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RESPONSE TO JOBS AND SKILLS AUSTRALIA GENDER EQUALITY STUDY CONSULTATION PAPER



A response from Women in Adult and Vocational
Education (WAVE)

Acknowledgement

Women in Vocational and Adult Education (WAVE) acknowledge the traditional owners of our lands and waters – the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples – who are the first educators and the first teachers of this land.

We pay our respects to elders, past present and emerging and recognise that these lands and waters have never been ceded.

We support truth, treaty and reconciliation and the Uluru Statement of the Heart.

Always was, always will be Aboriginal land.

Endorsement – National Women’s Equality Alliance (NWEA)



The National Women’s Equality Alliance (NWEA) endorses this submission from Women in Vocational Education (WAVE) to the Jobs and Skills Australia Gender Equality Study consultation.

The NWEA, established as part of the Working with Women Alliance, is one of the five National Women’s Alliances that play a key role in ensuring women’s voices are central in policy development processes by providing evidence-based, intersectional gender equality advice. NWEA aims to connect the sector, experts, government and individuals with a shared vision to ensure and advance women’s equality and leadership.

Gender segregation across work, education, skills and training is persistent and harmful, leading to gendered pay gaps, superannuation gaps, wealth gaps and increasing risks of poverty and housing precarity or homelessness for older women. We urgently need systems reform to ensure a more equitable and inclusive workforce.

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WHO IS WAVE?

WAVE is a national network of women involved in Vocational Education and Training (VET) and adult education. WAVE provides research, policy advice and advocacy to Australian and State/Territory Governments on gender equity in skills and adult education policy and provides input into T/VET and adult education regionally and internationally. We are supported within each state by local representatives who, in turn, contribute collaboratively to national events and governance. Formed in 1985 WAVE is the first and only national independent, non-government organisation for Australian women and girls in the adult, community and vocational education and training sector/s.

Our mission is to advocate so that Australia's vocational education and training and adult education systems are equitable for all women and girls. Our vision is for a future where women and girls in all their diversity can participate fully in all aspects of work and democratic society, through equitable and transformative vocational and adult education.

Our Way of Working

WAVE undertakes its work within a feminist framework recognising that intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation can impact a person's capacity to access and benefit from Australia's vocational and adult education system/s. As such, WAVE is keenly aware of the importance of centring lived experience in our work. We advocate for the vocational and adult education system to enhance its inclusivity, relevance and affordability for those who may be left behind to provide a coherent voice for under-represented, vulnerable and marginalised groups.

The transformative power of inclusive education, training and lifelong learning that centre gender equity is at the core of WAVE's values.

As leaders in the areas of gender equity and vocational and adult education, WAVE is uniquely placed to provide expert advice to Australian and State/Territory Governments on ways that these systems can be equitable for all Australians. We can provide partners, members and stakeholders with deep understanding of the last 40 years of evidence in VET and adult education and gender equity from Theory of Change to Theory of Action and monitoring and evaluation of results.

We work in collaboration and in partnership with organisations, leaders and communities that share an appreciation of the breadth of challenges associated with gender inequity, especially as they relate to Australia's national adult education and skills system/s.

WAVE's mission is to partner with organisations and individuals with a shared commitment to social justice in the co-production of sound research and advocacy to benefit both Australia's adult, vocational education and skills training system and especially those who learn and work in it.

Summary of our response to the consultation paper

Vocational Education and Training (VET) is a critical site for intervention for gender economic equality, with the potential to drive transformative change in gender equality across education, training, and employment. Women comprise over 50% of Australia's population: the time has well past for the traditional 'fix women'/'the women problem' approaches to equity. For sustainable outcomes, interventions to achieve gender equality must be both central to planning, resourcing & delivery of all skills related policies and also integrated consistently across the breadth of VET/skills system.

Research over many decades provides evidence of that persistence of gendered occupational segregation in Australia demands bold, systemic reforms rather than fragmented policy responses. By embedding intersectionality, addressing structural biases, and rethinking the valuation of work and of 'skill', Australia can move towards a fairer, more inclusive, and economically sustainable labour market.

TRENDS AND PATTERNS CHARACTERISING AUSTRALIA'S GENDER-SEGREGATED LABOUR MARKET

Australia's labour market exhibits persistent and entrenched patterns of gender segregation that have remained remarkably stable despite many decades of awareness, recommendations and various policy initiatives¹. Analysis of Australian labour market data reveals that the distribution of men and women across different sectors has shown little substantive change over the past three decades. A 2021 study using ABS Labour Force Survey and Census data found that segregation remains "stubbornly persistent throughout the Australian labour market," presenting ongoing challenges to economic equality².

