



MASTER BUILDERS
A U S T R A L I A

BREAKING GROUND: WOMEN IN BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION

MARCH 2024



THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT

The building and construction industry is one of the largest sectors in Australia. At the end of 2023, there were 1.32 million workers across 445,000 businesses. Small to medium enterprises represent 98 percent of those businesses.

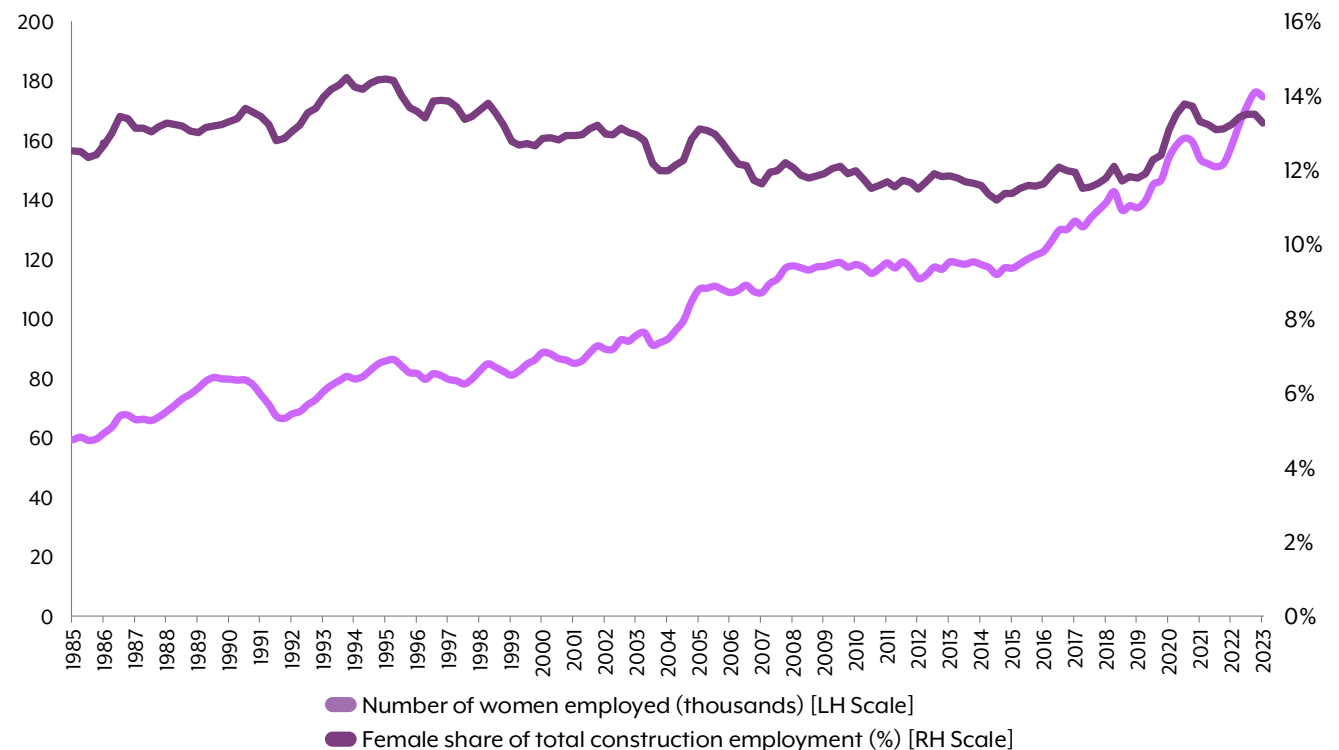
The industry fuels economic growth, innovation, and job creation. For every \$1 billion dollars this industry makes, \$3 billion are returned to the Australian economy.

The way work is performed provides plenty of opportunity. It may be a career as a tradesperson, working in management, starting a business – or all of the above. Jobs can be on-site, off-site or a bit of both. A career in building and construction can be in the residential, commercial or civil sectors – the possibilities are endless.

There is a limit, however, to how successful the industry can be. Acute workforce shortages are impacting Australia's urban environment needs. This does not just affect housing, but all the infrastructure that underpins and supports the community.

Master Builders Australia (Master Builders) estimates that the sector needs around half a million new workers in the next three to five years to meet demand and replenish an ageing workforce.

FEMALE CONSTRUCTION EMPLOYMENT IN AUSTRALIA - 1985 TO 2023



Given building and construction has historically only attracted half of the potential workforce – men – the industry has limited its capacity to meet shortfalls.

However, over the last decade, there has been a shift with more proactive engagement encouraging women to join this sector.

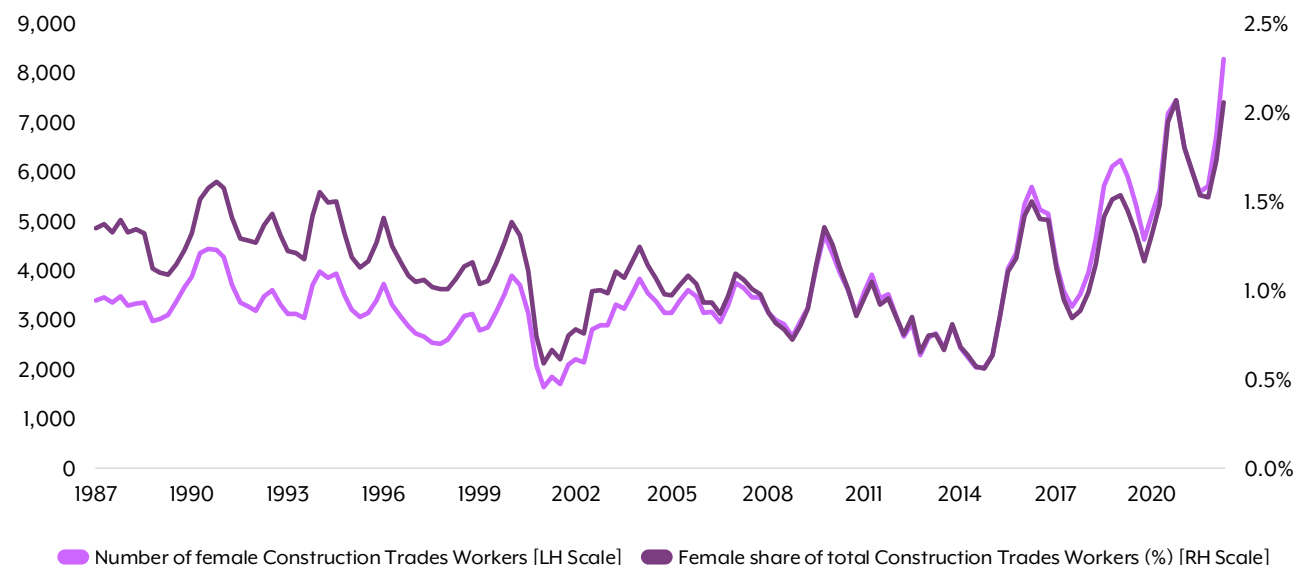
More women than ever are working in building and construction and viewing it as a viable career option. An option that offers flexibility, competitive wages, an excellent community, and hugely rewarding outcomes.

