

Supporting women in non-traditional trade.

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Abstract

There are many myths around women working in non-traditional trade areas which are treated as fact and provide reasons for people to continue maintaining the status quo which prevents women entering these trades. Women represent half of the population yet account for less than 0.1% of some areas of non-traditional trade training. Occupations which have been male gender dominated but which have shown shifts in parity have been considered as examples of how change can be effected.

Sixteen women who were engaged in training on trade courses at the Illawarra Institute were interviewed for this report. The trades included building and construction, fitting and machining, welding, auto spray and butchery. Most of the women came from strong trade families although not generally with family members in the same trade. Almost all the women commented on their love of their trade and their need to be passionate about it to survive. Family influence and particularly the attitudes of the women's fathers were found to be important.

Most of the women were apprenticed and were high achievers in their training and an excellent influence on the trade classes, according to their Head Teachers. The women who were training without apprenticeships were equally committed and had gained work on a self employed basis. It is currently difficult for women to gain access to training in the trades and the report highlights the way this has been overcome in one trade department at The Illawarra Institute, which now has a participation rate of 12% women in its trade courses. Other avenues which could facilitate women's participation in the trades are also considered. Without an engagement by all parties (employers, Registered Training Organizations, schools and society) in the spirit of true Equal Employment Opportunities (EEO), where any person capable of the job is trained and employed to do the job, nothing will change.

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Introduction

As a female tradesperson with fourteen years experience in my trade I am well aware of the difficulties and barriers women face when they decide to engage in the male dominated world of non-traditional trade for women. This report is an attempt to understand what has helped, hindered and driven the women currently training in some of the manual trades at the Illawarra Institute, Wollongong. The purpose of this research is to support current students and encourage women and prospective employers to consider the trades as a career choice for women. Consideration of the history of women's participation in trades and other forms of nontraditional areas of employment has also been included.

Women's historical participation in trades and other forms of non-traditional areas of employment.

Despite efforts to ensure equal opportunities in employment there remain large areas of employment which are dominated by one gender, men. Many of these employment areas are manual trades which are also areas with skill shortage concerns. Attempts were made in the United States of America by the Carter administration during the late 1970's to force the construction trades, in particular, to train and employ women and minorities (Martin, 1988, Eisenberg, 1998). Goals and timetables were set with the intention of establishing a basis of 6.9% of women in the trades over three years. Construction companies with federal contracts over \$10,000 faced losing their contracts if they did not comply. However, "By 1983, women were 1.8 percent of the construction workforce" (Eisenberg, 1998, p20), less than a quarter of the intended target.

The American women's stories of this time are well documented by writers/tradespeople such as Molly Martin (1988) and Susan Eisenberg (1998). They met fierce opposition not only from most of their fellow workers but often from their management and unions. Resentment manifested in direct intimidation, sexual harassment, veiled threats and isolation, and even included "workplace accidents". The women who survived to "Journey person" (tradesperson) status came from a variety of standpoints; young, older, married, single, with and without children, yet they all had a passion for their trades which kept them going. Most of the women commented on knowing little or nothing about their trades when they began. Things that helped them to survive were drive and determination, the prospects of a very good income for the time, family support and the occasional support from a male work colleague who went against the implicit harassment code of his compatriots.

Other occupations or employment areas which have been similarly traditionally male dominated are medical practitioners, policing, and firefighting. For example, in 2006/2007 the police force in Australia reported an average of 23% female officers of all ranks and the Fire Brigade less than 3%. This is despite the fact that both the Police Force and Fire Brigade having a government target for female officers of 50% (Police and Fire Brigade Annual reports 2006/2007). Both services have support groups for women but there is a more general acceptance within society and all ranks of the Police Force that women should be in the Police force. Many of the myths

regarding women's participation in the fire service revolve around the perception of women's weakness (Lewis, 2004, pg8)

