



**GENDER AND POLITICS**

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# The Politics of Gender Equality

Australian Lessons in an  
Uncertain World



Carol Johnson

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# Gender and Politics

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Carol Johnson

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AGPS	Australian Government Publishing Service
ALP	Australian Labor Party
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women
DEET	Department of Employment, Education and Training
DPMC	Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
EU	European Union
GFC	Global Financial Crisis
GRB	Gender Responsive Budgeting
ILO	International Labour Organization (ILO)
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer
LPA	Liberal Party of Australia
NCVAW	National Committee on Violence Against Women
NEAT	National Employment and Training Scheme (NEAT)
NESB	Non-English-Speaking Background
NFAW	The National Foundation for Australian Women
NIAA	Australian Government, National Indigenous Australians Agency
NPA	National Party of Australia
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OSW	Office of the Status of Women
SET	Science, Engineering and Technology (SET)
TCF	Textile, Clothing and Footwear
UN	United Nations
US	United States
WB	Women's Bureau

xii ABBREVIATIONS

WEETAG	The Women's Employment, Education and Training Advisory Group
WEL	Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL)
WISET	Women in Science Engineering and Technology Advisory Group



## CHAPTER 1

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# In the Frame: Women and the Discursive Construction of Gender Equality in Theory and Practice

This book analyses the politics of federal government gender equality policy and issues in Australia from the reforming 1970s Whitlam government to the current day. It emphasises that gender equality policy needs to be situated within a broader politics, including politicians' electoral strategies and ideological/discursive frameworks. The book also situates Australia in an international context, identifying policy innovations and influences while drawing attention to the wider relevance of the Australian experience. It argues that analysing the history of the politics of Australian federal gender equality policy throws an important light on some of the ongoing deficiencies of those policies. In particular, a historical analysis highlights how those policies have often been shaped by, and incorporated within, pre-existing policy frameworks that were not originally designed to challenge gender inequality. The book identifies gendered biases and flaws that have arisen as a result and that continue to the present day. The analysis concludes by discussing future policy challenges facing Australian women and what a reimagined policy agenda, driven by the needs of women in all their intersectional diversity, would look like.

In 2022, the newly elected Australian Labor government of Anthony Albanese produced a detailed *Women's Budget Statement* as part of its overall budget process. As we shall see, such budget statements, originally introduced by the Hawke Labor government in 1984, constituted one of the many feminist gender equality innovations which Australian governments have introduced internationally. The *Statement* affirmed that: "The

Government is committed to Australia re-emerging as a global leader in gender equality”.<sup>1</sup> However, it painted a grim picture of the position of Australian women noting that: “Gender inequality is holding Australia back. In 2022, Australia was ranked 43rd of 146 countries in the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index”.<sup>2</sup> Yet, Australia had been at number 24 in 2013 when Labor was previously in office.<sup>3</sup> Prominent Labor politician, Tanya Plibersek blamed former Liberal-National Coalition government cuts to pay, family benefits, childcare, education and health for Australia’s even worse position, previously, of 50.<sup>4</sup> The Liberal Party is a centre-right party, Australia’s equivalent to the British Conservative Party, and governs in Coalition with the National Party, formerly the Country Party. Plibersek’s party, the centre-left Labor Party, is Australia’s social democratic party.<sup>5</sup> Labor’s 2022 Budget Statement went on to note that:

Our national level indicators highlight persistent gaps between women and men, including a gender pay gap of 14.1 per cent. Women in Australia continue to shoulder the majority of unpaid work and caring responsibilities and are more likely to be in part-time, casual or low-paid work as

<sup>1</sup> Australian Government, Treasury, *Women’s Budget Statement: October 2022–23*. Commonwealth of Australia, 25 October 2022, p. 18. [https://archive.budget.gov.au/2022-23-october/womens-statement/download/womens\\_budget\\_statement\\_2022-23.pdf](https://archive.budget.gov.au/2022-23-october/womens-statement/download/womens_budget_statement_2022-23.pdf). Accessed 23 January 2023.

<sup>2</sup> A. Albanese, J. Chalmers, & K. Gallagher, Foreword. In Australian Government, Treasury, *Women’s Budget Statement: October 2022–23*. Commonwealth of Australia, 25 October 2022, p. 1. [https://archive.budget.gov.au/2022-23-october/womens-statement/download/womens\\_budget\\_statement\\_2022-23.pdf](https://archive.budget.gov.au/2022-23-october/womens-statement/download/womens_budget_statement_2022-23.pdf). Accessed 23 January 2023.

<sup>3</sup> World Economic Forum (WEF), Insight Report: The Global Gender Gap Report 2013, WEF, 2013, p. 8. [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GenderGap\\_Report\\_2013.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2013.pdf). Accessed 12 April 2023.

<sup>4</sup> T. Plibersek, If you’re wondering how badly Scott Morrison is letting women down, just take a look at Australia’s ranking in the World Economic Forum’s gender ranking [...]. *Twitter*, 31 March 2021; see also B. Williams, Australia’s woman problem? The rise and fall of gender equality. In M. Bonotti & N. Miragliotta (Eds.), *Australian politics at a crossroads: Prospects for change* (2024, pp. 241–255). Routledge. [https://twitter.com/tanya\\_plibersek/status/1377126674165231622](https://twitter.com/tanya_plibersek/status/1377126674165231622). Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>5</sup> The Country Party changed its name to the National Party in 1975. See further National Museum of Australia (NMA), Defining Moments: Country Party. NMA, Updated 6 March 2023. <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/country-party#:~:text=In%201975%2C%20the%20Country%20Party,gain%20popularity%20in%20urban%20areas>. Accessed 1 May 2023.

they try to balance work and family. Gender inequality is also a key factor underpinning gender-based violence. Until there is true gender equality, we cannot reach our full potential and be the Australia we want to be.<sup>6</sup>

Australian women are also more likely to live in poverty than Australian men, with figures worsening during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>7</sup> Women over 55 make up the largest component of those on the jobseeker unemployment benefit.<sup>8</sup>

More detailed and updated figures on the position of women in Australia will be given later in this book. For the moment it is worth noting that such findings on gender inequality are not unusual. A World Economic Forum report projects that, based on progress in the 102 countries assessed over the past 16 studies, “at the current rates of progress, it will take 155 years to close the Political Empowerment gender gap, 151 years for the Economic Participation and Opportunity gender gap,

<sup>6</sup> Albanese, Chalmers, & Gallagher, Foreword. The gender pay gap had slightly reduced by 2023 with Minister for Women, Katy Gallagher, stating that “In 2023, Australia’s national gender pay gap was 13.3 per cent. The average weekly full-time earnings of a woman in Australia are \$253.50 lower per week than the equivalent for men. ... On current projections it will take another 26 years to close the gender pay gap”. K. Gallagher, Progress to close the gender pay gap. Media Release, 30 March 2023. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2023/progress-close-gender-pay-gap>. Accessed 27 April 2023; Australian Government, Treasury, Women’s Budget Statement: October 2022–23.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) & National Council of Single Mothers and their Children (NCSMC), ACOSS & NCSMC: We know how to deliver gender equity and end poverty for women, but will we? ACOSS, 8 March 2022. [https://www.acoss.org.au/media\\_release/acoss-ncsmc-we-know-how-to-deliver-gender-equality-and-end-poverty-for-women-but-will-we/](https://www.acoss.org.au/media_release/acoss-ncsmc-we-know-how-to-deliver-gender-equality-and-end-poverty-for-women-but-will-we/). Accessed 27 April 2023; U. Sila & V. Dugain, OECD Economics Department Working Papers, No 1539: Income poverty of households in Australia: Evidence from the HILDA Survey. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 14 February 2019, p. 14. [https://one.oecd.org/document/ECO/WKP\(2019\)8/En/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/ECO/WKP(2019)8/En/pdf). Accessed 12 April 2024; P. Davidson, B. Bradbury, & M. Wong, Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report No 20: Poverty in Australia 2023: Who is affected. ACOSS & UNSW Sydney, March 2023, pp. 32–35.

[https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Poverty-in-Australia-2023\\_Who-is-affected.pdf](https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Poverty-in-Australia-2023_Who-is-affected.pdf). Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Australian Parliament, Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO), JobSeeker Payment: COVID-19, age & gender. PBO, 12 January 2023, p. 3. [https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20230428071132/https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_departments/Parliamentary\\_Budget\\_Office/Publications/Budget\\_Bites?CalendarWidgetTargt=26-02-2023&tab=tab2a](https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20230428071132/https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Budget_Office/Publications/Budget_Bites?CalendarWidgetTargt=26-02-2023&tab=tab2a). Accessed 3 May 2023.

and 22 years for the Educational Attainment gender gap”.<sup>9</sup> Ominously, the same report stated that the “time to close the Health and Survival gender gap remains undefined as its progress to parity has stalled”.<sup>10</sup> Iceland was ranked number 1 in the Global Gender Gap index in 2022, New Zealand Australia’s close neighbour number 4, Sweden number 5, the UK number 22, Canada number 25 and the US number 27. Singapore scored worse than Australia at 49.<sup>11</sup> Further comparisons with such countries will be given later in this book. In terms of parliamentary rankings, in December 2022, Australia ranked 34 in terms of percentage of women in the lower house, compared with Rwanda at number 1, New Zealand at number 4, Iceland at number 7, Sweden at equal number 10, the UK at number 45, Canada at number 62, Singapore at number 67 and the US at number 70.<sup>12</sup>

While Australia’s position could be worse, it is still a sad state for a country that was once a world leader in terms of women’s political rights and feminist-influenced policy. South Australia, then a separate self-governing British colony, was the first place in the world to grant women the right both to vote and to stand for parliament, passing legislation in 1894 that was signed by Queen Victoria in 1895.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, all women including Indigenous, non-property-owning and married were

<sup>9</sup> WEF, Insight Report: Global Gender Gap Report 2022. WEF, July 2022, p. 5. [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2022.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf). Accessed 27 April 2023.

<sup>10</sup> WEF, Global Gender Gap Report 2022, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> WEF, Global Gender Gap Report 2022, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments. IPU, December 2022. <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?month=12&year=2022>. Accessed 12 April 2024; though of course women politicians may have different views on what constitutes gender equality or oppose it all together, see, e.g., K. Celis & S. Childs, *Feminist democratic representation*. Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 13, 20, 27, 188–189.

<sup>13</sup> New Zealand had given women the right to vote but not stand in 1893. New Zealand History, Women and the Vote: Page 5—World suffrage timeline. Ministry for Culture and Heritage, Updated 27 April 2023. <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/politics/women-suffrage/world-suffrage-timeline>. Accessed 28 April 2023.



given the right to vote for the lower house, although property qualifications remained in the upper house.<sup>14</sup> Most Australian women, although not Indigenous women or those from non-European backgrounds in all states, obtained the right to vote and stand nationally in 1902, after the separate colonies federated to form a new Australian nation.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, it was not until 1918 that the UK gave women who were over 30 and met a property qualification the right to vote, with those property restrictions not lifted until 1928.<sup>16</sup> Australian feminists had been active in the fight for women's suffrage in the UK and the Australian example was regularly cited by British suffragists.<sup>17</sup> Nor were many other parts of the world much better than the UK. Gender equality branding may be a key way in which Nordic states currently depict themselves.<sup>18</sup> However, Sweden, for example, did not introduce equal suffrage for women until 1919.<sup>19</sup> Canada granted some women the right to vote in 1918 but restrictions on Indigenous women voting were not lifted until 1960 and women did not get the right to vote in Quebec provincial elections until 1940.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>14</sup> NMA, Defining Moments: Women's Suffrage: 1894: Women's suffrage, South Australia. NMA, Updated 29 September 2022. <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/womens-suffrage#:~:text=The%20Bill%20was%20officially%20made,and%20women%20of%20the%20colony>. Accessed 28 April 23.

<sup>15</sup> But not without a struggle, see P. Grimshaw, A white women's suffrage. In H. D. Irving (Ed.), *A woman's constitution?: Gender & history in the Australian commonwealth* (2001, pp. 77–97). Hale & Iremonger.

<sup>16</sup> UK Parliament, Women get the vote. UK Parliament, 2023. <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/overview/thevote/>. Accessed 28 April 2023; A. Hough, The 120th anniversary of women's suffrage in Australia. Flagpost—Parliamentary Library Blog, 15 June 2022. [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/FlagPost/2022/June/Womens\\_suffrage](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/FlagPost/2022/June/Womens_suffrage). Accessed 28 April 2023.

<sup>17</sup> See C. Wright, *You daughters of freedom: The Australians who won the vote and inspired the world*. Text Publishing, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> E. Larsen, S. M. Moss, & I. Skjelsbæk (Eds.), *Gender equality and nation branding in the Nordic region*. Routledge, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Sveriges Riksdag, The history of the Riksdag. Sveriges Riksdag, 5 January 2023. <https://www.riksdagen.se/en/how-the-riksdag-works/democracy/the-history-of-the-riksdag/#c142d5528926be60edcfc232f18df90f>. Accessed 28 April 2023.

<sup>20</sup> Elections Canada, Women's right to vote case study. Elections Canada, 2023. <https://electionsanddemocracy.ca/voting-rights-through-time-0/case-study-2-women-right-vote>. Accessed 28 April 23.

Australia was also innovative when so-called second-wave feminism arrived in Australia—“so-called” because feminism has a very long history and there had also been some feminist activity between these two so-called waves.<sup>21</sup> Not only did Australian thinkers such as Germaine Greer influence the new feminism internationally but Australia began to develop very innovative feminist policy machinery that will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter.<sup>22</sup> In doing so, feminists drew on a long Australian tradition of looking to the state to improve citizens’ social and economic conditions.<sup>23</sup> By 1990, Marian Sawer could write that “over the last fifteen years Australian women have created a range of women’s policy machinery and government-subsidised women’s services (delivered by women for government) which is unrivalled elsewhere”.<sup>24</sup> Sawer agreed that the “utilitarian attitude towards the state” had distinguished Australian feminism from feminism in the UK and US. The invention of the term “femocrat”, for feminist bureaucrats involved in the design and implementation of government services for women and broader feminist analysis of government policy, was typical of the Australian innovation of this period.<sup>25</sup>

It was one of those femocrats, Anne Summers, then head of the Office of the Status of Women, who was responsible for another innovation, namely the introduction of the Women’s Budget Program for the 1984 Budget. That Budget Program (the forerunner of what were later termed Budget Statements) required federal departments and agencies “to provide a detailed account of their impact of their activities on women for a document circulated by the prime minister on Budget night”.<sup>26</sup> The OECD has recognised Australia’s international contribution in this regard with a 2015 report acknowledging that: “Gender budgeting initiatives have been pursued in various forms over many years. Australia pioneered and piloted attempts at gender budgeting from 1984 onwards in response

<sup>21</sup> See Lake’s list of achievements in the 40s, 50s and early 60s. M. Lake, *Getting equal: The history of Australian feminism*. Allen & Unwin, 1999, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> In particular, Greer’s conception of empowering women revealed the influence of her Australian libertarian background (see further Lake, *Getting equal*, pp. 227–228).

<sup>23</sup> Lake, *Getting equal*, p. 253.

<sup>24</sup> M. Sawer, *Sisters in suits: Women and public policy in Australia*. Allen & Unwin, 1990, p. xv.

<sup>25</sup> Sawer, *Sisters in suits*, p. xv; on femocrats see further pp. 22–25.

<sup>26</sup> Sawer, *Sisters in suits*, p. 228; on Summers see further pp. 71–73.

to calls from women's rights activists. Over 90 countries have experimented with some form of gender budgeting over the past decade".<sup>27</sup> It is a reflection on how much Australia's often innovative role goes unacknowledged, even within Australia, that the Labor government's 2022 *Women's Budget Statement* triumphantly announced that: "The Government has committed to implement gender responsive budgeting, also known as gender budgeting, which is an established practice across a number of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries".<sup>28</sup> Yet there was no mention that a form of gender responsive budgeting had been established in Australia in the 1980s, before being abolished by the socially conservative Abbott Liberal government in 2014<sup>29</sup> (although the conservative Morrison Liberal-National Coalition government eventually re-introduced a sanitised version for the 2020–2021 Budget after facing increasing feminist criticism for gender-blind economic policies and poor poll results from women voters).<sup>30</sup> Such oversights regarding Australia's contribution make the writing of books such as this even more important.

<sup>27</sup> R. Downes, L. von Trapp, & S. Nicol, Gender budgeting in OECD countries. *OECD Journal on Budgeting*, 16(3), 2017, p. 6. <https://www.oecd.org/gender/Gender-Budgeting-in-OECD-countries.pdf>. Accessed 12 April 2024; for a history of its establishment and influence, see further M. Costa & R. Sharp, Gender-responsive budgeting. In M. Sawyer, L. A. Banaszak, J. True, & J. Kantola (Eds.), *Handbook of feminist governance* (2023, pp. 138–149). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800374812.00018>, although Costa and Sharp also draw attention to limitations in the way it has been implemented, both by specific governments and in terms of the neglect of key macroeconomic policy issues (pp. 146–147).

<sup>28</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, Treasury, *Women's Budget Statement: October 2022–23*, p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> See R. Sharp, M. Costa, & S. Austen, Each budget used to have a gender impact statement. We need it back. *The Conversation*, 30 September 2020. <https://theconversation.com/each-budget-used-to-have-a-gender-impact-statement-we-need-it-back-144849>. Accessed 28 April 2023. Australia's role in introducing gender responsive budgeting was belatedly acknowledged in J. Chalmers & K. Gallagher, *Women's Budget Statement: 2023–24*. Commonwealth of Australia, 9 May 2023, p. 5. [https://budget.gov.au/content/womens-statement/download/womens\\_budget\\_statement\\_2023-24.pdf](https://budget.gov.au/content/womens-statement/download/womens_budget_statement_2023-24.pdf). Accessed 10 April 2024.

<sup>30</sup> M. Payne, A. Ruston, & J. Hume, *Women's Budget Statement: 2021–22*. Commonwealth of Australia, 11 May 2021. [https://archive.budget.gov.au/2021-22/womens-statement/download/womens\\_budget\\_statement\\_2021-22.pdf](https://archive.budget.gov.au/2021-22/womens-statement/download/womens_budget_statement_2021-22.pdf). Accessed 10 March 2023; National Foundation of Australian Women (NFAW), *Budget 2021–22: Net Impact on Women*. NFAW, May 2021 <https://nfaw.org/storage/2021/05/Overview-2021.pdf>. Accessed 10 March 2023.

As we shall see, Australia was also innovative in other ways. For example, Carmen Lawrence, the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women, boasted to the UN Fourth World Conference of Women in 1995 that Australia was “the first country in the world to develop national strategy on women and the new information technologies”.<sup>31</sup> UN reports suggest that gender disparities in regard to women and technology still need to be addressed.<sup>32</sup> The Australian government had been particularly alert to the opportunities offered by information technology, and the new markets it offered, because the government saw it as a way to overcome what is commonly referred to in Australia as “the tyranny of distance” resulting from Australia’s geographical location. It will be suggested in this book that Australia sometimes has particularly interesting insights to offer because of its location as a multi-cultural but predominantly western settler-colonial society located in, and largely economically dependent upon, the Asia-Pacific. Challenges that have resulted range from dealing with the effects of British/European colonialism on Indigenous women’s well-being to the effects of trade with China on women’s employment and the impact of heightened national security concerns in the region on discourses of masculinist protectionism. At the same time, being on the margins has arguably made Australian governments more open to varied perspectives and policy influences.

Unfortunately for feminists, Australia has not always been innovative in positive ways. Years before Tony Blair’s (1997–2007) “Third Way” or Gerhard Schroeder’s (1998–2005) “Neue Mitte”, the Australian Labor governments of 1983–1996 had attempted to meld neoliberal market economics with social democracy, albeit in an arguably more socially inclusive form than either Blair or Schroeder envisaged.<sup>33</sup> As will be

<sup>31</sup> C. Lawrence, Presentation of Australia’s national commitments to women, Speech. Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 6 September 1995. <https://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/conf/gov/950906225912.txt>. Accessed 28 April 2023.

<sup>32</sup> J. Wajcman, E. Young, & A. Fitzmaurice, Discussion Paper No. 36: The Digital Revolution: Implications for gender equality and women’s rights 25 years after Beijing. UN Women, August 2020, p. 11. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/The-digital-revolution-Implications-for-gender-equality-and-womens-rights-25-years-after-Beijing-cn.pdf>. Accessed 22 February 2023.

<sup>33</sup> C. Johnson & F. Tonkiss, The third influence: The Blair government and Australian labor. *Policy and Politics*, 30(1), 2002, pp. 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.1332/0305573022501539>.

argued in Chapter 3, while this period saw some major advances for women, including facilitating greater economic participation via affirmative action legislation, neoliberal-influenced government budget cuts to benefits and services and neoliberal-influenced industrial relations policies also had particular costs for women. Indeed, this book argues that neoliberal ideology has played a key role in constraining gender equality policy over many decades.

However, before proceeding to discuss the politics of gender equality policy in more depth, it is necessary to discuss what is meant by gender equality.

### WHAT IS GENDER EQUALITY?

As an OECD report points out, the pursuit of gender equality is “an uphill battle” despite significant progress having been made.<sup>34</sup> After all, not only is gender inequality long-standing historically and pervasive throughout society but even sympathetic governments and political parties often rank it as a low priority compared with other policy and electoral concerns.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, as we shall see later in this book, gender equality policy has faced considerable opposition from socially conservative forces. Such opposition remains internationally, with a more recent development being populist mobilisations against so-called gender ideology.<sup>36</sup> While Australia has not yet seen the major influence of so-called anti-gender ideology prevalent in European countries, ranging from

<sup>34</sup> OECD, *The pursuit of gender equality: An Uphill battle*. OECD Publishing, 2017, pp. 17–18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264281318-en>.

<sup>35</sup> M. Verloo, How to study varieties of opposition to gender+ equality in Europe?: Lessons from this book, conceptual building blocks, and puzzles to address. In M. Verloo (Ed.), *Varieties of opposition to gender equality in Europe* (2018, p. 222). Routledge.

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g., M. Verloo, Introduction: Dynamics of opposition to gender+ equality in Europe. In M. Verloo (Ed.), *Varieties of opposition to gender equality in Europe* (2018, pp. 3–18). Routledge; D. Paternotte & R. Kuhar, The anti-gender movement in comparative perspective. In R. Kuhar & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilising against equality* (2017, pp. 253–276). Rowman & Littlefield; J. Kantola & E. Lombardo, Strategies of right populists in opposing gender equality in a polarised European Parliament. *International Political Science Review*, 42(5), 2021, p. 566. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512120963953>.

Hungary to Italy, and in the US, the issue is being increasingly raised by socially conservative Australian politicians.<sup>37</sup>

*Gender* can be understood in a variety of ways, including by feminists.<sup>38</sup> In Australian political discourse, the phrase “gender equality” is usually understood as shorthand for equality between men and women and that is the sense in which it is primarily used in this book. However, as we shall see, the issue of how “men” and “women” are defined can itself be contentious. Transgender and non-binary Australians can face significant discrimination and inequality because of their minority gender identities. The *equality* aspect of gender equality can also be conceived in various (albeit often interrelated) ways and can take material and institutional as well as cultural and social symbolic forms.<sup>39</sup> For example, it can be conceived as *equality of outcomes* or *equality of opportunity* or a mixture of both. Equality can be conceived as providing *formal equality* (constitutional, legislative, rules-based) or as *encouraging capability*. Equality can be conceived as giving women the *same rights* as men or as transforming or displacing *citizen norms* to go beyond traditional masculine biases, either by adding norms that are more relevant to women or by aiming to go beyond gender binaries altogether.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Although some opponents of so-called gender ideology, ranging from Georgia Meloni to former Prime Minister Scott Morrison, claim that they support both gender equality and the traditional family. See G. Meloni, L'intervista di Giorgia Meloni al Washington Post, Interview, 14 September 2022. <https://www.giorgiameloni.it/2022/09/14/lintervista-di-giorgia-meloni-al-washington-post/>. Accessed 28 April 2023; G. Meloni, L'8, il 9 e il 10 maggio FdI in piazza per difendere la famiglia tradizionale e contrastare l'ideologia di gender, News, 7 May 2015. <https://www.giorgiameloni.it/2015/05/07/18-il-9-e-il-10-maggio-fdi-in-piazza-per-difendere-la-famiglia-tradizionale-e-contrastare-lideologia-di-gender/>. Accessed 28 April 2023; see also Chapters 6–8.

<sup>38</sup> J. Kantola & E. Lombardo, *Gender and political analysis*. Palgrave, 2017; R. Alsop, A. Fitzsimmons, & K. Lennon, *Theorizing gender*. Polity, 2002; J. W. Messerschmidt, P. Y. Martin, M. A. Messner, & R. Connell (Eds.), *Gender Reckonings: New social theory and research*. New York University Press, 2018.

<sup>39</sup> For a useful and detailed survey of key debates see J. Squires, Equality and universalism. In G. Waylen, K. Celis, J. Kantola, & S. L. Weldon (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of gender and politics* (2013, pp. 731–755). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199751457.013.0029>.

<sup>40</sup> See further, M. Verloo & E. Lombardo, Contested gender equality and policy variety in Europe: Introducing a critical frame analysis approach. In M. Verloo (Ed.), *Multiple meanings of gender equality: A critical frame analysis of gender* (2007, pp. 22–24). CEU Press; G. Whitehouse, & M. Smith, Equal pay for work of equal value, wage-setting and

It can involve *recognition* of women's identity and/or *redistribution* of resources. Equality can be conceived in *individual terms* or in terms of *women as a socially disadvantaged group*. (Disadvantaged group conceptions of equality are frequently tied to social democratic conceptions, although some social/welfare liberals also emphasise conceptions of social disadvantage.)<sup>41</sup> Equality can be understood in ways that are relatively blind to the specific issues that different groups of women face, or can be sensitive to issues of *intersectionality* in terms of how gender inequality interacts with, and is compounded by, issues such as class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and non-binary identity.<sup>42</sup>

There is also the related issue of how to *measure and assess* issues of gender equality.<sup>43</sup> It will be argued in this book that many concepts of equality that have been derived originally from class issues often throw only a partial light on gender inequality. Such concepts can be particularly useful for drawing attention to differences that can be quantitatively measured, for example income inequality—an original class issue. Quantitative measurement can also be extended to other aspects, ranging from gender disparities in full-time employment or hours devoted to domestic labour to percentages of women in parliament or political leadership. Class-derived conceptions can also throw light on issues of formal equality. Just as property qualifications in many countries once prevented working-class men from voting, so one can analyse when women won the vote. Conceptions of formal equality can also be extended to other issues, for example, whether regulations required women to resign from employment, such as full-time public service or teaching jobs, when they married.

the gender pay gap. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 62(4), 2020, p. 522. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185620943626>.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., S. Walby, *Globalization and inequalities: Complexity and contested modernities*. SAGE, 2009, p. 6; M. Sawyer, *The ethical state? Social liberalism in Australia*. Melbourne University Press, 2003, pp. 103–121.

<sup>42</sup> Squires, Equality and Universalism, pp. 746–748; P. Hill Collins & V. Chepp, Intersectionality. In G. Waylen, K. Celis, J. Kantola, & S. Laurel Weldon (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of gender and politics* (2013, pp. 57–87). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199751457.013.0002>.

<sup>43</sup> For a more quantitative economic approach see, e.g., P. Profesta, *Gender equality and public policy: Measuring progress in Europe*. Cambridge University Press, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108525886>.

However, such concepts of equality can be less useful for analysing a range of more qualitative issues. For example, nuanced issues such as how politicians perform their gender or encourage conventional forms of masculine and feminine self-esteem are harder to analyse using traditional quantitative concepts of equality. Quantitative forms of equality can also have unintended cultural gender biases implicit in them, for example is women's equality being measured against a male norm?

Recently, it has become fashionable to contrast the concepts of equality and equity. For example, 2023 International Women's Day in Australia had a "#EmbraceEquity campaign theme" that "seeks to get the world talking about why '*equal opportunities are no longer enough*' - and can in fact be *exclusionary*, rather than *inclusive*".<sup>44</sup> Those making the distinction between equality and equity argue that:

*Equality* means each individual or group of people is given the same resources or opportunities.

*Equity* recognizes that each person has different circumstances, and allocates the exact resources and opportunities needed to reach an equal outcome.<sup>45</sup>

The Australian Human Rights Commission has made some similar arguments.<sup>46</sup> However, it will be argued here that the concepts of equality and equity are not regularly used in such distinctive ways in Australian policy and political discourse. The concept of equality has not necessarily meant treating people the same and has often incorporated broader conceptions of equality of opportunity and/or outcomes.

For example, the Albanese government's "National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality Discussion Paper" explicitly stated that preventing inequality involved recognising differing experiences and needs:

<sup>44</sup> International Women's Day (IWD), Equality versus Equity: What's the difference as we #EmbraceEquity for IWD 2023 and beyond? IWD, 24 January 2023. <https://www.internationalwomensday.com/Missions/18707/Equality-versus-Equity-What-s-the-difference-as-we-EmbraceEquity-for-IWD-2023-and-beyond#:~:text=Defining%20equality%20and%20equity&text=Equality%20means%20each%20individual%20or,to%20reach%20an%20equal%20outcome>. Accessed 15 March 2022.

<sup>45</sup> IWD, Equality versus Equity.

<sup>46</sup> Australian Government, Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), Let's talk about equality and equity. AHRC. <https://humanrights.gov.au/lets-talk-about-equality-and-equity>. Accessed 28 April 2023.



Gender inequality means people are not treated fairly because of their gender. Sometimes gender inequality happens because of gender and other things. For example, a person's:

- race
- religion
- sexuality
- disability
- age
- education.<sup>47</sup>

Prime Minister Albanese's speeches state his support for both gender equality and equity and often use the terms interchangeably.<sup>48</sup> The analysis in this book will identify the forms of gender equality (including equity policies) being pursued by specific governments. It will address which forms of gender equality are likely to result in the best outcomes and raise issues regarding the limitations of particular gender equality agendas.

## GENDERED POLICY AREAS AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Having discussed various forms that gender equality can take, it is now time to discuss the range of policy areas that gender equality needs to address. For example, the European Union 2020–2025 gender equality strategy aims to address the following policy areas in its attempt to achieve “a gender-equal Europe”:

<sup>47</sup> Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), National strategy to achieve gender equality: Discussion paper summary. Commonwealth of Australia, March 2023, p. 5. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/nat-strategy-gender-equality-discussion-paper-easyread.pdf>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>48</sup> A. Albanese, CEDA: State of the Nation Conference, Parliament House, Canberra, Speech, 8 September 2022. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/ceda-state-nation-conference-parliament-house-canberra>. Accessed 12 April 2024; A. Albanese, UN Women Australia International Women's Day Parliamentary Breakfast, Parliament House, Canberra, Speech, 8 February 2023. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/un-women-australia-international-women-day-parliamentary-breakfast>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

The goal is a Union where women and men, girls and boys, in all their diversity, are free to pursue their chosen path in life, have equal opportunities to thrive, and can equally participate in and lead our European society.

The key objectives are ending gender-based violence; challenging gender stereotypes; closing gender gaps in the labour market; achieving equal participation across different sectors of the economy; addressing the gender pay and pension gaps; closing the gender care gap and achieving gender balance in decision-making and in politics.<sup>49</sup>

In addition, the strategy refers to the need to use intersectionality “as a cross-cutting principle” in identifying policy area goals.<sup>50</sup>

All of these European policy areas are ones that would be familiar to Australian feminist policy-makers since at least the 1970s. Although the exact term would not have been used, even the reference to intersectionality would not have seemed totally alien given the 1970s Whitlam government’s attempts to address the specific issues faced by working-class, Indigenous women and women from non-English-speaking backgrounds, as well as its raising of women and international development issues at United Nations level.<sup>51</sup> More recently, the Albanese government pledged to consult with a long list of groups while developing its national gender equality strategy, including:

- First Nations people
- people with lived experience of gender inequality

<sup>49</sup> European Commission, Gender Equality Strategy: Achievements and key areas for action. European Commission. [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-equality-strategy_en). Accessed 28 April 2023.

<sup>50</sup> European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025. European Commission, 5 March 2020, p. 2. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0152&from=EN>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>51</sup> These are discussed in more depth in Chapter 2 but see, e.g., G. Whitlam, Speech to the opening of the Women and Politics Conference, Canberra, 31 August 1975. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00003874.pdf>. Accessed 4 May 2018; E. G. Whitlam, World Conference of International Women’s Year: Statement by the Leader of the Australian Delegation Ms Elizabeth Reid at Mexico City on Friday 20 June 1975, Media Release, 24 June 1974, pp. 4–5. [https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00003796\\_0.pdf](https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00003796_0.pdf). Accessed 12 April 2024.

- people living with disability
- people who are LGBTIQ+
- culturally and linguistically diverse people
- migrant and refugee women
- people living in regional and remote areas
- older people
- younger people
- people from all backgrounds.<sup>52</sup>

All of these intersectional issues will be addressed in this book. However, it will be argued that issues of sexuality and gender equality have been particularly closely entwined in the politics of gender equality. As Verloo points out, “opposition to gender equality has strong heteronormative components”.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, there is a complicated interrelationship here in which masculine and feminine gender stereotypes and performances are based around and reinforce heterosexual norms, while heterosexual norms also reinforce conventional conceptions of masculinity and femininity. An opposition to same-sex relationships or transgender identity can therefore be used to signal support for traditional gender roles in contexts where it might not be politically strategic to express such support explicitly. In other words, it is not just the case that same-sex and transgender issues are themselves gender equality issues in terms of discrimination against minorities who are seen to be not performing their gender correctly. It is also the case that politicians’ rejection and critique of such identities can be used as a sign of support for those more traditional gender identities that are being transgressed by LGBTIQ+ citizens.<sup>54</sup> Issues of sexuality therefore intersect with issues of gender equality in numerous ways although they should not be reduced to it, rather the relationship is reciprocal. Issues of transgender identity and gender equality can be particularly contentious with many feminists being very

<sup>52</sup> Australian Government, Office for Women (OFW), Working for Women: A strategy for gender equality. Commonwealth of Australia, 2024, pp. 8, 26, 87. <https://genderequality.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-03/working-for-women-a-strategy-for-gender-equality.pdf>. Accessed 28 April 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Verloo, How to study varieties of opposition to gender+ equality in Europe?, p. 224.

<sup>54</sup> C. Johnson, Fixing the meaning of marriage: Political symbolism and citizen identity in the same-sex marriage debate, *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 27(2), 2013, pp. 242–253. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2013.766308>.

supportive of transgender rights as a gender equality issue but with some others arguing that transgender rights can impinge on women's rights.<sup>55</sup> As already mentioned, while these latter issues have not played quite such a prominent role in Australia as in some other countries, they have had a role to play in Australian political campaigns and will be discussed in later chapters in this book.

As the earlier references to gender responsive budgeting make clear, all aspects of government policy, not just those labelled as gender equality initiatives, have the potential to impact differently on men and women given their different positions in Australian society and the economy. For example, as we shall see in Chapters 5 and 6, government economic stimulus measures have sometimes supported industries with high levels of male employment while neglecting industries with high levels of female employment. Since women are often considered most responsible for family caring responsibilities, general policies cutting back the public sector can result in women having to undertake extra duties in order to make up for public services that have been reduced.

The analysis in this book will therefore touch on a broad range of policy areas, including the implications for diverse groups of women. However, there is one major proviso. This book focuses on analysing government policy-making at the level of politicians. It does not analyse how effectively those policies are then conceived and implemented by relevant public servants.<sup>56</sup> Nor does it provide in-depth analyses of the feminist governance structures that have been introduced within the

<sup>55</sup> C. A. MacKinnon, F. Mackay, M. Shuman, S. Fredman, & R. Chang, Exploring transgender law and politics. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. <https://signsjournal.org/exploring-transgender-law-and-politics/>. Accessed 5 June 2023; S. Hines, The feminist frontier: On trans and feminism. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28(2), 2019, pp. 145–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2017.1411791>; B. Winter, Transgender Body Politics launch speech by Bronwyn Winter, 30 October 2020. <https://www.spinifexpress.com.au/blog/transgender-body-politics-launch-speech-by-bronwyn-winter>. Accessed 12 April 2024; Equality Australia, New research shows overwhelming support among Australians on trans equality, 18 January 2021. <https://equalityaustralia.org.au/overwhelming-support-on-trans-equality/>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>56</sup> See, e.g., P. Ahrens, Indirect Opposition: Diffuse barriers to gender+ equality in the European Union. In M. Verloo (Ed.), *Varieties of opposition to gender equality in Europe* (2018, pp. 77–97). Routledge; R. Cavaghan, *Making gender equality happen: Knowledge, change and resistance in EU gender mainstreaming*. Routledge, 2017.

public service as part of those policy processes.<sup>57</sup> Unfortunately, such issues are beyond the scope of this current study given its focus on the politics of gender inequality in regard to the discourse, image, actions and policies of government politicians (rather than issues of public administration) and that this book is already addressing a wide range of gender equality issues across a long historical period. However, this book will cite relevant secondary literature and will analyse when politicians make key changes to bureaucratic advice structures, for example, transferring the Office for Women to different departments or cutting or abolishing women's advisory functions within the bureaucracy. Unfortunately, this means that it was not possible to document the, sometimes courageous, attempts by key public servants to defend and extend gender equality policy, although the efforts of some are briefly alluded to. Similarly, problems of word length and scope have resulted in a focus on the federal level of Australian politics and have prevented the analysis of the development of gender equality policies at a state level.

In other words, this book does not claim to analyse the complete picture of the politics of gender equality policy and issues in Australia but it does aim to analyse key aspects of them in regard to the role of federal politicians in elected governments.

## THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

In order to analyse the politics of gender equality, this book will draw on a long tradition of feminist political science research that highlights the gendered nature of the state and of related citizenship identities, rights and entitlements.<sup>58</sup> It will also draw on more specific feminist insights, especially the use of feminist discursive framing analysis to analyse policy.

<sup>57</sup> See M. Sawer, L. A. Banaszak, J. True, & J. Kantola, Introduction to the handbook of feminist governance. In M. Sawer, L. A. Banaszak, J. True, & J. Kantola (Eds.), *Handbook of feminist governance* (2023, pp. 1–13). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800374812.00005>.

<sup>58</sup> See, e.g., L. Chappell, The state and governance. In G. Waylen, K. Celis, J. Kantola, & S. L. Weldon (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of gender and politics* (2013, pp. 603–626). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199751457.013.0024>; M. Sawer, Feminist political science. In D. Berg-Schlosser, B. Badie, & L. Morlino (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of political science* (vol. 1, 2020, pp. 96–113). Sage; J. Kantola & E. Lombardo, *Gender and political analysis*. Palgrave, 2017.

Feminist research in political studies and political theory has long drawn attention to the gendered nature of citizenship, pointing out that traditional western political thought and practice constructed the citizen as a (propertied) male head of household, although this later extended to include male wage-earner heads of household.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the western citizen was also constructed not just as male but also as white and, at least predominantly, as heterosexual.<sup>60</sup> Feminists soon pointed out that such traditional constructions had not only influenced traditional liberal thought but also a broad range of practical policy outcomes, including the very nature of the welfare state.<sup>61</sup> Women tended to be constructed in much social policy as the dependants, wives and daughters of male income earners and consequently received benefits largely at second hand, albeit with some exceptions for women who were single or widowed. Yet, modern liberalism tended to depict itself as gender-neutral, while also still reproducing gendered dualisms (for example identifying self-interest with a strong masculinity and selflessness with a weak femininity).<sup>62</sup> The citizen was constructed as an “autonomous” abstract individual—a “fantastic” figure given that the (male) individual was actually dependent upon the domestic support of women.<sup>63</sup> In other words, the concept of the citizen was still being constructed not just around males but around a

<sup>59</sup> Susan Moller Okin, *Women in Western political thought*. Princeton University Press, 1979, p. 202. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt24hq74>; D. Coole, *Women in political theory: From ancient misogyny to contemporary Feminism*. Wheatsheaf Books, 1988; C. Pateman, *The sexual contract*. Basil Blackwell, 1988; M. Stacey & M. Price, *Women, politics and power*. Tavistock, 1981.

<sup>60</sup> It is acknowledged that western categories need to be used with caution in other contexts, see C. Johnson & V. Mackie, Sexual citizenship in a comparative perspective. In N. A. Naples (Ed.), *Companion to sexuality studies* (2020, 337–356). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119315049.ch18>; C. Johnson, Sexual citizenship in a comparative perspective: Dilemmas and insights. *Sexualities*, 20(1–2), 2017, pp. 159–175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460716645787>.

<sup>61</sup> E. Wilson, *Women and the welfare state*. Tavistock, 1977; C. Pateman, *Democratization and citizenship in the 1990s: The Legacy of T.H. Marshall, Vilhelm Aubert Memorial Lecture 1996*. Institute for Social Research and Department of Sociology, University of Oslo, 1996.

<sup>62</sup> W. Brown, *States of injury: Power and freedom in late modernity*. Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 142, 152–161. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzgb898>.

<sup>63</sup> Brown, *States of injury*, p. 158.

male norm.<sup>64</sup> The existence of “male biases and norms” has been represented by feminists as “the main problem with policy-making” that is uninformed by feminist strategies and analyses.<sup>65</sup> Given this history of how citizenship was constructed, it is also no wonder that women remain underrepresented in politics globally.<sup>66</sup>

Nonetheless, as Louise Chappell has indicated, Australian feminist work has had a nuanced view of the nature of the state due to the long history of feminist engagement mentioned previously. For example, Australian feminists have tended to see the state as neither irredeemably patriarchal, unlike in some radical feminist views, nor gender-neutral, as in some liberal feminist views.<sup>67</sup> This book concurs with that approach, seeing the state as a site of gendered contest where it is possible to win important policy reforms, despite the hurdles in place. Those hurdles include the influence of gendered political institutions both formal and informal and gendered codes and rules, indeed, Chappell herself has made important contributions to the comparative study of gendered political institutions.<sup>68</sup> Specific characteristics of Australian political institutions that may influence some outcomes, such as its form of federalism or the lack of a bill or charter of human rights, will also be taken into account, although previous work by the author has emphasised the significant role

<sup>64</sup> A. Phillips, *Engendering democracy*. Polity Press, 1991, p. 149.

<sup>65</sup> E. Lombardo, P. Meier, & M. Verloo, Policy making. In G. Waylen, K. Celis, J. Kantola, & S. L. Weldon (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of gender and politics* (2013, p. 691). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199751457.013.0027>.

<sup>66</sup> See, e.g., P. Paxton, M. M. Hughes, & T. D. Barnes, Introduction to women in politics. In P. Paxton, M. M. Hughes, & T. D. Barnes (Eds.), *Women, politics and power: A global perspective* (4th ed., 2021, pp. 1–27). Rowman & Littlefield.

<sup>67</sup> Chappell, The State and Governance, pp. 603–606, 616; see further Sawer, *Sisters in suits*; H. Eisenstein, *Inside agitators: Australian feminists and the state*. Temple University Press, 1996; S. Franzway, D. Court, & R. W. Connell, *Staking a claim: Feminism, bureaucracy and the state*. Allen & Unwin, 1989.

<sup>68</sup> Chappell, The state and governance, pp. 607–608; L. Chappell & G. Waylen, Gender and the hidden life of institutions. *Public Administration*, 91(3), 2013, pp. 599–615. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9299.2012.02104.x>.

that political will can still play.<sup>69</sup> So will the need for gender equality policies to address the impact of settler-colonialism on Indigenous women.<sup>70</sup> The gendered nature of the state has also been influenced by various political actors outside of parliament and the bureaucracy. For example, I have argued elsewhere that the trade union movement and social democratic parties historically reinforced the male breadwinner model that was formally implemented in Australian industrial relations policy and institutions.<sup>71</sup>

While building on existing feminist work, the analysis in this book has used the insights gained to assess the relevance and utility of particular feminist theories. It draws on “congruence analysis” approaches which assess whether case studies are congruent with particular theoretical approaches.<sup>72</sup> For example, some relevant feminist theory has been critical, or ambivalent, in its attitudes towards policies based on equality claims fearing that they reflect fixed rather than fluid gender categories; result in outcomes that are normalising (incorporating women into existing male-defined norms); or involve an undifferentiated category of “women” that can negate the specific needs of women from different social groups, for example class racial or ethnic ones.<sup>73</sup> Yet, I have previously argued (in the context of same-sex marriage) that while such theorising can provide useful insights, it can also overlook the challenges that equality claims can pose to normalising discourses and the positive

<sup>69</sup> See, e.g., L. Chappell, *Gendering government: Feminist engagement with the state in Australia and Canada*. UBC Press, 2002; C. Johnson & M. Tremblay, Comparing same-sex marriage in Australia and Canada: Institutions and political will. *Government and Opposition*, 53(1), 2018, pp. 131–158. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.36>.

<sup>70</sup> A. Moreton, *Talkin’ up to the White woman: Indigenous women and feminism* (20th anniversary ed.). University of Queensland Press, 2020.

<sup>71</sup> C. Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality: Australian social democracy in a changing world*. Springer, 2019, pp. 57–59. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6299-6>; C. Johnson, Does capitalism really need patriarchy? Some old issues reconsidered. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 19(3), 1996, pp. 193–202. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395\(96\)00013-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(96)00013-1).

<sup>72</sup> J. Blatter & M. Haverland, *Designing case studies: Explanatory approaches in small-N research*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, pp. 144–203. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137016669>.

<sup>73</sup> See, e.g., Brown, *States of injury*.



difference that equality-based policies can make to peoples' lives.<sup>74</sup> In the Australian case, feminist theorising suggesting the category 'woman' has been undifferentiated overlooks attempts to acknowledge the varying needs of women from different social groups from the Whitlam period on that have already been alluded to. Similarly, the analysis in this book counters arguments that contemporary feminist measures have neglected low-income women and issues of redistribution in support of a politics of recognition.<sup>75</sup> While that has sometimes been the case with Liberal-National Coalition governments, it has generally not been the case with Labor governments in Australia.

In order to analyse the gendered nature of policy further, the study will also make extensive use of a key tool, namely the analysis of gendered discursive policy framing.

## DISCURSIVE POLICY FRAMING

The policy "discourse" analysed in this book covers both bodies of thought (in, for example, texts, documents, statements, arguments, debates, analyses, associated images) and practices underpinned by particular forms of knowledge and expertise, for example economic orthodoxies.<sup>76</sup> It is now widely acknowledged that "ideas participate in the construction of the issues and problems that enter the policy agenda", including by legitimising or challenging existing policy agendas.<sup>77</sup> Discursive framing plays a crucial role in this. Ryan and Gamson describe a

<sup>74</sup> J. Butler, Is kinship always already heterosexual? *Differences*, 13(1), 2002, pp. 14–34. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-13-1-14>; C. Johnson, Fixing the meaning of marriage.

<sup>75</sup> N. Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis*. Verso, 2013, p. 4; see further N. Fraser, The end of progressive neoliberalism. *Dissent*, 2 January 2017. [https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/progressive-neoliberalism-reactionary-populism-nancy-fraser](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/progressive-neoliberalism-reactionary-populism-nancy-fraser). Accessed 15 April 2024; N. Fraser, *The old is dying and the new cannot be born: From progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and beyond*. Verso, 2019; C. Arruzza, T. Bhattacharye, & N. Fraser, *Feminism for the 99 per cent: A manifesto*. Verso, 2019.

<sup>76</sup> Although the term discourse has been used in a variety of ways, see, e.g., J. P. Gee & M. Handford (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis*. Taylor & Francis, 2013.

<sup>77</sup> See the account of existing arguments in D. Béland, Ideas, institutions, and policy change. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16(5), 2009, pp. 704–705. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760902983382>.

frame as “a thought organizer, highlighting certain events and facts as important and rendering others invisible”.<sup>78</sup> Consequently, as Fischer explains “a particular framing of an issue can bestow the appearance of problematic on some features of a discussion while others seem proper and fixed”.<sup>79</sup> In other words, policy frames influence how issues are conceived, which issues are seen as important or even noticed at all and which policy responses are considered to be the most appropriate responses to perceived policy problems. There can also be a form of discursive and institutional path dependency at work whereby thinking outside of existing discourse and policy programmes becomes too difficult.<sup>80</sup> This book argues that the historical development of policy framing can be particularly important, influencing both subsequent policy design and outcomes.

Given its subject matter, the approach here draws heavily on feminist analyses of gendered discursive policy framing. It recognises that gender equality is a contested, discursively constructed concept influenced by a broader politics.<sup>81</sup> As Lombardo, Meier and Verloo pointed out, it “does matter greatly what meaning is attached to the concept of gender equality”, especially given that: “Gender equality can ... lose part of its dynamic when it is fixed to a particular understanding”.<sup>82</sup> The concept of gender equality can be incorporated into other policy frames that shape it in non-beneficial ways. For example, the concept of gender equality can be “shrunk” to involve just formal legal equality or “bent” to focus on other

<sup>78</sup> C. Ryan & W. A. Gamson, The Art of reframing political debates. *Contexts*, 5(1), 2006, p. 13. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ctx.2006.5.1.13>.

<sup>79</sup> F. Fischer, *Reframing public policy: Discursive politics and deliberative practices*. Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 85.

<sup>80</sup> On path dependency see further, P. Pierson, Increasing returns, path dependence, and the study of politics. *The American Political Science Review*, 94(2), 2000, pp. 251–267. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2586011>; D. C. Grube, Sticky words? Towards a theory of rhetorical path dependency. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 51(3), 2016, pp. 530–545. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2016.1171824>.

<sup>81</sup> E. Lombardo & M. Forest, *The Europeanization of gender equality policies: A Discursive-Sociological approach*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 14.

<sup>82</sup> E. Lombardo, P. Meier, & M. Verloo, Stretching and bending gender equality: A discursive politics approach. In E. Lombardo, P. Meier, & M. Verloo (Eds.), *The discursive politics of gender equality: Stretching, bending and policy making* (2009, pp. 1, 3). Routledge.

desired outcomes such as economic growth.<sup>83</sup> Noting that policy frames influence policy design (and potentially outcomes) in regard to gender, Carol Bacchi argues for feminists “to open up the problem representations contained in policy proposals to critical analysis, teasing out the presuppositions which lodge there”.<sup>84</sup> Rosalind Cavaghan makes a similar call for the need to analyse meanings and perceptions.<sup>85</sup>

Even relatively mainstream commentators now recognise the important role of gendered policy frameworks. For example, a Committee for the Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) report notes the important role played by policy framing when it comes to issues of “minimising the motherhood penalty”:

Policy frameworks can entrench existing workplace, social and cultural norms. Reducing barriers to women working and enabling more even sharing of unpaid work will increase equality of opportunity, allowing women to continue in demanding jobs if they choose. Australia’s current policies around parental-leave entitlements, childcare and effective marginal tax rates contribute to the high rate of part-time work among women, exacerbating the motherhood penalty. Surveys support this finding, showing Australian women’s satisfaction with their employment opportunities declines following having children and continues showing a sharp decline four years into parenthood.<sup>86</sup>

Some further examples will help to explain the relevance of framing analysis and how it will be applied to the analysis in this book. One of the key questions to be asked here is: How are both gender inequality and gender equality being understood in specific framings and how do

<sup>83</sup> Lombardo, Meier, & Verloo, *Stretching and bending gender equality*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>84</sup> C. Bacchi, *Women, policy and politics: The construction of policy problems*. Sage, 1999, p. 207.

<sup>85</sup> R. Cavaghan, *Making gender equality happen: Knowledge, change and resistance in EU gender mainstreaming* (2017, pp. 63–64). Routledge.

<sup>86</sup> S. Tofts-Len & A. Barker, *Occupational gender segregation 2023*, Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA), Melbourne, 2023, p. 12. [https://cedakenticomedia.blob.core.windows.net/cedamediacontainer/kentico/media/attachments/occupational-gender-segregation-ceda\\_1.pdf](https://cedakenticomedia.blob.core.windows.net/cedamediacontainer/kentico/media/attachments/occupational-gender-segregation-ceda_1.pdf). Accessed 1 May 2023; CEDA is a long established, independent body founded in 1960 ‘whose members are leading economists, researchers and policy experts’. Tofts-Len & Barker, *Occupational gender segregation 2023*, p. 3; CEDA, *Our Story*. CEDA, 2022. <https://www.ceda.com.au/About/Our-Story>. Accessed 1 May 2023.

those relate to different concepts of equality that have already been noted? For example, have policies framed through a pre-existing male norm resulted in women's gendered caring responsibilities not being adequately factored into both broader economic policies and those specifically designed to address gender inequality? If policies that were originally framed around conceptions of the male wage-earner head of household are simply extended to women, has that resulted in relations of financial interdependency/support being assumed in government policy, rather than individuals being assessed separately, with implications for means tested benefits? Is equality being framed in a way that involves a more radical transformation of society that goes well beyond existing gender role expectations, so that government benefits and workplace industrial relations regulations are redesigned, for example, to encourage equal caring roles by both men and women? How is gender equality being framed in terms of those with non-binary or LGBTIQ+ identities?

Overall, particular attention will be paid to whether measures were adequately taking into account the general social and economic situation of women, for example in regard to women's caring role, a gender differentiated labour market, the influence of constructions of masculinity and femininity—or whether the measures were influenced by existing party frameworks on economic and social issues that did not adequately allow for addressing the problems and forms of inequality faced by women. For example, Annesley has analysed how varied and shifting framings of the “male breadwinner model” and the “adult worker model” in Britain influenced New Labour welfare state policies, as women were increasingly expected to be economically self-reliant.<sup>87</sup> However, she has also noted that there can be problems when such framing does not allow adequately for women's caring responsibilities or disadvantaged position in the labour market. Claire Annesley's insights are potentially relevant to a number of policy positions in Australia including Gillard-era policies that cut single parents' benefits to around 80,000 recipients (mainly women) after their youngest child turned eight on the grounds that this would encourage women to take up employment but did not sufficiently take into account the effect of the loss of earnings or whether sufficient, adequately paid jobs with flexible family-friendly arrangements were available. As we shall

<sup>87</sup> C. Annesley, Gender, politics and policy change: The case of welfare reform under New Labour. *Government and Opposition*, 45(1), 2010, pp. 50–72. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-7053.2009.01304.x>.

see in Chapter 7, this policy deficiency has only been partially addressed by the Albanese government.

## IDEOLOGICAL INFLUENCES ON DISCURSIVE POLICY FRAMING

The focus on individual economic self-reliance reflects the ongoing influence of neoliberal ideological frameworks on policy discourse. The term “ideology” is used in this book to refer to a broad, umbrella-like framework of belief and meaning—a political “world view”—consisting of concepts, ideas and images. The term ideology is not used here to connote a negative meaning of “false consciousness” but can include concepts that one agrees with as well as disagrees with. Within the confines of the broad framework, considerable contradiction and variety are possible. For example, versions of liberal ideology may share common features in terms of emphasising the rights of the individual and the right to own private property but can take a range of forms when it comes to views regarding the preferred size and role of the state and its exact relationship with the private sector.<sup>88</sup> Ideology and policy discourse intersect. We will see in the next chapter that social democratic and social liberal ideological perspectives, which believe the provision of government services have a crucial role to play in improving citizens’ quality of life, played a key role in policy discourse supporting feminist-influenced services from rape crisis and women’s health services to better childcare. However, from the late twentieth-century, policy discourse around gender equality tended to be impacted by neoliberal ideological perspectives which privileged market-oriented objectives. These neoliberal perspectives influenced western countries, for example Sweden, Britain and the US, as well as international development programmes.<sup>89</sup> However, it will be

<sup>88</sup> For the author’s more extended case for using both the terms ideology and discourse, and their relevance for Australian politics, see C. Johnson, *Governing change: From Keating to Howard* (2nd ed.). Network Books, 2007, pp. 13–22; on broader debates see M. Freedon & M. Stears (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political ideologies*. Oxford University Press, 2013; A. Vincent, *Modern political ideologies* (3rd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

<sup>89</sup> M. Rönnblom, Bending towards growth: Discursive constructions of gender equality in an era of governance and neoliberalism. In E. Lombardo, P. Meier, & M. Verloo (Eds.), *The discursive politics of gender equality: Stretching, bending and policy making* (2009, p. 109). Routledge; S. Childs & P. Webb, *Sex, Gender and the Conservative Party*:

argued here that what Sophie Jacquot has described in the European Union context as “the articulation between the market norm and the equality norm” followed a somewhat different trajectory in Australia.<sup>90</sup>

Neoliberalism has long been criticised by feminist economists for resulting in unequal gender outcomes.<sup>91</sup> In the case of Australia, neoliberal policy frameworks saw governments privileging free markets and economic deregulation over economic intervention while promoting individual capability, self-reliance and choice over government support or conceptions of structural gender inequality.<sup>92</sup> As Marian Sawer et al. have pointed out, neoliberalism not only moved away from the social liberal idea that the state had a major role to play in increasing social justice, thereby lowering expectations of government, but questioned the very idea of social justice itself.<sup>93</sup> Although the extent differed, neoliberal frameworks influenced both centre-left Labor and centre-right

*From Iron Lady to Kitten Heels*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 117. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230354227>; Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*, pp. 209–223; K. Wilson, Towards a radical re-appropriation: Gender, development and neoliberal feminism. *Development and Change*, 46(4), 2015, pp. 803–832. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12176>.

<sup>90</sup> S. Jacquot, *Transformations in EU gender equality: From emergence to dismantling*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 176. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137436573>; see further P. Ahrens, *Actors, institutions, and the making of EU gender equality programs*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 237–252. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-57060-4>. For the articulation of market and gender equality norms in former communist countries in Europe, see, e.g., C. M. Hassenstab, Introduction: Never the “Right” time. In C. M. Hassenstab & S. P. Rammet (Eds.), *Gender (in)equality and gender politics in Southeastern Europe: A question of justice* (2015, pp. 3–16). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137449924\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137449924_1).

<sup>91</sup> M. Ferber & J. Nelson (Eds.), *Beyond economic man*. University of Chicago Press, 1993; A. Agenjo-Calderón & L. Gálvez-Muñoz, Feminist economics: Theoretical and political dimensions. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 78(1), 2019, pp. 137–166. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajes.12264>; R. Sharp & R. Broomhill, *Short-changed: Women and economic policies*. Allen & Unwin, 1989.

<sup>92</sup> M. Sawer, Australia: The fall of the femocrat. In J. Outshoorn & J. Kantola (Eds.), *Changing state feminism* (2007, p. 20). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230591424\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230591424_2). For an analysis of a neoliberal focus on facilitating individual capability, see K. Jayasuriya, *Statecraft, welfare and the politics of inclusion*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 36–56. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230503328>.

<sup>93</sup> Sawer, Banaszak, True and Kantola, Introduction to the Handbook of Feminist Governance, p. 3; C. Johnson, Gender research and discursive policy framing. In M. Sawer & K. Baker (Eds.), *Gender innovation in political science: New norms, new knowledge* (2019, pp. 195–218). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75850-3\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75850-3_10).

Coalition (Liberal/Country Party/National) government gender equality policy settings.<sup>94</sup> However, Liberal-National Coalition governments were more likely to downplay structural disadvantage and to believe that markets characterised by minimal government intervention were gender-neutral and would further gender equality. Meanwhile, the conventional economic framings involved in the “economisation” of gender equality contributed to the neglect of issues such as social reproduction, the everyday caring and domestic labour traditionally done predominantly by women, that reproduces the workforce and the population more broadly.<sup>95</sup>

### INFLUENCES OF POLITICIANS’ GENDER PERFORMANCE ON DISCURSIVE POLICY FRAMING

I have argued elsewhere that political leaders’ performance of gender identity is a key way in which leaders attempt to attract electoral support.<sup>96</sup> Australian leaders are no exception.<sup>97</sup> This book will argue that political leaders’ performance of gendered identities can also influence the framing of gender equality policy and vice versa. Support for, or opposition to, particular gender equality measures can be an integral part of a politicians’ image designed to gain them electoral support. For example, performances of traditional masculine identity can contribute

<sup>94</sup> E. Humphrys, *How Labour Built Neoliberalism: Australia’s accord, the labour movement and the Neoliberal project*. Brill, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004383463>; Johnson, *Governing change*, pp. 70–87; Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*, pp. 57–74.

<sup>95</sup> A. Elomäki, Economization of expert knowledge about gender equality in the European Union. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, 28(4), Winter 2021, pp. 1162–1184. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxaa005>.

<sup>96</sup> C. Johnson, Gender, emotion and political discourse: Masculinity, femininity and populism. In O. Feldman (Ed.), *The Rhetoric of political leadership: Logic and emotion in public discourse* (2020, pp. 16–33). Edward Elgar; C. Johnson, Feeling protected: Protective masculinity and femininity from Donald Trump and Joe Biden to Jacinda Ardern. *Emotions and Society*, 4(1), 2022, pp. 7–26. <https://doi.org/10.1332/263169021X16310949038420>.

<sup>97</sup> C. Johnson, The gendered identities of Australian political leaders: From Hawkie to ScoMo. In Z. Ghazarian & K. Lee-Koo (Eds.), *Gender politics: Navigating political leadership in Australia* (2021, pp. 11–23). New South Publishing; C. Johnson, From Obama to Abbott: Gender identity and the politics of emotion. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 28(75), 2013, pp. 14–29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2012.759311>.

to more traditional framings of gendered policies while performances of more progressive forms of masculinity can contribute to a greater focus on enhancing gender equality. In short, policies in regard to gender are very much part of how a politician attempts to frame their image. Furthermore, gendered leadership images can sometimes undermine the broader politics of gender equality by contributing to gender stereotypes. They can also undermine attempts to change parliamentary institutional culture to be more gender sensitive.<sup>98</sup>

Performances of “protective masculinity” have often played a particularly significant role in regard to gender policy. For example, on the socially conservative side of politics, Prime Minister John Howard (1996–2007) depicted himself as a grandfatherly figure protecting those adhering to more traditional gender roles. On the more progressive side of politics, Anthony Albanese (2022–?) depicted himself as a caring new age man protecting vulnerable women, including those working in the care economy. The gendered use of emotion can play a particularly significant role as politicians aim to make some sections of the population feel protected while encouraging anger or resentment towards others.<sup>99</sup> For example, Howard attempted to encourage “mainstream” Australians to feel resentment towards groups, including feminist organisations, which were claimed to be exploiting state largesse and dismissing stay-at-home Mums.

Meanwhile, societal expectations of women’s role also impact on how feminist policy framings are interpreted and (mis)framed by opponents as well as supporters. For example, Sawer notes that:

A good example of unsuccessful policy framing was the women’s movement demand in the 1970s for “free community-controlled 24-hour childcare”. Intended to exhibit sensitivity to the needs of low-paid shift workers who needed childcare outside normal business hours, this slogan instead contributed to perceptions that those involved in women’s liberation were unnatural and wanted to get rid of their children.<sup>100</sup>

<sup>98</sup> See S. Childs & S. Palmieri, Gender-sensitive parliaments: Feminising formal political institutions. In M. Sawer, L. A. Banaszak, J. True, & J. Kantola (Eds.), *Handbook of feminist governance* (2023, pp. 174–188). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781800374812.00021>.

<sup>99</sup> See further Johnson, From Obama to Abbott.

<sup>100</sup> Sawer, *Feminist political science*, p. 100.



In short, various forms of the politics of identity influence policy framing and will be taken into account in the analysis in this book.

## SOURCES USED

The bulk of the original research undertaken for this book has been primary source research related to the specific Labor and Coalition electoral strategies, government policy initiatives and legislation to be studied. Particular attention has been paid to the Liberal Party as the senior party in the Coalition and the party that has supplied Coalition government ministers for Women. Sources used included politicians' and parties' websites, Hansard, Parliamentary Papers (including budget papers), legislation and extra parliamentary statements which provide essential information regarding how specific policies and legislation on gender equality were framed and justified. Academic analyses, relevant Australian Bureau of Statistics figures, views of NGO and women's organisations, government reports and critiques by political opponents have also assisted in identifying potential oversights and weaknesses in how key policies were framed.

## STRUCTURE OF BOOK CHAPTERS

This book has a chronological structure, dealing with Australian governments in sequence, while also making some international comparisons. Chapter 2 analyses the Whitlam and Fraser governments of 1972–1983, focusing on “second-wave” feminisms' influence on the policy framework of a reforming Labor government but noting that a neoliberal framework was beginning to emerge during the period of its Coalition successor. Chapter 3 analyses the Hawke and Keating Labor governments of 1983–1996, focusing on the implications for women of the governments' innovative attempts to meld social democratic and neoliberal frameworks. Chapter 4 analyses the Howard governments of 1996–2007, focusing on the role of a more socially conservative and right-wing neoliberal policy framework in undoing many advances for women, including those supported by more moderate Liberals. Chapter 5 analyses the Rudd and Gillard governments of 2007–2013, focusing on the governments' attempts to undo key Howard government policies and improve gender equality as part of a more “fair go” framework that embraced elements of Keynesian economics in response to the Global Financial Crisis but also

still revealed some neoliberal influences and failed to adequately anticipate gendered opposition culture war strategies. Chapter 6 analyses the Abbott, Turnbull and Morrison Coalition governments of 2013–2022 and their policy framework that was more sympathetic to a neoliberal version of market-friendly gender equality than Howard’s government but still exhibited key forms of gender blindness that became increasingly evident during COVID-19 and could not deal adequately with parliamentary sexual harassment and rape scandals. Chapter 7 deals with the Albanese Labor government of 2022—as it sought to develop a less neoliberal policy framework that could also address key gender equality issues, including many left over from the Rudd and Gillard years.

