

## Special Issue Article

# Feminism, Gender, and Power Relations in Policy – Starting a New Conversation

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Stemming from the United Nations Conference in 1975 on women, there was previously a strong global recognition that governments needed to develop formal policies and processes to ensure women's needs are met and gender equity is pursued (Harris Rimmer and Sawyer 2016). However, the last two decades have seen a shift away from these as a result of the neoliberal agenda (Harris Rimmer and Sawyer 2016). Although it is sometimes argued that neoliberal policies negate the need for an explicit gender focus, growing gender-based inequities in many OECD countries suggest otherwise. This includes issues such as wages and pay disparities, media roles, promotion, political leadership, and science to name a few. Alongside this trend, in developing countries, neoliberal and 'liberal' forms of feminism have been promoted which have been found to extend and deepen gendered inequalities in many cases (Davids et al. 2014; Stratigaki 2005; Yeatman 2015). Harris Rimmer and Sawyer (2016) conclude that in the Australian context, where

neoliberal agendas have been adopted, gender equity architecture has been given no salience by either left-wing or right-wing governments in the ways intended by the 1975 United Nations Conference.

The trends outlined above raise two separate questions: firstly, whether 'women's policies' as such is a durable approach to the overall aim of gender equity? Secondly, is it time to change tactics and 'mainstream' issues using feminist lenses to analyse and amend the wide range of policies which produce gender inequities? These challenges sit within broader concerns about the gap between research and policy, and growing awareness of the implicit and explicit power dynamics and relational practices which underpin the messy world of policy (Cairney 2011, 2016; Greenhalgh and Russell 2009). Although concern and awareness of feminism and its value to policy is increasing (Carey et al. 2017; Malbon et al. Forthcoming), frameworks and ways of understanding blockages and sticking points in the policy process from this perspective are scarce. This is despite the fact that feminist scholars have

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made important contributions to the study of public policy, including analysing how policy problems are framed (Bacchi 1996, 2009), the need for a gendered analysis of policy design (Bacchi and Eveline 2010; Parpart 2014), workforce composition (Deacon 1982; Evans et al. 2014; Lindorff 2009), and the assumptions which underpin institutions (Williams 1992).

This journal is itself not immune from these issues. In 2015, two of the editorial team curated an online special issue for the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* in which we surveyed research published in the journal archive relating to issues of gender and feminism (Carey and Dickinson 2015). We found that two major silences exist in public administration concerning gender. The first is the place of women and gender equity within public service workforces. The second silence is the role that feminist theories could play in tackling contemporary public management challenges. We argued that there are particular contributions that feminist theories could make in relation to topics such as collaboration, boundary spanning, and skill requirements for future public sector workers. From this work, we conceived a special issue dedicated to addressing these silences.

In 2016, we put out a call for papers to address this space. We challenged authors to not just consider gender in their work but also adopt and explore how a feminist approach might enhance work in their various domains of policy research. Although feminist policy is not a new idea, we believe this collection provides a much-needed foray into the practical application of feminism across a breadth of policy work. Reflecting a parallel process, we took a feminist approach to putting together this special issue. Rather than the traditional blind peer review process, all three editors reviewed each paper multiple times – working with authors to craft their research. The aim of this was to usurp the traditional authoritarian review process with a more constructive and collaborative practice. In doing so, we provided a robust peer review process that paralleled the theoretical approaches reflected in the work included in this special issue.

## The Aim of This Special Issue

The articles in this issue bring a gender analysis and/or feminist lens to a diverse range of policy and public administration literature, ‘slanting’ how we perceive and understand them. This is a long-term project. Like policy itself, change is often frustrating incremental when it comes to both the way we think about women and more broadly altering the paradigms in which we operate.

To quote Emily Dickinson:

‘The Truth must dazzle gradually

Or every man be blind —’ (Dickinson 1998)

This is reflected in Eva Cox’s contribution, where she notes that the quality of the contributions to this issue is strong but ‘there could have been much more’.

