THAT’S NO JOB FOR A LADY: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF GENDER ON SUCCESSFUL CAREER OPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Gender inequality means not only foregoing the important contributions that women make to the economy, but also wasting years of investment in educating girls and young women. Making the most of the talent pool ensures that men and women have an equal chance to contribute both at home and in the workplace, thereby enhancing their well-being and that of society. (OECD, 2012)

The foundation for transition from education and training to employment is established during school. It is during these formative years that young men and women develop notions of what is possible for their future. What is not possible is also reinforced. Unfortunately, gendered stereotypes and perceptions around certain career options for young women are still reinforced within schools and create barriers to widening young women’s participation in non-traditional areas of work. The continued underrepresentation of women in many industries including construction, mining and IT is not only bad for gender equality, it undermines economic productivity.

Career transitions however, are not only the responsibility of schools, but also vocational education and training (VET) and adult education organisations. These organisations offer a pathway for unemployed and underemployed Australians to employment and also career progression for existing workers. What stereotypes are reinforced when there are few female teachers in non-traditional areas? How effective are adult education programs in ensuring mature-aged women are presented with a range of options when looking to re-enter the workforce?

This paper considers these and other questions that are significant in ensuring women have the opportunity to pursue interesting and successful careers in a range of industries. The paper draws on a series of research projects undertaken by Women in Adult and Vocational Education (WAVE) on female participation in the workforce in Australia over several years. It traces not only the challenges faced by young women as they transition from school to work, but also the educational needs of older women looking to re-enter the workforce and pursue a different career.

As part of the research a national Australian survey was undertaken of career advisors and industry and VET stakeholders, as well as interviews held with relevant
educators. The data informed case studies which identified successful strategies to overcome these challenges and which inform this paper.

INTRODUCTION

“Gender inequality is not just about economic empowerment. It is a moral imperative. It is about fairness and equity and includes many political, social and cultural dimensions. It is also a key factor in self-reported well-being and happiness across the world.” (OECD, 2012, p. 13)

In its 2012 report on “Closing the Gender Gap’, the OECD goes on to say that, while many countries have made significant progress towards gender equality in education, and that girls outperform boys in many areas of education, “women continue to earn less than men, are less likely to make it to the top of the career ladder, and are more likely to spend their final years in poverty... Gender inequality means not only foregoing the important contributions that women make to the economy, but also wasting years of investment in educating girls and young women.”

The 59th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 59 2015), recently reviewed the progress of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Platform for Action adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, is regarded as a global agenda to promote equality, development and peace for all women.

The Platform reaffirms the fundamental principal that the rights of women and girls are an "inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights." It calls on governments to eliminate disparities between women and men in access to education and educational outcomes at all levels and in all forms of education including VET, adult literacy and lifelong learning. The CSW 59 expressed concern that 20 years after the Fourth World Conference on Women, no country has fully achieved equality and empowerment for women and girls.

Despite women's increasing participation in tertiary enrolment, there are still significant differences in the fields in which men and women study. “In 88 out of 102 countries reporting data in the period 2005-2012, women accounted for the majority of graduates in the field of education. By contrast, in the area of engineering, manufacturing and construction, men constituted the majority of graduates in 99 out of 103 countries with data in the same period.” (UN Women, 2015, p. 13)

In their report ‘Raising the global ambition for girls’ education’, Winthrop and McGivney (2014) explain that getting girls into and finishing school is just the start of addressing the problem. The authors highlight the improvements in in life prospects for girls who complete secondary school and the benefits for women and their societies. “Women who are educated and work are more productive, gain greater control over family income and decision-making, and invest more in their families.” (Ibid, p. 9) However, women are more likely to be employed in ‘vulnerable’ jobs, often unpaid and without benefits and security. (Winthrop and McGivney, 2014; Hutchinson and Jackson, 2007) The reasons for the disparities between educational achievement and employment opportunity are complex and according to Winthrop and McGivney (2014), are firmly based in cultural expectations.
In November 2014, G20 leaders announced that increasing female labour participation by 25% over the next 15 years would bring 100 million women into the workforce thereby enabling G20 countries to reach their goal of achieving a 2.1% increase in global economic growth by 2018. In response to Australia’s support of the G20 targets, Australia’s Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) spokesperson Yolanda Beattie said that the target could only be reached if all the embedded workplace structures that disadvantage women are addressed. According to Beattie, there are three key "levers to pull" in order to lift female workforce participation: social change, policy change and workplace change (Osborne-Crowley, 2014).

