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Male dominated workplaces and the power of masculine privilege: a comparison of the Australian Political and Construction sectors

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Introduction

The problem of the lack of gender diversity in political life – across almost all political systems – and across business sectors has generally been interpreted and examined as one of women's *disadvantage* and power*lessness*. This paper positions the problem from the inverse perspective as a problem of men's *advantage* and *powerfulness*, contributing to a growing literature on masculinities by contrasting two male dominated work places in Australia, federal parliament and construction sector, to better understand how masculine privilege operates (Bjarnegård, 2013; Murray, 2014). While we acknowledge that gender varies across context, time and institutions, we argue that by drawing a comparison between these two sectors, we are able to distil common processes which maintain a gendered hierarchy.

The central questions driving this article are: what is masculine privilege and how does it interact with gender? What specific acts of privilege operate across the Australian construction and political sectors? How do these acts work to perpetuate male advantage and, in turn reinforce gender bias and discrimination against women? In highlighting the role of masculine privilege in reinforcing gender hierarchies in the Australian parliament and construction sectors, we seek to make a contribution to the feminist institutionalist (FI) approach to power. Feminist Institutionalism, a paradigm of New Institutionalism, has made two important interventions, first showing that formal and informal political rules *are gendered* in that they are normatively organised around stereotypes about men's and women's attributes, experiences and abilities, and symbolically valorise masculine traits, especially hegemonic ones, over feminine ones. As a result, these patterns embody and

reproduce particular patterns of status and domination. Its second intervention is to reveal the *gender effects* of rules, including the formal and informal rules around the access to political power and to resources, on political and policy outcomes, and on organisational stasis and change (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Lowndes, 2019). This article draws greater attention to how privilege operates through formal and informal 'rules in use', and the effects these rules have for the political appointment and the employment lifecycle of men and women across the stages of *recruitment*, *retention* and *promotion*.

Our article is organised into five sections. Drawing on feminist institutionalism and gender theory, the article begins by outlining how gender and the rules intersect to produce and maintain masculine privilege. The second section details the problem of male dominance in two work spheres: the Australian construction sector and Australian parliament. Section three provides an overview of the methodology applied in each comparative case. The fourth section is the discussion that compares the operation of masculine privilege across the work spheres before the article's conclusion, the fifth section that draws out key lessons from the study.

Gender, privilege and the rules

In recent years, the FI literature has been concerned to differentiate between types of gendered rules and their effects. Institutions are often described as 'the rules of the game' that operate within workplaces and are known, followed and enforced (North, 1990, p. 3). They are made up of formal and informal institutions that together form the 'rules in use' (Ostrom, 1986): the 'distinct ensemble' of rules that one learns on the ground (Lowndes et al., 2006, p. 545). Formal institutions are rules and practices that are consciously designed

and clearly specified (Lowndes & Wilson, 2003). They are relatively easy to identify and take the form of a written clause which prohibits women entering a venue or laws which sanction paying women less than men. By contrast, informal institutions are more complex and harder to see and take the form of norms, practices and narratives. They include masculine and feminine norms and daily gendered practices that maintain gender power relations and reproduce gendered expectations about what are appropriate behaviours, capabilities and duties of men and women (Chappell & Mackay, 2017, p. 6). Informal institutions are 'sticky' and difficult to shift (Lauth, 2000) they have, as North notes, a 'tenacious survival ability' because of their submerged nature and their gradual evolution and embeddedness in organisational operations (1990, p. 10). Such tenacity is relevant to this study where narratives, practices and patterns of behaviour which emphasise masculinity remain stubbornly entrenched despite efforts to shift them.

We add to this literature by showing how the 'rules in use' within work places operate to maintain and perpetuate masculine privilege and result in structures that hold in place male powerfulness and overrepresentation. Instead of focusing on rules directed primarily towards women's equality, such as strategies for improving women's political recruitment or influencing the design and effects of gender policy, we invert the focus of extant research of gender and institutions, to understand how male dominance is reinforced in ways which block women's progress.

Masculine Privilege: dimensions and effects

Failure to dramatically shift the underrepresentation of women in the political and construction spheres through government and business interventions has led scholars to suggest that an emphasis on women's disadvantage is an inadequate explanation for explaining gender inequality (Eveline, 1994, 1998; Murray, 2014; Murray & Bjarnegård, 2018). Rather than empowering women, these initiatives can have an unintended effect of leaving 'women with the problem and men with the advantage' (Eveline, 1998, p. 92). As Sharpe et al (2012) have argued, this 'woman-centred' approach interprets the problem as one relating to inadequacies in women, rather than addressing male overrepresentation and power, resulting in a limited analysis on understanding ways in which men as a group benefit from gender inequality. These limited analyses have renewed a focus on understanding and unravelling male advantage as a way to understand and address entrenched gender hierarchies.

Advantage

According to a pioneer in the area of male advantage, Joan Eveline (1998, p. 91), the narrative of women's disadvantage leaves the gender *status quo* intact and its normative practices unquestioned. For Eveline, it implies a resignation to the inevitability of male dominance. This approach acts to blinker policy reformers, thereby limiting future policy reforms. Interpreted from a feminist institutionalist perspective, the focus on women's disadvantage helps establish a gendered 'path dependency' in policy development (Chappell & Waylen, 2013) where initial steps along a path are reinforced through a process of increasing returns (Pierson, 2000) thus frustrating efforts to promote change to the gender status quo hierarchies. It is for this reason, that scholars are calling for a shift in how gender inequality is problematized (Bjarnegård, 2013; Murray, 2014). Their call is not aimed at

eliminating the notion of *women's disadvantage* but to remind gender researchers the that the conceptual and rhetorical value of looking at *male advantage* cannot continue to be ignored (Eveline, 1994), not least because of the persistent ways in which male dominance is able to reproduced itself (Bjarnegård, 2013; Murray & Bjarnegård, 2018).

