

Career Pathways for Women and Girls: Emergent and Non-traditional Occupations and Industries (Viable Work)

Policy Action for Improved Viable Employment for Women

Rationale

That, in C21st Australia, there is still the need for concern about the status of women and so the need to advocate for access to training for and employment in emergent and non traditional occupations and industries for women highlights both deeply ingrained cultural attitudes about what is appropriate work for women and for men, and by default their place in society; along with enduring outmoded work practices and workplace cultures and gendered pay inequities. However, it also points to policy failures that must be addressed, not only to benefit the economic and social well being of women and their families and communities, but also Australia's national economic well being. This is especially significant, given recognised contemporary and future skills shortages in male dominated industries and occupations, as it is to ensure that emergent industries do not perpetuate the gender bias that exists in Australia's labour force.

The following provide evidence of the needs in the area of investigation for this project:

The Australian Government recognises that skills shortages in the engineering profession are of serious concern, holding back investment and productivity growth. While these issues are most apparent in the resources sector, they also impact upon the effectiveness of other sectors such as manufacturing, construction and civil engineering as well. PM Julia Gillard (Foreword)¹

There is widespread understanding that Australian industry faces an engineering skills shortage. Professional engineers, engineering technologists and technicians have been in short supply in construction, road, rail, power generation, local Government and other industries over a period of several decades. This is a fact recognised by Government reviews, industry surveys and engineers themselves.

This skills shortage is a significant problem for business, the economy and the community, with millions of dollars of cost-overruns and opportunity loss as a result. ...

This is an issue of supply. There is an identified supply mismatch between the number and specialisations of engineering graduates produced by Australian universities and the VET sector, and the identified needs of industry and the community. ... Universities and the VET sector are simply not producing enough graduates, leading to increasing reliance on internationally sourced skilled labour in a competitive global labour market.²

¹ Gillard, Julia, 2010, Foreword by Prime Minister Julia Gillard' in Pearce A; Flavell K; Dao-Cheng, N. 2010. *Scoping Our Future Addressing Australia's Engineering Skills Shortage* Australian National Engineering Taskforce (ATEN) October 2010 <http://www.anet.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Scoping-our-futureWEB.pdf> Accessed 28th June 2011

² Ibid p 5

Although higher education enrolments in other male dominated professions such as law and medicine have improved significantly over the last three decades from very low bases to 50 – 60%, engineering enrolments over the same period have only increased to approximately 15%, with even lower participation rates for construction management.³ Similar gendered enrolment trends are replicated in 'blue collar' trades areas and apprenticeship enrolment in VET. In these areas in both institutions, 'gender ... remains the "elephant in the ...classroom"'⁴, the associated industries and their workplaces. In previous research undertaken by WAVE in Transport and Construction Industries, women participants asserted that they 'must be recognised as economy builders'⁵. The research also confirmed that:

Transport & Logistics and Construction industries are ... experiencing long term skills shortages. In particular, the growth areas of road transport and trade based construction, are experiencing nationwide shortages. Promotion of these ever changing industries to women and young people is highly recommended. Working conditions including pay, hours, safety, training, career opportunities and work/life balance, must continue to improve and be promoted if women are to enter these industries with confidence. The specific requirements of women who may be interested in entering these industries should be sought so that employers, industry bodies, and Government can begin to tailor and encourage recruitment and promotion packages for women in a more efficient and effective manner. VET must also be tailored to meet industry requirements so that employee eagerness for training is supported by employers, and must promote the involvement, retention and employment success of women students⁶.

National policies that focus on equity, and specifically acknowledge the complexity and challenges associated with gender and intersectionality have been neglected (and in many cases disbanded) over the last decade and a half, with much gender equity expertise and practices being lost. There has been no national policy framework for women and girls in education since 1996, and the recently expired national policy in VET⁷ was never implemented. As well as advocating for the establishment of policy frameworks and national strategic plans for women and girls (acknowledging the diversity than is encapsulated in the word 'women') that in turn inform state/territory policies and resourcing decisions in VET⁸, WAVE continues to raise questions about equity and equity policy practices. The current approach in Australia is located under the 'social inclusion' umbrella⁹, which does not implement gender analyses, nor include gender as a factor of multiple disadvantage¹⁰. Rather, the framework takes a gender-neutral stance.

³ 'Tackling gender issues will increase the talent pool'. In Focus. *Professional Educator*. Vol 10, Issue 4, June 2011 pp 4-5

⁴ Ibid p5; Mills, J. June 2011 *Addressing gender equity issues in engineering*.

<http://www.altc.edu.au/June2011-addressing-gender-equity-engineering>. Accessed 26th June 2011

⁵ Turner Zeller K, October 2009, *Women on track: Addressing Skills Shortages in Transport and Construction Industries*. OfW/WLDP Project WAVE http://www.wave.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=87:women-on-track-addressing-skills-shortages-in-transport-and-construction-industries&catid=46:projects&Itemid=59

⁶ Turner Zeller K, 2009, *Women on track: Addressing Skills Shortages in Transport and Construction Industries*. Paper delivered at AVETRA 2009 National Conference. <http://www.avetra.org.au/papers-2009/papers/62.00.pdf>

⁷ Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), 2004 *Women: Shaping our future*. Brisbane, ANTA

⁸ e.g. eS4W/WAVE 2007, *Towards a sustainable economic future. Women & Vocational Education & Training*; eS4W/WAVE, 2010, *Women & Vocational Education & Training: Strategies for gender inclusive VET reform. A policy background paper*. <http://www.security4women.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Women-and-VET-Strat.pdf>

⁹ See: <http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au/Pages/default.aspx>

¹⁰ <http://www.socialinclusion.gov.au/FAQs/Pages/WhatDoWeMeanBy.aspx>

According to Reid, there is no 'articulated government view about the meaning of equity', and this is compounded by the manner in which 'the dominant discourse about education is based on a simplification of complex issues, that public policy debate in Australia is 'generally being dumbed down. ¹¹ As Reid acknowledges, 'addressing equity in education is difficult and complex work'; it is a 'marathon rather than a sprint'. He states that equity requires policy processes that are:

- Based on a clear and articulated concept of equity.
- Thorough and systematic and recognise the complexities involved in achieving better educational outcomes for 'equity groups'.
- Founded on research and inquiry, and an appreciation of the different contexts in which educational practice operates.
- Trialled and evaluated before being spread widely.
- Wary about reinforcing the very inequities that they are designed to address.¹²

We contend that any articulated concept of equity must be gender inclusive, in line with international agreements and national legislation. There is a plethora of research relating to the need for gender inclusive policy in VET, including many extensive consultation projects, best practice examples that acknowledge the diversity of women; policy strategies and initiatives that have been trialled and evaluated. What is lacking is the political-cultural will to update, legislate, resource and implement. In the past Australia has enjoyed a proud international reputation as a leader in gender related policy. We argue that, given the urgency of skills shortages in the industries and occupations that are the focus of this project; the seemingly intractable gender disparity in education and especially VET enrolments in study pathways, and the low numbers of women employed in the industries, gender inclusive policy action is needed now as a matter of urgency.

This position is further reinforced by the focus of the UN's CSW 55 2011- *Access & participation of women and girls in education, training and science and technology, including for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work*, the Agreed Outcomes of which Australia is a signatory¹³. The Agreed Outcomes Statement sets out a clear rationale, and set of actions under five categories: -

- Strengthening national legislation, policies and programmes.
- Expanding access and participation to education (and training).
- Strengthening gender-sensitive quality education and training, including in the field of science and technology.
- Supporting the transition from education to full employment and decent work.
- Increasing retention and progression of women in science and technology employment.

This document, including the focus on science and technology that is foundational to and underpins knowledge and skills in the 'non traditional' and emergent industries and occupations that are the focus in this Project, provides further compelling impetus and obligation for action in gender sensitive policy especially for VET in Australia.

¹¹ Reid, A, 2011, 'What sort of equity?' in *Professional Educator*. Vol 10, Issue 4, June 2011 p3, 4.

¹² Ibid, p 4.

¹³ Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) 55 Agreed Conclusions 14 March 2011:
<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/agreedconclusions.html>

Along with national policy action, for improved sustainable and viable employment for Australian women and girls, and as a Project outcome, we require:

- the promotion and provision of gender sensitive career counselling, to result in broader subject selection (including science and technology) by women and by girls in schools to counteract the perpetuation of segmented fields of work and study;
- a reinstatement and re-commitment to the value of pre-vocational programs for women returning to work after raising children, caring or moving from income support;
- a shift in workplace culture in male dominated industries to work practices and processes based on EEO and work/family principles - women-friendly environments, to attract and retain a critical mass of women, including their promotion to occupations at all levels;
- promotion of industry and employment based work experience and work shadowing programs, and training programs for women and girls to address skills shortages and offer opportunities in emergent industries and occupations and viable career pathways to full employment and decent work;
- recognition that increased qualifications for women do not necessarily result in improved employment outcomes and that structural reforms are needed.

We call on Industry to ensure that:

- Industry Skills Councils act as facilitators in addressing the gender imbalance of these industries, and recognise women as a part of the skills shortage solution in both the construction and transport industries providing focus, coherence, independence, extensive networks and real industry leadership;
- strategies be implemented to address working conditions including pay equity, flexibility of hours and job sharing, provision for child care, safety, mentoring, and work/life balance in line with current best practice, including gender auditing of workplace practices;
- industry-based women's organisations be identified as sources of numerous good practice initiatives and expertise which can be invaluable guides;
- industry best practice initiatives in marketing promote the benefits that the employment of women will have in meeting demand and link this promotion to training pathways to women and girls;
- in-work and work experience mentoring programs be expanded, and include women in industry mentoring women in training and entry level positions.

In relation to Career Counselling, to promote pathways into a broader range of careers through career advice, we require that:

- whilst the VET system responds primarily to the training needs of industry and employers, it must also consider the needs of women and girls undertaking or attempting to undertake training, including improvements in quality, to participation outcomes and flexibility in delivery means;

- career planning information provided at all education levels be actively informed by labour market analysis and trends within a framework that recognises gendered workplace implications, and women’s continuing poorer labour market outcomes, to improve women’s long-term economic well-being;
- industry best practice initiatives promote pathways through marketing and employment strategies to target girls in schools through career advisors networks and direct marketing campaigns, through to promoting career progression in employment for women within attainable and open recruitment based on the Equal Employment Opportunity principles.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Economic Security4Women and WAVE call on the Australian Government to:

- implement as a matter of urgency Agreed Conclusions from CSW55, viz: Access and Participation of women and girls in education, training and science and technology, including for the promotion of women’s equal; access to full employment and decent work¹⁴;
- make women’s learning needs central to all VET strategies and policies, including the forthcoming National Equity Blueprint. This requires an explicit recognition of women *per se*, to adequately redress issues of intersectionality (indigenous women, women with disabilities, CALD women, low SES women, rural women and so on);
- implement strategies for VET based on gender analyses to inform a training framework able to provide opportunities for women at different stages of their life cycle and appropriate to their needs and circumstances. Again, such analyses must include attention to issues of intersectional issues and related disadvantage;
- ensure gender expertise on all national VET equity advisory committees & VET working groups;
- ensure gender analysis and provision for implications of such analyses informs all COAG consultations especially those relating to VET reform¹⁵;
- implement a VET strategic framework for women with clear priorities & accountability mechanisms, including linking VET funding arrangements to key performance indicators for women, especially those most disadvantaged (indigenous and disabled women and girls);
- collect, analyse and publish performance and outcome data that include trends over time and are disaggregated by gender and demographic characteristics. Such data will assist in the identification of trends and issues, development of strategies to address these, and ongoing monitoring;
- provide accessible gender sensitive career counseling (including VET in schools) to broaden subject and course selection by girls and women in schools and VET, to enhance career pathways and meaningful employment outcomes for women and girls as well as addressing Australia’s gender segmented labour force;
- reinstate and recommit to the value of pre-vocational or ‘stepping stone’ programs for women returning to work after raising children, caring or from income support;
- develop, implement and monitor programs that promote women into non-traditional trades and professions, with particular attention to addressing preconceived ideas about the capabilities and attributes of women and the workplace cultures and requirements of such trades and professions;

¹⁴ Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) 55 Agreed Conclusions 14 March 2011: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/agreedconclusions.html>

¹⁵ Of high significance at the moment are COAG initiated inquiries relating to VET system reform including: Foundation Skills; Apprenticeships and Traineeships; Assessment in VET; Teaching in VET.

- design and implement a national program in partnership with strategic corporate and industry partners to redress entrenched cultures in masculinised industries and occupations to increase enrolments in VET and higher education and so critical mass of women in such industries and occupations;
- ensure that employment creation programs and employer based incentives designed in response to skilling Australians for future employment opportunities, for skill shortages, emergent industries and occupations include initiatives that benefit women and girls, and include quotas &/or targets where necessary to address Australia's gender segmented labour force¹⁶;
- ensure that the Australian Apprenticeship Program and the Australian Apprenticeship Access Program be vehicles to promote pre-vocational and vocational trades to women and girls to enter male dominated industries.
- ensure that the Productivity Places Programs identify women and girls as part of the skills shortage solution both in relation to retraining of existing workers into pathways into emergent and non-traditional fields, and for new job seekers via the Job Services Australia to progress into pathways into these industries
- ensure provision of local, accessible, flexible and culturally sensitive training, at low or no cost, so that training-related initiatives and policies benefit all who are currently outside the workforce or seeking to improve their existing employment status and security;
- promote industry and employment based training programs aimed at recruiting women into industries that value flexible work practices for men and women to enable caring responsibilities to be met.

¹⁶ Of significance here for example is the recent announcement of \$200 million Critical Skills Investment Fund to improve skills in the resources sector – a heavily masculinised sector