Chapter 6

Women at Work in the 1990s: Time To Reflect and Revise

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The 1990s are a time for reflection for the women’s movement. It is a time to see how far we as women, and the whole community in its attitudes to women, have come in recent years and what remains to be achieved.

In the early 1970s women wanted involvement - in politics, in education, in the workforce, in the very concept of humanity including women. We needed child care, health care, equal employment opportunity practices and anti-discrimination legislation to remove the barriers which kept us from participating fully in society.

The outcomes of this agenda continue to bear fruit as the range of support services and support mechanisms for women increases. A range of legislation and initiatives has been introduced to break down the remaining barriers to equal employment opportunity. It is an unfortunate aspect of our society that legislation is required to redress the effects of discrimination of such a significant proportion, indeed the majority, of our population. Of course, EEO and affirmative action programs are only part of the equation. We need to rethink many of our old assumptions and revise our tactics for securing political and social change.

Equality Debate

Twenty years ago the arguments for equality had a clear human rights focus. Now the equality debate is often couched in economic terms. Over time, the pundits say, there will be increasingly powerful economic pressures on employers to ignore factors which are not employment related like age, gender or race, and to recruit the best person for the job. Perhaps skills shortages, the aging profile of the population, women’s growing workforce participation rates and the increased proportion of girls who go on to tertiary studies will impel employers to turn to women, older workers and people from racial and ethnic minorities to meet their recruitment needs.

Modern management practices are increasingly taking account of the special skills that women can bring to the workplace. In recent Harvard Business Reviews there were articles on the advantages of a more “feminine” approach to management, that is, a more inclusive approach which encourages participation, shares power and information and enhances other people’s self worth. However, we cannot rely on economic pressures and good management practices to deliver the changes we need. Economic imperatives are a two-edged sword and notions of “good management practice” change with the fashion.

Despite the progress made, there was a dawning recognition in the late 1980s that legislative and policy changes were having little effect on the everyday lives of most women. Women remain under-represented in government, in the executive ranks of our companies and unions, on our boards and advisory bodies, and in our pulpits and universities. The statistics show clearly how far we have to go. For example, adult women who work full-time earn only around 83 per cent of adult male average weekly ordinary-time earnings. Around 40 per cent of women employees work part time.

In Australia the representation of women in most general occupations is still deplorably low. A large proportion of jobs are considered “female” jobs or “male” jobs. The majority of women workers is employed in only two categories of occupation: clerical; and, sales and personal services. Much of what women can, and cannot, do goes back to education. While more girls are staying on at school to complete year 12, their options after school remain limited because of their under-participation in maths and science. In Victoria last year, for instance, less than half the girls in Year 12 studied maths of any kind.

Non-traditional Careers Please!

The Commonwealth Government is encouraging girls to complete their secondary school education, to undertake a wider range of subjects and to consider non-traditional careers. The participation rate of women in TAFE vocational courses and in other forms of higher education is increasing. It has been very pleasing to note also that the Institution of Engineers through its recent Awards has been actively encouraging employers to interest young women in engineering as a career. Some have offered scholarships, work experience, better liaison with educational institutions, and an evaluation of the factors which help retain women in the engineering profession.

While these developments are encouraging, much still needs to be done to encourage girls to broaden their subject choices, to enable a wider range of future
career options. It has been found that the kind of roles that society places on women and men gives school girls a limited vision of their future. A recent study by the Education Department of South Australia, which focussed on Aboriginal girls and girls in poverty, found that girls in primary school had a clear understanding of the roles ascribed to women and women's work in the family situation, but little understanding of the concept of paid work, and a narrow understanding of the range of available occupations.

**Limited Perceptions**

These perceptions are held by girls more generally across geographic, class and cultural lines. Margaret Clark's book *The Great Divide: Gender in the Primary School* records interviews with children within the range of primary school years, in a variety of schools. The responses are highly disturbing. When the girls were asked what they might be doing at ages 20, 30 and 40, those who could visualise a future for themselves saw it in terms of domestic responsibility. Typical visions of their future at age 20 were "married", "housewife" or "part-time job", and for age 30, a common response was "nothing". For age 40, nearly a third of the girls answered "dead".

