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200300421

Women's Work In Regional Labour Markets: Spatial Versus Industry Differences*

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Abstract

This article reviews the impact of space on paid employment opportunities for women in regional areas of New South Wales. Regional labour markets have been categorised according to the distinct industry of major employment (O'Connor and Gordon, 1989: 212-214): agricultural regions; manufacturing regions undergoing structural change; natural resource regions; resort and retirement regions; isolated areas. The research compares six regional labour markets in New South Wales that fall into the categories of agricultural regions, natural resource regions and resort and retirement regions. It compares industry and occupation for men and women between these regions and with the metropolitan region. The article concludes that the labour market for women is more constrained in regional areas than in the metropolitan area. In addition, the article examines the differences in female and male labour markets between the three regional types and examines whether the variation in women's employment between regional types is as great as the variation for men. Differences between metropolitan and non-metropolitan labour market outcomes are pervasive regardless of industry differences between regions. A starting point for labour market policy (for example, equal employment opportunity) is an acknowledgement of this fundamental spatial difference.

Introduction

Issues concerning women and work in Australia, especially paid employment, have been researched in some detail since the 1970s. Discrimination against women in employment was a focus of research leading to the inclusion of sex discrimination in state anti-discrimination laws from 1975 and the federal *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* and *Affirmative Action (Equal Opportunity for Women) Act 1986*. In addition, the gender segmentation

of the workforce in Australia has been recognised as a major division within the labour force. This has acknowledged that women are segregated by occupation, industry and level within industry and are more likely to occupy positions at the lower level of organisations, while men hold a far greater proportion of the senior positions. The overwhelming majority of studies, and the literature in general, deals with an Australia-wide view of women's employment (Strachan and Burgess, 2000a). The literature generally assumes that all Australian women face exactly the same opportunities, constraints and decisions about education, training and paid employment. It is only on rare occasions that the category of women is disaggregated.

Few studies in the labour economics and industrial relations research agenda have analysed the differences that apply to women workers outside of capital cities. Indeed, there is little work on labour markets for men as well as women in non-capital city regions. This is of particular concern in relation to women workers as the pattern of women's work is constrained by gender segregation, leaving a narrower range of jobs open to women workers even in capital cities. While some women have entered 'non-traditional' jobs in the last three decades, the extent of segregation remains. This has major consequences for women and the availability of work in regions which do not present the full range of occupation and industry options, as is likely to be found within the most populous cities. An additional constraint on women's participation in the paid workforce is the primary caring role for young children which many women undertake (Lee and Strachan, 1998).

A preliminary analysis of this literature and labour force statistics leads to the hypothesis that women's regional labour markets are different to men's regional labour markets and that regional labour markets offer fewer employment opportunities than major metropolitan labour markets. Indeed, the regional labour markets may offer quite specific areas of employment. This article explores some of the major issues in women's regional labour market opportunities.

The Region

Despite the importance of the impact of the geographical region 'most studies of social relations [have] ignored geography' (Massey, 1984: 51). In particular, the spatial organisation of labour market structure is studied rarely, although 'it may be one of the most productive directions for explaining differential access to economic opportunities' in society (Tigges and Tootle, 1990: 330). Indeed 'social practices are inherently spatial' and 'the patterns of human territoriality result from the interaction between the economic/political/social spheres and the constitutive / constraining / mediative roles of space' (Dear and Wolch, 1989: 9). There is a strong tradition in geography of feminist spatial research (Longhurst, 2002) that is instructive for researchers from industrial relations. While this research agenda is far from homogenous and settled, it firmly places gender at the core of critical spatial research (Women and Geography Study Group, 1997).

Classification of regions is further complicated, as 'interaction through space' is determined by the different scales over which human activities operate. Geographical regions, or locales, 'are defined by physical or human boundaries which delimit fields of

process and interaction' (Dear and Wolch, 1989: 7). The interaction of the social and the spatial is made more complex by changes over time as these forces are changing continually. Changes in transport in the past century, for example, have meant that many small towns situated around larger urban centres which once were separate locations, are now suburbs or commuting centres for the purposes of work, education, commercial and social activity.

One of the major organising principles of settlement is economic production, and the site of industries and concentration of labour and territorial production complexes may give rise to distinct localised communities of workers (Dear and Wolch, 1989: 10). Because of this 'the specificity and uniqueness of territorial organisation in each locale makes it possible to speak of a crisis of the locale'. Thus geographically-specific changes, or 'crises' if they are major changes, can occur 'if a particular combination of economic, political, or social crises is concentrated in a single locale' (Dear and Wolch, 1989: 11).

The importance of the region has been examined in a few studies. In a review of a number of international studies Tigges and Tootle (1990: 330) reported that underemployment is more of a problem in non-metropolitan and rural areas and 'rural labour markets are less efficient in matching persons to jobs'. They concluded that:

although individual characteristics may determine who receives low-paying or part-time jobs, as opposed to adequate employment, these characteristics cannot account fully for the supply of good jobs. Individuals participate in a geographically limited labour market, with boundaries often determined by proximity to residence. (Tigges and Tootle, 1990: 328-329)

For an individual who has a skill in high demand in many locations. The labour market may be national or international. Other individuals face a labour market where their skill is in limited demand geographically or in which their skill is so widespread that they face many competitors in many locations. The demand for skills is coupled with individual choices about where to live, choices that are made within family units. Demands for employment for partners and other family needs (such as education for children) may further constrain these individual decisions. These family decision constraints historically have impacted heavily on women. The proximity to residence is judged to be more important for women than men, as women's caring role for children, access to public transport and other issues may limit their willingness, or ability to travel distances to work or to relocate (Peck, 1996: Ch. 4; Department of Employment, Workplace Relations and Small Business, 1996: Ch. 3).

