

FW's submission to the Jobs and Skills Australia 2026-2027 Work Plan public consultation

FW is pleased to make this submission to the development of Jobs and Skills Australia's 2026-2027 Work Plan. FW supports JSA's ongoing commitment to achieving women's full workforce participation as a mechanism to achieve women's economic security, foster inclusivity, address critical skills shortages and unlock \$128 billion in economic productivity¹.

Women's underemployment amidst labour shortages

There are more than one million women in Australia looking to return to paid employment or increase their hours of work². This tells the story of a group facing systemic un- and underemployment. But this is also a story of missing workforce potential. Australia is currently experiencing acute labour and skill shortages. Unlocking the full productive capability of Australian women will be key to addressing Australia's workforce needs into the future.

The barriers to employment faced by women in Australia are complex and well-documented. They include the disproportionate share of unpaid care undertaken by women, difficulty accessing childcare, workplace inequality and harassment, gender stereotypes and bias, and the challenge of returning to work after a career break.

FW particularly recognises the intersecting bias and barriers that face some women more acutely, such as the 341,500 migrant and refugee women working below their skill level in Australia³. These women are a valuable talent pool and could be driving economic growth and productivity.

JSA has reported shortages in a third of occupations nationally⁴. We know that occupational gender segregation in Australia exacerbates these skills shortages. The Australian Government's *Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality* identified that approximately 65% of occupations in shortage on the Skills Priority List have workforces dominated by one gender (80% or above, either men or women)⁵.

Australia has an opportunity to foster inclusivity and equal workforce participation, while also solving pressing labour shortages. JSA could extend its existing gender equity advocacy by prioritising the transition of women into these in-demand occupations.

Opportunities for reform

The Government's *Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality* recognises that mainstream employment services aren't adequately supporting women, who have a lower job placement rate in every cohort and in every age group compared with men⁶. Women require targeted support to return to work because they face distinct barriers to participation.

¹ Deloitte Access Economics. (2022) [Breaking the norm: Unleashing Australia's economic potential](#).

² Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2026) [Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation, Australia](#).

³ Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance (2026) [Activate Her Skills: Harnessing the economic potential of migrant women through better skills recognition](#)

⁴ Jobs and Skills Australia (2025) [Occupation Shortage List](#)

⁵ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2024) [Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality](#)

⁶ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2024) [Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality](#)

Further investment is needed to close the gap between women seeking employment and the industries in need of labour and skills. FW exists to do just that.

FW is a national platform supporting women to find jobs and build careers. We bring together women looking for work and employers with vacancies through our pre-employment services. We prioritise accessibility through flexible and digital delivery, in an approach that centres the confidence and career clarity of job seekers.

As part of the 2026–27 Work Plan, FW is well-placed to continue advising and supporting JSA to connect women job seekers with industries in demand. This includes identifying possible career paths for these job seekers and working with JSA to understand how we can support women into these roles. As experts in communicating with women, FW sees an opportunity to translate JSA’s wealth of data into content that will resonate with women jobseekers, tackling industry stereotypes and inspiring new careers that women previously may not have considered.

The benefits of harnessing women’s full workforce participation extend beyond employers and the labour market, to the women themselves, their families and communities. Meaningful paid work is associated with increased wellbeing, sense of purpose and social inclusion, as well as improved physical and mental health outcomes and reduced gender-based violence. In alignment with JSA’s commitment to fostering inclusivity and participation, women’s improved wellbeing and economic security must be recognised as an important outcome in and of itself.

FW recommends JSA prioritise closing the gap in women’s workforce participation in Australia, in its 2026–2027 Work Plan, in alignment with recommendations in the final paper of its Gender Economic Equality Study. Sustained investment into strategies proven to accelerate women’s economic participation is necessary to accelerate Australia’s economic productivity, and support more women to live meaningful, safe and financially secure lives.

The consultation questions

1. Which parts of JSA's enduring programs most impact your work?

The data and insights produced by Jobs and Skills Australia are critical to FW's mission. All six Enduring Programs of Work outlined in the Consultation Paper are highly relevant to our work.

