Is the women’s movement over?

Finding the Australian women’s movement in protest, institutions and
the Internet

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1. Scope and rationale

There is a widespread view in Australia that the women’s movement is a thing of the past. As in many Western countries, the Australian movement is much less visible and influential today than it was during the heyday of the 1970s ‘second wave’, with smaller numbers attending protest events and a far less obvious ‘femocrat’ presence in government. Some have even suggested that the women’s movement has been counter productive, citing the visibility of ‘raunch culture’ among young women as an example of feminism gone badly wrong. But does any of this mean that the Australian women’s movement is, in fact, over?

But while the women’s movement might no longer be as visible on the streets as it once was, this book contends that it is still alive—if not quite kicking. The book explores the ways in which the movement is continuing to work its way through institutions, and persists within submerged networks, cultural production and in everyday living, sustaining itself in non-receptive political environments and maintaining a discursive feminist space for generations to come.

Social movement theorists have often assumed a limited life cycle for social movements, with the energies of participants being exhausted in a relatively short period. Women’s movement historians, on the other hand, tend to see a centuries’-long movement, with periods of peak mobilisation interspersed with periods of less visible protest or institutional activity. The media assumption that women’s movements were ‘over’, which became common in the 1980s, relied on a definition of a social movement tied to particular repertoires of action that may not be characteristic of women’s movements.

The institutional legacy of the women’s movement continues in the form of a wide range of feminist women’s services, including information services, domestic violence refuges, rape crisis and women’s health centres. While these have become more professionalised, feminist philosophy still influences the way most services organise and advocate. Women’s non government organisations have also evolved, becoming more specialised and often having a strong vocational focus. Older generalist bodies are turning away from
direct policy engagement and public contestation, when this has few returns, and focusing more on commemorative activities that validate collective identities and values.

The institutions often regarded as most characteristic of the Australian women’s movement, the array of women’s policy agencies found at different levels of government, have had mixed fortunes. The co-ordinating units have been moved from central agencies out to line departments while many of the former line department units have been ‘mainstreamed’. It seems doubtful that a movement that no longer has a visible media presence can provide a political base for women's policy machinery and for the protection of women’s policy gains. The Australian experience suggests that the precarious institutionalising of feminist perspectives within the state cannot survive the loss of visible movement activity outside, and so this book also explores the losses and compromises resulting from a downturn in movement visibility.

This book sets out to trace the legacies of the Australian women’s movement through protest, institutions and the Internet, arguing that not only has the movement left an indelible mark on Australian policy and political culture, it also persists in some unexpected places. There are risks, however, and there have certainly been losses. But understanding the legacies of the movement lends insight to how women everywhere might organise for the political challenges of the future.

2. Proposed contents

1. Finding the Australian women’s movement
   
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   All over the world, obituaries have appeared for the women’s movement. But the grounds for pronouncing death are far from clear. Is it because the women’s movement is no longer ‘on the streets’ or because it lacks novelty and hence newsworthiness? Clearly it cannot be because the women’s movement has achieved all its goals. The same old issues are still as far from being solved, whether the undervaluing of ‘women’s work’ or the prevalence of gender-based violence. In this volume we find that the Australian women’s movement is still very much alive, although not necessarily in the places where journalists or social movement theorists might look.
In the Introduction we take a long view of the trajectory of women’s movements and the way they have persisted over time, despite pronouncements of death. We examine how feminism became ‘unfashionable’ after the first wave of mobilisation as well as after the second. We look at other constants, such as how separate organising by women has been derided as something holding them back rather than as a means for maintaining women-centred policy perspectives. Overall we find there has been a rich harvest of feminist institutions in Australia, some more sustainable than others, as well as unexpected relationships between protest, institution-building and parliamentary presence.

Chapter 2
Taking to the streets: The rise and fall of feminist protest
Kirsty McLaren and Catherine Strong

Protests are a public and disruptive demonstration of political dissent. This chapter examines when and why women have taken to the streets, and how their protests have appeared in the media. It presents analysis from a new protest event database that provides great detail about the waxing and waning of feminist protest between 1970 and 2005 in Australia.

Feminist protest peaked in 1975, and again in 1982-1983. Feminist mobilisation has been especially strong in relation to reproductive rights, employment rights and conditions, and peace and disarmament. There have also been significant intersections between the women’s movement and other social movements. By the early 1990s, feminist protest was waning, but it has never disappeared. Media reporting has tended to exaggerate the peak periods of feminist protest, and feminists have garnered significant coverage through disrupting or transgressing against social norms and gender roles. This is not to say that this disruption was simply strategic: challenging gender norms has been an objective of feminist protest, and performing or embodying that challenge is integral to the practice of feminist ideas. Indeed, the very ways that women have protested have been strongly symbolic, positioning women and their claims in the public sphere.

Chapter 3
Hiding in plain sight: Australian women’s non-government organisations
Linked to the waning of feminist protest on the streets has been the decreased visibility of women’s non-government organisations (NGOs). Reduced visibility led to loss of interest by governments and less political influence for women’s advocacy organisations. At the same time there has been increased corporatisation with NGO access to government expected to take place through a limited number of umbrella organisations. Funding agreements for such bodies has sometimes restricted their capacity for public comment, while project funding is linked to government policy priorities rather than priorities identified from below.

