

THE CHALLENGES OF DEFINING AND MEASURING WOMEN'S SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROGRESS

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The Challenges of Defining and Measuring Women's Social and Economic Progress

Siobhan Austen, Therese Jefferson & Alison Prestonⁱ

Abstract

We examine six studies which use social indicators to assess women's status and progress. We then identify the underlying social and economic goals assumed to be relevant to women and analyse the suitability of current social indicators for measuring progress toward these goals. We find that although each of the six studies uses a variety of meaningful indicators, it is relatively easy to identify significant areas of women's experiences that remain neglected. We suggest that these 'blind spots' may result from two possible and related sources. The first relates to the method in which definitions of women's progress are constructed. The second reflects poor or limited data collection in some significant areas of relevance to women's social and economic status.

Introduction

It has increasingly been accepted that aggregate economic measures such as GDP have significant shortcomings as proxy indicators of economic well-being. This is because such measures do not capture issues significant to well-being, for example, income distribution, pollution and environmental degradation and the value of unpaid labour (Daly and Cobb 1986; Kendrick 1979; Mishan 1967; Zolotas 1981).

Current approaches to measuring women's progress also suffer some disadvantages. Firstly, the indicators that are currently used to illustrate women's relative status give an incomplete picture of women's experiences and interests. Secondly, the current indicators of gender equity are unlikely reflect the goals and aspirations of many women (Austen, Jefferson and Preston 2000)

In this paper we review six studies examining women's status in order to gain insights into the broad social and economic goals currently measured by indicators of women's progress. We then examine the types of indicators used to monitor progress toward these goals. This gives some insights into those areas of women's experiences that are well monitored. Our findings suggest that while there is considerable consensus about the broad issues of importance to women's social and economic goals, significant areas of women's experiences remain neglected. We suggest that these 'blind spots' may result from two possible and related sources. The first relates to the method in which definitions of progress are constructed. The second reflects poor or limited data collection in some areas of significant relevance to women's social and economic status.

Our research into this issue was prompted by a project commissioned by the Women's Policy Office in Western Australia to examine "how far had Western Australian women progressed by the end of the twentieth century?" This, in turn, led to consideration of how "women's progress" is defined and which aspects of "progress" are measured. In some respects the research, in particular the studies examined, has a focus on the Western Australian context. However, many of the characteristics of Western Australia are to be found in a range of other western developed economies and this gives the research relevance to other contexts.ⁱⁱ

Our paper is divided into four main sections. Firstly, we list some of the main criteria that definitions and indicators of progress should be able to meet if they are to be relevant to a particular population. Secondly, we examine existing definitions of progress, how they were developed and their relevance to women in Western Australia. Thirdly, we analyse the suitability of available data for monitoring 'progress'. In particular, we identify data that is required but currently not collected. Finally, we discuss some implications for the broader research program of defining 'progress' and monitoring it through social and economic indicators.

Women's Goals and the Required Features of Social Indicators

Economic and social indicators are used to monitor progress towards a particular economic or social goal. As discussed above, GDP is measured not because growth in GDP is, by itself, always a desirable goal, but because it is felt that GDP statistics are an appropriate proxy measure of the broad goal of better conditions for living. Similarly, statistics on women's status are proxy measures for broad social goals. For example, comparative statistics on average earnings for men and women may be considered a proxy measure for the broad goal of a society that equitably distributes earnings to those contributing to a productive society.

The appropriate measurement of women's progress requires that two major steps be undertaken. Firstly, 'progress' must be defined so that there is a clearly stated understanding of exactly what it is we are hoping to measure. That is, broad social and economic goals are defined. Secondly, indicators, or proxy measures of progress, must be developed. These indicators are used to monitor movement toward (or away from) particular desirable or necessary goals.

