

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46042-2 - Living Feminism: The Impact of the Women's Movement on Three Generations of Australian Women

Chilla Bulbeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

In 'The Blank Page', Isak Dinesen tells of a Spanish convent where framed wedding night sheets of aristocratic marriages hang on the walls. The blood on the sheets signals the virginal repudiate of princesses. But there is one sheet which is a blank page:

It is in front of this piece of pure white linen that the old princesses of Portugal – worldly wise, dutiful, long-suffering queens, wives and mothers – and their noble old playmates, bridesmaids and maids-of-honor have most often stood still.

It is in front of the blank page that old and young nuns, with the Mother Abbess herself, sink into deepest thought. (Dinesen 1957:105)

Sidonie Smith (1993:2–3) suggests that while these sheets are 'signatures of cultural expectations', the stories are not written by the princesses themselves. Rather, women's stories are written from their bodies, 'their bodies have expelled them'. In writing from their bodies, women comply with the cultural expectations of femininity – like being chaste on marriage – and unswervingly follow a biological destiny, to marry and have children. But even in this past time, not all women followed their destinies; one princess is represented by an unmarked sheet. Because her page is blank, the obvious implication is that she has even less to say than those who have followed their expected paths. However, the blankness of her page conjures up questions for all who see it. As I read this story, I wondered what those questions might be. Did this princess, in fact, not marry at all, but became a writer or traveller or Mother Abbess in another convent? If this is indeed her wedding sheet, what does it suggest of her parents and husband that they would permit a blank sheet to hang on the walls of the convent? Did her parents love and nurture a rebellious tomboy and encourage her to read and write? Did her

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46042-2 - Living Feminism: The Impact of the Women's Movement on Three Generations of Australian Women

Chilla Bulbeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

husband acknowledge a woman of difference and encourage her talents?

According to Smith (1993:3), in the blank space 'woman's autobiographical fabrication becomes possible'. However, western women's lives are no longer blank pages on which others may write their stories. In Australia there has been a white feminist movement at least since the last decades of the nineteenth century. Even so, in the 1990s we are still apt to hear some feminist stories more often than others. Our understanding of the women's liberation movement has largely come to us through the women who 'made' it happen. These are women like Anne Summers, who went on from her pathbreaking honours thesis to turn a doctoral thesis into the best-selling book, *Damned Whores and God's Police*. She has worked as a journalist and editor both in Australia and the United States, and was Prime Minister Paul Keating's advisor in the 1993 federal election. Germaine Greer, the errant daughter of Australian feminism, wrote *The Female Eunuch* which became almost synonymous with women's liberation, even as the growing handful of Australian feminists repudiated her and her works. Women's liberation spawned femocracy and academic feminism; its denizens have not been tardy in telling their stories. But what of those women who have not as yet told their tales? This book explores the question: 'What has the women's movement meant to women who were not at its helm?' Despite the growing number of texts on the history of post-war feminism, there is still a blank page in women's experiences on which to write the significant or telling tales of those who experienced but do not claim to have made the women's movement.

Just as the princess whose sheet disrupts cultural expectations provokes our questions about how she made her life different, a key issue for this book is how women made their lives anew. How did they find paths which were other than those they and their parents had anticipated as they grew up? How did they diverge from what their husbands expected of them? How did they live askew from the dominant cultural expectations around them? This book explores the impact on so-called 'ordinary' women's lives of the women's movement, both in terms of the institutional possibilities and the changing perceptions of what it meant to be a woman which were opened up by feminism. These women's lives are influenced by equal employment opportunity in the workplace, gender inclusive curriculum in schools, mature-age entry in universities, supporting parents' pensions so women can choose to leave violent and unsatisfactory marriages, domestic violence protection orders so that such choices do not threaten their lives, cultural contributions like films, magazine articles and women's studies courses which say there are many acceptable ways to be a woman.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46042-2 - Living Feminism: The Impact of the Women's Movement on Three Generations of Australian Women

Chilla Bulbeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

3

Women responded differently to these opportunities and challenges. Those differences were a result of their own generational position, whether grandmother, mother or daughter; their resources and upbringing, which often had much to do with ethnicity and class; the trajectory of their lives, which meant they might live in a capital city or a country town. Ultimately, women also brought their own individual personalities to these possibilities, some of them overcoming enormous structural and situational impediments in the process. Thus, every woman has her unique story to write on the blank page, even as that story is framed by the cultural expectations of her time and the challenges to those expectations from feminism and other social movements. This book tells sixty of those stories, and sometimes only fragments of the stories. But in that telling, it reveals many experiences were shared by more than one woman, that in the 1970s and the 1980s the women's movement and the movement of women intersected in domestic spaces, educational institutions and working environments.

