



Electrical Trades Union

Gender Economic Equality Study Consultation

MARCH 2025

Submission to the Jobs and Skills Australia
Consultation on Gender Economic Equality



About the ETU

The Electrical Trades Union of Australia ('the ETU')¹ is the principal union for electrical and electrotechnology tradespeople and apprentices in Australia, representing well over sixty-thousand workers around the country. The electrical workers we represent form the backbone of Australia's clean energy workforce across all sectors and stages of the transition.

The ETU has actively sought to increase women's participation in the electrical trades, and within the union itself, including by establishing and supporting rank and file women's committees in our branches, changing our Union's rules to ensure women have a representative in all of our Union's governing bodies, holding annual women's conferences, developing and delivering women-only prevocational training programs and working with industry to set targets to increase the percentage of women in apprenticeships both through industrial instrument settings and through public policy changes such as through government procurement.

ETU women sit on formal boards and advisory groups providing advice and expertise regarding the trade, training and their experience as women in male dominated industries.

The ETU has a long history of collaboration with industry to deliver improved outcomes for women. For example, in 2023, the ETU was involved in the joint industry submission to the *National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality*, involving partners from across industry, including NECA, Keystone, Contact Group, Schneider Electric, NAWIC, Fredon Group, Build like a Girl, Master Plumbers Association, Axis Plumbing and the Curtin Institute for Energy Transition. In 2023, the ETU released the *Nowhere to Go* report, highlighting the lived experiences of electrical women working in historically male dominated occupational industries, the barriers they face and key solutions to removing those barriers.

The ETU is also proud to be involved in the operation of nine registered training organisations (RTOs) around the country. These RTOs deliver higher-than-average women's commencement and completion rates in electrical training.

Acknowledgement

In the spirit of reconciliation, the ETU acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all First Nations peoples today.

¹ Being a division of the CEPU, a trade union registered under the *Fair Work (Registered Organisations) Act 2009* (Cth).

Introduction

The ETU welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the *Gender Economic Equality Study Consultation*. The ETU, and in particular, our national and state women's committees, have been actively involved in numerous initiatives at the workplace, state and federal level to increase the number of women in the electrical trades.

A key focus on this consultation is on the drivers and impacts of gender segregated occupations across the Australian workforce, including considering:

1. How education choices, divides and outcomes are shaped by gender.
2. How these intersect with the gender make-up of jobs and industries across Australia.

The electrical trades – like many traditional construction trades more broadly – is one of the most gender segregated, male-dominated occupations in the Australian workforce.² The percentage of women in the electrical trades has remained stubbornly low for decades. In May 2024, the ABS put the percentage of women in the electrical trades at 4.3%, an increase of only 2.5% in four decades.³ These numbers are slightly higher than that found Powering Skills Organisation (PSO), which found that 9000 women were employed in the electrical trades in 2024, representing 3.5% of workers in the electrical trades.⁴

As discussed below, there are many factors that influence these persistently low numbers. These factors impact apprentice enrolments and completions, and ongoing retention in the trade. With women making up only 6% of enrolled electrician apprentices and 7% of electrical transmission apprentices in 2023, any change to increase the total percentage of women in the trade will be slow unless substantial attempts to address these factors are made.⁵

In this submission, we briefly highlight just some of the reasons for the persistently low rates of women in the electrical trades, while detailing some key case studies of innovative and ambitious programs that the union has been involved in that has seen significant increases in the percentage of women enrolled in and completing electrical apprenticeships and continuing onto work in the electrical trades.

We have also included our previous work on these issues as an appendix to this submission, including:

- *National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality* submission with partners from across industry, including NECA, Keystone, Contact Group, Schneider Electric, NAWIC, Fredon Group, Build like a Girl, Master Plumbers Association, Axis Plumbing and the Curtin Institute for Energy Transition. I
- *Nowhere to Go* report, highlighting the lived experiences of electrical women working in historically male dominated occupational industries, the barriers they face and key solutions to removing those barriers.

² https://poweringskills.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Shifting-Currents-Elevating-Diversity-in-Energy-Careers_November-2024.pdf

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⁴ https://poweringskills.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Shifting-Currents-Elevating-Diversity-in-Energy-Careers_November-2024.pdf

⁵ <https://poweringskills.com.au/data-dashboard/>

Systemic and Cultural Barriers

There are several systemic cultural and practical barriers for women in the workforce which desperately need to be addressed. As the Australian Human Rights Commission found in their report, *Women in Male-Dominated Industries*:

Many women are deterred from participation in some of Australia's most thriving and essential businesses, particularly in male dominated industries, because of the lack of family role models, stereotypes about the nature of 'women's work', discouraging workplace cultures and structural problems within those organisations.⁶

These findings are echoed in a 2022 survey of ETU women members completed by Essential Media, which found that:

- 23% of female apprentices considered quitting due to work and culture, and women are 53% more likely to consider quitting due to culture than men.
- Men are 50% more likely to have regular contact with their apprentice mentors than women, and women are 10% more likely to have never received any support from their apprentice mentors.
- 40% of women in electrical trades don't have access to gendered amenities at work, and only half report consistent access to sanitary bins.⁷

Sexual Harassment and Workforce Culture

A key factor impacting the retention of women in the electrical trades is workforce culture and specifically sexual harassment.