The existing literature suggests that male advantage is composed of, and perpetuated by, two interrelated elements: earned advantage and privilege (Bailey, 1998; McIntosh, 1992). Earned advantage is an advantage obtained through an acquired skill, asset, or talent within a restricted condition which benefits and advances the possessor – such as training hard to participate in a marathon or, learning a musical instrument. Privilege sits in contrast to earned advantage in that it is not a reflection of one's individual capacity or ability. It is gifted and *unearned* power; the product of membership to a social category – gender, sexuality, class, physical ability, race. In other words, Bailey (1998, p. 109) defines privilege as:

> systematically conferred advantages individuals *enjoy by virtue of their membership* in dominant groups with access to resources and institutional power that are beyond the common advantages of marginalised citizens (emphasis added).

Privilege is also relational, favouring the dominant group, who over history have constructed, defined and allocated values to different social categories (A. Johnson, 2001). These values are built into the fabric of institutions and society and operate through rules and practices that shape behaviour (Brod, 1987). It provides a pathway to power in a way which earned advantage does not, and it acts to maintain existing hierarchical systems by granting benefits to those who are privileged which they might not otherwise have enjoyed.

Privilege and earned advantage are often interconnected as privilege places one in a better position to earn greater advantage (Bailey, 1998).

The features of privilege

An analysis of the extensive literature on privilege suggests that privilege produces a range of effects. We focus on the three most prominent of these: *denial, neutrality and backlash*. The first important feature of privilege is its *invisibility* to those who enjoy it, and, like gender, it is framed before we know it. As McIntosh (1992) observes, men tend not to see their gender privilege; whites tend not to see their race privilege; ruling class members tend not to see their class privilege. This is the 'paradox of privilege', and is one of the 'privileges of being privileged' (A. Johnson, 2001, p. 34). The invisibility of privilege stems from the fact that those who enjoy such status represent and are considered the 'norm' (Rosenblum & Travis, 1996, p. 142). By contrast, a 'marked status' usually identifies a lower status group or 'other' for example, 'gay man', 'female engineer' or 'female Prime Minister'. Consequently, those who are privileged may not recognise that others lack access to the benefits they receive, including the wide comfort zone in which they operate, due to acceptance, inclusion and respect (A. Johnson, 2001). The invisibility of privilege produces a *culture of denial*, even when confronted by unfair practices (Franzway et al., 2009). Turning 'a blind eye or a deaf ear', 'not getting it' and following 'the path of least resistance' (A. Johnson, 2001) becomes the *modus operandi.* Denial perpetuates a lack of awareness, understanding and analysis of gender power relations operating within organisations.

A second effect of privilege is that those individuals who enjoy it tend to see the rules and the structure they operate in as *objective*, *neutral* and *legitimate*, which precludes these

rules from being analysed, including for their gender dimensions (Murray, 2014). Rather, these are the rules by which success and failure are measured. Importantly for this study, when those in privileged positions suggest they are applying these 'neutral rules' to assess standards of merit, they fail to recognise that the measurement is both complex and gender dependent (Chappell, 2002, 2006). For example, very often in male dominated sectors, perceptions of who is 'right for the job' is shaped by the normalisation of man's place and competency (Faulkner, 2009). As Murray (2014) observes, men as a privileged group neither have to prove their competency nor justify their inclusion.

A third effect of privilege is that when the 'rights' of the privileged are denied or challenged, it is often met with *backlash* (Rosenblum & Travis, 1996). Backlash is characterised by 'attitudes of hostility and fear, particularly on the part of the privileged groups who will be harmed by others progress, but it can also be the result of unconscious, unorganised, perhaps institutionalised resistance to change.' Backlash operates within institutions and by individuals both emotionally and normatively and can take the form of a violent attack, or a complicit action of defiance and resistance (Superson & Cudd, 2002). According to Mansbridge and Shames (2008, p. 627), emotional loss of entitlement is often felt more powerfully than any material loss and it is expressive and can be relentless.

Gender and privilege

Gender operates in a similar way to privilege. Like privilege, gender is relational and produced in and through social contexts (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As in other western nations, Australian society attaches privilege to white, heterosexual males who express masculinity in a particular way. This maleness is also linked to a form of gender:

masculinity. Although the literature on gender suggests that sex and gender should not be conflated, Bjarnegård (2013, p. 18) reminds us that they are closely related: 'biological sex and social gender exist as important axes around which personal experience is mediated and social power is distributed.'

According to gender theorist Raewyn Connell (1987), our society privileges masculinity – that is, norms relating to strength, competence, rationality for example, which are the antithesis of feminine norms of passivity, nature, care, and emotion. However, she also notes that masculinity is diverse, and that within particular contexts there are hegemonic forms of masculinity that are 'culturally exalted' (Connell, 2000, p. 84), while others, such as those attaching to homosexual men for example, are marginal and subordinate. Hegemonic masculinity is the most honoured and socially endorsed way of being a man and the benchmark which men are encouraged to strive (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is positioned in opposition to these marginal masculinities, and to femininity; these are the 'other', against which hegemonic masculinity is defined. It is acknowledged here that masculinities are neither static - they vary across contexts – nor passive, often exacting a cost on men's safety and wellbeing (Galea, 2018). Nevertheless, complicit and explicit adherence to the practices that promote hegemonic masculinity brings with it a form of privilege that attaches to particular men via acceptance, inclusion and respect (A. Johnson, 2001). As the privileged group, men who fit the hegemonic code enjoy what Connell (1987) calls the 'patriarchal dividend' as practices and systems are modelled on their experiences. It is through practices that maintain hegemonic masculinity

but also that gender privilege emerges and gender bias becomes institutionalised making gender equality harder to achieve (Hawkesworth, 2005)[1].

