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Who gets played by “the gender card”? A critical discourse analysis of coverage of Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s sexism and misogyny speech in the Australian print media.

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with questions of sexism and misogyny in the context of post-feminism. It examines the particular case of former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's "misogyny speech", a rare instance of a woman in high political office directly accusing her opponent of sexism. Through a critical discourse analysis of the coverage of that speech in the Australian print media, the article explores the radical disjuncture between how the speech resonated with women, both in Australia and internationally, and its construction in the print media as an illegitimate and ill-conceived "playing of the gender card." In forwarding this analysis, the article highlights how, in a postfeminist media environment, the possibilities for women of naming experiences of sexism are being closed down not least because such naming is positioned as a strategic choice on the part of women deployed only to gain advantage.

KEYWORDS

Julia Gillard, sexism, misogyny, postfeminism, politics, gender

Who gets played by “the gender card”? A critical discourse analysis of coverage of Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s sexism and misogyny speech in the Australian print media.

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“I will not be lectured about sexism and misogyny by this man. I will not... If he wants to know what misogyny looks like in modern Australia, he does not need a motion in the House of Representative – he needs a mirror” (Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, 9th October 2012)

Since the historic 2008 U.S. presidential election race, there has been an intensification of scholarly interest in how the media represents women running for high public office. Detailed analyses have been produced of the media coverage of campaigns by women candidates in the U.S., particularly those of Hillary Clinton (e.g. Carroll 2009; Carlin and Winfrey 2009; Gutgold 2009), Sarah Palin, (e.g., Gibson and Heyse 2010; Wasburn and Wasburn 2011), Nancy Pelosi (Dabbous and Ladley 2010) and Michele Bachmann (Bystrom and Dimitrova 2013). Notable examples from other countries include Germany’s Angela Merkel (van Zoonen 2006), Julia Gillard in Australia (Hall and Donaghue 2013; Stevenson 2013; Wright and Holland 2014), and Helen Clark in New Zealand (Devere & Davies 2006). These analyses have primarily considered how the reporting of candidates in the media is highly gendered, and they have shown how sexism is both produced and perpetuated in the reporting of women’s aspirations towards and performance of leadership roles in government. Conventional wisdom has it that although such women inevitably experience some sexist treatment, it is politically unwise to acknowledge directly – let alone confront – sexism, and

most high profile women candidates adopt this advice. In this article, I analyze a case study that shows what happens when they do not.

On October 9th 2012, the Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, delivered a speech to the parliament decrying the misogyny and sexism of the leader of the opposition, Tony Abbott. In it, she listed numerous examples to support her charge, and told of her personal offence at many of Mr Abbott's actions, including his statement that women are biologically less suited for power and public office than men, his notorious claim that "abortion is the easy way out" of an unwanted pregnancy, his interpellations of Australian women ("What the housewives of Australia need to understand as they do the ironing..."), and his appearance at an anti-Gillard protest rally in which he stood in front of a placard reading "ditch the bitch." Video of the speech rapidly circulated via social media. Within a week of its delivery, the speech was reportedly viewed more than a million times on youtube (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16th October, 2012). The speech and its public reception were the subject of intense media analysis and commentary in the Australian press. It was also widely reported in the British and North American media (Goldsworthy, 2013).

In making this speech, Gillard not only touched the "third rail" of politics for female candidates – sexism – she grabbed it with both hands. In what follows, I analyse what happens when a powerful, high profile woman calls out sexism. Other analyses of the speech and Gillard's prime ministership more generally have considered how the framings of the speech in the media drew on and reinforced elements of the double bind experienced by women politicians (Wright and Holland 2014) wherein they must simultaneously exhibit traditionally masculine qualities of toughness and strength without compromising expectations of feminine self-effacement and peace-keeping (Hall and Donaghue 2013). They have also explored the different – higher and wider – standards to which women in politics are routinely held (Stevenson, 2013), and they have pondered how the arguments generated

by the speech concerning the distinctions between sexism and misogyny might help to understand the nature of feminism's "unfinished business" addressing the cultural sexism and misogyny of contemporary Australian social life (Goldsworthy, 2013). My focus in this article is threefold. Firstly, I provide a close analysis of immediate reactions to the speech in the Australian mainstream print media in order to explore how the spontaneous public celebration of the speech was accounted for. Secondly, I explore how Gillard herself was characterised in making the speech, particularly with respect to intent or motivation. Finally, I consider whether the same problematic constructions of the act of naming sexism that so often prevent women from speaking out about sexist behaviour may be themselves be present in media responses to the speech. Before analysing those responses, I first address how "postfeminist" culture has diminished opportunities for the public discussion of longstanding feminist concerns such as sexism. In particular, I am concerned to examine the tendency in this context for attempts to confront sexism openly to be interpreted as a cynical strategic gesture (playing "the gender card") rather than as a legitimate attempt to seek justice against a form of oppression.

Postfeminism: The 'real' issues of feminism have been dealt with.