We know sexual assault and harassment is a gendered issue affecting women in the workplace. The electrical trades are no exception. The Australian Human Rights Commission identifies several factors that increase the risk of experiencing sexual harassment at work, including that the sector is male dominated due to:

- the gender ratio;
- the over-representation of men in senior leadership roles;
- the nature of the work being considered 'non-traditional' for women; or
- the masculine workplace culture

The report *Women in Construction: Exploring the Barriers and Supportive Enablers of Wellbeing in the Workplace* found that 1/3 women had experienced negative incidences at the workplace, ranging from gender discrimination to assault on site, and that many employers were not meeting their obligations to provide a safe workplace for women.⁸

The ETU made a submission to the *National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces*, which collected the experiences of harassment of our women members on sites

⁶ Australian Human Rights Commission (2013), *Women in Male-Dominated Industries*, p. 1.

⁷ Essential Media (2023), *Essential Research Apprentices Survey*

⁸ Holdsworth, S. et. al. (2020), *Women in Construction: Exploring the Barriers and Supportive Enablers of Wellbeing in the Workplace*, p. 7.

around Australia.⁹ A survey of women members conducted to inform that submission found that electrical industry respondents were more likely to report sexual harassment than the broader membership of the ACTU, however, they were three times more likely to experience less favourable treatment in their workplace than the broader group.

ETU findings aligned with the broader findings in the *Women in Construction* report, with members reporting that employers are failing to adequately deal with sexual harassment on site and are failing to offer support – even punishing individuals reporting sexual harassment. For example:

[A senior female apprentice] was often working with younger school-aged female apprentices—aged around 16 and 17. When the supervisor, who was in his 50s, started inappropriately approaching the young girls, she stood up to him and management’s lack of action and spoke out about the behaviour. She has since been blacklisted from that major construction company because of this.¹⁰

A review of the literature by the *Women in Construction* report points to three primary drivers for sexual harassment:

- women are seen as outsiders in male dominated industries,
- consequence-free behaviour – which includes a lack of workplace support for managing inappropriate behaviour, and little or no consequences for people acting inappropriately, and
- culture of silence, including a lack of transparent processes for reporting inappropriate behaviours, and a fear of punishment for reporting inappropriate behaviours.¹¹

The *Respect at Work Act* inserted new provisions that expressly prohibit sexual harassment at work. It also provided for the granting of remedies when sexual harassment occurs and introduced a new dispute resolution function for the Fair Work Commission (FWC).

Despite this, women members are still reporting significant failures by employers to provide safe workplaces for women workers. Even where policies and procedures do exist, there is often a failure to meaningfully enforce these policies, to ensure that victims are protecting in raising complaints about inappropriate, and sometimes violent behaviour. The experiences of our members are echoed in the experiences of survey respondents in the *Women in Construction* report.

A Lack of Amenities in the Workplace

Ensuring workplace amenities are regularly serviced, accessible, suitable, and open should be a priority for every workplace. Sadly, this is often not the case. For women in historically male dominated occupations the challenge is particularly stark with women’s amenities frequently treated as an inconvenience, improperly and / or irregularly serviced or not provided at all.

ETU has produced several reports and submissions detailing the failure to include women’s amenities on worksites, which include detailed case studies of the impact that this has on

⁹ ETU (2019), *National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces*.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 8.

¹¹ Holdsworth, S. et. al. (2020), *Women in Construction: Exploring the Barriers and Supportive Enablers of Wellbeing in the Workplace*, p. 7.

women in the electrical trades and construction more broadly.¹² As we illustrate there, the lack of amenities is not merely an inconvenience but can have significant health repercussions and adds to a general feeling of discrimination at the worksite. Together these issues factor in women leaving the electrical trades.

These submissions and reports have been included as an appendix to this submission.

A Lack of Workplace Flexibility and Impacts on Raising a Family

... the culture of long hours without allowances for flexibility has a particular impact on women. The age profile of electricians is disproportionately in the age group where women are most likely to be having children compared with other jobs.¹³

The desire to start a family disproportionality impacts women thinking about entering and remaining in the electrical trades. PSO reports that, according to a 2020 survey, “34% of women electrical trades workers said family considerations affected their job participation, compared to only 1% of men”.¹⁴

With flexible and part-time work unavailable in many parts of the electrical trades, outside domestic construction, women wanting to have children report having to take off significant periods of work or move to areas of the industry (like domestic construction) that have more flexible working hours, to manage parenting.

We note that this is changing slowly. ETU delegates of all genders, have worked together to win improvements to working conditions to enable workers to better take on parenting duties, including significant increases in employer-funded parental leave for both parents. We note, however, that these wins have been concentrated in large, state government employers, that have a higher percentage of direct employment and flexible work is still absent in almost the entirety of the large-scale construction industry.

