

Insiders and Outsiders: Feminists in the Academy Influencing Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Change

Natalie Barr ¹, Maria Maley ² , and Sonia Palmieri ³ 

¹ Global Institute for Women's Leadership, Australian National University, Australia

² School of Politics and International Relations, Australian National University, Australia

³ Department of Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, Australia

Correspondence: Sonia Palmieri (sonia.palmieri@anu.edu.au)

Submitted: 29 January 2024 **Accepted:** 28 March 2024 **Published:** 24 June 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Gender Equality Reforms in Parliaments” edited by Petra Ahrens (Tampere University) and Sonia Palmieri (Australian National University), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i382>

Abstract

While the idea of a gender-sensitive parliament is over 20 years old (Childs & Palmieri, 2023), institutional reforms in the name of gender equality have been slow to materialise around the world. Where change has occurred, it appears to have been catalysed by a limited range of—sometimes confluent—factors including the public airing of allegations of sexual misconduct in the #MeToo era, the increasing salience of gender-sensitive parliament international norms, and the role of feminists in the academy. Celis and Childs (2020) identify feminist academic critical actors as those who rather than simply researching parliamentary change, explicitly undertake institutional (re)design and (re)building work (see also Childs, 2024). In this article, we uncover the work undertaken by feminists in an Australian academic institution to support the 2021 independent inquiry of the Australian Human Rights Commission into Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces. This work—undertaken by the authors as both insiders and outsiders—informed the analysis and recommendations in the Australian Human Rights Commission's report, and since its launch, has also kept pressure on the various bodies entrusted with implementing gender-sensitive changes. We argue that feminists in the academy are uniquely positioned to navigate insider and outsider roles in support of gender-sensitive parliamentary reform.

Keywords

academia; critical actors; feminism; gender equality; #MeToo; parliamentary reform

1. Introduction

From federation in 1901 until 2021, the Australian parliament implemented a select number of gender-sensitive reforms. Among these were the introduction of proxy voting for “nursing mothers” in 2008, a childcare centre which opened in the same year, changes to the (long) hours of business in the House of Representatives, and the relaxation of rules that disallowed “strangers” (such as babies and toddlers) on the floor of both parliamentary chambers. These are not insignificant reforms, but each one took years of behind-the-scenes advocacy and, importantly, was pursued as a singular change (Palmieri, 2010; Palmieri & Freidenvall, 2024). However, a code of conduct or any kind of mechanism to handle complaints of bullying and harassment allegations is notably absent from reforms in those 120 years.

Since 2022, a comprehensive suite of reforms has been steadily implemented, based on the recommendations of a report entitled *Set the Standard* (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2021). The independent inquiry that produced the report was catalysed by a public allegation of rape in a ministerial office. It received submissions from over 1,700 individuals and organisations, many of which reported incidents of serious misconduct. The ensuing report presented Australian political leaders with a substantial “case for change” and a set of measures that would establish a safer, more respectful workplace across the entire parliamentary ecosystem. By early 2024, the Australian parliament had established a Parliamentary Leadership Taskforce to oversee the implementation of the report’s 28 recommendations; passed legislative changes to the working conditions of political staff; created an independent complaints body; changed the sitting hours and parliamentary schedule to improve wellbeing, balance and flexibility; commissioned committee reports into everyday respect in the chambers; established a new independent HR body for parliamentarians and staff; and drafted new behaviour standards and codes. In 2024, work on developing an Independent Parliamentary Standards Commission continues. By any measure, this is an impressive, wholesale set of gender-sensitive parliamentary reforms.

In this article, we are interested in exploring the specific strategies employed by feminists in the academy in support of this wholesale parliamentary reform in Australia. We do this by presenting our own role in the advocacy and design of specific changes, most notably towards the code of conduct, changes to the working conditions of ministerial staff, and the operation of the parliamentary chambers. We are motivated, in part, by a desire to contribute to the increasing body of literature that seeks to understand the catalysts behind gender-sensitive procedural reforms in parliament (Childs & Palmieri, 2023; Erikson & Josefsson, 2019; Erikson & Verge, 2022a; Palmieri & Baker, 2022; Palmieri & Freidenvall, 2024). While this literature has canvassed the role of international norms and the articulation of aspirational standards and practice, as well as the role of critical individuals and acts (or “shocks”) within the institution of parliament, less work has focused on the role of outsiders to the parliamentary process, and specifically, the work of feminists in academic institutions. In making this point, we seek to extend the foundational work of Celis and Childs (2020; see also Childs, 2024) that explicitly aims to better understand the opportunities and constraints pertaining to the feminist academic critical actor when they are in a position to support (or drive) parliamentary reform, and the institution building that allows that action (or activism).

We ask two questions: What strategies do feminists in the academy employ in supporting parliamentary reform, and how do academic institutions facilitate that work? Responding to these, we build on Childs’s work to develop a typology for policy change influenced by feminists in the academy. We identify and detail

four strategies that were ultimately successful in translating knowledge to practice: (a) convening international and national gender experts and learning from those experiences to design context-appropriate solutions, (b) acting as an intermediary between knowledge holders who wish to remain anonymous and knowledge seekers, (c) working within the change instigating institution (in this case, the AHRC), and finally, (d) publicly monitoring and engaging with parliament's responses to proposed recommendations. By uncovering these strategies, we suggest that feminist academic critical actors are uniquely placed to navigate reform processes as both insiders and outsiders: As insiders, we can be drawn in to do the conceptual work of designing credible policy recommendations, even where that may not have a visible output for our everyday job; as outsiders, we can use our positions in academia to amplify the voices of those individuals who prefer to remain anonymous, usually without jeopardising our institutional reputation.

