

“If she was a boy, she could do the resilience of gender as a de

CAROLE FORD argues that the triad of state-market-family pressures has continued to compromise women’s participation in the labour market into the 21st century, undermining the tenuous grasp women have on the right to social, economic and political independence.

A gender segregated labour force is not merely an economic issue, which locates women at the periphery of the formal economy, it has implications for all facets of women’s citizenship.

Systemic disadvantage experienced by women within the labour market is linked to a workplace historically structured on the needs and attributes of male workers — the ‘traditional breadwinner’ model. IR policy which purports a gender neutral framework while implementing assumptions about gender in occupational descriptors, professional hierarchies and workplace practices has for more than a century been “an important arena for the consolidation and reproduction of gender identity” (Williams, 1995:180).

While the recent Work Choices reforms have serious implications for women — who are an increasingly important, but demonstrably vulnerable, sector of the labour market — I would contend that the ‘invisibility’ of women in the design and implementation of IR policy merely reflects their omission from consideration in most mainstream policy development.

In the area of paid labour, it would be simplistic to relegate the discussion exclusively to fluctuations in the gender pay gap. For many women participation in the labour force, besides being an economic imperative, develops self-esteem, fosters independence and results in a range of other tangible and intangible personal benefits. However, it is undeniable that lower pay levels are evident in jobs which are socially downgraded and have participants with relatively lower labour market status and bargaining power (Brosnan, 2006:3), and this certainly includes women.

The undervaluation of women’s workforce participation and the predominance of normative assumptions which underline the sexual division of labour have been a focus of feminist challenge in the analysis of labour market theory, but the myth of ‘women’s work’ — and with it ‘women’s pay’ — prevails. As Justice Mary Gaudron remarked in 1979: “We got equal pay once, then we got it again, and then we got it again, and now we still don’t have it.” In 2006, it is still elusive.

To promote women’s rights to income security gained from paid employment challenges many expectations perpetuated by the ideology of the family, and interpreted in government policy as female dependency. The reality is that women’s reliance on a male income earner has been stead-

ily decreasing, so that by the late 1980s less than a third of women in Australia over fourteen were fully supported in this manner. Yet the concept of women as the secondary labour force persists.

The sex-segregated division of labour that characterises the Australian labour market is seemingly impervious to fundamental change: women continue to be disadvantaged by a significant gender pay differential and women overwhelmingly have responsibility as primary carers of children, the elderly and those with a disability. Currently women make up 42 per cent of the Australian workforce, 70 per cent of all women of working age are in some form of employment and women in all types of employment earn on average 66 per cent of male earnings. Despite these discrepancies between women and men in the workforce, IR reform continues to be based on male models of participation ignoring the ramifications for women.

The connection to vocational education and training:

The patterns and procedures which normalise gender differences amongst VET students were emphatically highlighted in an encounter at my TAFE Institute between a career counsellor, a potential student, and her mother. After numerous suggestions for appropriate courses had been discussed and dismissed, the mother exclaimed with equanimity: “If only she was a boy, she could do an apprenticeship!”

The VET sector, despite its inherent centrality to workplace issues, is addressing the dimension of gender in an ad hoc manner, and gender-segmentation of areas of study persists. In a comprehensive study of women in vocational education and training, ATEC (2002:2) concluded that:

... [T]he pattern of women’s participation in training mirrors their participation in the labour market. Women are clustered in ‘feminised industries’ and at the lower end of the pay scale ... Women are still less likely to have fulltime employment after graduating from VET courses ... In addition, women are more likely to be studying at the lower certificate levels.

Preliminary data from enrolled students on the Cairns campus of the Tropical North Queensland Institute of TAFE in a range of specified courses appear to validate these observations. The graph demonstrates the gendered nature of enrolments, with a negligible cohort of students enrolled outside traditional occupational areas.

to an apprenticeship': Determinant in career planning



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force) has increased markedly in the past five years and continues to be far higher than for boys.

The promotion of vocational education in schools has gathered in intensity partly as a response for improving post-school options for designated 'at risk' students. However, the research available suggests that involvement in a VET in schools program precipitates gendered career selection at an even earlier age.

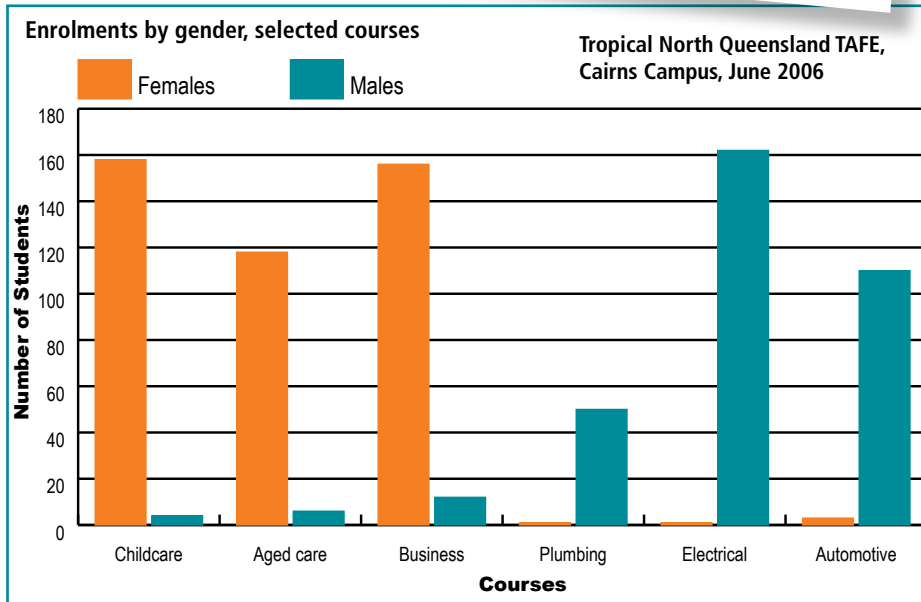
With the pace of IR reform and technological change, the position of girls and women within feminised industries is increasingly precarious and there appears to be limited cause for optimism. As Cumming (1997:7) points out, there has been considerable effort undertaken to increase female participation in non-traditional areas of the workforce, and yet the interventions have achieved only minimal success.

