Preface
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This third collection of papers and materials is launched in a period of great interest in affirmative action in North America, Europe and Australia.

The pressure for equal opportunity at work has been fuelled by the need to overcome barriers to efficient workplace performance and by concern for social justice. Economic imperatives, set against a backdrop of recession, have generally proved the more insistent voice.

Two strands in the American debate have concerned the contributions made by affirmative action to economic performance and the assertion that, despite appearances, very little progress has been made. In the Harvard Business Review, Felice Schwartz has argued that demographic changes, in particular, the drop in the birth rate, will soon leave many organisations short-staffed. Companies which discourage female employees will have a much smaller pool from which to choose.

By contrast, those employers who seek to assist women at work will enjoy an important advantage. She points to maternity and parental leave schemes, flexible working hours and child care as appropriate reflections of managerial concern. She notes however that relatively few organisations appear to have investigated the costs and benefits of these arrangements. Her message is that those organisations that show sensitivity to their female employees will prosper.

A variation on this theme is provided by Judy Rosener. She argues that many women managers have broken out of the “command-and-control” style of leadership usually associated with male managers. On the basis of a survey of women and men managers in medium-sized and non-traditional organisations, she suggests that women managers are more likely to encourage employee participation, share power and information with their subordinates and seek to create a sense of excitement about the work to be tackled. This “interactive” and “inclusive” style of leadership will lead to better decisions, more readily accepted by those that they affect.

There are of course disadvantages. It commonly takes longer, involves the relinquishing of a measure of control, facilitates criticism and may be interpreted as weakness in management. Nonetheless, Rosener asserts that the benefits far outweigh the costs.

Susan Faludi, an American journalist, has challenged the view that great progress has been made, that the battle for feminism has been won. In Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women she asks:

If women are now so equal, why are they much more likely to be poor, especially in retirement? If women have ‘made’ it, then why are 80 per cent of all workers in catering, cleaning, hairdressing and other personal services still women? If women ‘have it all’ then why don’t they have the most basic requirement to achieve equality in the workforce good quality child care?

Her book has fuelled international debate on the progress made towards equal opportunity.

In Britain the Sex Discrimination Act and the Equal Pay Act are part of the framework designed to limit discrimination at work. Nonetheless, many commentators look back on the past dozen years as a period in which progress towards equal opportunities stalled. There is renewed attention to the obstacles faced by women at work: inflexible arrangements, lack of child care, lack of training opportunities, poor conditions and low pay. Other reflections of inequality abound. For instance, before the 1992 national election there were still only 44 women out of 650 MPs; only 19 female circuit-court judges out of 426 and women still held less than 2 per cent of the Board room seats in large companies. Neither women nor women’s issues featured in the election. The Guardian reported that three weeks into the campaign, out of 528 election interviews in the main news programs only five involved senior women in any of the parties.

There are some brighter signs. An article in the Daily Telegraph featuring the headline “The best man for the top job in the 90s is a woman” looked at recent experience at the Midland Bank. There the employer has established an extensive network of nurseries to provide childcare and has introduced career-break schemes, job-sharing and family leave, open to men as well as women. Midland’s EEO Director stressed that the bank sought to encourage men also to combine work and family responsibilities.

Joanna Foster, President of the European Community’s Advisory Committee on Equal Opportunities, has investigated the varied approaches taken within the European Community. She found marked differences in regulations on the length and allowance for maternity leave, on childcare and on approaches to job-sharing. Speculating on the range of factors affecting national competitiveness, she said: “The strongest country will be the one that has invested in a quality workplace. And half of those are women.”