The Study

It is through the tales of ordinary women that a conundrum of feminism can be explored. On the one hand are celebratory claims that women have achieved 'new identities and a new consciousness', that Australia has become a different country – 'tolerant, multicultural, more feminist', that 'feminism is easily the most important thing to have happened in the twentieth century', that the redefinition of gender roles 'has had the most impact on the Australian way of life'.¹ Feminist issues appear so entrenched as to make it on to bestseller book lists (*Generation f* and *DIY Feminism* were ranked in the top ten best sellers in October 1996) and to have found a place in the popular media, even *Who Weekly* which carries stories of celebrities' lives. In an article on 'The 25 most intriguing people of 1995', alongside media, sporting and business personalities, readers were offered Aung San Suu Kyi (Nobel Prize winning democracy campaigner in Burma), politician Carmen Lawrence (described as 'bearing the "additional pressure and honour" of being a role model for women' during the Easton affair) and Helen Garner, author of *The First Stone*, a book to which we will return (*Who Weekly*, 1 January 1996:48–91).

However, this portrait of feminism's success story is questioned in letters to the editor from Marina Bassham and Lauren Ayers in the 9 October 1995 edition of *Who Weekly*. Feminists blame 'men for all the wrongs that happen in life' and don't 'let men and women live their own lives how they want to live them'. However, Lauren Ayers, while 'sick to death of feminists', described herself as 'a firm believer in equality' and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46042-2 - Living Feminism: The Impact of the Women's Movement on Three Generations of Australian Women

Chilla Bulbeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

choice, claiming a woman should be whatever she 'wants', whether doctor or housewife. These letters capture both the victory and defeat of the women's liberation movement in Australia. While feminism is often linked to the issues over which it has campaigned, like spousal abuse and equal opportunities, feminism is less likely to be applauded for making a positive contribution in raising these issues and changing women's lives. 'Feminist' does not stand for what women accept but what they see as radical. Thus, feminists are not for 'equality' and 'choice', but are 'taking it too far' according to Lauren Ayers. Feminists are man-haters, radicals, lesbians, bra-burners.

Women whose thought-power, like that of mountain streams, is of little effect alone but which, when run into a general river of purpose, can potentially aid in turning the wheel of time, to grind out a new era. (Louisa Lawson in 1889 in Scutt 1991:xviii)

In talking to the women who participated in this book's project, I discovered a similar ambivalence, at least among those who do not call themselves feminists. Every woman with whom I spoke had something positive to say about the gains of the women's movement, although these were mostly expressed in terms of equal employment and educational opportunities. But a number also thought that feminists are 'taking it too far', for example, in endorsing quotas of women in winnable parliamentary seats or in sexual harassment legislation. In a decade's time these issues may be part of the accepted landscape of equal rights, while other issues will be the mark of the 'radical' feminist. Perhaps, however, in their struggle to 'grind out a new era' feminists meet more resistance for some proposals than others. These issues will be pursued in Part II and the Conclusion, where women's responses to the women's movement are discussed.

Furthermore, while writers like Summers celebrate the gains of the women's movement, others are anxiously pondering a backlash, an idea made popular by Susan Faludi (1991) writing about the situation in the United States. Faludi claims men have beaten back women's gains with increased levels of violence against women, increasingly violent pornography and films, reversals of affirmative action decisions, and repressive and controlling images of women in much of the media. Although Beatrice Faust (1994) disputes evidence of a backlash in Australia, there are signs that women's gains have stalled. While women's educational participation rates now exceed those of men and women's workforce participation rate is approaching that of men, women are far more likely to work part-time and in the lower reaches of the workforce. Women may now earn 83 per cent of men's hourly rates, but their average annual earnings are only 60 per cent of men's (Australian Bureau of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46042-2 - Living Feminism: The Impact of the Women's Movement on Three Generations of Australian Women

Chilla Bulbeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

5

Statistics 1993a:179).² It is claimed that women hit a 'glass ceiling' when they reach a certain point in management hierarchies. Women still do more than half the unpaid housework and caring for others.