Research by Butler and Woolley (2005) identified a concerning lack of awareness amongst girls of contemporary employment trends, job availability, pay rates and the potential sustainability of the choices they make. For many girls participating in VET programs, entry into traditional areas of paid employment is not identified as problematic.

It seems to me that in this discussion some critical factors, while outside the scope of this paper, must necessarily be addressed. These include:

- the role of school counsellors and career education at primary, secondary and post-secondary levels;
- a renewed commitment to sustainable intervention programs in educational settings at primary, secondary and post-secondary levels;
- a move away from the individualism of the 'deficit model' of students to an acknowledgement of disadvantage from institutional and systemic factors;
- emphasis on positive aspects of workplace diversity — and what it actually means;
- a potential solution to the current labour skills shortage;
- comprehensive strategies for change which engage students, parents, employers, teachers and the community in general; and
- more research, particularly analysis and evaluation of previous gender-focused projects.

Significant progress cannot be expected, or sustained, without a co-ordinated consideration of change which de-emphasises the responsibility of individual students. Placing the onus on *all* the



Historically, VET had been associated with a masculinised culture related to the link between technical education and the predominantly male-dominated trades and vestiges of this relationship still appear to define policy directives in many TAFE institutions.

The integration of apprenticeships and traineeships into a revised category of New Apprenticeships in 1998 resulted in a proportionately dramatic increase in females in training from 20 to 36 per cent, but again the occupational segregation by gender apparent in the workforce is replicated in enrolment statistics. The NCVER (2006:86)

reports that, for the period 1995 to 2000, "... nearly two-thirds of females in new apprenticeships are clerical sales and service workers, whereas almost two-thirds of male new apprentices are tradespersons ..."

Typically in a discussion of emerging patterns of women's employment, the relative success of some women perpetuates the misconception that female disadvantage is no longer a factor in the workplace. Yet Horin (2005) asserts that the proportion of girls considered 'at risk' (unemployed, working part-time or withdrawn from the labour

‘If she was a boy, she could do an apprenticeship’

players to promote inclusive attitudes and implementation policies and procedures which are gender-sensitive is a challenging prospect, especially in a climate of ‘what about the boys?’.

A recent proposal at TNQ TAFE takes a proactive stance. The proposal, “Girls in aTrade”, aims to promote female entry to trade qualifications by engaging 10-14 females in apprenticeships with regional employers by January 2007.

This is a tangible response to the skills shortages being experienced within some trades in Cairns and Queensland in general, as well as a reaffirmation of TNQ TAFE’s commitment to equity and diversity. The aim is to introduce a pilot project involving the creation of a female-only apprenticeship class in the electrical trades’ area, through targeting three audiences: partners/sponsors, apprentices, and employers. Specific components include a \$5000 bonus scheme for employers funded by partners working in conjunction with TNQ TAFE; the use of mentors and spokespersons to promote the initiative with girls and their parents; media promotion; actively pursuing the employment of a female trade teacher; and ensuring effective promotion to local employers. Intrinsic to the project is an evaluation timetable designed to include progressive review, make adjustments where necessary and develop a feasible model for expansion of the initiative to other trade areas.

Evaluation of past strategies, while fragmented, identifies a lack of integrated industry and employer focus, and an organisational environment which while tacitly not hostile is far from welcoming as major issues. These are some of the elements that the TNQ TAFE proposal attempts to address. However, securing a foothold in non-traditional areas of employment for some girls does not abrogate TNQ TAFE from working collaboratively with other educational sectors to dismantle the barriers for equitable access for all students.

Linking employment, VET realities and educational practice:

In pursuing issues of occupational choice, career planning and gendered workplaces, I would contend that it is essential to examine curriculum practices at the earliest educational levels.

While much of the research in gender construct and gender related schemas in the area of vocational choice focuses on the post-primary student, analyses of sex-role stereotypes demonstrate that gender is already salient amongst pre-schoolers (Kimmel, 2000). Gottfredson found that children begin to eliminate career choices because they are the wrong sex-type between the ages of six and eight (WEEA, 2002).

While projects like the TNQ TAFE ‘Girls in a Trade’ are extremely relevant for women and girls currently making decisions about their labour market participation, they are basically a reactive approach which may create short-term change. Stereotypes about women and women’s work roles and concepts of labour force participation based on gender do not suddenly ‘appear’ in the post-compulsory years, they have been evolving since birth. Enhancing the career development process for young children has significant advantage for both girls and boys to realise their potential and to contribute to personal well-being unconstrained by gender imperatives.

There is valid and persuasive argument for identifying connections between work and gender at a number of life stages: females currently in or returning to the paid labour market; females at the transition stage between education and work; and young girls in the primary school sector. Each stage requires renewed vigour in research, policy planning and implementation of socio-cultural projects. Learning about work should be a lifelong experience; learning about gender should be

intrinsic to the experience.

Dr Carole Ford is currently the Equity and Disability Officer at Tropical North Queensland TAFE and is a MEd candidate at James Cook University (Cairns).

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