2. An Auto-Ethnographic Exploration of Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Change

In 2022, Maria publicly presented, for the first time, her work behind the scenes to reform the working conditions of Australian political staff. In the audience, Sonia was struck by three specific aspects of this work: It had hitherto been invisible, it was more than “academic research,” and it was driven by a strong feminist ethic of care for the victims of harassment and assault in the parliamentary environment. This public presentation instigated a series of private conversations among us: We knew we had all contributed, individually and collectively, to a major reform process in the Australian parliament (culminating in the implementation of the recommendations made in the *Set the Standard* report). This reform process is outlined in Table 1. We asked: To what extent did our various university roles support that work? To what extent did our university require us to undertake this work as insiders (and therefore invisibly) or as outsiders (and therefore publicly)? If careful navigation of insider and outsider roles was crucial to our ultimate impact on the process, under what conditions did the university allow us to do both?

In answering these questions, we take these initial conversations at the end of 2022 and the continued discussions in 2023 that led to the writing of this article as a form of auto-ethnography (Adams et al., 2022). This is deeply reflective and reflexive research (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2012), enabling a collective interrogation of past experiences with a view to informing future theory and practice. Topics of discussion included: our own positionality and past parliamentary and political experiences; the relationships within the policy and parliamentary ecosystem that we held in common and separately; the meaning and effectiveness of our insider and outsider roles, including in contrast to previous (failed) attempts at policy and procedural reform; and the purpose of our work, underpinned by a strong desire to see feminist, social justice outcomes. These discussions allowed us to interpret and critically examine our experience of supporting gender-sensitive parliamentary reforms in Australia. Mirroring the subject of our inquiry, we note that our research method also raises questions about “insiders” and “outsiders” (see Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013). We are investigators studying ourselves (and therefore insiders), but also investigators seeking to contribute to wider debates (outsiders). We lay no claim to objectivity necessarily; indeed, we are conscious that research objectivity norms expect us to “smuggle our knowledge...into a discourse of science that fundamentally contains, and painfully undermines, the powerful knowledge of activist feminism” (Fine, 1994, pp. 13–14).

Our research focus is singular in two ways: It is a single case study of one parliament and of feminists from one university. Single-case studies are useful when they allow an intensive analysis of one unit (in this case,

Table 1. Timeline of Australian federal parliamentary reforms, 2020–2024.

2020	<p>November:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allegations of bullying by a minister aired in the <i>Four Corners</i> program “Inside the Canberra Bubble”
2021	<p>February:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Former adviser Brittany Higgins alleges she was raped in a ministerial office • 24/7 support line created for those working in federal parliament <p>March:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government announces an Independent Review Into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces to be undertaken by AHRC • Women’s March4Justice takes place across Australia <p>June:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interim complaints body established <p>July:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global Institute for Women’s Leadership (GIWL)/Australian Political Studies Association conference proposes a code of conduct <p>September:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex Discrimination Act extended to parliamentarians and their staff <p>November:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquiry report <i>Set the Standard</i> tabled in parliament, with 28 recommendations for reform
2022	<p>February:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parliament issues apology for the “unacceptable history” of bullying, sexual harassment, and sexual assault in its workplace • A cross-party cross-chamber leadership group created to steer the implementation of the recommendations, the Parliamentary Leadership Taskforce • A Joint Select Committee on Parliamentary Standards created to develop codes of conduct for parliamentary workplaces <p>July:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes to the sitting calendar and hours <p>September:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inquiries into everyday respect in the chambers <p>October:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act
2023	<p>February:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three behaviour standards and codes endorsed by both houses of parliament <p>October:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A new HR body for parliamentarians and staff begins, the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service (an independent statutory agency headed by an independent CEO) • Members of Parliament (Staff) Act amended
2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work underway to develop an Independent Parliamentary Standards Commission, planned for October

a parliament) and then, based on that intensive analysis, generate a collection of interpretative lessons which may inform a larger group of units. While the Australian parliament is not the only one to undertake wholesale gender-sensitive reform (see Palmieri & Freidenvall, 2024), the process by which reforms were designed, implemented, and monitored has been atypical. There is much from which to learn. The singularity of our university base, however, is also noteworthy: We are all employed by the Australian National University (ANU). Maria and Sonia are academic faculty with research and teaching responsibilities, while Natalie is the chief operations officer of the GIWL. The ANU was also not the only academic institution from

which experts were sourced to contribute to the reform process. Feminists from universities in Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane also contributed. It is not immaterial, however, that the ANU is based in the country's capital, not far from the national parliament. This proximity is further indicated in our longstanding association with the parliament. All three of us have held previous positions in parliament (as either ministerial advisers or parliamentary staff). As we show below, however, the establishment of a new institute for women's leadership at the ANU also proved an important differentiator from other universities in the country.

3. Feminists, Academic Institutions, and Gender-Sensitive Parliamentary Change

For two decades, the norm of a gender-sensitive parliament has been increasingly socialised among a predominantly international community of parliaments. At the global level, good practices in gender-sensitive parliamentary reforms have been shared with national parliaments through research, resolutions, and plans of action. In essence, this normative framework encourages parliaments to have greater gender balance in their membership and leadership structures; stronger gender mainstreaming practices in their representational, legislative, and oversight work; and a gender-equal workplace culture that does not tolerate any form of sexism or otherwise discriminatory behaviour and language (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2011).