Women would appear to be exposed to just as much violence as they were thirty years ago, if not more. It has been suggested that the rate of sexual assault in Australia is higher than in any other country except the United States (Evans 1992:198), that in the 1970s Australia had 'the highest incidence of recorded gang rape in the world' (McFerren 1990:193) and the rate of pack rape still remains higher than in Britain or the United States (Looker 1994:217–18). Thus, legal changes in the treatment of sexual harassment, rape, sexual assault and domestic violence have had little impact on the culture of violence in Australian society. Women's liberation has not changed markedly the widespread acceptance that aggression is a component of masculinity; male aggression may even have risen in a backlash against women's increased economic independence.

The return to work in the 1950s and 1960s of married women, prompted by smaller family sizes and an expanding economy, preceded the efflorescence of women's liberation. Kaplan (1996:20) notes that these were disproportionately immigrant, not Australian-born, women. Despite feminism, women continue to be disadvantaged in the workforce. They experience both continuing workplace discrimination and still bear the major burden of caring for dependants, largely children but increasingly aged or invalid relatives.³ Women's entry into the workforce left them holding the baby as well as a wage packet, the 'double shift' as it was soon termed.

For more than a century Australian governments and unions have disrupted 'free market' decisions to support collective wage bargaining by workers, to ban dangerous goods, to ensure a basic standard of living, to enhance our sense that we belong to a shared national community. Since the 1980s, however, economic rationalism has become entrenched as the dominant government ideology; its full blossoming is promised under the Howard government. To economic rationalists, free markets make the correct decisions about what people and resources are worth, even if these decisions mean the lowest wage paid is below a living wage. Government intervention is seen as inefficient, because governments do not base decisions purely on notions of cost efficiency, but also respond to the needs of people who do not necessarily have money to finance their needs.

In an economic rationalist environment women's capacities to ensure adequate recognition for their labour will be worked out within enterprise bargaining or individual contracts with employers. The relative incomes of weaker and under-represented workers, which includes women, are almost certain to decrease where arbitration and unions do

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46042-2 - Living Feminism: The Impact of the Women's Movement on Three Generations of Australian Women

Chilla Bulbeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

not support the claims of all workers. But women in work are relatively fortunate. Those relying on pensions are likely to be squeezed even further, as economic rationalists call for smaller government and balanced budgets. Women continue to make up the bulk of the poor, particularly as the young and homeless (often forced on to the streets by sexual abuse), and as supporting parents or aged pensioners.

From this it can be seen that feminism appears to be something of a curate's egg, successful in parts, or perhaps useful for some women but not others. Indeed, one of the most vitriolic and long-lasting debates within feminist scholarship contests whether feminism has served largely white middle-class women or also responds to the needs of working-class and other marginalised women.⁴ This book explores how the women's movement has affected the educational outcomes, occupational success, family experiences and sense of self for women whose stories have been relatively neglected or for whom it has been claimed that feminism has had little value. These are women about whom it is sometimes said that feminism has been marginal or marginalising, women from non-English speaking backgrounds, Indigenous Australian women, women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and women who do not live in capital cities. The women with whom I spoke are not the 'famous' makers of women's liberation, although a few have been active in the women's movement. Some are feminist fellow-travellers, but most do not call themselves feminist. The focus on women who are not 'notable'⁵ distinguishes this project from the plethora of short autobiographies written by women, now amounting to over five hundred stories.⁶

Methodology

While the appendixes contain some statistical data which frame the experiences of the sixty women with whom I spoke, the methodology employed in this book is qualitative rather than quantitative. The raw 'data' are sixty life histories told to me by women living in an arc from Cairns to Adelaide. In asking women to tell their life stories, one is not searching for an 'objective truth' or a mere description of past events. Rather, life histories aim for an understanding of the meaning people ascribe to their lives (Glucksmann 1994:159). In the life histories, women explored how their understandings of the world had changed, while also relating their understandings to wider social relations, to experiences of family, education and work, for example. The method used differs from the life history approach by relating interview material to 'prior analysis of the social structure involved' (Connell 1992:739), and forging a 'link between an individual life and the social and economic structures which shape that life' (Watson 1994:26–7; see also

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46042-2 - Living Feminism: The Impact of the Women's Movement on Three Generations of Australian Women

Chilla Bulbeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

7

Shaw 1989:89). This method, described as 'socially theorised life history', identifies a role for social theory in interpreting the interview material. For men who live alternative versions of masculinity, a key aspect of their life path is their engagement with, and response to, the dominant versions of masculinity. For example, gay men experienced an early engagement with heterosexual masculinity but forged their alternative masculinity in the collective practices of a gay community (Connell 1992:747).

