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