A key feature of so-called postfeminist societies involves how feminism is "taken into account" (McRobbie 2004, 2009) as involving a set of concerns that were once legitimate, but that have since been addressed, so that any lingering commitments to the belief that women are systematically oppressed are seen as out-dated and self-interested. In Australia, as in many other western nations, the "solvedness" of feminism's issues is rhetorically scaffolded in two main ways: by highlighting the legal and social progress that has been made for women since the mid 20th century, and by contrasting the apparent freedoms of

Australian women with images of oppressed women in developing nations. These latter dismiss any ‘remaining’ inequalities and discrimination experienced by Australian women as trivial and self-indulgent “first world problems” (e.g. Tasker & Negra 2007; Mohanty 1988). These constructions of sexism as either long past or geographically distant deny the continuing existence of broad, systematic structures of gendered oppression. Although differences in the lives of women and men clearly exist, these are accounted for as a result of “natural” differences between women and men that lead them to make different “choices” (e.g. Hakim 2011). Sexist behaviour and attitudes have come to be seen as mere remnants of a past era which, while irritating and unpleasant, need not be treated seriously as they are divorced from structural or institutional arrangements and thus can do no “real” harm.

Not only does a postfeminist culture deny sexism as a serious concern for women, it also creates costs for those who might think of complaining about it. As has been widely discussed, postfeminism has developed within a broader context of neoliberalism, and reiterates neoliberalism’s requirement for women to understand themselves as agentic, choice-making individuals, and to reject any suggestion that they are victims or somehow in need of protection (Barker 2010; Gill and Donaghue 2013; Harris 2004; McRobbie 2009; Stuart and Donaghue 2012). Shauna Pomerantz and colleagues’ recent interview-based study with Canadian teenage girls shows clearly how powerful postfeminist discourses of “girl power” and “successful girls” create a sense of girls as the primary beneficiaries of recent changes in Western societies. The result is that girls lack a language for talking about sexism as a live force in their lives, even while they recount many instances of sexist behaviour in their classrooms and peer groups (Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik 2013).

Paradoxically, sexist behaviour can shore up postfeminism by apparently showing how inconsequential sexism is to the well-being and freedom of women in postfeminist societies (McRobbie 2004). Being offended by sexism is positioned as a “choice”, and a woman can

enhance her capital by showing herself to be unaffected by sexism (Cohoon, Nable, and Boucher 2011; Kelan, 2009). In many ways, Julia Gillard was a postfeminist prime minister. In interviews at the time of her elevation to the prime ministership, she avoided labelling herself as feminist, and played down the significance of her becoming the first woman to hold the office of prime minister in Australia (Hall and Donaghue 2013). As prime minister, despite experiencing extreme, well-documented sexism from many quarters both within and outside the parliament (Summers, 2012, 2013), up until the misogyny speech Gillard barely acknowledged this sexism. In this sense Gillard was a model postfeminist woman, “choosing” to show herself as beyond the reach of sexism by, as Anna Goldsworthy (2013) puts it, “just getting on with it.”

“Playing the gender card”

Along with a sense that sexism has become a trivial concern in western countries, a culture of suspicion has developed concerning the motives of those who complain about or confront sexism. The idea that women can (and generally should) choose to ignore instances of sexism to avoid creating a sense of themselves as victims puts attention onto those women who do “choose” to confront sexism. The phrase “playing the gender card” has become a ubiquitous way of dismissing a woman who attributes criticism or poor treatment to her gender. It is a pejorative phrase and its connotations of strategic game playing work to deny any possibility that a woman who names sexism might do so out of genuine grievance. Yet despite its widespread use in public discourse, the notion of “playing the gender card” has received surprising little scholarly attention. In a recent study, Erika Falk (2013) examined the use of the gender card metaphor in media coverage of Hillary Clinton’s bid to win the Democratic Party nomination in 2008. Falk found that although the gender card metaphor encapsulated a

range of different meanings, over the course of Clinton's campaign it came to be used to imply that Clinton was inappropriately seeking a tactical advantage by accusing her detractors of sexism.

The notion that deploying the "gender card" confers an advantage on women is ironic, given research findings show primarily negative consequences for women who confront sexism. Women who confront sexism are perceived as "complainers" (Shelton and Stewart 2004), "troublemakers" (Kowalski 1996), and are often ridiculed (Czopp and Montieth 2003). Some more recent research suggests there may positive outcomes for women who confront sexism on behalf of a third party (e.g. Mallett and Wagner 2011), but these studies do not capture the kind of situation in which a woman states or implies that she herself has been subject to and affected by sexism – the type of situation in which accusations of "playing the gender card" are usually made.

The context of Julia Gillard's "misogyny speech": a reading

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard delivered her speech to the Australian Federal Parliament in opposition to a motion of no confidence in the Speaker of the House, Peter Slipper, put forward by opposition leader Tony Abbott. The no confidence motion was the culmination of a series of events involving Mr Slipper that were made public as part of the proceedings of a court case involving allegations of sexual harassment against Mr Slipper by his former (male) aide. The no confidence motion was precipitated by the revelation that Mr Slipper had sent a text message to the aide in which he made offensive remarks about female genitalia, and described a female member of the opposition as "an ignorant botch (sic)". In presenting the motion to remove Mr Slipper, Mr Abbott put the case that the misogyny

displayed by Mr Slipper rendered him unfit for the high office of Speaker. Ms Gillard's speech was given in direct response.

