

Gender equity is about addressing a lack of access to human rights.

Saturday, 1st February 2020

When Bettina Arndt was awarded an Australia Day honour for her services to gender equity, there was a burst of dismay from gender advocates across the country, including former Australian of the Year, Rosie Batty.

Alina Thomas explains why the “men’s rights” movement fails to find traction in the wider community.

For those of us in the community that seek to improve human rights, it is a given that gender equity strategies include consideration of men as we move towards a fairer and less violent society.

It is paramount, for example, that alongside the work we do reduce the high levels of violence against women that we also examine and understand the devastating high rates of male suicide. However, these two social issues should never be pitched against each other. In fact, it can be argued, that the conditions that lead to men and boys completing suicide have their roots in

similar patterns of social dysfunction that result in 1 in 4 women in Australia experiencing violence at the hands of their intimate partner.

Contentions arise when we defend the abusive actions of men under the banner of “men’s rights”. If “men’s rights” was a movement that addressed the lack of relevant support services and challenged the systemic causes of gender disparity, there would be no controversy. However, where the “men’s rights” movement falls down, is that it lacks critical analysis of systemic causes of the issues it seeks to address and can, to its utter detriment, take the populist but ineffective step of pitching their issues against the safety of women and children. And in the instance of Bettina Arndt, going as far as advocating for men who are convicted of violent and sexual offences and promoting impunity for those who have been predatory to women and children.

For Tasmanians who have experienced sexual assault and those who support sexual assault survivors, Bettina Arndt delivered a very low blow. In 2018 Arndt used her YouTube channel to broadcast an interview with Hobart man, Nicolaas Bester. Bester is protected by the Tasmanian Evidence Act which prevents his victims from speaking publicly about their experiences while he enjoys the freedom to broadcast his point of view at will. In the YouTube interview, Arndt offers support to Bester for being, as she describes, “persecuted by feminists” as a result of a school student in his care being “sexually provocative” and therefore causing the repeated sexual assaults and rapes that he inflicted on her. This is one example, among multiple public displays of support, which Arndt has published for men who have actively committed violence against women and children.

It is not difficult to see how Arndt’s idea of “men’s rights” fails to resonate in the broader community and has led to the public outburst that erupted in response to her receiving an award for her work on gender equity.

Gender equity advocates have made a considerable impact on the phenomena of “victim blaming” which positions the victim of sexual assault as responsible for the rape or assault. The idea that rape victims have provoked their attackers is being replaced by a more credible notion that people who assault others are entirely responsible for their violent behaviours. This is important work that needs to occur to

improve the justice outcomes for people who are sexually assaulted and to challenge the social and cultural conditions that drive sexual assault in the community.

It is very unfortunate that the work of Our Watch and the Council of Australian Governments National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children should be sidelined by ill-informed commentators who privilege conservative social values over the rights of all people to live free from violence. It is also unfortunate that so soon after Pauline Hanson, as a member of the Committee to review the Family Law System, claimed women were making up instances of family violence, that another appointed group, the awards committee, representing the Australian people, has chosen to promote a point of view that reduces the vital impacts of #MeToo, #LetHerSpeak and Change the Story. Instead, Bettina Arndt and the people who are valuing her work, play a divisive ploy, positioning women's rights as an opposition to the rights of people.

A more sophisticated understanding of gender equity involves improving women's access to private and public decision makers that flows onto improving children's health. Providing access to free and accessible reproductive health gives women agency over parenting and helps to raise happy, healthy children. Believing people who have experienced sexual violence means that people who perpetrate violence are held to account and are less likely to go on to violate more people. Gender equity includes supporting all people to express their gender in the way that suits them and promotes have mutually consensual sexual relationships so that problematic behaviours can be addressed and not become grossly aberrant and pushed underground. True gender equity measures also includes the provision of free quality education to all citizens and people transitioning to citizenship. It includes providing free and accessible healthcare that is relevant to all communities and populations.

Achieving gender equity is about addressing the inequalities in access to basic human rights. It's about embracing and welcoming the many experiences, genders and identities that are not properly recognised by our mainstream policies and systems and adjusting our social systems to be authentically inclusive.

Alina Thomas is the CEO of Engender Equality www.engenderequality.org.au. Engender Equality is a Tasmanian service that provides counselling to people of all genders who have experienced family violence. Engender also provides training to workplaces on family violence and gender equality.

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