

Gender Economic Equality Study

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Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) has identified ‘electricians’ as an occupation experiencing a shortage below economy-wide average.¹ As the skilled trade responsible for installing and maintaining electrification assets, the current skills shortage will be exacerbated if we do not immediately address the issue. JSA’s “preliminary modelling shows we will need approximately 26,000 to 42,000 more electricians in the next seven years, and the clean energy supply workforce will likely need to grow from approximately 53,000 workers today to 84,000 by 2050.”²

A key solution to alleviating electrical skills shortage pressures is to boost female participation. The industry remains heavily male-dominated, with men making up 97 per cent of the industry’s workforce³; significantly higher than the 51 per cent average across all occupations.⁴ Gender diversity issues within the industry are deeply rooted and requires systemic change. Increasing the number of women in trades across Australia is essential, not only to help address the skills shortage but also to bring diverse perspectives and approaches to the industry. However, we must do so in a way that does not take female workers from smaller businesses or create negative experiences for women in our sector.

To address the construction and electrical industries’ longstanding gender imbalance it is essential for the industry to adapt workplaces and operations to better support female workers, prioritising their safety, well-being, and mental health. Creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment is crucial to encouraging greater female participation.

Driving Issues

Education & Perceptions

To drive sustainable and systemic change in perceptions of female participation in the electrical industry and enhance the skilled labour pool, initiatives must target societal attitudes including at secondary school.

MEA advocates for better integration of Electrotechnology into the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) framework. This approach would expose more students to the electrical industry without restricting them to either higher education or Vocational Education and Training (VET) careers. For example, by establishing an ‘Electrotechnology’ course that counts towards both ATAR and introductory units for Cert III qualifications, we can foster greater participation in trades including amongst women, shift perceptions of the ‘stereotypical’ electrical worker, and ultimately increase female involvement in the industry.

¹ Jobs and Skills Australia “Skills Priority List” *Australian Government* < [Skills Priority List](#) | [Jobs and Skills Australia](#) >

² Jobs and Skills Australia “The Clean Energy Generation Workforce needs for a net zero economy” [3 October 2023] *Australian Government* <[the_clean_energy_generation.pdf](#)>

³ Euan Black “Energy transition needs more women, says Jobs and Skills head” *Australian Financial Review* [14 August 2024] <[Gender equality: Skills boss Barney Glover says the energy transition needs more women \(afr.com\)](#)>

⁴ “WHS Profile: Electricians” *SafeWork Australia* <[WHS Profile: Electricians](#) | [dataswa \(safeworkaustralia.gov.au\)](#)>

Increasing the Female Talent Available

Larger contractors with reporting obligations, tender targets or government quotas are able to offer higher wages to attract female workers from smaller businesses, leaving those small businesses facing high staff turnover rates which is disruptive and costly. It is quite common in the electrical contracting sector for large businesses to attract 3rd and 4th year apprentices from small businesses. This has the impact that a small business has trained the apprentice for two years, during which time they require constant direct supervision (taking the time of a qualified electrician as well as the apprentice), only to lose the apprentice when they become more productive.

Initiatives should not incentive apprentices being 'poached' from smaller businesses (or at least that the smaller businesses be compensated for training the apprentice during the initial stages of apprenticeship) especially as we see an increase in policy discussion of 'female quotas' for government projects. We want to grow the pool of women working in trade-based roles, not see contractors fight over an existing small pool of female workers.

Female Amenities

Construction sites may not have access to facilities that accommodate different toiletry needs, and this can pose challenges for female workers. In particular -

- **Limited Guaranteed Access to Clean Toilets** - Toilet amenities often present significant barriers for women, including issues related to hygiene, privacy, and access. Insufficient access to clean, private, and easily available toilet facilities (with sanitary product storage and disposal) can deter women from pursuing a career in electrical trades. This issue is especially prevalent on construction sites.
- **Medical Implications** - Females who lack access to a toilet may train their bladders to hold urine for extended periods. "Holding your urine for extremely long periods of time can weaken the bladder muscles and lead to problems such as urinary incontinence, which is the involuntary leakage of urine. It can also cause bacteria to multiply, which may lead to urinary tract infections (UTIs)."⁵ Additionally, the risk of kidney disease increases. To manage the need to urinate on-site, some women might reduce their liquid intake, which can lead to risks associated with dehydration.

We also note that women might choose to hold their urine not only for privacy reasons but also due to practical considerations. For instance, accessing a toilet might require them to pack up their tools and leave the site, which can be cumbersome and time-consuming.

- **Birth Implications** - Women who have given birth may experience "stress incontinence," a condition where weakened pelvic muscles lead to a more frequent and urgent need to urinate. This condition can make access to toilet facilities even more critical for managing bladder health effectively.

⁵ "What Will Happen To Your Body If You Hold Your pee For Too Long?" [TheHealthSite.com](https://www.thehealthsite.com/health-tips/what-will-happen-to-your-body-if-you-hold-your-pee-for-too-long/) < [Why you shouldn't hold your pee for too long?](https://www.thehealthsite.com/health-tips/why-you-shouldn-t-hold-your-pee-for-too-long/) | [TheHealthSite.com](https://www.thehealthsite.com/) | [TheHealthSite.com](https://www.thehealthsite.com/)>

Assistance for smaller businesses to provide additional toilet facilities for female workers should be prioritised.

