

WOMEN AND GIRLS INTO NON-TRADITIONAL OCCUPATIONS AND INDUSTRIES: BROADENING CAREER OPTIONS FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

School-based strategies actively encouraging girls and young women to explore careers in non-traditional occupations

eS4W is a National Women's Alliance that aims to inform actions to increase female participation in non-traditional occupations and industries. eS4W is concerned about the impact of gender segregation in the labour force on women's lifetime earnings.

As a result of research undertaken for the Alliance by WAVE, eS4W has concluded that intervention in the career choices of young Australian women is crucial to achieving better employment outcomes and long-term financial security for individual women, as well as increased rates of women's workforce participation, especially in the non-traditional occupations and industries and improved gender equity in Australian workplaces.

Overview

The report on the research identifies components of best-practice career guidance that can lead to expanded opportunities for the participation of women in the workforce and increased participation of women in high-income, in-demand Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) careers.

The research explored current models of careers' exploration available to young Australian women, particularly in relation to study and career choices in STEM and other non-traditional occupations and industries.

What we're doing well

Innovative careers' exploration practices in Australian schools have resulted in good outcomes for girls and young women in STEM. The research underpinning this report demonstrates the value of the following approaches:

- Industry-led schools' partnership strategies that invite and support career exploration by young women, as well as long-term female participation in STEM and non-traditional occupations, careers and industries
- Highly visible female role models and mentors from STEM and other non-traditional occupations and industries are crucial to broadening the career aspirations and expectations of young women
- Promotion of support networks for young women in STEM and non-traditional workplaces are important, whether workplace-based or via networks of women in STEM and non-traditional careers
- Provision of low-stakes' career exploration opportunities for girls and young women to 'taste' and experience non-traditional and STEM roles and occupations prior to and during their senior secondary years of schooling
- Staged career exploration opportunities early in girls' schooling that encourage reflection on their skills and interests, while exploring relevant options in a broad range of occupations, industries and workplaces. This will help young women make informed choices about their future
- Widespread partnerships between schools, educational institutions, industries and communities to assist girls and young women to access non-traditional and STEM study and work placement opportunities that advance their career aspirations.

What's holding young women back from STEM and non-traditional occupations

Research undertaken for this report, in conjunction with research conducted elsewhere, indicates that a number of significant factors are limiting the subject and career choices of Australian girls and young women. These limitations impact negatively not only on the long-term future of individual women, but also on the Australian economy.

Employment options for young women are limited by factors that range from persistent stereotyping to negative perceptions about and experiences of young women in non-traditional occupations.

Key insights from the research include:

- At the Australian Science and Mathematics School in South Australia - where girls are enrolled on the basis of their ability and passion for STEM, and comprise 40 per cent of the school population - girls' enrolments have not advanced past 23 per cent in Physics and 14 per cent in Specialist Maths
- Gender stereotyping and perceptions about subjects and career options 'suitable' for young women are often reinforced in schools and families. Such stereotyping impacts negatively on the career choices of young women and creates barriers to increasing young women's participation in STEM and non-traditional occupations
- Negative experiences and/or perceptions of the adverse nature of male-dominated workplace cultures discourage young women from participating in STEM and non-traditional careers
- It is widely perceived by professionals in the careers' industry that current models of careers' guidance are 'gender blind'. In fact, the statistical reality is that discrimination is inherent in gender-blind careers' programs
- Careers' exploration activities cannot be successful when they fail to respond to existing interests and capabilities of young women.

The National interest

A National Careers' Guidance Strategy that addresses the participation of women in STEM and non-traditional jobs, careers and industries would align nicely with current national commitments to and concerns about gender equality, women's economic empowerment, their skills development and workforce participation.

It is worth noting that in the construction, mining, and utilities industries, women account for around 12 per cent, 15 per cent, and 23 per cent of employees respectively. Recent figures suggest that increasing women's employment rates could boost Australia's GDP by 11 per cent (Broderick, 2013).

Recommendations

To advance the ideal of gender equity in the Australian workforce - as well as the long-term economic well-being of Australian women individually and the national economy generally - eS4W recommends

1. The Federal Government commission the development of a model for best practice careers' guidance for secondary school girls, and that this model build on elements of successful programs from Australia and around the world.
2. That highly visible female role models and mentors from STEM and other non-traditional occupations and industries - who are crucial to broadening the career aspirations and expectations of young women - be included in the development of this model.
3. That promotion of support networks for young women in STEM and non-traditional workplaces be recognised as integral to future strategies.
4. The facilitation and development of widespread partnerships between schools, educational institutions, industries and communities to assist girls and young women to access non-traditional and STEM study and work placement opportunities, in order to advance career aspirations, choices and outcomes for Australian women.