



GENDER EQUALITY IN MEN-DOMINATED INDUSTRIES: THE BARRIERS ARE NOT MADE OF STEEL

Insights from the UnionsWA Workplace Gender Equality Project (WGEP) highlighting barriers to gender equality, desired industry changes, and key survey findings.





Australian Government
**Department of Employment
and Workplace Relations**

Funded by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations under the Australian Government's Advancing Gender Equality in Gender Segregated Industries grant program.

Words from the Workplace Gender Equality Project

This report shares the voices of women working in male-dominated industries across WA. It reflects lived experiences, challenges and ambitions for change. Change begins by asking a deeper question: **Who holds the power?**

When we look beyond surface outcomes and examine who shapes decisions, opportunities and advancement, we begin to see where inequality persists. These insights also show that conversations about gender equality are most powerful when grounded in shared benefits and fairer outcomes for everyone. When we identify the structures shaping our workplaces, we strengthen our ability to change them. These findings offer clear evidence to support collective action and stronger advocacy.

The WGEP thanks the more than 280 women who shared their time, stories and expertise through surveys, interviews and focus groups, and everyone who helped make those connections possible.

Acknowledgment of country

UnionsWA acknowledges and pays tribute to the Whadjuk people of the Noongar Nation and their Elders past and present as the Traditional Custodians of the Country (Boodja) on which we work and gather. We recognise their enduring cultural and spiritual connection to land, waters and community, and their ongoing role in caring for Country.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UnionsWA has received funding from the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations under the Australian Government's Advancing Gender Equality in Gender Segregated Industries grant program to continue our work in identifying and dismantling barriers to the full inclusion of women in every industry sector.

The Workplace Gender Equality Project will focus on identifying tangible actions and outcomes to be implemented in gender segregated industries, especially in relation to safe and dignified conditions and amenities, work flexibility, and inclusive workplace cultures. Under the current grant, the Project explores barriers to women's participation in three men-dominated industries in WA: construction, energy and transport. This report represents the first Insights Report published under this grant and shares findings from our Workplace Gender Equality survey. A final report will be published on the UnionsWA website by the conclusion of the grant in June 2026.

The findings are complemented by insights from one-on-one interviews and focus group sessions, which are ongoing. The survey was launched at the end of August 2025 and closed at the end of November 2025. While the survey was live on the UnionsWA website, the team directed its efforts at advertising and disseminating it as much as possible, with targeted outreach and communication strategies to reach women working in the construction, energy and transport industries. Affiliated unions have been instrumental in ensuring its dissemination to their members and within industry. We also reached out to employers and organisations, inviting them to circulate the survey with their women workers and members.

The survey allowed us to gather a large amount of data in relatively little time. The questions were directed at uncovering participants' experiences working in men-dominated industries and were based on preliminary desktop research around existing barriers to gender equality in those industries. While our dissemination strategy focused on women and gender-diverse people in construction, energy and transport, the survey remained open to men, though with different wording for most of the questions. Data analysis started in December 2025, soon after the survey was closed, when the target number of responses was reached. The survey registered 403 valid responses.

The results show that the survey successfully reached our desired population targets: we heard from women in construction, energy and transport, as well as from a wide array of other industries in WA. We also heard from men and gender-diverse people, though to a smaller scale. The analysis of the findings below suggests that women identified many barriers to gender equality in their industries, though some dominated over others. Furthermore, the findings both validate and expand beyond some of our hypotheses regarding what needs to change in those industries. Including a mix of close-ended (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) questions, the survey largely gave participants the opportunity to elaborate on their responses, ensuring the collection of rich, meaningful data. At times, those responses strengthened our assumptions about the industry, and at other times, completely overturned them. **Regardless, we let the women tell US what needs to change.**

These findings formed the basis for the development of training materials, model clauses for enterprise agreements, provisions and policies which will be rolled out to unions and industry throughout the next phase of the Project. It should be noted that these findings are preliminary, and deeper, more nuanced analysis will be undertaken, in conjunction with new insights gathered through the ongoing interviews and focus group sessions. For the sake of length, this Report focuses almost exclusively on responses from women in construction, energy and transport, and includes a brief note on the responses from male participants. The relatively small sample sizes should also be acknowledged; with the time and resources available, we were able to reach a total of 30 women in construction, 70 women in energy and 73 women in transport. As such, these findings do not aim to represent all occupations or facets of the industries under analysis and are also not representative of the experiences of all women workers in WA.

More research should be conducted to expand on these findings and created a more comprehensive analysis of women's experiences working in men-dominated industries in WA today.



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A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

This project utilised a mixed-method approach to identify and explore the barriers to gender equality in selected men-dominated industries in WA. Two qualitative methods (interviews and focus groups) and one mixed method (online survey) were used to collect data for this Project.

Qualitative research methods allow researchers to collect valuable insights into the lived experiences of the participants. The process of data collection was conducted in two phases. During the first phase, relevant men-dominated industries were identified based on the insights gathered from consultations with Union Secretaries through one-on-one, semi-structured interviews.

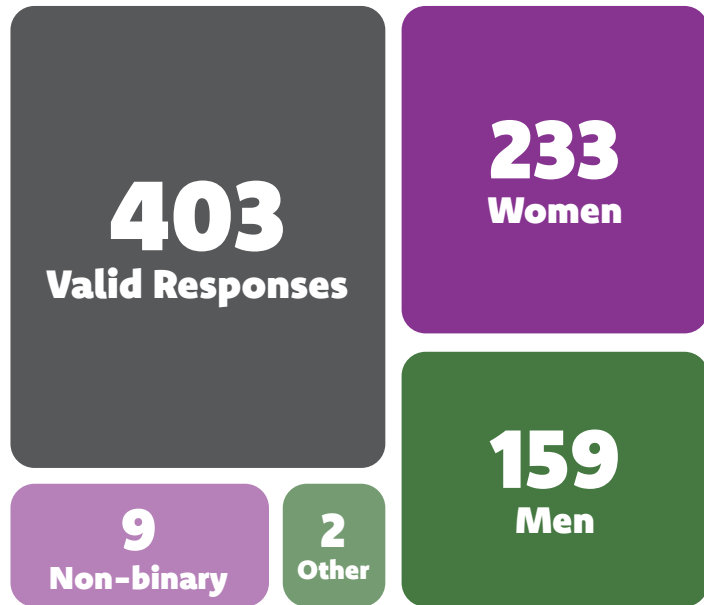
The second phase involved survey development and roll out and planning of interviews and focus group sessions. The survey took about 10-15 minutes to complete, depending on the level of engagement with the more qualitative responses, which were not mandatory.