These specific events were part of a wider context involving the Speaker. The Labor-led minority government was reliant on the support of several independent members of parliament to form government. The appointment of Mr Slipper (formerly a member of the opposition) as speaker was widely understood as a strategic move to preserve an "extra" vote for the Gillard government in the House. Traditionally, the Speaker is a member of the government and they have the casting vote in the event of a deadlock, but otherwise do not vote on bills brought before the Parliament. Thus both the initial appointment of Mr Slipper to the Speaker's role and the defence of his position in the face of the allegations against him were highly consequential in terms of the continued survival of the Labor government.

Despite the government successfully defeating the no-confidence motion, the Speaker resigned his position later that same evening and was replaced by a Labor MP. In this sense, Gillard's speech did not achieve its ostensive purpose. Certainly the specifics of the context in which Gillard's speech was made complicate discussion of her allegations of sexism and misogyny against Mr Abbott. Nevertheless, such a high profile, public discussion of sexism is critical in enabling an analysis of public understandings of what sexism is, how it works, and what (if anything) should be done about it.

Newspaper coverage of reactions to the speech

The data for this study consist of all articles published in the major Australian (National and State) newspapers over the four days following the speech (the 10th to 13th of October 2012). This time period was chosen to include the Saturday papers, as they often feature more in-depth reflections on the news of the week than are provided in the daily reporting of events.

A search of the Factiva online newspaper database using the key words *Julia, Gillard, Sexism, and Misogyny* returned 48 articles (after removing duplicates). These data formed the basis of my critical discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, Mulderrig and Wodak, 2011) combines a close reading of texts with an existing concern about particular social issues in order to provide an “explanatory critique” of how certain understandings of the issues at hand come to prevail. It is particularly useful for highlighting the nature of the tensions that may organise social discourse around an issue. In turn, such a reading provides a basis for understanding the cultural logics on which problematic social relations rely, and it may suggest strategies by which they might be challenged or resisted. By its nature, critical discourse analysis is strongly influenced by the concerns brought to it by the analyst – in this case an interest in how sexism is understood and (de)legitimised as a live force in contemporary social life. Other analysts with different priorities and concerns might produce different readings of the data, but the strength of this method is that it provides a closely evidenced case for a particular reading of the data.

Many issues were canvassed across these articles. In particular, much of the commentary concerned the political wisdom of Gillard’s strategy in making the speech. Although some writers considered it a bold move that might increase public concern over the attitudes held by Mr Abbott, most of the coverage declared it a tactical misstep that would ultimately damage Ms Gillard and her government. In the analysis presented in this article I focus less on media discussion of the political impact of the speech (see Wright and Holland 2014 for a detailed analysis in these terms), and more on examining how the issues of sexism, and the motives for and consequences of making allegations of sexism were discursively constructed. Importantly for my purposes here, these provide insight into the resources that are available for talking about what sexism means in contemporary social life. My analysis is organised around four main issues: reportage of the public’s response to the speech; how Gillard’s

motives for making the speech were portrayed; the anticipated consequences of the speech for Gillard herself, for women in general, and for “feminism”; and how sexism and misogyny were positioned discursively as private, individual and largely trivial concerns rather than legitimate social issues.

Resonance and recognition: “The best thing you’ll see all day”

There was a notable disjuncture between the positive reception of Gillard’s speech on social media and in the international press and the more censorious reporting of the speech in the local Australian news media and this disjuncture rapidly became part of the story of the speech. Commentators in mainstream media coverage cited the contrasting reactions as evidence of a disconnect between the narrow concerns of the Canberra press gallery and those of the wider public.

Gillard’s speech has gone viral internationally, struck a chord locally, and divided commentators and women. Feminist Anne Summers lambasted press gallery journalists who criticised it, saying they were totally “out of kilter with how so many of the rest of us reacted.” [Gillard’s betrayal of feminism, 12th Oct, *The Age*]

Many of the articles emphasised how the public reactions to the speech showed that sexism is a live issue in the lives of contemporary western women. This focus on the resonance of the speech, and the ability of women to recognise elements of their own experience in Gillard’s words, extended beyond Australian women. Indeed, the high levels of interest in Gillard’s speech internationally became a feature of the local Australian coverage. Most of the Australian newspapers mentioned the favourable coverage in the British and American press, and several also noted how feminist website Jezebel labelled its link to the video of the

speech as “the best thing you’ll see all day.” Even coverage that was highly critical of the PM acknowledged that the speech had “struck a chord”:

Most women watching Julia Gillard’s speech to Parliament last Tuesday would have felt that silent cheer. If you forgot the context, didn’t over-scrutinise the substance and just saw a powerful woman calling out sexism and saying she had had enough, it was arresting. Any woman who has ever been put down, talked over, dismissed, demeaned, overlooked or derided – in ways a male colleague would never be – was probably transfixed. [PM’s speech did stir hearts, but remember the context, 13th Oct, *The Sydney Morning Herald*]

