

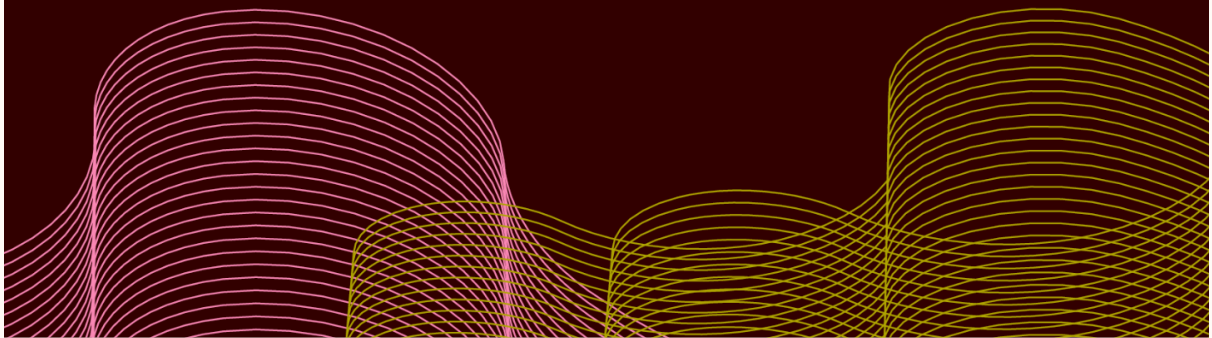


Outcomes summary

WORKPLACE GENDER
EQUALITY FORUM

**'Building an inclusive
construction sector'**

29 July 2024



In partnership with



The Workplace Gender Equality Forum

On Monday 29 July, FW's *Workplace Gender Equality Forum: 'Building an inclusive construction sector'* brought together industry leaders, policy makers and advocates to unpack the challenges facing the construction sector and search for solutions.

Through expert presentations, panel discussions and facilitated group workshops, we explored opportunities to fast-track a more gender-balanced construction sector.

FW thanks the NSW Government for partnering with us on this important event. The Minns Government's commitment to gender equity is well-established and their investment in the Women in Construction Program (2023–2026) is an important step forward.



FW's Deputy Managing Director, Jamila Rizvi, speaks to the Hon. Courtney Houssos

We particularly want to thank the Hon. Jo Haylen, NSW Minister for Transport and the Hon. Courtney Houssos, NSW Minister for Finance and Natural Resources and Minister for Domestic Manufacturing and Government Procurement for their time, insight and commitment to driving change.

FW would also like to thank our event partners, FDC and Transurban for their generous support, without which an event like this would not have been possible. Our gratitude

also goes to speakers, panellists and facilitators who shared their practical knowledge and innovative solutions throughout. Specifically:

- Dr Samone McCurdy, Executive Manager, Workplace Gender Equality Agency
- Tom Gellibrand, CEO, Infrastructure NSW
- Josh Murray, Secretary, Transport for NSW
- Alex Sparvell, General Manager, Engineers Australia
- Nicole Green, Group Executive, Transurban
- Nadia Henry, Head of the Women in Construction Movement, FDC
- Sarah Elliott, Chief People Officer, John Holland
- Alison Mirams, former CEO, Roberts Co
- Georgia Coulston and Talia Keyes, National Association of Women in Construction
- Meg Redwin, Multiplex and the Australian Constructors Association.

Finally, we recognise and thank all attendees for dedicating their time and sharing their insights and ideas freely and generously. FW was delighted by the goodwill and commitment to accelerating the pace of change for women working in construction today and into the future.



The Hon. Jo Haylen says the NSW Government needs the sector's help to find solutions

The case for change

The construction industry is not widely considered an employer of choice for women. Participation barriers are well-documented, longstanding and pervasive. They include:

- **Attracting women.** Construction is often viewed as ‘dirty, dangerous and heavy’, or as ‘men’s work’. There is limited understanding of the roles available and the nature of the work. These stereotypes and perceptions can dissuade women from considering a career in construction – often from an early age.
- **Recruiting women.** The pipeline to construction is ‘leaky’, with women less likely to start and finish training and apprenticeships. When women make it through this stage, bias and discrimination continues to run rife in recruitment. Adding to this, women are more likely to be recruited through formal recruitment processes while men are more likely to be hired through informal networks.
- **Retaining women.** The research is well-established on why women leave the industry. Women need workplaces that are safe and respectful, that provide ongoing support and mentoring, and that enable flexible working arrangements. Rates of sexual harassment and gendered violence, cultures of exclusion, as well as long hours and presenteeism continue to dominate the industry.