To facilitate recruitment for interviews and focus groups, participants in the survey were given the opportunity to sign up for a session with the team at the end of the survey. While this method made it easier for the team to create a list of potential participants to contact, it also compromised the anonymity of the survey, which not all participants would have found acceptable due to the sensitive nature of some of the information provided. As such, participants have also been recruited via contact with existing unions' networks, referrals, and employers' engagement. A consent form was developed for participants to sign to ensure voluntary participation and privacy protection as the sessions were voice-recorded.

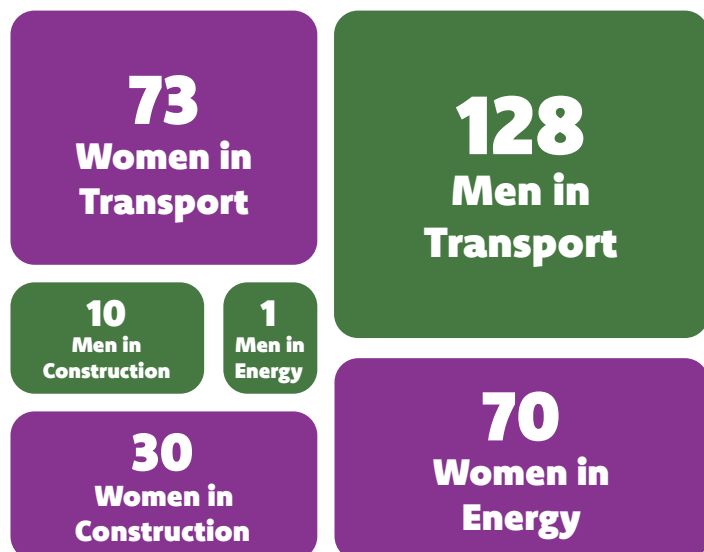
The quantitative data analysis of close-ended survey questions was conducted using Excel, while qualitative data – both from the survey and the interview sessions – was analysed thematically using NVivo15.