Pronounced Horizontal and Vertical Segregation

The most visible pattern of the above is pronounced horizontal segregation, with women heavily overrepresented in feminised sectors such as aged care, early childhood education, healthcare, retail, and hospitality, while men dominate industries like construction, manufacturing, mining, and energy. This segregation has intensified in some sectors over time, rather than diminishing. Data from the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) shows that the construction industry has seen a decline in female representation from 14% in 1998 to just 12% in 2018, while female representation in health care and social assistance increased from 77% to 79% over the same period³.

Vertical segregation is equally prevalent, with women underrepresented in leadership and senior positions across most industries. Even in feminised sectors where women form the majority of the workforce, men often occupy a disproportionate number of senior roles. This pattern further contributes to wage disparities and limited career advancement opportunities for women.

¹ Butler, E, & Ferrier, F. (2022-2023), *A fair go for all? Equity frameworks and landmark documents in Australian vocational education and training*, VET Knowledge Bank, NCVET, Adelaide.

<https://www.voced.edu.au/vet-knowledge-bank-landmark-documents-equity-access-historical-overview>

² Lind, G., & Colquhoun, R. (2021). Analysis of gender segregation within detailed occupations and industries in Australia. *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, 24(1), 47–69.

https://ajle.org/index.php/ajle_home/article/view/28

³ Committee for Economic Development of Australia. (2023, January 30). *Segregation getting worse in key industries despite growing female workforce: CEDA*.

<https://www.ceda.com.au/newsandresources/mediareleases/workforce-skills/segregation-getting-worse-in-key-industries-despit>

Economic Implications and Compounding Disadvantages

Segregation has cascading impacts on economic outcomes. Feminised industries typically feature lower wages, higher rates of casualisation, and fewer opportunities for advancement. The veterinary profession provides a stark example - despite women comprising 80% of graduates and 60% of practitioners by 2016⁴, female veterinarians earn an average of \$78,176 annually compared to \$112,950 for male veterinarians – a gap of 44.4%, which is more than three times the national average gender pay gap of 14.2%.

Male-dominated industries tend to receive greater funding, more robust workplace protections, and better-structured career pathways. This creates additional barriers for women's participation and progression in these sectors. Research demonstrates the gendered patterns in government VET investment, where women's learning is funded less, while women's personal debt load from educating themselves is higher than men⁵.⁶ The wicked reality is that this disparity in funding and debt creates a double disadvantage for women seeking to advance their skills and careers. On this point, WAVE also ask if Fee Free TAFE has established itself as a policy to create sustainable equity, including recommending that government undertake a gender impact assessment to understand if it is addressing the drivers of gender segregated learning and work pathways.

Structural and Cultural Barriers

High attrition rates for women in non-traditional fields perpetuate workforce segregation. Recent Australian research has highlighted the safety concerns and negative experiences of women in male-dominated trades. Studies consistently demonstrate the psychosocial risks women face in male-dominated workplaces, along with substantial barriers to their participation in these sectors. The Australian Human Rights Commission and state Occupational Health and Safety regulators frequently highlight how intersecting factors—including gender, age, geographic isolation, and

⁴ Animal Emergency Service. (2020, June 3). *Women 'Slaying' it in the veterinary industry*. Animal Emergency Service. <https://animalemergencyservice.com.au/blog/women-in-the-veterinary-industry/>

⁵ West, T. (2019). *Women pay their way on income contingent student debt*. *Policy Futures in Education*, 18(2), 260–278. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210319895182>

⁶ Warburton, M. (2023). *Gender, equity and policy neglect in student financing of tertiary education*. Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne. <https://doi.org/10.26188/22114829>

workplace culture—increase the risks of sexual harassment and gendered violence in these settings^{7 8}.

Many workplaces fail to provide the necessary structures to support women's career advancement and retention. The Women's Economic Equality Taskforce report highlights that "strong industry and occupational gender segregation persists" with women "largely working in the same jobs they did 35 years ago," with only 46.5% of employees working in what could be described as "gender-mixed" industries⁹.