Gender privilege is not shared equally amongst men, as Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity explains. Equally, not all women are excluded from such privilege or social powerlessness (Bjarnegård, 2013). Women can enjoy various levels of gender privilege, especially where this intersects with race and class advantage; although relative to men's privilege as a group it is much less, and is usually more complicated (Messner, 1990). Especially in male dominated areas, women who display 'feminine' characteristics are often marginalised, while women who display hegemonic masculine characteristics, can sometimes share in the privilege dividend but only up to a point. As Wright (2013, p. 833) observes, within this male dominated environments those who are seen to be doing the same job as men can also be threatening to ideas of masculinity. The result is that women are left exposed, and open to criticism for being a 'bitch', cold and uncaring. In technical occupations like those found in construction, women's sex and gender shapes expectations associated with their technical ability and rationality impacting their professional legitimacy (Faulkner, 2009). Similarly in politics, women have the impossible task of not seeming to be too feminine, while also not arousing male approbation or vilification on the one hand for not being a 'real' woman or on the other, for being 'too tough' (Chappell, 2002; Crawford & Pini, 2010).

[1] This account of gender and privilege is not to ignore how intersectionality operates, as privilege might be enjoyed in relation to one social category but not in relation to another. For example, because of their bodily appearance, a gay man may enjoy the privilege maleness bestows (Coston & Kimmel, 2012). Yet in because of the operation of hegemonic masculinity in particular contexts – such as on a construction worksite or sporting team, that privilege is likely to be undermined if they disclose their homosexuality or present as effeminate (Chan, 2013).

In the main, gender privilege – arising from attachment to hegemonic masculinities – serves to reinforce men's advantage and women's disadvantage in already male dominated sectors. Even if only engaged in a 'performance', men are better able to blend in and take advantage of the hegemonic masculinity codes which are invisible to, or denied by, those who enjoy the privilege emanating from those codes; men also are advantaged by the presupposed 'neutrality' of rules and measures of merit which preference masculine over feminine traits; and, finally, because of their association with hegemonic masculinity, men are less likely to be the victims of 'backlash' when attempts are made to shift the gender *status quo*.

Methodology

It is a methodological challenge to 'see' the rules in use as the informal institutions in particular, are often taken-for-granted, and the power asymmetries gender rules create are naturalized and institutionalized, and are therefore barely visible (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2016; Chappell & Waylen, 2013). To uncover the rules requires tracing macro and micro interactions to identify patterns of behaviour, narratives, and practices as well as sanctioning and enforcement techniques over time.

We argue one of the most promising methods for uncovering the engagement of institutional actors with the rules is through ethnographically focused research (Chappell & Galea, 2017). Such methods enable the researcher to capture the social meanings, 'unarticulated attitudes' and ordinary activities of people in their natural settings –

including, we suggest, the operation of informal institutions and their enforcement (Busby, 2013).

This study partially adheres to such a method. For the study of the Australian construction sector, it draws on data from the first part of our three year 'rapid' ethnographic study of two large Australian construction firms, known in this paper as Company A and B. Evolved from healthcare studies, rapid ethnography was first used in the study of human interaction with computers by David Millen (2000). It is a focused ethnographic probe described as a 'time-limited exploratory study within a fairly discrete community or organisation' (Muecke, 1994, p. 199). It has been found beneficial in the study of fragmented and specialised work environments such as hospitals, prisons and nursing homes, also in specialised subgroups and professions such as politicians (Knoblauch, 2005; Rhodes, 2005). It permits the researcher to undertake short, intensive and focused investigations in multiple locations using multiple and iterative methods to gain a deep understanding of the work setting they are studying (Millen, 2000). As a methodology, it accommodates and captures the shifting and temporal qualities of the construction sector better than many other approaches and allows for a focused observation of the career path of construction professionals (Galea, 2018).

In the two construction firms we studied, our ethnographic tools included 1. semi-structured and open ended interviews with company elites, 2. document analysis, and 3. shadowing and semi-structured interviews with workers on six construction sites. In this paper we draw on the first part of the ethnography - 20 semi-structured interviews (10 in each company) conducted with purposefully sampled business leaders who included: policy

designers, human resource managers, and senior executives including the chief executive officer (see Table 1). Our aim was to build a picture of respondents' experience of the formal rules (for example, gender equality policies) and the informal rules (norms and practices) that intersect to produce the rules in use, those rules that are followed and adhered to within these firms. Interviews typically lasted 60-90 minutes and, with permission, were recorded. Subsequently interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised to protect interviewee identities. The data was analysed through a feminist lens and coded thematically using NVivo to identify what gendered rules are operational under the surface of construction firms. In the first instance, we identified emerging themes and units of meaning related to theoretical concepts that could be abstracted from the data (for example, 'privilege', 'career pathways', 'gender' and 'institutions'). From these themes, we considered hierarchical relationships to further refine our coding and create second and third order categories from which eventual conceptual categories could be developed and grouped in association (Daniel, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For instance, within the conceptual category of 'privilege', our second order categories were 'backlash and resistance', 'wilful ignorance', 'denial', 'neutrality' and 'passivity' etc. The third order category of 'backlash and resistance' in turn included for example 'backlash (individual)', 'backlash (institutional)', 'condemnation', 'ostracism' etc. The categories were then grouped in relation to the career stages of recruitment, retention and progression.

[Insert Table 1]

For this study, analysis of the Australian parliament was conducted via a close reading and analysis of primary and secondary literature of the topic. A review of Australian gender and politics literature over the past decade was undertaken, which revealed only a handful of

sources. We also undertook a comprehensive search of gender and parliamentary politics in the Australian news media. These primary and secondary sources were analysed to identify: 1) formal gendered rules, that is codified rules which are written down and accepted as the formal 'rules of the game'; 2) repeat narratives and patterns of behaviour which suggest the presence of an informal rule; 3) the gendered outcomes of these patterns of behaviour in terms of an assessment of how these rules effect behaviour. While these literature reviews revealed some clear patterns of behaviour and definitive gendered outcomes, it is recognised that this method could not provide the nuance and more deeply submerged informal gender norms, leading us to conclude that there is a definite need for a gender-based ethnography of the Australian parliament, along the lines of the work undertaken in the British Parliament (Childs, 2016).