THE SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

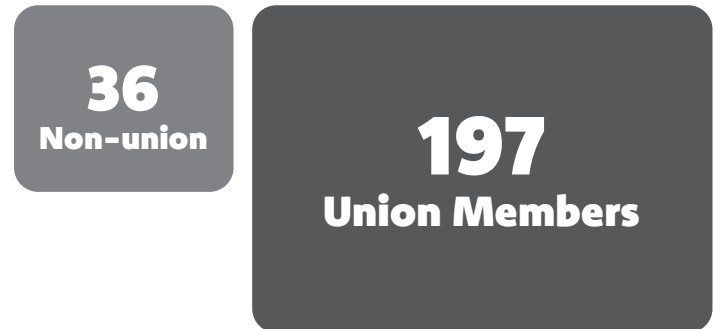
Survey Respondents by Gender



Survey Respondents by Industry



Survey Respondents by Union Membership



Interviews



Focus Groups



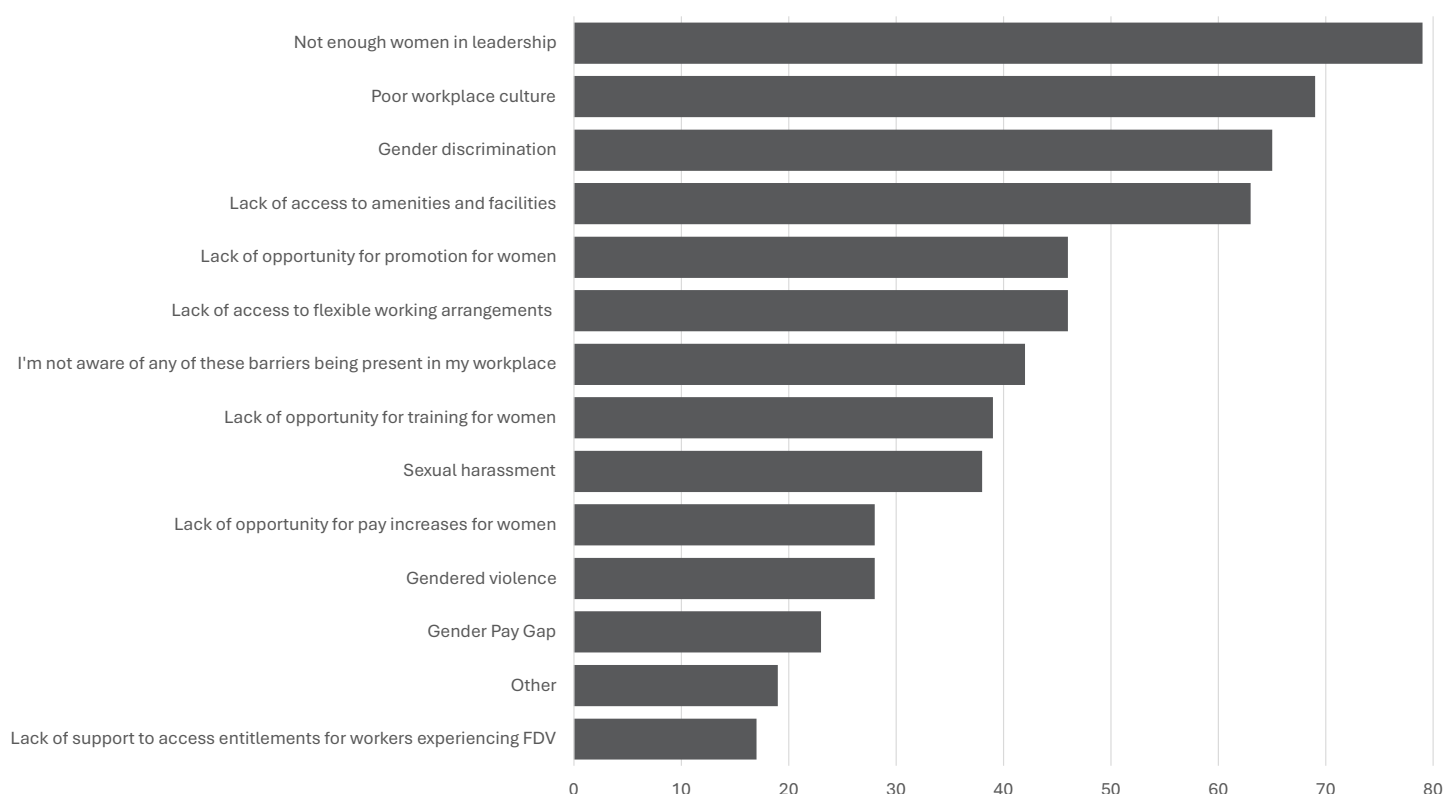
BARRIERS TO GENDER EQUALITY

The total number of women in construction, energy and transport that completed the survey is 173.

We prompted participants with a multiple-choice question and a list of 14 options, to find out which barriers women from those industries would identify as the most prevalent. Participants could select as many options as they liked, including *Other* and then elaborate on their answer. Question 15 reads *Do you feel that any of these barriers to gender equality are present in your workplace? Select all that apply.* Prevalence was calculated in Excel using helper columns to disaggregate each option and numeric binary values (1=selected, 0=not selected) to count.

The results are displayed in the chart below.

Chart: Prevalence of responses from women to 'Do you feel that any of these barriers to gender equality are present in your workplace?'



Interestingly, *not enough women in leadership* ranked among the top three barriers across all selected industries (1st place for construction and energy, 2nd for transport after poor workplace culture).

The overrepresentation of men in managerial roles across almost all industries in Australia has been widely recorded in the literature. While women make up half of the employees in the 2024-25 WGEA dataset (50%), women comprise only 22% of CEOs; 39% of key management positions; 33% of board members; 21% of board chairs.¹

The benefits of having a more gender-diverse leadership have also been explored, with a Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre study concluding that firms with balanced leadership outperform peers on value, profitability and resilience.² It is therefore not surprising that women recognise this as a significant barrier to gender equality in their industries, suggesting that more efforts should be directed at addressing this issue.

As mentioned, participants were also able to select *Other* and input a response. 19 participants selected this option, and 16 valid responses were collected. A quick qualitative analysis of those responses reveals that there is at least one dominant barrier which was not included in the list: workplace bullying. This barrier was particularly prevalent in responses from women in transport, as the following quotes show.

¹WGEA, Australia's Gender Equality Scorecard - Key results from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency's Employer Census 2024-25 (November 2025)

²BCEC | WGEA, Gender Equity Insights 2025

"Workplace bullying"

"Bullying and harassment from male employees to female employees"

"Bullying from a dangerous male employee. Two women had already left because of him."

34% of women in energy selected *I'm not aware of any of these barriers being present in my workplace*. There is no immediate and straightforward explanation for this, other than the individual participant's perception that they do not face such challenges in their workplace.

In one instance, the participant, when selecting this option, was coming from the perspective of their current employment (in a different industry), but when prompted about their experience working as an electrician on sites, many different barriers were identified.

A comparison with responses to survey questions 44 - *What would you most like to see change in your industry?* - and 45 - *What changes would you most like to see in your workplace to promote gender equality? Select all that apply* – assists us to reach a better understanding of women's experiences in these industries.

WHAT WOMEN WANT



At the end of the survey, we asked participants what they would most like to see change in their industry to promote gender equality. This was an open-ended question, where participants could input any answer (Q44). A multiple-choice question followed (Q45), as well as an opportunity for participants to elaborate if they selected Other (Q45a).

Q44	<i>What would you most like to see change in your industry?</i>	Open-ended
Q45	<i>What changes would you most like to see in your workplace to promote gender equality? Select all that apply.</i>	Multiple choice
Q45a	<i>If other, please elaborate -- workplace gender equality changes</i>	Open-ended

Responses were analysed for women in construction, energy and transport. For question 44, women expressed the need for improvements in a variety of areas, many of which overlap across the three industries: equal treatment, more women in leadership, better rosters, reproductive health leave, more training for women.

Some desirable changes were mentioned more frequently, e.g., several women in energy stressed the need for better access to amenities, which is consistent with the prevalence of responses in the barriers question for energy, where *Lack of access to amenities and facilities* ranked 4th (31% of participants). For women in transport, better rostering is at the top of their priorities, which was reflected in the data collected during interview sessions.

Table: Prevalence of responses to 'What changes would you most like to see in your workplace to promote gender equality?'

Workplace changes	n=respondents	n=percentage
More women in leadership	96	55
Better workplace culture (it is safe to report issues and they are dealt with quickly and well)	90	52
Better access to flexible working arrangements	80	46
More support for parents and carers to balance work and family life	74	43
Access to improved and safe amenities and facilities	64	37
Equal opportunity for promotion	61	35
Tackling gender discrimination	59	34
Stopping sexual harassment and gender-based violence	55	32
Equal opportunity for training	54	31
Better access to paid parental leave for both parents	52	30
More jobs that are secure	49	28
Support for workers experiencing family and domestic violence	45	26
Equal opportunity for pay increases	44	25
Equal pay	35	20
None	13	7

For women in our targeted industries, the most desirable change is increasing the number of women in positions of leadership (55% of respondents). Therefore, we should prioritise exploring strategies to achieve that, including conducting more research into why women are not progressing to those higher roles.

Analysis of the reported barriers and desired changes indicates that most women in these industries do not perceive unequal pay or limited access to pay increases as primary concerns; in fact, these issues ranked lowest. We heard consistently, often with pride, that 'in this industry, everybody is paid the same for the same job'. However, research shows that there are structural issues in these industries that systematically exclude women from accessing those opportunities fairly, preventing them from progressing into higher paid roles. That is why, even though 'everybody is paid the same for the same role', the Gender Pay Gap still sits at 21.2% in WA, the largest in Australia.³

It should be considered that the full-time workforce in WA has a larger share of mining and construction than other states, two industries with relatively high earnings and low representation of women. The analyses below explain, at least in part, why gender equality in these industries remains a myth.

