
Gendered Claims:

Men in feminism in 1980s
Australia

Sophie Robinson
Honours,
University of New South Wales

This article examines the role that men played in the feminist project in Australia during the 1980s, a time of increased public awareness and institutional presence of feminist politics. It will show that the 1980s was a period of growing concerns about the feminisation of Australian society, and in particular the workplace. This prompted many men and some women throughout Western societies to scapegoat feminism as the reason for their sense of gendered displacement. Motivated by media representations of feminism as anti-men, some men began making gendered claims; that is, claims about the specific interests, status, and possible crisis of men and masculinity. Of interest to this article is the way that such claims were aided by the very language and theories of feminism that were encouraging individuals to reassess their identity and values. Gendered claims took a variety of forms in this decade, and this article is concerned with those forms that signified a continued interrogation and positive engagement with feminism by men which challenged the backlash rhetoric of this decade. In presenting these examples I highlight the at times ambiguous and contested presence of men alongside feminist debates and practices of the 1980s as nonetheless integral to the history of contemporary Australian feminism.

* * *

In 1980, ten years since the Women's Liberation (WL) movement began in Australia, various publications emerged that documented the impact of contemporary feminist activism from the perspectives of men. One in particular, *Fathers at Home* (1980) by Jan Harper, revealed through a number of interviews with Australian men (mainly white, educated and middle-class) that their most acute dealings with feminism were taking place in the home. A specific experience recounted by these men concerned their 'new' roles as stay-at-home dads, and their negotiation of more equitable childcare arrangements with their female partners. In these cases, many men found themselves completely dependent on the financial income and support of their working wives or

female partners.¹ This suggested that the original aims of the WL movement, such as ending sex-role stereotyping, de-gendering childcare and advocacy for communal living arrangements, were being pursued and articulated through alternative childcare and lifestyle arrangements.² And although not all of the Australian men interviewed for this book could articulate any clear feminist beliefs or affiliations, certainly many were experiencing their new roles within the family as a result of revolutionary and reformist feminist activism throughout the West.

Furthermore, these men drew on the recent history of women's liberation and the sexual revolution in Australia to advocate some specific claims for themselves as men, as both beneficiaries and victims of feminism. One interviewee, Geoff Fawkner (who shared childcare with his wife and was for a period a stay-at-home dad) stated;

I think that the Women's Movement is killing itself by alienating itself from men. It's got to be a movement of *people* oppressed, not just women oppressed. Men can feel the oppression just as women, although not in the same way. 3CR [a radio show] had a programme once, called 'Men Against Sexism', and I was tempted to get involved in that. But you're becoming too limited if you try to get men to do one thing and women another. I mean, it should be people against all roles in society. Obviously, a man can't feel as unhappy as can a woman who is discriminated against but a man can feel unhappy about *any* discrimination.³

Jan Harper concluded *Fathers at Home* by stating that such attitudes were indicative of Australian men's desires to experience more egalitarian lifestyles and, like feminist activists, to quash 'deeply embedded beliefs about childhood and motherhood'.⁴ Whilst the book indeed illuminates a very specific shift in some men's perceptions of feminism and its relevance to their lives, Harper acknowledges that this new consciousness could still be largely superficial and conservative at best.⁵

As this article will show, although men were amongst some of the biggest advocates of feminist reform in the private and public spheres in the 1980s, their embrace of feminism was never simple, nor uncontested. While existing histories and social studies of this period in Australia and elsewhere, such as Margaret Henderson's *Marking Feminist Times* (2006), Gisela Kaplan's *The Meagre Harvest* (1996) and Bob Lingard and Peter Douglas' *Men Engaging Feminisms* (1999), have outlined the public backlash against the perceived anti-male bias of feminist reform, in this article I consider the legacy of 1980s Australian feminism in a new way. In it I offer evidence of men, including gender theorist and sociologist R.W. Connell, who resisted dominant Australian constructs of masculinity and focussed instead on feminism's broad vision for individual and relational transformation.⁶ Furthermore, my research has revealed one part of a much wider history of men positively and

1 Jan Harper, *Fathers at Home*, (Ringwood: Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 1980).

2 Ibid, vii-ix.

3 Geoff Fawkner, 'Working Towards Change', in *Fathers at Home*, Jan Harper, (Ringwood: Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 1980), 220.

4 Harper, *Fathers at Home*, 238.

5 Ibid, 11.

6 Pauline Johnson, 'Liberation Theory, Feminism and Utopianism' in *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, ed. Barbara Caine *et al.*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 206-214.

dynamically aligning themselves with feminism in Australia. This is an aspect of feminist and gender history that requires ongoing analysis in Australia and elsewhere.

This article will do two things. First, it will show that despite (and also because of) the widespread cultural and institutional influence of feminism, one of the most discernible public discourses of the 1980s in Australia was a backlash to the gains of feminism, namely the media representation of feminism as at the expense of men and boys.⁷ Australian feminist backlash politics (and by association, masculinity politics) would become particularly directed towards the education system by the end of the millennium, encouraging moral panic at the idea of a feminised teaching workforce, a lack of focus on the education and wellbeing of boys and a lack of avenues for them to develop a 'healthy' masculinity in Western societies.⁸ Second, the article will highlight three forms of male engagement with feminism which were partly enabled by a favourable political context as well as a greater public awareness of the feminist movement. This includes firstly the development of gender studies in the academy in which male academics such as R.W. Connell (now Raewyn Connell) began utilising feminist frameworks to interrogate masculinity politics. Secondly, I also consider the emergence of therapeutic men's groups in Australia, namely the 'Mercy Family Life Centre' in Sydney, and their feminist influences. The emphasis such groups, and their male facilitators, placed on destabilising sex-roles and sexist behaviour revealed a continued engagement with feminism by men in Western societies since at least the late-1970s.⁹ And yet, these groups would also present obstacles in fostering feminist allegiances and anti-sexist practices amongst men. For example, in their various attempts to reform—rather than destabilise—the nuclear family and traditional constructs of masculinity, as well as their primary focus on men as an identity group in need of self-image transformation.¹⁰ Finally, I discuss the Melbourne-based organisation 'Men Against Sexual Assault' (MASA) that emerged by the end of the 1980s and exemplified Australian men engaging with specific and ongoing feminist debates regarding male violence and sexuality.¹¹ What these different approaches had in common was their insistence that men be recognised as a gendered category. That is, these groups and the men that constituted them were reflecting an awareness of gender as a significant social and political category, with ramifications for both men and women.¹²

