The Power of Masculine Privilege: Comparing Male Overrepresentation in the Australian Political and Construction sectors

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Recent work (Bjarnegård, 2013; Murray, 2014; Eveline, 1994; 1998) has reorientated the focus of unequal political representation away from female underrepresentation towards male overrepresentation. This work has obvious and widespread implications for other sectors as well. This paper compares the overrepresentation of men in Australian political life with men in professional positions in the Australian construction sector – the most male dominated sector in the Australian economy. It shows, that as with attempts to introduce gender equality policies into politics through quotas, government led gender diversity policies and initiatives to address men’s over representation in construction has made no significant impact: recent figures show that men’s overrepresentation in the Australian politics has remained constant while it has increased in construction industry in recent years.

Using key concepts from the literature on masculinities and on feminist institutionalism, this paper argues that part of the explanation for overrepresentation of men in both Australian political life and construction is linked to practices that privilege and maintain hegemonic masculinities, which in turn serve to maintain gender hierarchies. Using elite interviews from the construction sector, the paper demonstrates that as in political life, entrenched privilege produces denial, neutrality and backlash. These effects of privilege combine to act as a barrier to the attraction, retention and progression of women to the construction sector. The paper concludes that despite core differences between the two sectors, the concept of privilege provides a valuable lens to explore how hegemonic maintain male overrepresentation within both construction and politics overtime.

Key words: masculinities, privilege, construction sector, politics, feminist institutionalism

Introduction
The problem of the lack of gender diversity in political life – across almost all political systems –has generally been interpreted and examined as one of women’s disadvantage and powerlessness.

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Rarely has the problem been viewed from the inverse perspective – as a problem of men’s advantage and powerfulness (Bjarnegård, 2013: 52). Recent work has attempted to reverse this trend by focusing on the intractable resilience of male advantage (Murray, 2014; Bjarnegård, 2013; Eveline, 1994; 1998). This paper contributes to this effort by bringing insights about the dynamics of advantage in another male dominated sector, the construction industry, operating in the advanced democratic and economic context of Australia. While the paper acknowledges that gender varies across context, time and institutions, we argue that by drawing a comparison between two male dominated sectors, we are able to distil common processes which maintain masculine gendered hierarchy and better understand their operation in the sphere of politics (Scott, 1988).

A core concern of this paper is to identify factors that lead to male advantage and draws in particular on the notion of masculine privilege. Privilege is understood as a form of advantage contributing to a system of dominance; understanding and undoing privilege is required to bring about systematic change in gender relations (McIntosh, 1992). This paper asks: what is privilege and how does it interact with gender? What specific acts of privilege identified in the construction sector also operate in the world of politics? How do these acts work to perpetuate male advantage and maintain hegemonic masculinities and, in turn reinforce gender bias and discrimination against women?

Drawing on existing literature in the fields of gender and politics and sociology and through elite interviews with professionals from the Australian construction sector and secondary women and politics literature, this study identifies three effects of gender privilege - denial, neutrality and backlash – and explores how they operate to maintain male advantage and sustain barriers to women’s access in these male dominated sectors. It charts these across three stages: selection/appointment, election/retention and progression to senior office. Separating out these stages is important because different acts of privilege operate alone and in combination at each stage. Privilege also has a cumulative effect across stages: male privilege in the selection/appointment process reinforces privilege at the election/retention stage and culminates in the dominance of men ‘at the top’ of the political and construction sectors. In short, the operation of masculine privilege means that the ‘pipeline’ for promotion and seniority is more open to men than women, allowing the gender status quo to be maintained. In developing these arguments, the paper also draws on and contributes to the growing feminist institutionalist literature. It understands privilege as an informal gender institution, that can operate to undermine formal gender equality rules (Chappell and Waylen, 2013), and reinforce gendered processes and gender (un)just outcomes.
The paper is organised into four sections. Section one outlines the nature of the problem - male overrepresentation in the Australian political and construction sectors. Section two explains the meaning and operation of privilege, and identifies its gender effects. Part three compares the operation of masculine privilege in the Australian construction and political spheres before part four draws out lessons for each sector.

**Section 1: Male overrepresentation in the Australian Political and Construction spheres**

As in most countries, in Australia the political and economic systems remain dominated by men despite efforts to advance greater diversity across both sectors in the past three decades.

**Australian Politics**

Historically and in the contemporary period, men have dominated all aspects of Australian political life – including recruitment, election and progression to the executive. Despite the longstanding recognition of the problem of women’s underrepresentation in Australian politics (for discussions see Sawer and Simms, 1984; Van Acker, 1998; Chappell, 2002) and some attempts by political parties to address this problem - especially by the Australian Labor Party through a party-based quota system (McAllister, 2012: 110) – the number of women parliamentarians has for the past decade stagnated at around 30 per cent. This is somewhat surprising given Australia was a pioneer in recognising women’s rights to stand for parliament. In 1920, Australian became one of the first countries to provide formal rules allowing women this right, and while some women took advantage of these rules and sought election early on (McCann and Wilson, 2014-15: 10) none received electoral support. It was not until 1943 that the first women, Edith Lyons and Dorothy Tangey, were elected to the House of Representatives (HoR) and the Senate respectively. However, the breaking down of this barrier did not lead to an influx of women members. By 1980 only 3 per cent of the seats in the HoR were held by women; 1990 was milestone election, with 10 women elected to the lower house for the first time (McAllister, 2012: 105). The 1990s saw a sharp improvement; a high point in female representation in the lower house was reached in 2001 when 27.7 per cent of seats were held by women, but this was followed by a period of reversal. After the 2013 election the number of women-held HoR seats inched back to just over 26 per cent with the combined total of women parliamentarians across both houses reaching 30 per cent. In sum, the trend of recent developments of the representation of women in the Australian national parliament has certainly not been a clear upward trajectory towards greater gender diversity, rather it has been pendulum motion swinging towards an increase in women’s representation at one election, and a decrease at the next (McAllister, 2012: 105; McCann and Wilson, 2014-15) with the overall result that men remain overwhelming overrepresented in Australian politics.
In terms of the selection of candidates, since the time of Australian federation in 1901, men have always been, and continue to be, the preferred party candidates for political office. At the 2013 Australian Federal election, men comprised 72.6 per cent of all candidates standing for the Commonwealth Parliament (McCann and Wilson, 2014-15: 8), a figure that has remained static since the mid 1990s. At this latest election, figures for male candidates for the Senate, elected through proportional representation - were at their highest since 1987.

