

Transforming Workplaces of the Future: Unpacking EEO Policy in Australia

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This paper positions the 'problem' of inequality of women within a remedial strategy known in Australia as Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policy. It argues that normative frameworks of power and gender are limited in their contribution to the analysis of the problems of inequality or thinking about alternative futures. It proposes that we need to engage in different ways of thinking about the exercise of power and offers an example of a poststructural analysis of EEO illustrating how alternative frames of reference produce alternative realities.

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Introduction

Since human society began to organise itself and people from different cultures and social backgrounds began to dialogue, societies have been faced with social problems. This phenomenon is unlikely to abate and is certainly one that will offer many challenges to futurists. In more recent times, governments have responded to social problems with social policy. Such policies have claimed to target a perceived problem by either reducing its negative impact or eliminating it altogether. This paper makes a postmodern examination of the mechanisms behind a social policy to argue that the major effect of social policies is to institute surveillance or tighten governance over a particular group.

Futurists who seek to make a contribution to analysing the problematic of the social world and the outcome of social policies need to be able to engage in different ways of thinking about the exercise of political power. What is needed is inquiry into all frames of reference and the reality they give us. We need to challenge, for example, the liberal paradigm and the way it sequesters gender. We need to examine the manner in which alternative futures are dealt with in trivial ways. A poststructuralist analysis may prove useful in challenging some of the universal, essentialist truths in which so much policy making, analysis and evaluation is grounded. This paper provides an example of post-structural social policy analysis. Taking an Australian social policy known as Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) the paper considers its functions and effects. The paper concludes that if we are to construct social policies based on transforming society, then we need to ask different questions about the exercise of political power.

Background

More than twenty years have passed since the Australian Government passed three pieces of legislation making it unlawful for organisations to discriminate against people on the basis of their sex, race, marital status, physical disability and sexuality. This legislation which commenced with the Anti Discrimination Act, included the New South Wales Equal Employment Opportunity Act and the Federal Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act. EEO legislation had two main aims. These aims were to :

redistribute the workforce so those members of the target group are represented at all levels and in all occupations throughout the organisation. The other is to achieve a transformation of the organisational values and structures so that the organisation reflects the circumstances of diverse groups. (Office of the Director of Equal Employment in Public Employment, (DEOPE) 1991:1)

A separate Office of the Director of Equal Employment Opportunity directly responsible to the Premier of each State was created, with responsibility for implementation of EEO in Australia. The EEO Act requires both private and public organisations with more than 100 employees to establish EEO Management Plans and Affirmative Action programs for women and minority groups, and to demonstrate a commitment to these programs by involving personnel at all levels of the organisation. The responsibility for EEO is vested in each organisation's senior executive with authority to ensure its promotion and implementation and to monitor and report results to the central authority.

Affirmative Action Strategies

Consistent with the Liberal Feminism, in which EEO is grounded, the most significant approach to addressing inequality in Australian workplaces has been through education and the provision of specific training. In addition to changing attitudes towards the education of girls in schools and to women's participation in tertiary education, assertiveness training programs and programs especially for women who wish to rejoin the workforce after years of fulltime family making have been popular. A wide variety of skills, knowledge and attitude training continue to be conducted by a range of providers. Other approaches associated with the policy include:

1. Adjustments to job design and physical environments.
2. Addressing policies and practices which act as barriers to EEO.
3. Introducing programs which enable target groups to compete more successfully for appointment and promotion.
4. Eliminating discriminatory policies and practices from the workplace.
5. Application of merit principal in recruitment and promotion.
6. Building EEO principles into structural changes, award restructuring and strategic planning.
7. Devolution of accountability for implementation of EEO to all levels

of management.

