

The Ministry of Women's Affairs after 25 years – Personal reflections on its existence, roles, and effectiveness

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Abstract

This article critiques the work of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, using its own publications and website, evaluations of others, and my analysis and experience as a lesbian feminist economist and academic, who worked two years for MWA in 1989 and 1990. It outlines international literature on state feminism and its recent history, with MWA's survival as an independent entity being atypical. Examining MWA's effectiveness from a variety of viewpoints, it discusses the tightrope it has to walk as a policy department responsible to the Minister and government of the day committed to neoliberal policies but with strong perceived community group stakeholders. I argue that the constraints have inevitably resulted in feminists and their community organisations being often dissatisfied with MWA's work and the partially disappointing outcomes for women. My examples come largely from the labour market and unpaid work, my main areas of expertise, together with MWA's attention (or lack of it) to lesbian issues. The paper concludes by looking at the current situation.

Introduction

This article evaluates the work of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MWA) based on my own experience as a feminist economist and academic, who worked for MWA full time in 1989 and 80% in 1990. In addition, I had a consultant/training role before and after that time, but less so recently. I have also read most of the Ministry's publications and a number of articles on its work as well as making frequent visits to its website. I first outline my own experience and reflections over the 25 year period. The article then discusses some international literature on state feminism and its recent fate in a number of countries, and makes comparisons with the New Zealand situation – MWA's survival as an independent entity is atypical. It goes on to examine MWA's effectiveness from a variety of viewpoints, looking at differences in sub-periods of the 1985-2010 span. Examples are mainly from the labour market and unpaid work, my main areas of expertise, together with the lack of attention to lesbian issues. Some consideration will also be given to the situation facing feminists working in the bureaucracy (known as femocrats in New Zealand and Australia) and particularly in MWA. The paper concludes by looking at the current situation.

My own experience – writing for and about MWA

Like most feminists, I was thrilled with the Labour election promise to establish an independent Ministry of Women's Affairs if elected in 1984, following the Women's Forums and strong representations from women's organisations inside and outside the party. The 1984/1990 Labour governments had a strong women's caucus, including Helen Clark, Ann Hercus, and Margaret Shields – also Margaret Wilson was President of the party 1984-87, Ruth Dyson 1988-93 and Maryan Street 1993-95. I did some consultancy work on feminist economics issues for the Ministry from early on and in 1988 CEO Mary O'Regan and I agreed that a full-time economist on staff would be of benefit to its work. A one year contract was negotiated, with Victoria University giving me leave, and with my being aware that Mary would be leaving before this

commenced. Hence my actual years on secondment, 1989-90, were early in the period of Judith Aitken's term as CEO. When she was appointed, she and I agreed that the arrangement should stand, albeit with some misgivings on my part and probably hers! Nevertheless, the initial one-year term was extended by agreement for a second year, which indicates at least a degree of satisfaction on both sides.

I first reflected in writing on the MWA situation, based largely on my own experience, in 1994, saying: "Governments basically want advice within very narrow parameters based on their philosophy and current wisdoms. Alternative views are not sought, and research which may give them support often fails to find funding. The Ministry of Women's Affairs attempts to give advice on differential gender impacts of policies over a wide range of policy areas. However, its resources are few, and its position can easily be marginalised" (Hyman, 1994a, p 5). The initial years of MWA coincided with the more market, Rogernomics deregulation agenda where interventionist policies were under attack. Internationally, too, an increasing acceptance of the need to increase gender equality, following strong pressure from feminist groups, clashed with the advancement of the neoliberal consensus. Hence in New Zealand, the commitment to improve the position of women, and in particular Maori women, were hard to carry through into effective policies. "Such policies were often contradictory to, and overwhelmed by, the general trend to deregulation and emphasis on the market created by overall economic policies which I argue work against progress for most women. These contradictions account for the holdups and major fights which occurred between departments and ministers before the Employment Equity Act 1990 was passed. Inevitable compromises were involved. The promised legislation on equal pay for work of equal value/equal employment opportunity took until the last months of the six-year term to enact, thanks to a rearguard action against it from anti-interventionist Ministers and bureaucrats – and it was immediately repealed by the incoming National government. Nor could MWA directly drive the legislation. The Ministry, as a policy department only, cannot itself sponsor or administer legislation. Thus it was constantly responding to Department of Labour and Minister's office drafts, rather than taking the initiative" (ibid, p 6).

I emphasised at that time that "general economic policies, covering macro and micro areas, and including labour, industry, government sector and international trade policies, have more impact on the economic and social status of women than specific policies aimed to improve that status. Thus the impact of equal opportunity policies, for example, may be significant alongside a favourable economic situation and policy climate, but can be negligible if other policies are causing job losses and reduced union and employee bargaining power" (ibid, p 39). Marian Sawyer, quoting this passage, pointed out that in opinion polls in Australia and Canada on major neoliberal issues, there is a wide gender gap, with women far more sceptical. However, "it is when women's policy machinery in government attempts to intervene on such economic issues that it meets most resistance – both because of traditional views that these are not 'women's issues'; and because of the economic rationalist view that interventions in the name of social equity are invariably 'rent-seeking' in nature and hence illegitimate" (Sawyer, 1996, p 3). In many countries, women's policy agencies (wpas) have had little impact in various debates of the highest national priority, such as immigration, economics, and crime, which were not traditional feminist issues like abortion, child care, and prostitution. "State feminism is rather weak or absent in these policy issues" (Sauer, Haussman and McBride, 2007, p 331).