This paper arises from work undertaken by the authors on three separate pieces of research, looking at women and girls education in three separate settings: girls and career exploration in a school context, women and girls undertaking women’s programs in vocational education and training, and the female trades teachers in TAFE colleges. The paper will also highlight some strategies that may enable the successful transition of women and girls into careers often considered to be male-dominated domains, including ICT, engineering and non-traditional industries, and enable them to gain skills for effective navigation of education and employment options over a lifetime. (Hansen, 2006)

The education, training and employment of women can have a positive impact on many aspects of our society including economic productivity and health and well-being. Yet barriers to participation through gender inequality remain significant in all countries. This paper, and the research undertaken by WAVE in Australia, considers some of these issues in depth and asks; what are the benefits to women and girls of a vocational education? How can schools help to address gendered job segregation through a range of career exploration strategies? Is vocational education and training itself addressing the issues of gender stereotypes in careers and supporting women and girls into a variety of career pathways? In considering these questions, our research seeks to consider how the issues and strategies raised in this paper may help to address gender inequality, and assist in ‘pulling’ Beattie’s three key levers for change.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper refers to international labour market trends, but it is mainly focused on the Australian workforce, which is recognised as being deeply gendered. The three research papers it draws highlights from were undertaken in the Australian context. According to the Global Gender Gap Index introduced by the World Economic Forum in 2006, Australia has an overall gender gap index of 24 out of 136 countries, with 1 being the highest. The measures used in this Index show that Australia’s economic participation and opportunity ranking for women is below the ‘equality’ ratio in the areas of labour force participation, wage equality for similar work and number of female leaders.

Despite the global increase of women in the labour force, gendered divisions remain entrenched and are perpetuated by the lack of young women entering Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and non-traditional occupations, often to their disadvantage. “Gender discrimination impedes women’s empowerment and blocks progress at a societal level. Yet governments, NGOs, academics and
businesses haven’t adopted adequate or holistic strategies that build women’s equality regarding ICTs and encourage girls to move towards STEM careers.” (Microsoft, 2013)

The 2013 Microsoft/UN policy paper also quotes Larry Summers from the World Bank, who said: “Investment in girls’ education may well be the highest return investment available in the developing world”. Women however, comprise only 30% of the ICT workforce worldwide, which remains a concern considering general agreement that 9 out of 10 jobs will soon require ICT skills. Gender sensitive teaching methods are one way that will help prevent ‘the job pipeline leakage during the transition from education to career’, with teachers talking to girls and young women about science and technology in ways that resonate and relate to their lives and aspirations. (Microsoft, 2013)

The issue of the gendered nature of the workforce remains a significant issue in Australia, especially in relation to the STEM subjects and non-traditional trades for women. Women comprise only 31% of those with university level STEM qualifications and 12% of those with vocational level STEM qualifications (ABS 2014a). These anomalies indicate the need for a range of interventions, including in the critical area of career exploration for girls and young women while engaged in school education. Low-level participation of women in ‘non-traditional’ occupations is underpinned by low numbers of girls studying STEM-related subjects at school. For example, the proportion of female students undertaking mathematics and science subjects in Years 11 and 12 has fallen over recent years, and from year 10, there is a swing away from prime STEM subjects to Allied Health STEM subjects by girls. (Westwell & Buxton, 2012).

A study undertaken by the Australian Council of Engineering Deans (King, 2008) found that representation by women in engineering fields had dropped further, and noted that, as engineering is rarely articulated as a career option for school students, especially young women, it is not considered. The study states that: “Part of the reason for this is that unlike many other areas of study, engineers rarely become schoolteachers,” leading to the conclusion that career advice programs need to provide a more accurate understanding of the engineering profession to school students.

According to OECD, the Pisa 2012 survey found that many young girls feel anxious about mathematics and have less confidence than boys in their mathematical skills and ability to solve mathematics problems. (Achiron, 2014) One of the strategies often suggested to support young women is greater visibility of female leaders and role models in science related fields. Yet, with figures as low as 14% of women entering tertiary studies in these fields or manufacturing or construction compared to 39% of men, “there will continue to be few role models for young girls to emulate and the cycle will simply perpetuate itself.” (Achiron, 2014)

A similar picture was presented in 2012 in a report prepared for Australia’s Chief Scientist which reflected the views of 3500 students from 30 Australian universities. The report called on policy makers and stakeholders in the STEM education arena to make changes, including effective programs that reach young women in secondary schools to address concerns that girls often disregard science careers because they
cannot picture themselves as scientists. (Lyons et al, 2012) The report also called on teachers to “appreciate their potential for influencing students’ career paths and heightening interest in STEM.”

