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Desperate PM's war has failed her own gender

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LITTLE Miss Bossy tells everyone what to do. Little Miss Naughty is badly behaved.

And Little Miss Fickle breaks her promises. But no one is as scary as Little Miss Ogyny, especially when she goes on the attack.

Not that she understands the difference between *ad hominem* and *ad nauseam*. Nor is she shy of veering into a Little Miss Statement.

For despite all the noise Julia Gillard makes about gender women achieved far greater progress under the Howard government than they have under Labor.

Since Labor came to power, the female unemployment rate has risen from 4.4 to 5.2 per cent. And surveys show women feel more at risk of losing their job now than at any point in the Howard years.

At the same time, the female labour force participation rate has stagnated. Between April 1996 and November 2007, it increased from 53.8 per cent to 58.5 per cent. But Labor's election basically stopped that rise, and five years on it still sits at 58.7 per cent.

As for the gap between annual female and male full-time earnings, it has increased by \$3848. And while that has happened the cost of living for families has taken off, with utilities bills rising at an unprecedented 12.5 per cent a year, childcare charges increasing at over 8 per cent a year and health and education fees rising to a rate of 5.5 per cent. But the real risks for women go beyond those immediate concerns.

For few changes have made a greater contribution to women's wellbeing than the labour market deregulation Gillard and her union backers are determined to reverse.

Until the 1990s, employment conditions for more than 80 per cent of workers were determined by awards. At unions' insistence, those awards routinely set limits on part-time jobs, including by prohibiting the recruitment of part-timers if any unemployed union members were seeking full-time jobs.

With few flexible opportunities, women faced a stark choice: work full-time or not at all, entrenching low participation.

Freeing up the labour market helped dramatically change that picture. In 1966, 8 per cent of working age women worked part-time; by 2007 it had increased to 25 per cent.

And the increase was even greater for younger generations: of the women born in 1936, fewer than 10 per cent were in part-time work at age 34; in contrast, more than 40 per cent of women born in 1976 worked part-time at that age.

As the share of women in full-time employment has increased only 3 percentage points since the 1960s, that growth of part-time work accounts for rising female labour force participation.

Far from disliking part-time work, only 5 per cent of the overall workforce would prefer to move from part-time to full-time jobs: that is less than half the number who would like to move the other way.

Moreover, measures of job satisfaction, subjective wellbeing and work-life balance are all significantly above average for women in part-time work, and especially for those with partners who work full-time.

It is unsurprising part-time work scores so highly, for its increased availability opened new scope to earn an income while having a family.

After all, study after study finds today's young women don't simply decide to have children: they choose to be a mother, because of the satisfactions that brings. A flexible labour market allows women both their own income and continuity of work experience.

Mothers have chosen that option in droves. Of women aged 25 to 44 who work part-time, 60 per cent do so to care for children; and 70 per cent of working mothers with children under the age of five work part-time.

All that contrasts sharply with Europe's highly regulated labour markets. There, restrictions on working conditions prevent the private sector from creating the jobs women want.

Public spending and public employment have therefore accounted for almost all the gains women have made, at an unsustainable cost in terms of tax burdens and stunted productivity.

No wonder, then, that in a recent survey of women's labour market performance two left-leaning American academics, Harvard professor Torben Iversen and Yale professor Frances Rosenbluth, conclude "female participation rates tend to be lower in countries with strong unions, while in economies with fluid labour markets women are better able to compete on an equal footing with men".

The Gillard agenda, captive as it is to the unions, is consequently hardly favourable to women. Yet Gillard's gender war has nothing to do with sound economics. Its immediate aim appears to be to shut off tough questioning about the AWU affair; but there is a wider political message as well.

At the 2010 election, Labor's vote from women was 8 per cent higher than would be expected, given voting patterns overall.

That partly reflected women's favourable response to a female prime minister; naturally, Labor wants to preserve that edge.

But it is smaller and more precarious than it seems. In 2010, women didn't especially like Gillard: her overall approval was no higher than women's approval of Howard in 2007, and some 17 per cent lower than women's 2007 support for Kevin Rudd.

Moreover, while women did prefer Gillard to Abbott, the gap was far smaller than the difference between their 2007 approval of Howard and Rudd. And women expressed greater disapproval than men of Rudd's removal.

Labor would therefore be foolhardy to count on women's votes; and no matter how strongly it resonates with "the sisterhood", railing against male chauvinism is unlikely to drown out the realities of rising bills and mounting job insecurity.

Nor will it erase the memory of a government that, from "computers in schools" on, created expectations it could never deliver or overcome the discomfort episodes such as the AWU affair create. And it risks further alienating male voters, where Labor's position is dire.

But Gillard is down to the last throws of the dice. Commanding power but not authority, her response is to transform every issue into a clash of absolutes.

Few tactics seem less likely to succeed, while the political hypertrophy it causes invites economic and social atrophy as it freezes all credible reform.

Ever shriller in tone, our Little Miss Ogyny ends the year as she began: howling at the moon. And not even Little Miss Magic can wave her crisis away.