In 2003 I reviewed MWA's *Towards an Action Plan for New Zealand Women – a Discussion Document*. In addition to arguing that the value of unpaid work was given inadequate attention, I discussed MWA more generally: "I think I should be brave enough to put on record to those outside Wellington who may hear less of the capital's talk, that there is a great deal of disquiet about MWA in recent years. Of course, it has had a variable history throughout its life,

and its place within the bureaucracy probably makes this inevitable – including tensions with feminists working outside. There were earlier concerns when Judith Aitken, a long-time feminist but supporter of the economic restructuring direction of the 1980s, took over as CEO from Mary O'Regan, the first MWA head with a community background and commitment to community consultation. But recently (say the last three years or so) it has lost most of its experienced and feminist staff, and turnover has been very rapid. The policy side is now understaffed and it is tough for those who remain – personally and to provide good policy advice across the range of areas. Poor industrial relations and management/policy analyst relationships have been a factor” (Hyman, 2003, p 11). The high turnover in that period may be one reason for the lack of collective memory I have found in a number of MWA papers in recent years. Turnover is inevitable over such a long period, but in my labour market areas, at least, when asked to comment on papers, I sometimes found that earlier work was neglected or lost, with the wheel reinvented or even backward steps taken, with inferior and less feminist analysis, and the word feminist too dangerous and loaded to use.

Literature on state feminism – and conditions for survival

Much of the recent literature on ‘state feminism’, defined as institutions and policy measures to achieve gender equality, outlines a decline in their strength over the last decade, with the influence of neo-liberal agendas, reduced welfare states and gender mainstreaming. The issues of recognition of diversity of interests among women and their organisations through ethnic, class and other differences, has also posed major challenges (Outshoorn and Kantola, 2007, based on ten European countries, Australia and the United States; Haussman and Sauer, 2007, incorporating also Canada and Japan). As women have increased their presence in the public sphere and civil society, spanning legislatures, wpas, and feminist movement organisations, the relative power of the public sphere has declined relative to orthodox economics and its institutions. In over half the 14 countries included in the Haussman/Sauer study, the wpa structure had suffered some retrenchment in the 1990s, such as abolition or becoming subsidiary in another department. Mainstreaming has frequently been the reason given for dismantling wpas, with all agencies responsible for gender analysis. However, this often means in practice, not that everyone is responsible, but that nobody is (Sawer, 2005).

Another common theme in the literature is that governments further to the left, to the extent that this is still a useful label, usually helped preserve or expand structures and/or funding levels to a greater extent than those of the right. However, this is not universal, with three of the more right-wing governments ignoring or destroying wpas (Austria, Australia and Japan), but not all. Nor have all left-wing governments been entirely supportive – unsurprising when neoliberal individualistic policies and state restructuring have been common to both left-wing or social democratic (‘third way’) and right-wing governments, even if to slightly different extents. Hence on gender issues, the left/right distinction can at times be misleading. National in the 1970s, unlike the recent period, had more electoral support from women than Labour, partly due to some policies supporting women’s equality – it was National who introduced the 1972 Equal Pay Act, for example. Labour being seen by most feminists as the greater champion of women’s causes is therefore comparatively recent.

The literature above does not include New Zealand. However, some commentators have attempted to account for the survival of MWA as an independent entity under ‘left’ and ‘right’ governments and make comparisons with other countries. Katherine Teghtsoonian compared the fates of wpas under right wing governments in New Zealand and British Columbia. In 2001 the incoming BC Liberal government immediately eliminated its Ministry of Women’s

Equality, replacing it with a small sub-unit. She argues that while in both jurisdictions, the wpa had made some adaptations to neoliberal norms, the BC structure was more vulnerable, partly because it had a major role and budget involved in grants to women's organisations and delivery of programmes and services which were targeted for cuts. In contrast MWA from the beginning had only a tiny project fund, with policy advice the main focus, supplemented by its international role and the Women's Appointments File, all these areas continuing to the present day. Further, ideological opposition to the existence of a wpa as unnecessarily representing a 'special interest' was more entrenched in the BC Liberal party than in National in government from 1990 to 1999 (Teghtsoonian, 2005). Jenny Shipley was a senior minister and Minister of Women's Affairs in 1990 and later in the term became Prime Minister, for a time holding both jobs. As she strongly defended the existence of the Ministry, it was less under threat from National in that period than earlier or later. With Don Brash leader of the party, National planned to abolish MWA if elected in 2005. When John Key became leader he appointed Jackie Blue as spokesperson, while Pansy Wong was made Minister of Women's Affairs following formation of a National led government after the 2008 election. With National's plans to reduce the size and budget of the state sector, it remains possible that MWA could be amalgamated into an umbrella department, but electoral considerations are likely to ensure its survival in some form. The recent decision to appoint a new CEO with a five-year term reinforces this view.

The conventional wisdom among feminist commentators on MWA is that there has been a steady retreat, albeit with some fluctuations, from the ideals for policy and process from its earliest days under Mary O'Regan. That retreat was forced on MWA fairly quickly, with the neoliberal and state sector policies of the 1984-90 Labour governments clashing with the culture and policy agenda of MWA. The advent of a National government in 1990, even more committed to this agenda, made the contradictions more obvious. I would argue, though, that the fluctuations are considerable and complex, with interactions between the party in power, the strength, areas of interest, and commitment of the Minister and her support in Cabinet, and the quality and other characteristics of the CEO and policy staff. A short article cannot do justice to that complexity: however, a catalogue of time periods and governing parties/Ministers/CEOs involved is a starting point:

- a) Parties: 1984-90 Labour: 1990-99 National (and National led coalitions): 1999-2008 Labour led coalitions (1999-2002 with Alliance): 2008-present National led coalition
- b) Ministers: 1985-87 Ann Hercus: 1987-90 Margaret Shields: 1990-99 mainly Jenny Shipley: Christine Fletcher/Georgina te Heuheu later): 1999-2002 Leila Harre (Alliance): 2002-2005 Ruth Dyson: 2005-2008 Lianne Dalziel/Steve Chadwick: 2008-present Pansy Wong
- c) CEOs: 1985-88 Mary O'Regan: 1988-92 Judith Aitken: 1992-94 Liz Rowe: 1995-2003 Judy Lawrence: 2004-2010 Shenagh Gleisner (omitting some acting CEO periods)

