

# **A strategy to understand the nexus between gender analysis and policy**

Working Paper for the “Inside the black box - Intra-household resource allocations of older couples” project

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**Women in Social & Economic Research**

Working Paper No 0119

April 2018

Working Paper Series of

Women in Social & Economic Research

Curtin University of Technology

Perth Western Australia

<http://business.curtin.edu.au/our-research/centres-and-institutes/women-in-social-economic-research-cluster/>

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# **A strategy to understand the nexus between gender analysis and policy**

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April 2018

## **ABSTRACT**

Despite growing evidence of gender inequality and gaps, gender research has had only a sporadic impact on policy in Australia. The softness of the nexus between gender analysis and policy is all the more surprising given the strong rhetoric around the importance of evidence-informed policy-making and an important tradition of women being policy shapers and innovators. This suggests that, despite great progress in achieving recognition of gender equality as a normative goal, large gaps remain in current knowledge about how to translate evidence on gender inequality and gaps into policy change. This working paper explores how a gender analysis of intra-household resource allocation might be able to strategically influence policies and budgets. The investigation is part of a large research project into the factors affecting the ownership and management of resources within older Australian couple households. Specifically this paper, drawing on the principles and practices of feminist action research and gender responsive budgeting, is a first exploration into how projects such as these need to be designed and implemented to maximize policy impact. This paper contributes to the literature on the nexus between research and policy by developing a prospective approach to an analysis of the links between a gender analysis of intra-household resource allocation and policy on retirement income.

**Keywords:** Analysis to Policy Nexus, Feminist Research, Action Research, Gender Responsive Budgeting

**JEL codes:** B54, D71, B41

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Gender research has had only a sporadic impact on policy in Australia in recent decades. This is at odds with burgeoning research evidence on gender inequalities, particularly in universities<sup>1</sup>, the strong rhetoric around the importance of evidence-informed policy-making and a long tradition of women being policy shapers in Australia where they have successfully engaged with the State to realize their policy claims (Sawer 1996). The neglect of gender analysis in major policy areas was illustrated in 2017 when the deputy secretary of Treasury conceded that an analysis of the impact of the tax system on women had not been conducted despite Australia's G20 commitments (see Hutchens 2017). As Susan Harris Rimmer and Marian Sawer (2016: 753) observed, 'both Labor and Coalition governments now appear more comfortable in articulating gender equality objectives in the international realm than in domestic policy'. It appears to be the case that, while there has been great progress made in achieving recognition of gender equality as a normative goal, large gaps remain in our knowledge about how to translate evidence on gender inequality and gaps into domestic policy and budgets.

Motivated by a desire to achieve positive change in women's lives, this paper explores how a gender analysis of intra-household resource allocation might be able to strategically influence policies and budgets. The exploration commences with a brief overview of previous Australian studies of the effect of gender and other research on policy outcomes. These studies provide valuable insights to a range of characteristics of the political and policy environment that can affect the influence of research. However, they are limited somewhat by their retrospective position and their limited focus on gender issues. The remainder of the paper attempts to respond to these gaps by describing how a research project on gender equality might be designed and implemented – and its findings communicated - to maximize its policy impact. We use a current research project on the factors affecting the ownership and management of

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, *Gender Excellence in the Social Sciences* project ([www.genderinstitute.anu.edu.au/gess-home](http://www.genderinstitute.anu.edu.au/gess-home)) for a discussion of the contribution of feminist research.

resources (income, wealth and time) within older Australian couple households as a case-study to pursue these broad aims.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. BACKGROUND: PREVIOUS AUSTRALIAN STUDIES OF THE IMPACT OF RESEARCH ON POLICY

Current research on the factors that matter for gender analysis to influence Australian policy is patchy and, of the work that is available, most relies on retrospective accounts of particular policy change. Meredith Edwards' (2001) analysis of child benefit policy implemented during the 1980s is an important example. It points to the central role that research played in ensuring that this reform saw the light of day. Edwards explained how in the 1980s under the Hawke labour government concerns emerged about the economic vulnerability of sole parents and children as a result of the failure of non-custodial parents to pay child maintenance voluntarily.<sup>3</sup> The research work of members of the influential Family Law Council, which included Meredith Edwards, played a role in convincing the social security minister at the time of the need for reform of child maintenance. Research within government departments also proved to be important in helping address resistance within the bureaucracy and mobilize broad political support for reform. Her work hints at how academics, by working with government, create opportunities to translate their research into policy.