In 2023, women made up 15 per cent of the building and construction workforce, but only about three percent of them were on the tools.

Female participation is still not high enough and more needs to be done by employers, industry groups, educational institutions, and all levels of government.

Cultural change is needed, industry structures must adapt – such as more flexible patterns of work – and more funding is required to support evidence-based programs of how to attract and retain women.

FEMALE CONSTRUCTION TRADES WORKERS IN AUSTRALIA - 1986 TO 2022



THE BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY NEEDS MORE WOMEN

Master Builders has a goal for more women to enter the industry and pursue long-term careers.

Female participation has many benefits. It lifts productivity, boosts the economy, facilitates financial independence, assists in developing an inclusive and diverse culture and meets the much-needed workforce shortages the building and construction industry is facing. It also provides women with long-term and financially viable career paths, economic security, job creation and leadership opportunities.

Many people in the industry see women as excellent communicators and multi-taskers with strong attention to detail – skills that are hugely valuable. Having a more diverse workforce also brings different approaches to problem-solving.

One female participant in the Women Building Australia program said:

“On-site, you can sort of feel the tenseness sometimes. Then after you are in there for a few days, it calms the farm to be honest. That’s why we often try to get female materials hoist operators and people-lift operators. Because they tend to chill the boys out in the lift a bit.”

One of the male mentors in the Women Building Australia program said:

“I think women have a unique way of looking at things compared to men. So, putting men and women in a workplace together actually helps the whole work environment.”

Master Builders is aware, through its Women Building Australia program, that there is a growing number of women interested in working in all facets of building and construction, including trades, but their commencement and retention rates are low.

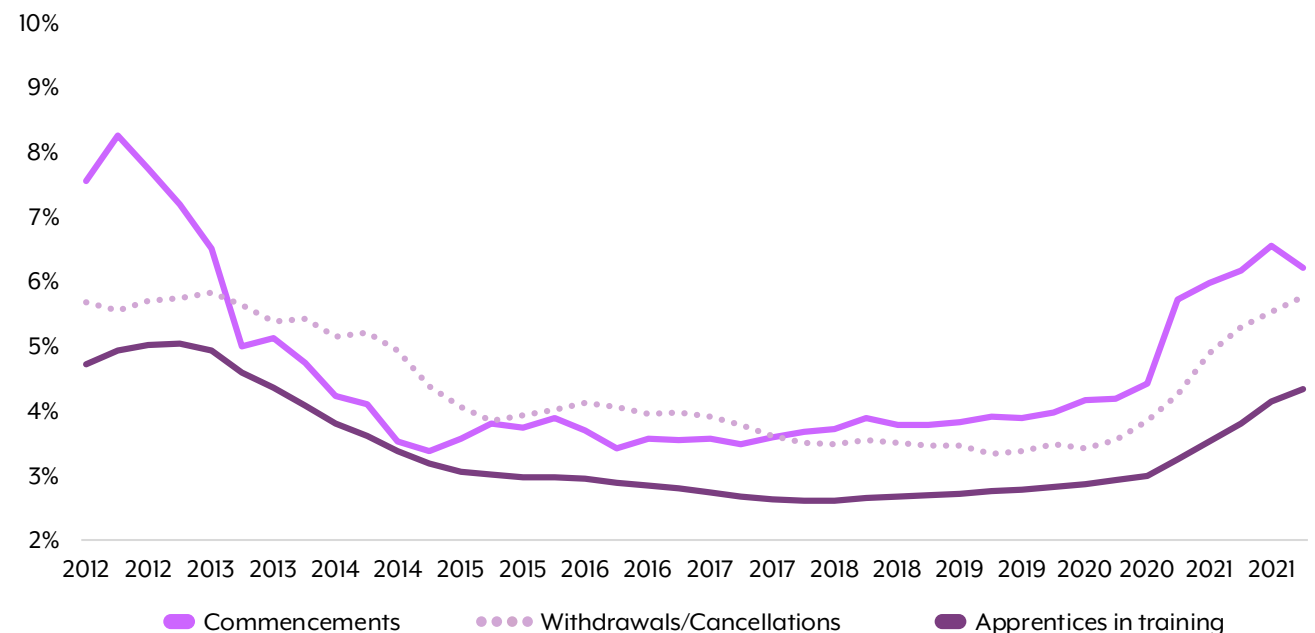
This indicates that the industry must focus its attention on the barriers to entry and retention.

There are diverse entry ages and pathways to the industry for women. Most 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.

FEMALE SHARE OF CONSTRUCTION APPRENTICE ACTIVITY - 2012 TO 2022 (MOVING ANNUAL TOTAL) (% OF TOTAL)



WHAT ATTRACTS WOMEN TO BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION?

An evaluation by Women Building Australia highlights what women in building and construction consider to be the benefits of the industry:

SOCIAL



Strong sense of connection within their network of peers

Diversity of people

Importance of teamwork

Feeling like you have helped make someone's dream a reality

For many women in building and construction, there is a strong sense of connection to the industry and the networks within it. 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 gives a satisfying sense of achievement.