However, the theorised life history method poses a hoary dilemma for researchers. If researchers merely relay women's experience there is no room for our input, our training in the constraints imposed by social structures or meanings embedded in cultural texts (Reinharz 1992a:26–31). On the other hand, to assert the superiority of our interpretation comes close to asserting that 'we' have access to the objective truth and 'they' – non-academic or non-feminist women – have 'false consciousness'. One answer to this dilemma is to point out that there are many views of the world, and these views quite clearly influence what we choose to research and how we decide to go about it. Thus, I asked women to tell their life histories from a perspective framed by the claims of feminist writers concerning how women's lives had changed since the 1950s.

Furthermore, if we propose to demur from those we interview, perhaps we should offer them our interpretations for their comment (Borland 1991:73; Middleton 1993:71,74; Billson 1991:212). I sent transcripts of our discussion to the women with whom I spoke, asking for corrections and comments. By allowing a space for reflection and editing, this method encouraged frankness at the point of narration. However, on reflection, a number of respondents made themselves appear less racist, less critical or less confused than their transcript might have suggested. While this seems to imply a loss of 'authentic' data, I suspect that if I had not offered the chance to edit transcripts I would not even have glimpsed this personal self who, on reflection, women displaced for a more public self.

Secondly, by sending her extracts from the first draft of the book manuscript, I offered each narrator an opportunity to respond to my (mis)interpretations of her story, how I had used her experiences to buttress my theoretical project. For example, Sullivan (1994:268) had 'not noticed' the theoretical problems in many feminist accounts of prostitution, despite reading them for several years, until 'forced to deal with the angry responses of sex workers'. Through the lens of their anger, Sullivan could see the ways in which feminist theorists 'disparage both sex work and sex workers'. As a result, Sullivan advocated that feminist theorists be both 'respectful of what prostitutes do and yet

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46042-2 - Living Feminism: The Impact of the Women's Movement on Three Generations of Australian Women

Chilla Bulbeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

maintain a focus on gendered structures of power in all work and personal relations'. Interestingly, my respondents maintained a firm sense of their role: to tell their stories and correct any mistakes rather than to offer alternative interpretations. However, this method of response did allow one of the women with whom I spoke, Rita, to finally explain why our discussion had been so unproductive. She had felt 'interrogated' at our first interview, there being 'no connection between you and I'. At Rita's request, I returned eighteen months later to again record her story. During the interviews, and contra some feminist methodology prescriptions, I found that the women with whom I spoke were usually impatient if I offered aspects of my own life story, although I answered any questions they asked. They understood the interview as an 'unnatural conversation' (Lyons-Lee and Collins 1995:7) in which they were given the opportunity to tell their story rather than hear mine (see also Middleton 1993:79).

Reflecting on women's writing in Australia up to the 1980s, Joy Hooton (1990:89) suggests men tend to tell their life histories as a teleological unfolding of events towards one's destiny, as 'a journey to one's current place' (Connell 1992:746), with a focus on individual struggle and achievement rather than structural barriers and frameworks. For women, however, 'it is the process of living that is foregrounded', rather than the achievement or destiny. Many of the women with whom I spoke revealed conflict and uncertainty in their life histories. A number noted paths glimpsed and not followed, either because circumstances (structures) prevented them or because their self-definition as a woman precluded that path. As mothers, they might understand their obligations to do certain things; as women of ideas they might yearn for another life. Once her children were grown, Berenice's mother began to recover herself as an artist. Women could also discern contradictions in their lives, but tolerated these. Rita, while arguing for a form of female power that was loving rather than aggressive, went on to say: 'And, I think, to some extent this is contradicting maybe what I just said, the woman has to have a certain aggression to survive, you know, because the woman's role is very demanding today'.

