

# Still Lacking Her Rights at Work: The Treatment of Women Politicians in the Australian Parliament and Print News Media\*

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**Abstract** Anne Summers' 2012 speech entitled 'Her Rights at Work' examined the 'sexist and discriminatory treatment of Australia's first female Prime Minister', Julia Gillard, by both the Opposition and a section of the broader public. This paper will argue that Parliament is still all too often a sexist and discriminatory place of work for women politicians and that parliamentary sexism and discrimination is often exacerbated by the news media's coverage of incidents. While providing a broader background, the paper will focus on several key case studies of parliamentary events and their subsequent media coverage, including: Gillard's 'Misogyny speech'; Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young's 'slut-shaming'; and former Liberal MP Julia Banks' criticism of Parliament's sexism.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2021, former Labor MP and Minister Kate Ellis published *Sex, Lies and Question Time*. The book described appalling sexist behaviour that she and other parliamentarians had experienced. Ellis emphasised 'how much the culture in Parliament is behind the rest

of society. It is outdated, toxic and often unfair, particularly for women'.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, this is not the first book penned by a former MP that focuses on sexism against women parliamentarians.<sup>2</sup> Recent years have seen a deluge of revelations from current and former women politicians, ranging from suggestions in Cabinet meetings being overlooked until a man gets credit for them, to sexist comments, weaponised sexual innuendo, sexual harassment, and gendered bullying and intimidation. Furthermore, former Deputy Liberal Leader, Julie Bishop, noted that fear of damaging their own party electorally prevents many women from complaining about sexist or illegal behaviour, giving a sense of impunity to offenders.<sup>3</sup>

Greens Senator Lidia Thorpe, a proud Gunnai Gunditjmara and Djab Wurrung woman, recently spoke out against the 'toxic culture that's been left to fester in Parliament House – a culture of racism, sexism and misogyny' that she had both observed and experienced.<sup>4</sup> At the time, Thorpe had only been a Senator for six months. Greens Senator Mehreen Faruqi has also written about her negative experiences as a Muslim, migrant woman.<sup>5</sup>

This kind of treatment is not isolated within Parliament House—it is often endorsed and exacerbated by the mainstream print media, which plays a crucial role in our parliamentary system. As Hartley notes: 'Contemporary politics is "representative" in both senses of the term; citizens are represented by a chosen few, and politics is represented to the public via the various media...'.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the crucial role of the media in ensuring an informed citizenship and well-functioning democracy is widely recognised. However, politics is becoming increasingly mediatised; that is, 'becoming dependent in its central functions on mass media and is continually shaped

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Ellis, *Sex, Lies and Question Time*. Wurundjeri Country: Hardie Grant, 2021, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Janine Haines, *Suffrage to Sufferance: A Hundred Years of Women in Politics*. North Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1992; see also Marian Sawer and Marian Simms, *A Woman's Place: Women and Politics in Australia*. North Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993, pp. 118, 121.

<sup>3</sup> Julie Bishop, 'Julie Bishop Joins 7.30 to Discuss the Workplace Culture in Parliament'. 7:30, ABC Television, 8 March 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.abc.net.au/7.30/julie-bishop-joins-7.30-to-discuss-the-workplace/13228124>

<sup>4</sup> Lidia Thorpe, 'There's a Toxic Culture That's Been Left to Fester in Parliament House', Twitter, @lidia\_\_thorpe (blog), 16 February 2018. Accessed at: [https://twitter.com/lidia\\_\\_thorpe/status/1361521092452511749](https://twitter.com/lidia__thorpe/status/1361521092452511749). See also

<sup>5</sup> Mehreen Faruqi, *Too Migrant, Too Muslim, Too Loud*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> John Hartley, *The Politics of Pictures*. London: Routledge, 1992, p. 35. See further Brian McNair et al. (eds), *Politics, Media and Democracy in Australia*. London: Routledge, 2017, p. 3.

by interactions with mass media'.<sup>7</sup> A key component of this is journalistic news framing, which involves the 'selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens and what matters'.<sup>8</sup> As framing concerns what is reported and how an event, person or situation is selected, presented and shaped to the audience, it can be used to support certain voices or ideologies while denouncing others.<sup>9</sup> It is crucial to analyse such framing devices to understand what, exactly, is being communicated.

However, both mediatisation and framing theories tend to leave gender out of their analysis. While most politicians attempt to shape their media framing, this is something that women particularly struggle with because of the gendered nature of the media. For example, Australia's first woman Prime Minister Julia Gillard unsuccessfully tried to downplay her gender early in her term, as she did not want to "hark on" about being a woman given it was "obvious" [wanting] it to be about "doing it rather than talking about it".<sup>10</sup> *Gendered mediation* provides a gendered lens, specifically on the use of these techniques and processes to reinforce gender norms and power relations.<sup>11</sup> Drawing from this line of thought, previous research has found that women politicians have long experienced gendered and sexist media coverage that reflects masculinist norms. Mainstream commentators frequently emphasise the gender, appearance and family life of women politicians, often using these as a source of criticism, or to trivialise and delegitimise them in their roles.<sup>12</sup> This is further

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<sup>7</sup> Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Winfried Schulz, "Mediatisation" of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy?, *Political Communication* 16(3) 1999, p. 250.

<sup>8</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. California: University of California Press, 1980, p. 6; Claes H. de Vreese, 'Mediatization of News: The Role of Journalistic Framing', in Frank Esser and Jesper Strömbäck (eds), *Mediatization of Politics Understanding the Transformation of Western Democracies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 137–55.

<sup>9</sup> James W. Tankard Jr., 'The Empirical Approach to the Study of Media Framing', in Stephen D. Reese, Jr. Gandy, and August E. Grant (eds), *Framing Public Life: Perspectives on Media and Our Understanding of the Social World*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001, pp. 95–106.

<sup>10</sup> Carol Johnson, 'Playing the Gender Card: The Uses and Abuses of Gender in Australian Politics', *Politics and Gender* 11(2) 2015, p. 300.