Regional Labour Markets In Australia

Little work has been done on Australian regions and their labour markets. O'Connor and Gordon (1989) surveyed the major issues and their work provides a useful definition:

Regional labour markets are parts of nations where labour demand and labour supply interact. The characteristics implied in 'regional' incorporate judgments that the links between demand and supply are worked out in a small part of the country, and also that the character of the labour market emerges in response to short term, even daily, fluctuations in demand and

supply. Hence the regional labour market differs from the labour market in general where in the latter the interaction could take place throughout the nation, and involve migration. In short, a regional labour market is anchored to the residential pattern of the workforce. (O'Connor and Gordon, 1989: 196).

In an analysis of labour market opportunities it is important to examine the geographical range within which most residents work. A recent study of one area of New South Wales has not grappled with this issue and has considered a large geographical area, the Illawarra, as if it were one labour market (Markey et al., 2001: 1-10). In reality, commuting distances in this statistical region are great and it presents as several labour markets for most individuals.

The extent of the geographical subdivision of labour markets depends on the willingness of individuals to undertake daily work journeys and to shift residential location. One way of ascertaining these limits is to establish the role of customary networks and established behaviour which influence the search behaviour of employers and employees. Movement within this area is easier than outside it. In addition, the nature and scope of systems of communication and the extent to which informal networks operate, vary between occupations and industries. Commuting data offer a standard means of identifying regional labour markets, and the research suggests that a regional labour market is an area where a certain percentage of the population both live and work (O'Connor and Gordon, 1989: 196-197).

In the case of Australia 'any criterion which links residences in commuting distance to jobs will, given the overall low density settlement pattern, produce separate labour markets that are spaced well apart, each with its own local catchment area'. Labour markets can be identified which correspond to the larger metropolitan areas that are spaced at 700 kilometres or more apart around the coast. The same pattern can be found among the smaller scale cities spaced at 50 to 100 kilometres apart and 'these non-metropolitan regional labour markets have their focus on an urban centre which functions as a nodal city for the region' (O'Connor and Gordon, 1989: 197). The widest range of job opportunities in the region is likely to be available at this location.

Another characteristic of the Australian scene is that apart from small areas of overlap, the labour markets are separate and independent from one another, and 'fit in between one another in a rough jigsaw fashion'. There are 'very few places in Australia that fall within the labour market of more than one employment cluster' (O'Connor and Gordon, 1989: 197). In a study of Victoria O'Connor and Gordon found that the core area around the major towns such as Bendigo and Shepparton supplied 70 to 80 per cent of all labour in those towns. This interlocking network of towns with commuter areas around them is similar to the United States but 'the unique character of Australia remains in the distance between centres, and the relative isolation of each market, brought about by low population density' (O'Connor and Gordon, 1989: 198). The structure of labour markets within metropolitan areas such as Sydney and Melbourne depends on some different features but these areas are not the focus of this study.

Whereas some American literature discusses the attractiveness of rural locations for low-wage, labour intensive industries because of the ability to offer lower wages in these locations (Tigges and Tootle, 1990: 331), the influence of trade unions and the industrial relations system in Australia has not produced a similar pattern. In the past, the system of industry awards, which determined the base level wages, militated against the development of regional wage differences. Site allowances and over-award payments provided higher incomes and an incentive to attract workers to less agreeable or remote locations. High wages paid in one industry in a region often distort local supply patterns, with other industries unable to compete and experiencing shortages alongside a high-wage paying neighbour. However, with the shift towards workplace bargained wage rates over the past decade, the potential is now greater for regional wage disparities to increase. That is, fewer employment opportunities and weaker labour markets will translate into a greater spatial disparities, mirroring the emerging trend of growing industry, occupational and intra-firm wage disparities (Watts and Burgess, 2000).

The pattern of the regional labour market in Australia possesses some distinct features because of the low population density in Australia and the distances between many of the centres of population. O'Connor and Gordon (1989: 210) developed a typology of regional labour markets in Australia. The principal components relate to the urban character of regions, the stability and mobility of their populations, the strength of their cash-income market-orientation, family lifecycle phases (for example childrearing and retirement), educational levels, 'cultural' values and government-dependent regions. They discuss metropolitan regions in terms of an inner core and outer ring while the situation of non-metropolitan regions is 'closely allied to the relatively smaller size of their labour markets and the relative lack of diversity which they exhibit in job opportunities' (O'Connor and Gordon 1989: 212).

O'Connor and Gordon (1989: 212-214) classified non-metropolitan regions into five groups:

- agricultural regions
- manufacturing regions undergoing structural change
- natural resource regions
- resort and retirement regions
- isolated areas

Agricultural regions usually have a small population and a very low population density and rural industries provide more than a quarter of the jobs. These areas have low-density agricultural settlement and networks of small towns. In some rural areas recorded unemployment rates are below the average, though disguised unemployment may be present. A particular problem of these areas is the small rural labour market, with demand restricted to a narrow group of services such as community services and the retail trade. Some of these regions have single dominant manufacturing establishments usually involving agricultural processing such as meatworks. The isolation of these regions

means that there are few alternative employment opportunities within commuting distance (O'Connor and Gordon, 1989: 212).

Manufacturing regions undergoing structural change can result in altered employment opportunities. The restructuring of the manufacturing industry in Australia in recent years has had a major effect on some regions, especially those that had developed a capacity in textiles and clothing and steel. Shifts in the international economy have changed the competitiveness of Australian industry and in some cases removed markets. The unemployment rates and unemployment growth in these regions are often well above other parts of the nation (O'Connor and Gordon, 1989: 212).

