This is the published version

Holmes, Katie and Pinto, Sarah 2013, Gender and sexuality, in Cambridge history of Australia, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, Vic, pp.308-331.

Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30062015

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner

Copyright: 2013, Cambridge University Press
The population of colonial Australia was always marked by a significant imbalance in the ratio of European men and women, which closed only at the beginning of the twentieth century. Its legacy was a highly masculinist culture, where violence against women, especially Indigenous women, was common and women were treated as bedmates, child bearers and domestic workers. Feminists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries campaigned vociferously for women's bodily autonomy, recognition of their importance as mothers, and the right to vote and participate in government. The suffrage campaigns were rewarded by the relatively early extension of the franchise at State levels between 1894 (South Australia) and 1909 (Victoria). The right to vote for and stand for election in the Commonwealth parliament was granted to white women who were British subjects in 1902. Feminists argued for the women's vote on the grounds of equality with men, but also because of the maternal values women would bring to public life. It was an argument that spoke directly to the racialised concerns of a new nation in need of white mothers to populate its vast expanses. This anxiety about population, its growth and colour, would continue to shape attitudes towards gender and sexuality across the century and beyond.

Citizen-workers and citizen-mothers

Marriage and family was the expected life course for both men and women. Heterosexuality was normalised and sexual self-control was the ideal for all, though in practice women were held to this more tightly than men. While sex was often understood as an essential or inevitable part of men's lives, the strong emphasis on motherhood and racial fitness left little room for non-procreative notions of female sexuality. In the period after Federation there was an emphasis on sexual and social purity that belied a deep interest in, and discussion of, sex. There were significant public conversations about
the age of consent, prostitution, rape and masturbation. As one commentator remarked in 1917: 'you can't move without Sex being flung in your face'.

Although the imperative to marry was strong, surprisingly large numbers of women and men remained single: 12.3 per cent of women and 22.4 per cent of men in 1911. The marriage rate began falling in the 1890s and continued to do so through the first two decades of the twentieth century. The state of marriage was also under scrutiny, with feminists attacking the institution for its subjection of women in language that revealed the influence of British feminists and liberal theorists. The prospect of women’s independence and apparent lack of interest in child bearing created considerable anxiety. Married women who sought to curtail their fertility were singled out for special condemnation. The 1903 New South Wales Royal Commission into the decline of the birthrate – which had fallen from six children in the average family in the 1880s to three in 1910 – laid the blame squarely at the feet of selfish women and their increasingly ‘lax morality’, condemning women’s desire for pleasure and aversion to child bearing. Yet the overwhelming reason for limiting family size was economic, and withdrawal was the main form of birth control – requiring the agreement of men.

The feminist movement’s emphasis on women’s independence from men enabled some women to imagine autonomy. Women’s magazines encouraged small-scale, home-based industry as a path to independence, which could be appealing. Mildred Hood, eighteen, poor and living on a farm near Hobart in 1909, dreamed of becoming a doctor by selling produce from her market garden and ‘patching scraps out of the newspaper to gather and Medical pamphlets to make my begining [sic]’. Not surprisingly, Mildred did not realise her dream, and spent the rest of her life caring for her family. Domestic service was still the dominant form of employment for working-class women, although factory work was becoming more common among urban women; in Victoria they constituted 37 per cent of the

2 Marriage rates differed across the States: they were highest in Western Australia and Queensland, lowest in Victoria. Nationally, the percentage of women never married by the age of 45-49 rose from 5.8 per cent in 1891 to 16.6 per cent in 1921; the percentage of men decreased from 23.6 per cent in 1891 to 16.7 per cent in 1921. See Peter F. McDonald, Marriage in Australia: Age at First Marriage and Proportions Marrying, 1860–1971 (Canberra: Department of Demography, ANU, 1974), pp. 133–5.
manufacturing workforce in 1900. Although women's participation in the workforce increased steadily, their pay did not. On average women received just over half the male wage, a ratio that would prove persistent once the Harvester judgment of 1907 enshrined the concept of the 'living wage' calculated on the needs of a family of five and applied only to men. As newly enfranchised citizens, women could claim a kind of equal status to men, but not equal pay.

As citizens, it was women's role as mothers that most interested both the state and feminists. Maternal citizenship was a key platform for feminists and women attached to the Labor Party. In 1912 women in the Labor Party convinced Prime Minister Andrew Fisher to introduce the £5 maternity allowance, payable to all white women on the birth of a child. The inclusion of single mothers in the maternity allowance was radical, its racial exclusion telling: in an extension of the white Australia policy, Asian, Aboriginal and Islander mothers were ineligible. Some feminists saw it as an example of the White Australia policy gone mad.

