



The National Library supplies copies of this article under licence from the Copyright Agency Limited (CAL). Further reproductions of this article can only be made under licence.

- City Report*, 1995, Centre for Population and Urban Research, Monash University, 1995
- <sup>2</sup> J. Flood, 'Internal Migration in Australia', *Urban Futures*, February 1992
- <sup>3</sup> Resources Assessment Commission, *Coastal Zone Inquiry*, Final Report, 1993, pp. 18-19
- <sup>4</sup> R. Reich, *The Work of Nations*, Knopf, 1991
- <sup>5</sup> Queensland Department of Housing local Government and Planning, 1994, *Migration 1986 to 1991*, p. 19
- <sup>6</sup> M. Bell & C. Maher, *Internal Migration in Australia 1986-1991: The Labour Force*, Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research, Melbourne, 1995, p. 128
- <sup>7</sup> L. Wanna, 'Gateway City? The politics of economic development strategies', in J. Caulfield & J. Wanna, eds, *Power and Politics in the City: Brisbane in Transition*, Macmillan, 1995, p. 126

## PREMATURE EXULTATION: HOW THE DEMISE OF INEQUALITY HAS BEEN GREATLY EXAGGERATED

Tanya Castleman

*Criticisms of equity programs in higher education and employment purport to show that gender and culture are no longer barriers to achievement. Such arguments fail to recognise the complexity of gender and culture privilege and thus present a misleading picture of the position of women and those from non-English speaking backgrounds in higher education and the workforce.*

### INTRODUCTION

Two articles appeared in this journal during 1995 which argued against the continuation of equal opportunity and affirmative action measures for women and people of non-English speaking background on the basis that these groups are doing as well as (and have even surpassed) men and those of English speaking background. The first of these articles, 'Female Achievement in Higher Education and the Professions' by Birrell, Dobson, Rapson and Smith' (hereafter, BDR&S), analysed data from the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) and concluded that young women perform better than young men as measured by secondary school retention rates, higher education undergraduate commencing enrolments, degree level qualifications and employment rates. On the basis of these figures, the authors argued that the Commonwealth Government's policy statement, *A Fair Chance for All*,<sup>2</sup> has outlived its usefulness and that 'it is men who could be regarded as being members of a disadvantaged group'.<sup>3</sup>

Stephen Rimmer's paper, 'Attaining equity: An assessment of federal government programs',<sup>4</sup> analyses data on Australian Public Service (APS) employment and concludes that women and those of non-English speaking background are not, in fact, disadvantaged. The author argues that equity-oriented pro-

grams (including affirmative action) 'should be wound-up once they have attained their goals' and warns that 'continuation and extension of these [EEO] programs could result in the target groups becoming systematically over-represented compared to individuals not targeted, such as lower-socio-economic-status English-speaking-background males'.<sup>5</sup>

The mass media feasted on these conclusions, amplifying the impression that men are hard done by and that migrants are displacing the native-born. Whatever the intentions of the authors, the articles gave comfort to those who believe that government equity initiatives disturb the natural operation of education and employment and give women and the children of migrants an unfair advantage. This picture, however, does not sit well with the experience of scholars and practitioners working on these issues. In Australian universities and workplaces there is still wide evidence of exclusionary practices and attitudes which challenge the legitimacy of those who do not meet the male, English-speaking standard. These claims that there is no longer any need for equity measures are, at best, premature and, at worst, seriously misleading.

Quantitative analyses of workforce data which include analyses of gender and cultural background are a useful contribution to our assessment of employment equity and evaluation of policy measures. But it is a

grave mistake to take such data at face value without addressing the underlying social dynamics which shape the experiences and opportunities of individuals from diverse social backgrounds. Unfortunately, neither of these articles shows any appreciation of these social dynamics, yet both reach sweeping conclusions which do not make sense in light of the vast body of research on gender and cultural processes within education and employment. In sum, the articles in question invite us to view these complex issues in a simplistic way — if women and NESBs can approach 50 per cent participation then they are, by definition, no longer disadvantaged.

#### WHAT DO THE DATA REALLY TELL US?

While there is not scope here for a detailed consideration of the arguments and interpretations in the articles, a couple of examples of faulty interpretation of the figures that they present must be noted.

There is no dispute over the growing proportion of women enrolled in higher education courses, but it is misleading to announce (as does the BDR&S article) that women predominate in higher education. Notable gender disparities can be observed in 1994 higher education commencing enrolments. Women outnumbered men in total higher education enrolments only in the traditionally feminised areas of arts, education, health and in veterinary science.<sup>6</sup> The article disregards some patterns in participation rates (for example, 47 per cent of women in business and 43 per cent of women in science) while depicting others as indications of women's advantage (for example, the 48 per cent of women among commencing medical students and the 53 per cent of women among commencing law students).

