How to maximise the policy impact of feminist economics?
Lessons from Action-Research

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Our Study: “Inside the Blackbox: Intra-household Resource Allocations of Older Couples” (2017-19)

- The focus of our research is on ownership, control and management of resources within older couple households.
- Why? Australia has moved from reliance on tax-payer-provided age pension to compulsory defined contribution accounts (superannuation).
- We are also interested in understanding the link between gender analysis and policy change in relation to intra-household issues for older Australians.
- Mixed-methods approach:

  - Interviews with older couples.
  - Feminist Action Research into political, policy and budgetary processes relevant to older couple households.
Why Feminist Action-Research?

- Conceptual and methodological framework blending participatory action research and feminist lens.

- Focus on how knowledge is created and its role in emancipatory change.

- Aims to create knowledge that encourage the participation of women in research and include their experiences and views.
Our approach to action-research

- Observation and engagement: Meetings complemented by email and phone discussions.
- Keeping an account of a practice of gender analysis (civil society).
- Submissions to parliamentary commissions and briefings to politicians.
- Semi-structured interviews with representatives of civil society organisations, researchers and policy actors with experience in policy influence and change.
WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT?
INITIAL THOUGHTS
1. Understanding the policy process - Policy community relevant to retirement incomes:

- Policy agencies and politicians
- Parliamentary Budget Office and committees
- Researchers
- Civil society organisations working in the policy area of retirement income policies
2. Understanding the policy process: The policy and political context

- How individuals use and manage their retirement income is gaining some policy traction.
- Women’s economics insecurity in retirement has been documented.
- Yet there is no change in policies re. retirement incomes.
  - Depletion of gender machinery in government.
  - Neoliberalism has reduced entry points for gender issues.
  - Women in retirement no perceived as a constituency.
3. Identifying intra-household inequality as an issue

- Placing **intra-household inequality in retirement on the agenda:**
  - Intra-household issues in retirement are invisible and seen as outside the realm of the retirement income policy.
  - Situations of vulnerability as the only site for action: *transparency in divorce.*

- **Articulating the problem:**
  - Belief that inequality in retirement savings will close as the system matures.
  - Belief that idealised versions of about families.
  - Superannuation are prioritized in Australia’s retirement incomes.
4. Policy analysis

❖ **On the inside:**
  ❖ Bureaucracy was a welcoming space to our research team.
  ❖ How we presented our research mattered and experiences were powerful.
  ❖ Policy framework and agenda sets the tone for the analysis that gets noticed.

❖ **On the outside:**
  ❖ Limited visibility of academic research.
  ❖ NGO dedicated to the well-being of older Australians has produced its first report on gender inequality in retirement.
  ❖ Placing the research in the paper: ‘Who’s the boss?’ Survey (Western Australian)
How has our analysis changed?

- Greater focus on discussing the potential of what we are finding and listening to what matters to those engaged in policy.

- Communication of findings – Briefing Notes as well as journal articles.

- Expanding the debate: Presence of an international voice (S. Himmelweit).
What have we learnt about action-research?

- Policy processes are complex: analysis involves different lenses.
- Juggling demands of the project and those of AR is hard.
- Our multi-method and discipline approach as been an asset to generate engagement with the issue.
- Engagement is resource intensive and challenging.
- Our focus is on the potential to generate new ideas and an agenda; change is complex, demands activism and cannot be hurried.