

Working Women's Centre

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WOMEN IN SKILLED TRADES.

Increasing unemployment and technological change, particularly with regard to "women's work", have made the future of employment for women even more insecure than for men. Women are confining themselves more and more to the traditional areas of female employment, characterized by low pay, low status and poor training or promotion prospects. Too few women, it seems, are investigating avenues for work in the trade and technical fields. This paper discusses some of the reasons why women are under-represented in these areas.

TECHNICAL EDUCATION.

7.6 per cent of males over 15 were studying for qualifications in 1971, compared with only 2.9 per cent of females. 4.2 per cent of males, but only one per cent of females undertook trade and technician courses (including hairdressing and nursing).⁽¹⁾ In 1971, 20.3 per cent of men in the labour force compared to 1.9 per cent of women, held trade qualifications.⁽²⁾

In technical and further education (TAFE) courses leading to qualifications, females predominated in "other skills" courses which for women are mainly secretarial courses. The Report of the TAFE Commission for the Triennium 1977-1979, shows that only 6.1 per cent of all students in trade areas were female. Yet the first TAFE report stated:⁽³⁾

"It should be the responsibility of TAFE institutions ... to ensure that they do not deny access to courses, or subjects offered on the grounds of age or sex. Discrimination against women can take the form of unavailability of suitable toilets, ablution facilities, safety clothing and clothing suitable for women."

These same reasons are often used by employers not to take on women for skilled trades and training. The Report continued:

"Social and traditional attitudes of the community, including those held by the women themselves, have excluded them from the manual trades and this appears unlikely to change significantly in the foreseeable future. They have not, however, faced the same obstacles in the professional and para-professional fields where the strongest and fastest increases in the share of the skilled labour force are occurring."

During the Second World War women proved they could perform well in so-called "male" jobs. At the end of the War, most of the women were gradually phased out of the skilled jobs. The 1947 Census (the last to give detailed occupational breakdowns) gives a good indication of the type of jobs in which women were included during the war years. Figures for women in skilled occupations were:

24	Carpenters and joiners
222	Painters and french polishers
7	Glaziers
15	Motor mechanics
19	Electrical mechanics
170	Dental mechanics
11	Engine drivers
197	Moulders
74	Welders
122	Fitters and turners
529	Printers
68	Boot makers

APPRENTICESHIPS.

More recently the number of women entering skilled trades has been increasing slowly in comparison with the war years. The most recent figures for Victoria show that there are 302 women in apprenticeships other than Ladies' Hairdressing out of a total of 35,980. In fact, Victoria, (with the exception of the ACT), had many more female apprentices than any other state.

Between 1976 and 1977, there was an increase in female apprentices of 23% - far greater than the overall intake of apprentices of 8% over the same period. Despite increasing applications from girls, they still comprise only 5% of all apprentices and less than one percent in all trades outside hairdressing. The Victorian Industrial Training Commission 1977 Annual Report commented:

"There is still much work to be done in overcoming obstacles to girls entering apprenticeship trades The greatest obstacle to further development would be the reluctance on the part of many employers to consider engaging female apprentices."

EMPLOYER ATTITUDES.

"Once we have exhausted the potential male population, then perhaps we would look at girls."

This comment from a survey by Calvert, sums up the attitude of many employers towards taking on female apprentices. Unfortunately, no person can enter an apprenticeship unless an employer is willing to indenture him/her. (Catch 22) In her survey, Calvert found the same tired old excuses used repeatedly:

- (i) *"the weights they would have to lift would be too heavy."*
(In fact the weights laid down for apprentices of 16, 17 and 18 are below the maximum weights for women.)
- (ii) *"There are no facilities for women."*
- (iii) *"Women aren't stable employees - they'll only leave and get married."*
- (iv) *"We're not sexist, but thank goodness we haven't got any girls applying."*

Some employers had taken on girls but they had to be very much better applicants than the boys to stand a chance of selection.

ATTITUDES TO GIRLS THEMSELVES.

Many girls believe they will stop working once they are married. They do not realise that most of them will spend an average of 25 or 30 years in the workforce. Up until now the education system did little to encourage girls to deviate from this view.

Because of increasing unemployment, particularly for women in the traditional clerical/sales areas, and because of a current shortage of skilled trades workers, girls could be encouraged to think about apprenticeships as an important area for training.

Calvert interviewed a small number of girls who were apprenticed in non-traditional areas. ⁽⁷⁾ *Obstacles the girls themselves found when applying for apprenticeships included social conditioning, a lack of awareness of opportunities and employer attitudes. They blamed the schools too -*

- (i) *the division in secondary education into high and technical schools,*
- (ii) *the practice of channelling girls away from trade subjects (woodwork and metal work),*
- (iii) *the failure of schools to encourage girls to continue with maths and science,*
- (iv) *negative attitudes of some trade teachers.*

Their parents did not oppose their apprenticeships but feared perhaps they might be unable to find employment in traditionally masculine trades.

UNION ACTION.