Chapter 8, the Conclusion, briefly revisits the position of women in Australia today and makes international comparisons, including in the context of a global backlash against gender equality. It asks whether Australia, as a multicultural but predominantly western, settler-colonial society situated in the Asia-Pacific has some unique insights to offer. The chapter emphasises the importance of understanding the continuing influence of historical policy settings (e.g. path dependency) given that Australian governments, like others, have largely engaged with feminism via their pre-existing political and policy frameworks. Consequently, some long-standing gendered policy biases can remain and male politicians, in particular, are all too often performing traditional gender roles that help to undermine broader social and cultural change. The chapter concludes by imagining what a more feminist-centred political, economic, social and cultural agenda would look like as well as the future challenges, ranging from technological to geopolitical and geoeconomic change, that such an agenda would need to address.

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# Great Hopes: “Second-Wave” Feminism and the State, from Whitlam to Fraser (1972–1983)

## INTRODUCTION

As several commentators have pointed out, there was a fortuitous convergence between so-called second-wave feminism that reached Australia’s shores in the late 1960s and the election of a new Labor government in December 1972 after over two decades of conservative Coalition government.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Sara Dowse has suggested that “the convergence of the rise of ‘new wave’ feminism and the election of a social democratic government after so long a period of conservative rule is perhaps unique in contemporary western democracies”.<sup>2</sup> Or, as Marian Sawer has put it, “the stars aligned in southern skies”.<sup>3</sup> Feminism was just beginning to make its mark on mainstream politics internationally. 1972 was the same year that Olof Palme, the social democratic Prime Minister of Sweden,

<sup>1</sup> Women’s liberation proper reached Australia at the end of 1969, M. Sawer, *Sisters in suits: Women and public policy in Australia*. Allen & Unwin, 1990, p. xv. Though of course Australian women prior to that had read feminists’ works such as Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. Penguin, 1963. Australia was to make its own contribution to key feminist literature in terms of G. Greer, *The Female Eunuch*. MacGibbon and Kee, 1970, although Greer had moved to England from 1964.

<sup>2</sup> S. Dowse, The women’s movement’s fandango with the state: The movement’s role in public policy since 1972. In C. V. Baldock & B. Cass (Eds.), *Women, social welfare and the state in Australia* (2nd ed., 1988, pp. 207–208). Allen & Unwin.

<sup>3</sup> M. Sawer, Women and political influence: Introduction. In M. Arrow (Ed.), *Women and Whitlam: Revisiting the revolution* (2023, p. 3). NewSouth Publishing.

gave a pathbreaking speech supporting gender equality.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the UN was advocating greater women's equality, including proposing 1975, which would fall during Labor's period in government, as International Women's Year.<sup>5</sup> So, Australia was positioned to be amongst the countries at the forefront of international developments, especially given its determination to transform Australian society after decades of conservative government.

Whitlam's election speech had explicitly addressed the "men and women of Australia" promising a brighter future that included advances for women.<sup>6</sup> Prominent feminist Anne Summers, who was subsequently to become head of the Office of the Status of Women during the Hawke Labor government, has written of the excitement many feminists felt. The government's second act in office was to write to the Arbitration Commission (the independent regulatory body overseeing wages and conditions) seeking to reopen the equal pay wage case. It then moved within days to remove a 37.5% tariff on imported diaphragms and condoms and remove a 27.5% "luxury tax" on oral contraceptives as well as putting the pill on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme thereby further reducing its cost.<sup>7</sup> By April 1973, the Whitlam government had become the first in the world to appoint a dedicated women's advisor (Elizabeth Reid) to advise on women's policy.

The appointment was crucial given that, as Whitlam later acknowledged, women (along with racial minorities) had also been largely excluded from conventional forms of political power:

For most of this country's history women have lived without visible political power; they have been excluded from almost all levels of government in our society. The momentous decisions of war and peace, of finance and technology, as well as the everyday decisions which affect how all people

<sup>4</sup> C. Florin & B. Nilsson, "Something in the nature of a bloodless revolution..." How new gender relations became gender equality policy in Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s. In R. Torstendahl (Ed.), *State policy and gender system in the two German states and Sweden 1945–1989* (1999, pp. 14, 68 & 70). Bloms i Lund Tryckeri AB. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:59603/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Accessed 10 January 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Sawyer, *Women and political influence: Introduction*, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> E. G. Whitlam, 1972 election speech, Blacktown, NSW, 13 November 1972. <https://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/1972-gough-whitlam>. Accessed 8 February 2024.

<sup>7</sup> A. Summers, *The misogyny factor*. NewSouth Publishing, 2013, pp. 27–28.

live, have been made by a minority of individuals who happen to be born white and male. Women whether they be conservative, liberal or radical should be fully represented in the political power structure simply as a matter of right: not just because they are women, but because they are capable human beings with skills, abilities and creativity from whom the world has much to gain. We all of us live in this man-made, man-defined and man-controlled world.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, there were no Labor women members of parliament during Whitlam's first period of government, although three were elected in the 1974 election. Importantly, Whitlam was also to acknowledge that the women's movement was not just demanding greater political representation but also a transformative broadening of political thinking:

one of the most enlightening changes that has recently occurred is that women are insisting more and more that concerns of the home be the concerns of politics, that the personal be the political. Child care, family planning, housework and so on are now becoming issues for the political arena. To this extent women are in the process of trying to re-define and to re-describe, the political.<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, the deficiencies in women's political representation combined with the transformed political thinking had also left many members of the women's movement wary of engaging with the state.

## THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND THE STATE

The reservations amongst Australian feminists (many of whom would have preferred descriptions like women's liberationists at the time) regarding interactions with the state have been explored by a number of academic commentators.<sup>10</sup> However, it is noteworthy that a wide

<sup>8</sup> E. G. Whitlam, Speech by the Prime Minister the Hon E. G. Whitlam QC MP at the opening of the women and politics conference, speech, PM Transcripts, Canberra, 31 August 1975, p. 8. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00003874.pdf>. Accessed 4 May 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Whitlam, Speech at the opening of the women and politics conference.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Sawer, *Sisters in suits*; Eisenstein, H. *Inside agitators: Australian femocrats and the state*. Allen & Unwin, 1996; S. Franzway, D. Court, & R. W. Connell, *Staking a claim: Feminism, bureaucracy and the state*. Allen & Unwin, 1989.

range of Australian feminists in the community, including those who identified as liberal, socialist and even radical feminists, were prepared to engage with governments to some extent. As we shall see later in this chapter, the downsides of working within the state also troubled many femocrats as they chafed against the bureaucratic, political and budgetary constraints that they encountered. Whitlam's own women's advisor, Elizabeth Reid, remained unhappy with many of the compromises she'd needed to make.<sup>11</sup> The reservations were all the greater since the transformation of politics feminists advocated went well beyond the purview of the current state, challenging existing social structures and domestic life. Looking back on 1970s feminism, Elizabeth Reid noted that:

The solutions that we were discussing in those times were collectivist and communal; for example, medium density housing, shared facilities such as laundry, or shared services, such as childcare, cooking and cleaning. This is in sharp contrast to today's world where the policy response is increasingly individualised and personalised.

Although most contemporary Australian feminists were probably unaware of it, such approaches had a long history. For example, some nineteenth-century British socialist feminists who had advocated equality in domestic personal relationships had suggested collective solutions in their "utopian" communities, albeit often with limited success in challenging gendered divisions of labour.<sup>12</sup> However, such earlier feminist perspectives had been sidelined as issues of class struggle increasingly came to dominate issues of gender equality. As Barbara Taylor has explained:

The accelerating contest between capital and labour became the central axis on which all socialist struggles (non-Marxist as well as Marxist) turned, with every other struggle subordinated to that "world-historical" battle. The Owenite call for a multi-faceted offensive against all forms of social hierarchy, including sexual hierarchy, disappeared – to be replaced with a dogmatic insistence on the primacy of class-based issues, a demand for

<sup>11</sup> R. Joyce, Elizabeth Reid women's advisor to the Australian government. Women's History Network, 2 December 2017. <https://womenshistorynetwork.org/elizabeth-reid-womens-advisor-to-the-australian-government/>. Accessed 11 July 2023.

<sup>12</sup> B. Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*. Virago, 1983, pp. 238–260.

sexual unity in the face of a common class enemy, and a vague promise of improved status for women "after the revolution".<sup>13</sup>

I have argued elsewhere that socially conservative male trade unionists and social democrats played a key role in restricting women's employment (which had been widespread in early factory production in areas such as the cotton industry) and constructing the worker as a male wage-earning head of household.<sup>14</sup> As we shall see, class issues still often continued to trump gender ones. Some Labor politicians in Whitlam's government also still adhered to the belief that women needed to be "protected" from waged work. The issues twentieth-century Australian feminists were to encounter were therefore often very old ones.

Furthermore, even women's organisations that were often associated with mainstream liberal feminism, such as the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), put forward demands that can seem quite radical today.<sup>15</sup> As Marian Sawer points out, the six key WEL demands were "equal pay, equal employment opportunity (EEO), equal access to education, free contraceptive services, abortion on demand and free 24-hour child care".<sup>16</sup> Unlike in a few other countries, free contraception and free childcare are not available in Australia today, and 24 hour free childcare generally remains an ambitious demand.<sup>17</sup> The right to abortion, while

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem*, pp. xv–xvi.

<sup>14</sup> See C. Johnson, Does capitalism really need patriarchy? Some old issues reconsidered. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 19(3), 1996, pp. 193–202. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395\(96\)00013-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(96)00013-1); C. Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*. Springer, 2019, pp. 58–59. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6299-6>. Engels had noted the impact on male workers' masculinity of their replacement by female employees, see F. Engels, *The condition of the working class in England*. Panther, 1969 (First published in Great Britain 1892), pp. 169–173.

<sup>15</sup> WEL had come to prominence during the 1972 election campaign with a survey of politicians that had revealed the extraordinary ignorance of many of them regarding issues affecting women. M. Sawer (with G. Radford), *Making women count: A history of the women's electoral lobby*. UNSW Press, 2008, pp. 10–15.

<sup>16</sup> Sawer, *Sisters in suits*, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> See the concluding chapter for more information.



available with some medicalised restrictions in all Australian states and territories, is under threat internationally.<sup>18</sup>

## THE NEED FOR TRANSFORMING SOCIETY

Despite some political differences, all brands of 1970s feminists wanted to see major transformations in society. They had good reason to do so. After all, this was a society where sexist attitudes were widespread and working mothers, for example, were often criticised for neglecting their children. Susan Ryan (born 1942), who was elected to the Senate in 1975 and later became Hawke's Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women, has written eloquently about what life in Australia was like for women during the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>19</sup> Partial advances made in women's employment during the Second World War ended when the male troops returned home.<sup>20</sup> Women in the postwar period were expected to focus on being housewives and mothers in marriages that were meant to last for life, however unhappy. For much of this period, contraception was unavailable and abortion illegal. Most girls only received three years of secondary school education until they were 15 and were often discouraged from studying science or maths. Most went into low-paid factory or clerical jobs, although a few went into acceptable female professions such as teaching and nursing. Women only rarely made it into then male-dominated professions such as medicine or law.

In both the private and public sectors, women commonly lost their jobs once married. The marriage bar in the Australian Federal Public Service had remained until 1966, although women could return as temporary employees in junior typist positions considered unsuitable for men.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Healthdirect, Can I have an abortion in Australia?, Blog post. Healthdirect, 10 July 2023. <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/blog/can-i-have-an-abortion-in-australia>. Accessed 11 July 2023.

<sup>19</sup> S. Ryan, Women of Australia. In T. Bramston (Ed.), *The Whitlam legacy* (revised ed., 2015, pp. 206–215 & 207–208). Federation Press.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>21</sup> For a detailed account of the removal of the marriage bar in 1996 see M. Sawyer, The long, slow demise of the “marriage bar”. *Inside Story*, 8 December 2016. <https://insidestory.org.au/the-long-slow-demise-of-the-marriage-bar/>. Accessed 11 July 2023. The marriage bar in teaching had been removed in 1956. Victorian Women's Trust, Gender equity milestones. Victorian Women's Trust, 2023. <https://www.vwt.org.au/gender-equity-timeline-australia/>. Accessed 11 July 2023.

Some women managed to remain in part-time work but risked losing even that if they became pregnant. Few women received superannuation and usually lost it once marriage forced them to resign.<sup>22</sup> Equal pay for those who did work was still a dream with most women being paid 75% of the male rate, under long established industrial relations principles that had supported a male wage-earner head of household model (thereby also justifying lower female and higher male wages).<sup>23</sup> Women needed a male guarantor to get a home loan as well as personal loans.<sup>24</sup>

Other MPs were also well aware of the inequalities women faced. Senator Ruth Coleman complained that there were only 5 women members out of a total of 187 in the Senate and House of Representatives in 1974 and the *Parliamentary Handbook* still only referred to the entitlements of wives of members. Yet such matters were minor compared to other barriers women faced, especially the inability to obtain loans, including hire purchase or housing finance, without a male guarantor, while in Western Australia women could not be financial guarantors for children attending tertiary education.<sup>25</sup> Insurance companies routinely asked women questions regarding their husband’s employment.<sup>26</sup> Minister for Labour, Clyde Cameron, noted *Government Gazette*

<sup>22</sup> Ryan, *Women of Australia*, pp. 207–208.

<sup>23</sup> See G. Strachan, Still working for the man: Women’s employment experiences in Australia since 1950. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 45(1), 2010, pp. 120–121. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1839-4655.2010.tb00167.x>.

<sup>24</sup> Realestate.com.au, How to get a home loan when you’re single. Realestate.com.au, 6 March 2019. <https://www.realestate.com.au/home-loans/how-to-get-a-home-loan-when-youre-single>. Accessed 11 July 2023.

<sup>25</sup> R. Coleman, Governor-General’s speech address-in-reply, 11 July 1974. *Parliamentary Debates*, Australia, Senate (p. 86). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/hansard80/hansards80/1974-07-11/0057/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/hansard80/hansards80/1974-07-11/0057/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 19 August 2023.

<sup>26</sup> R. Coleman, Australian government insurance corporation bill 1975, 20 August 1975. *Parliamentary Debates*, Australia, Senate (p. 117). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansards80/1975-08-20/toc\\_pdf/19750820\\_senate\\_29\\_s65.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201975%2008%2020%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansards80/1975-08-20/toc_pdf/19750820_senate_29_s65.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201975%2008%2020%22). Accessed 13 July 2023.

job advertisements had regularly stated a preference for male candidates before Labor stopped it.<sup>27</sup>

Labor Senator Jean Melzer cited examples of a teacher discouraging a female student from proceeding to sixth year maths on the grounds that it would cruel her marriage prospects.<sup>28</sup> Melzer complained that some parents still thought that girls did not need an education because they would only work briefly as a clerk or typist before being married.<sup>29</sup> Senator Melzer cited examples of women trying to access a government employment scheme being questioned whether they should be trained in case they had more children (and of a woman being asked for the name of her gynaecologist to confirm that she had had a hysterectomy); of married female government officers applying for appointments overseas being asked how their husbands felt about going overseas when men were never asked equivalent questions.<sup>30</sup>

The next section will analyse some of the key ways in which the Labor government began to address such issues.

<sup>27</sup> C. Cameron, Discrimination in employment and occupation: Ministerial statement, 22 May 1973. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 2375). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansard80/1973-05-22/toc\\_pdf/19730522\\_reps\\_28\\_hor84.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201973%2005%2022%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansard80/1973-05-22/toc_pdf/19730522_reps_28_hor84.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201973%2005%2022%22). Accessed 12 July 2023.

<sup>28</sup> J. Melzer, Family law bill 1974, 30 October 1974. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (p. 2140). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansards80/1974-10-30/toc\\_pdf/19741030\\_senate\\_29\\_s62.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201974%2010%2030%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansards80/1974-10-30/toc_pdf/19741030_senate_29_s62.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201974%2010%2030%22). Accessed 12 July 2023.

<sup>29</sup> J. Melzer, Governor-General's speech address-in-reply, 10 July 1974. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (p. 37). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansards80/1974-07-10/toc\\_pdf/19740710\\_senate\\_29\\_s60.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201974%2007%2010%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansards80/1974-07-10/toc_pdf/19740710_senate_29_s60.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201974%2007%2010%22). Accessed 12 July 2023.

<sup>30</sup> J. Melzer, Appropriation bill (No. 5) 1974–75, 23 April 1975. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (pp. 1277–1278). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansards80/1975-04-23/toc\\_pdf/19750423\\_senate\\_29\\_s63.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201975%2004%2023%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansards80/1975-04-23/toc_pdf/19750423_senate_29_s63.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201975%2004%2023%22). Accessed 12 July 2023.

## WOMEN’S SERVICES AND POSITIVE EQUALITY

Whitlam’s concept of “positive equality” was to play a crucial role in the provision of women’s services.<sup>31</sup> Reflecting the postwar Long Boom, Whitlam initially argued that the “abundance” produced by rising living standards and economic growth would take care of many needs, while also providing revenue for funding government programmes.<sup>32</sup> Additional improvements in a citizen’s life would now come from the provision of government benefits and services, ranging from the provision of adequate public health care and sewerage for outer suburbs to the provision of community centres and better educational opportunities.<sup>33</sup> Whitlam’s argument was particularly important because Australia had tended to rely on a system of industrial courts and mediation services to ensure good standards of living via high wages (for male wage-earner heads of households), with less focus on government provision of welfare services than in some other western countries.<sup>34</sup>

Whitlam’s position on positive equality and the provision of government services was to fit well with feminist demands for women’s services ranging from women’s health centres to refuges for victims of domestic violence. Nonetheless, as late as 1975, Whitlam was still describing his conception of equality in a way that reflected its origin in attempts to improve the quality of life of the male wage-earner head of household by providing community services that would supplement his wage income. In other words, it was a conception that had its origin in attempts to address issues of class inequality rather than gender equality:

what I call positive equality ... is based on this concept: increasingly a citizen’s real standard of living, the health of himself and his family, his children’s opportunity for education and self-improvement, his access to

<sup>31</sup> E. G. Whitlam, Chifley memorial lecture, speech, University of Melbourne, 14 August 1975, p. 5. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00003847.pdf>. Accessed 3 July 2023.

<sup>32</sup> Whitlam, Chifley memorial lecture, pp. 5, 7 & 11–12.

<sup>33</sup> Whitlam, Chifley memorial lecture, pp. 4–6. As Whitlam acknowledges in this speech, he had been putting forward similar arguments for many years, see E. G. Whitlam, *Socialism within the Australian Constitution*. Curtin University, 1961. <https://john.curtin.edu.au/jcmemlect/whitlam1961.html>. Accessed 12 July 2023.

<sup>34</sup> F. G. Castles, *The working class and welfare: Reflections on the political development of the welfare state in Australia and New Zealand, 1890–1980*. Allen & Unwin, 1985.

employment opportunities, his ability to enjoy the nation's resources for recreation and cultural activity, his ability to participate in the decisions and actions of the community, are determined not so much by his income but by the availability and accessibility of the services which the community alone can provide and ensure. The quality of life depends less on the things which individuals obtain for themselves and can purchase for themselves from their personal incomes and depends more on the things which the community provides for all its members from the combined resources of the community.<sup>35</sup>

Positive equality was therefore largely based around government filling the gaps that a capitalist economy had not filled. Importantly, in terms of later developments, it was the exact opposite to the neoliberal prescriptions discussed in the next chapter, in which it would be argued that the private sector was best able to provide the services people needed and, accordingly, that citizens should be encouraged to purchase them from the private market rather than having services provided by the state. By contrast, Whitlam argued that the aim of the government was to pursue "equality" by providing "things which the community alone can provide" in the form of "welfare, health, education, recreation and transport".<sup>36</sup> Whitlam claimed that the Liberal Party's opposing philosophy was based on "private incentive and individual initiative" and a related view that people were motivated by "fear and greed".<sup>37</sup> That therefore if governments provided services and security, citizens would lose motivation, becoming "lazy and improvident".<sup>38</sup> Whereas Whitlam argued that reducing insecurity would liberate human creativity rather than reducing motivation.<sup>39</sup>

Whitlam also argued that competitive pressure from government service providers would help compensate for constitutional barriers to government powers over the private sector.<sup>40</sup> Senator Ruth Coleman

<sup>35</sup> Whitlam, Chifley memorial lecture, p. 5. See further C. Johnson, Gough Whitlam and Labor tradition. In T. Bramston (Ed.), *The Whitlam legacy* (revised ed., 2015, pp. 357–364). Federation Press.

<sup>36</sup> Whitlam, Chifley memorial lecture, pp. 5–6.

<sup>37</sup> Whitlam, Chifley memorial lecture, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup> Whitlam, Chifley memorial lecture, p. 6.

<sup>39</sup> Whitlam, Chifley memorial lecture, p. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Whitlam, Chifley memorial lecture.

emphasised that the new Australian Government Insurance Corporation would not be allowed to discriminate against women, potentially pressuring existing companies which, for example, routinely asked women questions regarding their husband’s employment.<sup>41</sup> However, Whitlam did not mention a major constitutional issue, namely the lack of a bill or charter of rights in the Australian Constitution that could also disadvantage women.<sup>42</sup>

Initially, the Whitlam government did indeed see the burgeoning of multiple services for women. Not only was government funding for child-care centres substantially increased but government funding was provided for family planning, women’s refuges, rape crisis and women’s health centres that the women’s movement had begun to set up. Interestingly, these were sometimes run on significantly unbureaucratic lines, for example, as Marian Sawer notes, the Leichhardt Community Women’s Health Centre opened in 1974 might have been funded by the federal government but it was actually run by a women’s collective.<sup>43</sup> The government was proud that it had encouraged a greater participation by women in the planning, delivery and administration of community health care.<sup>44</sup>

Whitlam also emphasised the role of educational services in ensuring that restrictive gender expectations were not placed on girls.<sup>45</sup> The government established a sub-committee of the Schools Commission, which was explicitly designed to improve services that would benefit

<sup>41</sup> R. Coleman, Australian government insurance corporation bill 1975, pp. 115–118.

<sup>42</sup> H. Irving, *Gender and the constitution: Equity and agency in comparative constitutional design*. Cambridge University Press, 2008. The Whitlam government had proposed a legislative human rights bill in 1974, that would have provided some protections for women, but this lapsed due to the 1974 election, and it was not entirely clear that the federal government had the power to legislate in the area. Sawer, *Making women count*, p. 43.

<sup>43</sup> Sawer, *Sisters in suits*, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> E. G. Whitlam, Speech by the Prime Minister: International Women’s Year—Inaugural Meeting of the National Advisory Committee, Canberra, 11 September 1974, p. 8. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00003385.pdf>. Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>45</sup> E. G. Whitlam, The emancipation of women, Speech to YWCA Convention, Queensland, 24 August 1973, p. 15. [https://rosetta.westernsydney.edu.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=IE1312](https://rosetta.westernsydney.edu.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE1312). Accessed 12 July 2023.

women and girls, including forms of childcare.<sup>46</sup> The abolition of tertiary education fees benefited many women, including older women wishing to return to the workforce or upgrade their skills. However, Whitlam trod softly given his acceptance that many women still identified as full-time housewives. He emphasised that the function of such programmes was not to require women to aim for workplace careers but rather “to give women the pre-conditions necessary for them to be able freely to choose the lives they want to lead”.<sup>47</sup> The underlying assumption was that the choice was largely a woman’s, rather than one that might also involve men’s participation in childcare. In his 1972 election policy speech, Whitlam had specifically talked of: “A woman’s choice between making motherhood her sole career and following another career in conjunction with motherhood depends upon the availability of proper child care facilities” that he pledged the Pre-School Commission would be involved in developing.<sup>48</sup> Just as equality of pay and conditions was a question of justice for those women who *chose* to work, so women should not “be expected to bear full responsibility for the rearing and care of our future generations” although many women might freely make that *choice*.<sup>49</sup> Labor claimed that a 1969 Bureau of Statistics survey showed 91,500 women with children under six would have worked if they could obtain childcare.<sup>50</sup> Facilitating women being able to work if they wished to, albeit often part-time and combined with caring responsibilities, was therefore a major priority for the government but so was pay equity for those who did choose to work.

<sup>46</sup> Whitlam, Speech, Opening of the women and politics conference, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> Whitlam, Speech, Opening of the women and politics conference, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Whitlam, 1972 election speech.

<sup>49</sup> Whitlam, Speech, Opening of the women and politics conference, p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> J. Riordan, Maternity leave (Australian government employees) bill 1973, 29 May 1973. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 2787). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansard80/1973-05-29/toc\\_pdf/19730529\\_reps\\_28\\_hor84.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%221970%201973%2005%2029%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansard80/1973-05-29/toc_pdf/19730529_reps_28_hor84.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%221970%201973%2005%2029%22). Accessed 13 July 2023.

## WOMEN, WAGES AND EMPLOYMENT

Having facilitated reopening the equal pay case in the Arbitration Commission, the Whitlam government fully supported the Australian Council of Trade Unions’ claim for equal pay, which the McMahon Liberal government had opposed. Whitlam had repeatedly raised issues regarding equal pay since 1958 but had received negative responses from the then Liberal-Country Coalition government.<sup>51</sup> Whitlam explained that if it succeeded the new equal pay application would extend an existing Arbitration Commission equal pay judgement since: “Women in industries employing predominantly females were excluded from the application of that judgement”.<sup>52</sup> In other words, the 1969 judgement only applied to women doing exactly the same work as men in traditionally male-dominated jobs (and it is estimated therefore benefited fewer than one in five employed women).<sup>53</sup> Whereas the new judgement was intended to support the government’s position of “equal pay for work of equal value” regardless of the employee’s sex and thereby potentially challenging the historical value attributed to predominantly women’s jobs.<sup>54</sup> Unfortunately, although a major step, the judgement did not achieve all that had been hoped for since equal value continued

<sup>51</sup> E. G. Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government 1972–1975*. Viking, 1985, pp. 511–513.

<sup>52</sup> E. G. Whitlam, Press statement no. 3–6 December 1972, Media Release, 6 December 1972, p. 1. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00002734.pdf>. Accessed 12 July 2023; Strachan, Still working for the man, p. 121 cites a case where 700 female nurses employed in the Australian Capital Territory were denied higher wage levels paid to their 7 male colleagues because it was a female-dominated industry.

<sup>53</sup> L. Risse, 50 years after “equal pay”, the legacy of “women’s work” remains. *The Conversation*, 19 June 2019. <https://theconversation.com/50-years-after-australias-historic-equal-pay-decision-the-legacy-of-womens-work-remains-118761>. Accessed 10 April 2024; M. Smith, Gender equity: The commission’s legacy and the challenge for fair work Australia. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 53(5), 2011, pp. 647–661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185611419617>.

<sup>54</sup> Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, National Wage and Equal Pay Cases, 1972, p. 178. [https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20110217231857/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/159622/20190729-0118/www.fwc.gov.au/documents/documents/education/resources/1972\\_147\\_car\\_172.pdf](https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20110217231857/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/159622/20190729-0118/www.fwc.gov.au/documents/documents/education/resources/1972_147_car_172.pdf). Accessed 13 July 2023. See further, Fair Work Commission (FWC), Equal pay case 1972. FWC, 30 March 2014, <https://www.fwc.gov.au/waltzing-matilda-and-the-sunshine-harvester-factory/historical-material/equal-pay-case-1972>. FWC, Secure Jobs Better Pay Act—What’s Changing, FWC. <https://www.fwc.gov.au/about-us/secure-jobs-better-pay-act-whats-changing>. Accessed 15 January 2024.



to be assessed against male norms rather than female-dominated work being fully revalued.<sup>55</sup> Both the Rudd/Gillard and Albanese governments had to take subsequent action. Furthermore, the Commission did not initially support an equal minimum wage for men and women, arguing that the minimum wage still contained a (male head of household) family wage component.<sup>56</sup> However, in 1974, the government, along with the Women's Electoral Lobby, the Union of Australian Women and the National Council of Women of Australia, successfully argued for an equal minimum wage for women.<sup>57</sup> Whitlam argued that it was "a significant step forward in the application of the principle of economic remuneration for work of equal value" and reflected Labor's "consistent support for wage justice for women".<sup>58</sup> Whitlam then pressured recalcitrant state governments to move on the issue so that the federal government could finally ratify the International Labor Organisation (ILO) Equal Remuneration Convention of 1951, which successive Liberal-Country Party Coalition governments had failed to do.<sup>59</sup> Whitlam later criticised the Opposition Leader, Billy Snedden, for stating that legislation ensuring equal pay would disadvantage women since it might restrict their job opportunities.<sup>60</sup>

The government also moved to make federal public service workplaces more women-friendly. However, it was still assumed that women would usually have the primary responsibility for childcare although Whitlam argued that women should not be disadvantaged as a result:

if there is to be real equality of opportunity, we must accept the fact that the work pattern of women is different. A woman should not be

<sup>55</sup> Smith, *Gender equity: The commission's legacy and the challenge for fair work Australia*, pp. 651–652.

<sup>56</sup> Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, *National Wage and Equal Pay Cases 1972*, p. 176.

<sup>57</sup> E. G. Whitlam, *Ratification of International Labor Organisation convention on equal pay*, Media Release, 6 May 1974. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-3244>. Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>58</sup> E. G. Whitlam, *Press statement no. 245*, Media Release, 2 May 1974, p. 1. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00003233.pdf>. Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>59</sup> Whitlam, *Ratification of International Labor Organisation convention on equal pay*.

<sup>60</sup> Whitlam, *Ratification of International Labor Organisation convention on equal pay*.

unduly penalised in employment by requirements such as unbroken service, full-time working hours and other conditions governing her eligibility for security of employment and opportunity for advancement beyond junior status.<sup>61</sup>

Consequently, the government introduced measures such as removing age limits for appointment for the position of Clerk, Clerical Assistant and Typist in the Commonwealth Public Service, which would facilitate women who had taken time out for child rearing to enter or re-enter the public service and would hopefully be combined with permanent part-time work and more flexible working hours.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the 1973 introduction of three months paid maternity leave (and 40 weeks unpaid) for the public service was based on an assumption regarding women's child rearing responsibilities.<sup>63</sup> Paternity leave was limited to two weeks paid leave.<sup>64</sup>

Moreover, some ALP politicians still harboured concerns that women would be forced to go out to work rather than being full-time carers for their children, including women otherwise benefiting from the new no fault divorce laws. For example, in 1975 conservative catholic Labor MP Tony Luchetti still objected to women working:

When I became involved in the great political party which has made such a contribution to the development of Australia over the years- the Australian Labor Party- I was reared on the credo, on the thought and on the belief that what we were trying to do for women was to take them out of industry- take them from the mines and from the workshops- and give them a position of dignity in their own home in which they could care

<sup>61</sup> E. G. Whitlam, Statement by the Prime Minister the Hon E.G. Whitlam QC MP, No. 84, Public service age limits, 4 May 1973, p. 2. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00002909.pdf>. Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>62</sup> Whitlam, Statement, Public service age limits, p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> J. Riordan, Maternity leave (Australian government employees) bill 1973, 29 May 1973. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (pp. 2785–2788). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1973-05-29/toc\\_pdf/19730529\\_reps\\_28\\_hor84.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%221970s%201973%2005%2029%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1973-05-29/toc_pdf/19730529_reps_28_hor84.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%221970s%201973%2005%2029%22). Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>64</sup> D. Brennan, Australia: The difficult birth of paid maternity leave. In S. B. Kamerman & P. Moss (Eds.), *The politics of parental leave policies: Children, parenting, gender and the labour market* (2009, p. 19). Policy Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt9qmq0.7>.

for their children, be greatly respected and preside over the moulding of the character and human quality of our people and the building of our nation.<sup>65</sup>

In 1970, future Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating had also expressed concern about married women working:

Husbands have been forced to send their wives to work in order to provide the necessaries of life. Young mothers have been forced out of their homes by economic pressure.... Family life is the very basis of our nationhood. In the last couple of years the Government has boasted about the increasing number of women in the work force. Rather than something to be proud of I feel that this is something of which we should be ashamed.<sup>66</sup>

Yet, other Labor MPs had very different views. Gareth Clayton challenged traditional gender expectations arguing that: “One of the changes to be encouraged is in the relative roles of women and men in society. Historically, men have been the breadwinners and women have stayed at home as unpaid servants for the menfolk”.<sup>67</sup> By contrast: “Women and men should be free to seek employment with equal opportunities in all occupations, or to stay at home if they wish”.<sup>68</sup> Whitlam himself repeatedly stressed that the government’s role was to facilitate women having choices, and that it was addressing the needs of all women in the process:

Some of you may feel... that the only women we are concerned to help are the minority of young, career-minded women with higher education.

<sup>65</sup> T. Luchetti, Family law bill 1974, 20 May 1975. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 2523). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/hansard80/hansardr80/1975-05-20/0126/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/hansard80/hansardr80/1975-05-20/0126/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>66</sup> P. Keating, Governor-General’s speech address-in-reply, 17 March 1970. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (pp. 514–515). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/hansard80/hansardr80/1970-03-17/0092/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/hansard80/hansardr80/1970-03-17/0092/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>67</sup> G. Clayton, Governor-General’s speech address-in-reply, 18 July 1974. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 430). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1974-07-18/toc\\_pdf/19740718\\_reps\\_29\\_hor89.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201974%2007%2018%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1974-07-18/toc_pdf/19740718_reps_29_hor89.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201974%2007%2018%22). Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>68</sup> G. Clayton, Governor-General’s speech address-in-reply, p. 430.

Nothing could be further from the truth. I don't think even the most radical women's organisation would want to force women into any role that they wouldn't choose for themselves. It may well be true that if they were completely free to choose, most women today would choose the traditional role - to be wives, to be mothers, to stay at home. Women who choose those roles, those honourable roles, have as much right to help and guidance as anyone else. The point is that women should be free to make their choice; they should have exactly the same opportunities as men to education, to highly paid and satisfying jobs, to positions of responsibility and personal fulfilment, it is this freedom that we want to enlarge.<sup>69</sup>

Indeed, the government's wages policy was clearly designed to help many working-class women. The government also recognised that discrimination in multiple forms, including gender, religion, race and sex, had an adverse effect on productivity and the number of people in the workforce.<sup>70</sup> Discrimination was seen as an unjust "anti-social" offence that was not just a human rights and moral problem.<sup>71</sup> However, it was also an "economic problem" and a lost investment in skills and training.<sup>72</sup>

As its term in office progressed, Whitlam argued that there had been very successful outcomes in terms of women's wages, boasting that an ILO study:

...has shown that in the year ending June 1974 the world's biggest increase in real wages for women in manufacturing industry went to Australian women. Then real wages went up by 16%. From December 1972 to the December quarter 1974 average minimum weekly award rates for women increased by 73%.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>69</sup> E. G. Whitlam, Prime Minister's Queensland broadcast, No. 21, women, 10 August 1975, p. 2.

<https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00003840.pdf>. Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>70</sup> C. Cameron, *Discrimination in employment and occupation*, p. 2371.

<sup>71</sup> Cameron, *Discrimination in employment and occupation*, p. 2371.

<sup>72</sup> Cameron, *Discrimination in employment and occupation*, pp. 2371–2372.

<sup>73</sup> E. G. Whitlam, International women's day reception, Speech, Melbourne, 8 March 1975, p. 3. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00003643.pdf>. Accessed 13 July 2023.

By 1975, Whitlam was boasting that while male award wages had risen by 64% during the government's term in office, the amount for women was 90%.<sup>74</sup> The government also emphasised advances in training for women and that they had introduced "anti-discrimination committees throughout Australia, new training and retraining opportunities".<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, the government was addressing women's previous lack of influence by being "the first Government to appoint women as judges, as arbitration commissioners, as career diplomats, as member of statutory bodies".<sup>76</sup>

In short, the Whitlam government was firmly breaking with an earlier social democratic tradition that had historically supported the family wage with higher wages for male wage earners and that had restricted payment and employment for women accordingly. Women workers were now considered members of the working class (as were migrant workers and members of minority races which included women too) with government policies designed to address those who were most vulnerable in the community.<sup>77</sup>

## OTHER MEASURES FOR DIVERSE GROUPS OF WOMEN

Women who were single parents were seen as particularly vulnerable. The introduction of a supporting mother's benefit in 1973 not only provided essential financial support but potentially helped to change social attitudes. The government recognised "that supporting mothers form one of the largest groups below the poverty line and introduced a supporting mothers' benefit".<sup>78</sup> Once again, Whitlam was clear that the government's programmes were not focused on looking after privileged women. On the contrary:

<sup>74</sup> E. G. Whitlam, Speech by the Prime Minister to the ACTU congress, Melbourne, 18 September 1975, p. 7. [https://rosetta.westernsydney.edu.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=IE4432](https://rosetta.westernsydney.edu.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE4432). Accessed 5 July 2023.

<sup>75</sup> Whitlam, International women's day reception, p. 4.

<sup>76</sup> Whitlam, *The Whitlam Government*, p. 517.

<sup>77</sup> Whitlam, Speech by the Prime Minister to the ACTU congress, pp. 7 & 23; E. G. Whitlam, Speech at the annual conference of the building workers' industrial union, Sydney, 5 August 1974, p. 17. [https://rosetta.westernsydney.edu.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=IE3652](https://rosetta.westernsydney.edu.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE3652). Accessed 5 July 2023.

<sup>78</sup> Whitlam, Speech, Opening of the women and politics conference, p. 6.

To this day the majority of poor people in Australia are women, including mothers many of them single or deserted mothers. The need to create a more humane world for these women is an overwhelming concern of this Government: We introduced the Supporting Mother’s Benefit, we removed the sales tax on the pill, we are funding women’s refuges, women’s health centres and family planning centres.

Perhaps the most exciting development has been the acceptance of the need for multi-purpose centres, centres concerned with all the needs of women in the area. The Hunter Region Working Women’s Centre in Newcastle is one such centre. It will cater for women’s health, welfare, educational, workforce and legal problems as well as providing recreation and child care facilities.<sup>79</sup>

Class was not the only issue. The government also confirmed that: “We are concerned about the problems facing all women in Australia, be they young or old, Aboriginal or newcomers, married or unmarried, English speaking or non-English speaking”.<sup>80</sup>

The input of Aboriginal women was seen as particularly important when it came to the provision of Aboriginal health.<sup>81</sup> Nonetheless, there are criticisms that government conceptions of Aboriginal self-determination and land rights did not take Aboriginal women sufficiently into account.<sup>82</sup> There were also still divisions between Aboriginal women and the wider feminist movement with many Aboriginal women feeling that white women were not placing enough emphasis on the racism

<sup>79</sup> Whitlam, International women’s day reception, p. 4.

<sup>80</sup> Whitlam, Speech, Opening of the women and politics conference, p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> Whitlam, International Women’s Year—Inaugural Meeting of the National Advisory Committee, p. 8.

<sup>82</sup> See P. Brock, *Words and silences: Aboriginal women, politics and land*. Allen & Unwin, 2001, p. 14 and passim; for broader conflicts at the time over conceptions of self-determination, see, e.g., J. Perheentupa, Taking control: Aboriginal organisations and self-determination in Redfern in the 1970s. In L. Rademaker & T. Rowse (Eds.), *Indigenous self-determination in Australia: Histories and historiography* (2020, pp. 189–208). ANU Press & Aboriginal History Inc. <https://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/n7084/pdf/book.pdf>.

Aboriginal women experienced.<sup>83</sup> Senator Coleman reminded Opposition Senators that Aboriginal women would also benefit from the Racial Discrimination Bill, given “that there are Aboriginal females”.<sup>84</sup>

Migrant women also felt that their experiences were sometimes ignored.<sup>85</sup> Although Whitlam did acknowledge that: “There could scarcely be a more disadvantaged group than migrant women”. Not only did many migrants live in disadvantaged urban areas but “to inequalities of opportunity in housing, employment and education is added the burden of strangeness”.<sup>86</sup> The government did develop volunteer programmes to bring language teaching into migrant women’s homes, and hoped to use ethnic radio broadcasting to break down the isolation of migrant women who stayed at home while their husbands went out to work.<sup>87</sup> The government also attempted to address language issues by trying to ensure that non-English-speaking migrants contacting a government department would have access to people who could speak their language and translate documents if required.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>83</sup> See, e.g., M. Arrow, *The Seventies: The personal, the political and the making of modern Australia*. NewSouth Publishing, 2019, pp. 106–107.

<sup>84</sup> R. Coleman, Racial discrimination bill 1975, 15 May 1975. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (p. 1520). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansards80/1975-05-15/toc\\_pdf/19750515\\_senate\\_29\\_s64.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201975%2005%2015%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansards80/1975-05-15/toc_pdf/19750515_senate_29_s64.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201975%2005%2015%22). Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>85</sup> Arrow, *The Seventies*, pp. 129–130.

<sup>86</sup> Whitlam, *The emancipation of women*, p. 5; On migrant women, see also E. Cox, Just add women and stir: Revisiting the femocrat revolution. In M. Arrow (Ed.), *Women and Whitlam: Revisiting the revolution* (2023, pp. 157–168 & 184–185). NewSouth Publishing.

<sup>87</sup> A. J. Grassby, Immigration (education) bill 1973, 27 September 1973. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (pp. 1675–1676). Commonwealth of Australia. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22hansard80%2Fhansardr80%2F1973-09-27%2F0099%22>. Accessed 9 April 2024; D. McClelland, Questions without notice, 27 May 1975. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (pp. 1825–1826). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansards80/1975-05-27/toc\\_pdf/19750527\\_senate\\_29\\_s64.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201975%2005%2027%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansards80/1975-05-27/toc_pdf/19750527_senate_29_s64.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201975%2005%2027%22). Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>88</sup> E. G. Whitlam, Extracts from Prime Minister’s speech at migrant rally, Melbourne Town Hall, 26 October 1975, p. 5. [https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00003937\\_0.pdf](https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00003937_0.pdf). Accessed 15 January 2024.

One group of women the government did not mention was lesbian women. Traditionally, Labor governments had assumed that the citizen was heterosexual and, despite its many reforms in other areas, the Whitlam government did very little to challenge that. Whitlam himself tended to construct sexuality as a private issue arguing that issues such as homosexuality and abortion (which were also matters for state rather than federal law) “are in essence matters of private conscience and not of public policy”.<sup>89</sup> The construction was significant in so far as it suggested Whitlam thought neither should be criminalised (as male homosexuality, but not lesbianism, still was at that time) but it was also a convenient way of sidelining the issues. Whitlam might believe that women were redefining the political so that (heterosexual) women’s issues were no longer confined to private life but issues of addressing the needs of lesbian women were another matter entirely. It was far removed from later Labor conceptions which saw issues of sexuality not as issues of private morality but as issues of equality. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, lesbian couples were in fact excluded from many benefits available to heterosexual couples whose relationships were recognised. Furthermore, married heterosexual relationships were not seen as private matters but were recognised in legislation, covering issues such as citizenship, superannuation and social services.<sup>90</sup> Some progressive Labor and Liberal MPs did unsuccessfully try to pass a motion encouraging decriminalisation of male homosexuality at state level. However, lesbians remained largely invisible when it came to tackling issues of discrimination or providing explicitly targeted government services.<sup>91</sup>

Several groups of women therefore felt that their needs had not been taken adequately into account in the government’s positive equality model. However, there was also an additional problem, namely the economic underpinnings of the model.

<sup>89</sup> M. MacCallum, No party line on morals, says Whitlam. *The Australian*, 1 September 1970, p. 2.

<sup>90</sup> See, e.g., Australian Citizenship Act 1973 (Cth). [http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdb/au/legis/cth/num\\_act/aca1973254/](http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdb/au/legis/cth/num_act/aca1973254/). Accessed 26 October 2018; Social Services Act 1973 (Cth). <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C1973A00001>. Accessed 26 October 2018; Superannuation Act 1973 (Cth). <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C1973A00046>. Accessed 26 October 2018.

<sup>91</sup> See further Johnson, Social democracy and the crisis of equality, pp. 81–87.



## ECONOMIC UNDERPINNINGS OF EQUALITY

Initially, the political economy had seemed to favour women. An influential OECD report had advocated that Australia increase the participation of women in the workforce, partially to offset the costs attributed to Australia's migration programme.<sup>92</sup> Indeed, the percentage of women in the workforce had already been increasing despite discriminatory practices that the government argued also had a negative impact on productivity.<sup>93</sup> However, as noted earlier, the conception of positive equality was underpinned by an assumption that economic growth would continue to provide rising standards of living and also fund the government revenue needed to pay for a larger public sector. That assumption was to be undermined by a worsening world economic situation.<sup>94</sup> Treasurer Hayden's (blocked) 1975 budget speech emphasised that the government was facing high inflation and high unemployment (i.e. stagflation) and argued that this undermined Keynesian prescriptions supporting greater public sector expenditure; instead requiring public sector expenditure restraint.<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile, the government introduced wage indexation to constrain "unrealistic" and "harmful" wage rises that it argued had resulted in "higher prices, a severe squeeze on profits, a slump in new investment and a contraction of job opportunities".<sup>96</sup>

## THE ECONOMIC IMPACT ON WOMEN'S POLICY

Proposed funding for women's services came under threat as the recession worsened, with substantial cuts to childcare in particular occurring including via a focus on cheaper family daycare programmes, despite a

<sup>92</sup> A. Game & R. Pringle, *Women and class in Australia: Feminism and the Labor government*. In G. Duncan (Ed.), *Critical essays in Australian politics* (1978, p. 121). Edward Arnold.

<sup>93</sup> Cameron, *Discrimination in employment and occupation*, pp. 2371–2372.

<sup>94</sup> Whitlam, *Chifley memorial lecture*, pp. 9–11.

<sup>95</sup> B. Hayden, *Budget speech, 19 August 1975*. *Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives* (p. 52). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1975-08-19/toc\\_pdf/19750819\\_reps\\_29\\_hor96.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201975%2008%2019%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1975-08-19/toc_pdf/19750819_reps_29_hor96.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201975%2008%2019%22). Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>96</sup> Hayden, *Budget speech*, p. 54.

WEL campaign that restored part of the axed funding.<sup>97</sup> However, there were some exceptions, such as an increase in single parent benefit.<sup>98</sup> Despite welcoming its positive initiatives, WEL remained critical of the government on various grounds, including a focus on preschools rather than long-day care for children that would be more helpful for working women and women wanting relief from domestic care responsibilities.<sup>99</sup> Various government inquiries (e.g. the children’s commission) and services (such as women’s health services) were only funded after major campaigns and pressure from the women’s movement.<sup>100</sup> Meanwhile, the state and national committees originally set up to investigate sexual discrimination remained toothless advisory bodies, although they may have contributed to the creation of a sex discrimination act if the government had retained office.<sup>101</sup>

There were also problems with the government’s employment programmes for women. Ann Game and Rosemary Pringle write of the irony of the government encouraging women into the workforce as thousands of women in the clothing, textiles and footwear industry lost their jobs as a result of Whitlam’s 25% tariff cuts that were designed to make Australian industry more economically competitive.<sup>102</sup> As Marian Sawer has pointed out, the government’s National Employment and Training Scheme (NEAT) had originally been designed to address inequalities in employment, and consequently, a majority of those assisted originally had been women re-entering the workforce but from late 1974 the scheme prioritised those who had recently become unemployed along with “primary breadwinners”.<sup>103</sup>

Reviewing gender equality initiatives during the period of the Whitlam government, Sara Dowse also concludes that “the limits to reform are set by the political economy — not by the particular government in

<sup>97</sup> Game & Pringle, *Women and class in Australia*, pp. 114–134, 115–116, 128–129 & 134; Dowse, *The women’s movement’s fandango with the state*, pp. 210–215.

<sup>98</sup> Game & Pringle, *Women and class in Australia*, pp. 128–129.

<sup>99</sup> Sawer, *Making women count*, p. 47.

<sup>100</sup> Game & Pringle, *Women and class in Australia*, pp. 128–131.

<sup>101</sup> Game & Pringle, *Women and class in Australia*, p. 124.

<sup>102</sup> Game & Pringle, *Women and class in Australia*, p. 123.

<sup>103</sup> Sawer, *Sisters in suits*, p. 11.

office”.<sup>104</sup> To which could be added that the limits to reform actually involve both the political economy and the particular government, given that the view of how government should respond to economic crises is influenced by a specific government’s ideological influences. Despite Whitlam’s comments about reconceptualising politics, the government’s conception of the economy was not subject to adequate gender analysis. The government’s framing emphasised problems in the capitalist form of the economy (and the public sphere) but overlooked the role of the patriarchal economy (and the private sphere). The government’s attempts to negotiate with a male-dominated trade union movement to restrain wages protected programmes of interest to powerful male unionists but failed to protect major areas of interest to women. A narrow conception of the “economy” was privileged. Dowse, head of the women’s unit in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, has described a 1975 meeting where a group of male public servants nodded sagely in agreement when informed that the government’s key priority would now be managing the economy. It was left to the sole woman in the room to ask: “Isn’t the economy meant to serve society rather than the other way round”.<sup>105</sup> Unfortunately for Australian feminism, the clear answer for decades to come was to be “no”.

## GENDERED CULTURES

At the same time as the economy was deteriorating, the Whitlam government was also encountering an increased culture wars-style gendered backlash against its support for women’s equality. Indeed, some backlash elements had been present from the start, as media attacks on Elizabeth Reid had revealed.<sup>106</sup>

Whitlam (and Reid) had been well aware that pursuing gender equality would require major culture change and that there were limits to how much government could do. As Whitlam argued in 1974:

Government legislation can only achieve so much and I shall not pretend to you that any government can achieve immediately for Australian women

<sup>104</sup> Dowse, *The women’s movement’s fandango with the state*, p. 210.

<sup>105</sup> S. Dowse, *Then, now and what might come: A writer’s take*. In M. Arrow (Ed.), *Women and Whitlam: Revisiting the revolution* (2023, p. 243). NewSouth Publishing.

<sup>106</sup> Sawyer, *Sisters in suits*, pp. 18–21.

the revolution required to allow them to develop fully as individuals, for instance it must be said that, even if we were to remove all the inequalities of opportunity and of status, it still would not be enough, we have to attack the social inequalities, the hidden and usually unarticulated assumptions which affect women not only in employment but in the whole range of their opportunities in life, this is not just a matter for governments and for action by governments it is a matter of changing community attitudes and uprooting community prejudices, and insofar as this requires a re-education of the community then clearly governments alone cannot be expected to do the whole job,...<sup>107</sup>

Whitlam acknowledged that the government could play a role in "raising consciousness".<sup>108</sup> This included, not only removing forms of discrimination but in addressing "the deeply ingrained cultural assumption that every woman's primary role is that of daughter, wife, mother, mother-in-law, or grandmother; nurse, secretary, teacher or shop assistant: the deeply ingrained assumption that women are here to serve or assist". Whitlam also acknowledged that women parliamentarians were not only few in number but encountered "a host of problems which women face and which they no doubt will continue to face until a woman politician is as everyday a phenomenon as a man politician".<sup>109</sup>

Whitlam (and Reid) seemed to hope that a Royal Commission into human relationships might help to address some of the more complex issues around gender relations.<sup>110</sup> As Michelle Arrow has pointed out, the Royal Commission gave ordinary Australians an unprecedented opportunity to give evidence about personal relationship issues, both heterosexual and homosexual.<sup>111</sup> Whitlam argued it would also examine:

the stresses that society places upon relationships between people, in what ways inadequate housing, insufficient money, too many or too few children,

<sup>107</sup> Whitlam, Speech, International Women's Year inaugural meeting of the national advisory committee, p. 4.

<sup>108</sup> Whitlam, *The emancipation of women*, p. 3.

<sup>109</sup> Whitlam, Speech, Opening of the women and politics conference, p. 6.

<sup>110</sup> Whitlam, Speech, Opening of the women and politics conference, p. 6.

<sup>111</sup> See Arrow, *The Seventies*, pp. 141–168; M. Arrow, *An inquiry into the whole human condition? Whitlam, sexual citizenship and the royal commission on human relationships (1974–77)*. In J. Hocking (Ed.), *Making modern Australia: The Whitlam government's twenty-first century agenda* (2017, pp. 3–34). Monash University Publishing.

the availability or otherwise of contraceptive counselling and the adequacy of medical care affect people and their relationships.<sup>112</sup>

However, the Commission's report was not completed before the Whitlam government lost office and received a relatively hostile response from the subsequent Fraser government (despite the Commission having been proposed initially by Fraser as an Opposition backbencher in the narrower context of abortion policy).<sup>113</sup>

Meanwhile, the United Nations International Women's year had also provided an opportunity to fund various women's organisations involved in consciousness raising.<sup>114</sup> Whitlam acknowledged that: We must challenge notions such as that of the breadwinner and the homemaker; values such as those of ambition, prestige, status and incessant promotion; dichotomies such as that between work and home; the hidden and usually unarticulated assumptions about women's abilities, capacities, life patterns, needs, skills and desires. These affect women not only in their employment but in the whole range of their opportunities in life. Both men and women must be made aware of our habitual patterns of prejudice which we often do not see as such but whose existence manifests itself in our language and our behaviour. During this year, International Women's Year, we must question, discuss and reassess the attitudes, assumptions, beliefs and prejudices that society holds about women. We must create a society in which a woman's place is where she freely chooses to be, from which neither cultural prejudices, lack of education or lack of self-confidence will keep her.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>112</sup> Whitlam, Speech, International Women's Year inaugural meeting of the national advisory committee, p. 8.

<sup>113</sup> A. Summers, Women. In A. Patience & B. Head (Eds.), *From Whitlam to Fraser: Reform and reaction in Australian politics* (1979, p. 193).

<sup>114</sup> Parliament of Australia, Statement No. 3 estimate of outlays 1974/75, Appropriation Bill 1 1974 (Cth), 17 September 1974. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 1343). [https://archive.budget.gov.au/1974-75/downloads/Budget%201974-75\\_Budget\\_Speech\\_and\\_Statements.pdf](https://archive.budget.gov.au/1974-75/downloads/Budget%201974-75_Budget_Speech_and_Statements.pdf). Accessed 13 July 2023; See, for example, the comments regarding cultural subordination of women and examples of relevant grants given in Adelaide mentioned by M. Whitlam, Podium copy of the speech at the ZONTA Club of Adelaide Symposium: "The realities of equality of the Australian scene in international women's year through Mrs. Margaret Whitlam's eyes". Whitlam Institute, 19 April 1975, pp. 3–5 & 8. [https://rosetta.westernsydney.edu.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps\\_pid=IE20569](https://rosetta.westernsydney.edu.au/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE20569). Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>115</sup> Whitlam, International women's day reception, p. 6.

Whitlam was prepared to deliver such speeches but they also reflected the strongly held views of Elizabeth Reid. Reid's views were perhaps best illustrated by a speech given, under the government's imprimatur, at the United Nations World Conference of International Women's Year. Reid denounced "sexism", "patriarchal societies", colonialism, violence against women, and gendered power relations and urged women in the developing world to be cautious about accepting western economic and social structures that disempowered women.<sup>116</sup> She also noted the limitations of formal equality agendas in the absence of broader cultural and social change:

Equality is a limited and possible [sic] harmful goal. Associated with the struggle for equality have been some needed and just reforms: equal pay, equal access to formal education and vocational training, equality under the law and equal rights to vote and to run for public office.... But we can no longer delude ourselves with the hope that formal equality, once achieved, will eradicate sexist oppression - it could well merely legitimise it. For there is a real danger ... that... the achievement of formal equality will encourage the belief that all problems are thereby solved. However even if formal equality were to be achieved, all else still remains to be done.<sup>117</sup>

It was a very radical statement, but Whitlam was at that stage still prepared to praise Reid's contribution to women's causes domestically and internationally.<sup>118</sup> However, such public support was not to continue. Reid resigned when she was going to be moved sideways out of the prime minister's office and made a public servant, therefore restricting her independent rights to speak.<sup>119</sup> Reid felt that the Whitlam government no

<sup>116</sup> E. Reid, World conference of international women's year: Statement by the leader of the Australian delegation at Mexico City on Friday 20 June 1975, 24 June 1975, pp. 2 & 4-5. [https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00003796\\_0.pdf](https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00003796_0.pdf). Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>117</sup> Reid, World conference of international women's year, p. 7.

<sup>118</sup> Whitlam, Queensland broadcast, p. 1.

<sup>119</sup> A. Summers, Women, p. 198.

longer had the same commitment to women's issues.<sup>120</sup> She has written retrospectively of how difficult her position had been:

the strains of achieving reform from the inside are truly immense and you are always compromising and how far you go in that act of compromising is a difficult decision to make. moral dilemmas and challenges were the ones that were always there for me, how do I move, when do I say no, or draw the line. What means do you use to achieve the end that you believe in.<sup>121</sup>

Significantly, it was not just the political economy that was causing problems but the ongoing cultural backlash. The government's retreat on women's issues was partly due to controversy after a particularly politically rambunctious *Women and Politics* conference, funded by the government, that achieved widespread media criticism and was seen as electorally damaging. (Amongst other incidents, the prime minister's speech had been disrupted by Aboriginal women protesters, while lesbian activists daubed the men's toilets with slogans.)<sup>122</sup> A conference on women and the media, which was to address a wide range of issues to do with women, communication and culture was cancelled.<sup>123</sup> The cultural consciousness raising that was seen by feminists to be a particularly useful aspect of International Women's Year was seen to have gone too far.

<sup>120</sup> See M. Arrow, Working inside the system: Elizabeth Reid, the Whitlam government, and the women's movement. Australian Women's History Network, 5 March 2017. <http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/elizabeth-reid/>. Accessed 12 May 2020; Sawer, *Sisters in suits*, pp. 19–21; For Whitlam's response on Elizabeth Reid's resignation, see his response to Ralph Willis' question on women's affairs: E. G. Whitlam, Questions without notice: women's affairs, 9 October 1975. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (pp. 1926–1927). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1975-10-09/toc\\_pdf/19751009\\_reps\\_29\\_hor97.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1975-10-09/toc_pdf/19751009_reps_29_hor97.pdf). Accessed 17 July 2020.

<sup>121</sup> R. Joyce, Interview with Elizabeth Reid, women's advisor to the Australian government. Women's History Network, 2 December 2017. <https://womenshistorynetwork.org/elizabeth-reid-womens-advisor-to-the-australian-government/>. Accessed 12 May 2020.

<sup>122</sup> Sawer, *Sisters in suits*, pp. 19–21.

<sup>123</sup> Sawer, *Sisters in suits*, p. 20.

## WHITLAM GOVERNMENT SACKING

The Whitlam government was controversially sacked by the Governor-General in November 1975, shortly after Reid's resignation, when the Opposition blocked the government's budget and ongoing funding for government programmes and services. The Governor-General installed the Opposition as a caretaker Liberal-National Country Party Coalition government until an election could be held. The government's dismissal stymied some projected reforms, including a proposed bill that would have prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual or marital status that WEL had long been calling for.<sup>124</sup> As Anne Summers points out, Whitlam, who had once been such an enthusiastic supporter, "made no promises to women" in the subsequent election campaign.<sup>125</sup> However, his 1975 election speech did claim that, under his government: "For the first time Australia had a government seriously concerned to give equality of opportunity to women and to remove all forms of discrimination against women. Every Federal department is now charged to take women's interests into account".<sup>126</sup>

## THE FRASER YEARS 1975–1983

Whitlam's Liberal opponent, Malcolm Fraser, did promise to "use example encouragement, administration and where necessary specific legislation to rid Australia of discrimination based on sex, race, colour, ethic or social origin".<sup>127</sup> However, the Fraser years were to prove problematic for Australian feminists, with Summers arguing that "the Liberal government had virtually no commitment to women's issues as they were defined by the women's movement".<sup>128</sup> Nonetheless, initially it looked as though Whitlam era reforms would survive and in some cases even be expanded, given the support both of public service femocrats and feminists within the Liberal Party, such as Beryl Beaurepaire. For example, Marian Sawyer has noted that while there was federal government funding

<sup>124</sup> Sawyer, *Making women count*, pp. 43–44.

<sup>125</sup> Summers, *Women*, p. 198.

<sup>126</sup> E. G. Whitlam, Election Speech, Melbourne, 24 November 1975, <https://whitlamdismissal.com/1975/11/24/whitlam-1975-election-policy-speech.html/>. Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>127</sup> M. Fraser, Election Speech, Melbourne, 27 November 1975, <https://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/1975-malcolm-fraser>. Accessed 13 July 2023.

<sup>128</sup> Summers, *Women*, p. 199.



for 21 women's refuges under the Whitlam government, by 1985 they numbered 170 with significant expansion occurring during the Fraser years (96 refuges by 1980). The Whitlam government had funded the Leichhardt women's health centre in 1974, but by 1980 there were six women's health centres.<sup>129</sup> The government also established a number of women's policy units, reflecting WEL's innovative "wheel" model, first proposed during the Whitlam years and later taken up internationally, of having "the hub at the Centre of government, spokes in line departments and a focus on policy advice and policy monitoring rather than program delivery".<sup>130</sup> The government also appointed a Minister Assisting the Prime Minister in Women's Affairs and established a National Women's Advisory Council.<sup>131</sup> Such moves were in line with Fraser's view that "the Government's policy that the special concerns of women - equality of opportunity, freedom from discrimination, equal status in society - should be stressed within the framework of individual policy areas".<sup>132</sup>

Fraser also expressed his personal support for improving childcare services for working women, rejecting conservative criticisms as well as arguing that Labor's focus on preschools had not adequately served working mothers who needed full day care.<sup>133</sup> In 1977, the government converted the supporting mothers' benefit, introduced during the Whitlam years, into a supporting parents' benefit thereby acknowledging the potential parenting role of fathers, although as Sawer notes, unfortunately the Whitlam government's paid paternity leave provision for the Commonwealth Public Service was abolished in the same year.<sup>134</sup> The government also ran a campaign encouraging women to take up

<sup>129</sup> M. Sawer, Women: The long march through the institutions. In B. W. Head & A. Patience (Eds.), *From Fraser to Hawke: Australian public policy in the 1980s* (1989, p. 433). Longman Cheshire.

<sup>130</sup> Sawer, *Making women count*, pp. 157–158.

<sup>131</sup> Sawer, Women: The long march, pp. 430–432.

<sup>132</sup> M. Fraser, Co-ordination in women's affairs, Media Release, 4 July 1976. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00004177.pdf>. Accessed 20 January 2020.

<sup>133</sup> M. Fraser, Ninth national convention of the young Liberals movement, Media Release, 7 January 1977. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00004295.pdf>. Accessed 20 January 2020.

<sup>134</sup> Sawer, Women: The long march, p. 434.

apprenticeships in non-traditional occupations.<sup>135</sup> However, the focus was heavily on women being able to choose whether to work to support the family income and the government also offered a generous single-income spouse tax rebate “to make it easier for a mother to stay at home if that is what she wants to do...”.<sup>136</sup> The government was a signatory to the United Nations’ *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms, of Discrimination Against Women*, (although it was not ratified until the Hawke Labor government).<sup>137</sup> Fraser clearly saw such measures as compatible with Liberal Party beliefs, emphasising the long history of the party’s encouragement of female participation and its original support for equality of opportunity for women.<sup>138</sup>

However, signs that progress might not be smooth soon began to develop. While there were calls for legislation against sex discrimination, the response was merely that this was a “complex” matter that was “under active consideration”.<sup>139</sup> By 1982, it was being announced that the government’s pre-budget consultations included not just the Women’s Action Alliance, the Women’s Electoral Lobby and the Young Women’s Christian Association of Australia but also Women Who Want

<sup>135</sup> M. Fraser, Presentation of the 1981 Bulletin/Qantas award for Australian business-woman of the year, Speech, 16 November 1981. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-5691>. Accessed 22 January 2020.

<sup>136</sup> M. Fraser, Interview with June Barton, Morning Extra, 14 April 1982. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00005466.pdf>. Accessed 14 July 2023.

<sup>137</sup> M. Fraser, Presentation of the 1981 Bulletin/Qantas award.

<sup>138</sup> M. Fraser, Presentation of the 1981 Bulletin/Qantas; M. Fraser, Interview with Libby Stone, 6WP (ABC), Perth Talk-back, 6 October 1980. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-5466>. Accessed 20 January 2020.

Women’s organisations had played a central role in the formation of the Liberal Party and had always included some women who supported greater women’s equality from a liberal feminist perspective, see M. Fitzherbert, *Liberal women: Federation-1949*. Federation Press, 2004, pp. 209–233.

<sup>139</sup> I. McPhee, Answers to questions: Discrimination against women, Question no. 1641, response provided, 10 December 1976. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (p. 3147). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/hansard80/hansards80/1976-12-10/0273/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/hansard80/hansards80/1976-12-10/0273/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 16 November 2019.

to be Women.<sup>140</sup> Women Who Want to be Women was a conservative organisation, often drawing inspiration from conservative American organisations, that reflected a growing backlash against feminism. It increasingly mobilised against the National Women's Advisory Council and against government-funded childcare, capturing the ears of more conservative members of the Liberal Party.<sup>141</sup>

At the same time as this cultural backlash, right-wing economics was also increasing its influence. Sawer has documented the growth of socially conservative neoliberal ideas within the Liberal Party and the impact this began to have on the party platform, where disagreement ensued between those supportive of liberal feminism (which saw a significant role for government in furthering equality) and social conservatives, including Fraser's Treasurer and later Prime Minister, John Howard.<sup>142</sup> The nature of neoliberalism and its implications for women will be discussed more in subsequent chapters. However, a key difference in policy framing lay in its support for a minimal state and for free markets rather than government provision and regulation. In short, a neoliberal policy framework involved ideas that were the exact opposite to Whitlam's conception of positive equality which emphasised providing state services. Furthermore, many proponents of neoliberalism melded their economic views with socially conservative ones. The need for specific women's policies or advisory units immediately came under threat. Increasingly, influential Liberal feminist women such as Beryl Beaufort, who held a number of key party roles as well as being convenor of the National Women's Advisory Council, had to fight rearguard actions against proposed cuts to services and advisory functions. For example, a number of women's advisory units were cut, with Beaufort and others only able to protect some; family allowances reduced in real value and some key areas of services, including the Community Health Program Funding of women's refuges, rape crisis and health centres, were handed back to state governments in 1981.<sup>143</sup> There had already been issues over the 1977 transfer

<sup>140</sup> M. Fraser, Prime Minister pre-budget consultations, Media Release, 22 February 1982. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00005756.pdf>. Accessed 22 January 2020.