Identifying specific social and economic goals for women requires recognition that there may be widely diverging views about what constitutes progress for different women. Women are not a homogenous group of people and are likely to have different, possibly conflicting, views of progress. Economic and social goals are also likely to vary according to women's economic resources, stage in the life cycle, geographic location, household arrangements, culture and any number of

other factors in their social context. Indeed it would be surprising if views on progress did not vary greatly. If social and economic changes are to be recognised as progress, it would appear necessary that they are desired by most, if not all, of the relevant population and are congruent with their interests and needs. Two criteria for successful indicators for measuring women's progress are therefore to:

- 1 reflect women's understanding of progress in their lives;
- 2 reflect the diversity of the aspirations and experiences of women in the community.

In addition, any set of indicators of women's progress should permit some form of benchmarking to allow progress to be monitored over time. Statistics examining gender equity are one form of benchmarking. Comparison between men's and women's achievements in various fields is relatively common and one reason why social indicators on the status of women are collected is that, on average, women have yet to achieve economic and political equality with men in their communities. For example, statistics on women's earnings have particular significance when they are compared with the earnings of men.

However, it is important that measures of women's progress are not dominated by male-female comparisons. This risks restricting definitions of women's progress to activities in which men have already achieved 'success', and areas where the institutionalised measures of success are male-dominated. For example, care must be taken with the interpretation given to economic indicators that show men work longer hours in paid work and shorter hours in unpaid household work than women. If progress for women is simply defined as becoming more man-like in terms of working patterns, then the wrong implication may be drawn that women's work in the home is of lesser value than men's work in the market.

For this reason, a desirable feature of indicators is that they enable additional forms of benchmarking appropriate to specific areas of social and economic activity. For example, inter-jurisdictional comparisons might be important in the political (funding) environment where decisions affecting women's welfare are made. In the case of Western Australia, where the funding for areas such as health, education and social welfare is significantly affected by the allocation of funds between the various States in the Australian federation, the ability to make inter-State comparisons are particularly important. Similarly, indicators which allow comparisons over time may assist in monitoring social change which affects women in particular, for example, specific issues relating to fertility. Therefore a further two criteria for successful indicators for measuring women's progress are that they:

- 1 permit comparisons of the economic, political and social achievements of men and women; and
- 2 permit comparisons of the progress of women between jurisdictions and within a jurisdiction over time.

Existing Definitions Of Progress – What Are Women’s Social and Economic Goals?

An obvious first step for developing a set of social indicators relevant to women’s progress would be to engage the community of women in a discussion of the meaning of progress. This discussion would need to include a diverse range of groups that make up the community. This approach has the strong advantage of not making any *a priori* assumptions about women’s understanding of the meaning of progress. It assists with ensuring that the resultant analysis of progress and design of social indicators emerges from respondent’s data rather than prompted by existing theories or views. Perhaps surprisingly, no research could be found which used such a consultative approach to the definition of progress and then systematically linked this to the development of social and economic indicators appropriate to its measurement.

In the absence of such research, an alternative first step in the project has been adopted. This is to review existing studies and definitions of women’s progress in order to gauge some current perceptions of the issue. This approach has some obvious limitations. First, existing social indicators often reflect research priorities that do not have women’s progress as their main focus. For example, the wide range of data that is available on paid work, compared to the limited information on unpaid work, do not necessarily reflect women’s priorities or interests.

Second, the selection of indicators to measure women’s progress from the broader set of social indicators that are available is likely to be significantly affected by the researcher’s and/or policy maker’s own perceptions of women’s progress. As both groups of women are likely to share a similar (and relatively privileged) background, in terms of education and income, there is a danger that the chosen indicators will not be representative of the aspirations of the broader community of women.

With these limitations in mind, the next section provides an evaluation of six studies which use economic and social indicators to assess women’s status. The studies included in this review are:

1. A fact sheet developed by the Women’s Policy Office in Western Australia (Women’s Policy Office 1998).
2. The National Agenda for Women Implementation Report undertaken by Office of the Status of Women of the Commonwealth Government in Australia (Office of the Status of Women 1992).

