

Telstra Address

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Launch by Julia Gillard

Wonder Woman: the myth of 'having it all'



Virginia Haussegger Telstra Address ...

Thanks Julia

For a weirdo – she's not that bad really?

But she is weird.

One of her own colleagues even thinks so. He (and we can assume it was a 'he') even told a journalist - not long after Mark Latham bowed out of the Labor leadership – that you, the electorate, wouldn't accept a politician like Gillard as Federal Leader of the Labor party..

Why ?

Well for a start... She's a woman (in Australia that rules her out of key political leadership) ... but worse, she's single... AND childless!

How weird is that?

What's more – her kitchen is empty!

Not a bit of bread, butter, or rotting banana in sight!

Now we all *know* that a spouse, a brood of kids, and an oven full of home baked meat pies are necessary pre-requisites for political leadership in this country –don't we?

When the gender dogs began barking in January of this year, after Julia Gillard was photographed in her empty kitchen ... I - no doubt along with many women - was gob-smacked by the overt and shameless patriarchy at play.

Like Gillard I too am childless – although not single.

And like Gillard - until my partner Mark came along with his Italian pastas and loads of dirty dishes - my kitchen too used to be always empty.

I never had fruit in my fruit bowl!

(In fact any friends visiting knew they had to bring their own food parcels)

But unlike Gillard I'm not ambivalent about being childless... nor am I *disinclined* to discuss it.

I discuss it all right... and boy has that got me in trouble!

Apart from being called everything from a 'perverse, petulant brat' for lamenting my childless state... it's been politely suggested It'd be best if I shut up – and stop whinging ..

(Funny isn't it ... how a man's complaint is an 'argument' ... And a woman's complaint is a 'whinge'...)

But at the core of this issue – ‘Childlessness’ has emerged as a perplexing subject of taboo.

But you know what?

... we all better get ‘relaxed and comfortable’ talking about it– because there’s a lot of it around.

Not just Julia and me... but the ABS suggests around 25% of Australian women will remain childless... that’s 1 in 4

And there is every indication that that proportion is going to get bigger and bigger...

American author Madelyn Cain warned the USA a few years ago that ‘*Childlessness was about to come bursting out of the closet*’...

Here in Australia we’ve flung open that closet door... And a few of us have tripped out – only to get whacked over the head for being a ‘whinge’ ... or a weirdo.

We are in the midst of a ‘Childless Revolution’ ... but so silent is this revolution, that many of its foot soldiers don’t even know they’re part of it.

Many *privately* are wondering how the hell they wound up childless in the first place.

“It’s a gamble, isn’t?” says Catherine, one of the women I interviewed, who was quite perplexed to find herself childless at 43.

After years of studying, working and racing forward, when she finally stopped to focus on having a family – it was too late. The baby had bolted!

“It feels like I made this huge gamble”, she says... “It’s kind of like a high stakes game I didn’t even know I was playing.”

When I first raised the issue of my own childlessness back in an Op Ed commentary in the AGE in mid 2002... the public outcry was extraordinary.

One of my most vocal critics suggested that Op Ed piece ‘got nearly as much attention as President Bush’s declaration of war on Iraq’

The difference being – I might add - that unlike Saddam... my critics did harbour WMD’s... in the guise of letters to the editor, comment pieces, rants on radio etc..

The media frenzy raged for days, weeks, months.. and even now, almost 3 years later – the fallout still shadows me everywhere I go.

Some of the headlines were full of angry instruction....

‘*Yes Virginia there is such a thing as personal responsibility...*’

'No Virginia, feminism is not to blame for your solitary pain.'

But the piece-d' resistance was a whopper one Saturday morning in the Age...

Above a pathetically miserable photo of some forlorn looking woman, in a eerily dark TV studio, was the headline *'Meet Virginia, the woman some love to loathe'*

Now you can't read a headline like that about yourself without laughing... which of course I did.

I thought it was a witty piece of alliteration ... despite the somewhat hysterical tone.

I was still laughing... when the phone rang.

It was my dad.

The conversation went ... something like this..

"Darling don't you take any notice of that nonsense ... I can't *believe* they'd print such rubbish"

Then – as dad's do, when the situation is too confronting – he handed the phone to mum.