Over the last decade, associations and groups have been established across Australia, mainly through universities and industry bodies, to support women and girls to enter and remain in a wider variety of occupations. One of these, Digital Divas, focuses on ways to support young women into ICT qualifications. This group notes that “under-utilisation of the female perspective is a problem for the ICT industry and is leading to a lack of female input in design, communication and creativity.” Their report suggests that barriers to girls who might contemplate careers in the ICT industry are established early in secondary schools and that “how ICT subjects are taught has major impact on girls’ attitudes towards ICT”. Many girls, for example, consider these subjects to be too theoretical, rigidly structured and boring.” (Digital Divas, 2012)

In Australia’s labour force, women represent almost 46% of employees, with a 58.5% participation rate (ABS 2014b). However, in the industries of construction, mining, and utilities, women account for only around 12%, 15%, and 23% of employees respectively. Underrepresentation by women in these industries is not only bad for gender equality; it also undermines Australia’s economy. Recent figures suggest that increasing women’s employment rates could boost Australia’s GDP by 11%. (Broderick, 2013). Within the context of current skills shortages in Australia, attracting and retaining underutilised sources of talent, including women, is essential to economic growth and prosperity (Daley et al, 2012). This is particularly true in industries that have traditionally relied on male workers to fill roles, including the mining, construction and utilities industries, generally referred to as non-traditional trades for women.

There has been increased recognition by many in the mining industry of the importance of addressing the gender gap: “There are a number of ways resource employers can build on their female workforce, from introducing flexible work practices, to ensuring work villages are built to accommodate women and actively engaging with schools and universities to promote resource industry careers to female students. Leaving stereotypical assumptions aside, many roles in the mining industry are gender-neutral, making way for entry level and higher tertiary roles available for women. There are a range of jobs available including scientific, business, trade-based roles, as well as a need for qualified support staff such as psychologists. Hard-hat roles, including dump truck drivers, as well as cleaners, hospitality staff, engineers and project managers are just some of the endless career opportunities for women in the resources sector.” (Santic, 2013)

Despite such support, female students are still less likely to enrol in VET study or take up apprenticeships or traineeships in the fields of Architecture and Building or Engineering and related technologies. See Figure 1 below:
Australia’s Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick, suggested that the following barriers need to be overcome to encourage more young women to enter non-traditional trades. The barriers include: lack of family role models, stereotypes and bias starting at school, negative perceptions and lack of awareness of some industries and the career paths that are available, stereotypes and myths about women in the workplace, workplace culture in some jobs, perception of and actual gender specific bias in some industries, and structural issues that do not support family-friendly workplaces. (Broderick, 2013)

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) in the United Kingdom undertook a survey of girls’ career aspirations in 2011, noting that almost all the girls and young women who participated in the survey were open to the possibility of pursuing a career that challenged gender stereotypes. However, the course and career choices made by most young women were in fact predominantly stereotypical with most of the girls surveyed holding conventionally stereotypical views about jobs for men and women. Further, a narrow range of gender-stereotypical work placements dominated choices in most schools and the girls had limited knowledge and understanding of how choices about courses and careers influenced pay and progression routes. Only a few girls had career ambitions changed through direct observation of a professional at work, mentoring activities

Figure 1: Gender patterns in four largest Apprenticeship and Traineeship groups (20-24 year olds)
and/or discussions with a professional about what their job was actually like. (Ofsted, 2011) Despite broader ranges of curriculum and training opportunities, young women continue to make education and employment choices along traditional and gendered lines. (Ofsted, 2011; Hutchinson & Jackson, 2007).

Many women are deterred from participation in some of Australia’s most thriving and essential businesses, particularly in male-dominated industries, because of the lack of family role models, stereotypes about the nature of ‘women’s work’, discouraging workplace cultures and structural problems. The absence of meaningful and well-structured opportunities to explore some of these occupations during their schooling studies does not effectively ameliorate the negative perceptions that many young women have of STEM and non-traditional occupations and career pathways. Research findings from the authors identify these issues and others and seek to make recommendations about strategies to tackle these areas that can lead to gender inequality.

