CULTURE IN CONSTRUCTION
Time for Life. Wellbeing. Diversity.

Strategies for recruiting, retaining and progressing women in the construction industry – guidance information

This resource provides practical advice about recruitment, retention and career progression for your Inclusion and Diversity Action Plan.

Overview

For women in construction, various practices undermine gender equality, making it critically important to focus on practices associated with women's recruitment, retention and progression.

The Culture Standard focuses on reducing bias and setting targets to support women in the construction industry – particularly in leadership and critical roles/segments, gender pay inequality and inclusive work environments. The success of goals linked to the Culture Standard will rely on your success with recruitment, retention and progression.

Recruitment

Recruitment practices influence the entry and placement of women and men into companies and project teams.

Women often face disadvantages in recruitment due to the industry's reliance on informal recruitment networks, which can perpetuate gender bias. Women typically apply for jobs through formal channels, while men frequently leverage informal networks, including family, friends and industry connections. These networks heavily influence formal recruitment decisions, giving men an advantage. Company referral programs often unintentionally reinforce these informal systems and the bias built into them, creating further disadvantage for women.

Recruitment practices may lack transparency and consistency, with applicants experiencing differing pathways, interview formats and questions with different projects or teams. In addition, employment practices that focus on cultural fit can further exacerbate gender inequality and perpetuate gender bias in recruitment.

Overall, the sector's recruitment practices require greater transparency, fairness and inclusivity to address systemic barriers and create equal opportunities for women and men.

Recruitment strategies

To eliminate bias in recruitment, projects and organisations should:

- Assess cultural fit: Evaluate whether the criteria for cultural fit are exclusionary or gender-biased. If necessary, adjust the criteria to foster inclusivity. For example, valorising a 'work hard, play hard' culture may exclude people with caring responsibilities.
- Enhance transparency: Make recruitment processes consistent and transparent to ensure fairness and eliminate bias. For example, advertise all internal roles, standardise interview questions and ensure interview panels have equal gender representation.
- Pay attention to job advertisements: Revise job advertisements for subtle language that may discourage women from applying. Focus on behaviours rather than skills.
- Set recruitment targets: Establish clear recruitment targets for women in decision-making roles, critical workforce segments and leadership positions. Establish targets for job shortlists and interview panels. Develop strategies to achieve these targets.

- Target recruitment for women: Organise recruitment initiatives specifically aimed at women, with on-the-job training and tailored courses to support their development.
- Broaden the recruitment pipeline: Extend graduate recruitment programs to include candidates from other built environment disciplines, such as architecture and landscape architecture.
- Challenge the narrative: Change the way your organisation talks about work to show that you value and recognise diverse career paths, including agile career trajectories and career breaks. Over time, this will attract and support a wider talent pool.
- Review external recruiters: Ensure any contracted recruiters are following gender-inclusive recruitment practices.
- Partner up: Establish partnerships with registered training organisations, social enterprises, non-government organisations and secondary schools to promote construction careers to women.
- Buddy up: Allocate all women new starters (apprentices, cadets and interns) with a woman mentor.
- Connect: Introduce all women new starters to relevant communities of practice (e.g., Tradewomen Australia, Build Like a Girl, National Association of Women in Construction).

Retention

Poor retention of women in construction is heavily influenced by rigid work practices, parental leave policies and the exclusionary nature of the industry. Long work hours, presenteeism and total availability are deeply ingrained in the culture, often forcing women to choose between advancing in their careers or maintaining a family life. These practices impact wellbeing and work–life balance for both women and men, but they disproportionately affect women, who often bear the brunt of caregiving responsibilities.

Parental leave is typically viewed as a women's issue and is a significant barrier to retention. While parental leave policies exist, women often navigate their departure and return with little support. The financial and operational burdens of pregnancy (for tradeswomen) and parental leave, coupled with its impact on career progression and pay equity, further exacerbate the challenges women face.

The construction industry's exclusionary culture acts to remind women of their gender and difference. Over time, this can lead to frustration and exhaustion, and challenge women's legitimacy as tradespeople and construction professionals.

Sexism is often tolerated in construction workplaces. Sexist comments, graffiti or assigning women only to administrative or junior tasks all perpetuate women's exclusion.

Ultimately, these conditions drive women away from the sector, because they feel unable to thrive in an unwelcoming environment.

Focusing on retention will help to achieve diversity targets on women in leadership roles and close the gender pay gap.

