

18 December 2023



Natalie James
Secretary
Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

Via: wiv@dewr.gov.au

Dear Ms James,

RE: SUPPORTING WOMEN TO ACHIEVE VET-BASED CAREERS CONSULTATION

On behalf of the Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) I thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the consultation on supporting women to achieve VET-based careers.

VTHC was founded in 1856 and is the peak body for unions in Victoria. VTHC represents over 41 unions and more than 500,000 workers in the state. These workers are members of unions that reach into every industry across Victoria. Unions are committed to ensuring that our vocational education and training (VET), and apprenticeship system is accessible and inclusive. Apprenticeships and VET must be a viable avenue for all workers to have to a long-term career in the trades.

This response to the consultation paper considers all ten questions. To address the issue of gendered segregation in the workforce in male dominated trades, reforms to the VET system should prioritise real, measurable actions related to:

- i. Attracting women workers into trades and VET-based work,
- ii. Retaining women VET-based workers by ensuring workplaces and work is safe, and
- iii. Evaluating programs to ensure women's participation in VET-based work actually increases.

Workers should not have their career choices defined by their gender. Yet pervasive gender norms continue to influence women workers both in the choice they make about their careers and the treatment they are subjected to at work.

VTHC applauds the work currently being undertaken to address these issues and to improve gender equality in trades. VTHC's response to the discussion paper draws on our work including the Women Onsite Project; a pilot project focussed on increasing women's participation in trades such as manufacturing and clean energy, by providing practical and real support to women workers and apprentices. This includes a partnership with the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and Holmesglen TAFE to roll out a pre-apprenticeship program specifically to supporting women in their electrical pre-apprenticeship. This project had a 94% success rate, and it is understood this is approximately double the statewide average for women pre-apprenticeships. The program won the industry collaboration award at the 2023 Victorian Training Awards, and recently won the Federal training award for 2023, celebrating the holistic approach to supporting apprentices from engagement to placement.

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VTHC is also guided by its work on the Victorian Government's Equal Workplaces Advisory Council, the Victorian Building Equality Committee, and the Building Industry Consultative Council (BICC), all of which contributed to the Victorian Government's Building Equality Policy (BEP). The BEP has introduced targets for labour hours in Victoria for women workers in trade covered labour, non-trade construction Award labour and management/supervisory and specialist staff. Work on the BEP has demonstrated that genuine, early consultation and collaboration is extremely important to the success of improving women's participation in male dominated trades.

1. Making VET-based careers attractive to women workers

Traditional notions of apprenticeships, from which modern-day trades have developed, are based on the out-dated model of a young man living at home. As a result, low apprentice wages, and inflexible working arrangements persist making it difficult for women workers to actively participate in VET.

For example, junior Award-based electrical apprentices who have not completed Year 12 are paid just \$11.46 per hour. An equivalent adult apprentice is paid \$18.44 per hour,¹ or \$36,437 per year. The average participant of the Women Onsite Project is a 28-year-old woman, looking to change career. With median weekly rents across Melbourne being \$515 per week² - 73% of an adult electrical apprentice's weekly wage - apprentice wages are unliveable for women looking to change careers. Additionally, working women are more likely to take on the share of caring responsibilities,³ which impacts their ability to progress or change careers. A further 58% of working women said that their caring responsibilities have stopped them from applying for a promotion or changing jobs,⁴ and 19% have left a job because it was too difficult to balance caring responsibilities and work.

VTHC recommends that the Federal Government abolish apprentice wages in their current form and immediately increase apprentice wages to a living wage. It is recognised that fully qualified trades people are paid a higher wage in recognition of their skills. Therefore, VTHC's recommendation that apprentices wages be lifted does not mean that apprentices should be paid equivalent wages to fully-qualified trades people, but that apprentice wages must be able to meet basic living expenses during their training.

Recommendation 1: Abolish current apprentice wages and increase apprentice wages to a living wage.