Natural resource regions exhibit other characteristics. Mining regions or regions which have included major electricity development projects have had rapid population growth and below average unemployment. In these areas, 'boom conditions are associated with high participation rates for both males and females in the middle age groups'. In contrast to this, some older established mining areas have declined or their growth has slackened. O'Connor and Gordon (1989: 213) found that regions such as far-western New South Wales and far north South Australia had lost population and experienced unemployment, especially of women, and sharp curtailment of labour force participation of older workers.

Resort and retirement regions provide expansion of the leisure industry. There has been strong population growth in some physically attractive regions, and much of this migration consists of people over fifty years of age. The impact of an ageing population is felt most severely in these regions which are becoming 'retirement' regions. These areas exhibit 'concentrations of particularly low participation rates for older age groups..., with the marked decline in male participation evident from fifty-five years onward, and for females, from fifty years onward in these regions'. Resort locations on the coast of New South Wales and Queensland, for example, have experienced in-migration which has boosted employment in the service sector but has not delivered sufficient jobs for the children of older workers in this sector. Here the problem is one of a narrow employment base and seasonal demand combined with largely low skill jobs. This creates problems for the resident population and for optimistic younger in-migrants who are attracted by the area's climate. In addition there can be problems from localised structural change, particularly in the shift from agriculture and agricultural processing to tourism. Although job opportunities are wider than in most other non-metropolitan regions, opportunities are still restricted and not sufficient to match the growth in labour supply, with resulting high unemployment rates (O'Connor and Gordon, 1989: 213).

Finally, isolated areas are regions that cover very large land areas with very low population density and small total population size. Without any boost from tourism or mining they have limited economic activity and strong seasonality in pastoral industries. The lack of demand is 'a natural explanation of their labour market problems, but at the same time an unemployed workforce stays on, perhaps held by the promise of improvement, perhaps anchored by low skill and State housing'. These are important features for Aboriginal labour forces (O'Connor and Gordon, 1989: 214).

Overall, in non-metropolitan Australia, the low density settlement of Australia produces a network of labour markets focused around rural regional towns. The low population density over much of the country combined with the concentration of industrial production in a few areas results in Australia having many labour markets where agriculture and the population related sectors (trade and community services) are the mainstay of labour demand. In fact, these account for the majority of the areas, though they are less important in economic activity terms. Indeed, 'the emphasis on the underlying geography is important, as area and population density control the opportunities available to the Australian labour force within commuting distance of their homes'. This means that demand is very limited for many people in the far flung labour markets in non-metropolitan areas, while job choice is quite diverse for a much smaller area of the nation (O'Connor and Gordon, 1989: 208). The problem with the classification of regions such as the O'Connor and Gordon (1989) is that they are largely gender neutral. Indeed, such classifications largely depend upon differences between male employment across regions by industry classification. Women, in contrast, exhibit much greater consistency in both their industrial and occupational distribution across regions (Strachan and Burgess, 2000a). Any typology for classifying non-metropolitan labour markets should recognise the fundamental difference between men's and women's employment patterns within regions, and differences in the gender distribution of employment across regions.

Women In The Labour Market In Australia

Historically Australia's labour market was highly segregated by gender and characterised by overt discrimination policies such as the 'marriage bar', which meant that women, once married, could not retain their jobs in public services or with many private employers. For the first seventy years of the twentieth century between 55 per cent and 75 per cent of women were employed in occupations where more than half of the workers were women (Power, 1975). Although the most common women's occupations have changed, a high level of segregation remains and has encompassed new industries such as computing (Game and Pringle, 1983). Australia's report to the OECD Conference on the Employment of Women in 1981 noted that there was 'no evidence to suggest that segregation is diminishing' and concluded that there were 'signs that some occupations are becoming increasingly segregated'. The report commented that segmentation was occurring within occupations and the increasing 'feminisation' of occupations such as bookkeeper and bank teller was leading to further occupational segregation (Women's Bureau, 1981: 24).

The majority of research on women and work makes no distinction between geographical regions. While research on women and work has burgeoned since the 1970s, its focus has remained on the national level. Since 1980 research on women in Australia has covered national issues such as the segmentation of the labour force (Mumford, 1989); the impact on women of economic policies such as income, taxation and superannuation (Sharp and Broomhill, 1988); the impact of anti-discrimination and affirmative action policies (Ziller, 1983; Sawyer, 1985; Scutt, 1990; Thornton, 1990; Burton,

1991; Poiner and Wills, 1991; Ronalds, 1991; Hunter, 1992; Bacchi, 1996); wages policies and outcomes for women (Ryan and Conlon, 1989; Scutt, 1990; NSW Pay Equity Taskforce, 1996). Other works have examined broadly the impact of a variety of national policies and state intervention of importance to women (O'Donnell and Hall, 1988; Franzway et al., 1989; Watson, 1990; Eisenstein, 1991). Another area of research has concerned the impact of changing technology on women's work (Giles, 1985; Probert and Wilson, 1993). As well, there is a large literature concerning the analysis of skill in relation to women's work (for example Cox and Leonard, 1991; Poynton and Lazenby, 1992).

A considerable amount of work has analysed particular occupations and/or particular aspects of occupations such as part-time work or shiftwork. This has included work on women in a variety of industries (Game and Pringle, 1983) or in the finance industry (Junor et al., 1993), the service sector (Women's Bureau, 1989) and local government (Lewis and Coleman, 1993). In addition specific occupations have been studied, with work on clerks (Career Path Project, 1993), nurses (Gatfield and Griffin, 1990) and women in male-dominated occupations (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1993). Other research has examined women in small business (Roffey et al., 1996). Women working as managers have attracted a deal of research (National Labour Consultative Council, 1986; Bellamy and Ramsay, 1994; Crozier-Durham, 1995) and discussion in the popular press, often under the generic phrase of 'the glass ceiling'. Part-time work has also received specific attention (Romeyn, 1992; Probert, 1995) as has the impact of broken working patterns (Rimmer and Rimmer, 1994) and home-based work (Dawson and Turner, 1990).