While the women who were populating the new Commonwealth could be described as citizen-mothers, the men creating the nation were citizen-workers, and of a race peculiarly suited to progressive nation building. Women could give birth to future citizens, but it was upon the shoulders of their sons that the future and defence of the country were seen to lie. Different understandings of masculinity circulated at the turn of the twentieth century: the bushman, a figure based on the large number of rural workers and considered to be the quintessential Australian, embodied the values of egalitarianism, mateship and the freedoms and vigour of outdoor life; the respectable workingman, a skilled labourer who was a hard-working family man; and the working-class 'larrikin' who was a danger to the social order, hanging around on street corners and threatening respectable citizens, especially women. Feminists generalised the figure of the larrikin to encompass many working-class men who, they believed, rendered family life difficult at

7 Marilyn Lake, Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), ch. 2.
8 Katie Holmes and Marilyn Lake (eds), Freedom Bound II: Documents on Women in Modern Australia (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995), p. 7.
best, miserable and dangerous at worst, a critique politicised by the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.\(^\text{10}\)

This paradigm converged with calls from some feminists, religious leaders, purity workers (who campaigned for a single moral and sexual standard for women and men) and doctors for men to control their sexual desires. Unlike so many other colonial societies, however, the anxiety did not extend to the threat of Indigenous men, whose sexuality was often silenced.\(^\text{11}\) Instead, it was Asian and Pacific Islander men who carried the burden of being cast as the non-white sexual predator, apparently threatening national racial purity. The fear associated with interracial sex could have consequences that extended far beyond legislative restrictions: a police constable in La Grange Bay in Western Australia chained Aboriginal women overnight to protect them from the men of pearling boats.\(^\text{12}\)

People sometimes found ways of subverting normative understandings of gender and sexuality. Indeed, historians have argued that the disorder and threat represented by figures such as the cross-dresser was important for producing understandings of 'normal' sexual behaviour.\(^\text{13}\) Transgressing gender or sexual norms could bring severe punishment, but in the early decades of the century this was more likely to be directed towards men engaged in 'deviant' sexual practices than women, whose same-sex desire was only beginning to be publicly acknowledged.\(^\text{14}\) When compared with the United States or Europe, however, there is relatively little acknowledgement—beyond prosecutions—of same-sex desires, practices or experiences in Australia during this period.\(^\text{15}\) Prostitution was by far the most widely recognised form of female 'deviant' sexual behaviour, implicitly sanctioned but also legally and criminally regulated.\(^\text{16}\)

With the outbreak of World War I and Australia's 'baptism of fire' on the shores of Gallipoli, the earlier masculine types came together as the Anzac soldier. The war sharpened understandings of gender but also sowed

---

12 Featherstone, *Let's Talk about Sex*, p. 86.
the seeds for future changes. It was not only Australian men who rushed to enlist and sought to serve the Empire. Australian women volunteered in their thousands to assist the war effort, but the government rejected all but nurses for war service; their experiences in this war differed markedly from those of British counterparts. Motherhood remained paramount; concerned by the threat to the population posed by so many men at war, some even campaigned for celibate motherhood (via artificial insemination) to enable women to contribute to the nation without disgrace. Women were also encouraged to make their sacrifices as wives and mothers, offering their husbands and sons to the nation and Empire; they were to ‘wait and weep’. Many women found such passivity unconscionable and committed themselves to labouring long hours as volunteers: knitting, sewing, packing parcels to send off to the troops. Others challenged established roles and claimed public voices and spaces. They also organised internationally to oppose the war, joining the Sisterhood of International Peace, the Women’s Peace Army and the Australian Peace Alliance. Their opposition to the war, however, was framed within conventional understandings of women’s roles. As Kathleen Hotson declared in the Woman Voter in 1916, ‘We shall have no faith in womanliness, in wifeliness, motherliness, if woman cannot [oppose the war].’

Australian soldiers were credited with the ultimate power of national creation. Gallipoli, Prime Minister William Morris Hughes declared in 1916, was ‘the birthplace of the nation’. The official war correspondent, C.E.W. Bean, would famously declare that the importance of the war was the discovery of Australian manhood. The Anzac, embodying the characteristics of courage,

resourcefulness, mateship and good humour, emerged from the war as the dominant, if contested, understanding of Australian masculinity. But for some men the Anzac legend proved incompatible with their own experiences, a source of discomfort and further disillusionment. The mythologised Anzac also belied a more violent and militarised version of masculinity that found expression among some returned servicemen, many of whom were unemployed and unemployable. The hundreds of thousands of wounded men inhabiting Australia’s public and private spaces threatened social stability and domestic harmony. War-wounded men also needed to be cared for, a task that fell predominantly onto families. Thousands of men returned from Europe with venereal diseases, requiring a very different type of care. In contrast to earlier panics, these men also found themselves condemned as diseased carriers, putting the health of women and children – and by extension the nation – at risk.

Modern men and women

World War I might have reinforced traditional understandings of gender but the economic expansion of the 1920s brought significant changes to the lives of women and men. Modernity heralded a more sexualised culture, with increased attention to women as desiring subjects. Several versions of femininity circulated, including the sexually precocious flapper, the modern woman and the bachelor girl. Young women’s behaviour was hotly debated: they were both the harbingers of modernity and its more worrying manifestations. White, single women were of particular concern, lest they find the modern desire for pleasure and freedom too appealing and relinquish their marriage and reproductive responsibilities. The author Dymphna Cusack was very tempted: ‘I’m finding life as an independent woman so fascinating I can’t conceive of wanting to change it for any other’. Even so, established ideas about gender and sexuality remained important, particularly in rural areas.