<sup>11</sup> Linda Trimble, *Ms. Prime Minister: Media, Gender, and Leadership*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017, pp. 9–10.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Ross and Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, 'Playing House – Gender, Politics and the News Media in Britain'. *Media Culture and Society* 19(1), 1997, pp. 101–9; Trimble, *Ms. Prime Minister*; Blair Williams, 'A Tale of Two Women: A Comparative Gendered Media Analysis of UK Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May'. *Parliamentary Affairs* 72(2) 2020, pp. 398–420.

compounded for women of colour, who are ‘doubly disciplined – once on account of their gender and then again on account of their race’.<sup>13</sup> This kind of sexist and racist coverage not only impacts on parliamentarians themselves but can have a bystander effect. Just witnessing sexist coverage of a woman politician can deter other women from entering politics as it ‘signals that woman considering a political career must overcome powerful informal norms’.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore important to analyse the media coverage of women in politics, especially how they are framed, if we want to see any tangible change for women in Parliament.<sup>15</sup>

It is not possible to give a full account of the complaints made by or on behalf of women politicians in this brief article. Rather we will focus on three particularly revealing incidents: Gillard’s 2012 ‘Misogyny speech’; the alleged ‘slut-shaming’ of Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young in 2018; and former Liberal MP Julia Banks’ critiques of parliamentary sexism, including within her own party. We examined media framing in coverage of these incidents from a range of Australian newspapers, though we note that this is a representative not a total sample. This paper argues not only that Parliament is often a sexist workplace for women parliamentarians but that the news media frequently exacerbates their situation rather than critiquing it.

## **JULIA GILLARD**

Anne Summers’ August 2012 speech, ‘Her Rights at Work’, examined the ‘sexist and discriminatory treatment of Australia’s first female Prime Minister’, Julia Gillard, by both the Opposition and sections of the broader public. Summers argued that the treatment of Gillard constituted bullying according to the definition of the Commonwealth health and safety agency and would have been ‘outlawed under both

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<sup>13</sup> Erin Tolley, ‘Breaking the Concrete Glass Ceiling: Media Portrayals of Racialised Women in Politics’, in Angelia Wagner and Joanna Everitt (eds), *Gendered Mediation: Identity and Image Making in Canadian Politics*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2019, pp. 106–26.

<sup>14</sup> Amanda Haraldsson and Lena Wängnerud. ‘The Effect of Media Sexism on Women’s Political Ambition: Evidence from a Worldwide Study’. *Feminist Media Studies* 19(4) 2019, p. 534.

<sup>15</sup> Social media is also an important aspect to examine, due to the high rates of misogynistic abuse towards women in politics, and a code of conduct is needed for social media companies. However, this is beyond the scope of our paper.

the Sex Discrimination Act and Fair Work Australia'.<sup>16</sup> Gillard had long been subject to sexist behaviour by parliamentary opponents, that had escalated after the 'coup' in which she replaced Kevin Rudd as leader.<sup>17</sup> The Liberals suggested that Gillard was devious and unusually bloodthirsty for a woman. Liberal MP Christopher Pyne stated that: 'Comparing her to Lady Macbeth is unfair on Lady Macbeth—she only had one victim to her name; this Prime Minister has a list of victims longer than Richard III'.<sup>18</sup> Tony Abbott alluded to Gillard being unmarried in his assertion that: 'if the Prime Minister wants to make, politically speaking, an honest woman of herself, she needs to seek a mandate for a carbon tax'.<sup>19</sup> He denounced the Government's carbon price as 'the mother of all taxes', thereby suggesting that Gillard had perversely given birth to a tax rather than a child.<sup>20</sup> Gillard had long been targeted for not having children, including being depicted as 'deliberately barren'.<sup>21</sup>

Gillard's famous 'misogyny' speech needs to be understood in the light of those previous sexist attacks and also in the immediate context of her response to a speech by Tony Abbott regarding Peter Slipper. Slipper, a former Coalition member, became Speaker of the House of Representatives in 2011, thereby shoring up the minority Gillard Government's numbers on the floor of the House. Abbott's speech attacked a text message that Slipper had sent (before becoming Speaker) in which he disparaged female genitalia. Abbott argued that Slipper was 'no longer a fit and proper person' to hold the position of Speaker and accused Gillard's Government of hypocrisy for not acting on Slipper's 'misogyny'.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Anne Summers, 'Her Rights at Work' (R-rated version). 2012 Human Rights and Social Justice Lecture, University of Newcastle, 31 August 2012. Accessed at: <https://www.annesummers.com.au/a/42277/her-rights-at-work--r-rated-version->.

<sup>17</sup> See further Marian Sawyer, 'Misogyny and Misrepresentation: Women in Australian Parliaments'. *Political Science* 65 (1) 2013, pp. 105-17.

<sup>18</sup> Christopher Pyne, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 8 February 2012, pp. 287-288.

<sup>19</sup> Malcolm Farr, 'Tony Abbott Tells Julia Gillard to 'Make an Honest Woman of Herself' on Carbon Tax'. *news.com.au*, 25 February 2011. Accessed at: <http://www.news.com.au/national-news/tony-abbott-tells-julia-gillard-to-make-an-honest-woman-of-herself-on-carbon-tax/story-e6frfkvr-1226012034629>.

<sup>20</sup> Farr, 'Tony Abbott Tells Julia Gillard'.

<sup>21</sup> Sawyer, "Misogyny and Misrepresentation", p. 111

<sup>22</sup> Tony Abbott, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 9 October 2012, pp. 11574-5.

In her response to Abbott, Gillard criticised Slipper's comments, saying she was 'offended' by their 'sexism' and their 'anti-women' content 'in the same way I have been offended by things the Leader of the Opposition has said'.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, Parliament should wait for the outcome of an ongoing court case against Slipper, who had stood aside. However, the major focus of Gillard's speech was on Abbott's own hypocrisy, since 'if he wants to know what misogyny looks like in modern Australia he does not need a motion in the House of Representatives; he needs a mirror'.<sup>24</sup> Gillard then went on to quote various examples of Abbott's sexism and misogyny. Gillard also criticised Abbott's sexist behaviour in Parliament, saying he would never have catcalled equivalent comments to a male Prime Minister or yelled at a male Prime Minister to shut up.