It is important to note that since 1994 the Australian Labor Party (ALP), one of the two major Australian parties, has adopted a formal candidate selection affirmative action policy, whereas the other major party, the Liberal party of Australia has resisted such moves. In 2012, the ALP quota requirement for the pre-selection of women in winnable seats shifted from 35 per cent to 40 per cent. The policy has had a marked effect on decreasing the number of male ALP candidates for the House of Representatives from 87 per cent in 1990 to 68 per cent in 2013 (McCann and Wilson, 2014-15: 10), these figures sit in contrast to Australia’s second major party, the Liberal Party of Australia who ran 77 per cent male candidates at the 2013 election for the lower house.

The advantage male candidates enjoy at pre-selection stage is reflected in their representation as members of the Australian federal parliament (MPs); as noted above, men currently hold approximately 70 per cent of combined HoR and Senate seats. Similar figures are reflected across Australia’s state parliaments, with the result that men comprise 71 and women comprise 29 per cent of all Australian parliamentarians - a figure that has reduced by just below 10 per cent over the past 17 years (McCann and Wilson, 2014-15: 11). To put this into perspective, since the time of Australia’s federation, 89 per cent of all parliamentarians – at state and federal levels - have been men (McCann and Wilson, 2014-15). Due to the ALP’s quota rules, since 2001, its number of elected female MP’s has been on average 31.5 per cent, which has been consistently higher than that of the Liberal party which has returned 22 per cent female Liberal MPs (McCann and Wilson, 2014-15: 19).

Indeed, Hutch Hussein suggests that these formal quota rules have had three positive influences on gender diversity in Australian politics: increasing the numbers of women ALP candidates, increasing the number of ALP representatives in federal parliament, and strengthening women’s chances of incumbency over time (Hussein, 2011).

Looking at progression of the two sexes to Cabinet, the centre of executive power in Australia’s Westminster parliamentary system, the figures are stark: in 2014 men occupied 80 per cent of all
ministry positions nationally, and at the end of the first year of an Abbott-led conservative coalition Commonwealth government men held 17 of the 19 Cabinet positions (Australian Parliament (Australian Parliament, 2015). These figures are not static – in 2011 Australia boasted a short-lived strong female leadership presence across the Federal and State executives with a female Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, and female state premiers in three of the six states. All of these female executive leaders were from the ALP, suggesting the quotas may also strengthen chances of progression to Cabinet level positions. By 2014, the situation had rapidly reversed; with the re-election of Liberal party governments across the country from 2010 - 2013, men regained 100 per cent of preeminent executive posts across the nation (Chappell, 2014; Sawer, 2012).

A range of explanations has been proffered for the disparity of sex representation in the selection, election and progression of women in Australian parliament. Formal rules account for some of the disparity. A preferential, majoritarian single-member electoral system for House of Representative seats is seen to: encourage a tighter party control over candidate selection; protect incumbents; and, discourage the preselection of a diverse range of candidates (Chappell, 2002: 57-8). The gender and politics literature has argued that the Proportional Representation (PR) system, used to elect Australian Senators, is more favourable to women candidates (see Sawer and Simms, 1984: 15; McCann and Wilson, 2014-15). This appears to be true in the Australian case, as evidenced by the greater percentage of women elected to that house (with women hovering closer to the 40 per cent mark in the Senate as opposed to the 25 per cent mark in the House of Representatives) (McCann and Wilson, 2014-15: 15). However, as Jennifer’s Curtin’s work has made clear, and as the stagnant figures on women’s pre-selection for the Senate outlined above indicate, these (PR) electoral rules are necessary but not sufficient condition on their own to promote women’s election (Curtin, 2006). The same can be argued for quota systems, such as that used by the ALP. Attention has also been drawn to the operation of informal gender rules - including traditional views about women’s social roles and a culture of ‘mateship’3 - within Australian political parties and the parliamentary system. Underlying the gender status quo of Australian politics, these informal rules will be discussed in detail below.

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2 The Queensland election in February 2015 shifted the balance again slightly with Annastacia Palaszczuk becoming Australia’s sole female Premier.

3 According to Pease (2001), mateship is a definitively Australian idiom reflective of masculine behaviour and male bonding which is grounded in loyalty, equality and friendship.
The Australian Construction Sector

As Australia’s largest employer and major contributor to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the construction sector is a central economic player (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). It is also Australia’s most male dominated sector, where despite government led gender diversity initiatives; male overrepresentation in construction is climbing (Franzway et al., 2009; WGEA, 2013b; ABS, 2006). Consistent with Australian politics, at the attraction, entry and progression stages, construction is numerically and hierarchically overrepresented by men (WGEA, 2012).

In terms of the attraction to construction related degrees and trades, in the last few decades, men have and continue to dominate student enrolment and completion at a consistent rate (Department of Education and Training, 2015). Echoing other western nations, male dominance is most extreme within construction trades, with men almost completely dominating (99 per cent) enrolment and completion (NSW Government, 2013; Smith, 2013). At a tertiary level, the picture is mixed. In construction related engineering courses, men account for 90 per cent of the student’s enrolled, yet in architecture and building degrees their dominance subsides to 60 per cent (AWPA, June 2014; NSW Government, 2014).