As with other policy and procedural reforms, the conceptualisation and implementation of gender-sensitive parliamentary reform have benefitted from "a continuous interplay between academics and the wider gender-sensitive parliament practitioner community" (Palmieri & Freidenvall, 2024, p. 224). While international development organisations such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association initially conceptualised and commissioned this research, they subsequently relied on academics and researchers to translate norms onto the "floors of parliament." This has essentially led to a new sub-discipline of gender and politics research, evident in dedicated panels at conferences and special issues of academic journals (e.g., Erikson & Verge, 2022b). The growth in this field has also seen the publication of toolkits organised and funded through international organisations (for UN Women, see, e.g., Childs & Palmieri, 2020).

This "symbiosis" begs the question of why and how academics have been able to contribute to gender-sensitive parliamentary reform. Woodward (2003) originally pointed to the "identity-based" grounds on which feminists in academia found their voice in policy reform more broadly. As women (and usually as political scientists), academics have found an almost natural affinity with work that seeks to change the political institutions they study, to become more gender-sensitive, inclusive, and diverse. This rings true for us in many ways: We each identify as feminists, being women who are professionally and personally compelled to advocate for gender justice, specifically (but not exclusively) in relation to women's and other marginalised groups' increased and effective political participation and leadership.

With this policy affinity, academics became a trusted corner of Woodward's (2003, p. 77) "velvet triangles" of policy change, alongside feminist bureaucrats and organised voices in the women's movement. Yet, within these triangles, feminist academics were seen to work in ways that differentiated them from bureaucrats and activists. Holli (2008, p. 174) asked whether as researchers, feminist academics were "outside helpers or an integral part of the triangle." In fact, the insider/outsider status of feminist academics, or the ability

of these gender experts to be both contributors to gender equality change but also observers and analysts of that change, has become a defining feature of *how* they work (see also Childs, 2024). It is the ability to navigate *both* outsider and insider roles that distinguishes feminists in the academy from feminist bureaucrats (nominally insiders) and movement activists (nominally outsiders).

Following her secondment to Westminster in 2016, Childs has paid considerable attention to defining and defending the specific role of “feminist critical actors inside the academy” (see also Celis & Childs, 2020; Childs & Dahlerup, 2018). For Childs (2024, p. 5), “the feminist academic critical actor not only acts directly within a political arena, they *instigate*—‘bring about’ changes by incitement or persuasion—and *institute*—set up, establish...introduce—feminist change.”

Using this definition and the idea that feminists in the academy carry out their reform work as both insiders and outsiders, we propose a typology of gender-sensitive parliamentary reform instigated and instituted by feminists in the academy. This typology (Table 2) outlines both the strategies employed to instigate and institute policy reform, as well as the mode of that activity; that is, whether a strategy is best employed as an insider, an outsider, or both. Between *instigating* and *instituting* policy reform is a spectrum of strategies that can be used by feminists in the academy. While these strategies may already be well known to the feminist policy community, we suggest that academics have particular abilities to draw attention to issues and promote reform ideas through conferences and media commentary. Their policy research also grants them respected expert status within the insider policy community. They can be influential if they choose to activate these opportunities at critical moments.

Table 2. The reform work of feminists in the academy.

Reform phase	Strategies	Activity mode	Examples
Instigating (or agenda-setting)	Strategy 1: Convening experts to design a code of conduct Strategy 2: Researching, listening to, and speaking for insiders	Outsider	Research, compiling good practice, media commentary, lobbying, bringing together feminist networks dedicated to reform
Instituting (or policy development)	Strategy 2: Researching, listening to, and speaking for insiders Strategy 3: Crafting context-appropriate policy options from the inside	Insider	Work on inquiries as consultants and meeting with key actors to craft solutions/recommendations, using evidence to build the case
Instituting (or implementation and monitoring)	Strategy 4: Monitoring, critiquing, and keeping policymakers accountable	Insider Outsider	Talking to implementers, critics, and key actors involved in decision-making and continuously persuading the decision-makers Submissions, media commentary, testifying before committees, monitoring of progress, and providing external accountability

We make a small differentiation from Childs' work in that our typology includes the work of feminist actors who work within the academy but who are not academics. These feminists are both visible and invisible. They may not seek the public profile of an academic—they will rarely speak in the media, for example—but they are still passionate about the feminist outcomes they seek to achieve. Often with experience outside academia—including in the policy institutions in need of reform—"professional staff," as they are known at the ANU, have the time and capacity to organise complex events and to oversee and project manage research and policy collaborations to ensure they are translated from academic research to tangible and time-sensitive outcomes. Professional staff collaborate with other like-minded third-party groups such as civil society groups to extend the endorsements and authority of academic work.

4. An Independent Review of Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces

Revelations of sexual harassment, misogyny, bullying, and even criminal behaviour between and among parliamentarians and political staff rocked Australia from 2020 to early 2021. Allegations of misconduct and sexual assault were widely covered in the media, most notably the case of former adviser Brittany Higgins who shared her experience in a televised interview with a prominent journalist on a commercial network in February 2021. These allegations sparked mass protests, with thousands of people across the nation calling for change. The huge public outcry was an unusual feature of Australia's reform trajectory (Sawer & Maley, 2024).