24 Ibid., pp. 169–74.
26 Marina Larsson, Shattered Anzacs: Living with the Scars of War (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2009).
27 Featherstone, Let’s Talk about Sex, pp. 95–103.
28 Kane Holmes, Spaces in Her Day: Australian Women’s Diaries of the 1920s and 1930s (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1995), ch. 1.
29 Dymphna Cusack to Florence James, April 1933, in Holmes and Lake (eds), Freedom Bound II, p. 68.
and within religious cultures where restraint and self-control continued to be valued. 30

The expansion of factory work for working-class women freed them from the demands of domestic service, while middle-class women also found increased opportunities for work. 31 Labour-saving devices such as gas and electric stoves, vacuum cleaners and washing machines assisted middle-class women with domestic labour. Efficiency and rational, scientific management became the principles that were to govern the domestic and paid workplaces. Scientific ‘experts’ were teaching women how to mother and to clean, and scrutinising their labour. 32 The promises of technology to reduce women’s labour proved illusory. Mabel Lincoln, a housewife in the Victorian town of Leongatha, recorded the unrelenting nature of her labour: ‘Start work 8 oclock finish 11 p.m., feel awfully fed up, this life is much worse than the farm’. 33

Experts also turned their attention to sex, where a scientific approach was expected to deliver substantial benefits to all. Sex education became a focus, particularly for adolescents. Arguments for sex education varied, but they had one thing in common: ‘the chief aim was simply to convince children and young adults not to have sex’, as Lisa Featherstone argues. Adolescent boys were encouraged to exercise control, and adolescent girls implored to assist them. Advice was different in the sex and marriage manuals written for (married) adults. New, companionate models of marital life substantially altered understandings of sex, with mutual pleasure the aim. Australian writers such as Marion Piddington were strongly influenced by British and US reformers, and especially by Marie Stopes. 34 This advice literature offers useful insight into expectations and understandings of heterosexual sex in the period. But evidence of practices and experiences is much harder to come by; most bedroom doors remain closed to historians.

Expert attention to mothers reflected the persistent concern with low fertility rates among white families. White women seemed impervious to such concerns, however, and the severe economic Depression of the 1930s brought a further fall in the birth rate and a dramatic rise in abortions. In 1935 the number of women seeking treatment ‘suffering from abortions’ at

33 Mabel Lincoln, Diary, 21 January 1930, in Holmes, Spaces in Her Day, p. 53.
34 Featherstone, Let’s Talk about Sex, pp. 123–30.
Melbourne’s Royal Women’s Hospital was estimated to be as high as one for every two births, and in 1936 sepsis from abortions accounted for 31 per cent of the maternal death rate for Victoria. The vast majority of these women were married. A 1937 report to the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) suggested that the most common reason given by women for seeking an abortion was poverty; but the report also noted that middle-class women were similarly seeking to limit the number of children they bore. 35

While heterosexuality was actively promoted, modernity opened up new possibilities for its transgression. Transgressors, in turn, were more rigorously policed. Male homosexuality remained illegal in all States, with charges of sodomy, buggery, indecent assault and gross indecency variously used to prosecute offenders. Most people only became aware of homosexual activity when its ‘criminality’ impinged on society, and then it was generally discussed in euphemistic terms. 36 Lesbian sexual activity was not explicitly outlawed in Australia, although suspects were subject to increasing police harassment and intervention. 37

Influenced by eugenic ideas, governments engaged in the population debate. Indigenous women and families were specifically identified. The rising number of lighter skinned, or ‘half-caste’ children, was a particular concern to authorities, although the white men involved in creating the ‘problem’ were mostly ignored. The practice of child removal intensified in the inter-war years, and children born as the product of interracial relationships were singled out. The practice was designed to breed out the blackness and to purify white Australia, although it paradoxically aimed to do so by mixing bloodlines. 38

Fiona was five when she was taken from her mother in 1936. It was 32 years before she again saw her mother, who had been left without any children. ‘Who can imagine what a mother went through?’ Fiona asked. 39

Some feminist groups took an active interest in the conditions of Indigenous Australians, linking with international women’s organisations to press their cause. The British Commonwealth League and the Pan-Pacific Women’s Association both provided venues for Australian feminists to highlight Indigenous women’s subordination. Mary Montgomerie Bennett, a Perth-based teacher and campaigner for Aboriginal rights, issued a ‘Call to the Women of Australia’ to ‘affirm the right of the aboriginal woman to the sanctity of her person and ask for definite reforms for her protection’. Bennett’s analysis of interracial relations was uncompromising: she believed there was a ‘white slave trade in black women’ in the north-west of Western Australia.

A plethora of women’s organisations campaigned for the interests of white women. The conservative Australian Women’s National League boasted 52,000 members at its height in 1914. It sought to combat socialism and protect the interests of home, women and children. The non-aligned National Council of Women served middle-class women’s activism, while the Country Women’s Association sought to represent the welfare of rural women and children. The United Associations of Women, with Jessie Street as a founding member, was the more radical of women’s organisations and campaigned for women’s economic rights and independence.

Australian feminists engaged in sustained international activism during the inter-war period. They joined with feminists from other Dominions to campaign for peace, and were committed to educating themselves about other cultures and nationalities. Such involvements broadened their views and strengthened their critiques of racism within Australia: the Pan-Pacific Women’s Association, in particular, provided a forum where women could engage with a ‘more egalitarian international framework’. Their goals included an equal rights treaty, which would recognise the equality of the sexes, including the right to work and payment for women’s labour both inside and outside the home.

The right of women to work became hotly debated during the mass unemployment of the Depression. Most of those thrown out of work were

41 Quoted in Lake, Getting Equal, pp. 110–11.
Gender and sexuality

men, who felt acutely their failure as breadwinners to provide for their families. Children and adults alike went hungry. Women in paid work were accused of taking men’s jobs — and, by implication, their manhood. They were also accused of being ‘scarlet lipped’ and ‘overdressed’, their very visibility a threat to conventional understandings of femininity. In 1935 the trade union organiser Muriel Heagney published Are Women Taking Men’s Jobs?, arguing cogently that sexual segregation was an entrenched feature of the labour market in Australia, and men’s jobs were safe. She also exposed women’s appalling pay and working conditions.