In relation to workplace participation, men account for 88 per cent of construction workers (WGEA, 2012). Considering the education ‘pipeline’, trade-based roles are almost exclusively filled by men (98 per cent) (NSW Government, 2013). Despite greater numbers of women entering architecture and construction degrees, at the professional level men accounting for 86 per cent of white-collar managers and professions (project managers, construction managers, engineers, architects, cost estimators and commercial managers) in construction (WGEA, 2012). Poor participation rates amongst women are compounded by poor retention rates. Early enthusiasm from women construction professionals reduces with increased exposure to the sector, resulting in them leaving the industry 38 per cent faster than their male counterparts (Bastalich et al., 2007; APESMA, 2007).

Focusing on progression, while over half of the construction sector is made up of small or medium size firms with fewer than one hundred employees, it is a minority who employ the bulk of construction professionals and generate the highest earnings (ABS, 2013). Of these companies, 88 per cent of senior managers and 97 per cent of CEO’s are men (WGEA, 2014). Men’s hierarchical dominance in construction in comparison to Australian business broadly is significantly higher (WGEA, 2014). By contrast, the majority of women in construction are found in junior, marginal, administrative and part-time roles (Sang and Powell, 2012; WGEA, 2013a). Coupled with this, the
gender pay gap between men and women doing equivalent roles in construction is 25 per cent (of total remuneration); with the highest differential at the most senior levels (WGEA, 2014).

These outcomes persist in spite of government-led company-based gender diversity policies aimed at reversing women’s disadvantage. These include; commissioning gender reporting, making the business case for gender diversity, raising awareness of women’s career opportunities in the construction industry, establishing support networks and training for women, promoting women mentors and role models and introducing flexible work policies (Greed, 2006).

The literature has identified construction’s masculine culture and structure as a critical barrier to women’s attraction, recruitment and retention (Sang and Powell, 2012). These barriers include informal recruitment, promotion and networking practices (Dainty et al., 2000a); adherence to rigid coercive work practices including long hours, ‘presenteeism’ and total availability (Watts, 2007); gendered discourse (Barnard et al., 2010); the practice of ‘othering’ through humour and exclusion (Powell and Sang, forthcoming) and gender bias (Sang and Powell, 2012).

Section 2: Privilege: dimensions and effects
Failure to dramatically shift the underrepresentation of women in the political and construction spheres through government and business interventions such as quotas, women’s polices and reporting has led scholars to contest that an emphasis on women’s disadvantage is problematic for enhancing gender equality (Eveline, 1994; 1998; Murray, 2014). Rather than empowering women, these initiatives have had an unintended effect of leaving “women with the problem and men with the advantage” (Eveline, 1998: 92). In effect, such a ‘woman-centred’ approach interprets the problem as one relating to women as a group, rather than addressing male overrepresentation and power (Sharpe et al., 2012), resulting in a limited analysis on understanding ways in which men as a group benefit from gender inequality (Flood and Pease, 2005).

Advantage
According to a pioneer in the area of male advantage, Joan Eveline (1998: 91), the narrative of women’s disadvantage leaves the gender status quo intact and its normative practices unquestioned and implies a resignation to the inevitability of male dominance. Eveline (1994)suggests this approach acts to hamper the effectiveness of existing strategies, and also blinkers policy reformers ruling in some options, but not others, thereby limiting future policy reforms. Interpreted from a feminist institutionalist perspective, the focus on women’s disadvantage helps establish a form of gendered ‘path dependency’ in policy development - where initial steps along a path are reinforced
through a process of increasing returns (Pierson, 2000) - and frustrate efforts to promote change to the gender status quo (Chappell and Waylen, 2013; Mackay and McAllister, 2012). It is for this reason, that Bjarnegård (2013) and Murray (2014) in the tradition of Eveline (1994; 1998), call for a shift in how gender inequality is problematized. Their call is not aimed at eliminating the notion of women’s disadvantage but to remind gender researchers that the conceptual and rhetorical principle of male advantage cannot continue to be ignored (Eveline, 1994), not least because of the persistent ways in which male dominance is able to reproduce itself (Bjarnegård, 2013: 52).

The existing literature suggests that male advantage is composed of, and perpetuated by, two interrelated elements: earned advantage and privilege (McIntosh, 1992; Bailey, 1998). Earned advantage is an advantage obtained through an acquired skill, asset, or talent within a restricted condition which benefits and advances the possessor (Bailey, 1998: 109). These might include training hard to participate in a marathon, learning a musical instrument, and working hard to afford a home. Privilege sits in contrast to earned advantage in that it is not a reflection of one’s individual capacity or ability. It is gifted and unearned power; the product of membership to a social category – gender, sexuality, class, physical ability, race. In other words, Bailey (1998: 109) suggests, privilege is:

systematically conferred advantages individuals enjoy by virtue of their membership in dominant groups with access to resources and institutional power that are beyond the common advantages of marginalised citizens (emphasis added).

Privilege is also relational, favouring the dominant group, who over history have constructed, defined and allocated values to different social categories (Johnson 2001). These values are built into the fabric of institutions and society and operate through rules and practices that shape behaviour (Messner, 2011; Brod, 1987). Indeed, privilege provides a pathway to power in a way which earned advantage does not, and it acts to maintain existing hierarchical systems by granting benefits to those who are privileged which they might not otherwise have enjoyed (Bailey, 1998). Privilege and earned advantage are often interconnected as privilege places one in a better position to earn greater advantage: “privilege is by definition advantageous, but not all advantages count as privilege” (Bailey, 1998: 108).

The features of privilege

An analysis of the extensive literature on privilege suggests that privilege produces a range of effects. The following discussion focuses on the three most prominent of these: denial, neutrality and backlash.
The first important feature of privilege is its *invisibility* to those who enjoy it and, like gender, it is ‘framed before we know it’ (Messner, 2011; Ridgeway, 1997; Ridgeway, 2009). As McIntosh (1992) observes, men tend not to see their gender privilege; whites tend not to see their race privilege; ruling class members tend not to see their class privilege. This is the ‘paradox of privilege’, and is one of the ‘privileges of being privileged’ (Johnson, 2001: 34). Those who are privileged are neither treated as the ‘other’ or the ‘token’, but are considered the ‘norm’ (Kanter, 1977).