Medicine has a particularly long history during which women were seen as being both victimized and pioneering. However, it became a key platform for breaking down barriers to women in relation to employment, education, the law and above all suffrage. Women initially trained as doctors informally during the 1800's, in the face of immense opposition. The myths included women's lack of strength physically and mentally. The first woman to enter medical education in Sydney, Dagmar Berne, in 1885 was forced to complete her studies in Edinburgh due to male hostility. As a proportion of the medical student body, women's percentages rose slowly reaching 16.9% in 1960 and up to 36% in 1985 (McCarthy, 2006). In 2005 women represent 32% of all employed doctors according to Australian Institute of Health and Welfare figures (AIHW, 2005) today women represent half of the student body in medical studies. McCarthy comments that a major factor which contributed to breaking barriers to female physicians was the wish of women to consult a female doctor. She also cites the historian Brian Harrison who notes the importance of women's health issues as a component of women's progress. The change from the 1960's percentage to that of the 1985 figures may also be a reflection of improved education for women in combination with these and many other factors. Whilst the focus of this report is to examine the experiences of women currently training in trades, women have broken gender barriers in medicine and increasingly in the police force. Research and recommendations have also been produced to facilitate women's entry to the Fire Brigade (Lewis 2004).

Current figures for women in manual trades

Figures released in January 2008 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2008, pg 36) state that out of a total of 349,700 Construction Tradespersons, 4,300 are women. In the same table only 2,900 men are registered as secretaries and personal assistants out a total of 178,200. In percentage terms this means that 1.96% men state their occupation as secretaries and personal assistants compared to 1.25% female tradespersons.

The results of the latest International WorldSkills Competition 2007 for the trades were also examined. Whilst it must be born in mind that this competition is restricted to entrants under twenty-one years of age, 815 competitors took part representing 49 trades. Only one trade had no male competitor which was Caring. Twenty seven trades or 57% of the total, had no female representation. The mean figure for total contestants in trades was 17 although twenty trades had more than 17 contestants with a total of 463 male contestants and only 13 female contestants. Women's mean figure of participation was 2.59 but in reality most of the female contestants were grouped into six trades of Floristry, Ladies/men's Hairdressing, Beauty Therapy, Ladies Dressmaking, Restaurant Service and Caring. Only two trades had an almost equal balance of males and females, Graphic Design Technology and Confectioner/Pastry Cook. The only construction trade to have noticeable female representation was Painting and Decorating which had 5 women (35.75%) to nine men. The only other manual trade with a higher than average number of females, was Landscape Gardening with 4 women (13.36%) and 26 men. It was interesting to note that the Illawarra Institute has female enrollments of 37.56% in Horticulture and was not considered gender dominated for this report.

Research Method

Head Teachers for the different sections were contacted to find out how many women were in their sections and which courses they were completing, as official figures on gender balance were often misleading. For example, in Carpentry and Joinery the official figures showed 139 women and 2590 men were enrolled, whereas only 2 women were actually participating on the trade courses, as the figures were affected by enrollment for courses such as Occupational, Health and Safety 'Green' cards. Of the forty six women established as being in areas still considered very male orientated, twenty two were in the Painting, Decorating and Signcraft Department (P & D) (see figure 1). The reasons for this cluster are discussed further in this report. Twenty women who were engaged in training on trade courses at the Illawarra Institute were interviewed for this report. The trades included building and construction, fitting and machining, welding, auto spray, electrical, refrigeration and butchery.

The majority of the research was qualitative by nature with the women questioned on why they entered their trades, how that had happened, the length of time in their trades, negative and positive aspects and what had helped or hindered them. Initial interviews were conducted with most of the women and time constraints or other factors excluded a few women from the second interview. Only one woman overall did not wish to participate further. The second interviews were all conducted face to face during the women's attendance at TAFE. The final interviewing process was conducted over eight months and was restricted to sixteen by time and funding constraints. The number of women within the Painting, Decorating and Signcraft Department are noticeably much higher. The causes are highlighted in this report, so only four women were interviewed; one apprenticed and one non-apprenticed in both trades.

