



Working Women's Information Service

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ISSN 0159-3846

Bulletin No. 84/2

May 1984

This bulletin is a revised and updated edition of a paper presented by Mary Owen at the 52nd ANZAAS Conference at Macquarie University, Sydney, May 1982

EMPLOYER AND UNION ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE REVERSAL OF MALE AND FEMALE WORK ROLES

I did not choose the title of this paper and, frankly, my mind boggles at the implications of reversing male and female roles in the workplace or anywhere else.

The most noticeable difference between the roles of men and women is that men are in command and women provide the support without which those at the top could not operate.

In the workplace men are regarded as breadwinners - women as providers of supplementary benefits - although we may have progressed a little since Judge Heydon declared that every boy knew from birth that he would be a breadwinner whereas for women work was just an interlude in their lives.⁽¹⁾

I do not wish to see these roles reversed; nor, I think, does anyone else. What liberationists - female or male - are concerned about is breaking down artificial barriers and allowing all people freedom to choose what they wish to do with their lives, unconstrained by having to play a role predetermined by sex or class or any other factor.

What I think is required of me is to consider the attitudes of employers and unions towards the acceptance of women and men in occupations currently regarded as being peculiarly suitable for one sex or the other. I say "currently regarded" because, contrary to popular belief, the work performed by men and women is seldom allocated on the basis of 'natural' inherent aptitude and in fact the allocation changes from time to time and varies from country to country.

OFFICIAL ATTITUDES

Unions and employers and governments too - at the top level - "agree that discrimination against women in employment is unacceptable in Australia today. All are becoming increasingly aware of the need to demonstrate their commitment to non-discrimination by introducing positive procedures to promote equal employment opportunities".⁽²⁾

We know this is so because it says so in an admirable little pamphlet entitled "Guidelines to

Employers", produced by the National Labour Consultative Council (NLCC) which consists of representatives of those three august groups of people - employers, trade unions and governments.

The pamphlet suggests possible action for "those wishing to encourage equal employment opportunities in their enterprise".⁽³⁾ Well, who is wishing and how hard are they wishing?

EMPLOYER ATTITUDES

I thought the best source of information on employers' attitudes would be employment agencies and so I drafted a short questionnaire and endeavoured to ring 28 Victorian agencies including three CES Offices. Despite numerous attempts, I could get no response from one 'phone number and in another case I was unable to contact the appropriate person. I assured those whom I contacted that I would not quote any names and I asked them for an honest assessment of their clients' attitudes.

Three refused point blank to answer any questions and one begged to be excused. He said "You may be genuine but I'd rather leave it" and added a rather enigmatic little comment that "The law should be changed back to the way it used to be. A man used to shake another man's hand and know he could trust him. That doesn't bind anyone any more". I had the feeling that he meant you couldn't trust a woman.

All those who refused to answer were males. One said "I don't know who you are". He may have been less suspicious had I been able to call personally but one wonders what he had to hide.

Of the 22 who agreed to co-operate 12 were female and 10 were male.

The survey consisted of six questions. Although most of the respondents said they believed the attitudes of employers were changing, the answers they gave to the questions showed that many prejudices still remain.

Q.1: Do prospective employers usually specify the sex of the person required?

Five agents admitted that, although it was against the law in Victoria, most employers still specified a particular sex when recruiting a new employee. Six said their clients simply assumed a particular sex. Nine said it varied but that employers tended to make assumptions that some environments would not be suitable for women or they were not willing to introduce a woman to an all-male establishment or vice versa. Only two said that most employers did not stipulate a particular sex but one qualified that by saying "but there is no way they would have a man as a typist" and the other said "but they still keep saying 'he'".



Q.2: When interviewing applicants for a client, do you feel free to recommend

- (a) a woman for a position such as architect, engineer, sales representative, manager, senior executive, accountant, draughtsman, technician, skilled tradesman, unskilled labourer?
- (b) a man for a position as nurse, child-minder, domestic cleaner, typist, word-processor operator, clerical assistant, receptionist, tea-maker?

Every agent said that he or she would be willing to recommend a woman for a traditionally male-type job but six qualified their answers by excepting some positions which they themselves felt would not be suitable for women or which they assumed the employer would not consider suitable. As one man said: "You can't have women digging trenches".