The invisibility of privilege stems from the fact that those who enjoy such status represent the ‘norm’; members of the privileged groups have an “unmarked status” so that their race, class and sex usually go unnoticed (Rosenblum and Travis, 1996: 142; also see Johnson, 2001). By contrast, a ‘marked status’ usually identifies a lower status group for example, ‘gay man’, ‘woman engineer’ or ‘woman Prime Minister’ (Johnson, 2001). As a consequence, those who are privileged may not recognise that others lack access to the benefits they receive, including the wide comfort zone in which they operate, due to acceptance, inclusion and respect (Johnson, 2001: 33). The invisibility of privilege produces a *culture of denial*, even when confronted by unfair practices (Franzway et al., 2009; Messner, 2011: 6). Turning “a blind eye or a deaf ear” (Messner, 2011: 6), ‘not getting it’ and following “the path of least resistance” (Johnson, 2001: 87) becomes the *modus operandi*. As Suzanne Franzway et al. (2009) found in a study on gender equity in engineering professions, this *modus operandi* perpetuates a lack of awareness, understanding and analysis of gender power relations and how it operates within and by organisations.

A second effect of privilege is that those individuals who enjoy it tend to see the rules and the structure they operate in as *objective, neutral and legitimate*, which precludes these rules from being analysed, including for their gender dimensions (Bailey, 1998; Chappell, 2006; Johnson, 2001; Franzway et al., 1989; Murray, 2014). Rather, these are the rules by which success and failure are measured (Flood and Pease, 2005). Importantly for this study, when those in privileged positions suggest they are applying these ‘neutral rules’ to assess standards of merit, they fail to recognise that the measurement is both complex and gender dependent (Chappell, 2002; Murray, 2014). For example, very often in male dominated sectors, perceptions of who is ‘right for the job’ is shaped by the normalisation of man’s place and competency (Franzway et al., 1989). As Murray (2014) observes, men as a privileged group neither have to prove their competency nor justify their inclusion.
A third effect of privilege is that when the ‘rights’ of the privileged are denied or challenged, it is often met with backlash (Rosenblum and Travis, 1996). According to Superson and Cudd (2002: xiv) backlash is characterised by “attitudes of hostility and fear, particularly on the part of the privileged groups who will be harmed by others progress, but it can also be the result of unconscious, unorganised, perhaps institutionalised resistance to change”. Backlash operates within institutions and by individuals both emotionally and normatively and can take the form of a violent attack, or a complicit action of defiance and resistance (Watts, 2007; Superson and Cudd, 2002). According to Mansbridge and Shames (2008: 627), emotional loss of entitlement is often felt more powerfully than any material loss and it is expressive and can be relentless.

Section 3: Gender and privilege

Gender operates in a similar way to privilege and is linked closely to it. Like privilege, gender is relational and produced in and through social contexts (Connell, 1987; 2002; 2005). As in other western nations, Australian society attaches privilege to white, heterosexual maleness (Johnson, 2001; McIntosh, 1992). This maleness is also linked to a form of gender – masculinity. Although the literature on gender suggests that sex and gender should not be conflated, Bjarnegård (2013: 18) reminds us that they are closely related: “biological sex and social gender exist as important axes around which personal experience is mediated and social power is distributed.”

According to gender theorist Raewyn Connell (1987), our society privileges masculinity – that is, norms relating to strength, competence, rationality for example, which are the antithesis of feminine norms of passivity, nature, care, emotion and irrationality. However, she also notes that masculinity is diverse, and that within particular contexts there are hegemonic forms of masculinity that are ‘culturally exalted’ (2000: 84), while others, such as those attaching to homosexual men for example, are marginal and subordinate. Hegemonic masculinity is the most honoured and socially endorsed way of being a man and the benchmark which men are encouraged to strive (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Bjarnegård, 2013). Hegemonic masculinity is positioned in opposition to these marginal masculinities, and to femininity; these are the ‘other’, against which hegemonic masculinity is defined. It is acknowledged here that masculinities are neither static – they vary across contexts – nor passive, often exacting a cost on men’s safety and wellbeing (Laplange, 2014). Nevertheless, complicit and explicit adherence to hegemonic masculinity brings with it a form of privilege that attaches to particular men via acceptance, inclusion and respect (Johnson, 2001). As the privileged group, men who fit the hegemonic code enjoy what Connell calls the ‘patriarchal dividend’ (1987) - practices and systems are modelled on their experiences. It is through practices that maintain
hegemonic masculinity that gender privilege emerges and gender bias becomes institutionalised – both of which make gender equality harder to achieve (Hawkesworth, 2005).

As Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity suggests, gender privilege is not shared equally amongst men. Equally, not all women are excluded from such privilege or social powerlessness (Bjarnegård, 2013). Women can enjoy various levels of gender privilege, especially where this intersects with race and class advantage; although relative to men’s privilege as a group it is much less (Messner, 1990), and is usually more complicated. Especially in male dominated areas, women who display ‘feminine’ characteristics are often marginalised, while women who display hegemonic masculine characteristics, can sometimes share in the privilege dividend – but only up to a point. As Wright observes, within this male dominated environments (2013: 833) those who are be seen to be doing the same job as men can also be threatening to ideas of masculinity. The result is that women are left exposed, and open to criticism for being a ‘bitch’, cold and uncaring (Johnson, 2001). In technical occupations like those found in construction, Faulkner (2009) observed that women’s sex and gender shapes expectations associated with their technical ability and rationality impacting their legitimacy as a construction professional. Similarly in politics, women have the impossible task of not seeming to be too feminine, while also not arousing male approbation or vilification on the one hand for not being a ‘real’ woman or on the other, for being ‘too tough’ (Chappell, 2002; Childs, 2004; Crawford and Pini, 2010).