<sup>141</sup> Sawer, *Women: The long march*, pp. 437–438.

<sup>142</sup> M. Sawer, From the ethical state to the minimal state: State ideology in Australia. *Politics*, 18(1), 1983, p. 28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00323268308401870>.

<sup>143</sup> Sawer, *Women: The long march*, pp. 434–443.

of the Women's Affairs Office out of Prime Minister and Cabinet and into the lowly ranked new Department of Home Affairs, resulting in the resignation of its head, Sara Dowse.<sup>144</sup> Dowse was scathing in her arguments that "women had been demoted" from a location where they had easy access to all cabinet submissions. Instead: "Half the population became the responsibility of the newly created Department of Home Affairs, of Mr Robert Ellicott, a junior minister whose other concerns include museums, archives, shipwrecks, external territories, arts and the Australian Capital Territory". Yet she pointed out that women were facing greater unemployment than men and a widening earnings gap amongst other issues.<sup>145</sup>

There was no progress on issues such as anti-sex discrimination legislation, despite Fraser's comments suggesting possible support in the 1975 election campaign, support from WEL, from the National Women's Advisory Council and from some key Liberal politicians.<sup>146</sup> WEL and Liberal women supporters did have some successes, for example fighting off conservative Liberal politicians' attempts to introduce income-splitting or family-unit taxation that would have tended to benefit male higher income earners while providing a disincentive for women to work.<sup>147</sup> They also saw off attempts to remove medical benefits funding from abortion services.<sup>148</sup> Anne Summers has written of the Fraser Years that "it is fair to say that this was a period in which very little was done to advance the equality project. In fact, considerable energy went into preserving what was already there".<sup>149</sup>

<sup>144</sup> Sawyer, *Sisters in suits*, p. 46; S. Dowse, Why I quit: How do women really rate with the federal government? *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 1 February 1978, p. 7. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/51603567>.

<sup>145</sup> Dowse, Why I Quit, p. 7.

<sup>146</sup> Sawyer, *Women: The long march*, pp. 440–441.

<sup>147</sup> Sawyer, *Making women count*, pp. 140–142.

<sup>148</sup> Sawyer, *Making women count*, p. 142.

<sup>149</sup> Summers, *The misogyny factor*, p. 33.

## CONCLUSION

While the Whitlam government acknowledged that it had not addressed all the issues raised by groups such as the Women’s Electoral Lobby, it claimed significant progress.<sup>150</sup> It had brought in major reforms to women’s pay and also to work conditions in the public service. Whitlam’s conception of positive equality had also played a major role in policy framing, facilitating the funding of key services for women. However, we have seen that, by the end of the Whitlam government’s period in office, the economic underpinnings of providing greater government services were increasingly questioned. Furthermore, the framing model had been one that was originally designed to address issues of class inequality. While it facilitated some improved services for women, there had not really been a major rethink of the government’s policy framework from a feminist perspective. While many feminists had been calling for a radical reimagining of the political framework, the Whitlam government had tried to incorporate gender equality within its traditional equality agenda, adding on rather than totally transforming the agenda. It was major progress but still not enough.

Both the relative success and prospective failures were therefore present in the Whitlam government policy from the start. Anne Summers, who remembered such excitement at the Whitlam government’s first steps towards achieving women’s equality wrote that “In the 1970s it seemed self-evident that the way to achieve equality was to remove the legal and other barriers that prevented women from participating fully in society”.<sup>151</sup> The Whitlam government had certainly taken significant steps in that direction, although Summers acknowledged that achieving such forms of equality had only ever been seen “as a short-term objective achievable principally through legislative and other government-supported measures that would be a mere stepping stone on the road to liberation” that would involve “a total transformation of society and

<sup>150</sup> C. Cameron, Answers to questions: Women’s electoral lobby, 6 November 1973. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 2873). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1973-11-06/toc\\_pdf/19731106\\_reps\\_28\\_hor86.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201973%2011%2006%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/hansard80/hansardr80/1973-11-06/toc_pdf/19731106_reps_28_hor86.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221970s%201973%2011%2006%22). Accessed 5 July 2023.

<sup>151</sup> Summers, *The misogyny factor*, p. 27.

of the roles of women and men".<sup>152</sup> Feminists had been expecting steady incremental advances not the "erratic progress" brought about partly by conservative Coalition governments.<sup>153</sup>

While some of Whitlam's speeches, albeit under the influence of advisers such as Elizabeth Reid, emphasised that a fundamental cultural rethinking was required, the true extent of this rethinking had not been fully grasped. While Whitlam's speeches reflected a recognition that improving the position of women could not be achieved by government actions alone and would require major cultural change, the government's perspectives overlooked some of the factors shoring up women's subordinate position. These included not just the economic advantages some businesses gained by exploiting female labour, but also the extent to which particular models of femininity and masculinity were implicated in identity formation and the forms of self-esteem attached to it. Feminist groups had long attempted to use a "consciousness raising" model to transform women's perspectives, however less thought was given to the implications for male self-esteem or how women would feel whose self-esteem was dependent upon having achieving the goals of traditional femininity from homemaking to childrearing to "catching" a suitable husband. More radical analyses, including Elizabeth Reid's, did recognise that women's subordination was related to gendered power relations. However, power is only part of the story, the other side of the story is constructions of forms of masculine and feminine self-esteem that are related to the socially approved performances of forms of masculinity and femininity, in other words, forms of gendered identity. In this respect, gender subordination may sometimes be experienced less as an open and explicit acknowledgement that power relations are occurring and more as an issue of self-esteem, including a sense of feeling good about oneself.<sup>154</sup>

Government policy is deeply implicated in identity formation, assuming and encouraging particular forms of citizen identity. One of the issues that therefore needs to be addressed is what forms of identity the Whitlam government was encouraging? On the one hand, the Whitlam government was itself a male-dominated government. On the

<sup>152</sup> Summers, *The misogyny factor*, p. 24.

<sup>153</sup> Summers, *The misogyny factor*, pp. 26–27.

<sup>154</sup> See further C. Johnson, Narratives of identity: Denying empathy in conservative discourses on race, class and sexuality. *Theory and Society*, 34(1), 2005, pp. 37–61. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4501713>.

other hand, the Whitlam government was arguing that women should have the choice of pursuing any career they wanted and that traditional male attitudes towards women should change. Challenges to traditional identities, including gender and racial/ethnic ones, were to haunt the Australian Labor Party many years later as John Howard mobilised a politics of identity against Labor that was explicitly designed to split the so-called Whitlam coalition that combined the workers movement and progressive social movements. These issues will be addressed in later chapters of this book.

The end of the Whitlam period had already seen a changing political economy as the Keynesian outlook that had supported a significant public sector and that had underpinned Whitlam's conception of positive equality began to be challenged. Those challenges had only increased during the Fraser years, when the combination of a rising neoliberalism and a growing social conservatism had stymied the momentum of the Whitlam years, despite some successes achieved by the women's movement, femocrats and liberal feminists within the Liberal Party.

Significantly Sara Dowse, who had resigned so forcefully during the Fraser years, has argued that the Fraser government had still not fully abandoned Keynesianism, citing measures such as its support for government-funded childcare rather than commercial centres. Rather, she argues, "it was the Hawke Labor government elected in 1983 that was wholly committed to the new economics" that we now know as neoliberalism.<sup>155</sup> It is to an analysis of that government, and the implications of its policy framing, that the discussion will now turn.

<sup>155</sup> Dowse, S. *Then, now and what might come: A writer's take*, p. 244.

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## CHAPTER 3

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# Labor's Economic Rationalism: Women Under the Hawke and Keating Governments (1983–1996)

## INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter analysed how the Whitlam Labor government introduced internationally innovative gender equality policies as a reforming social democratic government, albeit with limitations, particularly as Keynesian economics, with its support for public expenditures, waned. The Hawke and Keating governments were to be internationally innovative in a different way, as Australian social democracy became increasingly influenced by neoliberal ideology. The result was that a watered down, more socially inclusive form of neoliberal-influenced policy framing. It opened up some opportunities for women but also resulted in free market-influenced policies and forms of budget restraint that impacted very negatively on women. Nonetheless, it will be argued here that Labor's was a very different form of neoliberal policy framing from that experienced in other Anglosphere countries such as Thatcher's UK or Reagan's US. The government's policy framing was also more progressive than Tony Blair's New Labour despite influencing it. Australian Labor saw itself as showing the way for other social democratic governments, with Prime Minister Keating arguing that Australia was "in the vanguard of social and democratic progress... once more".<sup>1</sup> Keating was also to claim

<sup>1</sup> P. Keating, Speech at the Australian book publisher's awards, Sydney, 26 June 1992, p. 6. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00008557.pdf>. Accessed 21 January 2024.

that: “For many years, Australia has been an international pacesetter on status of women issues”.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, Labor’s achievements were taking place in the context of international advancements. Australia ratified the *International Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) in 1983 and was elected to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women from 1993–1996; Australian experts contributed to developing the draft *International Declaration on Violence Against Women* in 1991–1992 and Australia was also actively involved in the OECD Working Party on the role of women in the economy.<sup>3</sup> The government ratified *The International Labour Organisation Convention no. 156, Workers with Family Responsibilities* in 1990.<sup>4</sup> Keating proudly proclaimed in 1995 that: “The recently released United Nations Development Program report on women points to Australia as having one of the best records, ranking number six out of 130 countries on a range of criteria including women’s share of income and participation in education”.<sup>5</sup>

So what were the Hawke and Keating governments’ achievements in regard to women and what are the criticisms that can also be made of their policies and policy framing?

## ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND

Hawke came into office emphasising that: “Labor has a comprehensive women’s affairs policy, developed in recognition of the fact that Australian women do not yet experience total equality with men, or enjoy full participation in all aspects of our society”.<sup>6</sup> However, as Sara

<sup>2</sup> P. Keating, The Australian government’s commitment for the United Nations fourth world conference on women, Beijing, 29 August 1995, p. 2. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00009731.pdf>. Accessed 23 January 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Government, Office of the Status of Women (OSW), *Women: Shaping and sharing the future: The new national agenda for women 1993–2000*, 2nd edition, No. 92/22038. Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS), 1993, pp. 133–137.

<sup>4</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> Keating, The United Nations fourth world conference on women, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> B. Hawke, Federal Election Speech, 16 February 1983. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20240312141638/https://electionspeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/1983-bob-hawke>. Accessed 26 April 2024.

Dowse has noted, while the new political economy was already influencing women's affairs under Whitlam and Fraser, the neoliberal influence was far from uniform.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, for gender equality, the influence of neoliberalism was to increase under Hawke and Keating. Unlike in many other countries internationally, neoliberalism in Australia (and New Zealand) was largely implemented initially by Labor/Labour governments.<sup>8</sup> Hawke, and his Treasurer and successor as Prime Minister, Paul Keating, supported a programme of major public sector cuts, deregulation, corporatisation and privatisation, with Keating extolling the virtues of "free markets", although the measures did not go as far as those introduced by conservative governments overseas.<sup>9</sup>

Margaret Thatcher herself endorsed Keating's embrace of economic orthodoxy.<sup>10</sup> However, the Thatcher government's belief in small government, individualism, self-reliance, budget cuts and opposition to unions and social movements was to result in the stalling of Britain's gender equality measures' previous momentum (with the partial exception of some employment measures required by European Community decisions).<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile in the US, the neoliberal Reagan era was also characterised by an embrace of social conservatism and a hostility to many feminist equality agendas, along with market-friendly policies, a weakening of unions and attacks on welfare programmes, particularly for

<sup>7</sup> S. Dowse, Then, now and what might come: A writer's take. In M. Arrow (Ed.), *Women and Whitlam: Revisiting the revolution* (2023, p. 244). NewSouth Publishing.

<sup>8</sup> E. Humphrys, *How Labour built neoliberalism: Australia's accord, the Labour movement and the neoliberal project*. Brill, 2018; See also M. Pusey, *Economic rationalism in Canberra: A nation building state changes its mind*. Cambridge University Press, 1991; C. Johnson, *The Labor legacy: Curtin, Chifley, Whitlam, Hawke*. Allen & Unwin, 1989, pp. 92–108; F. G. Castles, R. Gerritsen, & J. Vowles, (Eds.), *The great experiment: Labour parties and public policy transformation in Australia and New Zealand* (1996). Auckland University Press.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., B. Hawke, Annual dinner of the confederation of Australian industry, Speech, Canberra, 29 November 1989, p. 4. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00007836.pdf>. Accessed 23 January 2023; P. Keating, Election speech, Bankstown, NSW, 24 February 1993. <http://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/1993-paul-keating?Highlight=Keating>. Accessed 24 January 2024.

<sup>10</sup> M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street years*. HarperCollins, 1993, p. 505.

<sup>11</sup> S. Bashevkin, Tough times in review: The British women's movement during the Thatcher years. *Comparative Political Studies*, 28(4), 1996, pp. 525–552.

groups such as single mothers.<sup>12</sup> Unlike Anglophone governments such as Thatcher's or Reagan's that combined neoliberal ideological influences with socially conservative ideological influences, the Australian Labor government was forging a version of neoliberalism influenced by a socially inclusive form of social democratic ideology. This framing allowed the government to justify some government policies/interventions on behalf of gender equality which a more restrictive form of neoliberalism would have opposed.

Furthermore, Australian Labor introduced its policies in consultation with the union movement rather than attacking unions. Accords negotiated with the unions were based on achieving wage restraint (and later real wage cuts) in return for providing a "social wage" of government benefits and services. Those benefits and services were means tested for eligibility to those on lower incomes, thereby facilitating budget cuts to benefits and services previously available to higher paid workers and the middle class. Government members later admitted that this advantaged business via paying lower wages and resulted in higher profits.<sup>13</sup> While neoliberal-influenced governments overseas critiqued so-called special interest groups, including unions and progressive social movements organising around race and gender, Hawke and Keating affirmed the role of such groups. Keating criticised Opposition leader Howard's opposition to consulting with "special interests". Keating argued that such groups, including the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), "represent almost every sector of the community" and affirmed that: "The Labor Government deals with interest groups, accords them status, learns from them, and

<sup>12</sup> F. Coste, "Women, Ladies, Girls, Gals...": Ronald Reagan and the evolution of gender roles in the United States. *Miranda [Online]*, 12, 2016, pp. 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.8602>; Z. Eisenstein, Liberalism, feminism and the Reagan state: The neoconservative assault on (sexual) equality. *Socialist Register*, 23, 1987, pp. 236–262. <https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5547>; M. J. Piore, A critique of Reagan's labor policy. *Challenge*, 29(1), 1986, pp. 48–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/05775132.1986.11471069>.

<sup>13</sup> Bob Hawke, quoted in P. Drum, ACTU-Labor accord that helped shape Australia is gone, but not forgotten. *ABC News*, 20 February 2018. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-02-20/hawke-whitlam-unions-historic-accord-revisited/9462332>. Accessed 24 January 2024; K. Beazley, Speech to the Australian sustaining prosperity conference, Melbourne Institute, 1 April 2005, p. 5. [http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/N4MF6/upload\\_binary/n4mf63.pdf](http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/N4MF6/upload_binary/n4mf63.pdf). Accessed 16 January 2024; C. Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*. Springer, 2019, pp. 119–120. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6299-6>.

acts in partnership with them” when bringing in social reforms.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the Hawke and Keating governments funded the WEL national office, with funding peaking at \$60,000 in 1993–1994.<sup>15</sup> Ministers responsible for the women’s portfolio such as Susan Ryan, Wendy Fatin and Rosemary Crowley had previously been active members of WEL. Thatcher and Reagan were also loath to acknowledge women’s social disadvantage, preferring to focus on individual choice.<sup>16</sup> Yet, Labor’s social democratic heritage meant that it was ready to recognise social disadvantaged groups and prepared to use government action to improve their position.

It was therefore a far less socially conservative and more socially inclusive form of neoliberalism than that experienced under Thatcher or Reagan. Indeed, it was also to prove more socially inclusive than that under the British Blair Labour government, elected a year after Australian Labor lost office and owing a number of policy debts to its Australian Labor predecessor.<sup>17</sup> The Hawke and Keating governments tended to emphasise issues of social diversity and inequality rather more than Blair, who often privileged an undifferentiated community.<sup>18</sup> Despite commitments to women’s equality, the Blair government’s framework “failed to fully comprehend the complex ways in which the neoliberal economic model itself creates and sustains gender inequality”.<sup>19</sup> As we shall see, Australian Labor was to encounter some similar economic framing issues, even if not to the same extent as the Blair government.

<sup>14</sup> P. Keating, Speech at the 1995 national social policy conference, UNSW Sydney, 7 July 1995, pp. 3–4. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00009662.pdf>. Accessed 23 January 2024.

<sup>15</sup> M. Sawyer, *Making women count: A history of the women’s electoral lobby*. UNSW Press, 2008, p. 108.

<sup>16</sup> M. Thatcher, General election press conference (“Scottish press conference”), 26 April 1979. <https://www.margarethatcher.org/document/104045>. Accessed 23 January 2024; Coste, Ronald Reagan and the evolution of gender roles in the United States, pp. 6–7.

<sup>17</sup> C. Johnson, & F. Tonkiss, The third influence: The Blair government and Australian Labor. *Policy and Politics*, 30(1), 2002, pp. 5–18. <https://doi.org/10.1332/0305573022501539>.

<sup>18</sup> T. Blair, *New Britain: My vision of a young country*. Fourth Estate, 1996, pp. 217–221; Johnson, & Tonkiss, The third influence.

<sup>19</sup> C. Annesley, F. Gains, & K. Rummery, Engendering politics and policy: The legacy of New Labour. *Policy & Politics*, 38(3), 2010, pp. 400–401. <https://doi.org/10.1332/030557310X521071>; T. Blair, *New Britain*, pp. 151–158.

## GENDER EQUALITY AND LABOR'S ECONOMIC RATIONALISM

For Keating “social justice and economic efficiency are not only generally compatible but generally complementary”.<sup>20</sup> For example, Labor believed that increasing women’s economic participation would benefit both business and labour, given that “in order to become internationally competitive, the Australian economy needs to utilise fully the abilities and skills of its total labour force, women and men”.<sup>21</sup> Australian Labor was prepared to use legislative means in ways that its conservative predecessor, the Fraser government, had not been in order to bring about such positive economic outcomes. The government’s sex discrimination and affirmative action bills were important steps in this regard.

## SEX DISCRIMINATION AND AFFIRMATIVE ACTION LEGISLATION

The Sex Discrimination Bill was intended to fulfil Australia’s obligations under the *International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women* as well as implementing the government’s own strongly stated belief:

that discrimination based on sex, marital status and pregnancy and discrimination involving sexual harassment cannot be tolerated in our society; and that in public life-work, education, accommodation, the provision of goods, facilities and services, the disposal of land, and the administration of Commonwealth laws and programs-any such discrimination should be unlawful and there should be a means of redressing discrimination where it occurs.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Keating, Speech at the 1995 national social policy conference, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> Australian Government, Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), Australian women’s employment strategy. Australian Government Publishing Service, 1988, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> S. Ryan, Sex discrimination bill 1983 (No. 2): Second reading speech, 29 November 1983. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (p. 2913). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/1983-11-29/toc\\_pdf/S%201983-11-29.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22chamber/hansards/1983-11-29/0117%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/1983-11-29/toc_pdf/S%201983-11-29.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22chamber/hansards/1983-11-29/0117%22). Accessed 24 January 2024.

Having an international agreement facilitated using the federal government's Constitutional external affairs power. Indeed, most federal anti-discrimination legislation in Australia has had to use this power given the lack of a bill of rights in the Australian Constitution.<sup>23</sup> However, sex discrimination legislation was a first step, requiring an individual to make a complaint. The government subsequently introduced affirmative action legislation that would require employers (albeit those with over 100 employees) to be more proactive in ensuring that there was not discrimination against women, once again arguing that this was in the employer's interest too<sup>24</sup>:

The Government is determined that women should be able to enter and compete in the labour market on an equal footing with men and that outdated prejudices or conventions should not prevent them from fully participating. Neither individual employers nor the nation can afford to waste the valuable contributions which women can, and do, make to our economy.<sup>25</sup>

Wendy Fatin, a future Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on Women, went somewhat further, claiming that the bill would challenge “organisational rules and regulations which were designed to accommodate to white Anglo-Saxon male expectations, lifestyles and career patterns”, while facilitating women's choice.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), Australian and Human Rights Treaties, Fact Sheet 7. AHRC, 2009. [https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/education/hr\\_explained/download/FS7\\_Australia.pdf](https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/education/hr_explained/download/FS7_Australia.pdf). Accessed 24 January 2024.

<sup>24</sup> S. Ryan, Questions without notice: Sex discrimination legislation, 9 November 1983. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (p. 2367). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/1983-11-09/toc\\_pdf/S%201983-11-09.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22chamber/hansards/1983-11-09/0050%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/1983-11-09/toc_pdf/S%201983-11-09.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22chamber/hansards/1983-11-09/0050%22). Accessed 24 January 2024; Sawyer, *Making women count*, p. 186.

<sup>25</sup> B. Hawke, Affirmative action (equal employment opportunity for women) bill 1986: Second reading, 19 February 1986. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 862). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansardr/1986-02-19/toc\\_pdf/H%201986-02-19.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221980s%201986%2002%2019%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansardr/1986-02-19/toc_pdf/H%201986-02-19.pdf;fileType=application/pdf#search=%221980s%201986%2002%2019%22). Accessed 24 January 2024.

<sup>26</sup> W. Fatin, Affirmative action (equal opportunity for women) bill 1986: Second reading, 9 April 1986. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 1930). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansardr/1986-04-09/toc\\_pdf/H%201986-04-09.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22chamber/hansardr/1986-04-09/0100%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansardr/1986-04-09/toc_pdf/H%201986-04-09.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22chamber/hansardr/1986-04-09/0100%22). Accessed 24 January 2024.

However, WEL was amongst the feminist groups complaining that, while there were reporting mechanisms in place, the legislation did not have strong teeth in terms of sanctions.<sup>27</sup> It was not until 1992 that then Prime Minister Keating was to introduce some of the sanctions that WEL had called for, namely that there would be no government assistance provided or government contracts awarded to companies that failed to comply with the Act. However, the government refused to extend the legislation to cover employers with fewer than 100 employees or to give the Affirmative Action Agency investigative teeth.<sup>28</sup> Despite its arguments that its legislation would be economically beneficial, there were limits as to how far the Labor governments were prepared to intervene in the market, particularly given the risk of antagonising employers. Consequently, criminal sanctions or firm quotas were also omitted amongst other deficiencies. Nonetheless, the government did take action in the public sector. From 1992, government departments had to report the appointment rate of women to committees and boards and women's appointments to the Senior Executive Service of the public service increased from 4.4% in 1984 to 13.3% in 1991.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, despite the government's legislative aims, there were also issues with other government policies in regard to women's employment, including attitudes towards part-time work and industrial relations.

### WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT: PART-TIME WORK AND CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

Government documents had initially expressed concern that so many women were working part-time.<sup>30</sup> Yet, by the period of the Keating government in the early 1990s, when Australia was facing a recession, government documents were encouraging women to take up part-time work to supplement the family income and even to support unemployed

<sup>27</sup> Sawyer, *Making women count*, pp. 186–187.

<sup>28</sup> Sawyer, *Making women count*, pp. 186–189.

<sup>29</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> DEET, *Australian women's employment strategy*, p. 2.



male wage earners.<sup>31</sup> However, one Keating-era document did see the development of permanent part-time work as preferable to casual employment.<sup>32</sup> Keating facilitated what Andrew Scott has termed “a one and a half breadwinner model which assumes a family structure of a male full-time worker and a female part-time worker”.<sup>33</sup>

The focus on part-time work suggested that childcare and other domestic responsibilities were still mainly women’s responsibility. Keating argued that the “double shift” of women both working and having domestic responsibilities “is not one that governments can arbitrate” although “there are things the Government can do to help women cope with their different roles”.<sup>34</sup> Noticeably, Keating did not urge men to take up more domestic and caring responsibilities in such statements. This is despite Wendy Fatin, the then Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women, having advocated making “it easier for men and women to successfully combine their jobs and their family responsibilities”.<sup>35</sup> The 1993 National Agenda for Women, which Keating provided an opening message for, noted that women carried out about 70% of unpaid domestic labour in the home and that the percentage remained constant at an average 36 hours per week even when they had paid jobs. The agenda stated that women not only wanted their unpaid work valued more but the load shared “more fairly” with women wanting “the trend towards fathers taking and welcoming a shared role in family life” to be “accelerated”.<sup>36</sup> However, rather than addressing such disparities, Keating advocated improving carer’s leave provisions in industrial relations, assuming this worthwhile measure would largely be addressing the

<sup>31</sup> P. Keating, *Working nation: Policies and programs*. AGPS, May 1994, pp. 149–152; Committee on Employment Opportunities, *Restoring full employment: A discussion paper*. AGPS, 15 December 1993, p. 187. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/publications/tables/papers/HSTP03189\\_1993-95/upload\\_pdf/3189\\_1993-95.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/publications/tables/papers/HSTP03189_1993-95/upload_pdf/3189_1993-95.pdf). Accessed 5 February 2024.

<sup>32</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 43.

<sup>33</sup> A. Scott, *Northern lights: The positive policy example of Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway*. Monash University Publishing, 2014, p. 67.

<sup>34</sup> Keating, *The United Nations fourth world conference on women*, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> W. Fatin, Foreword. In OSW, *Juggling time: How Australian families use time*. AGPS, 1991, p. iii.

<sup>36</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 79.

needs of women.<sup>37</sup> He also suggested that the then new information and communication technologies could be used to increase opportunities for women to work at home, facilitating combining work and family responsibilities, and revealed that he had asked the National Information Services Council to advise regarding this.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the government hoped that the new technologies could be used to provide new areas of women's employment, despite the detrimental impacts of technology that will be discussed below.

## TECHNOLOGY AND WOMEN WORKERS

Carmen Lawrence, the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women, boasted to the UN Fourth World Conference of Women in 1995 that Australia was “the first country in the world to develop national strategy on women and the new information technologies”.<sup>39</sup> Small Business Minister Chris Schacht later announced that a Task Force on Women and Communications Technologies was “developing strategies to ensure that women have equal access to, and are involved in the development of infrastructure, hardware, software and content”.<sup>40</sup> As usual, there was a strong economic justification with Schacht arguing that “women are essential not only to the development of products, but as discerning consumers who can set profits soaring”.<sup>41</sup>

Yet, Hawke had noted in 1983 that technology was having a particularly negative impact on women's employment.<sup>42</sup> In particular, New Information Technology was impacting office jobs, such as typing.<sup>43</sup> In May 1985, a Women's Bureau, government commissioned report

<sup>37</sup> Keating, The United Nations fourth world conference on women, p. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Keating, The United Nations fourth world conference on women, p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> C. Lawrence, Presentation of Australia's national commitments to women, Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, 6 September 1995. <https://www.un.org/esa/gopher-data/conf/fwcw/conf/gov/950906225912.txt>. Accessed 28 April 2023.

<sup>40</sup> C. Schacht, Women taking the byte by storm, Media Release, 10 December 1995, p. 2. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/2VO20/uploader\\_data/2VO20.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/2VO20/uploader_data/2VO20.pdf). Accessed 25 January 2024.

<sup>41</sup> Schacht, Women taking the byte by storm, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Hawke, Election Speech.

<sup>43</sup> D. Cockroft, New office technology and employment. *International Labour Review*, 119(6), 1980, p. 697. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/intlrl19&i=703>.

also drew attention to the detrimental impact of technological change on women working in telecommunications and textiles and clothing as well as issues in broader industries, including the lack of recognition of women's skills.<sup>44</sup> The report's recommendations included suggesting that the government establish an appropriate advisory body for unions with women more involved in decision-making.<sup>45</sup> Ten years later, the Women in Science Engineering and Technology Advisory Group produced a 1995 discussion paper entitled *Women in Science, Engineering and Technology* (SET).<sup>46</sup> The Advisory Group noted a "repeated pattern" of "a range of behaviour by the men and boys who predominate in both the educational and employment settings of SET which had a consistently negative impact upon the girls and women wishing to enter, contribute to and progress through higher levels of SET education, training and employment".<sup>47</sup> The Advisory Group's description of this pattern, which they deemed "gender harassment", and the failure to acknowledge that it is men engaging in it, is worth quoting at length:

Common elements in this behaviour by men and boys is that it expresses a strong sense of masculine ownership of the whole area of SET, as an area of knowledge, as an area of study, as an area of research and as an area of employment. A second common characteristic of the behaviour is that it consistently emphasises solidarity and shared identity, values and interests between men and boys in such a way that it excludes, alienates, marginalises and isolates the girls and women who are, by definition, the outsiders. Thus women are referred to as being excluded, isolated and alienated but men are rarely acknowledged or described as actually doing anything which achieves this outcome. What we are left with is a mysterious and disembodied negative force.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Australian Government, Department of Employment and Industrial Relations (DEIR), *Women workers and technology bargaining*, contributed paper No. 2 by Penelope Giles. AGPS, 1985, pp. 54–55 & 142–143.

<sup>45</sup> DEIR, *Women workers and technology bargaining*, pp. 84, 148–149.

<sup>46</sup> Women in Science Engineering and Technology Advisory Group (WISSET), *Women in science, engineering and technology*, discussion paper. AGPS, May 1995. <https://www.engineersaustralia.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2017-01/WomenInScienceEngineering&Technology.pdf>. Accessed 11 August 2023.

<sup>47</sup> WISSET, *Women in science, engineering and technology*, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> WISSET, *Women in science, engineering and technology*, p. 3.

The discussion paper made a number of recommendations, including improvements to work conditions and selection and evaluation criteria in the higher education sector and government science agencies; improvements to technical and further education training; better gathering of statistical data; re-entry scholarships and top up and bridging courses for women who had been out of the workforce; a valuing of the benefits diversity can bring to the workplace; mentorship schemes; a greater focus on SET in reporting to the Affirmative Action Agency; equal representation of women on selection panels; the establishment of a Women in Science Engineering and Technology Unit.<sup>49</sup> The report also recommended exploring the possibility of affirmative action criteria for SET industry contract tenders.<sup>50</sup> It also suggested a major education and awareness campaign designed to address impediments and gender harassment.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately none of these measures were implemented before the government lost office and, as we shall see later, they were not to be progressed under the new Coalition government, given its attitudes not just to issues of gender equality but also its opposition to what was seen as too much government intervention in the economy and the affairs of business.

While Labor's economic policy framing had facilitated some reasonably positive developments in regard to women and employment, there were also some relatively negative developments, particularly in regard to women and industrial relations.

## WOMEN AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

At the same time as the government claimed to be supporting equity in the workforce, it was introducing neoliberal-influenced changes to industrial relations that would increase enterprise bargaining at the level of individual businesses and reduce the role of the Industrial Relations Commission, Australia's independent regulatory body, in setting wages and conditions as part of broad industrial award conditions. It was an approach designed to make industrial relations more market friendly

<sup>49</sup> WISET, Women in science, engineering and technology, pp. 17–41.

<sup>50</sup> WISET, Women in science, engineering and technology, p. 27.

<sup>51</sup> WISET, Women in science, engineering and technology, pp. 40–41.

and encourage international competitiveness by encouraging more direct bargaining between employers and employees.

Yet, Keating acknowledged the concerns of key women's organisations.<sup>52</sup> WEL argued that women often lacked the industrial strength to negotiate good agreements and also often worked in human services industries where it would be hard to prove productivity increases.<sup>53</sup> Feminists proved to be totally correct in their concerns that enterprise bargaining would disadvantage more vulnerable and less industrially strong sections of the workforce such as industries where women predominated.<sup>54</sup> As early as 1995, research was showing the gender pay gap rising and women being disadvantaged in negotiations over "flexibility" (that had been intended to benefit the balance of work and family caring responsibilities).<sup>55</sup> Indeed, as we shall see in Chapter 7, the Albanese government has had to try to address some of the long-term consequences of the disparities in women's wages that resulted. Facing feminist concerns, Keating promised to establish additional Working Women's Centres, initially in four states that did not at that time have one, to assist with issues such as enterprise bargaining and access to training.<sup>56</sup> However, while helpful in providing advice, there was little such centres could do to counter balance the structural power of employers in workplaces.

Indeed, the position of many women workers was even weaker because it was already apparent that the Whitlam government's attempts to ensure the better recognition of the value of women's work in female-dominated professions was not working adequately. In 1985, the Arbitration Commission (that preceded the Industrial Relations Commission)

<sup>52</sup> P. Keating, National agenda for women, Speech, Bankstown Town Hall, Sydney, 10 February 1993, p. 8. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00008815.pdf>. Accessed 25 January 2024.

<sup>53</sup> Sawyer, *Making women count*, p. 199.

<sup>54</sup> B. Pocock, Prospects for women under Labor and Coalition industrial relations policies. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review*, 6(2), 1995, pp. 234–251. <https://doi.org/10.1177/103530469500600205>; on the longer-term consequences, see M. Smith, Gender equity: The commission's legacy and the challenge for fair work Australia. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 53(5), 2011, pp. 647–661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002218561419617>.

<sup>55</sup> Pocock, Prospects for women under Labor and coalition industrial relations policies, pp. 237 & 241–243.

<sup>56</sup> Keating, National agenda for women, p. 9; Sawyer, *Making women count*, p. 200.

had rejected a nurses' case based on comparable worth that sought to challenge the historical undervaluing of nursing work compared with equivalently skilled male dominated jobs, although some success in increasing female nurses' pay was later achieved utilising discrepancies with a former higher male rate. Admittedly, flat rate increases for low-income earners had provided significant pay increases for some low-paid female workers.<sup>57</sup> However, the Accord process was also holding back equal pay, given that the Arbitration Commission did not proceed with comparable worth partly because it would challenge existing wage relativities, which had been generally frozen under the Accord.<sup>58</sup>

### SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE WORKPLACE

As we have seen, most issues affecting women had to be justified and framed in economic terms as well as social justice ones. This included sexual harassment in the workplace, which Wendy Fatin stated “can lead to absenteeism, low morale, a poor work environment and a consequent reduction in productivity”.<sup>59</sup> Such framing did not raise issues such as issues of male entitlement over women's bodies, the perceived need by some men to assert their masculinity in the workplace or power differentials between men and women. Nonetheless, it did demonstrate the ways in which the government's inclusive economic framing could also be used to raise some issues of great concern to women and to justify governments' addressing them. There were also other ways in which the government's economic frameworks could be used to justify providing services to women.

<sup>57</sup> National Women's Consultative Council of Australia (NWCC) & Labour Research Centre, *Pay equity for women in Australia*. AGPS, 1990, p. 11; M. Smith & G. Whitehouse, Wage-setting and gender pay equality in Australia: Advances, retreats and future prospects. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 62(4), 2020, pp. 539–544. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185620926220>.

<sup>58</sup> M. Sawer, Women: The long march through the institutions. In B. W. Head & A. Patience (Eds.), *From Fraser to Hawke: Australian public policy in the 1980s* (1989, p. 451). Longman Cheshire.

<sup>59</sup> W. Fatin, No place for sexual harassment, Media Release, 5 July 1990. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/HPR08022460/upload\\_binary/HPR08022460.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/HPR08022460/upload_binary/HPR08022460.pdf). Accessed 25 January 2024.

## PROVIDING SERVICES FOR WOMEN

The government's economic framework did provide a justification for funding government programmes for lower income earners, especially ones associated with encouraging women's workforce participation from childcare to training courses. Once again, the extent of support for providing government services marked a difference with Reagan's and Thatcher's governments. However, as we shall see, there were also tremendous costs as other services got cut back.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, from 1984, the Hawke government introduced a Women's Budget Program (later called Women's Budget Statements) that instructed departments "to provide a detailed account of the impact of their activities on women for a document circulated by the Prime Minister on Budget night".<sup>60</sup> As we shall see later, these budget documents did not adequately document the impact of neoliberal-influenced government policies on women, but they did indicate that improving the position of women was one of the government's economic aims. Indeed, the OECD has cited this Australian initiative as the pioneer of gender responsive budgeting internationally.<sup>61</sup> The Hawke government also gave the Office of the Status of Women the right to comment on Cabinet submissions (although the two-page "impact on women statements" on cabinet submissions was later replaced with a one-page document entitled "sensitivity/criticism").<sup>62</sup>

Consequently, the government was able to claim a number of achievements in regard to providing services for women. To give just some examples, in 1990, the government had established the National Committee on Violence Against Women (NCVAW) with a three-year budget of 1.35

<sup>60</sup> M. Sawyer, *Sisters in suits: Women and public policy in Australia*. Allen & Unwin, 1990, p. 228.

<sup>61</sup> R. Downes, L. von Trapp, & S. Nicol, Gender budgeting in OECD countries. *OECD Journal on Budgeting*, 16(3), 2017, p. 6. <https://www.oecd.org/gender/Gender-Budgeting-in-OECD-countries.pdf>; For a history of its establishment, influence and deficiencies, see further M. Costa & R. Sharp, Gender-responsive budgeting. In M. Sawyer, L. A. Banaszak, J. True, & J. Kantola (Eds.) *Handbook of feminist governance* (2023, pp. 138–149). Edward Elgar Publishing.

<sup>62</sup> A. Summers, *The misogyny factor*. NewSouth Publishing, 2013, p. 34; Sawyer, *Women: The long march*, p. 457.

million to examine legal, policy and programme issues and to undertake community education work.<sup>63</sup> The federal government had joined with state governments to establish 263 women's refuges/shelters and fund other domestic violence services.<sup>64</sup> The government also claimed increases in traineeships for women, with women constituting 69% of participants in the 9129 traineeship available through the Australian Traineeship scheme, although overall women received 42% of Department of Education, Employment and Training labour market programme places.<sup>65</sup> In 1990, the government also established the Women's Employment, Education and Training Advisory Group (WEETAG).<sup>66</sup> In 1992, the government launched a National Employment and Training Plan for Young Australians that included provisions to encourage young women into training.<sup>67</sup> Other assistance for young women included a Youth Social Justice Strategy with funding for young women suffering financial hardship and for those fleeing violence or sexual abuse.<sup>68</sup> The government also substantially increased family allowance and family allowance supplement payments and ensured that the payment went to the primary caregivers, which was usually the mother.<sup>69</sup> The government's national agenda acknowledged that women, particularly in single parent families or older women, were a disproportionate number of those who lacked appropriate housing or were facing financial hardship in paying for it and a state/federal Women's Housing issues Working Party reported to responsible ministers.<sup>70</sup> The government had substantially increased public housing.<sup>71</sup> Government policies had contributed to an increase in women covered by superannuation, from 36.5% in 1988 to 65.5% in

<sup>63</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 11.

<sup>64</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 11.

<sup>65</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 31.

<sup>66</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 31.

<sup>67</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 37.

<sup>68</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 37.

<sup>69</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 79.

<sup>70</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 89.

<sup>71</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 87.



1991,<sup>72</sup> although it was not mentioned that some of the increase in superannuation had come in lieu of wage rises under the Accords and women's specific superannuation problems were not mentioned.<sup>73</sup>

## CHILDCARE

The government also increased the number of federally funded childcare places from 46,000 in 1983 to 193,000 by 1990.<sup>74</sup> Spending on childcare increased from \$65 million in to just under \$440 million in 1992.<sup>75</sup> Rosemary Crowley, the then Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women, emphasised the significance of childcare initiatives being announced in the prime ministers' "major economic statement" for the 1993 election so that: "For the first time ever, child care was included among mainstream economic issues – not tagged a 'women's issue' or a 'welfare issue' but treated as a serious mainstream economic issue".<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, the announcement was far from the original women's movement demand of free 24 hour childcare for all (including women who were not employed) raised during the Whitlam years. Furthermore, as Brennan points out, during the Whitlam years, childcare funding by governments had been confined to not-for-profit providers, with government subsidies tied to the number of qualified staff (who were being paid award wages). In 1991, the Labor government embraced marketisation, extending government-subsidised fee assistance to those using private, for-profit services, also without tying it to levels of training or wage levels.<sup>77</sup> One result was that from 1991 to 1996 the provision of for-profit childcare rose by 233% from 36,700 to 122,462 places while the provision of not-for-profit places went from 39,567 to 45,601 places.<sup>78</sup> In Brennan's words: "The decision to extend public

<sup>72</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 105.

<sup>73</sup> See further D. Olsberg, *Still missing out: Women, superannuation and retirement income*, *Just Policy*, 1, 1994, pp. 45–49.

<sup>74</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 51.

<sup>75</sup> OSW, *Women: Shaping and sharing the future*, p. 51.

<sup>76</sup> R. Crowley, Speech to the women's electoral lobby, 26 May 1993, pp. 1–2. Typescript in possession of author.

<sup>77</sup> D. Brennan, The ABC of child care politics. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 42(2), 2007, p. 214. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1839-4655.2007.tb00050.x>.

<sup>78</sup> Brennan, *The ABC of child care politics*, p. 215.

subsidies to users of private, for-profit care rather than to expand the supply of non-profit care took place in the context of a broader shift towards the ‘marketisation’ of human services including health, education, aged care and employment services”.<sup>79</sup> It also represented a shift in economic framing from Whitlam’s conception of “positive equality” which assumed that workers needed government and community-based services precisely because they could not use their income to purchase adequate services in the market, to a neoliberal model in which private capital plundered state resources via governments’ subsidising market provision. Furthermore, the funding model restrained government expenditure per childcare place and involved a significant rise in the costs that parents, including low-income parents, were expected to pay.<sup>80</sup>

### SERVICES FOR INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND WOMEN FROM A NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING BACKGROUND

The Hawke and Keating governments also developed a more inclusive neoliberal framing when it came to issues of race and ethnicity that had some positive implications for migrant women from a Non-English Speaking Background (NESB as women from non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds were characterised then) and also for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. While socially conservative neoliberals such as Margaret Thatcher in the UK saw cultural difference as potentially threatening, Keating saw it as economically advantageous.<sup>81</sup> Keating argued that “multiculturalism also makes good economic sense” because “industry is better able to develop and locate export markets because our entrepreneurs, managers and workers bring to the task invaluable knowledge, understanding and skills from their various countries of origin”.<sup>82</sup> Similarly Robert Tickner, while Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, argued that there

<sup>79</sup> Brennan, *The ABC of child care politics*, p. 215.

<sup>80</sup> Sawyer, *Women: The long march*, p. 450.

<sup>81</sup> J. Bourne, “May We Bring Harmony”? Thatcher’s legacy on “Race”. *Race & Class*, 55(1), 2013, pp. 87–91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396813489247>; A. M. Smith, *New right discourse on race and sexuality: Britain, 1968–1990*. Cambridge University Press, 1994.

<sup>82</sup> P. Keating, Common values the cement that preserves our diversity, *The Weekend Australian*, 8–9 April 1995, p. 31.

would be “a rapid growth in Indigenous business and economic development opportunities” given that the Labor government’s emphasis on reconciling Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians had contributed to a greater appreciation of Indigenous culture with benefits for the arts industry and tourism, while the government’s land rights legislation would encourage negotiation over mining leases.<sup>83</sup> Such comments indicated a broader friendly, rather than hostile, context within which it was possible to facilitate policies that benefited women from a range of backgrounds.<sup>84</sup>

For example, in 1989, the government established a combined federal and state governments’ Council on Non-English Speaking Background Women’s Issues which, amongst other measures, developed a Women’s Health Strategy for NESB women.<sup>85</sup> The government tried to ensure that NESB women had suitable language access to knowledge of government benefits and services, including resources for women experiencing domestic violence. There was also an acknowledgement that the skills NESB women had acquired prior to coming to Australia needed to be better recognised.<sup>86</sup>

The government had also set up the Aboriginal Women’s Task Force to consult with Aboriginal women regarding their needs. The resulting report was “the first of its kind for government”.<sup>87</sup> The report identified issues of lack of information, self-determination, housing, education, health, care of children and employment, legal aid, land rights and broader, interrelated, cultural issues as being of particular importance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. The report emphasised that

<sup>83</sup> R. Tickner, Prediction of rapid growth of Indigenous business opportunities, Media Release, 14 August 1995, p. 1. [http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/0SE20/upload\\_binary/0SE20.pdf](http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/0SE20/upload_binary/0SE20.pdf). Accessed 1 April 2018.

<sup>84</sup> For a critique of Labor’s attitudes towards the marketisation of difference, see C. Johnson, *Governing change: Keating to Howard*. University of Queensland Press, 2000, pp. 24–37. [http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/eserv/UQ:195374/JQ4031\\_J64\\_2000.pdf](http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/eserv/UQ:195374/JQ4031_J64_2000.pdf); Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*, pp. 32–38, 61–62, 66–69, 118–121 & 152–153.

<sup>85</sup> OSW, Women: Shaping and sharing the future, p. 61.

<sup>86</sup> OSW, Women: Shaping and sharing the future, pp. 62–66.

<sup>87</sup> OSW & Aboriginal Women’s Task Force, Women’s business: Report of the Aboriginal Women’s Task Force. AGPS, p. vi. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/publications/tabledpapers/HSTP03387\\_1985-86/upload\\_pdf/3387\\_1985-86.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/publications/tabledpapers/HSTP03387_1985-86/upload_pdf/3387_1985-86.pdf). Accessed 25 January 2024.

both men and women had responsibility for caring for children in traditional society and that the role of women had been highly respected.<sup>88</sup> The report documented contemporary Indigenous disadvantage, noting that 22.1% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women were unemployed compared with 6.8% of “all Australian” women, that only 3.4% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women had post-school qualifications compared with 17.1% of “all Australian” women, and that they consistently earned far less than “all Australian women”.<sup>89</sup> The report also emphasised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women had important custodial roles in regard to caring for land and that it was crucial they be consulted as well as men—an issue that we saw previously was also raised during the Whitlam period.<sup>90</sup>

Nonetheless, Peggy Brock has raised issues about whether Indigenous women were adequately taken into account in the government’s 1993 land rights legislation.<sup>91</sup> The 1986–1987 *Women’s Budget Program* admitted that while women played an “important part” in consultations: “The programs developed in response to this advice are of major benefit to Aboriginal women and their children although very few are specifically directed to Aboriginal women”.<sup>92</sup> The specific measure mentioned was accommodation provision for supporting mothers and children in hostels dedicated to that purpose.<sup>93</sup> Subsequent reports mentioned additional funding for workshops on domestic violence, and that the Aboriginal Employment Development policy encouraged employment opportunities for Aboriginal women. It was hoped that the development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), which would both advise on and run some policy programmes, would further the position of

<sup>88</sup> OSW & Aboriginal Women’s Task Force, *Women’s business report*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>89</sup> OSW & Aboriginal Women’s Task Force, *Women’s business report*, pp. 135–137.

<sup>90</sup> OSW & Aboriginal Women’s Task Force, *Women’s business report*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>91</sup> P. Brock, *Aboriginal women, politics and land*. In P. Brock (Ed.), *Words and silences: Aboriginal women, politics and land* (1st ed., 2001, pp. 1–17). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003118435>.

<sup>92</sup> OSW, *Women’s budget program: An assessment of the impact on women of the 1986–87 budget*. AGPS, 1986, p. 11. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/publications/tabledpapers/HSTP03905\\_1985-86/upload\\_pdf/3905\\_1985-86.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/publications/tabledpapers/HSTP03905_1985-86/upload_pdf/3905_1985-86.pdf). Accessed 29 January 2024.

<sup>93</sup> OSW, *Women’s budget program*, pp. 13–14.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.<sup>94</sup> Yet, Megan Davis notes that not only were Aboriginal women underrepresented in ATSIC, it also demonstrably failed to address many of their needs.<sup>95</sup> Similarly Aileen Moreton-Robinson has suggested that ATSIC's male-dominated bureaucracy was more akin to white Australian culture than to traditional Aboriginal political structures in which women had played a far more significant role. Women's neglected needs included employment policy where gender disadvantage tended to be masked by a focus on racial disadvantage that could end up perpetuating gender inequality.<sup>96</sup> Furthermore, Robert Tickner, Minister for Indigenous Australians from 1990 to 1996, made remarkably few mentions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in his book on Indigenous policy issues.<sup>97</sup> Nonetheless, as already stated, the Hawke and Keating government's treatment of race was markedly different from other forms of Anglophone neoliberalism, not only from Thatcher's in Britain but also from Ronald Reagan's in the US. To give just one US comparison, Keating acknowledged the negative legacies of colonialism, including the children who had been stolen from Aboriginal mothers, by contrast Reagan had a history of demonising so-called African American single mother "welfare queens", whom, it was claimed, were ripping off American taxpayers.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>94</sup> For a succinct summary of ATSIC's general role and achievements, see A. Holland, Many claim Australia's longest-running Indigenous body failed. Here's why that's wrong. *The Conversation*, 24 July 2023. <https://theconversation.com/many-claim-australias-longest-running-indigenous-body-failed-heres-why-thats-wrong-209511>. Accessed 29 January 2024.

<sup>95</sup> M. Davis, ATSIC and Indigenous women: Lessons for the future. *Balayi: Culture, Law and Colonialism*, 10 November 2009. <https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/ielapa.201000213>.

<sup>96</sup> A. Moreton-Robinson, Masking gender and exalting race: Indigenous women and commonwealth employment policies. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 7(15), 1992, pp. 5–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.1992.9994640>.

<sup>97</sup> R. Tickner, *Aboriginal reconciliation*. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Studies Unit, University of Queensland, 1991.

<sup>98</sup> P. Keating, Australian launch of the international year for the world's Indigenous People, speech, Redfern, 10 December 1992, p. 3. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00008765.pdf>. Accessed 29 January 2024; C. H. Foster, The welfare queen: Race, gender, class, and public opinion. *Race, Gender & Class*, 15(3/4), 2008, p. 164.

## DETRIMENTAL IMPACTS OF GOVERNMENTS' ECONOMIC FRAMING

Despite the record of government service provision noted above, the government's neoliberal-influenced support for budgetary restraint and public sector cuts meant that funding for women's services frequently had to be fought for. In his 1991 Budget Speech, Keating boasted that "Commonwealth spending is now at its lowest level as a proportion of GDP since 1974, and in three years will be down to the level of the 1950s".<sup>99</sup> It was a far cry from the days when Whitlam had supported an expansion of the public sector as part of his aim of supporting "positive equality" discussed in Chapter 2. Furthermore, as Marian Sawer has pointed out, despite claims to the contrary, the government's class-based focus on tripartite consultations between government, business and labour often ended up excluding or downplaying the need to consult with women's organisations. Women's organisations were often excluded from economic decision-making.<sup>100</sup> Extraordinarily, WEL complained that the Affirmative Action legislation consultation process had involved business and unions but not women's organisations.<sup>101</sup>

Commentators at the time pointed out the sometimes disastrous implications of the Hawke and Keating governments' broader economic policy settings on women. For example, Rhonda Sharp and Ray Broomhill provided a detailed analysis of why the economic benefits of market-friendly policies, including deregulation, would not "trickle down" to ordinary Australians and especially women. Women particularly suffered from budgetary restraint that restricted welfare measures. Despite the:

apparent basic sympathy of the government towards improving women's position... the results of its policies have provided only limited benefits for women, in fact, some policies have actually worsened women's economic position, particularly for young women, low and middle income earners and those in poverty.... The influence of neo-liberal economic theory can

<sup>99</sup> P. Keating, Appropriation bill (No. 1) 1990–91: Second reading (budget speech), 21 August 1990. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 1154). Commonwealth of Australia.

<sup>100</sup> Sawer, *Women: The long march*, pp. 446–447.

<sup>101</sup> Sawer, *Making women count*, p. 186.

be perceived in a wide range of specific policies introduced by Labor that have been negative in their effects on the majority of women.<sup>102</sup>

Sawer has noted that, despite the Women's Budget Program, key government departments were reluctant to acknowledge that their broader economic settings had implications for women. For example, Treasury suggested that it would be difficult to assess the impact on particular groups of its macro-economic measures to reduce government expenditure as a proportion of GDP. Sawer describes this as "a remarkable claim given that policies of reducing public expenditure as a proportion of GDP (promoted by Treasury) have a well-known effect on women, who are disproportionately dependent on public expenditure for employment, services and income support".<sup>103</sup> Costa and Sharp have also noted the repeated failure to address the impact of macro-economic issues.<sup>104</sup> In addition, Sawer has documented multiple cuts to services that impacted detrimentally on women. These included cuts to public service staffing that impacted on the implementation of complaints procedures for the Sex Discrimination Act and the Public Service Reform Act; means testing of family allowances; cessation of widows' pensions and supporting parents' benefits once a child turned 16.<sup>105</sup> As was to be the case years later with the Gillard government's further reduction of the age limit, these changes were justified on the basis that they would encourage women out of welfare dependence but were introduced without adequate training packages or ensuring availability of appropriate jobs with good pay and conditions and that could be combined with caring responsibilities.

In this environment, measures benefiting women often had to be hard fought for by feminist ministers, backbenchers and femocrats and sometimes faced defeat. As Troy Bramston has noted of Susan Ryan:

Meetings of the Hawke cabinet were robust. Ryan was no shrinking violet and could be a tough and wily political operator. She supported the major economic reforms and pursued education and women's issues strongly. But

<sup>102</sup> R. Sharp & R. Broomhill, *Short-changed: Women and economic policies*. Allen & Unwin, 1988, p. 94.

<sup>103</sup> Sawer, *Women: The long march*, p. 452.

<sup>104</sup> Costa & Sharp, *Gender-responsive budgeting*, pp. 146–147.

<sup>105</sup> Sawer, *Women: The long march*, pp. 450 & 455–456.

when she asked for more money, she was routinely dismissed by finance minister Peter Walsh as “an unreconstructed Whitlamite”.<sup>106</sup>

Many femocrats were also expressing their concern at the constraints the dominant economic frameworks were imposing on them.<sup>107</sup>

## THE POLITICS OF MASCULINITY

The economic model framing often implied that outdated prejudices were holding back a modernising of an Australian economy which would benefit from increased women’s participation and this arguably contributed to a lack of consideration of gendered power relations.<sup>108</sup> Domestic violence was one of the few issues where feminist analyses of men’s power were still clearly articulated. For example, the Office of the Status of Women argued that: “Men’s violence against women is about power and control. Many men think they own women and that they have the right to control or dominate us by using violence”.<sup>109</sup> Politicians tended not to make such blunt statements. When launching the government’s education campaign against domestic violence, then Minister Rosemary Crowley emphasised the key message that “real men do not bash or rape women”, an argument that appealed strategically to a traditional view of men as protectors of women, as well as to a softer, gentler form of masculinity.<sup>110</sup> That argument was used later by social conservative prime ministers such as Tony Abbott. Meanwhile, Keating, while decrying the extent to which women surveyed feared violence and advocating measures ranging from coordinated responses to education

<sup>106</sup> T. Bramston, Susan Ryan held a Senate spot when a woman in power was rare. *The Australian*, 28 September 2020. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/susan-ryan-held-a-senate-spot-when-a-woman-in-power-was-rare/news-story/528d56dd93fb97f5988960240a45b3b5>. Accessed 8 February 2024.

<sup>107</sup> H. Eisenstein, *Inside agitators: Australian femocrats and the state*. Allen & Unwin, 1996, pp. 198–203 & 211.

<sup>108</sup> Hawke, Affirmative action (equal employment opportunity for women) bill 1986.

<sup>109</sup> OSW, Women: Shaping and sharing the future, p. 11.

<sup>110</sup> R. Crowley, Questions without notice: Violence against women, 16 November 1993. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (p. 2858). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/1993-11-16/toc\\_pdf/S%201993-11-16.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22chamber/hansards/1993-11-16/0008%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/1993-11-16/toc_pdf/S%201993-11-16.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22chamber/hansards/1993-11-16/0008%22). Accessed 29 January 2024.



campaigns, often avoided mentioning that it was largely men who were involved in violence against women.<sup>111</sup>

Insights like those of the Women in Science Engineering and Technology Advisory Group, mentioned earlier, that identified broader issues of masculine identity and behaviour by some men against women were even more few and far between. As we have seen, Keating had also failed to raise issues about men sharing more domestic labour and caring responsibilities. Australian feminists at the time had been well aware that some other countries internationally were taking a more proactive stance. For example, in 1992 a report arising from an international colloquium on Work/Care involving academics, activists and femocrats argued that there was “a pressing need right now to ‘shift the ground’ from the current concentration on women as the problem to men’s behaviour”.<sup>112</sup> In particular, many men needed to change their attitude to household labour. It was acknowledged that other governments had done more to encourage such behavioural change, including the Swedish government’s emphasis on generous paid parental leave for both partners, the provision of the opportunity to work a six-hour day with no loss of benefits until a child turned eight and the provision of 16 fully paid days to care for sick family members (although the report did note that women rather than men were more likely to take up these options, especially given lower female pay, and that Norway was considering some leave just for men at that time).<sup>113</sup> The report also advocated more radical measures such as a Basic Income, less gendered public sphere conceptions of workplace linear time and a shift from the “rationality of the market” to the “rationality of care”.<sup>114</sup>

The latter suggestions were ones which fell far outside the scope of Hawke and Keating’s economic rationalism, indeed, as we shall see, even the Albanese government, which is less economic rationalist and values

<sup>111</sup> Keating, The United Nations fourth world conference on women, p. 4.

<sup>112</sup> C. Bacchi, B. Thiele, J. Eveline, & J. Currie, *Shifting ground: The dialectics of work/care: An international colloquium held at the Australian National University, 6–8 July 1992*. Murdoch University, August 1992, p. 20.

<sup>113</sup> Bacchi, Thiele, Eveline, & Currie, *Shifting ground*, pp. 16–21. Australia only had unpaid parental leave at the time (and indeed for many years after), NWCC, International Labour Organisation Convention 156: workers with family responsibilities. AGPS for the NWCC, 1990.

<sup>114</sup> Bacchi, Thiele, Eveline, & Currie, *Shifting ground*, pp. 12–13.

care more, has tended to reconstruct issues in terms of workers in the care economy. Australia was not to have a national paid parental leave scheme until the Rudd/Gillard years.<sup>115</sup> Crucially, advocating the reconstruction of masculinity outside of market rationalities was also a step too far. Indeed, in so far as Keating did try to reconstruct masculinity, it tended to be at least partly market based. For example, Keating argued that some popular culture images of Australian masculine identity, such as “yobs” who put “shrimps on the barbecue”, needed to be replaced with more sophisticated images that would facilitate Australia succeeding in the global economy (including the scientific and cultural economy), as well as in international tourism.<sup>116</sup> Despite arguing that Australia’s world leading women’s policies should be part of Australia’s international image, Keating did not suggest broader changes to the image of Australian males.<sup>117</sup> He claimed that Mervat Tallaway, the chair of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, had stated that Australia was a model internationally in regard to its policies for women, with no other country performing better and perhaps only being equalled by the Scandinavian countries, but without mentioning some of the Scandinavian policies in regard to the sharing of parenting and caring responsibilities that have been mentioned earlier.<sup>118</sup>

Furthermore, Keating’s own alpha maleness was frequently on display when he belittled the masculinity of his opponents, as when he said of a speech by Opposition leader John Hewson that it: “was the limpest performance I have ever seen ... It was like being flogged with a warm lettuce. It was like being mauled by a dead sheep”.<sup>119</sup> Keating depicted

<sup>115</sup> For a more detailed explanation of the failure to introduce such policies than can be given here, see D. Brennan, Australia: The difficult birth of paid maternity leave. In S. B. Kamberman & P. Moss (Eds.), *The politics of parental leave policies: Children, parenting, gender and the labour market* (2009, pp. 15–32). Policy Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt9qgmq0.7>.

<sup>116</sup> P. Keating, Interview with Susan Mitchell, Radio 5AN, 29 June 1992, pp. 6–7. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00008560.pdf>. Accessed 31 January 2024.

<sup>117</sup> Keating, Interview with Susan Mitchell, p. 7.

<sup>118</sup> P. Keating, Speech at the Australian book publisher’s awards, Sydney, 26 June 1992, p. 4. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00008557.pdf>. Accessed 21 January 2024.

<sup>119</sup> P. Keating, Motion: Tax cuts and family assistance, 31 October 1989. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 2134). Commonwealth

himself as the strong leader who would make tough decisions that would transform the Australian economy to make it internationally competitive. Although some MPs suggested that the parliamentary culture was changing in regard to masculinity with former Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women Margaret Reynolds claiming that: "Women are now seeing that that male culture is lessening in impact. It is changing, it is adapting".<sup>120</sup> Those changes included the ALP adopting a quota in 1994 that aimed to achieve 35% of women MPs by 2002. However, Reynolds admitted the change was less apparent with respect to Question Time which remained highly aggressive.<sup>121</sup> Significantly, in terms of issues that were to arise prominently during the Morrison period, she also argued that the cultural change and processes put in place meant that prominent women MPs were no longer receiving the type of complaints about sexual harassment they had received previously.<sup>122</sup>

However, the cultural change was especially partial when it came to challenging heteronormative conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

### SAME-SEX ISSUES

One category of women was to be relatively neglected by Labor, namely women in same-sex relationships. Labor had not yet fully progressed from seeing same-sex relationships as a morality issue to seeing them as an equality issue. This is not to suggest that Labor made no progress. Complaints of discrimination on the basis of sexual preferences could be made to the Human Rights Commission and would have been covered under the government's proposed (but unsuccessful) Human Rights Bill

of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansardr/1989-10-31/toc\\_pdf/H%201989-10-31.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansardr/1989-10-31/toc_pdf/H%201989-10-31.pdf). Accessed 31 January 2024. For a more detailed analysis of Hawke and Keating's use of identity, including their masculinity, see C. Johnson, Other times: Thatcher, Hawke, Keating and the politics of identity. In G. Stokes (Ed.), *The politics of identity in Australia* (1997, pp. 37–49). Cambridge University Press.

<sup>120</sup> M. Reynolds, Women, pre-selection and merit: who decides? *Papers on Parliament*, 27: *Reinventing Political Institutions*, March 1996, pp. 31–47. [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Senate/Powers\\_practice\\_n\\_procedures/~/~/~link.aspx?id=DB87E15C703242179906EACC1253891C&z=z](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Senate/Powers_practice_n_procedures/~/~/~link.aspx?id=DB87E15C703242179906EACC1253891C&z=z). Accessed 28 August 2020.

<sup>121</sup> Reynolds, Women, pre-selection and merit. [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Senate/Powers\\_practice\\_n\\_procedures/~/~/~link.aspx?id=DB87E15C703242179906EACC1253891C&z=z](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Senate/Powers_practice_n_procedures/~/~/~link.aspx?id=DB87E15C703242179906EACC1253891C&z=z). Accessed 28 August 2020.

<sup>122</sup> Reynolds, Women, pre-selection and merit.

with the consent of the Attorney General.<sup>123</sup> Gays and lesbians were allowed to serve in the military. Limited rights for same-sex partners to migrate were introduced in the “interdependency” provisions in the immigration laws.<sup>124</sup> There was particular progress made in terms of gay men and the AIDS pandemic. Australia introduced innovative policies that included the gay male community in influencing health policy rather than being demonised.<sup>125</sup> However, Labor backtracked quickly on initial suggestions that same-sex relationships could be included in definitions of the family.<sup>126</sup> Keating bemusedly dismissed a suggestion of an equivalent to paid maternity leave for same-sex families with children.<sup>127</sup> When asked about recognising same-sex relationships, Keating responded: “I have my own personal and social views on this issue, but this is not a matter for government policy. We do not make laws governing these things in Australia”.<sup>128</sup> In other words, same-sex relationships were seen

<sup>123</sup> G. Evans, Answers to questions: Homosexual rights, 5 December 1985. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (p. 3110). Commonwealth of Australia.

[https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/1985-12-05/toc\\_pdf/S%201985-12-05.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/1985-12-05/toc_pdf/S%201985-12-05.pdf). Accessed 31 January 2024.

<sup>124</sup> R. Ray, Motion for disallowance: Migration regulations, 5 June 1991. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (p. 4348). Commonwealth of Australia.

[https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/1991-06-05/toc\\_pdf/S%201991-06-05.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/1991-06-05/toc_pdf/S%201991-06-05.pdf). Accessed 31 January 2024.

<sup>125</sup> G. Willett, *Living out loud: A history of gay and lesbian activism in Australia*. Allen & Unwin, 2000, pp. 174–175; G. Dowsett, Governing queens: Gay communities and the state in contemporary Australia. In M. Dean & B. Hindess (Eds.), *Governing Australia: Studies in contemporary rationalities of government* (1998, p. 149). Cambridge University Press.

<sup>126</sup> A. Theophanous, Childcare rebate bill 1993: Consideration of Senate message, 17 December 1993. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (pp. 4355–4356). Commonwealth of Australia.

[https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansardr/1993-12-17/toc\\_pdf/H%201993-12-17.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansardr/1993-12-17/toc_pdf/H%201993-12-17.pdf). Accessed 31 January 2024.

<sup>127</sup> P. Keating, Interview with Spencer Howson, Radio 4RK, Rockhampton, 19 July 1994, p. 7. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00009282.pdf>. Accessed 31 January 2024.

<sup>128</sup> M. Kingston, Keating avoids taking a stand. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 June 1995, p. 8.

as a private matter in a way totally different from heterosexual relationships, given that numerous pieces of government legislation recognised those relationships, both married and de facto.<sup>129</sup>

In short, the conceptions of gender equality being used were still overwhelmingly heteronormative. Nonetheless, there were some attempts to address issues of same-sex rights and the discourse was not as actively homophobic as, for example, Margaret Thatcher's in Britain.<sup>130</sup> Once again, Labor's policies were more inclusive than many of its Anglophone counterparts, but not quite as inclusive as they could have been.

