Women in Politics in Australia

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It is reasonable to think that women should be more conspicuous on the Australian political landscape. South Australian women (except for indigenous Australians) gained the right to vote and stand for parliament in 1894, and the rest of the country's women gained these rights by 1902. Indigenous Australians were granted suffrage as late as 1962.[1] Edith Cowan was the first woman elected to a state Legislative Assembly, in 1921. In 1943, Enid Lyons and Dorothy Tangney made history in being elected to Australia's national parliament. The reasons why so few women were active in political life in this era include "the difficulties of combining the roles of wife, mother and housekeeper with public, political life, and the fears of the parties that the electorate would not generally accept women candidates".[2] Has much changed?

To answer this question, this chapter offers some explanations as to why there are not higher numbers of women in politics or in high-level policy positions in Australia. Traditional stereotypes about women's social roles remain as obstacles to their progression. Current numbers of women in political leadership are lower than one would expect. For example, while the Social Progress Index (2019) ranks Australia 12th out of 149 countries on an overall assessment of 50 indicators on human needs, well-being and opportunity, in the "equality of political power by gender" component,

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[1] Senator Nova Peris was the first indigenous woman to be elected as Senator for the Northern Territory to the Federal Parliament, serving from 2013 to 2016. Linda Burney was the first indigenous woman elected to the Federal House of Representatives, in 2016. Australia has governments in six states, two territories and a national parliament, and at local government level in states and territories. The national parliament is called the Parliament of Australia, Commonwealth Parliament or Federal Parliament.

[2] Jocelyn Clarke and Kate White, *Women in Australian Politics* (Sydney: Fontana/Collins, 1983), 311.

Australia is ranked 39th.[3] Changes needed for equitable gender represen-tation are worryingly slow to come about.

Australian Women and Politics

Australian feminists have a long tradition of being active in the state bu-reaucracy. These "femocrats," or feminist bureaucrats, consciously work "to 'represent women's interests' within the state".[4] From the 1970s on, femocrats made a significant difference in addressing practical matters like domestic violence, childcare, anti-discrimination and equal-oppor-tunity legislation, custody and child support, women's participation in the labour force, and women's election to political positions. Since then, various governments have built on this early work to strengthen women's opportunities to engage in active participation in public life.

Particularly since the 1996 election of the Liberal-National Coalition government led by John Howard and continuing until 2007, there have been progressive budget cuts to health, housing, education, employment and training, with significant impact on women's lives. Now, there is "little support on either side of politics for systematic gender analysis of policy" with a greater domestic focus given to lessening gender-based violence,[5] an area of grave concern, given that "more than one in three Australian women experience physical or sexual violence in a lifetime."[6] However, the active women's policy machinery for broader issues of gender equality has declined. In 2017, Australia, an early frontrunner for women's right to vote and women's rights, was ranked 35th on the global index measuring gender equality.[7] In 2020, Australia ranked 44th out of 153 on the World

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[3] Social Progress Index 2019, https://www.socialprogress.org/, accessed 23 April 2020.

[4] Suzanne Franzway, Diane Court, and R. W. Connell, *Staking a Claim, Feminism, Bureaucracy and the State* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 133.

[5] Susan Harris Rimmer and Marian Sawer, "Neoliberalism and Gender Equality Policy in Australia," *Australian Journal of Political Science*, (2016) 51(4): 753.

[6] Katrine Beauregard, "Partisanship and the Gender Gap: Support for Gender Quotas in Australia," *Australian Journal of Political Science*, (2018) 53(3): 291.

[7] Ibid., 291.

Economic Forum's "gender gap" index, and 57th on the "political empower-ment" index.[8]

Obstacles to Women's Political Representation

The current factors that limit women's opportunities for political par-ticipation are similar to those in previous eras. Mainstream political parties persist in favouring men in pre-selection for winnable seats, sometimes as a reward for long-term party loyalism. There remains the social expec-tation that women should be the prime carer within families for children, the elderly and the ill, despite increasing assistance with childcare from some men. Certainly, "being a 'family man' is an advantage" for men, "whereas many women with high profile public positions have no family dependants".[9] I return to this issue shortly when discussing Australia's first woman Prime Minister.

