

# How to attract, support and retain more women into the construction industry and improve workplace wellbeing for everyone

Women remain significantly underrepresented in the Australian construction industry, and those who enter are leaving at increasing rates. Barriers include male-dominated informal recruitment networks, rigid work expectations, lack of mentoring and sponsorship, and a workplace culture that normalises sexism and undermines wellbeing. Women are often forced to choose between family and career, and both women and men report stress, fatigue, and poor work-life balance especially in project-based roles.

## Why the study:

- The construction sector has struggled to increase gender diversity and equity in its workforce, despite many reforms to address this problem.
- Women still account for a very small proportion of the workforce and while the proportion of women has increased, retention has got worse with women leaving the industry at a far higher rate than men and this rate is increasing rather than decreasing.
- Research shows that while the best firms have made efforts to address these problems, there remain significant formal and informal barriers to employment and career progression for women.
- While there is also a growing recognition of the need to address wellbeing in the workplace, there is a tendency to try and 'cure the individual' through generic solutions which seek to 'improve employees' lifestyle and behaviours and responses to stress, rather than addressing the underlying organisational causes.

- Beyond the many ethical reasons to address these causes, there are increasing regulatory imperatives in the form of gender equity targets in social procurement and reporting requirements and the industry is facing a severe skills shortage.

## What we did:

- This research is based on a survey of skilled female migrants seeking working in construction, interviews, policy analysis and daily work observations with a range of male and female professionals working in the construction industry.

## What we found:

- Women face many formal and informal barriers to employment and career progression in the construction industry. Skilled migrant women face especially difficult barriers which intersect cultural, educational, linguistic and industry norms.
- Business leaders and managers have variable understanding of gender equality initiatives and of the barriers which women face.
- Project leaders and line managers play a central role in the careers of employees yet are often reluctant to take responsibility for gender equality policies.
- Despite many formal policies, beneath the surface of construction companies there remains a subtle culture of denial and resistance with regards to diversity and equality initiatives.

- In terms of recruitment, women are much more likely than men to be recruited through formal recruitment channels. Most men are recruited through informal networks which are the main way in which people get a job in the industry. Companies focus on 'cultural fit' into an industry with a highly masculine culture. Male sponsorship is important to recruitment and recruitment onto projects routinely operates through a practice of male-to-male sponsorship and 'picking your team'. This undermines women's access and opportunities in the industry.
- In terms of retention, employees' value is demonstrated through their adherence to rigid work practices that include long hours, 'presenteeism' and total availability. As a result, women - who continue to carry the greatest caring responsibilities - are often left to choose between a career in construction or a family. Rigid work practices undermine employee wellbeing and work life balance for both women and men. Parental leave is seen as a resource cost to construction projects and as a female (rather than male) entitlement. There is also resistance to affirmative action practices (e.g. targets, quotas) by men (and some women), as these are perceived to advantage women. Women across different levels highlighted a lack of mentoring, sponsorship and career support as significant factors that contribute to feelings of isolation and exclusion. Despite formal parental leave policies, individual women have to strategize and negotiate their departure, return and career 'survival'. Industry culture operates to remind women – subtly and overtly – of their gender and difference, frustrating and exhausting women over time. There are widely accepted norms that women will do the administrative work, and other practices that make women feel they are intruding in a male-dominated space.
- Construction sites are overwhelmingly a masculine space. Men dominate influential positions and masculine norms and practices including the acceptance of aggressive and combative exchanges, swearing and resistance to flexible work hours are ever present. There is a tolerance for sexism with sexist comments, sexist graffiti and of homophobia and racism.

- Poor mental health is a significant issue for many women in the industry (although many men suffer too). This is an even greater problem for skilled migrants who are seeking working in construction due to language barriers, racism, lack of recognition of prior work experience and qualifications and lack of local work experience.
- Many men and women report being stressed, fatigued, having sleeping and relationship issues, stress related health issues, having anxiety attacks and feeling depressed.
- Physical safety on site is generally valued over wellbeing and the challenge of achieving an effective work-life balance was most pronounced for fulltime employees with children with long hours away from home putting a strain on relationships with children and partners, and for young people having to balance study and work.
- These pressures are especially acute in project-based roles and this is also where gendered institutions are most apparent and intense. Current individual-based approaches to improving wellbeing are no match for the risks posed by the industry's culture.



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**More information about this research can be found here:** Galea, N., Powell, A., Loosemore, M. and Chappell, L. (2018) Demolishing Gender Structures. UNSW: Sydney.  
[https://www.humanrights.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/Construction\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](https://www.humanrights.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/Construction_Report_Final.pdf); Alkilani, S. and Loosemore, M. (2024), "The employability of skilled female migrants in the Australian construction industry", Smart and Sustainable Built Environment, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SASBE-06-2024-0243>;