In the main, gender privilege –arising from attachment to hegemonic masculinities – serves to reinforce women’s disadvantage and men’s advantage in already male dominated sectors. Even if only engaged in a ‘performance’, men are better able to blend in and take advantage of the hegemonic masculinity codes which are invisible to, or denied by, those who enjoy the privilege emanating from those codes; men also are advantaged by the presupposed ‘neutrality’ of rules and measures of merit which preference masculine over feminine traits; and, finally, because of their association with hegemonic masculinity, men are less likely to be the victims of ‘backlash’ when attempts are made to shift the gender status quo.

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4 This account of gender and privilege is not to ignore how intersectionality operates, as privilege might be enjoyed in relation to one social category but not in relation to another. For example, because of their bodily appearance, a gay man may enjoy the privilege maleness bestows (Coston and Kimmel 2012). Yet in because of the operation of hegemonic masculinity in particular contexts – such as on a construction worksite or sporting team, that privilege is likely to be undermined if they disclose their homosexuality or present as effeminate (Chan 2013).
3: The Effects of Gender Privilege on Women’s Disadvantage in the Australian Political and Construction Sectors

Hegemonic masculinity, as noted above, operates differently in different contexts. In construction, hegemonic masculinity is characterised by toughness, competitiveness, authoritativeness, dependability, rationality, heterosexuality and homosociality (Watts, 2008; Dainty et al., 2000b; Faulkner, 2005; Greed, 2000). In politics, similar traits around rationality and heterosexuality and homosociality hold, but are complemented by norms of logic, pragmatism and aggression (Crawford and Pini, 2010: 609). In both cases, these norms sit in stark contrast to definition of femininity – marked by emotion, consultation, passivity - and can be seen to operate to the advantage of men through processes of denial, neutrality and backlash. These can be identified across the stages of attraction, recruitment, and progression.

Privilege and attraction

In Australia, masculine privilege operates to dissuade women from being attracted to work as professional construction employees and as politicians. In the construction sector, entry into professional education is one key measure of attraction, and here the picture is mixed. Women remain highly under under-represented, accounting for less than 10 per cent of graduates in engineering and construction related trades, yet women account for over a third of participants in architecture and construction degrees. This ‘pipeline’ issue has been overwhelming interpreted by industry leaders as a matter related to women’s education and career choices rather than as one related to the nature of the construction sector per se. This was certainly a general view espoused in interviews with construction leaders undertaken for this research project. When asked about the lack of gender diversity in the sector, responses included:

‘women don’t want to work in the jobs that we work in’

‘my sense is that the sort of lack of expression of senior women is - is not coming about from a lack of respect for the skills they bring, just that there's not many coming in at the front end, if you know what I mean’.

‘we are still struggling with gender diversity because there are just not enough women in the market or coming through at a graduate level’.

These views suggest that a culture of denial exists about the hegemonic masculine nature of the industry and how this might influence women’s view about it as a suitable workplace.
Given this denial about the existing gender status quo, it was not surprising to find in an analysis of formal gender diversity policy responses in top tier Australian construction companies that they were overwhelmingly aimed at women (Galea et al., 2014). These policies included setting targets on women’s recruitment and conducting targeted graduate recruitment campaigns, rather than focusing on how recruitment is broadly and informally practiced within firms. By contrast, most interviewees rejected ‘harder’ responses, such as a shift towards mandated quotas for women’s recruitment because of their perceived ‘unfairness’ and interference with merit-based selection. As one male leader put it:

Well we are anti-quota just so you understand but pro-target...
...quotas I think can have some bad outcomes; quotas can end up being an excuse for not having a meritocratic process. I think quotas can actually be very detrimental to people who are put into positions and questions are asked about whether they were you know the token women, the token African American or the token whatever. I think, fundamentally women ...a reasonably high percentage of women in the workforce in general, actually don’t want to get a job as part of a quota system.... So, people view any attempt to level the playing field as giving the women an unfair advantage.

This notion of an ‘unfair advantage’ speaks directly to the point in the privilege literature about how existing notions of ‘merit’ are often left unproblematised, perpetuating the view that the existing system is unbiased towards those who fall outside existing privileged group.

Similarly, in the Australian political system, the emphasis at the pre-selection stage continues to rest on women’s suitability for political office, rather than reasons why more men stand for pre-selection and become candidates. Assumptions continue to be drawn about women’s attributes – including their primary roles as nurturers that inhibit their role as political representatives. As Crawford and Pini (2010) found in interviews with male MPs in the Australian federal parliament, some continue to hold views against women’s pre-selection because of assumptions about the demands of private responsibilities on women’s ability to carry out a political role (2010: 613). As one male MP noted:

[I know men] who have politely declined to support women candidates in preselection because they have got young children and they look at it and say ‘I couldn’t do it with the kids’. Nothing sexist, I am all in favour of women in parliament, but the young kids are still as the age when they need a fair bit of nurturing.
Further, some of their respondents suggested that because they could not conceive of doing the job without a supportive stay-at-home wife, they could not see how women could do it (Crawford and Pini, 2010: 612) This emphasis on women’s ‘natural’ roles as wives and mothers, and men as the political actors, gives the impression that there is nothing wrong with the existing system that has been established to suit the needs of married or men, helping to maintain among male MPs a culture of denial about their own privileged position.

As in the Australian construction sector, in politics, there also remains a strong scepticism about the value of quotas to improve the sex imbalance. The introduction of the ALP’s preselection quota system was according to former ALP Minister Susan Ryan ‘bitterly resented by many men in the party’, many of who engaged in a form of backlash, at first through resistance to its implementation, then through attempts to delegitimise it through arguments about how quotas interfere with ‘merit’ (Ryan in Chappell, 2002: 66). Members of the Liberal Party of Australia continue to mount these anti-merit arguments and maintain a strong opposition to the introduction of such a system. Women on the conservative side of politics are themselves vociferous critics of quotas. Liberal Senator Michaela Cash (2013) argues that:

The Liberal Party selects candidates on merit, rather than limiting a selection process to considerations based on gender alone ... One can only speculate that if a woman is appointed as the Labor candidate for [a] seat, the assumption will be that it was because of Labor’s affirmative action quota rule rather than because she was the best candidate for the job. Not a great start to a Parliamentary career.

