



ISSUE SUMMARY

Women in the construction and manufacturing industries

Barriers, enablers and strategies for success

Introduction

This Issues Summary presents a snapshot of the issues impacting on women's participation in the construction and manufacturing industries. It highlights some of the barriers preventing women's equal participation, and makes the case that increasing women's involvement would be beneficial for women and men, organisations, and the national economy. Content summarises and updates a comprehensive review developed by Women's Health Grampians in 2019.

The issues presented will be of interest to decision makers from the manufacturing and construction sectors, as well as those from other male-dominated industries. Policy makers, training and education providers and community organisations working to support gender equality will also find points of interest.



Women's participation in construction and manufacturing

The gender participation gap remains persistent in industries related to construction and manufacturing, which are both among the top five most male-dominated industries in Australia.¹

Construction

The construction industry is one of Australia's biggest employers, accounting for 9.6 percent of the total workforce.² Women make up 13.3 percent of this workforce, although are overrepresented in lower levels of organisations, underrepresented in management and are most likely to work in administration.^{3; 4; 5}

There is also a gender disparity in work retention, with women leaving the construction industry on average, 39 percent faster than men.⁶

Construction industry employment statistics do not include the large number of women who are not officially employed but who are the partner of a small business owner and take care of the clerical aspects of their business, often without remuneration.⁷

Manufacturing

The manufacturing industry accounts for 6.3 percent of the total workforce in Australia, with a female workforce participation rate of 28.3 percent.⁸ However, when breaking the manufacturing industry down by occupation, women are overrepresented in lower paying clerical and administrative roles, and underrepresented in higher-paying technical trade roles, and especially in senior management positions.⁹

"Women are overrepresented in lower levels of organisations, underrepresented in management and are most likely to work in administration."

Benefits of increasing women's participation

1

Pay Equity

Women, on average, earn less in female-dominated industries than in male-dominated industries.¹ Encouraging female participation in male-dominated industries has the potential to narrow the gender pay gap and superannuation gaps, and to strengthen the economic security of women and their families.¹⁰

2

Job Flexibility

Self-employed people are found in all areas of the economy, but are in heavier concentrations in construction, professional and scientific/technical areas, agriculture and the retail sector.¹¹ The prospect of self-employment may be an attractive option for women, with flexible hours allowing them to manage family commitments.¹²

3

Job Satisfaction

Many women find great joy and satisfaction in engaging in meaningful construction work, and appreciate the security of employment and remuneration.³

4

Gender Equality

Increasing female participation in traditionally male vocations can challenge traditional gender roles and help normalise equitable relationships between men and women.¹³

Business Case Arguments

Increasing gender diversity in the construction and manufacturing workforces is likely to:

- Reduce staff turnover and attrition⁶
- Increase competitiveness by widening the talent pool and recruiting and retaining the best staff available^{6; 10}
- Increase the range of capabilities in the workplace by diversifying skills, knowledge and experience¹⁴
- Improve organisational reputation among potential clients, investors and employees^{15, 10}
- Increase productivity and company performance^{6; 14}
- Help address the current skills shortage within construction^{16; 6; 10}
- Increase national productivity and economic growth and improve Australia's Gross Domestic Product by an estimated 11 percent¹⁴

Barriers to women's participation

Women and girls face multiple barriers to establishing careers in trades, which can be due to structural inequalities, societal expectations, or a lack of opportunities because of gender stereotypes or misconceptions.

Negative image of the industry

There is an underlying assumption that trade work is 'dirty, dangerous and heavy' and working conditions are viewed as poor with an expectation of long hours.³

Male-centric workplace culture

A male-centric culture prevails within construction and manufacturing, where masculinity is often celebrated and femininity devalued.⁶ Allowing women to enter these industries can represent a threat to the traditional male power structure.¹⁷

Male-dominated industries commonly have cultures which are accepting of overt and covert sexism.⁶ Women are often made to feel as though they are intruding in a male space.⁶

Women endure practices of sexism, sexual harassment and sexual discrimination⁶ and are often reluctant to speak up or take action for fear of limiting their careers.¹⁵

Employer bias and cultural fit

Workplace culture also affects the recruitment of women. Many employers cite cultural fit as a key attribute when recruiting.⁶

This subjective concept, which supports the employment of workers who are like those already in the workplace, may bias the recruitment process and lead to women being excluded from male-dominated industries and workplaces.

