

THE NATIONAL CENTRE FOR WOMEN: EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND TRAINING FOR WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL AREAS

Sue Lewis

Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia

What is the National Centre for Women?

The National Centre for Women (NCW), based at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, is a unique university centre in Australia whose current brief is to research and enhance women's recruitment into and equal participation within 'non-traditional' employment, education and training. In the late 1980's, the NCW started as a government funded Centre aiming to increase the participation and retention of female students in engineering and other non-traditional study areas. At that time, the Centre performed most of the recognised advocacy tasks aimed at increasing female recruitment and retention: targeted recruitment through attractive promotional materials, participation in seminars, "hands-on" taster days; support for women enrolled in engineering through support groups, mentors, use of role models, intervention classes in areas from engines to assertiveness.

However in 1993, the NCW reassessed its programs and we shifted our emphasis from changing women's career aspirations and support once they had enrolled, to include working toward change at organisational and cultural levels in education and industry. Much of our work focuses on or intersects with engineering work and study.

Why do we exist?

The Centre exists for two main reasons:

1. Women continue to be under-represented in a wide range of occupations. Australia has one of the most sex segregated patterns of employment in the OECD. We believe it is important for women to think beyond a narrow range of careers. Many areas in which women are under-represented offer good pay and interesting work. Some industries in which women are under represented have an enormous impact on society — engineering for example. It makes sense to have both women and men shaping these professions.

2. While the numbers of women in non-traditional areas has increased over the last two decades, very little work has been done on exploring the experience of women in non-traditional areas. What sort of climate is it for

them? Why do they drop out? What changes might need to be addressed?

Much of our emphasis at the National Centre for Women is in exploring these issues. For example, we investigate the experiences of women in diverse non-traditional courses and work (career paths, relationships, obstacles to progression etc). We explore the learning environments in male-dominated Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and university courses and conduct work with staff on eradicating gender bias in curriculum materials, assessment practices and teaching and learning styles. We also investigate the organisational cultural factors which might prevent women from achieving within non-traditional areas in industry

What do we do?

Operate a small business venture within Swinburne University of Technology and direct any revenue raised back into advocacy programs. Provide consultancy and training to industry, government, TAFE and universities. Provide written materials such as Data Matters and Gender Matters. Conduct research. Promote women's achievements in non-traditional areas through events such as the Awards.

Some Current Projects

Workplace Programs

The NCW is currently managing a research and change project within Broken Hill Proprietary Co Ltd (BHP) entitled Maximising Diversity. This project is a long-term ethnographic research project into workplace culture as well as the piloting of change strategies. The research outcomes will assist BHP to maximise the potential of its female and multicultural engineers, scientists and managers and thereby increase its diversity, productivity and competitiveness. The research outcomes will also provide guidance for other Australian companies.

Recruitment Initiatives

Trialing of a range of recruitment and retention activities for women in engineering at Swinburne University of Technology. These activities include training women students to speak in schools, support for undergraduate students and the fostering of special relationships with neighbourhood schools for collaborative curriculum and teaching projects in engineering.

Awards for Outstanding Women of the Year in Non-Traditional Areas

The NCW awards celebrate the value and importance to Australia of a diverse and talented student and workplace population in all areas, across all sectors. Initiated by the Centre in 1995, the awards highlight the outstanding



achievements of women in a diverse range of non-traditional areas. Not surprisingly, an analysis of the nominations (from 1995 and 1996) revealed a remarkable number of engineers. Awards are presented in four categories, with an overall winner announced as well. Categories cover study in both universities and TAFE in the non-traditional areas as well as the workplace where awards are made for less than and more than 5 years experience.

Data Matters

Part of any change program is being fully informed about issues. Having access to clear data is particularly important in framing and understanding those issues. In the 1990s for example, there has been a popular perception in Australia that "things have changed for women" (for the better). But what does the work and study data for female engineers say? After numerous, frustrating calls to government departments to find the relevant data for a paper or submission we have initiated a national data update series on women and engineering. *Data Matters* was first published in late 1995. The goals of *Data Matters* are to:

- provide an accurate and accessible data source on gender and engineering for the education, employment and training communities in Australia
- link this data to the issues and challenges within engineering
- provide a data source for international comparisons
- provide regular updates after these three editions have been published

The first three *Data Matters* will focus on gender and engineering in universities, TAFE and in employment.

Gender Matters

Gender Matters is the quarterly newsletter of the National Centre for Women, first published in 1994. It is currently sent to over 2000 readers throughout Australia and overseas, including university and TAFE colleges, public sector and corporate sector groups. *Gender Matters* aims to:

- report on national and international initiatives which advance the position of women in engineering
- question and critique existing initiatives to avoid complacency in our practices
- promote an informed understanding of the processes of change
- promote local initiatives on women in engineering (eg. new resources, handbooks, videos) at a national level
- link the four sectors (private, public, educational and community) through the exchange of new ideas, theories and practices, networks, conferences and events

