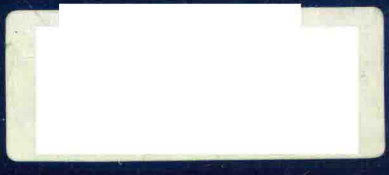
ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN GENDER AND POLITICS

The Women's Movement in Protest, Institutions and the Internet

Australia in transnational perspective

Edited by
Sarah Maddison and Marian Sawer



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'This is the most authoritative text on the state of the women's movement written in well over a decade. A must read for anyone who doubts the continued existence of feminism, these meticulously researched and magnificently written essays, reveal that it is alive, thriving, and changing.'

Verta Taylor, Professor and Chair of Sociology, University of California, USA.

'No, feminism is not dead! This collection of vibrant scholarship, using a wealth of data, makes the case clearly and strongly that feminism continues to mobilize and build new institutions. It effectively contributes perspectives from Australia to the global debates.'

Sylvia Walby, Distinguished Professor of Sociology and UNESCO Chair in Gender Research, Lancaster University, UK, and author of The Future of Feminism Polity 2011.

The Women's Movement in Protest, Institutions and the Internet

The death of feminism is regularly proclaimed in the West. Yet at the same time feminism has never had such an extensive presence, whether in international norms and institutions, or online in blogs and social networking campaigns. This book argues that the women's movement is not over; but rather social movement theory has led us to look in the wrong places.

This book offers both methodological and theoretical innovations in the study of social movements, and analyses how the trajectories of protest activity and institution-building fit together. Rich empirical study, together with focused research on discursive activism, blogging, popular culture and advocacy networks, provides an extraordinary resource, showing how women's movements can survive highs and lows and adapt in unexpected ways. Expert contributors explore the ways in which the movement is continuing to work its way through institutions, and persists within submerged networks, cultural production and in everyday living, sustaining itself in non-receptive political environments and maintaining a discursive feminist space for generations to come. Set in a transnational perspective, this book traces the legacies of the Australian women's movement to the present day in protest, non-government organisations, government organisations, popular culture, the Internet and SlutWalk.

The Women's Movement in Protest, Institutions and the Internet will be of interest to international students and scholars of gender politics, gender studies, social movement studies and comparative politics.

Sarah Maddison is Associate Professor and Australian Research Council Future Fellow at the University of New South Wales, Australia.

Marian Sawer is Emeritus Professor in the School of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

Routledge research in gender and politics

1 **The Women's Movement in Protest, Institutions and the Internet**
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Preface

Sarah Maddison and Marian Sawer

In October 2012 the Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, rose in parliament to speak on a motion from the Opposition. The motion argued that the Speaker of the House should be removed from his position following revelations that he had sent sexist text messages to a member of his staff. The context of the motion was politically complex; it is the spectacle of the speech itself, as it circled the globe that is highly relevant to what follows in this book.

In response to the Opposition's motion, Gillard, Australia's first female prime minister, launched into a powerful speech directed at the Leader of the Opposition:

> I will not be lectured about sexism and misogyny by this man, I will not. And the government will not be lectured about sexism and misogyny by this man. Not now, not ever. The Leader of the Opposition says that people who hold sexist views and who are misogynists are not appropriate for high office. Well, I hope the Leader of the Opposition has got a piece of paper and he is writing out his resignation. Because if he wants to know what misogyny looks like in modern Australia, he doesn't need a motion in the House of Representatives, he needs a mirror.[1]

Over the following 15 minutes Gillard recalled various instances in which the Leader of the Opposition had revealed his misogyny. When, for example, in a radio interview he had questioned the 'assumption' that the under-representation of women was 'a bad thing', and wondered aloud whether men may be 'by physiology or temperament, more adapted to exercise authority or to issue command.' Or when, as Minister for Health, he had described abortion as 'the easy way out.' Her examples flowed, and the nation watched in astonishment.