Bronwyn Bishop, long-time Liberal MP and Speaker of the House in the Abbott Liberal Government, echoes these views: “I never want to see affirmative action - that is, you got the job because you were a woman - because that makes you a permanent second-class citizen” (in Peatling and Hurst, 2013). Such statements reinforce male privilege by denying there is anything wrong with the existing system and that existing measures merit are acceptable.

**Privilege and retention**

In interviews with construction industry leaders a range of factors were identified as influencing women’s retention within the sector, but perceptions about these factors varied between men and women. Men identified the lack of women graduating from construction related courses, personal preferences or choices made by women, and the nature and inflexibility of the industry as the key barriers and cause of women’s lack of retention. By contrast, women singled out construction’s dominant male culture, the lack of flexibility in the industry and assumptions and stereotypes made
about women (Galea et al., 2014). Despite these differences of perspective, in the construction companies under review, gender diversity policies aimed at retaining women focused heavily on women. These included women’s support groups, women’s resilience training, mothers groups, paid parental and care leave, targeted graduate recruitment campaigns, pay equity reviews and corrections, gender bias training for recruiters, diversity policy and gender diversity committee (Galea et al., 2014).

Focussing on shifting women’s behaviour, these existing policies suggest companies are opting for ‘a path of least resistance’. These policies are largely irrelevant to the majority of employees who are men, with them either not participating in, or having little knowledge about them. The effect leaves men at the centre, the legitimate markers of Australian construction professionals and perpetuates the ‘othering’ of women, who need to fit in around them.

That said, work place flexibility is one area of emerging policy reform within construction firms. Construction is characterised by its inflexibility and long hours. Most sites operate six days a week, with employee presenteeism and total availability the norm. In addressing workplace flexibility, two different approaches were observed. One company focused on employee agency, encouraging employees to negotiate work arrangements with their manager to meet their flexibility needs. The other company made wholesale change to the employee’s working week requirements; reducing work hours to the prescribed company hours and reducing the working week from six days to five. Business leaders view these policies as innovative and a welcome change.

It’s game changing for the industry if we can crack it in a way that I think is meaningful …

They’re struggling but we’ll get there.

However, these policies are far from transformative. In line with feminist institutionalist theory (Chappell and Waylen, 2013), many of these formal policies, have been met with employee resistance, and mostly undermined by informal rules which maintain the previous operational arrangements. As one Human Resources manager explains:

It’s challenging for some managers to think differently - its construction – you need to be here from six in the morning to eight o’clock at night and every Saturday, and every second Sunday, or every rostered day off, because that’s how we did it, back in the day and so that is challenging for some managers to think that way… I think there’s still a lot of reluctance to use it. I think people look at it and go it’s good that the company has flexible working but I’ll never do it, and I wouldn’t expect my team to do it. I think it’s probably they relate it to women, and yes it is a gender diversity initiative, so I think that’s seen in the workplace.
Such employee resistance reflects the strength of masculinised informal work practices including presenteeism and total availability that acts as a barrier to women’s retention within construction.

Unlike the Australian construction sector, women tend not to choose leave politics once they have made it through the hurdle of preselection, so retention does not present as the same problem. However, the operation of a hegemonic masculine code which produces male privilege creates and equally challenging work environment.

One obvious sign of the operation of masculine hegemony in the Australian political sphere was the lack of a childcare centre in the Australian Parliament building until 2008. Despite a decade of pressure by some MPs to build such a centre, it was strongly resisted. This resistance reflected embedded yet unquestioned assumptions that men are the primary inhabitants of political life, that men come into political life unencumbered by nurturing responsibilities, and conversely, that a political profession is not a suitable option for women who have primary role as nurturers. The construction of the centre in 2008 some way challenged these views. As Anthony Albanese, Minister responsible for building the centre argued at the time:

Previous generations of representatives in this House, on both sides of the chamber, whatever their qualities, did not understand that this was not an issue which should have been negotiable. The fact we have many facilities in this parliament—a snooker room, a pool, a gym, a dining room and many other facilities here that are appropriate in this magnificent building—but no childcare centre reflects the parliament of the last century. It is appropriate that the parliament of this century reflect more adequately values such as ensuring that all parents, whether they be men or women, have access to child care.

However, Albanese went on to note that building the childcare space did not wipe out discriminatory views about men’s and women’s involvement in politics, with many men on both sides of politics maintaining what he termed ‘old fashioned views’ about the suitability of such a facility in the building in order to better accommodate parental needs (2008).

The strong hegemonic masculine code of loud, aggressive and combative behaviour – often with strong sexist undertones - for which the Australian parliament is renowned, also works to privilege men in Australian politics. There is an expectation that men will replicate this type of behaviour, but when women politicians attempt to use the same modes of communication they are punished for doing so (Lawrence 1994 in Chappell, 2002: 75; Ryan 1999). As one former Liberal party member explains: ‘The biggest mistake you can make is to be pseudo man because the men hate that” (in
Chappell, 2002: 75). However, women politicians have not passively accepted this cultural gender status quo, but have in recent years responded in various ways to challenge some of its more overt aspects. The most notable example occurred in 2013 when then Prime Minister Julia Gillard gave her famous ‘misogyny speech’ in which she attacked then opposition leader, now Prime Minister, Tony Abbott for his ongoing aggressive, sexist behaviour in parliament and beyond. In this speech she noted:

I was offended too by the sexism, by the misogyny of the Leader of the Opposition catcalling across this table at me as I sit here as Prime Minister, “If the Prime Minister wants to, politically speaking, make an honest woman of herself…”, something that would never have been said to any man sitting in this chair. I was offended when the Leader of the Opposition went outside in the front of Parliament and stood next to a sign that said “Ditch the witch.” (Gillard, 2012).

