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A Gendered Undertaking: The Feminisation of After-Death Work in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Long after women have successfully entered many other occupational fields once considered to be ‘men’s work’ they have remained a small minority in after-death work in the funeral industry in Aotearoa New Zealand. Women and their contributions to the funeral industry have been excluded, marginalised and devalued. In the last decade, however, there has been a marked increase in the numbers of women funeral directors and embalmers. In the same decade, the occupational specialism of funeral celebrant, comprising a large majority of women, has been established to fulfil a growing demand for non-religious funeral ceremonies.

This thesis examines the means by which men have excluded and marginalised women from the funeral industry in Aotearoa New Zealand. More importantly, it examines the ways women are successfully overcoming exclusion and marginalisation by men. To this end I analyse research material from a range of sources. These include: unstructured interviews with funeral directors, embalmers, celebrants, clerical workers and members of clergy; my observations from previous funeral industry research and fifteen years’ experience as organist in the industry; plus data from the association magazines of the Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand.

To develop a theoretical framework with which to explain how women are surmounting exclusion and marginalisation, I draw on two strands of literature that highlight different aspects of women’s involvement in paid work. The first strand includes theories of gendered occupational control, focusing on both practice-based and discursive-based strategies of gendered closure. This strand reveals women’s exclusion from, and their strategies for entering, the funeral industry. The second strand of literature focuses on theories of gendered organisational structures, culture and power, uncovering women’s marginalisation within the funeral industry.

There are five analytical chapters. The first two are largely historical, examining the masculinisation and commercialisation of after-death work, and the ways women and their contribution to after-death work have been devalued and made invisible. The third and fourth analytical chapters investigate men’s and women’s closure strategies in after-

death work. The fifth is a discussion of the ways women promote and position their contribution to after-death work by claiming that, as women, they bring different values from men to after-death work. In this, they adopt discourses of new professionalism; resistant discourses invert the masculinist discourses of the old model of professionalism, valorising long denigrated 'feminine' attributes.

I argue that the hierarchical gendered boundaries in the funeral industry stem from the early development of funeral firms in Aotearoa New Zealand as family firms, plus their failed attempts, throughout the twentieth century, to achieve professional status. In this, they reflect the patriarchal power of the masculinist projects of modernity, the society in which funeral director leaders established their professional project. Further, I argue that the failure of their professional project has, paradoxically, facilitated the men's continuing discrimination of women by leaving access to education in the industry's control. I also argue that the recent rise of women in the funeral industry reflects the growing feminisation of the public sphere, with a subsequent increase in women funeral industry clients, who bring different expectations and needs from those of men clients. Women after-death workers claim to facilitate the needs of women and men clients: they are able to do the work equally as well as men, while also drawing on skills they have learned from their experiences as women.

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