



Building Equality Policy

Female participation in the Victorian Construction Industry 2022

Prepared by Industry Capability Network Victoria

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Front cover photo

Participants at Industry Capability Victoria's Roundtable discussing *Female participation in the Victorian Construction Industry 2022*

L-R: Sarah Tozer, General Manager Strategy and New Business, John Holland; Craig Robertson, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Skills Authority; Marcelle West, Technical Specialist Building and Construction at Industrial Relations Victoria; Professor Zora Vrcelj, Head of Built Environment, Victoria University; Lisa Kinross, Chief Executive Officer, Civil Contractors Federation; Paula Hernandez Martin, National Association for Women in Construction, Dianne Smith, Chief Executive Officer, Industry Capability Network Victoria; Victoria University; Tariro Makwasha, Executive Manager, Customer Strategy and Development, Industry Capability Network Victoria; Lucy O'Reilly, Contracts Manager, Apprenticeship Employment Network; Rebecca Lee, Principal Social Procurement Adviser, Industry Capability Network Victoria; Franklin O'Carroll, Director, Apprenticeships Identification and Coordination, Apprenticeships Victoria; Bree Gauci, Acting Director, Delivery Branch, Senior Secondary Pathways Reform Taskforce, Department of Education; Jeremy Levine, Executive Director, Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions.

Executive Summary

In December 2022, Industry Capability Network Victoria hosted a roundtable to discuss the topic: *Female Participation in the Victorian Construction Industry 2022*. The roundtable brought together key players working within the Building Equality Policy environment to reflect on one year of implementation and discuss the following questions:

1. Do we have enough females interested in the construction industry?
2. Is the culture enabling females to come onsite?
3. What next steps can government and industry partners take to encourage diversity and inclusivity in the construction industry?

Attendees included representatives from various government agencies, including Industrial Relations Victoria, education and training providers, a tier 1 construction company, advocacy groups and research professionals¹. We acknowledge that these attendees represent a small subsection of the construction industry, with views of unions, industry associations, other larger construction companies and subcontractors to be obtained to inform future work.

The roundtable discussed the relative merits of current initiatives implemented by the Victorian Government and the construction industry to increase female participation. These initiatives demonstrate a collective ambition to increase the participation of females within the construction industry and to improve the culture for all workers. However, more assistance is required at all levels and across occupations of the construction industry to improve female participation rates.

Roundtable attendees acknowledged that a collaborative approach from the construction industry is required to achieve lasting change. To strive towards this goal, attendees discussed the need to:

1. Use social influence to normalise female participation in construction, starting in schools, through training institutions and onto the work site
2. Identify male and female role models to champion culture change in the sector
3. Reimagine the employment model to promote and foster inclusive participation.

The paper will detail the main primary discussions, problems and possible solutions posed by the roundtable attendees.

¹ [ICN Vic Women in Construction](#)

Recommendation 1

Use social influence to normalise female participation in construction, starting in schools, through training institutions and onto the work site.

Schools

The roundtable discussed the ongoing misconception that the construction industry is not a career option for females. Feedback from Victoria Government's Head Start program² demonstrates this misconception. Young girls in the program are stating that they do not picture themselves in a construction role and find it difficult to access reliable and comprehensive information to understand the sector. Further, other students have reported that their parents' perceptions of the construction industry have dissuaded them from considering a career in the sector. It is imperative that schools, especially career counsellors, demystify the construction industry to encourage girls and their parents to enter the sector.

Gendered stereotypes begin in schools. With young girls making career decision as young as grade five, it will be important to target programs and initiatives to introduce in primary school for long-term, sustainable change. The roundtable discussed the option to increase the availability of construction skills in school-based learning and improve its education of construction-based career options for all students at an early age. By removing stereotypes in primary and secondary schools, young girls may feel more confident to choose a career in construction.

Roundtable participants also discussed the need to improve education and awareness of construction career pathways to ensure that women and girls develop a clear understanding of the opportunities available to them. Although the Building Equality Policy does highlight the variety of these pathways in its defined terms list³, there is still a lack of awareness outside the industry. Educating young girls and their parents about these pathways will be a key driver in improving long-term and sustainable female participation within the construction industry.

² Head Start is a school-based apprenticeship and traineeship (SBAT) program that helps students in years 10-12 develop skills, capabilities and confidence that employers in growth industries need. [Head Start Apprenticeships and Traineeships](#)

³ <https://www.buyingfor.vic.gov.au/building-equality-policy-defined-terms>

Training

Training programs were highlighted as an opportunity to challenge stereotypes and encourage more females into the industry.

Research by RMIT⁴ has identified the need to improve apprenticeship training for females to attract more females into non-traditional roles. Through this research, several strategies have been identified including:

- re-educating trainers to enable an inclusive teaching environment
- identification of training pathways
- the creation of networks between tradeswomen, TAFE teachers and industry to connect females to employment opportunities
- incentives to take on mature-aged apprentices⁵.

