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**EEO CO-ORDINATORS AS FEMOCRATS:
FEMINISM AND THE STATE**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the
Degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the relationship between feminist theory and femocrat practice. The central purpose is to examine the way femocrats act within the state and the extent to which they pursue a feminist agenda. This involved focusing on EEO co-ordinators as a case study of femocrats.

The feminist debate about femocrats has raised a series of issues which concern: the structure and activities of the state and the extent to which non-dominant groups can use the state to pursue their political agendas; the ability of individuals to change the nature of the organisational culture and the extent to which those women in femocrat positions pursue the collective interests of women as opposed to their own individual interests.

To explore this issue, this study has focused on the position, practices and networks of EEO co-ordinators working within a range of state organisations. In particular, this study examines the extent to which the strategies and issues which EEO co-ordinators have pursued in the development and implementation of an EEO programme are informed by feminist theory and practice. The central fieldwork component involved conducting indepth interviews with eight EEO co-ordinators.

This study of EEO co-ordinators has revealed that the links between co-ordinators' practice and the agendas of the feminist movement were limited. Rather, an examination of EEO co-ordinators' practices, networks, and issues of priority has suggested that it is more appropriate to view EEO co-ordinators as pursuing a professional project within the field of EEO.

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Chapter One

Femocrat Intervention in the State

This thesis focuses on femocrats: the way femocrats act within the state and the extent to which they pursue a feminist agenda. The emergence of a group of women working in the state in relatively senior levels has created a new focus for feminists in their on-going debate about the state. That debate has involved a series of questions regarding the structure and activities of the state and the extent to which non-dominant groups can use the state in the pursuit of their political agendas. While this thesis focuses on Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) co-ordinators, it also contributes to current feminist debates about the state in New Zealand in the 1980s.

New Zealand analysts have tended to present the state as a contradictory institution established in, and manifesting, structural inequalities which create significant inconsistencies and paradoxes within its operation (Saville-Smith, 1987; James, 1986; Koopman-Boyden and Scott, 1986). Those contradictions both foster and constrain the opportunities of various actors who wish to exploit the state's unique ability to appropriate societal resources and monopolise legitimate power (Offe, 1984; Franzway, Court and Connell, 1989). If this view of the state is accurate, it suggests that femocrat's could represent a feminist intervention in the state. Equally, femocrats may merely express the ability of the state to co-opt those who challenge the power of dominant elites. This thesis considers those questions through exploring the position, practices and feminist connections of EEO co-ordinators working within state organisations.

EEO co-ordinators and the femocracy

There is considerable diversity in the structural positions of femocrats. However, as Franzway, Court and Connell, (1989:87) argue, "'Equal opportunity' programmes are probably the best known [and] the most politically visible, product of feminism's interaction with the state".

Considering the practices, networks and positions of EEO co-ordinators involves exploring:

- i) the relationship between feminist theory and the feminist movement;
- ii) the state both as an institution of power and as an organisation with interests as an employer;
- iii) the interests of women as employees and as a sex.

In undertaking that task, this study has centred on the strategies EEO co-ordinators adopt in implementing EEO. It considers the type of strategies in which EEO co-ordinators engage, the relationship of these strategies to a feminist agenda and principles of feminist practice as they are articulated through the various strands of feminist thought.

The debate about femocrats

Feminists attempts to influence both the direction of the state and women's place as employees within the state have coincided with the increasing demand for female labour within state bureaucracies (Ehrenreich, 1990). In New Zealand the numbers of women working in the state sector have increased rapidly with the overall increase in women's participation in the paid employment since 1945 (Department of Statistics, 1990:72). It is within this political and economic context that the term 'femocrat' has emerged. It refers to women in positions of relative power within the state, particularly those positions where their holders speak in official contexts on behalf of, or in relation to, women.

Femocrats are not limited to one occupational group. Rather, the term is used almost as a cultural category to set these women apart from other women

who work in the state on the basis of their perception of themselves as feminists. It is a term which can be used both perjoratively and supportively. In its perjorative sense, femocrats are said to use feminism merely as part of professional credentialism. Feminism serves to assist the entrance of these women into, and mobility, within mainstream organisations. In this way the term femocrat constitutes a challenge to women, particularly managerial women, working within state agencies.

