

# POLICY FORUM

POD

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The Brief: Women in politics  
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**About us:**

Policy Forum Pod is the podcast of Policy Forum.net - Asia and the Pacific's platform for public policy debate, analysis and discussion. Policy Forum is based at Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University.

Our regular podcasts are written for a broad audience of public policy professionals, and those interested in public policy throughout the region.

Policy Forum connects with the Asia and the Pacific Policy Society – a network of thousands of people involved in every level of policy around the region.

**Host:** Edwina Landale

**Guest:** Blair Williams

[intro music 0:00:00-0:00:15]

**Host:** Hello, and welcome to The Brief – a short shop-snapshot of the region’s policy landscape. My name is Edwina Landale, and this is the last episode of The Brief for this year.

For today’s episode, we’re talking about women in politics. Women’s representation is a hot topic for policy makers and politicians. From policy-making to parliament political spaces tend to have a long history of male leadership. Creating a more balanced gender dynamic is incredibly important if we want to create policy that represents the interests of society.

Women make up more than half of the community, so it’s of course important for their voices to be heard in political spaces. Female politicians face an incredible challenge getting into parliament, and it doesn’t necessarily get any easier once they’re there. Here, in Australia, the total number of women in parliament is just over 30%, and their treatment by male colleagues at times leaves a lot to be desired, so how can we create more space for women and how can we make sure that that space is safe?

Joining me today, to talk about women in politics and in the media, is Blair Williams. Blair is a PhD candidate currently working on a comparative study of women prime ministers and gendered print media studies. She completed a joint Bachelor at the University of Adelaide, winning Business and Professional Women’s Award for top GSSA Honour student. She is a coordinator of the Australian Political Studies Association Women’s Caucus and the International Political Science Association pages. Thanks for joining us today, Blair.

**Blair Williams:** Thanks. I’m excited to be here.

**Host:** What exactly are the barriers to success that women face when embarking on political careers, that don’t exist necessarily for men?

**Blair Williams:** There are many barriers for women to enter politics and, as we said before, once they’re in politics as well. Previous research I did a few years ago, after Gillard’s left politics, asked young women, “Did the gendered media representation of Gillard impact negatively on your aspirations to leadership in your own life but also leadership in the political space?” and a lot of these women said it did negatively impact on them.

They don’t really want to enter such a hostile and volatile political realm, because they know that, as women, if they do become politicians then they are subject to more media scrutiny – they’re subject to more scrutiny from their own fellow politicians, both from the opposition and from within their own party.

That dissuades women from wanting to enter politics itself, but aside from that those who do want to enter politics, which is fantastic, [?? 0:02:59] to enter, a lot of the times they are not placed in safe seats. They’re placed in marginal seats or seats where there will just outright lose.

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Although parties, like the Labor Party, are trying to put in place policies that change that, to make women also in safe seats — the Labour Party in the UK did a fantastic job at that for the last 20 years, but the more conservative parties, they don't do that. They see this preferencing more women for safe seats as identity politics thing that they don't stand for.

They think that more women will enter politics if they are good, if they are capable, seeing quotas as incapable women entering politics, which is not the thing. It's just making it more-fair for women to be able to enter politics.

Those are some of the barriers: we need more women in safe seats, we need gender quotas — definitely, and we need more substantive representation of women in politics itself, but we also need more women candidates, in general.

**Host:** Actually, I'm glad that you've mentioned this Coalition Labour split, in terms of the approach to quotas or in terms of female representation, because I have some information here, now I want to ask questions about.

Australia has the largest gap in the representation of women in right and left parliamentary parties of any comparable democracy, except the USA.

**Blair Williams:** Not shocked [laughs]

**Host:** So, for example, after the 2016 federal election women made up 41% of Labor members for the House of Reps, but only 17% of Coalition members, so why exactly, do you think, this gap exists between those two parties?

**Blair Williams:** I wonder what the percentage will be like after this year [laughs], after what happened with Julia Banks resigning and what not.

Yes, it's not been a good time for the Coalition in terms of the "women problem", but what accounts for the difference, well, for starters Labor has the gender quota which helps obviously more women to enter parliament. They put them in more safe seats.

It's just those basic things: to just get more women, to make it more equitable for women to enter politics, whereas the Liberal Party, as I was saying before, they have their feet in the ground, pushing against this wave of wanting more women to be in politics. They think that they should get that by their merit, not by quotas, ignoring that a lot of women with merit are being pushed out because of unfair, unequitable gender biases.

Another reason why there are less Liberal women politicians is, in all areas of the Liberal Party, young liberals are a lot more men than women. In the Liberal Party, the party-base are a lot more men than women. It's just constantly--; There is *[sic.]* a lot more male party members, male voters that lean Liberal than women. Women are more likely to lean Labor-voting. They're more likely to be more progressive, at least socially if not economically. That, I guess, impacts on how many women there are in the Liberal Party.