A final note on methods relates the comparative nature of our analysis. Comparative studies across two or more cases have been widely used in feminist institutionalist research to bring to light the operation of gendered institutions (see for example Chappell, 2002; Freidenvall & Krook, 2010; Waylen, 2007, 2014). Comparative analyse have the benefit of identifying similarities and differences in institutional settings to better identify which rules are in use where, and to understand the effect of these on similar or different gendered political outcomes (see Chappell, 2002). Our research builds on these studies, while bringing something new to the literature in focusing on two institutional settings within a similar polity, rather than across polities as the other studies have done. It also shines a light on a commercial sector alongside a political one, which is a novel approach to understanding similarities and differences in the dynamics of gendered institutions across contexts. Our comparative study also engages with methodological pluralism by drawing on two cases

both utilise interpretivist deductive analysis while applying different methods and sets of data. As Hantrais (2014, p. 133) reminds us that methodological pluralism has its limitations but it can be used to capture more fully 'the complexity of the objects under study' to gain new insights and offer complementary explanations to extract gendered patterns in play within two male dominated Australian workspaces.

Case studies: Australian Construction sector and Australian Parliament

As in most countries, in Australia the political and economic systems remain dominated by men despite efforts to advance greater diversity across both sectors in the past three decades.

The Australian Construction Sector

The construction sector is Australia's third largest employer and a central economic player. It is also Australia's most male dominated sector, where despite government led gender diversity initiatives; male overrepresentation in construction is climbing (ABS, 2016). At the recruitment, participation and progression stages, construction is numerically and hierarchically overrepresented by men (WGEA, 2018).

Men account for 88 per cent of all construction workers and management (those managing construction sites and construction businesses), and 99 per cent of construction trades people (ABS, 2018). Men dominate the education 'pipeline' into construction trades, however there are greater numbers of women entering architecture and construction degrees. Poor participation rates amongst women are compounded by poor retention rates. Early enthusiasm from women construction professionals reduces with increased exposure

to the sector, resulting in them leaving the sector 38 per cent faster than their male counterparts (Professionals Australia, 2007).

Focusing on progression, 97 per cent of CEO's in construction are men, significantly higher than other industry sectors (WGEA, 2020). By contrast, the majority of women in construction are found in junior, marginal, administrative and part-time roles. Reflecting this hierarchy, the gender pay gap between men and women doing equivalent roles in construction is 26 per cent (of total remuneration); with the highest differential at the most senior levels (WGEA, 2020).

These outcomes persist in spite of government-led company-based gender diversity policies aimed at reversing women's disadvantage. These include commissioning gender reporting, making the business case for gender diversity, raising awareness of women's career opportunities in the construction sector, establishing support networks and training for women, promoting women mentors and role models, and introducing flexible work policies (Galea et al., 2015). Informal rules associated with construction's masculine exclusionary culture and work practices act to undermine women's attraction, retention and progression within the sector (Galea et al., 2015, 2020).

Australian Parliament

Like construction, men have dominated all aspects of Australian political life – including recruitment, election and progression to the executive historically and in the contemporary period. Despite some attempts by political parties to address this problem, male parliamentarians have for the past decade have been overrepresented at around 70 per

cent. This is somewhat surprising given Australia was a pioneer in recognising women's rights to vote and stand for parliament in 1920. The 2019 election, saw the least number of men elected, holding 64 per cent of combined Senate and House of Representatives seats (Hough, 2019) with the Australian Senate reaching parity for the first time in history. Nevertheless, to put it in perspective, in the 120 years since Australian federation, approximately 90 per cent of all parliamentarians – at state and federal levels - have been men (as at 2014 - McCann & Wilson, 2014) .

The figures are equally stark in relation to the centre of executive power in Australia – the Cabinet. In 2019 men occupied 80 per cent of all ministry positions nationally, and only recently, during the initial period of Abbott-led conservative coalition Commonwealth government, men held 17 of the 19 Cabinet positions (89 per cent of cabinet positions - Australian Parliament, 2015). These figures are not static, in 2011 Australia boasted a short-lived strong female leadership presence across the Federal and State executives with a female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, and female state premiers in three of the six states. All of these female executive leaders were from the ALP. By 2014, the situation had rapidly reversed; with the re-election of Liberal party governments across the country and men regained 100 per cent of preeminent executive posts across the nation (Chappell, 2014).

A range of explanations has been proffered for the disparity of sex representation in the selection, election and progression of women in Australian parliament. Formal rules account for some of the disparity. A preferential, majoritarian single-member electoral system for House of Representative seats encourages tighter party control over candidate selection; protects incumbents; and discourages the preselection of a diverse range of candidates

(Chappell, 2002, pp. 57–58). The Proportional Representation (PR) system, used to elect Australian Senators, is more favourable to women candidates (McCann & Wilson, 2014). However, these (PR) electoral rules have been shown to be a necessary but not sufficient condition on their own to promote women's election (Curtin, 2006). The same can be argued for quota systems, such as that used by the ALP, which increase the number of women while maintain gendered hierarchies of power. How these hierarches have been maintained via male privilege in Australian politics, is discussed in detail below following the methodology.