There was a lot more hesitation about presenting men for traditionally female jobs. Three women and one man said they would not attempt this, one adding that his clients would laugh if he sent a man along for a typist's job. Several mentioned that there was an increasing number of Asian men seeking jobs as typists and receptionists but that they met with little success despite overseas experience. Two people suggested that many male employers regarded their secretaries and receptionists as status symbols. One said "they want a bit of glamour" and the other "they still prefer dumb blondes". One added that typing was more suitable for a woman. Four men and one woman said they had recommended men for some of these jobs and recounted success stories including finding jobs for male tea-makers ('retired gentlemen') and nurses but most qualified their replies in some way and indicated that the successes were the exception.

Q.3: (a) Do you ever actively encourage an employer to try a person of the opposite sex to that expected? If so,

- (b) What tactics do you use?

Eleven said they did try to change employers' attitudes. One said "Not on your life". Two said it was not their job to try and persuade a client and another said "Only if I had no suitable man". Six said they would in some cases if a woman were extra good, depending on how well they knew the employer.

All the persisters said they argued for acceptance of the applicant on the grounds of the best qualifications for the job and none suggested that there should be any positive discrimination in favour of women or men. One woman said she had never convinced anyone who was opposed from the start.

The three CES officers (one man and two women) were adamant that they were not allowed to discriminate in any way. They did see themselves as having a role to educate employers about the requirements of the Equal Opportunities Act but they pointed out that they did not know what happened when the applicants went for interviews as they received no feedback on who actually got the job.

Q.4: What sort of response do you get if you press the point?

Four people said they had had good results from persistence - if the women were really good - but most said it depended on the employer - particularly on his age, older men being more conservative. One said "Europeans won't consider it" but another said "Australians are behind the times". One woman said "They have collapsed on the phone" (when she suggested a man as a typist). The most perceptive comment came from a woman who said "It varies but women don't have as much chance of getting jobs in my field - they don't have the network contacts - the old school tie etc."

The stock objections were:

- * We just don't employ females. We've always had men (or women).
- * There are no other women in the establishment and they wouldn't fit in. It might throw the office out.
- * The environment is unsuitable - the men's language would upset women.
- * The work is too heavy or too dirty.
- * Women would have difficulty with subordinates.
- * Females are less reliable.
- * Women can't work alone - they have difficulty in selling programmes to senior managers. The senior managers tend not to believe that young women can tell them what to do.
- * The men wouldn't work with her.
- * Union rules work against women - they aren't allowed to work back by themselves and must have taxis home if they work late. They can't lift heavy weights.
- * Women might want to take maternity leave.
- * There are no lavatories or change rooms for women.
- * Male employers want glamour in a secretary.
- * Men are more inhibited about working in all-female occupations.

- * Women are better at detail work. They stick at it longer.
- * Would not recommend men for babysitting - clients might think twice about that.
- * Women come cheaper.

Reasons why agents would not press employers to take the other sex.

- * Would not attempt to persuade employer because I would be held responsible if the person proved unsatisfactory.
- * Clients would laugh.
- * Some clients are old-fashioned and conservative.
- * Our role is to present applicants - not to educate employers.
- * Some women are timid and it would not be fair to them to try and push employers to take them.
- * I would not recommend a woman to take a job which I wouldn't take myself - e.g. in dirty unpleasant environment.
- * Sexual harassment is a big problem for women these days and there would be more danger of this in an all-male environment.
- * We've never had any female engineers apply.
- * So few men apply for these jobs and we have plenty of women, so why bother pushing the men for jobs which women usually do?
- * They won't take women as hotel managers - married couples sometimes but not women as managers.
- * Few men can type - it's more suitable for women.
- * Our business is done over the telephone and it's a bit delicate. You can tell by the client's voice whether he will consider a woman or not.

The most forthright answer was from a man who specialised in hotel and catering staff.

"Females are not work a cracker," he said. "They're unreliable and unstable. They don't stick. Women should stay at home. They're alright for nursing and office work. If you only knew the influence they have on managers. Young managers are idiots and some older ones who should know better. She sleeps with the boss and gets him around her little finger. They wreck the place. There are some good women bosses but so many women are prejudiced." Well, well. Who's prejudiced?



