

WOMEN IN ADULT AND  
VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

WAVE | SA branch present a Symposium:

**“Education, Training and Viable Work:  
Addressing pathways for women and girls”**

**SPEAKERS:**

**The Hon Kate Ellis MP** Minister for Employment Participation

**Suzanne Franzway PhD**

Professor Sociology and Gender Studies

Chairperson: Research Centre for Gender Studies

University of South Australia

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infrastructure)

Including the Launch of the **eS4W/WAVE** project package:

**“Career Pathways for women and girls: emergent and non-  
traditional occupations and industries”**

**Thursday, 27 September 2012**

**4.00pm — 6.00pm**

**AEU Conference Centre: 163 Greenhill Road, Parkside SA  
5063**

## *Pathways, ignorance and male-dominated work*

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## *Pathways, ignorance and male-dominated work*

*JOAN BIELSKI*

I found first year hard because of the booing, pointing and giggling. 63

My first real disappointment came when I started job-hunting. Then I learned about discrimination. (Bielski 127)

The job they had was on site and even though they were progressive, they were not progressive enough to have a woman on site (122)

The girls generally got jobs last. I went to many interviews where they had no intention of employing me – they just wanted to see if I had 2 heads. (122)

My husband and I are now well into our second five year plan (83)

Once embarked on childbearing, I planned it thoroughly. (73)

### **Introduction**

In 1986, when these interviews took place the engineers professional association, the Institution of Engineers, Australia reported it had 289 women members out of a total of 36,000. i.e 0.8%. and women were 4.3% of engineering students. At the same time, women were well on the way to becoming 50% of medical graduates (Pringle 1998).

Today we are arguing that women have the right education and training for decent work, but progress is mixed at best. I want to talk about an example taken from one of the more slow changing areas: engineering.

To do that I want to introduce 3 concepts, which may also be useful in the larger context of pathways to male-dominated work:

Politics of ignorance

Sexual politics

Workplace culture

**Politics of ignorance:**

Ignorance is produced in much the same way that knowledge is, and so understanding ignorance and the complex practices of its production are equally as important as the practices of knowledge production culture (Le Doeuff 2003; Tuana 2006). Ignorance like knowledge is connected to power and therefore with politics, thus ways of not knowing about gender and change are shaped by a politics of gender or sexual politics.

**Sexual politics:**

The effects of gender in any situation and at any time are the outcome of the state of sexual politics at that point. I define sexual politics as the dynamic and contested politics of gender relations in which discursive and material gendered power is always at stake (Franzway 2001).

**Workplace culture:**

Workplace culture includes the complex spectrum of practices, discourses, material conditions, time and space that go to make up the workplace. The historical development of work practices, the impact of workplace organisations and associations such as trade unions and professional associations, as well as workers' identities, including class, race, and gender their family involvement and information networks.

**The problem** of why women have made few inroads into engineering, with less than twenty per cent in most OECD countries, is sharpened by contrast to the progress that other traditional male-dominated professions such as law and medicine seem to have made (in terms of student numbers and recruitment). I argue that a politics of ignorance is perpetuated in engineering workplace culture in ways that help to sustain gender inequality. I draw on a large project on the puzzle of the failure of engineering to attract and retain women that I have conducted through a series of studies over a ten year period with three colleagues<sup>1</sup>.

**The case study of engineering workplace culture**

In our team's earlier studies we found that while gender equity has become an accepted demand, the implementation of gender equity policies is frequently met with resistance, hostility or indifference by both women and men engineers. We designed a case study approach to investigate the engineering workplace culture. The three large engineering organisations we selected were all located on several sites, both metropolitan and regional,

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Mills, Rhonda Sharp, Judith Gill at University of South Australia

and operated across several sectors of the industry. All were facing skills shortages and had gender equity programs. Each of the organisations, a recently corporatised utility (referred to hereafter as Corporatised Utility, CU) a large multinational company in the mineral resources and processing sector (Mineral Processing, MP) and a multidisciplinary consulting private company (Consulting Engineers, CE) employed an average 28 per cent of women in their total engineering related workforce. The women were relatively young and had less work experience than the men. We interviewed 62 men and 88 women and conducted three focus groups of women (total 20 respondents).