One aspect of the complexity is that CEOs are appointed in a particular climate. Even with the State Services Commission rather than Ministers formally making such appointments, there are inevitably influences from the political situation in the process. Her community networks, experience and feminist commitment were undoubtedly crucial in Mary O'Regan's appointment, a surprise to many including her. The advent of the 1988 State Sector Act, the neoliberal environment, and the political climate which led to her resignation and disillusionment led to a very different subsequent appointment. Judith Aitken, a self-defined feminist comfortable in the new environment, was well placed to change MWA in the ways required for its survival, albeit at the cost of disquiet among many feminists in the community and some MWA staff.

Certainly significant gains for women were achieved in those early years. Ann Hercus and

to a lesser extent Margaret Shields had mana within their party leadership and Cabinet. Hence progress was made, mainly in issues seen, rightly or wrongly, as women's concerns. These included permanent part-time work in the public service, rape law and funding of agencies, and organisation and funding of child care (Curtin and Teghsoonian, 2007). Margaret Shields' background was with Statistics New Zealand so she was well placed to push for measurement of unpaid work, with Census questions in 1986 and later, after a long build up, a Time Use Survey. Helen Clark in health and employment portfolios fought for some feminist policies, such as the short-lived Employment Equity Act and more independent practicing rights/equal pay to doctors for midwives in normal birth delivery. Even under National in the 1990s there were some achievements in areas like pornography, cervical cancer screening, human rights legislation, and Maori women and business. In addition, the 1993 centennial suffrage year events and funding of research promoted much feminist work and celebrations. However, the negative impacts of the neoliberal agenda under both governments outweighed these in terms of outcomes for many less privileged women. This particularly applied under National, with 1990 benefit cuts (including DPB) and negative impacts from the Employment Contracts Act. Later, Leila Harre suffered the disadvantage of being from the junior Coalition party, with Labour unwilling to make major concessions to their stronger social justice agenda. However, she fought energetically for feminist policies and was key to the introduction of paid parental leave. But progress overall on feminist issues was comparatively slow throughout the Labour led governments of 1999-2008. Helen Clark as Prime Minister, Margaret Wilson as Minister of Labour, and Leila Harre as Minister of Women's Affairs would have seemed a feminist nirvana in the National 1990s but heaven did not arrive. Nevertheless heaven has receded further under National, with the immediate abolition of the Department of Labour's Pay and Employment Equity Unit and suppression of the results of associated pay investigations which analysed the underpayment of several state sector female-dominated groups one prime example of many.

Measuring the effectiveness of MWA and its policy advice – is the price of survival too high?

Attempts to maintain a feminist framework

As an insider/outsider I have been part of the criticism of the retreat from early ideals, but I also respect those trying to maintain a feminist perspective in policy advice from within, albeit with limited success. However, the word feminist is now rarely if ever used in Ministry publications. The blander language of gender analysis predominates, albeit often with clear evidence of the relative disadvantage of women and particular groups of women on many indicators. Closer adherence to public service norms on leadership and policy work is reflected in significantly less emphasis on the need to understand feminism in job descriptions for MWA positions (Curtin and Teghtsoonian, 2007). In recent years, some well-qualified feminists have failed to obtain appointments to policy positions (personal communications). However, in the early days of the retreat, at least, there were still several feminists in the Ministry attempting to maintain strong analysis of a type unlikely to be acceptable to government in the increasingly neoliberal environment. At various points, though, disillusionment over the receipt of such work outside MWA and even within, led to rapid turnover and less strong feminist representation among the policy staff.

During my two years at MWA, I attempted to maintain a strong feminist framework, particularly in the labour market area, as well as to assist other staff to have confidence writing economic policy comment informed by feminist analysis. During the 1988-89 public sector

wage round, MWA attempted to have female dominated low paid areas exempted from the concessionary bargaining requirements being imposed in negotiations by the State Services Commission. These requirements involved removal of arbitration mechanisms in the public sector, loss of occupational bargaining, pressures to lower the public wage bill, and a push for flexible wage structures such as ranges of rates – all particularly disadvantageous for low paid female groups. Both efficiency and equity arguments informed the MWA papers I drafted to analyse labour market impacts and argue that direct and indirect negative effects on women must be avoided. Meanwhile, SSC negotiators pushed for flexibility, in practice almost always favouring employers, while concessionary bargaining was negative for women on hours, overtime, penal rates, and leave.

Similarly in the Employment Contracts Act (ECA) drafting process under National in 1990 (just before I left MWA), my negative analysis was based on academic feminist economics papers discussing how labour differs from other commodities, and the policy implications (eg Hyman, 1999). Most of the analysis survived internal scrutiny and went to the Minister and/or other departments, but very little survived into policy. There was an attempt, perhaps last ditch, in the MWA Briefing Papers for the 1990 government to wave the feminist economics flag (MWA, 1990). Rereading them today, I find much still relevant and recognise my input in the labour market section. Other feminist commentators who were not insiders and therefore perhaps more objective than myself nevertheless agree that in these briefing papers, “Ministry staff presented a careful but incisive critique of the economic rationalist policy directions that the fourth Labour Government had been pursuing – a stance unlikely to be attractive to the incoming government” (Curtin and Teghtsoonian, 2007, p 8). By contrast the 2008 Briefing Paper is short and bland, with a focus on realizing women’s potential and changing attitudes (MWA, 2008).

