



# Response to the Gender Economic Equality Study Consultation

**Submitted by Skills Insight Jobs and Skills Council**

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## **Overview**

Skills Insight Jobs and Skills Council (JSC) provides strategic advice on workforce and skills needs across agribusiness, fibre, furnishing, food, animal, and environment care industries. As a not-for-profit, industry-led organisation, our work is deeply informed by stakeholder engagement, research, and data analysis. Our response to the Gender Economic Equality Study consultation offers insights into how gendered occupational segregation and systemic barriers in training, and workforce participation impact our industries.

Australia's workforce faces widespread skills shortages, and these shortages are often gendered. Women's participation is shaped by systemic challenges, including occupational stratification, undervaluation of feminised work, and barriers to career mobility. Similarly, men's entry into feminised sectors faces cultural and institutional roadblocks. Addressing these issues is critical to achieving equitable workforce outcomes and ensuring a sustainable supply of skills across all sectors.

Skills Insight supports the Study's intersectional approach and recognises the importance of addressing systemic barriers that impact not only women but also culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, First Nations peoples, and regional, rural, and remote (RRR) Australians.

## **Key issues identified by Skills Insight, Jobs and Skills Council**

### **1. Gendered occupational segregation in Skills Insight industries**

Occupational gender segregation remains entrenched in regional, remote and rural (RRR) industries, driven by long-standing cultural norms, systemic barriers, and structural inequities in education and training.

Gendered occupational segregation shapes workforce participation and a more targeted approach to workforce development—one that integrates gender-

responsive training models, workplace reforms and employer incentives—is required to address these disparities.

Skills Insight’s *2024 Workforce Plan* highlights:

- Women’s participation in technical and trade occupations (e.g., agriculture, forestry, and manufacturing) remains low due to a combination of social expectations, lack of workplace flexibility, and training accessibility.
- Conversely, men’s participation in care, animal welfare, and food processing is limited by gendered perceptions and a lack of targeted career transition support.
- Employers in traditionally male-dominated industries report challenges in attracting and retaining women, citing barriers including limited access to workplace-based learning models and support networks as well as peer support, mentorship, representation, and leadership opportunities.
- Access to housing and services remains a prevailing issue in RRR Australia for those seeking both employment and training. For reasons associated with caregiving and safety this may disproportionately impact women.

### **Examples of gendered occupational segregation from *An Essential Ingredient - The Food Supply Chain Workforce***

#### **Agribusiness**

In the agribusiness sector, women are underrepresented as farm managers but overrepresented in administrative support roles, reflecting entrenched gender divisions in leadership and operational roles.

In the food production industry, female participation in leadership roles is below 10%, while they account for 60% of casual labourers in seasonal work, reinforcing limited career mobility.

The National Agriculture Workforce Strategy (NAWS), however, suggests that national data collections on formal employment do not include work carried out by women on behalf of family businesses, such as the generation of off-farm income through entrepreneurial initiatives and value-adding endeavours, such as direct-to-customer sales.

The relatively low visibility of women in agribusiness - including through published statistics - sustains the perception of the industry being male dominated, which further discourages women from seeking opportunities and so hinders industry growth potential (“if you can’t see it, you can’t be it”). (J. Azarias, R. Nettle & J. Williams (2020); National Agricultural Workforce Strategy: Learning to excel; National Agricultural Labour Advisory Committee; Canberra, December; p.115.)

## **Veterinary nursing**

The gender composition of the veterinary workforce is highly skewed. Veterinary nursing is overwhelmingly dominated by women, with 94% of Certificate IV Veterinary Nursing students being female. This segregation aligns with broader trends of women being concentrated in caregiving and support roles, while men are more often found in leadership or specialist roles within the same industry.

## **Agriculture and irrigation technology**

Women are significantly underrepresented in certain agricultural sectors. For example, only 7% of students in Certificate III Irrigation Technology were female in 2022. Similarly, there is a low proportion of women in heavy vehicle training (though this increased from 6.4% in 2020 to 11.5% in 2022), reflecting traditional gender norms that push men into machinery and technical roles while limiting female participation.