According to web publisher Mia Freedman, no other political issue has ignited this much conversational traffic on her Mamamia website. “It does feel a little like a feminist awakening in this country,” she says in the wake of Gillard’s brain snap. “That speech is the one every woman gives in the shower or at 2am in her own mind or in the car as she’s mulling over whatever sexist behaviour she’s had to endure.” [PM’s speech may write a page in history, 13th Oct, *The Australian*]

In these extracts sexism is constructed as a common experience among women – “every woman” has rehearsed a similar speech, and “most” women watching would give a “silent cheer”. But even here, although experiences of sexism are acknowledged as widespread, they are still constructed as instances of “sexist behaviour” rather than in more systemic or structural terms (McRobbie, 2009).

The huge public interest in the speech and the enthusiastic reaction to it are at odds with constructions of sexism in postfeminist culture as not much more than an irritating but largely inconsequential hangover of attitudes from the ‘bad old days’ (McRobbie, 2009). As shown in the extracts above, one of the striking features of the coverage was how sexism came to be

constructed as something simultaneously ubiquitous in many women's experiences yet invisible in public discourse. Gillard's speech was presented as precipitating an outpouring of 'yes, me too!' responses from women who (for reasons almost entirely unexplored in the mainstream media coverage) had previously treated their experiences of sexism as private matters that they could or should not complain about. In this way, the slowness of male journalists in recognising how profoundly Gillard's speech resonated with women was understood to result from that fact that such resonance was grounded in an aspect of women's experience that, as Ben Eltham wrote for *newmatilda.com*, "many men simply don't see."

The media coverage in the days following Gillard's speech did disrupt the postfeminist narrative that sexism is no longer an important social force by affirming the ongoing reality of sexism in some aspects of Australian public life. For example, many of the articles reported an interview with the new Speaker, Labor MP Anna Burke, in which she discussed sexism both within parliament and in wider social discussion of Julia Gillard's leadership.

For example:

..Ms Burke [the Speaker] told ABC radio there was "obviously some sexism and misogyny that goes on in the Parliament"... "one of the most disappointing parts about having the first female Prime Minister is that unfortunately that's brought out the worst in some of the people in the Parliament and some people in the public", she said. "It's brought this tone and tenor of underlying sexism in our country, and I think we need to be rising above it, and I think the Prime Minister's speech this week was pretty spot on." [Speaker backs Gillard on sexism, 13th Oct, *The Age*]

In this interview, the new speaker expresses the view that "underlying sexism" has become more visible since the election of Australia's first female PM, although she attributes this sexism to the bad behaviour of "some of the people in Parliament and some people in the

public”, rather than identifying and naming it as a systemic set of institutional practices. This individualistic formulation is further reflected in her proposed solution, that “we need to be rising above it”, obviating any need for action designed to directly address sexism. This unwillingness to engage with the possibility of a more institutionalised sexism resonates with Rebecca Huntley’s observation that “we sorely want to believe that while there might be sexist people in Australia, we are not a sexist nation” (2013: 101).

Much of the power and appeal of Gillard’s speech was attributed to her manner of delivery, in particular the anger and emotion that she conveyed. Anger has long been considered a risky emotion for powerful women (Brescoll and Uhlmann 2008; Johnston 2013), in that it violates feminine norms for niceness and decorum, while at the same time risking confirming stereotypes of women as too emotional for the rigours of high office (Hall and Donaghue 2013; Wright and Holland 2014). In this instance, however, Gillard’s ability both to express and control her anger was portrayed as a key element of its resonance for many women:

Women do not speak with one voice, even those bound by generational ties.

However, there can be no doubting many were moved by Gillard’s raw emotion. She didn’t exactly land on the moon but there was a similar sense this week of people riveted to televisions and consoles to savour every word. [PM’s speech may write a page in history, 13th Oct, *The Australian*]

In parliamentary terms, Gillard’s performance was one of her best; it had controlled anger, emotion and conviction as well as her trademark withering put-downs and ripostes. [Gillard’s betrayal of feminism, 12th Oct, *The Age*]

Gillard’s anger, and her ability to harness its power in such a way that it animated her speech without undermining her eloquence, was identified by commentators as crucial factors in “riveting” the audience. Although Wright and Holland (2014) argue that over the weeks

following the speech, Gillard's anger came to be used by some media commentators to build a case that she was emotional and out of control, the immediate responses to the speech constructed her "controlled anger" as a key element of its appeal. Social researcher Rebecca Huntley noted that in her public opinion focus groups in the period following the speech, Gillard's "finely honed anger" was cheered and admired by women (Huntley 2013). However, although Gillard's anger was constructed as crucial in persuading audiences of her authentic motivation, some articles did question whether her emotions were "actually" (as opposed to "apparently") genuine:

What stood out was her anger. She almost quivered with rage (whether genuine or confected) as she pointed at Abbott across the chamber, quoting statements and citing actions that she said demonstrated an intolerable attitude to women.