As one analyst explains, the speech was important because: “it was a repudiation of female stoicism, of being a good sport. It was a repudiation of turning the other cheek and getting on with it” – (emphasis in original. Goldsworthy, 2013) - behavior typically expected of female politicians. The speech called out hegemonic masculinity for what it was, and its cost for women who must endure its effects. Nevertheless, since Gillard’s delivery of the speech in 2013, there is no sign of change in the tenor or tone of debate in the Australian parliament. Indeed, with the return of a Liberal Coalition Government in 2013, there has been an obvious intensification of the bullying, abrasive, and aggressive form of communication identified with the hegemonic masculine norms of Australian political life.

**Privilege and progression**

In the construction industry, gender diversity policies aimed at removing barriers to women’s progression have primarily focused on ‘fixing women’ by building their resilience and internal networks. Yet Dainty et al. (2000b) observed that while internal networks are important, it is the opportunities availed to men and women that shaped their career progression within construction firms. Noting that men tended to work on prestigious projects, in construction based roles (e.g. project manager, construction manager) which led to greater exposure in the company and this was critical to career progression. Further, a heavy reliance on informal networks prevailed within both construction companies in relation to career progression, with internal job boards routinely failing to capture job postings. As one diversity leader noted:
There was no transparency about talent across regions, you just knew someone’s name. It wasn’t written down anywhere. If it was, it was in their region in someone’s top drawer.

Yeah, there was no transparency.

Informal recruitment processes do little to challenge existing gender hierarchies or gender practices, including assumption of skill, capability and competence. As one business leader explained:

So when you look at the trajectory of how people are promoted and... the buckets of knowledge that they choose to employ from, you have a really small pond that you’re fishing from. That pond tends to be all of the same person with the same sort of history.... So they only hire people who have ticked every single box that has to be ticked to do the job. The reason why I say that is that they don’t hire on potential or the ability to train. They hire on the fact that you’ve done that same exact job, or almost that same exact job somewhere else in your career.

While a culture of denial exists around the transparency of the systems of recruitment, appraisal and promotion one company has begun to take action. They have introduced codified human resource systems including job descriptions, competency frameworks, annual gender pay gap review, talent and succession planning and methods to manage bias within performance appraisals.

So for example in our talent reviews that we do, we actually have a bias champion who is trained and actually sits there listening and trying to interpret whether there’s any bias coming through from anyone in the room in that regard.

However resistance to these efforts exists and has resulted in a senior executive outside of human resources being charged with the monitoring and enforcement of the new transparent framework. Furthermore, the capacity of the new employee performance management system to address masculine privilege is undermined by the association of this system to company values – and measures of ‘merit’ – which are inherently gendered. These values and behaviours are encapsulated in slogans, which while appearing gender neutral, have gendered dimensions including “work hard: play hard(er)”, “love to start: love to finish”, “outperformance”, “passion and tenacity”, “competition”, “ambition” and “Larrikinism”⁵. Such values reproduce hegemonic masculinity ideals of toughness, competitiveness, authoritative, reliability and rationality providing a ‘gendered logic of appropriateness’ through which merit is determined and assessed against (Chappell, 2006). In effect, the neutrality of the codified performance management system may continue to be challenge

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⁵ Larrikinism is an Australian term which refers to an “arrant blokishness” that is good natured, mischievous yet irreverent to authority (Bellanta 2012, xviii).
by informal gendered rules. Particularly as there is resistance to move away from these values that represent the gender legacy of the past.

Within the setting of Australian federal politics, progression has also been impeded by the operation of informal gender rules. Neither major party have affirmative action rules to challenge male dominance in Cabinet, leaving it to the party rooms to determine who gets to wield executive power. Growing numbers of women MPs on the Labor side of politics – driven in part by preselection quotas - has been reflected in greater female representation in Cabinet posts. For instance, under Prime Minister Gillard, there was a record eight women Ministers, comprising 23 per cent of Cabinet. While there is clearly still some way to go to reach parity in progression to the top posts, the ALP has a much stronger record that the conservative side of politics. Elected to government in 2013, incoming Prime Minister Tony Abbot appointed to his 19 member Cabinet one sole female minister from a pool of 24 women, and doubled this to two from 19 at the end of 2014. Defending his Cabinet choices in the face of strong criticism, the Prime Minister argued that: “In the end all of our appointments are on merit. As time goes by and the number of women in the parliament increases, I am confident there will be more women in the ministry” (Abbott in Maley, 2014). Criticising his point of view, and drawing out its gender implications, ALP Deputy Leader Tanya Plibersek argued:

This idea that there aren't women appropriate in the Liberal party and the National party to be in the Cabinet or in the ministry, I find perplexing. If every single man in Cabinet was a complete knock out you might say "Well this is a fluke of history. For the first time ever there, you’re right, there is not a single appropriate woman as qualified as the men.” But it's not like that (in Dent, 2014).

Journalist Jacqueline Malley was similarly perplexed about Abbott’s merit arguments when she asked: “Is Abbott saying that the Coalition’s women lack merit - they either don’t have the talent, or the drive, to become cabinet ministers in proportionate numbers to their male colleagues? Or is he simply saying they don't rise high enough to be considered for ministries? If so, why would that be?” (Maley, 2014).

Other senior political figures have also refused to recognise how merit is constructed, and denied there is a problem with women’s lack of progression. As Marian Sawer noted in relation to the previous Liberal Prime Minister, John Howard: ‘Prime Minister Howard had scoffed at those commenting on the drop in the number of women in his Cabinet following the sacking of Senator Amanda Vanstone, saying that to bother about the sums was ‘patronising’ and ‘old-fashioned’
(Schubert 2007 in Sawer, 2008: 268). Further, as Crawford and Pini found in their interviews with 15 male members of the Australian parliament, only three suggested that there were barriers confronting women’s political success (2010: 612); most others were of the view that gender inequality in Australian national politics was ‘an aberration of the past’ (2010: 616).