3. A Canadian Report on Gender Equality Indicators (Federal-Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for the Status of Women 1997).
4. The PCC index on the Status of Women (Mohiuddin 1996).
5. The AC index on the Status of Women (Mohiuddin 1996).
6. A study by Danner, Fort and Young that examines international data and resources available for studying the status of women (Danner, Fort and Young 1999).

This list of studies is not intended to be exhaustive and the aim is to identify a set of common broad-ranging goals relevant to diverse populations rather than identify specific goals relevant to only one or two jurisdictions. The Australian and Canadian jurisdictions represent well-developed economies with diverse populations and one could reasonably expect their social indicators to exhibit similar broad goals. The remaining three studies have an international focus and include a wide range of indicators comparing the status of women in different countries. The activities included in these latter studies tend to be very broad to enable comparisons of women's progress across an extremely varied range of circumstances.

Despite this, the studies reveal a remarkable degree of consensus about the broad goals thought to be relevant to women's social and economic progress. As Table 1 illustrates, there is some consensus that women's education and training, health and physical well-being, employment and economic independence and family

Table 1: Broad areas of social and economic activity for which indicators are used in selected studies

Broad Social Goal	Western Australia (WA)	Australia (Aust)	Canada	PCC Index	AC Index	Danner, Fort and Young (Danner et.al.)
Education and Training	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Health and Physical Well-being	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Employment and Economic Independence	✓	✓	✓ **	✓	✓	✓
Family Responsibilities						
*Note: the Canadian category of work includes unpaid work						
Additional Indicators-Participation in society's	Decision making	Income support	Legal rights	Social equality	Political representation	Public power

responsibilities are areas of activity which warrant monitoring. Each study also includes additional indicators relating to issues such as income support, social equality, political representation, legal rights and public power. These issues are loosely grouped together as relating to women's right to participate in decision-making institutions at various levels in their society.

Each of the five broad categories of activities considered by most, if not all of the six studies, appear to be of obvious significance in determining an individual's social and economic status. For example, the linkages between education and training and many aspects of social and economic well-being are firmly established. Enhanced access to education and training for women is correlated with declining infant and child mortality rates, lower birth rates, improved health and physical well-being, improved employment opportunities, higher incomes and greater autonomy (Mohiuddin 1996). Furthermore, education increases not only the economic and social well-being of individuals, but also the pool of available skills and contributes to the growth of the economy (Schultz 1961).

Similarly, health and physical well-being are also widely acknowledged as constituting human capital and therefore as having a close link with the economic and social status of individuals. Access to health services gives returns to both the individual and society in terms of increased productivity and quality of life. In this respect, the reasons for considering health and physical well-being as crucial to women's progress are similar to those for education and training (Schultz 1961).

Within developed economies, paid employment is the predominant way in which people gain access to market goods and services to meet their needs for shelter, food, clothing, education and information, in addition to a wide array of other needs and wants. In developing economies this is increasingly the case as market-based employment is used to supplement or replace self provisioning practices. Access to employment and participation in the formal labour market is, therefore, closely linked with economic and social well-being, economic independence and financial security. As Richardson observes, employment outcomes also have a critical bearing on an individual's sense of social worth:

Very high wages puff up the recipient and exaggerate his or her sense of social worth. Very low wages, conversely, degrade the recipient and imply that he or she is of little value. (Richardson 1998, 14)

Family responsibilities generally require the undertaking of a large amount of work, both paid and unpaid. Unpaid work is predominantly assumed by women and forms a major part of the contribution women make to society. It constitutes up to 58 per cent of all work performed in Australia (Ironmonger 1996) and in monetary terms has been valued at approximately 50 per cent of GDP, yet typically does not get counted as part of GDP (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1992).

While the structure of families and households can vary considerably, the type of unpaid work that is carried out within them consists of a well recognised range of tasks, including raising children and caring for the sick and elderly (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1994). Performing this work has significant effects on women's participation in a range of other social and economic activities.