8. Building EEO accountabilities into public sector senior executive performance agreements.
9. Establishment of EEO databases for internal review and compliance audits.
10. Flexibility in working hours and conditions.
11. Work based childcare.
12. Access for all employees to a range and level of skills to facilitate mobility and flexibility.
13. Removal of vague or subjective criteria for promotion and the valuing of particular gender-related and cultural attributes in job descriptions. (DEOPE 1995)

Surveying the Impact of Anti Discrimination and EEO Policy in Australia

In 1978 Australian women comprised 50.7% of the population and by 1998 this figure had changed very little (50.8%) although in real numbers, the female population increased by 2,145,500 (40%). Over the same period 1978-1998, the percentage of women in the workforce increased by 7% from 36% in 1978 to 43% in 1998. As illustrated in Figure 1, most of growth of women's participation has occurred in the full-time sector. In 1978 women held 27.5% of full-time jobs and 78.7% of part-time jobs. By 1998, this had grown to 32.9% of full-time jobs and dropped to 73.8% of part time jobs.

These figures illustrate that the growth of women in the workforce as only kept pace with growth in the population of women. This may be contrary to some opinion that there has been a far greater increase in the numbers of women in the workforce over the last 20 years than the growth of women in the population, and that the majority of these women have been part-time workers.

Figure 3 shows that in February 1998, 72.07% of Clerks, Salespersons and Personal Services Workers were female. Of all women in full time work, 47.2% are in these two occupations. This over representation of females in these occupations is repeated in part time work where females account for 63.0% of Clerks, Salespersons and Personal Services Workers. With the exception of plant operators and trades, women dominate part time work in every occupation.

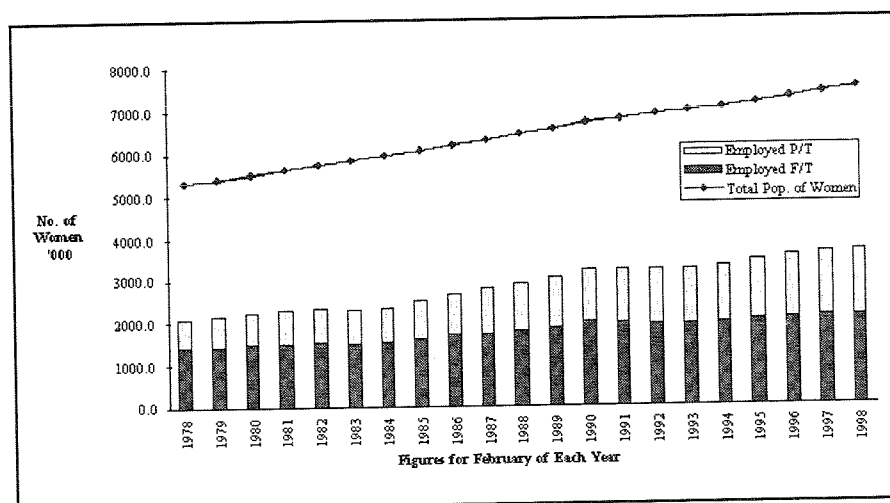


Figure 1 Number of Women employed Full time and Part time, 1978-1998

Trends in labour force participation also show participation rates for females rose from 43.7% in February 1979 to 53.7% in February 1998 (see Figure 2).