Wartime opportunities and anxieties

It was another war that brought women’s wages closer to men’s, and opened up new areas of employment. World War 2 had a profound impact on the understandings and daily experiences of gender and sexuality in Australia. Images of militarised manhood again called men to join up. As men left their jobs, women were called upon to step into them. The mobilisation of women into the auxiliary services and war industries is in stark contrast to their experience during World War 1. Now women could be welders and truck drivers, farmers and mechanics, secretaries and munitions workers. ‘Total war’ meant that even married women with children were expected to work, although childcare provision was lacking.

Women’s entry into paid work in large numbers created many new opportunities. Those in traditional areas of male employment received between 60 and 100 per cent of the male rate, and the wages of other female workers were raised to 75 per cent. Many women experienced a new independence and autonomy, but their new freedoms were bound within strict understandings of sexual difference. Those involved in the war effort were encouraged to retain their femininity, which was increasingly defined in terms of heterosexual desirability. The presence of large numbers of

44 Noted Sydney feminist Jessie Street in her letter to the Sydney Morning Herald, 20 February 1934, defending women’s right to work; quoted in Holmes and Lake (eds), Freedom Bound II, p. 74.
45 See Lake, Getting Equal, p. 179.
American servicemen, better paid and considered better looking and better mannered than their Australian counterparts, introduced many women to previously unexplored pleasures, and threatened Australian masculinity. Lola Taylor, a Brisbane teenager during the war, remembered the impact of American servicemen: 'after Australian men, American men were so clean. They smelt beautiful...They had beautiful teeth...Their clothes were starched and smelt so lovely.'

Young women's readiness to experiment with their newfound freedoms brought condemnation. Particular concern was expressed about those described as 'amateurs', women who apparently actively sought out men for sexual relations and risked spreading venereal disease among the troops, sabotaging the war effort. Young working-class women found themselves blamed for the moral breakdown of the community. There was a racial element to this anxiety: black American soldiers represented a fascinating and frightening sexual frontier. The war presented other challenges for Australian men; the 22,000 men taken prisoner of the Japanese were difficult to incorporate into the Anzac legend. One-third of these prisoners died while in captivity. All suffered physical and psychological torture. Photographs of their emaciated bodies posed a direct challenge to understandings of Australian, and especially Anzac, masculinity.

The war also provided homosexual men with increased opportunities to explore their sexuality, and Australian women were not the only ones to find American servicemen attractive. But the war brought the full consequences of censure and exposure if soldiers were discovered in a homosexual relationship. In a not dissimilar way, the auxiliary services provided lesbians with the opportunity to meet and form relationships with other women, at the same time as providing circumstances whereby their activities could be more easily policed. Paradoxically, the military's anxiety about lesbian behaviour both increased public awareness and fostered a lesbian identity.

Concerns about homosexual activity were also an expression of anxiety about heterosexual behaviour, and a desire to reinforce the expectation of

51 Ruth Ford, 'Lesbians and Loose Women: Female Sexuality and the Women's Services during World War II', in Damousi and Lake (eds), *Gender and War*, p. 98.
marriage and procreation. Worry over the declining birthrate continued during the war, though the birthrate had begun to increase when Australia’s strategic vulnerability was dramatically exposed. In 1943, when Enid Lyons gave her maiden speech in the House of Representatives, population growth was a key theme. As a mother of eleven children, she believed she spoke with authority on the subject. Lyons was one of the two women first elected to the Commonwealth parliament, but in many ways she was not representative: most Australian women were clearly seeking to limit the number of children they bore. When the NHMRC called on women to explain why they were limiting their offspring, it received 1,400 replies. Like the 1936 report on abortion, chief among the reasons given were poverty and economic insecurity. Second came the unending round of domestic labour and the impossibility of obtaining help. As young women in the 1930s, these writers had been promised the adventure of romance and marriage. When this melted into the realities of daily life as a mother and housewife, women gave voice to their dreams of different horizons. They sought better wages, domestic help, assistance with child care, a few hours respite per week and some level of equality in the partnership of marriage.

Home is where the heart is?

'Sydney went wild' when peace was declared in 1945, according to Enid Sweetnam, a member of the Australian Women's Land Army. 'I didn't come home for three days...I walked the streets and sang, danced, talked, laughed. I just went silly.' 52 It is tempting to characterise the war's end as a time when people eagerly resumed life at the beginning of Australia's long boom of economic prosperity and material comfort. The immediate aftermath of the war, however, was a time of uncertainty and unrest. Arrests for crimes against the person rose by 20 per cent in the two years following the war, an increase on pre-war levels that was maintained until the 1950s. 53 The rate of divorce also increased, as it did in Britain, France and the United States. 54 The statistics gesture towards a time of increased interpersonal conflict, and the foundation of the Marriage Guidance Council in 1948 indicates concern

for the institution of marriage. The common image of the 1950s – ‘suburbia, nuclear families, material prosperity, social stability’ – was not so much the inevitable outcome of the war’s end as the ‘imagined solution’ to the instabilities of the period. This can be seen in the management of anxieties that surrounded gender and sexuality.