EMOTIONAL



Feeling like building something is really rewarding

Creating something tangible you can see and feel

Feeling mentally and physically challenged gives a sense of progression and achievement

Many women are driven by passion for building. The reasons they love it are similar to why their male counterparts do too. But women face different obstacles to success.

Networks and mentorships – such as the Women Building Australia mentoring program – play a huge role in women's career progression.

RATIONAL



It is interesting and dynamic

No two jobs or days are the same

It is cognitively challenging

Opportunities for personal and career growth

Having a group of peers to turn to for guidance, help, support, and camaraderie is vital when it comes to attracting women to and retaining them in building and construction. It assists with their ability to progress to leadership and management roles.

WHAT THE DATA SAYS

According to the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census data, in 2021 there were 156,979 women in the building and construction sector, compared with 910,680 men.

Women in the building and construction industry are older, work fewer hours and take home less pay than men overall.

Women generally hold higher levels of qualification than men, and the percentage of women in management roles relative to the total female workforce is similar to the percentage of men, relative to their total.

The majority of women in the industry are in administrative and clerical roles, while most men are in trades.

AGE DEMOGRAPHIC

Of all the women in the sector, half (50.8 per cent) are in the 30–50 age brackets. There is a lack of women in the under 30 age brackets (19.1 per cent).

This is a strong indicator that more needs to be done to help young women see what a career in building and construction could look like, and to find ways to support them to join the industry earlier.

Particularly, employers, educational institutions, and government must make building and construction an enticing option for young people trying to juggle career and family responsibilities.

Females and males in building and construction by age

AGE	FEMALE (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		MALE (% OF TOTAL MALE)		TOTAL
15-19 yrs	2,821	1.8%	44,278	4.9%	47,093
20-24 yrs	10,312	6.6%	100,065	11.0%	110,370
25-29 yrs	16,891	10.8%	114,688	12.6%	131,578
30-34 yrs	21,172	13.5%	122,400	13.4%	143,572
35-39 yrs	21,558	13.7%	110,306	12.1%	131,860
40-44 yrs	18,803	12.0%	92,659	10.2%	111,458
45-49 yrs	18,168	11.6%	88,938	9.8%	107,103
50-54 yrs	16,844	10.7%	81,885	9.0%	98,730
55-59 yrs	14,063	9.0%	70,940	7.8%	85,003
60-64 yrs	9,600	6.1%	51,342	5.6%	60,948
65-69 yrs	4,403	2.8%	22,786	2.5%	27,186
70-74 yrs	1,695	1.1%	7,451	0.8%	9,140
75-79 yrs	474	0.3%	2,244	0.2%	2,721
80-84 yrs	132	0.1%	542	0.1%	676
85-89 yrs	28	0.0%	123	0.0%	147
90-94 yrs	12	0.0%	23	0.0%	37
95-99 yrs	3	0.0%	10	0.0%	11
Total	156,979	100.0%	910,680	100.0%	1,067,633

Source: Master Builders Australia analysis of ABS Census 2021 TableBuilder

EMPLOYMENT STATUS AND WORK HOURS

The majority of women are working full-time (52 per cent).

However, the percentage of women in the industry who work part-time is significantly higher than the percentage of men who do. Of all the women in building and construction, 41 per cent (63,675) work part-time, compared with only 16 per cent (149,344) of men.

This may be because women still tend to take more time away from work to raise children or for caring responsibilities than their male counterparts do.

It might also be because women tend to hold roles that are more suited to part-time work, such as administration or clerical positions.

Female employment status in building and construction trends similarly to other industries. There is a fairly even split between women working part-time and full-time, although women in this sector are slightly more likely to be employed full-time.

Female and male working hours per week trend similarly, although a higher percentage of women work part-time hours.

Female and male employment status

	FEMALE (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		MALE (% OF TOTAL MALE)		TOTAL
Full-time	81,923	52%	685,923	75%	767,849
Part-time	63,675	41%	149,344	16%	213,019
Away	11,369	7%	75,408	8%	86,779
Total	156,967	100%	910,675	100%	1,067,647

Female employment status in building and construction versus other industries

	BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		MALE (% OF TOTAL MALE)	
Full-time	81,923	52%	2,587,338	47%
Part-time	63,675	41%	2,426,747	44%
Away	11,369	7%	471,688	9%
Total	156,967	100%	5,485,773	100%

Source: Master Builders Australia analysis of ABS Census 2021 TableBuilder

Females and males weekly hrs worked

HOURS	FEMALE (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		MALE (% OF TOTAL MALE)		TOTAL
0 hrs	9,786	6%	61,828	7%	71,613
1-9 hrs	10,287	7%	21,018	2%	31,307
10-19 hrs	17,180	11%	33,505	4%	50,681
20-29 hrs	23,361	15%	50,636	6%	74,003
30-34 hrs	12,842	8%	44,182	5%	57,030
35-39 hrs	29,537	19%	142,032	16%	171,574
40-44 hrs	32,854	21%	278,025	31%	310,880
45-49 hrs	6,696	4%	77,773	9%	84,470
50-59 hrs	8,090	5%	117,068	13%	125,161
60-69 hrs	2,950	2%	46,303	5%	49,256
70 hrs/more	1,792	1%	24,725	3%	26,520
Total	155,375	100%	897,095	100%	1,052,495



EARNINGS

In general, women tend to be lower income earners, although this could, in part be because women tend to work fewer hours overall than their male counterparts and/or work in lower paid roles such as administration.

Nevertheless, a gender pay gap remains. When comparing female and male salaries for the same kind of occupation, employment status and work hours, there is an average gap of 14.5 per cent between male and female earnings.¹

The percentage of total men earning salaries over \$91,000 per annum is higher than that of women in all types of roles. Women hold 14,360 full-time management roles compared to 102,243 held by men. In lower salary brackets, male and female earnings are comparable, with women more likely to earn middle incomes than men.

¹ In May 2023, the ABS Average Weekly Earnings series showed that full-time ordinary time earnings in the building and construction industry were \$1,601.10 per week for women compared with \$1,833.40 for men. This comparison was for the same type of role, same employment status and average work hours. This suggests that men are currently earning 14.5 per cent more than women per week.