Gillard's 'Misogyny Speech' resonated with many women in Australia, and around the world. Footage of the speech rapidly 'went viral' on social media and was praised by several world leaders.<sup>25</sup> Yet, the Canberra press gallery was largely dismissive. The Murdoch press coverage of Gillard's speech was particularly critical, portraying it as a strategic attack, a controlled emotional outburst, an act of hypocrisy, or part of a larger 'gender war'.<sup>26</sup> In addition, newspaper coverage in the following week frequently framed Gillard as playing the victim in addition to the 'gender card' or 'betraying' feminism, while it was claimed that her accusations about Abbott did not demonstrate sexism and that she risked further isolating male voters.

The print media largely framed Gillard as playing the 'victim card' for daring to call out sexism and misogyny. As she had previously steered away from the topic, many journalists assumed that she was now addressing it to distract from the Slipper issue. For example:

Gillard sought to portray Mr Abbott as anti-women in a transparent effort to use attack as a distraction and to assume victim status for herself .... It

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<sup>23</sup> Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 9 October 2012, p. 11582.

<sup>24</sup> Gillard, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 9 October 2012, p. 11581.

<sup>25</sup> Katharine A.M. Wright and Jack Holland, 'Leadership and the Media: Gendered Framings of Julia Gillard's 'Sexism and Misogyny' Speech'. *Australian Journal of Political Science* 49(3) 2014, pp. 455-468.

<sup>26</sup> Wright and Holland, 'Leadership and the Media'; Ngaire Donaghue, 'Who Gets Played By 'The Gender Card'?'. *Australian Feminist Studies* 30(84) 2015, pp. 161-78; Linda Trimble, 'Julia Gillard and the Gender Wars', *Politics and Gender* 12(2) 2016, pp. 296-316.

was disappointing to see the Prime Minister seek the solace of victimhood to protect herself from a sordid scandal of her own making.<sup>27</sup>

Once again, Gillard reached for anything – the gender card, the victim card, a gotcha ....<sup>28</sup>

Other articles accused her of performing ‘phoney hysteria’,<sup>29</sup> or quoted Liberal women who admitted to experiencing abuse but ‘would never play the “victim card”’.<sup>30</sup> Numerous voices in the media dismissed the concerns she raised and questioned her legitimacy and credibility as a leader. These critiques reflect the pressure exerted on all women to ‘ignore instances of sexism to avoid creating a sense of themselves as victims’,<sup>31</sup> both in their workplace as well as other areas of society. Those who speak up are often dismissed and accused of being ‘phonies’ or ‘hysterical’. Women who call out sexism are frequently considered ‘bad women’ as they challenge male dominance and are therefore made an example of to send a message to all women that this is what they risk if they follow in their footsteps.

According to media coverage of the speech, Gillard was also ‘playing the gender card’ and inciting a ‘gender war’. The former phrase is commonly used to dismiss a woman for calling out sexism, implying that she does so strategically and so denying ‘any possibility that [she] might do so out of genuine grievance’.<sup>32</sup> The latter is a metaphoric device used to portray any discussions relating to gender and sexism as ‘acts of extreme political violence,’ with the aim of silencing or punishing those who raise these issues in the political realm.<sup>33</sup> Gillard was therefore depicted as weaponising gender:

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<sup>27</sup> ‘The PM, the Speaker, His Texts and Their Misogyny’. *The Australian*, 10 October 2012, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Bolt, ‘Shameless: A Woman of No Principle’. *Herald-Sun*, 11 October 2012, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> ‘The PM, the Speaker’.

<sup>30</sup> Milanda Rout, ‘Lib Women Cop Abuse, Too, but They Don’t Play the ‘Victim Card’’. *The Australian*, 12 October 2012, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Donaghue, ‘Who Gets Played?’.

<sup>32</sup> Donaghue, ‘Who Gets Played?’, p. 164.

<sup>33</sup> Trimble, ‘Julia Gillard and the Gender Wars’, p. 297.

It was a deliberate decision by Gillard to use her gender as both her primary defence and her method of direct attack against Abbott's greatest perceived vulnerability.<sup>34</sup>

Playing the gender card is the pathetic last refuge of incompetents and everyone in the real world knows it.<sup>35</sup>

Dennis Shanahan's *Australian* op-ed embodies this metaphor, arguing that the Government has 'launched a gender war' and labelling Gillard as a self-appointed 'gender-general and commander-in-chief' who had 'become the arbiter of sexist and misogynist behaviour'.<sup>36</sup> By accusing Gillard of playing the gender card or commanding the so-called gender wars, the Australian media dismissed her concerns, reprimanded her for challenging the sexist political status quo and attempted to shut down further conversations about gender and sexism.

The content of Gillard's speech was further dismissed by some in the media, who argued that her examples of Abbott's history of sexism were not evidence of his misogyny. As part of this 'blame game' narrative, numerous journalists claimed Gillard's accusations against Abbott were exaggerated and a distraction from the 'real' issue at hand:

That metaphor is the blame game .... Yes, they [Abbott's past actions] are unacceptable. It is equally obvious they do not constitute misogyny ... the misogynist card is just another tactic.<sup>37</sup>

That defence was based almost entirely on vilifying Opposition Leader Tony Abbott as a 'misogynist' himself – a ludicrous non-sequitur. Moreover, the examples Gillard chose were pathetic.<sup>38</sup>

Miranda Devine's article in the *Sunday Telegraph* rejected Gillard's 'self-indulgent performance calling out Tony Abbott on misogyny' and measured it against women's oppression elsewhere in the world:

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<sup>34</sup> Jennifer Hewett, 'Gender Agenda Unravels'. *The Australian Financial Review*, 11 October 2012, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Miranda Devine, 'Gender Card Is a Loser'. *Sunday Telegraph*, 14 October 2012, p. 41.