Discussion: The Effects of Gender Privilege in the Australian Parliament and Construction Sectors

Male privilege operates differently in different contexts. In construction, hegemonic masculinity is characterised by toughness, competitiveness, authoritativeness, dependability, rationality, heterosexuality and homosociality (Watts, 2008). Those who demonstrate these traits are most valued, and gain privilege as a result. In politics, privilege and authority is also granted to rationality and heterosexuality and homosociality, but these are complemented by norms of logic, pragmatism and aggression (Crawford & Pini, 2010). In both cases, these norms sit in stark contrast to feminine norms and can be seen to operate to the advantage of men through processes of denial, neutrality and backlash. As the following discussion shows, each of these effects can be identified across the employment lifecycle of attraction, recruitment, and progression.

Privilege and recruitment

Construction

In Australia, masculine privilege operates to dissuade women from being attracted to work as professional construction employees. In the construction sector, entry into professional education is one key measure of attraction, and here the picture is mixed. Women remain highly under under-represented, accounting for less than 10 per cent of graduates in construction related trades, yet women account for almost half of the participants in architecture and construction related degrees. These 'pipeline' gaps have been interpreted by industry leaders as a core reason why the numbers of women construction professionals are so low – it is a problem about women, not about the construction sector *per se*. This was certainly a general view espoused in interviews with construction leaders undertaken for this research project. When asked about the lack of gender diversity in the sector, responses included:

> Women don't want to work in the jobs that we work in (Paris, Female, Executive General Manager, Company A)

> My sense is that the sort of lack of expression of senior women is - is not coming about from a lack of respect for the skills they bring, just that there's not many coming in at the front end, if you know what I mean (Steven, Male, Group General Manager, Company B).

> We are still struggling with gender diversity because there are just not enough women in the market or coming through at a graduate level (Mark, Male, Regional Director, Company B).

Given denial about the nature of the sector and its effects on the gender *status quo*, it was not surprising to find in an analysis of formal gender diversity policy responses in top tier

Australian construction companies that they were overwhelmingly aimed at women (Galea et al., 2014, 2015). These policies included setting targets on women's recruitment and conducting targeted graduate recruitment campaigns, rather than focusing on how recruitment is broadly and informally practiced within firms (Galea, 2018). By contrast, most interviewees were reluctant to improve transparency of recruitment practices for all employees, or shift towards mandated quotas for women's recruitment. These measures were considered unfair and would interference with merit-based selection. As one male leader put it:

> Well, we are anti-quota just so you understand but pro-target…
>
> …quotas I think can have some bad outcomes; quotas can end up being an excuse for not having a meritocratic process. I think quotas can actually be very detrimental to people who are put into positions and questions are asked about whether they were you know the token women, the token African American or the token whatever. I think, fundamentally women …a reasonably high percentage of women in the workforce in general, actually don't want to get a job as part of a quota system…. So, people view any attempt to level the playing field as giving the women an unfair advantage (Tom, Male, Human Resources, Company A).

This notion of an 'unfair advantage' speaks directly to the point in the privilege literature that notions of 'merit' are often left unproblematised, perpetuating the view that the existing system is unbiased, and alternative approaches are rejected in order to maintain the status quo (Murray, 2014).

Politics

In the Australian political system, the emphasis at the recruitment/pre-selection stage continues to rest on women's suitability for political office, rather than reasons why more men stand for pre-selection and how they become candidates. Assumptions continue to be drawn about women's attributes – including their primary roles as nurturers that inhibit their role as political representatives. But rarely does attention fall on whether men who are fathers are able to balance their family and careers (Crabb, 2019).

Feminist political scientists Crawford and Pini's (2010, p. 613) interviews with male MPs in the Australian parliament highlighted these gendered perceptions about women's gender roles that resulted in

> [I know men] who have politely declined to support women candidates in preselection because they have got young children and they look at it and say 'I couldn't do it with the kids'. Nothing sexist, I am all in favour of women in parliament, but the young kids are still as the age when they need a fair bit of nurturing (Male, Member of Parliament).

This emphasis on women's 'natural' roles as wives and mothers, and men as the political actors, illustrates a culture of denial by some male MPs about their own privileged position. Lauren Rosewarne (2018) summed up the situation in the Australian parliament:

> …remains a workplace dominated by those with the loudest voices and with personal lives most conducive to spending large amounts of time away: i.e., a wife to keep the home fires burning. It's a workplace geared around men — their 'strengths', their values, their rules.

To ‘get in the door’ of the Australian parliament, MPs must go through a preselection process. Reflections by women who have been engaged in pre-selection contests describe it as a hostile experience, including sexist questioning, and being bullied and undermined on the basis of their sex (Chappell, 2002; see Banks in Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). In 2015 the Liberal Party acknowledged the effect of these informal practices on women candidates in its internal report *Room for Movement: women and leadership in the Liberal Party in 2015* (Tomazin, 2015). While the report is not publicly available, journalists who read the report noted it recognised that ‘talented, capable women are either being overlooked or under-supported in favour of male candidates’ and that ‘a perceived ‘boys' club’ culture; occasional chauvinistic behaviour from men; and party processes designed to ‘keep outsiders out’ and ‘perpetuate the power of those who hold political positions’ operated inside the party (Tomazin, 2015).

In politics, as in the Australian construction sector, there remains a strong scepticism about the value of gender quotas to improve political representation. Although gender quotas have now become an accepted feature of the ALP’s electoral recruitment system, they were strongly resisted in the first instance with arguments made that quotas interfere with ‘merit’ (Chappell, 2002, p. 6). It took the ALP twenty years to reach its 40 per cent target, while its commitment to reach 50 percent will take till 2025 (Bramston, 2015). While outwardly the ALP appears at one on this policy, preselection skirmishes arise from time to time to push back against gender quotas as a reminder of the ongoing power of masculine privilege in the party and the gendered power politics attached to entry into the political realm.

Meanwhile, most Liberal MPs continue to mount anti-quotas arguments, reflecting a denial about the problem of men’s representation advantage. Women on the conservative side of

politics have themselves been vociferous critics of quotas. Liberal Senator Michaela Cash argues (in Medhora, 2015) that:

> The Liberal Party selects candidates on merit, rather than limiting a selection process to considerations based on gender alone… One can only speculate that if a woman is appointed as the Labor candidate for [a] seat, the assumption will be that it was because of Labor's affirmative action quota rule rather than because she was the best candidate for the job. Not a great start to a Parliamentary career.