Systemic Reinforcement Through Education and Training

The VET system often reinforces rather than challenges these patterns. The corresponding gendered patterns of engagement and outcomes across VET with this labour market segregation remain hidden by the extremely limited publication of disaggregated VET data, despite the collection of such data. Women's representation across VET pathways mirrors the broader gender-segregated labour market, with female students remaining concentrated in traditionally "feminised" educational pathways¹⁰. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle where educational choices reinforce existing labour market patterns, which in turn influence future students' educational choices.

Gender scholars and researchers argue that this ongoing segregation should be understood not as the core challenge to be addressed, but rather as a symptom of persistent underlying inequity and discrimination—the actual problem to be solved. As noted in submissions to the Productivity Commission, addressing these patterns requires recognizing how gendered occupational segregation reflects deeper structural issues within Australia's education and employment systems¹¹. These systemic

⁷ Australian Human Rights Commission. (n.d.). *What causes workplace sexual harassment?* Retrieved October 6, 2024, from <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/positive-duty-sex-discrimination-act>

⁸ Worksafe Victoria. (n.d.). *Work-related gendered violence including sexual harassment*. Retrieved January 10, 2025, from <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/gendered-violence>

⁹ Women's Economic Equality Taskforce. (n.d.). *Women's Economic Equality Taskforce final report*. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/resource/download/womens-economic-equality-taskforce-final-report.pdf>

¹⁰ Butler, E. (2007). *Towards a sustainable economic future: Women and vocational education and training*. Security4Women. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/153067884>
https://wave.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/WAVE-towards-a-sustainable-future_women-and-education2007.pdf

¹¹ Butler, E. (2007). *Towards a sustainable economic future: Women and vocational education and training*. Security4Women. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/153067884>
https://wave.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/WAVE-towards-a-sustainable-future_women-and-education2007.pdf

challenges require transformative approaches rather than surface-level interventions if meaningful change is to be achieved.

The Social Construction of Skill and Structural Barriers

The persistence of occupational segregation points to deep structural and cultural barriers beyond individual choices^{12 13}. The analysis in the Australian Journal of Labour Economics identifies three key challenges presented by this segregation¹⁴:

1. Constraining individuals' labour supply choices
2. Limiting women's earning potential
3. Hampering overall labour market efficiency and flexibility

Research indicates that the very construction of "skill" itself is gendered, with feminised skills often undervalued. As Blackmore (1992) notes, "Women's work has therefore generally been stereotyped and statistically and legally categorized as unskilled as much because they have lacked the industrial strength to define it otherwise and not due to any real difference in actual content or technical knowledge."¹⁵ This undervaluation has been systematically embedded in Australia's skills recognition framework.

The economic consequences for women are significant and well-documented.¹⁶ To further the previous example of Veterinary Science sector, research involving the Australian Veterinary Association revealed that "irrespective of the level of experience or number of hours worked, the females in the study earned less than their male counterparts"¹⁷. This suggests that feminisation of an occupation does not necessarily lead to economic parity. In fact, further research tells us that unless the social context, norms and attitudes are addressed then any work to create gender diverse workforces will result in negative outcomes for women, including – as can be seen in Vet Sciences –

¹² Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA). (2019, April 19). *Gender segregation in Australia's workforce*. WGEA. <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gender-segregation-in-australias-workforce>

¹³ Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee. (2017). *Gender segregation in the workplace and its impact on women's economic equality*. Commonwealth of Australia. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Finance_and_Public_Administrati on/Gendersegregation

¹⁴ Cassells, R., Duncan, A., & Mavisakalyan, A. (2021). Analysis of gender segregation within detailed occupations and industries in Australia. *The Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, 24(1), 47–70. https://ajle.org/index.php/ajle_home/article/view/28

¹⁵ Blackmore, J. (1992). The gendering of skill and vocationalism in twentieth-century Australian education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 7(4), 351–377. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093920070402>

¹⁶ Please see Workplace Gender Equality Agency Data Portal and Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector

¹⁷ Tufvesson, A. (2022, March 21). *The gender pay gap*. Vet Practice Magazine. <https://www.vetpracticemag.com.au/the-gender-pay-gap/>

reduction in remuneration when women move into higher paid previously male dominated roles¹⁸.

CEDA's research concludes that "while many social, historical and economic factors have driven this segregation, many of the remaining barriers to change are cultural – whether at the government, workplace or individual level"¹⁹. A key structural barrier identified is rigid workplace structures that insist on fixed hours, locations, and attendance modes, which further entrench occupational segregation.