The speech caused a sensation, not just in Australia but around the world. In just ten days the YouTube video of the speech had been downloaded from the Internet two million times. International media, including the blogosphere,[2] rushed to praise the feisty Prime Minister from Australia, with the *New Yorker* suggesting that Barack Obama could take a leaf from Gillard's book.[3]

In Australia the word 'misogynist' was suddenly a part of everyday conversation, creating new media interest and debate. It seemed that the women's

movement, and the feminist discourse it had created and sustained, was not dead after all, but living and breathing in Australia's Parliament.

The Australian women's movement and the world

This was not the first time that an Australian variety of feminism and the women's movement had made an impact on the rest of the world. In a history that has been well documented, Australia achieved recognition for the unique model of women's policy machinery developed during the 1970s, when women's movement organisations turned to the state seeking a response to their demands. In 1975 the Prime Minister's Women's Adviser, Elizabeth Reid, led the Australian delegation to the first United Nations (UN) Women's Conference in Mexico City. Not only had she been a prime mover in drafting the World Plan of Action but in her speech to a plenary session she introduced the word 'sexism' into the lexicon of the UN and hence into languages around the world.[4] She said it was a word that nobody should be afraid to use:

> Sexism is the artifical ascription of roles, behaviour and even personalities to people on the basis of their sex *alone*. This does not simply create *differences* but inequalities. We none of us live in, and it is impossible to imagine living in, a non-sexist society...
>
> To attempt to work out strategies for changing this situation must, therefore, be our primary task at this conference.[5]

Observers from other countries were amazed that a feminist (and member of Women's Liberation) could lead an official delegation in this way and help shape a new international agenda. Almost 40 years later it was a woman prime minister rather than a prime minister's women's adviser who was amazing the world with her denunciation of sexism.

The model of feminist policy machinery developed in Australia in the mid-1970s arose from and relied on a close relationship between activists in the women's movement inside and outside government. Their model gave the rest of the world the term 'femocrat', the name for feminists appointed to positions with a specific mandate to improve policy outcomes for women. While the name was devised by their critics, it was soon adopted as a badge of pride. It was hoped that women's rights, needs and interests could be institutionalised in the practice of government. This was a radical goal. To indicate its subversive nature, a hostile Senator read into Hansard a parable written by a former head of the Office of Women's Affairs for a Women's Electoral Lobby conference. The parable dealt with the short-lived kingdom of Craminalot, where the lady-in-waiting wove magic to ensure all girl babies were allowed to live, rather than mothers being forced to abandon every second new-born female child. Just outside the palace walls grew a tree of magic that was tended by wise women and brought forth a profusion of purple flowers. As the lady-in-waiting was overworked she was allowed to bring in some of these wise women to help her,

but most of the wise women stayed outside the palace to tend the magic tree, which was the source of her power. The hostile Senator interpreted this parable to mean that the first loyalty of the femocrat was to Women's Electoral Lobby or the women's movement, not to the government of the day.[6]

The way in which the women's movement operated through government was of course more complex than these early interpretations might suggest. The chapters in this book provide the first detailed, empirical evidence about the trajectories of the Australian women's movement, whether the incidence and visibility of protest actions; the development of services and institutions, both autonomous and nested within other institutions; and the introduction of discourse that changes the way women (and men) think, talk and act.

While it brings new evidence to bear, our book also builds on an important body of scholarship. Studies of the Australian women's movement have exercised international influence, providing much of the initial empirical data for the analysis of feminist institution-building within government. Not only did institutional innovation in Australia precede much that occurred elsewhere, but so has the reconfiguration or 'mainstreaming' of those institutions. Forty years after the initial creation of movement-inspired policy agencies and women's services, Australia remains well positioned to contribute to international scholarship and theory-building on movements and their institutional impacts. The transnational character of women's movement advocacy and policy diffusion through transnational bodies has led to a certain degree of similarity in institutional forms, particularly in old democracies. The global spread of neoliberal discourses and modes of governance has also presented similar challenges to feminist-inspired institutions. Of course the international relevance of this study has its limitations. Political context matters, and the trajectory of the Australian women's movement has been shaped by its relationship with the Australian welfare state. Thus, the data and analysis in this book is likely to be of greatest interest and relevance to actors and scholars of social movements in other old democracies in the West.