Further, the BDR&S paper argues that women are easily able to translate educational achievement into labour market position. It dismisses as 'myth' the idea that 'women have difficulty putting their qualifications to work'<sup>7</sup> but the evidence advanced for this is merely that 20-24 year old degree-qualified women have a lower unemployment rate than their male counterparts. The same table<sup>8</sup> shows that these female graduates have a lower rate of employment in any administrative, managerial or professional occupation than comparable male graduates (61 per cent and 66 per cent respectively). Only

among those with qualifications in health and in building design do women have a noticeably (3 percentage points) higher participation in such employment. Yet female graduates' lower rate of professional employment (which is consistent with the literature on women and employment) is explained away as 'young female graduates were *nearly as successful* as men in finding jobs in the administrative/managerial or professional occupations'<sup>9</sup> (my italics). The failure to note the nine percentage point difference in favour of male law graduates in gaining professional employment is particularly interesting in light of the article's earlier point that women constitute over half of commencing law enrolments<sup>10</sup> and 'outperform men in virtually all areas of study'.<sup>11</sup> These figures would seem to indicate a significant male privilege but are not acknowledged.

A similar partiality is evident in Rimmer's article. He contrasts the 48 per cent of total APS staff who are female with their somewhat lower participation in the workforce as a whole,<sup>12</sup> omitting to mention that the clerical and administrative occupations which characterise much of the public service are feminised. This is precisely where we would expect to find a predominance of women. What is important is women's low level of representation at higher levels of clerical and administrative employment. Likewise, he suggests that the 'NESB2'<sup>13</sup> employees are 'over-represented in the APS compared to their numbers as a proportion of the total population'<sup>14</sup> while acknowledging that this group is more likely to hold qualifications than their English-speaking background counterparts. One could as reasonably argue that we should expect an even higher rate of participation from this category of people.

There is a subtext common to the articles which implies impending doom and a concern that equity programs will interfere with some natural state of affairs. For example, Rimmer warns that EEO 'could in time result in women being *over-represented* at senior levels [of the APS]...'<sup>15</sup> even though the target figure for women in the senior executive service of the APS is only 20 per cent by the year 2000.<sup>16</sup> The BDR&S article complains about '*pressuring* young women into the technological fields'<sup>17</sup> (my italics) and alludes to 'state intervention'<sup>18</sup> in publicly-funded higher education (though universities must be accountable to the

Government for their provision of education). These statements distort and mislead.

#### TARGETED PROGRAMS

The target of both articles is government equity programs. These include those which relate to education (*A Fair Chance for All* and the *National Action Plan for the Education of Girls*) as well as employment equity legislation such as the Affirmative Action Act (1986) and the Public Service Reform Act (1984). However, neither article shows how these policy provisions operate to 'disadvantage' men.

What does *A Fair Chance for All* do? It provides a policy framework and commits the Commonwealth to 'providing extra funding for programs targeted specifically at helping institutions improve the participation of disadvantaged groups in higher education'.<sup>19</sup> It also mandates special entry arrangements, bridging and supplementary support programs, higher education awareness programs in some areas, subsidies for child care, improved links between TAFE and higher education and information for long-term unemployed people.

The targets set for women's participation in 1995 include increasing the proportion of women in non-traditional courses (other than engineering) to 40 per cent, in engineering to 15 per cent and in postgraduate research study equal to the proportion of undergraduates in each field. Each higher education institution is charged with developing its own programs and strategies and are given considerable leeway to tailor their targets to their 'local circumstances'. The institutions are 'required to report annually on their progress towards achieving institution equity objectives and targets'<sup>20</sup> Universities seem to have been very cautious in introducing programs except in specifically targeted areas. A Victorian study in 1990<sup>21</sup> found that initiatives to encourage female course applicants were largely confined to those with especially small female participation rates, in particular engineering courses. Bridging courses were offered rather than giving preferential entry to women.

These are hardly jackboot tactics. But have they overshot their aims? The data presented in the BDR&S article do not support this conclusion. Only 13.6 per cent of commencing undergraduate enrolments in engineering in 1994 were women (short of

the 15 per cent target) and only 13.1 per cent<sup>22</sup> of total engineering students were women. Comparable enrolments in 'science' reached the target figure (43 per cent female) but there are still areas within science which have less than 40 per cent female. In some science disciplines the proportion of women is actually decreasing and in engineering the growth of women students has slowed.<sup>23</sup> According to the data presented, in no area except engineering/surveying did the female proportion of postgraduate research commencing enrolments reach the level of females in commencing undergraduate enrolments. Not only is there much more work to do, but the gains are, in fact, fragile. Without the continuation of targeted programs women's participation may well slip back and in at least one such case this slippage has been documented.<sup>24</sup>

