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Why are women still waiting to achieve full equality with men?

Brett Debritz
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We read a lot these days about the empowerment of women, the breaking of glass ceilings and affirmative action. And rightly so, because equality between the genders has been a long time coming. Too long, in fact.

I'm a man over the age of 50, and I'm sure my younger self would be shocked to be told that, in the year 2016, women would still be paid less and be vastly underrepresented in positions of authority.

While misogyny was rife in the Australia of my youth, there were healthy signs that this was changing.

My mother, who had held an office job before getting married, re-entered the workforce when I was in primary school. By the time I left high school, she was our family's main breadwinner, as my father (who was 10 years older than her) was transitioning to retirement.

My older sisters were also a strong presence – and positive influence – in the household and my young life in general.

I met many "empowered" women at university – lecturers, administrators and other students in my social group. Some of the women with whom I studied, played backgammon, drank too

much coffee and discussed ways to put the world to rights are now in positions of power and influence.

Among them are senior lawyers; academics, including faculty deans; high-level public servants; politicians; and, as you might expect, journalists.

But, sadly, they are in the minority in their respective fields – even though there are far more women than men in tertiary education. In 2014, almost 45,000 more women than men graduated from Australian universities and colleges.

In the United States, 57 per cent of college students are female; in British universities, women outnumber men in 112 of 180 degree subjects. In the UAE, more than 70 per cent of Emiratis in higher education are women.

In the world around me in the early 1980s, Sirimavo Bandaranaike had already twice been prime minister of Sri Lanka, with another term to come; Margaret Thatcher was the British prime minister and Indira Gandhi held the same position in India.

Today, Britain has another woman, Theresa May, at the helm, Angela Merkel has been the German chancellor for 11 years, and Hillary Clinton may soon become the first female president of the United States.

But they are still largely the exception rather than the rule. In the world of business, only 22 of the S&P500 companies have female chief executives, and many countries have never had a woman as head of state.

In almost every industry, women continue to receive lower salaries for performing equivalent work to men.

It's hard to escape the conclusion that this is, for the most part, because the men are in charge and they are protecting their turf.

That was certainly the case not long before I became a journalist. In the 1970s, the few female employees in newsrooms were seen as exceptions to the accepted wisdom that a woman's place was in the home. Even then, they were generally required to write about domestic matters: cooking, sewing, weddings and the like.

The women of my generation broke the mould in terms of the kind of work they would go on to do – covering previously male-only domains such as the courts and politics – but even today women in journalism tend to earn less and are notably absent from executive offices and boardrooms. The same story applies in other professions.

Despite many generations of women in the workplace, there is a pervasive attitude that they are essentially homemakers who will suddenly go off and have babies and never return.

Well, my mother proved them wrong 45 years ago – when stepping out of the kitchen and back into an office wasn't so easy, especially for a woman in her forties.

Today, many millions of women are successfully juggling careers and family responsibilities – very often with the help of a new generation of men who happily share, or even take over, the domestic duties.

It is simply mind-boggling that anyone could argue that women are somehow ill-equipped to do certain jobs or incapable of serving in leadership positions.