Interestingly, although our call for submissions challenged people to examine *any* policy area through a feminist lens, many of the submissions we received focused on policies that might be conventionally considered ‘women’s issues’. This speaks to the ways in which gender and feminism are often conflated. A feminist approach does not connote a focus on women’s issues. As we have argued elsewhere, feminist theory offers a range of tools which are relevant to the (re)examination of any policy area or process (Carey et al. 2017). These include recognising the positionality of different policy actors and group and that each of these different actors have different and partial knowledge. Recognising this disrupts authoritarian views of policy making and policy implementation processes (Carey et al. 2017). Feminist theory also brings concepts of social performance and performativity to the fore – highlighting the ways in which power and context are intertwined, particularly important in an era of networked governance (Carey et al. 2017). Feminist theory is part of the broader post-structuralist project: as a project in which theories of subjectivity, social processes, and institutions are challenged to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change (Weedon 1987).

Although incremental, we view this issue as an important step in reframing the ways

we think about both policy content and policy processes using perspectives that unsettle the dominant discourses and concepts in the area by approaching them from a feminist slant. These include notions of path dependency, policy entrepreneurship, and Kingdon's famous policy window theory, evidence-based policy, and the interplay of structure and agency in policy processes. Each of the authors in this special edition has disrupted these traditional concepts and, in some cases, provided a critical lens on specific policy areas.

### Contributions to the Theme

In their article on feminism, gender, and bushfires, Reynolds and Tyler examine the ways in which hegemonic masculinity has shaped responses to disaster relief in Victoria. They find that responses are deeply gendered, often ignoring women's voices and choices even when they represent the safer option. In doing so, Reynolds and Tyler further challenge the already fraught notion of evidence-based policy – demonstrating that evidence is always value-laden and influenced by social and cultural norms. In particular, Reynolds and Tyler's piece highlights the ways in which hegemonic masculinity can become embedded in policy through the process of path dependency. Path dependency refers to the processes by which certain institutions and the practices they encourage remain stable for long periods of time, making them difficult to shift (Cairney 2011; Howlett and Rayner 2006). Reynolds and Tyler's article demonstrates that even in areas where one might not expect gender to play a significant role, or in policies where the relationship between evidence and policy might be more linear, policies are often codified along gendered lines. As they suggest, 'in terms of feminist analysis, the values in the "policy primeval soup" raise questions about gender and power; from the (in)visibility of women and claims of gender neutrality, to assumptions about the roles of men and women and norms of masculinity' and how these can contribute to the continuation of a flawed policy. This challenges us to think about *how* and *where* hegemonic notions of masculinity are

being embedded in our institutions and perpetuated through path dependency.

In their contribution, Cairney and Rummery bring a feminist analysis to evidence-based policy (as touched on by Reynolds and Tyler). They note that it is 'common in scientific debates to bemoan an evidence-policy gap without regard to the evidence from policy studies about its cause'. They argue that researchers can learn from feminist advocates in how to combine evidence and values with engagement to pursue social change, and how to handle tough choices between framing their aims in terms of the dominant political discourse versus challenging institutional, policy, and social practices founded on patriarchal power. Feminist advocates, Cairney and Rummery rightly argue, have found ways to combine evidence and values. This has been found to be important for researchers successfully engaging policymakers (Carey and Crammond 2015). Moreover, they argue that much can be learnt from the ways in which feminist advocates have framed policy issues – balancing dominant discourses and with a fight for change. As Cairney and Rummery note: 'Success is built on framing and storytelling rather than "the evidence" speaking for itself, and forming alliances for the long term rather than expecting a quick and direct route to policymakers'. These lessons have applicability to all areas of policy which arguably need to combine both values and evidence.

In their article, Neff and Caporale provide a critical analysis of the policy entrepreneurship literature, arguing that many of the attributes commonly associated with policy entrepreneurs in the literature do not hold true in practice. Using feminist and intersectionality lenses, they propose a new set of characteristics for policy entrepreneurship:

- Serving as a relevant actor;
- Attaching their solution to a problem;
- Biasing political outcomes;
- Gaining something from their engagement;
- Changing the emotional habitus of socio-political structures;

Neff and Caporale then apply this new framework to female comics and their success in identifying and highlighting issues of the disempowerment of women and damaging dominant cultures. In doing so, they demonstrate that unusual actors can introduce disruptive narratives into the policy space, particularly Kingdon's 'solutions' stream. Comics, Neff and Caporale argue, can locate themselves in the solutions stream and thereby return power to disempowered groups by influencing the broader public climate and debate. In this article, we can see the ways in which intersectionality can effect policy change, as it 'informs the way political actors articulate problems and solutions' and brings in an analysis of power. An important challenge for researchers moving forward is to apply this new framework to a range of policy areas. The idea of challenging emotional habitus is a particularly innovative addition and provides a rich theoretical lens through which to investigate policy entrepreneurship.