Number of women and men employed full-time in construction industry by income and occupation

	MANAGERS				PROFESSIONALS				TECHNICIANS & TRADES WORKERS				COMMUNITY & PERSONAL SERVICE WORKERS			
	FEMALE (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		MALE (% OF TOTAL MALE)		FEMALE (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		MALE (% OF TOTAL MALE)		FEMALE (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		MALE (% OF TOTAL MALE)		FEMALE (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		MALE (% OF TOTAL MALE)	
Negative or nil income	59	0.01%	384	0.05%	15	0.00%	60	0.01%	31	0.00%	763	0.10%	0	0.00%	7	0.00%
\$1-\$399 (\$1-\$20,799)	94	0.01%	551	0.07%	27	0.00%	61	0.01%	107	0.01%	2,765	0.37%	0	0.00%	9	0.00%
\$400-\$799 (\$20,800-\$41,599)	484	0.06%	4,065	0.54%	253	0.03%	397	0.05%	1,603	0.21%	54,103	7.18%	45	0.01%	55	0.01%
\$800-\$1,749 (\$41,600-\$90,999)	6,108	0.81%	33,299	4.42%	5,959	0.79%	9,827	1.30%	5,454	0.72%	206,620	27.43%	321	0.04%	612	0.08%
\$1,750-\$3,500 or more (\$91,000-\$182,000 or more)	7,615	1.01%	63,944	8.49%	5,646	0.75%	21,407	2.84%	1,376	0.18%	101,017	13.41%	74	0.01%	347	0.05%
Total	14,360	1.91%	102,243	13.57%	11,900	1.58%	31,752	4.22%	8,571	1.14%	365,268	48.49%	440	0.06%	1,030	0.14%

	CLERICAL & ADMINISTRATIVE WORKERS				SALES WORKERS				MACHINERY OPERATORS & DRIVERS				LABOURERS			
	FEMALE (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		MALE (% OF TOTAL MALE)		FEMALE (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		MALE (% OF TOTAL MALE)		FEMALE (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		MALE (% OF TOTAL MALE)		FEMALE (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		MALE (% OF TOTAL MALE)	
Negative or nil income	153	0.02%	25	0.00%	7	0.00%	15	0.00%	7	0.00%	216	0.03%	24	0.00%	280	0.04%
\$1-\$399 (\$1-\$20,799)	280	0.04%	47	0.01%	17	0.00%	37	0.00%	14	0.00%	332	0.04%	60	0.01%	820	0.11%
\$400-\$799 (\$20,800-\$41,599)	3,301	0.44%	420	0.06%	214	0.03%	261	0.03%	168	0.02%	3,116	0.41%	742	0.10%	8,794	1.17%
\$800-\$1,749 (\$41,600-\$90,999)	26,943	3.58%	8,333	1.11%	1,884	0.25%	3,839	0.51%	1,052	0.14%	37,941	5.04%	2,691	0.36%	57,929	7.69%
\$1,750-\$3,500 or more (\$91,000-\$182,000 or more)	5,891	0.78%	8,361	1.11%	759	0.10%	2,947	0.39%	441	0.06%	17,160	2.28%	565	0.08%	21,652	2.87%
Total	36,568	4.85%	17,186	2.28%	2,881	0.38%	7,099	0.94%	1,682	0.22%	58,765	7.80%	4,082	0.54%	89,475	11.88%

Source: Master Builders Australia analysis of ABS Census 2021 TableBuilder

Total Female: 80,484

Total Male: 672,818

Note: Only full-time workers are counted in this table, no part-time workers are included.

OCCUPATIONS

When it comes to management roles, 21,084 women hold these types of positions, compared to 122,742 men.

The percentage representation of women who hold management roles in the industry (14 percent) is about the same as the percentage representation of men (14 percent), although the practical difference in the actual number of people is stark.

The majority of women in building and construction work in clerical and administrative roles. Most men, unsurprisingly, are technicians and trades workers.

The percentage of total women in the building and construction workforce who are in clerical and administrative roles (54.5 per cent) is significantly higher than the percentage of total in other industries (18.7 per cent).

This suggests that the building and construction industry continues to be divided between male workers as tradespeople and female workers as business support.

Female and male employment categories / female occupations in building and construction versus other industries

	FEMALE (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		MALE (% OF TOTAL MALE)		TOTAL	CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY	SHARE OF WOMEN IN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY	ALL INDUSTRIES EXCLUDING CONSTRUCTION	SHARE OF WOMEN IN ALL INDUSTRIES OUTSIDE OF CONSTRUCTION (%)
Managers	21,084	13.6%	122,742	14%	143,822	21,084	13.6%	608,657	11.2%
Professionals	17,181	11.1%	37,005	4%	54,184	17,181	11.1%	1,577,062	29.0%
Technicians & Trades Workers	14,075	9.1%	488,532	54%	502,609	14,075	9.1%	238,310	4.4%
Community & Personal Service Workers	1,074	0.7%	1,620	0%	2,693	1,074	0.7%	965,360	17.8%
Clerical & Administrative Workers	84,411	54.2%	21,256	2%	105,671	84,411	54.5%	1,017,567	18.7%
Sales Workers	4,989	3.2%	8,989	1%	13,979	4,989	3.2%	579,987	10.7%
Machinery Operators & Drivers	2,530	1.6%	76,230	8%	78,756	2,530	1.6%	84,818	1.6%
Labourers	9,569	6.2%	142,419	16%	151,982	9,569	6.2%	366,208	6.7%
Total	154,913	100%	898,793	100%	1,053,696	154,913	100.0%	5,437,969	100.0%

Source: Master Builders Australia analysis of ABS Census 2021 TableBuilder

QUALIFICATIONS

There is a difference in the level of qualification held by women and men in the industry.

Women are more likely to have higher degrees with almost 20 per cent holding a bachelor's degree or equivalent.

Of all the women in building and construction, 27 per cent have at least a bachelor's degree equivalent or higher, compared with 11 per cent of men in the sector.

This equates to 41,498 women with higher degrees and 97,583 men with the same.

This difference could be attributed to the divide seen between male workers on the tools who need vocational education and training qualifications (almost 50 per cent of male workers have a Certificate III or IV level qualification), whereas women in supporting professional, management or administrative roles require higher degree qualifications.

