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Between Survival and Relevance
remaking 30 years of the Ministry of Women's Affairs

Since its establishment in 1984 the Ministry of Women's Affairs has had a controversial profile.[1] What began as a feminist policy agency in the public sector discernibly transitioned, in the course of a decade, into a mainstream policy agency whose function is to focus on issues of relevance to women (Curtin and Teghtsoonian, 2010). The ministry's distinctive location at the crossroads of policy and gender places it in a maelstrom of contradictory expectations; like other women's policy agencies elsewhere in the world, the Ministry of Women's Affairs has historically been caught between expectations from community to be its advocate, on the one hand, and requirements from the public sector to

conform to the standards of new public management on the other (Sawer and Unies, 1996; Teghtsoonian, 2004, 2005). Its ensuing struggles for legitimacy are as much about identity and ideology as they are about institutional structures and policy processes. Not surprisingly, the ministry has critics both within and outside the public sector.

As part of marking the 30th anniversary of the ministry, this article traces its institutional development and the contested idea of its 'effectiveness'. It reviews diverse narratives about the ministry and re-examines the notion of 'relevance' in an era of conservative fiscal and political ideologies. In so doing, the article appraises the implications for the ministry's representation of women's diverse interests within the constraints of the current policy environment. There is substantial critical scholarship about the Ministry of Women's Affairs over this period that is a useful resource for reconstructing significant change periods (Sawyer and Unies, 1996; Teghtsoonian, 2004; Curtin, 2008; Curtin and Teghtsoonian, 2010; Hyman, 2010). Additionally, this analysis draws on a body of secondary policy data:

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government reports, policy documents and parliamentary debates, among others. Finally, this article is informed by interviews I conducted between 2008 and 2012 with past ministry officials and representatives of community organisations working in the area of women's issues.[2]

A brief profile

The Ministry of Women's Affairs is a small population-based agency within the New Zealand public sector focused specifically on issues that are of relevance to women and that have a gender focus. It has, since its establishment, retained its status as a stand-alone ministry. Currently there are 27 full-time staff positions and a total annual operating budget of $4.79 million (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2014). Its primary roles include advising the minister of women's affairs on the implications of government policies; monitoring and initiating legislation and regulations in order to promote equality of opportunity for women; and operating a nominations service for the appointment of women to statutory and quasi-government bodies. In addition, the ministry is also required to report periodically back to the United Nations on New Zealand's international commitments on gender status (Mallard, 2003; www.mwa.govt.nz).

Although not the sole agency working in the sphere of women's issues, the ministry has spearheaded gender policy work in the public sector, including strategic work on gender analysis/gender mainstreaming across the public sector in the 1990s; women in leadership programmes, particularly the 'Women on Boards' nominations scheme; improved data on women's lives (especially the development of the Time Use Survey in 1998–99); and changes in key policy areas, including child care, sexuality education, pornography and violence, including rape (Curtin, 2008; Curtin and Teghtsoonian, 2010; Hyman, 2010). The ministry has also highlighted the diverse needs of women through its research and policy work with Māori, Pacific Island and, more recently, minority ethnic women. Since the 2000s women's economic independence has been an area of focus of the Ministry of Women's

Affairs under both Labour and National governments.

Despite the array of work it undertakes to draw attention to the issues faced by women, the ministry has no regulatory, enforcement or monitoring roles to ensure adoption of gender-aware policies or approaches in other public agencies.

Policy actor or policy advocate? Shifting identities

Over its 30-year lifespan the Ministry of Women's Affairs has been under continuous pressure to reconstitute its institutional identity and practices. Its early years were marked by explicit community-oriented and feminist-collectivist approaches to its work defined, by its first chief executive,

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Mary O'Regan, who saw the ministry as an 'insider' for women in communities. In her words, the ministry was a 'bridge' within the public sector:

> [I told women's groups] [w]e have got a symbiotic relationship. You have your networks. You have access to the community and we have access to cabinet. We need each other. We [the ministry] are the bridge. So if we work well together, that's a strong bridge and we can get things done. (Mary O'Regan, interview with the author, 2011)

The feminist/community approach was a stark anomaly in the public sector and very quickly fell foul of government professional standards for bureaucracy. Subsequent appointments to the position of chief executive were career bureaucrats who strove to re-align the ministry with prevailing public management principles and instituted corporate-style governance and accountability structures. By the 1990s, performance management

and policy output/outcome measures framed definitions of effectiveness for the ministry and replaced its non-hierarchical community focus (Sawer and Unies, 1996; Teghtsoonian, 2004; Curtin and Teghtsoonian, 2010; Hyman, 2010).