The circulation of advice about how men and women could return to their ‘natural’ roles as breadwinners and homemakers suggests doubts about their attainment. Advice literature gave guidance on the return to normal marital sexual relations, advice that betrayed concern about the continuation of the alternative sexual practices of wartime. The Melbourne psychiatrist R.S. Ellery warned that military life resulted in ‘an unnatural life of repression’ or ‘substitute gratifications’, both of which could interfere with the sexual relationship between husbands and wives. There was concern, too, around diminished or damaged masculinity, seen most clearly in discussions of returning prisoners-of-war. Wounded and incapacitated men stood in direct contrast to the many women who had experienced the war as a time of independence and freedom. Magazines and newspapers of the late 1940s were filled with fictional and non-fictional accounts of these women as a threat, a ‘suspicion of women’ that extended beyond cultural narratives.

The possibility that women would be unable or unwilling to return to pre-war femininities also animated public discussion in the post-war years. Ellery warned that women in the services who had ‘tasted the independence which money and position confer’ might struggle to return to a life of domesticity. An article in the Australian Women’s Weekly noted that military uniforms had ‘encouraged striding, abruptness and jerky mannerisms’. Women would have to relearn how to look and behave like women. Despite these and other anxieties, many women happily anticipated a return to a more stable and domesticated life. One West Australian woman noted in 1944 that she was ‘breaking [her] neck to get out, get married and have children’. But not all welcomed that prospect.

Gender and sexuality

The home loomed large in 1950s Australia. Idealised and longed for, it became the principal site of Australia’s post-war reconstruction. Domesticity shaped private lives and underpinned ideas about citizenship and community. The everyday life of the Australian woman was to be framed around her husband and children, who were to be prioritised in all but the most unusual of circumstances. As Cora Carlisle put it in Women’s Day in 1950, ‘No substitute for marriage exists to establish a girl’s position in the cosmic scheme of things’. Among the generation of women who were the mothers of the post-war baby boom, only around 5 per cent never married.

As the war had amplified pro-natalist population policies, motherhood dominated understandings of this domesticated femininity. Although motherhood was not women’s only role in the 1950s – around 30 per cent of women worked outside the home, making up almost one-quarter of the Australian workforce – motherhood was assumed to be women’s priority. But motherhood and domestic life were not embraced unquestioningly. There was discussion of the limits of domesticity, and in particular of ‘suburban neurosis’, the Australian version of American feminist Betty Freidan’s ‘problem with no name’. There were also some mothering roles that women did not welcome. Returned soldiers, for example, could sometimes demand the care of a mother from their wives, as one wife of a returned serviceman explained: ‘I always felt that he was my eldest child. He’s never [been] a husband...He needed help. I hated him.’ And there were women whose capacity to be acceptable mothers was questioned, with often devastating implications; Indigenous and unwed mothers were particular targets, albeit in quite different ways.

There were alternatives to motherhood. While many working-class women saw work outside the home as a necessary chore or exhausting juggle – immigrant women in particular, with little option but to work, were concentrated in low-skilled and low-paid jobs – others, particularly middle-class women, found employment outside the home interesting and

61 Quoted in John Murphy, Imagining the Fifties: Private Sentiment and Political Culture in Menzies’ Australia (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000), p. 43.
62 Ibid., p. 21
64 Murphy, Imagining the Fifties, pp. 42-7.
65 Damousi, Living with the Aftermath, p. 117.
satisfying. For others still, work alleviated the drudgery and narrowness of domesticity in precisely the way that second-wave feminists would soon be insisting it could. The late 1950s and early 1960s also saw significant increases in the number of women in higher education in Australia – from less than 7,000 in 1955 to more than 12,000 in 1960 and 22,000 in 1965 – many of them in professional courses. The increasing education of women was to be a major driver of social change in later decades.

Working women had to contend with continuing institutional impediments to their participation in the workforce. Women worked outside the home despite unequal rates of pay, the significant tax benefits afforded to single-income families, and the marriage bar in the public services and large parts of the private sector. Although female participation in the workforce grew only slightly, the proportion of married women who worked rose from 8.6 per cent in 1947 to 18.4 per cent in 1961. This increase was significantly below the participation rates of married women in Britain and the United States, but it was a dramatic change nonetheless. Domesticity might have been a 'powerful middle class imagining' that 'filled public space' in the 1950s, but it could not capture the entirety of women's experiences.

The idealised masculinity of the breadwinner was just as domestically bound as that of the homemaker. As the sociologist Morven Brown put it in 1956, the Australian man is satisfied 'within the home circle. His great ambition is typically to marry, to have a family, to purchase a house, to own a car and then to settle down to enjoy life.' The difference was the perceived relationship between gender and parenthood. Whereas women's embrace of motherhood was assumed to be a seamless and natural process, men required instruction: 'the wife must take upon herself the task of making her husband into a father', as David Mace commented in Women's Day in 1952.


69 Sheridan and Stretton, 'Mandarins, Ministers and the Bar on Married Women', p. 86.

70 21.4 per cent of married women were working in Britain in 1951 and about 23 per cent in the United States in 1950; Melanie Nolan, 'The State Changing Its Mind: Australian and New Zealand Governments' Postwar Policy on Married Women's Paid Employment', in Grimshaw, Murphy and Probert (eds), Double Shift, p. 159.

71 Murphy and Probert, 'Never Done', in Double Shift, p. 150.

72 Morven Brown, Australians and Their Way of Life', Australia Today, 20 October 1956, 55, quoted in Murphy, Imagining the Fifties, p. 35.