While strategies to improve the training environment were not explicitly discussed by roundtable participants, several key themes are replicated in the research into apprenticeship training.

In addition to improving apprenticeship training, strategic recruitment of females at a mid-career stage can be strengthened to address labour shortages in the industry. Females have transferrable skills that could be applied to careers in construction. Examples of this are recent case studies of:

- An events manager now working in site inductions. Her stakeholder management, communication and problem-solving skills have allowed her to facilitate site inductions ensuring compliance of all staff.
- A woman working in hospitality in now working within construction. The communication, organisation, and problem-solving skills she obtained through hospitality have been an asset in changing to a career in the construction industry⁶.

⁴ Bridges, D., Krivokapic-Skoko, B., Bamberly, L., Jenkins, S., & Wulff, E. (2019). *A Trades of One's Own' Regional NSW Stakeholder Findings – Barriers And Proposed Solutions For Women In The Manual Trades*. Charles Sturt University; Holdsworth, S., Turner, M., Scott-Young, C.M., & Sandri, K. (2020). *Women in Construction: Exploring the Barriers and Supportive Enablers of Wellbeing in the Workplace*. RMIT University, Melbourne; Simon, L., Smith, E., & Clarke, K. (2016). *Apprenticeships should work for women too! Education + Training*

⁵ Holdsworth, S., Turner, M., Scott-Young, C.M., & Sandri, K. (2020). *Women in Construction: Exploring the Barriers and Supportive Enablers of Wellbeing in the Workplace*. RMIT University, Melbourne

⁶ https://www.linkedin.com/posts/icnvic_buildingequalitypolicy-womeninconstruction-activity-7005332277488492544-4IJC?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop

Increased availability of support for women and girls entering the construction industry should also be prioritised. The availability of mentoring programs is discussed in Recommendation 2.

Worksite

The worksite is currently not a culturally safe environment for women and girls. This should be reviewed and reformed to encourage female representation on worksites. RMIT research indicated that a key barrier to retention of females within the construction industry is the masculine workplace culture. It was noted that this culture does not support females and offers limited career pathways, with females often having to prove they are capable⁷. In addition to this, females in construction report leaving the industry due to bullying and sexual harassment⁸. Roundtable participants discussed the need to change the employment model to address a number of these concerns (see Recommendation 3).

The construction industry should review the wide suite of worksite policies to ensure inclusivity. A key example is the use of appropriate equipment and facilities onsite. There has historically been an underrepresentation of female-tailored utilities onsite. Practical operational and safety measures such as introducing female-tailored Personal Protective Equipment and uniforms and having female bathrooms on worksites, improve inclusivity.

⁷ George, M., & Loosemore, M. (2019). Site operatives' attitudes towards traditional masculinity ideology in the Australian construction industry. *Construction Management and Economics*, 37(8), 419–432; Galea, N., Powell, A., Loosemore, M., & Chappell, L. (2018). *Demolishing Gender in Oz*. University of NSW, Sydney; Holdsworth, S., Turner, M., Scott-Young, C.M., & Sandri, K. (2020). *Women in Construction: Exploring the Barriers and Supportive Enablers of Wellbeing in the Workplace*. RMIT University, Melbourne

⁸ Holdsworth, S., Turner, M., Scott-Young, C.M., & Sandri, K. (2020). *Women in Construction: Exploring the Barriers and Supportive Enablers of Wellbeing in the Workplace*. RMIT University, Melbourne; Jenkins, S., Bamberry, L., Bridges, D., & Krivokapic-Skoko, B. (2019). Skills for women tradies in regional Australia: A global future. *International Journal of Training Research*, 16(3), 278–285.

Recommendation 2

Identify male and female role models to champion culture change in the sector.

The roundtable discussion highlighted the importance of diverse and inclusive representation to encourage females into the construction industry. Showcasing stories of females working in construction (across all levels and areas of the industry) will demonstrate that a career in construction is possible. In September 2022, the Victorian Government launched the *She Built It* campaign, a series of social media collateral featuring females in the building sector and their projects⁹. The campaign, which has had over 610,000 views on YouTube, was also aired on the radio and Spotify. More exposure and diverse campaigning will support the demystification of the construction industry for females.

Having role models onsite and within businesses to support and mentor women and girls is integral to the attraction and retention of female workers. This need is demonstrated through several Women in Construction organisations that have seen great success from their programs. National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC), Women in Design and Construction (WIDAC) and Tradeswomen Australia (TWA) offer mentoring, coaching and networking opportunities for females in the industry.

It was noted during the roundtable that female students wanted to hear from both males and females working in the construction industry. Demonstrating male and females working together will also help breakdown stereotypes and alleviate some of the concerns held about females working in construction.

Roundtable participants also identified the need for male role models to lead cultural change onsite. Having male role models reinforce gender equality, demonstrate appropriate behaviour and to call out inappropriate behaviour will assist in changing worksite culture. They will also provide support and encourage females working within the construction industry. With changes to worksite culture, including less incidents of bullying and harassment, will enable females to feel safe and included on the worksite, increasing retention rates.¹⁰ However, irrespective of gender, the industry needs diversity in its champions to enable culture change success.