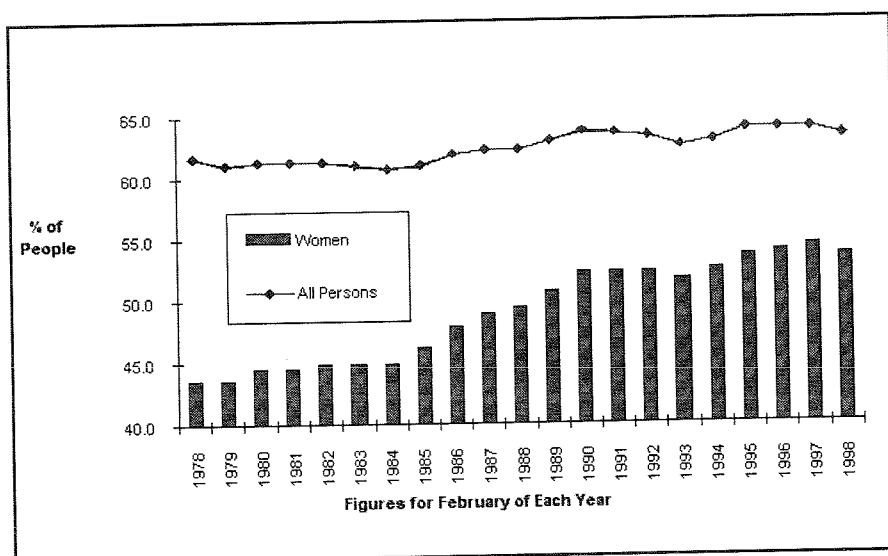
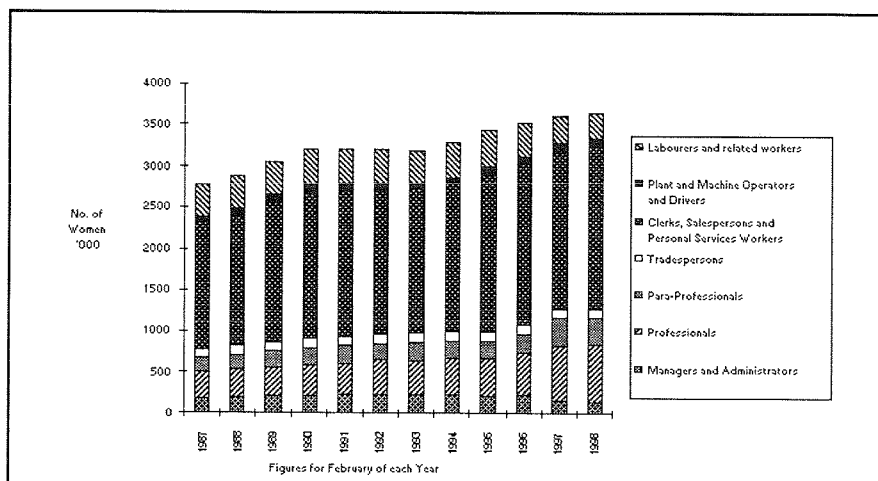


Figure 2 Participation Rate of Women 1978-1998



Source: Figures 1-3 Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998.

Figure 3 No. of Women employed by Occupation 1978-1998

In summary it can be seen that part of the increase in women in the workforce over the past 20 years, can be explained by population growth and full labour force participation. Despite this growth in numbers, women are still largely located in a narrow range of occupations that have traditionally been dominated by women.

The policy has, therefore, been largely ineffective in achieving its first aim of redistributing the workforce across all occupations. Although more women are in full time work, they continue to dominate part time work.

The second aim of the legislation is to achieve a transformation of the organisational values and structures so that the organisation reflects the circumstances of diverse groups. Ample evidence now exists that the values and structures of organisations have changed very little and this, in no small measure, accounts for the failure of the first aim (see Adler & Izraeli 1994; Burton & Ryall 1995; Fagenson 1994; Hall-Taylor 2000 in press; Poiner & Wills 1991).

What then, Has the Policy Achieved?

Analysing EEO policy outcomes through normative frameworks

EEO and Anti Discrimination policies intend to counteract the continuing impact of past discrimination on women and minorities "and to draw attention to the structure of power which systematically benefits

men and penalises women" (Pettman 1992:62). In this view of power, power is thought to be mediated through the economic arrangements of society, through ideology and social structures and is seen to be held by a dominant male group or social elite. Power is thought to be oppressive, limiting, obstructive, punitive and prohibitive to women.