[Misogyny's a hit for badass Gillard, 13th Oct, *Daily Telegraph*]

As I will argue below, questions of Gillard's authenticity and her motivation were central to coverage of the speech, and they were the prime means by which the matter of the validity of her charges against Tony Abbot was sidelined.

Motives for calling out sexism

As is regularly the case when women make accusations of sexism (Falk 2013), a key issue in the coverage of the speech concerned analysis of Gillard's motives for delivering it. The political context in which the speech was made (as described earlier) was highlighted in all of the Australian news reports. While Gillard herself later explained her motivation as "just ... to call out sexism and misogyny where I see it" [Conservative women dismiss those cries of

misogyny as a cheap rhetorical tool, 13th Oct, *The Australian*], unsurprisingly none of the coverage took this declaration at face value.

In many articles and opinion pieces, the immediate political context of defending the Speaker against a vote of no confidence was portrayed as sufficient to explain (or explain away) the speech. For example:

This is Julia Gillard's hypocrisy stripped bare. She rails against what she calls misogyny, yet for base political reasons she has staunchly defended a discredited MP who has displayed women-hating sentiments. By wedging herself on sexism in this fashion, the Prime Minister only adds to her trust deficit. [Gillard's hypocrisy stripped bare by her defence of demonstrable misogyny, 13th October, *The Australian*]

As Wright and Holland (2014) have noted, many commentators seemed satisfied that simply pointing to the domestic political context of the speech was enough to render its content invalid. At other times, there was an effort made to account for the positive reactions to the content of the speech, while still remaining clear that the genuinely newsworthy aspect of the speech was its hypocritical purpose:

The applause from some quarters is understandable – Gillard's speech was a powerful admonition of perceived sexism. But in domestic politics it can't be divorced from the hypocrisy of its purpose or the exaggeration against its target. [Gillard's hypocrisy stripped bare by her defence of demonstrable misogyny, 13th October, *The Australian*]

Ms Gillard's full-frontal attack on Tony Abbott on Tuesday wasn't an isolated piece of political theatre, which is how social media is treating it. Its proper context was as

part of a fraudulent campaign built around confected concepts of sexism that evaporated with their vote to support Mr Slipper. What a sad reflection on the YouTube generation that many saw Ms Gillard's speech as an assault on misogyny when it was the exact opposite. [Sisterhood's misogyny campaign a charade, 13th Oct, *The West Australian*]

These extracts show how positive reactions to the speech were accounted for but then dismissed as occurring because people either did not know about or did not pay enough attention to its political agenda. The fault was deemed to lie clearly with the appreciative audience whose apparent failure to understand the "real" meaning of the speech was a "sad reflection" on their preference for "political theatre" over sober analysis. Even the praise in these extracts is expressed in diminishing language. Gillard is seen as responding eloquently to "perceived sexism", or producing a compelling political exhibition. These constructions work to undermine the force of Gillard's charges against Abbott: she is portrayed responding only to "perceived" or "confectioned" sexism in order to achieve a base political goal.

However, a more common variation on this framing was to acknowledge that there was indeed real provocation for the speech but to lament that the powerful arguments were undermined by the dirty political context in which they were raised. In this view, the speech could be heard at "two levels". As Goldsworthy (2013) expressed it, it was as though there were "two speeches" – one heard by the politicians and press gallery journalists present in the parliament when it was delivered, and another heard by those who saw it replayed on news bulletins or on youtube.

The speech has resonated with many women who are tired of the way they are routinely treated by men. What this demonstrates is the two distinct levels on which it operated. Despite her attempts to avoid the matter, her speech, unquestionably the

most devastating attack on entrenched male power ever made in this country, came while protecting the rampant sexism of her own Speaker. [PM's mixed messages, 12th Oct, *The Advertiser*]

To be clear, I thought Gillard gave a great speech, but that it was delivered for at least some of the wrong reasons, in the wrong context, at the wrong time. [PM's speech did stir hearts, but remember the context, 13th Oct, *The Sydney Morning Herald*]

In the extracts above there is clear admiration for Gillard's speech, but it is tinged with what is constructed as inevitable regret regarding the context in which it was given. These writers see it as impossible to separate the content of the speech from the agenda that was portrayed as unquestionably driving it. By constructing the issue in this way – that however much one might like to, it is impossible to separate the evaluation of an argument from the apparent motives of the one delivering it – they present it as an unfortunate but inevitable shame that what could have been a powerful message must be understood as tainted by the agenda of the woman delivering it. This powerfully illustrates a phenomenon that Gillard herself has previously described as the “Golden Girl Vortex” (Baird 2004; Goldsworthy 2013). “Golden Girls” are rising female stars in politics who attract considerable public attention and excitement. But this attention comes at the price of extreme levels of public scrutiny and judgement against standards that are both higher and wider than those used to evaluate male politicians or ‘ungolden’ women (see also Hall and Donaghue 2013; Stevenson 2013). In this case, the existence of motives for her speech other than pure “feminist affront” is drawn on to imply that Gillard was at best exploiting or at worst lying about her experience of sexism, thereby unleashing the disappointment that attaches to women politicians perceived to have fallen short of the high standards held for them when they enter the “Golden Girl Vortex”.