As a result, the construction industry is one of the most male-dominated in Australia, with the largest gender pay gap – sitting at 31.8 per cent.¹ Nationally, women make up just 26 per cent of the construction workforce, 19 per cent of managers and six per cent of CEOs.² In New South Wales, women account for just 13 per cent of the construction workforce and just two per cent of qualified trade workers.³

As the third largest employing industry in the country, this represents a serious missed opportunity. Research shows that addressing barriers to participation for women in construction could add \$128 billion to the national economy.⁴ As demand for labour continues to grow, women represent a critical and untapped talent pool for employers.

The business case is clear. More gender-balanced workforces enjoy better rates of retention, productivity, profitability, and performance, as well as reduced legal and HR costs.⁵ It is with this in mind – as well as the NSW Government’s ambitious goals to increase the number of women in trade and non-traditional roles – that we explored industry-wide opportunities for change.

¹ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2023) *Australia’s Gender Equality Scorecard 2022–23*

² Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2023) *Australia’s Gender Equality Scorecard 2022–23*

³ NSW Government, Department of Education (2024) *Trade pathways for women*

⁴ Australian Government Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2023) *A 10-year-plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy 2023 – 2033*

⁵ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2018) *Workplace gender equality: the business case*

Facilitator reflections

FW are no strangers to the gender equality challenges that male-dominated industries across the country experience. Indeed, many of the barriers explored at the *Workplace Gender Equality Forum* are not unique to the construction industry. They are, however, particularly stubborn and challenging in the context of this sector. A clear and persistent focus on gender equality will be required to disrupt cultural and systemic biases.

Despite a slow pace of change in recent decades, there is a renewed appetite for action on gender equity in the construction industry. Facilitators were impressed by the spirit of cooperation and candour at the Forum, from representatives across the industry.

The Forum took place in the context of an evolving macro environment. From new regulatory requirements for large employers, to increasing demand for labour as part of the clean energy transition. From a workforce increasingly made up of 'Gen Z' workers, to new state-based industry targets for women's representation. Combined, these shifts create conditions for an acceleration in positive change.



Attendees participated in facilitated group workshops to explore challenges and strategies

While policy makers, industry bodies, and private companies have made varying levels of progress, the data is irrefutable: there has been only limited impact to date. An industry-wide commitment to knowledge sharing and advocacy is needed. One that

ensures the construction industry is free from gatekeeping around what works, and discourages competitors undercutting one another by removing meaningful commitments to gender equality from tenders and bids.

In the wake of the Forum, it will be important for organisations to harness commitments for change internally. Singular or token actions will not shift the dial. Employers need to make equity and inclusion a daily priority, not one that receives attention only on special days or occasions. This means making equity and inclusion competency an essential function of leadership and keeping the business case for gender equality top of mind.

Attendees were clear that commitment 'from the top' is important, and so too is equipping line managers with the knowledge and practical skills to build inclusive teams. There is an opportunity to better support those who have the most direct relationship with other employees, to build and role-model gender equal workplace cultures.

Finally, as a key 'client' of the construction industry, the NSW Government plays a powerful role in driving change. It will be important that the government continues to work closely with industry leaders, bringing a gender lens to policy making and especially, to procurement of major construction projects.



Industry leaders, major employers, policy makers and advocates gathered in Sydney

Outcomes summary

At the *Workplace Gender Equality Forum*, FW facilitated a collaborative workshop encouraging attendees to reflect on practical strategies and innovative ways of working that could help drive change. This provided a unique opportunity for reflection, industry-wide knowledge sharing, and creative problem solving. Key themes, insights and ideas are summarised in the table below, which we hope will inspire further action.

