

INQUIRY INTO STUDENT PATHWAYS TO IN-DEMAND INDUSTRIES

Organisation: Women's Health in the South East (WHISE)

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Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-Demand Industries

Submission Prepared by Women's Health in the South East

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About WHISE

Women's Health in the South East (WHISE) is the regional women's health service for the Southern Metropolitan Region. WHISE is a not-for-profit organisation that focuses on empowering women.

We work to improve the health and wellbeing of women in our region by providing health information and education to governments, organisations, education providers, and community groups.

Our team of health promotion professionals work to promote gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, mental health and wellbeing and the prevention of violence against women.

Executive Summary

Women's Health in the South East (WHISE) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-Demand Industries. Our submission draws on local research, practice-based expertise, and gender-transformative program delivery across Victoria's vocational education and training (VET) system. It highlights the systemic barriers faced by women, particularly those from regional, low-income, or culturally diverse backgrounds, as they pursue pathways into male-dominated industries such as construction, manufacturing, and engineering.

Women remain significantly underrepresented in these fields, not due to lack of interest or ability, but due to persistent structural inequality, gendered stereotypes, and unsafe training and work environments. Despite decades of initiatives, participation and retention rates among women in trades have not improved meaningfully. Cultural barriers, such as “spotlighting”, tokenism, and workplace gendered violence, intersect with institutional discrimination and weak policy implementation to create hostile environments that hinder access, wellbeing, and progression.

This submission presents two case studies led by WHISE:

- *Training for Respect*, a sector-wide primary prevention initiative designed to build safe, inclusive VET learning and workplace cultures; and
- *Nice Work if You Can Get It*, a cross-sectoral partnership applying a Gender Impact Assessment (GIA) framework to address entrenched inequities in manufacturing education and employment pathways.

Both projects demonstrate that coordinated, gender-transformative approaches grounded in intersectionality and systems thinking, can produce scalable, sustainable outcomes that improve safety, culture, and inclusion across the VET sector.

WHISE's key recommendations are structured around four pillars:

- Zero tolerance for gendered workplace violence
- Gender-transformative education and training reforms
- Equitable and inclusive employment practices
- Targeted support for regional and disadvantaged students

We urge the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee to adopt a gender-transformative framework to remove barriers and build inclusive, equitable student pathways into in-demand industries. Only through systemic reform can we ensure that every student – regardless of gender, background, or postcode – can participate fully in the future of work.

Note on Collaboration

This submission was developed incorporating feedback from the Victorian TAFE Association

Introduction: Transforming the System, Not Just Women

To create equitable and inclusive student pathways into in-demand industries, especially for women in male-dominated trades, we must move beyond deficit-based approaches that aim to “fix women”. These approaches reinforce individualised responsibility for navigating structural inequality and ignore the deeply embedded systemic drivers that constrain women’s participation and progression. A gender-transformative approach is essential. This requires coordinated, sustainable, and scalable interventions across education, training, and employment systems that shift harmful norms, dismantle discriminatory structures, and build inclusive, safe environments for all learners.

Gendered Drivers of Inequality

Cultural and Structural Barriers

Industries such as construction, manufacturing, and engineering remain highly male-dominated, with pervasive leadership cultures and institutional norms that disadvantage women. Women in these fields often face “spotlighting”, where their visibility as the minority subjects them to excessive scrutiny, with any perceived mistake attributed to their gender rather than individual performance (Holdsworth et al., 2020). This contributes to stress, low confidence, and high attrition.

Leadership structures lacking gender diversity further entrench unequal power dynamics. Many women report that inappropriate behaviour, harassment, and bullying are ignored or inadequately addressed by management. Fear of retaliation and lack of support prevent reporting, reinforcing cultures of silence and inaction (Holdsworth et al., 2020). Additionally, rigid assumptions about caregiving responsibilities, maternity leave, or physical capability often lead to discriminatory recruitment and promotion practices (Ibáñez, 2016; England, 2005).

Tokenism and Resistance in Education Pathways

Gender stereotypes are deeply embedded in career guidance and VET curricula. Girls are often steered towards “caring” or service-oriented roles, while trades and STEM careers are framed as masculine domains. Research shows that only a small proportion of female students report being actively encouraged by school staff to pursue a trade (Holdsworth et al., 2020).

Within VET settings, women face exclusion, scepticism, and tokenism. Classmates and instructors may question their legitimacy, assign them lower-value tasks, or perpetuate sexist jokes and behaviour (Bridges et al., 2024). These experiences, combined with a lack of female role models and mentors, contribute to significantly higher attrition among women in gender-atypical VET courses (Beckmann, 2023).