73 Quoted in Murphy, Imagining the Fifties, p. 61.
the historian Mark Peel has highlighted the way the 1950s father understood the work of fatherhood to take place outside the home: it was ‘the work I did so my kids wouldn’t have to’, as one working-class man commented.\(^{74}\)

Others saw limits to the breadwinning role. In men’s magazines such as *Man* and *Man Junior*, marriage could be represented as an intensely unhappy state, with fatherhood only adding to its burdens.\(^{75}\) The post-war years also witnessed a gradual opening up of alternative expressions of gender and sexuality, as well as the ‘birth’ of the ‘teenager’. Whether it was at the harder edge of bodgie culture, where violence and criminal activity was a possibility, or as part of a less threatening subculture centred around rock’n’roll music, some young men and women found alternatives to lives as breadwinners and mothers. The influx of migrants from continental Europe also altered sexual cultures, prompting both interest and anxiety.\(^{76}\) While the sexualisation of young people in this period was nascent in popular culture, by the beginning of the twenty-first century it had become endemic.

As in the inter-war period, marriage was to be heterosexual, procreative and monogamous. Couples were under renewed pressure to perform in the bedroom, with simultaneous orgasm during intercourse the ideal of heterosexual sex. Men were to be good lovers, responsible for women’s pleasure. Women who didn’t reach orgasm, and specifically vaginal orgasm, risked being classified as frigid, a reflection of the growing influence of Freud on ideas about normative sexuality. But heterosexual sex was not confined to marriage, as the rising number of ex-nuptial pregnancies during the 1950 and 1960s makes clear. Women who found themselves pregnant and unmarried typically faced familial and social ostracism, and were usually expected to relinquish their babies at birth.\(^{77}\) Legitimate mothers were white and married.

For gay and lesbian people, the 1950s were a ‘dark decade’ of increased persecution and sharpened surveillance as the medicalisation of ideas about homosexuality solidified. Men and women who displayed same-sex desires or engaged in same-sex practices – or those who came under suspicion for doing so – were talked about and victimised. The public activities of gay men were of particular concern to police, and there was a significant increase in arrests and convictions for unnatural offences. In Victoria a squad was formed to


\(^{77}\) Featherstone, *Let’s Talk about Sex*, pp. 231, 244–5, 272–3.
deal with the apparent menace: 'We know there are hundreds of perverts in Melbourne and we plan to get them all'. Graham Willet argues that although gay and lesbian lives were possible in post-war Australia, they were only possible in private. Not all chose to live in secrecy: Val, who ran a coffee shop in Melbourne, 'rebelled against the dreariness of Melbourne... An Italian woman tailor made me beautiful suits which were extremely mannish but beautifully cut and in very good taste.'

Decades of change

From the introduction of the contraceptive pill in January 1961 to the federal government's Affirmative Action Act in 1986, a wave of social, cultural and legislative changes challenged normative ideas about gender and sexuality, and changed lives. Many of these changes came about as a result of individual and collective activism. Women came to the women's movement in a variety of ways: frustration with workplace inequalities, outrage at the men of the New Left, demand for new models of female desire, insistence on full control over reproduction, and engagement in universities with the history and politics of women's oppression. The list of their achievements is striking: the gradual removal of the marriage bar in employment, the achievement of equal pay (in two decisions of the Arbitration Commission in 1969 and 1972), the introduction of no-fault divorce (1975), the provision of benefits for single mothers (1973), the creation of paid maternity leave in the public service (1973), increasing attention to the need for child care, the beginnings of the decriminalisation of abortion, and the introduction of anti-discrimination and equal opportunity laws (1984). This was second-wave feminism at work, a broad movement that aspired to bring about a major reformulation of women, men and society. 'We felt enormously powerful', remarked one woman involved in the establishment of the Darwin branch of the Women's Electoral Lobby in the early 1970s.

80 Willett, 'The Darkest Decade'.
81 Quoted in Ford, "Filthy, Obscene and Mad", p. 106.
Gender and sexuality

One of the most noticeable aspects of this reformulation was the way it provided women with avenues out of motherhood and domesticity. Reliable birth control and increased access to education changed women’s horizons, undoing the idea that women’s primary role was maternal. Women were instead to live as properly desiring subjects and full members of the workforce, with all the benefits and privileges both these roles were believed to entail. Most obviously articulated in campaigns around access to contraception, abortion and child care, this turn away from motherhood as a defining feature of femininity can be seen in many campaigns associated with the women’s movement in Australia, particularly in the early 1970s. So, too, consciousness-raising groups offered some women the opportunity to examine the disappointments and limitations of marriage and the life of the wife and mother.83

Not all rejected the primacy of motherhood. Indigenous women had reason to resist the women’s movement’s critiques of motherhood and the family. Colonisation had resulted in sustained and continuing attacks on Indigenous family life, and the forcible removal of Indigenous children involved a denigration of Indigenous motherhood that is yet to be fully redressed.84 Some radical and lesbian feminists argued for a new form of motherhood, one removed from the world of men that would allow women to embrace their difference from men – a difference perceived as innate superiority.85

The women’s movement also provided an intense critique of men and the models of masculinity they inhabited. Men were said to be oppressing women in the home, benefitting from women’s unpaid physical and sexual labour, and dominating a society they had created without reference to anyone but themselves. They had circumscribed women’s lives and sought to write them out of history. Some were inadequate lovers, propagated the myth of the vaginal orgasm and maintained their dominance through actual or threatened violence. Although this critique echoed and was directly informed by feminist politics in the United States and the United Kingdom, feminist historians marked out Australian society as particularly masculinist – the historian Miriam Dixson, for example, described Australian women as ‘the doormats