Despite this considerable amount of research on women and employment the difference between regions in Australia is under-researched. Yet, the differences in employment and training opportunities between capital and non-capital cities, towns and rural areas are considerable.

Women In Regional Labour Markets

In general, there has been little analysis of the presence of women in regional labour markets. While greater interest in rural women is emerging in policy making, as evidenced, for example, by the holding of the first National Rural Women's Forum in 1995 (Alston, 1995), there has been no systematic study of employment opportunities of women in non-capital city labour markets. Much of the labour economics literature on regional labour markets in Australia is largely gender neutral (Borland, 1998; Powell, 1985). While differences across regions and differences between metropolitan and non-metropolitan labour markets are acknowledged, gender differences are largely ignored or mentioned in passing.

The gendered nature of work can be utilised in the placement of industries. While the development of industries in specific locations is dependent on many factors, in some instances

spatial labour markets have developed to take advantage of the fact that many women workers are relatively immobile. both in terms of residential mobility since they are part of a

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male-headed household, and access to urban transportation services. Women are much more likely than men to be 'captive riders' on public transit, and are apt to have child-care responsibilities. These make employment opportunities closer to home more attractive, so that women constitute a captive labour pool for employment in lower-paid and often sex-segregated occupations.... This reinforces male domination in the workplace and home, and limits economic mobility chances for women. (Dear and Wolch, 1989: 14)

There is some discussion in the international literature about the mobility of women workers, which is seen as less than that of men (Dear and Wolch, 1989: 14). However, the placement of industries in areas where female labour is available is a minor factor in the analysis of women's labour market participation in Australia.

A small number of government reports have included some discussion of regional employment issues. The Report on Australia provided to the OECD in 1973 noted that there were nine studies which took some account of different geographical locations. Most looked at the availability of labour in a specific town. While the studies varied, 'all of them had a common concern with the character and extent of male and female labour force supply and the corresponding character and extent of the demand for female labour in specific areas in eastern Australia' (Women's Bureau, 1974: 25). Six were surveys of labour availability designed to reveal the total supply of labour in various New South Wales settlements in order to assist decentralisation policies. These included a survey of households to ascertain how many people not registering with the employment service would enter the labour force if work availability increased.

The overall conclusion was that the female labour market was affected in all study areas by maldistribution of available jobs or available workers. In fact lack of suitable work opportunities in the towns of Kempsey, Lismore, Taree, Parkes, Dubbo and Albury/Wodonga deterred many women from registering as unemployed. An average 24 per cent of the females surveyed who did not register would have sought work if they thought it available. Most of these women were married, aged between 35 and 54, and wanted part-time employment (Women's Bureau, 1974: 25-27).

The 1992 Report of the Inquiry into Equal Opportunity and Equal Status for Women in Australia discussed 'Women in Remote and Rural Communities' in the chapter titled 'Women with Particular Needs' (House of Representatives, 1992: 194-199). Other groups discussed in this chapter are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women, Women from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds and Women with Disabilities. This places a geographical category within the construct of special needs and disadvantage, rather than viewing the needs of women in a variety of regional categories as part of the national picture.

This report noted that 'official data on rural women is quite patchy' (House of Representatives, 1992: 195). The report noted that 'women who leave the farm and take up paid employment in the town, experience many of the difficulties of their urban sisters attempting to re-enter the paid work force, although the problems are often exacerbated by distance' (House of Representatives, 1992: 197). Access to training opportunities and

child care were specific problems. The Inquiry expressed particular concern about the choices for young rural women, who frequently had few options once they left school and may leave the rural districts. Women in remote communities faced special problems as 'employment is almost totally restricted to men, particularly towns developed by the mining industry' (House of Representatives, 1992: 199).

An emerging area of policy interest is the lack of paid employment opportunities for women in rural areas. A report which surveyed many rural women in the late 1980s found that a rural recession meant that many rural women

have sought employment or replaced hired farm workers to help secure an adequate financial base for their farm businesses or their families. Women whose partners have been employed on farms or in farm-dependent service industries have also sought employment or, like farming women, have managed on much reduced incomes. For young women, the prospects of a future in rural Australia have dwindled with a shrinking range of employment opportunities coupled with an already limited set of options for their further education. (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1988: 3)

This study was conducted in 1986 when approximately 135,000 questionnaires were distributed and 14,000 returned. Of these 14,000 women, 53.3 per cent undertook home duties only (although this percentage may reflect the age of respondents as 38.8 per cent were over the age of 60). A further 20.8 per cent were employed on a family farm or property, 17.9 per cent were wage and salary earners, 5.7 per cent were a family business worker and 2.2 per cent combined these activities. Almost all respondents lived in country towns of at least 1,000 people or within one hour's drive from such towns, and a significant proportion lived in provincial cities of up to 100,000 people. Only a small percentage lived in remote country areas (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1988: 5-10).

The report commented that 'today many more farming households depend on income earned outside the farm to improve their financial positions' (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1988: 11) and noted that

there has been a dramatic increase in the number of rural women participating in the paid workforce. This not only relates to long term trends which have seen a reduction in on-farm labour requirements, higher education retention rates for women in rural areas and higher workforce participation rates of women throughout Australia, but also to the need to supplement farm families' incomes through off-farm work (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1988: 27).