It is not only quotas, but access to safe seats that influences a candidates entry into parliament (Davies & Evershed, 2018). Historically, in Australia there has been an evident informal rule of preselecting men for safe seats, and women for marginal seats. While this problem has occurred in both major parties, formal quota rules are gradually shifting this pattern in the ALP, leaving the Liberal Party lagging well behind. (Hanrahan, 2019).

Privilege and retention

As with entry into the construction and political sectors, retention of women is an issue that is influenced by practices of male privilege which can operate to undo much of the hard work of human resource departments and party machinery trying to increase the gender equality.

Construction

In the Construction sector, interviews revealed that industry leaders' perceptions about retention in the sector, especially low rates of women's retention, differed between men and women. Men identified the lack of women graduating from construction related

courses, personal preferences or choices made by women, and the nature and inflexibility of the sector as the key barriers. By contrast, women singled out construction's dominant male culture, the lack of flexibility in the sector and assumptions and stereotypes made about women (Galea et al., 2014). In the construction companies under review, gender diversity policies aimed at retaining women focused heavily on 'fixing' women rather than challenging the existing norms and practices that privileged men. Interventions included women's support groups, resilience training, mothers' groups, formal paid parental policies, targeted graduate recruitment campaigns, pay equity reviews and corrections, gender bias training for recruiters, diversity policy and gender diversity committee (Galea et al., 2014, 2015). While existence of formal paid parental leave policies is a positive step towards retaining women in the workplace, both companies parental leave policies were found to maintain traditional gender roles, allocating different benefits to workers who identified as a babies 'primary carer' and the 'partner' of the primary carer.

Additionally, these existing policies largely focus on shifting women's behaviour and this suggests that companies are opting for 'a path of least resistance'. These policies are largely irrelevant to the majority of employees who are men, with them either not participating in, or having little knowledge about them. The effect leaves men at the centre, the legitimate markers of Australian construction professionals and perpetuates the 'othering' of women, who need to fit in around them.

Construction is characterised by its inflexibility and long work hours. Most construction sites operate six days a week, with employee presenteeism and total availability the norm. In addressing workplace flexibility and long work hours, two different approaches were

observed. Company A focused on employee agency, encouraging employees to negotiate work arrangements with their manager to meet their flexibility needs. While Company B made wholesale change to the employee's working week requirements; reducing work hours and introducing a roster system were employees worked a five day week while the construction site continued to operate on a six day week. Business leaders view these policies as innovative and a welcome change.

> It's a game changing for the industry if we can crack it in a way that I think is meaningful … They're struggling but we'll get there. (Polly, Human Resources, Company B)

However, these policies are far from transformative and both policies had been met with resistance from management and employees who continue to reinforce informal rules that maintain the previous operational arrangements. As one senior executive explains:

> It's challenging for some managers to think differently - its construction – you need to be here from six in the morning to eight o'clock at night and every Saturday, and every second Sunday, or every rostered day off, because that's how we did it, back in the day… I think there's still a lot of reluctance. I think people look at it and go it's good that the company has flexible working, but I'll never do it, and I wouldn't expect my team to do it. I think it's probably they relate it to women, and yes, it is a gender diversity initiative (Troy, Senior Executive, Company A).

Such employee resistance reflects the strength of masculinised informal work practices including presenteeism and total availability that act as a barrier to women's retention within construction.

Politics

As the number of women in Australian politics grows, there is increasing evidence of them departing male dominated parties or the political sphere entirely, either because they have lost an election (often because they are in marginal seats), or they no longer want to be in the party or parliament. Very often, the reasons women provide for their resignation is the lack of attention to women's experiences in parliament, or because of backlash displayed as threats, intimidation and bullying (Crabb, 2018). In recent years we have seen a spate of Liberal women in particular choosing to leave the party and/or the parliament for reasons directly related to these issues. In 2018, after yet another leadership coup, two Liberal women who held hard won ministerial positions resigned - Kelly O'Dwyer and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, both left expressing concern about the treatment of women in the party (Crabb, 2018). As Bishop remarked: 'It is evident – notwithstanding those who say 'nothing to see here, move on' – that there is an acceptance of a level of behaviour in Canberra that would not be tolerated in any other workplace across Australia' (Julie Bishop in Tony Wright, 2018).

Around the same time, Julia Banks MP withdrew from the Liberal Party to sit as an independent member. She stated:

> Often when good women call out or are subjected to bad behaviour the reprisals backlash and commentary portrays them as the bad ones, the liar, the troublemaker the emotionally unstable or weak, or someone who should be silenced...Across both major parties, the level of regard and respect for women in politics is years behind the business world (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018).

Reflecting the very backlash she was commenting on, Banks was told by one leading conservative Liberal member that she needed to learn to 'roll with the punches in this game', (Craig Kelly in Strutt, 2018). At the time of Bank's resignation, Liberal Senator Lucy Gichuhi, the only African born member of the Liberal Party complained about bullying and mistreatment by male colleagues. Despite, or perhaps because of the diversity she brought to the party, she was placed by the Party in an unwinnable position on the 2019 Senate ticket (Norman, 2018). Even the Australia Green's, who have had a long history of striking a gender balance in their parliamentary members, have not immune from expressions of male privilege, (mis)managing their own internal sexual harassment cases in recent years (Knowles & McClymont, 2018) .

