*Building Gender Equity Strategy 2023-2031: Women in Construction*

*FOCUS GROUP CONSULTATION: 2*

*2023*

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# Draft Building Equity Strategy 2023-31 and Action Plan: Stakeholder Consultation and Feedback 2023

## Part 1: Introduction

In 2022, the Victorian Government continued its efforts to strengthen gender equality by committing to continue and expand on the 2019-2022 Strategy. The Department of Premier and Cabinet (DPC) is leading the development of an eight-year Building Equity Strategy 2023-2031 – Women in Construction (the Strategy) and an initial four-year Action Plan that will build on the work already commenced.

The Strategy's purpose is to create an industry agreed, long-term plan to increase the number of women in onsite and offsite professional, trade and non-trade roles across the building, construction, infrastructure, and civil engineering sectors. The development of the second Strategy presents the opportunity for a generational shift within the Victorian construction industry.

In 2022, sixteen focus groups were conducted with stakeholders associated with the Victorian construction industry. The Victorian Government, unions, employers, industry associations/peak bodies, and education/training providers were represented. Both women and men participated in the focus groups.

The focus groups explored the scope and vision for the new strategy, challenges experienced by women in construction, and areas of priority to inform the development of the Strategy and its associated Action Plan.

The lived experience of focus group participants and the initiatives already in place were developed into *a* *Draft Building Gender Equity 2023-2031: Women in Construction* [Draft Strategy] and an associated Action Plan to build on the work implemented through the first Strategy.

In 2023, the Draft Strategy and the associated Action Plan were provided to participants from the first consultation phase for comment. This report presents the findings from eight focus groups to elicit feedback to ensure the critical issues facing women in construction have been identified and incorporated into the Final Strategy and that the associated Action Plan reflects and will enable the Strategy to achieve its aims over the first four years of implementation.

The collaborative approach helps to ensure that the Strategy meets the industry's needs and includes all stakeholder voices while committing the industry to more equitable and inclusive workplaces, identified responsibilities to action change, and a Strategy to guide the industry's evolution.

## Part 2: Methodology

The development of the Final Strategyand associated Action Plan is underpinned by a collaborative approach. Key stakeholders from relevant government departments and representatives from education, construction, infrastructure, civil engineering and the employees of these sectors were invited to participate in two consultation stages.

### 2.1 Stage 1

Stage 1 was conducted in 2022 and sought to elicit from stakeholders their views on the following:

* The proposed scope and vision of the Strategy.
* The role of government, industry associations, employers and unions in setting standards for acceptable behaviour and modelling good practice.
* The barriers women experience across their career lifecycle and how these can be removed.
* The forms of disadvantage and discrimination women experience, why these behaviours are present and reinforced, and what can be done to address these negative behaviours.
* The traditional male stereotypes prevalent in the industry and how these can be modified to actively encourage and normalise inclusion.

Over 80 people participated in 16 focus groups, and the key findings were provided to the Department of Premier and Cabinet in the report: *Holdsworth, S. & Turner, M. (2022). Building Gender Equality: Victoria's Women in Construction Strategy 2023-2031. Focus Group Consultation: 1. RMIT University: Melbourne, Australia.* The findings from this report informed the development of the Draft Strategy and Action Plan (Appendix 4.1).

### 2.2 Stage 2

Stage 2 was conducted during 2023 and sought to elicit feedback from stakeholders who had participated in Stage 1 and others interested through a series of focus groups. The focus groups provided a forum for stakeholders of the Victorian construction industry to identify positive and negative aspects of the Draft Strategy and initiatives that should be removed, augmented, or included in the Action Plan. Participants were provided with documents outlining topics for consideration and discussion in preparation for the focus group. Refer to Appendix 4.2 for preparatory focus group documents.

All focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were de-identified and thematically analysed. The thematic analysis results are reported in Part 3. Ethics approval was attained from RMIT University to conduct focus groups and collect and analyse the data.

Eight one-hour focus groups were conducted with 40 participants, including men and women from industry associations, state government departments, schools, higher education, vocational education and training (VET), employer organisations, unions, and women's advocacy/employment groups. Table 1 summarises stakeholder groups and the number of participants involved in the consultation.