<sup>36</sup> Dennis Shanahan, 'PM's Gender War Ends in a Spectacular Self-Wedge'. *The Australian*, 12 October 2012, p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Kelly, 'Misogyny Tactic Will Backfire'. *The Australian*, 13 October 2012, p. 1.

<sup>38</sup> Bolt, 'Shameless: A Woman of No Principle'.

Misogyny is the Taliban shooting a 14-year-old girl in the face because she wants an education, not an opposition leader directing legitimately forceful criticism against a government ... What Gillard objects to is that Abbott holds a different opinion to hers.<sup>39</sup>

This logical fallacy—known as ‘whataboutism’—is a derailing technique used in response to ‘a difficult issue or question with a counter issue or question,’<sup>40</sup> and is often used by social conservatives to silence any discussions about feminist issues at home, because women elsewhere have it worse. Devine’s claimed concern for women in Afghanistan is used here to silence, dismiss and derail Gillard from speaking about sexism in politics in Australia.

Likewise, some critics accused Gillard of ‘betraying’ feminism by supposedly protecting Slipper. One article in particular declared that Gillard had ‘debas[ed] ... the feminist ideals that Canberra’s Labor sisterhood holds so dear’, accusing her argument of being ‘barren’ and her speech of ‘not Stalinism, [but] Gillardism’.<sup>41</sup> The term ‘barren’ is highly gendered, given the ‘deliberately barren’ comments noted earlier. Comparing Gillard’s speech to Stalinism draws on the age-old ‘reds under the beds’ stereotype that associates the Labor Party with communist authoritarianism and feminism with totalitarianism. Gillard is here accused of corrupting feminism by supposedly playing the ‘gender card’ as a tool of political salvage, thereby ‘rendering [feminist politics] useless for [her] own purposes ... [and damaging] these arguments for future use’.<sup>42</sup>

For the media, her ‘strategic’ speech backfired and many noted how it would affect her status among men. As Gillard’s speech called out sexism, apparently not considered a ‘real issue’ by some in the media, it was alleged that she risked isolating ‘blue-collar working men’ with ‘legitimate’ concerns, such as ‘fearing job losses’.<sup>43</sup> Two *Australian* articles illustrate this clearly: one argued that Gillard’s ‘problem with blue-collar men won’t be helped by accusations of sexism’<sup>44</sup> while another conceded that Abbott ‘has

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<sup>39</sup> Devine, ‘Gender Card Is a Loser’.

<sup>40</sup> Jessica Eaton, ‘Stop Asking Me “What about Men?”’. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence* 2(2) 2018, pp. 391–95.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Sisterhood’s Misogyny Campaign a Charade’. *The West Australian*, 13 October 2012, p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> Donaghue, ‘Who Gets Played By ‘The Gender Card’?’, p. 172.

<sup>43</sup> Dennis Shanahan, ‘Grubby Attempts to Smear Abbott as a Hater Will Leave Labor Base Unimpressed’. *The Australian*, 13 October 2012, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Shanahan, ‘PM’s Gender War Ends in a Spectacular Self-Wedge’.

a woman problem. But this performance will only accentuate Gillard's men problem'.<sup>45</sup> By calling out sexism and misogyny, Gillard transgressed the rules of the boy's club *and* subverted the norms of femininity. 'Good women' are supposed to support and comfort men, not confront and humiliate them by forcing 'them to face up to uncomfortable truths about their discriminatory social attitudes'.<sup>46</sup> As a result, the media often punished Gillard and portrayed her speech as a salvo in her 'gender wars' that indicated her desire to play the victim and willingness to betray feminism, dismissing her evidence against Abbott and thereby permitting the sexist abuse against which she spoke out.

### SARAH HANSON-YOUNG

Like Gillard, Sarah Hanson-Young had experienced a long history of bad behaviour before the specific case study we analyse. Hanson-Young describes the sexist psychological abuse that left her avoiding question time or leaving early:

It started as off-hand comments. Things about my dress. I had an MP comment - he had worked out it was my period this week. Names of men rumoured that I slept with whispered to me as they walk past me in the chamber, as we're sitting down to vote. All those things that are designed as mind warfare. To fuck with your head so that you can't deliver.<sup>47</sup>

It became a 'humiliating' male 'sport'.<sup>48</sup> Some sexualised comments were even made publicly and recorded in Hansard. Senator Barry O'Sullivan complained that Hanson-Young had not turned up to an inquiry and that there was 'a bit of Nick Xenophon in her—and I don't mean that to be a double reference. But there's a bit of Xenophon in her—references committees and not attending'.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Kelly, 'Misogyny Tactic Will Backfire'.

<sup>46</sup> Carol Johnson, 'Playing the Gender Card: The Uses and Abuses of Gender in Australian Politics'. *Politics and Gender* 11(2) 2015, pp. 291-319.

<sup>47</sup> 'Chamber of Silence'. *Australian Story*, ABC, 29 March 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.abc.net.au/austory/chamber-of-silence/13275176>.

<sup>48</sup> Ellis, *Sex, Lies and Question Time*, pp. 43-44

<sup>49</sup> Barry O'Sullivan, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, 27 November 2018, p. 8690.

In June 2018, the Senate had been debating a motion dealing with violence against women when Senator David Leyonhjelm yelled: ‘You should stop shagging men, Sarah’.<sup>50</sup> Leyonhjelm later incorrectly claimed that he had been responding to Senator Hanson-Young saying ‘something to the effect that all men are rapists’.<sup>51</sup> In subsequent media interviews,<sup>52</sup> which were not protected by parliamentary privilege,<sup>53</sup> Senator Leyonhjelm doubled down on his comments, suggesting that Sarah Hanson-Young was a ‘misandrist’ and a ‘hypocrite’ for having what he implied were multiple relationships with men.<sup>54</sup> Hanson-Young accused Leyonhjelm of ‘slut shaming’ her. She ‘decided at that moment I’d had enough of men in that place using sexism and sexist slurs, sexual innuendo as part of their intimidation and bullying on the floor of the Parliament’.<sup>55</sup> Hanson-Young sued Leyonhjelm for defamation and won a Federal Court case.