Finally, each of the studies includes some indicators monitoring aspects of women's legal rights and their participation in decision-making institutions at varying levels. As discussed below, the approach taken to these issues was examined from several different perspectives. However, there appears to be a common recognition that many policy decisions which affect the lives of women are made by various levels of government. Some studies recognise that one method of ensuring that women's interests are considered in these decision-making processes is for women to participate in all stages of policy development including that of framing and passing (or rejecting) legislation. In a broad international context it is evident that in many jurisdictions women's participation is relatively limited and they are still to achieve basic rights such as the right to vote or achieve formal rights equivalent to those of men.

Indicators and Data Used to Monitor Progress

The broad social and economic goals which implicitly underpin each of the six studies appear to be inclusive of women's interests at many levels, although as noted previously, it is difficult to determine this with certainty on an *a priori* basis. More problematic however, is the availability of adequate data with which to monitor progress within each of the broad areas identified. This can be demonstrated by reference to the indicators available for use in each study.

Education and Training

A range of indicators relevant to the broad category of education and training are contained within the six studies listed above and these are summarised in Table 2 below. Some of these indicators are more relevant to monitoring the progress of some Western Australian women than others. For example, indicators of relatively basic education, such as literacy rates and primary school participation, remain highly relevant for specific groups of Western Australian women, such as some Aboriginal women, as has been recently demonstrated by the results of literacy and numeracy tests of primary school children in Western Australia (Ashworth 1999). However, for most other women in Western Australia, a greater emphasis upon indicators of post-secondary education (such as enrolment at colleges of technical and further education and universities) is appropriate, given the almost universal attendance of children at primary and secondary levels of education and the importance of post secondary education to women's competitiveness in the labour force (Office of the Status of Women 1992).

Table 2: Examples of indicators used in selected studies to monitor women's progress in the area of education and training:

Studies using this	Benchma rks used	type of indicat or
Types of Indicators		
Illiteracy rates	Gender, Internatio nal comparis on.	PCC; AC; Danner et.al.
Enrolment rates at primary, secondary and/or post- secondary levels.	Gender Internatio nal comparis on.	PCC; AC; Danner et.al. Aust.
Ratio of female teachers at primary, secondary level and/or post- secondary levels.	en Inter de nati r onal comparis on.	PCC; Danner et.al. WA
University degrees granted in female-dominated, gender neutral and	Gender, Time	Canad a, WA, Aust.

However, the set of indicators in the above table is far from perfect. For example, the indicators do not reflect the many different ways in which education and training can be delivered. Instead, they reflect an assumption that the delivery of education and training takes place in schools, colleges and universities, with students physically attending classes at a campus. However, a significant amount of education and training takes place in the workforce and there is considerable male-female difference in the incidence and duration of this type of training (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997). An indicator relevant to on the job training was found only the Canadian study and similar statistics for Australia are produced only on an irregular basis. However, it has been found that there is a positive association between training and occupational status (full-time, permanent), that women with family responsibilities are less likely to be selected for training and there is a non-neutral gender effect in the access to (employer sponsored) in-house training programs – with firms tending to discriminate against females (Miller 1994).

It may also be expected that flexible delivery programs such as correspondence courses, open learning programs and courses available via the internet will increasingly extend the reach of education and training beyond those who are geographically close to educational institutions. It may also have the potential to allow access to those who are confined to their homes due to, for example, age or family responsibilities. Adult education programs, on-the-job training, recognised prior learning and employer-sponsored training and education can also have a significant impact on the opportunities afforded to different population groups.

Ideally, any set of indicators on women's progress in education and training would be sensitive to the emerging importance of these alternative forms of delivery, particularly women's opportunities and ability to access them.