Interestingly, 33.8 per cent (52,108) of the women have a secondary education only, compared with 27.6 per cent (248,226) of men. Of the women in the industry, there is an over representation in the higher degree and less-qualified categories.

This might be attributed to the impact of men generally working in trade-specific roles, while women are in support roles that either require a qualification at the higher end, or do not need any qualification at all.

Education and qualification

	FEMALE (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		MALE (% OF TOTAL MALE)	
Postgraduate Degree Level	8,454	5.5%	18,646	2.1%
Graduate Diploma and Graduate Certificate Level	2,812	1.8%	4,018	0.4%
Bachelor Degree Level	30,232	19.6%	74,919	8.3%
Advanced Diploma and Diploma Level	23,719	15.4%	60,409	6.7%
Certificate III & IV Level	28,087	18.2%	443,960	49.4%
Secondary Education - Years 10 and above	52,018	33.8%	248,226	27.6%
Certificate I & II Level	102	0.1%	405	0.0%
Secondary Education - Years 9 and below	3,132	2.0%	30,295	3.4%
Supplementary Codes	5,564	3.6%	17,973	2.0%
Total	154,120	100.0%	898,851	100.0%

Source: Master Builders Australia analysis of ABS Census 2021 TableBuilder

WOMEN AS BUSINESS OWNERS

Women are more likely to be business owners in building and construction than in other industries. Ten per cent of the women in this industry are business owners, compared with eight per cent in all other industries.

Men, however, are still more likely than women to be business owners in building and construction.

Of the men in the industry, 31.1 per cent are business owner/managers in some capacity, compared with 19.8 per cent of women. This equates to 30,896 women and 280,199 men owning businesses in building and construction.

Women are more likely to be contributing family members to a building and construction business than men, although many who help with the family business do not classify themselves as working in the industry.

Female employment type in building and construction versus other industries

	WOMEN IN BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		WOMEN IN OTHER INDUSTRIES (EXCL. BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION)	
Employee	116,129	74%	4,881,697	89%
Owner manager of incorporated enterprise with employees	15,349	10%	130,272	2%
Owner manager of incorporated enterprise without employees	5,146	3%	66,152	1%
Owner manager of incorporated enterprise - employees not stated	88	0%	613	0%
Owner manager of unincorporated enterprise with employees	2,884	2%	52,474	1%
Owner manager of unincorporated enterprise without employees	7,373	5%	265,405	5%
Owner manager of unincorporated enterprise - employees not stated	56	0%	1,202	0%
Contributing family worker	9,167	6%	66,728	1%
Total	156,192	100%	5,464,543	100%

Female and male roles in building and construction businesses

	FEMALE (% OF TOTAL FEMALE)		MALE (% OF TOTAL MALE)		TOTAL
Employee	116,129	74.4%	612,968	67.9%	729,094
Owner manager of incorporated enterprise with employees	15,349	9.8%	85,398	9.5%	100,745
Owner manager of incorporated enterprise without employees	5,146	3.3%	48,397	5.4%	53,547
Owner manager of incorporated enterprise - employees not stated	88	0.1%	441	0.0%	527
Owner manager of unincorporated enterprise with employees	2,884	1.8%	29,341	3.3%	32,217
Owner manager of unincorporated enterprise without employees	7,373	4.7%	115,816	12.8%	123,191
Owner manager of unincorporated enterprise - employees not stated	56	0.0%	806	0.1%	860
Contributing family worker	9,167	5.9%	9,130	1.0%	18,296
Total	156,192	100.0%	902,297	100.0%	1,058,477

Source: Master Builders Australia analysis of ABS Census 2021 TableBuilder



KYMBERLY BOUCHARDT

ELECTRICIAN & WOMEN BUILDING AUSTRALIA INFLUENCER



Kymberly decided early on that she wanted to have a career in the mining or construction industry. After applying for some apprenticeships and traineeships she landed an electrical apprenticeship. She moved sixteen hours from home to a place she had never been before, to chase the aspiration of being a tradesperson. She began her apprenticeship in the rail industry in 2016, and she was placed with other external companies to develop her skills and knowledge in the construction, industrial and domestic areas of electrical.

She believes that the challenges she has faced through her career so far are the typical trials women face (although she hopes that one day in the near future they are not).

“I would be lying if I said that I found my time easy or took every day in my stride however was it worth it? ABSOLUTELY YES. I am very proud, not only of myself but the other women I now work alongside or have met along the way, who are also living their truths and working towards their chosen careers.”

A typical day for Kymberly is not really a thing. Every day is different. She is currently working in the infrastructure department on a mining site, which in a day can have her fault-finding, setting up new installations or doing routine maintenance on anything from fuel farms, lighting plants, crib rooms, office buildings, and water treatment plants. She says her days are exciting and filled with unbelievable learning opportunities, surrounded by fantastic people eager and willing to teach her everything she wishes to know and learn.

Kymberly says you need to be resilient if you want to be successful.

“Find your ‘why’. If you can get up each morning and face whatever the day throws at you by knowing ‘why’ you’re doing what you are, you’ve won half the battle.”

For all the women who are interested in the industry, Kymberly says: “My advice would be fearlessly chase the goals you have for yourself, if you want to start a career in the industry do the research on what you need to succeed in that area, reach out and gain industry advice from people already in those areas, join groups online to surround yourself with like-minded people, look into events held by industry groups such as WBA, NAWIC, SALT, WIMARQ. There are endless resources at your fingertips (thank you internet), mentorship programs, TAFE open days.

**“You are your greatest asset.
Build upon that, invest in yourself-
you are so very worthy of that.”**

IN HER OWN WORDS: THE GOOD PARTS

Despite the difficulties that might arise for women in this industry, many share positive stories and experiences. Participants in the Women Building Australia program say:

"I like that the construction industry is tangible. I like going into the city and saying 'on that 31st floor, I've done an amazing office fit out. And I did this part and this part and this part'. And I think being able to actually show what you do is special. It's not all just Excel spreadsheets."

"There's great satisfaction in building something. And then standing back and going, 'You know, what? I did that or my team did that'."