Long working hours impacting on work-life balance

The construction and manufacturing industries have strong cultures of presenteeism (coming to work despite illness, injury or mental health concerns) and long working hours. The six-day working week is the norm in many workplaces, with employees working as many as 60-70 hours per week.⁶ It is common, and in many cases expected, that employees to work overtime.^{6; 18}

Parental leave – availability and stigma

Parental leave represents a major barrier to women in the construction and manufacturing industries, both for real and perceived reasons. The construction industry has one of the lowest proportions of organisations offering employer-funded, paid parental leave (PPL) in Australia, with only 22% of organisations offering PPL.¹⁹

Access to PPL in manufacturing is also limited, with it only available in 34% of organisations.¹⁹

Adding to this, parental leave is often viewed as a women’s concern and seen as a resource cost. Negative stigma associated with parental leave impacts women’s recruitment, career progression and their retirement savings.^{3; 6; 16}

Challenges during training

Around half the women undertaking traditionally male apprenticeships drop out early on.¹⁴ Of those who discontinue their apprenticeships, one in three believe they were not treated fairly at work.¹⁵

Barriers to career development

Women in the construction and manufacturing industries face more barriers to career advancement and progress more slowly than their male counterparts, making them less likely to receive bonuses or work in management positions.¹⁶

For women and girls, these barriers to participation begin manifesting from a young age. Young women are actively discouraged from, or have little to no exposure to, the construction industry while at school.¹⁴

Within the education system, career pathways and subjects choices are often gendered, with trades commonly seen as an option for boys.²⁰ When girls express interest in pursuing a construction-related trade, they are often met with resistance from parents due to the poor reputation of the industry and its treatment of women.²⁰ and girls unlikely to be given a trade apprenticeship as an option by a career advisor.¹⁵

As a result, women don’t tend to seek trade careers or apprenticeships. Those who do tend to have had less exposure to trades than their male counterparts and lack confidence in their abilities.^{15; 16}

Gendered stereotypes and misconceptions

Gendered expectations and pervasive stereotypes about what is ‘men’s work’ and what is ‘women’s work’ are rife in the construction and manufacturing industries, with these expectations creating barriers for women to enter and remain in the workforces.

Bias against employing women has been seen in the construction industry where there may be a belief that construction work is too difficult or too dangerous for women.^{3; 20}

Women’s capabilities were often singled out, questioned and discussed in relation to progression (and recruitment).⁶

Women report being routinely tested and having to prove themselves to new teams and managers.⁶

Gender Pay Gap

Every single industry in Australia has a gender pay gap that favours men. Despite the potential for women to earn more money in male-dominated industries than in female-dominated industries¹, across all industries the pay gap is highest in construction (29%), while in manufacturing the gap is 12.3 percent.¹

Strategies to support women's employment in construction and manufacturing



A range of actions have been found to be effective in enabling women to participate in construction and manufacturing. Organisations committed to recruiting and retaining more women in their workforce should consider the following strategies:

- Ensuring hiring practices are equitable by introducing an independent recruitment process that eliminates biases related to gender, sexuality, culture, ability, age etc.
- Introducing programs that provide targeted support to women apprentices seeking employment in their trade
- Increasing the prominence and visibility of female role models in the industry
- Taking a holistic and strategic approach to cultural change across the organisation that creates an inclusive culture and builds support for female participation
- Increasing flexibility and improving work-life balance – for all workers
- Committing the organisation to change through the introduction of policies, procedures, and systems that support female participation
- Reviewing the appropriateness of facilities, equipment and uniforms for people of all genders and abilities
- Forming local partnerships with local secondary and trade schools to build employment pathways
- Supporting women's career development through leadership training, mentoring and career supports.

Supporting the employment of diverse women

It is important to recognise that women are a diverse group, with some women experiencing additional barriers to workforce participation due to factors such as sexuality, age, disability, socioeconomic status, visa status, and ethnicity.

An intersectional approach is important for understanding the ways in which different groups of women may require particular strategies and approaches to support their careers in construction or manufacturing.





Conclusion

Highlighting the key issues affecting women's employment in the construction and manufacturing industries paints a picture of 'opportunities lost' within industries that have worked in a particular way for a long time. Entrenched ways of recruiting, working and supporting employees, and the work cultures that have evolved, have created multiple barriers to women's employment and retention. These barriers extend for women with additional forms of disadvantage due to factors such as sexuality, age, ethnicity and disability.

The benefits of diversifying workforces and increasing women's participation in the construction and manufacturing industries are clear, but will only be realised if women find such jobs attractive and are supported to succeed in their roles. This will require determined action to address the many barriers to their employment, but can be achieved.