Edwards (2001: 93) also found that research was not enough by itself to effect policy change on child benefits. Other factors which were critical to this policy reform included the fact that the case for improved child benefits included both fairness and the savings to the public purse. Political leadership was also present, with many Cabinet Ministers committed to some reform, and there was broad consensus around the problem and its alignment with the ideological position of the government. Also crucial was having the right policy actors interacting 'on the scene at the right time' (Edwards 2001: 95).

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<sup>2</sup> More details on the project are available on <https://businesslaw.curtin.edu.au/our-research/centres-and-institutes/women-in-social-economic-research-cluster/projects/inside-black-box/> (March 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Other arguments were important to this reform gaining political traction. These included the need to reduce disincentives to paid work, political interest in influencing social values about quality family life and a need government savings (Edwards 2001).

Other Australian writing on the topic of the impact of gender research on policy has a broader focus and tends to highlight the importance of having gender acknowledged as a category of analysis and women being recognised as a political constituency. Anne Summers (2003) argues both were made more difficult under the Howard coalition government when women were subsumed under the category of ‘family’, and this reduced the policy space around gender equality. Susan Harris Rimmer & Marian Sawer (2016) and Rhonda Sharp & Ray Broomhill (2002) argue that the framing power of neoliberalism reduced entry points, and indeed eroded the differences between Labor and coalition parties, in terms of their gender equality policies.<sup>4</sup>

Australian research on the broader question of the effect of research on policy highlights that part of the challenge is that research is only one type of knowledge that is included in policy processes. That is, research findings are considered alongside the knowledge of practitioners and that of political elites (Head 2010a). Feminists have long recognised the influence of these alternative knowledges and have invested in the development of policy machinery in government as part of an attempt to influence policy processes and outcomes. In the past these units led important reform including the development of the women’s budget statements, yet progress has faltered since the 1990s. This machinery was critical in training and educating public service across sectors on the relevance of gender analysis in guiding policy. Recent efforts to provide training to the public service on these issues highlighted a pronounced gap in knowledge and skills for gender analysis. An additional problem is that these units once powerfully positioned in the Prime Minister and Cabinet and armed with strong political mandates have been devoid of policy influence. In fact, a recent article found that officials in the women’s policy unit have found themselves excluded from economic Cabinet submissions (see Harris Rimmer & Sawer 2016). Given this, it is important for researchers on gender issues to reflect on who are the best placed bodies to operate as ‘transmission belts’ (Bulbeck 2005: 155) linking research and policy. This also raises the question of how does this transmission occur?

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<sup>4</sup> Despite this, party differences remain around issues such as re-establishing gender budget statements, labour market regulation and gender pay gaps (Harris Rimmer & Sawer 2016).

Debates about the links between research and policy have not been immune to broader debates about hierarchies of knowledge within and between disciplines (see Head 2010b). In economics, for example, higher status and greater legitimacy is attached to quantitative research, and, commonly, less value is placed on qualitative and participatory research methods. These assumptions have been litigated by feminist research, which has challenged knowledge hierarchies showing the masculine bias, including those that position mathematics and abstraction as central to economics. Feminists have argued for a broader panoply of methodologies including qualitative methods. However, returning to the question of the impact of gender research on policy, it must be acknowledged that taking up pluralist methods carries risks if the bureaucracy and polity is unprepared to engage with complex conceptual and methodological approaches. Joshua Newman, Adrian Cherney & Brian Head (2017) observe in the Australian context that individual deficits and inadequate organizational processes have resulted in a public service that is ill-equipped to engage with complexity in knowledge production.