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Then, you have this Liberal Coalition “women problem”, as has been in the media for the last few months: accounts from Julia Banks that she was bullied by the [other? 0:06:03] Liberal male politicians, that they’re expected to adhere to this masculine, so typically masculine way of acting in parliament.

A quote from a Liberal politician a few months ago was how to cop it on a chin, in response to Julia Banks’s bullying he was saying that you have to, kind of, deal with it. It’s part of the politics, it’s the “Canberra own game” or whatever, but for women to have to try to do without, then they’re stuck.

They’re stuck in this bind of they’re required to have masculine attributes, they’re required to be not aggressive but adversarial, to be not so much competitive but to have to stick out for themselves, but then if they do those things they’re seen as being too hard, so they’re stuck. It’s hard. I’m not saying they can’t do it. Obviously, a lot of people have, but it’s a lot harder for them to deal with this stuff than for Liberal male politicians.

Male political leaders have a lot more freedom and have a [?? 0:07:03] to their leadership performance. They’re expected, I guess, and can also be more competitive, more adversarial and have this strong protector role, depending on what politicians they are. Abbott definitely took that protector role in his leadership performance, while Kevin Rudd less so.

On the other hand, women leaders – not that we have had that many, they’re expected to be compassionate, warm, calm, and they need to be able to compromise really well. Women politicians as well as leaders are expected to be able to compromise, where men are more argumentative and competitive, and I think that’s the main difference. Women are expected to be more group-minded while male leaders are more of that the sole leader, where women are expected to lead with a group.

**Host:** Your research focuses a lot on the portrayal of women by the media, which perhaps focuses on exactly the qualities that you’ve just mentioned. What kind of image does the media typically portray of the female politician?

**Blair Williams:** Ooh, where do I start? [laughs] The media both reinforce gender roles, norms and stereotypes, while also questioning if you don’t perform incorrectly, whether they’re not – and this is they might not even know that they’re reinforcing this – reinforcing norms, but they seem to portray women political leaders using five different themes I’ve noticed.

The first one is they consistently talk about their gender. They’re referred to as women prime ministers, especially in Gillard’s case – female Prime Minister, and that’s not just in the first few days after they ascended to the leadership position but constantly. Although it does wane after a while, but it still is consistently mentioned that they are female, or woman, or lady, or girl.

All those kinds of gendered markings are used in their portrayals, as well as discussing things that they do politically in an extremely feminising way. For example, Gillard’s leadership [attention? 0:09:06] in the first few weeks of her Prime-Ministerial role was seen to be cleaning up

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the house. She was seen to be doing housework in parliament, cleaning up the boys' mess, sweeping up. These kinds of words were always used: sweeping, cleaning, housework, housewife, or housekeeper, and it's not just with Gillard, it's with women – Thatcher and Theresa May in the UK, political leaders in New Zealand. It's this trend that they do through all other countries.

They also massively focus on their appearance, so whether Gillard has a “big arse”, to quote Germaine Greer.

**Host:** Her prime-ministerial portrait was recently revealed and it's from the neck up because she said that she just didn't want to deal with anyone commenting on what she was wearing, which is a huge reflection on exactly what you're saying.

**Blair Williams:** Yes, because she really did get a lot of criticism about what she was wearing. Her [?? 0:09:54] coat jacket, her legs were commented on, her ankles, her heels, her hair and her nose, oh my gosh, that they were extremely commented on. It's just consistent.

This is news stories – not just in opinion pieces, but news stories that are supposed to focus on hard policy and politics. Her in her leadership role as Prime Minister, they comment on her appearance. It's degrading, and trivialises, and puts her back into this role of, “You're a woman, you're an object to be gazed at,” from the male gaze, rather than the leader of our country. That's quite disheartening for not only Gillard herself to endure or women politicians as well, but society in general. Young girls and women seeing that is disheartening. It's like, “No matter how far I get in my career, I'll be seen as an object to be looked upon.”

Another theme I've noticed is they consistently talk about their relation to their family roles, especially relation to men that they know, such as their partners, or husbands, or lack of partners, their fathers especially – not so much their mothers, interestingly enough – and whether they have children, or they don't have children. Again, women are in this double-bind: if you have children you should be staying home to look after them; if you don't have children, then you're really a woman – womanhood is inextricably linked to child-rearing and bearing.

Again, that trivialises them, brought up in things that should not be brought up in. Men rarely have that coverage or, if they do, it makes them more approachable. They're a family-man. This Scott Morrison has two kids, primary-school aged. No one says, “Stay home and look after them.”

And just other small things, like consistently using their first names to refer to them, “Julia did this”, “Julia said that,” but they wouldn't really do it with Howard. No one would say ‘John did this’, ‘John said that’, and if they do use it to cover men, like Kevin claimed – you know ‘Kevin 07’ – that was a media spin on his part, it makes them more approachable again. In one way, these things [hurt? 0:11:53] women, in another way it privileges men.

