

# *Exploring gender in peak union bodies*

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## **ABSTRACT**

With an increasing interest in examining peak union bodies both theoretically and empirically, as yet little attention has been given to gender. This paper argues that, by focusing on explorations of both gendered power and gendered space, greater insight is gained into the power and spatial dynamics found within peak bodies. With a focus on examining our understanding of women's role in peak bodies, a brief review of the Australian literature is then followed by an overview of the fragmented and incomplete picture we have of women in one peak body, the Victorian Trades Hall Council.

## **Introduction**

On the walls of the Council Chamber in the Victorian Trades Hall are honour boards listing the names of past secretaries and presidents of the Victorian Trades Hall Council (THC). Careful scrutiny reveals the title Ms. before J. Armstrong's name, signifying the first woman to be elected president of the Victorian Trades Hall Council in June 1989. Since then three other women (Barbara Lewis, Karen Batt and Jane Calvert) have served as president with Michele O'Neil currently holding office. In 2004, more state peak union bodies had a woman secretary than a man, with affirmative action policies ensuring their senior leadership groups are characterised by gender representation. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), led by its second woman president, Sharan Burrow, ensures it has an executive with equal representation of women and men (Cooper 2000a: 590). Clearly, significant advances have been made since the early 1990s, where women's executive representation on two state peak bodies was 24 percent in South Australia and 14 percent in Victoria (Pocock 1995: 13). While these figures highlight the contemporary position of women unionists, our understanding of women's experience in peak bodies is not supported by a vibrant body of research integrating contemporary experience with past patterns, actions and strategies. Indeed we know comparatively little about the historical legacy of their sister delegates, and their presence in (and absence from) peak union bodies.

In recent years in Australian industrial relations and labour history, there has been an increasing interest in focusing attention on the under-researched area of peak union bodies. Some of these studies incorporate critical spatial insights drawn from geography into the analysis of peak bodies. As yet, however, there has been only minimal attention given to gender (Brigden, 2003). The experiences of both men and women unionists in peak bodies, the impact of masculinity on the strategies, agendas and campaigns of these historically male-dominated peak bodies and the recent feminising of patterns of representation and decision-making and the consequences for union power and purpose remain insufficiently explored.

In looking at women in peak bodies, this paper will focus on one part of a larger project of 'gendering' our analysis of peak bodies. With scattered and incomplete secondary sources, the picture is still a preliminary one as stories await uncovering. Excavating the experience of women trade unionists fits, as Matthews (2003: 3) recently noted, with the ongoing need for 'reclamation' and 'contribution' feminist history. While acknowledging Lake's call (1992: 2) to move 'beyond new forms of 'contribution history' to address the political difference made by the presence of women' (as, for example, Cobble's (2004) 'The Other Women's Movement' does in relation to American labour feminists in the post-war years), without revealing this 'hidden history' (to draw on Sheila Rowbotham's much-invoked term) the picture of women unionists in peak bodies remains opaque, fragmented and incomplete.

The first section of the paper will canvass some of the debates about gender and space relevant to 'gendering' our analysis of peak bodies. To identify our current understanding of women's roles and activities in peak bodies, a number of peak body histories are then examined. The final section will focus on some of the challenges involved in the project of 're-claiming' and 're-placing' women into the story of the THC.

### ***Power, gender and space in peak bodies***

As has now been generally observed and begun to be remedied, there have been limited theoretical and empirical studies of peak bodies (Ellem and Shields 2001: 66; Brigden 2003: 13-17). While there may be a number of national peak body histories, once attention is shifted to the state or regional scale, fewer and fewer stories are found. In the Australian case, we can count the full-length published histories on one hand, with lengthy periods between each publication (Hagan 1981; Markey 1994; Oliver 2003).

Among the growing body of literature, there have been theoretical frameworks advanced for increasing our understanding of why peak bodies are created by trade unions as collective bodies; challenging the prevailing focus on authority as the key explanatory framework with power being argued to provide a more nuanced perspective through which to explore and understand the internal dynamics of peak bodies, and exploring the nature of peak body power and purpose (Ellem, Markey and Shields 2004; Ellem and Shields 1996, 2001; 2002; Brigden 2000; 2003). Such work strengthens our empirical studies of peak bodies, in which there are several key themes: the origins of peak bodies; the relative priority of the political role compared to the industrial role, and peak body purpose (Brigden 2003: 17-26). Gender is strikingly absent. Clearly presenting a significant gap in the peak body literature, this omission is consistent with, and indeed reflects, the broader absence of gender analysis in the general industrial relations literature (Pocock 1997a).

