



GENDER AND SKILL IN AUSTRALIA : A CASE STUDY OF BARMAIDS

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Master of Arts (Women's Studies)

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STATEMENT

This dissertation contains no material which has been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any University.

To the best of my knowledge and belief this dissertation does not contain any material previously published or written by another person, except where due acknowledgement is made either in the text, or in the list of references.

Wendy Bastalich

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SYNOPSIS

This study focuses on gender segregation in the Australian labour market and constructions of skill. Women's work is often defined as unskilled by conventional definitions of the term and is, by implication, regarded as less valuable than men's work even when differences between the nature of the work performed do not exist. This is because definitions of skill have been historically and socially constructed in the process of industrial struggles involving male owners of capital and designers of machinery, powerful male dominated worker's organisations, and the male dominated arbitration system. Women's experience in the workplace has often not been represented in skill debates due to their lack of political and trade union power. Women have also been excluded from areas of 'skilled men's work'. As a result 'skill' often reflects masculine characteristics. Aspects of work associated with women's 'femininity' are often considered to be 'natural attributes'. In this way the social definition of skill does not describe the content or task difficulty of jobs in an 'objective' manner. Women are not clustered in 'unskilled' occupations because of a universal lack of skill but because the social definition of skill discriminates against them.

The assertion that skill is historically rather than technically or biologically determined in this study, is developed in three parts. A review of the theoretical literature examines the conceptual debates around skill. Conclusions are then given context in a summary of Australian history, with specific reference to the role of Arbitration, employers and trade unions in setting the minimum wage, equal pay and comparable worth determinations and Award Restructuring principles. The final chapter examines the past and present experience of a particularly marginalised category of workers in the hospitality industry - female bar attendants in the small hotel trade.

The way skill is defined is of paramount importance in the present context of industry and award restructuring which offers, in theory, the opportunity to recognise worker's skills not previously identified. Women's vulnerable position in the labour market means they have the potential to win or lose substantially in this process. Women in the service sector have received very little feminist research attention particularly those in the hospitality industry. It is therefore crucial for feminist research to direct its attention to debates surrounding skill.