Alongside a generally aggressive environment, women have been the subject of sexist attacks and 'slut shaming', which appear to have become more obvious and brazen in recent years, perhaps directly related to the increased women in parliament (Crabb, 2018). No one was made more conscious of sexist backlash than Julia Gillard who as Australia's first female Prime Minister came in for vicious gender-based attacks within and outside the parliament during her time in office. Throughout her time in power, Gillard was called by her opponents and critics 'a lying cow', 'a menopausal monster', 'Ju-liar', a 'bitch', a 'witch' and 'deliberately barren' (Mao, 2019). At the height of Gillard's term, although all political leaders are subject to attack, 'what is not normal is the way in which the prime minister is attacked, vilified or demeaned in ways that are specifically related to her sex' (Summers, 2012). Other researchers have also documented the extreme forms of backlash experienced by Gillard both in the Parliament (C. Johnson, 2015), and the gendered treatment she received in the media during her term in office (Williams, 2017).

In Gillard's now famous misogyny speech, directed to the then Liberal leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott signalled how gender norms and narratives related to her downfall, including sexist abuse and harassment (Gillard, 2012). The speech can be seen as a form of resistance to masculine privilege, and its cost for women who must endure its effects. In 2018, women in the Liberal Party demonstrated their own form resistance, commencing a campaign of wearing red in parliament, to draw attention to the gender problem in their party and the dismissal of the senior male leadership of the problem (Tony Wright, 2018).

Privilege and progression

Male privilege operating through formal and informal rules and practices including resistance and backlash is also evident in the third area of focus: career progression across the Australian construction and political sectors.

Construction

In the construction sector, gender diversity policies aimed at removing barriers to women's progression have primarily focused on gendered rules aimed at 'fixing' women by building their resilience and internal female networks. While internal networks are important, it is the different opportunities availed to men and women that shaped their career progression within construction firms (Dainty et al., 2000). Men tended to be appointed to work on prestigious projects, in delivery based roles which provided them greater exposure in the company, particularly to senior leaders and this was critical to career progression. Further, a heavy reliance on informal homosocial networks amongst men prevailed within both

construction companies in relation to career progression, with internal job boards routinely failing to capture job postings. The lack of transparency around employee talent management and how promotions occur within their company is noted by a diversity leader:

> There was no transparency about talent [management processes] across regions, you just knew someone's name. It wasn't written down anywhere. Yeah, there was no transparency. (Polly, Human Resources Executive, Company B)

In addition, informal recruitment processes do little to challenge existing gender hierarchies or gender practices, including assumption of skill, capability and competence. As one business leader explained:

> When you look at the trajectory of how people are promoted and… you have a really small pond that you're fishing from. That pond tends to be all of the same person with the same sort of history…. (Paris, Executive General Manager, Company A)

While a *culture of denial* exists around the transparency of the systems of recruitment, appraisal and promotion both have begun to take action introducing codified human resource systems including job descriptions, competency frameworks, annual gender pay gap review, talent and succession planning and methods to manage bias within performance appraisals. Company B introduced a 'bias champion' in talent reviews who:

> is trained and actually sits there listening and trying to interpret whether there's any bias coming through from anyone in the room in that regard. (Bruce, Regional Manager, Company B)

Company A undertake succession planning of the top five per cent of employees who are identified as having 'high potential'. Yet according to a senior leader, despite the existence of this formal process, in practice this process is cast aside.

> In reality when people are busy, it is the first thing that gets chopped. (Rachel, General Manager, Company A)

Both examples show that *resistance* to these efforts exists and enforcement of the formal rules appears weak.

Furthermore, the capacity of these formal rules to address masculine privilege is undermined by the association of this privilege system to company values – and measures of '*merit*' – which are inherently gendered (Galea et al., 2015). In both companies, revered values and behaviours are encapsulated in slogans and narratives including 'work hard: play hard(er)', 'love to start: love to finish', 'outperformance', 'passion and tenacity', 'competition', 'ambition' and 'larrikinism'[2]. While appearing gender neutral, these narratives have gendered dimensions and they reproduce hegemonic masculine tropes of toughness, competitiveness, authority, reliability and rationality thus providing a 'gendered logic of appropriateness' through which merit is determined and assessed against. In effect, the neutrality of the codified performance management system and succession planning may continue to be challenged by informal gendered rules particularly as there is resistance to depart from these values that represent the gender legacy of the past.

Politics

[2] Larrikinism is an Australian term which refers to a cheeky blokishness that is good natured, mischievous yet irreverent to authority.

Within Australian federal politics, progression has also been impeded by the operation of informal gender rules. Neither major party have affirmative action rules to challenge male dominance in Cabinet – the pinnacle of the Westminster Parliamentary system, leaving it to the party rooms to determine who gets to wield executive power (Annesley et al., 2019). Growing numbers of women MPs on the Labor side of politics – driven in part by preselection quotas - has been reflected in greater female representation in Cabinet posts. For instance, under Prime Minister Gillard, there was a record eight women Ministers, comprising 23 per cent of Cabinet. Since the Gillard, women's representation in cabinet has fluctuated from one sole female minister in the Abbott Liberal Cabinet of 2013 to seven female ministers, and to its highest level yet after the 2019 election at 30.7 per cent in the Morrison Coalition Cabinet.

Aside from Julia Gillard, men have always assumed the position of 'first among equals' as Australian Prime Minister. The situation is not much better in terms of the leadership pipeline. Since 1901: only 1 woman, Gillard, has held the Deputy Prime Ministership; men have entirely dominated the position of the Leader of the Opposition; and only four women from 35 have held the position of Deputy Opposition Leader (Gillard, Macklin, Plibersek from the ALP and Bishop from the Liberal Party). As one senior ALP member commented after Gillard's ousting: 'The model for leadership was created by white guys in the 1950s' (Jaqueline Maley, 2013).

There has been a great deal of denial about the lack of women in leadership positions, again with merit being used as the excuse. In appointing his Cabinet, Prime Minister Abbott stated:

> In the end all of our appointments are on merit. As time goes by and the number of women in the parliament increases, I am confident there will be more women in the ministry (Tony Abbott in Jacqueline Maley, 2014).