Femocrats are presented as representing only the interests of a particular class of women, the middle class¹. They are typified as having an educational and social background which sets them apart from most women. Consequently, femocrats are portrayed as having considerable advantages over most women within the labour market. The feminism they pursue is frequently described as passive, self-interested and individualist. Singh expresses precisely this when she describes the feminism of femocrats as:

" a conformist and uncritical feminism. It seeks to groom and package feminists into the political/corporate world. Profession, success, career, status, investment, marketing strategies, image, targeting goals and politicking represent a language and perspective that has increasingly become part of feminism " (Singh, 1987:38).

This view has largely been articulated within New Zealand by those feminists, particularly radical feminists, within the 'grassroots' movement who work outside the state (Singh, 1987).

Perjorative references to femocrats do not consist merely of a deep scepticism regarding the motivation of femocrats and their representativeness of women's experience. They also manifest a concern that women, irrespective of their commitment to feminism, will be unable to implement a feminist programme in the state because of the inertia of the state itself. Under these circumstances, working in the state is seen as largely futile and feminists who do so are seen as being vulnerable to eventual institutionalisation and co-option.

¹Wright (1978:73) identified the middle class as consisting of managers, adviser managers and supervisors. Three processes central to defining the middle class are: control over physical means of production; control over labour power and control over investments and resources.

Not all feminists accept this view of femocrats. McKinley (1990:93) suggests in her study of femocrats, that feminist bureaucrats recognise the dangers of personal co-optation and seek to protect themselves from this by actively 'recharging' their feminist perspective:

"How often we hear feminist women working in bureaucratic situations talk of coming to women's conferences or gatherings to 'recharge their feminist batteries', that is, to sharpen their feminist critique and find support for their feminist views" (McKinley, 1990:93).

For McKinley the danger of co-optation is that women lose sight of the feminist critique and the support of feminists. Thus, femocrats appeal to feminists outside the state to take account of the organisational constraints and pressures that they must contend with in order to survive within state bureaucracies, and to support them.

That support is portrayed by femocrats as worthwhile because feminist engagement within the state is imperative if sex inequalities are to change. This is because the state is seen as having a unique role in defining the overall direction of society through its legislative power, its control of public finances and its social policy function. For many feminists, any criticism of femocrats needs to be guarded in case femocrats' political credibility is undermined and the decision-making power of the state continues to be dominated by men.

Yeatman (1990), for instance, is not concerned that femocrats 'use' feminism to achieve professional advancement. Indeed, she argues that all access to the state and other complex organisations is governed by the "possession of socially certified claims to knowledge of a technical and/or substantive kind" (Yeatman, 1990:78). A commitment to feminism is one kind of certified knowledge. Femocrats are those who, to access the positions they have, must possess that knowledge. This strategy of credentialism which, according to Parkin (1979:54), is often used to safeguard or enhance market value, is not used by femocrats, argues Yeatman, as an exclusive closure practice. As such, femocrats can justifiably consider themselves feminists who use their positions for women collectively rather than merely benefit from them as individuals.

Franzway et al. (1989) also provide a similarly complex view of the position of femocrats. They reject both arguments that femocrats are merely passive functionaries of the state and that a femocrat's individual will-power is sufficient to effect structural change. Instead they argue that any analysis of femocrats must take into account the contradictions within the strategic concerns of the state. Those contradictions contribute to the construction of femocrat interests and their ability to manoeuvre within the state. Essentially, femocrats are presented as actors within the 'theatre' of the state. They have choices between parts, for instance as role-models or advocates for women, but the state structure ultimately limits their activities (Franzway, et al., 1989:153-4). In the process, Franzway et al. reject simple categorisations of femocrats.

This debate has largely been devoid of any input from men, with the notable exception of Connell (1989). Connell, with co-authors Franzway and Court, has been concerned with the development of a general theory of the state as an actor in sexual politics (Franzway, et al, 1989:33-55). Apart from Connell's contribution, the issue of femocrats appears to be of little importance to men. Rather, it is largely a debate which concerns either, a specific group of women who occupy middle class positions or, conversely, it is of concern to a broader range of feminists attempting to connect the professional life of individual women to the aims and objectives of the feminist movement. Femocrats expose the contradictions between a social movement which is largely dedicated to notions of 'sisterhood' and collectivity, and strategies frequently focused on assuring individual women social mobility within the labour market.