Topic	Insights and ideas
<p>Attraction and recruitment</p> <p>Construction is often viewed as ‘dirty, dangerous and heavy’ or as ‘men’s work’. How can we break these stereotypes and attract more women?</p>	<p>Targeting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gender stereotypes are formed in the early years, so employers could consider collaborating with child care centres to combat gendered drivers of job choice from the beginning. ● By engaging proactively with school leavers and university students, employers can promote a career in construction. For example, FDC’s Women in Construction Movement reached young women in schools across NSW to break down misconceptions and promote the benefits of a career in construction. Ultimately inspiring more than 3,000 women to register their interest in a cadetship. ● Employers should seek to engage with work-ready pools of untapped talent, not just school leavers. For example, women in industries and occupations with transferable knowledge and/or skill sets and women who have been outside of the paid workforce for an extended period, but are looking to return. Older women who can retrain on the job, represent a loyal and lucrative opportunity for employers seeking to fill skills gaps and achieve a better gender balance amongst their teams. <p>Messaging</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The industry should seek to promote the wide range of roles available, moving beyond the trade roles which may be front of mind for many. Disrupting the male stereotype of a construction industry employee should be a priority. ● Marketing could leverage the ways a career in construction may align with people’s personal values. In particular, recognising the importance of purpose-driven work for Gen Z employees who will account for an increasing proportion

	<p>of Australia’s workforce. For example, the industry could better promote its commitment to safety and equality, flexibility and that it is central to Australia’s transition to clean energy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All industry players should be making clear that safety, including sexual harassment, discrimination and assault, is something they take seriously. Allowing these negative perceptions – and realities – to remain and cement themselves will make growing the number of women in the industry impossible. • Marketers and recruiters should seek to explore the breadth of industry benefits, including that there are skills gaps, general vacancies and salaries are competitive. <p>Hiring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human resources should review job advertisements to remove gender-coded language and restrictive criteria, which has already proved an effective tactic amongst some employer organisations.
<p>Retention Inclusive, safe, supportive, respectful, and flexible working cultures are key. How do we better support women to stay and thrive in the industry?</p>	<p>Knowledge base</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations may wish to consider undertaking targeted research on why women leave the industry to develop nuanced and evidence-based strategies for retention. <p>Education and training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The industry needs to collectively recognise that good policy alone is insufficient. People managers need training to bring the intent of these policies to life in order to build genuinely inclusive workplace cultures. In particular, mid-career managers are a critical – but often forgotten – management tier that play an important role in building company culture through their direct involvement with employees. There is an opportunity to harness their influence as future leaders. • Employers should invest in training at critical time points, such as on entry to the industry and when someone first becomes a people manager or acquires supervisory duties. This may include written guidance on standards of behaviour; practical advice on how to support staff wellbeing; formal sexual harassment training, as well as formal unconscious bias and inclusive leadership training. For example, FW delivers tailored training specifically for mid-career and senior men, giving them the practical strategies, language and confidence to effectively lead diverse, inclusive and gender-balanced teams.

Family-friendly working arrangements

- Employers need to recognise and communicate that flexibility is about more than ‘working from home’. Think creatively about how different flexible working arrangements and role design could work in practice for individual projects and teams. For example, consider five-day work weeks, compressed nine-day fortnights, job sharing, and employee-driven rostering. Examples of these working in practice at John Holland were shared by CEO, Sarah Elliott, whose presentation is attached.
- By using research and evidence to promote the business benefits of flexible working, employers can drive take-up and adoption of these practices amongst leaders in the industry. This includes that flexibility working arrangements have been linked to improved productivity, retention, employee wellbeing and gender balance.⁶ In the construction industry in particular, research by Roberts Co and Health Health Infrastructure NSW made a clear case for the benefits of a five day work week on the wellbeing of workers, their partners and children, with limited to no impact on productivity. Former CEO of Roberts Co, Alison Mirams presentation on this research is attached.
- Employers should ensure people managers understand the benefits of flexibility, how to make it work in practice, and how they can support employees to utilise these arrangements.
- Organisations should strengthen parental leave policies, recognising this as a form of competitive advantage in recruitment. Research by WGEA⁷ indicates that leading practice policies:
 - provide full pay and superannuation on top of the government scheme
 - remove distinctions between primary and secondary carer status and/or gender
 - remove or minimise the minimum tenure required to access the policy
 - include still birth and adoption
 - are supported by clear return-to-work plans and supports
 - ensure employees are included in promotion and performance review processes while absent
 - are designed to be used flexibly to meet the caring needs of individuals
 - replace clawback schemes with return to work incentives.
- Employers should avoid framing flexible work and parental leave as policies that support women only. Promote the benefits of men utilising these entitlements.