Other senior political figures have also refused to recognise how merit is constructed and by whom, and denied there is a problem with women's lack of progression (Schubert 2007 in Sawer, 2008, p. 268). Denial is further shown in Crawford and Pini (2010, p. 616) research that found of 15 male members of the Australian parliament interviewed most viewed gender inequality in Australian national politics as 'an aberration of the past'.

Even though men overwhelmingly retain the privilege of entry and progression in Australian politics, there is evidence of a backlash towards women's moderate success as parliamentarians and ministers. One way this has been demonstrated is through a view held by male politicians that women are now privileged, and men disadvantaged in Australian politics (Crawford & Pini, 2010, p. 615). What's more, women who were considered 'fierce', 'gutsy', 'tough', 'tenacious' and 'not shrinking violets' – in other words those most capable of expressing hegemonic masculine norms of being 'tough' and 'feisty' – were seen by male incumbents as somehow illegitimate and to be threatening their hold on politics (Crawford & Pini, 2010, p. 616). It suggests that acts of denial and backlash block women's progression into positions of power within politics.

Conclusion: Recruitment, retention and progression in male dominated sectors

Despite the different contexts of the Australian construction sector and politics, and different emphases in the hegemonic masculine codes operating in each setting through formal and informal rules, this paper suggests that these codes continue to play a powerful

role in maintaining masculine privilege in each sector. This privilege has been evident in denials that such privilege systems exists; a reinforcement of narratives of neutrality and merit that leave unquestioned the gender status quo*;* and a backlash by those in privileged positions when signs of progress emerge. It seems from both cases the greater the progress, the stronger this backlash becomes.

This paper demonstrates that masculine privilege works within and cumulatively across the different career stages in both professions to obstruct the women's advancement. Formal and informal rules and the behaviours they emphasise, and value are the mechanism by which privilege is maintained. At the recruitment/pre-selection stage, formal rules such as gender diversity policy responses tend to focus solely on women such as through business targets or political gender quotas. This reinforces the notion that only women have gender, and that gender equity is an issue associated with women (Galea et al., 2014). This focus lets the business and political leaders 'off the hook' because the problem is framed as something outside their control (A. Johnson, 2001, p. 135) – and therefore enables them to deny their privileged positions. Women-focussed policy responses perpetuates the narrative that women are 'lacking' in some sense - inclination, education and/or skills (Eveline, 1998, p. 91). This further reinforces essentialist notions that tie technical competence and merit to masculinity (Faulkner, 2009). Selection processes become focussed on bringing women up to a pre-existing standard before allowing them entry, rather than examining whether these standards are fair, relevant or appropriate. Further obstructions arise at the entry level where women (but not men) are still perceived by business and political leaders to be tied to a nurturing role, making them 'naturally' unsuited for entry into the construction or political world. Additionally, weak formal rules in relation to progression act to perpetuate

men's grip on power within both construction firms and political institutions. Men are in denial that women are now gaining an unfair advantage in both workplaces, despite men's powerfulness in construction and politics remaining steadfast. Backlash occurs via a lack of enforcement of formal gender equity policies or through a process of 'forgetting the new' (formal rules) and 'remembering the old' (informal gendered rules) (Mackay, 2009).

In relation to retention, it appears in both the construction firms and political institutions, little attention is given to the hostile culture produced by the performance of hegemonic masculinities. Rather, these remain the standards by which 'success' is measured. In both sectors, women are expected to fit in – for example, to be present, work long hours, or engage in aggressive of combative debate. While there have been some efforts in both construction and politics to introduce formal rules to temper these practices – encouraging more family friendly work hours, introducing childcare facilities and the like – they have had little impact on the gender status quo, which remains resilient and difficult to shift.

This paper suggests that rather than existing women-focussed policies effectively challenging masculine privilege, they have fuelled resentment and backlash. It appears in the Australian construction and political realms, minor improvements in women's standing, and the implementation of women's-focussed policy has resulted in an exaggerated view about women's progress. This over-inflation has produced negative reactions ranging from men having a sense of being 'devalued' through to more direct and destructive practices of personal attack. This paper demonstrates that despite individuals and organisations proclaiming values of equality and non-discrimination, masculine privilege continues to operate within both work places to maintain men's powerfulness. It shows how existing

responses to gender equality largely fail to address the rules in use that advantage particular forms of masculinity and men to (re)produce a dominant gender order.

This paper also contributes to Feminist Institutionalism by combining two theoretical frameworks: FI and privilege. It draws on initial work (Murray & Bjarnegård, 2018) that demonstrates that masculine privilege works through political institutions to hold and replicate gender power and importantly, where resistance lies. But it extends this work across two different masculine sectors to reinforce the understanding that informal rules do not apply to everyone in the same way, in other words, that different informal rules apply to different groups in different ways. It shows how acts of privilege, especially backlash and resistance, act to deny 'out' groups access to valuable institutional knowledge and resources.

In conclusion, this article has demonstrated how masculine privilege provides a useful lens for understanding why gender equity remains an intransigent problem in politics and construction. It demonstrates that policy reform which focuses on correcting women's disadvantage alone is often little more than tinkering around the edges, keeping gender and gender power relations in place. By contrast, a focus on male advantage brings attention to how power is maintained within politics and business, and by whom. It crystallises our understanding of where efforts should be focused for gender equity to be achieved. Until and unless the systems of masculine privilege are made visible and observed, then these power relations, and the gendered institutions they reinforce, will remain untouched.

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	Total	Company A	Company B
TOTAL INTERVIEWS	20	10	10
Position held by participant			
Human Resource Manager		3	3
Senior Executive/Director		1	4
Executive General Manager		6	3
Gender of participant			
Male	12	6	6
Female	8	4	4

Table 1: Interviews with Construction Leaders