Finally, current indicators do not address the question as to whether the types of education and training in which women are participating are those that address their particular goals. While it is apparent that women are concentrated in particular types and areas of education and training and that their outcomes in terms of earnings are relatively low, current indicators do little to address the question of why this is occurring. Possible underlying reasons may include: women's economic capacity to engage in some forms of education and training; institutional arrangements which encourage or discourage women's participation in varying forms of education or training; women's broad social goals; and/or women's perceptions of how education and training will enhance or limit their ability to achieve these goals. The collection of survey data on women's reasons for choosing particular areas of education and training may assist in the construction of appropriate indicators.ⁱⁱⁱ

Health and Physical Well-being

Health and physical well-being indicators used in the six studies vary considerably according to the context of the study. As shown in Table 3, studies that included developing nations showed a greater propensity to use indicators such as infant mortality rates, life expectancy statistics and fertility rates. The focus on fertility perhaps illustrates the common perception that women's reproductive roles have significant effects on their social and economic status, something which is considered in the discussion on family responsibilities below. In the Australian context health and physical well-being were considered in greater detail. The Western Australian study in particular, made use of indicators which took into account broad lifestyle issues such as participation in sport and used survey data and crime data to provide indicators on women's experiences and perceptions of physical violence.

The use of a broader range of indicators in the Western Australian context demonstrates a range of issues. Firstly, shows that many threats to women's health do not arise merely from poor access to medical or health facilities, but can arise from social contexts in which physical violence against women is relatively common and/or ignored. While indicators on this aspect of women's physical well-being are absent from the other five studies it would be courageous to believe this is because violence against women is not occurring.

Secondly, it illustrates the value in using survey data of women's perceptions as the basis of social and economic indicators. An indicator of women's perceptions of physical danger and, as revealed in the Western Australian survey, their consequent reluctance to leave their homes when it is dark is likely to have implications for women's economic and social activities. Thus these perceptions

may have significant influences on social and economic outcomes for women that are unlikely to be revealed without community consultation with women.

Table 3: Examples of indicators used in selected studies to monitor women’s progress in the area of health and physical well-being:

Studies using this	Benchmark s used	type of indicat or
Types of Indicators		
Infant mortality	Gender	PCC
Female mortality in child-bearing years		PCC
Births attended by health staff		Danner et.al
Fertility rate		Danner et.al. PCC;
Use of contraception		Danner et.al PCC;
Life expectancy	Gender	AC:WA , Aust.
Experienced recent illness	Gender, Age group	Aust.
Consumption of alcohol, pain killers and/or tranquilizers	Gender	Aust.
Leading causes of death	Gender	WA
Participation in Sport		WA
Victim rates for crimes of physical assault	Gender	WA
Feelings of safety		WA
Violence restraining orders	Gender	WA

Thirdly, it illustrates that health and physical well-being are much more than just the absence of death or illness. Lifestyle issues such as participation in sport can have significant implications for health and it is not difficult to think of further indicators, commonly available which could be added to this list. The incidence of risk taking behaviour through potentially dangerous activities such as tobacco, alcohol or drug abuse are examples.

While the Western Australian study is relatively comprehensive, along with the other studies it neglects aspects of mental health. Indicators such as suicide rates, rates of use of specific prescription drugs may give some insights into aspects of health and physical well-being neglected in the above list of indicators. It is also likely that in the context of Western Australia, issues associated with geographic

remoteness are relevant. For example access to confidential health care or advice may be particularly significant health indicator for women in isolated rural communities. Again, the importance placed on this issue is unlikely to be revealed without some form of community consultation.

Employment and Economic Independence

In contrast with some areas of social and economic activity, indicators relevant to employment appear relatively plentiful. This perhaps reflects the long history of men’s participation in the labour market and the perception that it is part of the ‘public domain’ open to official scrutiny. Whatever the reason, it is relatively easy to access data on women’s participation rates in the workforce and their relative rates of pay.

