

**Gender unmasked: The implications for policy of
demographic shifts and gender discrimination**

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Introduction

Labour management policy currently reflects a more concerted effort by scholars to place gender at the foreground of equitable work practices. Affirmative action policies embody not only an equitable set of values; they actively promote women into management positions when skills are at least equivalent to their male counterparts. The problem is that access for women into management positions has been slow and although legislation has provided some impetus for labour management policy, equity through gender programs has been sporadic at best. There are a number of issues this paper will address. First, while women are entering the professions at higher rates than men and outnumber their male cohorts below the age of 30 in most professions (11 out of 16), there remains a marked deficit of female managers. We discuss why women's participation rates are increasing and the job-type perceptions which extend to women on the basis of sex stereotyping: leaving the workforce to begin a family, personal attributes not equal to men, and common perceptions that men are best suited for particular kinds of jobs. Second, the paper describes how labour management policies might address the more salient features of gender issues. We suggest that organisations must revisit their company-wide values in an effort to unmask the subconscious schemas that exist in relation to women. While access for women to a whole range of professions is increasing, job and age-type perceptions are common. Although fully articulated affirmative action programs are evident, rich traditions in some professions continue to inhibit women in reaching their true potential.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse and explore the changing numbers and age distributions of women in different types of professions and the implications of these demographic patterns with respect to labour management policies. While the percentage formed by females has been increasing over time, females are still in the minority, forming about 44% of the labour force in 2002 (ABS, 2002). However, marked differences in age and sex distributions are evident between different occupational groups. We discuss the implications of these patterns. We contend that information on the demographics of labour participation is important to policy planners both in Government and business for three broad reasons: for identifying prospective retirement bulges and labour shortages, in the analysis of career progressions and the appropriateness of organisational structures (Morrison, 1993, Foot and Venne, 1990, Foot and Stoffman, 1996), and in the need to create appropriate labour management policies (De Cieri et al., 2003). The age and sex distributions of occupational groups also have important implications for understanding the demography of income and consumer behaviour (Assael, 1998). In this paper, we place particular emphasis on the role and participation of women.

Our findings suggest that some common 'old' perceptions related to women, apparently more suited to particular professions, are slowly being reversed. Women now form a majority in the entry level age groups for some professions previously dominated by males. While some employers are finding creative ways to implement affirmative action programs, particularly in the case of larger employers, our analysis reveals that women continue to be underrepresented in managerial positions. We suggest that labour management policies require further fine tuning in changing the perceptions towards women in the workplace. The new predominantly female cohorts entering the professions

may often find themselves subordinate to an 'old-guard' of older male managers and older male colleagues within their professions.

Census Data on Females in the Professions and Managerial Occupations

The data used in this study are from the 1996 and 2001 censuses of Australia. Data on a person's occupation were collected specifically for the main job held in the week before the census. Responses were coded using the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO) (ABS, 1997). The classification of occupations, which reflects the level and type of skills they involve, was identical for the 1996 and 2001 censuses. It differs somewhat from the classification used for earlier censuses (ABS, 1997).

The 2001 census found that females formed 52.6% of those employed in a professional occupation, up from 51.1% at the 1996 census. The percentage formed by females is comfortably above the 45% of all employed persons they form, and far above the 28% of Managers and Administrators they represent. While women are in the majority across all professionals, males form the majority of most professions, with females outnumbering males in only five of the sixteen (minor) groups of professions identified by the census. The female percentage varies widely by profession (Table 1). At one end of the scale, there are more than ten male building and engineering professionals to every female, whilst at the other there are more than ten female nursing professionals to every male.

Between 1996 and 2001, the percentage formed by females increased in all professions, except for computing professionals, nursing professionals, and miscellaneous education professionals. In the latter two groups, this represents a slight evening of the gender balance in predominantly female professions. For computing professionals, the continuation of a strong male predominance reflects the low percentages of females both among graduates from university IT courses and among recently arrived migrants from overseas.

Females form the majority of professionals between the ages of 20 and 55 (Figure 1). The percent who are females dips noticeably between the ages of 25 and 40, **which would reflect these ages being the prime ones for childbearing and looking after young children and the difficulties some professional women face in combining work with these activities.** The sharp reduction in the percentage of professionals who are female above age 50 would in part be a legacy of the legal and social constraints and disincentives which prevented women from pursuing education and entering professional careers in the past (Evans, 1996). It may also be that some of the steep reduction in female professionals above the age of 40 similarly reflects inadequate labour management policies that have discriminated against women on the basis of both age and job-type characteristics. We contend that even in the traditional female dominated professions such as nursing and teaching, labour policies have been inadequate in encouraging job longevity. We discuss this in more detail later.