From 1969 the dynamic Australian women's movement—which included women's liberation (WL) groups and the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL)—raised feminist consciousnesses, successfully lobbied for equal pay and family law legislation, and also gained state funding for rape-crisis centres, women's refuges and childcare.¹³ Feminist projects expanded and became more embedded in the mainstream fabric of Australian society during the 1980s and 1990s, helped along by successive federal governments who were responsive to addressing the rights and status of

7 Bob Lingard and Peter Douglas, 'Deconstructing the "What about the boys" Backlash', *Men Engaging Feminisms: Pro-feminism, Backlashes and Schooling*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999), 95-130.

8 Margaret Vickers, 'Gender', in *Education, Change and Society*, ed. Raewyn Connell *et al.*, 3rd ed., (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2013).

9 Jon Snodgrass (ed.), *A Book of Readings: for men against sexism*, (New York: Times Change Press, 1977).

10 Michael Vincent Flannery, 'The Men's Group' (Masters of Social Work Thesis, University of New South Wales, 1986), 5.

11 Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).

12 Joan Wallach Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', (1986) in *The Feminist History Reader*, ed. Sue Morgan, (Oxon: Routledge, 2005), 133-148.

13 Marilyn Lake, 'A history of feminism in Australia', in *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, ed. Barbara Caine *et al.*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 142.

women in modern Australia. These projects were also helped by the fact that feminist voices were becoming increasingly vocal in the public sphere.

Men were indelibly altered by the successes of feminism in both the private and public spheres. In the 1980s the diversification of Australian feminism was most acute in the academy, spreading its influence through the developing field of women's and gender studies, and through groundbreaking, feminist-inspired legislation.¹⁴ Therefore although male involvement in the women's movement in Australia had largely been auxiliary or the exception, by the 1980s new spaces had opened for men to engage with feminism, including as academics involved in feminist scholarship as well as public campaigners for ending gendered violence.¹⁵ The 1980s also saw a surge in identity politics in which Australian men were both encouraging and challenging the increasing presence of feminism in the public sphere and making their own gendered claims—at times combatively—through the language and discourse of feminism and neoliberalism.¹⁶

The Australian case studies canvassed below are mostly sympathetic and creative in their engagement with feminism, but this was certainly not the case for all gendered claims made by men and/or their organisations during this period. For instance, rather than express any sort of alliance or dialogue with feminism, some men's groups chose instead to ignore the legacy of the Western feminist movement. For some this meant situating themselves within the diffuse, though expanding Western men's movement of which mythologising, redeeming and reinventing masculinity was a major preoccupation for its advocates.¹⁷ *Iron John* (1990), a bestselling book by American poet Robert Bly was particularly influential in instilling some of these ideas, advocating for men to engage a primal masculinity, and making a claim for the continued relevance of apparently ancient rituals and rites of passage in the lives of boys and men. The book also became part of a very specific strand of men's movement ideology in Australia, the United States and United Kingdom, based around psychoanalytic concepts of masculine and feminine archetypes and their impact on the psyches of men and women.¹⁸ The examples discussed in this article will address some of these tensions that emerged through men's involvement with feminism during the 1980s, which had the potential to both encourage and impede the woman-centered focus of feminist activism. They will also reveal the far-reaching influence of feminism and its success in transforming interpersonal relationships, as well as wider societal structures. By first addressing backlash politics, I will highlight the various social and cultural factors that were working *against* a positive engagement with feminism by men and women in the 1980s. I will also show that men's relationship to feminism in this and later decades could often be a reaction to pervasive backlash narratives, as well as a continuation of these.

14 Terry Threadgold, 'Gender Studies and Women's Studies,' *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 31 (2000), 39-48.

15 Miriam Dixon, *The Real Matilda: Women and Identity in Australia, 1788-1975*, (Ringwood, Penguin Books Australia, 1976), 211; Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans (eds.), *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation*, (Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992); Susan Magarey, Susan Sheridan and Sue Rowley (eds.), *Debutante Nation: feminism contests the 1890s*, (St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1993); Gisela Kaplan, *The Meagre Harvest: the Australian women's movement, 1950s-1990s*, (St. Leonards, Allen and Unwin, 1996).

16 Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and freedom in late modernity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

17 Robert Bly, 'What Men Really Want', Interview with Keith Thompson, in *Views from the Male World*, ed. Keith Thompson, (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 16-23.

18 Carl Jung, *Man and his Symbols*, (London: Pan Books, 1978); David Tacey, *Remaking Men: the Revolution in Masculinity*, (Ringwood: Viking, 1997); R.W. Connell, *The Men and the Boys*, (St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 2000).