Women sought paid employment off-farm, often to supplement the family income but sometimes because the children were older and they wished to return to the workforce. In many towns, employment opportunities for women contracted as the impact of uncertain economic conditions prevailing in the local farm economy was felt by business. Rural women were often discouraged job seekers, who had tried to secure employment but with

no success (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1988). These conclusions are echoed in other research. In a study of South Australia, Smailes (1997: 34) noted 'the great increase in farm women obliged to seek off-farm jobs to increase the family income'. In the case of the Upper Yorke Peninsula, one resident stated that

over the past 10 years farming incomes have fallen and many women in the area have had to find full-time or part-time work in local towns. Young people have left the district in search of jobs and education. (Smailes, 1997: 34)

The 1988 report on women in rural Australia noted that town women also sought employment for similar reasons to farm women and encountered similar difficulties. Some part-time casual work was available in motels, hotels and food shops but otherwise the options were few. The number and range of jobs available for women were especially limited in mining towns or in towns based on an industry which was in decline. The restricted range of employment opportunities had very serious implications for women who had left school recently. Faced with little prospect of employment in the area, young women often left their families and communities and moved to large metropolitan centres. Young farm women often undertook household work caring for younger siblings, cooking and cleaning while their mothers spent more time working the farm (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1988: 12-13). The questionnaire asked what was the single biggest problem for rural women. Employment issues ranked fifth, with only 4.5 per cent of respondents saying it was the major issue. It was ranked after social issues, financial or economic issues, essential services and education issues (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1988: 14-15).

The higher unemployment rate, lack of educational opportunities and lack of non-traditional jobs for women is discussed in a study of far north Queensland. This study commented that

rural and provincial women are disadvantaged right down the line. Education and training facilities are generally not available outside cities and large towns. Married women especially lack the mobility to attend distant training courses.

Young women seeking employment in these areas faced special problems:

Country girls often lack role models in other than the teaching and nursing professions. Despite the fact that fewer 'female' jobs are available, provincial conservative attitudes are a barrier to women entering non-traditional occupations. (Goadby, 1986: 27)

Goadby concluded that the shift in industries in far north Queensland had a particularly severe impact on women's employment, for, while men had adapted to the changed occupational distribution in the region, women had lost jobs in declining industries and only made extremely small gains in the growth industries (Goadby, 1986: 33).

It is clear that the range of employment options in rural areas is more limited than in cities and towns. The options are even more limited for specific groups of women such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women (Fuji, 1986). The larger the town or 'commuting' region, the more job opportunities. In more sparsely populated regions the options may be few or, as Brigid Walsh (1986: 67), secretary of the Union of Western Women, in 1986 commented, 'for many women isolated in remote areas of rural and provincial Australia a job is the stuff of which dreams and novels are made'. These opportunities, however, are constrained by the specific nature of the local labour market, with opportunities for work dependent on the nature of the region. Thus a predominantly retirement region will offer a limited range of employment options while a region in which manufacturing is in decline offers a different range of choices. Overall, occupational segregation means that women's employment choices are concentrated in the service sector. This limitation of options frequently constrains women's choices of employment to a greater degree than that of men.

The Decline In Services In Regional Australia

There has been much media attention on the removal of services such as government departments and banks in regional towns. In part this process is associated with the backlash against the orientation of the major political parties towards the rationalisation and downsizing of the public sector at all tiers of government. While this process of rationalisation and centralisation of service delivery has been proceeding for a number of years, for example the removal of telephone operator exchanges from regional towns and their placement in a limited number of large centres, public concern has heightened in recent years. Concern over these changes on rural communities is widespread (for example Beilin, 1995) but details of the impact on employment are scant.

Smailes has shown that approximately one-third of all employed people in small South Australian country towns tended to be in public sector jobs. He comments that

these positions have regular drought-proof incomes which greatly help to dampen seasonal fluctuations in rural business turnovers. Public sector services are vital components in the service infrastructure.... Their presence provides a significant element of the market for private businesses – e.g. accommodating travelling public servants, servicing government vehicles, casual work such as cleaning. (Smailes, 1997: 37)

Smailes (1997: 37) notes that national cuts in public spending have been greatly exacerbated by the collapse and subsequent state bail out of the State Bank in South Australia. The withdrawal, threatened withdrawal or deterioration of public services were often cited by respondents to his research survey, with the provision of school and hospital services the most emotive issue. The flow-on effects of these closures were illustrated in one example where the children of the staff of the Government Experimental Farm provided added numbers for the local primary school which was in danger of closing if the numbers

dropped. Like other states, several South Australian towns were heavily dependent on public service functions, including railways, power stations or prisons in former times.

Exact details on the changes and their impact on local employment are difficult to ascertain but many of the jobs lost have been in feminised industries and/or were clerical in nature, a highly feminised occupation. New South Wales lost more than 30,000 Commonwealth Public Service jobs in 1997, and taxation offices were closed in the country towns of Lismore, Wagga Wagga, Orange and Tamworth. Medicare, Commonwealth Employment Service and Department of Social Security offices were also closed in city and regional locations. The State Treasurer, Mr Egan, noted that rural and regional centres especially were hard hit by these changes (Riley, 1998). Postal workers in rural areas are concerned that further deregulation of Australia Post will lead to post office closures in regional Australia and consequent massive job losses (Davies, 1998).

A Victorian report noted that 'service closures and cutbacks have caused widespread job losses. Public service retrenchments in health, education, local government, community services and transport have been extensive.' Many job losses have been concentrated in single communities such as the Latrobe Valley where the restructuring of the electricity industry saw 16,000 people thrown out of work. The research revealed that communities feared local unemployment would increase when the policy of compulsory competitive tendering in local government took full effect (People Together Project, 1997: 25). The report concluded that the 'smaller an area's population, the less likely it is to attract investment and industry'. Unemployment meant less disposable income in a community to spend on goods and services, thus affecting local traders and small retailers, whose closure would once again affect the employment prospects of women. In Dunmunkle, for instance, three Westpac branches have closed as well as the local printer and electrical store (People Together Project, 1997: 25).