For many years, the dominant theme in the Australian peak body literature has been an overriding attention given to the nature of 'authority', particularly through analysis of the ACTU. More recently, this emphasis has been argued to unduly narrow our understanding of the dynamics of peak bodies. Shifting attention to an analysis of power enables the construction of a more complex picture of a peak body's internal and external relationships, and the exploration of the intersection of power and purpose (Brigden 2000, 2003; Ellem and Shields 2001). Grounding an analysis of peak bodies in the concept of power also enables us to explicitly address the gendered nature of the power dynamics at play in peak bodies. Pocock's assertion (1997b: 11) that the 'question of power is at the heart of gender politics in unions' forcibly emphasises the link between gender, power and unionism.

Trade unions, like other institutions in industrial relations, cannot be regarded as being gender-neutral. Indeed Forrest (1993: 9) argues that: 'The genderless worker/trade unionist is a myth that serves to perpetuate male control'. In countering this gender-neutrality, recognition of the diversity of experiences of workers and trade unionists should also include issues of masculinity and sexuality (see, for instance, Lynch 1997; Hunt 1999). The historical overt masculinity of individual unions became reflected in peak bodies as the under-representation of women found amongst both the membership and leadership of colonial unions was transposed to inter-union bodies. Peak bodies, like their affiliate unions, are gendered organisations in which gendered patterns of power consequently influence peak body policy, strategy and purpose. As Elton (1997: 110) argues, women's presence has shaped contemporary debate:

Women elected to ... affirmative [action] positions in Trades and Labor Councils and the ACTU have ensured a voice for women in these forums and have been important — even crucial — to the passage of recommendations put up by women activists.

Recognising the agency of both men and women is therefore critical. As Cooper (2000b: 67) reminds us, 'it is the *agency* rather than the mere *presence* of feminist women in unions that has the capacity to challenge the masculinist status quo within labour organisations'. Restoring a sense of gendered agency will contribute to the much-needed historical analysis of women in peak bodies. Extending our appreciation of the agency of trade unions in building, rebuilding and sustaining the union movement, through her discussion of the organising activities of the Labor Council of NSW between 1900 and 1910, Cooper (2002: 50) highlights the significant role played by a small group of women activists on the Labor Council's Organising Committee, wherein 'the impact of the women upon the agenda ... well exceeded their under-representation'. Drawing on the Canadian experience, White (1997: 94) focuses on the role played by women's committees, a feature of all Canadian peak bodies, asserting they are the 'critical base of women's activity inside the union movement' through which 'women raise

their issues, press for change, and get their demands onto both the convention floor and the negotiating table'. The historical continuities and discontinuities of women's peak body activism should underpin contemporary analysis of this scale of activity.

The historical 'gender-blindness' of much industrial relations research is matched by its 'space-blindness' (Ellem and Shields 1999). Gendering our analysis of peak bodies thus intersects with the growing interest in examining the spatial dimensions of industrial relations through greater awareness of the work of geographers (Sadler and Fagan 2004). Each of the three central geographical concepts of scale, space and place is salient for our analysis of peak bodies.

The scalar organisation of labour in the nineteenth century saw union organisation relatively quickly lead to the formation of peak bodies: in 1856 in Victoria and 1871 in NSW. Indeed, the early formation of peak bodies in the development of the Australian trade union movement demonstrated recognition by colonial unionists of the importance of organising at a variety of scales. As the early peak bodies were dominated by male unionists and their experiences and priorities, this created a scalar organisation of labour in which union activism and strategy was shaped by gendered patterns of participation and representation; raising, in turn, questions as to how women unionists engaged with this scalar organisation of labour, how the construction of scale was affected by their presence and agency, as well as how women sought to engage at different scales.