Too many girls view their future in terms of marriage and children, and assume that this will conflict with a full-time career. The reality is that a little more than a third of two-parent families now fit the traditional image of mother at home and father at work full time. Two-thirds of women who were in employment during their pregnancies are back at work by the time their children are 18 months old. Nearly a quarter of women with dependent children work full time and 60 per cent of women with children under the age of 14 are engaged in paid employment.

However, it is true that women still bear the burden of household and child-rearing tasks. Children are not the only family responsibility people have, as many workers have aged relatives who require care and attention. Ninety per cent of carers of relatives who are disabled and/or elderly are women. Many of these women may have found that just as children are leaving home, and career or other options are beginning to open up for them, their parents or other aged relatives need their assistance. This double burden of work and family responsibilities carried by most women is a major impediment to women's career development.

To date, most government policies and initiatives have tended to focus on the formal status of women but they have not addressed the fundamental structures which make women's lives so different from men's. Governments have concentrated on bringing about formal change without questioning the public/private split so central to our society. It is still assumed that giving women equal rights means that they could be just like men.

**Juggling Time**

The *Office of the Status of Women's* publication *Juggling Time: How Australian Families Use Time*, is an analysis by Michael Britton of the 1987 Australian Bureau of Statistics' Pilot Time Use survey. It shows that women do 70 per cent of unpaid work, and that men's contribution to the household work remains the same regardless of the time their partner spends in paid employment. The Office of the Status of Women is developing a community education program as part of the Government's implementation strategy for the International Labour Organisation Convention No. 156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities. The education program will aim to assist women and men to negotiate the equitable combination of family and work, and will focus on the issue of women's double load of paid and unpaid work.

Although much of the 1970s agenda was met during the 1980s, the goal of equality remains elusive. Carol Bacchi, in her paper to the 1990 National Women's Conference, poses the question: "Do women need treatment equal to or different from men?" She argues that there is something seriously wrong with posing the question in this way, and that it poses a false choice. Difference implies deviance from a norm, whereas it should be insisted that women's needs be included in the norm.

The debate that we are often presented with offers, as alternatives, assimilation to an existing standard, or opting out of that standard. However, the existing standard may be the key to the problem. The treatment of men becomes the norm, and is unquestioned, but it is this treatment that causes problems for women. For example, treating men as individuals without family commitments means that women are left responsible for the personal side of life which then causes them to be disadvantaged.

Many of the more obvious battles for women have been won, those that lie ahead may have to be fought in more subtle ways. The years ahead must involve analysis and action. We must better understand our society and our place in it. We need to think about new goals and to what extent we must change our thoughts and practices, of both men and women. Will we be content to be players in what remains a male game or...
do we want to change the values that underpin our public and private worlds? How can we go about achieving such change? We must break new ground, rethink our notions, question and evaluate our concepts of equality and responsibility. We will have to accept the continuing challenge of questioning old truths and carving out new roles for ourselves.

Focusing On Change

There are three possible ways in which we might focus our thoughts. The first is that we need to place continuing emphasis on empowering women so that we have a well-founded and well-grounded sense of being in control of our lives. It is destructive to cultivate a victim mentality. Victims by definition know that their problems arise because they are the objects of other people’s actions. They simply do not have any say in how the oppressive structures of society function. Let us remember these lessons when we develop strategies to stop sexual harassment.

Second, in working for change we must constantly and rigorously re-evaluate what we are doing. Otherwise we may get lost in the day-to-day struggle to survive. Third, we must get men and women to change. We must address entrenched attitudes, our attitudes towards ourselves, and our place in the world as well as masculine perspectives.

The challenges ahead for women in management and industrial relations are exciting. I believe that we are making historic progress in removing the social and economic barriers which deny women the fullest possible opportunity for choice in their lives and careers. This conference is part of the process in enabling that change to happen.