## CONCLUSION

The experience of the Hawke and Keating governments therefore had some positive outcomes for women. Nonetheless, there were also significant problems with the way in which the neoliberal-influenced framing of government economic policy, and gender equality policy within that broader framing, was impacting on women.

Despite criticisms feminists made of Hawke and Keating government policy, feminists at the time rightly identified that the growth of social conservatism within the Liberal Party would pose a far greater threat to women. Indeed, they feared that just as the UK was coming out of a period of conservative rule with detrimental impacts for women, Australia was about to go into one.<sup>131</sup> Despite support by Liberal moderates, key conservative Liberals had already opposed the government's sex discrimination and affirmative action legislation amongst other measures.<sup>132</sup> Feminists within the Liberal Party, such as Dame Beryl Beaurepaire who had done so much to protect, and sometimes advance, women's policy under the Fraser government, were increasingly concerned. After the 1993 Liberal election loss, under John Hewson's leadership, Beaurepaire had argued that "the Liberal Party has got to change and not expect the women to be doing the tea and cakes stuff and have them in the

<sup>129</sup> For a more detailed analysis of government policy towards same-sex relationships during this period, see Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*, pp. 87–91.

<sup>130</sup> Smith, *New right discourse on race and sexuality*.

<sup>131</sup> Sawer, *Women: The long march*, pp. 457–458; C. Johnson, Negotiating the politics of inclusion: Women and Australian Labor governments 1983–1995. *Feminist Review*, 52, Spring, 1996, p. 114. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395776>.

<sup>132</sup> Sawer, *Sisters in suits*, pp. 217–221.

policy-making areas more”.<sup>133</sup> Beaurepaire suggested that women were now having less input into policy, not just than during the Fraser years but also than during the Conservative Menzies years and stated that she knew a number of women who had deserted supporting the Liberal Party because they believed “Labor has done more for women and accepted the changing role of women more”.<sup>134</sup> Keating had in fact given “an extra special note of thanks to the women of Australia who voted for us believing in the policies of this government” in his 1993 election victory speech.<sup>135</sup> However, far from taking Beaurepaire’s advice, the Liberal Party was to embrace more socially conservative views on women under the future leadership of John Howard, with major implications for policy framing.

Many potential Labor policies were stymied as a result. For example, the year after Labor’s 1996 defeat by Howard, Democrat Senator Natasha Stott Despoja asked what had happened to the WISET group’s discussion paper *Women in Science, Engineering and Technology*. Senator Parer, the Minister representing the Minister for Science and Technology, responded that while the paper had included useful information regarding the issues facing women, “the paper’s recommendations are more relevant to the outlook of the previous government”, and that the current government’s aim was “to create a broad, positive environment in which all Australians have the maximum opportunity to achieve their potential”.<sup>136</sup> Parer’s comments signalled a different framing of gender equality issues and the measures that should be taken to address them, and it is to a discussion of that framing that the discussion will now proceed.

<sup>133</sup> G. Hughes, Liberals lose women with tea and cakes. *The Australian*, 17 March 1993, pp. 1 & 4.

<sup>134</sup> Hughes, Liberals lose women with tea and cakes.

<sup>135</sup> P. Keating, Victory speech: “True Believers”, 1993 Federal Election, Bankstown Sports Club, Sydney, 13 March 1993. <http://www.paulkeating.net.au/shop/item/victory-speech-true-believers---13-march-1993>. Accessed 31 January 2024. For example, an AGB McNair poll at the time suggested Labor had a 54 to 38 % lead in support over the Coalition, F. Carruthers, Women claim rewards for their vote. *The Australian*, 17 March 1993, p. 5.

<sup>136</sup> W. Parer, Questions on notice: Women in science, engineering and technology, 24 March 1997. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (p. 2341). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/1997-03-24/toc\\_pdf/S%201997-03-24.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/1997-03-24/toc_pdf/S%201997-03-24.pdf). Accessed 31 January 2024.

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## CHAPTER 4

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# Defending the Mainstream, Women and Neoliberalism Under the Howard Government (1996–2007)

### INTRODUCTION

The 1996 Australian election saw the defeat of the Keating government and John Howard becoming Prime Minister of a Liberal-National Coalition government.<sup>1</sup> The previous chapter has argued that the Hawke and Keating period had continued key aspects of Labor's gender equality trajectory, despite the detrimental impacts of neoliberal influences on women. In particular, Labor's social democratic traditions had facilitated the government recognising social disadvantage and the need for government to introduce measures designed to increase gender equality. Consequently, the Labor government had introduced measures such as its Sex Discrimination legislation and Affirmative Action legislation. Meanwhile, the "social wage" component of Labor's agenda had also justified the funding of various women's services, even if this was often inadequate. Labor's recognition of inequality also legitimated consulting with the social movement organisations that were advocating for disadvantaged groups, as well as frequently funding them. These factors had limited the impact of neoliberal influences, despite that impact still being significant. Consequently, as argued in the last chapter, while Australia was behind other countries in some respects (for example, when compared

<sup>1</sup> For an explanation of the election outcome, see C. Bean, S. Bennet, M. Simms, & J. Warhurst (Eds.), *The politics of retribution: The 1996 federal election*. Allen & Unwin, 1997, especially chapter by M. Sawyer, A defeat for political correctness.



with Nordic parental leave measures), overall, it still ranked relatively highly in terms of gender equality policy internationally. Australia had also pioneered early innovations, such as its Women's Budget Programs/Statements.

While social democratic influences were obvious, some of these Labor measures were also not incompatible with forms of social liberalism that had once influenced the Liberal Party.<sup>2</sup> However, as we saw in the last chapter, the Liberal Party was becoming not only more neoliberal but also more socially conservative, despite the efforts of social liberal feminists within the party. Consequently, the Liberal Party had opposed Labor's Sex Discrimination and Affirmative Action legislation. While Liberal leaders such as Andrew Peacock and John Hewson had been somewhat less socially conservative on women's issues, John Howard had proudly embraced conservative traditions.<sup>3</sup> It will be argued in this chapter that Howard's version of neoliberalism also positively embraced UK and US influenced neoliberal arguments that so-called elite, politically correct special interests had been ripping off taxpayers. Unfortunately for issues of gender equality that categorisation included feminist organisations. Howard was also to embrace US-influenced family values and religious right style arguments which were to see specifically women's issues mentioned less as Coalition MPs increasingly emphasised the family, with women frequently disappearing into it as a result.<sup>4</sup> Howard's arguments regarding elite politically correct special interests were also to apply to Indigenous and multicultural organisations with detrimental effects on particularly vulnerable groups of women. Unions were also targeted under the neoliberal agenda with detrimental implications for women on low incomes and with poor working conditions. Australia was soon to forfeit any claim to being a world leader in regard to innovations in gender equality policy. Above all, Howard claimed to represent "mainstream" Australians and it became increasingly apparent that that term

<sup>2</sup> M. Sawyer, *The ethical state?: Social liberalism in Australia*. Melbourne University Press, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> C. Johnson, *Governing change: Keating to Howard* (1st ed.). University of Queensland Press, 2000, pp. 74–87. Public access e-book version available at [http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/eserv/UQ:195374/JQ4031\\_J64\\_2000.pdf](http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/eserv/UQ:195374/JQ4031_J64_2000.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> On the increasing influence of the religious right in Australian politics see M. Maddox, *God under Howard: The rise of the religious right in Australian politics*. Allen & Unwin, 2005.

included Australians with socially conservative attitudes on race, ethnicity and gender and excluded others who were deemed to be suffering from “political correctness”.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, women’s position in society was largely framed as a matter of individual choice rather than social disadvantage or discrimination. Feminists were therefore to face a very hostile environment with Anne Summers, former head of the Office of the Status of Women under Labor and also an advisor to Paul Keating, writing in 2013 that: “A bitter lesson of the past forty years has been the realisation that we have not been able to guarantee that a reform will be permanent. It did not occur to us back then that a hard-won reform could actually be reversed, repealed”.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, Howard’s attitude to gender equality was part of his broader electoral strategy which attempted to drive a wedge between Labor and its heartland working-class base by suggesting that Labor was supporting politically correct elite issues while he was supporting the “mainstream”, including “battlers”. It was a perverse mimicking of class-based arguments about exploitation in which exploitation was depicted as occurring not in the capitalist labour market but at the level of the state via, for example, so-called elite feminist or Aboriginal “industries” ripping off taxpayers.<sup>7</sup> Perverse it might be but it was an electoral strategy that was to help keep Howard in office for eleven years.<sup>8</sup> Howard’s position, on issues ranging from emphasising individual choice and rejecting social disadvantage to minimising the public sector and government intervention in the economy, involved a very different framing of gender equality policy from that of his more immediate predecessors.

<sup>5</sup> J. Howard, Sir Thomas Playford memorial lecture, Speech, Adelaide Town Hall, Adelaide, 5 July 1996. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-10041>. Accessed 8 April 2024; Johnson, *Governing change*, pp. 38–54.

<sup>6</sup> A. Summers, *The misogyny factor*. NewSouth Publishing, 2013, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> For a broader analysis of this strategy, that goes beyond gender, see Johnson, *Governing Change*, pp. 39–56 & 161–173.

<sup>8</sup> I have discussed Howard’s electoral strategies in more depth in C. Johnson, The ideological contest: Neo-liberalism versus New Labor. In M. Simms & J. Warhurst (Eds.), *Mortgage nation: The 2004 Australian election* (2005, pp. 45–53). API Network; C. Johnson, The 2001 election campaign: The ideological context. In M. Simms & J. Warhurst (Eds.), *2001: The centenary election* (2002, pp. 33–40). University of Queensland Press; C. Johnson, John Howard and the mainstream. In M. Simms & J. Warhurst (Eds.), *Howard’s agenda: The 1998 election* (2000, pp. 18–24). University of Queensland Press.

## HOWARD'S PROGRAMME: THE BACKGROUND

Howard's socially conservative position on women's issues had long been apparent and was closely related to his attitude on the family. Howard had helped shape the Liberal's 1988 *Future Directions* document during his first period as Leader of the Opposition, which referred to the increasing "opportunities" for women to work but also to them being "forced by the economic pressures on families to do so".<sup>9</sup> The family was depicted as "the prime source of individual security" which was now under attack by social and economic change and Labor government policies.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, during his second period as Leader of the Opposition in 1995, Howard argued that "protecting and strengthening the family unit is the key to maintaining social cohesion and economic stability in the future. A stable functioning family provides the best welfare support system yet devised".<sup>11</sup> The implication was that the family was also a haven of security in a fast-changing world. As we shall see, women were to all too often to disappear within the family in Howard's conceptions. As well, the suggestion that the family is the best welfare support system has echoes of older family wage conceptions in which a male wage-earner head of household would support dependants. It also suggests that the family—that is mainly women—would play a key role in supporting those who needed caring for, rather than the state. Howard's social conservatism therefore reinforced neoliberal arguments against state support, suggesting that Howard could protect voters from social change while embracing a market-driven philosophy of economic change.

Nonetheless, Howard denied that his government was opposed to mothers working, arguing that it was a matter of parental choice whether a mother—or even a father—decided to stay home to look after their children and that governments should not interfere with that choice. However, he derided the claimed "stridency of some of the ultra-feminist

<sup>9</sup> Liberal Party of Australia & National Party of Australia (LPA & NPA). *Future directions: It's time for plain thinking*. LPA & NPA, 1988, p. 6. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/partypol/1104219/upload\\_binary/1104219.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/partypol/1104219/upload_binary/1104219.pdf). Accessed 28 January 2024.

<sup>10</sup> LPA & NPA, *Future directions*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> J. Howard, *Fair Australia: John Howard headland speech*, Australian Council of Social Service, Sydney, 13 October 1995, p. 8. Typescript, Electronic version available at <https://australianpolitics.com/1995/10/13/fair-australia-howard-headland-speech.html>. Accessed 13 December 2023.

groups in the community who sort of really demand that every mother be back in the workforce as quickly as humanly possible”.<sup>12</sup> Stay-at-home mothers were depicted as those being oppressed now. Howard argued that one should not replace “outdated” arguments of “some years ago” against working mothers which were “by and large, behind us”, with new attitudes “from some other sections of the community who seek to almost sneer at and treat as second class citizens those women who elect or, indeed, those men who elect to be full-time carers for their children at home”.<sup>13</sup> (Howard’s own wife Janette had given up teaching to raise the Howard children and support his career.) Elsewhere he said that “I think the ideal policy is to give all men and women an effective choice. Those who want one of the parents to be at home, normally but not always the mother, full-time while kids are young should be financially able to do so”.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, Howard suggested that the “normal” choice would be for the women to have major responsibility for children. Framing the issue as one of choice also enabled Howard to avoid suggesting, for example, that more men should play a role in childrearing and domestic labour, with Howard reverting to the argument that:

It is not the role of a government to dictate a stereotype. It is not the role of a government to say that you should or shouldn’t be in the workforce, that both parents should or shouldn’t be in the workforce when children are young. That is for parents to decide.<sup>15</sup>

Howard claimed that “some of the taxation changes we are making at the moment will make it a little easier... for them to exercise that choice”.<sup>16</sup> However, Howard was being disingenuous, in that government tax and benefits policy was shaping those choices, encouraging

<sup>12</sup> J. Howard, Interview with Alan Jones, 2UE, 16 March 1998. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-10678>. Accessed 18 December 2023.

<sup>13</sup> J. Howard, Opening address to the liberal women’s conference, speech, Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre, Brisbane, 13 March 1998. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-10896>. Accessed 18 December 2023.

<sup>14</sup> J. Howard, Radio Interview with Alan Jones, 2UE, 26 July 1999, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-11132>. Accessed 18 December 2023.

<sup>15</sup> Howard, Opening address to the liberal women’s conference.

<sup>16</sup> Howard, Radio interview with Alan Jones, 26 July 1999.

women to stay at home by providing a financial disincentive for them to work. Furthermore, the government's weak action on equal pay (primarily as we'll see providing information packages) contributed to women often earning less than men, thereby making a choice that women in heterosexual couples would stay at home more likely. In 1998, the same year Howard made his statement ostensibly supporting choice against "ultra-feminist groups", the government supported a tax package offering generous tax benefits to single-income families, thereby potentially discouraging some women from working. It also offered significant benefits to couples in which one parent, most likely the woman, appeared to be earning a relatively small income by working part-time (given the assumption of a 67%:37% income split).<sup>17</sup> By 2006, Harding and Vu were stating that, combined with \$28 billion spending on family benefits in the previous decade by the Howard government, the "effective tax rates are about 65c to 70c in the dollar" for many two-income families. This resulted in a very small financial benefit for both parents working that "may not be sufficient to cover additional costs of working, such as transport and child care. So it's not surprising if mothers facing this system decide to stay home".<sup>18</sup> Later in its period in office, the government paid single-income families \$2.6 billion per annum in non means-tested benefits that often benefited wealthy male-headed families. Yet it rejected Pru Goward's, their handpicked Sex Discrimination Commissioner's, proposal of government-funded paid maternity leave (costed at \$213 million per annum).<sup>19</sup>

Anne Summers, former head of the Office of Status of Women under the Labor government argued that:

<sup>17</sup> Australian Government, Department of the Treasury, Tax reform: Not a new tax, a new tax system: The Howard Government's plan for a new tax system. Commonwealth of Australia, August 1998. <https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-03/Whitepaper.pdf>. Accessed 10 April 2024.

<sup>18</sup> A. Harding & Q. N. Vu, Keeping mums out of paid work. *The Australian Financial Review*, 16 May 2006. <https://www.afr.com/policy/keeping-mums-out-of-paid-work-20060516-jffuj>. Accessed 18 December 2023.

<sup>19</sup> Goward's costings cited in, Goward delivers—But PM won't hug the baby. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 December 2002, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/goward-delivers-but-pm-wont-hug-the-baby-20021212-gdfyed.html>. Accessed 28 January 2024. See further A. Summers, *The end of equality: Work, babies and women's choices in twenty-first century Australia*. Random House, 2003, pp. 155–156.

The Howard government has made ruthless use of childcare, employment, family assistance and taxation policy to steer women with children out of the workforce and into fulltime motherhood, in the process imposing substantial financial penalties on mothers who continue to work.<sup>20</sup>

Summers particularly cited cuts to childcare, including abolishing operational subsidies for community-based centres, capping the Childcare Assistance Payment, stopping indexing it and changing its payment from being in advance to being in arrears. While childcare places expanded, the spending per place was reduced (for example, being less in 2001–2002 than in 1993–1994) despite rising operating and compliance costs, thereby contributing to fee increases.<sup>21</sup> The emphasis on marketisation of childcare centres also continued.<sup>22</sup> Academic commentators, such as Rhonda Sharp and Ray Broomhill agreed, arguing that policies, including the Baby Bonus (along with the Maternity Allowance that replaced it), “contained financial incentives that entrenched women’s primary responsibility for the care of children and their status as secondary incomer earners reflecting male breadwinner gender values”.<sup>23</sup> Indeed the baby bonus reflected natalist fears of a declining birth rate, and the resulting encouragement for families to have more babies, that had particular implications for women.

## DISSENTING VOICES WITHIN THE HOWARD GOVERNMENT

This is not to suggest that the Howard government did not include members who had different views in regard to women. There were still members who came from more moderate social liberal traditions when it came to issues of social inequality and the role of government. One of them, Judi Moylan, became Minister for Women from October 1997–October 1998. Moylan made a wide range of feminist comments. Her

<sup>20</sup> Summers, *The end of equality*, p. 143.

<sup>21</sup> Summers, *The end of equality*, p. 143.

<sup>22</sup> D. Brennan, The business of care: Australia’s experiment with the marketisation of childcare. In C. Miller & L. Orchard (Eds.), *Australian public policy: Progressive ideas in the neoliberal ascendancy* (2014, p. 155). Policy Press.

<sup>23</sup> R. Sharp & R. Broomhill, A case study of gender responsive budgeting in Australia. Commonwealth Secretariat, 2013, p. 12. [https://www.unisa.edu.au/siteassets/episerver-6-files/global/eass/hri/grb\\_papers\\_australia\\_comm-sec-updf\\_final-copy-.pdf](https://www.unisa.edu.au/siteassets/episerver-6-files/global/eass/hri/grb_papers_australia_comm-sec-updf_final-copy-.pdf). Accessed 10 April 2024.

statement on the 1998 Budget included comments advocating both men and women sharing family responsibilities; blending those responsibilities with work; recognising women's unpaid contributions and the importance of childcare in facilitating women's employment.<sup>24</sup> The recognition of women's unpaid labour was particularly un-Howard-like. Nonetheless, the example of Moylan also reveals how women (and supportive men) with more progressive views were constrained under the Howard government. Overall, Moylan's budget statement was compatible with a broader Howard government agenda, including providing \$6.1 million funding for "marriage and relationship education services", reflecting the government's focus on the family as the best welfare institution and consequent efforts to discourage divorce.<sup>25</sup> The statement suggested that the government's focus on enterprise bargaining would contribute to greater flexibility for women, without noting the downsides of enterprising bargaining for women, that have been noted in the previous chapter.<sup>26</sup> It stated that the government "is firmly committed to ensuring that men and women receive equal remuneration for work of equal value without discrimination based on sex" but then referred merely to an information Handbook that was designed to "assist employers in understanding the factors which lead to disparity in pay" and their existing legal obligations, rather than supporting legislative or regulatory measures being introduced.<sup>27</sup>

Moylan's marginalisation was graphically illustrated when Treasurer Peter Costello prevented Moylan from providing a gender analysis of the government's tax package to the Press, stating that "I don't think they're interested".<sup>28</sup> The failure of Women's Budget statements to provide a detailed analysis of the impact of broader government policy settings on women had been an issue under Labor but was even more so under Howard given his claim that "the way in which the economy operates, the way in which policies impact upon the community generally are of the

<sup>24</sup> J. Moylan, Maintaining our commitment to women: Statement by the Honourable Judi Moylan MP, Minister for the Status of Women, 12 May 1998, p. 1. [https://archive.budget.gov.au/1998-99/ministerial\\_statements/03\\_pmc.pdf](https://archive.budget.gov.au/1998-99/ministerial_statements/03_pmc.pdf). Accessed 12 December 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Moylan, Maintaining our commitment to women, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Moylan, Maintaining our commitment to women, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> Moylan, Maintaining our commitment to women, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> The Australian, Mother of all Gaffes. *The Australian*, 21 August 1998, p. 4.

same concern and of the same relevance to women as they are to men”.<sup>29</sup> While Howard suggested that women were as interested in issues such as interest rates as men, his statement also implied that the economy did not impact on them differentially. There was no analysis of the implications of the Howard government’s budget cuts for women. Moylan reportedly considered the funding and resources for her own portfolio of Women to be pitifully low.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, Moylan’s budget statement was only 39 pages long compared with up to several hundred pages under Labor.

Nonetheless, in various speeches, Moylan continued to make feminist-influenced statements that were markedly different from Howard’s and reflected her own different life experience, including on equal pay:

Equal pay for equal work is an issue that I feel very passionate about. It frustrates me that 90 years after the Harvester decision, and nearly 30 years after the equal pay decision of 1969, women’s wages still don’t have parity with men’s. Here we are in the late 1990s, still battling a basic equity issue. And the bottom line of that equity issue is whether we’re born male or female.

This was a bitter home truth that I faced in the 1970s, when, left with three small children, I looked at my options to earn a wage to support myself and my children. At that time, the only job I could find that offered equal pay for equal work, for which I was qualified, was real estate. The pay was based on results, rather than my gender -- and sexist assumptions about whose wages support children.<sup>31</sup>

(The Harvester decision of an industrial court supported the idea of a male wage-earner head of household who had dependant family members

<sup>29</sup> J. Howard, Launch of women’s policy, Speech, Stamford Hotel, Adelaide, 15 September 1998, p. 2. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/THA05/upload\\_binary/THA05.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/THA05/upload_binary/THA05.pdf). Accessed 15 December 2023; for a detailed analysis of the failures of gender responsive budgeting during this period, see Sharp & Broomhill, A case study of gender responsive budgeting, pp. 9–13.

<sup>30</sup> M. Fitzherbert, *So many firsts: Liberal women from Enid Lyons to the Turnbull years*. Federation Press, 2009, p. 183.

<sup>31</sup> J. Moylan, Launch of “The Equal Pay Handbook”, Speech, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney, 16 February 1998. [https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/19980625133944/http://www.dpmc.gov.au/osw/eph\\_spch.htm](https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/19980625133944/http://www.dpmc.gov.au/osw/eph_spch.htm). Accessed 12 December 2023.



and should therefore earn more while women should be paid less.)<sup>32</sup> Moylan also acknowledged that women with their own businesses were still in a minority position with the clear implication that they often faced discrimination.<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless, Moylan was loath to acknowledge that some businesses actually benefited financially from paying women less. She asserted that: “Most employers just want to... run their business – properly and fairly” which is why an information handbook would be useful.<sup>34</sup> She claimed that businesses would benefit from equal pay:

Improving parity between men’s and women’s wages is an issue of fairness. But there’s also a great deal in it for business. Tackling the issues behind gender pay inequities encourages a happier, more effective and productive workforce. It can also result in more stable staffing patterns, and more loyalty from employees. In short, it’s a “win-win” situation.<sup>35</sup>

Admittedly, Moylan also noted the impact of different working patterns on women’s low retirement incomes, implying that women should not always put their family carer responsibilities first<sup>36</sup>:

Women must start to move past the burnt chop syndrome - the tendency to put their own needs last. This is especially true for women with small children .... Superannuation is essentially an employment-linked entitlement. The fact is that more women than men spend long periods out of the work force - usually to take primary responsibility for child rearing - and interrupted work patterns deny many women adequate income security in retirement.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> R. Frances, One hundred years of women’s wage fixing. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies*, 5(2), 2000, pp. 84–86.

<sup>33</sup> J. Moylan, Keynote address at the Australian businesswomen’s network celebrating women lunch, speech, Millennium Hotel, Sydney, 6 March 1998. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/19980625133902/http://www.dpmc.gov.au/osw/abn.htm>. Accessed 20 September 2023.

<sup>34</sup> Moylan, Launch of “The Equal Pay Handbook”.

<sup>35</sup> Moylan, Launch of “The Equal Pay Handbook”.

<sup>36</sup> Moylan, Launch of “The Equal Pay Handbook”.

<sup>37</sup> J. Moylan, No more “burnt chops” for women!, Media Release, 30 October 1997. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/19990218061757/http://www.dpmc.gov.au/osw/media7.htm>. Accessed 20 December 2023.

She also noted the impact on women's retirement incomes if marriages broke down. Indeed, one of the Howard government measures she was particularly proud of was a family law reform ensuring that superannuation could be shared in the event of marriage breakdown.<sup>38</sup> Though it should be noted that while Moylan may have seen such measures as recognising the sacrifices and domestic, caring labour that women contributed to their marriages, more conservative Liberals may have seen it as reflecting the traditional male wage-earner head of household role of financially supporting women.

Given her relatively more progressive views, feminists were not surprised when Moylan was removed as Minister for the Status of Women and replaced by her predecessor, the more conservative, Jocelyn Newman. Newman had been notorious for positions such as defending Howard's decision to use the word "Chairman", including in legislation, declaring: "Call me chairman, my name is Newman".<sup>39</sup> The ministry was also renamed from Minister for the Status of Women back to Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women. Many years after leaving office, Moylan expressed her concern that "feminism is branded as a left-wing issue" by many conservatives which "is unfortunate, as generations of women have battled for basic principles of fairness and equity for all women under the banner of feminism".<sup>40</sup> She also expressed her concern that some male conservatives still believed that women's place was in the home.<sup>41</sup>

As we shall see below, moderate Liberal women were to try to influence Howard on some other issues, including cuts to key anti-discrimination positions. In a particularly important example of cross-party cooperation, female Coalition senators were involved in a successful attempt to facilitate

<sup>38</sup> J. Moylan (represented by H. Coonan), Marriage breakdown: Super and the family law, speech, Women in Super Luncheon, Hyatt Hotel, 17 June 1998. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/19980625133641/http://www.dpmc.gov.au/osw/superwom.htm>. Accessed 15 October 2019.

<sup>39</sup> P. DeBelle, Chairman John gives Person the push. *The Advertiser*, 5 March 1997, p. 15.

<sup>40</sup> Judi Moylan, quoted in J. Baird & S. Bold, Conservative parties around the world have a problem—And women are losing patience. *ABC News*, 7 February 2019. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-07/women-in-parliament-labor-liberal/10783234>. Accessed 18 December 2023.

<sup>41</sup> Judi Moylan, quoted in Baird & Bold, Conservative parties around the world have a problem.

Australian women's access to RU486, the medical abortion drug, which was also partly seen as a revolt against the religious right influence in the party.<sup>42</sup> However, later Howard government ministers for women tended not to make as feminist-influenced statements as Moylan. Subsequent ministers, including the final Minister Julie Bishop—who notoriously refused to describe herself as a feminist even many years later—continued to argue that the Howard government's broader social, economic and industrial relations policies had been good for women, increasing the “choices and opportunities” available to them.<sup>43</sup> Many Liberal politicians also continue to depict the Howard government's impact on women in a favourable light.<sup>44</sup> Though other Liberal women cautioned early on that at least some Howard government policies risked alienating women and raised the need for ongoing reform.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, as the comments by Anne Summers amongst others have already made clear, there is another story that can be told about the Howard government's broader measures.

## CUTS TO WOMEN'S SERVICES AND ORGANISATIONS

As explained previously, Howard's electoral strategy revolved around arguments that his government would protect so-called mainstream Australians from claimed politically correct, elite “special interests” that were attempting to rip off ordinary taxpayers by accessing state

<sup>42</sup> See M. Sawer, What makes the substantive representation of women possible in a Westminster parliament? The story of RU486 in Australia. *International Political Science Review*, 33(3), 2012, pp. 320–335. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512111435369>.

<sup>43</sup> J. Bishop, Message from the Minister. In Australian Government, Office for Women (OFW), Decade of Achievements for Australian Women, Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, p. i. [https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20071016201421/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/48207/20071017-0012/www.ofw.facs.gov.au/publications/decade\\_of\\_achievements/index.html](https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20071016201421/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/48207/20071017-0012/www.ofw.facs.gov.au/publications/decade_of_achievements/index.html). Accessed 11 April 2024; S. Medhora, Julie Bishop rejects term “feminist” as not useful in women in media address. *The Guardian*, 29 October 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2014/oct/29/julie-bishop-rejects-term-feminist-as-not-useful-in-women-in-media-address>. Accessed 13 December 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Fitzherbert, *So many firsts*, pp. 158–221.

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., H. Coonan, Winning women, Media Release, 3 December 1997. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/2014HNC0408117/upload\\_binary/2014HNC04081117.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/2014HNC0408117/upload_binary/2014HNC04081117.pdf). Accessed 11 April 2024; H. Coonan, Women's Business, Speech to the federal women's conference, Canberra, 12 April 2002. <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/helen-coonan-2001/speeches/womens-business-speech-federal-womens-conference-canberra>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

largesse. This socially conservative argument gelled well with neoliberal attempts to cut state benefits or, more accurately, to often redirect those benefits to private enterprise. Consequently, the Howard government's broader neoliberal perspectives resulted in major cuts to the public sector and welfare programmes along with privatisation, corporatisation and contracting out of previous government programmes to the private and faith sectors.<sup>46</sup> Howard's protective masculinity (that will be discussed in more depth later) included wishing to abolish the so-called nanny state a Thatcherite term that implied that reliance on government was emasculating for male citizens. Like Thatcher, Howard wished to encourage economic "self-reliance" (particularly for male individuals and their families) and an "enterprise culture", thereby correcting so-called welfare dependence.<sup>47</sup> The arguments regarding facilitating private sector provision were influenced by US right-wing claims that it was more efficient to contract out government services to competing private sector providers.<sup>48</sup> Although this often resulted in inefficiencies due to market failures and the private sector plundering state resources and taxpayers' money. Howard's position was therefore diametrically opposed to Whitlam's arguments regarding positive equality, discussed in Chapter 2, in which public provision was seen as crucial for the achievement of equality and he also went much further in privatising, corporatising and urging public sector restraint than Labor's Hawke and Keating had.

<sup>46</sup> C. Aulich, Privatisation and contracting out. In G. Singleton (Ed.), *The Howard Government* (2000, pp. 162–173). UNSW Press.

<sup>47</sup> J. Howard, Address to the Enterprise Forum lunch: Getting the big things right: Goals and responsibilities in a fourth term, Speech, Hilton Hotel, Adelaide, 8 July 2004. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-21373>. Accessed 13 December 2023; J. Howard, Address to ACOSS congress, Speech, Melbourne, 25 October 2001. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-12373>. Accessed 13 December 2023; M. Thatcher, Nicholas Ridley memorial lecture, Speech, Central London, 22 November 1996. <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/108368>. Accessed 13 December 2023; M. Thatcher, Speech, opening conference on information technology, The Barbican Centre, London, 8 December 1982. <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/105067>. Accessed 13 December 2023; R. Wettenhall, Reshaping the Commonwealth public sector. In G. Singleton (Ed.), *The Howard Government* (2000, pp. 65). UNSW Press.

<sup>48</sup> J. Brett, *Australian liberals and the moral middle class: From Alfred Deakin to John Howard*. Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 171–172.

Furthermore, it was not just that Howard's neoliberal focus on "choice" meant that he generally did not depict women as being disadvantaged or constrained by gendered power relations. It became increasingly clear, in related arguments, that feminist groups were amongst the "special interests" that the government was targeting as part of its neoliberal claim that so-called politically correct special interests had been ripping off taxpayers. Both these factors led to a major targeting of feminist organisations and feminist advisory machinery within government. The Office of the Status of Women was moved from Prime Ministers Department to Welfare where it covered issues such as family benefits. Importantly, it lost the ability to comment on all cabinet submissions.<sup>49</sup> The government even abolished the Women's Bureau which had been established by the Menzies Liberal government in 1963 and provided invaluable data and advice on women's employment and issues such as equal pay.<sup>50</sup> Howard removed the expert femocrat women's desks that had been based in individual government departments and advised on departmental policy, contributing to the disempowering and sanitisation of the women's budget programme, mentioned earlier.<sup>51</sup> The Women's statistics unit in the Australian Bureau of statistics was abolished. Consequently, it became much harder to track what was happening to women's equality issues.

The cuts would have gone even further if it was not for the efforts of some key government women. Howard's then chief of staff, Nicole Feely, reportedly persuaded him out of abolishing the Office of the Status of Women and the Affirmative Action Agency.<sup>52</sup> Jocelyn Newman, to give her due, was amongst those defending the continued existence of the Office of the Status of Women although its budget was cut by 46%.<sup>53</sup> Reportedly the Sex Discrimination Commissioner position in the Human Rights Commission was also under threat, but was saved by a combination of interventions within the Liberal Government and Liberal Party and by

<sup>49</sup> Summers, *The misogyny factor*, p. 40.

<sup>50</sup> Summers, *The misogyny factor*, pp. 41–42; L. Russell & M. Sawyer, The rise and fall of the Australian Women's Bureau. *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 45(3), 1999, pp. 362–375. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8497.00070>.

<sup>51</sup> Summers, *The misogyny factor*, pp. 40 & 42.

<sup>52</sup> J. Cadzow, In a league of her own. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 June 1996, p. 18.

<sup>53</sup> Fitzherbert, *So many firsts*, p. 172.

a number of non-government women's groups mobilising to defend it.<sup>54</sup> As it was, the government accused the then Sex Discrimination Commissioner Sue Walpole of being too close to the Labor Party and did not replace her for 14 months after she resigned.<sup>55</sup> A 40% cut to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission caused the loss of a third of its staff and particularly impacted the Sex Discrimination Policy Unit.<sup>56</sup>

The cuts were clearly targeted with the feminist Women's Electoral Lobby losing most of their government funding while the more conservative National Council of Women received \$275,000 over three years.<sup>57</sup> (As we will see later, a so-called father's rights group was also funded.) The Association for Non-English-Speaking Background Women of Australia was defunded despite, as Democrats Senator Stott Despoja noted, being "a national policy, advocacy, research and information organisation that provides advice on the needs and perspectives of migrant women, not just to government, but to industry, community organisations, unions and the media".<sup>58</sup> A 1999 Women's Round Table advisory meeting saw conservative women's groups invited but not some feminist organisations, Aboriginal, Muslim and Jewish women's groups—a point which indicates the multiple disadvantages faced by women who also suffered from the government's general policies in regard to race and

<sup>54</sup> M. Kingston, Howard's way with women stirs up the party faithful. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 September 1997, p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> Summers, *The end of equality*, p. 131.

<sup>56</sup> M. Sawyer, Shooting the messenger: Australia and CEDAW. In G. Crowder, et al. (Eds.), *Australasian Political Studies 1997: Proceedings of the 1997 APSA Conference* (vol. 3, 1997, pp. 903–906). Department of Politics, Flinders University of South Australia. Supplemented by unpublished update given to author.

<sup>57</sup> M. Gilchrist & M. Gunn, Big girls' stoush. *The Australian*, 16 October 1999, p. 30; J. Newman, Funding for women's groups, Media Release, 1 October 1999. <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fparlinfo.aph.gov.au>. Accessed 19 December 2023.

<sup>58</sup> N. Stott Despoja, Notice of motion: Migrant women, 17 June 1997. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (p. 4334). Commonwealth of Australia. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;adv=yes;orderBy=customrank;page=0;query=Association%20for%20Non-English-Speaking%20Background%20Women%20of%20Australia;rec=6;resCount=Default>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

ethnicity.<sup>59</sup> Labor MP Tanya Plibersek listed numerous women’s organisations that were initially defunded, with only partial funding restored after an outcry from politicians and community groups:

The organisations which initially lost their funding included Guides Australia, the National Council for Single Mothers and Their Children, the Older Women’s Network, the Women’s Electoral Lobby, the Catholic Women’s League Australia, the Muslim Women’s National Network, the National Council of Jewish Women, the National Women’s Justice Coalition, the National Women’s Media Centre and the Women’s Action Alliance. All of them—they are very worthwhile organisations—initially lost their funding probably because they criticised the government.<sup>60</sup>

Importantly, the government refused to sign or ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which would have facilitated an individual complaints process. The government had a general objection to United Nations human rights approaches, particularly after criticisms had been made of its treatment of Indigenous Australians and asylum seekers.<sup>61</sup>

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Given a neoliberal economic policy framing, those women’s issues that were taken up were increasingly justified by a business case. For example, Howard supported business playing an active role against domestic

<sup>59</sup> M. Kingston & T. O’Loughlin, Grassroots women lose voice. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 October 1999, p. 3.

<sup>60</sup> T. Plibersek, Equal opportunity for women in the workplace amendment bill 1999, 14 October 1999. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 11648), Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/1999-10-14/0080/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/1999-10-14/0080/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>61</sup> Also check A. Byrnes, The implementation of the CEDAW in Australia: Success, trials, tribulations and continuing struggle. In A. Hellum & H. S. Aasen (Eds.), *Women’s human rights: CEDAW in international, regional and national law* (2013, pp. 323–357). Cambridge University Press; H. Charlesworth, Human rights: Australia versus the UN. Discussion Paper 22/06, Democratic Audit of Australia. Australian National University (ANU), August 2006, p. 5. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2006-08/apo-nid1479.pdf>. Accessed 18 December 2023.

violence, not only because he appears to have been genuinely shocked by it, but because, in the words of the Office of the Status of Women:

... domestic violence can have a large cost for business. The victims of domestic violence, and the perpetrators, are not isolated in any one part of the Australian workforce. The witnesses - their children - are the workforce of tomorrow and we know that the culture of violence can be handed down from generation to generation.

A worker who experiences violence at home will not be as productive, neither will a worker who has been violent at home. And those are costs which are passed on to businesses.<sup>62</sup>

The Office of the Status of Women commissioned a report into the costs of domestic violence to the economy, funded by the Australian government under the Partnerships Against Domestic Violence programme, which concluded that the cost in 2002–2003 was \$8.1 billion.<sup>63</sup> The government claimed it was “a world-first in estimating the total extent of the costs of domestic violence economy-wide”.<sup>64</sup>

In 2006 Julie Bishop pointed out that the Howard government had provided \$149 million for tackling domestic violence, including spending money on major multimedia campaigns.<sup>65</sup> The government had also funded a legal support programme for Indigenous women and children escaping family violence.<sup>66</sup> Quite beside the business case, Harris Rimmer and Sawyer have argued that conservative governments can be more ideologically predisposed to funding domestic violence measures because they

<sup>62</sup> Australian Government, Office of Status of Women (OSW), Business against domestic violence, media release, 12 November 1997. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/19980625131639/http://www.dpmc.gov.au/osw/busagadv.htm>. Accessed 18 December 2023.

<sup>63</sup> Access Economics Pty Ltd., & OSW, The cost of domestic violence to the Australian economy: Part I. Commonwealth of Australia, 2004, p. vii. [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05\\_2012/cost\\_of\\_dv\\_to\\_australian\\_economy\\_i\\_1.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/cost_of_dv_to_australian_economy_i_1.pdf). Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>64</sup> Australian Government, Department of Family and Community, & Office for Women (OFW), The cost of domestic violence to the Australian economy. Commonwealth of Australia, 22 October 2004, <https://web.archive.org/web/20050409223420/http://ofw.facs.gov.au/padv/>. Accessed 15 April 2024.

<sup>65</sup> J. Bishop. More Australian women speak out against violence, Media Release, 10 August 2006. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/5342/100806\\_abs\\_personal\\_safety/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/5342/100806_abs_personal_safety/). Accessed 27 September 2019.

<sup>66</sup> J. Bishop. More Australian women speak out against violence.



do not involve forms of market redistribution.<sup>67</sup> Such measures also reflect conservative views that it is men's traditional role to protect women and were therefore compatible with Howard's form of protective masculinity that will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter.

## WOMEN, RACE AND ETHNICITY

Howard's conception of special interests also included the so-called Aboriginal industry which Howard claimed had thrived under Labor.<sup>68</sup> Howard's broader attitudes to Indigenous Australians saw negative developments in issues ranging from funding for Aboriginal organisations to women's sacred sites, land rights and the abolition of ATSIC, the Indigenous advisory body established under the Labor government. Howard government legislation particularly targeted anything constructed as "special rights" for Indigenous peoples and favoured a neoliberal market rationality instead.<sup>69</sup> So-called special rights were depicted as socially divisive and undermining not just national unity but also equality, as equality was interpreted as treating all Australians the same.<sup>70</sup>

All of these measures impacted on Indigenous women but there were also some particularly pernicious effects. One was the involvement of federal Liberal politicians, including Howard, in discrediting the attempt of some Ngarrindjeri women to prevent the construction of a bridge in South Australia on the grounds that the construction interfered with a sacred women's Aboriginal site and beliefs—an argument that had been accepted under the Labor government but was dismissed by state and

<sup>67</sup> S. Harris Rimmer & M. Sawyer, Neoliberalism and gender equality policy in Australia. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 51(4), 2016, pp. 742–758. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2016.1222602>.

<sup>68</sup> J. Howard, Radio interview with Alan Jones, 2UE, 2 May 1997. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-10326>. Accessed 18 December 2023.

<sup>69</sup> D. Howard-Wagner, Legislating away Indigenous rights. *Law Text Culture*, 12, 2008, pp. 44–68. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc/vol12/iss1/5/>.

<sup>70</sup> J. Robbins, The Howard Government and Indigenous rights: An imposed national unity? *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 42(2), 2007, pp. 315–328. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361140701320042>.

federal Liberals.<sup>71</sup> Government attitudes to the issue of the stolen generations of Aboriginal children taken from their families, often to be trained for menial service tasks, also impacted Indigenous women. Some Liberals, such as Judi Moylan acknowledged that the “separation of indigenous children, often by force from their mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters was a tragic period in our history”.<sup>72</sup> However, Howard refused to issue a formal government apology, arguing that current governments and Australians were not responsible, despite the fact that, as the then leader of the Opposition Kim Beazley pointed out, children were still being taken from their families in the 1970s when he and Howard were seeking public office.<sup>73</sup> Howard’s family values had clear limits when it came to Indigenous issues. However, those family values, along with a paternalistic form of protective masculinity, were also used to justify a militaristic “Intervention”, designed to protect Indigenous children from sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities, that was implemented without appropriate consultation. The measures often ended up disempowering Aboriginal women, despite claims that it would protect them,

<sup>71</sup> M. Simons, The Hindmarsh Island affair and Australian anthropology. *The Sydney Papers*, 15(2), 2003, pp. 150–159; Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), Bones discovery at bridge unearths land-claim proof. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 December 2002, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/bones-discovery-at-bridge-unclears-land-claim-proof-20021210-gdfy05.html>. Accessed 18 December 2023; Maddox, *God Under Howard*, pp. 124–12 & 138–139.

<sup>72</sup> J. Moylan, “Bringing Them Home” initiatives will help women, Media Release, 16 December 1997. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/MMO30/upload\\_binary/MMO30.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/MMO30/upload_binary/MMO30.pdf). Accessed 11 October 2019.

<sup>73</sup> J. Howard, Interview with Kerry O’Brien, 7.30 Report, ABC TV, 15 October 1998. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-10674>. Accessed 18 December 2023; K. Beazley, Motion of reconciliation, 26 August 1999. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 9209), Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/1999-08-26/0023/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/1999-08-26/0023/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 15 April 2024.

depicting them as inadequate mothers while demonising many Indigenous men.<sup>74</sup> It was a move that some also depicted as both neocolonial and neoliberal.<sup>75</sup>

While Indigenous women faced some of the most obvious impacts of the Howard government, as we have seen the government had also reduced funding to, and disempowered, multicultural groups. Indeed, Howard had initially avoided using the term multiculturalism arguing that it was divisive and only later endorsed the term “Australian multiculturalism” which he claimed emphasised common values.<sup>76</sup> In short, Howard was loath to acknowledge the existence of disadvantaged groups with major implications for intersectional issues of gender inequality.

The government boasted that Australia had been performing well on UN gender indicators.<sup>77</sup> However, it failed to mention that many of the policies praised had been introduced by Labor, such as paid maternity leave for public servants (the Whitlam government) and the Sex Discrimination legislation (the Hawke government and opposed by many Liberals). In particular, the UN Committee for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women had expressed its concern over the lack of adequate statistics available regarding women’s progress, the double disadvantage faced by Indigenous and migrant women, the treatment of female asylum seekers (including those facing domestic violence)

<sup>74</sup> J. Howard, To stabilise and protect. *ABC News*, 26 June 2007. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2007-06-26/to-stabilise-and-protect/81724>. Accessed 18 December 2023; A. Macoun, Aboriginality and the Northern Territory Intervention. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 46(3), 2011, pp. 519–534. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2011.595700>; T. Rowse, How John Howard positioned himself as Indigenous Australian’s champion. *ANU Historical Journal II*, 2, 2020, pp. 190–191. <https://doi.org/10.22459/ANUHJII.2020.09>.

<sup>75</sup> R. Stringer, A nightmare of the neocolonial kind: Politics of suffering in Howard’s Northern Territory Intervention. *Borderlands*, 6(2), 2007. [https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20080723214116/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/30280/20080724-0000/www.borderlands.net.au/vol6no2\\_2007/stringer\\_intervention.html](https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20080723214116/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/30280/20080724-0000/www.borderlands.net.au/vol6no2_2007/stringer_intervention.html). Accessed 15 April 2024; Macoun, Aboriginality and the Northern Territory Intervention.

<sup>76</sup> Johnson, *Governing change*, p. 46.

<sup>77</sup> J. Bishop, Decade of achievements for Australian Women, Media Release, 12 September 2007. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/5357/120907\\_achievements/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/5357/120907_achievements/). Accessed 12 September 2019.

and the government's rejection of quotas for female representation on decision-making bodies.<sup>78</sup>

## MASCULINITY

The Howard government's project to change the culture into an "enterprise culture" also involved encouraging forms of masculine self-reliance.<sup>79</sup> Women's identity was constructed more as a matter of choice with Howard, as we have seen, also encouraging stay-at-home mums and housewifely identities. Consequently, other than occasional statements by more feminist ministers such as Judi Moylan, there were very few statements encouraging non-traditional forms of masculinity. Howard himself projected a form of grandfatherly protective masculinity, suggesting that he would protect women who embraced more traditional forms of femininity as well as protect women from domestic violence which was depicted, including by Moylan, as "unmanly".<sup>80</sup> The fact that some men held discriminatory attitudes towards women and that their sense of masculine identity and self-esteem might be based upon gender power relations and conceptions of women's subordination was not addressed. After all, women's position in society was constructed more as an issue of choice, rather than an issue of gendered power relations. Nor was it acknowledged that some businesses might benefit from paying women less, rather than it simply being due to oversight or a lack of information. Howard rarely endorsed the terms "equality of men and women", except when he was critiquing radical Islamist views on gender, or dismissing quotas for women in the Liberal Party by claiming that such quotas undermined merit and conceptions that all individuals were equal and had not been needed to increase the number of women in cabinet and

<sup>78</sup> UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, Concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Australia, 34th session, CEDAW/C/AUL/CO/5. United Nations (UN), 16 January–3 February 2006. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/567933#record-files-collapse-header>. Accessed 28 September 2023.

<sup>79</sup> J. Howard, Address to the Enterprise Forum lunch getting the big things right; Johnson, *Governing change*, pp. 74–83.

<sup>80</sup> J. Moylan (represented by M. Payne), Address to the First National Forum on Men in Family Relationships, Speech, Hyatt Hotel, Canberra, 11 June 1998. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/19980625133649/http://www.dpmc.gov.au/osw/men.htm>. Accessed 19 December 2023.

parliament.<sup>81</sup> Consequently, under Howard there were none of the strong prime ministerial statements that we have seen from previous prime ministers, including Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, who recognised women were in an unequal position and sought to improve it.<sup>82</sup> Rather, Howard’s rhetoric all too often suggested that it was more traditional women, such as stay-at-home mums and housewives who had been disadvantaged by feminist policy agendas. Gender equality seems to have been understood at most in terms of involving obvious formal legal equality rather than a more nuanced and complex conception of gender inequality. Furthermore, Howard may have seen the need to shape other identities in order to build what he saw as a better future for Australians, however, when he came to women, it was more a matter of trying to hold back and protect Australians from social change, or, as he perceived it, government social engineering. In other words, Howard was shaping women’s identities in ways that facilitated socially conservative forms although Howard would not acknowledge that, for example, via the economic policy disincentives for women to go out to work or to increase their hours of work that were discussed earlier.

The government also had a history of supporting anti-feminist organisations that promoted “men’s rights”.<sup>83</sup> While major feminist groups had funding cut, the Howard government gave \$50,000 for two years to the Lone Fathers Association—a group widely criticised by feminists.<sup>84</sup> (Although the Lone fathers Association rejected suggestions it was anti-women, examples provided by the Opposition suggested a long history of them opposing Family Court custody decisions and arguing that women’s

<sup>81</sup> J. Howard, Address at the Australian defence force academy’s safeguarding Australia—frontline issues conference dinner, Speech, Canberra, 31 July 2003. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-20826>. Accessed 19 December 2023. Howard was particularly proud that 7 out of the ten female cabinet ministers at that time had been in Coalition governments, J. Howard, Address at the liberal women in cabinet dinner, speech, Parliament House, Canberra, 12 October 2006. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-22515>. Accessed 19 December 2023.

<sup>82</sup> M. Fraser, Co-ordination in women’s affairs, Media Release, 4 July 1976. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-4177>. Accessed 18 December 2023.

<sup>83</sup> M. Sawer, Women: Gender wars in the nineties. In M. Simms & J. Warhurst (Eds.), *Howard’s agenda: The 1998 general election* (2000, pp. 149–152). University of Queensland Press.

<sup>84</sup> S. Maddison, Prime Minister’s record on women is a stinker. *The Australian*, 6 October 1999, p. 15.

issues were dominating the agenda.)<sup>85</sup> Howard also criticised previous government legislation he claimed was “against men”.<sup>86</sup> Fathers’ and men’s rights groups influenced the Howard government to change child custody laws to ensure more male access to children, a move which critics claim often overrode accusations of domestic violence.<sup>87</sup>

## SAME-SEX ISSUES

The support for traditional gender roles and so-called family values, combined with heteronormativity and homophobia, also impacted upon same-sex couples.<sup>88</sup> Howard attempted to amend the Sex Discrimination Act to allow state governments to prevent lesbians and single heterosexual women from being able to have access to IVF (or donor sperm screened for health issues). He claimed he was not discriminating because: “This issue primarily involves the fundamental right of a child within our society to have the reasonable expectation, other things being equal, of the care and affection of both a mother and a father”.<sup>89</sup> (A journalist did draw attention to Howard’s potential double values given his claimed opposition to social engineering when it came to the issues of choice and the

<sup>85</sup> T. Plibersek, Equal opportunity for women in the workplace amendment bill 1999, pp. 11648–11649; Australian Parliament, Senate, Committee of Privileges, Persons referred to in the Senate: Mr Barry Williams, president of the Lone Fathers Association of Australia Inc., 136th Report. Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, February 2009. [https://www.aph.gov.au/~/media/wopapub/senate/committee/priv\\_cte/completed\\_inquiries/2008\\_10/report\\_136/report\\_pdf.ashx](https://www.aph.gov.au/~/media/wopapub/senate/committee/priv_cte/completed_inquiries/2008_10/report_136/report_pdf.ashx). Accessed 14 April 2024.

<sup>86</sup> J. Howard, Address at the re-launch of Dame Enid Lyons book “Among the Carrion Crows”, Speech, Main Committee Room, Parliament House, 22 September 1997, p. 4. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00010506.pdf>. Accessed 13 December 2023.

<sup>87</sup> M. Flood, “Fathers’ rights” and the defense of paternal authority in Australia. *Violence Against Women*, 16(3), 2010, pp. 328–347. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801209360918>.

<sup>88</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the Howard Government’s policies on same-sex issues, see C. Johnson, Heteronormative citizenship: The Howard Government’s views on gay and lesbian issues. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 38(1), 2003, pp. 45–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1036114032000056242>; C. Johnson, S. Maddison, & E. Partridge, Australia: Parties, federalism and rights agendas. In D. Paternotte, M. Tremblay, & C. Johnson (Eds.), *The lesbian and gay movement and the state: Comparative insights into a transformed relationship* (2011, pp. 30–34). Ashgate.

<sup>89</sup> J. Howard, Amendment to Sex Discrimination Act, Media Release, 1 August 2000, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-11547>. Accessed 18 December 2023.

construction of the family.)<sup>90</sup> The amendment was drafted and sent to a Senate Committee but was not reintroduced after a subsequent election. Howard argued that while people should be able to “choose their own lifestyle” and not be discriminated against, heterosexual marriage was still “one of the bedrock institutions of society” that provided “stability”. Consequently, he did not think that “you should give the same status to homosexual liaisons as you give to marriage”.<sup>91</sup> Although he claimed that: “I certainly don’t practice any kind of discrimination against people on the grounds that they’re homosexual”.<sup>92</sup> However, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission identified 58 pieces of discriminatory legislation against same-sex couples, in areas ranging from superannuation, to moving expenses for public servants, immigration, medicare, independent youth allowance.<sup>93</sup> Yet, Howard blocked moderates within his own cabinet who wished to remove key forms of discrimination against same-sex couples. In Howard’s mind, same-sex discrimination seemed to be reduced to laws making (male) homosexuality illegal. Meanwhile, he used same-sex issues as a form of electoral “dog-whistle” politics, signalling his socially conservative support for more traditional gender and family structures without risking an electoral backlash by spelling out his views more explicitly.<sup>94</sup>

## WAGES, WORK AND INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

A number of the Howard government’s socially conservative gender agendas came together in the context of industrial relations policy, despite claims to the contrary. The government proudly proclaimed that women’s wages had risen faster under it than under Labor (albeit without

<sup>90</sup> J. Howard, Interview with Virginia Trioli, 3LO, 9 August 2000. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-22868>. Accessed 18 December 2023.

<sup>91</sup> J. Howard, Interview, Triple J “talkback classroom” 24 August 2001. <https://pmttranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-11954>. Accessed 18 December 2023.

<sup>92</sup> Howard, Triple J “talkback classroom”.

<sup>93</sup> Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC), Same sex, Same entitlements: Report of the national inquiry into discrimination against people in same-sex relationships: Financial and work-related entitlements and benefit. HREOC, May 2007. [https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/human\\_rights/samesex/report/pdf/SSSE\\_Report.pdf](https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/human_rights/samesex/report/pdf/SSSE_Report.pdf). Accessed 19 December 2023.

<sup>94</sup> “Dog-whistle” politics refers to strategies where the full meaning is silently signalled to particular groups—a farmer’s “dog whistle” is set at a pitch that only dogs can hear.

mentioning that the Labor government had introduced wage restraint and offered government-funded social wage benefits in compensation).<sup>95</sup> The gender pay gap in relation to *full-time* average weekly earnings did reach a low point in 2004 under Howard, but then began to rise again.<sup>96</sup> Towards the end of the Liberals' period in office, the Government Office for Women was also proudly pointing out that the percentage of women in paid work had grown by 5.5% to around 55.1% along with a nearly 3% decrease in female unemployment since the Keating years. However, it also noted that around 44% of women worked part-time but that women constituted just over 70% of part-time workers.<sup>97</sup> The high percentage of women in part-time work also potentially gives a very different picture of what was happening to women's wages. Furthermore, Anne Summers pointed out that, despite social and historical change seeing more women enter the workforce internationally, the Australian women's participation rate was lower than in comparable countries with the percentage of part-time work also higher. She suggested that such figures revealed the impact of government policy rewarding stay-at-home mums and mothers who worked part-time.<sup>98</sup> Although, former moderate Liberal Senator Judith Troeth argued that the government's negative attitude towards working mothers had begun to soften as more younger male members with working wives entered parliament.<sup>99</sup> There was also some attempt to encourage women to work in non-traditional areas. For example, Julie Bishop, the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women's Issues, promoted a publication designed to encourage more women to work in

<sup>95</sup> K. Patterson, Women's wages grow three times faster under Coalition, Media Release, 8 March 2004. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/6167/womens\\_wages/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/6167/womens_wages/). Accessed 12 September 2019; J. Howard, Address to New South Wales division state council, Speech, Novotel Hotel, Sydney, 24 July 2004. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-21408>. Accessed 20 December 2023.

<sup>96</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), Australia's gender pay gap statistics. Commonwealth of Australia, February 2018. <https://www.agec.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Australias-Gender-Pay-Gap-Statistics-2018.pdf>. Accessed 27 September 2023.

<sup>97</sup> J. Bishop, Message from the minister, p. 44.

<sup>98</sup> A. Summers, *The end of equality*, pp. 160–163.

<sup>99</sup> Fitzherbert, *So many firsts*, p. 185.



the mining industry and also hosted a symposium designed to encourage more young girls to work in the STEM field.<sup>100</sup>

However, women's wages and employment conditions were to come under new threat once the Howard government gained control of both Houses of Parliament in the 2004 election and could pass its desired industrial relations measures, the so-called WorkChoices legislation. Julie Bishop, claimed that: "Women have particularly benefited from workplace reform that has encouraged greater flexibility in working arrangements" which had contributed to women having "more choice and opportunity in pursuing personal and family goals".<sup>101</sup> Her arguments were compatible with long-term arguments by John Howard that deregulating the labour market would contribute to greater flexibility for families.<sup>102</sup> In fact, however, the workplace reforms introduced under the Howard government were to prove particularly detrimental to low-paid women in predominantly female-dominated industries, who found themselves in an even weaker bargaining position than previously given that various workplace protections had been removed.<sup>103</sup> Interestingly, it was claimed that when WorkChoices was first discussed in 2004 and 2005 the three women in cabinet, Kay Patterson, then Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women, Amanda Vanstone the previous Minister and Helen Coonan had expressed concerns that it would be too harsh on vulnerable workers.<sup>104</sup>

Indeed, a study at the time found that, rather than providing more flexibility for organising work-life balance, the opposite was more likely the case as a result of the industrial relations changes:

<sup>100</sup> J. Bishop, Speech at the national women and mining symposium, 29 May 2007. <https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/2640/national-women-and-mining-symposium>. Accessed 12 September 2019.

<sup>101</sup> J. Bishop, Message from the minister, p. i.

<sup>102</sup> J. Howard, The future of work in Australia. In J. Inglis & Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) (Eds.), *The future of work* (2nd ed., 1995, pp. 122–123). ACOSS in association with Pluto Press (Chapter based on a speech given to 1992 ACOSS conference.).

<sup>103</sup> J. Elton, et al., Women and WorkChoices: Impacts on the low pay sector. Centre for Work+ Life, University of South Australia, August 2007. [https://cms-business.sydney.edu.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/40400/Impacts\\_on\\_the\\_Low\\_Pay\\_Sector.pdf](https://cms-business.sydney.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/40400/Impacts_on_the_Low_Pay_Sector.pdf). Accessed 20 December 2013.

<sup>104</sup> Fitzherbert, *So many firsts*, p. 199.

A significant area of impact lies in the hours of work and the difficulties women face in balancing work and family responsibilities. Few participants in the study were able to negotiate their start and finish times. Rather, many found themselves either working very long shifts without breaks or working short and unpredictable shifts (also affecting their income predictability). Single parents on parenting payment and subject to the new “Welfare to Work” rules (which require the undertaking of a minimum of 15 hours per week of paid work once the youngest child turns six) were particularly disadvantaged in their bargaining over hours. The fear of losing welfare support for failure to work 15 hours effectively removed any bargaining power these women had.

These women’s accounts suggest a hardening of their employers’ attitudes around accommodating work and family.<sup>105</sup>

Consequently, John Howard soon saw himself facing a major trade union campaign at election time targeting the impact of his industrial relations policies on women.<sup>106</sup> A key advertisement depicted the distress of a mother who was facing the dilemma of unexpectedly having to go into work due to arbitrary roster changes, despite having no childcare arranged, or losing her job.<sup>107</sup>

Commentators such as Judith Brett argued that Howard’s Work-Choices legislation revealed a significant contradiction between his social conservatism and neoliberalism by undermining protections involving “the regulation of time, and the capacity of working people to balance their work and family commitments”.<sup>108</sup> It was an argument that was also made by then Labor Opposition leader, Kevin Rudd, who argued that: “Neo-liberalism’s core philosophical dilemma is that it has no answer to the relentless march of market fundamentalism into the sanctum of the family itself”.<sup>109</sup> Or, as he put it even more explicitly:

<sup>105</sup> Elton et al., *Women and WorkChoices*, p. 10.

<sup>106</sup> K. Muir, *Worth fighting for: Inside the “Your Rights at Work” campaign*. UNSW Press, 2008.

<sup>107</sup> Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), Advertisement—Work Choices. YouTube, Uploaded by S.R. Perea, 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WvMTAci5nU>. Accessed 19 December 2023.

<sup>108</sup> J. Brett, *Relaxed and comfortable: Response to correspondence*. *Quarterly Essay*, 20, 2005, p. 92.

<sup>109</sup> K. Rudd, Howard’s Brutopia: The battle of ideas in Australian politics. *The Monthly*, November 2006, p. 50.

....the white picket fence and all it stands for is supposed to be enhanced, not undermined by Hayek's economic revolution. And, for a political party that trumpets family values, the impact of the quality and quantity of time that families have together as a direct consequence of Howard's industrial relations revolution is now a matter of great personal and therefore political importance.<sup>110</sup>

It was an attempt by Rudd to shift the socially conservative "family values" debate in a more left-wing direction. In addition, WorkChoices facilitated Labor advocating more traditional social democratic class agendas aimed at humanising capitalism and reducing exploitation of workers by bosses. That more traditional agenda undermined Howard's mimicking of class politics in his arguments regarding the so-called elites who were allegedly ripping off ordinary mainstream Australian taxpayers by accessing government largesse. The political agenda shifted with the site of exploitation reverting to being the labour market rather than the state.<sup>111</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Howard's political demise was therefore partly due to contradictions in his policy framing that undermined his attempts to integrate neoliberalism with social conservative attitudes to the family. It has been argued here that the integration of gender issues within that broader framing also had major implications for women both in terms of the impact of cut-backs to both general and women-specific services and in terms of an undermining of the women's advisory machinery that had previously functioned under both Labor and Liberal governments. The focus on deregulation and free markets also had major implications for women when applied to industrial relations. Particular attention has been drawn to the Howard government's emphasis on individual choice, with the position of women

<sup>110</sup> K. Rudd, What's wrong with the right: A social democratic response to the neo-liberals at home and the neo-conservatives abroad, Speech, The Centre for Independent Studies (CIS), 16 November 2006. [https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20061203221548/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/38035/20061201-0000/www.kevinrudd.com/\\_dbase\\_upl/061116+CIS.pdf](https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20061203221548/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/38035/20061201-0000/www.kevinrudd.com/_dbase_upl/061116+CIS.pdf). Accessed 29 November 2018.

<sup>111</sup> C. Johnson, *Governing change*, p. 180.

being framed as a matter of choice rather than being due to discrimination and structural disadvantage. The election of a Labor government was to see some positive developments in regard to the latter and it is to the next stage in this story that we will now progress.

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## Social Democracy, the “Fair Go” and Gender Wars: Women Under the Rudd and Gillard Governments (2007–2013)

### GENERAL RUDD GOVERNMENT POLICY INITIATIVES

Labor came into office after a small target election campaign that had sought to defuse Howard’s economic and culture wars rhetoric by convincing voters that they would be a safe pair of hands.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Labor had been so cautious about alienating blue collar male workers in particular that, as Marian Sawer points out, “it was the first time for more than 20 years that the ALP had gone to the polls without a women’s policy” and “the word ‘women’ did not actually pass the Labor Leaders’ lips during the 2007 campaign launch”.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, Rudd had committed to a “fair go for all”, especially “working families”, and had openly critiqued Howard’s neoliberalism, arguing that governments had a key role to play both in civilising markets and providing public

<sup>1</sup> C. Johnson, The ideological contest. *Australian Cultural History*, 28(1), 2010, pp. 7–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07288430903164736>.

<sup>2</sup> M. Sawer, Presence and the price: Women and the 2007 Australian federal election. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 23(56), 2008, pp. 263–269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164640802020584>. See further M. Sawer, Women and the 2007 federal election. *Australian Cultural History*, 27(2), 2009, pp. 167–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07288430903165311>.

goods and services.<sup>3</sup> However, the use of the term “fair go” evoked Hawke and Keating gender equality policy.<sup>4</sup> A deeper examination of Labor policy and the Labor platform does also reveal gender equality measures, including a commitment to improving domestic violence policy, strengthening the Office of the Status of Women and Sex Discrimination Act and tax policy, as well as signing up to the Optional Protocol of The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, as noted in the last chapter, Howard’s conservative “family values” had been challenged by suggestions that his government’s neoliberalism, including in industrial relations, had impacted negatively upon women. Indeed, Labor believed the appeal to women in the campaign against Howard’s industrial relations policies had been “instrumental” in helping to defeat the Howard government.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas Howard had tended to construct feminist demands for gender equality as those of a “special interest”, this was not Labor’s view.<sup>7</sup> As Rudd and his Minister for the Status of Women, Tanya Plibersek stated:

Australia is a long-standing supporter and advocate of women’s rights, being one of the first countries to grant women’s suffrage and the first country where women could stand for election for national parliament. This year also marks the 25th anniversary of Australia’s *Sex Discrimination Act*.

<sup>3</sup> K. Rudd, Election speech, Brisbane, 14 November 2007. <https://electionspeeches.moadoph.gov.au/speeches/2007-kevin-rudd>. Accessed 1 February 2024; C. Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*. Springer, 2019, pp. 122–123. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6299-6>.