For most professional groups for instance, the female percent declines markedly as age increases, with two female-dominated professions, nursing and miscellaneous education professionals being the only exceptions to this pattern (Figure 3). School teaching also has a somewhat lower gradient for the change in percent female by age than

other professions. While a pattern of a majority being females is observed in the younger working ages in most (11 out of 16) professions, males represent the majority in the older age groups in most professions. For medical practitioners, the change in the female percentage by age is especially pronounced. Above the age of 60, male medical practitioners outnumber females by more than six-to-one. In contrast, female medical practitioners form 51 per cent of the 20 to 24 years age group reflecting a greater participation rate for young females. For school teaching, although there are more females than males at all ages, the imbalance is greatest in the younger working ages. In the most heavily male-dominated profession (building and engineering workers), females form 18 percent of the 20 to 24 year olds, compared to less than 5 per cent of the over 45s. The variation in the percentage of females in managerial and administrative occupations is much less pronounced with males forming the majority of all groups, and the female percentage peaking at less than 37 per cent in the 25 to 29 age range (Figure 5). Female managers account for only 4.5% of all female employees (Table 2). By comparison, 10.8% of male employees are in managerial positions.

Part of the explanation of the dramatic changes in the sex ratio of professionals with age lies in the marked changes over time in the sex ratios of enrolments in higher education courses, and the flow on effect on new entrants to the professions. The percentage of all higher education students who were female increased from 21% in 1949 to 55% in 2000 (Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training 2000). Moreover female students are now more successful in their higher education studies than males. The effects of withdrawal from the labour force following childbirth, both short-term and longer term, would be very much a secondary reason for the decline in the percentage female with age for most professions (Birrell et al., 1995). Another important explanation for increased participation by women over time is the introduction and amendment of legislation. Both the Sex Discrimination Act of 1984 and the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act of 1999 have ensured that minimum standards exist in relation to equality in labour management policies such as recruiting. The latter Act amends the Affirmative Action Act of 1986 and provides a basis by which companies (particularly those employing above 1000), offer equal access to work regardless of sex. Such legislation is reflected in policies to retain female workers and in some countries, quota-like hiring to ensure that the workforce mirrors that of the local labour market (De Cieri et al., 2003: 92).

Many economic and social factors underpin increased participation by women in the workplace. Consistent with other Asia Pacific Rim countries such as New Zealand and Malaysia, in Australia women with children are increasingly remaining in the workforce, both as part of dual-career couples, and as single-parent families. Dual-career couples have increased from 51.7% of couple families with children in 1992 to 56.7% in 2002 (ABS, 2003). The growth of single-parent workers is a world-wide phenomenon with more than half of all US children living in a single-parent family (Haar and Spell, 2003:45). Working mothers exceed 25% of all working families in both New Zealand and the US. **In Australia, labour force participation of one-parent families with children aged 15 or under increased from 40.6% in 1992 to 46.2% in 2002.** Such socio-economic factors account for the increasing variations in age/sex demographics, but more importantly, place increasing demands on labour management receptivity in providing equal access for women throughout their careers as well as equal access to managerial

roles. We define labour management receptivity as “the capacity of a firm’s labour management policies to remove discriminatory practices related to age-based and job-type employment and to promote equality through equity in all labour management programs” (Parr and Murray, 2004). We discuss the implications of these and other factors in the next section.

Implications for Labour Management Policies

While legislation provides some impetus for labour management receptivity, equal employment policies remain not evident in over two-thirds of all Australian business (De Cieri et al., 2003). This is despite the reality that many socio-economic factors accounting for increased participation by women have been known for some time. These include: increased demands for semi-skilled female workers, attraction to work-related identities as opposed to marriage-related ones, and the need for women to return to work due to financial family pressures (White, Cox, and Cooper, 1992).

A number of scholars have criticised the price that women must pay to achieve equal status in managerial roles (O’Sullivan and Sheridan, 1999:17; Gagliardi, 1990). Traditionally, women have been noted for mimicking and reproducing the management styles of male colleagues (O’Sullivan and Sheridan, 1999:17; Gagliardi, 1990; Maddock, 1999), and popular fictions such as plays and films according to O’Sullivan and Sheridan (1999) have only served to reinforce reality that certain representations of women in particular roles fit preconceived societal perceptions (Parr and Murray, 2004). Not surprisingly, many companies now employ a range of labour policies designed to improve the gender balance and to reverse many popular misconceptions. These include anything from family-friendly policies, pregnancy programs, child-care facilities, and work-life balance. The existence of such programs is not representative of all companies. There is an increasing perception in Australia that while companies understand the importance of gender issues related to management, most notably through legislation, very few employ affirmative action policies that go beyond what is legislated (O’Sullivan and Sheridan, 1999; De Cieri et al., 2003). It should be noted however that the existence of affirmative action policies are more the case for larger rather than smaller firms and are not necessarily representative of non-professional groups, or indeed all professional groups.

