

# Beyond the barriers

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A few pioneers are taking on jobs dominated by the opposite sex, writes Mary Banfield

Fran Riley still remembers the bitter sting of her first attempts to get a job in a male-dominated industry.

Aged 15 and desperate to become an apprentice mechanic, she was knocked back by a string of garages before she finally secured an interview. After an hour-long grilling during which she felt she had held her own, she asked the male owner if she would be offered the position.

"God, no," came the astonished reply. "I was never going to give you a job. I just wanted to see what you were like."

Despite the setback Riley persevered, eventually winning an apprenticeship and becoming one of a tiny band of female mechanics. She subsequently retrained as an automotive engineer before securing her current gig as a manager with vehicle service and hire company, Red Australia.

Gender equality in the workplace is enshrined in law yet several professions remain dominated by either one gender or the other. The federal Job Search website puts the percentage of women working as motor mechanics at zero, so small is the number of females in the 90,000-strong workforce.

Similarly, while there may be some women working as steel construction workers and boilermakers, the number is so minute that it is statistically insignificant.

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 Labour Force Survey show other professions dominated by males are train driving (2 per cent women), greenkeeping (3 per cent), flying instruction (4 per cent) and air traffic control (4 per cent).

On the flipside of the coin, some professions are almost entirely dominated by female workers. Just 3percent of vet nurses are men, as are 2 per cent of secretaries and PAs, and 4 per cent of nannies. Men make up 7per cent of enrolled nurses, 5percent of beauty therapist and 9 per cent of florists.

"In the 1970s and 1980s we saw a huge increase in the number of women entering the workforce and breaking the barriers particularly in middle management," says Eva Cox, a senior lecturer in social inquiry at the University of Technology, Sydney. "Yet today Australia is still more rigidly defined in terms of men's jobs and women's jobs than in other countries."

Cox says in some sectors, such as agriculture, women's participation is actually decreasing. In others gender segregation is refusing to budge from historical lines.

Organisational psychologist Dr Amantha Imber says people of either sex who take on professional gender stereotypes face challenges but the hurdles for women are greater.

"In an industry dominated by men you find boys' clubs tend to emerge," she says. "It can be very difficult for females to integrate into these because they are for men only."

By contrast men often have an easier time integrating into female-dominated professions because those who choose to do so have compatible personality traits such as compassion and empathy. Imber says pioneers of both genders need a strong sense of self to overcome stereotypes and deal with potential discrimination.

Gerald Oude-Vrielink, a midwife for the past 14 years at Liverpool Hospital, says there are professional benefits to being a man in a workforce where 99 per cent of workers are women. He says he is able to relate to and calm male partners who can become agitated during a birth.

Oude-Vrielink says people he meets are often surprised by his job. "When I first tell people I'm a midwife, they say, 'Oh, you're joking,'" he says. "[But] you'll see more and more males getting into midwifery, slowly but surely. People like me [will] get in and ... realise there is something in it."

Riley, 36, says in the 20-odd years since she secured her apprenticeship she has encountered only two or three other female mechanics. She remains in contact with one and has tried to encourage other women into the profession with mixed success.

"At one workplace we recently put on four apprentices [and] three were girls," she says. "None of the girls made it past first year, even though they had each other for support and I was their foreman. It's because you're working with people constantly questioning your credentials and always watching for a mistake."

She believes male domination of mechanical engineering will eventually decrease. "My daughter's friends think it's so cool that I'm a mechanic," she says.

"My daughter is totally different from me. She studies make-up. I make her go out and work on her car and she gives me some advice on my make-up."

Cox believes there is a gaping opportunity for governments to address the gender imbalance by targeting older women for apprenticeships.

"If [they] pitched retraining to the thirtysomethings rather than the 17-year-olds, we may see mothers who've always liked mucking around with cars or renovating houses attracted to the tradie stuff," she says.