Those are the few of the things that I've noticed that puts women back into the private sphere, into this box of being a woman, which is different from what we are used to.

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**Host:** We are becoming more accustomed to seeing women in leadership roles and I think, Tanya Pliberseck, for example, is hugely present in the media –

**Blair Williams:** And Penny Wong.

**Host:** Exactly. There's a lot of examples, I think, which is really encouraging. Do you think that the amount of portrayal of women in the media is adding nuance and diversity to the images that are presented, or are we still seeing the same tropes that you mention now? Are you seeing those change at all or develop?

**Blair Williams:** Yes and no. I'm seeing the same tropes there, like I saw with the coverage of Julia Bishop and her challenge for the Prime-Ministerial role. The Australian, for example, still used some of the same tropes I noticed then, so compared her to Lady Macbeth, which they did with Gillard, they talked about her appearance, they talked about her family and her lack of children – that kind of stuff, but they didn't with Peter Dutton or Scott Morrison.

On the other hand, I'm also noticing that, especially the progressive media, like Sydney Morning Herald – if you can call that progressive, the less-conservative media are having a lot of articles that call out the misogyny. They say this is not okay, this gender treatment that they're experiencing is not okay. They're calling out the media as well as fellow politicians and, I guess, the public in general, so there is a lot of critical articles, but there are also a lot of articles that reinforce gender norms and gender roles.

But I think feminism is becoming more mainstream and our feminist lens of looking at these things are becoming more mainstream, but I don't think it's solved yet. I don't think--; It helps as there are more women in the political realm because it means it's less abnormal, it's more normal, which is fantastic, but the media are so personalised that they continue to focus on politicians' personal lives and, as I said before, for men that's okay, it makes them more approachable, but for women it mocks them as gendered others, which impacts negatively.

**Host:** Are you optimistic about the direction that Australian politics and Australian political journalism is going in?

**Blair Williams:** I guess I'm positive about the way that Australian politics is going in the sense of gender representation – mostly in the Labour Party, obviously, and hopefully in the next election it will improve and, if we have a Labour government, that will improve further.

In terms of media, it's good to see more feminist leaning articles or articles that look through that feminist lens that we see from The Guardian, the ABC, the SBS, some Sydney Morning Herald stuff, Daily Life. Those sorts of things are a lot more becoming more feminist, which is good to see, but there's still the Daily Telegraph, the Australian, the heavily Murdoch-run media in Australia that continue to reinforce gender norm stereotypes, and they reinforce that status quo.

So, yes, I'm positive in some ways, but I'm also pessimistic in other ways. My research in the UK, comparing the media coverage of Thatcher to that of May, you know May got in in 2016, Thatcher

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was 1979, it shows that over there the media coverage is getting more gendered and more personalised, not necessarily negative – it doesn't have to be negative, it can be a positive article but it will still mention her appearance and her gender, but it is showing that it's become more gendered in the last 40 years and mostly from conservative newspapers.

While the progressive press of The Guardian and The Mirror are becoming less-gendered, the conservative press of The Daily Telegraph and The Daily Mail, a notorious paper, are becoming extremely more gendered – we're talking three times as much in the coverage of Thatcher.

Looking at the UK, which is quite similar – we are both Westminster democracies, our media is quite similar, we both have Murdoch-run newspapers, it illustrates what could happen in Australia if we had another woman leader in terms of the conservative press. Maybe the progressive press [will be better than it was with? 0:15:55] Gillard, but the conservative press could get more gendered – depending.

**Host:** So, it's a perhaps neutral outlook on the future of gendered politics. Thank you very much for coming. That's all we have time for today, but it's been great to have you and best of luck finishing your PhD.

**Blair Williams:** Cheers.

**Host:** As this is my last episode as a presenter on The Brief, I would like to take the opportunity to thank everyone who's helped to make this show happen this year. Of course, we couldn't have done it without all the guests who have come in to share their thoughts and ideas, so a huge thankyou to all of them.

A bit less visible, but no less important, the whole team at Policy Forum has contributed a massive amount of time and care to the series. Nicky, Julia, Cherry, Maya, Tessia, and Sophie have all been behind the scenes with ideas and edits every single week, so I'm incredibly grateful to them for all their work, and a huge thankyou to Martyn Pearce for getting this series off the ground and making sure that every single episode is better than the last.

Finally, thank you to all of you for listening and I hope you've enjoyed The Brief as much as we've enjoyed making it. Of course, our usual Policy Forum Pod is still going so, although this is the last you'll hear from me, there will still be plenty of great content to tune into. Keep your eye out for the next episode of Policy Forum Pod on Friday.

As always, if you have any thoughts or comments, we would love to hear from you. You can catch us on Twitter at [APPSPolicyForum](#), Facebook the [asiapacificpolicysociety](#), or chuck us an email: [podcast@policyforum.net](mailto:podcast@policyforum.net). Thank you for listening.

[closing music 0:17:36]

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