Hanson-Young declared her satisfaction that the judgment proved that parliamentarians were not above the law and sent ‘a timely and critical message that women deserve to be safe and respected in our workplaces’.<sup>56</sup> She stated she would donate Leyonhjelm’s defamation payment to two organisations that supported women at work: Plan International and the South Australian Working Women’s Centre. Leyonhjelm then sought leave to appeal to the High Court but this was subsequently rejected. However, Hanson-Young had the legal advantage that Leyonhjelm had doubled-down on his comments outside of Parliament, as parliamentary privilege

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<sup>50</sup> David Leyonhjelm, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, 28 June 2018, p. 4362.

<sup>51</sup> David Leyonhjelm, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, Senate, 14 August 2018, p. 4707.

<sup>52</sup> See *Leyonhjelm v Hanson-Young* (2021) FCAFC 22 (Rares, Wigney and Abraham JJ).

<sup>53</sup> ‘Parliamentary Privilege’, *Infosheet 5*, House of Representatives, March 2020. Accessed at: [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/House\\_of\\_Representatives/Powers\\_practice\\_and\\_procedure/00\\_-\\_Infosheets/Infosheet\\_5\\_-\\_Parliamentary\\_privilege](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/House_of_Representatives/Powers_practice_and_procedure/00_-_Infosheets/Infosheet_5_-_Parliamentary_privilege).

<sup>54</sup> See *Leyonhjelm v Hanson-Young*.

<sup>55</sup> ‘David Leyonhjelm ‘Slut Shaming Me’ With ‘Stop Shagging Men’ Remark, Sarah Hanson-Young Says’. ABC Radio National, 3 July 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-03/david-leyonhjelm-sarah-hanson-young-slut-shaming-shagging-men/9934114>.

<sup>56</sup> ‘David Leyonhjelm Loses Appeal Bid, Must Pay \$120,000 for Defaming Sarah Hanson-Young’. *ABC News Online*, 3 March 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-03-03/sarah-hanson-young-david-leyonhjelm-defamation-appeal/13210042>.

protects parliamentarians who make outrageous comments on the floor of Parliament.<sup>57</sup>

Though Parliament's sexist culture clearly has not changed since Gillard's era, strides have been made in mainstream media coverage of women politicians who relate their experiences of sexism in the workplace. However, some sexism remains. In fact, we found many of the same frames identified above with the Misogyny Speech in coverage of Hanson-Young, such as: playing the victim; dismissing claims of sexism; and the risk of further isolating male voters.

Some voices in the media, particularly from the Murdoch press, dismissed Hanson-Young's criticisms of Leyonhjelm. Miranda Devine's *Daily Telegraph* article, for example, accused Hanson-Young and all feminists of 'play[ing] the victim'; as 'ball-breakers' who 'break taboos' but, when they 'get a taste of discourteous reciprocation', such as being slut-shamed in the workplace, 'melt like crybabies'.<sup>58</sup> Arguing that women should instead worry about 'the very concept of womanhood being "culturally appropriated"' by trans and non-binary people, Devine belittles and deflects Hanson-Young's experiences of sexism to not only silence these discussions, but to further her own trans-exclusionary ideology. Hanson-Young's criticism was also portrayed as isolating male voters, while Leyonhjelm's behaviour was regarded as appealing to them:

A considerable number of people are impressed by what they see as his single digit rampant to modern, developed-world, fainting-couch feminism.<sup>59</sup>

There are enough voters – mostly older white men – who share his resentments and imagine themselves as hostages to political correctness.<sup>60</sup>

This demonstrates an expectation for women to remain silent in the face of abuse to ensure men's comfort, power and privilege. Like Gillard, Hanson-Young subverted both

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<sup>57</sup> For more information on the protections provided to politicians, see 'Parliamentary Privilege', Infosheet 5, House of Representatives.

<sup>58</sup> Miranda Devine, 'Time We All Woke Up'. *Daily Telegraph*, 8 July 2018, p. 27.

<sup>59</sup> Helen Dale, 'Shades of Britain as Australia Goes Bonkers for Sex Scandals in High Places'. *The Australian*, 7 July 2018, p. 21.

<sup>60</sup> Jack Waterford, 'Political Bile Finds Its Level'. *Canberra Times*, 7 July 2018, p. 1.

gender and parliamentary norms by calling out the sexist abuse she experienced and was therefore punished by some in the media.

Yet this trend does appear to be changing, with more voices in the media rallying in support of Hanson-Young. Unlike the reticence on the part of many media commentators to follow Gillard in identifying her experiences as instances of misogyny, most articles acknowledged Leyonhjelm's comments as 'slut-shaming',<sup>61</sup> which indicates some progress. Leyonhjelm was widely labelled a 'grub' and criticised for his sexist comments:

... he demonstrated he's not bound by the concept of basic decency.<sup>62</sup>

He slathered on a bit of slut-shaming just for fun. And we are paying this guy.<sup>63</sup>

Numerous articles directed their ire at the institutionalised sexism rife in Parliament, which normalises sexism and harassment against women politicians:

The message is clear: you can be whatever you want, just don't enjoy shagging as much as the next man if you want to be taken seriously.<sup>64</sup>

If, in 2018, women in ... Parliament can suffer sexualised insults without penalties, then women with far less privilege have nowhere to turn.<sup>65</sup>

The rise of the #MeToo movement has had a global impact on how we perceive consent, sexual assault and harassment, and has inspired many survivors of sexual violence to share their stories.<sup>66</sup> Its influence is apparent in the media which, though still dominated by a 'blokey' hypermasculine newsroom culture despite more women in the profession,<sup>67</sup> is becoming far more supportive of open discussions about sexism, misogyny and sexual harassment. Nonetheless, it was the media that allowed

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<sup>61</sup> Savva, 'Bill Burns Business Then Dodges the Blame'.