The Role of VET in Reinforcing Gendered Patterns

The Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector plays a complex role in either reinforcing or potentially addressing occupational segregation. Despite women's increasing participation in VET programs, this engagement does not consistently translate to improved labour market outcomes or reduced segregation in employment²⁰.

Women's representation across VET pathways mirrors the broader gender-segregated labour market, with female students remaining concentrated in traditionally "feminised" educational pathways. This creates a concerning cycle where educational choices reinforce existing labour market patterns, which in turn influence future students' educational choices.

Research by Butler and Ferrier highlights how VET policy architecture, particularly through credentialing frameworks, has codified gendered assumptions about skill. Training packages and qualifications, despite appearing gender-neutral, often embed and reproduce gendered concepts of work that systematically disadvantage women. These frameworks tend to reflect an implicit default student who is young, male, able-bodied, capable of full-time work and study, and oriented toward trade or blue-collar work environments^{21 22}.

¹⁸ Pan, J. (2015). *Gender segregation in occupations: The role of tipping and social interactions*. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 33(2), 365–408. <https://doi.org/10.1086/678518>

¹⁹ Committee for Economic Development of Australia. (2023, January 30). *Segregation getting worse in key industries despite growing female workforce: CEDA*. <https://www.ceda.com.au/newsandresources/mediareleases/workforce-skills/segregation-getting-worse-in-key-industries-despit>

²⁰ Butler, E. (2007). *Towards a sustainable economic future: Women and vocational education and training*. Security4Women. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/153067884>
https://wave.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/WAVE-towards-a-sustainable-future_women-and-education2007.pdf

²¹ Butler, E., & Ferrier, F. (2000). 'Don't be too polite, girls!': women, work and vocational education and training: a critical review of the literature'. NCVET, Adelaide
<https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/dont-be-too-polite-girls!-women,-work-and-vocational-education-and-training-a-critical-review-of-the-literature>

The evidence also indicates concerning economic consequences for women in VET. Research using the HILDA Survey (2002-2014) found that while women generally had less student debt than men overall, women with low incomes carried more debt²³.

Research by Estévez-Abe²⁴ reveals that "apprenticeship based vocational training is particularly disadvantageous to women" especially in skill-specific systems that fail to account for gendered realities such as care responsibilities and safety concerns. When vocational skills are required at job entry, one should expect higher values on male-dominated occupations, creating systemic barriers for women. This helps explain why gender segregation persists in Australia's VET system despite numerous policy initiatives.

Policy Efforts and Their Impact

Recent policy initiatives have attempted to address persistent patterns of segregation with mixed results. Programs such as the Building Women's Careers Program aim to establish partnerships to drive structural and cultural change in traditionally male-dominated industries like construction, clean energy, advanced manufacturing, and technology²⁵. However, implementation of previous broader policy frameworks like "Women: Shaping our Future" has been described as "disappointing on a national level" in terms of actual implementation²⁶.

The evidence suggests that while policy recognition of the issue exists, translating frameworks into effective action remains challenging. The persistence of segregation despite various policy initiatives indicates that addressing this complex issue requires more than isolated programs. As noted in submissions on women and VET, "policy measures that aim to strengthen the economic outcomes from education and training for women under a rubric of continuous improvement will not only assist in diminishing

²² Butler, E., & Ferrier, F. (2006). Asking difficult (feminist) questions: The case of 'disappearing' women and policy problematics in Australian VET'. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 58(4), 577-601. DOI <https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820601007665>

²³ West, T. (2019). 'Women pay their way on income contingent student debt'. *Policy Futures in Education*, 18(2), 260–278. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210319895182>

²⁴ Estévez-Abe, M. (2005). Gender bias in skills and social policies: The varieties of capitalism perspective on sex segregation. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, Volume 12, Issue 2, Summer 2005, Pages 180–215, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxi011>

²⁵ Department of Industry, Science and Resources. (n.d.). *Building Women's Careers Program*. Business.gov.au. <https://business.gov.au/grants-and-programs/building-womens-careers-program>

²⁶ Butler, E. (2007). *Towards a sustainable economic future: Women and vocational education and training*. Security4Women. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/153067884> https://wave.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/WAVE-towards-a-sustainable-future_women-and-education2007.pdf

entrenched and systemic disadvantage experienced by some women but, will also enhance the potential for sustainable economic futures for many"²⁷.

