

Report on Workshop on Australian Women's Non-government Organisations and Government: An Evolving Relationship?

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This workshop was funded by the Academy in conjunction with the School of Politics and International Relations, Australian National University (ANU). It was convened by ASSA fellows Marian Sawyer (ANU) Patricia Grimshaw (University of Melbourne), and Judith Smart (University of Melbourne and RMIT University) and was held at the ANU on 29 and 30 November 2011.

The workshop brought together social scientists and historians, current and former senior government officials, and representatives of the currently funded women's peak bodies. The purpose was to review the current framework for engagement by women's non-government organisations (NGOs) with government on policy issues. The workshop comprised a two-day program of eight sessions, with presentations by 17 speakers, and a concluding agenda-setting session.

The workshop was opened by Senator Trish Crossin, Chair of the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee (and former Chair of the Caucus Status of Women Policy Committee), who stressed the importance of increasing the points at which the six National Women's Alliances engage actively with government. She encouraged looking beyond ministers to target relevant Caucus policy committees, including the Status of Women Policy Committee. Crossin also underlined the centrality of economic arguments in the current political environment and the value of making a well-researched business case for funding of policies aimed at redressing gender gaps.

The second session, titled 'The Women's Movement and Government' began with a paper by Marian Sawyer on how the Australian women's movement has related to successive Australian governments, including the increased corporatisation of that relationship from 1999. Today it is difficult for women's NGOs to access government except through the framework of government-supported peak bodies. These started with three in 1999, became four in 2002 thanks to successful rural women's advocacy, and grew to six with the addition of immigrant and Indigenous women's peaks when the Alliance structure was introduced in 2010.

Sawyer referred to international literature suggesting that institutionalisation and professionalisation of women's movements leads to 'feminist fading'. In Australia, as in other countries, there has been increased specialisation, diversification and professionalisation of women's movement organisations; the loss of political visibility; and the loss of interest of political parties in campaigning on women's policy platforms. She suggested that one task of the workshop was to consider whether the theory of feminist fading could be disproved in practice within the current framework. This would

require NGOs to be proactive rather than simply responding to government priorities and to be effective in providing a political base for gender equality initiatives in government.

The second speaker, Gwendolyn Gray, Convenor of the Australian Women's Health Network and Adjunct Fellow in the School of Politics and International Relations, ANU, took up this challenge with reference to the history of the women's health movement over the past two decades. Gray focused on the debates surrounding engagement or disengagement with the state, considering whether engagement has led to cooption and deradicalisation. Using a case study of recent abortion law reform in Victoria, she concluded that activists now have the skills, networks, and particularly the communication technologies, to work productively both inside and outside state institutions.

In the third session, three former senior feminist bureaucrats reflected on their experiences. Elizabeth Reid, FASSA, became women's adviser to Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1973, a global first. She was responsible for a host of innovative policies and programs and persuaded the government to fund a national consciousness-raising exercise for International Women's Year (IWY) in 1975. In another first she led the Australian delegation to the UN's World Conference on Women in Mexico City. Drawing on her papers, held in the National Library of Australia, she discussed the challenges, innovations, frustrations and overwhelming workload during her period in the prime minister's office. Like Gray, she questioned the dichotomisation of engagement and disengagement with the state but recalled the difficulties of dealing with radical feminists who challenged her right to speak or act for women. A major point of conflict was her decision to direct IWY funding to reach women not yet touched by women's liberation, rather than to women's refuges. She argued women's services should receive ongoing funding from line departments rather than one-off project funding. She nevertheless believed that radical energies were important to policy-making focused on redressing unequal power relations between men and women.

Sara Dowse was appointed in 1974 as head of the newly created Women's Affairs Section in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, becoming the first Australian 'femocrat'. She encountered bureaucratic hostility but had the sanction of the Prime Minister to monitor all Cabinet submissions and hence to assess departmental proposals for impact on women. Like Reid, she stressed the rewards as well as the problems of working cooperatively and productively with the range of women's, and the impossibility of achieving their goals through a poorly resourced unit. Her breaking point and resignation came in 1977 when the renamed Office of Women's Affairs was consigned to the low-status Department of Home Affairs. This effectively politicised the location of the Office and resulted in the Australian Labor Party's commitment to return the Office to the heart of government. Marie Coleman, Chair of the Social Policy Committee of the National Foundation for Australian Women, presented a paper focusing on her period as first woman head of a Commonwealth statutory agency. She was brought to Canberra by the Whitlam Government to head the new Social Welfare Commission. Reid and Dowse persuaded Whitlam to drop his commitment to sessional preschools (which working mothers were unable to access), enabling Labor to say in the 1974 election: 'vote for

Whitlam, he's the one with a child care policy'. As a politically skilful Director of the Office of Child Care under the Fraser Government, Coleman was able to introduce a raft of innovatory child care programs despite financial constraints.

