



MASTER BUILDERS
A U S T R A L I A

SUPPORTING WOMEN TO ACHIEVE VET- BASED CAREERS

Submission
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Images on the cover are winners of Master Builders National Excellence in Building and Construction Awards.

Introduction

Master Builders Australia (Master Builders) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations' (the Department) *Supporting women to achieve VET-based careers* discussion paper.

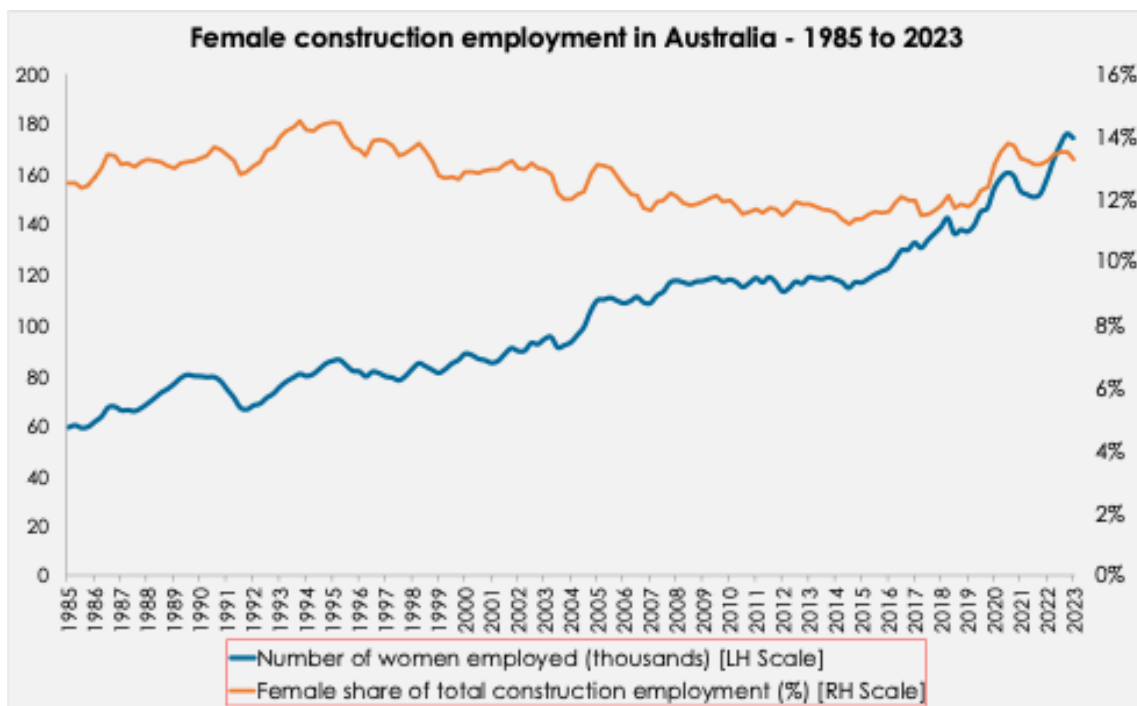
Master Builders is the nation's peak building and construction industry association which was federated on a national basis in 1890. Master Builders' members are the Master Builder state and territory associations, which represent over 32,000 businesses, including the top 100 construction companies.

Master Builders is the only industry association that represents all three sectors: residential, commercial and civil construction.

The building and construction industry is committed to increasing women's participation and fostering a culture that attracts them to the industry.

Traditionally, building and construction have been male dominated, and today men continue to hold the overwhelming majority of roles.

In 2023, women make up 14.5 percent of the industry's total workforce and 2.7 percent of building trades. Those numbers are increasing year on year.



The culture of the building and construction industry has evolved exponentially in recent years, with a huge number of champions of change leading the way, including the women and men participating in Master Builders' Women Building Australia¹ program.

Female participation in the industry has many benefits. It lifts productivity, boosts the economy, facilitates financial independence, assists in developing an inclusive and diverse culture and

¹ <https://www.womenbuildingaustralia.com.au/>

meets the much-needed skills shortages the building and construction industry is facing. It also provides women with long-term and financially viable career paths that previously may not have been an option for them.

Master Builders recommends that the Department focuses on initiatives like Women Building Australia that provide support and guidance to women in VET-based careers. Developing a network and having the ability to access a mentor to set and meet career goals empowers women and encourages their participation in this sector. Furthermore, the Department must ensure that there is better access to affordable and reliable childcare, paid maternity leave, paid carers leave and continuing superannuation so women do not feel they must make a choice between motherhood and a career in building and construction.

