

# Activism and Erasure, Preservation and Transmission

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Immediately after news of the defeat of the Liberal–National coalition government in Australia in May 2022, commentators reflected on the Liberal Party’s failure to engage with, and represent the interests of, women. Former deputy leader Julie Bishop reported that many Liberal women had told her that they did not feel that the Scott Morrison–led government had any empathy with women. ‘Grace Tame and Brittany Higgins changed the narrative’, she said. ‘Women were saying [parliament] was not a safe place to work’.<sup>1</sup>

On the other side of the divide, in his victory speech, incoming prime minister, Anthony Albanese, shone a spotlight on women. ‘Together’, he said, ‘we can make full and equal opportunity for women a national economic and social priority’. He also acknowledged Australia’s next minister for Indigenous Australians, Linda Burney, who was present on the night.<sup>2</sup> Burney was the first Indigenous woman to be elected into the House of Representatives in July 2016.

Independent candidate Zoe Daniel cited a historic precedent in her victory speech. Securing the seat of Goldstein in Victoria, she recalled how early twentieth-century suffragist Vida Goldstein, after whom the electorate was named, ran as an Independent numerous times, but unsuccessfully. As a Senate candidate in 1903, Goldstein was one of the first women in the British Empire to stand for election to a national parliament. ‘This seat is in her name’, Daniel said, ‘and today I take her rightful place’.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Amanda Meade, ‘Senior Liberals say party must address women problem and regain centre after election loss’, *Guardian*, 22 May 2022, [theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/may/22/senior-liberals-say-party-must-address-women-problem-and-regain-centre-after-election-loss](https://theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/may/22/senior-liberals-say-party-must-address-women-problem-and-regain-centre-after-election-loss).

2 Anthony Albanese, ‘IN FULL: Anthony Albanese delivers victory speech after clinching win over Coalition’, *ABC News*, 21 May 2022, [youtube.com/watch?v=77N\\_cxPJvkE&ab\\_channel=ABCNews%28Australia%29](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=77N_cxPJvkE&ab_channel=ABCNews%28Australia%29).

3 Zoe Daniel, ‘Independent Zoe Daniel defeats Liberal Tim Wilson in Goldstein’, *ABC News*, 21 May 2022, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvEDcej5rYc&ab\\_channel=ABCNews%28Australia%29](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvEDcej5rYc&ab_channel=ABCNews%28Australia%29).

What all of this pointed to was the highly uneven terrain on which gender issues and activists operated in Australia in 2022. On the one hand, there was childhood sexual abuse, sexual assault in parliament and an unresponsive, even complicit government.<sup>4</sup> On the other, there was mass feminist rallying, pioneering Indigenous women, historical connections and an incoming government at least pledging to take women's interests and needs seriously.<sup>5</sup>

While this was the national backdrop, the international scene was similarly uneven, in some cases much bleaker. Take the United States. A notoriously misogynistic Republican president, Donald Trump, was defeated by Democrat Joe Biden in 2020. From May 2022, though, people looked on anxiously as it seemed increasingly likely that the Supreme Court—now with a majority of conservative members—was about to strike down the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* judgement in the case of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. This spurred outpourings of solidarity and activism, including more than 380 pro-abortion rallies staged across the country on 14 May 2022. However, these were not enough to prevent the Supreme Court from announcing on 24 June its decision to overturn the *Roe* judgement, thereby removing the protection previously afforded to women who chose to undergo an abortion and allowing individual states to legislate on abortion. Almost immediately, abortion clinics began closing, while 13 states had so-called trigger laws in place that would see abortion banned within 30 days.<sup>6</sup>

In the face of ongoing threats to and erosion of women's rights, feminist activism continues. Yet, as Angela McRobbie and others have argued, there has long been a problem with ensuring the intergenerational transmission of feminist knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Publicly, feminist struggles and feminist achievements have long been 'caricatured and trivialised, if not forgotten', while finding funding to preserve and make available feminist

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4 Georgia Hitch, 'Review finds 1 in 3 staff in federal parliament experience sexual harassment', *ABC News*, 30 November 2021, [www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-30/sexual-haassment-report-parliament-brittany-higgins/100660894](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-30/sexual-haassment-report-parliament-brittany-higgins/100660894).