Systemic Discrimination and Institutional Gaps

Even where policies to support gender equity exist, they are often poorly implemented or lack enforcement. Many training providers and employers lack clear, accessible processes for reporting discrimination, and the consequences for perpetrators are minimal (Holdsworth et al., 2020). Infrastructure gaps, such as inadequate amenities for women on job sites, and rigid workplace structures send a clear message about who belongs.

Women often rely on informal support networks to navigate these challenges, but these should not be a substitute for formal organisational responsibility. Employers and education providers must embed accountability and actively address systemic bias.

Intersecting Disadvantages: Supporting Regional and Disadvantaged Learners

For many women, particularly those from disadvantaged or regional backgrounds, these barriers are further compounded by other forms of structural inequality. Financial insecurity can limit access to training and make it difficult to change careers, especially when family support is limited or household incomes are already low (Daniels, 2010). The low pay associated with many traditionally female-dominated roles can trap women in precarious work and make transitions into better-paid trades unaffordable.

Social isolation, particularly among women with young children or limited transport options, reduces access to career information, networking opportunities, and informal pathways into employment (Willott & Stevenson, 2006). This isolation also limits opportunities to find mentors or role models in non-traditional fields.

Low self-esteem and confidence, which are often shaped by a lifetime of exposure to gendered expectations, can further discourage women from pursuing non-traditional careers. For women who anticipate discrimination or exclusion in male-dominated settings, these psychological barriers are significant (Willott & Stevenson, 2006). Some women from culturally or religiously diverse backgrounds also face specific barriers to participating in mixed-gender training environments, underscoring the need for culturally safe, women-only training options (Willott & Stevenson, 2006).

Case Study: *Training for Respect*

The Victorian Government's inquiry into pathways for students entering in-demand industries highlights the critical need to support female students pursuing careers in male-dominated fields. A significant barrier to attraction and retention in these industries, particularly within VET and apprenticeships, is pervasive workplace gendered violence and its underlying drivers. The *Training for Respect* project, led by Women's Health in the South East (WHISE), directly addresses this systemic issue, aiming to create safe, inclusive, and respectful learning and work environments across Victoria's VET sector.

The Problem: Workplace Gendered Violence as a Barrier

Workplace gendered violence is defined as any behaviour targeting or impacting a person based on their sex, gender, sexual orientation, or non-adherence to gender roles, creating a risk to their health and safety (WorkSafe Victoria, 2025; Training for Respect, 2025). This is a widespread concern across Australia, with over 60% of Victorian women reporting experiences of workplace violence (Teh et al., 2022; WorkSafe Victoria, 2021). A recent prevalence study by WHISE found that in VET settings, approximately one in two staff and close to one in 10 students experienced some form of violence at their training provider or workplace in the last 12 months (Bricknall, Bush, & McMahon, 2025). Disturbingly, almost one in 10 staff and students admitted to perpetrating such violence (Bricknall et al., 2025).

For female students, particularly those in male-dominated trades, the learning environment itself can perpetuate gender inequality and foster behaviours leading to sexual harassment (Bridges et al., 2024). Female students are the predominant victims of violence in VET settings, with all identified student victims being women or non-binary individuals (Bricknall et al., 2025). Common forms of violence include bullying (experienced by 32% of staff and 8% of students), violence and aggression (22% of staff, 3% of students), and sexual harassment (18% of staff, 4% of students; Bricknall et al., 2025). Women are also more likely to experience discrimination (16% of women staff compared to 8% of men staff; Bricknall et al., 2025).

This hostile environment significantly impacts retention, with many female apprentices leaving their chosen fields due to microaggressions, harassment, bullying, and exclusionary cultures (Holdsworth et al., 2020; The National Association of Women in Construction, 2025). Most incidents go unreported due to fear of negative consequences for their reputation, career, or academic future (Bricknall et al., 2025). This problem exacerbates occupational segregation and contributes to skill shortages in high-demand industries (Parliament of Australia, 2017; WGEA, 2021).