Emphasising the intersections between space, place and gender is the debate about the gendered dimension of space (see, for example, Spain 1992 and Massey 1994). This is part of a broader feminist debate amongst feminist historians, anthropologists, sociologists and others about 'the way in which a consideration of 'public' and 'private' space can enhance our understanding of gender power relations and the dynamics of social organisations' (Damousi 1995: 255). Damousi's assertion (*ibid*) that 'studying the way space can define male and female roles in the socialist movement, we can illuminate the nature of gender relations in the movement and in society at large' has resonance for analysis of peak bodies and the labour movement.

Spain (1992: 3) talks about 'gendered spaces' which 'separate women from knowledge used by men to produce and reproduce power and privilege'. These gendered spaces, including trade unions, illustrate the negative impact on women's status of spatially segregated institutions and their control of information. Even when craft unions assisted women to form unions, she argues that 'separate organisations — separate places — were created in which women were segregated from men ... the result [being] a lack of female access to masculine knowledge and status' (pp. 20-21). When unions formed peak bodies, these forms of spatial segregation were translated into another, creating other gendered spaces. In the case of Victoria, the gendered nature of the Trades Hall was consolidated with the building of the Female Operatives Hall, which opened in 1883 in the wake of the Tailoresses strike in 1882 (Brigden 2003: 59). Gendered spatial segregation, including separate organising, was not always to women's disadvantage, however, and for some was a deliberate strategy to ensure women's voice and to create space for women (see below; Cobble 1991). Analysing how the absence, presence and agency of women influenced gendered space requires an appreciation of how women influenced (or sought to influence) and were shaped by space and place, particularly in light of Spain's assertion (1992: 28-29) that 'Gendered spaces themselves shape, and are shaped by daily activities. Once in place, they become taken for granted, unexamined, and seemingly immutable'. Just as examination of peak bodies will reveal patterns of gendered power, so too will the nature of gendered space be uncovered. We will now turn to look at women in the peak body literature, with primary focus on the Australian literature, beginning with the picture of women found in the three peak body histories.

### ***Women's place in the literature***

Women unionists are almost entirely absent from Hagan's history (1981) of the ACTU. Moreover, Hagan manages to talk about the issue of equal pay over the years without mentioning any women activists. Discussion of the Working Women's Charter is also devoid of any sense of women's agency with only one particular woman named (Barbara Murphy from the NSW Teachers Federation) and then as the mover of an amendment (pp. 380-81). Only two women are included in the index (Murphy, a Congress delegate, and ACTU advocate, Jan Marsh).

In contrast, Markey's history of the NSW Labor Council (1994: 23, 72-3, 75-6) begins more promisingly, telling us of the organising of women in the 1890s and early 1900s and the role of early women activists like Creo Stanley (secretary of the Female Employees' Union and the Labor Council's first female delegate in 1891) and Selina Anderson (employed by the Labor Council as an organiser). There then, however, appears a substantial chronological gap before women 're-appear' in the late 1970s (pp. 436, 437-9). While we may presume an ongoing presence, we don't actually know who the women delegates and activists were for many decades. Betty Spears, who had been a Federated Clerks Union delegate to Council since 1959, is only mentioned once (p. 436; for Spears' biographical details, see the Working Lives Biographical Register [www.econ.usyd.edu.au/wos/workinglives/spears](http://www.econ.usyd.edu.au/wos/workinglives/spears)). Most discussion is limited to broad developments in women's participation in the late 1980s up to 1991. As in Hagan's account, women are curiously absent from the discussion of equal pay, even with the formation of the Labor Council's equal pay committee in 1957 (p. 378). Equally, there is little discussion of the women's committee after its formation in 1978 (p. 436). While Betty Spears is mentioned as the committee's chair, there is no indication that she had been the secretary of the Labor Council's equal pay committee from the late 1960s until 1975.