#### MISUNDERSTANDING 'DISADVANTAGE'

The most striking characteristic of the two articles is their failure to appreciate the complex and entrenched dynamics of gender and culture privilege. Both adopt an implicitly mechanistic model which does not acknowledge power differences. We are invited to believe that once women and those of non-English speaking background have tipped the 50 per cent mark (or the level of their representation in the population), a new balance is established which no longer requires effort or intervention. This is coupled with what might be called the 'pipeline myth' which assumes that changes at one level or in one area are automatically translated into commensurate changes in other levels and other areas. For example, the naive assertion that 'men are going to have to rethink lingering traditional notions concerned with male/female roles in the workplace and the home...[and to accept] the existence of many more senior women'<sup>25</sup> ignores (or demonstrates ignorance of) the literature which identifies and analyses the continued resistance to women in the workplace<sup>26</sup> and the intractable gender divisions of domestic labour even where women are engaged in paid work.<sup>27</sup> Men of Anglo-Celtic background remain a privileged group as a multitude of Australian and international studies of women in the workforce and public life have demonstrated. These dynamics are well theorised and we have a wealth of material which documents these inequalities.

The authors represent themselves as merely showing 'reality' but the articles are redolent of the defence of male, Anglo-Celtic privilege without acknowledging or understanding how that privilege operates. They ignore what Joan Eveline has aptly called 'the politics of advantage'<sup>28</sup> which include the discursive practices which render male advantage invisible.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, women must continually explain and justify their position. Thus, the reaction when women's participation rates edge over 50 per cent is alarmist, even suggesting that we have been imagining gender inequality all along!<sup>30</sup>

The data presented in these two articles could be understood better in the context of the social practices which continue to marginalise women and NESB employees. A more tenable conclusion is that women have increased their participation in higher education and the workforce and some of these changes have been assisted by equity programs. But the world is far from equal and even farther from fair; it is premature to declare it so on the basis of limited statistics.

#### References

- <sup>1</sup> B. Birrell, I. Dobson, V. Rapson and T.F. Smith, 'Female Achievement in Higher Education and the Professions', *People and Place*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1995, p. 43-54
- <sup>2</sup> *A Fair Chance for All*, DEET, AGPS, Canberra, 1990
- <sup>3</sup> BDR&S, op. cit., p. 53
- <sup>4</sup> S. Rimmer, 'Attaining Equity: An assessment of federal government programs', *People and Place*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1995, p. 16-23
- <sup>5</sup> *ibid.* p. 22
- <sup>6</sup> As the WISET (Women in Science, Engineering and Technology) Advisory Group Discussion Paper, September, 1994 points out, 'science' covers a diverse range of disciplines in terms of gender composition. Veterinary Science is an area which has become recently much more attractive to women and, as such, is anomalous. It is misleading therefore to refer, as the BDR&S article does, to 'even veterinary science...' p. 46 (my italics).

- <sup>7</sup> BDR&S, op. cit., p. 49
- <sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 50
- <sup>9</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 47
- <sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, p. 48
- <sup>12</sup> Rimmer, op. cit., p. 18
- <sup>13</sup> NESB2 refers to the children of non-English speaking migrants; NESB1 to non-English speaking migrants.
- <sup>14</sup> Rimmer, op. cit., p. 21
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid.* p. 19
- <sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p. 18
- <sup>17</sup> BDR&S, op. cit., p. 53
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 43
- <sup>19</sup> *A Fair Chance for All*, op. cit., p. 9
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 56
- <sup>21</sup> Victoria, Ministry of Education, *Academic Progression: Strategies and Initiatives for Women in Higher Education in Victoria*, May 1990.
- <sup>22</sup> S. Lewis, 'Women in Engineering in Australia: an update on work and study data', Paper presented to the Second Women in Engineering Forum, RMIT, Dec. 9, 1995
- <sup>23</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> I am indebted to my colleague, Sue Lewis, for this information based on women in science and engineering programs. Failure to continue one such program resulted in a decrease of women coming into and remaining in non-traditional courses. Support is essential for many women in non-traditional courses which are frequently hostile educational environments.
- <sup>25</sup> BDR&S, p. 53
- <sup>26</sup> See, for example, C. Cockburn, *In the Way of Women: Men's resistance to sex equality in organisations*, Ithaca, IRL Press, 1991; and A. Sinclair, *Trials at the Top: chief executives talk about men, women and the Australian executive culture*, The Australian Centre, The University of Melbourne, 1994.
- <sup>27</sup> See M. Bitman, *Juggling Time: How Australian Families Use Time*, Canberra, Office of the Status of Women, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1991.
- <sup>28</sup> J. Eveline, 'The Politics of Advantage', *Australian Feminist Studies*, No. 19, Autumn, 1994, p. 129-154.
- <sup>29</sup> Joan Eveline has herself noted the misleading use of the term 'disadvantage' in the BDR&S article (public lecture, Victoria University of Technology, 10 October 1995).
- <sup>30</sup> BDR&S, op. cit., p. 51