## **Meat processing and food manufacturing**

Reports indicate gender imbalances in meat processing and food manufacturing. Women are more likely to be employed in lower-paid, lower-status roles such as food packaging and processing, whereas men dominate roles involving heavy machinery and slaughtering tasks. This reflects traditional gender roles where men are placed in physically demanding jobs while women are in roles associated with food handling and hygiene.

## **Dairy production**

Dairy farming and production show a gendered divide in roles, with women often taking on administrative, animal care, and milking tasks, while men more frequently occupy roles in machinery operation and farm management. Women make up 55% of those undertaking Certificate III in Dairy Production, reflecting their participation in hands-on farm work but often without access to higher-level decision-making positions.

## **Housing**

Housing constraints directly impact workforce participation, affecting both men and women in remote, rural and regional (RRR) jobs. However, limited accommodation options may disproportionately affect women, who may require safe and family-friendly housing to participate in these industries, as well as access to schools, childcare and other services to meet historically gendered care-giving responsibilities.

## **Privilege intersectionality considerations**

Overlapping social advantages (or disadvantages) shape an individual's experience in the workforce. In the context of gendered occupational segregation,

gender, race, socio-economic status, and other social identities interact to either reinforce or mitigate occupational inequalities.

It is important to understand which barriers to workforce participation need to be addressed, whether through policy changes, training programs, or workplace reforms. Solutions to gender inequality in rural and regional workforces must be tailored to the unique challenges faced by different groups of women and men, rather than assuming all experiences are the same.

**For example:**

Women in high-income households or with access to training may find it easier to enter leadership roles in agriculture or food production, whereas women from low-income households with limited access to training may be limited to lower-paid, insecure jobs such as seasonal farm labour or food packaging.

First Nations women in rural Australia may face double segregation—not only being underrepresented in high-paying agricultural jobs due to gender, but also due to systemic racial barriers that limit access to career advancement, land ownership, or training.

Non-Indigenous men, particularly those from established farming families, may have greater access to leadership roles and farm ownership due to intergenerational wealth and social networks.

Masculine-coded jobs (e.g., machinery operation, meat processing, irrigation technology) often come with higher pay and job security and the workforce is male-dominated.

Feminine-coded jobs (e.g., veterinary nursing, food packaging, administration in agriculture) are lower-paid and less secure despite requiring essential skills. Women who challenge these norms (e.g., becoming farm managers or truck drivers) may experience additional scrutiny or resistance from male-dominated workplace cultures.

Women in remote areas often have fewer career choices due to limited access to childcare, transport, and training opportunities. Those in regional centres with more resources may be better positioned to enter managerial or professional roles in food production and agriculture.

**Proposed strategies**

Many stakeholders have suggested that to promote the breadth of jobs, careers and education and training opportunities available, there should be a greater focus on case studies showcasing female participation in male-dominated workforces (and vice versa). The National Agricultural Workforce Strategy