Similar examples are reported in a range of employer and union submissions to the *Australian Apprentice Incentive Review*.¹⁵

The Economic Benefits of Engaging in Electrical Work

Male-dominated industries and occupations, like the electrical trades, tend to be better paid than female-dominated jobs are on average lower paid. ‘Industrial segregation’, women and men are concentrated in specific industries where one gender is dominant, is a persistent driver of the gender pay gap. In 2020, it explained 20% of the gender pay gap in 2020, up from 9% in 2017.¹⁶

For individuals, access to a job as an electrician means access to a secure job with high remuneration. As Per Capita finds:

¹² See for example: ETU (2021), *Nowhere to Go: Barriers to participation resulting from inadequate workplace amenities for women in male dominated occupational industries*;

¹³ Per Capita (2024), *Charged Up: Strategies for Addressing the Skills Shortage in Electrical Trades for the Clean Energy Transition*, p.23.

¹⁴ ABS (2024), *Participation, Job Search and Mobility*

¹⁵ Australian Government (2025), *Strategic Review of the Australian Apprenticeship Incentive System – Final Report*, p. 220.

¹⁶ KPMG (2022), *She’s Price(d)less: The Economics of the Gender Pay Gap*, p. 42

93% of electricians work full-time compared to only 70% across all occupations and only 5% of employees are casually employed compared to 22% across the wider workforce. Median full time total cash weekly earnings for electricians paid at the adult rate in 2023 was \$2204, compared to \$1697 across the broader economy.¹⁷

Gaynor Maree, CEPU SA Affirmative Action Officer writes of moving from female-dominated industries to the male-dominated electrical trades provided her with greater job and lifetime financial security:

I started my working life working in hospitality wanting to follow in my mother’s career, it wasn’t the glamorous career choice I thought it was going to be and was mainly cleaning hotel rooms. After a couple of goes I moved into the retail sector working on checkouts in supermarkets and in the service deli. From there I went on to drive a lunch van until I went on maternity leave. When I came back into the workforce I moved into the early childcare sector until I had my second child. None of these jobs were a career for me and none of them lasted more than a couple of years.

In September 2009, I found myself needing to completely restart my life and after spending 2010 studying at TAFE I discovered an all-female electrical pre-apprenticeship program being offered. I had nothing to lose so signed up. From the first day of the course, I was hooked, and every day just got better. I had found myself and my career. I started my electrical apprenticeship in 2012, and I haven’t looked back.

I went from not being able to pay bills, skipping meals to feed my kids and not being able to afford nappies to a career with promotions. I have continued to excel in my electrical career and never could have guessed where this opportunity could have taken me. The mental load of trying to find money for bills and food no longer exists. I couldn’t be prouder of myself and the choices I have made and the opportunities that I have created for myself and my two boys.

Addressing the barriers to women entering and remaining in the electrical trades will have significant impacts on individual women’s economic well-being and broader impacts on the gender pay gap.

Case Studies of Success

While this submission has focused on the barriers to women entering into and remaining in the electrical trades, change is possible. The ETU has been involved in several ambitious projects to lift enrolments and completions from women in electrical apprenticeship, reduce attrition from women in the workforce, and establish a positive culture that supports women in the electrical trade. These programs have delivered significant and unprecedented increases in the number of women starting and completing their trades – often well above the average completion rates for apprentices and early career workers in the electrical trades of any gender.

¹⁷ Per Capita (2024), *Charged Up: Strategies for Addressing the Skills Shortage in Electrical Trades for the Clean Energy Transition*, p.22.

Two case studies detailing these programs have been included below.

Energy Queensland

For example, the ETU have been working with Energy Queensland Ltd (EQL) and Powerlink to develop a workforce and skills resourcing plan to be adopted by the government as part of their Queensland Energy and Jobs Plan. The plan outlined the parties' commitment to expand the annual apprentice intake at least 10% year-on-year with a focus on working together to develop strategies for increased recruitment of women and First Nations apprentices. As a result, EQL has achieved a record 50% women and 8% First Nations apprentices in its recent 2024 intake. These strategies included leveraging pre-apprenticeship programs.

WAVE Program, Centre for U, Victoria

ETU Victoria's training facility, The Centre for U, has successfully run the Women in Apprenticeships Victoria Electrical (WAVE) program in collaboration with Holmesglen Institute, Victorian Trades Hall Council, Australian Women in Solar Energy, and the Victorian Department of Education and Training. WAVE seeks to attract women to targeted information events, recruit them into women-only pre-apprenticeships, and support them with mentoring through the first year of an electrical apprenticeship.

The WAVE project won a Gold Industry Collaboration Award at the Australian Training Awards in 2023. The ETU has had nearly 50 women complete pre-apprenticeships since the WAVE program started in 2021, and over 91% of women that start WAVE and complete the pre-apprenticeship move into successful apprenticeships.¹⁸

¹⁸ The Centre for U, "WAVE success rate over 84%", February 2023