The workplaces we observed were located in a mix of old and new buildings, designed for a range of functions and styles. Some engineers were housed in temporary buildings while their colleagues including the head office were in glass towers behind high security barriers. Regional offices or short term site workplaces tended towards the minimalist end of functional and eating areas gave little physical or visual comfort. Hard hats were often on display, even in the most technologically sophisticated office, signalling that at any moment, the worker could enact the high-risk side of the work. None of the workers lived on the regional sites, but travelled to them from local towns.

We asked the chief executives, personnel managers and engineers at each site why there were still so few women engineers:

I knew you were going to ask me that, and it's probably the only question I've thought about before time, and the answer is I don't know. I don't know. (Personnel manager, CE)

I don't know, I can't answer that one, I'm not a woman. (Male engineer, CU)

So many responded in similar terms that we wondered whether the answer, 'I don't know' meant a lack of knowledge or if it signified something else. Perhaps such ignorance itself might help to understand the persistence of women's inequality in the workplace.

### **Ignorance & sexual politics**

So let me say a little more about ignorance. If ignorance is produced or created in the same way that knowledge is then we can argue that the answer 'I don't know' is a kind of created ignorance. And it is this ignorance which helps to hide the gender inequality in engineering workplaces. It obscures the sexual politics in engineering, so that not knowing the effects of

sexual politics on the causes of women's inequality helps maintain the status quo. Any challenge to women's participation in the engineering workplace also involves a challenge to the state of sexual politics. The issue is thus one of how ignorance about sexual politics of workplace culture is produced and maintained. In our case study, generally interviewees did not want to know about the state of sexual politics in their engineering workplaces.

We therefore need to understand the characteristics of ignorance circulating in the sexual politics of engineering (Franzway et al. 2009) in order to understand the workings and effects of gendered power and how this may be made visible. I'll discuss 4 aspects of the production of ignorance in our case study of engineering workplace culture.

### 1) *Wilful ignorance*

It doesn't worry me whether people are men or women to be honest, I don't look to that sort of difference. (Male engineer, CU)

Usually we regard this kind of response as at least neutral and better than the overtly hostile, but look more closely.

Gender is not a problem since women and men are the same, or gender makes no difference. Gender, meaning women, is irrelevant. If all workers are the same then it does not matter if there happen to be no women engineers. Since gender is not an issue, the sexual politics that may be in play is also not an issue; sexual politics in engineering is invisible. In engineering, it is known that the proportion of women is small, but this knowledge overlays a wilful ignorance about why this is the situation and even more crucially, about the privileging of men as normative engineers.

These respondents endorsed the general principle of gender equity, at least when they spoke to us. While some will name the gender dimensions of engineering, they will go no further, and maintain a determined ignorance that deflects sexual politics as having any relevance to them. This is not unique to engineering. The desired effect is for gender to become invisible. In a context of sexual politics that is dominated by heterosexual men, the invisibility of gender also renders men's dominance invisible so that men's concerns and practices are seen to be the norm.

{Ignorance is active and systematic rather than a passive state of not knowing. The avoidance of knowing about the sexual politics in engineering is an active practice of ignorance. }

2) *Ignorance is produced by the construction of epistemically disadvantaged identities.*

*Why do women have to prove themselves?*

I know that a female mining engineer has to prove to them that she knows her stuff and she has to earn their respect a lot more [than young male engineers]. (Woman engineer, CE)

Women's knowledge and professional practice are rarely trusted (Townley, 2006). The construction of women as lacking authoritative knowledge, credibility and capacity lies at the heart of a politics of ignorance of women engineers. Women engineers whom we interviewed recounted many incidents where they were continually reminded of their femaleness as an impediment to being seen as a competent colleague with authoritative knowledge. In spite of the public acceptance of women's equality, women engineers were told they simply 'don't cut the mustard'.