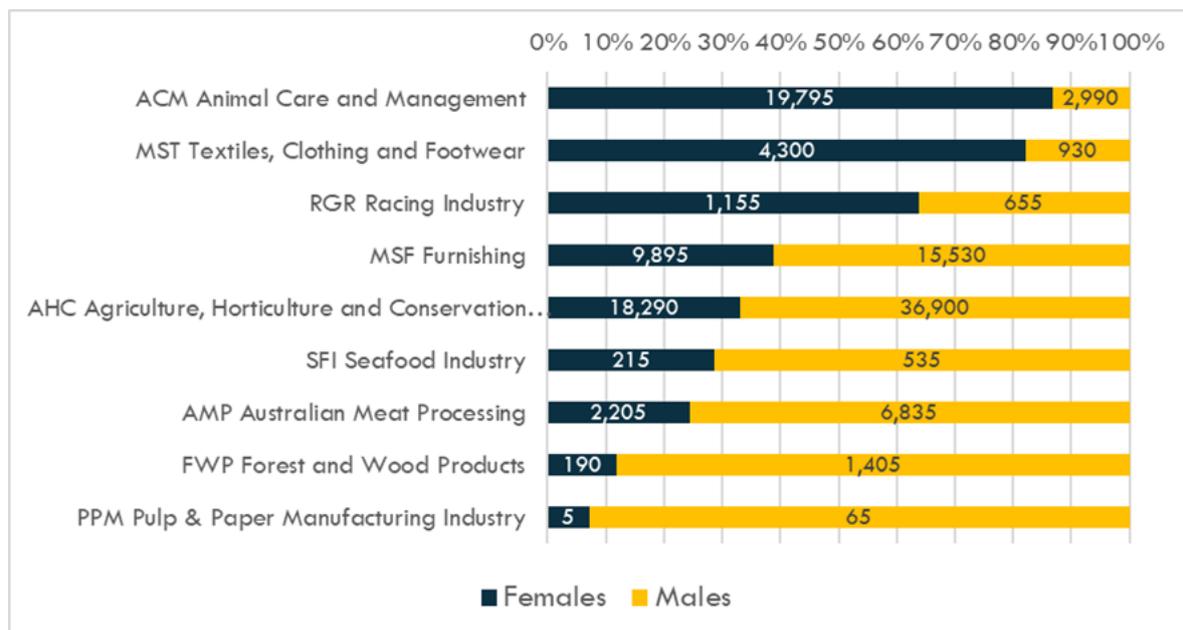
furthermore highlights stakeholders calling for greater flexibility in industry working conditions as a strategy for attracting and retaining more women. Given on-going issues relating to parental leave and career progression and continuance, they discuss the potential for additional support to be in place for women who take career breaks, including formal training support to bridge knowledge gaps that appear.

## 2. Skills Development and Training Accessibility

Formal training pathways are crucial in addressing gendered workforce disparities. However, significant challenges exist in attracting women to enrol in training for non-traditional roles and men to feminised sectors. For those people who are a minority in gender-skewed learning environments, retention rates tend to be lower, likely due to issues of providing socially and culturally safe spaces to learn and practice.

In 2023, the pattern of enrolments in training packages for which Skills Insight are responsible largely reflected the gender division of existing workforces.

**Table 1: Enrolments in Skills Insight training packages by gender, 2023**



Source: NCVET VOCSTATS (2024) Total VET Activity: TVA program enrolments

Key barriers to more equitable participation include:

- Training delivery models that fail to support flexible learning:** Many courses are structured around full-time, in-person participation, which does not align with the realities of unpaid care responsibilities that disproportionately impact women.

- **Lack of workplace-based learning opportunities:** Many RRR businesses cite difficulties in integrating formal training into workplace settings, creating additional barriers for women seeking flexible models to enter male-dominated fields.
- **VET funding models that do not prioritise gender equity outcomes:** Consideration of funding should include design to support women's participation in trade-based apprenticeships and men's entry into feminised sectors such as animal care and social services.
- **The leaky pipeline in gender-segregated occupations and policy implications:** The leaky pipeline phenomenon describes the gradual loss of women from certain career paths, particularly in male-dominated sectors. While initiatives have been introduced to encourage women's participation in trades and STEM, retention remains a significant challenge. Workplace discrimination, gendered training environments, limited professional networks and role models, and inadequate career development opportunities contribute to women exiting these industries at higher rates.

#### **Examples from Skills Insight data:**

##### **Gender Imbalance in Veterinary Nursing (Men in Feminised Sectors)**

Veterinary nursing remains a highly feminised profession, with 96% of the workforce being female as of February 2024.

The sector faces persistent skills shortages despite ongoing enrolment growth in Certificate IV in Veterinary Nursing, with 5,100 enrolments but only 1,250 completions in 2022.

Stakeholder feedback highlights factors such as low wages (\$27 per hour compared to \$41 for all occupations) and challenging working conditions making it difficult for men to enter and stay in the field.

##### **Limited Access for Women in Regional Trades (Women in Non-Traditional Roles)**

Women remain underrepresented in key regional industries. In broadacre cropping, only 26% of the workforce was female in 2021, increasing by just 1% since 2016.

The imbalance in the supply of and demand for VET training in rural, regional, and remote areas disproportionately impacts women seeking apprenticeships in male-dominated trades such as agribusiness, food manufacturing, and fibre industries.