Table 4: Examples of indicators used in selected studies to monitor women’s progress in the area of employment and economic independence:

Studies using this	Benchm	type of
Types of Indicators	arks	indicat
	used	or
Labour force participation by occupation and/or industry	Age, gender	AC; PCC; WA, Aust.
Average weekly earnings, high/low paying job ratios	Gender, Time	AC; PCC; WA; Canada, Aust.
Superannuation coverage	Gender	Aust.
Occupation segregation	Gender, Time	PCC; WA, Aust.
Gender equality indexes for total workload, including paid and unpaid	Gender, Time	Canada

The indicators listed in Table 4 reflect the importance of equitable access to well paid jobs to women’s progress. Specific indicators also illustrate that women typically receive lower pay, fewer benefits and less employment related benefits than do their male counterparts. Women tend to be ‘over-represented’ in lower paying industries and occupations and in part time or casual work. Many of these areas are those which also have poor training opportunities and poor career prospects (Preston and Crockett 1999).

While part-time work may provide some women with the flexibility to combine work and family responsibilities there is scope for greater use of indicators which recognise that family responsibilities and employment, economic and financial independence are not independent of one another. Economic theories of occupational choice posit that women who plan to spend periods out of the labour

market for family purposes (e.g. child rearing) may invest less in the accumulation of education and training. In the labour market these same women may choose jobs which trade-off career progression and responsibility for flexibility and reduced pressures. The combined effect will, obviously, impact on their employment, economic and financial security (Mincer and Polacheck 1974; Polacheck 1981).

There are some statistics available which could give insights into these issues, particularly the annual survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics which includes questions about participant's reasons for not actively seeking work (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998). For women, child care reasons are a significant factor. The Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency collects some statistics on workplace provisions which assist with accommodating family responsibilities.^{iv} Generally, however, the range of data collected on these issues is limited and released in a highly aggregated format. Hall (1999) finds that the anticipated flexibility offered by individual agreements is not yet a common occurrence and Austen and Birch (2000) find that flexibility provisions have had a very limited ability to address women's lower earnings and higher unpaid workloads.

However, it must be noted that although access to paid employment is important to the chances of economic independence for women, many women's economic welfare is affected by factors other than their own participation in the paid labour force. For example, the welfare of many of women who, for one reason or another, are not in paid work, often depends on the income of other household members and/or government transfers. Data reflecting intra-household allocations of income and other resources would give greater insight into women's access to resources and assist in identifying the economic vulnerability of women who depend on such transfers. For example, some women may experience a relatively high standard of living while they remain married losing economic status if they divorce (Richardson 1998).

Data collection examining the allocation of resources within households is limited, as are any specific indicators of women's progress relating to the intra-household allocation of resources. However, there is a large body of literature that demonstrates that this issue has important implications for women's welfare, including their economic security, education and health.^v Kirner and Rayner (1999, 23-24) suggest that potential indicators which may give insights into women's access to resources include: the number of single women who own their own home or are paying off a mortgage; women's share of new cars registered; and percentage of women who have a major credit card.

Statistics on household income and poverty are currently collected and if they included data on female-headed households living in poverty it would assist to identify the extent and nature of many women's economic problems. However, household statistics may give an inadequate picture, particularly whenever income

is difficult to measure (such as in the case of the self employed), and when assets are important part of the household's economic base (as can be the case for older individuals and farming families). Furthermore poverty measures that are based solely on household income do not indicate the nature and extent of material that is suffered by poor households.

Ideally a set of indicators of the incidence of poverty among West Australian women, and of the nature of the material hardship faced by poor women would be available. Rector, Johnson and Youseff (1999) suggest a range of measures of material hardship. These include 'threshold indicators', such as the incidence of poor households who did not meet essential expenses, including mortgage, rent, utilities and medical during the previous 12 months. They also include indicators of material problems, such as the incidence of poor persons living in crowded conditions^{vi}; the incidence of upkeep problems (such as leaking roof or ceiling and plumbing that does not work); the incidence of gas, electricity or phone disconnection; the incidence of evictions; and the incidence of shortages of food among poor households.

Family Responsibilities

A range of indicators relevant to women's family responsibilities are contained within the six studies and these are listed in Table 5.