While no *Other* responses emerged from women in construction and energy, women in transport elaborated on other changes they would like to see – one participant writes:

"Affirmative Action to increase female trainee numbers to achieve a full gender balance in the workplace. Walking into a room full of men is confronting and uncomfortable."

There is a perceived benefit of having more women in the industry, which includes an increased sense of comfort for other women. Intersecting identities also play a role in this discussion, with one participant commenting on the 'racist culture' in the workplace.

³Australian Bureau of Statistics Labour Report (February 2025)

While lack of flexible work arrangements did not rank particularly high in the barriers' question (5th position, with 29%), women identified it here as a significant area for improvement. Better rostering, including family-friendly solutions for parents and other workers with caring responsibilities, is very important for women in transport, which is reflected in their responses to Q45, where better access to flexible working arrangements ranks first. The analysis below focuses on participants' experiences of flexibility in the workplace.

FLEXIBILITY WITH STRINGS ATTACHED

The same analytical process was followed to explore prevalence of responses for survey question 29 *Are any flexible work options offered at your workplace? Select all that apply.* The results show that women in construction's experiences of flexibility in the workplace are quite different from those of women in the other two industries under analysis. Women in construction have predominantly selected *I don't know* for question 29.

Table: Prevalence of responses from women in construction to 'Are any flexible work options offered at your workplace? Select all that apply.'

Flexible work arrangements	n=respondents	n=percentage
I don't know	11	37
Other	8	27
Flexible workdays	6	20

The prevalence of this response required further qualitative analysis. As per interviews and focus groups with construction workers and union representatives, flexibility arrangements appear to be closely linked to informal networks that favour men, as supervisors tend to rely on "who they trust" or "who they know." There is little incentive or formal mechanism to support a diverse workforce.

Two 'child codes' (i.e., sub-codes emerging in relation to one code or theme) emerged from qualitative data around flexibility in construction: the *impact of caring responsibilities* and *pushback for requesting flexible work arrangements*. This means that women in construction who completed the survey tend to tie the need for flexibility to their caring responsibilities, and reported the difficulty and pushback in accessing flexibility.

"Caring for my children around school hours and now my grandchild. Had some supportive employers but alot of flak. Now if I don't go I lose future rostered shifts."

"To ensure I can meet all children and work requirements I opt to start at 5 but often get attitude when I need to leave before 3pm for an appointment for the children or anything related."

"Requests for flexible work were difficult. I know of other mothers who struggled to access flexible work too."

Women have pointed out that, although flexibility might nominally be available to them, access is still very restrictive.

"Many of these things - WFH, flexible start and finish times, flex leave, job sharing, flexible work days, even reproductive health leave (!!!!) are nominally available to us - but access is so restrictive that it's a fucking joke to say that it's available at all."

Elaborating on survey question 38 *What do you think real flexibility looks like in your industry?*, participants stress the importance of having more agency in choosing when to do their hours, and making sure that flexibility is also available to men.

"Being able to choose your work hours as long as you get the correct amount completed it shouldn't matter when it's done"

"Equal flexibility for men and women so that caring responsibilities aren't always the responsibility of women. If flexibility is offered it's often only offered to women meaning they unequally bear the brunt of career set backs, lower wages and fewer opportunities."

Women in energy predominantly selected *Flexible start and finish times* as the flexible work arrangement most available to them, indicating that, in that industry, there might be less restrictions around when to start and finish a shift.

Table: Prevalence of responses from women in transport to 'Are any flexible work options offered at your workplace? Select all that apply.'

Flexible work arrangements	n=respondents	n=percentage
Flexible start and finish times	27	39
I don't know	18	26
Shift swapping	16	23

However, when prompted about their experiences of requesting these arrangements, respondents report instances of employers' reluctance to grant them. For one respondent, only once the union was involved was the arrangement granted by the employer:

"Refused flexible working arrangement request and once the union got involved and highlighted how they have proceeded illegally and violated certain parts of the act, they rescinded all actions and just told me to come back to work..."

Respondents also report backlash from male colleagues for being granted the arrangement, indicating that flexibility is still largely perceived as 'special treatment'.

"Flexible working start and finish times. Working from home. My company is fabulous with these conditions for working parents - it's the attitudes and sly comments from the men that make it hard."

Nonetheless, women in energy still appear to experience more support from employers with regards to flexibility compared to women in construction.

Similarly, women in transport indicated that *Shift swapping and flexible start and finish times* were available to them, but accessibility remains an issue.

Table: Prevalence of responses from women in transport to ‘Are any flexible work options offered at your workplace? Select all that apply.’

Flexible work arrangements	n=respondents	n=percentage
Shift swapping	28	38
Flexible start and finish times	16	22
I don't know	12	16

Regarding shift-swapping, one interview participant working as a railcar driver said:

"It's a gentleman's agreement type of thing. They will do it. If you give a little, you'll get a little, but it's not a formalised process. I know that there are people who, for example, have carers, like they have their young kids in the evening, so they will change your shifts to try to, you give them enough notice, they will try to make, keep your shifts so that you can do that, but you have to specifically ask for it and oftentimes you have to argue for it."

As such, there is no formalised system for requesting and obtaining certain shifts, which puts women workers at a disadvantage, since the burden of caring responsibilities overwhelmingly falls on them. It is hardly surprising that 56% of women in transport have selected *Better access to flexible working arrangements* as the one thing they would like to see change in their industry. Our conclusion is that the women in construction who completed the survey do not perceive that changes to improve flexibility are possible in their industry, making it rank consistently low on their list of priorities.

A more specific, occupational analysis in construction is necessary, as certain roles on construction sites are more likely to access flexibility under the right circumstances (e.g., for experienced / low supervision roles; for tasks that can be done independently; for short-term informal arrangements). Across the board, 41 women were unsure regarding which flexible work arrangements they access to, if any; that is 24% of responses. Therefore, even though women in energy and transport are aware of flexible work solutions being available to them, true accessibility remains limited, informal and circumstantial.

GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION

In the survey, a line of questions addressed experiences of gender-based discrimination in the workplace, including close-ended question 16 *Have you ever experienced gender-based discrimination in your workplace?* and four sub-questions.