Much of Australian VET policy has focused on what gender scholars term a "fixing women" approach - addressing perceived deficits in women rather than transforming the systems that create barriers. These approaches include targeting funding for women in entry-level work, categorising all women as disadvantaged, promoting male-dominated trades to women without addressing workplace safety issues, and offering "try a trade" programs without sustainable pathways to full apprenticeships²⁸.

As Ely and Meyerson argue, these interventions reflect a "traditional approach" that "puts the onus of change and the blame for inequality on women themselves." Such approaches are underpinned by a deficit model that holds the assumption that women are somehow "broken" and need fixing, rather than addressing the underlying structural barriers. At best, the outcomes achieved through such approaches are "minimal" - "While better education has unquestionably increased the number of eligible women in 'the pipeline', and training programs have helped women develop valuable skills and play the game as well as - or better than - many men, the glass ceiling persists"²⁹.

Successful Policy Models and Case Studies

Addressing Australia's deeply entrenched patterns of occupational segregation requires drawing on and consistently utilising evidence-based approaches that have demonstrated success in similar contexts. Several promising models offer pathways forward:

1. **Application of Gender Impact Assessments:** Systematic application of GIAs in workforce planning, development, skills, and VET policy has shown potential to identify unintended consequences before implementation. This preventative approach helps ensure that new policies don't inadvertently reinforce existing patterns of segregation.
2. **Community of Practice Models:** Capacity-building initiatives that bring together industry, education providers, and equity specialists have proven effective in addressing intersectional inequities. These collaborative approaches

²⁷ Butler, E. (2007). *Towards a sustainable economic future: Women and vocational education and training*. Security4Women. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/153067884>
https://wave.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/WAVE-towards-a-sustainable-future_women-and-education2007.pdf

²⁸ Butler, E., & Ferrier, F. (2000). *Don't be too polite, girls!: women, work and vocational education and training: a critical review of the literature*. NCVET, Adelaide
<https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/dont-be-too-polite-girls!-women,-work-and-vocational-education-and-training-a-critical-review-of-the-literature>

²⁹ Ely, R. J., & Meyerson, D. E. (2000). 'Theories of Gender in Organizations: A New Approach to Organizational Analysis and Change', *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, (22, 103-151).
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191308500220042>

enable knowledge sharing and consistent application of best practices across sectors.

3. **Industry-Backed Initiatives in partnership with Gender Expertise with the long term in mind:** Programs with strong industry support that utilises and recognises gender equity and intersectional expertise planning for outcomes over 5 to 10 years (as opposed to 1 to 2 years) to target transformational change across key gender equality indicators (including recruitment, retention, flexible work arrangements, and pay gap reduction) have demonstrated sustainable impacts, particularly when they include accountability measures. The systemic approach delivered better returns to transformational outcomes than the approach based on one or two short term initiatives.
4. **Government-Funded Programs:** The reality is that Australia still has far to go in gender mainstreaming being sustainable through competitive markets. Whilst the evidence for the value of and return to diversity is prevalent, the work to change the “ways of work” and cultural settings to achieve a “tipping point” still requires government leadership. Targeted initiatives with transparent evaluation frameworks provide valuable insights into effective intervention strategies. Expanding and scaling up successful pilots with demonstrated outcomes in increasing women's participation in non-traditional sectors offers a data-driven approach to reform.

EDUCATION, SKILLS, AND TRAINING DIVIDES

The manifestation of gender segregation across Australia's education and training system perpetuates broader labour market inequities. The education and training landscape continues to reinforce gender bias, directing women toward lower-paying, less secure career pathways while also creating barriers for men to access and develop skills in care-related fields. Multiple long-term analyses of education and training and career pathways of women and men demonstrate the entrenched nature of segregation that, without addressing entrenched systemic and structural behaviours norms and attitudes, will be difficult to change.^{30 31}

³⁰ Hsiung, C. (2022). Gender-Typed Skill Co-Occurrence and Occupational Sex Segregation: The Case of Professional Occupations in the United States, 2011–2015. *Gender and Society*, 36(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432221102148>

³¹ Levanon, A., & Grusky, D. B. (2016). The Persistence of Extreme Gender Segregation in the Twenty-first Century [Article]. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 122(2), 573–619. <https://doi.org/10.1086/688628>

Educational Pathways and Career Trajectories

Women in VET-related careers face persistent income disparities stemming from multiple systemic factors:

- Lower wages in feminised industries that reflect the undervaluation of work and associated skills traditionally performed by women
- Career disruptions due to caregiving responsibilities, which disproportionately affect women
- Limited pathways to senior leadership roles, even in female-dominated sectors
- Lack of structured progression opportunities for upskilling and transitioning into higher-paying roles

Barriers within the education system include inadequate flexibility to accommodate care burdens faced by women, consistent congruent and evidence-based approaches to prevent and respond well to gendered and intersectional discrimination including workplace gendered violence in learning environments, limited career pathways in non-traditional fields, and the persistence of gender stereotypes that discourage women from pursuing STEM and trades. Traditional career guidance approaches often fail to challenge gendered assumptions, perpetuating a cycle of occupational segregation.