The Australian Parliament recently established an Inquiry into Equal Opportunity and Equal Status for
Affirmative Action and Workplace Reform

Senator Peter Cook, Minister for Industrial Relations, lends off the papers in this book. In his discussion of workplace reform he points to the two-edged rationale for the effective implementation of affirmative action programs. There is the drive to rectify the past neglect and misallocation of human resources; this is judged to have contributed to poor economic performance. There is also the pursuit of social justice. Senator Cook sees signs of progress. For instance, employers are devoting more attention to assisting employees to balance work and family responsibilities. An increasing proportion of women employees are covered by superannuation and more training opportunities are being offered. The engines of change have been award restructuring and commitment to affirmative action. He stresses the valuable part played by the Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunity for Women) Act 1986 and the Agency: "(they) ... are basic to the Government's task of ensuring that all employers maximise the skills of all their employees ... (and) eradicate discrimination from the workplace." He recognises however that greater reliance on enterprise bargaining within industrial relations may lead to more inequality in the workplace. His pledge is that government will seek to ensure that improved performance is not at equity's expense.

In chapter two, ACTU President Martin Ferguson also addresses recent developments in industrial relations. Award restructuring has meant the lifting of bottom rates of pay and the creation of career paths and training opportunities. Women employees in particular have gained. Moreover there has been a narrowing of the male-female earnings gap reflecting unions' incorporation of EEO principles into their industrial strategies. He recognises that ACTU support for workplace bargaining has lead to fears that those with less industrial strength will fall behind. Ferguson points to the priorities of Accord Mark VI, pursued during 1991, as evidence of ACTU sensitivity on this. For instance, the ACTU sought a flat wage increase ($12) and improved superannuation, both important to women at work. He points to the high priority attached by the ACTU to the recruitment and retention of female members, their improved representation within union decision making bodies and union attention to issues of concern to women members.

In chapter three, Heather Carmody, Executive Director of the Council for Equal Opportunity in Employment, focuses on the integration of EEO and employee relations. This means attention to a cluster of issues such as part-time employment, jobsharing, more flexible leave, career-break schemes for new parents, child care and programs to facilitate the re-entry of women into the workplace. Best-practice organisations, she argues, have adapted a strategic
approach to workplace planning, linking up EEO and affirmative action, employee relations, performance appraisal, managing diversity and pay. The policies developed have then been implemented by appropriately trained line managers. Carmody reviews the experience of several enterprises. She concludes that organisations which excel in fair and sensitive employment practices will enjoy a competitive edge.

Jennie George, Assistant Director of the Trade Union Training Authority (TUTA), discusses in chapter four the extent to which award restructuring has led to the revaluing of women's work. She also refers to the contribution made by centralised wage fixation in limiting the gap between male and female earnings. She considers whether greater reliance on bargaining may undermine progress made. George argues that locating bargaining at the enterprise level should assist women to identify and challenge practices such as discrimination in over-award pay and the unequal distribution of overtime. Although George indicates her continuing concern for that group of women workers who are not unionised, part-time and on the receiving end of low pay and poor conditions, nonetheless she asserts that progress has been made and that "we should take heart from our achievements to date".

Sandra Trulzi, then Manager of Recruitment and EEO at Westpac, explores the issue of flexibility. She contends that rapid demographic and technological changes have led more organisations and individuals to seek more flexible work arrangements. There has been a surge of interest in part-time work, jobsharing and telecommuting. There has also been some resistance to change. Middle managers have frequently felt uneasy about moves towards more flexible arrangements and there have also been questions about the impact on costs. Trulzi's judgment is that properly handled both employers and employees have much to gain from more flexibility at work.

Hazel Hawke delivered the keynote address at the 1991 Conference. Her paper, chapter six, presents a stocktake of the progress made in the search for equal employment opportunity. She discusses the shift of emphasis in argument for affirmative action from human rights to economic advantage. She warns against reliance solely on perceived economic pressure and notions of good management practice. She notes that there is still a significant gap between male and female earnings, women employees remain crowded into a small group of industries and occupations and child raising and housework remain unequally shared. Nonetheless, she believes that great progress has been made. Her remarks at the Conference dinner were warmly received and acclaimed.

Paula Bennett, Director of the Canadian Women's Bureau, brings an international perspective to bear on "women and management". She points to the growing recognition that women's talents in the workplace are underutilised and that this represents a disservice to economy and society. The international debate has similar overtones to the local debate. There is for instance emphasis on the role of education and training, preparing girls and women to work across occupations and industries. She also comments on the importance of flexibility and the role for partnership at work. Paula Bennett contends that joint employer and union efforts are the more likely to achieve equality and economic well-being.