If women are to have equal (equivalent epistemic) agency to men engineers, they must be treated with appropriate respect and trust which is a 'necessary and inherently valuable part of epistemic agency' (Townley 2006, : 41). Without it, they remain disadvantaged in relation to men. Where women do gain credibility, it is an occasion of note. Since the sexual politics in play produces the woman engineer as subject to 'group-based differential treatment' those women who appear to benefit from affirmative action programs are put at risk of lacking cognitive authority and being constructed as simply lesser (epistemically disadvantaged identities).

As a result, women strive to win the job 'because of merit' and not 'just because I'm a girl'. (engineer, MP). The women's wish to deny gender difference stems in part from their recognition that the state of sexual politics in engineering disadvantages those who are not part of the dominant group. But for the women engineers gender does make a difference, and one in which they are constantly at risk of being constructed as disadvantaged agents.

3) *Knowing that we do not know, and not caring to know.*

All our participants ‘knew’ that women can be engineers because ‘we’re all equal now’, and most know that the number of women engineers remains low in spite of various programs aimed at recruitment and retention. However, knowledge that is not linked to our interests is better ignored (Tuana 2006). Our questions about *why* these programs appear to have been largely unsuccessful led to a range of reasons such as the nature of engineering work, with its large structures, heavy machines, dirty mines, long and unpredictable hours, outdoor work and remote locations or the lack of knowledge about what engineers do. Somehow these are not problems for men, while even brilliant young female maths and science students are unable to find out about engineering.

Gender is seen to make a difference, but how or why it does, is either just nature or puzzling. The question that is rarely asked, is why are these reasons seen to be good enough?

I suggest that what is being ignored, the knowledge that we do not care to know is the refusal to know the role of sexual politics in workplace cultures. The state of sexual politics in engineering, and other male-dominated occupations, is one in which male dominance is deeply entrenched and it is this which is being ignored. Not caring to know about male dominance is a form of ignorance that is produced and sustained by the failure to pursue questions about why gender equity programs for women engineers make little difference.

4) *Do not even know that we do not know. What don't we know?*

Oh well, they've got a work-life balance committee. I think that's more lip service because I don't think they're getting to the core of the problem. (Woman engineer, CE)

The decades of feminist research and activism around the problems for gender equity in work make it seem unlikely that anything of significance is left unknown. We know that male dominance of the workplace, especially the so-called non-traditional, causes difficulties for women.

In engineering, a very common reason (given by both men and women) for women to leave engineering is its incompatibility with family and caring responsibilities. It is also widely assumed by society generally that the family is central to women's lives, impacts on their

paid work, but plays little part in men's lives as workers. In western societies, family-friendly workplace policies and practices are in place, but are designed to ameliorate the effects of women's family responsibilities primarily (Maher, Lindsay & Franzway 2008). Women's roles in the family are unchallenged by such family-friendly workplaces, which are not gender neutral but are shaped by the sexual politics of the family, work and the relationship between them. What we do not know that we do not know are the assumptions we make about the family, and just how resilient these are, especially those still see the family as the central institution in women's lives (Franzway 2001).

The core of the problem here is the sexual politics of the family. We take for granted that it is women and always will be women who cope with central family matters and family care more generally. We do not challenge the sexual politics of the conflict between work and family demands. What is not known, what is ignored, is that not only are women responsible for family care, but that this is an outcome of a sexual politics in which gender relations, gendered identities are at stake.

### **Conclusion**

It is the apparent stubbornness of these assumptions that demand attention. Gender is not a simple category, and the difference that gender makes does not just happen. Rather the difference depends on the state of sexual politics in male dominated workplaces such as those in engineering. It is the practices of ignorance which help to sustain that difference and thus the persistence of women's inequality.

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