In non-metropolitan NSW between 1993 and 2000, 231 bank branches were closed. These figures were similar to most other states in Australia at that time (FSU, 2001a). The impact of these branch closures on the community was an estimated four jobs per branch as well as the loss of expertise from the towns (FSU, 2001b). Bank branch closures has the consequence that 'thousands of middle management bank employees are being left stranded on the dole queue as a result of industry rationalisation, with the prospect of re-employment in the banking sector decidedly grim' (O'Riordan, 1998). The decade 1991 to 2001 saw 55,497 jobs lost in the four major banks Australia wide. Since 1996, 22,880 (or 18 per cent) full time equivalent positions were lost while part time employment increased by only 9,295 positions (FSU, 2001c). As the majority of bank employees are women, this has a serious impact on women's employment options. The Rural Transaction Centres (RTC) Programme was introduced by the Howard Government in the 1998-99 financial year at a cost of \$70m over the next five years. The programme's objective was to improve access to basic private and government transaction services such as banking, postal and telephone (Department of Transport and Regional Services, 1999). By July 2001 only 12 RTCs had been commenced in NSW (Department of Transport and Regional Services, 2001). These centres only replace some of the previously removed services and are usually

operated by individuals as part of their core business. They do not create jobs for those displaced due to bank closures and service withdrawals.

While the evidence is fragmentary, there is no doubt that the removal of government and banking services from towns has a major impact on employment opportunities in these areas. It is particularly significant for women's employment, concentrated as it is in the service sector and at the lower levels of organisations. Detailed study of the availability of jobs in towns is needed in order to assess the impact of these changes.

Typology Of Non-Metropolitan Regions

A study by Stimson et al. (2001) used a range of socio-economic variables for 122 cities and towns with populations of over 10,000 residents which were classified into seven clusters reflecting measures of community 'opportunity' (or advantage) and 'vulnerability' (disadvantage) in those towns. However, the relevance of the typology used in this study was not considered for this paper as the focus here is on employment within industries and occupations in non metropolitan regions and not on the many socio-economic factors suggested by Stimson et al. (2001).

How useful is the typology of regions set out by O'Connor and Gordon (1989) for assessing women's work? Does the typology represent a grouping by male industries and occupations only? This section presents a preliminary examination of the differences in women's employment within the regional typology set up by O'Connor and Gordon and assesses whether this typology is suitable for the experience of women's employment in regional areas.

The data used came from the 1996 Population Census of Australia and are confined to New South Wales regions. This data was chosen as it allows analysis at various levels such as State, statistical division, statistical subdivision and statistical local areas. This data can also be disaggregated by gender and location. The selection of any spatial unit may be subject to biases as it is based on arbitrary boundaries constructed, in this case, by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and this may misrepresent or abstract away differences across space.

With this caveat in mind two levels of census statistics were used in the analysis: statistical local areas (SLA) and statistical division (SD). Statistical local area is a general-purpose spatial unit for the purpose of collecting census data. SLAs are based on the boundaries of incorporated bodies of local government where these exist. The SLAs chosen are all whole Local Government Areas. Statistical local areas were used for the agricultural regions of Dungog and Tenterfield, the natural resource regions of Muswellbrook and Greater Lithgow, and the resort and retirement regions of Great Lakes and Coffs Harbour. The statistical division is the largest and most stable spatial unit within each state or territory in the main geographical structure. In New South Wales SDs correspond to the proclaimed Government Regions with the exception that the North Coast Region consists of two SDs. The metropolitan region of Sydney was analysed at the statistical division level and includes the statistical subdivision of Gosford-Wyong.

The areas selected in each of the regional categories were chosen firstly through local area knowledge. For example Muswellbrook is an area well known for coal mining, while Coffs Harbour has a large number of resorts such as Opal Cove Resort and Annuka Beach Resort. Secondary ways for choosing the areas were then used for consistency with the typology of O'Connor and Gordon. The areas selected for the agricultural regions and natural resource regions were chosen as they were the most common industry of employment in that area at the time of the Census. In Dungog and Tenterfield agriculture/forestry/fishing was the largest employer, while mining was the largest industry of employment in Muswellbrook and Greater Lithgow. The resort and retirement regions were chosen from the Census data of age of population. In Coffs Harbour 24.5 per cent of the population is aged over 55 and 34 per cent is not in the labour force. In Great Lakes 38 per cent of the population is aged over 55 with 45 per cent not in the labour force (ABS, 1996). Table 1 shows the populations for the regions chosen.

Table 1: 1996 Regional Populations

Region	Female	Male	Total
Dungog	3823	3835	7658
Tenterfield	3231	3298	6529
Muswellbrook	7429	8133	15562
Greater Lithgow	9423	9825	19248
Great Lakes	14254	14355	28609
Coffs Harbour	29524	28813	58337
Sydney	1883383	1857903	3741286

Source: ABS 1996 Census

The categorisation of the regions was done in large part on the basis of industry. However, it is useful to examine the major industry employer by gender for these regions. Table 2 shows that while agriculture is the major employer of men in Dungog and Tenterfield it is only the major employer for women in Tenterfield. This could be explained by the fact that Tenterfield is approximately two hours by road from the nearest town and relies on the local population for workers. In contrast, some residents of Dungog commute to work in Maitland and Newcastle (one hour away). Mining is the major employer of men in Muswellbrook and Greater Lithgow but not for women. In the resort and retirement regions the major industry for both women and men is retailing. Retailing, of course, is typically among the major employers of female labour in all the regions examined and has a predominantly female labour force.