Yet, despite a decade of 'realignment' the ministry's capability to be a strong policy ministry was found wanting, as its feminist roots were judged to be compromising its effectiveness. In a 2003 review led by the State Services Commission, the ministry was castigated for an 'internal culture [that] has been driven more by ideology/advocacy than being evidence-based' and for lacking 'a clearly identified and articulated focus (*it exhibits a mix of advocacy and policy focus*)' (Mallard, 2003, p.3, italics added). The review recommended new leadership (or what it called 'internal enhancement') that would focus on changing internal culture, with a focus on 'public sector values', improved management systems and policy capability.

There was a turnaround within government in the perception of the ministry's contribution as a public sector agency in the years following that review. The ministry's *Action Plan for Women* (2004), which outlined its strategic vision for improved outcomes for women for the next five years, was received well by other public sector agencies as well as by community stakeholders. By 2007 the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research (NZIER) ranked the Ministry of Women's Affairs as consistently providing high-quality policy advice, and, in fact, judged its policy papers as among the best briefs that it had scored (NZIER, 2007, p.1).[3] The ministry also developed a positive reputation for working in collaborative relationships with other agencies and was an integral member of several high-level

taskforces and committees facilitating key processes in the intra-government and community collaborations, including the Taskforce for Action on Violence within Families and the Taskforce for Action on Sexual Violence.

This success as a mainstream policy agency was short-lived. The election of a National-led government in 2008 heralded a period of instability and loss of ground for and within the ministry. There was 'lack of clarity on its main purpose and strategies following the change of government' (State Services Commission, Treasury and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2011, p.17), compounded by successive changes

If the ministry seems to have faltered in meeting the standards expected of it as a public policy institution, it has fared little better in the eyes of women's community groups and gender scholars, particularly following the euphoric early years. As Hyman (2010) points out, its strategy of eschewing a feminist lineage has alienated it from key community stakeholders whose presence, as has been argued, is integral to raising women's issues on the policy agenda (Weldon, 2002; Celis et al., 2008). Through the 1990s, as the ministry developed its sharpened focus as a policy ministry, its role in community funding and its community-orientated focus diminished.[4] In interviews conducted in

ed women's groups, in the main these have been with groups that fall, as Hyman (2010) points out, at the 'liberal' end of the feminist spectrum, and it encourages policy change through accepted institutional practices, notably submissions and writing letters to the minister, thereby clearly distancing itself from a role as an advocacy agency.

Feminist scholars have also pointed to the shifts in the ministry's values towards neo-liberal interpretations of gender equality. Specifically, there was an unmistakable emphasis on 'individual rights' and 'choices', particularly to achieve independence and self-reliance through paid work (Curtin, 2008; Curtin and Teghsoonian, 2010). Kahu and Morgan (2007) demonstrate that the *Action Plan for Women* frames women positively when they are constructed as economically active workers and less so in roles such as motherhood. Alongside this, there is an explicit rejection of 'feminism' as a value framework and its replacement by gender-neutral and family-oriented approaches: 'the feminist approach of the past has given way to a more inclusive set of values recognising the important role that family/whānau and men play in improving outcomes for women' (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2008, p.10). This repudiation of feminism has continued over the years: in 2014, in the third term of the National government, the newly-appointed minister for women, Louise Upston, announced that she was not a feminist. The Ministry of Women's Affairs' contemporary gender ideology also emphasises women's individualism rather than a feminist collective: 'It is also important for us to recognise that young women today are more likely to shape their thinking in terms of individual rights and entitlements than in terms of social movements' (ibid.).