From within this Liberal Feminist theoretical framework, the challenge for women is to work through existing legitimate channels - such as policy - to assert individual rights and freedom from oppressive gender roles (Tong 1989). There is a sense in which the policy aims at neutralising the effects of power. Because the policy has not achieved the desired effect of deflecting the negative effects of power on women, the policy is considered to have been less than effective (Burton 1991; Poiner & Wills 1991). The figures presented earlier in this paper tend to support the view that the policy has been of limited success. But if the normative framework, in which such policies and critiques are suspended, a quite different picture emerges. A poststructuralist framework for analysis, for example, derives an alternative interpretation.

Reading EEO policy Against the Grain

According to Foucault (1980), however, power is the structuring principle of society and is neither a possession nor a capacity. It is not something that emanates from the economic base, the Law, or the State. Power cannot be neutralised, rather, its elusive nature simply allows it to reappear in other new and disguised forms. Power is neither held by any one group nor can it be seized. Foucault (1980) argues that power is capillary, its networks extend everywhere, and it is exercised rather than held. Power circulates, momentarily being exercised by one before passing onto another. It is neither legitimate nor illegitimate but is exercised through individual actions (which are then interpreted as either legitimate or illegitimate) and through the processes, apparatus and procedures, whereby truth, knowledge and belief are produced. We are all in the process of exercising or being subjected to power from which there is no escape. As Foucault puts it:

power is not totally entrusted to someone who would exercise it alone over others, in an absolute fashion; rather this machine is one in which everyone is caught, those who exercise this power as well as those who are subjected to it. (Foucault 1980:156)

Power is exercised through discourses and discursive practices. Prior

to the Anti Discrimination Act in Australia, powerful discourses about women provided reasons, principles and justification for objectifying and subjectifying practices through which women were classified as inferior to men, were trained in particular ways, divided from others and formed as subjects. One of the fundamental conditions of the operation of power is, however, resistance. Dreyfus & Rabinow (1982:147) argue that "It is through the articulation of points of resistance that power spreads through the social field...through resistance power is disrupted. Resistance is both an element of the functioning of power and a source of its perpetual disorder."

Anti Discrimination and EEO policy are products of resistance by women who stand in a power relationship to those who seek to exercise power in ways that create inequality. Anti Discrimination and EEO policy, which seeks to disrupt existing power relations are, therefore, an apparatus of power. In this way it can be seen that power is productive, it enables, enhances and liberates as much as it prohibits, limits and regulates.

Anti Discrimination and EEO policy are firmly located within the discourse of inequality and contain their own discursive practices that may be identified by a set of rules. These rules which form modes of speaking or enunciations about women, dictate who is accorded what rights, who will be allowed to speak, how things shall be spoken about and from what institutional site statements may come. The rules force change and secure compliance through the threat of legal sanctions but also through persuasion to adopt its norms and values.

The target of power is the discipline and regulation of the body, irrespective of sex or gender. While the policy may have specifically targeted women, one often overlooked effect is the manner in which discursive practices associated with EEO policy, such as promotion and appointment on the basis of merit, have also benefited men as much as they have disciplined and regulated them.

From a Foucauldian perspective of power then, it can be argued that the policy never possessed the potential to neutralise power. The notion that power emanates from the economy, the Law or the State, rather than being exercised through them, has created a false expectation that policy could resolve the inequality of women. Policy functions as a servant of power, it is a conduit through which power is exercised. If power is exercised through the creation of legal apparatus then that apparatus will function in ways that are both productive and limiting.

Reflecting on the growth in the participation of women in the

workforce over the past 20 years what is apparent is the productive nature of power and the ways in which it has excited, induced, enhanced and been exercised by women in ways that make them more productive. For example, women have exercised their voting power to bring about this policy which has enabled them to increase their contribution to productive processes outside the domestic sphere. At the same time women continue to assume most of the responsibility for the domestic sphere. In some ways, women have won the right to work two jobs, only one of which is paid. Their demands for the alleviation of some of the career barriers and constraints around child bearing and raising have, however, gone largely unmet. Since women have been able to exercise some power to bring about legislative changes that benefit them, then clearly men do not hold all of the power all of the time. Women are not powerless, although they produce a discourse that suggests that they are.

