

# National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality: Consultation – Employment (Skills and Training) Meeting Summary

22 November 2022

*The government is developing a new* [*National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality*](https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/national-strategy-achieve-gender-equality)*. The National Strategy will guide whole of community action to help make Australia one of the best countries in the world for equality between women and men.*

*Consultation with diverse stakeholders is key to developing a strategy that speaks to the experiences and ambitions of women and girls around Australia. The first phase of consultation took place in late 2022 and summaries of these discussions are shared to support further consultation and input into the development of the National Strategy.*

*This note summarises a consultation meeting held on 22 November focused on employment (skills and training), which included representatives from industry, academia, non-government organisations, and community service organisations. The consultation drew on a* [*discussion paper*](https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/national-strategy-achieve-gender-equality/national-strategy-achieve-gender-equality) *prepared by the Office for Women. This summary note reflects the discussion amongst the participants. These are not the views of Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.*

### Summary of key points raised by participants:

1. The Government needs an increased understanding and appreciation for intersectionality, and the National Strategy must include a genuine intersectional lens to articulate the true barriers to achieving gender equality.
2. There is need for significant welfare system reforms.
3. Women are more disadvantaged in the Higher Education and VET system than men; they have a higher opportunity cost due to the burden of unpaid care, and traditional skill development pathways create further occupation and industry segregation.
4. The Government must focus on cultural and structural change, not ‘fixing’ women to achieve gender equality.

### Discussion at this roundtable focused on four questions.

### What are the drivers of gender inequitable outcomes across Australia’s workforce?

Many participants agreed that gender stereotypes and norms drive inequity in the workforce, noting that as a society, these stereotypes and norms influence what we value as success, how we structure the workplace and how we assign a money value to the workforce. Participants noted the importance of using a non-binary approach to understanding how society views gender.

In the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sector, structure, culture and role‑models drive continued gender inequality.

* Grant and research programs within the sector are set up to reward people who are already winning and does not easily allow for recognition of the new.
* In terms of culture, there is a promising call for action and desire for change at both the top level of management and the entry level of workers, however the middle layer of management are those who feel most threatened at making room for women.
* As a result of the above, there are very few positive role models to support greater levels of women into these sectors.

Participants noted a lack of genuine understanding and appreciation for intersectionality, and called for a genuine intersection lens to understand the true barriers. This includes age.

Women with disability experience an additional culture of ‘low expectation’ of people with disability.

* This is compounded by additional physical, built environment and learning barriers which lead to direct and indirect discrimination on top of ongoing sex and gender discrimination - “that person has a disability, it’s going to be too hard”.
* The conversation around the National Disability Insurance Scheme does not cover the whole population of people with a disability, which needs to be recognised and understood.

Existing cultural and structural barriers are often well ingrained, and have a historical lens. It is important to understand that it is not that women don’t want to learn or work – the barriers discussed prevent them from gaining access to education and/or completing it.

The income support system is a key barrier for women with caring responsibilities, and as a result of complexities in the system and a disharmony of what is implemented with what is needed. Policies are predominately not evidence-based, and when they are, we are missing out on the voices of those who experience it.

There are increased complexities with ‘welfare to work’ transitions associated with social security payment compliance policies. These complexities often result in women just getting employment, whether it is secure or not, to ensure they are meeting the compliance requirements of social security payments. ParentsNext was noted as an example of a program needing reform.

In the Vocational, Education and Training (VET) space, existing skill development pathways created for men and those created for women do not join up which creates further gender segregation. The VET workforce is also a highly gendered workforce.

Policy structures work against breaking down the segregation in our VET system, for example there is greater capital investment given to male skilling pathways. In creating policy structures, we also do not measure for the lived experience of women in the VET system. Privatisation of the VET sector has damaged previously existing initiatives which aimed at improving access to education.

There is a higher ‘opportunity cost’ for women to learn, including care burden, mental health burden, and safety both in the home and in the workplace. There is also disparity in the reasons given for not completing education, with men often providing the reason is due to other employment and women predominately quoting personal reasons and caring responsibilities.

Successful pilot programs aiming at addressing unequal access which have been successfully delivered, evaluated and reported, often receive insufficient funding to support full delivery. Previously greater opportunities for women to take up training in male‑dominated sectors have been provided, however as a result of underfunding, where these opportunities exist now, they are often small measures and only taken up by a small number.