METHODS

This paper uses a meta-analysis approach to analyse the data from three different studies undertaken by members of WAVE, including the authors of this paper, Simon and Bonnici. The analysis draws down relevant data from these studies in seeking to answer the questions identified earlier in relation to gender stereotyping arising from opportunities in school and vocational education, and the problems faced by women and girls in finding and working in sustainable careers, including those in male dominated industries. The research papers from which the data is drawn are:

1. *Where are the female trades teachers? A study of the views on increasing the number of female trades teachers.* Published in 2014, Simon and Bonnici identified key stakeholders, including current teachers and industry bodies and, by way of guided conversations based on a questionnaire, discussed their views and experiences of this issue. The questionnaire focused on:
   - the difficulties inherent in encouraging girls and women into the trades as students,
   - whether female teachers have a positive impact on increasing numbers of female students, and
   - strategies to attract females into trade teaching and the identification of existing barriers;

One of the challenges of this research was finding female trades teachers to interview, as the few currently employed within the NSW vocational education and training system, were employed on a casual or sessional basis. As one respondent noted, it is hard to increase the numbers of female trades teachers when there are so few females in the trades overall. While most participants in the research strongly supported the concept of increasing the numbers of female trades teachers, some also asked whether gender was the defining issue, or rather a good teacher with the right skills and understanding of the needs of female students?
2. The second piece of research, undertaken by Simon and Bonnici in 2013 entitled ‘A Course for a Lifetime’, focused on five case studies of programs specifically run for women in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Institutes in Australia. The researchers sought to measure the success of these programs, especially in terms of access to pathways that would take women into further education, community engagement or employment. As a basis of measuring their success, they used the principles for successful equity programs identified by the National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC), which was established in 2009 by the Labor government in Australia, but has since been dismantled. These principles included whether the program:

- supported learner pathways and transitions which were built into the learning experience;
- focused on training being integrated with work experience and/or aligned with areas of labour;
- embedded support for foundation skills; and
- ensured the voice of the learner being heard and acted upon.

3. A comprehensive piece of research was undertaken by Butler, Clarke and Simon in 2014 for the organisation, Economic security 4 women (eS4W); one of six women’s alliances in Australia funded by the Federal Government. The WAVE research report entitled: ‘Hard Hats, Robots and Lab Coats: Broadening the career options of young women’, focused on how women and girls might be better supported to enter non-traditional occupations and industries. The research involved an online survey of stakeholders, including government departments, VET organisations, industry and community groups, employers, careers advisers and teachers. There were 217 respondents, and key responses were followed up with telephone interviews. Respondents identified both barriers and enabling strategies they considered to be effective in widening the participation of young women in STEM and non-traditional areas.

**FINDINGS**

The findings from these three pieces of research seek to unpack issues around gender inequality and stereotyping, and ways to support women and girls into a diverse range of careers. A gender gap has emerged whereby women with low school achievement obtain casual, part-time and often low-skilled jobs in a highly competitive job market. (McMillan and Curtis, 2008) Within this context, effective and coherent approaches to career exploration that support pathways to secure and skilled occupations for women are important, along with the need to focus on a change of culture in perspectives about what is ‘women’s work’ and what is ‘men’s work’.

As educational aspirations are generally formed early in life, the data suggests that more attention should be focused on changing gender stereotypes and attitudes at a young age. Gender stereotyping takes place in many ways, including through families, teachers and role models. Changing gender stereotypes at school and through other educational institutions is critical. Not only do females of all ages
require information about a variety of careers on offer and how to access them, they also require information about organisations that seek to promote gender diversity as a core value. (OECD, 2012)

These research reports highlighted a variety of strategies that could help to change gender stereotypes, address gender gap issues, and help to ‘pull’ the three levers of change referred to earlier:

- social change by creating new social norms and changing career and work stereotypes;
- policy change by ensuring that public policy has a gender perspective and aims to break down barriers to female workforce participation;
- workplace change by ensuring an end to workplace inequalities and female-unfriendly workplaces. (Osborne-Crowley, 2014)

The strategies include:

- Increased awareness and employment of female teachers and role models, including in male dominated industries;
- Accessible foundation courses that provide women and girls with skills and confidence to embark on further education and careers;
- Targeted women’s programs in vocational education and training;
- Taster programs, work experience and work placements that both provide access to a range of career opportunities and also challenge gender stereotypes;
- Partnerships between schools, industries and community groups to enable local knowledge and expertise to be made part of the school curriculum;
- Staged career exploration as part of the school curriculum from an early age with increasing opportunities for young women to explore different careers; and
- Sustainable funding for such educational programs for women and girls, where gender is part of government policy.