Activism on and off the streets

The chapters in this book draw on a unique, longitudinal study.[7] To the best of our knowledge, there has been no other study anywhere in the world that tracks so comprehensively the institutional outcomes of a social movement over time. The project has produced a database that maps the emergence and, where relevant, the disappearance of institutions that grew out of the second-wave women's movement in Australia, between 1970 and 2005. The database, discussed in more detail in the Appendix to this book, contains entries for nearly 500 institutions.

In addition to the institutions database, the project has produced an event database coding over 1,000 events and detailing the media reporting of over 30 years of Australian women's movement activism. These rich empirical components of the project, together with focused research on discursive activism, blogging and advocacy organisations, have provided an extraordinary resource

through which to advance theoretical understandings of women's movement activism. Our quantitative data has called into question some assumptions in social movement theory concerning the relationship between protest activity and institutionalisation. This is the first time that quantitative material on both institutionalisation and protest event activity has been available to test these assumptions. More specifically, this data reinforces existing feminist critiques of mainstream social movement theory.

For example, social movements have often been characterised by non-institutional forms of collective action and protest, such as street demonstrations and civil disobedience. A large literature has focused on these features of social movements, including the strategies of participants and their collective identities.[8] North American scholars in particular have often viewed the use of unconventional and disruptive repertoires of political action as a defining element of social movements, at least as a heuristic device to distinguish them from other collective actors. Despite an acknowledgement that the initial distinction between contentious and conventional politics was probably too sharply drawn,[9] there is still a strong tendency to see institutionalisation as signalling the end of the potentially transformative phase of political action. Feminist scholarship has also tended to share this negative view of institutionalisation,[10] and many have observed with dismay the way activist energy and critical insight can become lost among organisational concerns.

Yet the idea that social movements are by definition involved in disruptive repertoires has come under challenge by social movement theorists.[11] It is now recognised that most movements have engaged with conventional politics, through lobbying and institution-building, at the same time as pursuing more adversarial and performative tactics. Particular questions have been raised concerning the relevance of the disruptive repertoires definition to the women's movement.[12] The media assumption that the women's movement was 'over', which became common in the 1980s, relied on the expectation of particular repertoires of action that may not be characteristic of women's movements. The idea that a social movement might be 'over' when it was no longer visibly engaged in public contestation was at odds with feminist views that there had always been a women's movement over the past century.[13]

Feminist scholars have highlighted the institutional innovation associated with women's movements and the conscious attempts to devise institutions that would embody feminist values, eschew hierarchy and model democratic service provision.[14] Others have observed how women's movements operate simultaneously and synergistically inside and outside the state.[15] There is now a considerable body of evidence suggesting that institution-building is *characteristic* of women's movement activism[16] and better seen not as the end-point of a social movement, but as a means for realising its objectives. Indeed even though street marches and disruptive sit-ins are less common than in the recent past, the issues that feminists sought to bring to public attention in the 1970s are still being pursued through organisations such as women's refuges, women's health centres, women's units in government and centres against sexual assault. One important

discovery from the dataset developed in the project underpinning this book is the insight that institutionalisation does not always come *after* social movement mobilisation and nor does it necessarily displace it. Peak periods for feminist institution-building in Australia occurred at approximately the same times as the peaks in protest events. The data also indicate that non-government women's services have been surprisingly resilient and stable in comparison with women's policy agencies within government.

Thus, while the women's movement might no longer be so visible on the streets (although protest activity has been more persistent than the popular narrative might suggest) the data from this project confirm that the movement is still working its way through institutions, and is alive within submerged networks, cultural production and everyday living. Meanwhile women's organisations have become more specialised and professionalised, and more reliant on cheque-book membership than collective action. Alternatively, at times when direct policy engagement and public contestation has few returns, there may be more of a focus on commemorative activities that validate collective identities and values.