The conservative government of the day led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison was due to be tested at an election in 2022. In part as a reaction to a known "woman problem" (Johnson, 2021), Morrison asked the AHRC in March 2021 to investigate "the workplace culture" at Parliament House and to report in nine months.

The review, well-funded and conducted mostly online as a result of the lockdown restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic, was widely consultative. In a survey of people currently working in the parliamentary workplace, the review found that 37% of respondents had been bullied at work and 33% had been sexually harassed (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021, p. 106). In 456 pages, *Set the Standard* made the case for 28 recommended changes, many premised on the link between gender equality and safety and wellbeing for all parliamentary workers.

The *opportunity* (see Chappell, 2000) afforded by this inquiry to instigate wholesale gender-sensitive (and diversity-sensitive) reform in the Australian parliament was not lost on us, and we each embraced the call to pursue changes we had previously tried to see implemented or that we felt were long overdue. Institutional resistance to gender equality reforms in the Australian parliament is perhaps better characterised as "passive," in the sense that it is perpetuated through inaction and non-decision, rather than "active," outright hostility (Waylen, 2014). For this reason, as had been demonstrated in other contexts, "policy failure" was unlikely to be overcome through "isolated efforts" (Verge, 2021, p. 191); as we demonstrate below, channelling our efforts through the AHRC process proved to be key to our success. We now outline the strategies by which we were able to effect change in 2021 and 2022, both in tandem with and following the AHRC's inquiry.

5. Strategy One: Convening Experts to Design a Code of Conduct

The GIWL at the Australian National University is a leading voice on parliamentary reform in Australia through a range of timely events, advocacy, research, and media engagement. The GIWL at the Australian National University was established in 2018 as a satellite unit to that established at King's College London by Hon. Julia Gillard AC, Australia's only woman prime minister. At both King's College and ANU, GIWL has been driven by three guiding principles: Its research aims to draw together existing findings and undertake new studies, its advocacy and engagement aim to bring together experts and stakeholders from across the world, and its practice translates research into evidence-based policy, practice, and training (GIWL, 2022).

In July 2021, GIWL partnered with the Australian Political Studies Association (whose contribution was led by Emerita Professor Marian Sawer) to bring together national and international experts to develop a model code of conduct for the Parliament of Australia at the Parliament as a Gendered Workplace: Towards a New Code of Conduct conference. Over two days, leading academics, politicians, and political staffers came together at the ANU to reflect on new research on gendered norms and practices in parliamentary institutions and to look at international best practices and consider how they could be adapted for the Australian context. The timing of the conference was critical, occurring in parallel to the AHRC inquiry, aiming to bring expertise to bear on the inquiry's recommendations to the government.

GIWL's contribution to the organisation of the conference was largely led by its non-academic Chief Operations Officer Natalie who nonetheless had her own extensive contacts. Natalie was driven by her former experience of working in ministerial offices and political campaigns, knowing the context of the dysfunctional workplace well, and desiring change.

The outcome of the July 2021 workshop was the development of a formal, co-authored submission to the AHRC's inquiry. This submission was endorsed by 21 academics and experts and included a model code of conduct, released publicly and promoted by the university. The submission argued that international best practices showed what might be done in Australia to mitigate the risk of bullying, sexual harassment, and misconduct in Australian political offices. It also highlighted limitations and what ought to be avoided. The codes of conduct later endorsed by the Australian parliament in February 2023 closely reflected the model code put forward by the GIWL/Australian Political Studies Association, with clear expectations around integrity, diversity, bullying, and harassment as well as an independent mechanism to deal with breaches of the code.

Natalie played a key outsider role, drawing together a wide range of experts and stakeholders to influence the outcome of the AHRC inquiry by producing a coordinated formal submission. As a non-academic, Natalie brought her experience of working as an "insider" across a range of relevant institutions, including as a media adviser working with journalists and in think tanks understanding how to drive public engagement and interest in an issue, as a ministerial policy adviser understanding decision-making in executive government as well as the central roles of lobbyists and stakeholders in supporting reforms, and as a public servant providing advice to government and understanding how government decisions are implemented. She had led major government reviews in the public sector, bringing together the contributions of disparate panels into a formal document able to be endorsed by a diverse group.

It is noteworthy that the GIWL/Australian Political Studies Association conference was the first time we three authors worked together. We were all involved in aspects of its organisation. Maria also presented her research (Maley, 2021b), and Sonia chaired a session and facilitated the workshop that drafted the proposed code of conduct. As outsiders, we used our research (including the compilation of good practices), feminist networks, and lobbying skills to set the agenda and instigate reform. In each other, we recognised a mutual desire to see change and a belief that, in this “high stakes” but potentially “fleeting moment,” genuine change was possible.

As the institution that initially brought us all together, the role played by the GIWL at the Australian National University is significant. Previous research points to the importance of creating feminist organisations/units within universities (Verge, 2021). Being chaired by Australia’s first—and to date only—woman and feminist-identifying prime minister meant GIWL had to navigate its political relationship with parliament. While non-partisan, GIWL is an explicitly feminist academic unit with a feminist purpose to change gender equality outcomes through research, advocacy, and practice. In this sense, it is not an “ivory tower” establishment; it seeks to achieve progressive, inclusive cultural change across multiple organisations. GIWL deliberately cultivates relationships with feminist organisations and stakeholders within and outside academia. Importantly, in organising the July 2021 conference, GIWL partnered with Australian Political Studies Association, not only for funding but also for academic legitimacy. As its chief operations officer, Natalie had both the level of experience and personal networks to facilitate this work and the authority to author and act quickly on the institute’s behalf. GIWL has continued to use its feminist identity to publicly pursue gender equality change in the Australian context and around the region.

