Women's leadership in the trades: an overview

Georgine W. Clarsen

*University of Wollongong, georgine@uow.edu.au*

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Abstract
Advocacy to encourage women to enter male-dominated trades has a long history, though leadership in this sphere of activism has rarely been documented in feminist histories. Efforts to improve women's working lives have most often focused on facilitating women's entry into the professions, company boards or upper management, and on campaigns to secure equal pay for work of equal value. Throughout the 20th century, however, numbers of women have promoted women's entry into skilled, working-class jobs that were thought to be the natural domain of men. One important reason for questioning the high levels of gender segregation in these trades and encouraging women to enter them has been the recognition that men's social power was bolstered by their claim that they had a special relationship with technologies. The need to expand women's opportunities into trade employment was also linked to key feminist goals of eliminating gender wage inequality and enhancing women's employment choices. Male-dominated trades promised employment that was better paid and more highly valued than female trades and often opened up opportunities for interesting work, independence and mobility that were unusual for working-class women.

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Women's Leadership in the Trades: An Overview

Non-Traditional Trade Employment

Written by Georgine Clarsen, University of Wollongong

Advocacy to encourage women to enter male-dominated trades has a long history, though leadership in this sphere of activism has rarely been documented in feminist histories. Efforts to improve women's working lives have most often focused on facilitating women's entry into the professions, company boards or upper management, and on campaigns to secure equal pay for work of equal value. Throughout the 20th century, however, numbers of women have promoted women's entry into skilled, working-class jobs that were thought to be the natural domain of men. One important reason for questioning the high levels of gender segregation in these trades and encouraging women to enter them has been the recognition that men's social power was bolstered by their claim that they had a special relationship with technologies. The need to expand women's opportunities into trade employment was also linked to key feminist goals of eliminating gender wage inequality and enhancing women's employment choices. Male-dominated trades promised employment that was better paid and more highly valued than female trades and often opened up opportunities for interesting work, independence and mobility that were unusual for working-class women.

Leadership in this area of feminist advocacy does not follow the model of the charismatic individual or visionary activist. There are no prominent media stars in this field and, even within the feminist movement, this area of campaigning is often overlooked. Actions to facilitate women's entry into male trades have been undertaken by unknown and unacknowledged leaders, many not themselves tradeswomen, who have worked together with tradeswomen or former tradeswomen to open out new training and employment opportunities for women and to agitate for broad social change. As with much feminist advocacy, work in this area is collectivist. Occasionally it has been conducted as paid work in formal agencies but, more often, it has involved unpaid, grass-roots agitation for social change or has been expressed in the quiet, personal action of an individual as she seeks to find employment in an area where few women are to be seen. The traditions and practices of sex segregation in the trades are deeply entrenched and progressive change in these areas has been slow and equivocal. Turnover is high, as individual activists or isolated tradeswomen have been subject to burn-out or harassment, or have been forced to move into other areas of work.

Traditionally, entry into the skilled trades has been carefully regulated through an apprenticeship system. Dating back to the craftsmen's guilds of the Middle Ages, an apprentice was legally bound to work at a low wage for a fixed period, and the employer agreed to train
him to be an accredited tradesman and a master of apprentices in his own right. From the late 19th century, the development of male craft unions with the power to control entry into specific areas of work further served to exclude women from valued trades. Elements of those openly patriarchal systems of training have persisted into the present and have created an unwelcoming climate, which makes it hard for women to secure a start position in the trades or, if they do, to flourish in them.

Feminist campaigns in this field of activism are complicated by strong societal norms about masculinity and femininity, as well as beliefs about the appropriate spheres of activity for men and women. The area is particularly fraught because it involves intractable understandings about physical differences between the sexes, which are often thought to be natural and not subject to change over time. The male-dominated trades are quintessentially fields of employment that involve exposure to weather and dirt, hard physical work, muscular strength, a 'knack' with tools, control of heavy machinery or-more recently-computer programming, and they typically demand bodily comportments and forms of sociality that are strongly associated with male bodies and masculine cultures. Those societal norms often make sex segregation in trade work seem commonsense and not open to question. Consequently, leaders in this field of activism have not only tried to facilitate women's entry into male-dominated workplaces through practical measures, such as pre-apprenticeship courses, peer support, or mentoring, but they have also instigated public debates and developed analytical tools to help understand the barriers that women working in male trades face. In short, leaders in these fields are not just attempting to broaden employment opportunities for themselves and other women but, at the same time, are working to reshape the very boundaries of masculinity and femininity. In this determination to question commonsense understandings of women's bodily capacities and experiences, they have much in common with activists in the field of women and sport.