'Darling', she said, 'I wish you'd stop writing these things'

'I didn't write it. Someone has written it about me.'

'But if you would just stop writing...'

'Mum, I didn't write it. The *journalist* wrote it after she spoke to me'.

'Well darling, I wish you'd stop talking to people'

(my poor suffering mum – here I am - *still* talking)

And for a simple reason we all *must*.

Talk that is ... (not defy our mothers)

If a simple, short article to a newspaper could generate literally hundreds of responses – from women desperate to be heard ... clearly something was going on ...

Opinionated, angry, lonely, frustrated women's voices began to shout from everywhere.

It was as if suddenly something had been unleashed, and everyone had something to say about it.

Sure - Not all of it was nice.

But in the rush of noise, one thing became alarmingly clear: women's voices had been quiet for too long.

We needed to talk.

And we were ready to listen.

It's time to be open and unflinchingly honest about what is going on in the lives of women around us.

Wonder Woman – the book, not the superhero – is an attempt to do that.

And I am greatly indebted to the numerous women who have added their voices and their stories along this journey.

With their help I've poked a stick at the web of issues affecting women in our 20s, 30s and early 40:

- Issues of fertility and procrastination;
- of choice and chance;
- ambition and career;
- of trying to find love in seemingly loveless times;
- of weighing up the merits of motherhood against unencumbered freedom;
- of copping a gob full of patriarchy in the workplace... and being forced to swallow;
- of coming to terms with childlessness, while grappling with the divide between mothers and non-mothers;
- of questioning feminisms unintended outcomes, ...
- and ...of contemplating our failure in the quest to 'have it all'.

After hundreds of hours of talk... from where I stand now, one thing has become very clear....
the World for Women is far from Wonderful...

Those of us born into Generation X were the first generation to feast on the smorgasbord of 'choice for women'... the first to taste the fruits of hard won feminist gains...

We were the lucky ones!

We were born into the age of the 'Superwoman'..... little did we know she'd turn out to be Patron Saint of Suckers.

Unlike many of our pre-war or baby boomer mothers, we could 'have it all': a solid education... tertiary degrees... an impressive career path ... a great job ... a top-salary.. an equal and loving partnership ... happy, well adjusted children ... and a balanced family life.

Yes – all that was ours for the *taking*, the *doing*, the *making*.

We just had to work out how the hell to fit it all in, and make it all work.

For the most part – we can't.

But that doesn't stop us trying!

Which leaves far too many of us wracked with guilt when we can't keep all the balls spinning at the same time ... feeling like a failure if we can't do it all.

Giuliana – a pediatrician – and one of the women in Wonder Woman... says in a quiet moment ... *'sometimes I think of my three jobs - mother, doctor and wife – and I think I do a crap job at all of them because I'm stretching everything.'*

Giuliana says 'guilt' is her middle name.

Louise ... who squeezed in a PhD while her kids were babies - described to me her own guilt laden battle with the juggle/struggle.

She frowned when I jokingly asked 'Where's feminism when you need it?'

'Second –wave feminists', she said, 'changed a lot of things for the better, but we had no reference points for how to manage a career and motherhood.'

When I came out of the closet - outing myself as feeling frustrated, miserable and even angry about finding myself childless at 38... I suggested - among other things - that I felt foolish and daft for taking the word of my feminist foremothers as gospel... foolish for believing female fulfillment came with a leather briefcase.

Like many young girls growing up in the 70s – I was enthusiastic about the women's movement rattling and shaking the world around me.

'Equality' was the buzz word.

And I was a sponge to the feminist cause.

By the mid 80s – a gender-quake had ripped through politics and our society.

I was convinced I could do and be anything I wanted.

The *only* impediment ... the *only* obstacle that might thwart my progress... were the old fashioned 'shackles' of my mothers generation ... 'wifedom' and most of all... 'motherhood'.

I would never need to be freed from - '*domestic tyranny*' – as one famous femocrat called it - I just wouldn't get trapped in the first place.

Which perhaps goes some way towards explaining why I spent my teens, my 20s and my early 30 steadfastly believing I didn't want children.