The latter strategies are a reaction to the tendency for the majority of women in paid work to be located within the secondary labour market and for even those women in the primary labour market to be restricted to a narrow set of occupations and to relatively low levels of seniority (Barron and Norris, 1976; NACEW, 1990). In contrast, femocrats, at least for this contemporary period, represent a particularly advantaged group of women within the primary labour market. They are seen to possess qualifications that offer them a 'fast-track' into management levels. Under these conditions, the emergence of femocrats is of critical importance to feminists and women generally because it challenges the notion of women's innate suitability only for subordinate roles.

Feminist conceptions of the state

The debate among feminists about how femocrats should be perceived links into a broader feminist debate about the extent to which the state acts to maintain and/or challenge dominant gender relations. Understanding the state and how it acts has always been an important concern for feminists at both a theoretical and practical level. The different positions adopted with regard to femocrats indicates that feminists are by no means in agreement with one another over the question of the state or interactions which should characterise feminist relations with it.

Feminist conceptions of the state tend to correlate broadly with radical, liberal and socialist feminist traditions respectively. These are now briefly outlined, and a fuller examination is pursued in chapter two. This conception of the state as patriarchal contributes to the use of the term femocrat in its perjorative sense. On the whole, the radical feminist tradition has tended to reject the state as a potential agent of change because of its patriarchal nature. Radical feminist analysis identifies the sexual division of labour and the control of reproductive resources as the fundamental division within society. It is upon that which all other divisions, such as class and 'race', arise. The state is seen as one of the instruments, if not the instrument, by which male dominance is systematically institutionalised within society (Millet, 1970:158; Firestone, 1972; MacKinnon, 1983:644).

More sophisticated analyses within a radical feminist tradition focus on the state as a bureaucratic structure and bureaucracy as a patriarchal organisational form. According to some feminists, the very qualities of the bureaucrat and the structural organization of bureaucracies exposed by Weber, that is, rationality, impersonality and hierarchical order, correspond to the cultural construction of masculinity (Eisenstein, 1985:105, Ferguson, 1984:160). The problem then becomes one of the gendered nature of bureaucracy in terms of the embeddedness of masculinity in the structures of public life.

In contrast, the liberal feminist tradition tends to identify the emergence of femocrats as a positive step for women and an indication that at least in some areas barriers to women are being broken down. This portrayal of femocrats

reflects liberal understandings of the state in which the state is conceived of as a benevolent or at least neutral institution responsible for protecting individual rights of citizenship and guaranteeing individual freedom (Wollstonecraft, 1982). In practice, liberal feminists recognise that women experience a situation of imperfect citizenship to which the state has been party. Nevertheless, because the state has the power of legislation, liberal feminists see the state as a significant agent of social change (Friedan, 1963). In addition, because the state is an employer, the state is seen as providing a role model to other employers in relation to non-discriminatory employment practices which will, in turn, prompt broader attitudinal change.

Unlike liberal feminists, who locate societal power within the state, socialist feminists identify societal power as arising out of relations of control over productive and reproductive resources. The appropriation of those resources by some groups and the exclusion of others give rise to systematic structural inequalities of class, sex and race (McIntosh, 1978; Rowbotham, 1973; Kuhn and Wolpe, 1978; Barrett, 1980).

Contemporary socialist feminists (James and Saville-Smith, 1989:1-6) suggest that these sets of structural inequalities are not mutually and unproblematically reinforcing as earlier socialist feminists suggested (Eisenstein, 1979:27; Hartmann, 1981:29). Instead, they create contradictions in the relationship between dominant and non-dominant groups. The state is constituted within and manifests these sets of structural inequalities and consequently is in a contradictory institutional position. This results in significant inconsistencies and paradoxes in state operation (Saville-Smith, 1987:197). These contradictions will necessarily impinge upon those who work within the state, conditioning and constraining their actions. This leads socialist feminists to suggest that femocrats may both represent the interests of women and also protect the state's sponsorship of dominant group interests from feminist challenges.