Oliver's (2003) history of the Western Australian (WA) Australian Labor Party (ALP) and Trades and Labour Council (TLC) does seek to highlight the role played by women in the labour movement. Like Markey's history, the strongest sections are those discussing the early activities of women union activists. As a consequence of the peculiarities of the WA situation, Oliver's story becomes one of two organisations in which more focus is given to the activities of the (political) 'Labor women' rather than their industrial sisters. This is underlined when we learn that Ruth Jeneff (or Geneff: as her name is spelt once with a J and twice with a G) is made a life member of the WA TLC (p. 331) but there is no mention of which union she represented, what led to this acknowledgment of her contribution nor what were her achievements. Cecilia Shelley, whose early activities are discussed by Oliver, disappears from the account after 1929 although she led her union until 1967, and was 'a member of [the ALP's] Trade Unions Industrial Council and the later [WA TLC]' (Radi 1988: 187). Known as the 'Tigress of Trades Hall', she too was made a TLC life member: however, Shelley's name is absent from Oliver's list of life members (2003: 378; Working Lives Biographical Register [www.econ.usyd.edu.au/wos/workinglives/shelley](http://www.econ.usyd.edu.au/wos/workinglives/shelley)). This means that, as time goes on, the presence or otherwise of women delegates and activists fades from view until women reappear in the contemporary period in leadership positions (see pp. 331, 346-7). Again women unionists encounter the chronological gap with analysis of contemporary activists disconnected from those who went before them.

We know even less about women in regional peak bodies, though two studies provide some insight into the gender politics at play. Eather (2000: 151), in the case of the Wagga Wagga Trades and Labour Council, argues that while '[o]verall numbers were never great ... all women delegates made positive contributions to the TLC's activities'. Not only had women been active in the body's formation in 1943, one of the first office bearers was a woman, Ellen Collins (a member of the Australian Railways Union's women's auxiliary). Reflecting broader community attitudes, Eather recognises that the 'women were subject to the dominant prejudices of the period' as well as being confronted by 'political parties and labour organisations [that] downplayed, obstructed or ignored in varying degrees the potential of their women members' (ibid). Ellem and Shields (2001) draw attention to the interplay of gender, power and union strategy through their examination of the Barrier Industrial Council's (BIC) imposition of a marriage bar in Broken Hill. Internal gendered power in a peak body was a consequence of external gender politics. With married women excluded from the labour market, their participation in the labour movement was severely circumscribed, with there being 'no women among the 50 or so delegates to the BIC and only a handful of female union officials' by the late 1920s (p. 134).

It is, of course, not just the Australian peak body literature in which women fade in and out of view, while men remain in eternal focus. Bather's bracketing of women in his comment (1963: 16) on 'the usually little known men (and women) who have created local political and industrial labour movements' demonstrates the secondary position of women. Leier's observation (1995: 181) that 'the masculine term is appropriate and illustrative' in using the term 'spokesmen' to describe the Vancouver TLC leaders, builds on his earlier depiction of women in the TLC in the early 1900s:

women in general remained unorganised and under-represented on the [Vancouver] TLC. In 1905 Mrs Smith of the Laundry Workers' Union was seated as a delegate, and in 1907 three other women represented their unions on the council ... Little is known of these delegates; they made no motions, served on no committees, and do not appear in the minutes apart from the notice of their initiations. Nor was their attendance exemplary: in 1909 the garment workers' delegates attended nine of forty-eight meetings.

Reflecting some awareness and appreciation of the gendered nature of power, Leier (1995: 170-71) surmises

Without evidence, it is difficult to know, but it is likely that the women did not take an active role because they were continually outvoted and intimidated by men. Such was indeed the pattern in unions that organised women.

However, Leier does not compare female and male participation rates nor acknowledge the impact of family responsibilities on women's ability to participate. In the forty year history of the Ohio AFL-CIO, we learn that in 1974, 'the delegates made history in electing the first two women to serve on the Executive Board, Barbara Easterling of the Communication Workers of America ... and Genevieve Motsinger [Electrical Workers]' (Van Tine, Slanicka, Jordan and Pierce 1998: 113). As we hear nothing more of these two women, or whether this began an ongoing pattern of representation of women, the impact and effect of women on this decision-making body remains unknown.

### ***Women's place in peak body history: building the Victorian picture***

In 1979, John Merritt commented that an article on NSW women trade unionists in the 1890s:

reveals a degree of organisation among women workers which might surprise readers familiar only with the 'standard' works on the nineteenth century. For the most part, Nicol's information has come from well used sources, an indication both that women's activities were passed over by earlier historians and that such sources can contribute to a broader and richer labour history if subjected to new or different questions (p. 1).