##### **Underrepresentation of Women in Timber, Wood Processing, and Building Solutions (Women in Non-Traditional Roles)**

The workforce in this industry was only 19% female in 2021, reflecting a minor 1% increase from 2016.

Industry reports highlight challenges in attracting women and other priority cohorts due to thin training markets in regional areas and a large proportion of the workforce approaching retirement age.

Skills Insight advocates for funding models that prioritise flexible learning, recognition of prior learning and competency, pathways that support women transitioning into trades and technical roles from other industries, on-the-job training and assessment, workplace training, and modular skills development to improve participation across gendered labour markets.

### **3. Gender Pay Gap and Workforce Retention**

While gender pay disparities persist across many industries, they are particularly pronounced in feminised sectors. Research indicates that jobs primarily occupied by women - such as those in food production, animal care, and environmental conservation - are often undervalued in wage structures and women demonstrate higher attrition rates than men.

While government-backed programs such as apprenticeship incentives and industry-specific gender initiatives have boosted recruitment, multiple challenges continue to push women out of these sectors.

Additionally:

- Many women in RRR industries experience significant career disruption due to a lack of structured return-to-work pathways post-parental leave.
- Workforce mobility remains limited for women due to fewer leadership pathways and a concentration in lower-paid, casualised roles.
- Employers express challenges in structuring equitable and sustainable remuneration models in industries where historical undervaluation of skills persists.

#### **Examples from Skills Insight data:**

Skills Insight's analysis of wage data across key RRR sectors shows that the median income for women in animal care roles is 18% lower than for men in equivalent positions, even when controlling for experience and qualifications.

Focus group discussions with women in agribusiness highlight concerns around "invisible work," where contributions to farm management and decision-making are undervalued - or not valued - in financial and remuneration structures.

An evaluation of job classifications in food production found that roles predominantly held by women were classified at lower skill levels than comparable male-dominated roles, directly contributing to wage disparities.

Addressing gender pay gaps requires workforce planning approaches that integrate gender equity into wage-setting mechanisms, career progression frameworks, and employer-led retention strategies.

Skills Insight calls on industry stakeholders, training providers, and government bodies to:

- Acknowledge retention as a workforce issue and integrate gender-based retention data into workforce planning.
- Adopt industry-specific strategies to address the needs of women in RRR and other minority sectors, rather than applying broad-stroke gender initiatives.
- Demonstrate create clear and flexible career progression pathways for women beyond entry-level roles, ensuring long-term workforce participation.

## **4. Cultural, Psychological and Structural Barriers to Gender Equity in the Workforce**

Women and men face deeply entrenched barriers when entering non-traditional roles. The perception that certain jobs are 'for men' or 'for women' is reinforced through workplace cultures and in training environments; among other influences.

Our research highlights that:

- Women in male-dominated industries frequently report workplace cultures that lack inclusivity, affecting retention and career progression.
- Men in feminised sectors cite stigma, lack of peer support, and limited career advancement opportunities as barriers to long-term participation.
- First Nations women and culturally diverse workers report experience of additional layers of marginalisation, exacerbating workforce inequalities.
- If gender minorities - especially those from marginalised sectors of the community - do not feel psychologically safe due to underrepresentation, they will not participate in training or job pathways into gender dominated industries.

Examples from the data:

Feedback from regional employers suggests that only 12% have formal gender diversity policies in place, despite recognising challenges in attracting women to traditionally male-dominated roles.

Industry interviews indicate that male workers in animal welfare roles experience social stigma, with 63% reporting they felt discouraged from pursuing long-term careers in feminised sectors.

Overcoming these challenges requires systemic interventions, including targeted mentorship programs in both training and work environments, employer incentives, and stronger accountability for workplace diversity initiatives.

Retention issues are closely linked to workplace culture. Many women in trades, manufacturing, and agriculture report:

- Discrimination and gender bias, affecting wages, promotions and career growth.
- Unwelcoming or unsafe workplace cultures, leading to job dissatisfaction.
- Limited flexibility and work-life balance, particularly affecting women with caregiving responsibilities.
- Lack of representation, mentorship, networking and career development opportunities.