5 While it is still early days in Albanese's tenure as prime minister, a record 10 women were sworn into his cabinet. Gay Alcorn, 'Editorial: A diverse cabinet that better reflects our nation', *Age*, 1 June 2022, [theage.com.au/politics/federal/a-diverse-cabinet-that-better-reflects-our-nation-20220601-p5aq6g.html](http://theage.com.au/politics/federal/a-diverse-cabinet-that-better-reflects-our-nation-20220601-p5aq6g.html).

6 Jia Tolentino, 'We're not going back to the time before *Roe*. We're going somewhere worse', *New Yorker*, 24 June 2022, [newyorker.com/magazine/2022/07/04/we-are-not-going-back-to-the-time-before-roe-we-are-going-somewhere-worse](http://newyorker.com/magazine/2022/07/04/we-are-not-going-back-to-the-time-before-roe-we-are-going-somewhere-worse).

7 Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: Sage, 2009), 26.

histories has been difficult.<sup>8</sup> This means that these histories have not always had the ready ability to inspire future generations of feminists, many of whom feel they are inventing feminism anew instead of building on an ongoing movement. Given the moment that we are in, however, I feel that this is set to change—*with* our continued work—and in the face of real and attempted retrogression.

Digital technologies are key to this feeling of imminent change. As soon as the 2017 Women's March—a global phenomenon involving 5 million people and 673 events—was over, the organisation immediately set about preserving its history and making it accessible via digital platforms, including its own website.<sup>9</sup> In subsequent years, the movement marched again, commemorating its initial mobilisation while also diversifying its protests, like those against curtailing reproductive freedoms. Its website captures its histories. Each group of marchers, wherever they are positioned globally, as long as they have internet access, can be informed about feminism's evolving histories. They can be jointly informed and inspired.

Of course, as with feminism itself, this is not without its complexities and issues. As Vera Mackie and I argue in a recent article, making the histories of diverse groups of women available and known has significant consequences for who feels invited and welcomed into feminist movements.<sup>10</sup> As the initial Women's March demonstrated, failing to incorporate the histories of women of colour into the memory cultures that activists were constructing around the movement ostracised groups of women that might otherwise have participated in it.<sup>11</sup> The organisation

8 McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism*, 49; Sharon Crozier-De Rosa and Vera Mackie, *Remembering Women's Activism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 22–24.

9 See *Women's March*, [womensmarch.com/](http://womensmarch.com/); and 'Women's March on Washington Archive', *George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida*, [ufdc.ufl.edu/collections/womensmarch](http://ufdc.ufl.edu/collections/womensmarch).

10 Vera Mackie and Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, 'Rallying women: Activism, archives and affect', *Women's History Review* (published online 11 July 2022), [doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2022.2090711](https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2022.2090711). The article is part of a special forum in the journal, edited by Sharon Crozier-De Rosa and Vera Mackie. See Crozier-De Rosa and Mackie, 'Mobilising affect and trauma: The politics of gendered memory and gendered silence', *Women's History Review* (published online 26 June 2022), [doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2022.2090705](https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2022.2090705).

11 For example, cultural critic and writer Jamilah Lemieux declared that she refused to 'feign solidarity' with White women who had initially appropriated the name of a historical Black protest when they called their proposed rally, the Million Woman March, without acknowledging Black history (in this case, the 1995 Million Man March and the 1997 Million Woman March organised by Minister Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam). Jamilah Lemieux, 'Why I'm skipping the Women's March on Washington', *Colorlines*, 17 January 2017, [colorlines.com/articles/why-im-skipping-womens-march-washington-op-ed](http://colorlines.com/articles/why-im-skipping-womens-march-washington-op-ed).

immediately reflected and self-corrected. It changed its name, invited a more diverse group of co-chairs, and, on its website, replaced its initial 'mission' with a more inclusive one.

