

## CHAPTER 2

# Of girls and spanners: Feminist politics, women's bodies and the male trades

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In mid-2017, a federal Senate Committee inquiring into gender segregation in the Australian workforce tabled its final report, after nine months of deliberation.<sup>1</sup> The committee was set up to investigate ongoing industrial and occupational gender segregation in Australia, its economic consequences for women and to recommend approaches for addressing it. The aims are wearingly familiar. How many such inquiries have been held at state and federal level, I wonder, following feminists' renewed activism around women's employment since the 1970s? How many individuals, organisations and agencies have undertaken research, collated data, compiled reports and volunteered their time to table submissions? How many research papers and reports languish in archives and desk drawers around the nation? What, indeed, will be the fate of this latest Senate Committee report?

Certainly the need for feminist action on gender segregation in the workforce remains. For many categories of work, this latest inquiry concluded, the figures show that occupational segregation has remained substantially unchanged since systematic data on gender has been

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1 Finance and Public Administration References Committee, *Gender Segregation in the Workplace and Its Impact on Women's Economic Equality* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 2017), [www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Finance\\_and\\_Public\\_Administration/Gendersegregation/Report](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Finance_and_Public_Administration/Gendersegregation/Report).

compiled in this country. The significance of workplace segregation in women's daily lives, as all the reports across the last half-century and more emphasise, is evident in the pay disparities between men and women.

A sadly depleted Australian Bureau of Statistics publishes an annual report, *Gender Indicators Australia*, which makes for depressing reading.<sup>2</sup> The latest report shows that the gender wage gap for full-time workers sits at more than 23 per cent, which translates into an average income gap of some \$27,000 per year. That gap is even larger than it was 20 years ago. It fell to its narrowest in 2005 and has been widening steadily ever since. Data collected from employers by the Workplace Gender Equity Agency, a legacy of Julia Gillard's prime ministership and published in their annual Gender Equity Scorecard, further confirms this conclusion.<sup>3</sup> So on this one key indicator at least, feminist gains have been lost over the last decade.

Dominating media debates on gender segregation in the workplace have been campaigns to increase women's access to positions of power, to 'smashing through the glass ceiling'. Marian Sawer's *Sisters in Suits* documents the rise of the femocrat, who worked in government agencies during the 1970s and 1980s to achieve progressive ends.<sup>4</sup> Women's desires to enter into the public service, politics, the professions and upper management; to be appointed to ASX listed boards and to prominent positions in the media; and to reach senior levels of higher education have received a great deal of attention and are now at least part way to being fulfilled. For example, women have made up 50 per cent of the professional workforce since 2000.<sup>5</sup> We are still, however, far from parity in other fields of employment. The most recent reports place women

2 Australian Bureau of Statistics, '4125.0—Gender Indicators, Australia, Sep 2018', accessed 21 January 2019, [www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4125.0](http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4125.0).

3 Workplace Gender Equity Agency, 'Australia's Gender Equity Scorecard, 2015–16', accessed 21 January 2019, [www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/80653\\_2015-16-gender-equality-scorecard.pdf](http://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/80653_2015-16-gender-equality-scorecard.pdf).

4 Marian Sawer, *Sisters in Suits: Women and Public Policy in Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990). See also Hester Eisenstein, *Inside Agitators: Australian Femocrats and the State* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996); Suzanne Franzway, Dianne Court and R. W. Connell, *Staking a Claim: Feminism, Bureaucracy and the State* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989). For a recent analysis, see Susan Harris Rimme and Marian Sawer, 'Neoliberalism and Gender Equality Policy in Australia', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 4 (2016): 742–58, doi.org/10.1080/10361146.2016.1222602.