Obstacles faced by women in high-profile professional positions overlap to include sexism, discrimination, workplace bullying, sexual harassment, inflexibility of work hours and lack of access to affordable childcare and influential mentors. Sheryl Sandberg argues that in addition to external constraints, there are many internal obstacles women face that say, "it's wrong to be outspoken, aggressive, more powerful than men".[10] Effective leadership galvanises support within political ranks and outside of it, cultivating potentially useful links and networks. Generally, men have greater opportunities to develop networks.

In Australia, political advisers play an increasingly influential role. About 450 politically appointed staff working at the national level have ef-fectively become an "institutionalised 'third' pillar of executive governance and policy actors in their own right".[11] Operating at the intersection be-

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[8] World Economic Forum, 2020. https://www.weforum.org/agenda, accessed 24 April 2020.

[9] Elisabeth Porter, "Feminist Analysis," in J. Summers, D. Woodward and A. Parkin (eds), *Government, Politics, Power and Policy in Australia*, 7th ed. (Sydney: Longman, 2002), 397.

[10] Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 8.

[11] Marija Taflaga, and Matthew Kerby, "Who Does What Work in a Ministerial Office: Politically Appointed Staff and the Descriptive Representation of Women in Australian Political Offices," *Political Studies*, (2019), 2.

tween political functions and policy work, they are powerful actors. While there are 58 percent of women in this group, the bulk of women are at lower levels of status, responsibility and remuneration.[12] These positions often act as important stepping-stones for a political career. Yet, in international relations, women rarely feature in key policy-shaping activities on "foreign policy, defence, intelligence, trade white papers"; and only one third of Australian ambassadors, high commissioners and heads of international missions are women.[13]

Australian Women Members of Parliament

Regarding women's political representation, the pace of change is slow. Australia lags behind many other countries. In international terms, "Australia's comparative ranking for women in national parliaments has declined from 20th position in 2001, to 48th in 2014,[14] to 51st in 2020, with 30.5 percent of women elected to the lower house and 46.7 percent sitting in the upper house.[15]

In the 2019 federal election, 23 percent of successful candidates from the Liberal Party of Australia from both houses are women, 47 percent from the Australian Labor Party and 50 percent from the Australian Greens. Reasons cited for typical under-representation "include party candidate selection practices, the nature of the electoral system, the challenges women face in balancing work and family responsibilities, discriminatory views about women in politics, and the adversarial nature of the parliamentary environment".[16] In Prime Minister Scott Morrison's Cabinet reshuffle in 2019, there are 7 ministry positions held by women from 23 positions in the Parliament of Australia. To date, the Parliament of

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[12] Ibid., 7.

[13] Danielle Cave, Alex Oliver, Jenny Hayward-Jones, "Foreign Territory: Women in International Relations," (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2019), 3, 2.

[14] Joy McCann, and Janet Wilson, "Representation of Women in Australian Parliaments," Research Paper Series 2014-2015, *Parliamentary Library,* (Commonwealth of Australia: Department of Parliamentary Services, 2014), 4.

[15] All statistics have been rounded. Inter-Parliamentary Union: Percentage of Women in National Parliaments Data, www.ip.org, accessed 7 April 2020.

[16] McCann and Wilson, op. cit., 4.

Australia has not had a woman appointed as Treasurer. In the Cabinet of the 46th Parliament, from 6 February 2020, the following women hold positions: Merise Payne, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Women; Michaelia Cash, Minister for Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business; Sussan Ley, Minister for the Environment; Linda Reynolds, Minister of Defence; Anne Ruston, Minister for Families and Social Services; Karen Andrews, Minister of Industry, Science and Technology, and in the Outer Ministry, Melissa Price, Minister for Defence Industries. These are significant posts. Typically, Australian women hold portfolios in agriculture, arts, community services, education and social security.