6. Strategy Two: Researching, Listening to, and Speaking for Insiders

After researching Australian political staff for many years, in 2020 Maria began tracking the movement of women into political and policy advising positions; by 2021, they occupied 40% of adviser roles and 30% of powerful chiefs of staff (see Maley, 2021a). However, Maria’s work had not yet focused on the working conditions of women in political offices.

Then, in November 2020, former media adviser Rachelle Miller went public in the national broadcaster’s *Four Corners* program “Inside the Canberra Bubble” about her sexual relationship with Minister Alan Tudge and the bullying she had experienced in ministers’ offices. Tudge was a senior minister in the Morrison government. The program also alleged predatory behaviour towards women by another minister, Christian Porter, then attorney general in the Morrison government.

After the *Four Corners* program aired, a journalist rang Maria for a comment. The following week, Maria was contacted by a political staffer who had read her comment and wanted to tell her story. It was a story of serious bullying by her MP and her chief of staff, poor working conditions, psychological and career damage, lack of redress against abusive behaviour, and powerlessness. The staffer felt it was not safe to go to the media and she did not want to damage her party. She said she chose to tell Maria her story because, in her words, “you are an academic so you can change the world.” In the febrile world of politics, female staffers were silenced by fear their complaints would be weaponised politically but trusted what they saw as an independent academic, with higher-order motivations. They also believed in academics’ potential for influence, using their public voice.

After getting ethics approval, Maria interviewed the staffer, who then contacted colleagues and friends and said they could trust Maria. By early 2021, Maria had listened to many stories, sometimes sharing tears, acknowledging the trauma and anger that had been suppressed for years. For some, she was the first person who had listened and cared. Maria realised deep problems existed in all political parties, locked behind a wall of silence. At this point in early 2021, no moment of change was on the horizon. Feeling a sense of responsibility to now act for her informants, she decided to bring their voices into the public domain.

Drawing on these stories, Maria published eight op-eds between 2020 and 2022, five in leading newspapers and two in the online platform *The Conversation*. Each piece argued strongly for reform. One article, “Why Political Staffers Are Vulnerable to Sexual Misconduct—And Little Is Done to Stop It,” was republished in 97 national, state, regional, and local newspapers across Australia in February 2021 and was discussed on ABC TV’s *Insiders* program (one of Australia’s most watched political news forums). In addition to radio and television interviews, Maria spoke with journalists around the world.

In this way, Maria acted as a bridge between staffers and the media, a safe conduit for them to speak out. Staffers wanted their stories to reach the public to bring about change. Journalists were desperate to interview staffers to humanise and understand lived experience but could not find people prepared to talk to them. As an academic, Maria could legitimately bring staffers’ stories into the public domain, keeping their identities and their parties hidden, confident in the integrity of her research interactions. Maria also organised for three women to write first-person testimonies of what happened to them and she provided those testimonies anonymously to the news site *Crikey* (<https://www.crikey.com.au>), which published them as a three-part series called “Insiders’ View.” These “real stories” were powerful in building the case for change, provoking public anger and creating moral commitment amongst politicians.

Being an academic proved beneficial in this position of “information intermediary” between the political staffers and the media. Ethical issues could be navigated through well-established human ethics protocols required by the university, as well as Maria’s personal commitment to always giving informants the opportunity to approve what was written about them (far more than a journalist will commit to). Maria’s academic status created relationships of trust with both informants and the media: Informants trusted their confidentiality would be maintained, and journalists trusted the material was authentic. Maria was driven by her feminism but also by a weight of responsibility: They had entrusted her with their stories specifically to create change on their behalf.

This work was not unnoticed by the AHRC. In 2021, Maria was employed for six weeks as a consultant to the Review, drawing on her expertise in international practice in regulating and protecting political staff employment and on her deep knowledge of the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act (the act under which political staff are employed in Australia). She also developed models for creating an independent human resources body for political staff, one of the most innovative recommendations of the AHRC report, which aims to prevent misconduct by professionalising the workplace (Sawer & Maley, 2024). Maria also wrote a submission to the inquiry. For this work, Maria is credited on the cover page of the *Set the Standard* report as having provided “expert advice and contributions to the Review.”

Maria played the role of the outsider (amplifying critical voices, keeping issues on the public agenda, and advocating for change through the media) as well as an insider role (working closely with the AHRC behind

closed doors to develop options for reform). These roles enabled Maria to “instigate” and press for reform and also to design specific reforms ultimately included in the AHRC report, or in Childs’ (2024) terms, to “institute reform.”

7. Strategy Three: Crafting Context-Appropriate Policy Options From the Inside

In September 2021—two months before the AHRC was due to table its report—Sonia was seconded to the Commission to support the writing of two specific sections relating to diversity and inclusion and work environments that foster safety and well-being. A key reason Sonia was asked to work on the report was to feed international comparisons and good practices on gender-sensitive parliaments directly into the report. Sonia was known to have those comparisons ready to hand having made a career of researching and compiling these for international organisations (see Childs & Palmieri, 2023). Sonia also had a previous working relationship with the Review director; they had both worked for UN Women at the time of the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action. The speed with which the secondment was offered and accepted (a matter of days, in fact) is explained by that relationship, as well as the relative flexibility of an academic role, enabling Sonia to pivot from what she was doing to work for the AHRC as it raced towards its November reporting deadline. While Sonia did have impending intensive teaching commitments, she argued the case with her supervisor that she could fit this work into her schedule.