<sup>62</sup> Georgia Willis, 'What Could Have Been If Abbott Had Kept His Word'. *Sun Herald*, 8 July 2018, p. 31.

<sup>63</sup> Tory Shepherd, 'Clearing the Air about Waging Wars on Drugs'. *The Advertiser*, 4 July 2018, p. 13.

<sup>64</sup> Jill Poulsen, 'Politics of Sex Is Still Bonkers'. *Courier Mail*, 7 July 2018, p. 48.

<sup>65</sup> Hugh Conly and Stephanie Dowrick, 'Outrage Is Long Overdue'. *Canberra Times*, 7 July 2018, p. 10.

<sup>66</sup> Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose, and Jessalynn Keller, '#MeToo and the Promise and Pitfalls of Challenging Rape Culture Through Digital Feminist Activism'. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 25(2) 2018, pp. 236–46.

<sup>67</sup> Louise North, 'The Gender of "Soft" and "Hard" News', *Journalism Studies* 17(3) 2016, pp. 356–73.

Leyonhjelm to amplify his claimed ‘slut-shaming’ comments in the first place, supported by a Parliament that condoned them by silence.

## JULIA BANKS

Liberal MP Julia Banks announced in August 2018, after Malcolm Turnbull was deposed as leader, that she would not recontest Chisholm at the next election. Banks stated that she had experienced ‘bullying’ and ‘intimidation’ against women ‘both from within my own party and from the Labor Party’.<sup>68</sup> In November 2018, Banks announced that she was leaving the Liberal Party to sit on the crossbench. Banks too had experienced a history of sexist behaviour. She had initially joined the Liberal Party in response to calls for more women to stand, thinking that ‘I’ve got a lot to give them in terms of my twenty five years of experience in the legal and corporate sector’.<sup>69</sup> However, Banks found that ‘in relation to women’ the Liberal Party ‘was decades behind the business world’.<sup>70</sup> As she summed it up: ‘Casual sexism throughout our federal Parliament is what I witnessed and observed and experienced myself...’. Furthermore, in 2021 Banks added to her previous allegations in her book *Power Play*, stating that that she had also been inappropriately touched by a Cabinet Minister.<sup>71</sup> Banks did not name the Minister, a decision that may well have been influenced by defamation considerations. Significantly, the inclusion of a public interest defence in the new uniform changes to Australia’s defamation laws may facilitate naming alleged wrongdoers in future—a development that would also have major implications for the broader media.<sup>72</sup>

In her November 2018 statement to Parliament, Banks had both noted the problems and suggested some solutions, including gender quotas and better protection and more respect for women who spoke out:

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<sup>68</sup> Julia Banks, ‘Statement’, 29 August 2018. Accessed at: <http://juliabanks.com.au/media-release/statement/>.

<sup>69</sup> ABC, ‘Chamber of Silence’.

<sup>70</sup> ‘“It Became a House of Horrors”: Julia Banks Opens Up on The Project on Her Exit from the Liberal Party’. *Women’s Agenda*, 10 March 2019. Accessed at: <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/it-became-a-house-of-horrors-julia-banks-reveals-on-the-project-truth-about-her-exit-from-the-liberal-party/>.

<sup>71</sup> Julia Banks, *Power Play: Breaking Through Bias, Barriers and Boys’ Clubs*. Richmond: Hardie Grant, 2021, pp. 156-7.

<sup>72</sup> See Michael Douglas, ‘Defamation Actions and Australian Politics’, *UNSW Law Journal Forum*, No. 5, July 2021, pp. 10-12.

Equal representation of men and women in this Parliament is an urgent imperative which will create a culture change. There's the blinkered rejection of quotas and support of the 'merit myth' but this is more than a numbers game .... There is also a clear need for an independent and whistleblower system as found in many workplaces to enable reporting of misconduct of those in power without fear of reprisal or retribution. Often when good women 'call out' or are subjected to bad behaviour – the reprisals, backlash and commentary portrays them as the bad ones; the liar, the troublemaker, emotionally unstable or weak, or someone who should be silenced.<sup>73</sup>

Banks herself received poor treatment in response to her complaints. Then Liberal MP Craig Kelly stated that she should be prepared to 'roll with the punches in this game', a particularly unfortunate choice of words given the high level of domestic violence against women.<sup>74</sup> Scott Morrison stated that he was making it clear to Liberal Party politicians that bullying and intimidation were not acceptable. However, he also implied that Banks was emotionally vulnerable, saying that he was concerned for her 'welfare and wellbeing' and was 'reaching out to Julia and giving her every comfort and support for what has been a pretty torrid ordeal for her'.<sup>75</sup> The Prime Minister's Office subsequently denied accusations that such comments had involved 'gaslighting' Banks as being overly emotional, claiming that Banks had been given genuine support to deal with a time that many found difficult.<sup>76</sup>

Banks' resignation announcement amid claims of bullying came only months after the Hanson-Young case. It is therefore unsurprising that the media response to Banks

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<sup>73</sup> Julia Banks, Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 27 November 2018, p. 11571.

<sup>74</sup> Patricia Karvelas, 'Julia Banks has Some 'Home Truths' for the Liberal Party, But They Point to a Bigger Problem'. *ABC News Online*, 29 August 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-29/julia-banks-home-truths-liberal-party/10178708>; Matthew Doran and Lucy Sweeney, 'Liberal MP Julia Banks Not Contesting Next Federal Election, Says Leadership Spill Was 'the Last Straw''. 29 August 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-29/julia-banks-not-re-contesting-seat-at-next-federal-election/10177360>.

<sup>75</sup> Transcript, Prime Minister Press Doorstop Interview, Padstow, Sydney, 29 August 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/doorstop-interview-sydney-0>.