In sum, the relatively small literature identifies an important set of factors as potentially influential in deciding the impact gender research might have on Australian policy. The factors include: the alignment of particular research projects with policy targets, the orientation of political actors and their influence in the policy process, the broader recognition of gender as a category of analysis and women as a political constituency, the relationship between research and the machinery of government, and how knowledge claims based on alternative methodologies are perceived.

Whilst these insights are undoubtedly useful they are not, however, drawn from a systematic investigation of the issue. As was noted in the introduction, previous studies of the topic rely on retrospective accounts of the research-policy nexus. Furthermore, whilst many studies have addressed policy and research with a gender focus they have not explicitly been concerned with the particular challenges involved in getting gender research on the policy agenda.

In an effort to address the current gaps in the literature on the effects of gender research on policy we pursue a case study of the policy impacts of research currently underway into the factors affecting the ownership and management of resources

(income, wealth and time) within older Australian couple households. The study of the gender analysis and policy nexus (henceforth GAPN), ultimately aims to identify:

- Whether policy actors recognize a need for a gender analysis of the household (visibility of gender issues within the household and their perceived policy relevance),
- How policy actors engage with gender research and policy in relation to older households (experience in building a nexus between gender analysis and policy),
- What makes gender research generally, and intra-household gender research specifically, relevant or useful to policy actors (what gender analysis is wanted by policy actors),
- How gender researchers better engage with policy actors (what researchers need to change to facilitate the use of their research).

In the remainder of this working paper we describe the key principles guiding the design of this study, and its major elements.

### 3. CURRENT STUDY: BROAD APPROACH AND KEY STEPS

Our approach to investigating the above issues involves a number of key steps that are broadly informed by the principles and experiences of Feminist Action Research (FAR) and Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB), which are feminist practical approaches that place an emphasis into linking gender analysis with policy action.

FAR places a particular focus on how feminist knowledge is created and the role of knowledge in supporting emancipatory and feminist change. It is a conceptual and methodological framework that blends participatory action research with its emphasis on linking knowing and doing, and critical feminist perspectives. Emphasising emancipatory learning, social change, social justice and democracy, FAR aims to create new forms of knowledge that encourage the participation of women in all stages of relevant research projects and includes their diverse experiences and views in research and policy-making environments. In doing so, FAR seeks to identify and address the, at times invisible, power inequality between academia, community and research



participants (Frisby, Maguire & Reid 2009; Maguire 1987; Ponic, Reid & Frisby 2010; Reid 2004).

GRB also grapples with understanding the nexus between research and policy. GRB is a strategy for mainstreaming a gender perspective in economic policy involving gender analysis and actions to change policies and budgetary decision-making processes (Sharp 2011). To some degree, GRB has incorporated principles of FAR with its emphasis on women's participation, arming women with information to engage in policy and budget debates, changing budget processes and decisions and advancing fiscal democracy (Costa 2018).

A feature of GRB is the high value placed on gender research and the contribution of researchers to inform policy decisions. In this respect GRB shows considerable potential for the engagement of academics with policy actors to foster change. In our study of GRB in education in Timor-Leste we made an early attempt to explore how researchers might better connect with policy actors within government. We established a close collaboration with the Ministry of Education in Timor-Leste and engaged them in discussions of our use of gender-disaggregated expenditure incidence analysis. We found that this data challenged a common perception amongst officials in the Ministry of Education that their education budgets were gender 'neutral'. The officials' reaction to our results also revealed a strong preference for particular types of data and analysis. By focusing on the officials' response to alternative forms of research evidence, we were able to tailor subsequent communications with them to more effectively inform the budgetary decision-making process (Austen et al. 2013).