Figure 1. Enrollments Illawarra Institute 2007

TEACHING SECTIONS	FEMALE enrollments	FEMALE trade course enrollments	MALE trade course enrollments	% RATES female trade enrollment
METAL FABRICATION & WELDING	22	2	996	0.20%
FITTING AND MACHINING	3	3	286	1.03%
PLUMBING	1	1	239	0.80%
CARPENTRY & JOINERY	139	2	849	0.23%
BRICKLAYING	3	3	332	0.90%
PAINTING, DECORATING & SIGNCRAFT	22	22	159	12.90%
VEHICLE PAINTING	3	3	56	5.10%
MEAT & ALLIED TRADES	9	2	139	1.42%
ELECTRICAL	8	8	720	1.96%
TOTAL	210	46	5,062	

Findings

Entry Pathways

The majorities of the women interviewed for this report were apprenticed and had participated in their trades for a varying amount of time, ranging between less than 1 and more than 4 years. Many of the women commented on the problems of getting established in the trade with only six entering their trade by applying directly for an

apprenticeship. Most of the women had to use whatever pathway they could to enter their trade.

“I started doing handy person stuff for my friends and myself which I was good at and enjoyed. I applied for so many ads for carpentry apprenticeships but they didn’t even respond or if they did they tried to talk me out of it by telling me I would have trouble driving from here to there etc. Finally I contacted the Master Builders Association (MBA), they won’t take you on unless you have work with someone so I got all the paper work and found someone who would take me on for three months. In fact it was the partner of a friend and I stayed with him for a year until I moved on to another job.”

Emma, Carpenter

“I have been in the trade of boilermaking for nearly four years now but it took a while to get established. I had a really good relationship with my School Careers Advisor, Miss D., I didn’t do really well in year 11 and I went to Miss D. and said I wanted to leave but I didn’t know what I wanted to do.Miss D. took me to a TAFE taster. I tried welding and loved it. I did the test for the Pre-Vocational Course and five minutes after walking away from the TAFE they phoned me to say I was in. To support myself during all this time I was also working in a kebab shop. Then I got my first job in the trade from March to September 2006 but unfortunately was laid off. I did casual work and then I got a phone call out of the blue from my current employers, who had heard about me by word of mouth because I was unusual.”

Adriana, Boilermaker

“Originally I applied for a pre-apprenticeship and I have had trouble getting a job. I thought I had a job a few months ago, they were going to put me on part time but then it didn’t happen. During my first year I did some work experience which was excellent and I learnt heaps.”

Margaret, Carpenter

During the 1980’s a successful class action was brought against BHP and the Australian Iron and Steel employment policies (McMurchy, Oliver et al, 1981) regarding their discrimination against women entering the Port Kembla Steelworks . Whilst only transient success was achieved at the time the current independent areas of BHP have strong EEO policies and a strong management culture of acceptance. The three apprentices working in Port Kembla, Jeanette, Melissa and Monica had the most direct pathways.

“I saw an ad in the paper and I sent in an application letter saying that I was well suited for the job and a hard worker. I got a phone call asking me to go to the Ribbonwood Centre in Dapto to do aptitude tests. There was a whole bunch of tables set up with tests on them but it was just before my HSC so that didn’t freak me out; I was used to tests! I did really well scoring 99%, I think someone got 100% but I was really pleased with my results. We had interviews straight away but I had to wait until the day after my first HSC exam to hear that I had got the job. I was tempted not to finish my exams, but my Mum would have killed me.”

Jeanette, Electrician

Research conducted by The Counselling Department at the Illawarra Institute (2006, pg23) into how apprentices found their apprenticeships noted that the most successful way of gaining an apprenticeship was through contacts of family and friends. Two of the women had been working in their families business and this was a major factor in their entry pathways.

“I have been working in the trade of Butchery for two years, my husband is a butcher and I started working with him for financial reasons. To begin with I was just helping him packing mince and placing stuff out on the counter. As far as I understand, I couldn’t cut anything because of work cover and safety issues so I started an apprenticeship.”