84 Haebich, Broken Circles.
of the western world' – and sought to understand women’s oppression by looking to Australia’s origins. 86

The iconoclastic atmosphere of the 1970s went beyond constructions of gender: protest and activism also reformulated sexuality. As the pill gradually uncoupled sex from procreation, so the pleasures of sex became its raison d'être, a development that opened up space for non-normative sexual expression and gave rise to new forms of sexual identities. Campaigns for homosexual law reform gathered pace, with the public articulation of sexuality they involved enabling the remaking of homosexual identities. 87 Indeed, coming out could not help but function as a rejection of the privatised sexualities of the pre-liberation era. For a lesbian couple, Mim and Sue, coming out in the early 1970s meant ‘kissing in the park, arabesques in the art gallery, pirouettes on the pavement, holding hands in the street’. 88

Amid the tumult of the new social movements and the counterculture, gay and lesbian rights campaigns quickly became more radical, particularly with the establishment of Gay Liberation. Where earlier campaigns sought to change opinions, Gay Liberation sought to change society, primarily through a reformulation of the individual. Sexuality was at the centre of these remade selves and sex the ‘centrepiece’ of liberation. 89 The insistence on the public assertion of homosexuality was the most significant and enduring change of this period. As early as 1978, this was something to be protected. Male homosexuality was decriminalised in South Australia (1972), the Australian Capital Territory (1976) and Victoria (1980). All other States and Territories made legislative changes in the next decade, with the exception of Tasmania, the last to decriminalise in 1997. Since only 22 per cent of surveyed Australians had supported homosexual law reform in 1967, this was a swift and substantial change. 90 Decriminalisation marked a time of increased possibilities for new and different kinds of lives – and, indeed, this is the legacy of campaigns for gay and lesbian rights in this period.

The practice of heterosexual sex was also changing, moving out of the sanctity of the marriage bed to become an accepted, even expected, aspect of de facto and some casual relationships. The pill liberated women to be

89 Reynolds, *From Camp to Queer*, pp. 74–82.
90 Ibid., p. 36.
desiring sexual subjects, although not all ethnic groups were supportive of such developments. Talk about sex, in women’s magazines, newspapers and journals, proliferated and the introduction of sex education in schools diminished the ignorance and fear that had characterised the experience of sex in earlier decades. By the turn of the twenty-first century sexually explicit imagery had become ubiquitous, profoundly altering sexual cultures in strikingly gendered ways; in a 2003 survey 73 per cent of boys and 11 per cent of girls aged 16 to 17 years reported watching X-rated videos.

The possibilities for women were also expanding. Around 45 per cent of working-age women were in the workforce in 1980, a figure that was to increase in the decades to come. In a development unique to Australia, the Hawke Labor government enacted legislation aimed at providing equal opportunity for women in employment. The Affirmative Action Act of 1986 required employers with more than 100 staff to create equal opportunity programs, a recognition of the impediments to equality that continue to exist even after formal legislative or regulatory changes. Feminist bureaucrats entered the federal and State public sectors to develop and implement women’s policies, a defining feature of Australian feminism. These ‘femocrats’ – women in middle and upper management positions in organisations that in the not-too-distant past had required married women to give up their employment – were instrumental in the creation of publicly funded refuges, health centres, rape crisis centres and information services for women. Members of the women’s movement who remained outside the realms of institutional power regarded femocrats as hopelessly compromised by their association with the (patriarchal) state. Conversely, anti-feminist organisations such as Women Who Want to be Women and the Women’s Action Alliance sought to undo many of the legislative and policy changes femocrats had overseen as they looked for a reaffirmation of motherhood.
The citizen-mother no longer filled the national imaginary. The fertility rate fell from a post-war high of 3.5 children to less than 2 in the 1980s and 1990s, while the median age of mothers rose from a post-war low of 25.4 in 1971 to a high of 30.8 in 2006. Over half of Australia’s women were engaging in paid work outside the home, more women than men were attending universities, and there were greater numbers of women in parliaments, management positions and occupations and professions that had been the preserve of men. Yet gender remained a marker of difference in social, political and economic outcomes. In the early 1990s the Australian workforce was one of the most gender-segregated in the industrialised world: women dominated the ranks of the low-paid, part-time and casual workforces, while men continued to occupy management positions in both male and female-dominated industries. Women continued to do the vast majority of unpaid domestic work, in spite of increased work outside the home. And more than 50 per cent of single parents – 80 per cent of whom were women – were living below the poverty line, contributing to what the Federal Inquiry into Equal Opportunity and Equal Status for Women in 1992 called the ‘feminisation of poverty’. A survey of women’s safety in 1996 found that 7 per cent of women had experienced violence in the previous 12 months and 38 per cent had experienced violence during their lives.

Backlash

Despite entrenched inequalities, the 1990s saw a backlash. Reflecting similar developments around the western world, the women’s movement was accused of failing women. The most significant of these failings was around motherhood: not only had (older) feminists unfairly derided motherhood, but the insistence on the importance of careers had robbed many women of the chance to be mothers at all. The journalist Virginia Haussegger declared in 2002 that she was childless and angry: ‘Angry that I was daft enough to believe female fulfilment came with a leather briefcase’. One of the

100 Ian Castles, How Australians Use Their Time, cat. no. 4153.0 (Canberra: ABS, 1994), p. 7.
101 Half Way to Equal, p. 90.
Gender and sexuality

women’s movement’s greatest achievements – ‘giving women a choice about when and whether to mother’ – had instead apparently become ‘the basic cause of their oppression’.\textsuperscript{104} Whereas the women of women’s liberation had largely understood their oppressions collectively, looking for structural explanations and causes, these women’s narratives of disenchantment were often intensely individual.