<sup>4</sup> Office of the Status of Women, A say, a choice, a fair go: The government’s national agenda for women. OSW, 23 March 1988. Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS). [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/publications/tailedpapers/HSTP0369\\_1988-89/upload\\_pdf/369\\_1988-89.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/publications/tailedpapers/HSTP0369_1988-89/upload_pdf/369_1988-89.pdf). Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Sawer, Presence and the price, p. 264.

<sup>6</sup> T. Plibersek, “Women’s business—Current issues and future agendas” colloquium, Speech, Sancta Sophia College, University of Sydney, 7 March 2008, [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1764/women\\_and\\_work\\_7mar08/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1764/women_and_work_7mar08/). Accessed 12 August 2020.

<sup>7</sup> M. Sawer, From women’s interests to special interests: Reframing equality claims. In L. Chappell & L. Hill (Eds.), *The politics of women’s interests: New comparative perspectives* (2006, pp. 111–129). Routledge.

While our history is strong in this respect, we continue to pursue three key priority areas – improving women’s economic security and independence, ensuring women’s voices are heard at all levels of decision-making, and reducing violence against women.<sup>8</sup>

Importantly, Rudd agreed to assent to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women which the Howard government had refused to do, saying it was “high time”, while clarifying that (unlike Howard) he had a favourable view of the UN’s human rights measures.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in 2009, the government also provided 17 million to UN agency UNIFEM to improve gender equality internationally.<sup>10</sup>

While Howard’s ministers for women had often been constrained, Labor’s Plibersek expressed strong feminist views once Labor was in office, pointing out that despite significant advances “we cannot yet say equality is won”.<sup>11</sup> Plibersek outlined many of the barriers that many women still faced, including the “glass ceiling” women wanting to progress higher up in organisations encountered; the “glass walls” reflecting beliefs that women could not handle policy or budgetary issues; and the “sticky floors” that kept women stuck in junior positions.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, she hoped “we’re at the beginning of a new era of community discussion around gender equality” canvassing issues such as both men and women balancing work and family life, businesses encouraging women’s leadership and men speaking up against violence against

<sup>8</sup> K. Rudd & T. Plibersek, International Women’s Day, Media Release, 8 March 2009. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/2006/iwd\\_08mar09/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/2006/iwd_08mar09/). Accessed 22 April 2020.

<sup>9</sup> K. Rudd, Ministerial statement in Parliament on the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, Speech, Canberra, 2 December 2008. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-16285>. Accessed 12 March 2020.

<sup>10</sup> T. Plibersek & S. Smith, Australia celebrates International Women’s Day and increases support to UNIFEM, Media Release, 8 March 2009. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1973/unifem\\_08mar09/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1973/unifem_08mar09/). Accessed 16 April 2020.

<sup>11</sup> T. Plibersek, Women and men—A new conversation about equality, Speech, The Sydney Institute, Sydney, 7 November 2008. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1763/women\\_equality\\_07nov08/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1763/women_equality_07nov08/). Accessed 12 August 2020.

<sup>12</sup> T. Plibersek, Speech at Slater and Gordon “Inspiring Women” lunch, Cockle Bay Wharf, Sydney, 10 November 2009. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1813/inspiring\\_women\\_10nov09](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1813/inspiring_women_10nov09). Accessed 28 May 2020.

women.<sup>13</sup> Plibersek critiqued the fact that under Howard: “The Office for Women was excluded from playing a serious role in advising the government on how existing and prospective policies would affect women” and committed to changing that under Rudd.<sup>14</sup>

Consequently, the Rudd government’s 2008 Budget included a number of measures specifically targeted at women. In line with social democratic perspectives, the framing of gender in women’s budget statements also shifted from being about so-called choice to emphasising gender equality.<sup>15</sup> Tax and childcare measures aimed to give working mothers a higher take-home pay, a welcome move given the Howard government’s incentives, discussed in the last chapter, for women to stay at home or reduce work hours.<sup>16</sup> The government committed to phasing out aspects of the WorkChoices industrial relations legislation that had detrimental effects on women and to reducing the gender pay gap. It implemented tailored services for female job seekers.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, while Howard reduced funding to, or actively defunded, feminist women’s advocacy groups, Labor returned to supporting funding them, arguing that: “Ensuring that representative organisations are well equipped to advocate and participate in current policy debates is critical to improving gender policy outcomes”.<sup>18</sup> The government committed to engaging with all women, including women who did not identify as members of the women’s movement, “young women, Indigenous women, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and women with disabilities”.<sup>19</sup> Groups representing immigrant and

<sup>13</sup> Plibersek, Women and men.

<sup>14</sup> Plibersek, “Women’s business”.

<sup>15</sup> R. Sharp & R. Broomhill, A case study of gender responsive budgeting in Australia. Commonwealth Secretariat, 2013, p. 15, [https://www.unisa.edu.au/siteassets/epi/server-6-files/global/eass/hri/grb\\_papers\\_australia\\_comm-sec-updf\\_final-copy-.pdf](https://www.unisa.edu.au/siteassets/epi/server-6-files/global/eass/hri/grb_papers_australia_comm-sec-updf_final-copy-.pdf). Accessed 14 November 2023.

<sup>16</sup> T. Plibersek, Women’s budget statement: A better deal for Australian women, Media Release, 15 May 2008. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1918/womens\\_budget\\_15may08/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1918/womens_budget_15may08/). Accessed 28 April 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Plibersek, Women’s budget statement.

<sup>18</sup> T. Plibersek, \$800,000 grant round opens to boost Australian women’s advocacy, Media Release, 24 April 2009. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/2058/grant\\_round\\_24apr09/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/2058/grant_round_24apr09/). Accessed 16 April 2020.

<sup>19</sup> T. Plibersek, \$800,000 grant round opens to boost Australian women’s advocacy.



Muslim women were specifically mentioned.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the government encouraged women’s groups to form “national alliances”, promising up to \$200,000 a year in funding over three years for each one.<sup>21</sup> For example, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Alliance involved “an alliance of Indigenous women and their organisations from across the country”.<sup>22</sup> The government particularly recognised the need to genuinely consult, engage and partner with women from remote Indigenous communities in the continuing aftermath of the Howard government’s Northern Territory Emergency Response.<sup>23</sup> This included addressing issues such as sexual abuse, domestic violence, financial intimidation and the need for legal advice.<sup>24</sup> The government also held a summit designed to “strengthen the voice of rural women in shaping rural and regional policy”.<sup>25</sup> Plibersek noted the alliance groups’ impact on policy, for example, that the Economic Security for Women Alliance helped to secure paid parental leave.<sup>26</sup>

A few days before Kevin Rudd lost the Prime Ministership to Julia Gillard in a leadership coup, Plibersek listed the Rudd government’s major achievements for women (which Gillard herself had frequently

<sup>20</sup> T. Plibersek, \$1.2 million for projects to boost women’s leadership and advocacy, Media Release, 27 July 2009. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1962/womensadvocacyboost\\_27july2009/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1962/womensadvocacyboost_27july2009/). Accessed 16 April 2020.

<sup>21</sup> T. Plibersek, Raising the voice for women, Media Release, 12 November 2009. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/2036/national\\_women\\_alliance\\_12nov09/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/2036/national_women_alliance_12nov09/). Accessed 15 April 2020.

<sup>22</sup> T. Plibersek & J. Macklin, Stronger voice for Indigenous women, Media Release, 9 March 2010. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/2226/indigenous\\_womenvoice\\_9mar2010/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/2226/indigenous_womenvoice_9mar2010/). Accessed 14 April 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Australian Government, Office for Women (OFW), & Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FAHCSIA), Australia’s combined sixth and seventh report on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women July 2003–July 2008. Commonwealth of Australia, 1 October 2008, [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05\\_2012/aiw\\_2008.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/05_2012/aiw_2008.pdf). Accessed 15 April 2020.

<sup>24</sup> OFW & FAHCSIA, Australia’s combined sixth and seventh report.

<sup>25</sup> T. Plibersek, National Rural Women’s Summit opening, Speech, Crowne Plaza Hotel, Canberra, 27 June 2008. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1774/national\\_rural\\_women\\_28jun08/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1774/national_rural_women_28jun08/). Accessed 12 August 2020.

<sup>26</sup> T. Plibersek, National Women’s Alliances annual meeting, Speech, Manuka Oval, Canberra, 22 June 2010. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1836/nat\\_womens\\_alliances\\_22jun10/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1836/nat_womens_alliances_22jun10/). Accessed 26 May 2020.

contributed to). These included the aforementioned paid parental leave; a national plan for improving the position of women; improving work-life balance and pay equity via introducing the Fair Work Act; committing to superannuation reform that would have major benefits for women's retirement incomes; increasing pension benefits that would also have major benefits for women; improving the quality and affordability of childcare and increasing the child rebate; strengthening breastfeeding protections in the Sex Discrimination Act; utilising the Office for Women and the Women's Interdepartmental Committee to increase gender equality oversight across government; increasing development assistance and prioritising the issues of maternal health and violence against women; and investing "\$3.6 million to boost women's advocacy through the Alliances".<sup>27</sup>

### GILLARD GOVERNMENT (JUNE 2010–JUNE 2013)

The Rudd government's commitment to gender equality continued under Gillard (although with some provisos that will be discussed subsequently). Key measures strengthening the Sex Discrimination legislation for both women and men to increase protection for family responsibilities, including breastfeeding and provisions against sexual harassment were passed after Gillard became Prime Minister.<sup>28</sup> The Gillard government also instituted new developments (albeit when Kevin Rudd was Foreign Minister) such as appointing a Global Ambassador for Women and Girls with a particular brief to further support and aid for gender equality in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>29</sup> Gillard's final Minister for the Status of Women, Julie Collins, declared that: "Gender equality continues to be

<sup>27</sup> T. Plibersek, National Women's Alliances annual meeting. Kevin Rudd realised he'd lost the numbers to support his Prime Ministership and stood down from office two days later on 24 June 2010.

<sup>28</sup> R. McClelland, Sex and Age Discrimination Legislation Amendment Bill 2010: Second Reading, 30 September 2010. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (pp. 275–276). Commonwealth of Australia. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansard%2F2010-09-30%2F0049%22>. Accessed 30 September 2020.

<sup>29</sup> J. Gillard, Australia appoints Global Ambassador for Women and Girls, 13 September 2011. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-18134>. Accessed 27 April 2024.

at the very heart of this government’s social and economic objectives”.<sup>30</sup> Gillard herself emphasised that she saw her government as part of a long Labor tradition of improving gender equality:

Look at our history. It was Labor that introduced maternity allowances.... It was Labor that gave women the chance to serve and shine in the farms and factories of wartime in the 1940s. It was Gough Whitlam’s Labor that delivered the first pay equality case and started federal funding for childcare. And it was only ever Labor that was going to give this nation its first female prime minister.

It was only ever Labor that was going to put paid parental leave on the agenda and get it done. Only Labor that understood that childcare was about affordability, but it was about quality too, and it’s about supporting the women who work in childcare.... It was only ever Labor that was going to increase the tax-free threshold to more than \$18,000, benefiting low-income workers, predominantly working women.... it was only ever Labor that was going to reduce tax on superannuation for part-time working mums. It’s only Labor that ever would have put in an equal pay principle that actually worked; that worked to make a difference so women in social and community services can get the pay and recognition that they deserve. (Gillard, 2013b)<sup>31</sup>

The reference to 1940s Labor governments encouraging women into the workforce is rather contentious given that, as noted in Chapter 2, those governments also largely expected women to return to the home after the war was over. However, the analysis in this book would suggest that Gillard was also correct to recognise the Whitlam government period as marking a watershed moment for women and she clearly saw her government as carrying on that tradition. The remainder of this chapter will consider some of Labor’s key measures and perspectives in more depth.

<sup>30</sup> J. Collins, Launch of women’s budget highlights, Speech, Parliament House, Canberra, 16 May 2013. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20130630235913/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/131352/20130701-0936/juliecollins.fahcsia.gov.au/node/359.html>. Accessed 22 December 2023.

<sup>31</sup> J. Gillard, Transcript of remarks at launch of Women for Gillard, Media Release, 11 June 2013. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-19394>. Accessed 30 October 2018.

## WOMEN AND THE ECONOMY

Both the Rudd and Gillard governments placed particular emphasis on improving women’s economic standing, arguing that this would also be good for the economy. Kate Ellis, Minister for the Status of Women (2010–2011) argued that ensuring equal opportunity for both women and men was “critical for the long term prosperity of our nation”.<sup>32</sup> The 2011–2012 Women’s Budget Statement claimed that “closing the gap between women’s and men’s workforce participation rate could increase Australia’s Gross Domestic Product by 11 per cent”.<sup>33</sup> However, the government also argued that individual businesses would benefit financially, emphasising that “self-interest” could build broader support given that: “Gender equity is a smart business decision – and it’s about time we ensured that all businesses knew it”.<sup>34</sup> Gender equality was crucial for the Australian economy since “in order to be internationally competitive, Australian companies need to have women represented at every level of their company. Not because it’s the right thing to do. Not because they’re in the grip of a feminist frenzy, but because it makes good economic sense”.<sup>35</sup>

The government also encouraged women to work in traditionally male-dominated industries, arguing that it would improve women’s economic outcomes, reduce the gender pay gap and address Australia’s skill shortage, including in the resources and construction industries.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> K. Ellis, Launch of the women’s budget statement 2011–12, Media Release, 12 May 2011. <https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/634/launch-of-the-womens-budget-statement-2011-12/>; K. Ellis, Women’s budget statement 2011–12. Commonwealth of Australia, 2011. [https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20120603235340/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/135947/20190124-1454/www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06\\_2012/womens\\_budget\\_2011.pdf](https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20120603235340/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/135947/20190124-1454/www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06_2012/womens_budget_2011.pdf). Accessed 2 January 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Ellis, Women’s budget statement 2011–12, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> K. Ellis, Women and Leadership Australia’s National 2011 Adelaide Symposium, Speech, Playford Sebel, Adelaide, 15 July 2011. <https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/583/women-and-leadership-australias-national-2011-adelaide-symposium/>. Accessed 4 May 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Ellis, Women and Leadership Australia’s National 2011 Adelaide Symposium.

<sup>36</sup> J. Collins, Launch of the women in male-dominated industries toolkit, Speech, 21 May 2013. <https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/12697/speech-launch-of-the-women-in-male-dominated-industries-toolkit/>. Accessed 2 January 2024.

Over \$15 billion was pledged for vocational education and training with claims that thousands of women would benefit.<sup>37</sup>

## GENDER, EMPLOYMENT AND LABOR GOVERNMENT STIMULUS MEASURES DURING THE GFC

However, despite such admirable aims in regard to women’s employment, the Labor government faced particularly difficult economic challenges once the Global Financial Crisis hit from mid-2007. The government responded with a Keynesian-influenced stimulus package that was highly praised internationally (by Joseph Stiglitz amongst others).<sup>38</sup> Indeed, Australians do not use the expression the “Great Recession” because Australia escaped recession aided by government policies (and Australia’s links with the expanding Chinese economy). However, Labor may have been partially moving away from the neoliberalism that had particularly pernicious effects on women when it came to issues of government intervention and public provision but had not adequately recognised that Keynesian-influenced policies could also neglect issues of women’s equality in different ways.<sup>39</sup> Long-term feminist activist and academic Eva Cox complained that it was a typical male-defined stimulus policy:

...it was always on the cards that any stimulus would make the assumptions that most workers are still male, and as breadwinners they need attention. All the hard infrastructure stuff has been very much about male jobs in most cases and that is traditional. One could hope that maybe a new and

<sup>37</sup> Collins, Launch of the women in male-dominated industries toolkit.

<sup>38</sup> News.com.au, Labor “saved Australia from the global financial crisis”—Nobel economist. *News.com.au*, 6 August 2010. <https://www.news.com.au/finance/business/labor-saved-australia-from-the-global-financial-crisis-says-joseph-stiglitz/news-story/fl08801b20043a6b35363ccb5d3843f6>. Accessed 2 January 2024.

<sup>39</sup> For Labor’s partial move away from neoliberalism during the Rudd period and partial re-embrace during the Gillard period, see C. Johnson, Gillard, Rudd and Labor tradition. *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 57(4), 2011, pp. 562–579. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8497.2011.01614.x>. For gender issues during the Keynesian-influenced Curtin and Chifley governments, see C. Johnson, *The Labor legacy: Curtin, Chifley, Whitlam, Hawke*. Allen & Unwin, 1989, particularly pp. 20–21.

enlightened government would think about some funding for soft infrastructure such as funding for care services and those other areas where more labour is always welcome ... but nothing there.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union of Australia complained that the Rudd government was supporting “jobs for the boys” in the automotive and construction sectors but not for workers in the female-dominated Textile, Clothing and Footwear (TCF) industry.<sup>41</sup> Greens Senator Scott Ludlam pointed out that male-dominated jobs were being supported while the most impoverished group in Australia, namely female-headed households, had been neglected, despite figures suggesting that “91.5 per cent of jobless sole parent families are headed by women”. Ludlam concluded that: “This economic stimulus package could do with some analysis by those expert in the field of gender responsive budgeting”.<sup>42</sup>

Ludlam’s comment was no doubt galling for the party that had previously been internationally innovative in introducing gender budgeting but it was a valid point. A report found the GFC’s impacts on women had rarely been adequately understood or addressed by government stimulus measures. Consequently, it was crucial that the impact of economic downturns on women be properly assessed next time such a downturn occurred—something that unfortunately was not to occur when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>40</sup> E. Cox, Rudd’s sexist, moralistic stimulus package. *Crikey*, 4 February 2009, <http://www.crikey.com.au/2009/02/04/cox-rudds-sexist-moralistic-stimulus-package>. Accessed 24 December 2014.

<sup>41</sup> AAP, Fed: Rudd Govt has turned its back on textile workers: Union. *AAP General News Wire*, 12 May 2009.

<sup>42</sup> S. Ludlum, Appropriation (Nation Building and Jobs) Bill (No. 1) 2008–2009 and Related Legislation: Second Reading, 10 February 2009. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate, (pp. 633). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansards/2009-02-10/0056/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansards/2009-02-10/0056/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 2 January 2024.

<sup>43</sup> M. Baird, et al., Women, work and the global economic downturn. Commonwealth of Australia, 1 May 2012. <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/women/publications-articles/general/women-work-and-the-global-economic-downturn?HTML>. Accessed 16 April 2020.

## INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS, WOMEN’S WAGES AND EQUAL PAY

Tanya Plibersek criticised the Howard era industrial relations system for neglecting “to recognise that not everyone in the labour market was on equal footing. This was especially important for low-paid women, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds”.<sup>44</sup> However, while some key reforms were instituted, neither the Rudd nor Gillard governments adequately addressed the fact that it was not just the Howard government that had advocated employees negotiating more with employers, reducing the role of industrial courts and disadvantaging vulnerable women but also, as noted in Chapter 3, the Hawke and Keating Labor governments. Plibersek argued that a number of factors contributed to the gender pay gap:

women are more likely to be in part-time and casual employment and less likely to be employed in occupations which offer overtime. The gap between women’s and men’s earnings reflects a number of complex and interrelated factors including: the broad undervaluation of women’s skills; occupational and industrial segregation; the prevalence of gender stereotypes; and, in some cases, outdated ways in which remuneration is calculated.<sup>45</sup>

The fact that some businesses might increase profits by paying women less was not specifically mentioned as a possible reason. Labor was also to face a number of additional challenges in regard to equal pay. These ranged from the impacts of a Chinese-influenced mining boom that substantially increased wages in a male-dominated industry and pressured some female-dominated areas of employment, with implications for the gender pay gap, to issues of potentially increased women’s wages in the service and community sector impacting government deficits.<sup>46</sup>

Labor’s 2009 Fair Work Act (in which Julia Gillard played a key role as Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations) facilitated some award pay increases for predominantly female work that had been historically undervalued (especially in jobs defined as involving caring work).

<sup>44</sup> Plibersek, “Women’s business”.

<sup>45</sup> Plibersek, “Women’s business”.

<sup>46</sup> Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*, p. 182.

However, the Labor government also pressed for a five-year phasing in period of the pay increases because of the impact of increased wages for women in the social and community service sector on Non-Government Organisations as well as on the government's budget bottom line in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis.<sup>47</sup> Yet, as Prime Minister, Gillard acknowledged, earlier attempts to introduce equal pay had not adequately overcome the undervaluing of traditionally female jobs.<sup>48</sup> In Gillard's words:

... when Labor came to office I was determined to make real progress in closing the gender pay gap. A gap which is now so great, with full-time working women earning on average one fifth less than men full-time, that it is as if women work nearly seven weeks every year for free. A gap driven, in considerable part, by the way our society and economy have traditionally undervalued female-dominated occupations. For too long society has undervalued the work women do.<sup>49</sup>

In short, Gillard was acknowledging that previous Labor government attempts, going back to the Whitlam years, had not been successful in addressing this issue. Bill Shorten, the then Workplace Relations Minister, acknowledged caring work in social and community services work "has been undervalued and under-remunerated because it was seen as unimportant and a natural extension of women's work".<sup>50</sup> Governments were amongst those benefiting from such low-paid women's work.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> J. Gillard, Questions without notice: Social and community workers, 23 November 2010. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (pp. 3429–3430). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/2010-11-23/0015/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/2010-11-23/0015/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 16 February 2024.

<sup>48</sup> Gillard, Questions without notice: Social and community workers.

<sup>49</sup> J. Gillard, Address to social and community sector workers, Speech, Sydney, 10 November 2011. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-18258>. Accessed 4 May 2023.

<sup>50</sup> B. Shorten, Celebrating WA equal pay decision, Media Release, 3 September 2013. [http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/22093/20130906-0237/www.alp.org.au/cm12\\_030913.html](http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/22093/20130906-0237/www.alp.org.au/cm12_030913.html). Accessed 4 May 2018.

<sup>51</sup> F. MacDonald & S. Charlesworth, Equal pay under the Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth): Mainstreamed or marginalised. *University of New South Wales Law Journal*, 36(2), 2013, pp. 563–586.



An initial decision by the Fair Work Tribunal in the case of workers in the social and community services sector accepted predominantly female caring work had been undervalued. However subsequent decisions by the Fair Work tribunal under Labor’s legislation, involving the early childhood education and care sector, were not as favourable for women. For example, Fair Work decisions would have required a group of higher-remunerated male employees doing comparable work for comparison, thereby downplaying structural disadvantage and revealing potential weaknesses in the original legislation.<sup>52</sup> Feminists had also questioned whether Labor’s Fair Work Act would adequately address the problems in the enterprise bargaining system which continued to play a key role in determining pay and conditions given that women were often in a vulnerable bargaining position.<sup>53</sup> The Fair Work Act was particularly criticised for not providing sufficient protection for those in precarious work.<sup>54</sup>

The Gillard government also introduced measures amending the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999 that were intended to ensure reporting of gender equality measures, especially gender pay gaps. The Act became the Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012, and changed the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency. The legislation’s measures were designed to become progressively more onerous, developing benchmarks and enabling the minister “to set industry-specific minimum standards, in consultation with industry and experts”. Nonetheless, the penalties for non-compliance merely involved naming, although there were also possible consequences for government grants, financial assistance and financial procurement.<sup>55</sup> The amendments were justified on

<sup>52</sup> M. Smith & G. Whitehouse, Wage-setting and gender pay equality in Australia: Advances, retreats and future prospects. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 62(4), 2020, pp. 550–554. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185620926220>.

<sup>53</sup> Smith & Whitehouse, Wage-setting and gender pay equality, pp. 550–554; M. Smith, Gender equity: The commission’s legacy and the challenge for Fair Work Australia. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 53(5) 2011, pp. 647–661. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002218561419617>.

<sup>54</sup> M. Rawling, Regulating precarious work in Australia: A preliminary assessment, *Alternative Law Journal*, 40(4), 2015, p. 254. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1037969X1504000408>.

<sup>55</sup> J. Collins, Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Amendment Bill 2012: Second Reading, 1 March 2012. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (pp. 2440–2442). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/bda27a36-a8b5-4e6a-a64f-6084b2c53511/0012/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/bda27a36-a8b5-4e6a-a64f-6084b2c53511/0012/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 2 January 2024.

familiar economic grounds, namely increasing productivity, addressing skill shortages and boosting domestic product as well as equality.<sup>56</sup> Senator Deborah O'Neill acknowledged that some businesses had not responded well to legislation on equal pay, with some seeking “to maintain inequality for a range of reasons one hates to imagine”.<sup>57</sup> Presumably the “reasons one hates to imagine” included not just rampant sexism but businesses benefiting financially by paying women less. Resistance to gender equality in the workplace related to masculine self-esteem and performance of masculine gender identity was not discussed, along with the pressures on women to conform to more traditional stereotypes.

Nonetheless, the government was aware that achieving equality in the workplace would also involve changing men's behaviour.

### PAID EMPLOYMENT, WOMEN, MEN AND CARING RESPONSIBILITIES

Minister for the Status of Women, Tanya Plibersek was particularly clear that achieving workplace equality required encouraging men to take more responsibility in the home given that “workplace culture and discriminatory practices will not change unless both men and women share their work and caring responsibilities”.<sup>58</sup> The government introduced paid parental leave for parents as part of “changing... laws and structure to allow equality between men and women not just at work, but in the home as well”.<sup>59</sup> However, Plibersek admitted that getting men to engage more in caring responsibilities might not be easy, describing it as “probably the one” issue “that will require the most difficult conversation between

<sup>56</sup> Collins, Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Amendment Bill 2012, pp. 2440–2442.

<sup>57</sup> D. O'Neill, Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Amendment Bill 2012: Second Reading, 29 May 2012. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 5965). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/4011f121-4ade-4f4b-89bf-3918b5ee0697/0010/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/4011f121-4ade-4f4b-89bf-3918b5ee0697/0010/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 2 January 2024.

<sup>58</sup> Plibersek, Speech at Slater and Gordon.

<sup>59</sup> T. Plibersek & J. Bishop, The gender agenda—UN women's forum, transcript, National Press Club, Canberra, 6 March 2013 (Uploaded 8 March 2013). <https://web.archive.nla.gov.au/awa/20160530120200/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/45135/20160530-1756/www.juliebishop.com.au/the-gender-agenda-un-women-s-forum-national-press-club/index.html>. Accessed 2 January 2024.

Australian men and women”.<sup>60</sup> She cited research revealing that mothers were present during most of the time Australian fathers spent with their children and UK research suggesting many fathers saw going to work as a welcome break from their children.<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, Plibersek also cited research suggesting that many fathers “are keen to spend more time with their kids”.<sup>62</sup> She hoped that facilitating women’s workplace opportunities would take some of the pressure of men to be sole breadwinners and encourage them to be “equal partners”, enjoying the “rewards” of parenting.<sup>63</sup> Although she emphasised that some would “choose a more traditional split – just as my parents did. That’s their right and their business”.<sup>64</sup> Her successor, Kate Ellis also emphasised the importance of men being involved in domestic responsibilities and caring, and of introducing flexible workplaces designed to encourage “cultural change”.<sup>65</sup> However, Ellis noted research showing: “that men are **not** taking up flexible work practices in large numbers. And the problem appears to be a cultural one. Taking up part-time work or flexible practices still seems to denote a lack of ambition”.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, a women’s budget statement noted that: “Men can experience more pressure to work long hours, limiting their capacity to play an equal parenting role” and that fathers only tended to take on

<sup>60</sup> Plibersek, Women and men.

<sup>61</sup> Plibersek, Women and men.

<sup>62</sup> T. Plibersek, Launch of the EOWA survey on paid maternity leave, sex-based harassment initiatives and the gender pay gap, speech, Parliament House, Canberra, 20 August 2009. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1817/ewasurvey\\_20aug09/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1817/ewasurvey_20aug09/). Accessed 2 January 2024.

<sup>63</sup> T. Plibersek, Launch of Plan International Australia’s “Because I am a Girl” report, speech, Government House, Canberra, 20 October 2009. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1810/launch\\_plan\\_int\\_21oct2009/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1810/launch_plan_int_21oct2009/). Accessed 28 May 2020; Plibersek, Women and men.

<sup>64</sup> Plibersek, Women and men.

<sup>65</sup> Ellis, Women’s budget statement 2011–12. Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2011, pp. 4 & 8. [http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/135947/20190124-1454/www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06\\_2012/womens\\_budget\\_2011.pdf](http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/135947/20190124-1454/www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/06_2012/womens_budget_2011.pdf). Accessed 2 January 2024.

<sup>66</sup> Ellis, Women and Leadership Australia’s National 2011 Adelaide Symposium.

average two weeks parental leave after the birth of a child.<sup>67</sup> The 2011–2012 Women’s Budget Statement estimated the “opportunity cost” of caring at \$6.5 billion per annum.<sup>68</sup>

Consequently, the government made changes to workplace legislation and the Sex Discrimination Act designed to prevent men being discriminated against if they did try to improve their work-life balance to be able to take on more caring responsibilities for children.<sup>69</sup> Labor’s paid parental scheme also enabled men to have an opportunity to take part of the time available to look after newborns.<sup>70</sup> However, the government’s paid parental leave scheme was not as generous as in some other countries and also, as we shall see, did not involve the payment of superannuation.<sup>71</sup> It was nonetheless a major advance for those women, in particular, who had not had access to paid parental leave before, unlike in the vast majority of OECD countries, where paid maternity leave had often been introduced in the 1950s. Indeed, some countries were even earlier with, for example, Germany introducing two weeks paid maternity leave prior to birth in 1903–1911 and Chile introducing a 60-day period of combined pre- and post-paid maternity leave in 1925.<sup>72</sup> Labor’s parental leave payments did include options for fathers (while generally assuming that it would be mothers caring for children):

The Paid Parental Leave scheme began on 1 January 2011, and is already helping working mothers as they take time off to care for their newborns. The Australian Government will also provide eligible working fathers or

<sup>67</sup> Ellis, Women’s budget statement 2011–12, p. 8.

<sup>68</sup> Sharp & Broomhill, Gender responsive budgeting in Australia, p. 15.

<sup>69</sup> Ellis, Women and Leadership Australia’s National 2011 Adelaide Symposium.

<sup>70</sup> J. Macklin, Questions without notice: Paid parental leave, 17 March 2010. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 2792). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/2010-03-17/0090/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/2010-03-17/0090/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 2 January 2024; J. Macklin, Paid parental leave scheme, ABC Local Radio, 18 June 2010, <https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/14115/paid-parental-leave-scheme-abc-local-radio/>. Accessed 2 January 2024.

<sup>71</sup> The historical trajectories of parental leave entitlements in various OECD countries are set out in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), PF 2.5 annex: Detail of change in parental leave by country. OECD, Updated December 2022. [https://www.oecd.org/els/family/PF2\\_5\\_Trends\\_in\\_leave\\_entitlements\\_around\\_childbirth\\_annex.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/els/family/PF2_5_Trends_in_leave_entitlements_around_childbirth_annex.pdf). Accessed 2 February.

<sup>72</sup> OECD, PF 2.5 annex, pp. 26 & 10.

partners (including same sex and defacto partners) with two weeks Paid Paternity Leave at the National Minimum Wage – currently \$570 a week in 2010-11... A father or partner may receive Paid Paternity Leave either on its own or in addition to their partner claiming 18 weeks of Parental Leave Pay. Alternatively, Paid Paternity Leave may be claimed in addition to other family assistance payments such as Baby Bonus and Family Tax Benefit.<sup>73</sup>

## SINGLE PARENTS

However, there were criticisms regarding the Gillard government’s attitude to parental caring responsibilities as children got older. The government built on a Howard government policy to force some 80,000 single parents, mostly mothers, off the higher paid single parent benefits and onto the much lower Newstart (unemployment) allowance once their child turned eight. Over 85% of single parent families were headed by mothers.<sup>74</sup> The government claimed the measure would reduce welfare dependence, while developing capabilities and self-reliance that would assist them in finding jobs, thereby increasing women’s economic equality.<sup>75</sup> The residual neoliberal influences on such arguments were obvious. Many women had difficulty finding jobs, especially ones with good pay and conditions and the flexibility required to undertake their caring responsibilities. This resulted in "an increase in the rate of poverty amongst unemployed sole parents from 35% in 2013 to 59% two years later".<sup>76</sup> Meanwhile single mothers with some paid work lost substantial income because of stricter means-testing caps for Newstart recipients.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Ellis, Women’s budget statement 2011–12, p. 8.

<sup>74</sup> Ellis, Women’s budget statement 2011–12, p. 17.

<sup>75</sup> J. Macklin, Dad and partner pay, family payments, parenting payment—Doorstop, Melbourne, 1 January 2013. <https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/13238/dad-and-partner-pay-family-payments-parenting-payment-doorstop-melbourne/>. Accessed 21 December 2014.

<sup>76</sup> J. Phillips, Poverty in Australia: A national perspective, PowerPoint Slides. ACOSS, 20 August 2019. [https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Poverty-in-Australia\\_A-national-perspective.pdf](https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Poverty-in-Australia_A-national-perspective.pdf). Accessed 4 January 2024.

<sup>77</sup> T. Edwards, Out of wedlock, out of luck: Single mothers and ex-nuptial babies. In M. Arrow (Ed.), *Women and Whitlam: Revisiting the Revolution* (2023, p. 179). NewSouth Publishing.

The change also affected many women in domestic violence situations, making it potentially harder for them to leave abusive relationships.<sup>78</sup>

## CHILDCARE

Under Rudd, Labor had promised a massive expansion of childcare during the 2007 election campaign, tying it to increasing women's work-force participation, and the Labor government subsequently increased the childcare tax rebate from 30 to 50%, with an initial costing of 1.5 billion<sup>79</sup>:

This will assist enormously in making it more possible not just for helping working families make ends meet but critically to increase work force participation.... We have so many qualified people out there, women in particular, who are effectively prevented from returning to the workplace because child care is either not available or not affordable.<sup>80</sup>

Quality childcare that involved educational training was emphasised given the benefits for childhood learning.<sup>81</sup> Labor pledged to establish “260 new long day care centres on school, TAFE, University and community sites” while also providing \$77 million for training childcare workers and setting tougher standards for childcare. Provision.<sup>82</sup> It argued that the Liberal government had been “negligent” in enabling women to maintain their work and home lives by providing affordable

<sup>78</sup> K. Soebig, How removing parenting payments when children turned 8 harmed rather than helped single mothers. *The Conversation*, 8 May 2023. <https://theconversation.com/how-removing-parenting-payments-when-children-turned-8-harmed-rather-than-helped-single-mothers-204927>. Accessed 31 January 2024.

<sup>79</sup> J. Collins, ACTU National Congress women's lunch, Speech, Sydney, 15 May, 2012. <https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/12859/actu-national-congress-womens-lunch-sydney/>. Accessed 2 January 2024; ABC News, Rudd pledges \$1.5b for child care. *ABC News*, 21 October 2007. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2007-10-21/rudd-pledges-15b-for-child-care/704748>. Accessed 2 January 2024.

<sup>80</sup> ABC News, Rudd pledges \$1.5b for child care.

<sup>81</sup> K. Rudd, et al., Labor's plan for early childhood, Election 2007. Australian Labor Party, November 2007, p. 2. [https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20071123203635/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/22093/20071124-0102/www.alp.org.au/download/early\\_childhood\\_policy.html](https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20071123203635/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/22093/20071124-0102/www.alp.org.au/download/early_childhood_policy.html). Accessed 2 January 2024.

<sup>82</sup> Rudd et al., Labor's plan for early childhood.

and quality child care.<sup>83</sup> However, Labor later backtracked on its pledge to deliver hundreds more childcare centres, especially after the collapse of major private provider ABC learning, with claims that only 38 would have been built by 2012.<sup>84</sup> Though Kate Ellis argued that the centres were not necessary due to 65,780 long daycare vacancies being available, over 1000 childcare centres having been built between 2005 and 2009 and a major reduction in costs. Furthermore, building the new centres could “threaten the viability of existing services” which was of major concern to the government in the wake of the ABC learning company collapse.<sup>85</sup> However, critics have argued that Labor failed to address governments’ reliance on subsidising private-sector provision (discussed in Chapters 4 and 5), despite parliamentary committee reports and others identifying major failures in government regulation and provision.<sup>86</sup> In the words of academic childcare expert Deb Brennan, whose expertise was later to be used by the Albanese government:

Australia’s system of market-based provision exists in uneasy tension with the goal of quality service provision. Of even deeper significance, the marketisation of ECEC in recent decades has focused public attention and debate on a narrow set of “outcomes” and “targets”. Technocratic debates of this kind divert attention from the deeper political and ethical issues at stake in the organisation of care and education for young children.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>83</sup> T. Plibersek “Women’s business”.

<sup>84</sup> M. Franklin, Gillard admits failure on childcare delivery. *The Australian*, 3 March 2010. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/gillard-admits-failure-on-childcare-delivery/news-story/5774941fb15b6424034e67a54ce16bab>. Accessed 2 January 2024.

<sup>85</sup> P. Hudson, Rudd Government scraps promise to build 260 childcare centres. *The Daily Telegraph*, 22 April 2010. <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/national/rudd-government-scraps-promise-to-build-260-childcare-centres/news-story/dfc780687c464d94eaf24e7e835d66f8>. Accessed 1 February 2024.

<sup>86</sup> Parliament of Australia, The Senate, Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee, Provision of childcare. Commonwealth of Australia, 23 November 2009. [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Education\\_Employment\\_and\\_Workplace\\_Relations/Completed\\_inquiries/2008-10/child\\_care/report/index](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_Employment_and_Workplace_Relations/Completed_inquiries/2008-10/child_care/report/index). Accessed 2 January 2024, especially Chapter 2 ABC learning centres.

<sup>87</sup> D. Brennan, The business of care: Australia’s experiment with the marketisation of childcare. In C. Miller & L. Orchard (Eds.), *Australian public policy: Progressive ideas in the neoliberal ascendancy* (2014, p. 152). Policy Press.

## SUPERANNUATION

Lower-paid jobs and timeout of the workforce continued to have a serious impact on women’s superannuation. Plibersek noted that the average superannuation pay-out for women in 2005–2006 was half of that for men and: “For women who spend their lives caring for family members – children, the elderly or those with disability – there can be significant economic consequences”.<sup>88</sup> However, Sharp and Broomhill pointed out that, while the 2010–2011 women’s budget statement lauded the fact that the government was funding measures costing \$2.4 billion over four years that would add an estimated \$78,000 in superannuation to a woman with a broken work pattern and \$108,000 to a woman without, the same budget document failed to acknowledge that the government would lose around \$20 billion a year in superannuation tax concessions that largely benefited high-income men.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, Liberal Sharman Stone criticised Labor for not including paying superannuation in their parental leave scheme, calling it a “mean and tricky offer” that would reinforce the disadvantage women faced from moving in and out of the workforce to have children.<sup>90</sup> The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women had also expressed its concern that superannuation was not included.<sup>91</sup> While Labor addressed other Committee concerns, for example, regarding the ability of women to serve in combat roles, the issue of superannuation and parental leave was to have to wait until the period of the Albanese government.<sup>92</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Plibersek, *Women and men*.

<sup>89</sup> Sharp & Broomhill, *Gender responsive budgeting in Australia*, pp. 16–19.

<sup>90</sup> S. Stone, *Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Amendment Bill 2012*: Second reading, 29 May 2012. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 5969). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/4011f121-4ade-4f4b-89bf-3918b5ee0697/0011/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/4011f121-4ade-4f4b-89bf-3918b5ee0697/0011/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 2 January 2024.

<sup>91</sup> UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Australia*. Forty-sixth session, CEDAW/C/AUL/CO/7. UN, 12–30 July 2010, pp. 7–8, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/692168?ln=en>. Accessed 6 November 2023.

<sup>92</sup> UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, *Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under Article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Combined Sixth and Seventh Periodic Reports of States Parties: Australia*, CEDAW/C/AUL/7. UN, 9 March 2009, p. 71. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/655281?ln=en>. Accessed 6 November 2023;



## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Rudd made strong statements opposing domestic violence, arguing for example that:

As a nation, the time has well and truly come to have a national conversation - a public national conversation, not a private one - about how it could still be the case that in 2008 half a million Australian women could have experienced violence from their partner... And it is my gender - it is our gender - Australian men - that are responsible.... we need to change the attitudes of Australian men. From birth, it must be drilled into the conscious and the subconscious of all men that there are no circumstances - no circumstances - in which violence against women is acceptable.<sup>93</sup>

The government committed \$12.5 million over four years to establishing a free 1800 RESPECT phoneline for victims of domestic violence and setting up a National Council and National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children, the developing of which was also supported by ministers for women at state level.<sup>94</sup> The government also funded \$17 million for a Respectful Relationships campaign.<sup>95</sup> By contrast, it was argued that the Howard government had backtracked on some of its domestic violence promises, for example using funding that had been earmarked for a respectful relationships campaign for fridge magnets advertising an anti-terrorist alert hotline instead.<sup>96</sup> However, as under the Howard government, domestic violence was also constructed

J. Thompson, Women cleared to serve in combat. *ABC News*, 28 September 2011. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-09-27/women-on-the-frontline/2946258>. Accessed 2 February 2024.

<sup>93</sup> K. Rudd, Respecting women and leading men, Speech, White Ribbon Foundation, Annual white tie dinner Four Seasons Hotel, Sydney, 17 September 2008. <https://pmt.ranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-16122>. Accessed 2 January 2024.

<sup>94</sup> Ellis, Women's budget statement 2011–12, p. 29; T. Plibersek, PM launches inaugural meeting of National Council to Reduce Violence against Women and Children, Media Release, 4 June 2008. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1886/nat\\_council\\_violence\\_05june08/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1886/nat_council_violence_05june08/). Accessed 28 April 2023.

<sup>95</sup> T. Plibersek, Lead agency announced for respectful relationships campaign, Media Release, 7 April 2010. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/2151/agency\\_rr\\_campaign\\_7apr10](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/2151/agency_rr_campaign_7apr10). Accessed 14 April 2020.

<sup>96</sup> Sharp & Broomhill, Gender responsive budgeting in Australia, pp. 11–13.

as a major economic and workplace issue, impacting women’s employment levels and histories and contributing to absenteeism and lower productivity.<sup>97</sup>

## REPRESENTATION

The government pledged to increase the percentage of women on government boards to 40% and funded scholarships for women to be trained to be on boards in the private sector.<sup>98</sup> From 2012 Labor increased its quota for women parliamentarians from a mandatory 35% of women in winnable seats to “to produce an outcome where not less than 40% of seats held by Labor will be filled by women, and not less than 40% by men” with 20% able to be filled by either.<sup>99</sup> Plibersek was well aware of the long history of women parliamentarians being a miniscule minority, citing past conservative and Labor women members in the process. For example, she cited Dame Enid Lyons’ statement that: “I would sometimes look at the men about me and envy them for having wives. Were there any of those politicians, I would ask myself, who even washed their own socks?”<sup>100</sup> Plibersek also mentioned the experience of distinguished Labor member Dorothy Tangney who had “never served with another Labor woman” for the “entire 25 year period” she was a member of parliament.<sup>101</sup> Unlike Labor, having party quotas is still opposed by the Liberal Party to the current day. Despite this being the practice at that time in some other countries, the Australian Labor government did not attempt to legislate quotas for seats reserved for women (as in Samoa) or follow the Republic of Ireland’s example of halving campaign funding for

<sup>97</sup> T. Plibersek, Speech at domestic violence is a workplace issue forum—University of New South Wales, 15 April 2010. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1832/domesticviolencework\\_15apr10/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1832/domesticviolencework_15apr10/). Accessed 26 May 2020.

<sup>98</sup> Ellis, Women’s budget statement 2011–12, p.33.

<sup>99</sup> A. Hough, Quotas for women in parliament. Flagpost—Parliamentary Library Blog, 19 April 2021. [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/FlagPost/2021/April/Quotas\\_for\\_women\\_in\\_parliament#:~:text=This%20was%20replaced%20by%20a,by%20candidates%20of%20either%20gender](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/FlagPost/2021/April/Quotas_for_women_in_parliament#:~:text=This%20was%20replaced%20by%20a,by%20candidates%20of%20either%20gender). Accessed 2 January 2024.

<sup>100</sup> T. Plibersek, Speech to Emily’s List ACT dinner, Southern Cross Yacht Club, Lotus Bay, Mariner Place, Yarralumla, Canberra, 19 August 2009. [https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1820/emilys\\_list\\_19aug09/](https://formerministers.dss.gov.au/1820/emilys_list_19aug09/). Accessed 28 May 2020.

<sup>101</sup> Plibersek, Speech to Emily’s List ACT dinner.

political parties that failed to nominate a minimum of 30% of candidates that were female (or male).<sup>102</sup> Furthermore, Labor was soon to discover that there were ongoing issues with the gendered nature of parliamentary culture.

## THE GENDER CULTURE WARS

Gillard initially tried to play down her gender, apparently believing that the novelty of her being Australia’s first female prime minister would eventually wear off as she got on and did the job.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, Labor seemed rather naïve regarding cultural gender issues, for example, repeatedly explicitly labelling Gillard as “tough” despite the risk of Gillard then being constructed as unfeminine and unlikeable as happens to so many female political leaders.<sup>104</sup> Even experienced feminist politicians seemed shocked by the level of vitriol Gillard received.<sup>105</sup> Yet Gillard herself had previously drawn attention to the problematic way in which female politicians, and political leaders in particular, were treated by both political opponents and the media.<sup>106</sup> Gillard was subject to a relentless barrage

<sup>102</sup> J. McCann, Electoral quotas for women: An international overview, research paper series, 2013–14. Parliamentary Library, 14 November 2013, pp. 7–8. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/prspub/2840598/upload\\_binary/2840598.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22library/prspub/2840598%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/library/prspub/2840598/upload_binary/2840598.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22library/prspub/2840598%22). Accessed 3 January 2024. For more recent developments internationally, see S. Lang, P. Meier, & B. Sauer (Eds.), *Party politics and the implementation of gender quotas: Resisting Institutions*. Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature, 2013.

<sup>103</sup> J. Gillard, *My Story*. Random House, 2014; J. Gillard & W. Swan, Joint press conference with Deputy Prime Minister Wayne Swan, 24 June 2010. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-17511>. Accessed 3 January 2024; J. Gillard, Interview with Prime Minister Julia Gillard (PM) by Anne Summers (AS), Kirribilli House, Sydney, 10 June 2013. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20130705074546/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/45745/20141020-0000/annesummers.com.au/pdf/transcript.pdf>. Accessed 4 January 2024.

<sup>104</sup> C. Johnson, Playing the gender card: The uses and abuses of gender in Australian politics. *Politics & Gender*, 11(2), 2015, pp. 302–303. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X15000045>.

<sup>105</sup> K. Ellis, *Sex, lies and question time*. Hardie Grant, 2021, pp. 124–127.

<sup>106</sup> J. Gillard, Doorstop interview, September 28 2005, [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/KYFH6/upload\\_binary/kyfh61.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/KYFH6/upload_binary/kyfh61.pdf). Accessed 4 January 2024; J. Baird, *Media tarts: How the Australian press frames female politicians*. Scribe Publications, 2004.

of gendered abuse with opposition politicians likening her to both blood-thirsty female villains Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth and Charles Dickens’ Madame Defargue.<sup>107</sup> Opposition Leader Tony Abbott highlighted her de facto relationship status by suggesting that she needed to make “politically speaking, an honest woman of herself”.<sup>108</sup> At a political rally, Abbott stood (he claimed unknowingly) in front of placards proclaiming, “Ditch the Witch” and “Bob Brown’s Bitch”—Brown was Leader of the Greens, a party Gillard made a pact with to introduce a price on carbon and to support her minority government. A Liberal Party fundraising dinner menu listed the “Julia Gillard Kentucky Fried Quail: Small Breasts, Huge Thighs and a Big Red Box” amongst its offerings.<sup>109</sup>

The broader social media and public response was even worse, ranging from “sack the crack” slogans to the distribution of doctored pornographic images and the selling of a “Julia Droolia” dog chew toy (featuring excessively large breasts and buttocks).<sup>110</sup> A radio commentator questioned whether her heterosexual de facto relationship was a sham, implying both she and her partner were concealing they were gay

<sup>107</sup> C. Pyne, Motions: Prime Minister, 8 February 2012. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (pp. 287–288). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/6c0c6a1a-65b5-4c98-a354-9ac64f38f5f/0119/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/6c0c6a1a-65b5-4c98-a354-9ac64f38f5f/0119/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 4 January 2024; C. Pyne, Motions: Labor party leadership, 26 June 2013. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (pp. 7145–7146). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/4d60a662-a538-4e48-b2d8-9a97b8276c77/0128/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/4d60a662-a538-4e48-b2d8-9a97b8276c77/0128/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 4 January 2024.

<sup>108</sup> T. Abbott, Transcript of the Hon. Tony Abbott MHR joint doorstep interview with Mrs Jane Prentice MHR, federal member for Ryan and Dr Bruce Flegg MP, state member for Moggill, Brisbane, 25 February 2011, p. 2. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/589600/upload\\_binary/589600.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/589600/upload_binary/589600.pdf). Accessed 4 January 2024.

<sup>109</sup> B. Jabour, Julia Gillard’s “small breasts” served up on Liberal party dinner menu. *The Guardian*, 12 June 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/12/gillard-menu-sexist-liberal-dinner>. Accessed 3 January 2024.

<sup>110</sup> A. Summers, Her rights at work (R-rated version): The political persecution of Australia’s first female Prime Minister, 2012 Human Rights and Social Justice Lecture, University of Newcastle, Australia, 13 August 2012. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20130408234843/http://annesummers.com.au/speeches/her-rights-at-work-r-rated/>. Accessed 4 January 2024.

while another claimed she should be placed in a “chaff bag” and dumped in the sea.<sup>111</sup>

Gillard eventually responded to the barrage of sexism with key speeches and statements in which she explicitly called out misogynistic and sexist behaviour. These ranged from her famously impassioned speech denouncing Liberal leader Tony Abbott for misogyny to gently chiding the press for its obsession with what she was wearing, for implying that she was not warm and cuddly enough and denouncing misogynistic “nut jobs” on the internet.<sup>112</sup> Arguably, it was the first time since the Whitlam era that issues of sexist culture had been so explicitly addressed and having an avowedly feminist Prime Minister do so made it even more significant. However, raising such issues did not come without potential costs as Gillard transgressed the stereotypical female role by calling out poor male behaviour rather than making men feel good about themselves.<sup>113</sup> Liberal women joined in some of the criticisms of Gillard, with Julie Bishop, (who

<sup>111</sup> D. Weber, Radio presenter Howard Sattler suspended from 6PR after disrespectful interview with the PM. ABC, 14 June 2013. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-06-14/radio-presenter-howard-sattler-suspended-from-6pr/4753466>. Accessed 27 September 2023; A. Goldsworthy, Unfinished business: Sex, freedom and misogyny, *Quarterly Essay*, 50, 2023, pp. 4–53; M. Farr, Alan Jones: Women are “destroying the joint”. *News.com.au*, 31 August 2012. <https://www.news.com.au/national/alan-jones-women-are-destroying-the-joint/news-story/402a32a90a61275ac789a6cbfb45c31d>. Accessed 31 August 2012; C. Johnson, From Obama to Abbott: Gender identity and the politics of emotion. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 28(75), 2013, pp. 19–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2012.759311>; M. Sawyer, Misogyny and misrepresentation: Women in Australian parliaments. *Political Science*, 65(1), 2013, pp. 111–114. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032318713488316>; A. Summers, *The misogyny factor*. NewSouth Publishing, 2013, pp. 104–136.

<sup>112</sup> See, Johnson, Playing the gender card: The uses and abuses of gender in Australian politics; J. Gillard, Motions: Speaker, 9 October, 2012. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (pp. 11581–11583). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/5a0ebb6b-c6c8-4a92-ac13-219423c2048d/0039/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansardr/5a0ebb6b-c6c8-4a92-ac13-219423c2048d/0039/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 3 January 2024; J. Gillard, Transcript of interview with Mike Willesee, Sunday Night, 5 February 2012, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-18372>. Accessed 3 January 2024; S. Hadfield, Julia Gillard laughs off the continuing attention to her wardrobe. *Herald Sun*, 23 April 2013. <https://www.news.com.au/national/julia-gillard-laughs-off-the-continuing-attention-to-her-wardrobe/news-story/761567f0e4fb496f967f3116ba12f7d2>. Accessed 4 January 2024; J. Gillard, transcript of joint press conference with Minister for Immigration, 23 August 2012, <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-18751>. Accessed 4 January 2024.

<sup>113</sup> See Johnson, Playing the gender card, pp. 309–310.

subsequently criticised sexism in the Liberal Party after she left office), stating that:

I think it's quite dispiriting that the Prime Minister would concoct a false gender war to divide the community. We should be able to expect the Prime Minister to govern for all Australians and not try to wage false gender wars as some sort of political weapon against the Coalition.<sup>114</sup>

By contrast, Tanya Plibersek argued that Gillard's comments in the misogyny speech had resonance because: "It's a speech that a lot of women would have liked to give in their own workplace at one time or another".<sup>115</sup> Gillard has subsequently regretted not speaking out against the sexism she encountered earlier in office when she had more political capital, arguing that she "didn't realise it was going to get as mad as it did around gender".<sup>116</sup> Gillard also later noted that "smashing through a glass ceiling is a dangerous pursuit. It is hard not to get lacerated on the way through".<sup>117</sup>

Nonetheless, while key reforms were introduced and Gillard made major contributions in arguing for women's equality, including her interventions in gendered culture wars, there have still been a number of criticisms made of her and Rudd's governments.

<sup>114</sup> J. Bishop, RN Breakfast with Fran Kelly, ABC, 12 June 2013. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20150407010902/http://www.juliebishop.com.au/rn-breakfast-with-fran-kelly/>. Accessed 4 January 2024.

<sup>115</sup> Plibersek & Bishop, The gender agenda.

<sup>116</sup> M. McGowan, Julia Gillard tells Q + A she wishes she had called out sexism at start of Prime Ministership. *The Guardian*, 14 July 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/14/julia-gillard-tells-qa-she-wishes-she-had-called-out-sexism-at-start-of-prime-ministership>. Accessed 14 July 2020.

<sup>117</sup> J. Gillard, Victorian women's trust: "credit where credit is due" speech notes, 10 November 2013. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/2837219/upload\\_binary/2837219.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22Victorian%20women%E2%80%99s%20%20%E2%80%9CCredit%20where%20credit%20is%20due%22](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/media/pressrel/2837219/upload_binary/2837219.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf#search=%22Victorian%20women%E2%80%99s%20%20%E2%80%9CCredit%20where%20credit%20is%20due%22). Accessed 3 January 2024.

## SAME-SEX ISSUES

A key criticism relates to the implications for lesbian women of the Gillard government’s position on same-sex marriage. Labor under both the first Rudd government and the Gillard government had opposed same-sex marriage, at least partly because of attempts to keep socially conservative Christian, working class and multicultural voters on side.<sup>118</sup> Gillard had argued against same-sex marriage on the grounds that “for this nation, with our heritage as a Christian country, with what’s defined us and continues to define us, the Marriage Act has a special status in our culture and for our community”.<sup>119</sup> Earlier she cited “hundreds of years of history in Australia and in western culture beyond about what marriage means”.<sup>120</sup> Gillard also argued that, as her own then de facto heterosexual relationship showed, it was possible to have a loving, committed long-term relationship without needing the imprimatur of marriage.<sup>121</sup> She has subsequently claimed that she had hoped to spark a broader debate about the nature of marriage and non-religious ways of recognising relationships but admitted that she had got it wrong.<sup>122</sup> By contrast, by the time Kevin Rudd returned to the office for his second stint as Prime Minister, he had accepted that Church and State could have different positions on marriage and supported same-sex marriage as a result, while granting Labor dissenters such as Gillard a conscience vote (although Labor was defeated at the 2013 election before this policy could be

<sup>118</sup> See C. Johnson & M. Tremblay, Comparing same-sex marriage in Australia and Canada: Institutions and political will. *Government and Opposition*, 53(1), 2018, pp. 145–146, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.36>, pp. 145–146.

<sup>119</sup> J. Gillard, cited in, D. Shanahan & P. Kelly, I’ll do it my way, declares Julia Gillard. *The Australian*, 20 August 2010. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/jill-do-it-my-way-declares-julia-gillard/news-story/b0f3fld243d41603bbdbf79f88c5d9e8>. Accessed 2 November 2018.

<sup>120</sup> J. Gillard, Television interview with PM agenda. *Sky News*, 31 July 2009. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id:%22media/pressrel/JFAU6%22>. Accessed 10 December 2018.

<sup>121</sup> ABC, Prime Minister Julia Gillard joins Q&A. *ABC TV*, 11 June 2012. <https://www.abc.net.au/qanda/prime-minister-julia-gillard-joins-qa/10661034>. Accessed 4 January 2024.

<sup>122</sup> G. Hitch, Julia Gillard admits she “got it wrong” on same-sex marriage debate. *ABC News*, 16 May 2023 (Updated 31 May 2023). <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-05-16/julia-gillard-same-sex-marriage-feminism-debate/102290962>. Accessed 4 January 2024.

put into effect).<sup>123</sup> However, this may have been easier for Rudd, as a married man and professed Christian, to do than Gillard. It seems likely that Gillard's opposition to same-sex marriage was partly an attempt to reassure social conservatives that, despite being an unmarried atheist in a long-term heterosexual relationship, she was not overly progressive and would draw the line at same-sex marriage. Her own personal circumstances may have led her to believe that this trade-off was not an excessive one without understanding its significance for a social group who had a long history of having their relationships discriminated against. She also possibly underestimated the ways in which, as explained in the last chapter, opposition to same-sex marriage was being used to signal support for traditional gender constructions, or alternatively, that may have been precisely why she thought that support for same-sex marriage would be a bridge too far for her personally.

Nonetheless, despite drawing the line at marriage for most of its time in office, Labor had brought in important relationship recognition laws, which gave same-sex couples the same rights as heterosexual de facto and married couples thereby ending extensive discrimination in over 58 pieces of legislation in areas including family law, taxation, superannuation, aged care, social security, health, immigration, workers' compensation, veterans' and defence benefits and many more.<sup>124</sup> The 2013 reforms to the Sex Discrimination Act did also remove exemptions against faith-based service providers being able to exclude LGBTIQ+ residents in aged care, though the ability for faith-based service providers to discriminate remained in other health areas, education and also family violence and homelessness

<sup>123</sup> K. Rudd, Church and State are able to have different positions on same sex marriage. Kevin Connects, 20 May 2013. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20130920165120/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/132487/20130921-0125/www.kevinruddmp.com/2013/05/church-and-state-are-able-to-have.html>. Accessed 4 January 2024; Australian Labor Party (ALP), It's time for marriage equality, Our Stories, 25 August 2013. [http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/22093/20130906-0237/www.alp.org.au/it\\_s\\_time\\_for\\_marriage\\_equality.html](http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/22093/20130906-0237/www.alp.org.au/it_s_time_for_marriage_equality.html). Accessed 26 October 2018.

<sup>124</sup> Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*, pp. 93–95; for the situation prior to this legislation being passed, see HEROC, Same sex: Same entitlements: Report of the National Inquiry into Discrimination Against People in Same-Sex Relationships: Financial and Work-Related Entitlements and Benefits. Commonwealth of Australia, May 2007. [https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/human\\_rights/samesex/report/pdf/SSSE\\_Report.pdf](https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/human_rights/samesex/report/pdf/SSSE_Report.pdf). Accessed 19 December 2023.



services.<sup>125</sup> Labor’s amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act not only made sexuality a protected category but also gender identity (in a move that provided transgender protections) and intersex variations.<sup>126</sup> The fact these protections were already in place, may have contributed to reducing the effectiveness of the anti-gender ideology campaigns to be discussed in Chapter 6.

In short, as with many of the policy areas covered in this chapter, the Rudd and Gillard legacy in regard to same-sex issues was a complex but not unproblematic one, revealing both the implementation of useful reforms and significant limitations to the reform process.

### ADDITIONAL CRITICISMS

Reflecting on the tenth anniversary of Gillard’s famous Misogyny Speech, Marian Sawer made a number of criticisms of Gillard’s legacy. The negatives included the single parents’ measures mentioned before but also the fact that the women’s policy for the 2010 election was released the day before the election “without telling anybody” and was not available amongst the other policies on the ALP website.<sup>127</sup> Gillard also left the Office for Women where Howard had put it, namely the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs rather than in Prime Minister and Cabinet, where, as pointed out in the last chapter, it had both a more central and overarching policy oversight.<sup>128</sup> Sharp and Broomhill argue that this made it much more difficult for the

<sup>125</sup> A. Brown, cited in, Parliament of Australia, Joint Committee on Human Rights, Inquiry into Australia’s Human Rights Framework, Official Committee Hansard, Commonwealth of Australia, 28 September 2023. pp. 20–21. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au:443/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22committees%2Fcommjnt%2F27339%2F0003%22>. Accessed 5 January 2024.

<sup>126</sup> N. Riseman, Transgender inclusion and Australia’s failed sexuality discrimination bill. *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 65(2), 2019, pp. 259–277. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12568>.

<sup>127</sup> J. Maley, “This is not OK from our first female PM”: Gillard’s legacy under the spotlight. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 October 2022. <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/this-is-not-ok-from-our-first-female-pm-gillard-s-legacy-under-the-spotlight-20220928-p5blj.html>. Accessed 12 April 2023; M. Sawer, Women and the 2010 Federal Election. *ABC News*, 3 September 2010. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2010-09-03/29700>. Accessed 24 October 2023.

<sup>128</sup> Maley, “This is not OK from our first female PM”.

women's Budget statement to be integrated into government economic policy and decision-making.<sup>129</sup> Nonetheless, Sawer also cites the many positive measures such as supporting better pay for women in the care economy and investing more funds in it.<sup>130</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Howard government had framed gender equality policy demands of a feminist nature as constituting politically correct “special interests” that ripped off taxpayers, divided Australians, suppressed individual choice and discriminated against stay-at-home mothers. By contrast, the Rudd and Gillard years framed feminist issues as legitimate demands for equality that deserved increased funding support and required more government intervention and regulation than the Howard government had been prepared to consider. Nonetheless, some feminist critiques can be made of both the Rudd and Gillard years. In particular, economic issues had not been adequately re-thought from a feminist perspective, including not just neoliberal but also Keynesian perspectives, with particular implications for government stimulus policies (in regard to Keynesian-influenced framing) and industrial relations and single parent support legislation (in regard to neoliberal-influenced framing). Admittedly, the government found itself in difficult economic circumstances post the Global Financial Crisis and given a mining boom that contributed to patchwork pressures on other parts of the economy, including contributing to a high Australian dollar that impacted manufacturing's domestic market and exports.<sup>131</sup> The Rudd government was not alone in failing to deal adequately with gender issues during the GFC though and at least focused on implementing stimulus policies rather than the austerity measures implemented by the European Union during its subsequent Eurozone crisis, which had a particularly disastrous impact on women.<sup>132</sup> The government also faced an Opposition that was successfully seeking electoral advantage by criticising Labor debt levels, despite those being relatively low by international

<sup>129</sup> Sharp & Broomhill, A case study of gender responsive budgeting, p. 18.

<sup>130</sup> Maley, “This is not OK from our first female PM”.

<sup>131</sup> See Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*, pp. 176–184.

<sup>132</sup> A. Elomäki & J. Kantola, Feminist governance in the European parliament: The political struggle over the inclusion of gender in the EU's COVID-19 response. *Politics & Gender*, 19(2), 2023, pp. 328–348. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X21000544>.

standards.<sup>133</sup> Nonetheless, women’s issues could have been given a higher economic priority and this issue will be discussed in more depth in the Conclusion. Furthermore, Labor’s framing of gender equality issues was also to prove inadequate for anticipating, and dealing with, the gendered culture wars that erupted during the Gillard period, particularly in regard to understanding (and counteracting) the complex politics of gender identity. Some of these issues will be returned to in the chapter on the Albanese government and in the Conclusion.

<sup>133</sup> See C. Johnson & J. Wanna (with H. A. Lee) (Eds.), *Abbott’s gambit: The 2013 federal election*. ANU Press, 2015; Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*, p. 156.

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# Framing a Business Case for Equality: Women Under the Abbott, Turnbull and Morrison Governments (2013–2022)

## INTRODUCTION

The defeat of the Rudd and Gillard governments in 2013 was to usher in nearly a decade of Liberal-National Coalition governments, under Tony Abbott, Malcolm Turnbull and Scott Morrison as Prime Ministers. However, this chapter particularly focuses on how the centre-right Morrison government (2018–2022) in Australia addressed issues of gender equality, arguing that the COVID-19 pandemic that took place during the Morrison years revealed important flaws in the Coalition governments' framing of gender equality issues, as did various sexual scandals that emerged on Morrison's watch.<sup>1</sup> It will be argued that Morrison government approaches to gender equality reflected both social conservative and neoliberal influences. While some aspects of neoliberalism were challenged by the pandemic—for example attitudes towards government debt, deficits and stimulus packages—other aspects of neoliberalism remained. These included the Morrison government's opposition to forms of government intervention in the market and the government's emphasis on individual choice. Meanwhile, the neoliberal focus on the

<sup>1</sup> I have explored the issue of COVID-19 in more depth in C. Johnson, What COVID-19 revealed about gender equality policy framing. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 57(1), 2022, pp. 93–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2021.2023094>.

individual, rather than on structurally disadvantaged groups, was reinforced by right-wing, socially conservative discourse opposing so-called identity politics and gender ideology.