Calvert found some employers unwilling to accept female apprentices because "it depended on the trade union"⁽⁹⁾ Union attitudes are changing. The ACTU Working Women's Charter Conference calls for:

"The ACTU and State Branches compile a comprehensive set of examples which would show women who are employed in positions which traditionally were occupied by the opposite sex. This information be widely distributed to vocational guidance centres and schools."

"ACTU request affiliates involved in traditional male preserves to campaign to encourage women to move into apprenticeship, other trades and technician training in these areas without any loss of status."

This action is of vital importance if women are to achieve equal opportunities in education and training, specifically in those trades and other jobs which have traditionally been labelled "men's jobs."

A number of unions have recently developed action to try to encourage girls to enter their areas. In the Seamen's Union "equal job opportunities for women" is union policy. Victorian Secretary of the Seamen's Union hopes "shipping companies will take the initiative" and employ women. The N.S.W. Secretary of the FEDFA believes there is no reason why women should not be boiler and turbine attendants.^{(9) (10)}

These positive attempts to encourage girls is a far cry from the views held a few years ago when one Victorian union stated:

"Our union is not opposed to the idea of women entering into apprenticeships especially in such trades as dental mechanics, watch-making and of course the traditional women's occupations ... However, we feel there will always be a number of occupations from which women should have to be excluded on the grounds that the work involved is too exhausting .. or .. not only is there the physical element to concern ourselves with, but the question of the dignity of women which could very well be at stake ..." ⁽¹¹⁾

"A further problem which concerns both young men and young women but which at the present stage greatly disadvantages young women", states the Victorian Committee on Equal Opportunity in Schools 1977, ⁽¹²⁾ "is the age limit placed on apprenticeships and the consequent inability of older persons to acquire many trade qualifications."

The "age bar" militates young women in particular because "at an age when they are least prepared psychologically to cross sex barriers in employment, they must decide on a career."⁽¹³⁾ In the U.S.A., where no such age limit applies, the average age of women entering apprenticeships is 26 years - and special "outreach" programs have been established to place women in apprenticeships and offer pre-apprenticeship training. The AFL-CIO's Human Resources Development Institute operates 22 apprenticeship outreach programs and since 1975 women have been the target group.⁽¹⁴⁾

Because of the age bar, Calvert ⁽¹⁵⁾ found few employers willing to take on apprentices above 17 years. So it is up to schools to make girls aware of apprenticeship opportunities at an early age until, as in most other job areas, women can have a "second chance."

GOVERNMENT ACTION.

The introduction of the Federal Government CRAFT* scheme to subsidize employers to take on apprentices and the demand for skilled workers, has led to an increase (during the past 18 months) in the number of apprentices. However, special incentives may be needed to encourage employers to take on girls. In England the House of Commons Expenditure Committee has recommended "special grants to firms which train girls and women for jobs outside the traditional range of women's work ..." ⁽¹⁶⁾

* Commonwealth Rebate Apprenticeship Full-time Training.

The Victorian Committee on Equal Opportunities in Schools suggests that "government instrumentalities and other areas of government employment, both State and Federal, should take the initiative in offering apprenticeships, on-the-job training and opportunities for upgrading skills to a proportion of girls and women in every financial year ... There can be no justification for any government to be providing opportunities for one sex only." (17)

Trade and technical jobs provide an opportunity for women to move out of the low paid clerical, sales and production jobs. Employers need to re-think their attitudes towards female apprentices. Perhaps the provision of anti-discrimination legislation will be of assistance.

Attempts to advertise jobs and to provide career information which clearly shows that jobs are open to both sexes are most important. The Victorian Committee on Equal Opportunity in Schools (1977) conducted an experiment with Telecom using two different advertisements for the position of 'linesman'. The first advertisement did not refer specifically to women although applications were called for from 'persons'. The second advertisement featured the word 'women' prominently and the job was titled 'lineswork'.

Less than 0.5% of applications in answer to Advertisement 1. were from women, however, in the case of Advertisement 11. 6.3% of applications came from women. Other studies have shown that when sex-reversed advertisements and career information depicting women in male jobs are provided, women become increasingly interested in these jobs. (18)

The proportion of women in the skilled trades area is slowly increasing. It is apparent that the absence of women in many areas has little to do with their unwillingness to do dirty, heavy, unlady-like jobs as women already perform these so-called unfeminine jobs in an unskilled capacity in industry.

IN THE FUTURE.

One would expect the employment of women in the skilled trades to increase. Trade jobs offer higher pay than most of the jobs traditionally held by women. They also offer paid on-the-job training and the work is usually more satisfying with more independence and freedom than most "women's work."

WHAT UNIONS CAN DO.

1. Support the recommendations on training in the ACTU Working Women's Charter and follow the examples of the Seamen's Union and the FEDFA.
2. Reconsider policy on the age limit for apprenticeships to enable older women to have a second chance.
3. Lobby education departments to act on recommendations in a number of government reports to overcome the disadvantage of women in schools.
4. Raise discussion amongst members about women in skilled trades pointing out to male unionists the advantages to all workers in striving for equal opportunity in access to all kinds of work.

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