Neo-liberal and gender-neutral discourses, found in both Labour and National policy framings, individualise women's experiences of discrimination, underplaying the systemic nature of inequality (Simon-Kumar, 2011). Indeed, the reframing of domestic violence using gender-neutral language was criticised in the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination

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in leadership at the chief executive and ministerial levels. Welfare reforms, cuts in community funding, changes in legal aid funding and reporting of domestic violence, and the disestablishment of the dedicated unit progressing pay equity, among other things, created a policy context that was at odds with the forward-looking goals set under the 2004 *Action Plan* (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2005a, p.3). As the ministry struggled to find its purpose, its effectiveness as a policy agency was compromised. In the NZIER's annual ranking, the Ministry of Women's Affairs' 'mean quality score' for policy advice declined: it fell below its high of 8.11, in 2007, to its lowest in 2010 of 7.50 (and 7.85 and 7.95 in subsequent years). In the 2011 Performance Improvement Framework review led by the central agencies, the Ministry of Women's Affairs was found to be 'needing development' in three out of the five key assessment areas (ibid.).

2011, women's groups voiced a lack of confidence over what they perceived as growing distance between the ministry and community groups:

> We don't have a lot to do with them [the ministry] really. I personally am not particularly satisfied by what their priorities are. For example, they are doing a huge amount of work on Women on Boards which I'm a little sceptical of in terms of a liberating process. I think it represents a very liberal feminist agenda. (Community-based NGO, interview, 2011)
>
> I don't know there is a great connection between MWA and working women. There is not a lot of engagement at that level. (Women's group representative, interview, 2011)

While it is true that the ministry has ongoing collaborations with select-

Against Women 2012 report's concluding observations to the New Zealand government: 'The Committee notes *with concern* … the recourse to gender-neutral language with respect to gender-based violence, including domestic violence' (United Nations, 2012, p.2, italics added). Furthermore, the dismissal of feminism is misplaced at a time when there is social disquiet around issues such as rape, sexual consent, domestic violence, pay equality and poverty in New Zealand, as stirrings of a feminist activist renaissance are emerging in the streets and in social media.

In sum, in the last three decades there has been a transformation of the Ministry of Women's Affairs into a gender technocracy. In the course of this transition, there have been substantial reconsiderations in the way the ministry 'does' policy: who its key stakeholders and client groups are, who it is accountable to, and its understandings of gender bias and equality.

Reviewing 'effectiveness'

Evaluating effectiveness in this climate of shifting institutional identities and ideologies constitutes its own challenge. Success or failure is clearly inseparable from who makes that assessment, whether the ministry is assessed for its institutional efficiency as a policy agency or, further downstream, for the impact of its policies on women. Furthermore, what constitutes 'impact' is heavily reliant on the priorities of the political context of the time.

As a policy agency seeking to mainstream gender into public policy, the ministry has received mixed reviews. Its strategic gender analysis tools appear to have limited uptake within the sector, and, where utilised, appear to lack rigour (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2005a, 2005b), but by 2008 seem to have become a muted component of the ministry's work (Curtin, 2014). In the mid-2000s the ministry had built a reputation for providing robust policy advice and was placed in the top tier of agencies that provided quality advice, but this success, as noted, lasted only briefly. While its policy advice is still recognised as commendable, as at 2013 it was rated as 'Adequate' by the NZIER (below the categories of High and Respectable).

Gendering policy effectively, however, does not equate to effective gender policy: it is here that the difficulty in demonstrating categorical linkages between the ministry's policy work and positive outcomes for women makes any definitive pronouncements on effectiveness impossible. Perspective is also critical here, as the ministry's various stakeholders carry diverse criteria for assessing effectiveness of outcome. The nominations service is a case in point. This service has continued to receive excellent reviews ('professional and efficient', according to the 2011 Performance Improvement Review). While such programmes undoubtedly are important for correcting women's unequal representation within boardrooms (McGregor and Olsson, 2004; McGregor, 2014), whether a surge of women in leadership will translate into advancing women's broader interests is a complex argument (Phillips, 2009). More immediately, as the community participant quoted above observed, the efforts at boardroom representation appear removed from the everyday struggles of women.