**Table 1 Focus Group Participants**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Industry Stakeholder Groups | Number of participants |
| Government | 11 |
| Industry Associations/Advocate | 5 |
| Employers – Commercial (Builders) | 7 |
| Employers – Civil (Infrastructure) | 2 |
| Education | 11 |
| Unions | 4 |
| Total | 40 |

## Part 3: Focus Group Feedback

This section presents the findings from the eight focus groups structured into key themes emerging from the data:

* Content
* Language and structure
* Reference to existing strategies
* Diversity and inclusion
* Governance
* Priority areas
* Action Plan

Within each area, the positive aspects of the Draft Strategy and the opportunities for further inclusions or amendments are presented as identified and discussed by participants. Seven participants provided specific and detailed written feedback on aspects of the Draft Strategy and Action Plan which was submitted directly to the Department of Premier and Cabinet.

### 3.1 Content

#### 3.1.1 Positive: Progressive and practical

Participants commented that the Draft Strategy and Action Plan clearly reflected key discussions from the first set of focus groups conducted in 2022. The Draft Strategy is evidenced-based and clearly presents background and barriers faced by women, along with proposed practical solutions that reflect the industry's and associated stakeholders' needs. One participant commented:

"*It's very comprehensive, a very good overview… I could actually see a lot of the comments that came out of the focus groups*."

Participants identified that the inclusion of all life stages (from childhood through to adulthood) as vital to achieving the Final Strategy's aims and objectives, i.e., removing the gender bias associated with construction work and enabling more women to enter education and employment.

Further, participants identified this second Strategy reflected the first *Women in Construction Gender Equality Strategy 2019-2023* while referencing, complementing, and supporting other Victorian Government Strategies related to gender, equality, and equity. Participants felt it was important that this Strategy drew from and built on existing work rather than replicating action and initiatives already being applied to address gender equality and equity.

### 3.2 Language and Structure

#### 3.2.1 Positive: Clear, comprehensive

Participants commented that the Draft Strategy and Action Plan used clear, succinct, comprehensive language within a structure that is easy to follow and the right length.

#### 3.2.2 Opportunities: Publish in multiple languages

Publishing the Strategy and Action Plan in various languages was suggested as it would increase stakeholder engagement and its application.

#### 3.2.3 Opportunities: Specific word changes

Table 2 presents specific language changes suggested by participants.

**Table 2 Suggested changes to keywords in the Strategy and Action Plan**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Word currently used | Proposed word choice |
| Unconscious bias | Replace with ‘conscious bias’. Participants commented that unconscious bias towards women in the industry does not exist. |
| Priority Area 4: Develop an advertising campaign | Replace with ‘commission the development of an advertising campaign’. It was argued that the committee lacked the expertise to develop an action plan. |
| Priority Area 4: Create workplace policies | Replace with ‘create best practice workplace policies’ because what is needed is a set of policies that govern the best way to achieve a respectful and safe workplace rather than those that currently exist. |
| Priority 2 – Leadership: Actions 2023-27: Targets | When using the term ‘targets’ (in any part of the Strategy or Action Plan), replace with ‘aspirational targets’ because even if an organisation doesn't know how to achieve the aspirational target, it will try to work out a way to achieve the desired outcome. If an organisation views a target as unachievable, they resist setting processes in place – aspirational targets create an environment of competition, and organisations strive to be better than their competition. |
| Use of the word ‘parent’ | Replace with ‘families’ as it is more inclusive of different family structures. |
| Title of priority areas | Add a verb so that the Priority Area titles are proactive and progressive, e.g., "Building economic equality". |
| Men and women | In certain areas, binary gender descriptors could be replaced with the term ‘gender’ to make the strategy more inclusive. |
| Section 6: What is the building and construction industry? | Add an extra point that clarifies the industry includes ‘tier one down to single operators - subcontractors, suppliers, manufacturers’ - so we're not just limiting it [Strategy and Action Plan] to the builder’. |
| Remove the word ‘support’ | Replace the word ‘support’ with ‘connect’ or ‘empower’ to remove the assumption that women are weak compared with others in the industry. |
| Action Plan: Develop an advertising campaign | Replace ‘develop’ with ‘commission’ as expertise to write such a campaign may need to be contracted to experts from the education sector. |
| Priority 5 Education and training | Have TAFE named explicitly. |
| Action Plan Priority 2 – Leadership: Ensure promotional decisions are based on merit, not gender | Reword 'everyone's appointed on a merit based approach' to talk more about the formal recruitment process and consider different skills and qualities before that process starts, to avoid appointing a person that is similar to the previous person in the role. |
| Change is everyone's responsibility. | Essential to ensure employers are clearly identified as part of ‘everyone’. |
| Section 5. Equality or Equity | The explicit identification of trans people was not required as this group is included in the term "gender-diverse people". |

### 3.3 Reference to existing strategies

#### 3.3.1 Positive: Use and reference existing related strategies.

Participants commented that the Draft Strategy references and integrates relevant existing policies rather than creating something new.