As the data presented also shows, power is exercised in ways that limit and regulate or discipline women as well. Some of the disciplinary mechanisms through which this discipline is achieved are concealed in the policy itself. Mechanisms such as categorisation, enclosure, surveillance, normalisation and examination are some of the disciplinary mechanisms or technologies that are worthy of further exploration.

Categorisation

Foucault (1977:143) argues that the objective of categorisation is “to establish presences and absences, to know where and how to locate individuals.” EEO policy categorises women as a disadvantaged group who then become a target for policy. Policy implementation required a network be established between them. These networks, such as the Public Sector Spokeswomen’s network, initially located women and then facilitated the transmission of the EEO discourse through Spokeswomen training and consciousness raising. For the first time women from all levels in every public sector organisation and its regional offices were connected in a vast and efficient network across the nation. This network may also be understood as a network of power, a circuitry to which women in the workforce were silently and efficiently connected. The connection established presences and absences, and a method of locating individuals. Hence women, categorised as disadvantaged, were to be treated as a special on the basis of their sex, serving the function of categorisation and surveillance.

Enclosure

Part of the network of power was the creation of structures that would monitor the implementation of policies and procedures. A cornerstone of these structures was the EEO Administrative structure - a central authority known as the Director of Equal Opportunity in Public Employment, and the establishment of EEO Departments in all large Australian enterprises. These structures were staffed largely by women who, not surprisingly, were often the most articulate and critical of the status quo. The existence of these departments served to provide a sense of security to its target group implying that something was being done and someone was being vigilant on issues which concern them. Through these structures, women were able to exercise power in ways that gained public compliance with the policy.

The distribution of women into these specific EEO enclosures or feminine domains (Burton 1991) also functions in ways that serve the twin objectives of disciplinary power and women. EEO Departments are enclosures which:

render visible those who are inside it; ... an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide a hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them. (Foucault in Rabinow 1984:190)

In this sense EEO Departments serve to regulate the behaviour of women who are potentially disruptive by confining some to the EEO Department and then confining the issues in which they may become involved, those identified in the policy. It refuses to admit anyone who is not capable of miming its reason or its ethics, in its voice. This has had the effect of confining most of the responsibility for EEO in organisations to the EEO Department and absolving many others from the need to engage in EEO practices. In addition it has confined EEO policy implementation to working within existing economic and social structures, not to change them. The policy, therefore, functions in ways that distribute women to specific enclosures so that they can be contained and the range of issues with which they are responsible for are also contained. All it can address is questions of access to predefined positions and preconstituted points of power and authority. It cannot address how or in what manner one occupies these points or positions.

Partitioning

Although the creation of EEO enclosures has been crucial to the

effective application of the policy and in differentiating the target group, as enclosures they do not fulfill the detailed requirements of disciplinary mechanisms. Those within the enclosures need to be ranked to ensure hierarchical and pyramidal supervision. Foucault (1977:146) argues that "this ranking corresponds to the function of each individual and his (sic) value." Ranking serially orders the EEO enclosure and although the rank is fixed, the individual is not. Duties can then be assigned to the rank according to the rank. The marginalised themselves are given responsibility for managing "their problem", but without being given any real authority to do so. As Burton argues, EEO Departments have "little real influence or power to ensure its success" (Burton 1991:32). The authority to create real change does not accompany the responsibility to achieve it.

Examination

The prime function of EEO Administration is to monitor and report, hence there is a constant examination of the workforce. Examination is one of the mechanisms that achieve the objectification of the individual. It marks, classifies, analyses, inspects, and provides the basis for judgement and measurement, hence it is both a system of collecting knowledge and a system of power.