In line with the theory on masculine privilege, these incremental shifts towards challenging the gender status quo in politics to make it more open to women, have not gone uncontested. Even though men overwhelmingly retain the privilege of entry and progression in Australian politics, there is evidence of a ‘backlash’ towards women’s moderate success as parliamentarians and ministers. As Crawford and Pini found in their interviews with male politicians, one way this has been demonstrated is through a view that it was women who were now privileged, and men disadvantaged in Australian politics (2010: 615). They discovered that women who were considered ‘fierce’, ‘gutsy’, ‘tough’, ‘tenacious’ and ‘not shrinking violets’ – in other words those most capable of expressing hegemonic masculine norms –were seen by male incumbents as somehow illegitimate and to be threatening their hold on politics (Crawford and Pini, 2010: 616).

A more direct and ugly form of backlash was revealed during Julia Gillard’s Prime Ministership. As journalist Anne Summers pointed out at the height of Gillard’s term, although all political leaders are subject to attack, “what is NOT normal is the way in which the prime minister is attacked, vilified or demeaned in ways that are specifically related to her sex”. Detailing the specific forms of vilification, Summers argued, that there was ‘a deliberate sabotaging of the prime minister by political enemies, who include people within her own party, and who are using an array of weapons which include personal denigration, some of it of a sexual or gendered nature, to undermine her and erode her authority’ (Summers, 2012). This form of gendered, personalised and sexualised backlash has by no means been restricted to Gillard. As the female members of her Cabinet recalled in a joint interview, they have all needed to engage in ‘wilful blindness’ as a way to cope with constant scrutiny and personal attacks expressed through blatant and not so blatant sexism (see Goldsworthy, 2013). The main concern of one of these members was the flow on effect this backlash will have on the ‘pipeline’ of young women contemplating a career in politics. “I never want a young woman to look at the treatment that the prime minister receives and think ‘I don’t want to do that job, because if I’m going to be a target like that I don’t want to let myself in for it.’” (Plibersek in Goldsworthy, 2013).
Conclusions

Despite the different contexts of the Australian construction industry and politics, and different emphases in the hegemonic masculine codes operating in each setting, this paper suggests that these codes continue to play a powerful role in maintaining masculine privilege in each sector. This privilege has been evident in denials that such privilege exists; a reinforcement of narratives of neutrality and merit that leave unquestioned the gender status quo; and a backlash by those in privileged positions when signs of progress emerge. It seems from both cases the greater the progress, the stronger this backlash becomes.

Masculine privilege - which operates through denial, claims of neutrality and backlash - work individually and cumulatively across the different career stages in both professions to obstruct the women’s advancement. At the recruitment/pre-selection stage, gender diversity policy responses tend to focus solely on women such as through business targets of political gender quotas. This reinforces the notion that only women have gender and that gender diversity is an issue associated with women (Galea et al., 2014). This focus lets the business and political leaders ‘off the hook’ because the problem is framed as something outside their control (Johnson, 2001: 135) – and therefore enables them to deny their privileged positions. The focus on women only policy responses perpetuates the narrative that women are ‘lacking’ in some sense - inclination, education and/or skills (Eveline, 1998: 91). This further reinforces essentialist notions that tie technical competence and merit to masculinity (Faulkner, 2009a). Selection processes become focussed on bringing women up to a pre-existing standard before allowing them entry, rather than examining whether these standards are fair, relevant or appropriate. Further obstructions arise at the entry level where women (but not men) are still perceived by business and political leaders to be tied to a nurturing role, making them ‘naturally’ unsuited for entry into the construction or political world.

In relation to retention, it appears in both the construction companies and political institutions, little attention is given to the hostile culture produced by the performance of hegemonic masculinities. Rather, these remain the standards by which ‘success’ is measured. In both sectors, women are expected to fit in – for example, to be present, work long hours, or engage in aggressive of combative debate. While there have been some efforts in both construction and politics to introduce formal rules to temper these practices – encouraging more family friendly work hours, introducing childcare facilities and the like – they have had little impact on the gender status quo, which remains resilient and difficult to shift.
This paper suggests that rather than existing women-focussed policies effectively challenging masculine privilege, they have fuelled resentment and backlash. It appears in the Australian construction and political realms, minor improvements in women’s standing, or the implementation of women’s-focussed policy has resulted in an exaggerated view about women’s progress. This over-inflation has produced negative reactions ranging from men having a sense of being ‘devalued’ through to more direct and destructive practices of personal attack. Attempts to challenge hegemonic masculinity and the privilege it produces may indeed help explain why in the construction sector the level of women construction professionals in recent years has dropped, why the number of women standing for Australian parliament has stagnated, and the dramatic reduction in the appointment of women to federal Cabinet in the first Liberal government proceeding that led by Australia’s first female Prime Minister.

This paper demonstrates that despite individuals and organisations proclaiming values of equality and non-discrimination, masculine privilege operates through denial, neutrality and backlash to maintain the gender power status quo. Because of this resistance, masculine privilege and how it operates to perpetuate male advantage must continue to be called out, repeatedly to those with the greatest influence over policy reform - leaders, policy entrepreneurs and legislative bodies. Unless the systems of masculine privilege are made visible and observed, then it will continue to function unstudied, unravelled and untouched.

Male advantage provides a useful lens for understanding why gender diversity remains an intransigent problem in politics and business. It spotlights that policy reform which focuses on correcting women’s disadvantage alone, is tinkering around the edges and keeps gender and gender power relations on the periphery of government and business. On the other hand, a focus on male advantage gets to the nub of how power is maintained within politics and business and by whom. It crystallises where efforts should be focused if gender equity is to be achieved.

References