5 Department of Family and Community Services: Women NSW, 'Women in the Trades: The Missing 48 Percent', *Women NSW Occasional Paper* (Sydney: the Department, 2013), 4, [www.women.nsw.gov.au/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0017/268010/3000\\_WNSW-OccasionalPaper\\_document\\_ART.pdf](http://www.women.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0017/268010/3000_WNSW-OccasionalPaper_document_ART.pdf).

at just 16 per cent of chief executive officers and only 37 per cent of managers are women. The salary gap at the highest levels of management is more than \$90,000 per year.<sup>6</sup>

Much less prominent in debates about gender segregation at work, however, are the even more intractable figures at the other end of the occupational scale. Extreme gender segregation continues to characterise the working-class trades. Identifying the precise patterns of change over time is not a simple matter, however, as occupational reclassifications and changes to the ways that data is recorded have made rigorous comparisons difficult. But the broad picture is clear. As the 2013 report ‘Women in the Trades: The Missing 48 Percent’, asserts:

It is clear that women’s representation in non-traditional trade and especially in the core trades of construction, electrical and automotive has been consistently tiny for three decades at least.<sup>7</sup>

This most recent Senate Committee report, four years later, confirms the continuing inequities. The numbers of women working in the core male trades, which account for almost half of the skilled trade workforce in Australia, remain minuscule, with women representing under 2 per cent in these areas of work or in training courses that lead to trade qualifications in these fields.<sup>8</sup> That figure has not changed since at least the 1980s and arguably since the end of World War Two. In terms of women’s earnings, the consequences of these disparities are stark. The average weekly earnings of a hairdresser, for example, are approximately half that of a carpenter, mechanic or electrician.<sup>9</sup> So, unlike in elite levels of employment, in the area of women’s engagement in working-class male trades, there have not ever been any feminist gains that we can now lament are under threat.

In this chapter, I will examine the fortunes of Australian feminist campaigns to encourage women to enter into ‘non-traditional’ trade employment, focusing particularly on efforts to advocate for women in the motor trades. In the first instance, I aim to simply place on record the history of a neglected aspect of feminist politics as it emerged during and in the decades after the upsurge of activism in the 1970s, and to reread

6 Finance and Public Administration References Committee, *Gender Segregation in the Workplace*.

7 Department of Family and Community Services: Women NSW, ‘Women in the Trades’, 12.

8 Construction, electrical and automotive trades accounted for 47 per cent of the skilled trades in 1986; 50 per cent in 1995; 58 per cent in 2006; and 56 per cent in 2012. ‘Women in the Trades’, 12.

9 Karen Struthers, ‘Paving the Way for Girls into Male-Dominated Trades: Reducing Gender Segregation in the Trades’ (PhD thesis, School of Human Services and Social Work, Griffith University, 2016), 36.

some of the key literature that emerged from it. Efforts to desegregate working-class employment have largely been forgotten in histories of feminism and rarely have been recognised in the historiographical literature.<sup>10</sup> These campaigns have fallen outside the purview of feminist collective memory, partly because few tradeswomen move in the circles that formally document, archive and theorise feminist histories.

Second, in this chapter I make a start at considering why change in this area of women's lives has been so minimal. It seems there has been an implicit assumption in public debates and perhaps even in some feminist advocacy that placing women in positions of power and leadership would carry over to benefit women in less powerful positions, in a 'trickle-down effect'. However, when feminist debates and practices have been so influential in other areas of national life, we need to ask questions of ourselves: Why has progress been so intractable in this area of employment? What have been the limits of feminist thinking and action in this field of national life? Where are the gaps in our interest, energy or capacity to campaign around these issues? Do these 'blind spots' share anything in common with other omissions in feminist thinking and activism in Australia? Might there be more effective ways to engage in these campaigns? These questions, I might add, are not easily answered. They demand a great deal of attention and collective thought, and I offer this chapter as just one contribution to that larger debate.