While self-correction was laudable, what the movement did, in effect, was to digitally erase evidence of its controversial history. This has consequences for future generations seeking to know the history of early twenty-first century feminist movements. What remains on the organisation's website is, arguably, a static and sanitised account of its history. This raises new challenges for us, including working to ensure that feminist history as a terrain encompassing solidarity and dissent, inclusion and exclusion, is captured and transmitted to future generations. Surely it is not a story of homogenous, unproblematic progress that has the capacity to inspire future feminists and inform them about the difficulties of achieving feminist reform, but rather that of a dynamic movement that has been complex, contentious, reflective and responsive.

For me then, thinking about 'doing' feminism in 2022 is both backward- and forward-looking, drawing on the physical and the digital. A tweet that appeared at the outset of the current global Covid-19 pandemic (referring to the United States' gender pay gap) stated: 'This quarantine is affecting everyone in the workforce, but it especially sucks for men. We're losing \$1 for every \$.79 women are losing'.<sup>12</sup> This was humour and pathos in a sea of historical continuities and regressions, wins and losses.

Feminists are still participating in the long fight for equal pay, equal representation, protection from sexual assault, violence and against patriarchy. In 2018, Ireland recorded a historic turn of the tide that has paved the way for abortion reform (via the removal of the 1982 constitutional clause that made the right to life of the 'unborn' and the pregnant woman equal).<sup>13</sup> In 2022, pro-abortion activists in Ireland warned feminists that 'the Dobbs case serves as a powerful reminder to us here in Ireland, and across the world, that we can never take progress on women's rights for granted'.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, feminists continue to make history. Activists in Argentina and Colombia have successfully

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12 See [twitter.com/\\_ryankirk/status/1241076154934726657](https://twitter.com/_ryankirk/status/1241076154934726657), posted 21 March 2020.

13 Ivana Bacik, 'Ireland has changed utterly: The cruel Eighth Amendment is history', *Guardian*, 26 May 2018, [theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/26/ireland-has-changed-utterly-the-cruel-eighth-amendment-is-history](https://theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/26/ireland-has-changed-utterly-the-cruel-eighth-amendment-is-history).

14 Ivana Bacik, 'As US abortion rights take a shocking step backwards, we must move forward', *Irish Examiner*, 25 June 2022, [irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-40903439.html](https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-40903439.html).

campaigned to decriminalise abortion.<sup>15</sup> Women demand and enact physical visibility through campaigning for monuments to their pasts and marching on the streets. They use social media to mobilise, connecting with feminists globally, while retaining and making accessible a digital archive of their activism.

I recently undertook research for a media outlet for a television advertisement on gender equality. My remit was to provide a report on 30 or more key moments—achievements and setbacks—in the campaign for gender equality in Australia. While this ‘stocktake’ reminded me that, yes, faith in a Whiggish notion of progress is naïve, I was simultaneously confronted by the knowledge that, due to feminist campaigning, we have come a long way. As a historian of feminist activism, doing feminism in 2022 means working to render the histories of these campaigns visible and accessible so that aspiring feminists can be inspired. It also means including the ugly, the confrontational and the setbacks, with the joy, the spectacle and the solidarity, to produce future feminists who are informed. The more they know of the historical nature of the struggle they’re signing up for, the more likely they are to be prepared, mindful of being inclusive and ultimately successful.

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15 Frances Solá-Santiago, ‘What the green scarf means in the fight for reproductive rights’, *Refinery29*, 17 May 2022, [www.refinery29.com/en-us/2022/05/10978997/green-scarf-meaning-roe-v-wade-protests](https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2022/05/10978997/green-scarf-meaning-roe-v-wade-protests).

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