"I find it is a really rewarding job. You get to see things that you have contributed to come to life. And while that may take a few years, it can be really fun when you walk through the city and go 'I've worked on that building and I've worked on that building'. You get to feel like you're part of the city that you're living in."

"You are helping to make client dreams come true in a sense. Because they've saved up for God knows how long to build this dream house that they've always wanted. And you're helping that become a reality - it's a really good feeling."

"I love that no two days are the same."

"Well, just for me, personally, I just like being outside. More and more of my time, unfortunately is in the office these days. But I think predominantly in the beginning, it was because I'd much prefer to be outside than stuck in an office."

"I love that you go to work every day with people that you genuinely have a great relationship with and being part of a team. I think that makes it really easy for people to come to work, they come to work because they love who they work with, sometimes more than what they actually do every day."

"What I have enjoyed is always learning, there's always something different, it never gets the same. I like challenges and I want to challenge myself, I want to keep learning, I want to keep developing myself."



JESS WILLS

CABINET MAKER & WOMEN BUILDING AUSTRALIA INFLUENCER



Jess Wills did not necessarily choose a career in the construction industry; it chose her.

Carpentry was something that Jess was passionate about, but when she was offered a job in cabinet making, she grabbed the opportunity and has never looked back.

“I’ve definitely had a few people be unsure of me being a girl in the trade and wanting to talk to someone else but it’s mostly been a pretty positive reaction from people.”

“Pushing myself, constantly engaging to learn, asking questions and having a good attitude about things is what helped me become successful. Being positive is the mantra.”

For all the women who are interested in the industry, Jess says:

“It’s probably the best thing you could do, the skills you’ll learn are never ending and you’ll have them with you for life. It will be tough at times but you just have to keep pushing and the reward is worth it at the end of everyday”

IN HER OWN WORDS: CAREER PATHWAYS

Many women in the industry have higher degrees and qualifications. Participants in the Women Building Australia program say:

"I did interior design at TAFE. And then worked in interior design for an architect. They were just a little firm. And they were kind of happy to support me, so I completed an architecture degree. And that was really good, I loved it. I spent a lot of time on-site and doing lots of things that you probably wouldn't have got to do in a big firm. I kind of fell in love a little bit more with being on-site and the more practical building side so I went over to [a building company] and added construction management onto my degree and built retail shopping centres, servos, stuff like that."

"I came back to work after an injury that required surgery. I sat doing data entry all day and ended up with a back injury and I decided that there has to be a better way than this. So I completed a degree in occupational health and safety. I also did a degree in bio-chemistry. When I finished that I ended up working as an industrial chemist where I had to learn how to weld and all that sort of stuff."

The kids were just leaving home so it was pretty easy for me to do another degree. And there was a construction guy in town who needed someone who could interpret some reports. It all went from there really."

"I finished school, and was just part-time, sort of helping out in the office of the family construction company a little bit. And my mum had always said, 'you're good with numbers, you should do accounting.' I didn't know what I wanted to do, and didn't really have much ambition. I enjoyed going out to the worksites, I enjoyed seeing the practicality of it, I love seeing how logical it was, and seeing the tangibility of things coming together. And you talk about something and then you know, you come onto site and see it happening. I've always enjoyed the planning side of things too. So being able to be involved in talking about a project - ordering and shipping it and then months later and seeing it all come together and seeing a project handed over and walking through a completed building and just knowing what went into seeing that come to life - I found so inspiring. So I completed my accounting degree but ended up working full time in the family construction business."

Most women do follow the more traditional pathway from school into tertiary education and then find work in building and construction. Participants in the Women Building Australia program say:

"I had no family history in the construction industry. I did do design and technology at school; our school didn't offer woodwork or any of those sort of more vocational based subjects for year 11, and 12. So design and tech was the closest I could get. I really loved looking at the design process, I really loved looking at the planning of everything. I was good at math, but I hated doing it. And I basically considered doing a tertiary education course in engineering. But I just didn't really want to do the math-heavy based degree where I was going to be studying 24/7. So I ended up completing a Construction Management degree."

BARRIERS STILL EXIST

Even though the building and construction industry is getting better – more diverse and inclusive every day – barriers to female participation still exist. An evaluation by Women Building Australia shows that there is still work to do to achieve equality.

SOCIAL



Friction between childbearing/rearing and career aspirations – pregnancy is difficult in a high risk environment and maternity leave is viewed as a disruption to productivity, rather than a parental necessity

Industry networks for women are still few and far between – many men still engage in the ‘beer and footy’ kind of networking that might isolate their female colleagues

Views that women are not physically strong enough or good enough on the tools

Inappropriate, sexist and gender-driven behaviour continues to exist in the industry to alienate women

EMOTIONAL



Bullying, sexism and hazing continue to exist in the industry

Mental health issues arise when trying to navigate poor workplace culture

Balancing caring roles that traditionally fall to women and job responsibilities can cause significant stress

RATIONAL



The gender pay gap in building and construction remains, and more women are working part-time hours in less senior roles

Government-imposed quotas make women feel uncomfortable and they question if they are only employed because regulation requires it

A lack of flexibility in the workplace means women often have to choose between family and career

IN HER OWN WORDS: THE BAD PARTS

The industry is getting better every day, but there is still a long way to go. Some of the participants in the Women Building Australia program said hurdles remain for women working in building and construction:

“You don’t see a lot of female leaders – how are the younger ones going to believe they can get there?”

“During a scaffolding inspection, a subbie was snickering and calling me ‘dear’ and ‘luv’ when I pointed out defects. When I walked off, he turned around to his mate said, ‘God, I hate that bitch’. And I just yelled out to him ‘I can hear as well’. I went straight to the site manager and said, ‘Get rid of him’. And he was kicked off site, never to return. But you get that kind of behaviour sometimes – particularly from the younger ones surprisingly.”

“It can be a challenge being a woman in a male dominant industry. You do get spoken down to a lot. They think that you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“There is a perception that you’re entering a man’s world. So, no one questions a man in construction. But women in construction seem to need to prove why they’re allowed to be there.”