Tracey, Butcher

My step dad was a signwriter and I probably wouldn’t have thought to explore that avenue if it wasn’t in my face as much. I did my work experience during year ten at my step dad’s signwriting business and loved it, so I left school and started as a shop assistant in the sign shop. I did this for two and a half years. I did leave and try a few other things such as retail

but didn't enjoy it as much. I decided to go back and worked for another year in the shop front then I asked for an apprenticeship and got it.

Tara, Signwriter

A couple of the women considered joining their trade as a career move.

"I had had previous jobs working in (fast food) etc but I found them boring and not challenging. My partner is a boiler maker and he knew that some new apprenticeships were coming up, so I watched for the ad in the paper. There were a number of different apprenticeships available but I decided I wanted to be an electrician as it gave me a chance at a real career. I didn't want to rely on my partner having a better job, by finding my own career I was more independent which I liked".

Monica, Electrician

"I had been working in Childcare, I'd needed a job and had opened the paper and Childcare was the only job available to me at the time. I'd been interested in plumbing and had seen a few plumbers come and go and I thought it would be very interesting. I got talking to my boss at the local Pub and I asked him for a job. He gave me a three month trial and then gave me a job and an apprenticeship straight away.

Renee, Plumber

Others described a passion which led to their choice of trade.

"I have always been a tomboy and I have always loved cars. It was cars and the colours – the colours you can paint cars – the pearls and the sparklers that drew me to my trade. I started on this course with my sister, she did the first two years with me then she got another job. It took a while to get an apprenticeship but I got one four months ago through my TAFE teacher.

Shandi, Auto Sprayer

Hannah, a boilermaker began in her trade through a personal interest but it was a break in her training which made her realize how much she loved her trade. Adrianna, also a boilermaker, had a similar passion. This strength of feeling gives the women tenacity to keep trying in the face of adversity and makes them very motivated students and later, tradespeople.

"I started my trade three years ago. I did my first year but then stopped and went overseas for a month when I came back I was behind everyone else and there was no metal work available at the time so I left I started working for my Dad again and this time was put with a boilermaker who is actually my cousin's husband as the company I work for is a family owned company. I realised that I really, really loved what I was doing and I wanted to finish my trade. I just like welding; I even weld in my spare time."

Hannah, Boilermaker

"I would stay back and do extra hours if there was anything I didn't understand. My teachers were really supportive and helped me heaps; sometimes I would finish as late as ten o'clock at night. They said it was unusual to see a girl this determined to do welding."

Adrianna, Boilermaker

For Jackie her interest started in childhood.

"My interest in Painting and Decorating began in childhood with memories of my mother painting well into the night with her dustcoat and head scarf on. She always incorporated new ideas and trends, we would go to bed and by the next morning our whole lounge room had been transformed. I have even seen two different wallpapers on the same wall in one day."

Jackie, Painter and Decorator

Causes of the cluster of women in Painting, Decorating and Signcraft

It is often stated that women don't want to enter the trades. When the opportunity to enter a trade is offered women enroll; generally they don't get offered the opportunity. The Painting and Decorating Department with funding and strong consistent support from the Outreach Department at Illawarra Institute have had thriving and steady enrollments for the introductory basic courses offered in Painting and Decorating which are also aimed at raising the women's self esteem. The original purpose had been a basic Outreach policy of reaching out to a disadvantaged group, bringing them

into TAFE, enabling them to realize their potential then helping them to move to whichever educational pathway was best for them.

What was discovered was a large number of women who found a passion for painting and decorating and who really wanted to continue and make a living from this trade. Through the support of the Outreach Coordinator Jennie Vulatha and the Head of Painting and Decorating, Jeremy Knight, I have been able to continue to train these women and many have now progressed into the trade courses. Whilst there are still not vast quantities of women in Painting and Decorating and Signcraft trade courses the department has about 12% females in trade courses and about 40% participation over all courses. This compares with a participation rate of which ranges from 0.2 (Metal Fabrication and Welding) and 0.23% (Carpentry and Joinery) to 3.46% (Vehicle Painting). Other trades which are not included in Figure 1 and which weren't part of this report had no women in them at all such as Shopfitting and Detail Joinery and Panel Beating.