Q.6: How do you think men feel about working for a female boss?

Seven said the men would not like it or would feel threatened and five others raised various doubts. Most felt that there would be problems and one woman said "We still have to tell them that their boss will be a woman". One said women would have great difficulty with subordinates and would be under great strain. Some evaded the question by saying "It doesn't matter if she's good" or "It's unlikely to happen in an industrial situation" but they did not actually say how they thought the men working under the woman would feel. Six said they had no way of knowing as they did not get any feedback - men would be unlikely to say they had left their last job because the boss was a woman.

A perceptive comment from a man was "My own opinion is that personnel evaluation systems are mainly male-oriented. Women evaluate differently. We need two evaluation systems".

Q.5: Do you think the situation is changing?

Fourteen of the respondents were emphatic that the position had changed during the seventies - particularly since 1975 (International Women's Year). One gave full credit to the Victorian Commissioner for Equal Opportunity, Fay Marles. Six were less enthusiastic but thought change was on the way and one said she did not think women had ever been discriminated against during the 16 years she had been working. They all presumed this question referred to women.

The main message seems to be that employers' attitudes are changing slowly but the prejudices are still there. Women have to have impeccable references even to be considered for senior positions. The few women who reach executive level are saddled with a tremendous load of responsibility for other women's advancement for, if they fail, the people who have employed them are likely to say "Women are no good in these positions".

UNION ATTITUDES

Obtaining candid expressions of individual union attitudes towards the reversal of sex roles presented a different problem as unions do not employ agencies to recruit members nor do they make decisions about who will be employed.

Like the employers' federations represented on the NLCC, the ACTU cannot direct its affiliates to adhere to its policy as expressed in the Guidelines to Employers. However, despite the odd demarcation dispute, unions have a solidarity which employers do not. We do not talk about the employers in the same way as we say the unions. There are thousands of employers in Australia and they do not see themselves as part of a unified movement. In fact they mostly act in competition with each other and each firm determines its own policies and attitudes.

In contrast there are only about 300 unions and, since the amalgamation of the Australian Council of Salaried and Professional Associations (ACSPA) and the Council of Australian Government Employees Organisation (CAGEO) with the ACTU, almost all unions are affiliated - either directly or through state trades and labour councils - with the ACTU.

All these unions contribute, through branches, trades and labour councils and industry groups, to the policy made by the ACTU. The big difference between individual employers and union leaders is that the former are self-appointed whereas union leaders are elected. Therefore there is some justification for believing that decisions taken by the ACTU reflect prevailing union attitudes. We may thus consider some of the actions taken by the ACTU during the last few years and see how far they tally with the sentiments expressed at the NLCC level.

Working Women's Charter

In 1977 the ACTU adopted a working women's charter which included the following statements:

"Active encouragement should be given by the trade union movement to women who wish to enter areas of training, employment and apprenticeships which traditionally have been regarded as male preserves;" and

"The ACTU, ... together with affiliated unions, should actively encourage women members to stand for office. Where necessary, positive provisions should be considered to provide specific representation of women to ensure that union executives are fully representative of all members. Women should also be nominated on delegations requiring union representation."⁽⁴⁾

The following year the ACTU held a special women's conference to discuss ways of implementing the charter and most of the decisions taken by that conference were endorsed by the ACTU Executive including a resolution that "a co-ordinated information and education campaign around the Working Women's Charter be given top priority by the ACTU and its affiliated unions".

Individual Unions

In 1980 the ACTU issued a report on The Integration of Women into Trade Unions⁽⁵⁾ which included reports from unions on the progress of the charter campaign. There was little about women entering traditionally male occupations (and of course nothing about men entering female occupations) but three unions which had previously had no female members reported a breakthrough.

The Australian Postal and Telecommunications Union had six women members who were employed as Telecom lines staff. (Note: they are not called linesmen any more.)

The Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen (train drivers) said: "There are two features worth noting and they are firstly that the recruitment of women into locomotive crew grades is a new phenomenon and secondly that they are well received by the male membership and encouraged to participate in union affairs. The union has taken a stand on having all barriers to women being employed in locomotive grades removed and is currently vigorously taking action to obtain amenities and all facilities at a standard no less than those provided for male employees."

