

The Power of Memory for Feminism

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Jessie Street National Women's Library

Being a feminist and assessing the position of feminism in Australia in 2022 is a complex matter, recognising that feminism is now, as always, in a position of real and energetically engaged conflict. It is also a time when it is crucial to recognise the importance of memory in both the assessment and ongoing success of the feminist project.

Historians are the guardians of strategic memory, of course, and so are libraries and archives. Significant in that regard is the Jessie Street National Women's Library (JSNWL), established in Sydney in 1989 by Shirley Jones and Lenore Coltheart. They named it to honour and preserve the memory of Jessie Street (1889–1970), a tireless feminist worker for the rights of humanity at all levels of society in Australia and internationally, for peace and, in particular, for the rights of Indigenous Australians.¹ Shirley Jones, who passed away in 2021, worked for 20 years to establish and secure the library.

The JSNWL is a specialist library and archive collecting the published and unpublished materials—including personal archives, serials and posters—that document the lives, political activism and experiences of Australian women of all ethnic, racial, religious and class backgrounds. It is independently funded by members and supporters, staffed entirely by volunteers and located in the Ultimo Community Centre, Sydney, thanks to the City of Sydney Council. In 1993 the library was chosen to house the collections of the former Women's Archive (Canberra), which faced funding difficulties. The JSNWL is regularly used by historians and is often called upon to contribute to exhibitions. The skill of the volunteer librarians is demonstrated by use of the library by university librarianship courses for work experience and training for their students.

1 Lenore Coltheart, ed., *Jessie Street. A Revised Autobiography* (Sydney: Federation Press, 2004).

Recent years have been a time both of new hope and all too familiar disappointments for feminists. We have been inspired by brave women, including Rosie Batty, Grace Tame and Brittany Higgins, speaking out about the violence they have suffered and to support others; by the international stirring of the #Me Too movement; and by thrilling participation in the biggest street demonstrations of angry women we have seen for decades in the rallies held in 40 cities across Australia organised as the Women's March4Justice on 15 March 2021.

Meanwhile, and in an equally encouraging indication of Australian feminist activism, the Equal Rights Alliance (ERA), one of six women's alliances funded to inform the federal government about women's concerns, continues to represent 65 vigorous women's community organisations. The Jessie Street National Women's Library is a member organisation of ERA.

But while #Me Too brought international encouragement, developments across the world increasingly threaten hard won feminist achievement. Fears, now all too true, have arisen in the United States about the implications of the reversal of the abortion right determination of the *Roe v. Wade* case, while Republican states enact abortion restriction legislation. In Poland in October 2020 100,000 people marched against legislative measures to restrict abortion access.² In Afghanistan employment and educational opportunities for women and girls have been reversed with the return of the Taliban.³ This poignant time in the international feminist struggle was dramatically demonstrated by the 2021 decision by the United Nations (UN), through UN Women, that changes in international politics made it too risky to continue the tradition of Women's World Conferences between 1975 (Mexico City) and 1995 (Beijing). Fearing that a further World Conference might see dilution of the Platform for Action agreed in Beijing, a less formal Generation Equity Forum was arranged. Despite pressure from conservative governments, strong action commitments were made, including on gender-based violence and feminist movements and leadership. Outcomes were harder fought at the 66th meeting of the UN Commission on the Status

2 Chelsea Matias, 'The latest on abortion rights in the U.S.', *New York Times*, 17 May 2022, [nytimes.com/interactive/2022/05/16/us/abortion-rights-latest.html](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/05/16/us/abortion-rights-latest.html); Weronika Strzyzewska, 'Erosion of abortion rights gathers pace around the world as US signals new era', *Guardian*, 4 May 2022.