Some early leaders in this area of work attempted to sidestep barriers to women's entry into the trades by setting up their own businesses, which trained and employed women outside of the normal apprenticeship structures. Sometimes that occurred in the face of direct hostility from men in the trade. For example, when the prominent feminist, Louisa Lawson, used female typesetters to print her feminist journal, The Dawn in the late 19th century, she encountered tremendous pressure from male unionists trying to defend their trade.

At other times, women found opportunities to enter new fields of work before they became fully 'fixed' as either male or female trades, and before accredited training systems were instituted. Often those women were trained and encouraged by men in their families, and their businesses survived to the extent that they were patronised by a female clientele. In the early days of the motorcar, for example, women like Alice Anderson (Clarsen, ADB; Lemon, AWR) set up motor repair garages in the 1920s with the support of sympathetic men, offering services especially targeted to women motorists.

It has long been noted that during times of war apparently natural differences between men and women in these areas of work are very quickly swept away. Not only have women stepped into men’s trades at short notice and rapidly acquired skills that were assumed to be naturally male, but many of them found great pleasure in the work and were bitterly disappointed that they could not find employment in their field when the war ended. Early in World War II, for
example, women established voluntary organisations to train other women in men's trades. They worked in aircraft industries, signals, munitions and motor transport work. Though their competency in those areas was celebrated at the time, it was soon forgotten after the national crisis was over. Direct and indirect pressure was placed on women to retreat from such roles and allow men to return to what was widely understood as their rightful place in public life. The ease with which women had been able to enter those spheres of work once social barriers against their participation were swept away, however, demonstrates that there is much more than natural differences between men and women at stake in the sex segregation of the trades.

While some women managed to maintain a precarious place in male areas of work after World War II, they had few successors in the following decades. The next high point came with overt campaigns to encourage women to enter the trades as a consequence of the re-energised feminist campaigning of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, sometimes called 'the second wave'. Those who took the lead were part of a new generation, the spiritual if not actual daughters of those who as young women during World War II had found work in non-traditional areas of employment. Singly and in small groups, this new generation of women began to enter the trades, often in the mistaken belief that they were the first of their sex who aspired to do so. Press reports at the time published stories about the 'first woman to qualify as a ...', which further served to erase memories of the long history of women's engagement in those fields of work. Together with new forms of organising, those decades saw an upsurge in feminist theorising and the development of new analytic tools for understanding and discussing women's place in society. 'Sex-role stereotyping' emerged as a key term in this area of advocacy, which suggested that the key barrier to women's success in the trades was merely irrational gender stereotypes that might easily be swept away. This period of feminist activism also saw a return to the androgynous styles of dress that called to mind the fashionable 'boyish look' of the early 1920s but also mimicked working men's garb. Overalls became the outfit of choice for many second-wave feminists, whether or not they worked in the trades.

The resurgence of feminist activism and public redefinitions of femininity went together with broad political changes in Australia during the 1970s and 1980s. Decades of conservative federal government ended; feminists gained a greater voice in parliaments; and both state and Commonwealth governments began to introduce a range of progressive policies, including Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) legislation, which incorporated some feminist demands. Special sections were established in bureaucracies devoted to 'women's affairs' and feminists in the public service, dubbed 'femocrats', were able to secure funding for a range of programs to facilitate women's engagements in national life (Sawer). With slogans like 'Girls Can Do Anything' and 'Give a Girl a Spanner', an array of semi-governmental advocacy groups was funded to document and research women's conspicuous absence from the trades, and to facilitate women's entry into them. Feminists in the trade union movement agitated against the formal and informal policies that closed many workplaces to women. Technical colleges came under scrutiny for the masculinist assumptions and practices of trade training. Public sector and private employers were lobbied to institute workplace reforms and to employ more apprentice tradeswomen.
Each state had a variety of agencies and campaigns, which were connected in a loose alliance. National ‘Women and Work’ conferences helped to bring together tradeswomen, activists, feminists and academics. Seminars devoted specifically to women in the trades shared information, devised strategies and provided mutual support. In the 1990s, much of this activity was shaped and funded through the National Women’s Vocational Education and Training Strategy, implemented through the federally funded Australian National Training Authority (ANTA). It is important to note that, by the 1980s, it was becoming difficult to attract young men into apprenticeships. Attrition rates were high and training schemes had not been responsive to technological changes or industry needs. There was broad agreement between governments, industry, educators, unions and the community in general that vocational training in Australia was in need of major reform.