Almost all the women who progressed in Painting, Decorating and Signcraft from basic courses through to trade courses participated in two or three introductory courses over the span of a year to eighteen months before entering the trade courses. This was found, by the staff in P & D, to give them a good skill and self esteem level on entry which they were able to maintain and combated the lack of industry experience for at least the first year of the trade course. The women were also advised not to seek Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) due to lack of industry practice and for the first year their skill level was almost always higher than their male counterparts. By the second year and beyond most of the female non-apprenticed students were gaining experience painting for at least family and friends and building portfolios of work experience. It was as found to affect the male students with their knowledge of female painters being positive. The caliber of the work completed by the Outreach Introductory courses was also consistently high and strengthened the men's perception of the women as being capable Painters. As some of these male students would become future employers this should affect future employment for women. The male apprentices also took this culture into their workplaces and there has been a noticeable increase, by staff in P & D, in employers trying out female students on a merit basis which has not been prevalent in the past.

Support factors that helped the women

For the women who have not had this pathway in the other trades, other factors helped maintain their belief in their abilities. Most commented on the support of their families and in particular the role their fathers had played in giving them a trust in their capability to perform manual tasks. Almost all of the women came from strong trade families although not normally with family members in the same trade.

“When I started in my trade I didn't think I had any family connections but my uncle runs an engineering company and he has said that once I finish my apprenticeship there may be a possibility of a job there if I am interested. My family have all been very supportive of me; other people tend to be surprised but impressed by what I do, they say “Oh really! That's heaps good” or good on you and all that.”
Melissa, Fitter & Machinist

“My Dad especially encouraged me to enter trade; Mum was more on the lines of so long as you've got a job. They are both really supportive. My Mum is a midwife, Dad is a fitter and machinist, my brothers are apprentice electricians and boilermakers. Having a strong trade family definitely helped because I didn't think I couldn't do it.”
Jeanette, Electrician

“When I finished school I talked to my Dad (by trade he is a bricklayer, rigger, scaffolder) he is a foreman for a company and he put me on as an apprentice with a guy who has been really instrumental in helping and influencing me.”

Hannah, Boilermaker

“My mother is a landscaper and I never thought about the fact that I was entering a male domain, I wanted to expand my creative horizons and this was a way to do so.”

Charmaine, Painter and Decorating

Type of work

The women who engage in trade are just like their male counterparts, they are hands on people, they can't cope with being confined to an office, they get immense satisfaction from seeing something they have made with their own hands and skill, they are proud of what they can do and they want to contribute to society in a very practical way. Again this aspect of satisfaction with creating something tangible was also a factor for the American Journeywomen (Martin, 1988 & Eisenberg, 1998)

“I didn't want to go to uni as I wanted a hands on job, I figured that if I got a trade I'd be set for life – I'd always have something to do.”

Jeanette, Electrician

I'm a hands on type and I just get in there and get on with it, but you do need a good memory for the breakdown of carcasses so that you don't cut into the wrong section of meat.”

Tracey, Butcher

Another myth often expressed is that the work is too heavy and dirty for women and that women will not or can not cope with the physical demands of the job and do not want to get their hands dirty. None of the women in this report had physical problems with their trade; the biggest problem was getting an apprenticeship or work.

Employer Support

Employer support was sadly lacking for the American women entering trades during the 1980/90s. Employer support was also considered important and appreciated by the women interviewed for this research. The only woman severely harassed at work was Tara who was bitten and harassed and the perpetrator was immediately sacked when her employer was told. When Melissa started some of her male colleagues expected her to clean up after them and informed her of their opinion. This was overheard by line management and immediately dealt with. This intolerance for discrimination was very important and ensures the women train on an equal footing and in a safe environment.

“I love my workshop, my boss is really good, he doesn't treat me as a girl just as someone doing a job. It is really good 'cause if he did I think there would be a problem. We've had our differences but we work it out.”

Shandi, Auto Sprayer

“My employer has a very strong policy on Equal Opportunities and all the guys know that they have to be aware of their language etc. it is really great, I have no problems at all, everyone is just treated the same.”