Q16a	<i>Which forms of gender-based discrimination best describe your experience? Select all that apply.</i>
Q16b	<i>If other, please elaborate -- gender-based discrimination experience</i>
Q16c	<i>Did you seek support?</i>
Q16d	<i>What was the outcome of seeking support?</i>

The results show that:

- 60% of women in construction have answered positively to question 16, implying they have experienced some form of gender-based discrimination in their workplace. Conversely, 47% of women in energy and transport have answered positively, suggesting that gender-based discrimination is more pervasive in the construction industry.
- Prevalence of responses to sub-question 16a shows that, overwhelmingly, women in construction, energy and transport share similar experiences of gender-based discrimination.

Table: Prevalence of responses to 'Which forms of gender-based discrimination best describe your experience? Select all that apply.'

Forms of gender-based discrimination	n=respondents	n=percentage
Hostile workplace culture against women	51	29
Being assigned to less important tasks	48	28
Being excluded from decision-making processes	40	23
Receiving less support from managers	36	21
Ongoing sexist remarks or inappropriate jokes	35	20
Biased assessment and feedback	35	20
Limited promotion opportunities	31	18
Limited training opportunities	27	16
Difficulty returning to work after paid parental leave	12	7
Unfair pay	9	5
Other	8	5
Difficulty obtaining paid parental leave	6	3
Biased job advertisements and hiring practices	0	0

Interestingly, for women in construction and energy, *Being assigned to less important tasks* is much more prevalent than for women in the transport industry, as well as *Being excluded from decision-making processes*. These are significant issues in the two industries which, in turn, negatively impact women's career progression and opportunities for promotion.

These forms of gender-based discrimination may partially explain why there are not enough women in leadership in these industries (see the 'barriers' analysis). A safe interpretation of these data would be that, while training opportunities are not lacking per se, the 'important' tasks are informally assigned to men, as well as most of the decision-making, two key features for building skills and experience and increase the chances of career advancement.

7 participants across the three industries elaborated on their *Other* responses; one woman in construction stated: "seeing women as inferior workers until you make relationships", implying that women do not start on the same footing as their male counterparts on the job and have to work harder and establish relationships to receive equal treatment. Similarly, a woman in energy wrote: "a toxic culture if you are not accepted into the family!".

Other forms of discrimination mentioned include: "the general assumption that a female would be less capable of the same work as a male" and "lack of access to toilet facilities when out on a job."

A qualitative analysis of responses to open-ended sub-questions 16c and 16d reveal that women across these industries experience a general lack of support from management and male colleagues when trying to address instances of discrimination, as the following quotes demonstrate.

"Even for more important issues with other women (sexual harassment), HR did not take any actions."

-woman in construction-

"I was targeted and tried to bully me out 10 weeks before I was meant to complete apprenticeship, instead of supporting me they tried to use my kids against me to get rid of me."

-woman in energy-

"I had to basically sweep it under the carpet. HR and Management back one another. I was not heard and constantly shut down"

-woman in transport-

In many cases, seeking support resulted in an escalation of the violence and / or ostracism and exclusion by male colleagues for being 'the woman that reports men'.

"I was singled out and alienated by other employees."

-woman in energy-



SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Survey question 18 and sub-questions 18a, 18b and 18c addressed experiences of sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

Q18	<i>Have you ever experienced sexual harassment or gender-based violence in your workplace?</i>	Closed-ended
Q18a	<i>Can you tell us more about your experience of sexual harassment and/or gender-based violence?</i>	Open-ended
Q18b	<i>Did you seek support?</i>	Closed-ended
Q18c	<i>What was the outcome of seeking support?</i>	Open-ended

Responses to these questions were considered for all three industries. As questions are a mix of close-ended and open-ended, a mixed-method analysis of the results was conducted. The results show that:

- 60% of the women in construction answered positively to question 18, indicating that they experienced some form of sexual harassment or gender-based violence in their workplace. Nine participants responded 'no' and three preferred not to say. On the other hand, most women in energy and transport (64% and 67% respectively) responded 'no' to question 18, indicating they have not experienced any form of sexual harassment or gender-based violence in the workplace.
- Responses to sub-question 18a reveal that, while women in all three industries experience similar forms of violence - including sexual harassment - in the workplace, women in the construction industry suffer a wider and more severe range of experiences, including, in their own words:
 - Snarky or inappropriate comments
 - Being grabbed by the waist
 - Unsolicited messages (including photos of genitals sent anonymously)
 - Being groped as an apprentice
 - Posters with rude comments in communal areas
 - Women being filmed without consent
 - Inappropriate jokes of a sexual nature
 - Unwanted touching
 - Being asked for explicit photos and/or videos
 - Being asked on dates by supervisors
 - Having one's clothes complimented when not too large
- Responses to sub-questions 18b and 18c show a general lack of support from the employer when reporting instances of violence and, at times, some form of retaliation from male colleagues; this is particularly prevalent for women in construction and energy and especially women 'on sites', occupying the most men-dominated roles (e.g., electrician - including FIFO-, apprentice electrician, draftsman, cable jointer, overhead line worker, project leader, rail signal technician, supervisor).

"I was ostracised by some of my male peers as the woman who reports males. Again not a nice place to be after I stood up."

-woman in energy-

In the transport industry, the occupations that have reported experiencing violence include transport planner, aviation ground crew, custody officer, driver (including railcar and locomotive), tilt tray operator, storeperson, plant operator and security officer.

"There was no outcome. Even with witnesses providing statements on hearing the comments made, nothing was done about it so the behaviour continues."

-woman in transport-

"Reported him to management, put a sexual harassment complaint in against him and as there wasn't enough evidence he got a slap on the wrist. This happened 1.5 years ago and he still works for the company today."

-woman in transport-

Therefore, even though women in construction represent the smaller cohort in the survey compared to energy and transport, most of them reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Nonetheless, women from all three industries reported instances of violence showing some level of similarity. The most common traits, however, are the general lack of support when reporting individuals, unsatisfactory outcomes and retaliation / backlash for speaking out against these injustices.

It is important, therefore, that the relatively lower numbers in energy and transport are not interpreted as the problem not existing in those industries or the systems of support being functional.

Table: Prevalence of responses to 'Have you ever experienced sexual harassment or gender-based violence in your workplace?'