Inclusion in the workplace

“Studies show that women report that gender discrimination is the main reason for leaving an apprenticeship”⁶. This is exacerbated by “inadequate corporate or governance processes to raise gender-based workplace discrimination”⁷.

We cannot expect to increase female participation in the electrical industry if women do not feel comfortable or safe. With the current lack of diversity in the electrical industry, women may hesitate to raise issues, fearing social isolation at work.

Employers are responsible to ensure that employees respect all diversities and maintain a workplace where everyone feels safe and comfortable. Additionally, providing clear, confidential reporting and discussion channels between female employees and supervisors/managers can help address these concerns.

Small business employers may struggle to find the resources to implement measures to improve inclusion in the workplace. We call on governments to provide funding and support for small businesses to implement processes and training for employers and supervising staff to create more inclusive workplaces.

All employees must be educated in their obligation to raise concerns about gender discrimination, bullying or harassment in the workplace. Governments should also establish dedicated trained staff within work health safety regulators to receive complaints, offer advice and provide education to workers and business owners.

Training for supervisors of apprentices

MEA advocates for additional education for those supervising apprentices, including handling communication and mental health challenges and how to create a more inclusive workplace. This education is also important for those delivering the Cert III courses.

Policy Solutions

While there is no single solution to addressing the attraction and retention of female apprentices, MEA recommends the following initiatives to increase female participation in the electrical industry:

- **Apprenticeship Grants** - The Federal Government could introduce “female electrical apprentice grants” to encourage increased female participation. Female electrical apprentices could receive 50 per cent of the grant at the start of an apprenticeship and the remaining 50 per cent upon its completion. This structure ensures that the grant supports long-term commitment and reduces the risk of misuse, while the initial payment helps offset any deterrent from waiting for the full funding at the end of the four-year apprenticeship.

⁶ “Workforce Plan 2024” Powering Skills Organisation Ltd [2024], at 41 <[Workforce-Plan-Report_2024_Final.pdf \(poweringskills.com.au\)](#)>

⁷ *Ibid.*

- **Employer Grants** - The Federal Government could offer incentives to employers who hire and retain female electricians for a certain period. This incentive is preferable to mandatory procurement quotas, as it encourages employers to improve recruitment practices and working conditions to attract and retain female employees, growing the pool of women in the sector rather than competing over a limited pool. Where female apprenticeship targets are included in government procurement, this could be specifically aimed at 1st year apprentices.
- **Secondary School Education** - MEA advocates for better integration of Vocational Educational Training within the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) framework as a crucial measure to sustainably address the electrical industry's skills shortage and enhance diversity. While some students may undertake a Cert II or III VET Electrotechnology course during high school – and we do not propose removing that option - additional efforts are needed in the secondary school curriculum to provide greater exposure to students interested in energy generation and technology. MEA suggests a senior schooling subject be developed as “Electrotechnology”, as an ATAR scaled subject, with a curriculum that includes renewable energy technology as well as covering the content of the introductory units of the Cert III in electrotechnology. MEA believes this initiative could drive societal and systemic change towards the perception of the electrical trade and increasing diversity of apprentices and workers in the electrotechnology industry.
- **RTO Trainers** - More female trainers, as well as providing training in mental health awareness and/or ‘accidental counsellor’ training would benefit both trainer and students.
- **Wage Subsidies for Mature-Age Female Apprentices** – Subsidies to attract ‘mature-age’ female apprentices into trade roles, including mothers wanting to re-enter the workforce.
- **Cultural Change Initiatives** – It is imperative that workplaces have inclusive and positive cultures for the women joining them, so they communicate a positive experience to friends and associates and hopefully encourage other women to start a trade-based role. Measures to improve the understanding of all workers of their obligations to be inclusive and respectful of everyone at work are necessary. This could start with additional requirements in White Card training, and include funded non-accredited education for those supervising apprentices.
- **Amenities Funding** – Subsidise female toilet facilities on worksites.
- **Support Packages** - We advocate for government support for products like the [Go-Pack](#) which provide women with a solution for managing their personal needs. This may include awareness and subsidies for access to such products, as they are fundamental necessities. For women with conditions like

endometriosis, managing periods can be particularly costly, and substantial quantities of hygienic storage solutions for 'on-the-go' jobs can become financially burdensome.

Conclusion

Gender segregation in the electrical industry is a deep-rooted issue that demands systemic change through targeted policy initiatives. Increasing female participation is crucial to addressing the industry's skills shortage, making it essential to implement policies that remove barriers and support both attraction and retention in the trade.

MEA has identified several key issues to achieving greater diversity in the electrical trade. To address these challenges, MEA has proposed a range of solutions aimed at fostering innovation and providing financial incentives to encourage more women to pursue electrical careers.

MEA looks forward to JSA's findings from its Gender Economic Equality Study and are welcome further discussion on addressing the gender diversity problem within the construction industry.