*3.3.2 Opportunities: Use and reference existing related strategies*

The VET sector Respect and Equality in TAFE guide was identified as an additional inclusion to the Final Strategy:

Our Watch. (2021). Respect and Equality in TAFE: Building a TAFE environment that promotes gender equality and respect (Victorian guide). Melbourne, Australia.

Participants commented that the relevant actions in the Action Plan could leverage existing initiatives. For example, the Trade Hall's Young Workers Centre education and outreach program designed to address the issues that young workers face when heading into the workplace in areas such as safety at work and bullying/discrimination.

### 3.4 Diversity and Inclusion

#### 3.4.1 Positive: Use and explanation of Equity, Equality and Intersectional

Participants noted that *Section 5 Equality and Equity* of the Strategy clearly defined the terms and their differences. Positioning the Final Strategy in the context of equity was recognised as preferable to equality. Additionally, participants commented on the use of language inclusive of all genders and its importance for a Strategy based on gender equity.

#### 3.4.2 Opportunities: Use and explanation of Equity, Equality and Intersectionality

Across the focus groups, debate emerged around the Final Strategy's focus on gender equity and the inclusion of non-binary genders in the workplace and outcomes of the Final Strategy and Action Plan. Participants recognised that the first Strategy was a women's strategy with a clear emphasis on equality. Some participants pointed out that if the focus of the Strategy is on gender equity, the lack of inclusion of other genders is a concern. Other participants felt that embedded in the Strategy was an intention to increase the inclusion of other genders across the eight-year implementation period. One participant commented that the Draft Strategy:

"*looks like we're focusing on women first. It also leaves the door open to expand [to other genders across the 8-year life of the Strategy and Action Plans*] ".

However, other participants raised concerns that shifting the focus away specifically from women would diversify the work of the Final Strategy and Action Plan and limit its outcomes and impact. One participant commented that even with a focus on women, "*this kind of strategy where we talk about gender equality will benefit everyone, non-binary, trans, trans women*".

Retaining the focus on women was considered essential and accepted by most participants, dependent on the inclusion of language that clearly communicated the Strategy recognised and included other gender groups. One participant commented: "*This is a women's strategy, but there are opportunities to recognise that people outside that binary can benefit from more inclusive cultures*. "

The following actions were suggested to address the concerns raised:

* *Section 14. Inequity does not impact all people in the same way;* Expand the description on intersectionality and how this can be experienced by those in the industry.
* Additional actions in the Action Plan could include other genders.
* Mention that the Building Equality Policy sits under the Social Procurement Framework and addresses all the other elements of intersectionality.
* Include a statement recognising the Final Strategy and Action Plan across the eight years will evolve to include other genders.
* Changing the title of the Final Strategy to reflect the focus on women in the first 3-4 years of the Strategy's remit and then amend it to reflect a broader scope concerning gender. Suggested changes to the Strategy's title included:
  + Building equity strategy or Building women's equity and then underneath have women in construction.

An additional concern related to the use of equity raised by one participant was that equity was the term easily conflated with financial equity, which could be misleading.

Participants recognised that the use of equity was necessary for such a Strategy as the term is understood to be inclusive of all, offsetting any resentment by men in the industry who may feel that they must do something special for women.

### 3.5 Inclusion of all stakeholders relevant to the industry and Strategy objectives

#### 3.5.1 Positive: Whole of-sector approach

Participants identified that a key strength of the Strategy was its inclusion of all the key stakeholders in the industry. It was not *"just a government initiative*" but a gender strategy led by the government, with all industry members actively participating as a requirement for change.

Additionally, participants felt the inclusion of all life stages of women in the Final Strategy and its Action Plan was necessary as *" there's the pre workforce and there's the workforce, and then there's the workplace, so there are different stages*" and by taking a *"systems approach"* change is more likely to be achieved.