Program 5: Fostering inclusive participation and opportunity aligns most closely to FW's goal of supporting women job seekers to return to the paid workforce. JSA's unique data assets, including the Gender Segregation Intensity Scale and Occupational Gender Pay Gap Dashboards, are vital inputs to our program design. They enable us to identify where 'skill deserts' exist, where women are most under-represented in work and which careers are in-demand and offer flexibility.

FW supports the core functions and lines of inquiry proposed in the Consultation Paper for Program 5. However, to enhance the impact of this work, FW recommends:

- **Program 5 is explicitly recognised as key to addressing workforce demand and levers for national productivity and growth, beyond being simply 'the right thing to do'.**

Additionally, FW recommends that JSA apply an intersectional lens across all six Programs of Work, recognising that the compounding effects of gender segregation and discrimination cannot be addressed in isolation. Examples of this are provided below.

- **Prioritise entry and transition pathways for women in in-demand and gender segregated industries.** JSA's data shows gender inequity and skills shortages are directly linked, with shortages most acute in industries and occupations with greater gender segregation. Understanding and addressing the barriers to entry in these sectors should underpin the lines of enquiry outlined in Program 1: Understanding the labour market and Program 2: Shaping the future labour market.
- **Prioritise skills recognition for migrant and refugee women.** There are currently 341,500 migrant and refugee women working below their skill level in Australia. This is not a skills gap, but a recognition gap. Bridging this gap will unlock a significant pool of talent and expertise across the Australian economy. This should be included as a line of enquiry in Program 3: Optimising Skills System Performance and Design.
- **Recognise women's workforce participation as a primary mechanism for improving Australia's productivity and long-term economic resilience.** There are more than one million women in Australia looking to return to paid employment or increase their hours of work. To support the full utilisation of a skilled and adaptable workforce, a core driver of productivity, Program 4: Supporting productivity and economic growth, should explicitly consider the pipelines, pathways and policy settings that can effectively support women to enter and return to the paid workforce.
- **Proactively include diverse voices in consultation.** The voices of diverse women and gender diverse people are proactively sought and facilitated in all engagement, research and dialogue processes proposed in Program 6: Activating an informed dialogue. The data, insight and lived experience of women job seekers should inform all program design across the Work Plan.

2. Which stakeholders should JSA engage with to ensure its programs are reflective of tripartite expertise and national needs?

FW recommends that JSA include organisations delivering tailored employment services as key stakeholders across all Programs. This will ensure national workforce strategies appropriately reflect the diverse needs of job seekers and can be implemented practically and effectively.

For example, based on JSA data, there may be a national commitment to supporting more women into in-demand trades. Achieving this outcome requires tailored programming that understands and addresses the particular barriers faced by women both in these professions and those considering entry. The advice and experience of specialist organisations, like FW, that are skilled at reaching, resonating with and engaging women job seekers, will be essential to driving this workforce goal.

JSA should prioritise engaging with women jobseekers. Understanding and valuing their lived experience will be critical to achieving the goals identified in all six Enduring Programs. FW can facilitate connections with the thousands of women who participate in our pre-employment services. We bring deep insights and experience into the unique barriers to employment faced by women from diverse backgrounds – and what supports and resources work best to support successful outcomes for these groups. We understand how to engage and work with this critical workforce cohort and welcome the opportunity to share our learnings with JSA as part of future engagement, research and dialogue processes.

3. Where do evidence gaps most constrain good decisions across jobs, skills and workforce participation and where does JSA have a unique ability to provide analysis or advice?

Over a million women are looking for work against a backdrop of nationwide labour shortages⁷. The challenge is building practical programs and pathways to funnel job-ready women into these roles in a sustainable and meaningful way.

JSA is well positioned to provide advice and take practical steps to make this happen, positioning the upskilling and workforce connection of women and diverse groups across Australia as a central lever for addressing workforce challenges.

We believe there is an opportunity to dissect, translate and communicate JSA's data in a way that resonates with women job seekers, tackling industry stereotypes and inspiring new career paths. FW sees an opportunity to support these efforts, translating your wealth of data into inspiring content and resources that may funnel women into relevant industries experiencing labour shortages. We understand the language and content that resonates, and have an engaged audience who can benefit from JSA's insights.