The Merchant Service Guild of Australia reported that: "The history and traditions of the Australian maritime industry are such that women have never played a significant role. However, last year, for the first time, a woman deck officer cadet was employed by the Australian National Line. She has completed some of her sea time and is currently studying at the Maritime College in Launceston. By all accounts she is coping extremely well and the Guild is hoping she will be forerunner to the inclusion of many more women into the industry and into the union."

It may surprise you to know that the Waterside Workers' Federation varied its rules on 28.7.1975 to enable women to be members of the union. However they stated that at the time of writing "because there has been no recruitment to the stevedoring industry there is only one woman member of the Federation".

Other unions reported that women had been elected as fulltime officials and as delegates to decision-making councils. The Vehicle Builders Employees' Federation commented that: "A change of attitude among male union officials has been the most significant result of the adoption of the Working Women's Charter ... although overall there is still under-representation of women".

Women as Union Officials

Progress has been slow but in 1981 one hundred and fifty women from forty-six unions registered for an ACTU conference for women who held official positions within the union movement. Following this conference a questionnaire was distributed through affiliated unions, seeking information from female members about their activities within their unions. Of the first 200 replies received 12 came from women who held the fulltime position of union secretary (a sixfold increase in the last five years). Twenty-six were honorary presidents or vice-presidents and 35 were industrial officers or organisers, most of these being elected positions. A number of other women held paid positions such as research officers and education officers. The election of women to top positions in the union indicates that the majority of the members of the unions concerned were not averse to having women in these positions, a situation which was very rare a few years ago when Jan Marsh was appointed by the ACTU as its first female industrial advocate, following in the footsteps of Ralph Willis and Bob Hawke.

Response to the above questionnaire was disappointing, particularly as there were no replies from members of some of the unions with a large or predominantly female membership except for a few women who were employed in the offices of other unions.

When this paper was presented to the ANZAAS Conference in May 1982 I stated that, so far as I knew, there had been no woman on any state trades and labor council executive since Pat Giles of the Trades and Labor Council of Western Australia was elected to the Australian Senate. However during the three years since the questionnaire was circulated (1981) there has been a marked increase in the number of women on the governing bodies of state and provincial trades and labor councils. In 1984:

- * The Labor Council of New South Wales executive includes two women. One of these - Judith Walker - is one of three vice-presidents.
- * The Victorian Trades Hall Council has three women on its executive, one of whom - Judith Bornstein - is the vice-president.
- * The Trades and Labor Council of Western Australia has two women on executive, one of whom - Anne-Marie Heine - is a junior vice-president.

- * The Tasmanian Trades and Labor Council has one woman on executive and recently appointed the first woman ever to the Trades Hall Trustees and Management Committee.
- * The Trades and Labor Council of the Australian Capital Territory has a female vice-president - Meg Bollen.
- * Two provincial trades and labor councils have female secretaries; one has a female secretary/treasurer; one has a female president; one has a female junior vice-president and one has a female minute secretary.

The most significant break-through of women into the union decision-making area was undoubtedly the election, in September 1983, of Jenny George of the Australian Teachers' Federation to the ACSPA industry group position on the ACTU Executive. Ms George is the first woman ever elected to the ACTU Executive.

Although these women represent only 8 percent of all the positions listed in the ACTU Directory, the situation probably compares very favourably with the percentage of first and second division Commonwealth Public Service positions occupied by women. It is also, I should think, better than the proportional representation of women on employer unions or the boards of directors of public companies.

Trade Union Training

The trade union movement is making an effort to improve the situation by running special training courses for women under the auspices of the Trade Union Training Authority (TUTA). Until recently the main problem was to get women to apply for these courses - often because their husbands did not want them to be away from home for a week. However, recent courses have been fully booked and several unions have credited the TUTA courses with the increase in women standing for election as officials and delegates.

Discrimination

The ACTU has checked out hundreds of awards and agreements for evidence of discrimination and its legal officer has prepared and distributed to affiliates a model anti-discrimination clause for inclusion in such awards and agreements. Several unions have already gone to the trouble of changing their rules in order to eliminate all sexist terminology and to ensure that the rules apply to all people - male and female. The ACTU Constitution, Rules and Standing Orders is a model for nonsexist language.