3 Stefanie Glinski and Ruchi Kumar, 'Taliban u-turn over Afghan girls' education reveals deep leadership divisions', *Guardian*, 26 March 2022, [theguardian.com/global-development/2022/mar/25/taliban-u-turn-over-afghan-girls-education-reveals-deep-leadership-divisions-afghanistan](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/mar/25/taliban-u-turn-over-afghan-girls-education-reveals-deep-leadership-divisions-afghanistan).

of Women in March 2022, with pressure against non-government organisation participation in the Commission on the Status of Women, the inclusion of references to intersectionality, climate change and even, from Russia, on the right of women to own land. Nevertheless, the Australian delegation assisted in the insertions of positive language on sexual reproduction, health rights and Indigenous women.⁴

Meanwhile, in Australia, it was only in March 2021 that, after decades of feminist campaigning, abortion was decriminalised in South Australia, the last state since Western Australia in 1998 to do so. That measure took until 7 July to become law in SA and technical restrictions, including access to public hospitals, continue in most states and territories.⁵

To return to the consequent importance of feminist memory, if we don't know where we have come from, if we don't remember how much desperately hard struggle achieved what we now take for granted, then we are in increased danger of loss. In our immediate present, if we don't remember the work it took to achieve the structure of human rights and anti-discrimination legislation built between 1975 (Racial Discrimination Act) and 2004 (Age Discrimination Act), including the Sex Discrimination Act 1984, then we might underestimate the near miss in 2021, when a failed attempt to legislate against discrimination on religious grounds threatened to undo hard won anti-discrimination measures at federal and state levels.⁶

Likewise, if we don't remember how long and hard the feminist battle has endured in Australia, we might either go on reinventing wheels or lose it all. That goes all the way back to our iconic campaigners for women's suffrage. We need to remember that those ardent suffragists wanted the vote to influence policy. What they sought in the vote was a practical tool not a symbolic right. In New South Wales, Louisa Lawson, Rose Scott, Maybanke Anderson, Dora Montefiore and their colleagues, all founders of the fight for suffrage, campaigned from personal experience against

4 Reports and briefings to member organisations by Equal Rights Alliance on the Gender Equity Forum, 2021, and UN Commission on the Status of Women 66, 2022.

5 Shari Hams, 'South Australia decriminalised abortion more than a year ago, but nothing has changed', *ABC News*, 10 May 2022, abc.net.au/news/2022-05-10/abortion-decriminalised-but-laws-not-enacted-in-sa/101051766; Erika Millar and Barbara Baird, 'Abortion is no longer a crime in Australia. But legal hurdles to access remain', *Conversation*, 4 March 2021, theconversation.com/abortion-is-no-longer-a-crime-in-australia-but-legal-hurdles-to-access-remain-156215. Human Rights Law Centre, 7 July 2022, www.hrlc.org.au.

6 Tass Livernis, President, Law Council of Australia, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 February 2022.

male violence—including rape—in marriage; for the right of married women to own property; for support from a husband's estate whatever the terms of his will; for equal access to divorce; and for a mother's custody of children on widowhood or divorce, the latter not achieved until 1934.⁷ In Victoria, Vida Goldstein, when standing for federal office on five occasions from 1903, staunchly opposed, as did many suffragists, the political party system, seeing it as inappropriately male in its strategies and interests.

Likewise, as subsequent generations of Australian politicians 'discover' gender-based violence against women as a means, if inadequately funded, to demonstrate their concern for women, it is equally dangerous to forget the desperate women who grabbed the microphone at a Sydney Women's Liberation Women's Commission in 1974. That was the start of the community-based response and analysis that led to opening refuges for escaping women, then rape crisis centres and the policy recognition that followed.⁸

These are just a few of the strategic memories that underline the importance of preserving the history of past achievements in order to protect and extend our rights in the present and in the immediate future.

7 Janet Ramsay, 'The making of domestic violence policy by the Australian Commonwealth Government and the government of the state of NSW between 1970 and 1985: An analytical narrative of feminist policy activism' (University of Sydney, PhD thesis, 2005), ch. 1.

8 Janet Ramsay, 'Policy activism on a "wicked issue": The building of Australian feminist policy on domestic violence in the 1970s', *Australian Feminist Studies* 22, no. 53 (2007): 247–50.

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