Before I do so, however, I want to briefly recognise and honour the work that is still going on in this area of feminist advocacy by a new generation of activists. Supporting and Linking Tradeswomen (SALT), is one of the most active grassroot organisations. SALT was established in Wollongong by NSW TAFE teacher Fiona Shewring, and the group works under the slogan 'jobs don't have a gender'.<sup>11</sup> Groups like SALT continue to encourage women to attend 'taste a trade' and 'tradie-ladies' days at depleted TAFE colleges. Dedicated tradeswomen still visit high schools and community centres, towing trailers filled with tools. They have established women's sheds to share their skills and enthusiasm for trade work. Women scattered

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10 Georgine Clarsen, 'Women's Leadership in the Trades: A Historical and Theoretical Overview', in *The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia*, ed. Shurlee Swain and Judith Smart, Australian Women's Archives Project 2014, [www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0626b.htm](http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0626b.htm).

11 SALT, [saltaustralia.org.au/](http://saltaustralia.org.au/); Fiona Shewring, 'One Step Forward Two Steps Back: Advocating for a New Generation of Women in Male-Dominated Trades', in *Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia*, ed. Shurlee Swain and Judith Smart, Australian Women's Archives Project 2014, [www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0632b.htm](http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0632b.htm).

in small workplaces around Australia, and indeed around the world, have formed support groups through social media and face-to-face meetings. They organise conferences to bring tradeswomen together to discuss issues of importance to them. Some feminists continue to analyse data and write research reports. It is notable, however, that this contemporary advocacy, unlike in the heady days of the femocrat and agencies like the Affirmative Action Agency and Women's Group Training Companies, largely remains volunteer work, unsupported by adequate public funding or institutional support.<sup>12</sup> Activists report that in the current climate it is private companies who are most likely to offer support for their work. After decades, much effort in this area remains ad hoc, sporadic and undervalued—and not always eager to claim the fraught f-word.

## On the record: (Some) women were there (of course)

'Give a Girl a Spanner' and 'Girls Can Do Anything' were slogans of 1970s feminism, and I was one of the 'girls' who picked up a spanner to become a motor mechanic in those years. It was hard work and it was fun. Though data is not available, it seems likely that for the most part tradeswomen worked (as I did) as the sole female in otherwise male workplaces.

Some public utilities, however, such as bus depots and water boards aspired to hire more than one female 'tradie' as part of a strategy to build a critical mass of apprentices. For the women I knew, even if we worked as the only female apprentice or tradeswoman in a worksite, that work was done with a sense of collectivity secured by broad feminist interest and support. Tradeswomen garnered considerable symbolic cachet in the women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Feminists brought their cars to be repaired at our garages and hired female carpenters, plumbers and electricians. The iconography of second-wave feminism, too, reflected a valorisation of women's skilled manual labour; for example, in the cartoons that illustrated feminist reports and in the routine use of the language of 'workshops' and 'toolboxes' in even the most non-manual of feminist organisations.

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12 Jo Pyke, 'Affirmative Action in Training 1987–2008', in *Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia*, ed. Shurlee Swain and Judith Smart, Australian Women's Archives Project 2014, [www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0627b.htm](http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0627b.htm).



Figure 2.1: ‘Mabel the Mechanic’ and her workmates, c. 1977, photograph.  
Source: Courtesy of Carol Ruff, Gallery East, Clovelly.

Women’s deliberate intrusion into spaces where men and masculinity was the norm meant that we were not just making individual choices about our own lives. For us, picking up spanners or hammers or wrenches was also a politics of representation and a performance of female ‘empowerment’. The pleasure we took in the work was a form of resistance through which we were self-consciously out to challenge ideas about masculinity and femininity and expand the range of places where women could legitimately be.<sup>13</sup> Our bodies—in overalls appropriately colour-coded to our trades, sporting steel-capped boots, our hands dirty and our waists slung with tool belts—became a poster for our acts. A cohort of activists, who were largely not themselves tradeswomen, simultaneously devised political campaigns and structures to enable more women to take up trade apprenticeships.

Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s—particularly in the Hawke/Keating years and during Joan Kirner’s premiership in Victoria—there were concerted efforts by feminists in government agencies, TAFE and unions to encourage women to enter the male trades. Those women

13 Louisa E. Smith, ‘Trading in Gender for Women in Trades: Embodying Hegemonic Masculinity, Femininity and Being a Gender Hotrod’, *Construction Management and Economics* 31, no. 8 (2013): 861–73, doi.org/10.1080/01446193.2013.833339.

established a number of programs—Women’s Group Training companies, Affirmative Action in Training schemes, pre-apprenticeship courses at TAFE, school outreach programs like Tradeswomen on the Move, as well as research and policy agencies like the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), which continues to be active. At the end of the 1990s, however, the Howard Government defunded or ‘mainstreamed’ those agencies, and the social justice remit of the vocational training system was severely curtailed by neoliberal ‘reforms’ that saw its rapid privatisation.<sup>14</sup> There is an extensive literature into the 1990s, however, which records feminist efforts to influence government policy, educational programs and business practices, as well as the career choices of potential tradeswomen.<sup>15</sup>

14 Jo Pyke, ‘Affirmative Action in Training 1987–2008’.

15 For just some of that literature, see: National Working Group on Women in Apprenticeship, *Report of the Working Group on Women and Apprenticeship* (Canberra: Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1987); Lucy Callaghan, *Girls Can Do It* (Ballarat: Ballarat Community Education Centre, 1986); Lois Welch, ‘Strategies for Employers for Supporting Female Apprentices in Non-traditional Trades’, *Affirmative Action Issues Papers*, no. 1 (Canberra: Affirmative Action Resource Unit, Office of the Status of Women, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1985); Women’s Bureau, *Occupational Segregation: Women’s Work, Women’s Pay. Action for Women* (Canberra: Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990); Jo Pyke, *Women in Building: The Missing 51%* (Canberra: Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1993); Annie Cowling, *Breaking New Ground: A Manual for Survival for Women Entering Non-Traditional Trades* (Melbourne: Building Workers’ Industrial Union, 1991); Noeline Kyle and Jan Wright, *Breaking Down Traditional Barriers: The Attitude of Small Industry to Non-traditional Schooling and Work* (Canberra: Women’s Bureau Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1993); Elaine Butler and Mike Brown, eds, *A-Gendering Skill: Conversations around Women, Work and Skill: An Australian Perspective* (Geelong, Vic.: Deakin University, 1993); Claire Burton, *The Promise and the Price: The Struggle for Equal Opportunity in Women’s Employment* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991); Sue Morley, *Women’s Participation in Non-Traditional Vocational Training: Strategies to Increase Women’s Participation in Australian Vocational Certificate Projects in Industries and Occupations Where They Have Been Underrepresented in the Past* (Canberra: Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1994); Barbara Pocock, *Demanding Skill: Women and Technical Education in Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988); Linda Tivendale, *Women in Building* (Melbourne: Victorian Building and Construction Training Council, 1987); Kim Windsor, *Shortcircuiting: Women in Electronics, Skills, Training and Working Practices* (Canberra: Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1991); Mally Jane, ‘Equal Access to Learning and Employment through TAFE: The Barriers to Teenage Girls’, *Victorian TAFE Papers*, no. 2 (Hawthorn: Hawthorn Institute of Education, 1985); Heather Holcombe and Anthera Rutter, *Girls Who Want to be Chippies: A Negotiated Targets Project Evaluation Project* (Melbourne: Western Metropolitan College of TAFE, 1992); Laurel Black, ‘Commonwealth Initiatives to Promote Women in Non-Traditional Training and Employment’, *Victorian TAFE Papers*, no. 4 (April 1986): 36–40, [hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/102168](http://hdl.voced.edu.au/10707/102168); Peter D. Earley, ‘Girls, School, and Work: Technological Change and Female Entry into Non-Traditional Work Areas’, *Australian Journal of Education* 25, no. 3 (1981): 269–87, [doi.org/10.1177/000494418102500305](https://doi.org/10.1177/000494418102500305); Australian Human Rights Commission, *Women in Male-Dominated Industries: A Toolkit of Strategies* (Canberra: the Commission, 2013), [www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/WIMDL\\_Toolkit\\_2013.pdf](http://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/WIMDL_Toolkit_2013.pdf); Australian Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Women in Entry Level Training: Policy Review of the 1987 Report Women in Apprenticeship* [WELT report] (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1991); Elaine Butler, Kira Clarke and Linda Simon,