“Playing the gender card”

In addition to being portrayed as hypocritically motivated (Wright and Holland 2014), Gillard’s allegations of sexism and misogyny against Tony Abbott were also often constructed as an illegitimate attempt to defend her own position:

The really troubling implication of the showdown in parliament this week is that the Prime Minister will now misrepresent any criticisms of her performance and the performance of her government as examples of sexism and misogyny. She will play this card, even if it is the lowest trick in the book, constantly portraying herself as a helpless victim. This is not the feminist way. [Criticising women not sexism or misogyny. 11th Oct, *The Australian*]

The above extract is a textbook example of an accusation of “playing the gender card” (Falk 2013). Gillard is constructed as disingenuously accusing those who criticise her of being sexist in order to undermine their legitimate concerns about her performance as Prime Minister. Many of the articles reported female MPs from the opposition amplifying this charge in various ways. For example:

[opposition MP Kelly O’Dwyer] “It’s a deliberately orchestrated campaign when gender is being used for the first time in Australian political history as a shield for the Prime Minister so nobody will ask questions about her record and her behaviour and her judgment.” [Conservative women dismiss those cries of misogyny as a cheap rhetorical tool, 13th Oct, *The Australian*]

Several elements of this extract work to produce Gillard’s behaviour as an egregious attempt to avoid legitimate scrutiny. The emphasis on a “deliberately orchestrated campaign”

suggests clear intent, while the claim that this behaviour is a “first in Australian political history” and designed to ensure that “nobody” can question her, constitutes the misogyny speech as an unprecedented attempt to secure an illegitimate end (namely, that of allowing “nobody” to question her actions). The problematic nature of this behaviour is further shored up by contrasting Gillard’s actions in making the speech with those of other high profile women who, although similarly provoked, “would never” act in the same fashion:

Coalition frontbenchers Bronwyn Bishop, Julie Bishop and Sophie Mirabella have been targets of some comments and say they have dealt with it [sexism and misogyny] through the years and would never play the “victim card”, which they accuse the Prime Minister of doing in parliament this week. [Lib women cop abuse, too, but they don’t play the “victim card”]

[Mr Abbott] said he would not be backing off one bit. “Just because the Prime Minister has sometimes been the victim of unfair criticism doesn’t mean she can dismiss any criticism as sexism, that she can dismiss any criticism on gender grounds,” he said. [I won’t back of PM, says Abbott, 11th Oct, 2012, *The Sydney Morning Herald*].

In addition to being seen as having potentially damaged her own credibility by “playing the gender card”, many articles also reported the reactions of women MPs from the Opposition, who accused Gillard of damaging women in politics more generally. For example:

Liberal women have accused Gillard and her women ministers of a new and bogus delicacy. “The Prime Minister is setting back the cause of women decades by using sexism as a shield against criticisms of her performance,” Opposition Deputy Leader Julie Bishop said. [Conservative women dismiss those cries of misogyny as a cheap rhetorical tool, 13th Oct, *The Australian*]

[Deputy Opposition leader Julie Bishop] “Instead of being remembered as Australia’s first female Prime Minister, she’ll be remembered as the Prime Minister who let down the women of Australia when she was put to the test.” [Gender battle will get uglier, 12th Oct, *The West Australian*]

“The Prime Minister has demeaned every female in parliament by doing it...we don’t wish to be treated as somehow less able or a victim of somebody’s spiteful words,” Bronwyn Bishop says. [Conservative women dismiss those cries of misogyny as a cheap rhetorical tool, 13th Oct, *The Australian*]

These extracts highlight a view that complaining about sexism positions women as weak or “less able” in a way that is detrimental to all women (Kelan 2009). According to this view, Gillard not only revealed her own weakness in playing the “victim card”, she also “let down the women of Australia.” Tellingly, it was women politicians from the opposition who led this charge. Rather than sexism being understood as a problem for women – a problem that those with power (women and men) should work to remedy – these powerful women instead exhorted other women to remain silent about sexism and to “get on with it” (Goldsworthy, 2013) without any sign of strain that would, apparently, be evidence of weakness rather than injustice.