EEO Administrators examine the distribution of the target group, the manner in which it is recruited, promoted, dismissed, reviewed. They check the manner about which it can be spoken, written, and researched; they examine by observation, counting, and setting targets or scores. The knowledge then permits those far removed from individual members of the target group to "know" and in doing so offers what Foucault (1977:180) calls a "punitive balance sheet". A punitive balance sheet can then be used as evidence for the failure of individuals or organisations to conform to the policy and its targets, coercing conformity.

Surveillance

In addition to the above functions, EEO Departments have become a central point of surveillance. They are both an object for surveillance and a subject of surveillance - a surveillance that is ceaseless. Surveillance is a disciplinary mechanism that functions to perpetually survey the target group but also serves to keep the surveyors under surveillance. Foucault (1984) argues that hierarchized, continuous, and functional surveillance is one of the most insidious extensions of power. It is a means by which surveillance and disciplinary power become an integrated

system. It is an organised, multiple, automatic, and anonymous power which functions as a network of surveillance:

from top to bottom, but also to a certain extent from bottom to top and laterally; this network "holds" the whole together and traverses it in its entirety with the effects of power that derive from one another: supervisors, perpetually supervised (Foucault 1980:190).

The policy legitimates others watching women - watching how they are treated, spoken to and spoken about. In this way, the policy functions not only to monitor and gain compliance, but also has also masked itself to create a ceaseless, unidirectional surveillance of women enhanced through the introduction of computer technology.

Data provided in the first section of this paper demonstrates that women are over represented in a narrow range of occupations. There is a large body of literature which argues that, for a variety of reasons, not always connected to women themselves, (selection criteria, perceived the masculinity of certain occupations and organisational cultures, for example) women do not compete for senior positions (Andrew et.al. 1990; Burke & Mikalachki 1990; Calas & Smircich 1992; Davidson & Burke 1994; Fine 1991). Hence they are under represented in a number of occupations. The mechanisms of normalisation and self-regulation are important in understanding why women appear to act in ways that perpetuate their marginalisation in particular occupations. Understanding these mechanisms is also crucial to providing another explanation for the limited outcome of EEO.

Foucault's genealogy of organisations outlines how the earliest work organisation were prisons, asylums, monasteries and work houses which, with the introduction of capital, were replaced as factories. This newer type of work organisation made possible the distinction between work and leisure, paid and non-paid work, the public and the private domain. Work occurred in a work place, was paid, and was stripped of private or domestic affairs. These work places or work enclosures excluded women. From the seventeenth century, there was a decline in the number of trades and professions open to women. Work became normatively male. Women were denied access to training, apprenticeships, education and skills development (Witz, 1986) restricted from practicing their traditional crafts and excluded from the development of new trades and crafts (Baron, 1992). By the nineteenth century, domestic service was the main occupation of women (Walby, 1986). The normalisation of women's

work as non-professional, non-trade is still entrenched in historical concepts of gendered divisions of labour.

Normalising concepts of women's work are embedded in a multiplicity of discourses concerning women and work and are bound up with power. Discourses act as regimes of "truth which are linked in a circular relationship with systems of power which produce and sustain them" (Foucault, 1972:133). Beliefs and attitudes towards women and work are sustained by systems of power that the policy does not extend to, address, or challenge because they are outside the confines of the employment contract. One effect of power is visible in a lack of influence on social and political behaviour which continue to implicitly accord privilege to males and their concerns as they are reflected in our ways of speaking in what we speak about.

Some regimes of truth, such as the discourse of women and work, may operate broadly across a whole society and therefore function as dominant discourses others, such as EEO discourse, which is part of women's discourse on inequality, may be marginalised. As a marginalised discourse it competes less than successfully with the dominant discourses concerning women.

Discourses circulate and operate at a multiplicity of levels. They exert a powerful influence on the beliefs, attitudes and values of women and no one is outside of their power. The particular discourses to which women respond, therefore, influence their choice of work and study. Hence power is exercised through discourses which are evident in the normalising and regulating effects of gendered divisions of labour.

