The Gillard years – measuring the impact of women leaders on women's lives

1. Summary of impact

The role of female political leaders in achieving better outcomes for women is not well understood, either in Australia or overseas.

The [Gender Legislative Index](#) is a collaboration between UTS Law, data science and engineering experts, designed to determine which legislation works most effectively to promote gender equity.

To do so, it scores laws against criteria for women's rights set down in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Originally created by Ramona Vijeyarasa in the Faculty of Law to measure the impact of female presidents in the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, it was expanded in 2020 with funding from the Centre for Social Justice & Inclusion to include Australia and the Gillard government's legislative footprint.

While family and workplace law are often taken as the natural place to start when it comes to measuring legislation's impacts on women, it's not only these 'usual suspects' the team was interested in, Dr Vijeyarasa says.

'We need to bring a woman's rights perspective to every area of law. Yes, women face many gender-specific vulnerabilities – think sexual harassment at work, or being paid less than men for the same work. But the idea was to create a tool that would actually help to make laws rarely thought about from a woman's rights perspective work more

effectively for women, from taxation through to mining industry to laws that regulate financial services.'

For the project, Ramona and her team rated 37 laws enacted during Gillard's prime ministership in terms of how they fulfill Australia's international treaty obligations.

2. The problem

As of May 2021, there were 24 women leaders worldwide occupying the highest level of elected office according to Ramona's research

But the role of female leaders in achieving better outcomes for women is not well understood, either here or overseas, say Ramona.

Nor, she says, does domestic law properly incorporate the commitments countries have made in international treaties.

'If this were done, we would see the law having a more positive impact on women's everyday lives.'

3. Beneficiaries

Users of the Gender Legislative Index are varied, says Ramona.

'There are so many audiences – legislators who need criteria and benchmarks to create good law; activists who are calling for law reform who want to critically evaluate existing laws and show those in positions of power who will listen what change is needed to make the law work better.'

Organisations such as the Asian Development Bank, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and United Nations human rights treaty bodies could also use the tool to help measure how different countries are tracking in terms of gender equality targets.

4. Approach to impact

   The Gender Legislative Index evaluated the legislative footprint of Gillard in a two-step process.

   Firstly, human evaluators combed through provisions of legislation to make an evaluation against seven criteria identified through a study of the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

   Laws were assessed against these seven criteria on a scale from 'gender regressive' to 'gender responsive'.

   In the second step, and drawing from scores provided by the human evaluators, a machine learning algorithm generated an overarching score for a law to help remove human bias, scoring the law from one end of the spectrum – a complete disregard for international standards – to the other – meeting international standards.

   For the Social Impact Grant project, Gillard's legislative footprint from 2010–2013 was evaluated in this way.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

   Ramona also has an upcoming article in *Australian Journal of Human Rights* based on the research.

   In terms of larger impacts, there has also never been a better time to address gender equality in Australia, she argues.

   'The last few months have brought so much visibility to the issue of gender inequality in Australia. This has been a perfect time to share examples of Australian laws that are gender-responsive as well as laws that are regressive, or have regressive provisions. It also means we can remind the world that gender inequality in the law is not a "third world" problem. It is as relevant to Australia as any other country.'

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

   The Social Impact Grant helped Ramona add Julia Gillard to her analysis of women leaders, which until 2020 comprised Megawati Sukarnoputri (Indonesia), Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Corazon Aquino (the Philippines) and Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga (Sri Lanka).

7. Challenges

   COVID-19 was a problem for the team initially but this was quickly overcome through technology. Project participants were trained to meet the social distancing requirements, after which the team worked independently off-site. Zoom calls were regularly arranged among team members to discuss any challenges they were facing and to gauge progress.