It also suggests that the attitudes and practices of femocrats, and the agendas they pursue may exhibit considerable diversity. That diversity emerges out of different understandings of the basis of women's subordination. It could also emerge out of the specific structural pressures to which femocrats are

vulnerable. Alternatively the diversity may arise out of the possibility that those identified as femocrats simply do not have a feminist agenda.

What is a femocrat?

A conceptual confusion exists around the identity of a femocrat. On the one hand, femocrat appears to refer to a particular set of positions within the state. On the other hand, the term is frequently used to refer to a particular type of person who has adopted a feminist agenda. When femocrat is used as a referent for a particular set of positions within the state, such as EEO co-ordinator, the assumption is made that the duties and responsibilities attached to that position serve feminist interests.

The alternative meaning given to femocrat applies to the person (generally a woman) working within the state bureaucracy who identifies as a feminist. The two meanings applied to femocrat may often be blurred, given that women sometimes work in policy or operational positions ostensibly concerned with women's issues. As Franzway et al. state:

"Verbal debates we have heard tend to confuse programs and people. Where there is hostility it is frequently focused on the EEO practitioners. The issue becomes 'Are they feminists?' For present purposes we will distinguish between equal opportunity as a strategy and EEO practitioners... as people" (Franzway et al., 1989:96).

The distinction is essential to maintain if the relationship between individual actions and the structural forces which shape the social context in which femocrats operate are to be understood.

Femocrats in New Zealand include women working within organisations like the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Women's Policy Units and Equal Employment Opportunity positions (Franzway, 1986; Franzway, Court and Connell, 1989). The Ministry of Women's Affairs constitutes a separate state organisation whereas both Women's Policy Units and EEO positions are found within a number of different state organisations. This conditions the functionality and power of femocrats both in terms of the position and as feminists.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs was established as a policy ministry in 1984, with a staff of approximately twenty five employees. The main function of the Ministry is to monitor Government policies for their impact on women and to advise Government on policies which promote equality for women (Ministry of Women's Affairs *Newsletter/Panui*, 1987:4) Included within the Ministry is Te Ohu Whakatupu, the Maori Women's Secretariat which specifically monitors Government policies on Maori women. The Ministry was restructured in 1988 into four units: Te Ohu Whakatupu, Policy Advice; Corporate Services and Information Services. The Chief executive and senior policy advisors represent some of the few women who constitute part of the Senior Executive Service. Despite the individual power and status of its senior officers, the Ministry itself appears to occupy a marginal position in relation to other state organisations as a whole.

Women's Policy Units were established in the Housing Corporation, Health Department, Education Department and the Department of Social Welfare in the late 1980s to provide specific policy advice regarding the impact of social policy on women and girls. Women's policy advisors are located at senior levels of the organisation and work with other senior policy advisors. They are accountable to the Minister and chief executive of their respective government departments.

Inclusion of EEO obligations within the State Sector Act 1988 has conditioned the creation of EEO co-ordinator positions within the forty three government departments which constitute the state sector. EEO co-ordinator positions are located at a middle management level, with co-ordinators accountable to personnel or human resource managers and chief executives.

There are significant differences between these groups. In reality, only the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Women's Policy Units directly advise Government on the impacts of its direction on women. EEO co-ordinators relate to the state as employer. The former tend to have senior positions. EEO co-ordinators are largely restricted to middle management positions. They have relatively little influence in the public service and limited power within departments. Nevertheless, as Eisenstein has pointed out, "One element that

accelerated the progress of femocratization of the bureaucracy was the impact of the EEO programme" (Eisenstein, 1990:90-9).

Given the pivotal role of EEO in feminists' political strategy, it would be logical to expect that feminists would attempt to gain EEO positions. Indeed, it is popularly assumed that EEO practitioners are feminists. This study explores the validity of this assumption. In particular, it focuses upon EEO practitioners and their awareness, understanding and commitment to the practice of a feminist agenda. In short, this study asks whether EEO co-ordinators are feminists. In raising this question a whole set of other questions emerge. For example, how do we know whether EEO co-ordinators are feminist? What sort of practices and agendas do they put into place that suggest that they are feminist or not feminist? It is to these questions that the following chapters now turn.