Contesting EEO Policy

Reading Australian EEO policy against the grain reveals the manner in which it has been highly effective in achieving the categorisation, enclosure, partitioning, examination and surveillance of women. The inequality of women in the workplace, it has been argued, is imbedded in dominant discourses that normalise women's work. These multiple, interlocking and powerful discourses - discourses to which women themselves sometimes conform, have remained largely resilient to EEO.

Scenarios of the Future

There are two probable future scenarios. The first is the intensification of surveillance and the second is full unemployment. In the first scenario the decentralisation of workplaces, the growth in the informa-

tion industry, the expectations of an educated workforce, the complexity of some processes and practices and technology, have made overt surveillance (supervision/management) increasingly outmoded and unacceptable, and importantly, more difficult. New ways of exercising disciplinary power and surveillance have emerged through the use of computer technology. As Foucault said, power is never diminished or neutralised, it simply appears in new forms. Technology offers a new form of the surveillance of women, far more efficient than any of its predecessors. Already technological surveillance of the masses, of which women constitute 50%, occurs in institutions, banks, and shopping centres and is built into many computer programs.

In one rapid data processing centre in the UK staff almost entirely by women, individual computers were programmed to pass a warning to the operators that after a two minute failure to engage in continuous work, a defect report was to be forwarded to the supervisor. In a university with an international reputation for excellence, and unbeknown to their academic owners, computers were programmed to provide a report to the academic head, detailing the times and dates the computer had been used. The academics responded by leaving the computers permanently active.

In yet another organisation, and as a move to counter pilferage, staff using a swipe card to enter and leave a building through a revolving door, were weighed. The entry and exit weights were computer analysed and any major difference in weight reported to a security guard. By far the most insidious surveillance, however, was the organisation that randomly tested urine samples from (swipe card entry) toilets to identify pregnancy or drug usage.

But technological surveillance, as an apparatus of power, does not function in strictly oppressive ways. Surveillance cameras, personal alarms for the aged and cellular telephones for example, have made it safer for women and children and the elderly in public spaces. Computers have allowed marginalised groups access to information previously denied them. They have been able to strengthen networks both globally and locally, mobilise political activity on a scale previously impossible. Technology as a form of surveillance, has empowered women as much as it has disciplined and regulated them.

The second scenario is characterised by full unemployment. While on the one hand this may herald a return to the conditions from which women have fought so hard to distance themselves, full unemployment would release women from paid work and allow them to develop activity

that many be more meaningful. Rifkin (1996) argues that we are entering a new phase in history, one characterised by the steady and inevitable decline of jobs. Sophisticated computers, robotics, telecommunications and other Information Age technologies are fast replacing human beings in virtually every sector and industry. Near-workerless factories and virtual companies loom on the horizon. Two possibilities emerge. Firstly, there will be too few jobs to absorb the vast numbers of workers displaced by technology. Secondly, the gender of workers in virtual companies appears to be immaterial and therefore, offers an opportunity to women to resist the normalisation of virtual work that has led to their inequality. Rifkin suggests that the end of work could mean the demise of civilisation as we have come to know it or signal the beginning of a great social transformation and a rebirth of the human spirit. For women, this offers the opportunity to create the kind of future they want a future in which their work is not normalised and unequal.

Conclusion

This paper positions the “problem” of inequity of women in Australia within a remedial strategy known as Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policy. It argues that normative frameworks of power and gender are limited in their contribution to the analysis of the problems of inequality or thinking about alternative futures. It proposes that we need to engage in different ways of thinking about the exercise of power and offers an example of a post-structural analysis of EEO illustrating how alternative frames of reference produce alternative realities. This analysis investigated the exercise of power through policy by drawing attention to the way in which it refuses the reduction of political power to the actions of a state. Rather, it draws attention to the ways in which such policy shapes and regulates the lives of a target group and those who are responsible for implementing it in ways that give scant attention to alternative futures.

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