In one of the earliest studies, in 1978, Ann Calvert noted that of about 36,800 apprentices in Victoria, some 2,200 were estimated to be female. However, when the trade of ladies hairdressing was excluded, there were only 340 female apprentices, less than 1 per cent of the total.<sup>16</sup> Her research was based on Victorian Apprenticeship Commission reports, in-depth interviews with a small number of female apprentices as well as employers. Calvert's groundbreaking study presented a wide-ranging discussion of the factors that limited women's entry into the trades—factors that would soon become familiar: parental attitudes and those of girls themselves; careers advice at schools; employers' prejudices; and industrial regulations such as lifting restrictions. Calvert employed the then relatively new feminist terms to consider broader social factors such as 'sex role stereotyping' and the structural impediments of the 'dual labour market'.

Ten years later, a 1987 Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) report similarly lamented that statistics on female apprenticeships remained ad hoc and difficult to obtain.<sup>17</sup> They concluded that 'the current low level of female participation in the [male] trades is the result of a wide range of social and institutional factors, both on the supply and the demand side'.<sup>18</sup> Key factors included 'negative attitudes' of women jobseekers, the general community and employers; lack of information about opportunities; employer concern about 'adequate facilities for women'; fear of 'adverse reaction' by male staff; biased recruitment methods and the lack of coordination between the several agencies responsible for this area. Their comprehensive list of recommendations included raising women's awareness of trade employment through effective marketing; systematic evaluation of affirmative action programs; Group Apprenticeship schemes; more preparatory and pre-employment courses for women; securing the cooperation of industry; compiling registers

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*Women and Girls into Non-Traditional Occupations and Industries: Broadening Career Options for Secondary School Students*, report from economic Security4Women (North Sydney: Security4Women Inc., 2014), [www.security4women.org.au/wp-content/uploads/eS4W-Career-Exploration-Project-Report-20140615.pdf](http://www.security4women.org.au/wp-content/uploads/eS4W-Career-Exploration-Project-Report-20140615.pdf); Judy McNamara, *A Fair Go for Women in Apprenticeship* (Melbourne: Outer Eastern Municipalities Association, 1986); and Georgine Clarsen, 'Auto-Erotics: The Sexing of a Skill' (MA thesis, Department of Women's Studies, University of Melbourne, 1993).

16 Ann Calvert, *Girls and Apprenticeships* (Melbourne: TAFE Services, 1979).

17 Australian Department of Employment, Education and Training, Australia Working Group on Women in Apprenticeship and Australia Commonwealth-State Training Advisory Committee, *Report of the Working Group on Women in Apprenticeship* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1987).

18 *Ibid.*, 6.

of women in the trades; subsidising pilot projects; establishing targets; better coordination across agencies and monitoring the effectiveness of programs.

By 1992, the Victorian Affirmative Action in Training (AAIT) organisation was cautiously hopeful about progress in this area, noting there had been an increase of 18 per cent in the number of women who had entered motor mechanic trade training between 1983 and 1991, with a dramatic jump of 30 per cent in the 1990/91 financial year. The numbers, however, remained small. There were only 95 women in motor trade training in Victoria, which represented less than 2 per cent of apprentices in the industry. The study surveyed those apprentices in the hope of discovering strategies that might lead to similar increases in other male-dominated trades. They concluded that women who had entered that trade could be described as a cohort who ‘dared to be different’.<sup>19</sup> They had higher than usual exposure to the trades at school or at home and had taken advantage of policies and strategies designed to encourage women to enter the trades. In order to ‘dismantle the gender divide’, however, ‘strategies to tap into the larger recruitment pool needed to be developed’, which could attract women who have the ability to enter those fields of work but currently ‘simply don’t consider it’.<sup>20</sup> Kimmel’s recommendations were familiar: comprehensive trades promotion that emphasised the people-centred aspects of trade work; school information programs; the development of a comprehensive database; the funding of preparatory courses to build a critical mass of tradeswomen; the establishment of support networks; affirmative action programs for all Group Training Companies; and careful ongoing research to investigate high attrition rates and develop the best strategies to foster social change.<sup>21</sup>