Drivers of Violence and Their Impact on Female Participation

The drivers of workplace gendered violence in Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) mirror those in broader workplaces, deeply rooted in gender inequality, rigid gender roles, and power imbalances:

- **Gender Inequality:** Unequal power distribution, pay gaps, and underrepresentation of women in leadership foster environments where workplace gendered violence is tolerated or ignored (Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector, 2023; Our Watch, 2021).
- **Rigid Gender Roles and Stereotypes:** Beliefs that men are naturally dominant or more capable in leadership, and that women are suited for subordinate roles, devalue women's contributions and normalise sexist language, exclusion, and harassment (Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector, 2023).
- **Power Imbalances:** Hierarchies between supervisors and junior staff, or trainers and apprentices, can lead to abuse of power, particularly when victims have limited recourse (Cortis et al., 2021).
- **Insecure Work:** Casual, part-time, or temporary positions common in VET placements make workers, especially young people and apprentices, less likely to report violence due to fear of job loss (Evesson et al., 2020; Victorian Skills Authority, 2023).
- **Intersecting Disadvantage:** Women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and people with disabilities often experience compounded forms of violence and marginalisation, exacerbating the impacts of workplace gendered violence (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020; Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector, 2023).

These drivers directly contribute to low participation and high attrition of women in male-dominated trades. When training environments are unsafe or discriminatory, they become active barriers, limiting access to diverse talent and undermining efforts to address workforce shortages (Training for Respect, 2025).

The Training for Respect Framework: A Transformative Approach

The *Training for Respect* project aims to address these issues by establishing a sustainable, sector-wide primary prevention infrastructure for Victorian RTOs and TAFE institutes (Training for Respect, 2025). Its Theory of Change outlines a roadmap for social and organisational transformation, focusing on building a “strong bridge over the problem and into a safe future” through interlocking actions related to “Enabling,” “Knowledge & Skills,” and “Behaviour & Practices” (Training for Respect, 2025). This

approach aligns with gender-transformative principles (Backman-Levy & Greene, 2024) by seeking multiplicative effects, sustainability, spread, and scalability.

Case Study: *Nice Work if You Can Get It*

The *Nice Work if You Can Get It* project demonstrates how education providers can systematically address gender inequity in male-dominated trades through collaborative action. This initiative between WHISE, Chisholm Institute, and the South East Melbourne Manufacturers Alliance (SEMMA) offers compelling evidence for the Victorian Government's enquiry into student pathways to in-demand industries.

The Challenge: Persistent Gender Segregation in Manufacturing and Engineering

Industry-Wide Disparities

Manufacturing and engineering remain highly segregated industries in Australia. Women represent only 23% of the workforce, with even starker imbalances in technical roles where 90% of technicians and trades workers and 85% of machinery operators are men (WGEA, 2022-2023). This segregation creates significant economic consequences, including a mean total remuneration gap of 18.1% in manufacturing.

Leadership positions remain overwhelmingly male-dominated, with 91% of CEOs, 77% of Heads of Business, and 74% of Key Management Personnel being men. This concentration of power limits women's access to higher-paying roles and decision-making influence throughout the industry.

Educational Pipeline Challenges

At the vocational education level, persistent disparities plague manufacturing and engineering apprenticeships in Victoria. Female participation has fluctuated without sustained upward trajectory over more than a decade (NCVER VOCSTATS, 2007-2023).

Chisholm Institute's internal data revealed particularly concerning local challenges. Female enrolment rates ranged from only 3.8% to 12.1%, significantly below the state-wide average of 15% to 27%. Even more troubling, retention rates showed peak female student attrition reaching 60% in 2022, indicating significant barriers at the very beginning of technical education journeys.

Lived Experiences of Discrimination

Beyond the statistics, female students and apprentices reported systematic exclusion and bias. Common experiences included being assigned administrative work instead of hands-on projects despite equal training qualifications, facing persistent scepticism

about technical abilities, and encountering toxic work environments characterised by sexist remarks, inappropriate physical contact, and inadequate HR support.

The absence of female role models in senior positions compounded these challenges, while inflexible work structures created additional barriers for those seeking work-life balance, particularly parents.

The Solution: Gender Impact Assessment as a Tool for Systemic Change

Understanding the GIA Framework

The project's cornerstone was implementing a comprehensive Gender Impact Assessment (GIA) process. A GIA provides a structured approach for organisations to evaluate how their policies, programs, and services affect different genders, ensuring equitable access and outcomes for all participants.

The Five-Stage Process

Stage 1: Problem Definition Teams clearly identified specific policies, programs, or services requiring evaluation for gender impact, focusing on the persistence of sexism and gender segregation in manufacturing education and training.

Stage 2: Data Collection and Analysis Comprehensive information gathering included demographic analysis, experience mapping, and stakeholder consultations. At Chisholm, this involved examining internal student data on enrolment, retention, and attrition while conducting targeted student and employer forums.

Stage 3: Impact Assessment Thorough analysis revealed how existing policies differently affected women, men, and gender-diverse individuals. For Chisholm, this process exposed how cultural norms, limited exposure opportunities, and inadequate employer policies contributed directly to retention issues.

