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Op-Ed Articles for the media by:

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There is a paradox at the heart of modern life. The events of the past three decades have relaxed the rules about how we live and have given us the freedom to pursue the happiness we desire. Yet we are seeing a growing sense of disillusionment with our society and with modernity itself. The events of the past three decades have also given us the freedom to pursue a better way of life, and we now have the opportunity to do so. The events of the past three decades have given us the freedom to pursue a better way of life, and we now have the opportunity to do so.
In all the hand-wringing, brow-furrowing and incessant forecasting that has accompanied the global financial crisis (GFC), there have been some especially deafening silences. One that particularly screams out for attention beyond the pinning the tail on the donkey stabs at when it will all cease, is the question of what this crisis will actually serve to change? Global warming has been considered by many to be an alarming enough crisis to trigger durable individual and corporate behavioural change but there’s still only sketchy evidence of any en mass greening amongst stubborn humanity. But surely this GFC already represents the planet’s best chance to have a good hard look at itself and put the very idea of what constitutes progress at the forefront of everyone’s attention.

Of course, it should be acknowledged that the GFC has led a number of prominent world leaders, most notably Barack Obama, to challenge common wisdom about ethics and values. Our own Prime Minister, in this month’s The Monthly, has written a damning obituary for value-free neo-liberalism of the past two decades and proposes a hybrid “social capitalism” that smells like UK Third Way spirit to many. The well-respected public theologian Jim Wallis, blogging from the World Economic Forum in Davos (http://blog.sojo.net/2009/01/30/davos-how-will-this-crisis-change-us/), sees the crisis as a spiritual one, where the loss of values has seen the notion of “the common good” disappear from economic decision-making. He quotes Gandhi’s seven deadly social sins, which seem an accurate diagnosis for some of the causes of this crisis: “politics without principle, wealth without work, commerce without morality, pleasure without conscience, education without character, science without humanity, and worship without sacrifice.”

His sentiments have been mirrored here where Uniting Church President Rev Gregor Henderson preaching at a service to mark opening of Parliament urged federal parliamentarians to broaden Australia’s fundamental national goals beyond that of economic growth - “It is but one part of what leads to human happiness - other components are the quality of our relationships, the beauty of our environment, the pursuit of justice and equity, enjoyment of the arts, realisation of our individual giftedness, and of course our spiritual wellbeing.” These sentiments concur with the explosion of studies showing little connection between wealth and happiness, the most notable being the highly influential British economist Lord Richard Layard’s Happiness, who convincingly demonstrates our inability to recall or predict what actually makes us happy.

Has it the taken the GFC wake-up call to alert the broader populace to these common wisdoms? Surely there were enough well-known local prophets in the wilderness – Fiona Stanley, Clive Hamilton, Hugh Mackay – crying out the same warnings during the boom years? Perhaps not, but the real task for our own and global civil society now is to create a new system that nourishes and sustains these fundamental goals. And it’s a system that many are increasingly wishing to see counted, measured and publicised. Various social movements, most prominently the environmentalists, have long questioned untrammeled growth and continue to provoke us to engage instead in a much broader debate about how whole societies define and measure progress, beyond the baseline index of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). These questioners are starting to come from more diverse places, whether it be a few private sector corporations increasingly influenced by the social aspects of triple-bottom line accounting or the Australian Bureau of Statistics whose Mapping Australia’s Progress is lauded internationally for its efforts to collate an impressive array of non-economic measures such as volunteering and perceptions of trust and safety. Wallis again implores that “if we learn nothing from this crisis, all the pain and suffering it is causing will be in vain. But if…. we can regain a moral compass and find new metrics by which to evaluate our success, this crisis could become our opportunity to change”. David Horton’s delicious pre-Christmas piece on ‘Unleashed’ finished with the hopeful tone that if we succeed in (re)turning the economy into a servant of society “there might one day be a ‘good society index’ published on the TV news each night, and the stock market index banished to esoteric pages of academic economic journals”.