Backlash Politics

Susan Faludi (1993) and Tom Morton (1997) have elaborated on the theme of backlash, charting the rising resentment and anxiety expressed amongst men and conservative groups as Western societies arguably became more feminised.¹⁹ Often this has been at the expense of a discussion of productive engagements between men and feminism. For example, the contribution of theorists and activists concerned with deconstructing masculinities in ways that were potentially beneficial and transformative for wider society is part of the history of modern feminism. The recognition of men as gendered (and following from this, also possessing class, race, sexuality and other identity categories) is also part of feminism's increasing engagement with questions of difference.²⁰ In Australia the interrogation of identity politics also happened to coincide with the lead up and aftermath of the Bicentennial, a period of immense public debate over Australia's national history, identity and 'values'.²¹ And yet, the backlash to feminism has a different chronology in Australia than other Western nations. Indeed, there is no doubt that economic recession, gendered transformations in the workforce and a reformist Australian Labor Party all contributed to a growing sense of resentment towards feminism and 'feminisation' in general. However the 1980s was also distinctive in its extension of rights-based claims made not only by men and women (as men and women), but also Aboriginal people, migrants, second-generation migrants, lesbian and gay groups and so on.²² It is from this context of competing identity politics that gendered claims by men were becoming more prevalent, and more vocal.

Faludi and Morton have analysed how backlash to feminism in Western societies during the 1980s was in part structurally based; the work-force was transformed by economic recession, destabilising traditional routes for men to find employment and earn the status of breadwinner.²³ As Faludi provocatively argued in *Backlash* (1993), the social anxiety that followed these shifts focussed on the perception of society as increasingly feminised/feminist; 'the economic victims of the era are men who know someone has made off with their future—and they suspect the thief is a woman.'²⁴ In Australia, economic recession reduced the career prospects of young men and according to Tom Morton, journalist and author of *Altered Mates* (1997), diminished 'one of the principle ways in which young men could demonstrate that they were entering the adult world.'²⁵ Simultaneously, these structural shifts would destabilise the restrictive gender-contracts and sex-

19 Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, (London: Vintage, 1993); Tom Morton, *Altered Mates: the Man Question*, (St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1997).

20 Denise Riley, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of Women in History*, (London: Macmillan, 1988).

21 Peter Spearitt, 'Celebration of a Nation: The Triumph of Spectacle,' *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 91, (1988), 3-20.

22 Marie de Lepervanche, 'Holding it all together: Multiculturalism, nationalism, women and the state in Australia,' *International Review of Sociology*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, (1991), 73-95; Dennis Altman, 'The emergence of 'modern' gay identities and the question of human rights', in *Human Rights and Gender Politics: Asia Pacific Perspectives*, ed. Ann-Marie Hilsdon, (London: Routledge, 2000), 205-221; Kathie Muir, 'Feminism and Representations of Union Identity in Australian Union Banners of the 1980s and Early 1990s,' *Labour History*, No. 79, (2000), 92-112; Stuart MacIntyre and Anna Clark, 'Bicentenary battles', *The History Wars*, (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 93-118; Damien Short, *Reconciliation and colonial power: indigenous rights in Australia*, (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008).

23 Faludi, *Backlash*, 66-96; Tom Morton, 'The Power Paradox', in *Altered Mates: The Man Question*, (St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1997), 11-38.

24 Faludi, *Backlash*, 89.

25 Morton, *Altered Mates*, 19.

roles that defined Australian society as governments began paying more attention to the economic values of women inside and outside the domestic sphere.²⁶

From the early 1980s various Australian commentators - not all of them men - were showing signs of anxiety towards structural changes, blaming the apparent excesses of feminism for drastically reshaping Australian society at the expense of boys and men.²⁷ By the late 1980s, such views were publicly expressed, notably through the work of Australian author on parenting and manhood issues, Steve Biddulph. In 1988, Biddulph published *The Secret Of Happy Children* in which he acknowledged the shift in gender roles in the home and celebrated new forms of fatherhood, but simultaneously encouraged men to reinscribe their masculinity through these new roles. Furthermore, in 1994 Biddulph published *Manhood* (1994), a widely read book, interspersed with the mythopoetic musings of Robert Bly, that offered advice for men on how to successfully negotiate the pathway between boyhood to manhood. It also suggested ways for men to redefine and ritualise their masculinity amidst increasing feminisation in their private and public lives.

In federal and state politics, as well as the academy, unique spaces opened up for men to publicly and productively engage with feminism in the 1980s. From 1983 to 1996, successive federal Labor governments explicitly sought to harness the female vote through implementing feminist inspired policies and through engaging with feminist activists as part of their 'Third Way' political agenda.²⁸ As Hester Eisenstein has shown, this approach fostered a dynamic and often paradoxical relationship between Australian feminist groups, state and federal governments that nonetheless culminated in 'Commonwealth funding of women's refuges, rape crisis centres, women's health centres and policies for women and girls in education.'²⁹ Marilyn Lake has astutely highlighted however that despite pivotal feminist-inspired reforms of the 1980s such as the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* and the *Equal Opportunity Act 1986*, the majority of female Australian workers remained economically worse off than men. They were still carrying the domestic load and still vulnerable to domestic violence, 'segregated in low paid, insecure jobs'³⁰. Furthermore, the capacity for prominent Australian feminists, known as 'femocrats', to represent an identifiable group of Australian women and to make claims on their behalf was deeply challenged, particularly by migrant and Aboriginal women who highlighted the complexities of identity politics.³¹ Meanwhile, in the academy,

26 Ibid, 37-38.

27 C. Hocking, *Men Facing Difficult Times: Report of an Inservice on 'Developing Interrelating Skills in Adolescent Boys*, (Melbourne: Equal Opportunity Unit, Department of Education, 1983); Bettina Arndt, 'Career v Husband,' *The Sun-Herald*, 6 September 1987; Bettina Arndt, 'Real Men Stand Up,' *The Sun-Herald*, 25 October 1987; Bettina Arndt 'Are Men Really So Terrible?' *The Sun-Herald*, 8 November 1987; Ann Jackson-Nakano, 'Sons of Feminists,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 October 1988.