ACTU policy declares that:

"Equal opportunity and access for women should be promoted in all areas of work to ensure that women are equally represented at all levels of the workforce structure"⁽⁶⁾ and

"Congress welcomes the Australian Government promotion of equal opportunity policies and programmes. Congress also notes the acceptance of the principles by the tripartite National Labour Consultative Council (NLCC). The ACTU seeks the implementation of such equal opportunity policies and programmes in both the public and private sectors of employment. Congress also supports the provisions of the Sex Discrimination Bill, particularly in regard to the question of sexual harassment."⁽⁷⁾

Affirmative Action

"Following the release of the Green Paper on Affirmative Action, Congress determines that a meeting of unions be convened to discuss the ramifications of the paper including:

- (i) structural changes necessary to implement equal opportunity and affirmative action programmes;
- (ii) the promotion by the ACTU of proportional representation of women on union and ACTU decision-making bodies and committees."⁽⁸⁾

At the time of writing the ACTU Women's Committee was considering a vast amount of material on affirmative action with a view to making recommendations to the ACTU Executive.

Young Women

The ACTU, in a pre-budget submission to the Federal Government, among a number of items specifically directed towards enabling women to share employment opportunities, urged the Government to allocate money to create jobs so that young women could obtain apprenticeships and subsequently employment.

Five years ago, the ACTU Working Women's Centre, with funding from the Federal Government, established a register of women in non-traditional occupations. The project, currently funded by the Victorian Ministry of Employment and Training, is designed to broaden the career aspirations of young women beyond the narrow range of jobs in the sales, clerical and services areas chosen by most women. Speakers from the register visit schools and speak to students about themselves and their work, thus providing alternative role-models for young girls while they are still in the process of choosing courses of study which will largely determine their future working life options.

This project has received a good deal of support from unions. In 1978 the three teacher unions' Elimination of Sexism in Education Project, with the assistance of the Working Women's Centre, produced a "Women at Work" schools kit from which the register was developed. The President of the ACTU, Mr. Cliff Dolan, endorsed the encouragement of women into trade apprenticeships by giving the opening address at the Box Hill girls' apprenticeship project display during Apprenticeship Week in 1981.

The Co-ordinator of the project has provided assistance to unions and other bodies in the establishment of similar registers in other states. In Victoria the ACTU Working Women's Centre register was extended to the La Trobe Valley in 1981. The Gippsland Trades and Labor Council has been very supportive of this development. The co-ordinator liaises with unions, employers and the schools sector to encourage broader employment opportunities for women.

Limitations

Despite all this activity at the top, there is still the problem that some unions have no or few female members. They can hardly be blamed for this. They no longer exclude women from membership (as some craft unions used to) but qualification for membership is based on either industry or job classification. Women have to be employed as carpenters or boilermakers before they can join the appropriate union. So far few women have broken the barriers and when they have many have encountered problems when they first reported for work in a hitherto all-male shop. However women

on the WWC register have reported that, once the men found they were willing to accept their share of the dirty work and responsibility, they were accepted and very often championed against would-be detractors.

There is little evidence of union encouragement to men to engage in work traditionally reserved for women except for the Hospital Employees' Federation which has a number of male nurses among its membership. This union held a seminar on discrimination in 1981 at which the secretary stressed the union's commitment to equal opportunity for all workers. The Royal Australian Nursing Federation probably has male members too but I do not have any firsthand evidence of any special effort to encourage men to join the nursing ranks.

Because the jobs which most women perform in Australia have always been paid less than the jobs men perform, few men want these jobs. It is true that some women earned the same wage as men performing the same work during wartime but those women were performing jobs considered to be men's work.

COMMUNITY ATTITUDES

Male and female roles in the workplace are but a reflection of the roles which men and women play in the community generally. In primitive societies the male role was principally concerned with hunting and fighting over territorial claims, activities which took men away from the domestic base and allowed them to interact with other tribes. Women were food-gatherers and carers of the young and more likely to remain at the home base while the men ventured further afield. Now that the battles have been transferred to the business world, that arena is seen as the 'natural' place for men, who are still regarded as fighters, leaders, heads of households, protectors - action-oriented, whereas women are seen as servants to the household, caring for the needs of others, passive and incapable of making important decisions - out of place in the tough hard world of business.