## BACKGROUND: THE MORRISON GOVERNMENT AND ITS PREDECESSORS

Gender equality policy under both the Abbott and Turnbull governments that preceded Morrison's was influenced by neoliberal perspectives that emphasised the importance of women's economic participation but interpreted this in market-oriented ways. The major focuses on equality of opportunity for women centred around facilitating individual capability, advancement and choice. Policies emphasised capability training and encouraging entrepreneurship amongst women, rather than addressing issues such as low pay in predominantly female industries. There was an underlying assumption that the market was gender-neutral with governments loath to intervene in the market. Indeed, the Abbott government undermined previous Labor government gender equality initiatives designed to address the revaluation of pay rates in female-dominated jobs and introduce stronger requirements for businesses to report unequal pay rates.<sup>2</sup> Rather, it was argued that making a financial, business case for gender equality would sufficiently encourage businesses to pursue gender equality measures. As Michaelia Cash, the then Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women, stated:

There is an irrefutable business case for gender equality, in terms of productive capacity, for the Government, for business, and for the community.

By failing to close the gap in women's workforce participation, the Australian economy could be losing out on \$195 billion a year, or 13 per cent of GDP.

<sup>2</sup> E. Hannan, & P. Karvalas, Coalition resists equal pay claim. *The Australian*, 25 February 2014. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/coalition-resists-equal-pay-claim/news-story/f571a837c47264044cbb980da25354f5>. Accessed 10 April 2024; E. Abetz, & M. Cash, Gender reporting must drive cultural change, 25 February 2015. <https://web.archive.nla.gov.au/awa/20150316215936/https://ministers.employment.gov.au/abetz/gender-reporting-must-drive-cultural-change>. Accessed 10 April 2024.

It is absolutely clear that gender diversity has advantages for business, for the economy, for our social system.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, it was suggested that stricter regulations on reporting gender pay gaps were not required since many businesses would fix gender inequalities once they became aware of them. Minister for Women, Kelly O'Dwyer, argued that the government wanted to work with employers rather than being “punitive” given that “there are some workplaces that do not fully understand that there is in fact a gender pay gap. When they have that information they can take action”.<sup>4</sup> The Australian government actually took a less interventionist position than some other conservative governments internationally. For example, while the UK Conservative government made a similar business case for gender equality it had also, as Kelly herself acknowledged, introduced tougher pay gap reporting measures.<sup>5</sup>

Australian government action to improve women's position focused on increasing the “choices” that were available to them, including sometimes via government subsidised training in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics).<sup>6</sup> However limited such perspectives were, it

<sup>3</sup> M. Cash, Speech to the Diversity Council of Australia, Sydney, 6 May 2014. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20140801074704/http://minister.women.gov.au/media/2014-05-06/diversity-council-australia-sydney>. Accessed 10 April 2024. See further Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), Workplace gender equality: The business case. WGEA, 12 November 2018. <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gender-equality-business-case>. Accessed 10 April 2024.

<sup>4</sup> K. O'Dwyer, Interview on ABC News Radio with Sandy Aloisi, 13 November 2018. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20190208072306/https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/odwyer/2018/abc-newsradio-sandy-alois>. Accessed 10 April 2024.

<sup>5</sup> O'Dwyer, Interview on ABC News Radio; D. Cameron, My one nation government will close the gender pay gap, 14 July 2015. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-my-one-nation-government-will-close-the-gender-pay-gap>. Accessed 10 April 2024; N. Morgan, Lord Davies review on women on boards, 29 October 2015. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nicky-morgan-lord-davies-review-on-women-on-boards>. Accessed 10 April 2024. On Cameron's attempts to address the Conservative's gender issues, see S. Childs, & P. Webb, *Sex, gender and the Conservative Party: From Iron Lady to Kitten Heels*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Cash, Speech to the Diversity Council of Australia; K. O'Dwyer, Foreword. In Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), *Greater choice for Australian women: Women's Economic Security Statement 2018*. DPMC, 20 November 2018. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20190312100735/https://www.pmc.gov.au/resource-centre/office-women/womens-economic-security-statement-2018>. Accessed 10 April 2024.

should be noted that they were far less hostile to feminism than those of the previous Howard Coalition government (1996–2007) analysed in Chapter 4. The Howard government had been influenced by a socially conservative neoliberalism that depicted feminist organisations as politically correct special interest groups ripping off taxpayers, with feminist policies disadvantaging traditional stay-at-home mothers and housewives. By contrast, the Abbott and Turnbull governments not only endorsed calls for gender equality (albeit in the relatively narrow conceptions suggested above) but argued that increasing women’s participation in the economy would have major economic benefits. For example, although Tony Abbott was a socially conservative Catholic on issues such as abortion and, as discussed in Chapter 5, mobilised conservative gender stereotypes against Australia’s first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, he argued that increasing women’s employment levels would potentially add tens of billions to the Australian economy.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, Julie Bishop, the Liberals’ deputy leader and the only woman in Abbott’s first cabinet subsequently complained of being constantly interrupted and not heard in his cabinet meetings.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, she later claimed that Abbott did not want women in his senior ministry at all—Bishop was automatically included by her position as Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party.<sup>9</sup> (While Bishop did not make such public complaints about the Liberals’ treatment of women while Deputy Leader, she did highlight issues of gender equality as Foreign Minister and had appointed well-known feminist and former Democrat Senator Natasha Stott Despoja to be Australia’s Ambassador for Women and Girls).<sup>10</sup> Abbott also signalled his socially conservative

<sup>7</sup> T. Abbott, Address to the National Press Club of Australia, Canberra, 2 February 2015. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-24163>. Accessed 10 April 2024.

<sup>8</sup> J. Bishop, Speech on future of women, off the record, Sydney, 30 October 2018. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20190308034816/https://www.juliebishop.com.au/future-of-women-off-the-record-sydney/>. Accessed 10 April 2024.

<sup>9</sup> K. Middleton, Tony Abbott didn’t want women in his senior ministry, former deputy Liberal leader Julie Bishop claims. *The Guardian*, 9 April 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/apr/09/tony-abbott-didnt-want-women-in-his-senior-ministry-former-deputy-liberal-leader-julie-bishop-claims>.

<sup>10</sup> J. Bishop, Announcement of Australia’s Ambassador for Women and Girls, 16 December 2013. <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/julie-bishop/transcript-eoc/announcement-australias-ambassador-women-and-girls-press-conference>. Accessed 28 April 2024.



credentials by personally opposing same-sex marriage and advocating a plebiscite, in the form of a divisive and traumatic public postal survey, on the issue. Malcolm Turnbull, Abbott's successor as Prime Minister, after a party-room leadership vote, shared Abbott's neoliberal economic policies. However, Turnbull was socially progressive on abortion and described himself as a feminist.<sup>11</sup> Turnbull also emphasised the need to encourage more women into non-traditional areas of employment, such as STEM.<sup>12</sup> However, Turnbull was cautious about antagonising powerful social conservative forces in his party, for example, eventually supporting holding a same-sex marriage plebiscite/voter postal survey despite his own support for marriage equality. Nonetheless, Turnbull did enthusiastically support same-sex marriage legislation after 61.6% of respondents voted yes.<sup>13</sup>

Turnbull's replacement by Morrison after another inner party vote was highly controversial, not least because Morrison had defeated a very high-profile woman candidate for the leadership, namely Julie Bishop. As well, several women parliamentarians raised accusations of bullying in the voting process, albeit behaviour particularly targeted at supporters of a third leadership candidate, Peter Dutton, later to become Leader of the Opposition during Anthony Albanese's term in office.<sup>14</sup> The Morrison government endorsed pre-existing perspectives on gender equality policy, emphasising individual choice, capability and equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcomes. Morrison stated that: "We believe in ... racial and gender equality where every citizen has choice and opportunity to follow their own paths and dreams".<sup>15</sup> Supporting individual

<sup>11</sup> M. Turnbull, Doorstop at Engineers Australia, 6 June 2016. <http://www.malcolmturbull.com.au/media/doorstop-at-engineers-australia>. Accessed 10 April 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Turnbull, Doorstop at Engineers Australia; K. Andrews, Strategy to advance women in STEM, 7 April 2019. <https://www.minister.industry.gov.au/ministers/karenandrews/media-releases/strategy-advance-women-stem>. Accessed 10 April 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey, 2017. ABS, 15 November 2017. <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@nsf/mf/1800.0>. Accessed 10 April 2024.

<sup>14</sup> N. Barry, The Liberal Party. In A. Guaja, M. Sawer, & M. Simms (Eds.), *Morrison's Miracle: The 2019 Australian federal election* (2020, pp. 301–302). ANU Press. <http://doi.org/10.22459/MM.2020.14>.

<sup>15</sup> S. Morrison, Keynote address to Asia Briefing Live: "The beliefs that guide us", 1 November 2018. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-41913>. Accessed 10 April 2024.

aspiration was combined with a focus on women’s safety, as Morrison’s statement describing the Australia he would like his own daughters to live in makes clear:

I’m the blessed father of two beautiful young girls and they are of course the joy of my and Jenny’s life. And my girls, like all of our children, they allow us as parents to see the world through new eyes, through young eyes, through fresh eyes. And when I see the girls I want them to be able to pursue their passions. I want them to be absolutely confident that they can chase their dreams whatever they are. And receive the same rewards for their hard work and their beliefs and their passions as their male counterparts and indeed I’ve had the blessing to do over my life. I want them as adults to have real choices so they can decide what works best for them and their families and not be judged for it. I want them to be free from harassment and violence. I want them to be able to walk the streets of Australia. And I want them to be safe in their home, both today and always in the future.<sup>16</sup>

Morrison’s comments above reflect the “protective masculinity” discussed in previous chapters. Australia’s male prime ministers have often appealed to voters by drawing on traditional gender roles in which male heads of households are protectors of their families as well as economic providers.<sup>17</sup> Morrison also felt it necessary to affirm that his support for gender equality did not come at the expense of men.<sup>18</sup>

## MORRISON, RELIGION, GENDER AND SOCIAL CONSERVATISM

Morrison’s reference to being “blessed” reflected socially conservative Pentecostal religious beliefs that influenced his policy framing. Morrison may have endorsed existing Liberal support for gender equality and proudly proclaimed that his cabinet had more women than ever before

<sup>16</sup> S. Morrison, Remarks at the International Women’s Day Parliamentary Breakfast, 14 February 2019. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-42120>. Accessed 10 April 2024.

<sup>17</sup> C. Johnson, The gendered identities of Australian political leaders: From Hawkie to ScoMo. In Z. Ghazarian, & K. Lee-Koo (Eds.), *Gender Politics: navigating political leadership in Australia* (2021, pp. 11–23). UNSW Press.

<sup>18</sup> S. Morrison, Speech for the 2019 Sir Robert Menzies Lecture, 12 March 2019. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-42191>. Accessed 10 April 2024.

(although some senior women politicians questioned how well he actually listened to women).<sup>19</sup> However, he also flirted with socially conservative rhetoric that reflected anti-gender campaigns by right-wing Christians in Europe, Latin America and the US.<sup>20</sup> Particular targets internationally included abortion (which Morrison personally disagreed with but in the Australian federal system is a state government legislative issue), same-sex marriage (which Morrison had personally opposed but had been introduced under Malcolm Turnbull) and sex-education in schools, particularly regarding transgender issues (which we will see he expressed views on).<sup>21</sup> School education involves both state and federal governments in Australia. Corrêa, Paternotte and Kuhar have emphasised that “gender ideology” is an “empty signifier” which needs to be understood in its local, national context, so the section that follows will analyse the form it is taking in Australian government policy discourse.<sup>22</sup>

As already indicated, Morrison himself was prepared to use terms such as “gender” in the context of support for equality policies (Corrêa, Paternotte and Kuhar make the point that anti-gender discourse should not be “confused with specific equality policies”).<sup>23</sup> However, there were also several instances in which Morrison signalled his familiarity with international anti-gender campaign arguments and these do impact on his

<sup>19</sup> R. Powell, Did Scott Morrison have a problem with women? *ABC News*, 11 February 2024. [https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-02-11/nemesis-did-pm-scott-morrison-have-a-problem-with-women/103436988?utm\\_source=abc\\_news\\_app&utm\\_medium=content\\_shared&utm\\_campaign=abc\\_news\\_app&utm\\_content=mail](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-02-11/nemesis-did-pm-scott-morrison-have-a-problem-with-women/103436988?utm_source=abc_news_app&utm_medium=content_shared&utm_campaign=abc_news_app&utm_content=mail). Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>20</sup> D. Paternotte, & R. Kuhar, The anti-gender movement in comparative perspective. In R. Kuhar, & D. Paternotte (Eds.), *Anti-gender campaigns in Europe: Mobilising against equality* (2017, pp. 253–276). Rowman & Littlefield; S. Corrêa, D. Paternotte, & R. Kuhar, The globalisation of anti-gender campaigns. *International Politics and Society*, 31 May 2018, pp. 1–6. <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/the-globalisation-of-anti-gender-campaigns-2761/>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Paternotte & Kuhar, The anti-gender movement, p. 258; S. Morrison, Constituency Statements: Same-Sex Relationships, 24 August 2011. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 9323). Commonwealth of Australia. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansard%2F1537dd12-1050-4838-9010-2fe57027547a%2F0212%22>. Accessed 11 April 2024; SBS News, Scott Morrison a “conservative” on abortion. *SBS News*, 28 August 2019. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/scott-morrison-a-conservative-on-abortion>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Corrêa, Paternotte, & Kuhar, The globalisation of anti-gender campaigns.

<sup>23</sup> Corrêa, Paternotte, & Kuhar, The globalisation of anti-gender campaigns.

particular framing of gender equality. For example, Morrison responded to a media report (incorrectly) claiming that teachers were being trained to identify transgender kids in their classes and that this had resulted in a surge of children wishing to change their gender with the words: “We do not need ‘gender whisperers’ in our schools. Let kids be kids”.<sup>24</sup> The expression, “let kids be kids” is one that is commonly used by US social conservatives, particularly in campaigns against transgender issues.<sup>25</sup>

Morrison’s conservatism when it came to issues of gender diversity also became clear over an incident regarding the gender designation on toilets, an issue which, once again, has been politically prominent amongst religious social conservatives in the US.<sup>26</sup> A reporter tweeted a picture of a sign on a toilet door in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet which stated that: “Prime Minister and Cabinet is committed to staff inclusion and diversity. Please use the bathroom that best fits your gender identity”.<sup>27</sup> When questioned about this by a journalist, Morrison responded by saying it was “ridiculous”, “political correctness over the top” and he expected the signs to go.<sup>28</sup> Senior bureaucrats reportedly cleared their diaries to be available to implement the PM’s wishes.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> S. Morrison, We do not need “gender whisperers” in our schools. Let kids be kids. *Twitter*, 4 September 2018. <https://twitter.com/ScottMorrisonMP/status/1037100764294836224>. Accessed 11 April 2024; see further N. Riseman, *Transgender Australia: A history since 1910*. Melbourne University Press, 2023, pp. 262–269.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Family Policy Alliance (FPA), Introducing the promise to America’s children. FPA, 22 February 2021. <https://familypolicyalliance.com/press-releases/introducing-the-promise-to-americas-children>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>26</sup> B. S. Barnett, A. E. Nesbit, & R. M. Sorrentino, The transgender bathroom debate at the intersection of politics, law, ethics, and science. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law Online*, 46(2), 2018, pp. 232–241. <https://doi.org/10.29158/JAAPL.003761-18>.

<sup>27</sup> S. Whyte, Scott Morrison has called signs outside departmental toilets “ridiculous”. *Canberra Times*, 29 August 2019. <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6356951/morrison-flushes-pmc-toilet-gender-signs/>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>28</sup> S. Morrison, Interview with Ben Fordham, 2GB, 29 August 2019. <https://web.archive.nla.gov.au/awa/20200818213042/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/170811/20200819-0254/www.pm.gov.au/media/interview-ben-fordham-2gb-1.html>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>29</sup> M. Koziol, “I’ve cleared my diary”: Senior bureaucrats scrambled to act on PM’s toilet door demands. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 November 2019. <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/i-ve-cleared-my-diary-senior-bureaucrats-scrambled-to-act-on-pm-s-toilet-door-demands-20191122-p53d1y.html>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

As indicated in Chapter 5, transgender and gender diverse Australians are partly protected against discrimination by federal legislation and, for example, Australian passports are issued to sex and gender diverse applicants.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, Morrison government attitudes had real impacts. For example, the 2016 Australian census had not been designed to generate accurate information regarding transgender or gender diversity identity. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reportedly dropped proposals to include relevant questions in the 2021 census after feedback from the office of the Assistant Treasurer, Michael Sukkar.<sup>31</sup> Yet, the ABS had acknowledged that the data would have “strong value” for government.<sup>32</sup> The information data was particularly relevant to Health given that an Australian study of transgender and gender diverse young people aged 14–25 years had reported that three out of four transgender respondents had experienced anxiety and depression, four out of five had engaged in self-harm and almost one in two (48%) had attempted suicide.<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless, Health Minister Greg Hunt responded to socially conservative criticisms of the treatment of children and adolescents with gender dysphoria by asking the Australian Health Ministers’ Advisory Council to audit gender clinics to review whether there were “strong and balanced counselling and safeguards” for those under 18, whether there was an

<sup>30</sup> Australian Government, Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), Quick Guide: Transgender. AHRC. <https://humanrights.gov.au/quick-guide/12104>. Accessed 12 April 2024; Australian Government, Australian Passport Office, Sex and gender diverse passport applicants. Australian Government, Australian Passport Office. <https://www.passports.gov.au/getting-passport-how-it-works/documents-you-need/sex-and-gender-diverse-passport-applicants>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>31</sup> P. Karp, Liberal MP calls for sexuality questions in census after ABS dumped them on Minister’s guidance. *The Guardian*, 24 October 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/oct/24/abs-dumped-census-test-forms-with-new-sexuality-questions-after-input-from-ministers-office>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>32</sup> P. Karp, ABS said census questions on gender and sexual orientation risked public backlash. *The Guardian*, 3 December 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2019/dec/03/abs-said-census-questions-on-gender-and-sexual-orientation-risked-public-backlash>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>33</sup> P. Strauss, A. Cook, S. Winter, V. Watson, D. Wright Toussaint, & A. Lin, Trans Pathways: The mental health experiences and care pathways of trans young people: summary of results. Telethon Kids Institute, Perth, Australia, 2017, p. 11. <https://web.archive.org/web/20230307232303/https://www.telethonkids.org.au/globalassets/media/documents/brain-behaviour/trans-pathwayreport-web.pdf>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

over-representation of autistic teenagers and whether a more cautious approach to prescribing hormones needed to be applied, as was now being done in Britain.<sup>34</sup> His office subsequently stated that Hunt had urged State and Territory governments to “ensure the provision of appropriate, consistent, high-quality health care in every jurisdiction, and in particular ensure strong and balanced counselling and safeguards, workforce standards, monitoring of practices, and monitoring of long-term health and wellbeing outcomes”.<sup>35</sup> While Hunt did not go as far as the critics wished, it was a clear attempt to placate social conservatives.

Morrison’s views indicate that his framing of gender equality was predominantly a traditional one of equality between men and women based on conceptions of biological sex and allocated birth identity. Significantly, Morrison appointed Senator Amanda Stoker as Assistant Women’s Minister. Stoker frequently courted the religious right and faced criticism for her conservative views on abortion and transgender issues amongst others.<sup>36</sup> She denounced “hard-left gender ideology”, believing in “basic biology” when it comes to children being born as either a boy or a girl, and raised parental concerns about what children were being taught about sex and gender in schools.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, while supporting the limited forms of gender equality described previously, Morrison expressed opposition to so-called identity politics:

...the experience and value of every human being is unique and personal. You are more, we are more, individually, more than the things others try

<sup>34</sup> B. Lane, Spotlight to shine on gender clinics. *The Australian*, 24 June 2020. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/spotlight-to-shine-on-gender-clinics/news-story/409acce209beb2eb81cfbbf4927629f>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>35</sup> B. Lane, Greg Hunt denies backing specific gender clinic treatments. *The Australian*, 28 May 2021. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/greg-hunt-denies-backing-specific-gender-clinic-treatments/news-story/802cbb17060576cd3984563def2f8c83>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>36</sup> T. Stayner, Critics concerned by Amanda Stoker’s “derogatory” views on transgender issues as she moves into women’s portfolio. *SBS News*, 30 March 2021. <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/critics-concerned-by-amanda-stoker-s-derogatory-views-on-transgender-issues-as-she-moves-into-women-s-portfolio>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>37</sup> B. Lane, MP Amanda Stoker taking fight to transgender activists. *The Australian*, 28 January 2020. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/mp-amanda-stoker-taking-fight-to-transgender-activists/news-story/6f3464c0065944087ebcbd0082249fa3>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

to identify us by, you by, in this age of identity politics. You are more than your gender, you are more than your race, you are more than your sexuality, you are more than your ethnicity, you are more than your religion, your language group, your age.<sup>38</sup>

In a speech to a Pentecostal, Australian Christian Churches Conference (that was unofficially recorded), Morrison suggested that so-called identity politics was not only socially divisive but undermined the individual identity conferred by God.<sup>39</sup> He suggested that identity politics was a socially corrosive weapon used “by the Evil One” (i.e. Satan).<sup>40</sup> Morrison also implied that he had received God’s endorsement for his Prime Ministerial election campaign.<sup>41</sup>

Morrison used how he framed identity politics, transgender issues and same-sex marriage to reassure conservatives who might have preferred Howard-era policies that were more hostile to feminism. Morrison’s arguments also reached out to social conservatives who would otherwise vote Labor. However, as we shall also see below, such framings also have implications for economic policy framing. Morrison’s rejection of so-called identity politics extended to rejecting an understanding of structural gender disadvantage and reinforced his neoliberal focus on individuals and individual choice. Furthermore, his socially conservative religious beliefs potentially made him less sympathetic to women who were low-income earners or on welfare because of the influence of Pentecostal beliefs in the “prosperity gospel”. The “Prosperity Gospel”, which is often entwined with neoliberal ideology, holds that those who are wealthy are being rewarded by God whereas the poor are being divinely penalised.<sup>42</sup> So,

<sup>38</sup> S. Morrison, Address at the United Israel Appeal Dinner, Randwick, 29 April 2021. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-43345>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>39</sup> S. Morrison, Speech to the Australian Christian Churches National Conference, Gold Coast, 2021. *Crikey*, 28 April 2021. <https://www.crikey.com.au/2021/04/28/scott-morrison-speech-acc-conference-gold-coast-in-full/>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>40</sup> Morrison, Speech to the Australian Christian Churches National Conference.

<sup>41</sup> Morrison, Address at the United Israel Appeal Dinner; Morrison, Speech to the Australian Christian Churches National Conference.

<sup>42</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the impact of Pentecostalism on Morrison, see P. C. Almond, Five aspects of Pentecostalism that shed light on Scott Morrison’s politics. *The Conversation*, 23 May 2019. <https://theconversation.com/five-aspects-of-pentecostalism-that-shed-light-on-scott-morrison-politics-117511>. Accessed 11 April 2024; M. V. Wrenn, Consecrating Capitalism: The United States prosperity gospel and Neoliberalism. *Journal*

Morrison's form of religious social conservatism tended to reinforce his neoliberal perspectives and influenced his government's policies.

It is to a more detailed analysis of those economic policies, and the influence of the government's framing on them, that the discussion will now progress, with a particular focus on the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## ECONOMIC POLICY AND GENDER EQUALITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

The Liberal Party had often campaigned against its Labor opponent by critiquing what the Liberals depicted as the Labor legacy of high government debt and deficits. The Turnbull and Abbott Oppositions had both opposed the extent of the Rudd Labor government's stimulus package during the Global Financial Crisis. Morrison had successfully attacked big spending and big taxing Labor during the 2019 election campaign, promising to restore the budget to surplus. The Morrison government had also legislated neoliberal-influenced tax cuts, to be phased in over five years, that would undermine the progressive nature of the Australian tax system and disproportionately benefit high-income earners, thereby mainly benefiting men, while disadvantaging women.<sup>43</sup> However, the pandemic was to see the government re-frame their attitude to debt, justifying bringing in a massive government stimulus package designed to keep the economy functioning that would see net debt reach around 30 per cent of GDP in June 2021.<sup>44</sup> This facilitated some increased expenditure on perceived "women's issues", particularly in the government's May 2021 budget. The government even temporarily introduced

*of Economic Issues*, 53(2), 2019, p. 426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00213624.2019.1594528>.

<sup>43</sup> Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), The Government's tax cuts: Who gains? What do they cost? ACOSS, June 2019, p. 10. [https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ACOSS-briefing-note\\_tax-cuts\\_who-gains\\_what-do-they-cost\\_final.pdf](https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/ACOSS-briefing-note_tax-cuts_who-gains_what-do-they-cost_final.pdf). Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>44</sup> Australian Government, Treasury, Budget 2021–22: Securing Australia's Recovery: Overview. Commonwealth of Australia, 2021, p. 6. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20210603093605/https://budget.gov.au/2021-22/content/overview.htm>. Accessed 11 April 2024.



free childcare for those workers who still had jobs.<sup>45</sup> However, it will be argued below that the continued influence of a neoliberal framing remained in the government's focus on individual choice and capability; its related failure to recognise forms of gendered structural inequality or to use government regulation and intervention to address them. This was despite the fact that, as discussed in Chapter 5, feminist commentators had noted failures to ensure an adequately gendered response during the Global Financial Crisis and had called upon governments to do better in the next economic crisis.

Before discussing those policies in more detail though, it is necessary to point out that Australia's experience of the pandemic was different to that of many other countries. Up until late 2021 when the availability and level of vaccinations resulted in the easing of government restrictions, the COVID-19 virus had been suppressed more successfully than in most other Western countries (with the exception of New Zealand). Local transmission had even been briefly eliminated at some points in time. Australia achieved this result through largely closing its international borders until February 2022 to all but returning Australian citizens and permanent residents (with numbers restricted by caps on compulsory quarantine). Australians required government permission to leave the country to travel overseas and this was only given in exceptional circumstances. Domestic measures included the use of contact tracing, appropriate health regulations including venue capacity limits, school closures and, when required, extended lockdowns. State governments also limited internal Australian travel, closing/restricting their state borders to contain COVID-19 outbreaks in other parts of the country. Consequently, as of 13 June 2021, Australia, with a population of 26 million, had only had 30,237 cases of COVID-19 and 910 deaths.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> S. Morrison, Press Conference at Australian Parliament House, ACT, 2 April 2020. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-42769>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

<sup>46</sup> Australian Government, Department of Health, Coronavirus (COVID-19) current situation and case numbers. Commonwealth of Australia, 14 June 2021. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20210614000145/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/181308/20210614-1000/www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-current-situation-and-case-numbers.html>. Accessed 11 April 2024; ABS, Population. ABS, 5 October 2021. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20211005021830/https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population>. Accessed 11 April 2024.

Nonetheless, disease outbreaks and the government-imposed preventative measures had a major impact on the economy. As in many other parts of the world, women's employment was particularly detrimentally affected by outbreaks because of the impacts on female-dominated areas of employment, such as hospitality, retail and accommodation. The Morrison government's Treasurer, Josh Frydenberg, acknowledged this:

The shock that we are seeing from the coronavirus is considerably sharper than what Australia experienced during the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s. ... In those earlier recessions, the impacts were felt more acutely by working-age men in the manufacturing and agriculture sectors. This time around, women have experienced higher job losses than men.<sup>47</sup>

Despite some government claims that women's employment was recovering better than men's by the 2020–2021 budget time, women were still suffering.<sup>48</sup> As one report concluded:

Women's jobs were hit harder than men's during the COVID lockdowns. At the peak in April, almost 8 per cent of Australian women had lost their jobs, and women's total hours worked were down 12 per cent. The figures for men were 4 per cent and 7 per cent.<sup>49</sup>

The report went on to note that even those women who recovered their jobs and previous hours worked could potentially suffer long-term economic "scarring" that could impact on future career progression, the gender wage gap and retirement income.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, 60% of new jobs created from May 2020 were casual and women were employed in

<sup>47</sup> J. Frydenberg, National Press Club Address, 24 July 2020. <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/josh-frydenberg-2018/speeches/national-press-club-address-canberra>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>48</sup> K. Andrews, Interview with Fran Kelly, ABC RN Breakfast, 8 October 2020. <https://www.minister.industry.gov.au/ministers/karenandrews/transcripts/interview-frankelly-abc-rn-breakfast-0>. Accessed 12 April 2024; D. Wood, K. Griffiths, & T. Crowley, Women's Work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian women. Grattan Institute, March 2021. <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Womens-work-Grattan-Institute-report.pdf>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>49</sup> Wood, et al., Women's work, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Wood, et al., Women's work, pp. 24–29.

62% of those jobs.<sup>51</sup> Women's workforce participation had also decreased during 2020 as a result of lockdowns and restrictions, as well as job losses, exacerbated by increased female caring responsibilities resulting in women reducing or leaving paid work, while men's had increased.<sup>52</sup>

Yet, despite women having been particularly badly impacted, the government's 2020–2021 budget responding to the pandemic was criticised for being gender-blind on numerous grounds.<sup>53</sup> For example, the requirements of the JobKeeper subsidy, paid to employers to keep workers on, excluded many women working in low-paid, precarious work because they would have been employed for less than the eligibility requirement of twelve months and this included many mothers re-entering the workforce.<sup>54</sup> The government tended to fund employment in male-dominated areas such as infrastructure and housing construction, rather than in more female-dominated areas such as health, education, food services and accommodation that would also generate more jobs.<sup>55</sup> The government did provide more funding for domestic violence, acknowledging that lockdowns could see women confined to their homes where they were in danger, although domestic violence service providers argued that

<sup>51</sup> Centre for Future Work, Briefing Paper: Budget Analysis 2021–22: Heroic assumptions and half measures. The Australia Institute, May 2021, p. 11. [https://futurework.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/11/Budget\\_Analysis\\_2021\\_FINAL.pdf](https://futurework.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/11/Budget_Analysis_2021_FINAL.pdf). Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>52</sup> A. Pennington, Briefing Paper: Women's casual job surge widens gender pay gap. The Australia Institute, March 2021, p. 2. <https://futurework.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/11/Womens-Casual-Job-Surge-Widens-Gender-Pay-Gap-CFW.pdf>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>53</sup> National Foundation for Australian Women (NFAW), Gender Lens on the Budget 2020–2021. NFAW, 18 October 2020. <https://nfaw.org/policy-papers/gender-lens-on-the-budget/gender-lens-on-the-budget-2020-2021/>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>54</sup> R. Cassells, & A. Duncan, JobKeepers and JobSeekers: How many workers will lose and how many will gain: COVID-19 Research Brief No. 3. Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, 31 March 2020. [https://bcec.edu.au/assets/2020/03/BCEC-COVID19-Brief-3-Job-Seekers-and-Keepers\\_FINAL.pdf](https://bcec.edu.au/assets/2020/03/BCEC-COVID19-Brief-3-Job-Seekers-and-Keepers_FINAL.pdf). Accessed 12 April 2024; R. Cassells, & A. Duncan, Short-term and long-term casual workers: How different are they?: COVID-19 Research Brief No. 4. Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, 6 April 2020. [https://bcec.edu.au/assets/2020/04/BCEC-COVID19-Brief-4\\_Casual\\_Workers\\_FINAL.pdf](https://bcec.edu.au/assets/2020/04/BCEC-COVID19-Brief-4_Casual_Workers_FINAL.pdf). Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>55</sup> D. Richardson, & R. Denniss, Gender experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown: Women lose from COVID-19, men to gain from stimulus. The Australia Institute, June 2020. <https://australianinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Gender-experience-during-the-COVID-19-lockdown.pdf>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

the funding was insufficient, especially in the light of previous cuts.<sup>56</sup> In line with a neoliberal focus on increasing individual capability via training, the government did also provide more funding to encourage women into STEM in the form of 500 cadetships but without other specific funded measures to facilitate women obtaining job opportunities as part of the government's focus on manufacturing and technical skills.<sup>57</sup>

The government appears to have been framing the economy and jobs in predominantly male-defined terms, a common and long-term problem in conceptions of the economic.<sup>58</sup> The government's focus on trades and construction was criticised for overlooking "the hard hit in favour of the hard hat".<sup>59</sup> Quiggin argued that the government's focus "on the kinds of workers (mostly men) who wear hard hats and hi-vis clothing" both failed to support the industries that had been hardest hit and failed to understand the contemporary Australian economy by supporting industries with a declining share of the workforce.<sup>60</sup> However, the influence of neoliberal frameworks on gender equality were also apparent with Scott Morrison being confident that the market would result in equitable outcomes once the economy began to come out of the pandemic-induced recession:

...where we were most successful going into the pandemic in our economy was with job creation for women in the workforce ... where the businesses are successful and they can create more jobs, what we are seeing in our

<sup>56</sup> S. Morrison, M. Payne, G. Hunt, & A. Ruston, \$1.1 billion to support more mental health, Medicare and domestic violence services, 29 March 2020. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-42763>. Accessed 12 April 2024; E. Kennedy, "The Worst Year": domestic violence soars in Australia during Covid-19. *The Guardian*, 1 December 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/dec/01/the-worst-year-domestic-violence-soars-in-australia-during-covid-19>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>57</sup> K. Andrews, Interview with Fran Kelly.

<sup>58</sup> See G. Becchio, *A history of feminist and gender economics*. Routledge, 2019, pp. 1–15, 182–216.

<sup>59</sup> For graphs demonstrating that the stimulus measures were not addressing the hardest hit, female-dominated industries, see D. Wood, K. Griffiths, & T. Crowley, High-viz, narrow vision: The budget overlooks the hardest hit in favour of the hardest hats. *The Conversation*, 7 October 2020. <https://theconversation.com/high-viz-narrow-vision-the-budget-overlooks-the-hardest-hit-in-favour-of-the-hardest-hats-147601>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>60</sup> J. Quiggin, Hard-hat utopians. *Inside Story*, 12 July 2020. <https://insidestory.org.au/hard-hat-utopians/>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

workforce it is often and usually women who are getting the bigger share of those new jobs.<sup>61</sup>

The government appeared less concerned than many other commentators regarding the fact that many of the new jobs generated for women as the economy began to recover from initial lockdowns were low-paid, precarious ones. Before the pandemic, Morrison's then Minister for Women, Kelly O'Dwyer, had dismissed concerns regarding the high proportion of women working in casual jobs with poor pay and conditions, claiming that many workers had good pay and conditions and chose to remain.<sup>62</sup> In fact, it was not for many months after Morrison's statement above that women's full-time employment began to improve, and then not because of normal market functioning but largely because of an increase in female-dominated healthcare and social service jobs due to the pandemic.<sup>63</sup> Many of those traditional female jobs, however, were also undervalued and underpaid.<sup>64</sup>

The government responded negatively to the many feminist critiques of the 2020–2021 budget, arguing that women would benefit from the general measures in the budget. For example since women were also small business owners, they would benefit from business support during the pandemic, and drove cars, so would benefit from funds spent on

<sup>61</sup> S. Morrison, Interview with Sabra Lane, ABC AM, 27 May 2020. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-42826>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>62</sup> K. O'Dwyer, National Press Club Q&A, 20 November 2018. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20190227154922/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/156011/20190228-0141/ministers.pmc.gov.au/odwyer/2018/national-press-club-qa.html>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>63</sup> See, e.g., explanations regarding figures at this time by Prof. Marian Baird in S. Lunn, & D. Tanner, Jobs recovery driven by women taking leap into full-time work. *The Australian*, 18 June 2021, p. 4 and by Bjorn Jarvis, Australian Bureau of Statistics' head of labour statistics in M. Cranston, Why Women are getting more jobs. *Australian Financial Review*, 15 April 2021. <https://www.afr.com/policy/economy/why-women-are-getting-more-jobs-20210415-p57jjz>. Accessed 12 April 2024. According to Jarvis in that period, women held 78% of jobs in the healthcare and social services sector, which had grown by 3 per cent during the pandemic. Women's participation rate in the economy improved significantly (at 61.7% in May 2021) but this was still significantly lower than men's (70.9%), see ABS, Labour Force, Australia. ABS, 17 June 2021. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/may-2021>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>64</sup> WGEA, What is the gender pay gap? WGEA. <https://www.wgea.gov.au/the-gender-pay-gap>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

constructing road infrastructure.<sup>65</sup> Morrison rejected the “divisiveness” he claimed was underlying those critiques:

This is about a Budget of bringing all Australians together in the national interest, to get us through. And there will be voices that will try and set young people against older people, women against men, jobs in one sector versus jobs in another sector - they are the voices of division that will undermine the future economic prosperity of all Australians.<sup>66</sup>

Similarly, other Liberal politicians claimed that criticisms were based on “identity politics”.<sup>67</sup> The government’s Environment Minister Sussan Ley, argued such criticisms failed to recognise the opportunities the market economy offered:

...what you hear from the opposition is this long, ongoing, bleak, dreary narrative about entrenched disadvantage. And, you know, it’s just so last century. I see the opportunities for women in the modern world, and coming out of this pandemic, as giving families and communities something that adds to their choices.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> S. Morrison, Questions without notice: Budget, 7 October 2020. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 6856). Commonwealth of Australia. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansard%2Fbfl851c7-25c9-46b4-9e99-47c27a7b63ff%2F0107%22>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>66</sup> S. Morrison, Press conference at Australian Parliament House, ACT, 8 October 2020. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-43072>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>67</sup> S. Brockman, Questions without notice: Take note of answers: Women’s economic security: Child care, 17 June 2020. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (p. 3463). Commonwealth of Australia. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansards%2F0da77ea-dflb-49bb-a70d-4c511f0c093e%2F0102%22>. Accessed 12 April 2024; D. O’Neill, Questions without notice: Take note of answers: Women’s economic security: Child care, 17 June 2020. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (p. 3464). Commonwealth of Australia. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2F0da77ea-dflb-49bb-a70d-4c511f0c093e%2F0103%22>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>68</sup> S. Ley, Matters of public importance: COVID-19: Women, 17 June 2020. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 4804). Commonwealth of Australia. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansard%2F4057a488-4d29-49e7-b8e7-52d45368ebe6%2F0150%22>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

Ley's comment reveals the Morrison government's tendency to downplay issues of structural disadvantage.

By contrast, the Labor Opposition had been critical of government policies, arguing, as mentioned earlier, that the government's JobKeeper payment would exclude many women in precarious work, that government stimulus measures mainly supported male-dominated areas of employment and the first sector cut from receiving JobKeeper had been the female-dominated area of childcare.<sup>69</sup> Labor politicians also criticised a government policy allowing emergency withdrawals from superannuation, pointing out that given many women already retired into poverty, they were likely to be hit far harder by this measure than men.<sup>70</sup> (A report also noted a high incidence of women in abusive relationships being coerced into withdrawing money from superannuation).<sup>71</sup> As Sussan Ley claimed, Labor's criticisms were indeed based on a conception that women faced "entrenched disadvantage", that there were patterns of gendered structural inequality in the Australian economy that needed to be taken into account when budget policies were being developed and especially in the context of a pandemic that had had a particularly detrimental impact. As the Leader of the Labor Opposition, Anthony Albanese

<sup>69</sup> L. Pratt, & M. Payne, Questions without notice: Women's economic security: Question, 17 June 2020. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (pp. 3440–3441). Commonwealth of Australia. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansards%2F0da77ea-df1b-49bb-a70d-4c511f0c093e%2F0081%22>. Accessed 12 April 2024; K. Gallagher, Questions without notice: Take note of answers: Women's economic security: Child care, 17 June 2020. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (p. 3459). Commonwealth of Australia. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansards%2F0da77ea-df1b-49bb-a70d-4c511f0c093e%2F0099%22>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>70</sup> J. Collins, Matters of public importance: COVID-19: Women, 17 June 2020. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, House of Representatives (p. 4802). Commonwealth of Australia. <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2F4057a488-4d29-49e7-b8e7-52d45368ebe6%2F0149%22>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>71</sup> H. Boxall, & A. Morgan, Intimate partner violence during the COVID-19 pandemic: A survey of women in Australia. Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), October 2021, pp. 27–28. <https://anrowsdev.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/4AP10-Boxall-Morgan-IPV-During-Covid-ANROWS-RR.1.pdf>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

stated: “We can’t have a pink recession and a blue recovery”.<sup>72</sup> Or as Labor Leader in the Senate, Penny Wong argued:

Labor understands that inequality is so often structural. Whether that inequality is on the basis of gender, race or socio-economic factors, or some combination, it persists until and unless we take steps to overcome it. Inequity exists not because of individual attributes but regardless of them. It is something our political opponents don’t understand and that’s obvious every day.<sup>73</sup>

While Labor perspectives on gender equality policy had been influenced by some aspects of neoliberalism during the Hawke, Keating, Rudd and Gillard governments, particularly in terms of encouraging capabilities and self-reliance, Labor had always been more open to conceptions of structural disadvantage.<sup>74</sup> We have seen in Chapter 5 that the Rudd and Gillard governments had attempted to tackle issues such as the low pay for predominantly women’s work—an approach that showed more of a traditional social democratic than neoliberal influence.<sup>75</sup> However, while Labor may have perceived the issues as ones of structural inequality, this was not the government’s position. Rather, the government’s neoliberal framing saw the market as largely facilitating gender equality. The government still privileged a focus on the individual, opportunity and choice.

For all the above reasons, the 2020–2021 budget was widely criticised for having not applied a gender lens to budget spending and thereby disadvantaging women.<sup>76</sup> Initially, as the responses described above make clear, the government seemed loath to address these issues. However, the gender politics began to shift following a number of gender-related

<sup>72</sup> A. Albanese, & C. Bowen, Doorstop Interview, Parliament House, Canberra, 6 October 2020. <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20210320133739/https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/anthony-albanese-chris-bowen-transcript-doorstop-interview-parliament-house-canberra-tuesday-6-october-2020>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>73</sup> P. Wong, Joan Kirner Oration, Moonee Valley Racing Club, Melbourne, 18 May 2021. <https://www.pennywong.com.au/media-hub/speeches/the-joan-kirner-oration-moonee-valley-racing-club-melbourne-victoria-18-05-2021/>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>74</sup> C. Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality: Australian social democracy in a changing world*. Springer Singapore, 2019, pp. 61–74.

<sup>75</sup> Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*, pp. 62–73.

<sup>76</sup> NFAW, *Gender Lens on the Budget 2020–2021*.



scandals and issues. These included historical rape allegations (strongly denied) being made against the then Attorney General; allegations that a female government staffer had been raped by another government staffer in Parliament House and that the government had failed to address the issue adequately; prime-ministerial social conservatism and ineptness in responding to both rape allegations and widespread reports of sexism within government ranks.<sup>77</sup> Crucially, polls showed the government's support amongst women dropping significantly.<sup>78</sup>

Consequently, in March 2021, Morrison announced a raft of female ministerial changes designed to bring “a fresh lens, in particular to achieving the outcomes, the results that we all want for Australian women across the country”.<sup>79</sup> The government had decided that their next budget needed to explicitly address women's issues after all. Recommendations by an Aged Care Royal Commission to increase the aged care workforce potentially gave the government the opportunity to increase employment in a female-dominated industry, although this was to be taken up more robustly by its Labor successor. Funding the construction of more social housing, rather than the previously funded private housing, was a step too far for a Coalition government though, despite high levels of homelessness amongst older women.<sup>80</sup> Instead the government made it easier for single parents, predominantly women, to take out mortgages to purchase a home.<sup>81</sup> While this policy was consistent with a neoliberal emphasis on property-ownership, it risked encouraging women to

<sup>77</sup> See further, C. Johnson, In Harm's Way. *Inside Story*, 24 March 2021. <https://insidestory.org.au/in-harms-way/>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>78</sup> S. Martin, Women abandon Coalition, with fewer than one in three backing it, Essential poll shows. *The Guardian*, 29 April 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/apr/29/women-abandon-coalition-with-fewer-than-one-in-three-backing-it-essential-poll-shows>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>79</sup> S. Morrison, Press Conference, Australian Parliament House, Canberra, 29 March 2021. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-43292>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>80</sup> D. Faulkner, & L. Lester, 400,000 women over 45 are at risk of homelessness in Australia. *The Conversation*, 4 August 2020. <https://theconversation.com/400-000-women-over-45-are-at-risk-of-homelessness-in-australia-142906>. Accessed 12 April 2024; NFAW, Budget 2021: Housing. NFAW, May 2021. <https://nfaow.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Housing.pdf>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>81</sup> J. Frydenberg, Budget Speech 2021–22, 11 May 2021. <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/josh-frydenberg-2018/speeches/budget-speech-2021-22>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

take out mortgages that they would eventually be unable to pay, thereby potentially exacerbating homelessness. Although free childcare had long ended, increased funding was provided, with the Treasurer, Josh Frydenberg, arguing that this would facilitate women's employment.<sup>82</sup> However, the funding package was arguably still highly inadequate.<sup>83</sup> Significantly, both the Prime Minister and his Treasurer had a tendency to assume that childcare was predominantly a woman's issue, including apparently in their own personal family arrangements.<sup>84</sup> The government's budget focus on security in uncertain times saw more emphasis placed on funding to ensure women's safety (\$1.1 billion) which was particularly important given the pandemic had increased family violence. Conservative governments arguably find it relatively ideologically compatible to fund domestic violence measures because they do not involve economic redistribution.<sup>85</sup> Such measures were also compatible with conservative views that it is men's traditional role to protect women.

However, the government was less forthcoming when it came to some other issues. A (newly reintroduced) *Women's Budget Statement* mentioned that work that is predominantly women's work is frequently undervalued.<sup>86</sup> Nonetheless, the government did not reconsider the past Abbott Liberal government decision to oppose important, Labor government inspired, interventionist measures for pay equity that could have facilitated revaluing women's work.<sup>87</sup> Nor did the Coalition rethink its

<sup>82</sup> Frydenberg, Budget Speech 2021–22.

<sup>83</sup> E. Dawson, Australian women are done waiting. It's time for a budget that invests in care. *The Guardian*, 10 May 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/may/10/australian-women-are-done-waiting-its-time-for-a-budget-that-invests-in-care>. Accessed 12 April 2024; NFAW, Budget 2021–22: Net impact on women. NFAW, May 2021. <https://nfaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Overview-2021.pdf>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>84</sup> A. Crabb, Men at Work: Australia's parenthood trap. *Quarterly Essay* 75, September 2019, pp. 3–5. <https://www.quarterlyessay.com.au/essay/2019/09/men-at-work>.

<sup>85</sup> S. Harris Rimmer, & M. Sawyer, Neoliberalism and gender equality policy in Australia. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 51(4), 2016, pp. 744–745. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2016.1222602>.

<sup>86</sup> M. Payne, A. Ruston, & J. Hume, Women's Budget Statement 2021–22. Commonwealth of Australia, 11 May 2021, p. 36. [https://archive.budget.gov.au/2021-22/womens-statement/download/womens\\_budget\\_statement\\_2021-22.pdf](https://archive.budget.gov.au/2021-22/womens-statement/download/womens_budget_statement_2021-22.pdf). Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>87</sup> Hannan, & Karvelas, Coalition resists equal pay claim.

undermining of Labor government legislation that would have strengthened equal pay reporting requirements in the private sector.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, those women who were lucky enough to return to work were often returning to the low-paid, often precarious, work they had before the pandemic. Key neoliberal assumptions remained, including an underlying assumption that the market was gender-neutral. There was little understanding that gender inequality is currently built into the labour market. The government still seemed to assume that making a business case that gender equality will benefit the bottom line would be enough to convince private enterprise to stop discriminating against women. Similarly, a gender pay gap within an organisation still seemed to be largely attributed to an oversight that would be fixed once businesspeople had it drawn to their attention.

It was not just that the government neglected the fact that some businesses make higher profits by undervaluing female-dominated jobs and by paying women less. The rejection of so-called identity politics still acted against the government recognising the existence of socially disadvantaged groups. It also prevented the government acknowledging particular constructions of masculinity and femininity that may disadvantage women, including involving undervaluations of women's work. Similarly, the government neglected the threat that may be posed to some traditional forms of masculinity, that are dependent upon women being subordinate if women become more equal and the gendered backlash that might result.

The failure to address issues of structural gender inequality in the labour market and constructions of masculinity and femininity also had implications for the government's plans for female employment. The 2021–22 budget contained training measures to encourage women into non-traditional trades, although only 5,000 places were funded, along with STEM scholarships for women. Karen Andrews, the Minister for Industry, Science and Technology had previously drawn attention to the impact of technological change on women's jobs, arguing that it was crucial to encourage women to obtain more STEM skills because "75 per cent of jobs of the future requiring skills across science, technology, engineering and mathematics".<sup>89</sup> Yet, she suggested that women's low

<sup>88</sup> Abetz, & Cash, Gender reporting must drive cultural change.

<sup>89</sup> Andrews, Strategy to Advance Women in STEM. See further WGEA, Future of Work: Where technology and work intersect. WGEA, 12 May 2020. <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/future-of-work-technology-and-work>. Accessed 12 April 2024; and

participation in STEM was largely due to the study choices that girls were making at school.<sup>90</sup> However, in order to understand those “choices”, it is necessary to analyse the politics of masculine and feminine identity as well as the gendered distributions of labour in the economy. There is also considerable international research on how gendered identities and power relations impact on women who do attempt careers in STEM and the implications for both attracting women to these areas of work and retaining them in them.<sup>91</sup> The government could also have suggested some more interventionist measures to increase opportunities for women in STEM-related industries. For example, the budget provided financial support for developing Australian sovereign capability in manufacturing industries after the pandemic revealed major deficiencies in international supply chains. Such support could have favoured companies pursuing gender equity strategies.

Despite such criticisms, various commentators pointed out that the 2021–2022 budget was a significant improvement on the previous one when it came to the level of funding that benefited women.<sup>92</sup> This included increased funding not only in areas mentioned here but in other areas, such as women’s health. More women were also made eligible for superannuation. Clearly, the government had been prepared to spend substantial amounts targeted to benefit Australian women (around \$3.4 billion in the 2021–2022 budget if the \$1.7 billion for childcare

Australian Academy of Science, Women in STEM Decadal Plan. Australian Academy of Science, 2019. <https://www.science.org.au/support/analysis/decadal-plans-science/women-in-stem-decadal-plan>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>90</sup> Andrews, Interview with Fran Kelly.

<sup>91</sup> For international studies, see, for example, K. De Welde & S. Laursen, The Glass Obstacle Course: Informal and formal barriers for women Ph.D. students in STEM fields. *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology*, 3(3), 2011, pp. 571–595. <http://genderandset.open.ac.uk/index.php/genderandset/article/view/205/363>; M. Saxena, T. A. Geiselman, & S. Zhang, Workplace incivility against women in STEM: Insights and best practices. *Business Horizons*, 62(5), 2019, pp. 589–594. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2019.05.005>; R. van Veelen, B. Derks, & M. D. Endedijk, Double Trouble: How being outnumbered and negatively stereotyped threatens career outcomes of women in STEM. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10(150), February 2019, pp. 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00150>.

<sup>92</sup> NFAW, Budget 2021–22: Net impact on women; A. Crabb, Does the Federal Budget deliver for women? *ABC News*, 11 May 2021. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-11/federal-budget-women/13339300>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

is included) in the long lead up to the 2022 election.<sup>93</sup> The subsequent budget brought in in March 2022 shortly before the May election also promised increased funding to address issues of “women’s safety, economic security, health and wellbeing”.<sup>94</sup> Nonetheless, the National Foundation for Australian Women criticised stimulus measures for still disproportionately privileging (male-dominated) physical infrastructure spending over social infrastructure such as aged care, childcare and education. Furthermore, it was argued that changes to parental leave, which were claimed to make it more flexible and facilitate choice by removing designated partner benefits, thereby enabling couples to divide up parental leave as they wished, would actually result in men being less likely to use parental leave, since the family would not lose any entitlements if partners failed to take up previously designated leave.<sup>95</sup> In short, the parental leave changes failed to recognise the extent to which both traditional gender roles and differential male and female earning capacity would influence choices.

Overall, it seems that the improvements in funding were strongly influenced by a (correct) perception that the government was losing electoral support amongst women.<sup>96</sup> In other words, it was due to a reframing of the gender issue as one of election strategy, rather than due to a major rethink of the government’s existing economic and social frameworks.

<sup>93</sup> Crabb, Does the Federal Budget deliver for women?

<sup>94</sup> DPMC, Budget: March 2022–23. Commonwealth of Australia, 29 March 2022. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/news/budget-march-2022-23>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>95</sup> NFAW, Gender Lens 2022 Election Budget Response: The budget fails to support Australian women: No structural reform in areas that affect women’s lives. NFAW, 4 April 2022, p. 1. <https://nfaw.org/storage/2022/04/NFAW-Gender-Lens-Budget-Report.pdf>. Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>96</sup> See B. Williams, & M. Sawyer, High-viz and hard hats versus the care economy. In A. Gauja, M. Sawyer, & J. Sheppard (Eds.), *Watershed: The 2022 Australian Federal Election* (2023, pp. 79–100). ANU Press.

## CONCLUSION

There were some partial international successes in integrating issues of gender equality into the COVID-19 pandemic response, most notably in Europe where feminist politicians in the European parliament were amongst those successfully propagating a “care economy” agenda designed to benefit women as well as society more broadly.<sup>97</sup> However, while the Morrison government had a pandemic-induced rethink of its attitude towards debts and deficits, the government did not fundamentally rethink how to challenge gender inequality. Although the government eventually provided greater financial incentives to improve the position of women, it was still loath to use more interventionist and redistributive measures to tackle structural gender inequality in the labour market. Similarly, gender equality policy had been constrained by socially conservative critiques of forms of “gender ideology”, gender diversity and so-called identity politics that reinforced a neoliberal focus on individuals rather than disadvantaged social groups. The government also reached out to social conservatives, including those who might be threatened by the government’s support for existing gender equality measures. The *Women’s Budget Statement* talked vaguely about the need to change the culture and outlined funding for worthwhile anti-domestic violence and anti-sexual harassment initiatives in the process.<sup>98</sup> Nonetheless, the government was loath to acknowledge that a traditional form of gendered identity politics reinforces women’s disadvantaged position in Australian society. In short, neoliberal and socially conservative ideological framings were still impacting on government gender equality policy in Australia. The next chapter will evaluate the extent to which the Morrison government’s Labor successor has challenged such perspectives.

<sup>97</sup> A. Elomäki, & J. Kantola, Feminist governance in the European parliament: The political struggle over the inclusion of gender in the EU’s COVID-19 response. *Politics & Gender*, 19(2), 2023, pp. 327–348. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X21000544>.

<sup>98</sup> Payne et al., *Women’s Budget Statement 2021–22*, pp. 3, 13–19.

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# Unfinished Business: The Albanese Government and Gender Equality Policy (2022–?)

## INTRODUCTION

The Morrison government’s gender-blind policy settings and ongoing issues around women’s safety in parliamentary culture, which have been discussed in the previous chapter, contributed to its subsequent electoral defeat by Labor. Consequently, Blair Williams and Marian Sawer have argued that: “Gender was a very important part of the story of the 2022 federal election”.<sup>1</sup> The Liberal Party’s own review of its election defeat acknowledged that “the Party’s standing with women was an important factor in the Party’s defeat”.<sup>2</sup>

Labor argued that not only had women been left behind under the Morrison government, but Australia had plummeted to “its worst ever result” in the global gender gap rankings when “Australia should be leading the world in equality between men and women”.<sup>3</sup> Some of

<sup>1</sup> B. Williams & M. Sawer, High-vis and hard hats versus the care economy. In M. Sawer, A. Gauja, & J. Sheppard (Eds.), *Watershed: the 2022 Australian federal election* (2023, p. 79). ANU Press. <http://doi.org/10.22459/W.2023.05>.

<sup>2</sup> B. Loughnane & J. Hume, Review of the 2022 federal election. Liberal Party of Australia, December 2022, p. 31. [https://cdn.liberal.org.au/2022/2022\\_election\\_review.pdf](https://cdn.liberal.org.au/2022/2022_election_review.pdf). Accessed 10 January 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Australian Labor Party (ALP), Equality for women, ALP Policies, Election 2022, 15 May 2022. <https://web.archive.org/web/20220515065228/https://www.alp.org.au/policies/equality-for-women>. Accessed 6 December 2023.



the figures regarding Australia's poor ranking and disturbing figures on gender equality were outlined in the introductory chapter of this book. Additional figures can be found in a report produced a few months after the Albanese government achieved office. That report identified "80 occupations in which men make up 80% or more of the workforce; these occupations have an average salary above \$100,000. In contrast, no occupation where women make up that share of the workforce has such a high average salary".<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, women did more unpaid work in Australia than in equivalent OECD countries: "Women, for example, do 77.4% more unpaid work than men in the United Kingdom, 63.6% more in the United States, and 51% more in Canada".<sup>5</sup> (The situation was much more equitable in Nordic countries.)<sup>6</sup> Australia also had some of the highest costs for childcare and early child education in the OECD.<sup>7</sup> Given such figures. It is perhaps not surprising that Australia also had the fourth highest proportion of women working part-time in the OECD and had the ninth worst gender pay gap in the OECD.<sup>8</sup> Australian women are still more likely to live in poverty than men.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, Labor promised to address multiple issues from women's safety and homelessness to improving employment and pay for women.<sup>10</sup> Minister for Women, Katy Gallagher, pledged that:

In developing a National Strategy for Gender Equality, we are aiming to improve life for women and to make Australia the most gender equal country in the world.

<sup>4</sup> E. Littleton and G. Jericho, *The times they aren't a-changin' (enough): It is past time to value women's work equally*, The Centre for Future Work at the Australia Institute, March 2023, pp. 9–10. <https://futurework.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/03/Centre-for-Future-Work-Gender-Pay-Gap-WEB.pdf>. Accessed 27 April 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Littleton and Jericho, *The times they aren't a-changin'*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>6</sup> Littleton and Jericho, *The times they aren't a-changin'*, p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> Littleton and Jericho, *The times they aren't a-changin'*, p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Littleton and Jericho, *The times they aren't a-changin'*, p. 7, 30.

<sup>9</sup> P. Davidson, B. Bradbury, & M. Wong. *Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report No 20: Poverty in Australia 2023: Who is affected*, pp. 13-14. ACOSS & UNSW Sydney, March 2023. [https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Poverty-in-Australia-2023\\_Who-is-affected.pdf](https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Poverty-in-Australia-2023_Who-is-affected.pdf). Accessed 12 April 2024.

<sup>10</sup> ALP, *Equality for women*.

This strategy will be about a fair go for everyone, regardless of their gender. We are looking at all aspects of life for women – from safety to pay, to stereotypes and attitudes that restrict choice, to how women’s labour and leadership is valued.<sup>11</sup>

While being “the most gender equal country” and “leading the world” seem exceptionally ambitious targets, this chapter and the one that follows examines Labor’s gender equality policies as it attempts to achieve those aims. Can Australia provide internationally innovative political and policy lessons for gender equality as it has in the past? Or will Labor’s aims fall victim to economic restraints and a failure of gender policy imagination?

It will be argued that the Albanese government has genuinely attempted to address unfinished business from the period of previous Labor governments, especially in regard to issues such as women’s undervalued pay in care work. This includes addressing some of the issues arising from neoliberal influences on past Labor governments that have held women’s wages and conditions back (although this is not acknowledged). The challenge for Labor has been a big one, given the figures cited above. In the words of Sam Mostyn, the then chair of The Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce established by the government: “in this country, the data shows over and over that inequality for women is prevalent and persistent and it impacts a woman’s public and private experience across the entirety of her lifetime”.<sup>12</sup> The challenge was even greater because of remaining gender biases in policy (although the analysis in this book suggests that Mostyn is perhaps somewhat overstating her case below):

....all of our policies seem to me to have been designed, previously, on the idea of post-war design of a family that had a primary breadwinner that was a man and a woman but then she had children with that man. And typically, she would do the caring and her income was forever dependent on his income.

<sup>11</sup> K. Gallagher, Australian government’s gender equality symposium, Speech, Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre, Brisbane, 28 July 2023. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2023/australian-governments-gender-equality-symposium>. Accessed 10 January 2024.

<sup>12</sup> S. Mostyn, Press Conference, Blue Room, Canberra, 23 October 2023. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2023/press-conference-blue-room-canberra>. Accessed 10 January 2024.

We don't live in that world anymore.... The policies have got to be contemporary and reflect that.<sup>13</sup>

In April 2024, Albanese announced that Mostyn would become Australia's second female Governor-General—a usually largely symbolic role although Sir John Kerr notoriously used his rarely used but extensive reserve powers as Governor-General to sack the Whitlam Labor government in 1975.<sup>14</sup>

So, how feminist is this Labor government and how well has Labor progressed in terms of reforming policy?

### WOMEN'S AND FEMINIST INPUT INTO GOVERNMENT POLICIES

The Albanese government has proudly proclaimed that 53% of government parliamentarians were women (48% in the House of Representatives and 69.2% in the Senate), the first time the majority of members of a government were women with 43% of Cabinet Ministers also being women (10 out of 23).<sup>15</sup> Katy Gallagher, one of many feminists among this contingent of women, was appointed as not just Minister for Women but also Finance Minister, whose responsibilities include budget policy and reviewing government programmes.<sup>16</sup> Gallagher's appointment both opened up possibilities and involved constraints but did

<sup>13</sup> Mostyn, S. Press Conference, Blue Room.

<sup>14</sup> A. Albanese, Australia's new Governor-General, Media Release, 3 April 2024. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/australias-new-governor-general>. Accessed 3 April 2024.

<sup>15</sup> K. Gallagher, Albanese government pushes Australia into top 30 global leaders on gender equality list, Media Release, 26 July 2023. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2023/albanese-government-pushes-australia-top-30-global-leaders-gender-equality-list>. Accessed 12 January 2024; ALP, Labor governments and women, Our History. <https://www.alp.org.au/our-history/labor-governments-and-women/>. Accessed 16 January 2024.

<sup>16</sup> See Parliamentary Education Office, What are the major differences between the roles of federal treasurer and finance minister? Commonwealth of Australia, Reviewed 14 December 2023. <https://peo.gov.au/understand-our-parliament/your-questions-on-not-ice/questions/what-are-the-major-differences-between-the-roles-of-federal-treasurer-and-finance-minister/>. Accessed 10 January 2024.

facilitate mainstreaming women's issues into economic policy along with gender responsive budgeting.

## WORKING FOR WOMEN—A NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Gallagher also engaged in a long and extensive consultation process in the lead up to producing the government's 103-page *Working for Women—A National Strategy for Gender Equality*, claiming that it was “informed by thousands of people and groups from across Australia including women's advocacy groups, businesses, unions and civil society”, including the input of First Nations/Indigenous women.<sup>17</sup> In her launch speech, Katie Gallagher suggested that the strategy was “our country's first national strategy to achieve gender equality”.<sup>18</sup> However, it is actually somewhat reminiscent of lengthy *National Agenda for Women* documents produced in 1988 (67 pages) and 1993 (162 pages) during the Hawke and Keating period and drawn on in chapter 3.<sup>19</sup> The 1988 *National Agenda* also claimed to be the product of consultation with more than 25,000 women from diverse backgrounds and experiences.<sup>20</sup> It stated that:

<sup>17</sup> Australian Government, Office of the Status of Women (OSW), Working for women. A strategy for gender equality, pp. 4 & 25. <https://genderequality.gov.au/>. Accessed 22 March 2024.

<sup>18</sup> K. Gallagher, National press club address: Working for women—A national strategy for gender equality, Speech, 7 March 2024. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2024/national-press-club-address-working-women-national-strategy-gender-equality>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>19</sup> OSW, A say, a choice, a fair go: the government's national agenda for women. OSW, 23 March 1988. Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS). [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/publications/tables/papers/HSTP0369\\_1988-89/upload\\_pdf/369\\_1988-89.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/publications/tables/papers/HSTP0369_1988-89/upload_pdf/369_1988-89.pdf). Accessed 4 April 2024; OSW, Women: shaping and sharing the future: The new national agenda for women, 1993–2000 (2nd ed.). AGPS, June 1993. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED371144.pdf>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>20</sup> B. Hawke, Foreword. In OSW, A say, a choice, a fair go: the government's national agenda for women. AGPS, 23 March 1988. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/publications/tables/papers/HSTP0369\\_1988-89/upload\\_pdf/369\\_1988-89.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/publications/tables/papers/HSTP0369_1988-89/upload_pdf/369_1988-89.pdf). Accessed 4 April 2024.

The Government is committed to ensuring that its policies and programs operate to improve the status of women by providing economic security and independence, freedom from discrimination and equality of opportunity in all spheres of activity. It is committed to ensuring that women's needs are taken fully into account in the development and administration of Government policies and programs. Women must have a choice, a say and a fair go and they must have these things regardless of their culture, language, age or family circumstances. This document offers a set of strategies to achieve this.<sup>21</sup>

There were also lengthy National Agenda Implementation Reports, providing detailed gender disaggregated data on progress in achieving the governments' goals.<sup>22</sup> It is a reminder of how much the wheel has had to be reinvented since the advent of the conservative Howard government that such earlier documents appear to have been overlooked. Nonetheless, *Working for Women* differs from its Hawke and Keating era predecessors in some key respects. As we will see below, the Albanese government has been less influenced by neoliberalism in regard to issues such as wage restraint and public sector expenditure. The government's position is also different in its emphasis on the care economy, with Gallagher arguing that "at the heart of our country's story on gender is extremely rigid gender expectations about who cares for whom, and what or whose work counts as something to be valued".<sup>23</sup>

## FIRST NATIONS/INDIGENOUS WOMEN

However, the government suffered a major setback in consulting Indigenous women when the Australian public voted no in an October 2023 referendum to establish an Indigenous Voice to Parliament in the Australian Constitution (formally the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice) that was intended to provide essential advice to government in the form of both Parliament and the Executive. While details hadn't been finalised prior to the referendum, the Voice had long been proposed to have equal gender representation and co-chairs of different

<sup>21</sup> OSW, National Agenda for Women, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., OSW, National agenda for women: Implementation report. AGPS, August 1991, pp. 93–154.