Post-Training Retention and Advancement

Evidence suggests that many women trained in male-dominated fields eventually exit these industries due to toxic workplace cultures, workplace discrimination, inflexible work arrangements, and unsafe work environments. This pattern of attrition represents a significant loss of skilled workers and perpetuates gender segregation despite initial training efforts. In addition to this, evidence suggests that men deliberately leave feminised industry³² due to status and pay^{33 34}.

Post-training gender pay gaps persist across occupations due to systemic biases in wage structures, career progression opportunities, and industry investment. The continued undervaluation of feminised labour exacerbates financial insecurity for women over their lifetime, creating compounding disadvantages that affect retirement outcomes.

³² Block, P. (2023). Understanding the self-organization of occupational sex segregation with mobility networks. *Social Networks*, 73, 42–50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2022.12.004>

³³ Coventry, B. T. (1999). Do men leave feminizing occupations? *The Social Science Journal*, 36(1), 47–64. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0362-3319\(99\)80003-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0362-3319(99)80003-2)

³⁴ Block, P. (2023). Understanding the self-organization of occupational sex segregation with mobility networks. *Social Networks*, 73, 42–50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2022.12.004>

Note: Applying an Intersectional Lens to Adult Pedagogy

The application of an intersectional gender lens to adult pedagogy is a critical yet often overlooked element in addressing occupational segregation. While policy frameworks and funding mechanisms receive significant attention, the actual delivery of education and training requires equal consideration to ensure equitable outcomes.

Currently, the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAE40122)—the minimum qualification required for VET educators—does not provide foundational knowledge or skills for trainers and assessors to apply gender-responsive or intersectional strategies in their teaching practice. In addition to this, the regulatory and policy environment surrounding educators is not enabling or empower educators to make modifications, tailoring and support to intersecting barriers to learning can present.

This represents a significant gap in Australia's VET system, as educators are not systematically equipped to:

- Recognise and address structural barriers related to gender and other intersecting factors
- Adapt teaching methodologies to diverse student needs
- Create inclusive learning environments that support retention and success for all learners
- Challenge unconscious bias and gendered assumptions in classroom interactions

This gap is particularly pronounced in gender-dominated industries, where learners in minority continue (due to their gender, ability, language or any other characteristic) to face exclusionary cultures and barriers to participation. Without educators trained in gender-responsive and intersectional approaches to adult pedagogy, even well-designed policies aimed at increasing participation may fail to achieve lasting impact.

A comprehensive approach to gender-responsive adult pedagogy would include:

1. Embedding intersectional gender analysis in course design and materials
2. Ensuring diverse representation in learning resources and examples
3. Implementing flexible delivery models that accommodate caregiving responsibilities
4. Adopting trauma-informed approaches that recognize the impact of gender-based violence
5. Utilizing participatory learning methods that value diverse experiences and knowledge
6. Addressing financial constraints through appropriate support mechanisms

Strengthening the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment to include these elements would significantly enhance the capacity of the VET sector to foster equity and improve learner outcomes. By equipping educators with the skills to create genuinely inclusive learning environments, Australia can address not only the symptoms of occupational segregation but also some of its root causes in education and training delivery.

This pedagogical dimension should be considered an essential component of any comprehensive strategy to address gendered occupational segregation, as it represents the crucial interface between policy intention and learner experience.