Another feature of both FAR and GRB is the importance assigned to activism in research, and ultimately bringing about change. Notwithstanding examples of success, women's groups making gender equality claims on the state face inherent limitations (Costa & Sharp 2017; Sharp & Broomhill 2002). In the UK context, Susan Himmelweit (2005: 112) comments that the real effect of a key women's organisation - the Women's Budget Group (WBG) - is hard to ascertain because any impact is largely unacknowledged. She perceives that the UK government had, by 2005, rarely recognised the WBG's influence and then only in particular areas:

government has been keen to acknowledge the WBG's influence on certain policies, for example on its revised tax credit regime, but not on others, particularly those that impact directly on business, such as maternity and parental leave policies.

Himmelweit (2005) highlighted that WBG had relatively limited success in translating research evidence on gender equality into new policy, especially when the evidence contradicted existing policy priorities, or when proposed changes involved a high cost or produced largely long term returns. She reminded that commitment to addressing gender inequality is relative in that while it 'is on the government's agenda, it does not figure as a high enough priority' (Himmelweit 2005: 120).

FAR and GRB principles are reflected at various steps in our study of the nexus between gender analysis and policy relevant to gender equality. As is shown in the detailed approach outlined below, an initial step involves tracing key elements of the relevant Australian policy community. Other aspects of the study's methodology are concerned with the appropriate type of engagement with actors in relevant policy situations, given the broad project aim of shining light on the particular circumstances when gender analysis of intra-household resource allocation contributes to strategically influence policies and budgets.