I didn't listen to messages about the biological clock - because motherhood was never going to be my gig.

Until late in my 30s ...everything changed.

The desire to have a child can be ferocious ... and even send a perfectly sane woman quite off balance.

... When such a woman finds she may have left her run too late – and her fertility bits are old and 'buggered' ... that ferocity of thwarted desire can turn into either a deep and private sadness ...

or it can turn into - a mad woman temporarily let loose ...

- For awhile.... that was me

So why did some *fellow* feminist commentators suggest I was driving a stake into the heart of the 'sisterhood' ... by suggesting feminism had something to answer for when it comes to childlessness among women of my generation?

Why?

Well, firstly, applying contemporary scrutiny to a dearly held and long loved ideology – makes us all uncomfortable.

Secondly – my 'sisters' anger ... simply missed the point.

This is not about blame.

Of course I accept full responsibility for all the conscious, unconscious... and semi-conscious choices I've made.

[but Anne Marie I blame you and too much chardonnay for some of those!]

I would have thought publicly admitting that you feel like you've cocked things up – is, well, an admission of responsibility.

But of much more value than blame – or 'mea culpa' – is ripping into the pain, the loss, the sense of disillusionment To ASK WHY?

Why did I make these choices.. or non-choices ...

From where did I take my cues?

Key to the emancipation of women is economic independence.

There is no question about that.

But even my critics acknowledge feminism - has something to answer for.

One of those critics – who has referred to me in her recent book as ‘a ‘brainless puppet’ and a ‘mindless drone’ (I’m sure she meant it in the nicest possibly way)

Even she says... and I quote:

“It is true that feminists urged all women to shed their domestic shackles and seek fulfillment and financial independence outside the home.’

Later she says “.. there have been a number of feminists who’ve intimated, or said outright, that career was more important than motherhood”.

In the rush to have what men had – the power of financial independence - motherhood – as an identity and a valued occupation - got not just left behind.

It got devalued, denounced ... and pretty much ditched.

Perhaps - now we are ALL suffering because of it!

BUT ... In more ways than one.

And here’s the ironic twist...

While motherhood might have long been denounced as a burden and a career killer...

The counter reaction now looks like swinging the pendulum full tilt the other way

These days it seems - we can’t shut up about mothers.

Motherhood has become akin to national goodness.

‘*Come on!*’ urged the Treasurer after delivering last year’s capital ‘F’ budget.. (you know, Families, Fertility and ??)

‘*Go home and do your patriotic duty*’ the Treasurer told journalists – have one ‘*for the husband... one for the wife...and one for the country*’.

Even The Prime Minister got quite breathy when he added his sexy chant ‘*Come on, come on – your nation needs you!*’

Many women were left dropped jawed... wondering what the hell this was all about.

Just as government policy would seek to punish women who terminate a pregnancy... now too the federal government is gearing up to punish women who don't breed when they should... those who don't 'get going' - as the Treasurer puts it - in their most fertile years.

The current debate about IVF funding is sending a blunt message to women...

In what sounds like a hark back to the 1950's ... That message is that a woman's prime responsibility and duty is to breed – and if you fail to do that at the appropriate time (in your 20s and early 30s) then you have no right, NO RIGHT, to expect any support sympathy or understanding from the Australian community.

It would appear Messers Abbott, Costello and Howard are collectively of the view that women suffering age related infertility - and therefore turning to IVF - have made a lifestyle choice to put their career or job first... and breeding last.

But why this government, community and media preoccupation with having babies anyway???

We've all heard plenty about Australia's declining fertility rate – so I want bang on about that now....

But I will say ... don't be fooled by the Treasurers recent claims of a 'baby boom'.

It isn't – a boom.

It's a 'blip'

It's merely the Second Echo of the First Echo of the Baby Boom.

The First Echo was back in 1971... (when the biggest crop of Australians ever was born)

And we were expecting this Second Echo around 2001...

...it was just a few years late.

(but hey! We don't want the facts to get in the way of a good story – or photo op!)

So why ARE women delaying child-baring?

Why aren't we breeding like we used to?

For Demographers and Government's in developed countries around the world – fertility delay is a modern day 'mystery'.