⁶ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2024) *Flexible Work* - <https://www.wgea.gov.au/flexible-work>

⁷ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2024) *Parental Leave* - <https://www.wgea.gov.au/parental-leave>

Career progression

- By encouraging men to be active sponsors of women, employers can improve the experience of women at work and accelerate career progression. A sponsor is typically a more senior person within the same organisation who publicly advocates for the person being sponsored, working to create connections and career opportunities. This can be every day acts of giving credit to women for their ideas, through to actively putting their name forward for a project, promotion or pay rise. Research by WGEA⁸ finds that this practical form of supporting women has a more tangible impact on career outcomes than formal mentoring arrangements.
- Employers should encourage women to be visible and vocal advocates for the industry, for example, through mentoring other women and attending networking events. It is essential that employers ensure these women advocates are adequately resourced, valued and remunerated for this work.
- Organisations should seek to embed clear and transparent succession planning. This means thinking strategically about future roles, particularly in leadership, identifying existing women employees with potential, and proactively supporting them to build the skills required to take on those roles once they become vacant. It also requires that organisations communicate their commitment to succession planning widely, and ensure women who have been identified for their future potential are aware of this.
- Leaders should systematise support for people managers to have meaningful conversations with women about their career progression, pathways and opportunities. Don't rely on people managers to do so instinctively.

Site-based work

- The industry must continue to address high rates of sexual assault and harassment by meeting positive duty obligations under new Respect@Work legislation. This includes holding subcontractors to the same standards of behaviour, ensuring employee safety is taken seriously across the workforce.
- The industry must continue to improve amenities for women, recognising widespread reports that toilets are often not fit for women, as well as non-binary people and people with disability. They lack sanitary bins, showers and change rooms. It is important that organisations review and improve facilities on sites to ensure all employees feel included,

⁸ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2016) *Supporting careers - mentoring or sponsorship?*

	<p>valued and like they belong at work. This will complement work underway by Transport NSW – announced by Minister Haylen – to audit 70 depots across the state and develop a program of works that will upgrade all sites to have dedicated female amenities.</p>
<p>Leadership Commitment and accountability from leaders – including men – is critical. How can leaders better drive change?</p>	<p>The role of men</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers should recognise that good parental leave and flexible working policies are not enough on their own. While they have proven benefits to women, they become a ‘double edged sword’ if not embraced by men at the same rates, with women missing out on critical meetings, projects and promotion opportunities. It is critical that male leaders are encouraged to utilise these policies, without guilt or shame. • Those men who utilise parental leave or flexible work should vocalise this with other employees, normalising a culture that recognises men’s capacity and desire to take on parenting and caring roles at home. This can mean sharing and celebrating stories of men in staff communication channels, as well as providing training and guidance to men on how to promote these policies and navigate conversations with other men in their teams. • Organisations should encourage men to be active sponsors of women. A sponsor is typically a more senior person within the same organisation who publicly advocates for the person being sponsored, working to create connections and career opportunities. This can be every day acts of giving credit to women for their ideas, through to actively putting their name forward for a project, promotion or pay rise. Research by WGEA⁹ finds that this practical form of supporting women has a more tangible impact on career outcomes than formal mentoring arrangements. <p>Education and training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations should ensure the business case for investing in gender equality is well understood by all leaders, including people managers, executive teams and boards. This may include investment in education or training that is tailored to the needs of leaders at various levels. • People managers should recognise diversity, equity and inclusion functions as core competencies for leadership. Communicate this to, and celebrate it when accomplished by aspiring leaders. Employers need to make DE&I a daily priority, not one that only receives attention on special days or occasions. This means making DE&I competency an essential piece of knowledge for advancement within the organisation.

⁹ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2016) *Supporting careers – mentoring or sponsorship?*

- Employers should equip leaders with the language and strategies they need to create a genuinely inclusive culture, for example, through unconscious bias and inclusive leadership training with a practical focus.