Table 5: Examples of indicators used in selected studies to monitor women's progress in the area of family responsibilities:

Types of Indicators	Age at first marriage	Benchmarks used	Gender	Studies using this type of indicator or WA; PCC Danner et.al. AC; WA
Fertility rate*				
Ratio of women headed households				
Lone parents working looking for work				

*Paid and unpaid work loads also Gender in Table 3 and health indicator and illustrates the difficulties of attempting to place different aspects of women's lives into discrete classifications.

In the Australian context there is scope to expand the use of indicators to include information about the nature and distribution of work carried out within households. Time-use statistics offer a greater understanding of the linkages between women's family responsibilities, unpaid work and other activities. For example, when considered in conjunction with earnings data, they demonstrate that men and women spend similar amounts of time doing 'work', but that

women do most of the unpaid work and therefore have lower earnings. Further, time-use statistics reveal that more equal distributions of unpaid work appear likely to result from women reducing their unpaid workload through the purchasing of goods and services rather than through men increasing their commitment to unpaid activities (Bittman 1999; Austen and Birch 2000). Over time, the social and economic changes reflected in this data may assist the development of more inclusive theories and explanations of women's economic and social well-being.

However, in general, these indicators concentrate on a limited range of issues relating to fertility, marital status and labour force participation. This illustrates the common perception that a woman's ability to control her own fertility and share the burden of family responsibilities is crucial to her welfare (including her economic independence).

In the Australian context there is scope to expand the use of indicators to include information about the nature and distribution of work carried out within households. Time-use statistics offer a greater understanding of the linkages between women's family responsibilities, unpaid work and other activities. For example, when considered in conjunction with earnings data, they demonstrate that men and women spend similar amounts of time doing 'work', but that women do most of the unpaid work and therefore have lower earnings. Further, time-use statistics reveal that more equal distributions of unpaid work appear likely to result from women reducing their unpaid workload through the purchasing of goods and services rather than through men increasing their commitment to unpaid activities (Bittman 1999; Austen and Birch 2000). Over time, the social and economic changes reflected in this data may assist the development of more inclusive theories and explanations of women's economic and social well-being.

In addition, there is scope for the provision of information about the support provided to women as they strive to meet their important and valuable family and community responsibilities. For example, data on physical and social infrastructure, such as access to paid parental leave, maternity leave, child-care and respite care are important to measuring progress in this area of women's lives.

Full Participation in Society and Decision Making

As illustrated in Table 6, some studies use the existence of different legal rights for men and women as indicator of women's rights to fully participate in society. The role in this context is fairly clear. Systemic issues of discrimination can arise from limited access to voting rights, a lack of legal protection against sex discrimination and inferior rights on issues such as inheritance, ownership or property and custody of children.

Women's legal rights are the subject of few indicators in the studies examined and those indicators which do exist reflect the comparative nature of international studies which aim to compare women's legal rights across extremely diverse jurisdictions. Specifically these include the right to vote and protection against discrimination on the basis of sex, including sex-based pay discrimination.

Table 6: Examples of indicators used in selected studies to monitor women's progress in the area of full participation in society and decision making:

Types of Indicators	Benchmarks used	Studies using this type of indicator or AC;
Seats in legislative bodies	Gender	Danner et.al.; WA
Right to vote	Gender	AC
Legal protection from sexual discrimination		PCC; AC
Divorce and family law rights		PCC
Right to inherit and own property		PCC
Women in the judiciary	Gender	WA
Women on Boards of Directors	Gender	WA
State government boards and committees	Gender	WA

International comparisons of women's representation in decision-making positions generally use the number or percentage of women participating in legislatures as an indicator of women's progress. In Australia, however, statistics are also gathered that reflect women's participation in a wide range of public and private organisations and at the State and local levels of government. Continuing disparities between legislated rights and women's relative levels of representation in a range of decision-making positions emphasises the importance of appropriate social infrastructure to ensure that rights are effectively implemented.