The issue of teachers and role models comes up frequently as one effective strategy. “If primary (school) teachers are mainly women, and secondary teachers, particularly in the sciences, are predominantly men, what messages are boys and girls getting about adult life? And if textbooks give examples of female nurses and male engineers, if teachers themselves project their beliefs about girls’ and boys’ abilities in mathematics or reading, what attitude towards those subjects will children form?” (OECD, 2012)

Yet the same questions apply post-school into vocational and tertiary education. Non-traditional trades for women remain dominated by males, with few female trades teachers in vocational colleges.

The findings from the study ‘Where are the female trades teachers?’ acknowledged the impact of teachers on girls making decisions about careers and the importance of both role models and mentors. As one respondent to the questionnaire that was used, said, “Increasing the number of women in trades is a long-term incremental
process, therefore the programs need to be sustained and sustainable. Cutting funding to programs once they start to achieve successful outcomes or the economic conditions deteriorate has often resulted again in the decrease of women in these occupations.” (Simon & Bonnici, 2014)

Evidence from other sources, including the Australian National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) student satisfaction surveys, acknowledge the importance of good teaching to successful student outcomes. Many respondents to the research on female trade teachers commented that a female teacher can have a positive impact on male students as well as female students. “Having male and female teachers working side-by-side, and respecting one another’s abilities, demonstrates that there is a place for women in this industry, and will help to change mindsets that still exist around male-dominant industries”, was one comment. “If you have no female teachers, it sends a message of its own,” commented another respondent. (Simon & Bonnici, 2014)

The WAVE research undertaken around career exploration in schools identified role models and mentors as effective enablers of career exploration for young women. Respondents to the national survey that was part of this study, strongly endorsed the benefits of bringing in successful women from STEM and traditional trades to speak to classes and career days, videos of successful women in resource kits and on websites, and providing access for young women to female-led and female-friendly STEM and traditional trade workplaces. Providing access to “successful women in non-traditional occupations, and allowing them to speak to our young women”, was frequently described as a simple yet highly effective approach to breaking down gender stereotypes in career decision making. This was sometimes conducted through specific associations in Australia, including Industry Women Central, Fanelle (for female automotive apprentices) and Support and Linking Tradeswomen (SALT). (Butler, Clarke & Simon, 2014)

However, other Australian research also points to the importance of vocational access courses in providing women and girls with the skills and confidence to progress on to higher qualifications leading to employment. (Shewring, 2009) The targeted women’s courses and programs studied by Simon and Bonnici in 2013 met the good practice principles established by NVEAC; that is ‘good practice principles which underpin programs and initiatives that are achieving positive outcomes for disadvantaged learners.” (NVEAC, 2012). These principles include: supported learner pathways and transitions built into the learning experience, training being integrated with work experience and/or aligned with areas of labour, embedded support for foundation skills, and the voice of the learner being heard and acted upon. While these principles applied to programs for all disadvantaged learners, women and girls were nominated as one of these identified equity groups.

The programs that were investigated in this study covered a variety of industry areas but they shared common aims, including to:

- build confidence and help women regain dignity
- strengthen the community to enable people to work together
- rebadge skills and raise awareness of what is expected at work
- increase skills for further study or employment
- accelerate skills and to have real and meaningful outcomes
- build skills, knowledge and confidence so that the women can join the workforce, volunteer or embark on further study
- support the women to see themselves as learners who are capable of studying a wide range of subjects, with pathways to further education and employment
- provide women with support and an inclusive environment for skills development
- provide work experience where possible

This particular research paper on women’s only programs, identified their importance in providing the opportunity for women to gain or refresh skills for the workplace through industry tasters and foundation skills programs. More significantly, these courses provide a comfortable and safe environment that recognises the conflicting pressures many women experience when balancing home and work responsibilities, and by doing so, develop strategies to support women and girls to gain vocational qualifications.