Local government work is grounded in the community, where many women are already active in organisations. At local government level, in 2011, women comprised 27.8 percent of elected representatives,[17] and from 2019, the numbers have improved, with women constituting 34.9 percent of local members across Australia.[18]

Gender Quotas

It is interesting to reflect on the importance of quotas in post-conflict scenarios, where "since the early 1990s, quotas have been established for women's participation in government";[19] Rwanda being a superb example. Inter-Parliamentary Union statistics show that on 1 March 2020, Rwanda has 61.3 percent women elected to the lower house and 38.5 percent to the upper chamber. Quotas can be effective, raising the profile of women as role models, compensating for previous discrimination and permitting the delivery of substantive equality outcomes. Evidence shows a clear relation between mandated quotas and a higher percent of women parliamentarians.

Historically, Australian debates about quotas reflect party divisions. The Coalition parties of the Australian Liberal Party and the Nationals do not adopt affirmative action measures, believing that gender quotas

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[17] Ibid., 27.

[18] Judy Skatssoon, 2019, "Women in Local Government Hit Historical High," *Government News*, www.goverment.news.com.au, accessed 7 April 2020.

[19] Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Dina Francesca Haynes and Naomi Cahn, *On the Frontlines. Gender, War and the Post-Conflict Process* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 238.

contradict merit principles, although the Liberal Party recognises the need to improve women's situation within its party. The Australian Greens do not adopt quotas but have highly supportive policies on gender equality. The Australian Greens' Constitution states affirmative action to encourage women into non-traditional positions. The Australian Labor Party introduced a 40:40:20 quota system in 2012 "to produce an outcome where not less than 40 percent of seats held by Labor will be filled by women, and not less than 40 percent by men", with the remaining 20 percent filled by either women or men.[20] In 2015, it set a target of 50 percent of women to be elected by 2025.[21] Centre-left parties are more inclined to support gender equality or quotas.

Australia's Female Prime Minister

From 2010 to 2013, Julia Gillard was Australia's first woman appointed as Prime Minister. When in opposition, former Prime Minister Tony Abbott taunted Gillard as then-Prime Minister, when he "repeatedly implied that, as an unmarried woman who has not given birth, Julia Gillard can't empathise with ordinary Australian families".[22] Yet when asked about her achievements, Gillard said: "I'm proud of what we've done in paid parental leave and the more support for childcare, all of those things that actually support family and support women," but the thing that is "really absolutely closest to my heart is the equal pay case".[23]

Gillard's famous "misogyny speech" went viral on social media. As she explained, it was the result of an emotional "crack point" after Abbott persistently made derogatory sexist remarks.[24] Misogyny is offensive. It degrades and undermines women's sense of self-dignity. Gillard's motivation in giving this passionate speech was for the national parliament to

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[20]   McCann and Wilson, op. cit., 18.

[21]   Laura Ismay, "Women in Parliament Briefing Paper," NSW Parliamentary Research Service, Briefing Paper No 3/2018, (Sydney: NSW Parliament, 2018), 26.

[22]   In Carol Johnson, "Tony Abbott and Women: How Both Sides Have Played the Gender Card," *The Conversation*, 8 October 2012.

[23]   In Anne Summers, "The Prime Ministership According to Julia Gillard," *Anne Summers Reports*, 3, July 2013, 18.

[24]   In Gabrielle Chan, "Julia Gillard Explains 'Misogyny Speech'," *The Guardian*, 30 September 2013.

"think seriously about the role of women in public life and in Australian society" and to show that "sexism should always be unacceptable".[25] Her "on-going personal experience of sexism lay bare the gendered hierarchy embedded" in Australian political life.[26] In her last formal interview before being voted out of office by the Australian Labor Party, she reflected on her successes, singling out health reform, pricing of carbon, paid parental leave, disability care, school improvement programme, a Royal commission into child sexual abuse in institutions and her foreign policy record. A productive Prime Minister, she was "responsible for legislating at the rate of 0.495 acts per day".[27]

Increasing Women's Participation in Political Leadership

Women's political leadership in decision-making is vital to a nation for three main reasons. First, equality-based arguments support "an ethical commitment to inclusivity" as a "fundamental pillar of good governance".[28] Equal rights to participate in decision-making are crucial to liberal democratic principles and practices. Second, rights-based frameworks highlight the need to change "structures and relationships of power to create a just society".[29] Diverse marginalised groups require a public voice to express specific needs. Third, women have multiple different experiences to men, and thus often have different priorities, so the hope is that more women in politics might change political processes in exercising power differently, and in placing onto the agenda human concerns of well-being that may otherwise be overlooked. A critical mass of women is needed to mainstream gender inclusivity.