⁹ [She Built It](#)

¹⁰ Holdsworth, S., Turner, M., Scott-Young, C.M., & Sandri, K. (2020). *Women in Construction: Exploring the Barriers and Supportive Enablers of Wellbeing in the Workplace*. RMIT University, Melbourne;

Recommendation 3

Reimagine the employment model to promote and foster inclusive participation.

The construction industry is modelled on an employment model that is designed for male workers¹¹. The discussion queried the current working hours, conditions and obligations and the impact on diversity and inclusivity. Further, it interrogated the recruitment and retention strategies that are designed to mobilise male participants.

Several factors were considered to inform a new employment model that will foster greater diversity and inclusivity in the workforce. These include reimagining rostering practices and policies, improving the availability of part time work and educating females on opportunities and pathways early in their career. These changes would provide flexibility for females to work around caring responsibilities, for example school drop off and pick up, and make an informed decision on what carer pathway best suits their needs.

Wages

Many females exploring a late career change into construction report that the apprenticeship wages and their caring responsibilities limit them from entering the workforce. During the roundtable, it was noted that the current apprentice wage is insufficient for females to sustain a career in construction, with the first-year adult apprentice wages being as low as \$21.31 per hour, with an increase to \$32.13 per hour for fourth year apprentices¹². Consequently, there has been a high incidence of females leaving trades courses before completion.

Caring responsibilities

Females' role as primary care givers is often a barrier to entering the workforce¹³. The roundtable discussed the merits of increasing paternity leave, encouraging the use of carers' leave and flexible hours by men to assist with caring for children or other family members. By creating more equality for men, there will be greater opportunities for females to re-join the workforce. The construction industry can learn from other sectors and initiatives who have had success with changing this culture to attract and retain females. The roundtable noted the achievements the Women on Track program, discussing the need to learn and share stories from it.

¹¹ <https://www.vic.gov.au/victorias-women-construction-strategy>

¹² https://www.etuvic.com.au/ETUV/Your_Union/Apprentices/Wage_Rates.aspx

¹³ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/barriers-and-incentives-labour-force-participation-australia/latest-release>

All Building Equality Policy actors, government, education institutions, unions, and contractors alike, should be considering and piloting new initiatives and programs to disrupt the current employment model of the construction industry. Through joint influence of male and females, as well as a collaborative approach to change may see the effective introduction of inclusive business practices at a whole-of-sector scale that has not yet been realised. Tier 1 companies have acknowledged their power and influence in effecting these changes, yet still struggle to conceive the practical application of collaboration amongst companies. ICN's neutral positioning in the industry will aim to assist this ambition by hosting further discussions and knowledge sharing across industry.

Conclusion

To increase female participation within the construction industry and meet the Building Equality Policy targets a concerted and collective effort is needed from all levels of the construction industry and government. The conversations throughout the roundtable demonstrated a willingness to work together to meet this objective.

The recommendations listed below bring together the collective voices of the roundtable participants and highlight the systemic changes required to attract and retain females in the construction industry:

1. Use social influence to normalise female participation in construction, starting in schools, through training institutions and onto the work site
2. Identify male and female role models to champion culture change in the sector
3. Reimagine the employment model to promote and foster inclusive participation.

The type of systemic change discussed need to be targeted to maximise impact and increase the participation of females working in the construction industry.

Although the roundtable attendees discussed the need for a collective approach to effect institutional change, the practical application of collaboration remained unresolved in the discussion. ICN Victoria intends to lead cross-sector collaboration to share knowledge, ideas and learnings for effective implementation of the Building Equality Policy. We will explore and recommend ways to improve the transparency, access and sharing of data, initiatives, and facilitate opportunities to facilitate this collaboration.

Next steps

To normalise females working in the construction industry, a joint effort from the Victorian Government, education and training providers, the construction industry and advocacy groups is required. There is an opportunity for Tier 1 construction companies to provide a lead role in this work, highlighting career pathways of females and providing supports to females entering their industry. Additionally, lead contracting construction companies have an obligation and responsibility to ensure that subcontractors are also adopting and endorsing these initiatives and behaviours.

We acknowledge that the roundtable represented the views of only a small portion of actors in the Building Equality Policy sector. Views from the wider industry will strengthen the conversations had and the future direction of works to be undertaken. ICN Victoria will be inviting all readers to participate in a survey that will validate and verify the discussion, including the views of subcontractors, unions, industry associations and other large construction companies. The survey and future roundtables will be used to monitor progress against the Building Equality Policy program.

ICN Victoria will also use the results from this survey to frame further conversations and assist in the development of future educational sessions, resources, and advice to government.

Additional six-monthly roundtables will be held throughout 2023 to monitor progress being made by the construction industry, discuss new challenges, share opportunities, and formulate new ideas to improve participation.