Over a decade later, in 1991, in their introduction to the *Labour History* special issue on women and work, Frances and Scates (1991: p. ix) noted again that often it was not 'a matter of finding new sources so much as asking new questions of the old' (in contrast to the 1975 special issue which 'bemoaned the 'fragmentary' character of women's past: in a world dominated by men the 'evidence' of their endeavours was either absent or repressed'). In the absence of a comprehensive history of the Victorian Trades Hall Council or indeed of the broader Victorian labour movement, women in the THC are often 'missing', overlooked or their peak body activities not recognised with significant information sometimes tucked away in footnotes.

Even in the standard account of the 1882 Tailoresses strike by Brooks (1983), women are notably absent. His story of the strike is marked by the focus on the role of the THC and its male secretary rather than, as may be anticipated, the women leaders (such as Helen Robertson, one of the founders of the Victorian Tailoresses Union) and members (Ellem 1989: 28). Only one woman, "Mrs A' – almost certainly Mrs Creswell' (one of the strike leaders and member of the strike committee, who later became president of the union), is mentioned: as a witness at the 1883 Royal Commission on Employees in Shops held after the strike (Brooks 1983: 36). Given the activity of members of this union spanned a number of scales, the lack of recognition of their agency is significant. An indication of their inter-colonial scale of activism is found in a footnote in an article about women in NSW unions in the 1890s (Nicol 1979: 20, note 11). At the third Intercolonial Trade Union Congress in 1885, congress president Thomas Caddy said 'how he hoped the 'noble example' set by the two female delegates to the Congress would serve to stimulate unionism amongst women in Sydney' (p. 20). Both delegates, Mrs Creswell and Ms Aribin, represented the Tailoresses Union, and were the only women present. In all, the union sent delegates to three of the Inter-colonial Trades Union Congresses: Mrs Creswell and Mrs Graham in 1884 and Mrs Muir in 1891 (Nicol 1979: 20, note 11).

The restoration of the Trades Hall building provides its own story of 'recovery'. As the walls of the Southern Hall were being restored in 1995, nine plaques, previously painted over, were revealed, listing Life Governors of numerous Melbourne charitable institutions, including the Melbourne, New Women's, Eye and Ear and St Vincent's hospitals. Five of the Life Governors were women unionists including Helen Robertson, Maude O'Connell (Tobacco Workers Union) and Minnie Felstead (Domestic Workers' Union). The governors were all members of the Eight Hour Day Anniversary Committee (whose membership was elected from Victorian unions). The elections for the prestigious governorships were 'hotly contested', providing evidence of the profile of these particular women unionists within the Victorian union movement (Brown 1995: appendix 2).

With that chronological gap in evidence again, Melanie Raymond (1988: 41-42) found:

It is normal ... to find mentioned the strike by the Victorian Tailoresses' Union in 1882 as the one and only example of early female involvement in the labour movement. A great leap forward is then made to the equal pay campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s led by equal pay activist Muriel Heagney. But in between these two events there is an enormous gap where working women seem to have disappeared from the political and union stage.

Filling part of that gap, Raymond (1986, 1988) and Nolan (1991) provide a critical contribution to our understanding of the profile of THC women delegates in the 1910s. In this period, 'separate organising' was a favoured strategy (see Cooper (2002) for its use in NSW). Minnie Felstead was elected to the THC Organising Committee in 1910, and 'argued for a special [THC] women's organising committee, established a Women's Organising Fund and was employed as Women's Organiser for £3 a week for six months' (Nolan 1991: 108). Together with women such as Sara Lewis (Female Hotel and Caterers Union) and Ellen Mulcahy (Clerks Union), Felstead organised women workers into separate women's unions as well as female sections of male unions in 1910 and 1911. By the end of the following year, together with women representatives of male unions, it is estimated there were 31 'forums' in which women workers were represented (Raymond 1988: 45-6). Although not indicating the extent to which these women-only unions affiliated with the THC, Nolan (1991: 108) argues that delegates 'from those unions in occupations with a growing proportion of female workers ... changed the composition' of the THC. Two further attempts by the THC to organise women between 1914 and 1921 occurred at the behest of its women delegates (p. 118).