<sup>76</sup> Spokesperson for Morrison cited in Finn McHugh, 'Tanya Plibersek Accuses Scott Morrison of 'Typical Gaslighting' after PM Denies Julia Banks' Account of Her Resignation'. *The Australian*, 6 July 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/breaking-news/tanya-plibersek-accuses-scott-morrison-of-typical-gaslighting-after-pm-denies-julia-banks-account-of-her-resignation/news-story/c23a9fd28b0a8a5d56a35bdeeb9114c2>

followed a similar pattern. Both politicians experienced supportive as well as negative coverage that framed them as playing the 'victim', doubting their accusations and deflecting the issue at hand. For example, the behaviour of then-Opposition Leader, Bill Shorten, and other men in the Labor Party was used by some in the conservative press to deflect from the criticism raised by Banks.<sup>77</sup>

Like Gillard and Hanson-Young before her, Banks too was framed as playing the victim by detractors.<sup>78</sup> Andrew Bolt's article, titled 'Victim is no hero', doubted Banks' claims and argued that she 'simply had to claim to be a victim, and she was believed'.<sup>79</sup> Bolt classified this sequence of events as a 'witch-hunt-without-witches' and labelled Banks 'the Great Sufferer. The eternal female victim whose idea of fighting was to quit and complain'. He argued that Banks 'hadn't yet given us evidence that she's been bullied. But she has shown me she's weak'. This trope closely follows that of 'disbelief'. Women who call out sexism, such as Banks, Hanson-Young or Gillard, are assumed to be playing the victim because enablers and regulators of the patriarchy do not consider their criticisms to be 'real' instances of sexism, misogyny, or bullying. Numerous articles took a similar stance, for example:

Is bullying in the eye of the beholder, girls?<sup>80</sup>

So where are the male complaints of bullying? Hmm.<sup>81</sup>

Here is identity politics at work again: women with an axe to grind whingeing about male bullies and being believed by a media too scared of seeming sexist to ask for proof.<sup>82</sup>

These tropes exacerbate sexist abuse in Australian politics by silencing those who speak up about sexism and bullying while shutting down further conversations about these issues, which are implied to be non-existent. They uphold the patriarchal parliamentary norms that excuse and protect those men who abuse their power and

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<sup>77</sup> Andrew Bolt, 'Victim Is No Hero'. *Herald Sun*, 3 September 2018, p. 13; Renee Viellaris, 'Banks Should Be a Catalyst for Change'. *Courier Mail*, 3 September 2018, p. 13.

<sup>78</sup> Viellaris, 'Banks Should Be a Catalyst for Change'; Bolt, 'Victim Is No Hero'.

<sup>79</sup> Bolt, 'Victim Is No Hero'.

<sup>80</sup> 'Last Post'. *The Australian*, 11 September 2018, p. 13.

<sup>81</sup> Ticky Fullerton, 'Bullying or Just Politics?'. *The Australian*, 14 September 2018, p. 14.

<sup>82</sup> Andrew Bolt, 'No Proof of Liberal Bullying, so How about an Apology?'. *Courier Mail*, 13 September 2018, p. 14.

women who remain silent, whether through complicity or fear. As Bolt writes, ‘until she tells us, no one can assume the Liberals have a problem’.<sup>83</sup>

As with the case of Hanson-Young, however, Banks’ accusations were largely supported by many in the media. Some used her case to examine wider issues of institutional sexism. An article in the *Hobart Mercury* identified a pattern extending from the mockery of former-Deputy Liberal Leader Julie Bishop for throwing her hat into the 2018 leadership spill to the gendered treatment of former-Prime Minister Julia Gillard, concluding that ‘politics is in many ways unfriendly to women’.<sup>84</sup> Others criticised the sexism embedded in the Liberal Party:

Through this process, Liberals also have managed something I didn’t think possible: to further discourage women from voting for them or joining their ranks.<sup>85</sup>

Liberal women are, finally, and spectacularly, rebelling. They are not ... petals or princesses. They are pissed off ... We can all see it is no meritocracy and blokes run the show.<sup>86</sup>

Banks’ accusations partly reignited a call for gender quotas in the Liberal Party, with many in the media linking their ‘women problem’ to the stark lack of women in government.<sup>87</sup> One article called such absence ‘reprehensible’<sup>88</sup> while another argued that ‘the only way ... the Liberal Party can really fight the prejudice against women is to bring in a preselection quota’.<sup>89</sup> These examples demonstrate a positive change in media coverage of women politicians speaking out against sexism. However, it is important to note that many of these supportive articles appeared alongside others

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<sup>83</sup> Bolt, ‘Victim Is No Hero’.

<sup>84</sup> Wayne Crawford, ‘Liberals’ Problem with Women’. *Hobart Mercury*, 8 September 2018, p. 30.

<sup>85</sup> Peter van Onselen, ‘Reactionary Liberals Won’t Rest until They Get Their Way’. *The Australian*, 1 September 2018, p. 22.

<sup>86</sup> Julia Baird, ‘Liberal Women on the Warpath’. *Canberra Times*, 8 September 2018, p. 12.

<sup>87</sup> John Warhurst, ‘The Bigger Issues after Turmoil’. *Canberra Times*, 6 September 2018, p. 17; Crawford, ‘Liberals’ Problem with Women’; Hayley Sorensen, ‘Time for Liberal’s Quota on Women’. *Northern Territory News*, 9 September 2018, p. 13.

<sup>88</sup> Warhurst, ‘The Bigger Issues after Turmoil’.