Sexual harassment and gender-based violence in the workplace	n=respondents	n=percentage
Yes	63	36
No	103	59
Prefer not to say	7	4

We should find encouraging that 59% of the women in these industries report not experiencing sexual harassment or gender-based violence in their workplace. However, sexual harassment and gender-based violence still represent a very real challenge for many women workers in those industries; 36% is a significant number.

As such, it is very concerning that women from these industries have indicated a reluctance to speak out either for fear of repercussions, of not being heard, or because they don't believe it will be taken seriously or be properly addressed.

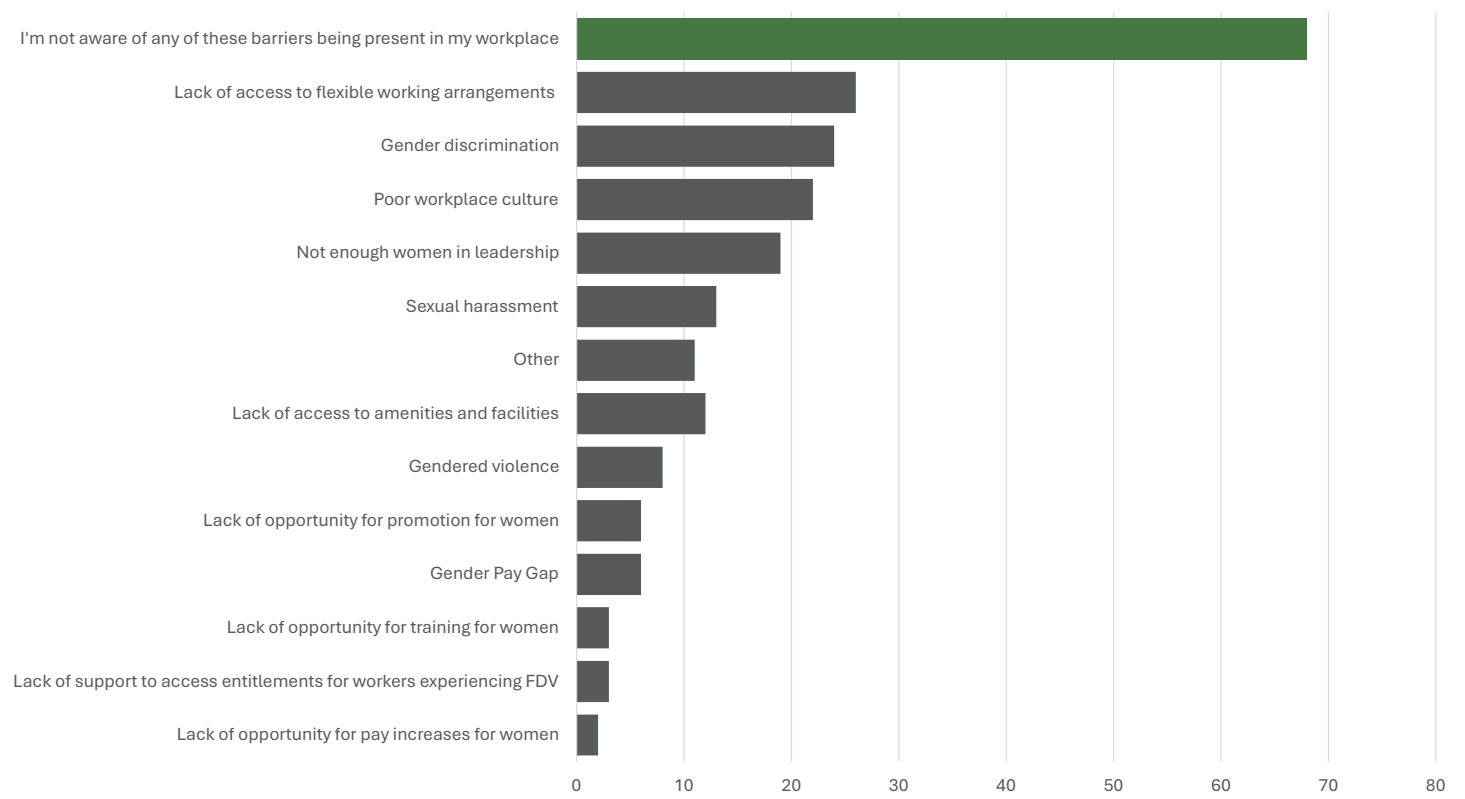
A NOTE ON THE MEN

In the WGEF survey, 159 men from different industries, including construction, transport, energy, manufacturing and others, provided input on gender equality. Notably, 49% of them reported that they weren't aware of any of the 12 barriers identified as preventing women from entering and remaining working in each of these industries. This pattern remains consistent when the sample is narrowed to traditionally men-dominated sectors.

An equal number of highly critical and highly constructive responses were identified among male participants. While four respondents strongly challenged the survey's premises, four others engaged meaningfully and provided considered, substantive feedback, even though the survey was not primarily designed with men as the central audience.

Considering these industries, beyond the 78 participants who indicated no awareness of barriers; *Access to flexibility*, *gender discrimination*, *Poor workplace culture* and *Not enough women in leadership* were ranked among the top five concerns, each selected by approximately 15-16% of respondents. The relatively even distribution of responses suggests that no single barrier emerges as dominant among those who recognise their existence.

Chart: Prevalence of responses from men to ‘Do you feel that any of these barriers to gender equality are present in your workplace?’



The ranking of the male responses suggests a more individualised and event-based understanding of discrimination, potentially limited to overt or formal practices rather than systemic or structural mechanisms. Male participants' comments further illustrate this perspective, particularly among those who selected "none" and chose to elaborate on other perceived barriers.

"None of these barriers are real or present in my workplace."

"All these selections are related to females; there is no gender equality for males."

"The company only wants to employ females and is discriminating against males."