For three weeks, Sonia became part of the team that produced the final report. This team worked remotely in the throes of lockdowns in Sydney and Canberra. They worked long and irregular hours, over and above normal working hours, many with families at home, evidenced in the occasional Zoom meeting attended by children. A secondment—even one as short as this—affords a feminist academic the ultimate “insider” role; in this case, Sonia became privy to the confidential transcripts of hundreds of interviews and focus group discussions with research participants conducted over the course of the inquiry, including senior parliamentarians and political and parliamentary officers. This access came with a signed confidentiality and non-disclosure agreement.

Sonia was tasked with helping the review team build a “case for change” by linking safety and well-being to gender equality. This was persuasion work, weaving together the international good practice of gender-sensitive parliament, national good practice in diversity targets and other measures, and analysing qualitative and quantitative evidence collected through the inquiry to make a credible argument for change. As noted, Sonia knew the international examples well, having written two reports on gender-sensitive parliament (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2011; OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2021). The domestic case was developed collaboratively with colleagues in the task force who had worked for Australian government agencies. Trawling through the confidential stories of assault and harassment, however, provided the most compelling evidence for change. Some of these stories were not new to Sonia given her prior experience as a parliamentary staffer; others were deeply disturbing. In contrast to Maria, Sonia was not able to share what she learned publicly; these stories and this evidence would never inform her own research. Rather, the analysis contributed to sections of the report relating to diversity and equality, as well as conduct in the parliamentary chambers, and the drafting of seven (of 28) recommendations. Like Maria, Sonia was credited on the cover page of the report as having provided “expert advice and contributions to the Review.” Like Maria, Sonia was able to use her insider role to institute specific reforms—that is, design recommendations that were ultimately accepted by the parliament.

Sonia was driven by the opportunity to effect meaningful change in her own national context. As a parliamentary staffer in the early 2000s, Sonia had felt powerless to instigate gender-sensitive change; in fact, as an inquiry secretary to the House of Representatives Procedure Committee, she had drafted a report that decided *not* to implement proxy voting for women with infants and small children (this was later implemented as a consequence of a change in government, also described as an “exogenous shock”; see Palmieri & Freidenvall, 2024).

8. Strategy Four: Monitoring, Critiquing, and Keeping Policymakers Accountable

Our individual and collective work did not end with the release of the *Set the Standard* report in November 2021. All of us engaged in extensive media outreach. Rather than having to pitch our ideas to news outlets, we were sought out to give interviews and write commentary. While Maria could publicly speak to insider accounts, Sonia kept her media commentary to the publicly released recommendations that were in her area of expertise.

Our continued engagement also involved social media monitoring and personal appearances at parliamentary committee hearings. Natalie created an advocacy campaign around the progress of recommendation implementation during the 2022 federal election campaign, tweeting about one of the 28 recommendations of the Review each day during the election campaign period and highlighting the need for an incoming government to commit to full implementation. As a result of this sustained advocacy, GIWL staff were invited to meet with the Parliamentary Leadership Taskforce responsible for oversight of the recommendations and the head of the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service. Maria also met with these actors and with the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet staff, who were leading the implementation process.

We all appeared before the Joint Select Committee on Parliamentary Standards, established to develop a proposed code of conduct, following detailed, evidence-based, and well-received submissions to the committee. In addition, Maria made two submissions to the 2021 Members of Parliament (Staff) Act Review. Her recommendations were discussed in the *Members of Parliament (Staff) Act Review Report*. Maria wrote to the Parliamentary Leadership Taskforce critiquing the proposed amendments to the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act. She also briefed several other MPs and senators about the amendments which she argued did not go far enough and she provided them with evidence and arguments to use in their own critical submissions.

Further to her submission to the Parliamentary Standards Committee, Sonia made a submission to the House of Representatives Procedure Committee’s inquiry into recommendations 10 and 27 of the *Set the Standard* report and subsequently appeared as a witness. The committee’s report is largely an endorsement of her submission: The committee has accepted her key recommendation to amend the standing orders to outlaw sexist, racist, homophobic, and otherwise exclusionary language and determine procedures by which the chair would deal with breaches of the proposed rule.

Our insider and outsider work instructed reforms as they unfolded in the critical implementation phase. Writing formal submissions, testifying before committees, and engaging with the media aimed to influence from the outside and to hold reformers publicly accountable. Private consultations with key actors, including providing them with evidence to make their own arguments for new policies, procedures, and institutions, are examples of insider activity.

9. Reflections and Conclusions

This article provides a case study of the work of feminist critical actors in the academy, noting that not all were academic staff. Compared to other Westminster nations, Australia was slow to start reforming its federal parliamentary workplace in the wake of the #MeToo movement. However, when the reform process began in 2021, it unfolded rapidly and dramatically. We took the opportunities for influence that arose from an unprecedented period characterised by a strong momentum for change and a collective push to create new standards regimes. Our actions provide examples of feminist academic critical actors at work both from the outside and as insiders. We brought deep knowledge, personal experience, and a strong commitment to the reforms. In conclusion, we relate our experiences to the specific conditions afforded us by working in an academic institution.