FUTURE TRAJECTORIES

Based on current evidence and trends, several potential trajectories emerge for Australia's gender-segregated labour market:

1. **Status quo persistence:** Without significant intervention, the current patterns of occupational segregation are likely to continue, with certain sectors potentially becoming even more gender-segregated.
2. **Partial progress through flexible work arrangements:** Since the pandemic, flexible work arrangements have become the highest priority for Australian jobseekers, overtaking compensation. This shift presents an opportunity to address one of the significant barriers to women's participation across sectors – rigid workplace structures that insist on fixed hours, locations, and attendance modes.
3. **Gender transformative approaches:** Research suggests that addressing gender segregation requires moving beyond "fixing women" to transformative approaches that reshape systems and structures. The UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme defines these approaches as work that "address[es] the causes of gender-based inequalities and works to transform harmful gender roles, norms and power relationships". Such approaches focus on driving profound systemic change, addressing structural inequalities, advancing strategic gender interests, and valuing diverse identities.
4. **Economic consequences amplification:** Without effective intervention, the economic consequences of segregation may amplify over time, particularly as feminised sectors continue to experience wage suppression relative to male-dominated fields.
5. **Reform of skill recognition frameworks:** Future progress may depend on revising how skills are defined, recognized, and valued in Australia's VET system and broader economy. This includes addressing what Blackmore³⁵ describes as the "socially constructed" nature of skill that has historically undervalued feminised capabilities. As she notes, "Women's work has therefore generally been stereotyped and statistically and legally categorized as unskilled as much

³⁵ Blackmore, J. (1992). The gendering of skill and vocationalism in twentieth-century Australian education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 7(4), 351–377. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093920070402>

because they have lacked the industrial strength to define it otherwise and not due to any real difference in actual content or technical knowledge"³⁶.

Recommendations for Policy Development

Addressing gendered occupational segregation requires a holistic, long-term approach that simultaneously addresses cultural, structural, and economic barriers:

1. **Transformative system change:** Move beyond "fixing women" approaches to address the structural and cultural barriers embedded in Australia's VET and employment systems. This requires examining how gender biases are codified in policy frameworks, funding mechanisms, and skill definitions. As research argues³⁷, transformative practice must seek to "explicitly redress gender inequalities, remove structural barriers and empower disadvantaged populations".
2. **Education pathway reform:** Develop targeted interventions within the VET sector to disrupt gendered educational pathways, ensuring that women's high participation and completion rates translate to improved economic outcomes. Such proactive interventions are also critical to avoid and/or redress further segregation in emergent occupations and industries including technology and 'green' climate change and sustainability related innovations.
3. **Workplace structure transformation:** Promote and incentivise flexible work arrangements across all sectors, in traditionally male-dominated industries, to remove structural barriers to women's participation but also in all occupations to encourage break down of gendered roles associated with care and unpaid care work.
4. **Economic outcome monitoring:** Establish robust mechanisms to monitor and address economic and social disparities that persist even in fields that have undergone feminisation, focusing particularly on pay equity irrespective of gender representation. Develop tracking mechanisms for VET outcomes that are more robust than completion and non-completion of qualifications, but that also seek to measure the positive impact on "the ability to lead a life one has reason to value thereby implying that valuable lives may include aspects beyond mere participation in productive activities"³⁸.

³⁶ UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage. (2022). A synthesis paper on the gender transformative accelerator. <https://www.unicef.org/media/125016/file/GTA-2022-Synthesis-Report.pdf>

³⁷ MacArthur, J., Carrard, N., & Willetts, J. (2022). Gender-transformative approaches in international development: Progress and challenges. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 95, 102635

³⁸ Amartya Sen in Bonvin, J.-M. (2019). Vocational Education and Training Beyond Human Capital: A Capability Approach. In *Handbook of Vocational Education and Training*. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94532-3_5

5. **Application of gender analysis to VET policy:** Apply intersectional gender analysis to understand how seemingly neutral policies reproduce gendered inequities. This should include Training Package policies to identify and address implicit biases that may disadvantage women.
6. **Address workplace safety and culture:** Develop comprehensive strategies to address gender-based violence, harassment, and discrimination in male-dominated industries, recognising the particular risks faced by women in apprenticeships and traineeships³⁹.
7. **Long-term investment in equity initiatives:** Establish as a matter of urgency a coherent national equity strategy that embeds gender economic equality across the vocational education and skills training sector. Replace short-term grant funding with sustained investment in transformative gender work, recognising that meaningful change requires adequate resources and time.

Prioritising Intersectionality and Collaborative Approaches in Policy Design

Embedding Intersectional Frameworks

For Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) to effectively address gender segregation in the labour market, an intersectional framework must be embedded in all aspects of policy design, implementation, evaluation and reporting. This approach recognizes that women's experiences of disadvantage are shaped by overlapping identities including race, disability, socioeconomic status, age, sexuality, and geographic location.