The next two chapters examine developments in occupational health and safety and the implications for women at work. In chapter eight, Jenni Neary, Deputy Chief Executive of Workplace Australia, reviews the general debate. She stresses that there is a high human, social and economic cost linked to neglect of health and safety. She reports on four projects currently undertaken by the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission. They explore in turn fair standards for manual handling, reducing illness and injury in the textiles, clothing and footwear industry, farm safety and appropriate equipment design across industries.

In chapter nine, Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Quentin Bryce, and Megan Chalmers, Director of Legal Services at the Commission, study developments in the lead industry. The possibility that lead might damage the fetus of pregnant women has historically meant the exclusion of women from this industry. Yet, on the basis of American evidence, it appears that the reproductive health of males may also be at risk. The preferred outcome therefore is to make the workplace safe for all employees, regardless of gender.

In chapter eight, Joanna Farrell, Manager Employee Relations at Argyle Diamonds, reports on the efforts made by her company to improve the work environment. EEO has been integrated into work and management and efforts have been made to involve employees in decision making on this. Keys to success have been support from top and senior management, the permeation of EEO into business planning, training and consultation and persistence.

Rob Pledger, Affirmative Action Advisor at Ericsson, discusses the effort made by his company to raise levels of awareness regarding fairness and equity for all employees, the measures taken to tackle discriminatory work practices and the steps taken to encourage women's participation at all levels. He points to the development and operation of women's forums at Ericsson, commitment to childcare and efforts to recruit women into the company. He concludes that employers with well developed affirmative action strategies will enjoy a strong competitive edge.

Kathy Duffy, then Manager Organisation
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Development at Nissan, looks at EEO and workplace reform. She discusses the tough competitive pressures on Nissan. Its management believed that the better management of its people is vital. A workplace reform task group was set up and given responsibility for implementing change. The program included job and organisational redesign, skill development and the promotion of employee involvement and participation in decision making. EEO concerns and considerations were woven throughout the approach to reform. Affirmative action was fundamental to the achievement of improved performance.

The back section of the book, as in previous volumes, presents a selection of materials and papers. The first appendix provides the latest general data on women in the workforce and the second reproduces findings from the most recent round of reports to the Affirmative Action Agency. It explores the level of compliance on the part of private sector organisations. The data indicate high compliance with several requirements of the Act but much lower compliance in the case of consultation. Only 44 per cent of companies indicated that they had engaged in consultation with unions. This result is disappointing but not surprising in the light of findings in the Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey. The survey reported that information-sharing and consultation remain relatively rare across Australian workplaces.12

Appendix three presents a paper by Dr Robin Kramar from the School of Industrial Relations and Organisational Behaviour at the University of New South Wales. Her paper examines international conventions on equality in employment and explores Australian experience. She notes that many employees remain unfamiliar with EEO and affirmative action and that domestic responsibilities remain the preserve of women.

Appendix four, the ACTU’s Draft Guidelines on Enterprise Bargaining, was issued at the 1991 Conference by Jennie George in relation to her presentation onaward restructuring and women at work. The guidelines expressly say what union workers should and should not be prepared to negotiate. It says workers should negotiate, for example, for a broadening of skills and that women should be included in negotiations to ensure that their interests are addressed.

Appendices five and six are bibliographies which will be useful for researchers of affirmative action and EEO. Appendix five presents a comprehensive listing of more than 500 books, journal articles and other published and unpublished material produced between 1985 and 1990. Appendix six, compiled by the Affirmative Action Agency presents a selection of government and other more recent materials.

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Ed Davis and Valerie Pratt
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REFERENCES
5. The Guardian, 1 April 1992, p.21, see also 11 April 1992 p.16: 58 women and 593 men M.P.s were returned in the 1992 election.
10. Ibid. p.7.