Returning to the ECA, MWA was faced in 1990 with a Minister totally in favour, arguing that it would provide labour market flexibility for women, although the Ministry had criticised it as strongly as they could. As Minister, Jenny Shipley “claimed that this legislation ‘has done more towards providing equity for working women than any other development for a long time’ (Dominion 1.1.92). The Combined Trade Unions National Women’s Committee Convenor called the Minister’s claims that women were happy with the Act ‘outrageous and insulting’” (Hyman 1994b, p 10). A deregulated labour market and bargaining at enterprise level is anything but good for most women. Only the small proportion of women with highly scarce skills were able to bargain any flexibility gains of their own. From a feminist perspective, the limited effectiveness of MWA in this climate reduced support for it in the 1990s. There was optimism when Labour was returned to power in 1999, but the neoliberal agenda was only moderated in minor ways.

However, MWA has taken on board the importance of general policies not specifically geared to women and continued to argue for improvements. Their papers on the minimum wage have at times been reasonably strong. I commented on this: “Three key government departments advise Cabinet on the annual review (Treasury, Labour, and the State Services Commission). All are regularly cautious, using the orthodox economic analysis of wage employment tradeoffs... These departments support employer organisations’ resistance to raising the minimum wage.” In contrast, MWA submissions argue for increases. “Their comments on drafts of official papers for Cabinet on the 1998 and 1999 Minimum Wage Reviews questioned conventional wisdom, arguing that appropriately set minimum wages can raise productivity levels and economic efficiency” (Hyman, 2004, p 146-7). They rightly argued that vulnerable workers needed protection from exploitation, often lacking bargaining power, and that raising the minimum wage was therefore vital for those in low waged work, amongst whom women

and Maori are disproportionately represented.

Judgement of effectiveness/quality of advice

Effectiveness and quality of advice in the view of politicians in power and their senior advisers is measured on different dimensions than those of feminists – and a positive assessment is essential for survival. The disquiet in these groups which occurred early in MWA's history was observed again early this century. Closer conformity to public sector norms was a consequence. The State Services Commission's 2003 review of the Ministry's capabilities was highly critical of its credibility and reputation, asserting serious challenges related to leadership, policy development processes and capacity to retain staff (Curtin and Teghtsoonian, 2007). It asserted that "MWA lacks a clearly identified and articulated focus (it exhibits a mix of advocacy and policy focus)", that some staff "demonstrate a limited understanding of and commitment to whole of government approaches and Public Service ethics and values" and that "the internal culture has been driven more by ideology/advocacy, than being evidence-based" (SSC, 2003, p 3). It recommended the appointment of a new Chief Executive "with change management and leadership skills to address critical capability problem areas" (ibid, p 7). Changes following Shenagh Gleisner's appointment as CEO led to a more favourable SSC report in 2005.

Also in 2005, the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research (NZIER) was commissioned to report on the policy development process at MWA, with updates in 2006 and 2007. Shenagh Gleisner's September 2007 letter to women's groups expressed delight that "the most recent review of our policy results by NZIER shows us to be in the top tier of policy agencies, once again a notch up from last year". This high quality "helps create the very positive reputation of the Ministry and therefore our influence for women." NZIER divides the assessed quality of 'local policy shops' (sic) into three broad groups – "a small band of 'tier one' organisations, setting the pace; a larger and rather spread out group in 'tier two' supporting Ministers reasonably well; and a 'tier three' tail" (NZIER, 2005, p 15). Overall, the first assessment in 2005 judged the quality of MWA advice "well up among the second group", with a "stance of quiet authority" and a finding that the advice provided is "sound, well presented and generally up to high standards" (ibid). Improvements were found in both the following years, with MWA assessed to be in the top tier (NZIER, 2006 and 2007).

At face value, the SSC 2003 report was disquieting and the 2005-2007 reports heartening, but there is room for considerable concern for feminists about the criteria and generic nature of assessment. One size appears to fit all. While most of NZIER's criteria appear sensible, and there is mention of context and implications of issues, including the views of 'stakeholders', there is nothing to indicate that differences in theoretical positions, ideologies, values, and perspectives can and probably should be part of the background of many policy papers. Under analysis, the question on rigour asks "is there evidence of use of recognised theoretical approaches and evidence apt for the situation?" – and under evidence "is the 'pedigree' of the supporting evidence clearly stated?" (NZIER, 2007, p 12). One does not have to be paranoid to suspect that 'recognised' and 'pedigree' may imply that current orthodoxy will be considered more appropriate than feminist and other alternatives. The current jargon is 'evidence based policy' – but what counts as evidence needs to be subjected to feminist critique. The claims that orthodox neoclassical economic analysis, the basis of so much policy over the life of MWA, is objective and value free, have been refuted by feminist economists for decades (Hyman, 1994a) but still hold sway in policy arenas.

Quality of advice and effectiveness are of course two different things. Advice is only effective if the policies it advocates are adopted, and an even more important issue is whether these policies actually do what is intended – for MWA, to improve women's lives in some way (or

that of particular groups of women). MWA's 2007-10 Statement of Intent touched on this. "The Ministry monitors the impact of the Action Plan for New Zealand Women, using indicators agreed with the agencies responsible for implementation of different parts of the Plan. Directly measuring the impact of its own policy advice on outcomes is more difficult, because changes in outcomes typically happen slowly over years and are the result of many different inputs, of which the Ministry's policy advice is but one. Like other policy agencies, it therefore has to rely on less direct measures, such as independent review of the quality of its policy, the views of stakeholders and the satisfaction of the Minister (MWA, 2007, p 4). In practice, good outcomes for women are likely to come about only with strong pressure from outside government and the seizing of opportunities by femocrats within (Sawer 2005).