Current approaches that categorise "women" as a homogeneous disadvantaged group fail to acknowledge the varying degrees of privilege or disadvantage experienced by different women. Instead of focusing solely on demographic cohorts, JSA should address the systemic barriers that reinforce occupational segregation and economic inequity across these intersecting dimensions.

An intersectional approach would examine how various factors compound disadvantage:

- How Indigenous women face unique barriers in education and employment pathways
- How women with disabilities navigate additional challenges in accessing appropriate training and workplace accommodations

³⁹ Heap, L. S. (2023). Preventing Gender-based Violence and Harassment at Work: A Study of the Potential of New Regulatory Approaches.

- How women in regional and remote areas contend with limited access to education, training, and employment opportunities
- How women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds encounter additional barriers related to qualification recognition and workplace inclusion
- How various factors compound disadvantage, particularly in how women carry a significantly higher debt burden for their education in Australia compared to men. This disparity becomes even more acute for women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who face substantially higher opportunity costs when building their skills.

Collaborating with Experts and Communities

Women's organisations provide essential expertise, lived experience, and evidence-based insights on gender inequality that should inform JSA's work. These organisations should be adequately resourced to contribute meaningfully to policy design, implementation, and evaluation processes. This includes:

- Establishing formal consultation mechanisms with dedicated funding to support sustained engagement
- Developing co-design approaches that integrate the perspectives of women's organizations throughout the policy development cycle
- Ensuring appropriate timelines that allow for genuine participation rather than tokenistic consultation
- Creating accountability measures to demonstrate how consultation inputs have shaped final policy outcomes

A lived experience framework should be incorporated to ensure that policies are responsive to real-world inequities. This approach recognizes that those who have navigated gender barriers in education and employment have unique insights that can strengthen policy effectiveness.

Government engagement with the women's sector must be structured and adequately resourced, with appropriate timelines and funding to support sustainable contributions. Short-term, inadequately funded consultation processes not only limit the quality of input but also place additional strain on an already under-resourced sector.

Addressing Structural Considerations in Labour Market Classifications

JSA's approach to labour market classification and skills taxonomy development should address several key structural considerations:

1. **Recognition of Care Work as Skilled Labor:** Care-related occupations have historically been undervalued despite requiring complex skills in empathy, communication, problem-solving, and technical knowledge. JSA should ensure that these skills are appropriately recognized and valued in occupational frameworks and skill taxonomies.
2. **Equitable Funding for Feminised Industries:** Funding mechanisms should be restructured to ensure that feminised industries receive equitable investment for skills development, workplace training, and career advancement pathways. This includes addressing the current imbalance where male-dominated industries typically receive more robust training support and funding.
3. **Expanded Sector Classifications:** Current occupational classifications often fail to capture emerging career pathways, particularly those that offer increased gender parity. JSA should work to expand these classifications to reflect evolving work arrangements, hybrid roles, and new occupations that may provide opportunities to disrupt traditional patterns of segregation.
4. **Addressing Power Dynamics in Classification Systems:** JSA should examine how existing classification systems reflect and reinforce power dynamics that privilege certain types of work over others. This includes reviewing how technical skills are often valued over social and emotional skills, despite both being essential for workplace effectiveness.
5. **Integration with Industrial Relations Frameworks:** Labor market classifications should be developed with consideration of how they interact with industrial relations systems, particularly regarding award classifications and wage determinations that impact gender pay equity.

By addressing these structural considerations in labour market classification, JSA can help dismantle some of the fundamental mechanisms that maintain occupational segregation and economic inequality in Australia's workforce.

CONCLUSION

The evidence clearly demonstrates that gendered occupational segregation remains deeply embedded in Australia's labour market despite decades of awareness and policy initiatives. This segregation manifests across educational pathways, workplace cultures, and economic outcomes, creating compounding disadvantages that affect women throughout their lives.

To address these disparities transformative action is required. WAVE recommends that Australia's vocational education and training sector and JSA:

1. Challenge the view that gender segregation is a "woman's problem" rather than a systemic issue requiring structural solutions
2. Tackle the underlying social construction of both gender and skill
3. Address workplace cultures that discourage participation and retention in non-traditional fields
4. Implement evidence-based policies with sustained funding and accountability measures

With comprehensive structural interventions addressing both educational pathways and workplace cultures, Australia has the opportunity to create more equitable, productive, and inclusive labour markets that benefit all members of society. The VET system in particular, stands as a potential catalyst for meaningful change in Australia's gendered labour market structures if reformed with transformative principles at its core.