The ensuing session turned from government perspectives to those of women's NGOs. Merrindahl Andrew, Senior Research Associate in the Mapping Australian Women's Movement project at the ANU, spoke on the involvement of the Women's Electoral Lobby in electoral politics and public policy, locating it at the reformist end of a 'continuum of radicalism'. She discussed WEL's style of political engagement from the candidate surveys of 1972 to the online party score cards of the 2000s, policy submissions, and personal connections via femocrats and feminist MPs. Victoria Grieves, ARC Indigenous Research Fellow at the University of Sydney, critically analysed the role of Aboriginal women in the diversity of women's NGOs, locating their engagement in a context of limited access to white women's organisations. Caroline Lambert, Executive Officer of YCWA Australia, examined the dual focus of YWCA advocacy, national and international, in its lobbying over the past century. Domestic campaigns ranged from the eight-hours day to the boycott of Ansett, evolving along with changes in the women's movement. The YWCA became a strong supporter of the secretariat and alliance frameworks for women's movement engagement with government, hosting the WomenSpeak network and then the Equality Rights Alliance.

On a different note, Susan Magarey, founding Director of the Research Centre for Women's Studies at Adelaide University, discussed Women's Liberation as a movement, stressing its critical attitude to the state and its ambivalence towards, and frequent reluctance, about engagement. From yet another perspective, Sue Salthouse, President of Women With Disabilities Australia (funded as a disability peak rather than from the Office for Women), spoke on the importance of direct engagement of women with disabilities in policy development. Women with disabilities are still too often excluded, or are unable to make themselves heard on matters affecting them. Finally, Marian Quartly, Monash University, delivered a paper jointly authored with Judith Smart on the National Council of Women of Australia, the peak representative body for the majority of women's organisations up until the middle of the 1970s. The paper stressed a willingness to work with governments of all political persuasions, referred to some short-term victories and long-term frustrations, but suggested the greatest political achievement was the gradual education of its own affiliates in matters of gender equality.

On the second day of the workshop, the morning sessions were focused on the six National Women's Alliances, beginning with the issues-based ones. Samiro Douglas, Director of WIRE member of the Economic Security for Women Alliance (eS4W), spoke of some of the obstacles in the way of engagement. Her particular focus was eS4W's efforts to get Australian women to identify and present submissions on key issues relating to women's life-long economic wellbeing, notably workforce participation, unpaid caring, and poverty among older women. The second presenter was Kathy Richards, Program Manager for Equality Rights Alliance (ERA), the largest of the Alliances with 56 member associations. Richards discussed the strains caused by the restrictive nature of funding agreements under the previous framework and concerns over diversity and voice.

In 2007 there was debate on how NGOs could go about reskilling and re-energising themselves to become advocates again. ERA is now conducting capacity-building workshops for all the Alliances on preparation of pre-Budget submissions, as well as preparing its own submissions to government and participating in the UN Status of Women Commission.

The third presenter was Julie Oberin, National Chairperson of WESNET, lead agency in the Australian Women Against Violence Alliance (AWAVA). She stressed that, for her, engagement with government was premised on government recognition that gender violence is both a consequence and a cause of inequity in all areas of society. Frameworks for engagement like the Alliance framework should aim to amplify rather than funnel and quieten women's voices. In the past WESNET, despite its expertise as the representative body for women's domestic violence services, had been frozen out of the policy process. It had lost operational funding, been told to join non-gender-focused peak bodies, and been given project funding with tight deadlines 'to shut it up'. A low point in the relationship with government was reached at a large domestic violence and sexual assault conference on the Gold Coast in 2001, when participants turned their backs on the then head of the Office for the Status of Women.

The following session saw presentations from the sector-based Alliances. Heather Wieland, Chair of the National Rural Women's Coalition and Network (NRWC), and National President of the Country Women's Association, described the Network's engagement with government as focusing on health, family violence, rural education and youth allowance, and communications and transport infrastructure. Future directions included expanding e-learning and leadership programs for rural, regional and remote women and working collaboratively with the other Alliances. Dot Henry, interim Chair of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Alliance, stressed the challenges facing this new alliance but emphasised that, with a paid full-time organiser (Alliance funding only covers a part-time position), NATSIWA would be capable of strong, strategic and effective policy interventions.