Some best practices identified by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) include determining "the skills that every woman needs to participate

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[25] Julia Gillard, "Transcript of Julia Gillard's Speech," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 October 2012.

[26] Cheryl Collier and Tracey Raney, "Understanding Sexism and Sexual Harassment in Politics: A Comparison of Western Parliaments in Australia, the UK, and Canada," *Sexual Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, (2018) 25(3): 441.

[27] Summers, op. cit., 17.

[28] Elisabeth Porter and Anuradha Mundkur. *Peace and Security. Implications for Women.* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2012), 111.

[29] Ibid., 111.

fully and capably in the political process", including what training assists; what positive and negative factors help or hinder building skills and confidence to participate capably; and what strategies women use to embrace positive forces and minimise negative tendencies.[30]

It is important to note that many women in Australia are active in informal political networks and non-government organisations (NGOs). An interesting example of this lies in the processes leading to the Fourth Civil-Society Report Card,[31] which assesses Australia's national action plan on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. This rigorous evaluation of the Australian government's response to the resolution brings together various civil society groups, academics and the Australian Civil-Military Centre. It recommends inclusive consultative processes with civil society, strong monitoring and evaluation of plans, and a plea for adequate resources to implement policies. A wide range of women play active roles on the broad political landscape, including in NGOs such as Action Aid, Amnesty International, Care Australia, International Women's Development Agency, Oxfam, Red Cross, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and World Vision.

Conclusion

In conclusion, to make Australian women's participation effective in influencing the governance agenda and making it responsive to women's concerns, a gender-sensitive approach to all political decisions is needed to analyse how policy decisions might affect women and girls differently to men and boys. This approach broadens gender awareness, so that the supposed "soft" political concerns of education, health, childcare, aged care and community service and welfare are not merely seen as women's concerns, but as gender-inclusive human needs; nor are supposed "hard"

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[30]   The NDI partners with United Nations Development Programme, UN Women, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance to establish the International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics to advance women in politics. National Democratic Institute, *Women's Political Participation Through Effective Training Program. A Guide to Best Practices and Lessons Learned.* (Washington: NDI, 2013), 51.

[31]   Hannah Jay, Luke Johnson, Katrina Lee-Koo, and Barbara Trojanowska. "Fourth Annual Civil Society Report Card – Australia's National Action Plan on Women, Peace, Security," (Melbourne: Monash Gender, Peace and Security Research Centre, 2016).

concerns of defence, finance and foreign policy viewed exclusively as men's affairs, because they are important for human security and well-being.

Democratic politics requires open public expression and broad-based participation in the decision-making processes of a nation. Where women are a lone voice in policy and political leadership, enormous courage and confidence are essential. Where women are part of a coalition, whether interest-based, ideological or party-based, there are strengths in acting together, and also in sharing platforms congenially with sympathetic men who understand the mutual benefits of gender-inclusive policies. High-profile male champions who oppose violence against women and actively support gender equality can play a crucial role in changing stereotypical perceptions of men and boys.

Surveys show there is a "persistent gender gap in political knowledge, with women knowing less about politics than men"; however, this gap was reduced when Gillard was Prime Minister.[32] Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that "opening up the political world to greater numbers of women politicians should generate higher levels of political engagement among women."[33] A key challenge remains to support and mentor women throughout the entire political process leading to their successful election. This engagement extends beyond formal corridors of power, to fostering multiple informal and community-based networks, beginning with sustained support for interested young women.

Effective women politicians are productive, constructive, fruitful and powerful leaders. These women do not shy away from presenting compelling, convincing and valid reasons why their presence on the political stage is valuable. Many Australian women from diverse multicultural backgrounds are articulate, impressive and authoritative politicians, and Australia needs many more.

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[32] Ian McAllister, "The Gender Gap in Political Knowledge Revisited: Australia's Julia Gillard as a Natural Experiment," *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, (2019) 2(2): 197.

[33] Ibid., 213.