Commitment and accountability

- Organisations should develop clear metrics of success related to gender equality to hold leaders accountable to. For example, 40:40:20 leadership targets are being increasingly adopted across Australian industries, as well as public commitments to closing gender pay gaps. Regularly reporting progress towards these targets to executive teams and boards has shown to accelerate progress to meeting them.
- Employers can develop strategies to improve not only the poor reputation and perceptions of the industry that dissuade women from joining, but also the lived experience of women that underpin those perceptions.
- Employers must ensure sexual harassment, discrimination and assault are taken seriously. At a minimum this means meeting legal obligations, including:
 - positive duty obligations under new Respect@Work legislation
 - positive duty obligations under the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth)
 - obligations under work health and safety laws
 - obligations under workplace or industrial relations laws, such as the Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth)
 - obligations under any state or territory anti-discrimination laws.
- Leaders should be proactive and vocal about expected standards of behaviour, and communicate widely and regularly to all employees. Leaders should embed conversations about sexual harassment in routine conversations, such as executive, staff and team meetings.
- Employers and representative organisations should engage with the NSW Government on how to effectively leverage policy and procurement processes to deliver outcomes for women. As major construction industry clients, state governments can provide clear signals to the market about the value of meaningful equity and inclusion initiatives.

Where to next

FW recognises that the discussions that took place during the *Workplace Gender Equality Forum* are being led and continued in multiple spheres. Importantly, there are a number of policy initiatives already underway in NSW to make the industry more gender-balanced and inclusive. This includes the NSW Government's Women in Construction Program, which introduced new pilot targets to increase the number of women from two to four per cent in trade-based roles and seven per cent in non-traditional roles on select state projects.

To meet these targets, government, industry, unions and peak bodies need to come together. The time tinkering around the edges of reform has well and truly finished. Women in the construction industry deserve a safe, supportive and inclusive working environment in which they have fair and equal opportunities for promotion.

Without this consensus for change, the industry risks losing more women from its ranks and cementing a sector-wide reputation as a stereotypical provider of 'jobs for the boys'. In fact, at current rates of change, we are unlikely to meet our workforce targets or close gender pay gaps for decades.

FW values the time and commitment made by forum participants to move outside their respective comfort zones and challenge 'the way we've always done it'. We recognise that unlike comparable events, there were significant numbers of men represented in the room. We consider this a positive sign because gender equality cannot be considered the responsibility of the limited number of women in the sector, who already face barriers to leadership roles.

Employers should not hesitate to contact the FW team for access to information, further advice or to learn more about the training programs we administer that are making a difference in other male dominated industries. As an organisation committed to achieving gender equality in workplaces, FW looks forward to supporting the ongoing conversation amongst, and education of, industry members.

FW is here to help

FW is committed to achieving gender equity in Australian workplaces. We are proud to be supporting women to reach their career goals, training the men they work with and guiding the employers they work for. Supporting more than 7,000 people and 180 organisations annually, our core programs include:

CHANGE MAKERS

Change Makers. A groundbreaking program designed to advance modern leadership and embed equitable, inclusive practices in Australian workplaces. Delivered online or in-person over one day, Change Makers provides male leaders the tools, language and confidence they need to build inclusive and high-performing teams. The program has proven effective across all leadership levels in public, private and male-dominated sectors.

Platinum+ EMERGING LEADERS

Platinum+ for Emerging Leaders. This is our flagship leadership training for women. The 12-month membership provides mid-career women with the connections, skills and confidence to propel their careers. Delivered online, Platinum+ Emerging Leaders works with participants to refine their value proposition, support their career development goals, and prepares them to be an inclusive leader, with strategies to support, communicate with and lead diverse teams.

Jobs ACADEMY

FW Jobs Academy. This year-long, fully-virtual program is designed to help women who have lost connection with the paid workforce find employment and build secure, rewarding careers. Over the next two years we expect to support more than 3,000 women through Jobs Academy. These highly motivated and experienced women represent an untapped market of talent. If your organisation is looking to attract work-ready women, become a partner - at no cost.

FW Agenda

FW Agenda. FW's team of experts work directly with employers to help you meet your workplace gender equality, diversity and inclusion goals. We can help you diagnose where you're at, consult with your employees, develop best-practice gender equality action plans and DE&I strategies, as well as train your leaders at every level to drive change. Amid a changing regulatory environment, expectations that employers are working effectively to eliminate gender pay gaps are greater than ever.

Certified



This company is committed to accountability, transparency, and continuous improvement.

Corporation