There was little room for sustained optimism, however. In the same year, the parliamentary report *Half Way to Equal* noted that programs to boost employment opportunities in the vocational trades had appeared to benefit boys rather than girls.<sup>22</sup> Just a few years later, advocacy programs

19 Georgie Kimmel, *Why Motor Mechanics? A Report on the Reasons Given by Victorian Women for Choosing Motor Mechanics Trade Training as a Career Option* (Melbourne: Affirmative Action in Training Inc. July 1992), 1.

20 Ibid.

21 Group training companies were established to foster apprenticeships among disadvantaged groups and also to assist small employers to take on apprentices.

22 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, *Half Way to Equal: Report of the Inquiry into Equal Opportunity and Equal Status for Women in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, April 1992), 49.

were defunded, though some agencies and academics continued to publish studies.<sup>23</sup> Most recent is a report by a consulting firm for the NSW State Training Services, *Ducks on the Pond: Women in Trade Apprenticeships*, and Karen Struthers's PhD thesis, 'Paving the Way for Girls into Male-Dominated Trades: Reducing Gender Segregation in the Trades'.<sup>24</sup> Both of these detailed studies lament the lack of change in women's take-up of apprenticeships in terms that echo much of the earlier research.

My survey of the literature across the 40 years suggests that most feminist studies analyse the lack of progress in terms of broad factors such as 'ingrained negative attitudes', 'limited perceptions', 'outmoded beliefs', 'prejudices', 'stereotypes' or 'lack of role models'. Tellingly, since the 1990s, an air of exasperation has crept into some of the literature at the apparent irrationality of the career choices made by working-class girls. In spite of all of the best efforts to make places available to them, the implication is that young women are not 'taking up opportunities' to move into jobs that were the domain of men. Programs are needed to educate girls so that they do not make the 'wrong' subject choices at school. They, their teachers and their parents should be 'persuaded' that their image of the trades is not correct, and be 'enticed' or 'convinced' that it is in their best interests to move into them.<sup>25</sup>

## Why is there so little change in this area?

The dismal failure to bring about a significant shift in the proportion of women in the male-dominated trades over four decades suggests that new forms of analysis and action are well overdue. Most effort to date has been based on the strategic fiction that men and women stand in much the same relationship to the job market and that men's and women's bodies are potentially interchangeable, if only women are given the chance to

23 Pyke, *Women in Building: The Missing 51%*.

24 Quay Connection, *Ducks on the Pond: Women in Trade Apprenticeships* (Sydney: NSW Board of Vocational Education and Training (BEVT), 2014); Karen Struthers, 'Paving the Way for Girls into Male-Dominated Trades: Reducing Gender Segregation in the Trades' (PhD thesis, School of Human Services and Social Work, Griffith University, 2016).

25 National Board of Employment, Education and Training, *The Australian Vocational Certificate Training System: Report of the Employment Skills Formation Council* (Carmichael Report) (Canberra: AGPS, March 1992), 99; Shirley Sampson, 'Increasing Women's Participation in the Male-Dominated Trades', in Department of Employment, Education and Training, *Dismantling the Divide: Conference on Women in Male-Dominated Occupations* (Canberra: Australian Government Printing Service, 1991), 34–36.