Affirmative Action in Training Inc. (AAIT) was a key agency at the time, established in Melbourne specifically to provide advocacy and support for women, employers and training agencies to increase women’s participation in trades. From the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, the organisation implemented a suite of programs such as Tradeswomen on the Move (TWOM), which organised tradeswomen to promote trade opportunities to girls in secondary schools. Other programs include ‘trade taster’ days for women in TAFE and women’s pre-apprenticeship programs run through Group Training Companies. AAIT became a training provider in its own right, was active in developing women’s employment programs, and made alliances with many other programs run for women through trade unions, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges, and employer associations, as well as undertaking research.

Unions played a key role in the implementation of programs to employ women in trades. The Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU) was one early example. The BWIU employed a women’s officer to encourage women into the building trades and thus increase women’s membership in the union. Starting from a female membership of almost zero in the mid-1980s, the union counted almost a hundred women among its members in 1992. However, this membership quickly declined following a recession in the building and construction industry, a change of government and withdrawal of funding for the women’s officer position.

There was general support from feminist groups for initiatives to encourage women into trades and agreement that broad changes in vocational training for both men and women were long overdue. Activists recognised, however, that they operated in a complex climate and that tradeswomen might be steered into dead-end trades that men no longer wanted, or that women’s enthusiasm to enter trades could be used to undercut men’s wages and conditions. Such concerns proved to be beside the point when the return to conservative governments in the second half of the 1990s put an end to programs and services that were targeted specifically to women. Agencies had their funding cut, affirmative action programs in public-sector institutions were wound down, data on women in the trades were no longer centrally collated, reports and recommendations were shelved, and the expertise that had been built up over two decades dissipated, as paid advocates moved to other areas of work. Public debate about women’s place in the traditionally male trades became more muted within a general ethic of individual free choice. It was easily assumed that if women were not entering trade work, then it was because they were naturally, or properly, not interested in those forms of employment and simply chose not to do so.
Together with this 'free choice' argument came a shift in the policy discourse from the need for 'gender equity' to the need to 'value diversity'. This was expressed by the 'productive diversity' policy launched by the Keating Labor government in the mid-1990s and was based on the idea that gender was only one dimension of difference that creates barriers to employment opportunities. The combination of a range of factors such as race, ethnicity, age, religion and physical ability, as well as gender, became the focus of attention in the implementation of labour market policy targeted at improving access and equity. One effect was to undermine public support for specifically feminist action. As a result, the intellectual project of developing conceptual frameworks and languages to analyse women's experiences in these fields of physical work lost momentum. Critiques of unwelcoming workplace cultures, debates about forms of masculinity that operated to secure male privilege, and agitation to transform unhealthy workplaces for both men and women were less frequently heard. And, although statistics are no longer readily available, it seems that women's current representation in the male trades has not changed significantly from the 1980s.

Those reversals in public campaigns to increase women's engagements with the male trades has not meant that women's leadership in this area has ended far from it. Some women continue to aspire to work in the trades and find ways to get a start in their chosen industry. Some trade unions continue to develop programs to foster women's inclusion. Activists within the vocational training sector continue to find ways to encourage and recruit women. Activists continue to mentor new apprentices and set up peer support groups of female 'tradies', now often through virtual or online communities. However, while those forms of feminist leadership persist, in spite of the lack of funding or public support, the memory of women's aspirations and campaigns in this field is in danger of being forgotten. Contemporary activists find themselves in a situation similar to that experienced by activists of the second wave, where there is no easy way of learning about earlier campaigns to facilitate women's entry into male-dominated trades. Indeed, they can be surprised to discover that publicly funded, organised campaigns once existed. Unless we find ways to keep those memories alive, it seems that each generation of activists in this field will be obliged to reinvent, as if for the first time, strategies and debates to foster women's aspirations to enter areas of trade work that have been characterised as male.

**Published Resources**

**Australian Women's Register Entries**


**Books**


**Online Resources**

Clarsen, Georgine, 'Anderson, Alice Elizabeth Foley (1897-1926)', in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University (ANU), c.2006,
http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/anderson-alice-elizabeth-foley-12772.. Details
Francis, Rosemary, 'Lawson, Louisa (1848 - 1920)', in The Australian Women's Register, Australian Women's Archives Project, 17 April 2009. Details

Related Themes

Non-Traditional Trade Employment

Related Women

Lawson, Louisa (1848 - 1920)

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