Furthermore, the benchmarks of neo-liberalism – whether that be efficiency goals or cutbacks in social programmes – have proven to be intractable barriers in the pursuit of simultaneous goals of both policy efficacy and gender well-being; indeed, the schism between the two deepens when neo-liberalism is at its most stringent. For instance, in the 2011 review by central agencies, the ministry was applauded for its '[r]ecent support provided to the Minister on potential Welfare Reform' as a demonstration that it has the ability to 'underpin effective interventions' (State Services Commission,

Treasury and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, p.13). Yet, by the government's own estimate, the welfare reforms have contributed to a reduction by at least 10,292 in the number of working-age women beneficiaries, while the corresponding reduction in male beneficiaries since the reforms was half that (New Zealand Government, 2014). The instances of ongoing inequalities in the labour market, especially of lower-paid 'female' work and among minority women (see Hyman, 2015) and the persistent poverty of single mothers (Dwyer, 2015), raise important questions about the well-being of women who are no longer on welfare. The reforms

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have also been treated with caution by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, which seeks assurance that 'the ongoing welfare reforms do not discriminate against disadvantaged groups of women and that an independent evaluation of their gendered impact is made' (United Nations, 2012, p.10). The neo-liberal turn in the public sector and in politics more widely, in fact, is perceived as contributing to the ministry's apparent insignificance in leading transformative gender policy; as a representative of a community organisation commented in an interview, '[the ministry was] dying in a neo-liberal kind of way' (personal interview, 2011).

Despite this culture of neo-liberalism, the ministry has demonstrated the ability to advance women's interests. In large part, its ability to counter conservatism, neo-liberal and otherwise, has been reliant on the political capital it has been able to marshal. 'Insiders' in authority who have championed and led the ministry's policy work have been important in this regard. Ministers of women's affairs with high

cabinet rankings and a commitment to progress women's work have been pivotal to the advances made by the ministry. The Labour Party's Labour Women's Council was an influential forum for advancing women-friendly policy through well-placed, sympathetic ministers of women's affairs such as Ann Hercus in 1985–87 and Margaret Shields in 1987–90 (Curtin, 2008). But significant policy advances and institutional stability have also been noted during the tenure of National's Jenny Shipley, from 1990 to 1999, and then-Alliance member Laila Harré in 2002–05 (Curtin

bill' (Goodhew, Hansard, 25 July 2012).[5] Without the presence of high-ranking Cabinet ministers or, alternatively, strong champions from within the governing party, the ministry is increasingly inclined to advocate for gender equality policy from within the status quo.

Additionally, the loss of other allies and partners working on women's issues in the bureaucracy has further diminished the prospects for the ministry to be effective in ways that challenge the political ethos of the day. The closure of the Pay Equity Unit at the Department

The first contradiction it faces is in its fundamental gender frameworks. The ministry's potential to provide consistent, first-principles policy analysis – identifying strategic issues, amassing evidence, offering comparative analysis and generating policy actions – is perceived as being compromised by the lack of 'analytical underpinning' (NZIER, 2011, p.4). Gender policy requires encompassing what Woodward (2001) calls the 'irrational': the underlying institutional and societal discriminatory values that are seemingly opaque to reason. In the current climate of ambivalent gender political ideologies and an absence of strategic policy visions (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2005a), the ministry lacks the political wherewithal to generate viable gender analytical frameworks that grapple with the deep-seated nature of structural discrimination.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs' 30-year history is a story of remarkable adaptability to the changes in its policy environment.

and Teghtsoonian, 2010). Furthermore, the period of the fifth Labour government (1999–2008), with strong female leadership in government, significantly provided a better climate for progressive and women-friendly politics within which the ministry could be effective.

Ministerial positions after 2008 have not, for any sustained period, been retained by similarly high-ranking female ministers. Research has consistently shown that 'newness' and the 'junior' ranking of women politicians compromise their ability to represent the interests of women, especially if it requires questioning the leadership's policy directives (Beckwith, 2007; Celis et al., 2008; Childs, 2001, 2006; Cowley and Childs, 2003). The 2012 debates around the extension of paid parental leave exemplify these concerns, when the minister of women's affairs Jo Goodhew's position in Parliament was in line with the party view that the government could not make commitments that attracted budgetary liabilities: 'Just because it is a good idea does not mean that the money is magicked up out of fresh air to deliver it. We are concerned at the financial implications of nearly doubling the amount of paid parental leave, which has been proposed in this

of Labour in 2008 and the conversion of its ongoing work into 'further research' by the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and the transfer of the National Advisory Council on the Employment of Women's accountability lines to the minister of women's affairs, signal the emergence of an era of conservative gender politics and re-set expectations about the priority given to women's issues.