In addition to harming the reputations of other women both inside and outside parliament, Gillard was also accused by some critics of “debasement” and “betraying” feminism more fundamentally. For example:

“No amount of international applause for the theatrics of Julia Gillard’s misogyny speech this week will obscure the debasement shortly afterwards of the feminist ideals that Canberra’s Labor sisterhood holds so dear” [Sisterhood’s misogyny campaign a charade, 13th Oct, *The West Australian*]

But the fact remains that Gillard did the wrong thing in embracing Slipper last year and again in resisting his ditching. She might have made a hero of herself to some feminists by flailing Abbott, but she betrayed feminism in trying to protect Slipper (that she condemned his messages is not enough mitigation). [Gillard's betrayal of feminism, 12th Oct, *The Age*]

Although these writers do not specify exactly how feminism has been cheapened by Gillard's speech, it seems that it is the allegedly cynical motives underlying the speech that are the issue. On this reading, no matter how compelling Gillard's evidence and arguments may have been, they are irredeemably corrupted by the context in which they were made. This not only renders them useless for Gillard's own purposes, but somehow damages these arguments for future use. By apparently failing to live up to the high ideals ascribed to feminism, Gillard is seen to have infected these very ideals with her stain (Stevenson, 2013). However, other commentators were more optimistic about the possibility that Gillard's stand, despite its context, might make it easier for others to recognise and object to sexism and misogyny in their own lives. For example:

What women have understood 'gender card' slurs to mean is that if they call out sexism, they will be stigmatised as being weak, or whingers, and their careers will be damaged. This is what female bankers, lawyers, academics and professionals everywhere learnt: cop it and move on, despite the cost. And this is why Gillard's speech in Parliament this week, in the middle of another grubby debate about grubby texts and a grubby court case, struck a sounding, loud chord. For the first time in Australian political history, a senior woman from a major party stood in our Federal Parliament and attacked her opponent on the grounds of sexism in a long, blistering speech...It struck a chord because she made a speech millions of women have rehearsed in their heads for years – against a colleague, boss or opponent they

consider to be obnoxious or sexist – but never made...Gillard said things women aren't supposed to say, in any job, and most of all, in politics. [Gender card flipped as PM fights back, 13th Oct, *Canberra Times*]

The sentiment expressed here, although by no means widespread in mainstream media coverage, takes up the more optimistic view circulating in social media that this moment of public attention to sexism might widen a crack in the veneer of postfeminism and allow other women to speak up where previously they have been silent (see also Goldsworthy 2013).

Distraction from “real” issues

For some writers, the validity of the claims of sexism were beside the point. True or false, they are primarily constructed as trivial and irrelevant to the concerns of “people”:

After a tumultuous week dominated by the gender wars, the shadow treasurer, Joe Hockey, implored the Parliament to move on. “Fair dinkum, I have had a gutful of it,” he said. “I feel as though I am in a parallel universe totally divorced from what people are living at the moment. It has just got to stop, it is just ridiculous.” [Speaker accused of bias over Gillard speech, 13th Oct, *The Sydney Morning Herald*]

Here, space is given to the apparent frustration of an opposition MP who has “had a gutful” of the “ridiculous” focus on sexism. The alleged gulf between those concerned about sexism and “people” is shown – it is hard to get more disconnected than a “parallel universe”.

Similarly, in the next extract, the writer draws a contrast between discussions of sexism and “real things”:

Was Julia Gillard’s ‘I had a scream’ speech worth a single vote?...Australia’s problem ...is that we have lost the ability to argue about real things. We avoid the

hard stuff altogether and get worked up about trivia in a dizzying cycle of denial and indulgence. [Come the federal election, the real world will have moved on. 13th Oct *The Australian*]

He goes on to characterise the focus on sexism as “get[ting] worked up about trivia”, reinforcing this view with a sexist pun that calls to mind stereotypes of women as irrational, emotional and shrill (Wright and Holland 2014). He further portrays Gillard’s complaints as being motivated by self-indulgence and a wish to avoid thinking about “hard stuff” (which he identifies later in the same piece as being economic and employment issues).

The coalition view is that people in marginal seats, the outer-suburban battlers, could not give a toss about arguments over misogyny. They’re concerned about living costs, services, government competence and asylum-seeker boat arrivals.

[Misogyny’s a hit for badass Gillard, 13th Oct, *The Daily Telegraph*]

... [independent] MP Rob Oakeshott ... says there is an absurd tone to the present debate. “Julia Gillard isn’t a cannibal, she’s not a transvestite, she’s not a member of the Taliban. And Tony Abbott isn’t going to eat the first born child of every Australian family if they’re female,” he told ABC radio. “You know, let’s get over this gender politics or whatever we want to call it and let’s get down to some matters that really matter for the future of Australia”. [MPs oppose sexism, whatever it means, 11th Oct, *The Australian Financial Review*]

These extracts present a view of the discussion of sexism in public life as a distraction from the issues that should be the proper subject of public debate. The inclusion of “gender politics or whatever we want to call it” among a list of things positioned as being far removed from the concerns of “the future of Australia” illustrate how concern about sexism is dismissed as

a fringe issue that is irrelevant to the concerns of mainstream Australians, and thus not an appropriate topic of concern for the prime minister or the parliament.

Beyond framing Gillard's claims of sexism and misogyny against her as trivial and irrelevant to the "real" concerns of Australians, other commentators went further, by suggesting that using the word "misogyny" as Gillard did works to trivialise "real" or "serious" misogyny that occurs in other places.