The Women Onsite Project has found that there are other financial barriers to women switching careers, but most predominantly are financial barriers. The cost of tools are on average between \$1,200 - \$1,500. For working women on apprentice wages, it is not possible to outlay this cost. Women Onsite provides assistance to its participants in accessing tools which makes a real impact.

¹ Clause 16.4, *Electrical, Electronic and Communications Contracting Award 2020*, accessed: https://library.fairwork.gov.au/award/?krn=ma000025#_Toc141281716

² <https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/publications/rental-report>

³ <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/national-strategy-achieve-gender-equality-discussion-paper/current-state/burden-care>

⁴ <https://workplaceinsight.net/caring-responsibilities-disproportionately-impact-womens-lives-and-careers/>

Recommendation 2: Provide tools or grants for tools to women entering traditionally male dominated trades.

Attitudes surrounding women's work and the type of work women should be undertaking continues to be a barrier for women entering VET-based occupations. Women still only make up 22% of jobs in the mining industry, 26% of jobs in the construction industry, and 26% of jobs in the electricity, gas, water and waste services industry.⁵ This is a persistent and difficult problem to overcome.

VTHC's participation in the Victorian Building Equality Committee led to the creation of real, scalable targets for women in the construction industry that were monitored and evaluated in real time by both unions and employers. These targets covered trades labour and started small at 7%, building up quickly over time. VTHC has contributed to the concurrent Australian Skills Guarantee draft procurement guidelines consultation. Getting women into male dominated trades via government procurement would begin to address some of the persistent attitudes around the nature of women's work.

Recommendation 3: Introduce specific, scalable targets for trades-based women in traditionally male dominated trades that are monitored and evaluated with the input of unions in real-time.

VTHC through Women Onsite undertakes a series of Try a Trade Days, which allow women interested in taking up a trade to learn some basic skills in those trades, and implements a promotion and communication strategy to normalise women in male dominated trades.

Women Onsite have found that these specific and practical demonstrations of women working in traditionally male dominated trades have helped their participants see themselves in those jobs, and as a result is rolling them out across Victoria alongside industry sessions.

Recommendation 4: Expand the Try A Trade days model across the country.

2. Ensuring workplaces are safe for VET-based working women

Efforts to attract women into apprenticeships and traineeships are hampered when the culture that they meet in the workplace is at best alienating and at worst sexually predatory and damaging. This represents a loss of potential, skills and opportunities for both workers and employers.

Over 60% of working women have experienced gendered violence at work, with 19% stating that an 'unsafe work environment' was the reason they left a job.⁶ Victorian unions applaud the work being done to address gendered violence at work, including gendered violence being treated as an occupational health and safety issue. However, more must be done to ensure women in VET-based work and traditionally male dominated industries are safe at work.

⁵ https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/WGEA_Gender_Equality_Scorecard_2022-23_0.pdf

⁶ Stop Gendered Violence at Work: Women's Rights at Work Report, Victorian Trades Hall Council (2016)

Addressing sexual harassment requires dismantling the systems of work and culture that enable it. It is important to interrogate how we do work, who does what work and who has power and control over decision-making in the workplace. It is simply not enough to have a policy about sexual harassment or gendered violence in the workplace, or procedures about how to respond to instances of sexual harassment. Employers must take proactive, consistent and preventative measures to stamp out gendered violence and ensure women are safe at work.

A consistent understanding of gendered violence and sexual harassment across our occupational health and safety system is crucial to ensuring effective prevention. All those who play a role in the VET system – be they employers, VET trainers and teachers, and apprentices/trainees should have an equal understanding of the risks and impacts of gendered violence in the workplace.

It is crucial that VET teachers undertake training to enable them to appropriately address sexual harassment in classrooms, so that workers of all genders undertaking VET-based training understand it is unacceptable in the workplace.

Recommendation 5: Require all VET teachers to undertake Safe Respectful Workplaces training that address gendered violence.

Recommendation 6: Make gendered violence training a mandatory subject in all VET based training courses.