These broader ambitions to measuring wellbeing have been the focus of a major Organisation for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD) project, Measuring the Progress of Societies, (www.oecd.org/progress) since 2004, challenging the world’s sharpest statistical minds to answer the key question: How can we measure how our societies are really doing? The project has undoubtedly helped elevate the political importance of long-standing alternative measures to the GDP such as the Genuine Progress Index. The OECD project has also been an important catalyst for the impressive work establishing indicators of sustainable progress emerging in Australia, particularly Community Indicators Victoria (www.communityindicators.net.au), Tasmania Together (www.tasmaniatogether.tas.gov.au) and a similar system emerging in Queensland. The rub for governments in publically presenting such indicators is in the inclusion of some of the more confronting aspects of progress, including measures of citizenship, human rights and democracy. Incorporating these aspects into 100 indicators of well-being across 18 of the 30 OECD countries, the economists Rod Tiffen & Ross Gittens in their 2004 book How Australia Compares, ranked Australia a lowly 15th. Hence, the key element in these systems is the active involvement of communities in determining, interpreting and responding to indicators of progress, and the main driver of a National Index of Progress making headway as a key outcome of the Ideas Summit in April 2008.
There is much to be achieved but if such initiatives are to be effective, they will help elevate fundamental markers of progress like bridging the vast discrepancy between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians’ life expectancy to start competing alongside the earnest daily recital of the fortunes of the Nikkei, Dow Jones and All Ordinaries. Perhaps the most fundamental challenge in all these efforts to measure progress comes from the Kingdom of Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness (GNH) index, the subject of ex-deputy PM Tim Fischer’s latest book, and whose own Prime Minister has frequently spoken of the kingdom’s conscious choice to grow more slowly than their rich resource base would have allowed them to. A truly radical stance and one that might just blow the torch on the most enduring shibboleth through all the GFC noise, namely that each generation must be more prosperous than the one that preceded it. A shift here might also do justice to the famous libertarian philosopher JS Mill’s thoughts dating back to the 1850s: “Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness.”

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Still working for the man? Women’s employment experiences since 1950

Glenda Strachan

In the 1950s most women worked until they married, and following marriage and certainly the birth of their first child, focused on the care of husband, children and the home. While at work, women worked in industries and occupations that society saw as ‘suitable’ for women. Women cared for others: as nurses, teachers, secretaries and domestic workers; they processed largely domestic items such as canning food and dressmaking. If they worked in the same job as a man, women usually took home 75 per cent of their male co-workers’ wage. There were few women who managed men in the workplace. And in the public services, and some private companies, women had to resign from their permanent jobs on marriage, a phenomenon known as the marriage bar. The public sphere of work was, with few exceptions, definitely a man’s world.

But the lives of the daughters of women setting up households in the 1950s offered different possibilities, and these possibilities have expanded for their grand-daughters, many of whom would not have any idea what a ‘marriage bar’ is. The 1960s saw the expansion of married women’s participation in the labour market – from 20 per cent of all working women in 1947 to 39 per cent in 1961. Agitation from the newly aroused Women’s Movement and women in trade unions eventually succeeded in Equal Pay cases in 1969 and 1972. As a result of these cases most women gained the same wage as their male counterpart. It was estimated that one and a half million women workers (from a total of one and three-quarter million women workers) were affected by the decisions. Female wage rates and earnings as a percentage of male wage rates rose from 71 in 1966 to 92 in 1976 (weekly rate).

From the mid-1970s Australian legislation outlawed discrimination in employment on the grounds of the sex of the worker – this meant that women could enter occupations that had previously been closed to them such as airline pilots with the major commercial companies. In the mid 1980s, equal opportunity legislation (initially called affirmative action) exhorted organisations to be pro-active and introduce measures that would promote equal employment opportunity: recruitment procedures that clearly specified what was required in a job; equal access to training, including management training; and ideas such as leave for family issues recognised women’s continuing responsibility for childcare and family care.

In 1950, the gendered pattern of paid work reflected the idea that a man’s wage should be able to keep his wife and children in frugal comfort. This male breadwinner model has disappeared in the past half-century, to be replaced today by the two income household, or dual breadwinner model, as the norm. Two-thirds of the daughters of the homemakers of the 1950s, that is the women born from 1946 to 1966, are still in the workforce. Many more options had opened up for these women in the workforce, but was there less option for a family to decide on the single income earner?

So what sort of working world do the grand-daughters of those women of the 1950s face? They are the most highly educated cohort we have seen, and more women (28 per cent) in this group (born 1966-1986) have university degrees than men (21 per cent). They will spend longer than their grandmothers in the paid workforce and can enter any occupation and industry and expect equal pay with their male co-workers. They can expect organisations (at least those with more than 100 employees as set out in the legislation) to have employment equity programs that consider and address equity issues.

But what is the current reality at work? Most managers are men. While more women than men have law degrees, women form less than 20 per cent of the Partners in Australia’s law firms. Looking back over the figures for the past 5 years there is no sign of increase in these percentages. In 2008, only 2 per cent of the Chairpersons of ASX200 companies and 2 per cent of CEOs in these companies were women. Women formed only 10.7 per cent of Executive Managers in these firms and clustered mainly in the support functions. The number and percentage of women executive managers has declined since 2004, and compares unfavourably with the USA, Canada, UK and South Africa.

What is the reality today? There are many more opportunities for women to enter the workforce but these opportunities decrease if women choose to move to managerial ranks. And women may be constrained in these choices by hostile organisational cultures and lack of practices that assist with managing both paid work and family care. Are women still working for a man? Most probably.

Based on research and publications by Glenda Strachan

Specific sources of statistics are: