

Economic wellbeing: Career pathways for women and girls in emergent 'green' industries and non-traditional occupations

Recent research completed by economic Security4Women (eS4W) demonstrates that there is inadequate attention being paid to supporting women into science, technology, engineering and mathematics-based careers. This knowledge and skill base is foundational to and underpins both the growing, emergent industries of the 'green economy' and non-traditional occupations and industries across Australia.

The largest employment increases in the five years to 2015/16 are projected to occur in Mining, Health Care and Social Assistance, Construction and Professional, Scientific and Technical Services.

Women are not enjoying strong jobs growth in the Mining industry (making just 13.2 per cent of employees), the second lowest industry employer of women.

Nor are they well represented in the Construction industry; the third largest employing industry in Australia and the most gender segregated with the lowest female employment rate of all industries at 11.4 per cent.

The smallest employing industry in Australia, the Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services Industry is now expected to grow at 3.9 per cent per annum totalling 32,400 new jobs given the increasing focus on green energy and improved recycling services

A failure to attract and skill women for careers in these industries has a twofold negative economic impact:

- a loss of productivity gains potentially available through increasing the skills and career opportunities of a large sector of the labour force
- the further entrenchment of Australia's highly gender segregated labour force with potential to widen the gender pay gap and reduce economic security for women and their families.

Governments and industry sectors can and should act to better attract women into careers in these industry sectors.

The problems

1. Australia is experiencing a skills shortage, which is expected to increase.
 - *Inadequate access to skilled labour has the potential to hold back investment and productivity growth, particularly in the resources sector as well as in construction and civil engineering.*

- *This is an issue of supply: there is a mismatch between the demands of industry and the numbers and specializations of graduates produced by Australian universities and the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector.*
2. The growing areas of the Australian economy, such as mining and construction, which offer above average levels of remuneration for skilled employees have traditionally relied heavily on men and have trained and employed only small numbers of women.
 3. Women's enrolments in professions and trades which service these growing industry sectors are not increasing; there is no indication that the number of women looking for work or girls considering careers will address this shortage in supply.
 - *Although female enrolments in some male dominated professions such as law and medicine have improved significantly over the last three decades from a very low base to 50-60 per cent, their enrolment in engineering studies over the same period of time has been lower (up to approximately 15 per cent).*
 - *But women are entering VET in increasing numbers in the more poorly remunerated areas of 'Food, hospitality and personal service' (91 per cent of course enrolments in eligible pre-apprenticeship courses), 'Society and culture (88 per cent), and 'Health' (87 per cent).*
 - *This pattern of training and education is exacerbating the highly gender segregated nature of the Australian labour force, raising the numbers of women in poorer paid occupations and professions, now and into the future, and worsening the economic outcomes for women and their families.*
 4. Recent Australian Statistical Research demonstrates that there is a need to expand the range of employment opportunities of Australian women, through a much better targeted approach to education and training.

These statistics indicate that more women than men are discouraged in their search for work (58 per cent) and these women are more likely than men to identify themselves as lacking the necessary training, skills, schooling or experience.

In combination these four major problems indicate a lost opportunity for the Australian economy and for Australian women. Without concerted action from governments and industry, this lost opportunity will only deepen.

Education and training for women and girls requires intensive government and industry action and is the focus of the solutions presented below. New skills are needed to develop and support sustainable social, economic and environmental outcomes in business, industry and the community in the emerging 'green economy'. Workers skilled in science and technology are needed for the growth in the non-traditional industry sectors of mining and construction.

The solutions

Australian Governments (federal, state and territory) and the business community need to act decisively to strengthen women's access to education and training for employment in emergent industries and non-traditional occupations. They can do this by:

1. Promoting these career pathways to girls through Australian Technologies Curriculum K-Y12 and including 'Girls into trades' seminars in Year 9
2. Making the learning needs of women and girls central to all VET strategies and policies
3. Establishing gender sensitive career counselling in schools
4. Targeting the specific needs of women in the Government's National 2012 Workforce Development Strategy
5. Promoting industry and employment based work experience and work shadowing and training programs for women and girls
6. Encouraging industry supported scholarships and training places for women and girls
7. Supporting industry based mentoring programmes for women and girls entering emergent and non-traditional industry sectors
8. Establishing and resourcing pre-vocational programs for women returning to work after raising children, caring or moving from income support
9. Promoting to small business the value of gender equity in the workplace to assist them to attract and retain the best workers

Recommendations

The Australian Government needs to ensure that national skills and VET reforms build the best available opportunities for women by:

1. Establishing a National Strategy for Women and Girls in Vocational Education and Training with clear priorities and accountability mechanisms, including linking VET funding arrangements to key performance measures (KPMs) for women and girls, especially those most disadvantaged.

There has been no national policy framework for women and girls in education since 1996 and the recently expired national strategy for VET (2004-2010) - that called for gender analysis of the top two KPMs - was not implemented.

2. Ensuring that all skills-related Australian Government programmes and policies identify and analyse their impacts on women and girls and provide enhanced opportunities to build the skills of Australian women and girls, particularly in emerging and non-traditional industries.

There is no analysis of gender or equity in 'Skills for all Australians'; the most recent reform of the national vocational education and training system to address skills shortages across the economy. This omission needs redress without delay.

3. Requiring State and Territory governments and relevant private service providers to, as a condition of receiving Commonwealth funding for VET and related activities, commit to and report against the key outcomes of a new National Strategy for Women and Girls in Vocational Education and Training
4. Ensuring Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) has the resources and mandate to report on whether Australian government policies and programs are effectively supporting women and girls into career and employment pathways in emerging and non-traditional industries
5. Recognising the complexity and challenges associated with gender and how it intersects with other structural and systemic labour market barriers and discrimination, resource EOWA or other parties through the National Research Council, to undertake research and analysis on mechanisms to enhance participation of women and girls in emerging and non-traditional career pathways, including examining international best practice.

The Australian Government should also ensure that its policies and programmes are gender inclusive to meet the commitments made by Australia to international agreements especially CSW 55 2011-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 work.

Action is needed now

Gender inclusive policy action is needed now as matter of urgency to address skills shortages, enhance national productivity and target women's skills development in particular industries including those of the emergent 'green economy' and in mining and construction.

We need national VET policies that focus on gender equity and acknowledge the complexity and challenges associated with gender and when gender intersects with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background, with disabilities, with culturally and or linguistically diverse backgrounds, with low socio economic backgrounds, with geographical isolation.

About eS4W

economic Security4Women (eS4W) is one of six National Women's Alliances funded by the Australian Government through the Office for Women.

eS4W is committed to strengthening economic wellbeing and financial security for all women. These are essential ingredients to achieving equity for all women and impact on all aspects of women's lives including their family, education, health, employment, retirement, housing and personal safety.