3. VET-based working women need conditions that make work viable

The limited availability of flexible working arrangements and quality affordable childcare presents a barrier to women's participation in VET-based work.⁷ Apprenticeships and traineeships are only offered full or part-time, and almost all VET-based training is undertaken during the day. Women spend on average 9 hours more per week than men on unpaid work and care.⁸ Until such time as when men and women share greater equality of caring and household responsibilities, a lack of flexible work continues to be a barrier to women participating in rigid 9-5 work hours, and a barrier from them entering trade-based work.

It is vital that flexible working arrangements enable working women to participate in VET-based careers. Currently, employers over-rely on insecure and casual work to diminish hard-fought entitlements that should be available to all workers, such as annual leave and personal (sick) leave.

Quality flexible working arrangements, such as part-time work or flexible working hours need to become normalised in VET-based careers.

Historically male dominated industries have in some cases, in collaboration with the union, to introduce flexible work to allow for workers to gradually transition to retirement. This has taken the form of job-share arrangements, whereby a worker is onsite for approximately four hours, and another worker takes over for the

⁷ Australian Human Rights Commission, "Supporting Working Parents: Pregnancy and Return to Work National Review – Report" (2014)

⁸ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/how-australians-use-their-time/2020-21>

remaining four hours. This demonstrates that there is capacity to provide for more flexibility in key industries. These policies should be formally adopted to provide the working conditions necessary to allow women to enter the industry.

Recommendation 6: Use government levers including procurement policies to encourage quality flexible working arrangements for women in VET-based work.

The Australian economy has several challenges on the horizon that require the input and coordination of government, including the threat of automation and the need to transition to clean energy. VTHC urges the government to direct procurement policies that invest in projects to employ women and that target these industries in the regions.

4. Reforms should be measured by how many women take up VET-based work

VTHC has found it challenging to access timely and accurate data about women undertaking VET. Evaluation should be more detailed and shared with unions so that any issues for women undertaking VET can be addressed quickly, and enable them to successfully complete their training.

Key considerations for evaluation must include:

1. The number of women commencing training,
2. The corresponding number of women completing training, with a focus on apprenticeships,
3. The number of women workers who remain employed after employer subsidies end for women apprentices,
4. The number of employers undertaking Safe Respectful Workplace training, and
5. The number of complaints brought forward in target industries.

Recommendation 7: collaborate with unions and monitor in real-time the success of programs to increase women's participation in male dominated industries.

Victorian unions know that there are a range of systemic barriers to employing women apprentices, including stubbornly persistent gender perceptions regarding women entering traditionally male dominated trades. Unions are committed to overcoming these persistent issues.

Government must work with unions, who have deep expertise in supporting workers throughout their training and into their trades. In the process of establishing Women Onsite, VTHC, as a peak body, has partnered with TAFEs, unions, industry groups and employers to roll-out the program. The Victorian experience has shown that when there is a genuine sense of collaboration between unions and employers and a commitment to increasing women's participation in traditionally male dominated trades, the root causes of issues can be worked through early.

5. VTHC's recommendations

Recommendation 1: Abolish current apprentice wages and increase apprentice wages to a living wage.

Recommendation 2: Provide tools or grants for tools to women entering traditionally male dominated trades.

Recommendation 3: Introduce specific, scalable targets for trades-based women in traditionally male dominated trades that are monitored and evaluated with the input of unions in real-time.

Recommendation 4: Expand the Try A Trade days model across the country

Recommendation 5: Require all VET teachers to undertake Safe Respectful Workplaces training that address gendered violence.

Recommendation 6: Make gendered violence training a mandatory subject in all VET based training courses.

Recommendation 7: collaborate with unions and monitor in real-time the success of programs to increase women's participation in male dominated industries.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission into this important review. Should you have any further questions, please don't hesitate to contact Tiarne Crowther, VTHC Special Advisor on tcrowther@vthc.org.au.

Regards,



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VTHC Assistant Secretary
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