28 In contemporary political history, the 'Third Way' is typically associated with the British Labour Government led by Tony Blair in the late 1990s that blended social justice principles and reforms with support for free-market enterprise and economic rationalism. According to Nick Dyrenfurth and Frank Bongiorno, the 'Third Way' blend of socialist and capitalist politics was utilised by the Hawke Labor Government 'well before that term was associated with . . . Tony Blair.' Nick Dyrenfurth and Frank Bongiorno, *A Little History of the Australian Labor Party*, (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press Ltd, 2011), 152.

29 Hester Eisenstein, 'Speaking for Women? Voices from the Australian femocrat experiment,' *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 14, (1991), 31.

30 Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The history of Australian feminism* (St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1999), 265.

31 Ellie Vasta, 'Immigrant women and the politics of resistance,' *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 18, (1993), 5-23; Maria Pallotta-Chiarolli, 'Multicultural feminism' in *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, ed. Barbara Caine *et al.*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 232-239; Ien Ang, 'I'm a feminist but . . . Other women and post-national feminism' in *Transitions: New Australian Feminisms*, ed. Barbara Caine and Rosemary Pringle, (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1995), 99-100; Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Talking Up to the White Woman: Aboriginal Women and feminism*, (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2000); Larissa Behrendt, 'Law Stories and Life Stories: Aboriginal Women, the Law and Australian Society,' *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 47, (2005), 245-254.

Australian feminist scholarship was expanding via the work of both female and male academics.³² This fact tempers pessimistic accounts of Australian feminism in the 1980s as diffuse and unable to incorporate the politics of ‘difference’.³³ Indeed, the increasing involvement by men in academic feminism during the 1980s, as commentators, scholars and even teachers of feminist history and theory, signified the important role men were playing in the dissemination of contemporary Australian feminism.

Gender in the Academy

The emergence of academic feminism in Australia during the 1980s, as feminist activists completed their degrees and sought university tenure, precipitated a surge in gendered claims in Australia.³⁴ As Lyndall Ryan has shown, the establishment of women’s studies programs in Australian universities from the early 1970s was initially in order to highlight ‘the absence of women from the content of the university curriculum, the absence of pedagogy that could liberate women students, and the absence of women academics to teach such courses.’³⁵ And yet, the greater emphasis on gender as a historical and political category in the 1980s, and the influence of poststructuralist feminist theories, meant that men and masculinity were increasingly conceptualised as objects of study in themselves as opposed to ‘universal models.’³⁶ Very quickly, studies of men as well as male feminist criticism emerged out of Western academic institutions.³⁷ As Ann Curthoys has highlighted, some women’s historians became ‘concerned that the new fashion for studying men might mean that women had once again faded from view.’³⁸ Indeed, United States and British feminist anthologies including *On the Problem of Men* (1982), *Men in Feminism* (1987) and *Engendering Men* (1990) indicated widespread concerns about the increasing prevalence of male academics contributing to feminist scholarship.³⁹ Australian contributors to the *Men in Feminism* anthology, Meaghan Morris and Rosi Braidotti interrogated some of these concerns. Braidotti’s article, ‘Envy, or, with your brains and my looks’, was emblematic of the wider message of this collection; that despite recent attempts to theoretically deconstruct subjectivity—and feminist identity—men could never ‘deconstruct a subjectivity one has never been fully granted [or] a sexuality which has historically been defined as dark and mysterious.’⁴⁰ Braidotti flagged here one of the main issues, if not the crux, of feminist theory and activism throughout history—the politicisation of women’s embodied, social and political experiences. This is a focus that I suggest is crucial to the future of

32 For example, the journal *Australian Feminist Studies* was established in 1988. In the same year Australian philosopher Elizabeth Grosz’s *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (1988) was published, along with Carole Pateman and Elizabeth Grosz’s *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory* (1988).

33 Kaplan, *The Meagre Harvest*, 122-148.

34 Threadgold, ‘Gender Studies and Women’s Studies,’ 39-48.

35 Lyndall Ryan, ‘Women’s Studies,’ in *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, ed. Barbara Caine *et al.*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 385.

36 Toby Miller, ‘Introduction: Masculinity,’ in *A Companion to Gender Studies*, ed. Philomena Essed, David Theo Goldberg and Audrey Kobayashi, (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 114.

37 Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (ed.), *Men in Feminism*, (London and New York: Methuen, 1987); Harry Brod, *The Making Of Masculinities: The new men’s studies*, (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987).

38 Ann Curthoys, ‘Gender Studies in Australia: A history,’ *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 31, (2000), 26.

39 Elaine Showalter argues that male feminist criticism is a form of ‘critical cross-dressing, a fashion risk of the 1980s that is both radical chic and power play’. Elaine Showalter, ‘Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and Woman of the Year’, in *Men in Feminism*, ed. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), 118.

40 Rosi Braidotti, ‘Envy: Or with your brain and my looks’, in *Men in Feminism*, ed. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), 13.

feminism, and therefore complicates my focus on the male presence in feminist (that is, woman-centered) politics.