All participants recognised and overwhelmingly supported the inclusion of Priority Area 5 Education and Training in the Draft Strategy and Action Plan. Participants identified that a strategy of this kind has never included the education and training sector. Inclusion is important for several reasons:

1. Education and training are vital in addressing women's different life stages and their roles in the industry. One participant commented:

*“I also really liked that it covers the spectrum from childhood through to mature aged women…there’s a lot of women out there who come off years of child raising looking for work… but equally I’m very passionate about gender bias in childhood and so addressing that and getting kids into STEM… fantastic.”*

1. Education and training can challenge the assumptions held by schoolgirls, boys, women, and their families that the construction industry is not inclusive or provides positive career opportunities and outcomes. One participant commented:

*"I thought the action plan, the strategy to educate career educators, was a really important one. The other thing that I liked in the action plan was the acknowledgement that there are different life stages and that there had to be some work done with families and individuals to change those attitudes."*

1. Education and training challenge the assumption of teachers, career educators, and trainers that the construction industry is not inclusive or provides positive career opportunities and outcomes. One participant commented:

*"We should spend 99% of our efforts in schools, educating the young women there to at least look at the possibility of a career in construction and in the trades."*

1. Improved connectivity between industry and education providers is important to increase careers communication, work experience, and clearer pathways into further education, training, and employment for women. One participant commented:

*"The thing that I really value in education and training is incorporating practical learning opportunities for primary and secondary school students, and that's very ad hoc."*

#### 3.5.2 Positive: Inclusion of men

Participants agreed that recognising men in the Final Strategy was essential to meeting its aim and objectives as they are vital to changing the workplace to ensure it is more inclusive. The Draft Strategy provided clear opportunities for men to lead change.

#### 3.5.3 Opportunities: Inclusion of men

Participants suggested *Section 13, Inequality Impacts Men Too*, should identify the diversity among the men who are not able to thrive, illustrating that the Strategy is inclusive of both men and women, a necessity for change.

Further, participants felt the evidence used in ‘Section 11 Gender equity is good for everyone’ should include more quantifiable data and discussion to prove women's value in the industry. One participant commented:

*"if men can see some value in it for themselves, they can understand and maybe have a bit more buy-in".*

In addition to quantifiable evidence illustrating how men have much better outcomes in positive cultural environments, collection and communication of case studies illustrating best practice would enable the adoption of change.

### 3.6 Governance

#### 3.6.2 Positive: Government oversite and evaluation

Participants recognised the Building Industry Consultative Council (BICC) as an appropriate body to take carriage of the Strategy and Action Plan governance structure. Participants commented that the BICC ensures that all key stakeholder groups of the sector are represented; it reports to the Minister for Industrial Relations and can nurture working relationships established with relevant Government departments, i.e., the Department of Education and Training. The BICC's Building Equity Committee was also identified as an appropriate committee to oversee the associated work if its membership base is expanded to reflect all the key stakeholders affected by the Strategy and Action Plan. Participants also recognised the importance of having a third party evaluate the Strategy.

#### 3.6.1 Opportunities: Application of Policy across the Industry

Given the range and scope of the Draft Strategy and Action Plan, participants articulated their concern regarding its applicability and resultant outcomes across large and small-scale projects and organisations.

Further, the Final Strategy should also address the future of the workforce through emerging techniques such as prefabrication, modular construction, and 3D printing. The Strategy could explore the role of women as related to the future of construction work over the next 20, 50, or 100 years.

### 3.7 Priority Area

#### 3.7.1 Positive: Inclusive of key issues facing the Industry

Participants identified the five key priority areas addressed the key areas of concern regarding gender equity. These included:

* + Economic equity
  + Leadership and representation
  + Wellbeing – physical and mental
  + Respectful workplace cultures
  + Education and training

Participants noted that the Priority Areas were exhaustive and reflected the discussion held in the previous round of consultation.

#### 3.7.2 Opportunities: Suggested changes to key priority areas

Some participants suggested that the 5 Priority Areas should merge into 4, with Leadership split across the existing Priority Areas. The proposed revised 4 Priority Areas are presented in Table 3 below.