Retention strategies

To build an inclusive work environment that retains women, projects and organisations should:

- **Plan for gender equality:** Design projects with gender equality and inclusion in mind, including physical amenities, PPE, communication processes (e.g., include gender safety and behavioural expectations in inductions and toolbox talks), policies and practices (e.g., flexible work and parental leave policies) and resource planning (e.g., flexible and part-time work provisions, flexible start–finish times).
- **Set and track retention targets:** Set and track targets for women's retention with clear and transparent reporting.
- **Address work hours and work practices:** Implement the time for life and wellbeing components of the Culture Standard.
- **Plan for diverse work arrangements:** Champion different ways of working and plan resources to accommodate different work arrangements (e.g., part-time work and job sharing).
- **Buddy up:** Where possible, ensure women work alongside other women on site, in training and at events. This helps to reduce feelings of isolation.
- **Enforce zero tolerance for sexism:** Enforce a zero-tolerance policy for sexism in the workplace (including sexist and offensive behaviour, material and language). Raise awareness through site inductions and toolbox talks. Enact a reporting mechanism and reward and promote respectful behaviours.
- **Review parental leave practices:** Examine how your organisation manages the practical aspects of parental leave, including how employees are supported to transition in and out of parental leave. Consider whether your practices could be improved.
- **Ensure equal pay during parental leave:** Make sure that salary reviews, bonuses and superannuation are provided to workers on parental or caregiving leave to prevent pay disparities.
- **Conduct independent research:** If your project or organisation has a high turnover of women, engage an independent researcher to understand why.

Pregnancy and parental leave

The construction industry faces significant challenges in supporting women on parental leave and ensuring their successful return to work. Poor communication during leave contributes to isolation. Workers who are on leave say they are not informed about workplace changes (51%), excluded from communication (47%), and miss out on training or promotion opportunities (44%).[12] When they return to work, women often face lower-skilled and unsuitable roles due to insufficient planning and support from employers. High rates of casual labour also disadvantage women, with many casual workers having no access to paid parental leave.[13]

Balancing women's societal expectation as caregivers with the industry's entrenched culture of long hours and competitive presenteeism forces women to choose between a career in construction or family responsibilities. While 77% of construction employers claim to offer flexible work policies, only 14.3% of workers are part-time, with long and inflexible hours remaining the norm.[14,15] Even when flexible work arrangements are granted, they may face resistance from colleagues, reduced career progression opportunities or reassignment to less visible roles, limiting women's prospects for advancement.[16,17]

These systemic issues create a significant talent drain, with many women leaving the industry permanently. In one study, half of the women did not return to work after leave, and inflexible work hours were a major deterrent for those considering a return.[18,19]

Progression

Women's progression in construction is often hindered by gender bias and assumptions about their capability and capacity. While men's abilities are taken for granted, women are frequently expected to prove themselves to a higher standard. Frequent changes in line managers further hinder women's career progression, forcing them to repeatedly demonstrate their skills.

Gender equality efforts are sometimes viewed by men as giving women an unfair advantage. This myth is reinforced by a lack of transparency around promotion, which can encourage staff to rely on strategic alliances with senior leaders – a strategy that further benefits men.

While career progression largely depends on demonstrating the ability to manage projects successfully, access to these opportunities is unequal. Men are more likely to be given chances to showcase their skills, while women are often steered into feminised roles that limit advancement potential.

Progression strategies

To support diversity targets and build a pipeline of women in leadership roles, projects and organisations should:

- **Introduce transparent promotion processes:** Clarify the criteria and procedures for promotions to ensure they are clear and accessible to all workers.
- **Pay attention to job allocation:** Consider how jobs and opportunities for skill development are allocated within a project to avoid gender bias.
- **Set clear progression targets:** Define specific career progression goals and create a strategy to meet them, ensuring that gender equity is addressed.
- **Redefine career pathways:** Acknowledge and support flexible career paths, including career breaks, by celebrating the diversity and agility of different career journeys.
- **Sponsor programs for women:** Establish a structured sponsorship initiative to support women in low- to mid-level management positions to accelerate their careers.
- **Standardise career pathways:** Evaluate existing career pathways and create a clear, transparent skill checklist for each role, ensuring consistency and fairness in career progression.

Support resources

- Parental Leave Toolkit: This resource will be available shortly from the National Association of Women in Construction (NSW) and The University of Sydney.
- Job Advertisement Gender Decoder: This tool helps to identify subtle bias in job ads. https://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com/
- For more information about Recruitment and Promotion processes, see WGEA Gender Equitable Recruitment and Promotion.
- For more information about women's recruitment, retention and progression, contact:
  - Sheforce
  - Carpentry Australia
  - NAWIC
  - Build Like A Girl
  - S.A.L.T Australia
  - Tradeswomen Australia

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