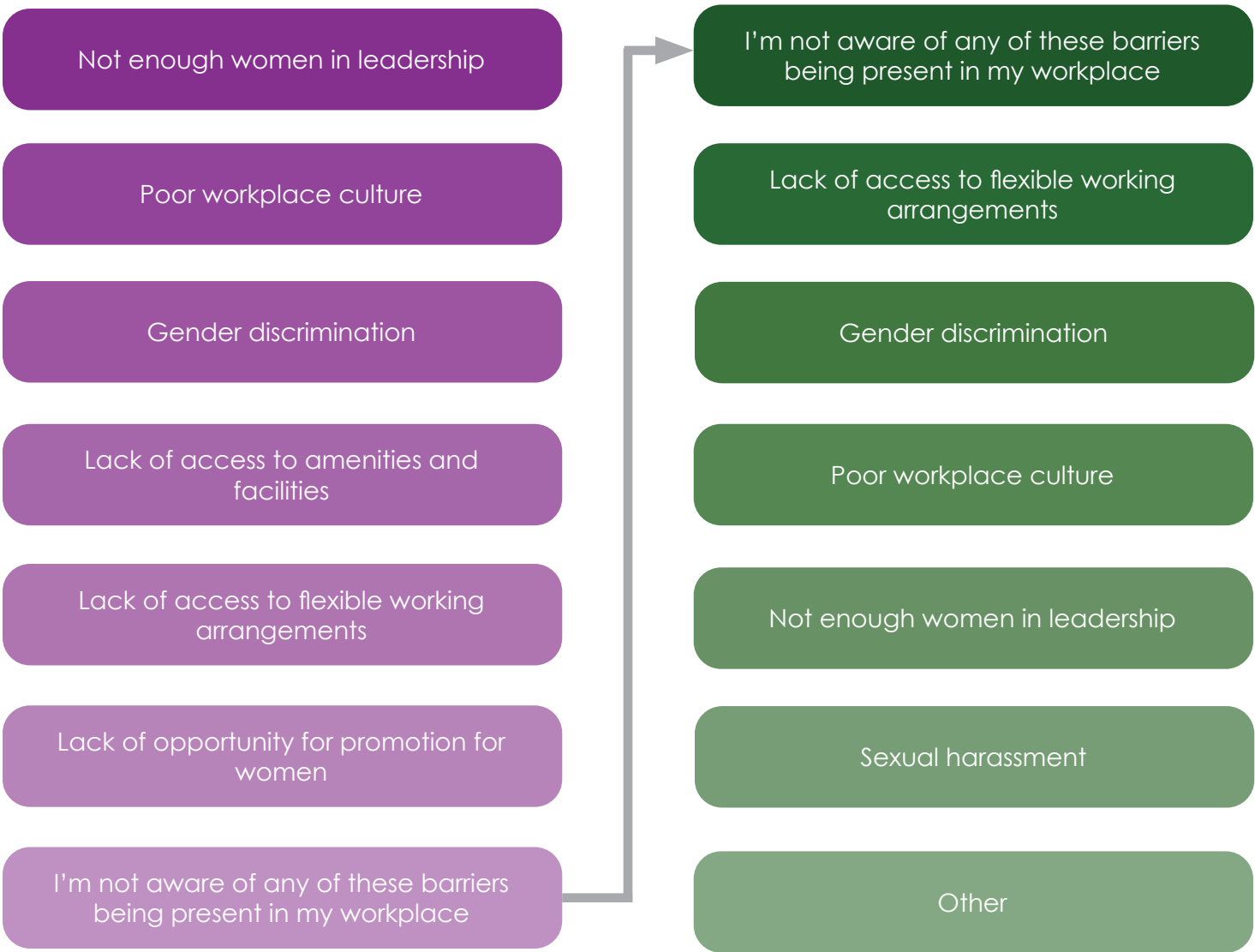
"None, it doesn't exist. You are trying to make something out of nothing."

SEEING (OR NOT SEEING) THE BARRIERS

When considered side by side, the ranking difference is conceptually significant. For women, inequality is structural and visible at the top of the hierarchy, and leadership representation signals whether advancement is realistically attainable. For men, the dominant response is the absence of awareness, which does not mean the denial of individual issues, but indicates that structural inequality is not perceived as systemic.

In other words, women identify inequality through institutional patterns (who holds power) and men assess it through personal perception (what they directly observe or experience). Women rank power and advancement first, whereas men rank conditions of work first.

Chart: Comparison of prevalence of the top 7 perceived barriers to women's workforce participation by gender



Women's responses centre structural inequality, leadership representation, and advancement pathways. Men's responses prioritise flexibility and, most prominently, report lack of awareness of barriers. The divergence confirms what everybody would have already heard before: inequality is more visible to those structurally affected by it, while those less directly constrained may interpret workplace dynamics as neutral or merit based.

Exploring this scenario further, another perspective can be obtained to explain the ranking, especially considering how contrasting is what men and women had to say.



"Promotion of women over more qualified men."

"Because I've been trying for the last three years to be a supervisor and some people won't even look at me as a paint blaster."

"Equal opportunities for everyone regardless of gender. Not allowing companies to recruit females only for the sake of quotas."

"No support. Constantly targeted to fail. Constantly told I only got employment jobs with shirts for being a female."

"Women treated differently to men, men have to get greater results and expected to do more."

Placed on a PIP plan in a all male workplace to be made a example of why woman shouldn't be offshore. PIP plan was horrendous and one could never pass. Was to prove could hold a electrical license as a tradesperson and redo all practicals of my apprenticeship TAFE components to my non-trade offshore lead person. I ended up being terminated after I took mental leave."

"Preferential treatment based on gender."

"Getting jobs taken off of me or pushed off of a job since I'm not as strong as the men"

"Lack of support or sufficient support"

"The discrimination in question is against males so it doesn't exist and nothing is done."

"Because it is hard to not only experience the difference in treatment, you then also get to listen to every bloke you work with tell you that it's not happening and women are exaggerating."

"I felt as though some men approached teaching me in different ways because I was a woman rather than just letting me give it a go in the way I was willing to."

Another interesting point is that the pay related barriers are ranked low by both men and women. Some hypothesis may arise from this, including either pay inequality is less visible in these industries or it is normalised and therefore not recognised as a priority barrier; or other barriers (culture, leadership) are perceived as more immediate drivers of inequality.

MEN WANT CHANGES, IF WE DON'T CALL IT 'GENDER EQUALITY'

When asked what changes they would most like to see in their workplace to promote gender equality, 35% of male respondents indicated that no changes were necessary from their point of view. However, the top-ranked change was better workplace culture (29%), followed by flexibility (26%).