Finally, Anastasia Kaldi, Project Manager for the new Australian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Alliance (AIRWA), explained how AIRWA was a partnership between the new Network of Immigrant and Refugee Women of Australia and the older Women's Committee of the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia. The Network was fostered by WomenSpeak and the YWCA to replace an earlier national body that imploded after being defunded. Its State and Territory-based member organisations range from the long-established Immigrant Women's Speakout Association of NSW to more recent peaks such as the Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition of Victoria and the Multicultural Women's Advocacy Association of the ACT. It looks to the kind of capacity-building provided by ERA to build its skills for engaging with the policy process.

The next session centred on a presentation by Mairi Steele, Manager of the Women's Branch in the Office for Women (OfW). She focused on the efforts of the Office to find the right balance between government and the women's sector, including what OfW can

offer the women's movement; what the women's movement can offer OfW; and what the next steps in the relationship might include. The session was attended by both OfW branch secretaries as well as policy officers. Lively discussion from the floor raised the symbolic significance of OfW's location in FaHCSIA on the outskirts of Canberra, as well as the sunset clause on the new COAG Select Council on Women's Issues. There were reports of a lack of commitment in the political realm and remarks such as: 'What do you need gender-disaggregated data for when you have a woman Prime Minister?'

The final session saw discussion led by YCWA Executive Director Caroline Lambert on 'Where do we go from here?'. Participants included Sandra Stoddart and Patricia Hamilton of NRWC; Vivi Germanos-Koutsounadis, Chair of the AIRWA; Veronica Wensing (former Chair of the National Association of Services against Sexual Assault, now Manager of the ACT Office for Women) and Patricia Grimshaw of the University of Melbourne. Current relations with government were viewed as largely positive, although there was a need to cut back on structured work plans to leave room for the unexpected. (The Alliances are required to prepare an annual work plan with priority issues, strategies and activities and to report quarterly on 'deliverables', with evidence of outcomes.) There had also been a loss of opportunities for women's NGOs to set their own agenda, as used to happen through the Australian Women's Organisations Conference held before Ministerial Round Tables from the 1990s. These had been attended by up to 66 organisations, including 'noisy' ones. A return to such independently managed NGO meetings before regular meetings with government was a major proposal from the workshop.

Another issue identified in this session was the need to reintroduce mechanisms for integrating women's issues and gender impact assessment across government, and guidance was sought on best practice in combining effective consultation and evidence-based policy (see Outcomes, below). Strategies for strengthening the Women's Alliances and the women's movement as a whole (including renewal of relations with academics and researchers) were also canvassed. There was stress on the inadequacy of funding (especially for NATSIWA) and the need to calculate the economic value of voluntary work on which the Alliances currently depend. The extensive paperwork required by government represented a large burden for volunteers.

Positive approaches on which workshop participants agreed included: expanding capacity building in the Alliances; sharing good practice between the Alliances; joint work on the 2013 federal election strategy (ERA led a ratings exercise on party policies in the 2010 election); developing strategic partnerships with party and parliamentary committees; and demonstrating the necessity for governments to consult the Alliances on all issues relating to women and children. Among the good practices being shared were the use of the Internet to conduct research using SurveyMonkey, and reaching out to young women through websites like the ERA's 'Settle Petal'. The rural women's alliance also recommended the 'rural proofing' of policies and programs.

Outcomes

Among the specific outcomes of the workshop were:

- increasing the points at which the Alliances engage with the policy process by scheduling presentations to the ALP Caucus Status of Women Policy Committee by the six Alliances at the committee's first six meetings in 2012;
- agreement by the Office for Women to publish and make available to the Alliances the survey of international best practice in gender assessment and the model framework for gender assessment prepared by Prof. Marian Sawer and colleagues in 2010 (now available at: http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women/pubs/govtint/Pages/review_gender_assessment.aspx)
- agreement to modify current meeting arrangements for the Alliances so that a women's NGO co-ordination and planning day precedes the meetings with government; and,
- publication by the *Journal of Australian Studies* (subject to refereeing) of five of the papers presented to the workshop in a dedicated section of the journal scheduled for mid-2013.

At a more general level, the workshop brought together historical, theoretical and applied perspectives on the current framework for NGO/government engagement. It contributed to reflexivity over the processes adopted and helped put Australian practice into international perspective. It was yet another example of the fruitful collaboration between social scientists and policy practitioners promoted by the Academy.