Women Building Australia

In 2020 Master Builders developed the Women Building Australia program. The program exists to support women in the building and construction industry, provide guidance, resources, mentorship and a network. It aims to attract the best workers regardless of gender by promoting opportunities for women and their employers. Women Building Australia is principally delivered through a national mentoring program which provides women with access to support, encouragement and advice from experienced individuals through a virtual or face-to-face mentoring relationship.

At present, the program has around 300 mentor/mentee pairs.

Women Building Australia has been incredibly successful in supporting early- and mid-career women in the building and construction industry. The program is centred around the following key initiatives:

Career Expos

Attendance at career expos to highlight the career pathways and opportunities within the building and construction industry to female school leavers, career advisors and parents encouraging more young women to enter the industry.

National Mentoring Program

The Women Building Australia National Mentoring Program provides women with up to five years of experience in the building and construction industry with access to support, encouragement and advice from experienced individuals through a mentoring relationship. Mentoring is an excellent way to help women early in their careers to succeed in the building and construction industry. Mentors are provided with training.

Business Resilience and Coaching Program

The Business Resilience and Coaching program provides courses and information sessions to women operators of small and medium enterprises in the building and construction industry teaching business fundamentals and how to safely grow and prosper within the industry. Business coaching offers experienced mentors providing tactical support for female business operators helping them navigate key issues confronting their business.

Female led Business Register

A register of businesses in the building and construction industry led by females to assist the public, particularly vulnerable women who would prefer using female builders and tradespeople.

Harassment and Discrimination Support Line

Women Building Australia provides a dedicated harassment and discrimination support line for women in the building and construction industry. The support line provides practical (non-legal) advice on issues of discrimination and harassment and recommends avenues that are available to women if they wish to escalate a matter.

Women Building Australia Jobseeker Handbook

The Women Building Australia Jobseeker Handbook has been designed to assist women to get a better understanding of the building and construction industry and the associate career opportunities. It highlights an extensive selection of positions in the industry identifying what the role is, the requirements and how one could be successful in that role. Also included are current supply, future demand and average salaries, and the various pathways into those roles. The Handbook features case studies of women at various stages of their careers in the building and construction industry. These include their pathways into the industry, and the challenges and rewards they have experienced.

The Women Building Australia Jobseeker Handbook can be found here: https://www.womenbuildingaustralia.com.au/sites/default/files/2022-04/Jobseeker%20Handbook%202022%20Web%20Version_0.pdf

Women in Building and Construction

It is important to note the context surrounding female participation in the building and construction industry. While it remains heavily male-dominated, change is occurring. This kind of cultural shift is not fast moving, but it is happening. Highlighting these changes and showing women the pathways into and through this industry is important.

There are diverse entry ages and pathways to the industry for women. Most who enter have a tie through their family or partner. A large number tend to have an intimate partner who is a qualified tradesperson, and they run the business side of the operation while their partner is on the tools. The smallest cohort commencing careers in this space are young women who are recent school leavers. Many women tend to enter the industry later in life, particularly post-child rearing age.

For many women in building and construction, there is a strong sense of connection to the industry and the networks they create. The tangible and challenging nature of the work is seen to be very rewarding – driving past a building and knowing one had a part in its realisation is seen to be a significant positive. Many women are driven by a passion for the industry, which helps them overcome the obstacles they face.

Building and construction remains a difficult area for women to engage with, particularly if they seek jobs as skilled tradespeople on the tools. Most women report instances of discrimination and harassment by their colleagues. Outdated views that women should not work in building and construction because they are not physically strong, or do not have the required skills do still exist. However, people with these views certainly make up the minority now, not the majority. The development of programs that bring male counterparts along on the journey to diversity and inclusion is vital.

Maternity leave is a key tension for women in building and construction. Women have reported being made to feel as though taking time out of the workforce for pregnancy and child caring responsibilities is a burden on the workforce and an unnecessary impact on productivity. The

post-maternity leave balancing act, which includes but is not limited to working part-time, starting on site later (when daycare centres are open), needing to leave to care for sick children or working school hours are not always well received or facilitated. The lack of female participation in this industry for younger age groups may be a direct result of this.

The practical aspects of continuing to work on the tools or on site when pregnant also appear to be a deterrent for many women. One Women Building Australia participant noted:

"I think in construction, there are very real risks. So, when you're pregnant, you're not necessarily going to be wanting to walk on site and just be sailing around while there's concrete cutting and jack hammering and whatnot going on."

These barriers must be removed before female participation can increase significantly in building and construction.

The Department must consider subsidies, programs and incentives to ensure women who seek to become mothers have the ability to do so without hindering their roles, financial position or career progression in the building and construction industry. There must be no choice between the two.