The stories women told me reveal the effects of the double hermeneutic, that what researchers discover about the world can frame everyday understandings. Such reverberations of feminist ideas in daily speech should give feminists pleasure, while also reducing the problem of imposing the label of false consciousness on those women we 'research'. This is not to suggest that communication problems never occur when speaking with women who are not feminist. I tried to answer honestly all questions put to me, if at times, briefly. Dishonesty is less likely to achieve empathy than a 'respectful distance' (Reinharz 1992:67)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46042-2 - Living Feminism: The Impact of the Women's Movement on Three Generations of Australian Women

Chilla Bulbeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

9

which attempts to understand the reasons for disagreement. As an example, when Myra told me about a woman who became a single parent, I asked: 'So you think that, given she didn't find someone to marry, she shouldn't have had a baby?' Myra replied: 'Mmm, I do, especially at that age too . . . But you might not agree with that?' In my response, I noted the problem of the double shift for women, suggesting that this might be an undesirable outcome of feminism. Myra responded: 'Thanks for saying that because that's true. It's good that you can sort of come and say that too'. However, my response to Myra was not the response I would give a feminist colleague. As Myriam Glucksmann (1994:162) suggests, we play roles to secure interviews. But a role is not necessarily a lie – in our daily lives we play a multiplicity of roles, such as commuter, work colleague, lover.

Women encounter prescriptions for ideal behaviour in their family, among their friends, in cultural representations like books and the media, at school and university. Their capacity to choose between future options, for example, various combinations of work and motherhood, will depend on their education, their control over their own bodies, the work sites to which they have access. I asked the women with whom I spoke to talk about their family of origin, their experiences of education (both as girls and later in life), their work experiences and their lives as wives and mothers.⁷ Within each of these arenas, I looked for signs of difference or discrimination in their treatment as girls or women. Examples included how housework was allocated in families, parents' career aspirations for daughters and sons, discrimination at work. I asked about their experiences as wives, mothers and lesbians and how these roles intersected or clashed with other roles in their lives, particularly paid work or personal dreams. Where divorce had occurred, I inquired as to the reasons; many women spoke of violence in relationships other than their own, and several in their own. Depending on their suggestions and experiences, we discussed a range of other issues including children's literature, the beauty myth, women and religion, childbirth, issues of contraception and sexual practices.⁸ My interpretation of their responses to these issues forms the subject matter of Part I of this book.

In order to discuss the relationship between their own life trajectory and feminism, I asked about the impact of the women's movement on their lives, expanding on this by inquiring how they raised their own sons and daughters (where this was relevant) and the differences they saw between themselves and women of the next generation (this to the 'mothers' and 'grandmothers') or the previous generation (this to the 'daughters'). Some of these women well remembered a moment of engagement with feminism, either of endorsement or rejection, but for

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-46042-2 - Living Feminism: The Impact of the Women's Movement on Three Generations of Australian Women

Chilla Bulbeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

others the relationship grew slowly and sometimes painfully. Women's responses to the women's movement form most of the subject matter addressed in Part II.

The Women

Theoretical sampling was used to identify the sixty women with whom I spoke. Rather than select a representative or random sample of Australian women, I focused on the experiences of women who would illuminate my research questions: 'Has the women's movement changed the world as much as feminists like Anne Summers claim?'; 'Has the world been changed equally for all women?' Thus, my attention was on the women who, it is claimed, have been neglected by feminism: women who are not 'white', 'middle-class' and 'cosmopolitan'. A short biography of the sixty women can be found in the List of Women Who Told Their Biographies for the Book at the beginning of this book. Appendix 2 explains how I identified the women.

Secondly, in order to highlight the changes which accompanied or were produced by the women's movement, I sought to speak with women across three generations. The changes associated with the women's liberation movement of the 1960s probably offered the fullest range of opportunities to young women in their late teens to early twenties, women who had not yet made decisions concerning marriage, motherhood and careers. For women over 45 in the 1970s, the women's movement may have been perceived as more of a threat to their achievements than a promise for change. The three cohorts of women whose life chances are compared in this study are the grandmothers (aged 65 to 75 in 1994–5), mothers (roughly baby boomers, aged 45 to 55 in 1994–5) and daughters (roughly 'Generation X-ers', aged 25 to 35 in 1994–5).⁹

Because the women with whom I spoke in no way represent a statistical sample of the several million Australian women with whom I might have talked, I undertook a life chances analysis for women across the three generations (see Appendix 1). The lives of the sixty women who comprise this book are framed by the wider structural changes outlined briefly below, and which is based on data for all Australian women, most particularly a greater role for education as women increasingly expect their lives to combine work and motherhood, the latter more likely to include at least a period of single parenting.

The cohort of the grandmothers were born between 1930 and 1940, generally before the Second World War. Compared with both subsequent cohorts and men in their own cohort, they were much less likely to complete secondary and tertiary education. The gender gap in