Particular kinds of labour management policies appear to be more successful than others. In some companies, slogans relating to work-life balance are more symbolic as it is difficult for employees to ‘catch up’ on the balance of hours owed to a company when taking time off work. Many programs are accordingly restricted or off-limits to most employees. Similarly, companies pay lip service to programs that train women in managerial roles. One exception to this is Johnson and Johnson’s gender/equity program where a number of women are seconded to participate in management board activities on a rotational program (Donaldson, 2002). Other policies relating to work-life integration as distinct from work-life balance is more important to some companies such as Cisco Systems. Work-life integration enables employees to plan their own personal lives around their work outcomes so that goals relating to both are fulfilled (Donaldson, 2003). Employers have also been criticised for allowing important skills to be lost to the organisation during child-rearing years and this may, among other things, partly explain

the reason for a sharp decline in women participation beyond the age of 40. Some organisations such as the Bank of Melbourne assist women to remain healthy throughout their working pregnancy, helping to ensure that working mothers return to work soon after (O'Connor, 2002). What is notable here is a shift in values towards women workers in providing extra care and in valuing skills that would be otherwise lost to the organisation. In following Parr and Murray (2004), we suggest that labour management receptivity can be controlled and adjusted so that organisational commitment by different groups (such as women professionals) can be increased. This is as much about reassessing organisational values and common perceptions related to women in the workplace as it is developing well defined policies.

The considerable difference in the age distributions of females and males within many professions raises issues for the assessment of gender equity in these occupations. The attainment of rank is clearly age-related, and some of the imbalances in rank and pay of males and females would reflect this. With the imbalances in the male and female age distributions now evident in many professions, policies formulated to address age-associated stereotyping and discrimination in these areas clearly will impact differently on the genders, with females being more affected by discrimination against the young and males by discrimination against the aged. The majority of those who would benefit from incentives aimed at promoting the retention of older workers would be male (Costello 2004). Support for this view can be found by analysing the figures attached to this paper. Male workers become dominant as age increases across most of the professions, with the exceptions of teaching and nursing. There is little evidence to suggest that an increasing participation of women will lead to increased management participation across different age/sex classifications.

Conclusion

Looking to the future, the prospect is of the retirement of older cohorts which are predominantly male and of the professions increasingly consisting of the newer predominantly female cohorts. Thus the imbalance of female professionals to males is likely to grow. Labour management policies will accordingly need to ensure adequate access for women into traditional male dominated domains including managerial positions. Policies are one thing but company-wide values related to women may also need overhauling. In a subsequent paper, we argue that both age and job-type discrimination account for the lack of managerial representation by women (Murray and Parr, 2005). While the issues discussed in this paper appear to be important to firms, actionable programs that delineate importance from performance in gender issues are still some way off.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1: Percent Female by Profession 1996 and 2001

	Percent Female	
	1996	2001
Natural and Physical Science Professionals	32.4	37.8
Building and Engineering Professionals	7.2	8.9
Accountants, Auditors and Corporate Treasurers	37.3	42.8
Sales, Marketing and Advertising Professionals	40.9	48.7
Computing Professionals	22.1	22.0
Miscellaneous Business and Information Professionals	46.2	49.4
Medical Practitioners	30.2	32.7
Nursing Professionals	91.8	91.5
Miscellaneous Health Professionals	58.1	60.9
School Teachers	71.0	73.0
University and Vocational Education Teachers	44.1	45.6
Miscellaneous Education Professionals	71.1	69.5
Social Welfare Professionals	61.3	65.0
Miscellaneous Social Professionals	33.7	38.6
Artists and Related Professionals	43.8	44.5
Miscellaneous Professionals	25.6	27.8
All Professionals	51.1	52.6

Table 2: Female and Male Employees by Occupation

Occupation of employees	Female employees ('000)	% of all female employees	Males employees ('000)	% of all male employees
Managers and administrators	192.4	4.5	554.7	10.8
Professionals	834.8	20.5	846.4	16.5
Associate professionals	437.6	10.8	652.1	12.7
Tradespersons	118.7	2.9	1058.6	20.7
Advanced clerical/service	347.4	8.5	40.9	0.8
Intermediate clerical/service	1147.0	28.2	428.1	8.4

Intermediate production/transport workers	87.7	2.2	701.3	13.7
Elementary clerical/service workers	600.6	14.8	314.9	6.1
Labourers and related workers	310.3	7.6	526.9	10.3

Adapted from De Cieri et al., (2003).