Feminist activity may take other forms among young women, sometimes with little connection to older women activists. Work on our project has been intergenerational, combining the expertise of senior and mid-career scholars with the insights of emerging feminist scholars. In this way we have sought to capture the new forms being taken by women's movement activism, a repertoire often less familiar to older feminist scholars and activists. We have tried to maintain an openness in our ideas about what constitutes the women's movement, a movement for which, as we shall see, there are no membership cards.

Women's movement activism into the future

Julia Gillard's speech was remarkable for a number of important reasons relevant to the rest of this book. First, we saw Australia's first female prime minister name the misogyny of her conservative opponent in no uncertain terms. Australian – and perhaps international – feminist discourse could receive no greater boost. The issue of misogyny and gender inequality was apparently being contested by the highest office in the land. This was important too for younger women, perhaps complacent, disengaged, or disillusioned with gender politics. The 'badass motherfucker'[17] challenging sexism among male colleagues in her workplace was a powerful reminder that feminist political contest is possible, important and powerful.

To understand the context of Gillard's speech, however, one must also consider what else happened in the Australian parliament that day. Earlier that morning the Prime Minister had faced down a divided caucus, on legislation to move up to 100,000 sole parents, of whom over 90 per cent are women, from a parenting payment to the lower, and indeed quite inadequate, unemployment benefit. This was similar to neoliberal policy agendas that had been implemented across the Anglosphere, justified by the perceived problem of 'welfare dependence' among

those who require income support from the state (dependence on a husband not being seen as posing a similar moral hazard). As we have argued elsewhere, by the time women reached significant numbers in parliament and executive government in Australia they were constrained by the dominance of such neoliberal discourses; it already seemed too late to promote feminist agendas concerning the value and role of non-market work.[18] In contrast to the way Gillard's speech in parliament took off through social media (press gallery journalists having missed its significance), relatively little attention was paid to the legislation affecting sole parents passed on the same day. Feminists did note that despite this denunciation of sexism the Gillard government was 'making life for some of the most vulnerable women in Australia even harder than it already is'.[19]

Both kinds of response to Gillard's speech, the global approbation of the denunciation of sexism and the critique of simultaneous cuts to sole-parent funding, highlight what the data in this study have told us, and the chapters in this book will argue: that women are still interested in mobilising *as women* to make claims that challenge the gender order. Discourse, including the naming of sexism is important and has changed women's expectations. Yet the pro-market bias of neoliberal government, including a government headed by a woman, cannot satisfy demands for policy that recognises and provides public support for non-market work. Hence the importance of finding answers to our question 'where did the women's movement go?'

Notes

1 Gillard, 'Transcript of Julia Gillard's speech'.
2 Grattan, 'International blogosphere applauds Gillard's "misogynist" attack on Abbott'.
3 Lester, 'Ladylike: Julia Gillard's misogyny speech'.
4 Dowse, 'Memoir', pp. 8–9.
5 Reid, 'Statement by the leader of the Australian delegation', p. 2.
6 *Commonwealth of Australia parliamentary debates*, Senate, 2 March 1978, pp. 313–315.
7 The Evolution of Social Movements, funded by the Australian Research Council as DP0878688.
8 della Porta and Diani, *Social movements*.
9 See Goldstone, 'Bridging institutionalized and non-institutionalized politics'.
10 For an influential example, see Lang,'The NGOization of feminism'.
11 See, for example, McAdam, '"There will be fighting in the streets"'.
12 Staggenborg and Taylor, 'Whatever happened to the women's movement?'
13 Spender, *There's always been a women's movement this century*; Lake, *Getting equal*.
14 Ferree and Martin, *Feminist organizations*; Andrew, 'Looking back at thinking ahead'.
15 Banaszak, *The women's movement inside and outside the state*.
16 Grey and Sawer, *Women's movements*.
17 Morrissey, 'Best thing you'll see all day'.
18 Sawer, 'Entering too late?'
19 Convery, 'On that parliamentary smackdown'.

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