A further piece of research undertaken by WAVE in 2009, entitled: “Women and VET: Strategies for Gender Inclusive VET Reform”, outlines some of the issues associated with a male dominated VET system and the struggle that VET has undertaken to “offer programs that appeal to women and, more importantly, enable them to gain sustainable employment outcomes commensurate with their skill and qualification.” (Miles & Rickert, 2009, p. 5) More importantly, the researchers go on to identify a “link between women’s long-term economic security and equitable access to, participation in, and outcomes from VET. Research demonstrates that targeted women’s programs within VET lead to increased individual agency, well-being and overall levels of community capacity…Affordable, accessible VET remains critical for women from low socio-economic backgrounds who may suffer from a lack of visibility within the community and may also suffer detrimental effects of the global financial crisis.” (ibid, 2009)

Taster, work experience and work placement opportunities have also been described as key to supporting young women’s active exploration of career options. Taster opportunities are perceived as an important opportunity for young women to “try before you buy” and crucial to “demystifying” some of the gendered perceptions of STEM and traditional trades careers. Active, experiential learning opportunities, enabled through work placement and through school-based strategies, were identified as a very important component of effective career development approaches. Prior research in Australia has highlighted how students want a variety of experiential opportunities to give them hands-on practical experience, and allow them to test different careers ideas. (Urbis, 2011)

In the career exploration research, intermediary and community organisations were seen as particularly relevant to the provision of programs targeted to young women. Organisations external to schools provided third-party expertise to support and enhance school knowledge and understanding of different career pathways for students. Davies and Cox (2014) suggest there are benefits to using existing skills hubs as intermediaries for businesses and industries that want to develop relationships with schools. Partnership arrangements between schools and
community, and business and industry stakeholders, are also considered essential to the informing and support of effective career exploration.

Overall, accessibility of reliable, accurate and relevant career information was a common and consistent theme from the national survey undertaken on career exploration, with the support of outside bodies acknowledged as critical for schools. However there was criticism of current career development approaches in Australian schools, in terms of what was described as the ‘add-on’ nature of strategies that are separate or abstracted from the overall school curriculum. This research identified that most stakeholders were aware of the need for career exploration activities and strategies being introduced as early as possible in secondary schools. This is in line with previous research (Davies and Cox, 2014; Cedefop, 2014), which highlighted the importance of early and staged career exploration and developmental approaches.

Staged career exploration which adopts a cycle of activities that promote increasing depth and focus of career exploration, can be important to the effective engagement of young women in non-traditional areas. A staged approach may include initial broad personal reflection on interests and capabilities in primary and early secondary school before progressing to research on related industries and finally taster opportunities in roles and workplaces within a chosen industry. Lack of time in the school curriculum and lack of resources are acknowledged as significant barriers to the implementation of such an effective cyclical approach. Appropriate training of careers advisers in schools is a further significant issue to be addressed.

**CONCLUSION**

Achieving greater gender equality is an economic imperative for the broader society, not just women who are individually impacted by inequality. In her comments in response to the G20 2014 targets, Yolanda Beattie from WGEA stated: "There is no silver bullet. It begins with a deep understanding of all of the systemic barriers to women's full participation in the workforce". (Osborne-Crowley, 2014) To achieve gender equality requires a sustained and multi-faceted approach that involves all the levers: social, political and workplace change. Beattie goes on to say: "Every key decision maker needs to understand that the workforce is not a level playing field, and they need to understand why this is the case and then make a commitment to addressing every single element of women's disadvantage at work".

VET plays an important role in this approach as the WAVE research demonstrates. Tailoring programs to meet the requirements of women and girls, with some gender segregated programs, has been shown to increase participation and open pathways to work or further education. Role models and mentors also play an important role, particularly in non-traditional industries, as they demonstrate to both girls and boys that there is no reason for women to be excluded from any field of work.

Career exploration needs to be recognised as an important part of the school curriculum, just as important as maths, science, history or English, so that time and resources can be dedicated to it. Work experience or tasters form an important role in breaking down stereotypes and allowing young women to experience a diverse range of career opportunities before they make a choice.
Achieving greater representation of women in traditionally male dominated areas is an incremental process. As NSW Minerals Council spokesperson, Lindsay Hermes says: “The more women we can attract into the industry, the more the industry will change to accommodate us. It’s not political correctness, it is a good business – and that is exactly what the mining industry is.” (Santic, 2013).

The 59th Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW 59 2015), expressed concern at the slow progress of change in relation to the empowerment and equality of women and girls. WAVE continues through its research to suggest ways in which this change could be progressed in Australia. This includes social change, policy change and workplace change specifically pursued through the lens of VET and adult education in order to provide pathways for women and girls to sustainable careers and lifelong learning.

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