Also quoted in *Men in Feminism*, postcolonial feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak argued that the reasons ‘straight, white, male intellectuals . . . have turned to feminism’ in the academy is due to their inability to properly join or sympathise with other struggles, namely those constituted by race and class differences. Thus he joins ‘the women’s struggle . . . [which he] can support from the inside.’⁴¹ And yet, contrary to Spivak’s claims, K. K. Ruthven has highlighted that in fact ‘the most successful male developers of academic feminism were not opportunistic heterosexuals but men involved in same-sex relationships . . . putting together the emergent discipline of gay studies.’⁴² In Australia, gay academic Gary Dowsett, along with Dennis Altman, David Buchbinder and Michael Hurley were starting to make contributions to feminist-inspired studies of men, masculinities and gender.⁴³ They would provide ground breaking research into gay male sexuality and masculinity, crucial for academic feminism’s interrogation of the multiple ‘mechanisms of men’s power’.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Gary Dowsett would later provide a stark critique of the emerging field of masculinity studies in Western universities. He argued that it was creating ‘a growing gap between gay men and other men [and] gay men and women’⁴⁵ by privileging a male, heterosexual continuum as the basis for analysis, and ignoring a proper analysis of homophobia—specifically gay male sexuality—in discussions of sexism.⁴⁶ While the largely heteronormative bias of masculinity studies, and also the wider men’s movement, is indeed still a valid concern,⁴⁷ one of the very first articles to foreground the academic study of men, ‘Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity’ (1985), theorised masculinity as embodied, plural, hierarchical and fluid.⁴⁸ It highlighted the potential for men to both reproduce, but also challenge, static definitions of masculinity and, more importantly, to engage with the sexual politics of feminism and gay liberation. Furthermore, this article was co-written by Australian sociologist R.W. Connell, along with two gay male scholars (and former activists in Gay Liberation), John Lee and Tim Carrigan.

R. W. Connell

In the early 1990s, R.W. Connell attended a demonstration against gendered violence in Sydney organised by Australian pro-feminist men’s group, Men Against Sexual Assault, which emerged during the 1980s and will be discussed further along in this article. Connell later contrasted her experience at this protest with the much larger and highly masculinist anti-war demonstration she attended in Washington D.C. in 1970. The male dominance at those since iconic protests were, Connell later recalled, ‘a key reason why the women’s liberation movement was emerging at the time.’⁴⁹ Both protests were targeting forms of violence, both were comprised of mainly men and both used similar protest techniques such as banners, posters, chanting and marching. And yet,

41 Gayatri Spivak, quoted in Showalter, ‘Critical Cross Dressing’, 118.

42 K. K. Ruthven, ‘Engendering Men’, *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol 1, No. 2, (1991), 186.

43 Threadgold, ‘Gender Studies and Women’s Studies’, 26.

44 Curthoys, ‘Gender Studies in Australia,’ 26.

45 G.W. Dowsett, ‘I’ll Show You Mine if You Show Me Yours: Gay men, masculinity research, men’s studies and sex’, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 5, (1993), 699.

46 Ibid, 701.

47 Stephen F. Morin and Ellen M. Garfinkle, ‘Male Homophobia’, *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 34, No. 1, (1978), 29-47.

48 Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell and John Lee, ‘Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity’ (1985), in *Feminism and Masculinities*, ed. Peter F. Murphy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 151-164.

49 R.W. Connell, *The men and the boys*, (St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 2000), 200.

the spectacle of men protesting against sexual violence in the early 1990s reflected a very different historical and political paradigm, informed by twenty years of second wave feminist activism. As Connell highlighted, the MASA men were ‘criticising the very masculinity that produced the demonstration as a confrontational genre of political action.’⁵⁰ These Australian men however, portrayed a developed awareness of feminist critiques of masculinity as well as feminist insights into how the practice and behaviours that constitute gender are integral to social justice.⁵¹

R. W. Connell, now Raewyn Connell, is today considered one of the most influential, pro-feminist theorists of men and masculinities, and her theory of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is continuously cited in contemporary feminist and gender studies literature.⁵² Connell’s foray into feminist scholarship was the result of an increasing awareness of gender ‘as a structure of social inequality with its own logic and internal complexities’⁵³ as she was studying class differences in the Australian education system.⁵⁴ Her personal interest in feminism was fostered through a number of channels, many of which occurred while Raewyn was still living as a man. For example, in the 1970s and 80s Connell was engaging with feminist theories that offered specific critiques of patriarchy and gender.⁵⁵ She was also surrounded by feminist women and gay men within the academy who had extensive knowledge of feminist thought. Furthermore, Connell was married to Pam Benton, a woman involved in New South Wales equal-opportunity legislation and the establishment of a women’s health care centre during the late 1970s.⁵⁶ These experiences, combined with Connell’s contributions to academic feminism, gender and masculinity studies, challenge widely held assumptions about a feminist identity as definitively female— that is, biologically fixed.⁵⁷ As a transgender person, Connell also complicates the question of who exactly can speak for feminism, and whether feminist discourse, and the success of its transmutation, ‘belongs’ to women. Some have indeed questioned Connell’s feminist credentials as well as the significance of her neo-Gramscian theory of hegemonic masculinity.⁵⁸ However, Connell’s engagement with feminist critiques in order to reveal the contingencies of men and masculinities since the 1980s, including her major texts *Gender and Power* (1987), *Masculinities* (1995) and *Gender* (2009), has enhanced the academic feminist project. Connell has argued convincingly for the necessity of interrogating male power ‘across the state, work, the family, sexual practice and organisational life’⁵⁹, expanding the relevance of women’s and gender studies for men and women into the 1990s.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Miller, ‘Introduction: Masculinity,’ 116-119.

53 R.W. Connell, quoted in Nikki Wedgwood, ‘Connell’s theory of masculinity: its origins and influences on the study of gender,’ *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 4, (2009), 330.

54 R. Connell *et al.*, *Making the Difference: Schools, families and social division*, (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1982).

55 Connell personally encountered the issue of separatist splits in Australian feminist theory during the early 1980s when ostracised by presumably feminist staff due to his new role as the male head of a gender studies department at Macquarie University, Australia, teaching courses on feminist theories of patriarchy. Nikki Wedgwood, ‘Connell’s Theory of Masculinity’, 331.