Yates' contribution introduces a new tool for conceiving of gender in the political and policy realm. Talk of capital P politics (formal politics) and lower case p politics (informal politics) is often spoken about in the political science literature (Hartley et al. 2013). Yates takes this idea and extends it to gender, presenting definitions of capital G gender and lower case g gender. Here, 'big G' gender refers to gender as something people have (gender identity) and is assumed to be fixed. 'Small g' gender, in contrast, is conceptualised by Yates as a process, something people perform which is more fluid. By examining how these differing notions of gender have played out in debates on domestic and family violence, Yates shows that how policy actors define and conceive of gender matters because they shape our interpretations of how issues are 'gendered' and the ways in which this influences the policy pathways that we take. She argues that this broader conceptualisation of gender may also make gender analysis both more nuanced and more widely accepted: 'Key to the "gender as process" view is the notion that gender is neither fixed nor stable, and in fact is "an identity tenuously consti-

tuted in time ... through a stylized repetition of acts"'.

Williamson and Colley explore issues of gender in the Australian Public Service and explore whether recent gender equality reforms represent an attempt to 'do' or 'undo' gender. In doing so, they explicitly address the first of the gaps we noted in our original review of *AJPA*. Williamson and Colley's paper draws on theories of liberal feminism that explore the idea of 'doing gender' in organisations. That is, such studies explore how women, men, and organisations create and reinforce gender roles (Abrahamson 2014). They note that a number of attempts to intervene in workplace gender equity have typically served only to reinforce traditional patterns and tendencies. They argue that what is needed is a framework to 'disrupt' gender through systemic workplace interventions. They draw on the 'doing gender' literature to whether current APS strategies can deliver sustainable change towards gender equity. A case study of PublicOrg is presented and found to have been relatively successful in terms of policy and procedural change. However, changes to informal work practices, narratives, and informal patterns have been less successful, and gender continued to be done. Williamson and Colley argue that gender is inscribed on the organisation (such as the long-hour culture), jobs (such as lack of job redesign) and employees (internalising their gender roles), entrenching a masculine culture. Moreover, the informal work and HR practices in PublicOrg redo, rather than undo, gender. In terms of what this case study suggests in terms of the APS Gender Equity Strategy more broadly, although this is a significant policy shift and has the potential to make great strides in terms of gender equity issues it is unlikely to disrupt gender patterns to any significant extent. Such an approach is likely to 'redo' rather than 'undo' gender. Williamson and Colley conclude that if the APS GES is to have a significant impact, then we need to use this opportunity to have some significant conversations about the meaning of gender and how this is enacted within our communities.

## Where to Next?

The articles in this special issue begin the task of filling the gaps we identified in our review of *AJPA*: the lack of information on women in the public service specifically, and the lack of feminist approaches to public administration and policy processes. In doing so, the issue demonstrates firstly the need to pay attention to inequities in the public service workforce, and also the ways in which popular theories and areas of debate in public administration can be enhanced by the addition of feminist perspectives.

As we have demonstrated elsewhere, a feminist lens has much to offer issues of policy implementation – which is enjoying a renaissance in research and practice (Carey et al. 2017). The contributions by authors in this issue take this further, disrupting – and in turn enhancing – theories of policy agenda setting, institutional change, and evidence-based policy. In doing so, they uncover nuances which traditional theories in this area gloss over. Although widely used, Kingdon's theory of policy windows ignores questions of intersectionality – an important and powerful concept for understanding not only agenda setting, but other aspects of public administration (including implementation). The concept of emotional habitus behoves us to look more deeply at the subjectivities of individuals engaged in various domains of policy. Meanwhile, evidence-based policy debates have ignored the lessons we can learn from feminist advocates for bridging the evidence-policy gap. Theories of path dependency have focused on the ways in which approaches to policy can become stuck in deeply embedded ways of knowing and doing, yet how this plays out in terms of gender has been ignored. Hence, each contribution challenges different theoretical streams and areas of research in mainstream public administration.

In her controversy piece that caps off the special issue, Eva notes we still need more risk takers in this area. There are, as she says, a great many possibilities at the intersection of research, activism, and feminism that stretch beyond the traditional 'women's policy' issues. We hope this special issue inspires

public administration researchers to engage more widely and more deeply in uncovering gendered-inequities in the field and applying critical feminist lenses to the mainstay theories of public administration.

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