“You can’t say it’s the older generation who are the worst culprits, because they’re not. Some of them are great, they’re wonderful. It’s some of the younger ones that are shocking.”

“Still to this day, when I’m booking in quotes and taking details, I’ll go ‘great, I’ll see you on site’. Probably about 30 of the time I have people say to me, ‘so who else is coming’? And I say, ‘just me - I do all the quotes and tenders for the company’. They’re like, ‘Oh, okay’. And it’s not just men. It’s men and women equally who say that too.”

“You do have comments like, ‘hey [Jane], can you go in and maybe just unbutton your shirt a little bit?’ They say it that though it’s a joke. But in a sense, I don’t think it should be a joke, you know?”

OVERCOMING BARRIERS: THE MOTHERHOOD BALANCE



**“So, it seems like the choice is:
‘Do I keep my career or do I have a family?’**

(Women Building Australia participant)

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 their colleagues and an unnecessary impact on productivity. This is not unique to the building and construction industry, however it does face some different challenges.

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 leave to care for sick children, or working school hours, is not always able to be facilitated. The lack of female participation in this industry for younger age groups may be a partial 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.

“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.”

(Women Building Australia participant)

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

Some ways to do this include but are not limited to:

- Providing pathways for women in trades to easily transfer to low-risk roles during and immediately after pregnancy.
- Enabling part-time or reduced hours work to facilitate child-caring responsibilities which is currently limited in industry industrial awards and enterprise bargaining agreements.

BAILEE MAJOR

CARPENTER & WOMEN BUILDING AUSTRALIA INFLUENCER



Bailee loves being creative and hands-on, which led her into woodwork. What started out as a hobby quickly turned into passion which inspired her to take the plunge and ditch her mainstream study and career. She turned her love for woodworking into building a career in carpentry. Post her apprenticeship, Bailee wanted to have a crack at running her own carpentry business and that led to the birth of B.Claire Carpentry.

Bailee's first job was straight into an apprenticeship after a trial period with a local carpentry business. They worked on framing, finish carpentry, and doing everything else in between. It proved to be a great start to her career; she had immense learning and got to experience doing many different tasks.

Bailee faced many challenges and she found it hard just being a “beginner” during her apprenticeship.

“Whenever you take on learning something new on you just have try your best and trust you’ll get quicker, better and stronger, it might not happen straight away and honestly you might feel a little useless at times but practice makes perfect, and you’ll get there!”

Bailee found it challenging at times to feel accepted and worthy. She experienced misogyny and the odd sexist comment, but her work ethic was soon realised by others. She was there to work, and was just as good and worthy of respect as anyone else on site, no matter their gender.

Bailee now specialises in finish and second fix carpentry, mainly doing new home internals. However, running her own business solo means she also does all the schedules, phone calls, admin, accounting, planning and shopping on top of that; adds up to a few extra hours of work off the tools over the week!

“There is no recipe to success. You just have to work hard and back yourself. If you have enough passion and persistence to work at it, you WILL get there!

“Any woman who wants to have a go, do it. Doesn’t matter who you are, where you’re from, if you’ve never been on the tools in your life; you just have to have a go! And if you find your niche within the industry don’t be scared to go against the grain or social norm and get into it!”

OVERCOMING BARRIERS: EDUCATION

Careers education remains a vital component for attracting more women to the building and construction industry. 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 relatively straightforward to transfer from one undergraduate degree to another, it is not as simple in vocational education and training.

Recognition of prior learning can be 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.

Young women still report feeling pressured to pursue higher education rather than vocational education and training. Building and construction remains seen as a 'men's industry' and young women do not have clear pathways to the sector.

Women Building Australia participants say:

"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."

Managing expectations, giving early access to trades, helping people understand what it is like to work in building and construction and ensuring access to ready-made mentoring networks is vital to increasing retention. Further insights from Women Building Australia participants tell us:

"I went to a private school, and they were very academic-focused. But I wasn't an academic kid. And they thought it was really important that I got an ATAR in order to represent the school. But the subjects I wanted to do meant I wasn't going to get an ATAR which meant I was going to represent the school badly. So, they were going to kick me out. I wanted to go to TAFE for two subjects. And I wanted to be hands-on. But that wasn't recognised and they made me feel terrible that I was going to ruin their reputation. Being told that you're doing that as a 16-year-old is an awful way to start your career. Just because you're not academic, doesn't mean you're not going to be thriving, many tradies earn more than most people who go to uni."

“I think society treats a trade or a TAFE education as a second-class thing as opposed to going to university. And it was always considered the less successful option. Ironically, now we have tradespeople earning more money than many white-collar jobs.”

Some ways to overcome these barriers include enhancing existing programs that:

- › Provide mentoring, networking and support.
- › Better promote building and construction careers to young women of early high school age.
- › Provide parents with a comprehensive understanding of what a building and construction career might look like for their daughter so they can provide early support.
- › Give access to female mentors for young women considering a career in the industry.
- › Take male counterparts along on the journey to female inclusion.



SUPPORT IS EVERYTHING



Support networks are vital. They prevent isolation, they empower, they foster communication and they give women strength in knowing they are not alone. Women Building Australia's mentoring program provides this support. Women Building Australia Mentees say:

"I decided I needed a mentor because I just needed someone on my side to tell me that I was on the right track. A lot of it just came down to confidence. For example, my mentor has been in commercial and residential construction for over 20 years. It can be as simple as some guy in the office asked me to do his binding. I'm not administrator, my time is just as important as anyone else's. I told him no. Was that okay? And it's as simple as, 'yes, you have your job role, your job role is not to support him. You did the right thing'. But you come across some very old school characters. And they can very easily try to influence you into being more of just this junior office admin person, where I know my role is way more than that."

"I remember doubting myself when I first started - striving so hard to make sure I wasn't saying something dumb and not looking dumb or pretending you know something you don't. And now you can enjoy that. Because you're not spending 80% of your energy just striving so hard to learn. You're actually just in it and you can you know, who's who and you know, where you sit. And when you don't know, you're not afraid to say you don't know. Whereas I remember when I first started to be trying so hard to just have an answer for everything, whereas now having the confidence in myself and what's okay to know or not know, being able to say, 'I don't know, I'll get back to you on that'..."