One highly contestable early criticism of MWA was that policy advice was subordinated to community activist or advocacy roles. This emerged again in the 2003 SSC report without evidence, as well as from some politicians and bureaucrats. However, I consider that this was always an inaccurate and unfair representation of MWA's activities. The line between advocacy and policy advice is thin and the Ministry early on rightly developed links with a broad range of community women's groups, but policy advice was never neglected. The links enhanced that advice. However, this criticism remained a sensitive issue for MWA. In many publications it distanced itself from any such suggestion. For example in the 2007-10 Statement of Intent, it was a major point in listing MWA's roles: "Policy not advocacy: The Ministry of Women's Affairs is not an advocacy organisation – that is the role of the non-government agencies with whom we work closely" (MWA, 2007, p 2).

Issues for MWA in accountability/delivery of policy advice

Relationships with women's organisations are important to MWA but not without political sensitivities. There have been many rounds of consultation, ranging from public meetings through inhouse discussions to ongoing relationships, starting from the heady days of the Women's Forums before the Ministry was established. "To what degree women's organisations and women generally have been seen as the major concern, 'clients' and/or source of advice for MWA has varied over the years – the 1988 legislation certainly made the Minister the only formal client and the purchase agreement the brief for MWA's work" (Hyman, 2003, p 11). The business models and highly prescribed but narrow accountability procedures established in the public sector by the 1988 State Sector Act and the 1989 Public Finance Act made it much harder to maintain the range of accountabilities, not only to the Minister, but also to women's groups and perhaps even individual women, which MWA's first CEO Mary O'Regan and her staff tried to create. Running the Ministry on feminist non-hierarchical and bicultural lines similarly came under pressure. While community consultation continued, and could be correctly defended as essential to informing and improving the nature and quality of policy advice, its breadth, significance and emphasis was reduced. And community enthusiasm to contribute to consultation may wane when results appear minimal.

The core groups now consulted regularly tend to be at the liberal end of the feminist spectrum. The National Council of Women has considerable expertise to call on and does well, for example, on coordinating the alternative non-government three yearly reports to CEDAW. However, with its membership constituting many varied women's organisations, it has to heed its conservative constituents, which also makes its advice reasonably acceptable to government and ensures its continued privileged position. The other two core consultation groups are the Maori Women's Welfare League and at times Pacifica. Major wider consultations in the past few years have included the next steps needed on pay equity and on the Action Plan for New Zealand Women, from 2004-2009 the major focus of its work (MWA, 2004).

During Shenagh Gleisner's term as CEO, MWA has made major attempts to be visible. For example the 2009 Annual Report included: "This year saw an increased commitment by the Ministry to engage widely with women around New Zealand. A series of 52 meetings were held over a number of months throughout the country to talk directly with women and men about the Ministry's programmes and priorities. These ranged from meetings of 50 or more people to focus groups, hui, and small meetings of women with specific interests or needs, such as women with disabilities. One reason for the meetings was to report back on the success of the Action Plan for New Zealand Women, which is coming to the end of its five-year life, and to discuss the Ministry's priorities for the coming three to five years. Another example of engagement was a workshop for Maori women directors" (MWA, 2009b, p 7).

While consultations have been extended, it is a constant challenge to the Ministry to generate an awareness of its work. Over the years, as part of the general backlash against feminism, media attention has usually been either nonexistent or negative. The website does a good job, with MWA's publications available, but how many women are aware of it is another matter. In writing this article, I re-read many publications and was reminded how useful they were, both in the early years and later – from consultations on housing and superannuation through a series of Every Woman's Guides to the System (on government policy making, the helping agencies, how to deal with your lawyer etc) to policy discussion papers (such as women and smoking) and checklists (for health board members). More recently there have been major reports on Maori and Pasifika women. And the MWA newsletter, *Panui*, which has gone through many changes in appearance and frequency, remains an important communication mechanism.

Checklists for gender analysis were developed into a systematic tool, The Full Picture (MWA, 1996), for mainstreaming to other departments. Since 2002, a gender implications statement has been required for all papers submitted to the Cabinet Social Equity Committee. However, the lack of ownership of the approach which often accompanies mainstreaming has meant inadequate implementation and often pro forma statements. Considering also the neoliberal climate, it is not surprising that the results are disappointing (Teghtsoonian, 2004).

The constraints discussed throughout this paper make it sad but inevitable that much of MWA's writing and work emerges in very bland form. As Linda Hill wrote shortly before her own short stint at MWA, discussing their analysis of 1996 labour market data: "Given the wealth of feminist literature on the subject, a more adequate feminist analysis of 1996 Census data on the position of women and of Maori women might reasonably have been expected in publications from MWA (and Te Puni Kokiri) under a Maori woman Minister" (Hill, 2000, p 22). Moderation, talking of difference rather than discrimination, playing up the gains rather than the outstanding problems, applies to much of MWA's work, including its Action Plan material. It also has to fit with government priorities, which has included under both major parties getting women into paid work and off benefits, whatever their situation.

The Action Plan for New Zealand women for 2004-2009 prioritised work in three areas – which are unobjectionable, but the devil lies in the details of spelling out their implications:

- i. economic sustainability – improving women's ability to independently provide for themselves and their families
- ii. work-life balance – helping women achieve a greater balance between paid work and life outside of work
- iii. well-being – improving health and social outcomes for women.