9.1. Taking Advantage of a Critical Moment

Given our previous experiences in ministerial and parliamentary offices, we recognised that the critical moment created by events in early 2021 was unique and powerful. Following serious allegations of misconduct in the parliament, the government—perceived to have an electorally salient “woman problem” *in an election year*—tasked an external statutory authority, which it could not control, to run a comprehensive inquiry into parliamentary workplaces. As feminists in an academic institution, we seized the opportunity presented by this moment of change when existing power dynamics and arrangements—long considered gender insensitive, unequal, and unsafe—were destabilised and questioned. We took advantage of the flexibility of our workplace—and indeed, the additional “flexibility” of the pandemic’s lockdowns—to accommodate this work.

9.2. Working in Multiple Modes: Insiders and Outsiders, Instigating and Instituting

In that critical moment, we used what we had—our voice, our research, our networks—to both instigate and institute specific changes, changes that we had known were needed for some time. We varied our mode of engagement at different stages of the reform process. In the early phases, our “outsider” work in the media helped to create and sustain momentum for reform, set the agenda, amplify voices, and allow staffers to be heard. Another outsider role was coordinating actors, expertise, and ideas in a conference to influence the inquiry process while it was underway. As outsiders, we corralled our feminist networks to identify solutions that would work in the Australian context and presented these as a collaborative effort to the inquiry. We can act in the moment, of course, because we have built credibility from our previous research, connections, and experience. We suggest it takes time and commitment over many years to be in the position to influence reform through the weight of our expertise and the value of our relationships. In the Australian case, instigating reforms took advantage of a critical moment, but was a long time in the making.

During the inquiry process, Maria and Sonia were formally drawn in as insiders, working closely with AHRC staff in crafting parts of the review report and its recommendations. This was instituting work in the sense that as insiders we were able to *design* reforms. In the implementation phase, when the report’s recommendations were handed to various bodies to enact, we again played outsider roles. We reinforced the recommendations through our testimony and media work, aiming to persuade various policymakers of the merits of the reforms. We maintained pressure for real change to occur, at times by critiquing the work

of the implementers or presenting further advice on the workability of recommendations. For example, following Maria's strong critique of the Members of Parliament (Staff) Act Review recommendations, published in the media, independent MPs raised concerns. Following Sonia's public conversation with the Procedure Committee, the speaker's role in establishing an inclusive culture in the House of Representatives was further refined. Our sustained efforts in this phase also included being consulted privately by some inside actors when decisions were being made. In this phase, both as outsiders and insiders, our instituting work was focused on monitoring progress; we continued to critique policymakers and hold them to account as they implemented recommendations.

9.3. Feminist Policy Activism in Academia: Legitimate Work?

Feminists in academic institutions can be actors within the agenda-setting (instigating) and reform-design and monitoring (instituting) process precisely because they often can pivot from what they are working on to take advantage of the critical moment offered. When asked to convene a workshop, prepare background briefings, or take on a secondment, we do so because we understand and value the opportunity to make a difference. For each of us, there was something compelling in the opportunity to effect meaningful change at a time when there was appetite in the government and Australian society broadly.

However, we must be prepared to divert attention from our everyday work and invest significant resources. The opportunity provided by the status and role of the academic is to be able to devote time when it is needed and to take normative positions in public based on their expertise and be heard (and sometimes responded to by key actors). Sustained research and attention over time to the details of policy are required to have an authoritative understanding and to be an authoritative voice which is recognised by public servants, journalists, politicians, and other stakeholders. This authoritative voice can be used to not only advance ideas and influence agendas but also to hold reformers accountable for their work. Making critical commentary in the media from a position of expertise can be powerful.

Yet taking normative positions publicly can be risky for our academic, institutional, and personal reputations. We note that not all our academic colleagues agree that we should be taking such normative positions, but our feminist identity drives our motivation to support policy change. Being critical publicly can also be risky if we want to remain trusted interlocutors with key government actors and agencies, some of which fund our work.

The time and sustained effort involved in writing submissions, testifying before committees, and working on inquiries is time that is lost from academic publication writing and teaching—principal academic outputs. Submissions and other contributions to reform are generally not counted or valued in the output metrics which govern our employment. The impact of the work of feminist critical actors is rarely acknowledged as a form of achievement in academia. A downside of insider work (such as secondment to work on inquiry reports) is that the extent of influence of the feminist academic is not obvious to others, even when it may be extensive. In fact, sharing this work in academic circles is one of the few strategies we have to render visible that which has been invisible work.

Academic institutions—and in our case, the ANU and the GIWL—afford feminists important opportunities to engage with policy work which can be recognised through the professional lens of “impact.” However, there are other kinds of recognition. In 2022, when major reforms were unfolding, the staffer who first contacted

Maria emailed to say that her decision to reach out to an academic was “the most powerful thing I have ever done—I achieved so much.”

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Sarah Childs, the anonymous peer reviewers, and the participants of the workshop facilitated by Petra Ahrens in late 2023 at Tampere University, for their constructive feedback and suggestions on this article. We also take this opportunity to acknowledge the work of the wider Australian feminist community in their ongoing support for gender-equality-focused parliamentary reform.