‘catch up’ with men by developing the appropriate knowledge, confidence and skills. Such a strategic fiction could be justified if it were delivering intended results, as it has been in upper sectors of the employment market. In the case of the male trades, however, clearly it is not. While what Joan Eveline in 1992 called the ‘pragmatics of equality politics’ suggests that we should accept uneven changes in the improvement of women’s position in the workforce, it is important not to lose sight of how advances for some women may be taken to be gains for all women, or even mask losses for others.<sup>26</sup>

To a large extent, affirmative action initiatives to introduce women into the male trades have sought to rectify or compensate for a perceived disadvantage. They have been based on presumptions of young women’s lack and this takes feminists onto dangerous territory. The patent absence of success might be taken to support a conservative conclusion that women ‘don’t want to be equal’ in spite of all the ‘opportunities’ placed before them, and so are complicit in their own oppression. Similarly, the focus on women’s lack can serve to perpetuate the belief that young women do not enter the trades because those areas of work are, indeed, no place for a woman. While the feminist research and programs since the 1970s certainly have some value in opening out debates and opportunities, it is more than time to acknowledge that those campaigns have failed to address the larger and more complex issues at the heart of women’s absence. To that extent, they do not and cannot ring true to the depth of the difficulties women in those areas of work encounter. Rather than focusing on the ways that that young women may be misguided, lacking in confidence or limited in some other way, it is more than time to broaden the terms of the debate and view their actions in a more positive light.

The liberal feminist strategy of presuming that it is only ‘irrational stereotypes’ that prevent equality best serves women who seek to move into the professional and managerial job market. There, bodily differences between men and women are considered to be of marginal importance to the job, though recent scandals highlight the continued harassment and discrimination that women face daily in those areas of work.<sup>27</sup> Feminisms of equality are even less adequate, however, in areas of employment where

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26 Joan Eveline, ‘The Police of Advantage’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 9, no. 19 (1994): 130, doi.org/10.1080/08164649.1994.9994729.

27 For example, Women in Media, ‘Mates Over Merit: Women in Media Report’, Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, 2016, last updated 11 February 2019, [www.meaa.org/resource-package/mates-over-merit-full-report/](http://www.meaa.org/resource-package/mates-over-merit-full-report/).

sexed, bodily difference is perceived as central to the performance of a job. In primarily 'manual' jobs, presumptions of equality barely touch the issues that legitimise their assignment to male or female bodies. The definition of women's bodies as unsuited to certain kinds of work, and the structuring of work in such ways that women's bodies are anomalous to its performance, are complex processes, central to an understanding of the position of working-class women and the skilled trades. Yet, in spite of calls to the contrary—for example, in the theoretically nuanced work of Joan Eveline and Elaine Butler—feminist employment policies have largely perpetuated the strategic fiction that working-class women stand in much the same relation to issues of bodily difference as middle-class women.<sup>28</sup> In Butler and Ferrier's terms, it is time to stop being so polite about the entrenched masculinist cultures that actively work to repel women from the male trades and eject those few brave women who venture into them.<sup>29</sup>

To understate or discount the complexity of the issues, and to avoid openly naming the role of men and masculinist practices in making those workplaces unwelcoming to women, is to fail to do justice to the strength of the forces that place working-class women on the outer when it comes to that job market. It is more than time to acknowledge that it has proven counterproductive to place the primary focus on young women who are choosing not to enter the trades. Indeed, an obsessive focus on data, with its calculus of women's absence, serves to reinforce rather than challenge the message that the trades are not for women. More importantly, it misses the point that women's absence should not be read as a failure but as instead a knowing act of recognition that those workplaces are not accidentally or coincidentally male dominated.

## What is to be done?

A feminist politics true to the complexities of this area of activism needs to shift the focus from women's purported lack to an analysis of the interested operation of male power. Women's reluctance to enter those workplaces should be understood as a considered response to the knowledge that

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28 J. Eveline and M. Booth, 'Gender and Sexuality in Discourses of Managerial Control: The Case of Women Miners', *Gender, Work and Organization* 9, no. 5 (2002): 556–78, doi.org/10.1111/1468-0432.00175.