The Way Forward

Women in building and construction careers need support. They need support to commence and continue their careers in the industry and it must come from all directions – government, industry, peers, family, managers, employers.

Funding for programs like Women Building Australia must be made abundantly available. Supportive networks and mentors play a vital part in ensuring the culture of building and construction is changing to be more diverse and inclusive.

Industry is doing its part in this space and the perception of women in trades has progressed hugely in recent years.

Networks play a huge part in this. They give women a sense of comfort when entering a male-dominated industry and a place to turn when things get tough. Government must seek to support these programs as much as possible, to ensure they are well-funded, wide-spread and well-known.

More work must also be done to incentivise younger women who are of school leaving age to enter the industry. Careers advice, 'come and try trades' days and networking are all important aspects that need to be developed, but most importantly, parents must be given the tools and comfort to help their daughters navigate a career in trade.

Parents remain the biggest influence on a young person's career decision.

For a young woman – say 13 or 14 years old – considering a career in building and construction, her parents will be the most influential figures in deciding whether to pursue it or not. Industry and government must ensure that her parents are informed, prepared and have their expectations managed so they can support their daughter in her career aspirations. Programs and information directed at parents will be vital to increasing participation and retention rates.

Both women and men who are considering building and construction careers or apprenticeships have noted the value of trying a trade before committing to their career. In particular for young women at school the opportunity to try trades and have early access to

vocational education and training in this space remains limited. The historic perception that women should not pursue careers in trades, but rather higher education continues in the school system. Providing up to date and easy to access information to careers advisors is vital.

One of the main reasons apprentices do not complete their studies is because their chosen career did not match their expectations. Unlike university, where it is straightforward to transfer from one undergraduate degree to another, or commence a Bachelor of Arts and specialise at a later time in the degree, that option does not exist for vocational education and training. Recognition of prior learning is complex and presents a barrier to moving between qualifications in trades. This means many young people make long-term career choices at 16 or 17 years of age, commence their qualification, find it is different than they expected and end up leaving the industry because there are few pathways to change their qualification without having to start again in a new specialisation.

Managing expectations, giving early access to trades, helping people understand what it is like to be in building and construction and ensuring access to ready-made mentoring networks is vital to increasing retention. Some women in the Master Builders network have noted:

"I wanted to get my hands on some tools and try it out before I committed to starting a trade. I eventually found a woodworking course an hour away, but even that wasn't long enough. It was really hard to find anything where women could try working with their hands."

"I wanted to work with my hands at school but there were just no opportunities for me to try."

"I did a few woodworking workshops, as well, just to get on the tools because there wasn't there's not a whole lot of opportunity for women to just try something manual."

The building and construction is rapidly becoming more diverse and inclusive and programs that highlight mentoring, networking and support opportunities from a young age are important.

One female apprentice in the Master Builders network noted:

"My dad's a very traditional guy, he basically said, you've got we've got no family in the industry. And the whole construction industry is based on who you know, and relationships. But you don't have those. Part of it, I think was [because I was] a woman. But the large part of it was he just thought it was going to be really hard to break into the industry. Yet I've had no issues doing that."

Women who have been part of the Women Building Australia program noted that government quotas – such as the Australian Skills Guarantee – could have a long term and detrimental impact in that it may bring women into the industry fast, but they will likely exit just as quickly. One female noted:

"I think at the moment quotas can be weaponised against businesses. I really am anti-quota, because, say you've got a talent pool of 100 people, 98 of them are going to be men and two are going to be women. But you've got to employ a certain [number] of women to be able to win a particular contract. So unless that two percent have something absolutely spectacularly special. You're not going to get the best people for the job."

It is the view of Master Builders that quotas do not incentivise more people to the industry, rather they reshuffle the deck of people already employed.

Quotas must be avoided as strategies to bring more diversity into the industry.

Recommendations

Firstly, for government to effectively incentivise more women into VET-based careers like building and construction, there must be a commitment to programs that:

- Provide mentoring, networking and support
- Better promote VET-based careers to young women of early high school age
- Provide parents with a comprehensive understanding of what a VET-based career might look like for their daughter
- Take male counterparts along on the journey to female inclusion.

Secondly, more research must be done on female participation in the industry that can underpin policy and funding decisions. While there are some valuable insights in this space, more can be done to truly understand what attracts and deters women from building and construction.

Finally, government must seek to ensure that there is significant funding directed towards programs for young women, career advisors and parents that removes the bias towards university pathways and highlights for them the rewarding, long-term and well-paid career they could have in building and construction. In particular, highlighting options that do not involve working on site or on the tools when pregnant or in a caring role at home will be important. For example, showing young women that they could spend that time in roles as trainers, assessors and managers.

Contact

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