"Misogyny is a very, very serious word with a very serious meaning," she [opposition MP] tells *Inquirer*, pointing to the Taliban attack on Pakistani teenager Malala Yousafzai. "That's a real issue." [Conservative women dismiss those cries of misogyny as a cheap rhetorical tool, 13th Oct, *The Australian*]

This extract shows how the charge is made that accusing someone of misogyny too lightly can undermine the "real issues" caused by misogyny and sexism. Gillard is tacitly put in her place by the identification of the attempted murder of Malala Yousafzai as evidence of the consequences of "real" misogyny. This kind of scolding of women for complaining about sexism by highlighting more "serious" oppression is a well-documented means of trivialising sexism (Braithwaite 2013; Mohanty 1988), and the reference to events in Pakistan effectively engages the postfeminist trope that "real" sexism happens in faraway places.

Conclusion

Julia Gillard's speech to the Australian parliament captured the attention of the world, and, however fleetingly, reignited a conversation about the prevalence of sexism faced by women in public life. Two strikingly different portraits of Gillard were painted in the wake of the speech. In one – most commonly seen in social media and the international coverage of the

speech – Gillard is a powerful hero, standing up to vicious and entrenched sexism, passionately and eloquently striking out at the attitudes and practices that, in thousands of ways, large and small, eat away at women’s rights to equality and freedom. In the other – dominating the Australian national news media coverage – Gillard is presented as conniving, weak, and unscrupulous by disingenuously accusing her detractors of sexism for base political purposes. What can we make of these contrasting appraisals? Is the example of Gillard’s speech in the end more an inspiring example or a cautionary tale?

One of the major takeaways from this episode is how central the issue of Gillard’s motivation was made; the issue became not so much *what* she said, but *why* she said it..Although some supporters saw it as a simple boiling over of frustration and rage – the final sexist straw that broke the camel’s back – a common refrain across the coverage was that this might have been a proud moment for feminist protest, if only the speech had been made out of more noble motives. From the earliest moments of the media response, it was constructed as essential that the speech be only and entirely one thing or the other – authentic, and thus inspiring, or strategic, and thus worthless – and which of these it “really” was turned on the fundamental question of motive. Two main disingenuous motives were attribute to Gillard: first, that she made the speech to deflect serious accusations of (among other things) sexism and misogyny made against her parliamentary ally (the Speaker, Peter Slipper), and second that she “played the gender card” in an attempt to dodge legitimate criticism of her own performance as leader. It seems that accusations of sexism are not judged on their merits, but rather are received as an invitation to examine the motives of the person making them. A woman who “chooses” to be offended by sexism is open to questions as to why she is not strong enough to take the high road of ignoring sexist attacks and simply “getting on with things” (Goldsworthy 2013).

The centrality of motives as the key to understanding accusations of sexism made by women creates a paradox in which the only people who can legitimately speak about sexism are those who are unharmed by it. Speaking out against sexism was constructed in the media coverage as a noble and admirable act, a good thing that in this particular case was disappointingly tainted by Julia Gillard's alleged personal motives for doing so. Gillard's position as one whose leadership had arguably been damaged by the institutionalised sexism in Australian social and political life (Hall and Donaghue 2013; Summers 2012, 2013) effectively disqualified her from speaking about the source of that damage. Her allegations, in turn, were recast as excuses that not only rendered her charges ineffective, but reconstituted them as further evidence of her weakness. Worse, by apparently "giving in" to the temptation to try to gain an advantage by "playing the gender card", Gillard's actions were portrayed as damaging the credibility of all women seeking to participate in public life. This is the hard choice experienced by women in power: other women look to them for leadership in speaking out against sexism, but if their own leadership has been damaged by sexist attitudes, the existence of this damage can be used to render these allegations as illegitimate and a (further) damaging sign of weakness.

In pragmatic terms, the "test" of the consequences of a speech such as Gillard's may be judged in terms of "what happened next". For Gillard herself, despite producing a brief increase in popularity, the speech was not enough to turn around her falling political fortunes; she was deposed as PM by her colleagues in June 2013, only months prior to the next federal election, which was won by the opposition. In broader social terms, the impacts are harder to judge. Gillard's speech was an important catalyst for public discussion of sexism in Australia, a discussion that has continued in various forms throughout social media, as in the Everyday Sexism, and "Destroy the Joint" campaigns on social media which encourage women to name and share their experiences with sexism in the many forms in which it manifests in their lives.

It seems possible that a feminist structure of feeling is re-emerging around increased consciousness of the continued pervasiveness of sexism in 'postfeminist' societies, and much has been made of the possibilities of social media as a space in which such a re-emergence might be fostered (Goldsworthy 2013). But for all the anger that was expressed towards him, Tony Abbott – the target of Gillard's speech – is now the prime minister of Australia, presiding over a cabinet of 19 senior ministers only one of whom is a woman. Important as it is to raise consciousness about these issues, it is unclear whether and how the increased willingness to call out instances of sexism will translate into a change in sexist practices. Unless and until women's outrage over sexist behaviour is effectively (re)connected to structures of political action that take power away from those who engage in sexism, these moments of feminist resonance can only fade away, leaving little to show for their powerful mobilisation of feeling.

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