29 Elaine Butler and Fran Ferrier, *Don't Be Too Polite, Girls: Women, Work and Vocational Education at Training, a Critical Review of the Literature* (South Australia: NCVER, Australian National Training Authority, 2000).

they have been constructed through the particular historical practices of specific male actors. That is, that they are environments that have been designed to repel women, for the benefit of men. This new starting point makes better sense of the conclusion made in many research studies, often called the ‘consistency gap’, that girls generally express strong approval of females in non-traditional occupations, but express little interest in entering it themselves.<sup>30</sup> Young women overwhelmingly and wisely judge that those workplaces are not structured around their interests, their fantasies, their bodies or their imagined life narratives, and that any who choose to participate must enter on terms that are set by men.

Feminist activists have, of course, always been aware of the extreme harassment of all kinds that female apprentices have routinely faced in their workplaces and at TAFE colleges. A 1986 Hunter Valley study, for example, noted that the incidence of female apprentices reporting harassment was extremely high. Some 80 per cent of women experienced harassment and most were reluctant to report it. The study also found that many male apprentices were ‘extremely hostile’ to women’s entry into that work and to the ‘special attention’ they perceived females to have received.<sup>31</sup> Given that feminist programs have relied on the goodwill of male gatekeepers, it is not surprising that the normative masculinism of the workplaces that women were being encouraged to enter was played down in almost all of the literature. However, with this strategy having proven to be so ineffective over 40 years, there seems little to lose in feminists taking a more direct approach to the key structural impediment that women in these areas of work face.

My argument is that we need to name the situation more directly, as is routine in the higher end of the employment market, as a situation of male domination, of systemic gendered injustice. Instead of looking at women, we might focus on the impact of male behaviours that self-interestedly structure the practices and cultures to make these workplaces unwelcoming to women. We might better analyse the trades as places where men produce and reproduce a kind of masculinity that is yoked to a particular male body and a particular kind of masculine culture, which is used to justify the exclusion of women. Certainly, as young tradeswomen

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30 Suzanne S. Dillon, *Jobs for the Girls: Why Not Technical?* (Melbourne: Knowledge Systems Research, 1986).

31 Patricia Moran, ‘Trading Tradition: Evaluation of the Issues Arising from the Experiences of Female and Male Apprentices in Male-Dominated Trades in the Hunter Region’, *Australian Journal of TAFE Research and Development* 2 (1986): 119–25.

in the 1970s and 1980s, we acutely felt those processes in action and tried to find words for them. But at that time there was not the language to think about it clearly, or articulate it in terms that might have helped us to better navigate the contradictions.

A conceptual framework that foregrounded sexed embodiment also leaves us better able to think about the pleasures we found in that work and how it was central to our investments in it. In spite of the difficulties, we were able to find enjoyment where apparently women were not supposed to—in the pleasures of being completely absorbed in physical actions; in our growing strength; of sensing a new relationship to technologies; of knowing how to use our bodies to get things done; of finding a knack for using tools well; of developing a capacity to listen differently and hear what had previously not been meaningful to us and even to smell what might be wrong with a car. Articulating the joy we experienced in the work, even more so when it was shared, brings ‘give a girl a spanner’ campaigns closer to their feminist potential. As Louisa Smith similarly concluded, finding pleasure in the skilled trades embodies a different reality where the purported givenness of masculine cultures (or rather one version of them) is experienced as porous.<sup>32</sup> At that moment the gendered order, in the form of the disciplinary regime of the trades, is revealed as constructed, unstable and potentially open to feminist reinscription.

I take heart in knowing that the situation I have described here—struggles over embodied workplace practices—is paralleled by the similarly long battles by sportswomen for recognition. I note the astonishing elevation in the profile of women’s sports we have seen in just this last year. These too are quintessentially bodily practices, though differently played out and in a much more public, performative forum. Sometimes the change you have been working toward so long is unexpected and sudden. It can take you by surprise and you need to be ready.

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32 Louisa E. Smith, ‘The Embodiment and Gender Contradictions of Women in the Male-Dominated Industries of Skilled Manual Trades and Information Technology (IT)’ (PhD thesis, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney, 2012).

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