WOMEN BUILDING AUSTRALIA

In 2020, Master Builders, with the support of the Federal Office for Women, 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.

The program has delivered more than 300 mentor/mentee pairs that have supported women to progress their careers.

Women Building Australia has been incredibly successful in supporting early- and mid-career women in the building and construction industry. The program has five parts:

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.

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.

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.

HARASSMENT AND DISCRIMINATION SUPPORT LINE

Women Building Australia provides a dedicated harassment and discrimination support line for women in the building and construction industry.

KIRSTY REAKS

PROJECT MANAGER, DOWNER & WOMEN BUILDING AUSTRALIA MENTOR



Kirsty was completing her nursing degree and she needed a job that would allow her to work around her placements. She was drawn to the flexibility that working casually for traffic control gave her. This was the starting point. Kirsty received exposure to different elements of the construction industry and discovered that she wanted to pursue a career here. Kirsty worked as traffic controller before Downer offered her a position as junior site administration clerk.

“I think for a long time it was fear of not being good enough – not knowing much about the industry I was very inquisitive about what the roads surfacing business was because I felt like I didn’t know everything. Seven years later I still don’t know everything, but that fear is long gone and been replaced by confidence in my skills and ability and knowledge to source information when I require it.”

Kirsty’s current role is all about the road surfacing business. She primarily deals with local and state governments working with them to deliver road maintenance projects that meet the expectations of the public. Having a good attitude and being adaptable were aspects that have been instrumental in Kirsty’s success.

“There is always change and 2020 showed us all how dramatic the change can be and while I might not always be comfortable with that, the ability to bounce back and simply bring a positive constructive attitude has led me to hit my stride in times of change.”

For all the women who are interested in the industry, Kirsty says:

“Give it a crack, there are so many different aspects to the construction industry there will be something that suits you. I never would have thought I would be interested and passionate in roads sector, but then there are other aspects in construction I doubt will entertain me - but that’s ok. I am sure there are people who will never be interested in a road but they will find passion in those other areas of construction.”

BRINGING MEN ALONG THE JOURNEY TO EQUALITY

The success of any attempt to bring about change and work towards gender equality is contingent on ensuring the issue does not become simply 'women's business'. Gender equality in the workplace is everyone's business and there are a huge number of men in this industry who are champions of change.

"I think it's great that it's actually happening. It's long overdue, I think it addresses a lot of those old traditions and very discriminatory viewpoints. So that's a really positive thing"
(Women Building Australia male mentor)

Men in this industry appreciate being part of the change process, rather than having it thrust upon them. For example, both men and women find that gender quotas have a negative impact on their quest for equality. Many people think that being contractually obliged to hire one sex over the other means they are not able to recruit based on skill.

A male participant in Women Building Australia said:

"I think we all need to be conscious, as we push hard to get more women into construction, that we don't push too hard. Because sometimes, if you just look at pure numbers, you will do yourself a disservice. Because you'll get the wrong people in the industry, and they will probably have a bad experience. And that will spread faster than any positive campaigns we do. I think that we are starting to get a bit political looking for those big numbers, that it should be 50/50 men and women. Because I don't think that's going to work."

A female participant in Women Building Australia said:

"You do ask yourself; 'is a woman being employed now because they want to have female figurehead or because she was actually the best person for the job?' It's a catch 22."

There is still a prevailing concern about what equality actually means for the industry.

One male participant in Women Building Australia said:

"We need to be careful. Because, one minute, we're saying equality. And the next minute, we're saying they've got needs that men don't have - well you can't have it both ways."

KARLY GAFFY

PAINTER & WOMEN BUILDING AUSTRALIA INFLUENCER



Karly's first job at Bunnings exposed her to so many trades and a few female tradies as well. When she finished year 11, she realised she did not want to do year 12 and wanted to start her trade. Her first job in the industry was painting and decorating and she is still painting today.

Karly believes no matter what you do, it is not always going to be easy but that does not mean it will not be worth the hard work. Karly's biggest challenge was thinking she was not good enough and second guessing herself. Falling in love with painting and the enthusiasm she had when she first started kept her going.

"You'll always face challenges, it's how you react to it and go about it instead of dwelling in it."

A typical day for Karly starts at 7:30 and finishes around 4:00. Preparation is key. Most often, she and her team prepare their site first which includes taping and plastic sheeting to protect the area. They fill, gap and sand. After the preparation is done, they start to paint. They do spray work, roller work and brush work.

"Doing my apprenticeship was the best decision I ever made. It's never going to be easy but I assure you that it will all be worth it, the good and the bad."

To a woman considering a career in trades, Karly says:

"It can be scary at times but don't be scared to give it a go, it may be nerve wracking at first and at times you may feel overwhelmed but coming from someone who is fully qualified, doing my apprenticeship was the best decision I ever made. It's never going to be easy but I assure you that it will all be worth it, the good and the bad."

"Something my father has always told me and it has stuck with me is that "you will get out of something, what you put into it" and honestly it really is true. My whole apprenticeship and even now as a qualified painter, I do believe it has made me a stronger, more independent person and has taught me that gender has no bearing on my ability to do my trade."

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN NEXT FOR WOMEN IN BUILDING AND CONSTRUCTION?

- › To bring more women into building and construction, change must continue. The industry is on the right track but there is more to do.
- › Enhancing existing programs to provide networking and mentoring opportunities for young women is a must.
- › Industry leaders should continue to promote good culture and safety practices – there is no room in the building and construction industry for bullying, harassment, assault, suicide, misogyny, racism, discrimination and gender-based violence.
- › Young women must be given access to unbiased careers education and information, including the opportunity to try different trades and get time on the tools.
- › The bias towards higher education must stop, and young women must be given the same opportunities as their male counterparts to pursue trade apprenticeships if they choose to do so.
- › Industry must make the balance between motherhood and a trade career easier to strike.
- › More funding must be directed towards programs, education, facilities, information, and forums that promote building and construction careers to women, support them on the journey, and strive for equality.
- › Parents need access to information so they can effectively guide their and feel comfortable throughout the process.
- › Women Building Australia has already made significant progress in some of these areas and is a beacon for further positive change.



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