Stage 4: Strategy Development Teams developed targeted interventions to address identified negative impacts and actively promote gender equality across all touchpoints in the educational experience.

Stage 5: Documentation and Monitoring All findings and proposed mitigation strategies were documented with ongoing monitoring systems established to ensure sustained achievement of gender equality objectives.

Implementation at Chisholm Institute

The GIA process involved four facilitated workshops where cross-functional teams systematically worked through each stage. Teams defined problems, understood contextual factors including unconscious bias and equipment design disadvantages,

created intervention options, and formulated strategic recommendations for both cultural change and institutional support.

Addressing Intersectional Disadvantage

While primarily focused on gender, the GIA process inherently incorporates intersectionality by examining how gender intersects with race, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status to reveal compounded inequalities. Project recommendations explicitly support industry-led equality frameworks that prioritise cultural inclusion and accessibility for learners with disabilities, demonstrating embedded commitment to addressing multiple layers of disadvantage.

This intersectional approach proves particularly relevant for regional and disadvantaged students who face multiple, overlapping barriers to accessing and succeeding in manufacturing and engineering pathways.

Key Outcomes and Implications

The “Nice Work if You Can Get It” project established that meaningful change in manufacturing requires coordinated action across education, industry, and community health sectors. This collaborative model moves beyond individual-focused solutions toward systemic, sustainable transformation.

For VET providers, the project demonstrates how applying a comprehensive gender lens through structured assessment processes can identify and dismantle structural inequities within vocational training pipelines. The systematic approach ensures interventions address root causes rather than symptoms of gender segregation.

Recommendations for Scalable Implementation

Education providers seeking to replicate this approach should prioritise establishing cross-sector partnerships, implementing structured assessment processes like the GIA, and committing to ongoing monitoring and adjustment of interventions. Success requires moving beyond awareness-raising to implementing measurable, systematic changes in policies, practices, and institutional culture.

The project provides a robust, evidence-based model for breaking down entrenched barriers and fostering truly inclusive pathways into male-dominated trades, offering actionable insights for the Victorian Government's broader strategy to address systemic barriers in student pathways to in-demand industries.

Key Recommendations for the Inquiry

Achieving genuine gender equality in VET and higher education pathways to in-demand, male-dominated industries requires a holistic and transformative approach. This involves dismantling systemic barriers and fostering truly inclusive environments for all students, moving beyond approaches that focus on “fixing women” to those that transform the entire system (Backman-Levy & Greene, 2024).

WHISE proposes the following key recommendations to strengthen student pathways to in-demand industries, with a focus on equity, safety, and systemic transformation.

1. Zero Tolerance of Inappropriate Behaviour: A System-Wide Cultural Shift

- **Industry-wide Code of Conduct (Multiplicative Effect & Sustainability):** Establish and enforce a comprehensive code of conduct for the VET sector and related industries, explicitly committing to eliminating discrimination, harassment, and bullying. This code must be aligned with and supported by clear policies and procedures within all individual organisations.
- **Mandatory, Inclusive Training (Multiplicative Effect & Spread):** Implement industry-wide *Safe and Respectful Workplaces* training for *all* employees (including managers, supervisors, and VET educators) and students. This training must cover occupational health and safety responsibilities (including psychological safety), workplace rights, and address gender-based conscious and unconscious bias. The *Training for Respect* online modules offer a model for this approach. Case studies describing best practices for supporting tradeswomen should supplement these resources.
- **Leadership Accountability (Sustainability):** Senior management, head contractors, and leaders must visibly lead culture change, acting as spokespeople and role models for gender equality. This includes implementing gender equality Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) for all executives and managers.
- **Robust Reporting Mechanisms (Sustainability):** Establish clear, accessible, and transparent policies and confidential processes for reporting incidents of discrimination, bullying, sexual harassment, and gendered violence without fear of retribution. This includes anonymous hotlines and ensuring consequences for perpetrators and for supervisors/managers who fail to report. The regulatory body should work in partnership with employers and OHS representatives to ensure compliance.

- **Pilot Site-Saturation Projects (Scalability):** Implement pilot projects that take a “site-saturation” approach, engaging multiple stakeholders (industry peak bodies, unions, government, and individual organisations) in mutually reinforcing activities to transform workplace culture, as successfully trialled in other contexts. This allows for testing and refining interventions for broader dissemination and is crucial for sectors like construction.