<sup>23</sup> Gallagher, *Working for women*.

genders.<sup>24</sup> However, the government made other efforts in addition to those in *Working for Women* to involve Indigenous women in policy formation, including via appointments to a First Nations National Plan Steering Committee to reduce family violence and abuse experienced by Indigenous women and children.<sup>25</sup> The government also provided \$3 million for what they stated was a “world first” Institute for First Nations Gender Justice at the Australian National University, which is intended to play a key role in developing a Framework for Action.<sup>26</sup> The Framework would build on a long process of consultation that began during the previous government, namely the Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women’s Voices) project, led by the Former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner of the Australian Human Rights Commission, June Oscar, in partnership with the National Indigenous Australians Agency and would also build on the outcomes of a 2023 First Nations Women and Girls National Summit.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Australian Government, National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), Indigenous Voice co-design process: Final report to the Australian Government. Commonwealth of Australia, July 2021, p. 126. <https://ncq.org.au/resources/indigenous-voice-co-design-process-final-report-to-australian-government/>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>25</sup> L. Burney, Expert First Nations steering committee to advise on reducing rates of family violence and abuse, Media Release, 24 January 2024. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/burney/2024/expert-first-nations-steering-committee-advise-reducing-rates-family-violence-and-abuse>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>26</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women’s Voices). Now and beyond: from the national summit to designing a national framework for action and institute for First Nations gender justice and equality. Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, p. 8. [https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/wyut\\_national\\_summit\\_-\\_summit\\_paper\\_2\\_1.pdf](https://humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/wyut_national_summit_-_summit_paper_2_1.pdf). Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>27</sup> AHRC, Wiyi Yani U Thangani national summit, 9–11 May 2023. Commonwealth of Australia, 2022–2023, <https://wiyiyaniuthangani.humanrights.gov.au/summit>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

## EXPERT APPOINTMENTS AND TASK FORCES

Blair Williams concluded her study of the impact of neoliberalism on Australian gender equality policy by arguing that: “The focus for the Albanese government should be on rebuilding the gender equality architecture that has been eroded by decades of neoliberal governance”.<sup>28</sup> It is therefore noteworthy that, as well as extensive consultations, the government also established a number of expert task forces and reviews. For example, the Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce included key feminist economists and labour market experts (many of whom had been critical of the Morrison government’s relative gender blindness), former feminist politicians and business leaders.<sup>29</sup> The government appointed feminist experts to other key positions too. These included appointing Danielle Wood to be Chair of the Productivity Commission for a five-year term from November 2023. Wood had previously been CEO of the left leaning Grattan Institute, where she contributed to a number of reports raising issues of gender equality policy.<sup>30</sup> She had also been a member of the government’s women’s economic equality taskforce.<sup>31</sup> Wood had previously made a key intervention at the government’s Jobs and Skills summit, when she argued that: “I can’t help but reflect that if untapped women’s workforce participation was a massive ore deposit, we would have governments lining up to give tax concessions to get it

<sup>28</sup> B. Williams, Australia’s woman problem? The rise and fall of gender equality. In M. Bonotti & N. Miragliotta (Eds.), *Australian politics at a crossroads: Prospects for change* (2024, p. 252). Routledge.

<sup>29</sup> Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce (WEET), A 10-year plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy, Final Report. Commonwealth of Australia, October 2023, p. 6. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/womens-economic-equality-taskforce-final-report.pdf>. Accessed 20 December 2023.

<sup>30</sup> D. Wood, K. Griffiths, & O. Emslie, Cheaper childcare: A practical plan to boost female workforce participation. Grattan Institute, 9 August 2020. <https://grattan.edu.au/report/cheaper-childcare/>. Accessed 16 January 2024; O. Emslie, D. Wood, & K. Griffiths, Reform “daddy leave” to narrow the gender gap in paid and unpaid work. *The Conversation*, 10 August 2020. <https://grattan.edu.au/news/reform-daddy-leave-to-narrow-the-gender-gap-in-paid-and-unpaid-work/>. Accessed 24 August 2020.

<sup>31</sup> WEET, Letter to the Minister for Women: RE: Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce Advice for May 2023 Budget. Commonwealth of Australia, 24 March 2023. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-04/weet-letter-minister-gallagher.pdf>. Accessed 19 April 2023.

out of the ground”.<sup>32</sup> Amongst other measures, the government also made key feminist appointments to a new National Women’s Health Advisory Council, committed to addressing the “medical misogyny” that saw women’s health issues dismissed, neglected and under-researched.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, the government commissioned a review into whether the women’s alliances, the national advisory bodies initially established under the Rudd/Gillard governments, were still working effectively and that established their need for better resourcing.<sup>34</sup>

A key decision was the appointment of Deb Brennan, as an Associate Commissioner to the Productivity Commission in February 2023 with a special brief to work on the Early Childhood Education and Care Inquiry.<sup>35</sup> The Inquiry was tasked with “identifying solutions that will chart the course for universal, affordable” Early Childhood Education and Care.<sup>36</sup> Brennan is the foremost Australian academic expert on childcare whose work, including trenchant critiques of successive governments’ marketisation models, has already been extensively cited in this book. Wood’s and Brennan’s appointments can be seen as part of a strategy identified by Treasurer Jim Chalmers of reforming key economic institutions such as the Productivity Commission so that they could

<sup>32</sup> D. Wood, Think big: A new mission statement for Australia, Keynote Address to the Jobs Summit. Grattan Institute, 1 September 2022. <https://grattan.edu.au/news/think-big-a-new-mission-statement-for-australia/>. Accessed 16 January 2024.

<sup>33</sup> G. Kearney, Women’s health experts appointed to tackle “medical misogyny”, Media Release, 31 January 2023. <https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-ged-kearney-mp/media/womens-health-experts-appointed-to-tackle-medical-misogyny>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>34</sup> Australian Government, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), National women’s alliances. Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/grants-and-funding/national-womens-alliances>. Accessed 4 April 2024; DPMC, Evaluation of the national women’s alliances model, Global Institute for Women’s Leadership and the Office for Women. Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, pp. 1, 4, 12–14. [https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/evaluation-of-the-national-womens-alliances-model\\_1.pdf](https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/evaluation-of-the-national-womens-alliances-model_1.pdf). Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>35</sup> Australian Government, Productivity Commission, Deborah Brennan: Associate Commissioner. Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.pc.gov.au/about/people-structure/commissioners/deborah-brennan>. Accessed 16 January 2024; Productivity Commission, A path to universal early childhood education and care, Draft Report. Commonwealth of Australia, November 2023, p. iv. <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/childhood/draft/childhood-draft.pdf>. Accessed 22 March 2024.

<sup>36</sup> Productivity Commission, A path to universal early childhood education and care, p. iv.



“help deliver change in areas of disadvantage, to prod and inform and empower”, as part of his aim of producing better market design and a “values-based” capitalism.<sup>37</sup> Those reforms clearly involved being more open to feminist input and expertise than under the previous Coalition government.

## WOMEN AND THE ECONOMY IN DIFFICULT ECONOMIC TIMES

However, unfortunately, the new appointments and gender equality commitments also coincided with difficult economic times. Treasurer Jim Chalmers noted the combination of the lingering effects of the Global Financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, global energy, inflation and high interest rate crises, aggravated by the war in Ukraine.<sup>38</sup> Such factors were subsequently compounded by conflict in the Middle East. Furthermore, although attitudes towards government intervention and debt had shifted during the COVID-19 crisis, and despite some unexpected but temporary revenue increases producing a budget surplus, Chalmers emphasised the need for budgetary restraint to reduce the high underlying debt over the coming years.<sup>39</sup> As we have seen previously, Labor governments have repeatedly encountered difficult economic conditions, from the 1970s Whitlam government facing stagnation to the more recent Rudd and Gillard governments facing the Global Financial Crisis and economic distortions arising from a mining boom. Nonetheless, Chalmer’s response not only reflected economic circumstances but also the lingering impacts of neoliberal ideology critiquing deficits and the role such critiques had played electorally in successful Liberal Party attacks on Labor’s claimed profligacy.

<sup>37</sup> J. Chalmers, Capitalism after the crises. *The Monthly*, February 2023. <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2023/february/jim-chalmers/capitalism-after-crises>. Accessed 28 January 2023.

<sup>38</sup> Chalmers, Capitalism after the crises.

<sup>39</sup> J. Chalmers, Opinion piece: Responsible economic management key to our entire agenda, 14 December 2023. <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/jim-chalmers-2022/articles/opinion-piece-responsible-economic-management-key-our-entire>. Accessed 10 January 2024.

Sam Mostyn, as Chair of the Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce, had accepted that the economic situation would cause delays in implementing desired reforms:

We’re very conscious that we face a terribly difficult economy and fiscal situation. So our recommendations are clearly driven to make sure that the early investments are the ones that make the most sense. But we’ve listed our recommendations across a decade of work. And we hold some of those more expensive, large-scale changes until the back end of that decade, to say that none of this can be fixed overnight.<sup>40</sup>

This was despite Mostyn also making it clear that many of the delayed costs involved investments that would have major economic benefits in terms of utilising the skills and resources of Australian women.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, the Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce cited estimates that the cost of not removing the barriers to women’s full economic participation was \$128,000,000,000.<sup>42</sup>

Women’s and Finance Minister Katy Gallagher has lamented that “If I had more money, I would be putting more money everywhere. I wish it was different”.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, the government stated in 2023 that “Australian women are front and centre in Labor’s second Budget with the most significant single year investment in women’s equality in at least the last 40 years”.<sup>44</sup> Gallagher argued that: “Investing in women’s safety is indisputable, investing in women who are most disadvantaged is the right thing to do, investing in programs that help get women back to work is common sense, and investing in wages for women is good economics”.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Mostyn, Press Conference, Blue Room.

<sup>41</sup> Mostyn, Press Conference, Blue Room.

<sup>42</sup> S. Mostyn, A Message from the chair. In WEET, A 10-year-plan to Unleash the Full Capacity and Contribution of Women to the Australian Economy 2023–2033: Final Report. Commonwealth of Australia, October 2023, p. 7. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/womens-economic-equality-taskforce-final-report.pdf>. Accessed 20 December 2023.

<sup>43</sup> K. Gallagher, National press club Q&A, 7 March 2024. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2024/national-press-club-qa>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>44</sup> K. Gallagher, Labor budget backs Australian women, Media Release, 9 May 2023. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2023/labor-budget-backs-australian-women>. Accessed 10 January 2024.

<sup>45</sup> Gallagher, Labor Budget Backs Australian Women.

Key measures listed included, 1.9 billion addressing the controversial Gillard-era legislation that removed single parents whose children had turned 8 from the single parents benefit and placed them on job keeper by expanding the eligibility age for the youngest child from under 8 to under 14. This had been a strong recommendation of the Women's Economic Equality Taskforce. Commonwealth Rent Assistance was increased by 15% (with single women being roughly half the participants) given high levels of single women's homelessness.<sup>46</sup> However, the National Federation of Australian Women still drew attention to deficiencies in the gender lens being applied to the 2023-24 budget:

The Government is committed to Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) but the implementation plan is dependent on agencies determining that policy measures fall within set criteria. At the moment these exclude many proposals with a total value of less than \$250 million over the forward estimates and revenue measures are out of scope.<sup>47</sup>

Although subsequent guidelines involved multiple criteria, the \$250 million figure remained for helping to determine whether "a comprehensive gender analysis" should be implemented.<sup>48</sup> More about the way in which GRB could be improved will be discussed in the concluding chapter that follows.

Nonetheless, the government has also introduced a number of other key economic measures during its period in office that will be discussed below.

<sup>46</sup> Gallagher, Labor Budget Backs Australian Women.

<sup>47</sup> The National Foundation for Australian Women (NFAW), Budget overview, Gender Lens on the 2023-24 Budget. NFAW, 20 May 2023, p. 2. <https://nfaw.org/storage/2023/05/overview.pdf>. Accessed 12 January 2024.

<sup>48</sup> DPMC, Including gender: An APS guide to gender analysis and gender impact assessment Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2023. Commonwealth of Australia, 2023, pp. 24-25. <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2023-08/apo-nid-323874.pdf>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

## PAID PARENTAL LEAVE

Given their assessment of the difficult economic situation, the Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce report strategically suggested 26 weeks paid parental leave as a first step, despite recognising that OECD experience revealed that 52 weeks facilitated a greater “lose it or use it” component that encouraged men to play more of a role. The report therefore recommended a move to 52 weeks in the next 5–10 years while accepting that the current “fiscal environment” made that a longer term aim rather than one that was immediately achievable.<sup>49</sup> Yet: “According to the OECD’s key characteristics of parental leave systems data, the global average of total paid leave entitlements available to mothers is 54.1 weeks”.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, Korea and Japan offer 52 and 54 weeks paid leave to fathers, respectively, with Japan making particular efforts to encourage men, although relatively few fathers in either country take this up.<sup>51</sup>

Women’s and Finance Minister Gallagher acknowledged that “we would all like to continue to improve that scheme, but we’ve got to find room in the Budget to do that as we go” although she also acknowledged that maximising women’s economic participation would have “a positive impact on the Budget”.<sup>52</sup> The Paid Parental Leave Amendment (More Support for Working Families) Bill 2023 introduced by the government aimed to increase the amount of parental leave by two weeks each year from July 2024 to reach 26 weeks by July 2026, with four weeks leave

<sup>49</sup> Mostyn, Press Conference, Blue Room.

<sup>50</sup> WEET, A 10-year-plan to Unleash the Full Capacity and Contribution of Women to the Australian Economy 2023–2033: Final Report. Commonwealth of Australia, October 2023, p. 47. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/womens-economic-equality-taskforce-final-report.pdf>. Accessed 20 December 2023.

<sup>51</sup> OECD Family Database, PF2.1: Parental Leave Systems. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), December 2022, p. 5. [https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2\\_1\\_Parental\\_leave\\_systems.pdf](https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/PF2_1_Parental_leave_systems.pdf). Accessed 4 April 2024; N. Kyung-min, Korean fathers miss out on OECD’s longest paternity leave. *The Korea Herald*, 6 June 2023. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20230606000119>. Accessed 4 April 2024; C. Lau, Japan wants 85% of male workers to take paternity leave. But fathers are too afraid to take it. *CNN*, 26 March 2023. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/26/asia/japan-paternity-leave-policy-challenges-intl-hnk-dst/index.html>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>52</sup> K. Gallagher, Radio interview, ABC RN Breakfast, 23 October 2023. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2023/radio-interview-abc-rn-breakfast-3>. Accessed 10 January 2024.

reserved for each parent, that could be taken concurrently, in order to encourage sharing of duties between both parents.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, Minister Gallagher acknowledged that the government would like to pay superannuation on parental leave “when we can find room in the Budget for that”. The government was roundly criticised by the Greens for not doing so.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Labor had originally promised to pay superannuation on paid parental leave in the 2019 election campaign but had dropped the commitment due to cost in the 2022 election campaign. It was subsequently announced that superannuation would be paid on government parental leave entitlements from July 2025, that is, after the next election.<sup>55</sup> Chapter 5 described how the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments had been widely criticised for not paying superannuation when Labor’s paid parental leave scheme was first introduced. The government was going to encourage private employers to offer paid superannuation as part of their supplementary paid parental leave schemes, partly by example and paying it themselves, but had not committed to legislate for it in all forms of paid parental leave as recommended by the Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce.<sup>56</sup> Furthermore, only 60% of companies were offering their own schemes, in addition to the basic government scheme.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> K. Gallagher, Delivering a historic expansion of paid parental leave, Media Release, 19 October 2023. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2023/delivering-historic-expansion-paid-parental-leave>. Accessed 10 January 2024.

<sup>54</sup> L. Waters, Matters of urgency—Gender equality, 8 March 2023. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (pp. 630–635). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/26443/toc\\_pdf/Senate\\_2023\\_03\\_08\\_Official.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/chamber/hansards/26443/toc_pdf/Senate_2023_03_08_Official.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 10 April 2024.

<sup>55</sup> S. Borys & T. Crowley, Super to be added to paid parental leave from next year. *ABC News*, 7 March 2024. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-03-07/retirement-savings-set-to-be-boosted-for-new-parents/103553762>. Accessed 4 April 2024; Gallagher, National Press Club Q&A.

<sup>56</sup> Gallagher, National Press Club Q&A; WEET, A 10-year plan, p. 44; for example, employers can choose to top-up payments above the minimum wage rate paid by government, see Services Australia, Paid Parental Leave Scheme Employer Toolkit, June 2023, pp. 6 & 14. <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-06/fpr081-2305en.pdf>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>57</sup> Gallagher, National Press Club Q&A.

## WOMEN'S WAGES AND THE GENDER PAY GAP

As we have seen in Chapters 5 and 6, Labor had been arguing for many years that women's care work had been undervalued but the Rudd and Gillard governments' attempts to address this had been undermined by the subsequent Liberal-National Coalition government. The Albanese government pressed ahead with supporting cases for wage increases for undervalued female-dominated care work in the Fair Work Commission and had incorporated gender equality as an object in the Fair Work Act.<sup>58</sup> In the process, the government was prepared to both subsidise some wage increases and subsidise higher employment levels in female-dominated industries.

Consequently, Minister Gallagher announced that key expenditures on women and the care economy in the 2023-24 Budget included:

Backing a 15 per cent increase to the minimum wage for aged care workers, over 85 per cent of whom are women....

Increased funding for community services, many with highly feminised workforces – including for organisations delivering women's safety initiatives;

\$91.3 million to boost the mental healthcare workforce through additional psychology placements, the majority of which are women;

\$72.4 million to build and retain the early childhood education and care workforce, 92 per cent of whom are women; and

\$67.5 million to support homelessness services during the transition to the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement, supporting jobs that are overwhelmingly done by women, including to assist women and children experiencing domestic and family violence.<sup>59</sup>

What Minister Gallagher did not mention was that in 2023 the government had originally tried to delay full implementation of the 15% pay rise for (predominantly female) aged care workers for financial reasons, suggesting to the Fair Work Commission that it be brought in in stages

<sup>58</sup> Fair Work Commission (FWC), *Secure Jobs, Better Pay Act—What's Changing*. FWC, 2024. <https://www.fwc.gov.au/about-us/secure-jobs-better-pay-act-whats-changing>. Accessed 15 January 2024.

<sup>59</sup> Gallagher, *Labor Budget Backs Australian Women*; Williams, & Sawyer, *High-vis and hard hats versus the care economy*, p. 84.

across two years. However, the Commission overruled the government.<sup>60</sup> The government was concerned about costs given it had agreed to fund the 15% wage rise in the aged care sector, including both residential and home care (albeit not in private retirement villages and independent living facilities that were not currently funded by the federal government) at a cost of \$11.3 billion.<sup>61</sup> By March 2024, a Fair Work Commission decision increased pay for some aged care workers to a cumulative total of 28.5% (including the 15 per cent). The government reiterated its support for a major pay increase, while stating it was considering the levels of funding support that would be provided.<sup>62</sup> Aged care operators expressed concern at the increased costs involved and whether government would fully cover them.<sup>63</sup> The government once again asked the Fair Work Commission to delay full implementation.<sup>64</sup> The fact that the increase

<sup>60</sup> J. Butler, Fair work commission overrules government on incremental aged care workers' pay rise. *The Guardian*, 22 February 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/feb/22/fair-work-commission-overrules-government-on-incremental-aged-care-workers-pay-rise>. Accessed 12 January 2024.

<sup>61</sup> Australian Government, Department of Health and Aged Care (DHAC), Better and fairer wages for aged care workers. Commonwealth of Australia, Updated 8 December 2023. <https://www.health.gov.au/topics/aged-care-workforce/what-were-doing/better-and-fairer-wages#:~:text=30%20June%202023.-,Funding,arrangements%20and%20new%20grant%20opportunities>. Accessed 10 January 2024; DHAC, Aged care worker wage rise—home care packages program, fact sheet, 29 May 2023. Commonwealth of Australia, Updated 31 May 2023. [https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-05/aged-care-workforce-wage-rise-home-care-packages-program-provider-fact-sheet\\_0.pdf](https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-05/aged-care-workforce-wage-rise-home-care-packages-program-provider-fact-sheet_0.pdf). Accessed 12 January 2024.

<sup>62</sup> G. Roberts, Aged care workers win up to 28.5 per cent wage rise. *ABC News*, 15 March 2024. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-03-15/aged-care-workers-pay-rise-case-ends/103591208>. Accessed 4 April 2024; T. Burke, M. Butler, & A. Wells, Fair work decision on aged care, joint media release, 15 March 2024. <https://ministers.dewr.gov.au/burke/fair-work-decision-aged-care>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>63</sup> E. J. B. Smith, Esperance aged care facility says federal funds will be critical to cover sector-wide pay rise. *ABC News*, 29 March 2024. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-03-29/esperance-aged-care-fair-work-pay-rise-federal-government-wage/103639052>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>64</sup> P. Karp, Many aged care workers may wait until 2026 for full pay increase as Albanese government requests phased implementation. *The Guardian*, 12 April 2024. [https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/apr/12/many-aged-care-workers-may-wait-until-2026-for-full-pay-increase-as-albanese-government-requests-phased-implementation?CMP=oth\\_b-aplnews\\_d-3](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/apr/12/many-aged-care-workers-may-wait-until-2026-for-full-pay-increase-as-albanese-government-requests-phased-implementation?CMP=oth_b-aplnews_d-3). Accessed 23 April 2024.

was so substantial underlines the fact that governments as well as not-for-profit and private enterprise aged care providers have been benefiting from underpaid female labour for many years.

The government also moved early in its period in office to recommend to the Annual Wage Review Panel of the Fair Work Commission that there be an increase in the minimum wage, acknowledging that: “Many low-paid workers are young, female, in casual employment, and are far more likely to find themselves experiencing financial hardship”.<sup>65</sup> The government argued this was particularly the case since in their view: “For nearly a decade, low wages were a deliberate design feature of the Liberal National Government”.<sup>66</sup> It has continued to advocate increases in the minimum wage and real wage rises generally.<sup>67</sup>

As well as trying to ensure that (predominantly) women’s caring work was valued more highly, the government also attempted to address flaws in industrial relations law that had disadvantaged women. Tony Burke, the Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations, admitted that enterprise bargaining was not working “in feminised industries like early childhood education .... People kept telling us multi-employer bargaining is actually a way to fix this”.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, multi-employer bargaining subsequently contributed to a major increase in childcare workers’ wages. What Minister Burke did not acknowledge is that, as explained in Chapters 3, 4 And 5, the gender equity problems with enterprise bargaining actually began under the Keating Labor government, were exacerbated under the Howard Coalition government and were partly retained under the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments whose industrial

<sup>65</sup> A. Albanese, J. Chalmers, & T. Burke, Government’s annual wage review submission, Media Release, 3 June 2022. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/governments-annual-wage-review-submission>. Accessed 15 January 2024.

<sup>66</sup> Albanese, Chalmers, & Burke, Government’s annual wage review submission.

<sup>67</sup> J. Chalmers, Interview with Peter Stefanovic, Sky News, 25 March 2024. <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/jim-chalmers-2022/transcripts/interview-peter-stefanovic-sky-news-6>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>68</sup> T. Burke. Interview- ABC AM interview with Sabra Lane, 6 June 2023. <https://ministers.dewr.gov.au/burke/interview-abc-amsabra-lane>. Accessed 23 July 2023.



relations provisions outlawed multi-employer bargaining.<sup>69</sup> The government has also prioritised trying to improve pay and conditions for those in the gig economy and other forms of precarious work.<sup>70</sup>

The government also moved to implement better gender pay gap reporting measures, including public reporting of the gender pay gap in individual businesses with over 100 employees, given stronger measures scheduled to be introduced in the previous Labor governments' legislation had been prevented by the Liberal-National Coalition government (as noted in Chapter 6). However, it remains unclear how strong the penalties for non-compliance or poorer results will eventually be, particularly in regard to government procurement. At present companies that are non-compliant in regard to reporting can merely be named although there are also existing restrictions on tendering for government contracts, which had not been enforced by the previous government.<sup>71</sup> By contrast Spanish law, for example, had penalties of up to Euro 180,000 for companies that did not comply as well as possible exclusion from public procurement and France had penalties of up to 1% of payroll (the UK and Sweden also had fines available through those were poorly monitored in Sweden and rarely applied in the UK).<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, in Sweden all public and private employers had to report, and in Spain, France and South Africa all employers with over 50 employees had to report, whereas in Australia it was over 100 in the private sector (and

<sup>69</sup> C. Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*. Springer, 2019, pp. 67, 123 & 128–129. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6299-6>.

<sup>70</sup> T. Burke, Interview with Dave Marchese, Triple J hack, 8 February 2024. <https://ministers.dewr.gov.au/burke/interview-dave-marchese-triple-j-hack>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>71</sup> K. Gallagher, Press conference, Parliament House, 27 February 2024. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2024/press-conference-parliament-house>. Accessed 15 January 2024; D. Crowe, Flouting discrimination rules no barrier to winning government contracts. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 2021. <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/gender-reporting-federal-funds-to-companies-flouting-rules-20210321-p57cpm.html>. Accessed 15 January 2024.

<sup>72</sup> M. Cowper-Coles, M. Glennie, A. Mendes Borges, & C. Schmid, Bridging the gap? An analysis of gender pay gap reporting in six countries. The Global Institute for Women's Leadership, October 2021, p. 8. <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/giwl/assets/bridging-the-gap-full-report.pdf>. Accessed 16 January 2024.

in the UK 250 in both public and private).<sup>73</sup> The Albanese government's plans for broad gender equality commitments in procurement policy (an issue that, as we have seen in Chapter 3, went back to recommendations during the Keating years at least) were vague and lacking a clear starting date. Minister Gallagher seemed to suggest that it would involve a voluntary statement, at least initially, by businesses involved with more than 500 workers and would be a "carrot", not a "stick". Yet *Working for Women* had suggested the government would be introducing clear requirements.<sup>74</sup> Gallagher was also uncertain whether any large companies had actually lost a government contract through a failure to adequately address gender equality issues.<sup>75</sup> When asked by a reporter if she thought that "the response from employers" following the release of gender pay gap data "was a little lacking", she merely argued that the important thing was "the conversation it started". However, she did add: "Don't worry. We'll be watching. This isn't just releasing information and then seeing that nothing happens for 25 years. That's the whole point of releasing it. So, I guess people are on notice about that".<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, even allowing for this being a first step, it was a relatively weak response.

Furthermore, it was not entirely clear what the government's explanation was for why women were paid less and the role that exploitation in a capitalist economy may have played in this, never mind the role that male trade unionists and social democratic governments had played historically in producing the male wage-earner head of family model discussed previously; nor the role that contemporary constructions of masculinity and femininity play. Rather, sometimes it seemed to be suggested that it was just a historical relic out of touch with contemporary society. As Prime Minister Albanese put it:

...in female-dominated sectors... lower wages have lingered like a relic from another era. It's a situation that's been allowed to slide for too long by successive governments. As a society, we cannot continue to accept the

<sup>73</sup> Cowper-Coles et al., *Bridging the gap?*

<sup>74</sup> OSW, *Working for women*, p. 85.

<sup>75</sup> Gallagher, National Press Club Q&A.

<sup>76</sup> Gallagher, National Press Club Q&A.

situation where certain occupations are paid below their true worth, just because a majority of the workforce are women.<sup>77</sup>

## WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT

Procurement policy could also help address government concerns about the gender segregated nature of the Australian labour force. The government's 2022-3 Budget also allocated \$8.6 million to the Australian Skills Guarantee which included targets for women in construction projects, trades/apprentices and ICT projects.<sup>78</sup> (Although the budget did not state that the incrementally increasing targets for tying training to government-funded projects would still only reach "a minimum of 12% for women in apprenticeships and traineeships and 10% for women in trade apprenticeships and traineeships in 2030" with the ICT targets still to be negotiated.)<sup>79</sup> However, it was clear that, in line with arguments put forward during the 2022 election campaign, the majority of employment funding for women was targeted at aspects of the care economy. The New South Wales Minister for Skills, Tafe and Tertiary Education Steve Whan confirmed that the free TAFE places facilitated by the federal government had often been used by women who were upskilling in health and aged care and who would not have been able to afford to do so otherwise.<sup>80</sup>

The Albanese government also moved to Implement key 2020 Respect@Work sexual harassment report recommendations that had not been implemented by the Coalition government.<sup>81</sup> Consequently, the government amended the Sex Discrimination Act, introduced by the

<sup>77</sup> A. Albanese, Address to the Australian nursing and midwifery federation, Sydney, 12 October 2023. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/address-australian-nursing-and-midwifery-federation>. Accessed 16 January 2024.

<sup>78</sup> Gallagher, Labor Budget Backs Australian Women.

<sup>79</sup> Australian Government, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR), Australian skills guarantee. Commonwealth of Australia, Updated 8 December 2023. <https://www.dewr.gov.au/australian-skills-guarantee>. Accessed 10 January 2024.

<sup>80</sup> A. Albanese, B. O'Connor, S. Whan, & J. Laxale, Press conference, Sydney, 23 November 2023. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/press-conference-sydney-8>. Accessed 10 January 2024.

<sup>81</sup> AHRC, Respect@Work: Sexual harassment national inquiry report. Commonwealth of Australia, 2020. <https://www.respectatwork.gov.au/resource-hub/respectwork-sexual-harassment-national-inquiry-report>. Accessed 16 January 2024.

Hawke Labor government in its original form in 1984, to ensure that employers had a positive duty to eliminate:

- workplace sexual harassment, sex discrimination and sex-based harassment;
- conduct that amounts to subjecting a person to a hostile workplace environment on the ground of sex;
- and, certain acts of victimisation.<sup>82</sup>

In other words, the onus was put on employers (and those conducting businesses or undertakings) to prevent such acts occurring rather than to merely have individual complaint-based policies in place for dealing with them after they occurred.

## WOMEN, TAXATION AND REVENUE ISSUES

The Incoming Labor government also faced gendered tax issues. Initially, the government committed to implementing the stage three tax cuts introduced by the Liberal-National Coalition Morrison government but projected to be phased in in 2024. Labor had feared the electoral consequences of opposing these cuts, especially after losing the 2019 election partly on tax issues.<sup>83</sup> However, those projected tax cuts not only undermined the progressive tax system by removing and reducing higher tax brackets, they would have mainly benefited men and worsened gender inequality.<sup>84</sup> They also involved major reductions in tax revenue with the Greens arguing that scrapping the stage three tax cuts would enable various measures to be “funded with \$254 billion in savings”

<sup>82</sup> Australian Government, Respect at Work Council, New positive duty on employers to prevent workplace sexual harassment, sex discrimination and victimisation. Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.respectatwork.gov.au/new-positive-duty-employers-prevent-workplace-sexual-harassment-sex-discrimination-and-victimisation>. Accessed 17 January 2024.

<sup>83</sup> A. Gauja, M. Sawyer, & M. Simms, *Morrison’s miracle: The 2019 Australian federal election*. ANU Press, 2020. <http://doi.org/10.22459/MM.2020>.

<sup>84</sup> The Australia Institute, 18 reasons why the stage 3 tax cuts should be redesigned. The Australia Institute, 2 May 2023. <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/18-reasons-why-the-stage-3-tax-cuts-should-be-redesigned/>. Accessed 21 January 2024; H. Hodgson, & M. Coleman, Introduction to the gender lens on the May 2023 budget. NFAW, 20 May 2023. <https://nfaw.org/policy-papers/gender-lens-on-the-budget/gender-lens-on-the-may-2023-budget/>. Accessed 12 January 2024.

which had previously benefited “rich men”, including free universal early childhood education and childcare, full reproductive healthcare, superannuation on parental leave, better funding of affordable housing to tackle women’s homelessness and raising income support.<sup>85</sup> Eventually, the government did not proceed with the stage three tax cuts. However, instead of retaining the resulting revenue, the government reshaped the cuts in a revenue/cost-neutral way that benefited lower income earners. A gender lens analysis revealed that women in jobs such as childcare workers, disability carers and aged care workers would be the major beneficiaries.<sup>86</sup> Such a tax gender analysis was important given that the National Federation of Australian Women (NFAW) had previously criticised the government for not adequately applying a gender lens to taxation issues.<sup>87</sup> However, it was also effectively another way of government subsidising the income of lower paid female workers, this time by forgoing tax revenue rather than directly subsidising services in which they were employed. Such subsidies have benefits for business and, as will be discussed in the concluding chapter, reveal more of a neoliberal framing legacy than a traditional social democratic one.

## LABOR’S RELATIONS WITH BUSINESS

As one would expect in a capitalist society, Minister Gallagher has emphasised that the business sector is one of the key stakeholders the government consults with over policy proposals.<sup>88</sup> The Albanese government has been more prepared to regulate business than its Liberal-National Coalition predecessors as measures in relation to issues such as gender pay gap reporting have revealed. Nonetheless, as that example also shows, the Australian Labor government has not gone as far as some other countries. Revealingly, Gallagher has stated that, “when government looks

<sup>85</sup> Waters, Matters of urgency—Gender equality.

<sup>86</sup> K. Gallagher, Labor’s tax cuts to provide cost of living relief to Australian women, Media Release, 25 January 2024. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2024/labors-tax-cuts-provide-cost-living-relief-australian-women>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>87</sup> Hodgson, & Coleman, Introduction to the gender lens on the May 2023 budget.

<sup>88</sup> K. Gallagher, Workplace gender equality amendment: Second reading, 8 February 2023. Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate (pp. 211–213). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansards/26439/0170/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansards/26439/0170/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 16 January 2024.

at what we can do, we look at the things that are within our control as opposed to the choice of individual employees and employers”.<sup>89</sup> Gallagher has emphasised that the government’s measures so far were only “first steps”, nonetheless there often seems to be a reluctance to impose strong regulations on the private sector.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese had long argued that his government would focus on bringing all Australians together, including business and labour, especially since he believed that the 2019 election had partly been lost by Labor because of Bill Shorten’s focus on targeting the so-called big end of town.<sup>90</sup> Nonetheless, one should not expect business to necessarily come to the party on more radical gender equality measures, including paying women more.

However, so far, the discussion has mainly focused on issues of women and the economy. The discussion that follows will focus on broader issues of government policy, beginning with one area that is often now constructed as primarily an economic issue facilitating women’s participation but that should actually be seen in a much broader context, namely childcare.

## CHILDCARE

Childcare is a major priority, with the Prime Minister Albanese reiterating his support for moving towards universal childcare that he had stated during the 2022 election campaign.<sup>91</sup> As Frank Bongiorno pointed out then, such talk of the universal benefits of public provision had rarely been heard since the Whitlam years.<sup>92</sup> Women did more hours of paid work in most other OECD countries and childcare costs were seen by

<sup>89</sup> Gallagher, National Press Club Q&A.

<sup>90</sup> C. Johnson, Variants of populism. In A. Gauja, M. Sawyer, & J. Sheppard, (Eds.), *Watershed: The 2022 Australian Federal Election* (2023, pp. 59–77, pp. 69–70). ANU Press. <http://doi.org/10.22459/W.2023.04>.

<sup>91</sup> A. Albanese, “The command to perform”, 2023 Gough Whitlam Oration, Canberra, 29 November 2023, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/command-perform>. Accessed 16 January 2024.

<sup>92</sup> J. Damousi et al., Quo vadis, Australia? Reorienting the nation following the election. *Australian Book Review*, 44, 2022, pp. 22–23. <https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/archive/2022/july-2022-no-444/979-july-2022-no-444/9303-quo-vadis-australia-reorienting-the-nation-following-the-election-by-joy-damousi-et-al>. Accessed 16 January 2024.

the government as “the single biggest barrier to work facing single parents and primary carers”.<sup>93</sup> Consequently, the Treasurer argued that making childcare cheaper and more accessible “is our biggest on-budget commitment so far, and why we see that as a core investment in the economy and in easing cost of living pressures, and not some form of welfare”.<sup>94</sup> The government claimed to have reduced childcare costs by around 14% per hour in 2023.<sup>95</sup> As the Labor government became increasingly concerned about the impact of cost-of-living pressures on voters, more affordable childhood education and care was increasingly depicted as “a win-win for Australian families, delivering cost-of-living relief while also making it easier to increase household income”.<sup>96</sup> Albanese argued it was also a measure that not only boosted participation and productivity but also helped with the family budget in a way that was designed “to take pressure off people” while being “carefully designed to not to put pressure on inflation” (and thereby also higher home interest rates designed to address inflation).<sup>97</sup>

Albanese also depicted childcare as a benefit to business, since it helped prevent businesses from losing valuable staff who otherwise might not return to the workforce.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, according to Katharine Murphy, Albanese had seen childcare as a crucial plank of his 2022 election strategy given it created a link to what Murphy describes as “harried working mothers”—an electoral cohort neglected by Scott Morrison—plus also being a productivity measure that provided links to business interests.<sup>99</sup> While it is estimable that Albanese supported universal provision, the

<sup>93</sup> J. Chalmers, Address to the future women leadership summit, speech, Sydney, 8 March 2022. <https://jimchalmers.org/latest-news/speeches/address-to-the-future-women-leadership-summit/>. Accessed 10 January 2024.

<sup>94</sup> Chalmers, Address to the Future Women Leadership Summit.

<sup>95</sup> J. Clare, & A. Aly, Cheaper child care delivering cost-of-living relief to Australian families, Media Release, 22 September 2023. <https://ministers.education.gov.au/clare/cheaper-child-care-delivering-cost-living-relief-australian-families>. Accessed 16 January 2024.

<sup>96</sup> Clare, & Aly, Cheaper child care delivering cost-of-living relief to Australian families.

<sup>97</sup> Albanese, “The command to perform”.

<sup>98</sup> A. Albanese, Ai group 150th anniversary dinner, Speech, Melbourne, 14 August 2023. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/ai-group-150th-anniversary-dinner>. Accessed 16 January 2024.

<sup>99</sup> K. Murphy, Lone wolf: Albanese and the new politics. *Quarterly Essay*, 88, 2022, pp. 1–103.

focus on encouraging women's workforce participation and on benefits to business did reflect a tendency to still relate childcare to work, rather than the model of free childcare for all, originally advocated by women's liberation over 50 years ago and discussed in Chapter 2. Significantly, the National Federation of Australian Women (NFAW) also thought that there had been missed opportunities, such as removing the activity test on childcare given that how many hours of government subsidised care were received depended upon how many hours of recognised activities (including work, approved study and some hours of volunteering or looking for work) one did.<sup>100</sup> However, First Nations children could get "at least 36 hours of subsidised early childhood education and care each fortnight, regardless of their family's activity level".<sup>101</sup> Education for the first five years of a child's life was seen as an essential equity measure for improving the trajectory of a child's life, and presumably for Indigenous children in particular.<sup>102</sup>

The Draft Report of the Productivity Commission review into Early Childhood Education and Care, mentioned earlier, went further than the government's measures, recommending that all children 0–5 years should have "an entitlement to up to 30 hours or 3 days a week of subsidised care without an activity requirement".<sup>103</sup> In other words, their childcare entitlement did not need to be tied to employment. Among a long list, the draft report also advocated that families earning up to \$80,000 should receive an 100% subsidy of the hourly rate.<sup>104</sup> The report also recommended better access to subsidise occasional and out of regular preschool hours care, along with better recognition, availability and regulation of

<sup>100</sup> NFAW, Budget Overview: Gender Lens on the 2023–24 Budget; Services Australia, Recognised activities. Commonwealth of Australia, Updated 15 June 2023. <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/recognised-activities-for-child-care-subsidy?context=41186>. Accessed 12 January 2024.

<sup>101</sup> Clare, & Aly, Cheaper child care delivering cost-of-living relief to Australian families.

<sup>102</sup> A. Aly, Address to the 2023 early childhood Australia national conference, Speech, 7 October 2024, <https://ministers.education.gov.au/aly/address-2023-early-childhood-australia-national-conference>. Accessed 12 January 2024.

<sup>103</sup> Productivity Commission, A path to universal early childhood education and care, pp. 2 & 58.

<sup>104</sup> Productivity Commission, A path to universal early childhood education and care, p. 58.



training for workers, including improving pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to receive appropriate training.<sup>105</sup>

## VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The Labor government's broader focus on women's economic security, through improving pay and conditions, was seen as a crucial element of facilitating women being able to leave domestic violence situations.<sup>106</sup> However, the government had much more ambitious plans, with the state, territory and federal governments' National Plan (some-what extraordinarily) pledging to: "Ending gender-based violence in one generation".<sup>107</sup> The government also introduced measures designed to improve data on family, sexual and domestic violence; ensure that ministers in all portfolios were addressing issues relevant to domestic violence; substantially reduce the time it took to access the Escaping Violence Payment; fund new frontline and community support workers; enshrine a legal obligation for employees to have access to ten days paid domestic violence leave; reform the family law to make it safer for those fleeing family violence and examine how to improve the justice system for sexual assault victims.<sup>108</sup> Indeed, the government had provided \$2.29 billion in funding over two budgets to cover issues of women's safety under

<sup>105</sup> Productivity Commission, *A path to universal early childhood education and care*, p. 559.

<sup>106</sup> A. Albanese, *There is no time to waste*, Opinion, Perth, 25 November 2023. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/there-no-time-waste>. Accessed 17 January 2024.

<sup>107</sup> Australian Government, Department of Social Services (DSS). *The national plan to end violence against women and children 2022–2032*. Commonwealth of Australia, 2022. <https://www.dss.gov.au/the-national-plan-to-end-violence-against-women-and-children/the-national-plan-to-end-violence-against-women-and-children-2022-2032>. Accessed 17 January 2024.

<sup>108</sup> Albanese, *There is no time to waste*. Many of these had been long campaigned for, for example, the campaign for paid domestic violence leave had been going for over a decade. J. Walsh, *Statements by Senators: domestic and family violence*, 8 February 2023. *Parliamentary Debates, Australia, Senate* (p. 178). Commonwealth of Australia. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansards/26439/0084/hansard\\_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/genpdf/chamber/hansards/26439/0084/hansard_frag.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf). Accessed 17 January 2024.

the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032.<sup>109</sup> There were delays in implementing some of these measures, for example, the employment of support workers.<sup>110</sup> Albanese also pledged that The Housing Australia Future Fund would include 4,000 homes (out of 30,000) would be designated for women and children fleeing family violence.<sup>111</sup> The government also introduced a pilot programme to assist migrant women facing family and domestic violence while on a temporary visa, recognising also that they often had additional difficulties accessing support groups or services.<sup>112</sup> The government had also committed additional funding to address violence against Indigenous women, given that, in Albanese’s words: “It is a tragedy that an Indigenous person is seven times more likely to die at the hands of a domestic partner, if you’re an Indigenous woman compared with a non-Indigenous woman”.<sup>113</sup> Nonetheless, the government has been criticised for not spending enough on domestic violence, as well as for categorising it as a National Crisis rather than as a National Emergency, which would technically release more funds.<sup>114</sup> The government subsequently held a meeting of national,

<sup>109</sup> Gallagher, Labor Budget Backs Australian Women; K. Gallagher, Increased support to end violence against women and children, Media Release, 9 May 2023. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2023/increased-support-end-violence-against-women-and-children>. Accessed 17 January 2024; Australian Government, Department of Social Services (DSS), The national plan to end violence against women and children.

<sup>110</sup> The George Institute for Global Health, World-class centre tackles sex and gender inequities in health and medicine, media release, 27 March 2024. <https://www.georgeinstitute.org.au/media-releases/world-class-centre-tackles-sex-and-gender-inequities-in-health-and-medicine>. Accessed 5 April 2024.

<sup>111</sup> A. Albanese, Interview, ABC 7.30, 17 August 2023. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/television-interview-abc-730-3>. Accessed 17 January 2024.

<sup>112</sup> A. Rishworth, & A. Giles, Increasing financial support for visa holders experiencing violence, Media Release, 3 July 2023. <https://ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/11626>. Accessed 17 January 2024.

<sup>113</sup> A. Albanese, L. Burney, M. Scrymgeour, Transcript—Press conference, 20 April 2024. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/transcript-press-conference-1>. Accessed 1 May 2024.

<sup>114</sup> P. Karp, PM brushes off accusation he lied about speaking arrangements at violence against women rally, *The Guardian*, 29 April 2024 <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/apr/29/no-more-violence-against-women-rally-canberra-anthony-albanese-speaking-arrangements?>

state and territory leaders and pledged \$1 billion to help survivors leave violent situations and to counter online misogyny.<sup>115</sup>

Gallagher acknowledged that many Australians remained ignorant of the prevalence of violence against women and that work had to be done to raise awareness as well as change social attitudes<sup>116</sup>:

...it is long and hard work, but we have to get to boys. Particularly in school, and educate – both boys and girls – and educate them about respectful relationships, about consent, around attitudes towards those social norms and gender roles about who does what. I mean, all of that is part of addressing the prevalence of violence, gender-based violence, in this country. It has to be. Because I think there’s a lack of understanding about gender inequality in this country as well. And that’s linked to this.<sup>117</sup>

Gallagher’s statement was particularly important because, as Bromfield, Wegner and Page have noted, conservative prime ministers such as Howard, Abbott and Morrison have had a tendency of “defining and framing the violent acts that women face as abnormal and individualised personal tragedies, rather than results of structurally gendered conditions that enable” sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).<sup>118</sup> (Although Malcolm Turnbull, as a Liberal moderate, had a better understanding of the role that gender inequality and widespread disrespectful attitudes towards women played in fostering domestic violence.)<sup>119</sup>

<sup>115</sup> G. Roberts, Nearly \$1bn funding announced to support victim-survivors leaving violence, combat online misogyny and AI porn, ABC Online, 1 May 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-05-01/national-cabinet-meets-to-address-violence-against-women/103789304?> Accessed 1 May 2024.

<sup>116</sup> K. Gallagher, Interview, The Briefing, 3 November 2023, <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2023/podcast-interview-briefing>. Accessed 17 January 2024.

<sup>117</sup> Gallagher, Interview, The Briefing.

<sup>118</sup> N. Bromfield, N. Wegner, & A. Page, Framing sexual and gender-based violence: Australia Day, nationalism and conservative prime ministerial policy discourse. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 59(1), pp. 14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2024.2327984>.

<sup>119</sup> M. Turnbull, Address at the white ribbon day parliamentary breakfasts, Speech, 5 December 2017. <https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-41363>. Accessed 5 April 2024.

## HEALTH

The Labor government's measures to tackle "medical misogyny" and improve women's health included establishing 22 new Endometriosis and Pelvic Pain Clinics, investing \$48.2 million for a National Strategy for the Elimination of Cervical Cancer and reducing restrictions on who could prescribe medical termination medication.<sup>120</sup> Importantly, the government acknowledged gendered biases in research with Assistant Minister for Health, Ged Kearney, stating that: "For too long, women and LGBTIQ+ Australians have been underrepresented in health and medical research and have all too often had their experiences ignored. Labor is committed to a stronger, more inclusive health and medical research industry".<sup>121</sup> It was indeed too long, given that deficiencies in understanding and treating women's health were an issue that Labor had sought to address since the Whitlam government first funded women's health centres in the 1970s.

The government also legislated to make it easier for patients to receive care from the (female-dominated) professions of nurse practitioner and midwife.<sup>122</sup> However, the government was relatively weak on some issues, for example the *Working For Women* Strategy document did not specify what measures the government would take to ensure that public hospitals offer abortions.<sup>123</sup>

## LGBTIQ+

As we have seen in a Chapter 5, the Rudd and Gillard period had seen legislation passed that removed most formal discrimination against gay and lesbian Australians and had also provided some protection against

<sup>120</sup> G. Kearney, Women's health. GED Kearney. <https://www.gedkearney.org.au/issues/women-s-health/>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>121</sup> G. Kearney, Improving health outcomes through inclusive health and medical research, 10 November 2023. <https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-ged-kearney-mp/media/improving-health-outcomes-through-inclusive-health-and-medical-research>. Accessed 25 April 2024.

<sup>122</sup> G. Kearney, Making it easier to get top quality care from a nurse practitioner and midwife, Media Release, 20 March 2024. <https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-ged-kearney-mp/media/making-it-easier-to-get-top-quality-care-from-a-nurse-practitioner-and-midwife?language=en>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>123</sup> Gallagher, National Press Club Q & A.

discrimination on the basis of gender identity and Rudd had supported same-sex marriage in his final term as prime minister although it hadn't been legislated. Albanese himself had been a champion of gay and lesbian rights long before it was fashionable to be so, having first introduced a private member's bill supporting same-sex superannuation rights in 1996.<sup>124</sup> Same-sex marriage had passed during the Turnbull period after the divisive postal vote survey result in support. However, there were some key issues that remained. When Labor amended the Sex Discrimination Act in 2013 to provide protection on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and intersex status, it provided an exemption for religious providers, including schools, that would, for example, allow them to continue to be able to expel gay and transgender students and sack gay and transgender staff (heterosexuals falling pregnant or having sex outside of marriage could also be targeted).<sup>125</sup> The issue of whether conservative religious providers should be able to discriminate (including against staff and students with progressive religious views on such issues) became an ongoing bone of contention in the debate over introducing religious freedom legislation. Following culture war, anxieties exacerbated by the defeat of the Indigenous Voice to Parliament and in the context of growing Islamophobia and anti-semitism, Albanese made an initial statement saying he'd require bipartisan support before proceeding on the issue. Although he subsequently modified his position to suggest he might possibly proceed with support from the Greens after backlash from LGBTIQ+ groups and their supporters.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>124</sup> A. Albanese, Superannuation (entitlements of same-sex couples) bill 1999, Speech, 21 November 1999, <https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/superannuation-entitlements-of-same-sex-couples-bill-1999>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>125</sup> W. Summers, PM's claim Labor made it legal to expel gay students ignores important points. *AAP*, 11 February 2022. <https://www.aap.com.au/factcheck/pms-claim-labor-made-it-legal-to-expel-gay-students-ignores-important-points/>. Accessed 4 April 2024.

<sup>126</sup> A. Albanese, Press conference, Eugowra NSW, 22 March 2024. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/press-conference-eugowra-nsw>. Accessed 5 April 2024; R. Lewis, Anthony Albanese changes his position on religious discrimination reforms: nor open to negotiating with Greens. *The Australian*, 26 March 2024. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/anthony-albanese-changes-his-position-on-religious-discrimination-reforms-now-open-to-negotiating-with-greens/news-story/4bb9b6f1aba5543dde31bff3767bf833#:~:text=The%20Greens%20say%20they're,deal%20with%20the%20minor%20party>. Accessed 5 April 2024.

Albanese's fear of so-called anti-gender ideology culture war issues being mobilised, as former Liberal Prime Minister Scott Morrison had attempted to do, also led to him trying to defuse (and sometimes sidestep) the issue of transgender rights. Albanese argued that the issue of whether transgender athletes should compete was up to the sporting codes involved and that "what shouldn't be done is to try to politicise an issue that should be made on its merits, based upon the proper assessment of whether it's fair or not, but done in a way as well, that doesn't seek to essentially target a very vulnerable group".<sup>127</sup> During the 2022 election campaign, Albanese had responded to a question as to whether men can have babies with the response "no".<sup>128</sup> Support for a LGBTIQ+ Human Rights Commissioner had been promised by Labor in the 2016 and 2019 election but had mysteriously disappeared by 2022.<sup>129</sup> Despite a two-page document covering the forms of discrimination faced by transgender and non-binary people, there are very few mentions in the *Working for Women* strategy, although there is a passing reference that "for all people, especially gender diverse people, identifying and expressing gender outside the traditional gender binary can result in violence, discrimination, stigma and exclusion" and transgender women of colour face particularly high levels of violence.<sup>130</sup> There was no mention of other issues mentioned in the discussion paper such as high rates of suicide, homelessness and educational disadvantage.<sup>131</sup> Whether the Labor government can continue to sidestep the issue, particularly given its political mobilisation in Australia and internationally, remains to be seen. However, in the meantime, the government is not providing additional, proactive support to transgender people.

<sup>127</sup> A. Albanese, Interview, Piers Morgan Uncensored, 3 May 2023. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/television-interview-piers-morgan-uncensored>. Accessed 5 April 2024.

<sup>128</sup> J. Hildebrand, Federal Election 2022: Anthony Albanese to change Labor's class war rhetoric, *The Herald Sun*, 22 March 2022. <https://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/national/federal-election/federal-election-2022-anthony-albanese-to-change-labors-class-war-rhetoric/news-story/f276923ff8dc247f89c38472ccc4ab6e>. Accessed 5 April 2024.

<sup>129</sup> Williams, & Sawyer, High vis and hard hats versus the care economy, pp. 73 & 93.

<sup>130</sup> OSW, Working for women, pp. 29 & 42.

<sup>131</sup> DPMC, Gender diverse, including LGBTIQ+, March 2023. [https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-03/Roundtable-Discussion-Paper\\_Gender-Diverse.docx](https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-03/Roundtable-Discussion-Paper_Gender-Diverse.docx). Accessed 27 March 24.

## FOREIGN POLICY

While this chapter has focused on domestic policy settings, it should be noted that the Labor government has affirmed that: “Promoting gender equality is a priority for Australia and central to Australia’s diplomatic, economic, development, and regional security efforts”.<sup>132</sup> Furthermore, the government restored a target of 80 per cent of Overseas Development Aid to address issues of gender, arguing that: “We know investing in women and girls has a powerful effect on economic growth and wellbeing”.<sup>133</sup> The government also stated that it will tackle “the root causes of gender inequality across security, trade, foreign and development policy”.<sup>134</sup> Australia also joined the Inclusive Trade Action Group (ITAG) and the Global Trade and Gender Arrangement (GTAGA) supporting “equitable and inclusive” trade.<sup>135</sup> As we shall see in the next chapter, Foreign Minister Penny Wong highlighted the campaigns against forms of gender equality that are taking place internationally.

## MASCULINITY

However, there were also domestic contestations over masculine gender identity in the form of politicians’ images. Albanese’s own persona tried to combine elements of blokeyness (beer loving DJ Albo) with sensitive new age man (the young man who grew up in social housing helping to support his disabled mother and who pledged to care for those Australians doing it tough). He toned down his previously more aggressive and macho statements, including that he wanted to get back

<sup>132</sup> P. Wong, Ambassador for gender equality, Media Release, 20 December 2022. <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/ambassador-gender-equality>. Accessed 5 April 2024.

<sup>133</sup> P. Wong, Speech to the Pacific Way Conference, Papeete, French Polynesia, 21 October 2022. <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/speech-pacific-way-conference-papeete-french-polynesia>. Accessed 5 April 2024.

<sup>134</sup> P. Wong, Australia-Germany foreign ministers’ statement, 19 September 2023. <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/australia-germany-foreign-ministers-statement>. Accessed 5 April 2024.

<sup>135</sup> T. Ayres, Australia signs up to the Inclusive Trade Action Group and Global Trade and Gender Arrangement, Media Release, 13 March 2024, <https://ministers.dfat.gov.au/minister/tim-ayres/media-release/australia-signs-inclusive-trade-action-group-and-global-trade-and-gender-arrangement>. Accessed 28 April 2024.

to “fighting Tories. That’s what I do” (admittedly said in the context of stopping Labor infighting).<sup>136</sup> Rather, during the 2022 election, Albanese promised to be a force for national unity and bringing people together.<sup>137</sup> He also drew on former New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, by emphasising kindness, arguing in his victory acceptance speech:

I want to find that common ground where together we can plant our dreams. To unite around our shared love of this country, our shared faith in Australia’s future, our shared values of fairness and opportunity, and hard work and kindness to those in need.<sup>138</sup>

He made a similar call for kindness in regards to supporting the Constitutional Referendum designed to establish a consultative Voice for Indigenous Australians: “There is nothing, no cost to Australians showing kindness with their heart as well as their head when they enter the polling booth tomorrow and voting Yes”.<sup>139</sup>

However, Albanese was to see his evoking of a caring, kind Australia turned against him, with the Murdoch media jumping on a poll respondent’s description of him as a “beta male”.<sup>140</sup> Leader of the Opposition Peter Dutton himself attempted to emasculate Prime Minister Albanese, referring to issues ranging from the cost of living to the High Court releasing some immigration detainees convicted of criminal offences:

<sup>136</sup> ABC News, Labor at War: Albanese declares hand for Rudd. *ABC News*, 25 February 2012. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-02-25/anthony-albanese-to-vote-for-rudd/3852596>. Accessed 17 January 2024.

<sup>137</sup> ABC News, Read incoming Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s full speech after Labor wins federal election. *ABC News*, 22 May 2022. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-05-22/anthony-albanese-acceptance-speech-full-transcript/101088736>. Accessed 17 January 2024.

<sup>138</sup> ABC News, Read Incoming Prime Minister Anthony Albanese’s Full Speech; see further C. Johnson, Feeling protected: Protective masculinity and femininity from Donald Trump and Joe Biden to Jacinda Ardern. *Emotions and Society*, 4(1), 2022, p. 17. <https://doi.org/10.1332/263169021X16310949038420>.

<sup>139</sup> A. Albanese, Press conference, Adelaide, 13 October 2023. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/press-conference-adelaide-2>. Accessed 17 January 2024.

<sup>140</sup> J. Campbell, & National Political Editor, Voters slam Anthony Albanese for failing to tackle cost of living, brand him a “weak beta male”. *The Daily Telegraph*, 3 December 2023. <https://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/voters-slam-anthony-albanese-for-failing-to-tackle-cost-of-living-brand-him-a-weak-beta-male/news-story/2321c5600a4cfd6bef49d10b688a3c3f>. Accessed 17 January 2024.



...the Prime Minister needs to show some strength, show some leadership, instead of being weak and woke, he needs to stand up and be strong and stand up for our country's interests. At the moment, the Prime Minister's not doing that. He's not doing it on cost of living, he's not doing it in relation to allowing these criminals out into the community to commit more offences, he's not doing it for the Jewish community, and I think the Prime Minister's weakness at this time that our country needs strength is of great and understandable concern to most Australians.<sup>141</sup>

Dutton similarly attacked Albanese for what he described as “the most significant display of weak leadership that I’ve seen in my 20-odd years in the parliament” when Albanese abandoned the Morrison government’s stage three tax cuts (albeit in support of tax cuts for lower income earners).<sup>142</sup> A December 2023 opinion poll showed only 39% of those polled thought Dutton was “likeable”, compared with 57% for Albanese. Only 45% thought Dutton “cares for people” as opposed to 61% for Albanese. However, 58% thought Dutton was “decisive and strong”, compared with only 48% for Albanese.<sup>143</sup> To draw on Judith Butler, Albanese’s attempts to model a more caring and kinder form of masculine leadership therefore contributed to arguments that he is not performing his “gender right”.<sup>144</sup>

Albanese himself had made some statements stating the need for leaders to encourage broader cultural change that also included encouraging socially progressive behaviour by men:

We have achieved a lot in our first 18 months, while remaining deeply aware that there is a long way to go. It isn’t just the job of governments.

<sup>141</sup> P. Dutton, Doorstop interview, Sydney. Peter Dutton, 4 December 2023. <https://www.peterdutton.com.au/leader-of-the-opposition-transcript-doorstop-interview-sydney/>. Accessed 5 April 2024.

<sup>142</sup> A. Bolt, “Most significant display of weak leadership” by Anthony Albanese: Peter Dutton. *Sky News*, 25 January 2024. <https://www.skynews.com.au/opinion/andrew-bolt/most-significant-display-of-weak-leadership-by-anthony-albanese-peter-dutton/video/9cdaa6a853f7070837fb9ca01c024de0>. Accessed 5 April 2024.

<sup>143</sup> S. Benson, Newspoll: Voters back Peter Dutton as more experienced, stronger than Anthony Albanese. *The Australian*, 19 December 2023. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/newspoll-voters-back-peter-dutton-as-more-experienced-stronger-than-anthony-albanese/news-story/07e068cab97059905a3286c2e25be3df>. Accessed 17 January 2024.

<sup>144</sup> J. Butler, *Gender trouble*. Routledge, 1990, p. 140.

Changing the attitudes that entrench inequality and discrimination, and objectify women and disregard consent, is everyone’s responsibility. Men in particular have to step up. And male leaders have an opportunity to champion change, and create the conditions that prevent violence, abuse, discrimination and harassment.<sup>145</sup>

The government has been prepared to challenge toxic masculine stereotypes, albeit particularly in the context of violence against women. For example, the government announced a \$3.5 million three-year trial programme designed to encourage “healthy masculinity” in boys that would be delivered via groups such as sporting clubs as well as online. The government was particularly concerned that:

Recent research has found that 25 per cent of teenage boys in Australia look up to social media personalities who perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes and condone violence against women... Research shows there are strong links between harmful forms of masculinity and the perpetration of violence against women.<sup>146</sup>

Nonetheless, Albanese was careful to reassure men that the government’s policies in a range of areas had been “win-win” ones for all involved and that “greater equality for women hasn’t led to worse results for men”.<sup>147</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Albanese might have been “deeply aware that there is a long way to go” but the government was very proud of its achievements.<sup>148</sup> In 2023, Minister Gallagher stated that the “latest Gender Gap Report from the World Economic Forum shows that since the Albanese Labor Government took office, Australia’s world gender equality ranking has jumped up 17 places from 43rd to 26th – the largest increase since the index began

<sup>145</sup> Albanese, There is no time to waste.

<sup>146</sup> A. Rishworth, Helping Young Men to Have Healthy, Respectful Relationships, Media Release, 25 October 2023. <https://ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/12886#:~:text=The%20healthy%20masculinities%20project%20trial,digitally%20on%20social%20media%20platforms>. Accessed 17 January 2024.

<sup>147</sup> Albanese, Ai group 150th anniversary dinner.

<sup>148</sup> Albanese, A. There is no time to waste.

in 2006”.<sup>149</sup> She was also proud of the fact that: “New data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) today shows that the national gender pay gap has dropped from 13.3% in November 2022 to 13% in May 2023, the lowest level on record”.<sup>150</sup> However, she acknowledged that the most recent gender report card revealed that “while Australia has the fourth highest level of tertiary educated women in the OECD, Australian women still earn less than men, do more hours of unpaid care and are less likely to be in leadership positions” so “serious disparities remain between men and women”.<sup>151</sup>

At an event launching Elizabeth Reid’s account of her time working as women’s advisor for the Whitlam government, Katy Gallagher thanked Reid “for reminding us that revolution, reform, and Labor Governments go together!”.<sup>152</sup> Recently appointed Governor-General Sam Mostyn, when Chair of the Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce, had spoken of the need “to actually think about a different, reimagined future, and in that future for us, women have got to be recognised and given the credit, rather than taking advantage of” and she referred to the negative role of “gender norms”.<sup>153</sup> Another version of the future was given by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese when he was questioned regarding what,

<sup>149</sup> K. Gallagher, Albanese government pushes Australia into top 30 global leaders on gender equality list, Media Release, 26 July 2023. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2023/albanese-government-pushes-australia-top-30-global-leaders-gender-equality-list>. Accessed 12 January 2024.

<sup>150</sup> K. Gallagher, Gender pay gap drops to lowest level on record under Albanese Labor government, media release, 17 August 2023. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2023/gender-pay-gap-drops-lowest-level-record-under-albanese-labor-government>. Accessed 12 January 2024.

<sup>151</sup> K. Gallagher, 2024 Status of women report card, Media Release, 7 March 2024. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2024/national-strategy-for-gender-equality>. Accessed 5 April 2024; OSW, Status of women report card 2024. Commonwealth of Australia, 8 March 2024. <https://genderequality.gov.au/status-women-report-cards/2024-report-card>. Accessed 12 January 2024.

<sup>152</sup> K. Gallagher, Elizabeth Reid Whitlam legacy paper launch, Media Release, 29 September 2023. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2023/elizabeth-reid-whitlam-legacy-paper-launch>. Accessed 17 January 2024.

<sup>153</sup> P. Karvelas & S. Mostyn, Push for women’s economic security in budget, RN Breakfast. ABC Radio National, 19 April 2023. <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/push-for-women-s-economic-security-in-budget/102239698>. Accessed 17 January 2024.

as a self-described “progressive”, he wanted Australia to be progressing towards and replied that it was:

....to a more inclusive society. To one that has greater opportunity regardless of people’s birth or people’s ethnicity or religion or gender. A country that is able to move forward as a whole, but an economy, for example, that works for everyone, not people working for an economy.<sup>154</sup>

Albanese’s answer is a typical twenty-first-century Labor one while Gallagher’s evocation of Reid reminds us of a somewhat more radical time. Albanese’s answer is, nonetheless, a worthy, reforming one. His government has conscientiously and methodically moved to address, progress, and in some cases begin to fix up, some key gender inequality issues inherited from past governments, including Labor ones. It has also often tweaked an existing policy agenda, reframing it to fit in to current political priorities as when subsidising childcare costs becomes a measure addressing an inflationary cost-of-living crisis as well as an equity, participation and productivity one. Like its predecessors, the Labor government has often cited economic constraints as a reason for not progressing faster, including in areas documented in this chapter, where Australian gender equality policy falls short in an international comparison. The next chapter will also suggest that the government could have done more to address current and future issues of climate change and technology, amongst other issues.

However, despite the genuine progress that has been made, it is in no sense a radical or revolutionary government gender equality agenda and it is not one that reconceives and refashions Australian policy regimes. Yet the concluding chapter that follows will suggest, as many feminists before have argued, that if we are really going to address gender equality, it is necessary to reimagine and reinvent the political as well as the policy agendas that go along with it.

<sup>154</sup> A. Albanese, Radio interview, ABC Brisbane Drive, 5 October 2023. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/radio-interview-abc-brisbane-drive-0>. Accessed 17 January 2024.

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## Gender Equality and the Failure of Political Imagination: Lessons for Reframing in Uncertain Times

As this book has demonstrated, the Australian Albanese government is committed to furthering gender equality policy, albeit in a reforming rather than radical way. However, it is attempting to do so in very difficult and uncertain times in which the government faces major social, economic, technological and climate change challenges. Furthermore, while Labor aims to develop world leading policies, there is a backlash internationally in which gender issues are being mobilised to support authoritarian and radical right agendas. This chapter will explore some of the dilemmas that this and future governments will face, while arguing for a need for governments to reassess and reimagine the policy frameworks they are using.