Regaining relevance

For all the reasons outlined above – evidentiary gaps in causal linkages and shifting ideologies – concepts such as 'effectiveness', 'outcomes' and 'impact' consign the ministry to lacklustre success as a policy shop. Arguably, since its formation the Ministry of Women's Affairs has maintained its relevance through adaptation: it has adopted supportive and facilitative roles with agencies in the public sector, a range of policy strategies that are not reactive but which aim at the long range, and tend to be politically non-controversial. However, in the future the fuller prospects for relevance will emerge from the ministry's ability to navigate through its own contexts of contradiction, negotiating both its technocratic obligations and socially transformative (indeed, feminist) potential.

The second contradiction relates to the ministry's relationship with stakeholders. The ministry deploys strategic relationship-based policy as a means to encourage gender accountabilities within the public sector. It has gained some repute and success in 'brokering' gender equality policy, creating a culture of 'client focus' within the organisation. The 2011 central agency review noted that much of this focus has been on relationships with other government agencies and with its own minister, and has recommended that the ministry foster 'closer engagement' with 'key non-profit agencies' (State Services Commission, Treasury and Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2011, p.22). While this mandate offers the ministry an opportunity to rebuild 'bridges' with the community sector, it is important that, to be relevant, such partnerships transcend the established repertoire of public sector interactions – namely, client-focused, brokering or consultative relationships – and instead foster the development of strategic alliances, a space where, as Curtin (2014) notes, women are present at the point of policy problem definition.

A third contradiction relates to the issues that are advanced on the policy agenda. Htun and Weldon's (2010) concepts of 'doctrinal' and 'non-doctrinal' policy issues are useful in this regard.

Based on their global research, Htun and Weldon identified doctrinal policies as those that subscribe to a society's core religious or cultural doctrines and, therefore, are more difficult to make progress on compared to non-doctrinal policies. Extending this frame somewhat liberally to the context of women's policy agencies, one might argue that the Ministry of Women's Affairs faces fewer barriers and greater success in non-doctrinal policy areas: e.g. women in leadership. Despite societal conservatism, the ministry has been successful in doctrinal areas as well: more recently this has been in sexual violence. Although a range of social factors have contributed to putting sexual violence on the policy agenda, the Ministry of Women's Affairs (in partnership with key public and community sector partners) has played an instrumental role in making policy progress in this area. The ability to raise 'doctrinal' matters for policy consideration is an indicator of relevance which satisfies both policy and gender/transformative imperatives.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Women's Affairs' 30-year history is a story of remarkable adaptability to the changes in its policy environment. Whether its legacy of survival as a policy agency has made it an effective institution for advancing women's equality is another – and rather hotly debated – matter. There is still unfinished business here. As it considers its next (hopefully) 30-year journey, 'relevance' for the ministry will require re-envisioning a transformative role in a way that goes beyond the policy advocacy versus policy agency binary. Its challenge will be to enhance its technical gender policy skills while simultaneously engaging anew with innovative pathways of transformative relevance.

1   The ministry was renamed the Ministry for Women and its minister the minister for women in December 2014 at the time this article was being written. As the change is still in process, and for the sake of continuity with existing scholarship and official documentation, this article will refer to the ministry by its previous name.

2   This data was collected as part of the author's research project 'Engaging Women in Public Policy', funded by a Marsden fast-start grant (2009–12). A range of community organisations were interviewed, including some which work on specifically women's issues (such as motherhood or abortion); some which work in areas where women are disproportionately, but not exclusively, represented (such as violence); and some that do not have gender as their major focus but have particular units or sections which target women's needs in their area.

3   The NZIER's rankings are intended for a specific, limited purpose and are not a comprehensive measure of the merit of policy advice. Their analysis of 'quality' does not engage with the substantive content of policy analysis and instead focuses on factors such as utilisation of graphs and charts, fitness for purpose, structure and organisation, length and turgidity (or what they call 'the risk of a numbers soup'). There are also limitations in the data comparison from year to year, as there is no clear systematic or standardised method for the selection of papers. Furthermore, as the NZIER itself reports, the assessment does not take into account any circumstantial factors which may have influenced the production of a particular brief.

4   The Ministry of Women's Affairs has never had a role in service delivery, which is likely to have contributed to its survival through periods of neo-liberal funding cuts which led to the closure of women's policy agencies in other countries (Teghtsoonian, 2004).

5   http://www.parliament.nz/en-nz/pb/debates/debates/50Hans D_20120725_00000032/parental-leave-and-employment-protection-six-months%E2%80%99-paid).

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