56 Ibid.

57 Laura Herbert, ‘Taking Difference Seriously: Feminisms and the Man Question’, *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1, (2007), 38.

58 Julie Marcus, ‘Australian women and feminist men’, *Hecate*, Vol. 14, No. 2, (1988), 98; Victoria Robinson, ‘Radical Revisionings?: The theorising of masculinity and (radical) feminist theory,’ *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Vol. 26, No. 2, (2003), 129-137; Christine Beasley, ‘Rethinking Hegemonic Masculinity in a Globalising World,’ *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 11, No. 86, (2008), 129-137.

59 Miller, ‘Introduction: Masculinity’, 117.

While the forum for Connells's scholarship on masculinities was mainly in the academy, her ideas were informing a much wider variety of texts and mediums concerning masculinity politics from the late 1980s through to the new millennium, including university courses, national health schemes, and self-help books.⁶⁰ These would all form part of the backlash to feminism that in the 1980s was conflated with a masculinity crisis. In the United States the emergence of specific men's studies programs in universities from the late 1980s were largely taught by men and focussed on the histories and subjectivities of men as complementary to the study of women. This can be viewed partly as a reaction against feminist gains in the academy, despite its obvious indebtedness to feminist scholarship.⁶¹ And yet, the greater critical interrogation of masculinities by men has also, as feminist historian Gisela Bock has highlighted, confirmed a major premise of women's studies and feminist projects in the West. That is, 'gender norms and gender identities are not identical and they are subject to historical change.'⁶² Furthermore, as a reading of Connell's scholarship highlights, men in the academy were choosing to assert an avowedly pro-feminist focus, taking the Man Question in many new directions despite the climate of widespread backlash rhetoric. Connell's theorising, which has often been supportive of both the women's and gay movements has proven to be more resilient and accessible than another gendered claim made in the 1980s: men as victims of feminism.

Male victimhood and therapy

Inspired by literature from the 1970s which encouraged men to reject their sex-role conditioning, some men had begun forming their own groups in Australia during the early 1980s to support them on a journey of self-transformation.⁶³ As Helen Franks highlighted in *Goodbye Tarzan* (1982), sometimes these incorporated feminism's consciousness-raising techniques as well as gay liberation's exploration of 'a lifestyle and values far removed from traditional male cultural history.'⁶⁴ Others were less concerned with critiques of traditional masculinity and more concerned with the potential for enhancing their male identity in a feminised society. As Connell highlighted, this spelled efforts to modernise and redeem heterosexual masculinity in very specific ways.⁶⁵

Between 1981 and 1985 the 'Mercy Family Life Centre' counselling service ran a series of men's therapy groups in various locations throughout suburban Sydney, coordinated by Michael Flannery and academic and author on fatherhood issues, Dr. Graeme Russell. In 1986, Flannery submitted a Masters Thesis in Social Work at the University of New South Wales on the experiences and outcomes of these groups. The groups were facilitated, yet casual, forums for discussion about what

60 The National Men's Health Conference, *Proceedings from the National Men's Health Conference, 10-11 August 1995*, Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, (Commonwealth of Australia, 1996); Franklin Abbott, *Men and intimacy: personal accounts exploring the dilemmas of modern male sexuality*, (California: Crossing Press, 1990); Glenda Banks, *Fathers Really Matter*, (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1991); Victor J. Seidler, *Men, sex and relationships*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); Steve Biddulph, *Manhood: a book about setting men free*, (Sydney: Finch Publishing, 1994); Helen Townsend, *Real Men*, (Sydney: HarperCollins, 1994).

61 James Doyle, 'Editorial', *Journal of Men's Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (1992), 1-4.

62 Gisela Bock, 'Women's History and Gender History' (1989), in *The Feminist History Reader*, ed. Sue Morgan, (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 112.

63 For example, Jack Nichols, *Men's Liberation: New Definitions of Masculinity*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1975); Joseph H. Pleck and Jack Sawyer (ed.), 'Introduction', *Men and Masculinity*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc, 1974); Warren Farrell, *The Liberated Man: Beyond masculinity, freeing men and their relationships with women*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1975).

64 Helen Franks, 'Men on the move', *Goodbye Tarzan: Men After Feminism*, (London and Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), 182

65 R.W. Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*, (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987), 228-237.

few unexamined quotes from R. W. Connell about the problems of viewing men as oppressed,⁷⁵ Flannery's thesis concluded that traditional male roles, values and behaviours in the home and wider society needed to be expanded and men's groups were 'one initiative to quicken the process.'⁷⁶ What these groups were particularly silent on however, were feminist challenges to the idea that the home, along with its male members, constituted a safe space.⁷⁷

Men Against Sexual Assault

As Estelle Freedman has shown, in Australia and similarly Westernised societies during the 1980s feminist discourse often centered on new critiques 'of violence . . . [to include] not only attacks by strangers but also those by acquaintances and husbands.'⁷⁸ This resulted in many feminist-inspired 'Reclaim The Night' marches. Initially excluded from these marches and other forms of feminist antiviolence activism,⁷⁹ Freedman has highlighted that the emerging feminist anti-rape movement 'called on men to become allies to women.'⁸⁰ Throughout the world men would respond enthusiastically, some forming their own projects as a form of pro-feminist solidarity and also as a way to respond and challenge some radical feminist claims about men's propensity for violent and oppressive behaviours.⁸¹ This prompted the formation of the National Organisation for Men Against Sexism in the United States, followed by Men Against Sexual Assault in Australia. As Bob Pease has highlighted, these groups were aligned as not only *pro-feminist*, meaning 'critical of the overall shape of masculinity', but also *male-positive*, that is, emphatic that men and masculinity can be transformed.⁸²

Men Against Sexual Assault was an avowedly political and feminist oriented campaign of the 1980s whose gendered claims involved gendered responsibilities, including raising awareness of male violence against women and working to eradicate it. It consisted mainly of middle class, heterosexual Australian men supportive of feminism's theoretical value and precedence (pro-feminist) and determined to destabilise sex/gender role stereotyping (anti-sexist). Their projects

⁷⁵ 'Men and Childcare in the Feminist Utopia: Paper for conference on anarchist feminism, October 11-12, 1975,' *Refractory Girl*, (1976), 3-5. Further, the domestic division of labour continued to be major feminist topic in the 1980s. Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife*, (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2004).