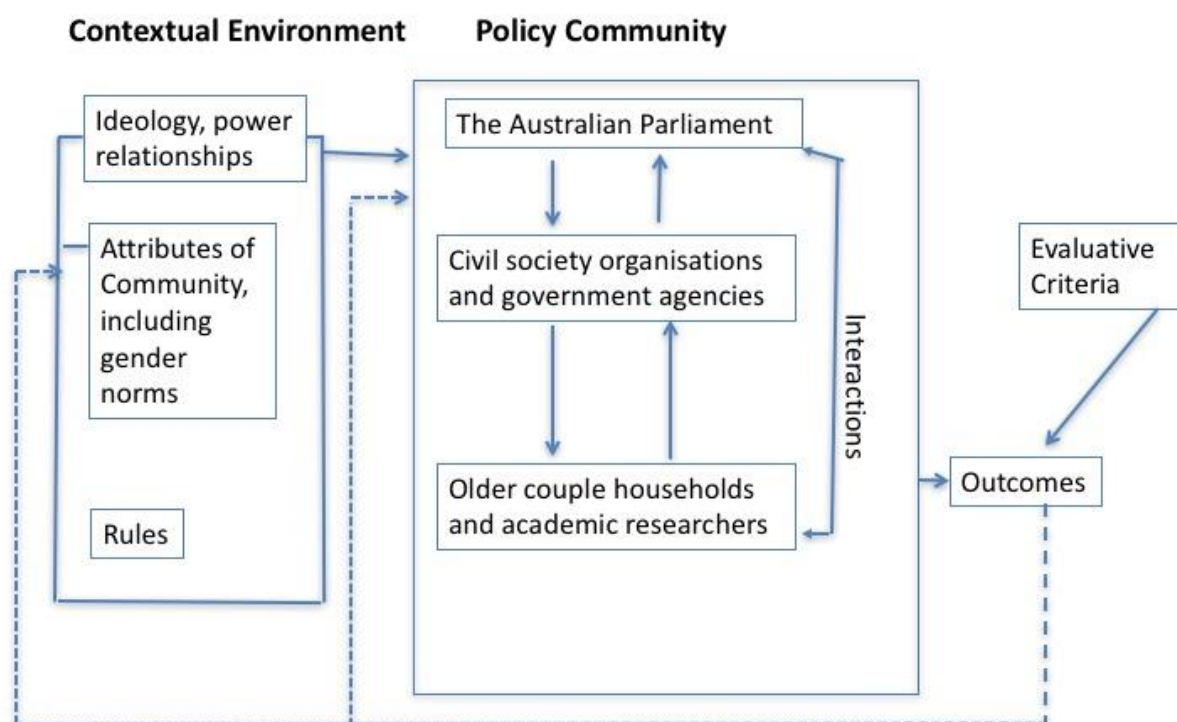
#### 4. TRACING THE POLICY COMMUNITY

Important first steps in a study of the gender analysis and policy nexus (GAPN) are to identify the context and key elements of the relevant policy community and to identify representatives of these elements. We frame the community associated with policy on gender equality and older Australians as being comprised of a number of civil society organisations, policy agencies, universities and parliament. We conceptualise this community as being situated within a broad contextual environment that features particular power relationships, gender and other social norms, as well as economic, budgetary and political conditions, as is summarized in the figure below.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> We acknowledge that there is a large literature on communities of practice that is important for this research. However this working paper focused on the practical and theoretical contributions of GRB and FAR.

Figure 1: Map of the policy community concerned with the nexus between gender research and policy and budgets affecting older Australians



Adapted from Ostrom, E. *Understanding Institutional Diversity*, 2005, 15.

### *Elements of the policy community*

This community has hierarchical elements. At a relatively 'high-level', the Australian parliament sets the broad rules that govern the operation of the retirement income system, framing gender equality requirements, and making decisions about the allocation of budgetary resources to policy initiatives. At another level, actors within coordinating departments, charged with the responsibility to implement the government's particular policy agenda, have some authority over the types of research and other information that is used in policy and budgetary processes. In the Australian context, key agencies include the Federal Department of Treasury and the Office for Women's Policy.

A further element of the relevant policy community includes civil society organisations. The policy agendas of these organisations reflect the interests and concerns of their specific constituencies, as well as the distribution of influence and decision-making processes within these groups. They play a significant role in influencing policy outcomes and budget allocations within a set of rules of engagement, determined by

parliament and the government agencies. Key civil society groups associated with the policy area of older Australians and/or gender equity include the Council of the Ageing (COTA) and Women in Super (WiS), and a feminist organisation, the National Foundation for Australian Women (NFAW).

Outside of current policy coordinating departments, civil society organisations and the parliament, a range of policy commentators engage in action situations that are relevant to policy on gender equality and older Australians. This group includes academics, former politicians and policy officers who have a deep and historical understanding of the action situations relevant to the nexus between gender analysis of intra-household issues and policy development and implementation in the Australian context.

#### *Choosing representatives of the policy community*

Because the parliament has a significant role in determining the parameters within which actors in other situations must operate, it is an important element of the policy community that our study engages with. Current and past senior politicians with a role in the development of policy on the economic security of older Australian women are an important source of information on the nexus between gender research and parliamentary process relevant older Australians. Actors within the Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) are a further source of data on how research might influence parliamentary processes. This office is used by politicians to provide independent analysis of the budget cycle, fiscal policy and the financial implications of policy proposals.

To reflect the importance of decisions about the take up of gender research by actors in coordinating policy departments, we liaise with senior bureaucrats from key Australian government agencies associated with women's policy and general budgetary processes. The aim of this continued engagement is to gain insights into the role of these policy actors in implementing gender research into policies and budgetary processes, including any findings from the intra-household project.

COTA is a national civil society organisation dedicated to older Australians with an agenda to pursue their rights and interests, particularly the most vulnerable in the community. It has over 1,000-member organisations and 40,000 individual members. Our entry point of this relationship is through the state organization of COTA South Australia. WiS is a not-for-profit national advocacy and networking group for women employed in the superannuation and wider financial services industries. This body aims to improve women's access to superannuation and to develop a superannuation system without gender bias.