2. Reforming Education and Training Pathways: Cultivating Inclusive Learning Environments

- **Proactive School-Based Guidance (Spread):** Schools must provide vocal and positive encouragement for girls in STEM subjects and trades. This involves addressing gender bias among career counsellors and VET teachers, ensuring they have the knowledge and resources to effectively guide young women toward a wider variety of careers.
- **Gender-Responsive VET Curricula (Multiplicative Effect & Sustainability):** All accredited building and construction courses must incorporate core capability standards on respectful relationships and safe workplaces into their OHS competency units. Training for VET educators on safe and respectful classroom behaviour is crucial. This also involves reviewing and updating VET curriculum and coursework with a gender and inclusion lens to be free from sexist or exclusionary content.
- **Supportive Learning Environments (Sustainability & Spread):** Implement strategies in VET institutions to counteract tokenism and sexual harassment in the classroom, equipping teachers to recognise and prevent such issues effectively. This includes providing opportunities for mixed-gender teaching across occupational areas to challenge assumptions and foster new norms of interaction, and establishing networks of gender-sensitive practitioners. Women-only training environments should remain an option to foster self-esteem and confidence where appropriate.
- **Targeted Apprentice Support (Spread):** Implement programs specifically targeting support for female apprentices, addressing challenges like informal networks and employer perceptions. This includes creating formal mentoring programs and “buddy systems” for women within and across organisations. Group Training Organisations (GTOs) should be held accountable for ensuring host employers adhere to these recommendations. The goal is to make the “exceptional” less exceptional by reducing the penalties for those who choose atypical fields.

3. Equitable Employment Practices: Ensuring Quality and Opportunity

- **Procurement as a Lever for Change (Scalability & Sustainability):** Government procurement practices must move beyond voluntary targets to mandatory requirements for gender equality in construction contracts. Contracts should explicitly stipulate that all companies within the supply chain demonstrate genuine acceptance and inclusion of women, provide positive working environments, and adhere to anti-discrimination and harassment policies. Contractual compliance monitoring should be augmented by external training and support throughout the entire supply chain.
- **Redefining “Equality” Metrics (Multiplicative Effect):** Shift the measurement of gender equality beyond mere numbers of women employed to encompass the quality of employment. This includes measuring appropriate treatment, support for progression, and employment commensurate with training and skills.
- **Meaningful Career Pathways (Sustainability):** Establish clear and meaningful career pathways for women in trades and semi-skilled roles, ensuring their employment opportunities are aligned with their training and skills. This actively challenges the “pigeon-holing” of women into entry-level or less valued roles. This requires strong Industry-TAFE partnerships that jointly address gender equity in on-job learning and workplace practices.
- **Family-Friendly Policies for All (Sustainability):** Implement flexible work practices (e.g., part-time work, job sharing, flexible hours) and ensure fair and equitable access to paid parental leave for *all* workers, irrespective of their employment contract type. Policies should equip employers to support pregnant women safely, enabling them to remain employed in roles aligned with their skills throughout pregnancy.
- **Preventative Focus (Multiplicative Effect):** Prioritise primary prevention interventions that focus on reducing or eliminating the root causes of gender inequality in the workplace, rather than solely relying on individuals to cope with existing stressors. This includes ensuring reasonable working hours and conditions for all employees, regardless of their employment contract.

4. Supporting Regional and Disadvantaged Students: Addressing Intersecting Disadvantages

- **Targeted Outreach and Guidance:** Proactive career guidance should be extended to regional and remote areas, ensuring that female students have access to comprehensive information about diverse career pathways and

opportunities in male-dominated industries, even if their local networks are limited.

- **Formal Network Building:** Formal mentoring programs and strong external support networks become even more critical in regional areas to compensate for limited informal networks. These networks can connect female students with role models and provide essential peer support to counter isolation. Data from the prevalence study shows that staff under 45, those with a disability, and those identifying as not straight, are more likely to have experienced workplace violence.
- **Addressing Economic Barriers:** Policies should consider financial incentives or support programs that address the economic barriers faced by disadvantaged students, making it more feasible for them to pursue and persist in VET and higher education pathways in traditionally male-dominated fields.
- **Culturally Responsive Approaches:** Training programs and workplace policies should be sensitive to diverse cultural and religious needs, ensuring that women from various backgrounds can access and thrive in these industries without facing additional discrimination. The *Training for Respect* project specifically highlights the need to support international and English as a Second Language (ESL) students with tailored communication and cultural safety training for staff.

By adopting this gender-transformative framework, the Victorian government can move towards systemic, sustainable change that fosters true gender autonomy and creates equitable pathways for all students into in-demand industries.

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