In the last 30 years there have been major social and political movements advocating equal rights and new protective legislation for indigenous people, gays and lesbians, women, children and others. There is legislation now in place protecting people from discrimination on the basis of race, sex, disability, and sexual preference, and laws regarding children and their status in Australia have been quite radically revised and updated. Our present notions of equal opportunity and our employment and access policies (however limited) have flowed, both directly and indirectly, from these social movements.

Gender issues are now on the social and political agenda and changes in legislation, and hence a change in social status; or at least social perceptions, is imminent. It may seem that gender is a "new" issue, or the "next big thing". However, none of the social movements mentioned above were advocating new issues when they pushed for cultural recognition, although they were largely perceived as such.

The cultural perception that an issue is "new" has much to do with the way in which the mass media and other institutions of power, such as the political arena, can create controversy or maintain silence. Feminism and other women's movements have existed for hundreds (and possibly thousands) of years, but it was not until the 1970's and the advent of "radical" feminism that any cultural recognition, however negative, was accorded to the people in this movement. There was, and still is, no real recognition accorded to the movement's history. Even now there is a cultural perception that "women's issues" have a short history of 20 years or so, and finding evidence to the contrary still presents quite a challenge.

... and their popular histories

Gender issues have been explored in both popular and high cultures for centuries. Shakespeare presented that actors who cross-dressed, as did many of the Greek classics; the English music hall of the late 1800's relied on cross-dressing for many of its comic effects. In terms of the recent past, performers such as David Bowie, Freddie Mercury, Annie Lennox, and the "gender-benders" and "beautiful boys" of the early 1980's blurred distinctions between "femaleness" and "maleness".

However, the forms of entertainment in which a culture takes pleasure are still regarded as being quite unimportant, with very little relevance to "real life". The fact that popular culture simultaneously shapes and mirrors many aspects of the culture that watches it or takes pleasure in it remains disregarded, yet it is astounding just how often the concerns of popular culture are found to precede social movements that impact on politics, law and the general social fabric. This can be seen quite clearly in popular culture preceding "women's liberation" and "gay liberation". Ideas get played with and toyed around with as a kind of "what if" or "imagine that". This is one of the primary roles of entertainment, fiction, and popular culture in general social movements happen when "what if" becomes "when".

In any case, gender issues are now being presented in the social and political arenas. Unfortunately it is the perception that an issue is "new" that can create or maintain hostility or marginalisation. Equally unfortunately, it is very difficult to place a social movement in its historical context if the majority of people can simply say, and believe, that "if this had a history surely everybody would have heard of it. Things like that don't just get ignored." (as was the case with feminism). The hostility is created by the perception that all of a sudden, out of the blue, a whole section or sub-section of the community expect to be offered "special" treatment or "special" rights.

Gender Issues

Gender and cultural notions of gender have evolved and changed constantly since the beginning of recorded human history. Gender, both as concept and practice, has always been mutable. It has been shaped and reshaped to deal
The best-known and most obvious example of the mutability of gender and the way it can be culturally utilised to fit circumstances is the mobilisation of women into trades during WWII.

The difference now is that those who are calling for political and legal reforms are working with this cultural mutability and pointing out the ways in which gender has always changed to suit the times. If this is so, then there is no reason for adhering to a rigid gender system, because a "rigid" gender system only ever exists for very short periods of time before changing again. This is very much the same as what happened when women and the gay community pointed out the inconsistencies of their status and demanded their rights (although these groups still have a considerable way to go in gaining equality.)

The question becomes: "If our gender divisions and definitions are "natural", how and why do their accoutrements change with such astonishing regularity?"

This question mirrors other social movements - the feminist question was "if the position of women is "natural" then why does our culture need such rigorous socialisation, and such severe sanctions for the crime of being "unfeminine" or "unwomanly"?" Even God apparently felt it necessary to tell women that it was a sin to dress in men's clothing (according to the translators, at any rate) - and why God ever needed to tell anybody what to do or not to do if everything "he" made was natural anyway has always been a vexing question. God certainly never had to tell people to breathe or eat or risk the consequences.

All of these questions are based on logic rather than shared cultural beliefs and as such are viewed by many people as antiscial or dangerous to society. And in a way, they are - for they are questions that demand truth, and the truth would certainly be "dangerous" to society as it stands now. Social movements are gaining momentum faster and faster as more people lose their willingness to uphold and maintain polite social fictions and begin to demand facts in the place of "social facts".

The most common accusation levelled at those advocating social change is that they challenge the accepted view of reality and demand that social beliefs be explained - particularly difficult if the belief has no rational basis and can only be explained in terms of itself.

Why now?

There are a variety of theories that have been put forward to explain why social movements that have existed and struggled in cultural silence for long periods of time suddenly gain exposure and credibility. That major theory is that the process of social change is very similar to technological change; that all of a sudden the world or a particular society is ready to cope with a new form of technology or a new social arrangement.

For instance, early astronomers were burned at the stake for suggesting that the earth was not the centre of the universe but merely revolved around the sun in company with several other planets. (This upset not just science but religion as well.) However, at a point in history people became willing to accept that this was so despite religion and earlier theories, and the suggestion became "truth". Feminism achieved much the same result for the position of women in society as the early astronomers did for the position of the earth in space.

History is broken up into epochs and eras by the particular aspects and events that characterised each time-period. Thus we have the "world at war" era (1915-17 and the years beyond) and the "age of decadence" (the 20's) and "The Great Depression" (late 1920s - mid 1930s and really in many ways up until WWII) and then "the War" Then there is "the family era" (the '50s), the "age of revolution" (the '60s) and the "decade of change" (the '70s). The '80s are popularly classified as the "me decade" or the "decade of greed" and the '90s as the "nervous '90s". Many of these classifications attempt to classify each era by characterising the "Zeitgeist" or the "spirit of the times".

To begin to place gender issues in their historical perspective, it needs to be understood that a social movement needs to take place when there is sufficient time, space, and resources to explore it. During the war eras or during the Depression there were so many life
and death issues that had to be dealt with on a daily basis that individual issues could do little but slide to the back burner. Few people stop to think about social issues on an empty stomach, or at least not about social issues that lack the potential to fill the stomach.

But between the wars, particularly during the Great Depression, there was a strong movement for female contraception and legalised abortion in Australia and America, although this declined during WWII and was heavily de-popularised during the "family values '50s". The swing back to and far beyond these movements in the 60's was therefore nothing short of phenomenal, but it is no coincidence that it happened at a time when the "baby boomers" were reaching their adult years, and when these young adults were, on the whole, better fed, educated, and more carefully nurtured than those at any other period of history.

A great variety of social constructs have outlived their usefulness and thus are no longer in existence. Patriotism of the jingoistic variety, which was necessary in the past to make refusing to go to war an almost unthinkable concept, has been largely superseded by "economic rationalism". In other words, we show loyalty to whoever enhances (or at least does not jeopardise) our economic well-being, rather than aligning ourselves "with or against a particular country on an "ideological" basis. Rigid gender roles are quite likely to go the same way, eventually.

Furthermore, gender issues could only truly gain momentum after there had been a cultural "consciousness-raising" effort on the meaning of gender and its place in society, and a further exploration of sex, sexuality, and sexual choice and freedom. Studies and advances in anthropology, archaeology, sociology, medicine, and other diverse disciplines also helped to provide a strong foundation for the social recognition of gender issues and thus the movement could begin to take on the power structures of society in earnest.