⁷⁶ Bob Connell, 'There's More to Feminism Than a Nice New Man', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 January 1987), cited in Flannery, *The Men's Group*, 5.

⁷⁷ Flannery, *The Men's Group*, 86.

⁷⁸ As Gail Mason has noted, feminist interventions into domestic and gendered violence, including protests and demonstrations such as Reclaim the Night emerged in the 1970s but proliferated in the 1980s in light of more studies and awareness of the continuum of violence in women's lives. Gail Mason, 'Violence' in *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, ed. Barbara Caine et al., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 339-342.

⁷⁹ Estelle B. Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and The Future of Women*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 279. See also Gail Mason 'Violence,' 341; Janet Ramsay, 'Policy Activism on a Wicked Issue', *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 53, (2007), 247-264; Suellen Murray and Anastasia Powell, 'What's the Problem?: Australian Public Policy and Policy Constructions of Domestic and Family Violence,' *Violence Against Women*, Vol. 15, No. 5, (2009), 532-552. In the United States where debates about these issues were part of what reductively came to be known as the 'sex wars', feminist theorists such as Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin examined sexual coercion within heterosexual relationships and drew interesting conclusions about male collusion in a range of sexual practices and crimes including pornography and incest. Helen Pringle, 'Pornography and Censorship' in *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, ed. Barbara Caine et al., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 473-475.

⁸⁰ In 1976 at an international feminist conference hosted in Belgium a Take Back the Night march was staged to affirm women's refusal to 'fear going out after dark' in case of male predatory behaviour. The first Take Back the Night or Reclaim the Night march was held in Australia in 1978. These were women-only events. Kaplan, *The Meagre Harvest*, 35.

⁸¹ Freedman, *No Turning Back*, 286.

⁸² Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence', *Signs*, Vol. 5, No. 4, (1980), 631-660.

⁸³ Bob Pease, *Men and Sexual Politics: towards a profeminist practice*, (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications, 1997), 70.

it meant to be a man in the 1980s.⁶⁶ They incorporated some formal structures such as planned do-it-yourself coffee breaks which, according to Flannery, were a way of examining ‘the group member’s responses to a ‘non-traditional’ role’.⁶⁷ The median age of male members was 32 years old and the majority were employed in technical and trade-oriented occupations such as engineering, retail, and the legal and accountancy professions.⁶⁸ The method, structure and content of the men’s groups suggested similarities with feminist consciousness-raising (CR) groups in that emphasis was given to discussing and analysing the negative effects of sex-role socialisation through the sharing of life experiences. Also, the groups provided a forum for gender-solidarity. As Flannery explained;

The nature and purpose of the Men’s group favours a small group encouraging more active participation, less anonymity, closer relationships, an environment more conducive to negotiation and influence, and in general an experience of more intensified intimacy. All desirable outcomes for the group process involving [sic] men wanting to change their behaviour attitudes and beliefs.⁶⁹

However, similarities between women’s CR groups and the men’s groups, particularly their focus in challenging and destabilising sex-role stereotypes in the home, were largely overlooked. Graeme Russell, who in 1983 published *The Changing Role of Fathers?* in between his commitments to the Mercy Family Life Centre groups,⁷⁰ argued that second wave feminism had placed too much emphasis on the role of the mother in contemporary family groups. He also argued that the feminist demand to ‘abolish the family or completely restructure it’ was extreme, thus reflecting his ignorance of the diversity of feminist critiques of the family, particularly amongst Aboriginal women in Australia.⁷¹ Russell’s concerns however were clearly shared, and a host of discussion groups and forums—including community education programs and counselling services specifically for fathers—were devised to redress the perceived ‘over emphasis on female roles’ in families, feminism and in wider society.⁷² Within the men’s groups, this was achieved through encouraging members to discuss and share stories on male-centred topics such as; ‘Father’s rights today: changing roles of women; Do men want change? Sex discrimination and equal opportunity – what about fathers?’⁷³ These topics were broached in order to assuage a sense of male powerlessness in the home and wider society and to reaffirm aspects of the men’s identity that might bring new meaning and potency to their lives.

And yet, the focus and idealisation of fatherhood in these groups, including the portrayal of modern fatherhood as an anti-sexist practice, ignored the variety of ways—outlined in many feminist critiques —men could challenge sexism, including through their involvement in childcare and domestic labour.⁷⁴ With sweeping allusions to gender equality and complementarity, and a

66 Michael Vincent Flannery, *The Men’s Group*, Masters of Social Work Thesis, (University of New South Wales, 1986).

67 Ibid, 31.

68 Ibid, 26-28.

69 Ibid, 30.

70 It is likely these groups had a major influence in the theorisation of this book, given that issues of fatherhood figured prominently in the men’s group discussions and would lead to a specific fathers group and resource centre.