Increased diversification and specialisation of women’s NGOs can be seen in negative terms as fragmentation or it can be seen as a strength: the number of national women’s organisations has continued to rise and previously marginalised groups such as immigrant and refugee women, Indigenous women or women with disabilities have become better organized. Feminist vocational bodies have flourished in new areas such as women and policing. Case studies of women’s NGOs in the 1970s and 1990s illustrate the increased diversity of the organised women’s movement and increased professionalisation of policy voice. The question is whether the media or government is interested.

Chapter 4

The institutional legacy: Women’s services and women’s policy agencies

From its resurgence in the 1970s, the Australian women’s movement has given rise to a vast array of organisations in the government and non-government sectors. Although these organisations are not always understood as forms of feminist activism, they can be seen as sustained attempts to achieve social change by making gender equality part of the business of government and by delivering services to women in a way that helps to transform gender relations. For this reason the proliferation of these organisations, and the extent of their survival, needs to be analysed as part of the legacy of the movement.

Analysis of a groundbreaking new database reveals that institutions established in government have been, perhaps surprisingly, more vulnerable than those established
outside government. Changes of government have frequently led to restructurings that have intentionally or unintentionally fragmented and interrupted the work of women’s policy machinery. The Australian version of ‘mainstreaming’ has provided the pretext for the abolition or downgrading of many women’s policy agencies. Yet women’s policy machinery persists in some form in all Australian jurisdictions. The non-government sector, which might be assumed to be more vulnerable due to resource constraints and generational changes, has actually proven to be surprisingly resilient: a very large number of non-government women’s services have survived from their inception to the present, with a sustained feminist focus.

Chapter 5
The discursive legacy: Changed expectations and popular culture
Sarah Maddison

During the second wave of the Australian women’s movement consciousness-raising groups sprang up rapidly all over the country, providing many women with their first experiences of feminism. These groups taught women a new grammar and allowed for a tentative solidarity with other women that was the basis for much collective action. Consciousness-raising allowed women to develop an understanding of the ways in which the problems that they experienced as individuals were both shared by many other women and socially produced. By thinking and talking together feminists developed new discourses and in doing so they developed a new view of themselves and the world.

While women today still struggle towards many of the same aspirations articulated by second wave feminists they do so within a framework of profoundly changed expectations – about work, autonomy, safety and political representation among other things. And where previous chapters have marked the legacy of the second wave in institutions and organisations, this chapter considers the discursive legacy of second wave feminism in popular culture, arguing that the commodification of feminist discourse, while certainly problematic, is not the whole story.
Chapter 6
New feminist frontiers: Blogging and the Australian women’s movement
Frances Shaw

Australian feminists are no longer as visible as they once were in mainstream discourse. But in online spaces, a group of feminist writers are creating a community, sharing experiences, and generating feminist claims. Feminist discourses are alive and well in the blogosphere, but they are also evolving and developing. The conversations that take place in Australian feminist blogs draw on the ideas of previous generations of Australian and international feminists, but they are also generating new claims and new ways of doing feminist politics. Particularly significant is the influence of intersectional feminism, and the allying of feminist bloggers with a range of other oppressions.

Through their involvement in the community, feminist bloggers developing new ways of being political at the individual level. At the community level, they are committed to developing and maintaining strong ethical and affective links with other bloggers. And finally, feminist bloggers are acting to challenge mainstream discourses not through institutions or street protest, but through interventions in everyday speech and attitudes.

Chapter 7
Slut walking: Where is the next generation of Australian feminists?
Sarah Maddison

There is a widely held view that the current generation of young Australian women have disengaged from a feminist politics that they see as belonging to their mothers’ generation. During the 1990s the view emerged that there was something of a ‘generation gap’ between younger women—more into ‘power feminism’ and cultural production—and older ‘victim’ feminists who maintained a focus on institutional politics. Of course these simplistic debates did not tell the whole story, and missed some of the spaces and places in which young women were and are engaging in feminist politics in ways that may not be recognizable to their older ‘sisters.’ This chapter reviews and updates the feminist ‘generation debates’ of the 1990s and explores where young women are active as feminists today. From the Slut Walk movement to trade unions and community sector organisations, young Australian feminists are anything but politically disengaged.
3. Markets

Among both scholars and activists there is broad interest social movements generally, and in the fortunes of the women’s movement more specifically. The field is open for a volume that maps the contemporary Australian women’s movement as an example of the way in which social movements evolve over time. Internationally, the Australian women’s movement has been known as one of the first to engage fully with the state. Forty years later is a good time to assess the outcomes of such state engagement both on the women’s movement and on policy. The book draws on a unique large-scale project weighing the whole harvest of a social movement – institutional, organisational and discursive. So while existing women’s movement scholarship is a valuable platform for our book, we have the advantage of unrivalled empirical evidence on which to base our conclusions. It is a volume by authors who have worked together on this research. It will appeal to both researchers and activists seeking to understand the life cycle of social movements and the current status of the women’s movement.

Accessibility is a key goal for the editors, with a view to a broad academic market within and across the disciplines of politics, sociology, history and gender studies, including policy practitioners and commentators. The closest competitor to our book is Sylvia Walby’s recent *The future of feminism* (2011). Where Walby’s analysis differs sharply from that advanced here, however, is in her suggestion that the institutionalisation of feminism means that it is no longer recognisable as a social movement. One of the most significant and innovative contributions of our volume is its challenge to this very way of conceptualising social movements. We contend that an approach that understands movements as ‘alive’ only when they are engaged in disruptive protest action is partly responsible for rendering women’s movements invisible.