FW also recommends that JSA consider distinct research projects that could help unlock women's career pathways. For example, tracking the success of non-linear career paths and the

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2026) [Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation, well-positioned Australia](#).

value of transferable skills, as well as understanding the barriers to male-dominated industries and occupations. These projects could inform both national and employer policies and approaches to recruitment in in-demand industries. FW can support these efforts, including with data and insights from our programs.

4: Where do persistent system barriers (e.g. transitions between learning and work, recognition of skills, job quality) limit productivity or inclusion?

There is extensive evidence on barriers that limit women's ability to participate in paid work. These barriers, by extension, limit both productivity and inclusion in Australia.

- **Stereotypes that reinforce gender segregation** across industries and occupations⁸. These ingrained societal norms channel women into lower-paid, feminised industries while discouraging participation in high-growth, high-wage sectors. Outdated and pervasive stereotypes that 'men are tradies' and 'women are nurses' represent a real impediment on economic growth, causing a misallocation of resources.
- **Recruitment bias**⁹, including gender bias, age bias, career break bias. These biases impact women disproportionately during recruitment, particularly in male-dominated fields. Recruitment bias compounds for women with intersecting identities and experiences. It is critical that employers are supported in building awareness – and systems – that mitigate bias and discrimination.
- **Respect and safety** in male-dominated industries. The prevalence of sexual harassment and exclusionary 'boys club' cultures act as a significant deterrent and often forcing women to exit these industries prematurely.
- **Motherhood penalty**. The lack of affordable and accessible early childhood education and care effectively functions as a tax on women's workforce participation, often making it financially irrational for a second earner to work full-time¹⁰. This structural barrier forces a choice between career and family, resulting in the underutilisation of thousands of skilled workers¹¹. Additionally, government and employer paid parental leave policies are not designed to incentivise equal uptake by women and men, again acting as a barrier to women's workforce participation, productivity and inclusion.
- **Skills recognition for migrant and refugee women**. Recent research highlights that 314,000 migrant women are currently working below their skill level in Australia¹². This is driven by structural barriers such as financial costs, strict institutional requirements and the heavy administrative burden carried by migrant women. This is not a skills gap, but a recognition gap, limiting the Australian economy's access to our existing talent and expertise.
- **Lack of flexible working options**¹³. Lack of flexibility continues to be a barrier across Australian workplaces, particularly in male-dominated industries. There is a need to build

⁸ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2024) [Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality](#)

⁹ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (n.d.) [Recruitment and promotion](#)

¹⁰ KPMG (2024) [Striving for fairer financial deals for working mothers](#)

¹¹ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2023) [A 10-year-plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy](#)

¹² Australian Multicultural Women's Alliance (2026) [Activate Her Skills: Harnessing the economic potential of migrant women through better skills recognition](#)

¹³ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2024) [Policy and strategy guidance: Flexible working arrangements](#)

more creative and innovative job design and work flows in key industries that better support employees with parenting and care responsibilities.

- **Economic insecurity and family violence.** The cumulative effect of lower pay and career breaks means that Australian women experience higher levels of financial insecurity, Additionally, women experience higher rates of domestic and family violence. Combined, these impact women’s career opportunities and outcomes, requiring tailored support¹⁴.
- **Universal, place-based employment supports.** Historically, the focus on in-person services can create a barrier for jobseekers juggling caring responsibilities and/or in regional and remote locations¹⁵. Complementary digital programs that are specifically tailored to the needs of different cohorts of job seekers, such as women, people with disability and First Nations Australians, is key to improving employment outcomes and unlocking the full productive capacity of Australia’s workforce.

FW recommends that these be considered across all Programs, working with government, employers, job seekers and service providers to deliver tailored solutions. With the right support, skills and encouragement, women could help ease Australia’s workforce challenges, unlocking \$128 billion in untapped productivity¹⁶.

¹⁴ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2022) [National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality](#)

¹⁵ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (2024) [Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality](#)

¹⁶ Deloitte Access Economics. (2022) [Breaking the norm: Unleashing Australia’s economic potential](#).