**Table 3 *Revised Priority Areas***

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Existing Priority Area | Revised Priority Area |
| Priority 1 – Economic Equity  Economic equity recognises that each person has different circumstances and allocates the exact resources and opportunities needed for them to reach an equal outcome.  For women, it means working to make sure gender inequality does not limit women's career potential or ability to achieve financial independence, safety, and security. | **Priority 1 – Economic Equity**  No change to text. |
| Priority 2 – Leadership  Leadership is not just about being in a leadership position. It is about how individuals lead in terms of behaviour and what people choose to accept and call out.  Everyone can be a leader by acting against disrespectful behaviour. | Delete as a stand-alone priority area. |
| Priority 3 – Workplace wellbeing  Employers must provide and maintain a work environment that is safe and without risk to the health of their employees, so far as is reasonably practicable.  Employers have a legal obligation to protect women from work-related violence. This is important as women remain in a gendered minority group and have limited positional power to control and influence their work environment. | **Priority 2 – Workplace wellbeing**  No change to text. |
| Priority 4 – Respectful workplace culture  A respectful workplace culture is one where everyone feels safe, appreciated, respected, and valued. Everyone has a right to a workplace where safety, inclusiveness and wellbeing are paramount. | **Priority 3 – Respectful workplace culture**  A respectful workplace culture is one where everyone feels safe, appreciated, respected, and valued. Everyone has a right to a workplace where safety, inclusiveness and wellbeing are paramount.  Leadership is not just about being in a leadership position. It is about how individuals lead in terms of behaviour and what people choose to accept and call out.  Everyone can be a leader by acting against disrespectful behaviour. |
| Priority 5 – Education and training  Education pathways into building and construction occupations are complex and confusing. This impacts the number of school leavers and mature women entering the industry.  To help navigate the pathways expert advice will be sought to ensure the actions compliment the work being undertaking at both a national and state level in the education and training sector. | **Priority 4 – Education and training**  No change to text. |

Participants suggested that numbering the priority areas was confusing as it inferred a ranking process of importance and guided the priority and timing of the work. Removing the numbering was suggested.

While Priority 1 – Economic Equity addresses casual employment, women's access to high-quality, secure jobs is not addressed. This needs to be included in this priority area as it is essential for the retention of women in the long term. Additionally, it was suggested to consider in more detail what flexible workplace arrangements would mean for smaller/medium-sized businesses within the construction ecosystem.

### 3.8 Action Plan

#### 3.8.1 Positive: Financial incentives

Participants recognised the value of financially incentivising employers to attract and recruit women, both schoolgirls and mature-age apprentices, into construction through:

* The development of a coordination body between main contractors, schools, Registered Training Organisations (RTOS) and the Education Department.
* Scholarships for mature-age apprentices.

#### 3.8.2 Opportunities: Changes/Additional Items to the Action Plan

The following list presents the additional items and changes to existing actions in the Draft Action Plan:

* While participants valued the development of a module on safe, respectful and inclusive workplaces for inclusion in the school curriculum, education experts should develop this work.
* Actions encouraging all genders to take paid parental leave are a necessary inclusion to challenge gendered work stereotypes.
* The creation of a contact person at work for women.
* The development of respect training within construction-related training packages.
* Embedding workplace wellbeing and respect training into white card training and toolbox talks.
* The development of training for managers and clear return to work post-childbirth programs.
* Accelerated career development programs for women into leadership positions.
* Development of best practice case studies because many workplaces have the best intentions, but they lack the ideas and time to develop these.
* Develop an overarching body coordinating industry and schools, providing a structured and coordinated approach. The Department of Education may be best placed to achieve this initiative.
* Use of VR to promote trades to schoolgirls and parents.
* Financial incentives for builders to train women entering the industry from other sectors to offset training costs, given the tight project margins.
* Initiatives to increase capacity around women's understanding of what they can expect and reasonably ask for regarding legislation and workplace rights.
* Improved data collection systems to capture information about women entering and working in the industry, specifically regarding numbers, role, and gendered violence.
* Benchmarking outcomes of quantitative-based initiatives of the Strategy and Action Plan to enable transparency and reporting of progress by organisations.
* Annual reporting of outcomes associated with the Action Plan that sits within a long-term action framework.
* Register of organisations’ performance against the Strategy and its objectives so that companies have a list of good and poor performing sub-contractors.
* Identification of upcoming skill needs of the industry and the career paths that lead to these jobs.
* Government owned Group Training Organisational which incorporates a training scheme for women.
* Work experience program for schoolgirls and mature age women with builders.
* Research piece to capture the number of women leaving the industry and why.

#### 3.8.2 Opportunities: Targets

Participants suggested that rather than having a long list of targets, one ambitious target at the beginning of the Strategy written into the Minister's message stating "this is where the situation is, and this is where we want to be" would communicate the intention for the Strategy and incentivise participation from all stakeholders. Overarching targets of 40% men, 40% women and 20% other were suggested.

Sitting underneath each Priority Area, a specific target or actions should be set related to how these over-arching targets would be achieved; these targets would then enable the outcomes of the Final Strategy to be measured, reported, and inform future action in subsequent Action Plans.