### GENDER EQUALITY IN A TIME OF BACKLASH

In June 2023, Australia's Foreign Minister Penny Wong gave a stark warning to the National Labor Women's Conference. She began by reminding attendees of the key role that an Australian delegation advisor, feminist Jessie Street, had played in the 1940s in ensuring that Article 1 of the UN Charter recognised equality of the sexes and in introducing stipulations that the UN itself should not practise sexual discrimination. Wong

noted that Street also played a key role in establishing the UN Commission on the Status of women and became its first Vice President.<sup>1</sup> Street was particularly progressive given that the then Australian Labor government privileged male-wage earners.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, once again, Australian feminism had played an important role in furthering gender equality internationally, as this book has argued it has done in other historical periods in areas ranging from women’s right to vote and stand for parliament to the appointment of women’s advisors and the pioneering of gender responsive budgeting. However, Wong warned that “the norms” that Jessie Street “helped establish are being eroded” since “there is a growing and sophisticated global campaign” questioning gender equality.

...in the last five years, progress on gender equality has been imperilled...We see gender becoming a Trojan Horse for those pursuing geopolitical ends. Countries like Russia and Iran, supported by conspiracy theorists and right wing extremists, manipulating attitudes on gender, questioning agreed international rules and norms of established so many years ago. This campaign dismisses the women who speak out for equality as ‘agents of Western influence’.<sup>3</sup>

Wong dismissed such accusations of “western influence”, pointing out that Street had worked closely with feminist activists from the global South all those years ago, including Bertha Lutz from Brazil and Minerva Bernardino from the Dominican Republic. Wong also cited recent examples of non-western activists and leaders from varied regions of the world who were strong supporters of gender equality. Nonetheless, Wong noted that: “Our diplomats report backlash on gender equality across the multilateral system. They report a rollback of women’s human rights and long-standing norms under attack”. Wong went on to list UN outcomes that had been blocked because of opposition to “long

<sup>1</sup> P. Wong, Speech to national Labor women’s conference 2023, Perth, Western Australia, 10 June 2023. <https://www.pennywong.com.au/media-hub/speeches/speech-to-national-labor-women-s-conference-2023-perth-western-australia-10-06-2023/>. Accessed 22 April 2024.

<sup>2</sup> H. Radi, Lady Jessie Mary Street (1889–1970). *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Australian National University, 2006. <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/street-lady-jessie-mary-11789/text21089>. Accessed 23 April 2024; C. Johnson, *The Labor legacy: Curtin, Chifley, Whitlam, Hawke*. Allen & Unwin, 1989, pp. 36–37.

<sup>3</sup> Wong, Speech to national Labor women’s conference 2023.

established propositions on gender equality” as well as “reports of well-resourced campaigns that amplify difference on gender equality to wedge, divide, and exclude”.<sup>4</sup> Those campaigns included increased “disinformation about sexual and reproductive health”, including attacks on sexual health clinics in countries that hadn’t previously experienced them.<sup>5</sup> As pointed out in the last chapter, Wong has moved to make support for gender equality an important part of Australian foreign and aid policy.

The Report of the Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce, established by the Albanese government, also noted a backlash:

In recent years there has been significant backlash against women’s rights.... This backlash is highly visible online. All over the world, women in politics and journalism experience relentless volumes of online abuse, threats and gendered disinformation campaigns on social media. This type of backlash can be due to the vested interest in upholding discriminatory attitudes and behaviours that maintain inequalities in access to resources and power.<sup>6</sup>

The previous chapter also noted the influence of misogynistic, anti-feminist social media on a significant percentage of Australian teenage boys as some boys respond negatively to uncertainties over, and challenges to, more traditional gender identities and privileges.

Such warnings concern backlash against equality between men and women. However, as we have seen, attacks on so-called anti-gender ideology have also attempted to fix meanings of what it means to be a true “man” or a “woman” in ways that have targeted transgender people in particular and also the broader LGBTIQ+ community. Such attacks do reflect a fear of gender, as Judith Butler points out.<sup>7</sup> They also involve a failure to acknowledge that gender and sexual identity involve the complex interaction of social constructions and biology, so the category

<sup>4</sup> Wong, Speech to national Labor women’s conference 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Wong, Speech to national Labor women’s conference 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Government, Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce (WEET), Final report: A 10-year-plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy 2023–2033. Commonwealth of Australia, October 2023, p. 72. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/womens-economic-equality-taskforce-final-report.pdf>. Accessed 20 December 2023.

<sup>7</sup> J. Butler, *Who’s afraid of gender*. Allan Lane Penguin, 2024.



“woman” cannot be reduced to “biology” alone.<sup>8</sup> Although, David Paternotte makes the point that international anti-gender campaigns shouldn’t just be constructed as a backlash attempt to retain or reintroduce a more traditional status quo. They also often involve an attempt to create new social and political formations.

.... the assaults on women’s or LGBTI rights take part into a wider project, which strives to establish a new political – less liberal and less democratic – order. In other words, these attacks do not only or mainly aim to destroy or dismantle progressive laws and policies in the fields of gender and sexuality, but also ambition to build something new.<sup>9</sup>

Paternotte’s analysis alerts us to the ways that critiques of “gender” are often mobilised internationally to fuel authoritarian and autocratic attacks on the norms of liberal democracy. Similarly, Wendy Brown has written about the Nihilism, Fatalism and Ressentiment felt by a key population of white men impacted by neoliberalism and mobilised by the radical right.<sup>10</sup> It is a development that has helped to drive Trumpism in the US.<sup>11</sup>

Fortunately, Australia has not yet seen the major developments occurring in countries ranging from Orbán’s Hungary to Milei’s Argentina and the Trump-influenced US. Both major Australian political parties still state their support for gender equality policies, albeit with somewhat different views on how to achieve it. Nonetheless, past Liberal government attempts to mobilise US-style anti-gender politics on transgender issues in particular were discussed in Chapter 6. There are also some

<sup>8</sup> Butler, *Who’s afraid of gender*, pp. 174–177.

<sup>9</sup> D. Paternotte, Victor Frankenstein and his creature: The many lives of ‘gender ideology’. *International Review of Sociology*, 33(1), 2023, p. 84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2023.2187833>.

<sup>10</sup> W. Brown, *In the ruins of neoliberalism: The rise of antidemocratic politics in the west*. Columbia University Press, 2019, pp. 161–187. [https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/brow19384?turn\\_away=true](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/brow19384?turn_away=true).

<sup>11</sup> For my arguments regarding this, see further C. Johnson, Feeling protected: Protective masculinity and femininity from Donald Trump and Joe Biden to Jacinda Ardern. *Emotions and Society*, 4(1), 2022, pp. 7–26. <https://doi.org/10.1332/263169021X16310949038420>.

concerning connections between Hungarian government-funded organisations, Australian News Corp journalists and some former Liberal politicians.<sup>12</sup> More recently, a number of former or current socially conservative Liberal politicians attended the international inaugural Alliance for Responsible Citizenship associated with the Canadian socially conservative campaigner on gender issues, Jordan Peterson.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, who played a key role in the campaign against the Indigenous Voice, has stated that she intends to take up transgender issues as a major focus, arguing that transgender rights arguments impinge upon women's rights and non-western women's rights in particular.<sup>14</sup> As pointed out in the last chapter, it is unclear how long the Albanese government will be able to sidestep transgender and gender fluidity issues and its attempts to do so can reflect a lack of positive support for transgender Australians. One cannot rule out that future political developments could have implications for how gender equality is conceived in Australia, whether it is confined to those deemed "biological" men and women; whether it is open to broader forms of gender diversity and identification; or whether there is a backlash against gender equality itself.

When Minister for Women, Katy Gallagher, launched the new Australian national strategy for gender equality, she mentioned that "as my friend Penny Wong likes to remind me sometimes – change doesn't come easily". Gallagher also acknowledged that: "Addressing gender inequality is not the work of a single minister or a single government. It is whole of government work over decades.... But I also know that progress isn't inevitable and isn't linear. It can easily be wound back".<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> P. Browne, Dazzled on the Danube: What was Greg Sheridan doing in Budapest? *Inside Story*, 7 June 2023. <https://insidestory.org.au/dazzled-on-the-danube/>. Accessed 23 April 2024; G. Sheridan, Orban really is nothing like the fascist portrayed by left. *The Australian*, July 20 2019. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/orban-is-far-from-being-fascist/news-story/1f48285f9c3a57f8e3fc30c9ee8b5082>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>13</sup> S. Basford Canales, Barnaby Joyce among politicians gifted trips to Jordan Peterson-led conservative conference. *The Guardian*, 10 November 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/nov/10/barnaby-joyce-among-politicians-gifted-trips-to-jordan-peterson-led-conservative-conference>. Accessed 23 April 2024?

<sup>14</sup> S. Ison, Transgender movement next on Price hit list. *The Australian*, 11 September 2023. <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/opposition-indigenous-affairs-spokeswoman-jacinta-nampijinpa-price-says-women-are-under-attack/news-story/32b7ec599e714c6d8b88abbc2f685d33>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>15</sup> K. Gallagher, National Press Club address: Working for women—A national strategy for gender equality, speech, Canberra, 7 March 2024, <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2024/national-press-club-address-working-women-national-strategy-gender-equality>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

Significantly, the challenge to progress also impacted Indigenous women facing intersectional racial issues in a settler-colonial society. The defeat of the Indigenous Voice referendum ruled out a constitutionally enshrined voice to parliament and the executive. While the final model of the Voice had not been formally finalised prior to the Referendum being held, it had long been proposed to have equal gender representation, as well as two co-chairs of different gender (and this was also the model legislated for by the South Australian state government in its Indigenous Voice).<sup>16</sup> There had also been a recognition that the Voice would need to represent forms of traditional Indigenous gender diversity and LGBTIQ+ Indigenous Australians.<sup>17</sup> As pointed out in Chapter 3, women had played an important role in Indigenous society and had major cultural responsibilities. Indeed, white settler colonial institutions had disempowered them politically, including in areas that had traditionally been clearly defined as “women’s business”. Nonetheless, there had been a long history of Indigenous women leaders playing a key role in the struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights. Australian settler colonial society, and the former British and European colonial powers, could therefore have learned some useful lessons from Indigenous society and the proposed gender structures of the Voice. The model of a required, inbuilt equal gender representation used in the Voice would have been internationally innovative, including compared with Canada’s Indigenous Advisory Committee, the Nordic Sámi Parliaments and Taiwan’s Council of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>18</sup> However, the defeat of the Constitutional Referendum meant that was not to be and instead what was learned

<sup>16</sup> Australian Government, National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), Indigenous Voice co-design process: Final report to the Australian Government. Commonwealth of Australia, July 2021, p. 126. <https://ncq.org.au/resources/indigenous-voice-co-design-process-final-report-to-australian-government/>. Accessed 23 April 2024; Legal services commission of South Australia, Law handbook, Last Revised: Mon March 18th 2024. <https://www.lawhandbook.sa.gov.au/ch27s03s01.php#:~:text=> Accessed 29 April 2024.

<sup>17</sup> NIAA, Indigenous Voice co-design process, p. 126. Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>18</sup> Although Canada’s Indigenous Advisory Committee currently has more female than male members, see Government of Canada, Indigenous Advisory Committee membership, <https://www.canada.ca/en/impact-assessment-agency/advisory/advisory-groups/indigenous-advisory-committee/iac-membership.html>. Accessed 29 April 2024 and the Norwegian Sámi Parliament has long aimed for gender equality, see Council of Europe, The Sámi: The people, their culture and languages, p. 22, <https://rm.coe.int/1680302f64>. Accessed 29 April 2024.

was a sad lesson about the difficulties of countering right-wing populism and ensuring intersectional women's rights in a settler colonial society.<sup>19</sup>

In tracing the work of government gender equality policy in Australia over decades, this book has also found many examples of policy being turned back. The result has been a repeated need to reinvent the wheel, with previous advances sometimes forgotten in the process. Gallagher's own mistaken claims, mentioned in the previous chapter, that the Albanese government's national gender strategy was the first is such an example. In particular, gender equality policy has often been constrained by economic policy and it is to that issue that the discussion will now turn.

### ECONOMIC CONSTRAINTS ON GENDER EQUALITY POLICY

Economic policy framing has played a particularly important, and often problematic, role in the development of Australia's gender equality framing. Internationally innovative policies, initiated during the Whitlam years, faced a very rocky rather than linear progression. As pointed out in Chapter 2, already by the end of the Whitlam period (1972–1975), the Keynesian economics that had helped justify the expansion of public sector services for women was under threat and services for women were some of the first to face cuts. That threat worsened during the Fraser Coalition government period (1975–1983), despite the efforts of socially progressive Liberal feminists to retain some of the impetus from the Whitlam years. However, neoliberal ideology was also increasingly influencing Australian Labor (and Australian Labor in turn later influenced Tony Blair in Britain). In Chapter 3, it was explained how the Hawke and Keating governments' (1983–1996) attempts to meld a watered down form of neoliberalism with social democracy had negative impacts on women despite arguments that women's equality benefited the economy and some positive gender equality reforms also being introduced. Chapter 4 explains how the advent of the socially conservative, more explicitly neoliberal Howard government (1996–2007) had an even

<sup>19</sup> See C. Johnson, The Voice campaign showed Labor's strategy for countering right-wing populism is in disarray. *The Conversation*, 18 October 2023. <https://theconversation.com/the-voice-campaign-showed-labors-strategy-for-countering-right-wing-populism-is-in-disarray-215709>. 23 April 2024.

more detrimental impact on women, not least because of the government's negative attitude towards feminist advocacy groups. Consequently, advances made during the Whitlam, Fraser, Hawke and Keating years were stymied and/or went backwards under Howard.

Chapter 5 describes the efforts made during the Rudd and Gillard years (2007–2013) to undo some of the worst harms of the Howard period and continue a trajectory of gender equality policy reform. The attempts by the Rudd/Gillard governments (2007–2013) to try to improve the low pay of female-dominated industries were influenced by traditional social democratic concerns. Nonetheless, Labor did not adequately address gender biases in Keynesian-influenced economic stimulus policies. The government had also inherited some lingering neoliberal legacies from the Hawke and Keating years that impacted on policy in areas ranging from industrial relations to welfare benefits. Meanwhile as Chapter 6 explains the advent of the Abbott/Turnbull/Morrison governments (2013–2022) saw the return of a more neoliberal-influenced Coalition government once again. Although, despite the influence of social conservatism under Abbott and Morrison, the governments were less overtly hostile to feminist arguments than during the Howard years. They embraced a limited, market-friendly form of gender equality policy. However, that over-reliance on the market contributed to some significantly gender-blind policy settings, including in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Consequently, through all of these periods gendered economic ideology influenced perceptions of how to conceive of, and deal with, actual economic conditions and uncertainties in the global economy with major implications for gender equality policy framing. The current period is no exception. As Chapter 7 explains, the Albanese government (2022–) is addressing some neoliberal legacies, including in regard to single parents benefits and industrial relations. It has welcomed and facilitated progressive feminist policy input in a way that the Morrison government, for example, did not. Nonetheless, some neoliberal influences still remain in regard to issues such as tax cuts and reducing deficits—not least because neoliberal critiques of government debt and increased taxes have been successfully mobilised to defeat Labor electorally in the past (e.g. in the 2013 and 2019 elections).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> C. Johnson & J. Wanna (with H. A. Lee) (Eds.), *Abbott's gambit: The 2013 federal election*. ANU Press, 2015. <http://doi.org/10.22459/AG.01.2015>; A. Gauja, M.

Yet Australian social democratic governments have long faced funding issues due to the impact on revenue of relatively low tax rates.<sup>21</sup> Despite COVID-19 stimulus packages, the level of Australian government debt is still relatively low internationally and also historically.<sup>22</sup> Indeed the Treasurer and Finance Minister (whom, one should remember, is also Minister for Women) boasted that “Australia had the second strongest budget balance as a share of GDP among G20 countries last year”, including bringing in a budget surplus.<sup>23</sup> It is therefore debatable just how much the government has to constrain debt and how it prioritises the expenditure and tax decision choices it does make (e.g. in regard to substantial defence budgets, fossil fuel subsidies, private schools or superannuation tax concessions amongst other issues).<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Tanya Kovac and Marea Overall have claimed that: “At a Federal level, only 3.2 per cent of total service output and asset expenditure is targeted to women”, although the government would no doubt dispute this figure, including suggesting it doesn’t adequately reflect the mainstreaming of gender equality measures within broader budget measures.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, despite neoliberalism problematising government budget deficits, some international research suggests that neoliberalism has actually contributed to higher government

Sawer, & M. Simms (Eds.), *Morrison’s miracle: The 2019 Australian federal election*. ANU Press, 2020. <http://doi.org/10.22459/MM.2020>.

<sup>21</sup> S. Wilson. The limits of low-tax social democracy? Welfare, tax and fiscal dilemmas for Labor in government. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 48(3), pp. 286–306, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2013.821102>.

<sup>22</sup> G. O’Brien, Australian government debt in historical and international perspective. Parliamentary Library Briefing Book: Key issues for the 47th Parliament. Commonwealth of Australia, June 2022. [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/BriefingBook47p/AustralianGovernmentDebt](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BriefingBook47p/AustralianGovernmentDebt). Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>23</sup> J. Chalmers, & K. Gallagher, Australia climbs to second in budget management ranking, media release, 18 April 2024. <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/jim-chalmers-2022/media-releases/australia-climbs-second-budget-management-ranking>. Accessed 24 April 2024.

<sup>24</sup> G. Jericho, Don’t worry about a budget surplus, care about the choices in the budget. The Australia Institute, 4 April 2024. <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/dont-worry-about-a-budget-surplus-care-about-the-choices-in-the-budget/>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>25</sup> T. Kovac & M. Overall, Only 3.2 per cent?: How government spending is leaving women behind. *Women’s Agenda*, 30 April 2024. <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/only-3-2-per-cent-how-government-spending-is-leaving-women-behind/>.

debt via monetary policy and government subsidisation of the private sector, while neoliberal austerity policies targeting welfare measures have had detrimental impacts on economic growth and therefore revenue.<sup>26</sup>

However, as we have seen in the last chapter, the government has constrained or delayed full implementation of a number of measures for women, including paid parental leave. The Australian government has also been left trying to manage the marketisation of services, from childcare to aged care that has resulted from decades of neoliberalism, often ending up subsidising private sector providers for wage increases in female-dominated caring jobs as a result. Given budget implications, the government has attempted to delay phasing in full wage increases for aged care workers on two occasions.<sup>27</sup> In short, a sometimes pernicious form of path dependency is at work as past economic policy framings are still influencing government policy.

### ADDITIONAL POLICY OMISSIONS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES FROM ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Indeed, the past is still present in other ways. Governments are often still addressing issues identified by the Whitlam government over fifty years ago (see Chapter 2) from low wages in female-dominated jobs, to the need for women's services in areas ranging from domestic violence to health to the importance of affordable childcare. Yet cost constraints mean that, for example, Whitlam-era demands regarding free contraception and childcare have still not been achieved in Australia. Parts of Canada may offer free contraception, but not Australia, despite ongoing

<sup>26</sup> C. Gilbert & H. Guénin, The COVID-19 crisis and massive public debts: What should we expect? *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 98, 2024, pp. 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpa.2022.102417>; R. C. Jump et al., The macroeconomics of austerity. *Progressive Economy Forum*, March 2023. [https://progressiveeconomyforum.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/pef\\_23\\_macro\\_economics\\_of\\_austerity.pdf](https://progressiveeconomyforum.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/pef_23_macro_economics_of_austerity.pdf). Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>27</sup> P. Karp, Many aged care workers may wait until 2026 for full pay increase as Albanese government requests phased implementation. *The Guardian*, 12 April 2024. [https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/apr/12/many-aged-care-workers-may-wait-until-2026-for-full-pay-increase-as-albanese-government-requests-phased-implementation?CMP=oth\\_b-aplnews\\_d-3](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/apr/12/many-aged-care-workers-may-wait-until-2026-for-full-pay-increase-as-albanese-government-requests-phased-implementation?CMP=oth_b-aplnews_d-3). Accessed 23 April 2024.

feminist demands.<sup>28</sup> Nor is there yet free 24-hour childcare (other than a partial exception to keep workers in place during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic). Yet countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Lithuania, Norway and Slovenia offer some free childcare for children under three, although most countries fail to cover full-time women's work never mind longer hours.<sup>29</sup> It is not just paid childcare that is an issue. Paid parental leave is still tightly tied to workforce participation, with some men who want to play more of a role in parenting dismayed to discover that the Albanese government's new paid parental leave scheme only covers fathers whose partners have returned to paid work. In other words it doesn't pay them to stay home to co-share parental labour with a partner who isn't currently in waged work.<sup>30</sup> It is no coincidence that the Albanese's national gender strategy is entitled *Working for Women*.

There have also been some notable omissions in recent Australian government policy when it comes to addressing future challenges. For example, it is strange that the party that boasted to have introduced the world's first policy on women and information technology during the Keating years (see Chapter 3) should have failed to include a gender lens in its initial interim response to issues of Artificial intelligence. This is despite the well-known gender inequalities in the area that could undermine existing progress on gender equality, ranging from gender biases in, for example, financial, health, justice and welfare algorithms to the predicted greater impact of AI on current women's jobs and women's

<sup>28</sup> A. Bridges, Calls for Australia to make contraception free following similar moves by British Columbia, parts of Europe. *ABC News*, 13 April 2023. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-04-13/calls-for-australia-to-make-contraception-free/102198058>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>29</sup> A. Gromada & D. Richardson, Where do Rich countries stand on childcare? UNICEF Office of Research and Foresight—Innocenti, June 2021. <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/reports/where-do-rich-countries-stand-childcare#download>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>30</sup> V. Tapscott, Gender equal—Except for single-income families. *The Australian*, 12 April 2024, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/gender-equal-except-for-single-income-families/news-story/63deeb8e86c634e9c2570db99548d8c0>. Accessed 24 April 2024.



underrepresentation in the new industries arising around artificial intelligence.<sup>31</sup> An International Labour Organisation report has found that: “Concentrated job losses in female-dominated occupations could threaten advances made in the past decades in increasing women’s labour market participation”.<sup>32</sup> By contrast to Australian Labor’s approach, the European Union has committed to “leveraging AI to advance gender equality”, including “by recognising the pervasiveness of gender biases”, and has introduced legislation accordingly.<sup>33</sup> The government’s gender equality strategy, *Working for Women*, only has one mention of artificial intelligence, in the context of countering gender-based violence,

<sup>31</sup> Australian Government, Department of Industry, Science and Resources (DISR), Safe and responsible AI in Australia consultation: Australian Government’s interim response. Commonwealth of Australia, 2024. [https://storage.googleapis.com/converlens-au-industry/industry/p/prj2452c8e24d7a400c72429/public\\_assets/safe-and-responsible-ai-in-australia-governments-interim-response.pdf](https://storage.googleapis.com/converlens-au-industry/industry/p/prj2452c8e24d7a400c72429/public_assets/safe-and-responsible-ai-in-australia-governments-interim-response.pdf). Accessed 23 April 2024; O. Cleal, The government has released its interim response to AI growth—But where is the gender lens? *Women’s Agenda*, 18 January 2024. <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/the-government-has-released-its-interim-response-to-ai-growth-but-where-is-the-gender-lens/>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

J. Wajcman, E. Young, & D. Kampmann, Rebalancing innovation: Women, AI and venture capital in the UK, second report. The Alan Turing Institute, 2024. [https://www.turing.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-03/rebalancing\\_innovation\\_second\\_report\\_2.pdf](https://www.turing.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-03/rebalancing_innovation_second_report_2.pdf). Accessed 23 April 2024; E. Young, J. Wajcman, & L. Sprejer, Where are the women? Mapping the gender job gap in AI. Policy briefing: Full report. The Alan Turing Institute, 2021. [https://www.turing.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-03/where-are-the-women\\_public-policy\\_full-report.pdf](https://www.turing.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-03/where-are-the-women_public-policy_full-report.pdf). Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>32</sup> P. Gmyrek, J. Berg, & D. Bescond, Generative AI and jobs: A global analysis of potential effects on job quantity and quality, ILO Working paper 96. International Labour Organisation (ILO), August 2023, p. 39. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---inst/documents/publication/wcms\\_890761.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---inst/documents/publication/wcms_890761.pdf). Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>33</sup> Press and information team of the Delegation to the UN in New York, EU Statement—68th UN Commission on the Status of Women: Interactive dialogue on AI to achieve gender equality: Challenges and opportunities, Media, Release, New York. European External Action Service (EEAS), 21 March 2024. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/eu-statement-%E2%80%9368th-un-commission-status-women-interactive-dialogue-ai-achieve-gender-equality\\_en?s=63#:~:text=The%20European%20Union%20is%20committed,health%2C%20safety%20and%20human%20rights](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/un-new-york/eu-statement-%E2%80%9368th-un-commission-status-women-interactive-dialogue-ai-achieve-gender-equality_en?s=63#:~:text=The%20European%20Union%20is%20committed,health%2C%20safety%20and%20human%20rights). Accessed 23 April 2024; European Parliament, EU AI Act: First regulation on artificial intelligence. 8 June 2023 [Updated 19 December 2023], <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/en/article/20230601STO93804/eu-ai-act-first-regulation-on-artificial-intelligence>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

where the government has recognised the prevalence of technology-based abuse and sexual violence and funded programmes accordingly.<sup>34</sup> Neither *Working for Women* nor, indeed, a key report from the e-safety commissioner's office, include detailed discussion of the role that artificial intelligence, including deepfake technology, is increasingly playing in not only sexual abuse but the widespread online denigration of women.<sup>35</sup> However, *Working for Women* does list technology amongst a general range of areas where women need to be involved in decision-making in order to ensure their needs are met.<sup>36</sup> Yet, there has been resistance to calls for an independent expert body to assess algorithms used in government decision-making, that could be tasked with gender oversight as well.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, the government has also promised that it will provide new women in STEM initiatives following recommendations of an independent Review of how to increase diversity in STEM and an Evaluation of the previous government's programmes.<sup>38</sup> The government

<sup>34</sup> Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC), Working for women: A strategy for gender equality. Commonwealth of Australia, 2024, p. 38. <https://genderequality.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-03/working-for-women-a-strategy-for-gender-equality.pdf>. Accessed 23 April 2024; Australian Government, Office of the eSafety Commissioner, Keeping women and their children safe from tech-based abuse, Media Release. Commonwealth of Australia, 30 November 2023, <https://www.esafety.gov.au/newsroom/media-releases/keeping-women-and-their-children-safe-from-tech-based-abuse#:~:text=Digital%20disruptor%20tools%2C%20anti%20Dharassment,Abuse%20of%20Women%20Grants%20Program>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>35</sup> Office of the eSafety Commissioner, Technology-facilitated abuse: family, domestic and sexual violence: Literature scan. Commonwealth of Australia, October 2023, pp. vi & 7. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-10/Technology-facilitated-abuse-family-domestic-sexual-violence-literature-scan.pdf>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>36</sup> DPMC, Working for women, p. 74.

<sup>37</sup> See recommendations 17.1 and 17.2 of the Royal commission into the Robodebt scheme: Report, Volume 1. Commonwealth of Australia, 7 July 2023, p. xvi. <https://robodebt.royalcommission.gov.au/publications/report>. Accessed 23 April 2024; D. O'Donovan, Let's be clear. Robodebt was ended by welfare recipients with their suffering. *The Guardian*, 9 July 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jul/09/lets-be-clear-robodebt-was-ended-by-welfare-recipients-with-their-suffering>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>38</sup> DISR, Women and girls in STEM. Commonwealth of Australia. <https://www.industry.gov.au/science-technology-and-innovation/women-and-girls-stem>. Accessed 23 April 2024; S. Williams, M. Jade, & P. Kaur, Pathway to diversity in STEM review: Final recommendations report. Commonwealth of Australia, 13 February 2024, <https://www.industry.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-02/pathway-to-diversity-in-stem-review-final-report.pdf>. Accessed 24 April 2024.

has also funded a digital literacy programme for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds (that is, women who have been officially accepted as refugees, since Australian Labor still supports harsh policies of mandatory offshore detention for asylum seekers arriving by boat).<sup>39</sup> Australia is well positioned geographically to learn from Asian models, such as Singapore's and India's, given that they have higher participation of women in STEM than most western countries, as well as from elsewhere in the world.<sup>40</sup> However, it should be noted that Labor governments have a long history of being over-optimistic about the positive impacts of technology and of underestimating the downsides.<sup>41</sup>

An OECD report has also suggested that it will be crucial to develop policies that help to diversify women's employment in the digital and green sectors of the social economy, which includes many caring and community-focused jobs. Yet, climate change is another strange omission. Susan Rimmer complained that in the government's major *Working for Women* strategy:

Literally the last page of the report notes that given the unequal impact of crises such as climate change and natural disasters on women, diverse leadership and representation are important. But the strategy doesn't see climate adaptation as the game-changer that it is, with most current climate adaptation measures in energy, transport, disaster management, finance, climate services and technology fuelling gender inequality outcomes.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> A. Giles & A. Rishworth, Empowering women from refugee, humanitarian and migrant backgrounds with digital literacy, 25 August 2023. <https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/AndrewGiles/Pages/empowering-migrant-women-with-digital-literacy.aspx>. Accessed 1 May 2024.

<sup>40</sup> T. Nair, CO22015: Women in AI: Is there a Singapore model? S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), 21 February 2022. <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/nts/women-in-ai-is-there-a-singapore-model/#:~:text=Globally%2C%20Singapore%20has%20been%20able,AI%20talent%20pool%20is%20female>. Accessed 23 April 2024; For a detailed comparative analysis of previous Australian government policies that includes a comparative component with India and Singapore, see K. Haynes, Nurturing women's participation in STEM: An analysis of Australian, Indian and Singaporean government policies and programs, PhD thesis. University of Adelaide, 2024. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/2440/140567>. Haynes' thesis candidature was funded by a University of Adelaide Faculty of Arts Divisional Scholarship tied to the Australian Research Council Grant used to produce this book.

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, *Social Democracy and the Crisis of Equality*, pp. 197–211.

<sup>42</sup> S. Harris Rimmer, "Inequality serves no-one": Australia finally has a strategy to achieve gender equality - but is it any good? *The Conversation*, 7

The detrimental impacts of climate change on women are well recognised internationally and the European Court of Human Rights has ruled that the European Convention on Human Rights covers protection from the effects of climate change.<sup>43</sup> Australian feminists have also expressed major concerns. For example, in a post for feminist organisation the Victorian Women’s Trust, Fang Zhao has highlighted research showing that Australia’s increasing bushfires have a disproportionate impact on women, both exacerbating existing gender inequality and cases of domestic abuse. Climate-related changes are also exacerbating health issues that disproportionately impact women. Meanwhile, women are also underrepresented in the clean energy sector in Australia and in developing climate change policy.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, journalist Toni Hassan has noted that: “Astonishingly, the National Disaster Risk Reduction Framework, the Australian Emergency Management Arrangements and the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework – so many frameworks and plans, all recent – are all silent on gender. It is still largely men who decide how a community mitigates and responds to disasters”.<sup>45</sup>

The government aims to facilitate Australia becoming a “renewable energy superpower”.<sup>46</sup> However, so far there has been little discussion of

March 2024. <https://theconversation.com/inequality-serves-no-one-australia-finally-has-a-strategy-to-achieve-gender-equality-but-is-it-any-good-225081>. Accessed 24 April 2024.

<sup>43</sup> A. Hailemariam, J. K. Kalsi, & A. Mavisakalyan, Climate change and gender equality. In R. Baikady et al., (Eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of global social problems* (2023). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68127-2\\_237-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-68127-2_237-1); G. Carbó Zack, 5 facts about gender equality and climate change. United Nations Foundation, 16 March 2022. <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/five-facts-about-gender-equality-and-climate-change/>. Accessed 23 April 2024; European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), Violations of the European Convention for failing to implement sufficient measures to combat climate change, Press Release. Council of Europe, 9 April 2024. <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng-press:i=003-7919428-11026177>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>44</sup> F. Zhao, Heat waves and gender gaps: Navigating the complexities of climate change in Australia. Victorian Women’s Trust, 22 February 2024. <https://www.vwt.org.au/heat-waves-and-gender-gaps-navigating-the-complexities-of-climate-change-in-australia/>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>45</sup> T. Hassan, Gender strategy fails climate test. *The Saturday Paper*, 30 March 2024. <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/life/environment/2024/03/30/gender-strategy-fails-climate-test?>

<sup>46</sup> A. Albanese, A future made in Australia, Speech, Queensland Media Club, Brisbane, 11 April 2024. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/future-made-australia>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

how gender equality policy would fit into the new, green industry policies, despite Australia having signed up to an international agreement that seeks to commit to gender equity in the green energy sector.<sup>47</sup> Hopefully, additional relevant gender equality measures, including workforce, skills and procurement policies, will be developed in due course, although it is also clear that a significant part of the government’s agenda is to find new jobs for the (predominantly male and electorally significant) workforce in the old energy sector, including groups such as coal miners.<sup>48</sup>

## THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSFORMING A CAPITALIST ECONOMY

Turning Australia into a renewable energy superpower is part of the government’s ambitious plans to develop Australian industry, including addressing issues of sovereign capability that became very apparent during pandemic-induced supply chain issues. Australia will face major challenges in doing so given competition from Chinese, US and EU efforts to develop their own renewable energy industries as well as to develop manufacturing industry more broadly. The challenges will be even greater because, as we have seen in Chapter 5, Australia’s economy has long been buffeted by the rise of Asia and China in particular. Indeed, as pointed out there, the very aspects that have benefited Australia, such as the sale of mineral resources to China, have also sometimes distorted the Australian economy and impacted negatively on other industries, with implications for women’s employment and the gender pay gap. Now Australia risks being caught in the economic jousting between one of our largest trading partners (China) and one of our closest allies (the US), with China showing it is more than willing to penalise Australian trade when the relationship becomes too tense and with security issues massively increasing Australia’s defence budget.

Nonetheless, the Albanese government’s belief that the neoliberal “Washington Consensus” has fractured”, along with the influence of

<sup>47</sup> A. Albanese, Future made in Australia; C. Bowen, & J. McAllister, Australia pledges gender equality to clean energy sector, Media Release, 17 January 2023, <https://minister.dcccew.gov.au/mcallister/media-releases/joint-media-release-australia-pledges-gender-equality-clean-energy-sector>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>48</sup> A. Albanese, Interview, ABC 7.30, 11 April 2024, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/television-interview-abc-730-6>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

alternative economists such as Mariana Mazzucato, does provide opportunities for more interventionist industry policies that could also be designed to assist gender equality.<sup>49</sup> Treasurer Jim Chalmers has emphasised building a capitalist economy with “equality and equal opportunity at the centre”.<sup>50</sup> This is compatible with Labor’s long-term agenda to reform and humanise capitalism rather than to incrementally replace it as some social democrats in the historical past aimed to do.<sup>51</sup> However, the government will also face gendered dimensions of social democracy’s longest term challenge, namely how to reform capitalism in ways that substantially improves workers’ pay and working conditions without antagonising business by impacting levels of profitability.<sup>52</sup> Governments of any persuasion are constrained by economic factors and by the political factors associated with them, for example by cost-of-living issues, economic downturns and/or the fear of them and the consequences for employment. This is especially the case since business occupies a privileged position in a capitalist economy, given that private sector investment, or the projected threat of reducing it/sending it offshore in response to government decisions that business opposes, can impact on employment levels and citizens’ standard of living. However, it should be noted that historically capitalist interests were sometimes subordinated to patriarchal ones in the contest between male-dominated unions and male-dominated employers. For example, the male wage-earner model, whereby one male wage worker was paid sufficient to support his wife and children, interfered with earlier capitalist models in which the whole family, men, women and children had to sell their labour to earn sufficient money

<sup>49</sup> Albanese, A future made in Australia; on Mazzucato’s influence on Labor see C. Johnson, Humanising capitalism: Chalmers new version of an old Labor project. *The Conversation*, 1 February 2023. <https://theconversation.com/humanising-capitalism-chalmers-new-version-of-an-old-labor-project-198763>. Accessed 23 April 2024; P. Hannam, Labor’s interventionist industry policy aims big. But how can Australia compete with the US and China? *The Guardian*, 14 April 2024.

<sup>50</sup> J. Chalmers, Capitalism after the crises. *The Monthly*, February 2023. <https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2023/february/jim-chalmers/capitalism-after-crises>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>51</sup> C. Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*. Springer, 2019, p. 2. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6299-6>.

<sup>52</sup> Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*, pp. 111–135.

to support the family.<sup>53</sup> Labor will therefore face ongoing challenges in subordinating capitalist interests to those of gender equality in situations where paying higher wages to women workers might reduce profits and especially where government subsidies are not available to soften the blow. However, Labor does not always adequately recognise or address such potential conflicts, given that it has long framed relationships between labour and capital in terms of “social harmony ideology”, a belief that workers and business may compete but also share common interests in a healthily functioning capitalist economy that can offer both reasonable returns for business and employment for workers.<sup>54</sup>

Yet, it is important to recognise that the history of economic gender equality in Australia outlined in this book has also partly been an account of the interactions between a capitalist economy and, for want of a better term, a patriarchal one, with major implications for gender. The debates about how to recognise and reimburse caring labour partly are taking place in the context of a (male-defined) industrial capitalism’s separation of the public workplace and the private domestic sphere as, for example, factories and offices replaced agrarian production and paid work became increasingly time-demanding. It is a division that is being to some extent reworked now, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and with technology providing increased possibilities of working from home, although gendered domestic responsibilities have reasserted themselves.<sup>55</sup> However, work/life balance remains a major issue.

Both Australian parties of government, Labor and the Liberal, were shaped by the need to manage currently existing capitalism (the issue of how to manage other forms of gendered economies, including ones claiming to be socialist, is beyond the scope of this book). Labor’s social democracy has potentially been at its best when dealing with issues such as women’s wages and the provision of government services, given they were related to previous social democratic agendas. However, as outlined in

<sup>53</sup> See C. Johnson, Does capitalism really need patriarchy? Some old issues reconsidered. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 19(3), 1996, pp. 193–202. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395\(96\)00013-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(96)00013-1).

<sup>54</sup> Johnson, *The Labor legacy*, pp. 4 & 102–103.

<sup>55</sup> D. Wood, K. Griffiths & T. Crowley, Women’s work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian women, Report No. 2021-01. Grattan Institute, March 2021, pp. 18–23. <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Womens-work-Grattan-Institute-report.pdf>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

this book, a political movement that originally centred around managing capitalism, the public sphere and economic class relations has at times struggled to deal with the broader ramifications of gender inequality. Meanwhile, Chapter 6 revealed the limits that the Coalition's greater reliance on the market placed on gender equality policy. Importantly, both Labor and the Coalition parties have failed to adequately reimagine the economy.

### RE-IMAGINING THE ECONOMIC

One can only fantasise about what our current economies might have looked like if male capital and male labour had not created a male wage-earner, head of family, form of capitalism and if nineteenth-century utopian feminists, discussed in Chapter 2, had managed to have more influence on the form that modern economies took. Nor should it be forgotten that, as early accounts by commentators such as Frederick Engels imply, male labour's response was partly due to the need to rebuild a form of masculine identity and self-esteem that had been emasculated by women being predominantly employed in early factory production, for example, in the cotton industry.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, social democracy itself has historically played a key role in constructing forms of masculine and feminine identity that have oppressed women.<sup>57</sup> Governments have either failed to address the issue that current forms of capitalism contain gender biases (historically constructed by both male members of the capitalist class and working class) or, as in the case of some social democratic governments, have belatedly attempted to play catch-up by simply adding women to existing economic programmes. Either way, the economy has not been radically reimaged in terms of what it might look like if gender equality was really privileged. Measures such as partially recognising and valuing women's work in the care economy, as the Albanese government has done, are significant but far from sufficient. Indeed, some feminist research has problematised the concept of care,

<sup>56</sup> See F. Engels, *The condition of the working class in England*. Panther, 1969 (First published in Great Britain 1892), pp. 166–176, and particularly pp. 173–174.

<sup>57</sup> Johnson, *Social democracy and the crisis of equality*, pp. 10–12.



pointing out both its possibilities and limitations in challenging gendered power relations and developing better policies and communities.<sup>58</sup>

Nonetheless, what if the impact on caring work of economic decisions really was fully taken into account? What if funding services that benefited women were privileged more over controlling deficits and government debt? What if governments that have been all too ready to fund private sector provision of services under neoliberalism were prepared to fund more not-for-profit community and community provision of services? What if the type of collective provision envisaged by 1970s feminists and discussed in Chapter 2 had more impact? What if the economic case for gender equality was actually taken seriously enough to justify significant intervention and regulation rather than being all too often used to justify leaving matters to the market? In short, what if, to return to the question raised by a femocrat at a Whitlam-era meeting discussed in Chapter 2, the economy really was meant to serve society rather than the other way round?

There were some faint hints that the government might be partially considering a reimagining of the economy when Treasurer Jim Chalmers stated that:

One of the reasons I'm attracted to some kind of broader measures of economic and social progress is to do a better job tracking gender inequality in our society. There's no reason why a wellbeing approach to the budget can't sit alongside traditional economic data and give us a better and more complete picture of how women are faring and the impact of government policy decisions.<sup>59</sup>

However, the government's well-being framework only made passing reference to issues ranging from higher levels of psychological distress amongst Indigenous women to women having less free time than men, negative experiences online and being more afraid of walking alone at

<sup>58</sup> See R. Harding, R. Fletcher & C. Beasley (Eds.), *ReValuing care in theory, law and policy, cycles and connections*. Routledge, 2017.

<sup>59</sup> J. Chalmers, Address to the future women leadership summit, Speech, Sydney, 8 March 2022. <https://jimchalmers.org/latest-news/speeches/address-to-the-future-women-leadership-summit/>. Accessed 10 January 2024.

night, as well as family violence and higher levels of abuse, in addition to more directly economic issues such as the gender pay gap.<sup>60</sup> It clearly wasn't a major rethink of well-being that fundamentally challenged existing, highly gendered, economic structures, never mind the broader issues about masculinity and femininity that will be raised later in this chapter. Nor has the government actually addressed some fairly basic questions about the frameworks being used, that could usefully be raised when policies are under consideration. These include the following:

- Is gender equality policy conceived in its own terms or in ways that were originally conceived for addressing other forms of inequality, for example class equality? If the latter, are there any detrimental impacts?
- What priority is given to issues of gender equality? For example, what priority is given to gender equality policies in relation to the market? Are issues of gender equality prioritised (when justified) over issues of private sector profitability or reducing government debt or subordinated to them? Is expenditure on other areas being unjustifiably prioritised over gender issues?
- Is the economy being conceived too narrowly, for example, is the impact of policies on (predominantly) women's caring, emotional and domestic labour in the home being adequately taken into account?
- What forms of citizen identity are being encouraged by particular policies and are those identities intentionally or unintentionally gendered?
- Are collective solutions being considered or primarily individual, marketised ones?
- Is equality being measured against a male-defined norm or one driven by feminist perspectives?
- What priority is given to issues of gender equality in shaping the future economy?

<sup>60</sup> Australian Government: Department of the Treasury. Measuring what matters: Australia's first wellbeing framework. Commonwealth of Australia, July 2023, pp. 24, 33, 35 & 57. [https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-07/measuring-what-matters-statement020230721\\_0.pdf](https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-07/measuring-what-matters-statement020230721_0.pdf). Accessed 25 March 2024.

Such questions go to the heart of a broader issue—have government policy frameworks been totally transformed to address gender equality issues or have gender equality issues mainly been incorporated into/added on to existing policy frameworks?

Of course such questions are not new. Some of them, such as how the economy could be reconceived to recognise female unpaid labour and emotional labour, have been raised for decades.<sup>61</sup> They also raise related longstanding issues regarding political will as well as how much one supports the primacy of politics over economics.<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, such questions could usefully be built into a gender responsive budgeting process, and gender evaluations of policies more broadly, especially since the previous chapters have argued that gender equality is far too often subordinated to other priorities, concerns and frameworks. In other words, while all governments are constrained by the need to manage an economy in ways that benefit their citizens' standards of living and quality of life, there is considerable debate about how best to do that and about the extent of the constraints.

Given all the questions raised above, one also wonders how fully effective Australian gender responsive budgeting has been despite the many positive budget measures for women mentioned in the last chapter. It is somewhat concerning that Minister for Women, Katy Gallagher stated in February 2024 that she hadn't yet received a policy submission that cited negative consequences for women and that there wasn't a clear process for such policies being sent back and reworked if it did occur. The gender

<sup>61</sup> M. Waring, *Counting for nothing: What men value and what women are worth*. Allen & Unwin, 1990; C. Beasley, *Sexual economyths: Conceiving a feminist economics*. Allen & Unwin, 1994.

<sup>62</sup> On which see further S. Berman, *The primacy of politics: Social democracy and the making of Europe's twentieth century*. Cambridge University Press, 2006; C. Johnson & M. Tremblay, Comparing same-sex marriage in Australia and Canada: Institutions and political will. *Government and Opposition*, 53(1), 2018, pp. 133–134. <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2016.36>.

impact analysis is also not public, despite it being so in some other countries.<sup>63</sup> For example, as the Women's Economic Equality taskforce report noted:

In Spain, the legislative framework requires the government to submit a Gender Impact Report of draft provisions to the Council of Ministers. This has ensured an enduring requirement despite changes due to political cycles. Through an interactive website, Spanish citizens can access data from the Gender Impact Report, increasing transparency and public accessibility to gender budgeting information.<sup>64</sup>

Australian feminists have also previously suggested that a government funded but independent women's budget group could assist with monitoring and evaluating the gender responsive budgeting process.<sup>65</sup> The introduction of such measures would contribute to establishing the broader forms of Feminist Democratic Representation envisaged by Karen Celis and Sarah Childs.

In this imagined feminist future, we look forward to a politics in which diverse women participate and contribute to the conversations of civil society, and with women participating in and represented in and by a formal politics that reciprocally seeks out their participation and representation. Learning among women, and between women and the politicians who ultimately make political decisions, is maximized.... Our elected

<sup>63</sup> Parliament of Australia, The Senate, Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee, Estimates (public), 13 February 2024. Commonwealth of Australia, p. 6. [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/estimate/27707/toc\\_pdf/Finance%20and%20Public%20Administration%20Legislation%20Committee\\_2024\\_02\\_13.pdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/estimate/27707/toc_pdf/Finance%20and%20Public%20Administration%20Legislation%20Committee_2024_02_13.pdf). Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>64</sup> WEET, Final report, p. 40; See further Ministerio de Hacienda y Función Pública, Secretaría de Estado de Presupuestos y Gastos Ministerio de Igualdad, Informe de impacto de género del Proyecto de Ley de Presupuestos Generales del Estado para 2022, January 2022, <https://www.sepg.pap.hacienda.gob.es/sitios/sepg/en-GB/Presupuestos/InformesImpacto/IIG2022/AccesoInformes/Paginas/Informes.aspx>. Accessed 23 April 2024; European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Spain, Updated December 2022, [https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/countries/spain?language\\_content\\_entity=en](https://eige.europa.eu/gender-mainstreaming/countries/spain?language_content_entity=en). Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>65</sup> L. Friedenvall, & M. Sawer, Gender budgeting: Australian innovation and Swedish delivery. In A. Scott & R. Campbell (Eds.), *The nordic edge: Policy possibilities for Australia* (2021, p. 121). Melbourne University Press.

representatives would be institutionally and systemically required to represent women. This role is designed into the political institutions of our representative democracy. This future is one we call Feminist Democratic Representation.<sup>66</sup>

However, such representation would involve not only reimagining economics but also the nature of politics itself.

### REIMAGINING THE POLITICAL: THE POLITICS OF GENDER IDENTITY

Many years ago when giving an Australasian Political Studies Association Presidential Address, Carole Pateman made the point that politics did not stop at the garden gate.<sup>67</sup> “The personal is political” was a key slogan of the early women’s liberation movement as explained in Chapter 2 and feminist scholars such as Pateman have also long argued for a broader conception of the political. Prime Minister Whitlam was correct when he argued, as noted in Chapter 2, that there were limits to how much government could do in bringing about the broader cultural change necessary to liberate women. However, what neither Whitlam in his early 1970s statements regarding the need to change attitudes regarding women nor more recent attempts, discussed in the previous chapter, to encourage “healthy masculinity” fully acknowledge is that parliament itself is a key site for the production of conservative forms of masculinity. Indeed, it has been for centuries internationally as the historical exclusion of women reveals. Although obviously there have been enormous advances, compared for example when women couldn’t even observe the British Houses of Parliament at work and Flora Tristan had to be smuggled in, inadequately disguised in male Turkish clothes, to witness appalling male behaviour.<sup>68</sup> Changing the culture could begin for politicians in their parliamentary home. The Australian government

<sup>66</sup> K. Celis & S. Childs, *Feminist democratic representation*. Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 27.

<sup>67</sup> C. Pateman, Women and political studies: Presidential address to the 23rd annual meeting of the Australian Political Studies Association, Canberra, August 1981. *Politics*, 1, 1982, p. 4. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00323268208401824>.

<sup>68</sup> See F. Tristan, *The London journal of Flora Tristan*, (J. Hawkes, Trans.). Virago, 1982 (Original work published 1842), pp. 57–65.

has supported measures designed to change parliamentary culture and prevent some of the most toxic parliamentary behaviour towards women, that has been exhibited by men in a range of parties.<sup>69</sup> However, the fact remains that gender identity still plays a crucial role in Australian politics as it does elsewhere internationally.<sup>70</sup> Most recently, we have seen that in the efforts by Opposition leader Peter Dutton, discussed in the previous chapter, to project a strongman politics, while deriding Albanese as weak and soft. The increasingly difficult security situation, as tensions rise between one of Australia's largest trading partners (China) and one of its closest allies (the US), can also favour strongman politics.

Meanwhile, although the role of women politicians is now more broadly accepted and they are arguably now able to display a wider range of forms of femininity than in earlier years, they still have to walk the tightrope of gender expectations. Australia's first female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, particularly encountered this problem. Her attempts to call out sexism and change the culture were praised by many but also resulted in a backlash by conservative forces. Gillard became a "feminist killjoy" to use Sara Ahmed's concept and has continued to pursue issue of gender equality.<sup>71</sup> But what if the politics of identity really was taken seriously, not just in right-wing culture wars but by progressives wishing to challenge conceptions of masculinity and femininity? What if discussions of changing toxic forms of masculinity went beyond issues of domestic violence or occasional comments regarding the need for men to undertake more caring responsibilities to have a much broader discussion

<sup>69</sup> K. Gallagher, First major tranche of legislative change in response to Set the Standard report, Media Release, 10 August 2023. <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/gallagher/2023/first-major-tranche-legislative-change-response-set-standard-report>. Accessed 23 April 2024; See M. Sawyer & M. Maley, *Toxic parliaments: And what can be done about them*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, pp. 101–122. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-48328-8>; T. Lowrey, Federal politicians could see their pay docked for misbehaving under new rules. *ABC News*, 2 April 2024. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-04-02/federal-politicians-could-see-pay-docked-for-misbehaving/103657308>, Accessed 23 April 2024; C. Johnson, & B. Williams, Still lacking her rights at work: The treatment of women politicians in the Australian Parliament and print news media. *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 36(2), 2021, pp. 110–129. <https://www.aspg.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Still-Lacking-her-Rights-at-Work.pdf>.

<sup>70</sup> See, e.g., Johnson, Feeling protected, pp.7–26.

<sup>71</sup> C. Johnson, Playing the gender card: The uses and abuses of gender in Australian politics. *Politics & Gender*, 11(2), 2015, pp. 291–319. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X15000045>; S. Ahmed, *The feminist killjoy handbook*. Penguin Books, 2023.

regarding alternative, kinder, gentler, more caring forms of masculinity in which masculine self-esteem, and heterosexual constructions of eroticism, did not require forms of female subordination as they sometimes still do in more conventional constructions of masculinity? The role of emotion should not be discounted here as the politics of identity involves not only whom one is encouraged to feel empathy, fear or resentment about but also people's own feelings of self-esteem.<sup>72</sup> Of course, such cultural change will involve the need for broader, extra parliamentary campaigns by women as well, just as the women's movement acknowledged in Whitlam's day.<sup>73</sup>

As this book has revealed, prime ministers from Scott Morrison to Anthony Albanese have argued that men have nothing to lose from women's equality. Such views fit into Labor's "social harmony" ideology and the Liberal's market one. But some men do have things to lose and it isn't just that they may face additional competition from women for jobs or for promotion. Those men whose masculinity is dependent upon women being in a subordinate position, who feel emasculated by women potentially being superior to them have something to lose. For those men whose masculine self-identity and self-esteem depends on seeing themselves in a macho job, it is potentially threatening to have women in the same trade and doing the same work. Conversely, for some men, the thought of being in one of the caring professions such as nursing or aged care would emasculate them. After all, there is a reason why women are overrepresented in some caring economy jobs—namely that it is compatible with a conception of femininity but not necessarily with some conceptions of masculinity. Yet politicians have not been good at dealing with the politics of identity around masculinity. Politicians frequently deal with how masculinity needs to be changed in regard to domestic violence for example. However, dealing with the broader issues of masculinity is often just too hard for them, both potentially electorally in terms of alienating a section of the voters but also because they cannot

<sup>72</sup> For my arguments on this point, see further C. Johnson, Narratives of identity: Denying empathy in conservative discourses on race, class and sexuality. *Theory and Society*, 34(1), 2005, pp. 37–61. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-005-3295-2>; C. Johnson, The politics of affective citizenship: From Blair to Obama. *Citizenship Studies*, 14(1), 2010. pp. 495–509. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2010.506702>.

<sup>73</sup> See B. Williams, Re-energising the revolution today. In M. Arrow (Ed.), *Women and Whitlam: Revisiting the revolution* (2023, pp 266–280). NewSouth Publishing.

get their own (parliament) house in order, as the accounts of numerous female politicians mistreated by male colleagues, including in recent times, have revealed.<sup>74</sup> Of course, it is also an issue for some women in terms of their construction of femininity as the creation of groups like Women who Want to be Women, discussed in Chapter 4 showed. So, one of the things that politicians have been bad at dealing with is the politics of identity. They can deal with a (traditionally male-defined) politics of identity when it involves the Liberal Party encouraging the construction of a neoliberal entrepreneurial citizen and Labor was founded upon a (masculine) conception of working-class solidaristic identity (although it has been challenged by decades of neoliberalism). However, transforming the politics of identity, of masculinity and femininity, has all too often proved to be beyond the scope of conventional politics.

Note that the issue here is not so much abolishing masculine and feminine gender identity as reformulating it. Indeed, the analysis in this book suggests the importance of keeping the category “woman”, given it has proved crucial for analysing gender blindness and biases in policies. This book endorses arguments that retaining the category “woman” is quite compatible with supporting transgender rights, not least so transgender women can identify with the category.<sup>75</sup> Additional transgender inclusive and gender fluid language should be used as well when needed. It is also not assumed that the construction of gender identity inevitably requires one binary form of identity (masculinity) to be dominant and the other (femininity) to be subordinate or that it rules out gender fluidity and non-binary identities.<sup>76</sup> Rather, it becomes possible to reimagine different forms of masculinity and femininity along with gender fluidity and non-binary identities. For example, is it possible to develop forms of protective masculinity that not only do not subordinate women but

<sup>74</sup> See C. Johnson, & B. Williams, Still lacking her rights at work: The treatment of women politicians in the Australian Parliament and print news media. *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 36(2), 2021, pp. 110–129. <https://www.aspg.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Still-Lacking-her-Rights-at-Work.pdf>; K. Ellis, *Sex, Lies and Question Time*. Hardie Grant, 2021; S. Hanson-Young, *En Garde*. Hachette Australia, 2020.

<sup>75</sup> See further C. A. MacKinnon, F. Mackay, M. Shuman, S. Fredman, & R. Chang, Exploring Transgender Law and Politics. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. <https://signsjournal.org/exploring-transgender-law-and-politics/>. Accessed 5 June 2023.

<sup>76</sup> See further my arguments Johnson, Narratives of identity.



actually empower them?<sup>77</sup> After all, theorists of masculinity from Connell onwards have raised the possibility of transforming masculinity into forms that do not oppress women.<sup>78</sup> What would it take for politicians to not use performances of traditional masculinity to belittle their male and female opponents or for sectors of voters not to reward them for doing so? In short, it is all very well for politicians to advocate cultural change, including men sharing domestic responsibilities and respecting women, but all too often parliamentary culture itself has undercut such worthy statements and reinforced undesirable and traditional forms of masculinity in the broader community.

Such issues are central to gender equality but it is also necessary to realise the limitations of equality frameworks themselves.

### THE LIMITS OF (INTERSECTIONAL) EQUALITY

This book has focused on issues of gender equality for women while recognising that gender identity, and the forms of equality related to it, can take diverse forms. However, as this book has suggested at various times, the conception of equality is itself problematic. Some poststructuralist and queer frameworks have suggested that equality demands can encourage oppressive forms of normalisation. For example, it is suggested that arguing for same-sex marriage equality can end up excluding those in non-marriage-like relationships.<sup>79</sup> This book does not endorse arguments that privilege avoiding normalisation over addressing inequality. However, it is important to transform existing social norms around issues such as masculinity, femininity, labour, work, care, health, welfare and parliamentary behaviour, rather than reproducing them in ways that measure women's equality by male-defined norms. For example, Chapters 2, 5 And 7 have described how women's pay in undervalued female-dominated jobs was held back for five decades by the privileging of male job norms and the higher pay associated with them.

<sup>77</sup> Johnson, Narratives of identity.

<sup>78</sup> J. W. Messerschmidt, The salience of "hegemonic masculinity". *Men and Masculinities*, 22(1), 2019, p. 87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X18805555>.

<sup>79</sup> See further C. Johnson, Fixing the meaning of marriage: Political symbolism and citizen identity in the same-sex marriage debate. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 27(2), 2013, pp. 248–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2013.766308>.

There is also a related need to contest conceptions that construct equality as treating all social groups the same regardless of the specific circumstances or disadvantages they face.<sup>80</sup> Significantly, the Indigenous Voice that would have so benefited Indigenous Women's representation was defeated partly by mobilising equal/same treatment arguments against it. Both Opposition Leader Peter Dutton and conservative Indigenous Coalition Senator Jacinta Nampijinpa Price argued that the Voice would institute racial inequality by giving one race special rights denied to others.<sup>81</sup> (Admittedly, Price also contentiously argued that it wouldn't effectively address practical women's issues such as domestic violence in Indigenous communities.)<sup>82</sup> Yet same treatment can reinforce, rather than challenge, existing norms and social power relations by ignoring patterns of disadvantage and the different needs associated with them. Same treatment can also ignore not only different needs but also different insights. For example, work on Indigenous women's conceptions of care have not only highlighted that Indigenous women have an even higher level of care responsibilities but have also highlighted that many conceive of care work differently. This includes having broader conceptions that allow for care not only of people but also of animals, plants and country that are so important for the environment and well-being and placing less emphasis on advancing via the paid economy.<sup>83</sup>

It is also important to realise that equality of opportunity by itself is not enough. Achieving equality of outcomes is particularly important in a society characterised by gendered and intersectional social power relations that can shape so-called choices and assert themselves long after an initial equal opportunity is offered. Such issues also raise complex

<sup>80</sup> C. L. Bacchi, *Same difference: Feminism and sexual difference*. Allen & Unwin 1990.

<sup>81</sup> See C. Johnson, The Voice campaign.

<sup>82</sup> M. Cunningham, Jacinta Price says Voice will do nothing to address levels of violence suffered by Indigenous women, lashes Yes advocates' focus on reparations, compensation. *Sky News*, 1 September 2023. <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/voice-to-parliament/jacinta-price-says-voice-will-do-nothing-to-address-levels-of-violence-suffered-by-indigenous-women-lashes-yes-advocates-focus-on-reparations-compensation/news-story/d7b994b32032c81db312567d0d1ef33f>. Accessed 23 April 2024.

<sup>83</sup> E. Klein, J. Hunt, Z. Staines, Y. Dinku, C. Brown, K. Glynn-Braun, & M. Yap Advised By M. Murray & B. Williamson, *Caring about care*, Centre for Indigenous Policy Research and the Centre for Social Policy Research, Australian National University, 2023. [https://genderinstitute.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/CommissionedReport\\_7\\_2023\\_CaringAboutCare\\_0.pdf](https://genderinstitute.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/CommissionedReport_7_2023_CaringAboutCare_0.pdf). Accessed 1 May 2024.

broadier questions, explored by Rebecca Huntley, regarding how issues of gender equality are best raised and argued for with specific sectors of the population who conceive and experience equality differently.<sup>84</sup>

The issue of what is equality being measured against emphasises that not all quality of life and well-being issues for women can be adequately understood or addressed via the lens of equality with men. To give just one example, both men and women would benefit from an improved approach to the sociology, politics and economics of (digitally accelerated) time, including relief from “greedy” jobs and a reduced working week.<sup>85</sup> While the leisure and domestic labour times that result should be shared in a gender equitable manner, the point is that gender equality is only part of what is desirable here and only one of the well-being benchmarks that need to be set. In other words, while this book has focused on gender equality issues, they are far from the only issues that need to be addressed in order to improve women’s opportunities and quality of life. They are, nonetheless, very important ones.

## CONCLUSION

The Albanese Labor government came to office promising to make Australia a world leader in gender equality again. That exceptionally high benchmark is still far from being reached. Nonetheless, the Albanese government has been making serious attempts to improve gender equality in Australia that have been documented in this chapter and the preceding one. However, the government’s efforts have been made all the harder by a difficult economic and security situation. These are uncertain times, nationally and internationally. In addition, the government has inherited the legacies of decades of neoliberalism in Australia, with ramifications for multiple issues including industrial relations, public sector cut-backs, marketisation of social services, depleted public service expertise, industry policy, a fear of government deficits and a lack of regulation in the private sector. At the same time, the government has faced ongoing culture wars facilitated by the Opposition, not only over issues of transgender identity

<sup>84</sup> Plan International Australia, *Gender compass: A segmentation of Australia’s views on gender equality*. Plan International Australia, 2023. [https://www.plan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/GenderCompass\\_Report.pdf](https://www.plan.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/GenderCompass_Report.pdf). Accessed 4 November 2023.

<sup>85</sup> See e.g. J. Wajcman, *Pressed for time: The acceleration of life in digital capitalism*. The University of Chicago Press, 2015, pp. 163–184.

but also over intersectional issues such as race in a settler-colonial society. Internationally innovative proposals, such as the gender-balanced Indigenous Voice, have failed to proceed as a result. The situation is made all the more difficult for the current Labor government because the post-Howard parliamentary Liberal Party remains dominated by politicians influenced by social conservatism and neoliberalism. Liberal adherents of the social liberal tradition, who would be more sympathetic to some of Labor's agenda, remain marginalised. Parliament itself has been a site of toxic masculinity, sometimes across the political spectrum, undermining efforts for cultural change.<sup>86</sup> The culture wars partly reflect the uncertainties resulting from the fact that traditional gender identities are also under threat.

Many of the lessons that Australian government gender equality policy offers to the world are therefore salutary ones. Policies that had been internationally innovative from the role of women's advisors and femocrats to gender responsive budgeting were derailed by a combination of social conservatism and neoliberalism. Furthermore, one of the reasons the damage was so substantial is that Australian Labor helped pioneer the integration of neoliberalism and social democracy internationally and is now having to belatedly address the harm caused. Australian governments of both persuasions need to reconsider their belief that gender equality doesn't sometimes involve conflicts with their existing economic and social frameworks and consider how to address those occasions when it does. Nonetheless, Australia's experience also provides important lessons in how a Labor party that helped initiate the attempting melding of neoliberalism and social democracy can begin to move beyond it.

Furthermore, Australia's geographic location has also given it a ring-side seat to the geopolitical and geoeconomic changes occurring with the rise of Asia, and China in particular, with economic and security implications that have impacted on broader policies, including gender equality ones. In the process, Australia has potentially experienced the impacts of the rise of Asia earlier and more immediately than many other western countries. Nonetheless, as the defeat of the Indigenous Voice referendum shows, Australia is also still suffering from the effects of British/European settler-colonialism. It is a difficult situation in which to pursue gender equality, although the Australian government has been attempting to do

<sup>86</sup> Sawyer & Maley, *Toxic parliaments*.

so. However, all too often, Australia has not just been playing catch-up with international developments but with its own domestic history. Yet, if Australia could seize the opportunity again, Australia, as a multicultural but predominantly western, settler-colonial society situated in the Asia-Pacific potentially has some unique insights and lessons to offer. Australia is itself an intersectional society.<sup>87</sup> It has a rich cultural, geopolitical and geoeconomic mix on which it could draw in an intersectional reimagining of the economic and the political.

Unfortunately, it has been argued in this book that, like their international counterparts, successive Australian governments have not yet adequately reimagined their policy frameworks to address issues of gender equality. Much has been achieved. However, after half a century of trying to pursue gender equality, albeit with some backsliding, there is still so much more to be done. Yet, in an uncertain time when gender equality is under attack internationally, it is even more important to prioritise gender issues and to bring about fundamental policy change.

<sup>87</sup> On Australia's intersectionality, see V. Mackie, C. Johnson & T. Morris-Suzuki. Australia, the Asia-Pacific and the Social Sciences, in Johnson, Mackie and Morris-Suzuki (Eds.), *The Social Sciences in the Asian Century* (2015, pp. 1–30), ANU Press. <https://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p325111/pdf/ch016.pdf>.

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