A critique of the Plan's perspective on the role of women in unpaid and paid work, as mothers and workers, argued that "although the Plan talks of giving women the freedom to choose a life path, its consistent privileging of paid work serves to position only one choice as the right one" and suggested that "for all its feminist rhetoric, the Plan is driven primarily by an

economic agenda rather than the needs of women” (Kahu and Morgan, 2007, p 136). Despite drawing on feminist discourses which both value women’s traditional roles and aim to increase their participation in the public sphere, in the Plan itself “motherhood is all but invisible and is constituted as inevitable and undesirable, while paid work is constituted as essential to individual well-being and a duty of citizenship” (ibid, p 141). With paid work as the prime desirable activity, caregiving is constructed in the Plan “as inevitable, as natural to women, and as undesirable: ... an unwelcome requirement that is imposed rather than a chosen pleasure. In addition, describing unpaid work as needing ‘to be taken into account’ makes it clear that the Plan does not aim to reduce women’s responsibility for this work” (ibid). Despite this, mothering is largely invisible in the Plan. “Instead the gender-neutral noun ‘parent’, drawing on egalitarian discourse, constructs the role of parent as the same for men and women” (ibid, p 142). Although in some places paid and unpaid work are both described as contributing to the economy, inconsistencies abound, with little attention to any practical ways of valuing unpaid work. With the goal of economic sustainability: “to improve women’s economic independence and ability to contribute to the New Zealand economy” (MWA, 2004, p 6) apparently paramount, women are constructed as workers first and foremost.

My own submission on the Plan also discussed the ongoing undervaluation of women’s paid and unpaid work and argued that there is no contradiction between supporting and properly valuing both forms of work. The vital importance of bringing up the next generation must be recognised by more than lip service. Hence when the choice is made to be a full-time mother (or father) and carer, this should be supported, whether by partnered or sole parents. Pretending to value parenting while continuing to stigmatise DPB recipients and rush them back to paid work is not consistent. The ability to attain economic independence has long been a feminist concern, but this should not mean that it is totally the responsibility of individual women to provide for themselves whatever their difficult circumstances and responsibilities. Insufficiently recognized by the previous government, this concern continues under National, with planned welfare ‘reforms’ to include tougher work-testing of DPB recipients.

With the five years of the Action Plan, according to the CEO, “successfully completed” (MWA, 2009a, p 2), almost coinciding with the change of government, the Statement of Intent for 2009-2012 sets out new priority goals with “both continuity and change” (ibid). Continuity includes a strong focus on ending sexual violence and increasing the numbers of women in leadership. The major priorities are now: (i) Leadership: Women have the opportunity to develop and use their skills and talents: (ii) Violence: Women are healthy, empowered, resilient and safe: (iii) Employment: Women fully participating in work, family and community, across their life course. Changes in emphasis, are stated to include “more of a focus on looking at the choices women make across their lifetimes, and better understanding the implications of those choices. This will lead to a greater emphasis on issues, such as young women’s career choices, that have long-term impacts. We will also be focusing more on women’s and men’s contribution to caring and the impacts that time out of the paid workforce has on long-term employment and income” (ibid). Both the previous and current priorities are unobjectionable and not incompatible despite differences of emphasis, but the interpretation and means of achieving both sets would be contested by feminists.

MWA engagement with lesbian groups and issues

In discussing consultation and outreach with various groups of women above, one important group, lesbians, was not mentioned. The relationship here has gone through different phases, with uneasy periods due to the sensitivity of politics in this area and the tendency to label

strong feminists as lesbian. With lesbians in the vanguard of feminist political activity world-wide since the 1970s, fighting both for lesbian political ideals and feminist/social justice causes generally, it is not surprising that in the early days at least, we formed a considerable proportion of MWA staff, had our own support network, and encouraged lesbian groups which lobbied MWA to act on particular issues. "While at the Ministry of Women's Affairs, together with other lesbians in the Ministry, I pushed management and other policy analysts to consider the implications of systems and policy proposals on lesbians as routinely as they were supposed to do with respect to all other disparate groups of women. Before and after this period I was part of a lesbian consultation group with similar aims. The Human Rights legislation was one major area of work and other issues included the needs of older lesbians, next of kin and partner rights, and visibility in statistics. However, it always felt like an afterthought for the Ministry, with Ministerial discomfort at any press coverage" (Hyman, 1994c, p 128).

Some actions were taken. For example, the MWA submission on the 'living arrangements' question in the 1991 Census of Population and Dwellings sought a wording which at least would be relevant/inclusive for lesbians (and gay men), although not provide adequately for visibility. That came to fruition, albeit only for lesbian couples living together, in the 2001/6 Census years. And on internal matters, MWA was one of the first departments to include lesbians as a group in their EEO programmes. However lesbians no longer appear to have any priority for MWA, with the Ministry of Social Development's 'Rainbow Desk' recently carrying the government's work in this area, from a lgbti perspective which can at times make lesbian concerns invisible. Any nightmare or pipedream (depending on your viewpoint) about MWA being a lesbian cabal, always without foundation, is now even further from the truth. But as with similar innuendos around Labour women politicians, they have an effect in terms of distancing and self-protection. Outgoing CEO Shenagh Gleisner recently confirmed that lesbian issues had not been on MWA's work programme for some time, nor have lesbian groups been involved in any recent consultations, although there are still out lesbians on staff (personal communication). In recent years, though, lesbian issues appear to have almost disappeared off the MWA radar.

Judgements from feminists of the effectiveness of the Ministry

Criticisms of the work of the Ministry have been prevalent from early in its history from feminists just as much as its existence and work has been attacked from the 'right' – the middle course for survival and some limited achievement is not easy. Tension is inevitable between femocrats and women in community organisations over what can be accomplished, and femocrats are sometimes seen from outside as well paid and comfortable, doing too little for the cause. However, "feminists who have worked in such machinery readily acknowledge the constraints and compromises involved, the kind of bilingualism required in dominant and oppositional discourses and the need for strong pressure from outside to be effective" (Sawer, 1996, p 23). For individual feminists working in the bureaucracy, there are bound to be mixed feelings about what can be accomplished, and whether working inside or outside the system is a better strategy. Nevertheless, I still argue we need to be everywhere, even if at times we feel in a token position and are more there to make the government look as if they are listening than really achieving anything (Hyman, 1994b). Most femocrats see themselves as walking a tightrope, working very hard to achieve gains for women in complex and difficult situations, as McKinlay's case study with ten New Zealand self-identified femocrats working in a number of departments illustrated (McKinlay, 1990). All said they brought a feminist agenda to their jobs while being aware of the dangers of cooption and the divided loyalties they faced to their

employer and to women and that agenda. She asked: “Are these efforts successful in achieving any change?” and answered “they are, but that the degree of change is usually less, or not as complete, as the women involved or women in the community may have wished” (ibid, p 85).