Monica, Electrician

The guys still test me out a bit, but when they realise you can do the job they stop reacting to me as a girl and just treat me the same as the other apprentices so they still have a bit of a go at me in a general way. I have a thick skin so nothing bothers me. If anything they are now a bit protective.

Hannah, Boilermaker

“I haven't yet come across any one that doesn't cope with me on site but they are out there. I don't take anything that anyone like that says to heart – it's just their insecurity and their problem – not mine.”

Renee, Plumber

Managing family commitments

One of the major arguments against employing women in the trades is that if the women are trained they will just stop and have babies, so it's a waste of time and money. The first point to make is that men have babies too and women, in general, return to work more commonly than not in today's society. Many of the women have children and use the same support methods as any other working family. Some industries are recognizing the worth of their female employees and adjusting their shifts to encourage more women with children to apply for jobs such as in the mining industries who employ female truck drivers. The manual trades have traditionally had very static hours and part-time work or job sharing has not been encouraged. A number of women commented on support from partners particularly regarding shared management of children.

"I have a young son who is five and I manage the same as anyone else that works. I start work at 7am so we just have to be organized and my partner helps pick him up and drop him off – we share the load as do most parents these days." Emma, Carpenter

"My day at work starts when I drop my daughter at school...When my daughter finishes school for the day she comes to the shop Depending on what needs doing in the afternoon I can leave at three if I need to... My hours are flexible which works well." Tracy, Butcher

"I have two children aged fifteen and thirteen and my boyfriend is very supportive helping me with them." Margaret, Carpenter

The women who are currently succeeding in the trade courses and who qualify as tradespeople have a tenacity which is beyond most of their male peers. They are also normally very good at what they do and as with male tradespeople with these attributes they often gain employment in management or use their trade to further their career in other areas.

I am pretty persistent. You have to be just to get your foot in the door - as a woman you normally need to work harder to remain even in the trades. Emma, Carpenter

This is the first job I've ever had and sometimes I'm surprised at how far I've come. I think that if you want to do something, do it, there's nothing to stop you and nothing you can't do." Annalisa, Signwriter

Conclusion

In conclusion initial training, such as described in the Painting and Decorating Department at The Illawarra Institute, with figures for female students and attitudes to their participation being changed, is hugely beneficial to supporting women's entry into non traditional trades. The first women to follow this pathway are licensed and are gaining an excellent reputation for the caliber of their work which is leading to steady occupation on a self employed basis. The women in this research who have trained without employment are finding their way. They are also banding together and working as teams. Both the major and small employers, and the women's partners and families mentioned in this report have also shown their belief in women and their abilities. They have also proved women's capabilities to train and work in the trades.

It is well recognized that trade training such as pre-vocational training which gives participants skills and experience has excellent outcomes for employment in trades and encouraging women to participate in pre-vocational courses would also be a very good starting point. It would, however, need to be backed up by education of employers and networking by TAFE teachers and family and friends to open up job opportunities. This would require commitment, dedication and support from industry if the traditional apprenticeship route is maintained as the prime requirement for skilling the trades. Changing the culture within the Painting and Decorating

department has had an immense effect. The recommendations from Sue Lewis's research regarding gender issues in the Fire Brigade concur with this and go on to say that there needs to be at least one female trainer on recruitment training courses and that the female recruits should be clustered, not split to provide them with peer support (Lewis, 2004, pg 23). There are more female fire fighters than female tradespeople which possibly points to a more discriminatory culture in trades. There has been little consideration of shifts in approaches to trade training or of women as a potential work force for skill shortages even though they represent half the population. Migrant tradespeople and financial incentives are not filling the gap and thus gender should be an area that is addressed. Many people will raise their hands in horror and say we can not train without guaranteed employment; we have to have substantiated outcomes before we begin, but we have to begin somewhere. The women who have trained through Outreach courses and then the trade courses in Painting and Decorating are still few in number in the big picture, but they are succeeding.

Fi Shewring

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