The role and impact of NFAW is a particular focus of this study. Historically, women's organisations played a crucial role in setting the discursive and political framework for GRB initiatives in Australia, including world's first initiative in 1984. However, by the 1990s their influence had diminished with the rise of neoliberal policy context, which undermined the influence of gender research on policy development and budgetary processes (Maddison & Partridge 2007; Sharp & Broomhill 2013). Green shoots of political contestation around economic policy have sprung to life recently, and these have rekindled interest in how to increase the influence of gender research on policies and budgets. The NFAW has played a significant role in such efforts, launching a comprehensive civil society-led gender analysis of the federal government budget in 2014. It is a feminist organization independent from public funding, committed to advancing and promoting the interests of Australian women through research, policy formation and communication.

Actors operating within NFAW and the other civil society organisations are a key source of knowledge on the day-to-day circumstances that affect the transmission and adoption of knowledge on gender equality and older Australians into policy positions. Engagement with these actors offers an opportunities to explore how civil society organisations engage with their members and give voice to older women's interests and concerns about intra-household inequality.

An additional important perspective on intra-household issues is, of course, that of the individuals who live in older couple households. It is important for a study of the nexus between gender research on this topic and policy to give voice to their viewpoints on intra-household inequality and their experiences of such issues.

## 5. FORMS OF ENGAGEMENT

FAR emphasizes the importance of continued and systematic reflection on the interactions between research and change, and strong awareness of the role of the researcher in this process. Reflecting these principles, our engagement with the different actors within the policy community relevant to gender equity in older Australian couple households involves three, closely interlinked, activities: investigation, education and action.

The investigation features us engaging with actors in especially the civil society organisations and coordinating departments around data collection, analysis and conclusions from the broader intra-household research project. To achieve this we schedule regular consultations with these actors to probe their knowledge of intra-household policy issues, how they engage with the targets of gender research and policy, their perceptions of whether these are relevant/important foci for policy action, as well as the role that academics might play in opening the 'black box' of intra-household issues.

These forms of engagement also provide education opportunities for us and our partners, informing both the design of the intra-household research project and, potentially, its actual policy impacts. In terms of action, such impacts may or may not be forthcoming. The actors engaged in the education process may well decide to not act, for example, if they perceive that the time is not right for a feminist agenda. However, the key actors are involved in various aspects of producing knowledge as well as determining how it gets used (see Maguire 1987: 29).

In practical terms, because significant geographical distance separates the researchers and some of the actors, the regular consultations involve email exchanges and phone conversations. Opportunities for a collective experience, typical of action research exercises, are also exploited, including a public forum with all relevant actors to the gender equality and the wellbeing of older Australians and a workshop focused on officials in key coordinating departments. These moments of collective analysis and conclusion building center on the policy implications of the project findings on intra-

household resource allocations for older Australians and aims to move the reflection to what actions are needed to change structural inequality.

More traditional methods such as interviews are also a feature of this GAPN component. We draw here on the work of Maguire (1987: 134) who discusses the value of interviews in participatory research noting its role in encouraging participants to ask questions that they would not normally do or pay attention to problems that are often neglected. Semi-structured interviews with representatives of civil society organisations engaged in policies relevant to women (WiS and NFAW) and older Australians (COTA SA) feature more of a conversation rather than a traditional style. The interviews take place close to the end of the project to maximize the opportunities for a candid assessment of the challenges and opportunities for gender analysis in a policy context.

Given its role in gender analysis of policy and budget, our engagement with NFAW has some additional features. It is mediated through a member of the research team, who holds a position on its management committee and is involved in conducting the annual budget analysis. Interviews are conducted with her to document how the NFAW's gender analysis of the budget comes to life and to record the way that particular issues around intra-household resources are discussed.<sup>6</sup> The interviews focus on NFAW's policy advocacy and lobbying work and the use of gender research in those efforts. Of particular interest is what intra-household resources are considered and how they are included in the analysis.