Some Implications for Future Research

It is difficult to criticise the broad areas of social and economic activity included in the above six studies which use social indicators to aid the assessment of women's status and progress. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine meaningful indicators which do not address each of the five general areas identified. However, it is also relatively easy to identify significant areas of women's experiences which remain neglected in such studies. This is not to say that

valuable research has not been undertaken in relation to many of these issues. Rather, it is to recognise that when readily available social indicators are used to give an overall picture of women's status and progress, there are many significant gaps.

In some cases there are data capable of filling some of these gaps, most notably in relation to some forms of crime, health statistics and time-use statistics. The use of these data to form additional social indicators would give a more complete picture of women's experiences. However, some gaps appear more difficult to fill, particularly those relating to intra-household allocations of resources and domestic violence. These areas have traditionally been considered part of the 'private' domain and remain outside most forms of data collection. In these cases our knowledge rests upon case studies and some piecemeal statistical data.

The types of benchmarks and comparisons currently used in studies that utilise indicators also illustrate some shortcomings. The indicators are often derived from data that are highly aggregated at a state or national level, thus making comparisons between jurisdictions and population groups difficult or impossible. For example, indicators which compared different groups of women, such as women in non-urban areas and urban areas, or women in different age groups, may highlight particular areas of achievement or disparity. As discussed in our introductory sections, women represent a heterogeneous population likely to have disparate goals and aspirations and it is difficult for this to be reflected through the use of highly aggregated data.

Finally, however, it can be argued that the most notable exclusion is consultation with women about their perceptions of progress. This may be insurmountably difficult in the case of international comparative studies but would be a useful starting point for more regional studies. It is to be hoped that future research can be undertaken which uses this approach as a starting point for the development of additional indicators which reflect women's experiences and aspirations.

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ⁱThis paper is based on an earlier report (Austen, Jefferson and Preston 2000) prepared for the WA Women's Policy Office. We acknowledge the valued contribution made by Joan Malpass (in particular) and other staff from the WA Women's Policy Office. ⁱⁱWestern Australia is geographically large and diverse with a relatively small, highly urbanised population. Much of Western Australia's economic activity is based on primary production, particularly the technologically advanced and capital intensive mining and oil industries. In general terms, its population may be characterised as relatively affluent and predominantly white.

However, these generalities tend to 'gloss over' the experiences of significant minorities of people with Western Australia's population. For example, approximately one-third of Western Australian women are immigrants from a wide range of cultural backgrounds and approximately 3 per cent of the State's women are aboriginal. Although the State is highly urbanised, more than one-quarter of all women live outside the capital city (Perth), many facing issues related to geographic isolation. Even within the capital city, some women live in affluent suburbs with relatively easy access to services, such as public transport, health and employment while others live in poorly served suburbs.

In common with many advanced industrialised countries, women in Western Australia continue to record poorer outcomes than men in most of the measured areas of their economic, social and political lives. For example, the average earnings of Western Australian women are lower than those of the men in the State and the representation of women in the legislature is relatively low.

Western Australia is, therefore, typical of many other developed nations exhibiting significant diversity in the economic, social and political status of women in its community. The challenges and complexities of finding a set of indicators relevant to Western Australian women's broad ranging experiences are likely to be found in a range of industrially advanced and culturally diverse societies. ⁱⁱⁱThe annual survey conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, of *Persons not in the labour force, Catalogue 6220.0* provides an example of systematic data collection which can provide some insights into possible reasons for participation or non-participation, in this case in the labour market. ^{iv}This is a Commonwealth Government Agency. The type of data collected may be viewed at <http://www.eeo.gov.au/> ^vA non-exhaustive list of references includes Duncan 1994; Sen 1990; Office of the Status of Women 1991; Behrman ; J.R. Behrman 1997; Cantillon and Nolan 1998. ^{vi}Moderate crowding is defined as 1.01-1.5 persons per room; substantial crowding is defined as 1.51 persons or more per room.