Active in campaigning for equal pay, the profile of women delegates reflected the ebb and flow of that campaign as the 'rise and fall of the equal campaign coincided with a rise and decline in women's representation' from a peak of 10% during the first world war to 5% of delegates by the early 1920s (Nolan 1991: 118). What led to this decline is as yet unclear. In a footnote, however, where Nolan lists the THC's five women delegates in January 1918, she notes that one of these, Sara Lewis was also a member of the THC executive (p. 118, note 119; surprisingly no mention of this is found in Raymond's 1986 article on Lewis). Whether this decline in women delegates persisted through the decade in the early 1920s is also unclear, yet women continued to be elected to THC committees. Most significantly, Nelle Rickie (Theatrical Union and a member of the Communist Party) was elected to the THC executive in December 1923, while other women delegates were elected to the eight hours committee in the mid 1920s (Brigden 2003: 256, note 26). Biographical material on Nelle Rickie doesn't include this membership of the THC executive, just that she was a THC delegate (for example, see Lake (1999: 99); Macintyre (1998: 125). While scrutiny of the THC minutes will ascertain if there were women THC executive members before Lewis and after Rickie, when Gail Cotton (Food Preservers) was elected to the executive in 1978 she was described in the media as the 'first woman in the history of the THC to sit on the old executive' (*The Age*, 10 June 1978: 5; see also *The Herald*, 8 June 1978; 1).

What we commonly find is episodic attention, which primarily revolves around the campaign of equal pay and particular activists, like Kath Williams (Nolan 1991; D'Aprano 2001). The broader participation of women in the THC, including decision-making bodies like the executive and key committees such as the eight hours committee is overlooked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the inter-war years, a pattern persisting through most of the post-war period (Brigden 2003). The differing profiles of two women delegates serve as an example. While their years as THC delegates coincided during the 1950s and 1960s, more is

known about Kath Williams (THC delegate for the Liquor Trades Union, Communist, equal pay activist and secretary (and only woman member) of the THC equal pay committee) than of another prominent woman delegate, Leonora (Lee) Lloyd (THC delegate for the Clerks Union) (D'Aprano 2001). Vice president of the Clerks Victorian branch, an active Grouper who later was an office bearer in the Democratic Labor Party, Lee Lloyd contested (unsuccessfully) a number of THC elections for the right. While they may have had gender in common, Williams and Lloyd reflected the factional divide in the THC: reminding us that factional politics could and did divide women (Brigden 2003).

From the latter 1970s, increased participation in the THC arose from new affiliates (such as teachers, nurses, airline hostesses, mothercraft nurses) with large female memberships and more women officials, as well as from an increasing number of women delegates from older affiliates (Brigden 2003: 251-254). Once again, the strategy of separate organising was adopted: initially with the formation of a women's committees and, later on, inclusion of affirmative action positions. This use of separate organising by women in different periods of THC history suggests that analysis of women in the THC should include an examination of this strategy. As Briskin (1999: 547) has noted, the 'meaning of separate organising is always being negotiated, and reconstituted through struggle and resistance' with different contexts shaping historical and contemporary approaches:

an historical perspective illuminates the difference between separate organising which is a response to imposed or forced segregation, and that which is a pro-active choice on the part of women in order to strengthen their voices, articulate their concerns as activists and workers, and create a context to develop gender-sensitive organising strategies.

## Conclusion

In redressing the historical omission of peak bodies from research agendas, a number of recent theoretical and empirical contributions have extended our analysis of trade unionism. Largely missing from that analysis so far has, however, been gender: in particular, the role of women unionists in peak bodies. This paper has sought to contribute to the 'gendering' of peak body research, by highlighting the contribution of a gender analysis which also intersects with another emergent research thread, the spatialising of industrial relations research. With women encountering a chronological gap in a number of accounts producing a fragmented and incomplete picture of peak body women, attention then shifted to the reclaiming and replacing women in the history of the THC. A focus on remedying the 'chronological gap' encountered by women activists by reclaiming and replacing women in the VTHC, identifying patterns of female activism from the late 1800s through the 'missing' post-war decades, should be the next stages of the 'gendering' project, together with an analysis of separate organising, which was used as a strategy in both the 1910s and the 1970s, and its impact on challenging the dynamics of gendered power and space within in the Trades Hall.

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