Further to these, the analysis includes interviews with feminists who have an historical perspective of the interactions between gender analysis and policy change and direct engagement with successful efforts to bring about policy changes relevant to gender equality. These include a small number of former politicians and academics. These interviews allow participants to reflect on their experiences of positive policy changes with regards to intra-household inequality issues, the factors that allowed particular issues in this area to rise in policy debates; and the interactions between gender analysis and policy changes. In addition, these women are invited to reflect on the

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<sup>6</sup> These interviews are an alternative to keeping a diary.

project's research findings and provide comments on the best ways to make these relevant and useful for policy change. Finally, it is important to highlight here that we are placing ourselves back in the picture of policy actors engaged in the research-policy nexus and also placing ourselves under the microscope by keeping a detail record of our discussions, decisions and findings.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined a strategy to investigate the nexus between gender research into intra-household resource allocation and policy and budget processes. This strategy draws on the principles and features of FAR methodologies and GRB. As noted above the study is a component of a larger project on intra-household resource allocations of older couples. As a result, we draw on research generated in other parts of this project to examine how research into intra-household allocation of resources is utilized by policy actors.

The first stages of this project have begun and involved planning and research design and establishing relationships with key policy actors. Initial consultations with key policy actors were designed to cover inter alia characteristics of the community and the type of research evidence that is useful to and/or powerful in their policy work (and why). Our 'actions' component of action-research will involve making public and discussing research findings and searching for insights into the usefulness of our research findings and considerations over what these matter for policy work. This 'action' component is how we test the nexus between research and policy through activities that build the bridge between research and policy. Direct consultations with policy officers in federal coordinating departments offers an example of the sort of steps we are taking to gain a better understanding of the nexus between analysis and policy.

The research design outlined in this paper raises a number of issues that are worthy of further discussion. One of these relates to the limited influence of the key policy actors engaged in this component in the overall project. This is because the key research questions and project design have already been set, to achieve project funding. We have attempted to create some opportunities to draw on action-research principles by



establishing contact with these policy actors very early on and developing areas of the project in collaboration with these key policy actors. Between February and September 2017, the team discussed the project with representatives from COTA SA, NFAW, WiS, Treasury, Parliamentary Budget Office and the Office for Women. These events speak directly to the educational component of the project in that these initial interactions were a critical point for us to get to understand the relevant community. But it was equally an opportunity for these actors to get a better handle of feminist economics research and gain an initial insight into intra-household inequality and gaps. Most had not thought critically about existing assumptions of intra-household pooling. An immediate outcome of these exchanges was the development of a series of briefing notes presenting initial findings of our analysis of factors that drive gender gaps in long term earnings using *Housing, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia* (HILDA). These briefing notes are a practical way of materialising our ongoing engagement with policy actors and commentators.

Our initial engagement with these policy actors around these briefing papers has been positive and has helped us identify some of the issues these actors are interested in. These issues inform the broader project and have served to consolidate our understandings of the relevant policy community. These briefings are in effect entry points for these actors to engage with the project team to determine what we should be investigating and how to go about it. This engagement is also important to demystify research methods to the actors specifically the relevance of mixed methods to understand economic problems.

A particular concern that was raised by these policy actors was the poor fit of research timings with regards to the demanding and more immediate policy and budget cycles. It was the view of these policy actors that our research design was a better fit than traditional research designs to respond, at least partially, to such concerns. One example of the enthusiasm with which our strategy was received was the offer by a policy actor to organise meetings with government departments for a reflection on the potential effects of the research findings on policy. An additional challenge is to apply this approach with a degree of flexibility while maintaining the broad framework, principles and aims of the research design.

Other challenges with this project relate to the nature of our existing relationships with some of the policy actors engaged in the GAPN component, which might influence what they say in the context of an interview. However, against this we can note that emancipatory research, such as FAR, actually relies on the development of a strong relationship between the research partners. This requires a foundation of trust, and recognition of power differentials and diversity in interest, agendas and skills. It can be argued that, by utilising existing relationships, we can minimise some of these hurdles and commit more effort to the task of maintaining the interest of our partners throughout the more than two and half years of the project.

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