Such critiques ironically echoed those made from within the emerging men’s movement, a term describing a variety of men’s activities and activism that developed in response to the women’s movement. It emerged at a time of renewed attention to men and men’s issues that can be seen in public policy, but also in a move into studies of masculinity in academic scholarship. Some in the men’s movement saw themselves as responding directly to feminism’s questioning of men and masculinity, and sought to develop new models of feminist manhood.\textsuperscript{105} Others articulated men’s rights in the face of the crisis of masculinity apparently prompted by feminism.\textsuperscript{106} The argument that feminism’s extension of women’s rights came at the expense of men was strongest in relation to the rights of fathers, many of whom felt disenfranchised following divorce. Groups such as the Abolish Child Support/Family Court Party and Dads Against Discrimination suggested a profound discomfort with the changes brought about by the women’s movement. The arguments of father’s rights campaigners varied. Some were ‘angry white men’ acting as apologists for violence against women.\textsuperscript{107} Others were struggling to inhabit a newly softened version of fatherhood they felt was undermined by ‘the system’.\textsuperscript{108} Although the women’s movement had disrupted the hegemony of men’s role as breadwinning workers – by 1990 men were the sole breadwinners in only 35 per cent of couples with children\textsuperscript{109} – the type of masculinities that might replace it were less than clear.

In the late 1990s some of the institutional achievements of the women’s movement, and particularly of the femocrats, were dismantled: women’s

\textsuperscript{104} Natasha Campo, \textit{From Superwomen to Domestic Goddesses: The Rise and Fall of Feminism} (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), p. 135.
\textsuperscript{105} For an example of this kind of engagement, see Michael Flood, ‘Men’s Groups’, \textit{XY: Men, Sex, Politics}, 4, 2 (1994): 27–8.
policy makers were moved out of prime ministerial and premiers’ departments; impact-on-women tests of public policy and budgets were removed; the Women’s Bureau, Equal Pay Unit, the Work and Family Unit and the Women’s Statistics Unit were abolished; and a raft of women’s organisations lost their funding, including the Women’s Electoral Lobby, the Women’s Emergency Services Network and the National Association of Services Against Sexual Violence. Feminists noted these changes with dismay and alarm.

Feminists’ frustration was fostered in large part by a renewed emphasis on motherhood in Australian politics. By 2004 both the Coalition government and the Labor Opposition supported pro-natalist policies that included cash payments for newborns, effecting a return to the maternity allowance of the early decades of the twentieth century, albeit this time through the so-called Family Tax Refund. Changes to the funding of child care and child payments brought about by the Howard government significantly benefited stay-at-home mothers at the expense of working mothers, changes that largely remained in place under the Rudd and Gillard governments, even with the introduction of Paid Parental Leave in 2011. Kevin Rudd’s 2007 election campaign also brought with it a new appellation firmly within this mould: ‘working families’. Some have viewed Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s 2012 parliamentary speech attacking Opposition leader Tony Abbott’s sexism and misogyny as the most visible indication of an undercurrent of frustration and anger at continuing gender inequalities, particularly in the workplace.

Despite its many successes, the women’s movement’s attempt to transform gender relations has not yet come to pass. Gay and lesbian rights campaigns have moved away from the radicalism of the 1970s. Indeed, it is possible to trace a narrative of decreasing radicalism in the gay and lesbian movement in Australia from the high point of the first Mardi Gras parade in Sydney in 1978, initially conceived and enacted as a political protest. The HIV/AIDS epidemic curtailed the possibility of radical sex, questioning the promise of

12 Ibid., pp. 142–71.
The increased commercialisation of the Mardi Gras led many to question the parade’s political significance and potential. And the ‘mainstreaming’ of gay and lesbian lives and identities led some to wonder if we are approaching the ‘end of gay’.

If gender relations have proved more resistant to change than many hoped, the proliferation of discourses about sexuality has proved as pervasive as many feared. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, sex saturated the culture and concern over the increasing sexualisation of children animated public discussion. Fears over the incidence of child sexual abuse increased and the practice of pedophilia became a focus for sustained community anxiety and police surveillance, leading eventually to a royal commission into institutional responses to child abuse in Australia in 2012. At the same time, concerns over the sex trade in Asian women echoed the fears of feminists a century earlier about a white slave trade.

While some of the gains made by the feminist movement and those campaigning for the rights of gay, lesbian and transgendered people seem to be at risk, fundamental changes of the past century have had a dramatic impact on the daily lives of the majority of Australian men and women. The decoupling of fertility and sexuality, along with persistent campaigns to improve the conditions of women’s lives and their access to the same opportunities as men, has had a profound effect on the expression and understanding of gender and sexuality. Understandings of masculinity and femininity are far more diverse than at the turn of the twentieth century and the transgression of gender norms far more acceptable, especially in highly urbanised areas. But the changes have not been felt equally. Most notably, Indigenous communities continue to experience high levels of gendered violence and disadvantage. While women have infiltrated many areas of traditional male employment, the sexual segregation of the labour market continues, with women in particular concentrated in lower paid jobs, and migrant women often the lowest paid, and most at risk of exploitation. New and different lives are both more visible and more possible, but the sweep of change can, and does, mask the everyday discriminations that remain for many.