Which is pretty funny really – given for most women it's no mystery at all.

Women are responding to the world around them and the circumstances in which they find themselves ... by voting with their trump card – their fertility.

The ‘Childless Revolution’ is perhaps the revolution we had to have!

We know affordability... and a committed relationship are key to a woman’s decision to have a child.

We also know the workplace – in which most fertile women spend most of their time – also works as a long lasting prophylactic!

Women of Generation X and beyond are smart – we’ve got more tertiary degrees than men..

We work hard... the proportion of women now working more than 50 hours a week – has doubled over the past couple of decades...

And we’re ambitious ... (*so what if our kitchen is empty!*)

But many of us have worked out... the best way (some might say the only way) to succeed in the world of work - is to morph into men.

Despite women winning a number of tangible rights – the world we live in is still organized and structured to suit men.

Prof Marilyn Lake says she finds it ‘astonishing’ that women still accept that our workplaces function around male rhythms... rhythms (and hours) that assume the worker is independent, autonomous and free from domestic responsibilities’.

Back in 2002, in a newspaper article that kick started my anger – and this journey – Malcolm Turnbull wrote:

‘There is compelling evidence that while women are increasingly accepted into responsible and well-paid roles, their acceptance is often, albeit tacitly, on the condition that they don’t have children.’

I wanted to knee him in the groin when I read that – I was so angry.

But the thing is – he’s right.

Women who aren't having kids... or are wondering about having kids... continue to look-on horrified...

- as we witness the despair of the working mothers juggle- struggle...
- as we see the humiliating thump when they hit the mummy-ceiling ...
- and we see the identity crisis some women suffer when a once proud job description is replaced with an embarrassed.. 'me? Oh – I'm just a mum'

We know Australia is riddled with family unfriendly workplaces...

While 90% of members of the Business Council of Australia say they offer 'family friendly working hours' ... we know it's mostly rhetoric...

In its 2003 Report (Balancing Work and Families) the BCA admits itself that 'company culture' has a nasty way of getting in the way of implementing flexible workplace policies.

We also know that even in households where both partners work full-time, women will still do 65% of the domestic chores.

Most importantly ... we know that a woman needs a bloke on a jolly good income in order to be able to afford the luxury of not working while she is raising a family...

Viewed at a distance... we also know that the horror of all this is encouraging a growing number of women to choose childlessness...

So then... what to do about these Childless revolutionaries... ?

Will this growing army of childless women cause a problem?

Mmm..., Quite possibly...

Some of them are sick of carrying the can for mothers who are struggling in the workplace... mothers who want to go part-time but keep their job seniority ... mothers who insist meetings are held within school hours ... mothers who ask for others to cover for them when they dash out to pick up sick kids from child care.

'Motherhood is their choice, so they should wear it' ... is the sort of sentiment I heard from the various Childfree women I interviewed.

During the 80s and 90s the divide between working mother VS stay-at home-mother... pitched women against women.

Well if you thought that sort of battle was over.

It's not... it's revving up again..

But this time... the battlefield is in the workplace – because that's where we all are...

And the divide is between mother and non-mother.

This is potentially dangerous stuff.

In summary...

The 21st Century demands a better deal for women

We must demand a better deal for women ...

And Rather than slog it out at one another ... a new generosity of spirit is required

This is not about a backlash against women...

Nor is it a call to turn back the clock.

It's about a call for honest dialogue.

And that takes courage...

A few journalists have become really irritated with me when they ask – ‘So what's the solution?’

When I open with a soliloquy about ‘dialogue’ ... I'm cut of.

What everyone wants is fire, fury and a few one liners ... not a bloody discourse!

But – as the Woman behind Wonder Woman (the book, not the superhero) – I'm still Wondering.

Sure it would be lovely to have the solutions ... but these are complex and entrenched problems ..

One woman even barked at me... ‘but these are old issues’...

Some are... but they remain un-resolved issues.

We can't have solutions... until we're first honest and upfront about the problems.

And perhaps the best starting point - is the ludicrous suggestion that we can

‘have it all’ ... it's bollocks, it's crap... and we all know it!

THANKYOU.