We must remember that employers and unions are not separate entities but part of the community. Although employers tend to come from a particular class, unions are made up of a wide range of members of the community - university professors, bank managers, sales people, wharf labourers, clerks and cleaners and their attitudes towards appropriate roles for men and women are those of the community generally.

Most of the objections to women and men being employed in nontraditional roles are based on prejudice, conditioning, selfinterest and sometimes fantasy. They come under two main headings: (1) protection of women's welfare and (2) protection of men's higher status.

Most men take their protective role seriously and firmly believe they are responsible for earning enough money to provide security for their families even though the reality is - and always has been - that for most this is an impossibility. When most paid work consisted of heavy manual labour in mines, on the land and in heavy industry, men did not believe that women could or should be expected to perform such work (that is in more recent times and forgetting the farm work performed by women - but without pay). The nature of work has changed since the industrial revolution and these days a very small percentage of the population is engaged in heavy work. But the old attitudes persist and are reflected in conditions which unions have won from employers such as limits on the weights which women may lift and the obligation to provide taxis to take women home if they are required to work late. These special conditions for women are used by employers as excuses for not employing women in positions where they could apply.

Most people are wary of changes to long-established customs and unions have long been suspicious of any moves on the part of employers to institute changes. They have good grounds for this because in the past when firms have sought to employ women it has usually been because they could get them at lower rates of pay or considered them more tractable than men, thus threatening men's jobs.

The principle of 'divide-and-conquer' has been used most effectively to divide women from men in the labour market and thus prevent a united front

for the betterment of all workers. The most effective strategy has been to imply that men are entitled to the best-paid jobs and that women are a threat to those jobs. Those who are in line for top jobs seldom want to move over and make room for someone else. In other words, it is not simply a matter of welcoming a woman to the ranks but of being prepared to give up one's own position in her favour.

Another more subtle means of keeping women on the outside is the mateship and 'old boys club' tradition - the idea that men will be men and must get away from the petticoats to let off steam, to use rough language on the job, to enjoy their 'pot' on the way home. For the working-class man his club is often his workplace and he fears that the admission of women on the same level would curtail his freedom and that he would lose what he considers to be his privilege. The same is true of the business man who gains status from having to drink with clients after work and importantly rings his wife - or gets his secretary to ring - to say he'll be late home because of business.

For the great majority of men who do not work for themselves but for a boss the only people over whom they can exercise authority are their wives and children. They need to feel they are better than women in order to bolster their own morale. They cannot accept that a woman could do their job as well as they can - that would belittle their own achievement. Most are not conscious of this. They truly believe that there are some things that women cannot do - just because they are women. They also

believe that men cannot be expected to waste their time on what they consider to be inferior duties such as looking after children and preparing meals and cleaning up. The work for which they think women are suited is usually an extension of this supportive caring role. They see themselves as heads of households.

A natural extension of the head of the household notion is that men should be leaders (although, strangely enough, an exception is made at the very top where, if there is no direct male heir, a woman may be accepted as monarch. In this case the preservation of caste and class outweighs the desirability of having a man in the number one position). Once in a leadership position they are unlikely to want to relinquish this power. Hence the lack of enthusiasm on the part of most men to enter occupations traditionally held by women.

I do not believe that we should be talking about reversing roles but rather about people performing work for which they are qualified. The trouble about women entering occupations traditionally performed by men and vice versa is that we are inclined to judge their performance by the manner in which the other sex has customarily performed the job. So the newcomer spends much energy in trying to show that she or he is just the same as the other sex. It could well be that men and women could bring a new perspective to many jobs and complement each other - to the benefit of all concerned. I am rather inclined to agree with the employment agent who said that we need two evaluation systems.

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Frank and Ernest

by Bob Thaves



HOW CAN A WOMAN
BE SUING US FOR
SEX DISCRIMINATION?...
WE'VE NEVER EVEN
HAD ONE WORK HERE!