The increasing move toward digitisation across the workforce is compounding disadvantage in the labour system, and regional disadvantage. Locational disadvantage is a driver of inequity for people who live in areas where there is already unequal access to study and employment opportunities as a result of where they live or grew up (i.e. regional, rural and remote).

### What are the key barriers to lifting women’s participation and closing the gender pay gap?

Inflexible work hours across multiple sectors negatively impacts on access and opportunity to participate, for example the construction industry has long and inflexible work hours (including expected Saturday work). The distinction in inequality for women in traditional blue collar work versus white collar in male‑dominated industries is important to recognise.

There are a number of male-dominated sectors with highly adversarial cultures, with gender stereotypes and gender norms ingrained.

There is insufficient relevant data on the gendered impacts and barriers to women’s participation. While there is some good ‘pockets’ of data available, these are often narrow in scope and often inaccessible. As a result of insufficient data, existing and new solutions are not effective as they are not evidence based.

* This is a result of male‑dominated industries holding the pen on what data is collected, when it is collected and how. Examples given were from STEM and medical research.
* There is a lack of data on intersectionality and the compounding impacts on gender inequality, it is important that we collect this data at a disaggregated level.

Within existing employment policy, there is a ‘work first’ policy landscape which sees key performance indicators driving contractual arrangements across employment services. These contracting arrangements are a disincentive in setting people into a skill pathway.

Bringing in the inequities associated with location, there is often limited ability to access the education that is needed in the first place, at any or all of the three education layers – primary, secondary and higher education. When there are not enough teachers, no visible role models, or access to certain topics during schooling (i.e. STEM), a person’s learning begins to narrow and in turn career opportunities become out of reach.

Funding models from the Government (i.e. annualised funding) impacts on providers abilities to develop and deliver strong longer term initiatives. Participants suggested the Government consider moving to three year funding arrangements, with annual reporting if accountability is needed.

Childcare was raised a key barrier to women’s participation in education and the workforce. Accessible childcare can make a difference for women who are studying or working part-time.

Despite international agreements and decades of research and advocacy in Australia, since the abolishment of the Australian National Training Authority in 2005 and the National Vocational Equity Advisory Council in 2014, the VET system has been resistant to implementing meaningful changes around gender equality, and about the positioning of equity in general.

### What are some concrete policy options that should be considered as part of this Strategy to achieve more gender equitable outcomes in Australia’s labour market?

Utilise buying power of government to drive key reform through procurement arrangements. There is opportunity to leverage these arrangements to incorporate standards and improve culture and diversity within private sector organisations. There are state government examples of this.

The Government should apply a gender and intersectionality lens to all policy formulation for employment/VET services; ensure policy is guided by what the outcome needs to be; and ensure greater transparency throughout development. The Government should also apply a user experience lens across policy development.

Participants suggested including targets and quotas in the National Strategy, and learning from leading practice overseas. Stakeholders noted there is work underway to require larger businesses to set targets for gender equality, but acknowledged these will only apply to large employers and that there remains a need to enforce stronger quotas (i.e. through procurement)

There is a need to not only focus on women in male-dominated industries, but also to focus on (lack of) men in the female-dominated industries, i.e. childcare and the health sector.

Participants suggested reforming the HECS and VET funding system and reintroducing scholarships for low-socioeconomic status women. Participants also noted the Job Ready Package may discourage learning and educational attainment among lower SES students.

In relation to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), stakeholders noted WGEA should play a greater national role in monitoring implementation of private sector equity and diversity strategies across Australia – this will encourage organisations to look at their strategies in a more meaningful and holistic way. There were calls to expand the scope of data covered under WGEA’s annual reporting program to include data on people with disability in the workplace, among other factors.

The VET/Adult and Community Education (ACE) system is one that is subject to both federal and state/territory oversight. Stakeholders noted, for this reason, to ensure that the National Strategy is successful and well implemented in this space, it is critical that the it is agreed not only by the Commonwealth Government but also all state/territory jurisdictions, and that any ensuring policies are resourced and have ’teeth’ - accountability mechanisms.

The Government should consider lessons learned, in particular from the first National Women’s Vocational Education Strategy. This Strategy was contextualised, intersectional and pro-active in its focus and considered measurements. It was used as 'blueprint’ to inform the development of National strategies for ‘equity groups’. Evaluation and consultation of this strategy experienced delays, and a second national strategy was launched in 2004. Stakeholders noted it was never implemented.

### What will success look like and how can it be measured and evaluated?

Participants agreed that ‘what success looks like’ had already been discussed throughout the session and is reflected across all points of the session summary notes.