<sup>89</sup> Sorensen, ‘Time for Liberal’s Quota on Women’.

that *reinforced* their sexist treatment. Nevertheless, these articles play an important role in changing the norms of how women in politics are treated.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2018 Federal Liberal MP Rowan Ramsey stated that: ‘It is a bit of mystery why we don’t have more women in the Parliament. Maybe it’s something about the workplace that is making them reluctant’.<sup>90</sup> The examples given in this paper suggest that Parliament can indeed be a toxic environment for women. Julia Banks and Kate Ellis are not the only former MPs to suggest that changes need to be made not only to address sexist behaviour but to transform how Parliament operates<sup>91</sup>. Julie Bishop has argued that ‘the environment, the conventions, the protocols, were all established at a time when there were no women ... or very few women in Parliament and it’s taken a very long time for there to be a change’.<sup>92</sup> Consequently, Bishop advocates ‘basic and fundamental structural change [that could include] induction programs, a proper formalised training programs, an independent complaints system so that people feel protected and secure if they do make a complaint’.<sup>93</sup>

Length considerations prevent us from providing detailed recommendations here. However, we agree with such proposals. In particular, we endorse the wording of the proposed Code of Conduct for the Parliament of Australia detailed in the Introduction to the special issue of this journal, along with the associated recommendations by the Australian Political Studies Association and Global Institute for Women’s Leadership, including those dealing with how complaints should be independently handled.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, we would add the need for political parties themselves to ensure that MPs do not make sexist comments. Parties need to make it clear that such comments

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<sup>90</sup> Daniel McCulloch, ‘PM Rejects Gender Quota for Liberals’. *InDaily*, 11 September 2018. Accessed at: <https://indaily.com.au/news/2018/09/11/pm-rules-out-gender-quotas-for-liberals>.

<sup>91</sup> See Jenny Macklin and Kate Thwaites, *Enough is Enough*. Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2021.

<sup>92</sup> Bishop, ‘Julie Bishop Joins 7.30’.

<sup>93</sup> Bishop, ‘Julie Bishop Joins 7.30’.

<sup>94</sup> See Australian Political Studies Association and The Global Institute for Women’s Leadership, *Towards a New Code of Conduct: Submission to the Independent Inquiry Into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces*, 2021. The authors are amongst the signatories to this submission. Accessed at: <https://giwl.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/docs/2021/7/Full%20Submission%20to%20Jenkins%20Inquiry.pdf>

are unacceptable and that they will detrimentally impact on MPs' future career prospects. Political parties need to establish their own robust complaints structures that can deal with issues that fall outside of the jurisdiction of the parliamentary complaint mechanisms advocated for above. These structures could build on, and strengthen, existing party procedures for dealing with issues such as bullying and sexual harassment.<sup>95</sup> Such reforms need to be reinforced by changes in the broader culture so that poor behaviour is penalised by voters as well.

The media has a crucial role to play in revealing and critiquing sexist behaviour rather than exacerbating it. By examining the frames that the media used in their coverage of Gillard, Hanson-Young and Banks, we identified four negative frames that appeared in all three cases: playing the victim, dismissing claims of sexism, and deflection or whataboutism. Gillard and Hanson-Young were also subject to the 'further isolating male voters' frame. There have been obvious changes in coverage since the Gillard era, thanks largely to the #MeToo movement and the resurgence of feminism in the mainstream. We observed that the coverage Hanson-Young and Banks shared the positive 'institutionalised sexism' frame, and found that a further frame for each politician: acknowledging 'slut-shaming' in the case of Hanson-Young and the Liberal's women problem in the case of Banks.

In 2021, we have seen big strides in the media coverage both of women in politics and sexual assault allegations. Women journalists, for example, broke the stories that ignited the March4Justice movement, from Samantha Maiden uncovering the Brittany Higgins allegation and Louise Milligan resurfacing the historic rape allegation against then-Attorney General Christian Porter, to Laura Tingle, Leigh Sales, Karen Middleton, Lisa Wilkinson, Katherine Murphy, Amy Remeikis and Tracy Grimshaw, among others, who continue to report on these issues. However, certain corners of the media continue to portray women politicians—especially those who call out sexism and misogyny—in a trivialising, delegitimising and even sexist manner. Through repeating these messages, they re-enforce toxic gender norms and stereotypes while silencing discussions on sexism in politics.

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<sup>95</sup> See for example, The Liberal Party of Australia: *Complaints and Dispute Resolution Policy*. Accessed at <https://cdn.liberal.org.au/pdf/Complaints%20and%20Dispute%20Resolution%20Policy%202019V2.pdf>; Australian Labor Party, *ALP National Complaints Handling Process*. Accessed at: <https://www.alp.org.au/media/2351/alp-national-complaints-handling-process.pdf>.

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To achieve tangible change in political culture so that Parliament is a safe work environment for *all*, political editors, journalists and commentators need to analyse critically the gendered messages they might be communicating. A simple way of achieving this for more subtle instances of sexist reportage would be for writers and editors to re-read a piece about women politicians and consider what they might change if they were instead writing about a man. If it is jarring or sounds unusual, then think about why that might be the case and what can be done to remedy it so the article is less gendered. For blatant instances, some institutional reform is needed, such as a media code of conduct that condemns and combats sexist imagery, language and practices. We would suggest that the Parliamentary Press Gallery needs to draw up its own Code of Conduct, designed to facilitate the principles outlined in the broader parliamentary Code of Conduct cited above, including by committing to exposing and condemning unacceptable behaviour wherever practicable. In addition, the Australian Press Council could usefully draw up Advisory Guidelines, as it has in other cases, that address the reporting of accusations of sexist bullying and sexual harassment in Parliament and elsewhere.<sup>96</sup>

Such changes need to be implemented across the board,<sup>97</sup> as a sexist print media landscape will hinder any progress towards making Parliament a safer workplace for all women. Reforms within Parliament are essential but they need to be backed up by broader cultural and institutional change outside of Parliament as well.

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<sup>96</sup> For other cases, see, for example, Australian Press Council Advisory Guidelines on 'Reporting on people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics', 'Reporting Elections' and the 'Family and domestic violence reporting advisory guideline'. Accessed at: <https://www.presscouncil.org.au/advisory-guidelines/>

<sup>97</sup> Blair Williams, 'It's a Man's World at the Top: Gendered Media Representations of Julia Gillard and Helen Clark'. *Feminist Media Studies*, 2020, pp. 1-20; Blair Williams, 'The Murdoch Presses: Representation of Masculinity and Femininity in Leadership', in Zareh Ghazarian and Katrina Lee-Koo (eds), *Gender and Australian Political Leadership*. Sydney: NewSouth, 2021, pp. 182-92.