These feminist critics include previous employees of MWA who were unable to achieve what they hoped in a neo liberal climate, including first CEO Mary O’Regan and first Director of Information and Liaison, Jill Abigail. Mary had hoped that if the processes and systems put in place were well judged, they would survive, including the bicultural structure. But she was worn down by three years of intense work with massive resistance to her approach – her assessment in 1991 reflecting severe disappointment about “just how easily any gains can be swept away. I was there for three years – and every single thing that we developed and achieved is now either gone or going” (O’Regan, 1991, p 166). Pay equity, housing and childcare funding were among her examples.

Jill Abigail discussed the phenomenal pressures working at MWA, with several of the most influential men in Cabinet opposed to its existence. Despite the pressures, “the Ministry was my whole life. I believed absolutely in the value of what we were doing” (Abigail, 1991, p 145). But she too saw the writing on the wall with the SSC and politicians determined to appoint as next CEO someone who would reverse advances on working differently. Judith Aitken’s appointment caused some disquiet among feminist commentators. Her early speech to the Senior Executive Service was described by Pat Rosier in *Broadsheet* as putting down previous management and mocking feminism and anti-racism as barriers to efficiency. As a result, “what we have is a MWA that operates just like any other government department. We can adjust our expectations accordingly” (Rosier, 1989, p 9).

In 1993, Sonja Davies evaluated the problems of trying to achieve feminist and social justice agendas after six years in the Labour Caucus. She praised the hard work, tenacity and determination of then Labour party deputy leader Helen Clark as she tried to push women’s issues up the agenda. While women were critical of “what they saw as vacillation over pay equity legislation”, they “had no idea of the strength of opposition from bureaucrats and in some instances male cabinet ministers” (Davies, 1993, p 152). And she praised Clark’s achievements in women’s health, midwives’ autonomy, and anti-smoking legislation. She hoped that when the herstory of MWA is written, “more people will understand that things like greatly increased funding for pre-school education didn’t just happen by magic. Women such as Margaret Shields, then Minister of Women’s Affairs, made them happen” (ibid). More recent evaluations on either side from key figures, whether politicians or femocrats, are hard to find.

The Ministry of Women’s Affairs today – blowing its own trumpet?

I have less hands-on experience of MWA under Shenagh Gleisner, appointed CEO in 2004 and about to leave mid 2010, though I have been to various meetings and been consulted on their recent work on the gender earnings gap. So this section will be mainly from publications and impressions. The push for visibility mentioned earlier at times seems to amount to MWA blowing its own trumpet in letters to women’s groups, annual reports, and statements of intent. Maybe this is necessary for ongoing success, but it grates somewhat. The favourable external reports, high quality of staff applicants, and independent assessments of a positive culture at MWA are often mentioned. For example the 2009 Annual report stated that “When it comes to efficiency and value for money, this year has seen a continual refining of our processes, analysis of the use of our time (to be more productive), and cutting out unnecessary internal processes. Our new Minister, Hon Pansy Wong, sets high expectations for cost-effective delivery – we welcome this. External assessment of our processes has again shown our systems

and processes to be strong: our policy briefings are assessed as high quality, and we have good performance review systems and excellent staff engagement” (MWA 2009b).

One major and welcome ongoing emphasis is means of addressing and reducing family/domestic violence. Thankfully at times the gender neutral language has been abandoned in favour of the reality that most of this is male violence against women and children. When then Minister Lianne Dalziel asked to respond in the WSA Newsletter to some comments of mine about MWA, this was her focus: “One of my priorities is to reduce domestic violence... I see my connector role as helping to highlight the problem, helping to shape public opinion that violence quite simply will not be tolerated, and forming that into grassroots action... The Ministry of Women’s Affairs has commissioned research on women’s experiences of protection orders... Women are overwhelmingly the adult victims of sexual violence and there are gender issues to be addressed. Again I see my role as a connector – bringing people together and advocating for approaches that ensure that women’s issues are not lost in these days of ‘gender neutrality’” (Dalziel, 2007, p 12).

An important development in the violence area was the two-year (2007-2009) research project into sexual violence against adults in New Zealand, led by MWA in collaboration with the Ministry of Justice and New Zealand Police. It was designed to identify New Zealand’s sexual violence conviction rate, the key points at which, and reasons why, different groups of victims opt in and out of the criminal justice system, the basis for victims’ decisions about accessing non-criminal justice services such as counselling or other support, the key points at which government and non-government intervention and support is most effective, ways to improve the likelihood of victims making formal complaints, where appropriate, and persisting through the criminal justice process, and options to improve service delivery within the criminal justice system. Titled ‘Strong and Safe Communities – Effective Interventions for Adult Victim/Survivors of Sexual Violence’, it included in addition to contracted research a two-person sexual violence research unit within MWA led by Dr Denise Lievore, who has excellent credentials. Substantive research within MWA has been rare in its history – limited internal resources have led to mainly use of academic and other research together with contracting out. It produced several strong publications (see <http://www.mwa.govt.nz/our-work/svrproject>) and, together with the Taskforce for Action against Sexual Violence, should result in much improved understanding of the realities of sexual violence and its aftermath for women and hopefully, real change in many policy and practice areas. However, the National Government has taken one major backward step with the changes to funding rules for sexual abuse counselling which give support only to survivors who have been diagnosed with a mental illness. The moderate National Council of Women were outraged, describing the changes as “in conflict with the intent and purpose of ACC,” inevitably leading to “extra emotional stress on the victim” which would “lead to many victims not asking for help” (<http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PO0910/S00283.htm>).