Table 2: Major Industry Employer By Region (percentage of population in the region)

Industry	Agricultural Regions				Natural Resource Regions				Resort and Retirement Regions				Metropolitan Region		
	Dungog		Tenterfield		Muswellbrook		Greater Lithgow		Great Lakes		Coffs Harbour		Sydney		
	M%	F%	M%	F%	M%	F%	M%	F%	M%	F%	M%	F%	M%	F%	
Accom/Café/ Restaurants									1.4						
Agriculture/ Forestry/ Fishing	4.8	2.2	6.4	2.7	2.7	1.5	1.9			1.9					
Construction										2.1					
Education											2.2				
Electricity/ Gas/Water Supply					2.6		2.2								
Health/ Community Services		2.2		2.3		2		2.2					2		3.1
Manufacturing	2.8	2.5										2.1			3.9
Mining					6.6		5.7								
Property/ Business Services															3.1
Retail Trade	2.6	2.7	2.4	2.1		2.9		3	2.5	3	3.3	3.4		2.8	2.9
Transport and Storage							2.2								

Source: ABS 1996 Census.

Occupational Analysis

Traditionally, Australia's labour market has been highly segregated by gender and characterised by overt discrimination policies. Occupational segregation was one of the major factors influencing women's employment patterns and the level of women's earnings. In May 1983 women were concentrated in three main occupational classifications: sales, clerical, and service with 63 per cent of the total female workforce concentrated in these three occupational categories (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1984: 13). In May 1996, 56 per cent of all employed women worked in two occupation groups: clerks, and salespersons and personal service workers.

Differences in women's employment can be seen between regions and between regions and Sydney (see table 3). The striking difference between the metropolitan area and the regions is the lower level of skilled work available outside the Sydney area. Managers and administrators, professionals, business and administration associate professionals, advanced and intermediate clerical and service workers form a greater percentage of women in Sydney. Compared with Sydney, women in the regions examined form a greater percentage of managing supervisors (sales and service), elementary sales workers and cleaners. This picture is also mirrored in the case of men, for example, in the categories of managers and administrators and professionals (see table 4).

The comparison between male and female employment reflects the gendered division of labour generally. In agricultural regions men are concentrated in the occupations of farmers and farm managers, and tradespersons and related workers. In natural resource regions and resort and retirement regions men are concentrated in the occupational categories of tradespersons and related workers, and intermediate production workers, and labourers and related workers. For the same three regions women are concentrated in the occupations of all professionals, clerical, sales and service workers. The categorisation of women in these occupations is consistent with the 1996 national figures. It also shows clearly that the male-dominated mining and related industries do not offer non-traditional employment to women.

What does this mean for spatial and gender research? First, the conceptual frameworks for analyses are not gender neutral and are often constructed with a bias towards the male breadwinner employment model. In this analysis, we did not consider other biases embodied in the emphasis on paid and market-based work. Second, many policies recognise either gender or spatial differences in the labour market but do not sufficiently pay attention to the interaction between space and gender in determining labour market outcomes. Here there is a tradition of feminist geography (Massey, 1994) to draw upon to better conceptualise the interactions between space and gender.

Table 3: Women Workers As Percentage Of Workers

Occupation	Agricultural Regions		Natural Resource Regions		Resort & Retirement Regions		Metropolitan
	Dungog	Tenterfield	Muswellbrook	Greater Lithgow	Great Lakes	Coffs Harbour	Sydney
Managers & Administrators*	1.3	1.1	0.9	1.0	1.2	1.3	2.2
Farmers & Farm Managers	3.8	5.7	1.3	0.7	1.3	0.9	0.1
All Professionals	7.8	6.2	5.1	5.6	6.3	8.3	9.9
Science, Building & Engineering Professionals	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.1	0	0.3
Business & Information Professionals	0.8	0.4	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.8	2.4
Health Professionals	2.1	2.0	1.5	1.9	2.2	2.4	2.6
Education Professionals	3.5	2.9	2.1	2.4	2.6	3.2	2.8
Social, Arts & Miscellaneous Professionals*	1.1	0.7	0.8	0.6	0.9	1.1	1.8
Technicians & Technical Officers	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.3
Business & Administration Associate Professionals	0.8	0.5	0.8	1.0	1.1	1.6	1.9
Managing Supervisors (sales & service)	2.4	3.3	1.5	2.2	3.6	2.7	1.6
Health & Welfare Associate Professionals	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.6	0.4	0.4	0.3
Other Technicians & Associate Professionals*	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2
Tradespersons and Related Workers*	1.8	1.5	1.6	1.3	1.9	1.4	1.1
Advanced Clerical and Service Workers*	3.6	2.6	2.9	2.4	3.8	4.0	4.8

Table 3: Women Workers As Percentage Of Workers (Cont'd)

Occupation	Agricultural Regions		Natural Resource Regions		Resort & Retirement Regions		Metropol- itan
	Dungog	Tenter- field	Muswell -brook	Greater Lithgow	Great Lakes	Coffs Harbour	Sydney
Intermediate Clerical Workers*	4.9	3.9	5.2	4.7	5.1	6.4	7.6
Intermediate Sales & Related Workers	0.1	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.4	0.8	0.6
Intermediate Service Workers	3.3	3.9	3.4	4.2	4.6	4.6	3.5
Intermediate Production Workers*	0.6	0.6	0.6	4.1	0.6	0.8	1.2
Road and Rail Transport Drivers	0.3	0.3	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.3	0.1
Elementary Clerks*	0.7	0.5	0.3	0.3	0.5	0.6	0.4
Elementary Sales Workers	3.4	3.3	4.3	4.8	6.3	6.2	4.5
Elementary Service Workers	0.4	0.1	0.3	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.4
Labourers & Related Workers*	2.2	3.1	3.3	1.6	1.8	1.5	1.8
Cleaners	2.7	2.0	2.4	2.2	2.4	2.0	0.9

* The 2 digit level of analysis was used but some categories were added together.