71 Graham Russell, *The Changing Role of Fathers?* (St. Lucia: Queensland University Press, 1983), 10.

72 Flannery, *The Men’s Group*, 25.

73 Ibid, 22-23.

74 According to Russell, feminists have been so preoccupied with efforts to secure state-based childcare facilities that they have paid little attention to the crucial role that fathers might play in childcare. This claim is false and unjustified, particularly as communal childcare, facilitated by both men and women, has been a major issue for the Australian feminist movement since the second-wave. Indeed, it was the subject of a pivotal talk at a 1975 conference on anarchism and feminism. Ann Curthoys,

engaged with a range of feminist theories and concerns, prompting protest rallies against sexual violence, raising public awareness of male violence through the White Ribbon Campaign and conducting patriarchy awareness and anti-sexist workshops for men and boys.⁸³ One of its founders was Bob Pease, who like many men of his generation came to interrogate feminist principles and practices via his relationship with a feminist woman. He also formed a feminist literature and CR group for men in Australia from the late 1970s.

The work of MASA thus continued his feminist education and consciousness into the 1980s, albeit in a more public context. Like the men's groups run by the Mercy Family Life Centre, MASA was committed to a contemporary restructuring of male identity in Australian society during the 1980s. And yet, where these groups differed was in their level of commitment to a dialogue with women. The Mercy men's groups incorporated relatively few, or later no, women into its meetings.⁸⁴ However Bob Pease has highlighted that MASA initially formed from a meeting of over Two Hundred men and women who had convened 'to highlight the prevalence of sexual violence against women in Melbourne and the consequences of this violence for women's lives.'⁸⁵ Feminist scholars have persuasively argued that the rise of masculinity politics in the form of new theories of masculinities and pro-feminist men's groups such as MASA sometimes lacked a proper 'recognition of the impact of masculinity or male gender behaviour on women.'⁸⁶ MASA workshops indeed endeavoured to transform male behaviour from violence and aggression to being 'loving and joyful' by focussing on the destructive effects of masculinity and motivating men to want to change.⁸⁷ Furthermore, this model constructed men, alongside women, as the *victims* of masculinity.⁸⁸ Meanwhile, R.W. Connell was conceptualising masculinity as not only damaging and pain-inducing for men and women, but also 'a richness, a plenitude' with oppressive ramifications.⁸⁹

The victim status attributed to men through the international men's movement literature and men's support groups (that emerged in Australia, the United States and United Kingdom during the 1970s) validated many men's experiences of feeling powerless and confused in a feminised society. In many ways the preoccupation with damaged masculinity, and guidelines on how to renew male identity through the work of Steve Biddulph and others, would outweigh the provocative and insightful interrogations of masculinity politics that were emerging from Australian men and women in the academy. Hence why, by the early 2000s there was a dramatic increase in literature and government resources focussed on solving the various physical and mental health problems amongst men, and also educational inequalities for boys. These issues were to be represented as a 'crisis in masculinity'.⁹⁰ By this stage it was also more prevalent for men and women in Australian society to speak tentatively and critically of feminism and its personal relevance for them, and also to make reductive analyses of contemporary Australian masculinity politics with the 'Sensitive

83 Ibid, 65-76.

84 The initial groups were run by both a male and a female until a consensus was reached within the group that female presence would be counterintuitive to the aims of group. Flannery, *The Men's Group*, 20-21.

85 Pease, *Men and Sexual Politics*, 68.

86 M. McGarry, 'Masculinity Studies and Male Violence: Critique or Collusion?' *Women's International Studies Forum*, 30, (2007), 404-415.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid, 409.

89 R.W. Connell quoted in Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men*, Third Revised Edition, (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 242.

90 Connell, *The Men and the Boys*; Lingard and Douglas, *Men Engaging Feminisms*; Vickers, 'Gender'.

New Age Guy' tagline.⁹¹ As Wendy Brown has suggested, this signifies how well-marketed and significant the male-victim figure became in the West during the 1980s.⁹² The examples of men's activism and gender theorising canvassed in this article nonetheless offer an alternative to the 'damaged masculinity' backlash narrative of the 1980s, in which men's movements and mobilisations were at times expressed in negative relationship to feminism. This includes the ground-breaking scholarship in the emerging fields of gender and masculinity studies by R.W. Connell, the poststructuralist critiques of gender from feminist and cultural studies theorists in Australian universities, and the pro-feminist activism of Bob Pease and Men Against Sexual Assault who were concerned with structural change and contemporary feminist debates about gendered violence. The examples of the Sydney-based men's groups run by Michael Flannery and Graham Russell, as well as the aforementioned instances of men experimenting with non-traditional roles as stay-at-home dads, further suggest that men could have a positive engagement with feminism's interrogation of sex-roles and social norms. This was an engagement that many took to be beneficial for their sense of manhood, allowing them to experience themselves as integral in their children's lives, and as individuals in the wider struggle to eradicate inequalities for women, men and children.

The examples canvassed above suggest that the influence of feminism in the lives of Australian men was sometimes ambiguous, as men and women simultaneously negotiated different experiences of gender politics, thus prompting different gendered claims. Nonetheless, the dissemination of feminist discourse through political institutions and academic scholarship in the 1980s broadened the scope for feminist debate amongst women and men in Australia. In this sense, many of the utopian aims of the feminist movement from the previous decade were being realised. The reasons for men engaging with feminism indeed varied widely, but whether they were critiquing it or complaining about it, Australian men were nonetheless *speaking* about it. This signifies that feminism at least had relevance in the conversations and everyday experiences of many men. Some more than others chose to engage with feminist critiques on a much more serious and sustained level. By the end of the twentieth century, Australian men, as well as women, were continuing to engage with feminist discourse and activism in a variety of ways, challenging more vitriolic backlash narratives and arguing for feminism's continued relevance and radical potential in Australian society.

91 McMahon, 'Blokus Domesticus: The Sensitive New Age Guy in Australia,' *Australian Masculinities*, Vol. 22, No. 56, (1998), 147-157; Monica Dux and Zora Simic, *The Great Feminist Denial*, (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2008).

92 Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Injury in Late Modernity*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