Recent Labour Ministers of Women Affairs strongly defended MWA and Labour’s record. After the 2005 election, I asked whether MWA could be effective with United Future and New Zealand First having a say in government policy. In response, Lianne Dalziel argued that “with a seat at the Cabinet table, women’s issues are consistently being considered. My Cabinet and other Labour colleagues are highly supportive of gender analysis and the work of the Ministry of Women’s Affairs.” (ibid, p 13). Current National Minister Pansy Wong said in her preamble to the 2009-12 Statement of Intent that “women should have real choices and be able to use their strengths to maximise social and economic success – for themselves, for their families and for New Zealand as a whole. In order to achieve this, we need a more integrated, ‘whole-of-life’, approach to women’s policies” (MWA, 2009a, p 1). She added that “I am fortunate to

have the support of my colleagues to do more, in-depth, work relating to the gender pay gap and contributing issues such as employment practices and occupational segregation” (ibid). Of course National are even more non-interventionist than Labour so that this can mean ever more research and very little action. And Ministers from both parties make little reference to inequalities by class (although ethnicity differences are acknowledged), ongoing patterns of poverty and discrimination against beneficiaries, and undervaluation of caring and other female dominated work. Nor is there in Ministry work any feminist critique of the macro frameworks of economic policy. In this area, both major political parties share orthodox perspectives on free trade, conventionally measured economic growth (despite the prospect of satellite accounts including unpaid work), and structural adjustment. And the Ministry writing style and substance remains largely bland and aspirational.

A section in the 2008 Briefing Papers headed “Legislation is not the answer” states that issues, such as the gender pay gap, “will not necessarily respond to further legislation or other forms of direct government action (such as requiring gender implications statements on some Cabinet Committee papers). Removing these last barriers that prevent women – and men – from achieving their full potential will require a much more co-operative and lateral thinking approach. For the Ministry it will mean working more closely with other government agencies, with NGOs, with communities and with individuals. It will also mean engaging more with men because men will also benefit from a society that makes the best use of everyone’s talents” (MWA, 2008). These initiatives may well be worthwhile, and constitute a strategic response to what the Ministry can achieve in the current political climate, but ruling out legislation and direct government action certainly weakens attempts to reduce the gender pay gap, despite the attempt to focus on action research and seize limited opportunities.

The gender pay gap work is financed by the injection of a 12% funding increase – an additional \$2 million over four years – funded by the savings from abolishing the Labour Department’s Pay and Employment Equity Unit, attempting to defuse adverse political reaction to that decision. According to Policy General Manager Sarah Watson, in 2009-2010 the associated work programme has included the following:

- a) “tackling occupational segregation by encouraging more women into trades that are currently male dominated and exploring what is happening in emerging industries in terms of occupational segregation
- b) creating career pathways for women in low-paid occupations so that women are not confined to low paid jobs for their entire working lives
- c) graduate income differentials: partnering with the universities to explore through a longitudinal cohort study of graduates what is driving the income differentials in male and female graduate incomes
- d) flexible work” (personal communication, April 2010), with a case study of flexible work practices in the accounting sector the first phase. She commented that MWA’s approach to the work programme has been to find partners and allies, and act as influencers and catalysts, working with businesses, professions, and the wider sector.

Internally, as the Ministry has become more normalized, operating almost like any other government department and with less idealistic feminist analysts than in past years, it may ironically be a more congenial place to work for some of its staff. Shenagh Gleisner pointed out to me that in a 2008 international public sector poll on employee engagement, MWA scored more highly than all other departments when comparing with similar organizations overseas. “The Ministry of Women’s Affairs has a highly engaged workforce and very positive culture, indeed top of the public sector benchmark” (personal communication, April 2010: see also SSC, 2010). She also claimed that for a small department where turnover tends to be higher,

MWA's turnover rate is now good, under 20% annually.

Conclusion

This is part of the verdict of two academic observers probably more distant from MWA and hence more dispassionate than myself. "The sheer institutional persistence of Women's Affairs as a free-standing Ministry has accorded a continuous visibility to the interests of diverse groups of women, and to the gendered and racialized dimensions of policy that would otherwise have been difficult to achieve. It also has ensured an opportunity for sustained work on a number of policy issues with significant implications for women in Aotearoa/New Zealand over an extended period of time. And arguably its continued existence as a government Ministry has given Women's Affairs a greater capacity to advocate on behalf of women in the face of problematic policy initiatives than that available to women's policy agencies that have been downsized, relegated to the margins or eliminated altogether in other jurisdictions. While these are important achievements, as are the various policy 'wins' to which the Women's Affairs has contributed in important ways over the past 20 years, the Ministry of Women's Affairs has also clearly been constrained in its ability to influence the course of government policy in ways that are of benefit to women... While the Ministry's ability to adapt to the changes in the public service initiated under the fourth Labour Government arguably ensured its survival, the price was high: the abandonment of the innovative aspects of the Ministry's approach to its work that were based on feminist principles... Overall, it is a very different Ministry to what it was 20 years ago" (Curtin and Teghtsoonian, 2007, p 18-19). I cannot disagree with any of that and would argue that the situation has worsened further under the 2008 National led government.

With a budget of \$4.7 million and under 40 staff, MWA cannot be expected to perform miracles. It probably receives more attention from all sides – right-wing opponents, feminist sceptics, and supporters – and has greater expectations on it than is fair or reasonable. My ambivalence, veering between criticism, admiration, and wishful thinking, will be evident in this paper. I certainly wish MWA well. Overall, I wish it was no longer needed, believe it is and am glad it survives, but sigh at the inevitably cautious approach it must take.

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