Chart: Prevalence of changes men would like to see in their workplace



Interestingly, while men endorse improvements in culture and work practices, they **do not recognise leadership diversity as a mechanism for driving these changes**. In many female-dominated industries, structural arrangements such as flexible schedules, part-time roles, and predictable hours are part of why women are more represented.⁴

NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has provided an overview of preliminary survey findings for women in construction, energy and transport. The results were supplemented with insights from interviews and focus group sessions, especially where further clarification was needed.

Preliminary results were used to develop model clauses, policies and provisions which will be rolled out to unions and industry. This analysis is ongoing. More responses to different survey questions will be analysed, comparing different cohorts and demographics and determining the direction of future research. For now, we endeavour to make the following recommendations, based on these findings.

⁴Women's Economic Outcomes Senior Officials Working Group. (2024). Workforce Gender Segregation in Australia. Background Paper: Key Findings from the Expert Consultations held in June and July 2023. Department of the Treasury. <https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2024-04/workforce-gender-segregation-findings-from-the-expert-consultations.pdf>.

RECOMMENDATION 1: ADDRESSING THE LACK OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

As this was recognised as the number one barrier and priority for change for women in these industries, we should direct our efforts at developing strategies to ensure that the same opportunities exist for women to progress in their careers if they wish to. In doing that, **it is essential to ensure there are clear and transparent ways by which responsibility and decisions are shared, including how tasks are assigned.**

Women in construction and energy have consistently reported feeling discriminated against when they are assigned to less important tasks. Furthermore, women in construction reported that additional responsibilities and 'more important tasks' are not fairly and transparently distributed and end up being informally assigned 'from mate to mate'.

This issue is worth exploring in depth, through more empirical research, to definitively conclude that it is a decisive factor holding women back from advancing in their careers in those industries. We know that there are other ways in which women are excluded from those roles: the expectation of long hours and presenteeism, the lack of flexibility, especially for people with caring responsibilities, to name a few.

We have spoken to women who have left their jobs and shifted to self-employment to obtain that flexibility, showing just how important flexibility can be to some workers. Another important part of this is to ensure there are clear pathways for young girls to enter the trade, receive proper training and find secure employment.⁵

RECOMMENDATION 2: FLEXIBILITY IS FOR EVERYBODY!

Our findings show that real flexibility in construction, energy and transport remains a myth. Requesting and obtaining flexible work arrangements for blue-collar roles is difficult regardless of gender, with men in our survey expressing a wish for more flexible solutions. Unfortunately, the reality is that women are still more likely to require flexibility, especially when tied to caring responsibilities. In our interviews and focus group sessions, women have pointed at the cost of childcare, which is becoming increasingly unaffordable, especially for a single parent.

Particularly in construction, flexibility is still typically granted based on trust and familiarity, disproportionately benefitting long-tenured workers and men with established site relationships. Research from NAWIC South Australia and our own discussions with industry diversity & inclusion officers indicate that women often need to establish networks to access work opportunities, such as overtime, confirming this hypothesis. Women and new entrants rarely qualify as "low risk" early and therefore miss out on flexibility when they need it most.

If the current system for requesting flexibility is based on informal trust, relationship-building, and 'gentlemen's' agreements', one can see how the result is women's exclusion. For these reasons, **flexibility should be embedded in roles, with clear processes to request a change in working arrangements; it should be accessed by everybody regardless of role, competency, project phase, gender, tenure, or networks. We strive to shift the responsibility to grant the arrangement from the supervisor's discretion to system-level decision-making.**

⁵For more research on this, see: Dawson, N., Cooper, R., Eastlake, I., Avery, N. & Galea, N. Big Sister: Advanced Mentoring SA/WA Rapid Literature Review.

RECOMMENDATION 3: SUPPORT FOR GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT

Women in the survey expressed a lack of support when reporting instances of sexual harassment or gender-based violence. According to recent WGEA data, 99% of employers in Australia have a policy to prevent sexual harassment; but only 38% offer employees' access to trauma-informed support officers.⁶ Results from our survey suggest that simply having a sexual harassment policy is not sufficient to guarantee effective prevention or ensure appropriate support. Furthermore, not all sexual harassment policies are up to the standards, emphasising the employer's responsibility to prevent and act in a timely and effective manner to address the issue.

A model clause around positive duty and sex discrimination will be developed in the next phase of the project, which will place the burden on employers to develop clear procedures to raise complaints, as well as correct and proportionate remedial action. The draft clause for discrimination and positive duty aims to ensure employers interrogate their policies to identify direct and indirect discrimination.

For the women in the survey, retaliation as a result of reporting also constituted a significant barrier. Employers should ensure that such behaviour will not be tolerated. The team is also in the process of developing and delivering training, including our new Positive Duty Training as well as Safe and Respectful Workplaces Training, which have been successfully piloted. More sessions will be delivered to union staff, delegates and members over the next phase of this project.

RECOMMENDATION 4: A NEW GENDER EQUALITY FRAMEWORK

Gender equality is not just a women's issue; it is an issue that affects everyone, and it is also an industrial issue, as ample research shows. We should shift the focus from the disadvantages women face to the advantages men often enjoy.⁷ Whether intentionally or not, men have historically benefited from women being excluded from these industries. **The goal is to bring women to the level of opportunity and recognition that men already experience.**

Framing the issue in this way helps ensure that our initiatives and solutions are not perceived as charity or special treatment, but rather as a matter of fairness and justice. However, many men in our survey view gender equality as a zero-sum game. They feel it is unfair to implement changes now because they themselves did not receive additional support to reach their current positions and therefore question why women should.

Yet two things can be true at the same time: men may have worked hard and earned their positions in the workplace, while women have also been excluded by systems that continue to create barriers to their participation and advancement. A system that still refuses to get its feet off our necks.

Men can—and should—be allies. Although only a few expressed this perspective in our survey, we know there are men who are willing to advocate for change. Our intention is to identify and work with these allies to drive progress together.

⁶ WGEA, Australia's Gender Equality Scorecard - Key results from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency's Employer Census 2024–25 (November 2025).

⁷ See, for instance, Framing gender equality - Message guide, VicHealth (January 2021).

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