

Gender on the Tender: Shifting Gender Equality in the Australian Construction Sector

Key points

- The number of women working in construction has dropped from a minority of 17% in 2006 to and even lower 12% in 2016
- In 2018, UNSW released a comprehensive research report on women's recruitment, retention and progression in the construction sector, detailing current issues and recommended actions
- Recommendations include actions for government on procurement policies and gender targets

Background

The construction industry is the most male-dominated sector in Australia: data from the most recent Census in 2016 shows that women represented only 12% of the workforce, a decrease from 17% in 2006¹. Men represent 99% of construction tradespeople. Among professional and managerial roles, women represent 14% of staff² and 97% of construction leaders. Men dominate senior 'technical' operational careers, while women congregate in junior and support roles such as administration, human resources, legal and marketing. Early enthusiasm by women about construction professions and their future careers in the sector decreases with increased exposure to the workplace with women leaving the construction profession 39% faster than their male colleagues³.

In 2018, UNSW released a [comprehensive research report](#) focused on gender equality in the Australian construction sector. The research conducted with industry partners and supported by the Australian Research Council investigated why existing formal policies and strategies to attract, retain and support the progression of women professionals in large construction companies have failed to achieve gender equity and diversity.

The research found that formal gender equality policies do not go far enough. A tolerance of sexism, poor parental leave practices, for women and men, and informal recruitment and promotion practices, act to undermine and in some cases replace gender equity initiatives in construction companies leaving women's recruitment, retention and progression disadvantaged. It found that tight programs and slim profit margins drive workplace behaviour and perpetuate gendered norms and practices including presenteeism, long work hours, and resistance to part-time and shared roles. These existing work practices were found to have detrimental effects on women's and men's health and wellbeing, undermining retention of skilled talent. Clients, as well as the construction companies, play a critical role in shifting behaviours in construction, according to the research.

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The research observed that companies were implementing a range of gender equality initiatives and strategies most of which were focused on women yet overlooked how existing work practices in construction influence women's participation. Additionally, companies were found to be setting gender targets on women's recruitment

¹ ABS, Labour Force, Australia, Detailed, Quarterly, May 2016, cat. no. 6291.0.55.003. Vol. 2016. 2016, Canberra, Australia: Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS); ABS, Census of Population and Housing, cat. no. 2068.0. Vol. 2013. 2006, Canberra, Australia: Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS).

² ABS, Labour Force Australia, cat. no. 6202.0. 2012, Canberra, Australia: Australian Government Publishing Services (AGPS).

³ Professionals Australia, Women in the Professions Survey Report 2007. 2007, The Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists & Managers: Melbourne, Australia. p. 1-8.

and participation, but targets and other initiatives were routinely not enforced, nor underpinned by an implementation strategy. Additionally, a varied degree of understanding and ownership by senior construction leaders and construction contract constraints were found to undermine gender equality initiatives.

One recommendation is that government procurement processes value and enforce gender equality and employee wellbeing in their assessment of construction tenders and project delivery.

Recommendations

- Government should broaden the social procurement requirements for construction contracts to include gender equality and employee wellbeing initiatives for women and for men.
- Reward contractors who provide for a range of measurable and diverse initiatives and strategies beyond targets on female participation. These should include but are not limited to: a percentage of construction roles that are part-time, shared and flexible, equal parental leave for women and men, fatigue monitoring, five-day work week, sponsorship programs for women and project leaders, implementation of technology to reduce presenteeism, inclusion of aggressive targets and strategies to achieve targets on women across the construction lifecycle, and so on.
- To encourage innovative responses, government should request and reward innovative thinking in the area of gender equality and employee initiatives. Innovation should be encouraged within the contract sum and as a costed add on.
- Government should stipulate non-negotiable gender targets on all parts of the tender and delivery process, i.e., men must only account for 60% of company representatives at the contractor's tender presentation. An 'if not, why not' response should be requested of contractors who do not meet this requirement.
- The performance of these measures should be assessed beyond the tender period at project reviews and at the completion of the project.
- All contractors must meet a minimum standard for construction projects. This includes: safe and secure toilets and showers for women on site, a suitable breast feeding room and zero tolerance of sexism such as removing sexist graffiti within two days.
- All contractors must adhere to the WGEA Act.

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