To address this, Skills Insight supports workplace training, peer networks and mentoring, leadership training, active sponsorship of female leaders in male-dominated sectors and vice-versa, flexible work arrangements that align with industry-specific operational needs and zero-tolerance policies for harassment and bullying, backed by clear reporting mechanisms.

## Summary of areas for exploration

### 1. Workforce development and training

- Gender-considered training to increase women in trades and men in care sectors.
- Flexible learning pathways to support diverse workforce participation.
- Workplace-based training and employer incentives to attract underrepresented groups.

### 2. Addressing structural barriers

- Gender-balanced recruitment and career transition support.
- Mentorship programs and workplace diversity initiatives.
- Housing and service accessibility supports to enable workforce participation.

### 3. Skills and retention strategies

- VET funding to support women in trades and men in feminised sectors.
- Career progression frameworks to enhance retention.
- Gender pay gaps and reclassify undervalued roles.

### 4. Workplace culture and equity

- Gender diversity policies and inclusive work environments.
- Policies on discrimination and harassment, backed up by workplace training.
- Psychological safety to encourage diverse participation.

### 5. Industry and Policy Collaboration

- Integration of gender retention data into workforce planning.
- RRR workforce strategies tailored to local needs.
- Cross-sector collaboration to drive gender-equitable employment.

## Response to other questions

### Which intersectional and/or gender data would be a useful addition?

A useful addition would be more granular data on:

- Gender wage gaps and career progression in food supply chains and agribusiness.
- Racial and cultural backgrounds of workers to understand systemic employment barriers.

- Intersectional barriers (e.g., gender plus rurality or disability) affecting workforce participation.
- Specific RRR challenges that impact access to employment and training opportunities for marginalised groups.

### **Which intersectional cohorts should JSA prioritise (in addition to gender)?**

As highlighted in the 2024 *Skills Insight Workforce Plan* emphasises the need to attract diverse workers, including:

- First Nations peoples, especially in rural and remote areas.
- People with disabilities, ensuring workplace inclusivity and training accessibility.
- Young people, particularly in regional and rural areas where workforce shortages are acute.
- Migrant workers, as certain industries (such as meat processing) rely heavily on temporary migrant labour.
- Older Australians
- Learners from low socio-economic backgrounds, particularly those from rural areas.

### **Are there examples of how we should talk, collaborate, and engage with different experts or communities to better incorporate research and lived experience into all our work?**

Skills Insight's [Community-based Aquaculture Training Tools - Skills Insight](#) project is an excellent example of a community-led approach to engagement with First Nations people.

### **What are the most gendered or racialised labour market and skills frames, classifications, indicators, and methodologies that JSA should be aware of?**

- Racialised labour market indicators:
  - Heavy reliance on migrant workers in low- and middle-skilled roles such as meat processing and seasonal agriculture.
  - Underrepresentation of First Nations workers in key agribusiness sectors despite strong cultural and historical ties.
- Data classification gaps:
  - ANZSCO classifications do not fully reflect the diversity of roles in emerging industries, such as First Nations land management or sustainable agriculture.

## **Are there any further recommendations for JSA to maximise visibility and access to improved ongoing gendered intersectional analysis?**

- Improve data granularity in labour force surveys by incorporating intersectional indicators, such as:
  - Gender-disaggregated wage and career progression tracking.
  - Cultural background and migrant status analysis in workforce participation.
  - Impact of regional and rural locations on employment opportunities for marginalised groups.

## **Conclusion**

Addressing gender equality issues requires targeted policy interventions, including financial incentives, stronger workplace equity measures, and greater investment in flexible working arrangements. The National Skills Plan emphasises the need for a new stewardship model, promoting collaboration among governments to achieve national priorities such as gender equality.

Skills Insight supports the objectives of the Gender Economic Equality Study and the development of the JSA Gender Framework. A more equitable workforce is not only an economic imperative but also a social priority. Gender-responsive workforce planning, targeted policy interventions, and industry-led change are essential to achieving a skills system that supports participation, career progression, and long-term economic security for all Australians.

Skills Insight is committed to working with Jobs and Skills Australia, government agencies, and industry stakeholders to implement evidence-based solutions that drive workforce equity and economic opportunity across all regions.