Table 4: Male Workers As Percentage Of Workers

Occupation	Agricultural Regions		Natural Resource Regions		Resort & Retirement Regions		Metropolitan
	Dungog	Tenterfield	Muswellbrook	Greater Lithgow	Great Lakes	Coffs Harbour	
Managers & Administrators*	3.3	2.8	2.9	2.5	3.5	4.4	5.9
Farmers & Farm Managers	9.3	12.4	3.8	1.5	3.8	2.1	0.2
All Professionals	5.5	3.9	4.4	4.5	4.8	7.0	9.8
Science, Building & Engineering Professionals	1.1	0.8	1.5	1.4	0.6	1.0	1.5
Business & Information Professionals	0.9	0.6	0.8	0.9	0.8	1.3	3.9
Health Professionals	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.5	0.7	1.1	1.0
Education Professionals	1.8	1.1	0.9	0.8	1.6	2.1	1.4
Social, Arts & Miscellaneous Professionals	1.1	0.9	0.8	0.9	1.1	1.5	2.0
Technicians & Technical Officers	0.9	0.4	2.0	2.2	0.9	1.1	1.3
Business & Administration Associate Professionals	0.9	0.7	1.1	0.9	1.3	1.5	2.2
Managing Supervisors (sales & service)	2.8	3.5	2.0	2.1	4.6	3.9	2.6
Health & Welfare Associate Professionals	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2
Other Technicians & Associate Professionals *0.6	0.9	0.8	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7
Tradespersons and Related Workers*	12.3	9.0	16.5	15.5	12.1	11.8	12.7
Advanced Clerical and Service Workers*	0	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.4	0.7

Table 4: Male Workers As Percentage Of Workers (Cont'd)

Occupation	Agricultural Regions		Natural Resource Regions		Resort & Retirement Regions		Metropol- itan Sydney
	Dungog	Tenter- field	Muswell -brook	Greater Lithgow	Great Lakes	Coffs Harbour	
Intermediate Clerical Workers	1.1	1.1	1.5	1.5	1.0	1.4	2.9
Intermediate Sales & Related Workers	0.6	0.5	0.8	0.5	0.9	1.8	1.4
Intermediate Service Workers	0.8	1.1	0.7	1.8	1.7	1.5	1.2
Intermediate Production Workers	8.8	8.1	13.1	16.2	8.2	6.4	6.4
Road and Rail Transport Drivers	3.6	2.4	3.5	3.7	2.8	2.6	2.6
Elementary Clerks*	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.3	0.5
Elementary Sales Workers	1.1	1.8	1.2	1.3	2.3	2.7	2.0
Elementary Service Workers	0.6	0.6	0.5	1.2	0.6	0.9	0.8
Labourers & Related Workers	7.1	8.0	6.5	4.5	5.7	4.1	3.4
Cleaners	0.3	1.0	0.8	1.2	1.0	1.2	0.9

Source: ABS 1996 Census

Conclusion

The literature canvassed in this article has shown that there has been insufficient attention paid to geographical features of women's employment in conventional economics and labour relations research. Much of this is policy based, yet the interaction between gender, space and employment opportunities is largely absent. The initial analysis of census data has shown that women have fewer employment opportunities in non-metropolitan regions than in the city and fewer industry and occupational choices than men. The classification of regions according to major industries is not as relevant to categorising women's employment, especially in the male-dominated mining regions. Women's employment

remains similar across the regions examined, with the exception of their involvement in farming in agricultural regions.

Women are still predominantly employed in industries such as retail trade and health/community services, where employment can be on a part time or casual basis and where career advancement is limited. These arrangements occur regardless of location, as shown in the three regions of agricultural, natural resources and resort and retirement, as well as in the metropolitan region of Sydney. For men, employment is spread over a wider number of industries, some traditional such as mining, agriculture and manufacturing and other newer industries such as retail trade. Occupations such as clerks and sales and service workers are still the domain of women.

While the introduction of equal employment opportunity policies is seen as the way to improve the position of women in the workforce, access to these policies is limited generally to organisations larger than 100 employees with some more pro-active than others. The retail sector, for example, has not been as active as other industries in the development of EEO policies (Strachan and Burgess, 2000b). Data from the 1996 census show that women face a narrower range of labour market opportunities outside major metropolitan areas, frequently in small organisations. Therefore, women's access to EEO policies is limited.

This review has highlighted the absence of space from much gender policy research and the absence of space from much labour market research in Australia. This suggests that there is a strong imperative for those researching gender, industrial relations and public policy to become more conversant with the extensive research on gender and space found in the geography literature (Longhurst, 2002; Massey, 1994; Women and Geography Study Group, 1997). This applies especially to the tools of analysis used to conceptualise and analyse space. The geography literature stresses how many of the analytical concepts are social constructs that often reinforce stereotypes and limit critical analysis. In the context of gender, space and economic activity this message is important, since regional labour markets are inclined to have high degrees of gender segregation by occupation and industry that are maintained across regions. The male labour market is more distinctly different across regions than the female labour market. Consequently, classifying regional labour markets on the basis of differences in the industrial distribution of employment largely reflect differences in the male distribution of employment. Likewise, gender differences within regional labour markets is an enduring feature of the Australian experience. In the context of equal employment opportunity and improving access of women to paid employment opportunities, the reality is that for women in non-metropolitan Australia the choices and opportunities are severely constrained, especially in relation to metropolitan Australia, and these limited choices are being further constrained through the restructuring of service provision in the banking sector and the restructuring and downsizing of the public sector.

Notes

* A University of Newcastle Research Management Committee Grant funded this research. We would like to thank the editors and the referees for their assistance and suggestions.

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