Funding

The authors acknowledge the support of the Australian National University in funding the publication of this article.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- Adams, T. E., Holman Jones, S., & Ellis, C. (Eds.). (2022). *Handbook of autoethnography* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Australian Human Rights Commission. (2021). *Set the standard: Report on the Independent Review Into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces*. <https://humanrights.gov.au/set-standard-2021>
- Celis, K., & Childs, S. (2020). *Feminist democratic representation*. Oxford University Press.
- Chappell, L. (2000). Interacting with the state: Feminist strategies and political opportunities. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 2(2), 244–275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740050137456>
- Childs, S. (2024). Gender sensitizing parliaments: Reflections on becoming a feminist academic critical actor. *Politics and Governance*, 12, Article 8045. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.8045>
- Childs, S., & Dahlerup, D. (2018). Increasing women’s descriptive representation in national parliaments: The involvement and impact of gender and politics scholars. *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 1(1/2), 185–204. <https://doi.org/10.1332/251510818X15272520831094>
- Childs, S., & Palmieri, S. (2020). *A primer for parliamentary action: Gender sensitive responses to Covid-19*. UN Women.
- Childs, S., & Palmieri, S. (2023). Gender-sensitive parliaments: Feminising formal political institutions. In M. Sawyer, L. Banaszak, J. True, & J. Kantola (Eds.), *Handbook of feminist governance* (pp. 174–188). Edward Elgar.
- Erikson, J., & Josefsson, C. (2019). The legislature as a gendered workplace: Exploring members of parliament’s experiences of working in the Swedish parliament. *International Political Science Review*, 40, 197–214.
- Erikson, J., & Verge, T. (2022a). Gender, power and privilege in the parliamentary workplace. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 75(1), 1–19.
- Erikson, J., & Verge, T. (Eds.). (2022b). Parliaments as workplaces: Gendered approaches to the study of legislatures [Special issue]. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 75(1).
- Fine, M. (1994). Dis-stance and other stances: Negotiations of power inside feminist research. In A. D. Gitlin (Ed.), *Power and method: Political activism and educational research* (pp. 13–35). Routledge.
- Global Institute for Women’s Leadership. (2022). *Global Institute for Women’s Leadership*. <https://giwl.anu.edu.au>
- Hesse-Biber, S., & Piatelli, D. (2012). The feminist practice of holistic reflexivity. In S. Hesse-Biber (Ed.), *Handbook of feminist research: Theory and praxis* (pp. 557–582). SAGE.

- Holli, A. M. (2008). Feminist triangles: A conceptual analysis. *Representation*, 44(2), 169–185. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344890802080407>
- Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2011). *Gender-sensitive parliaments: A global review of good practice* (Reports and Document No. 65).
- Johnson, C. (2021, March 24). In harm's way. *Inside Story*. <https://insidestory.org.au/in-harms-way>
- Maley, M. (2021a). The powers and perils of women in ministers' offices. In K. Lee-Koo & Z. Ghazarian (Eds.), *Gender politics: Navigating political leadership in Australia* (pp. 85–97). UNSW Press.
- Maley, M. (2021b). Problematic working conditions for female political staffers: What can be done? *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 36(2), 54–69.
- OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. (2021). *Realizing gender equality in parliament: A guide for parliaments in the OSCE region*. OSCE. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/506885>
- Palmieri, S. (2010). *Gender mainstreaming in the Australian parliament: Achievement with room for improvement*. ANU Parliamentary Studies Centre.
- Palmieri, S., & Baker, K. (2022). Localising global norms: The case of family-friendly parliaments. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 75(1), 58–75. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsaa050>
- Palmieri, S., & Freidenvall, L. (2024). Critical culture: The role of institutional norms in gender sensitising parliaments. In J. Erikson & L. Freidenvall (Eds.), *Suffrage and its legacy in the Nordics and beyond* (pp. 221–245). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sawer, M., & Maley, M. (2024). *Toxic parliaments—And what can be done about them*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Verge, T. (2021). Gender equality policy and universities: Feminist strategic alliances to re-gender the curriculum. *Journal of Women, Politics and Policy*, 42(3), 191–206.
- Waylen, G. (2014). Informal institutions, institutional change, and gender equality. *Political Research Quarterly*, 67(1), 212–223. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912913510360>
- Wilkinson, S., & Kitzinger, C. (2013). Representing our own experience: Issues in “insider” research. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 37(2), 251–255. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684313483111>
- Woodward, A. (2003). Building velvet triangles: Gender and informal governance. In T. Christiansen & S. Piattoni (Eds.), *Informal governance in the European Union* (pp. 76–93). Edward Elgar.

About the Authors



Natalie Barr is the chief operations officer at the Global Institute for Women's Leadership at the Australian National University. She worked as a ministerial adviser from 2007 to 2010 and was a senior policy analyst at the HC Coombs Policy Forum in 2011, before spending over a decade as an executive within the Australian Public Service. She holds an honours degree in political science from the Australian National University.



Maria Maley is a senior lecturer in the School of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University. She publishes research about political advisers and ministerial staff, gender and political leadership, politicisation, and the public service. In 2022, she was awarded the Marian Simms Policy Engagement Award by the Australian Political Studies Association for outstanding achievement, innovation, and creativity in research impact and policy engagement in the discipline of political science. She is the author of *Toxic Parliaments—And What Can Be Done About Them* (2024, with Marian Sawer).



Sonia Palmieri is an associate professor and head of the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University. For 20 years, she has worked across academic, international development, and parliamentary agencies in support of gender-sensitive parliaments. She is the author of the IPU's (2011) *Gender-Sensitive Parliaments: A Global Review of Good Practice* and the OSCE ODIHR's (2021) *Realizing Gender Equality in Parliament: A Guide for Parliaments in the OSCE Region*.