References

- 1 Workplace Gender Equality Agency. Gender Segregation in Australia's Workforce. Commonwealth Government of Australia; Workplace Gender Equality Agency; 2019. Available from: <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gender-segregation-in-australias-workforce#key-findings>
- 2 Australian Government. Labour Market Insights, Construction. [Internet] Canberra ACT: Australian Government; 2022. Available from: <https://labourmarketinsights.gov.au/industries/industry-details?industryCode=E>
- 3 Victorian Government. Victoria's Women in Construction Strategy. Melbourne Victoria: Victorian Government; 2022.
- 4 Mills JE, Franzway S, Gill J & Sharp R. Challenging Knowledge, Sex and Power: Gender, work and engineering. 1st ed. Routledge; 2014.
- 5 ConsultantANZ. Why Australia is struggling to get more women into engineering and construction. ConsultantANZ; 2023. Available from: <https://www.consultanz.com.au/women-in-engineering-construction/#:~:text=Construction%20is%20Australia%27s%20number%20one,site%20roles%20occupied%20by%20women.>
- 6 Galea N, Powell A, Loosemore M and Chappell L. Demolishing Gender Structures. UNSW; 2018. Fielden, S.L., Davidson, M.J., Gale, A.W. & Davey, C.L. Women in construction: the untapped resource.
- 7 Construction Management and Economics. 2000; 18: 113-121.
- 8 Labour Market Insights. Construction. Australian Government; 2022 Available from: <https://labourmarketinsights.gov.au/industries/industry-details?industryCode=E>
- 9 Department of Regional Development, Manufacturing and Water. Women in Manufacturing Strategy Queensland Government; 2023.
- 10 Victoria State Government. Building Equality Policy. Victorian State Government; 2021. Available from: <https://www.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-12/Final%20Building%20Equality%20Policy.pdf>
- 11 Self-Employed Australia. Independent Contractors: How many in Australia? Self Employed Australia; 2022. Available from: <https://selfemployedaustralia.com.au/independent-contractors-how-many/independent-contractors-how-many-in-australia/>
- 12 Australian Government. Why it's time to celebrate our hard working self-employed. Australian Small Business and Family Enterprise Umbudsman. 2023. Available from: <https://www.asbfeo.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/why-its-time-celebrate-our-hard-working-self-employed#:~:text=Self%20employment%20already%20allows%201.6,business%20owner%20than%20an%20employee.>
- 13 Our Watch. Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia (2nd ed.). Our Watch; 2021. Melbourne, Australia.
- 14 Jones, A. Reimagining Gender Equity in Trades. The Australian Tafe Teacher; Autumn 2017. pp. 26-29. Available from: <https://www.aeufederal.org.au/application/files/5614/9127/2112/TATTAutumn2017.pdf>
- 15 Quay Connection. Ducks on the pond: women in trade apprenticeships. NSW State Training Services; 2014. Available from: <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A73556>
- 16 Francis, V. What influences professional women's career advancement in construction? Construction Management and Economics. 2017; 35 (5): 254-275.
- 17 Ness, K. Constructing Masculinity in the Building Trades: Most Jobs in the Construction Industry Can Be Done by Women. Gender, Work & Organisation. 2012; 19 (6); 654-676.
- 18 Bryce T, Far H, Gardner A . Barriers to career advancement for female engineers in Australia's civil construction industry and recommended solutions. Australian Journal of Civil Engineering. 2019; 17 (1): 1-10.
- 19 Gender Equality Agency. Towards gender balanced parental leave – Australian and international trends. Insights Paper. Workplace Gender Equality Agency; 2017. Available from: <https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/gender%20balanced%20parental%20leave.pdf>
- 20 Holdsworth, S. Turner M. Career Pathways of Women in Construction: Boots on the Ground. RMIT University; 2022. Melbourne, Australia.

Acknowledgements

Women's Health Grampians acknowledges:

- The Traditional Custodians of the lands across the Grampians region: The Wadawurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Djab Wurrung, Wurundjeri, Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagalk Peoples, and recognises their continuing connection to the land and waterways. In particular we recognise the strength and courage of Aboriginal women and girls in our communities who bravely speak up against oppression and the consequences of colonisation and generously share their wisdom on family, country and culture.
- Alison Peipers (Alison Peipers Consulting) who has developed this issue summary and is supporting our team with the See What You Can Be Program Evaluation.
- Ange van den Berg (See What You Can Be Coordinator) who has developed the original Discussion Paper which provided a foundation for this document.
- The support from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet's Office for Women.

Women's Health Grampians

Ballarat Office:

728 Barkly St,
Wadawurrung Country
Ballarat 3350 VIC

Horsham Office:

39 Urquhart Street
Wotjobaluk Country
Horsham 3400 VIC

03 5322 4100

admin@whg.org.au
www.whg.org.au



Australian Government

Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

WHG women's
health
GRAMPIANS