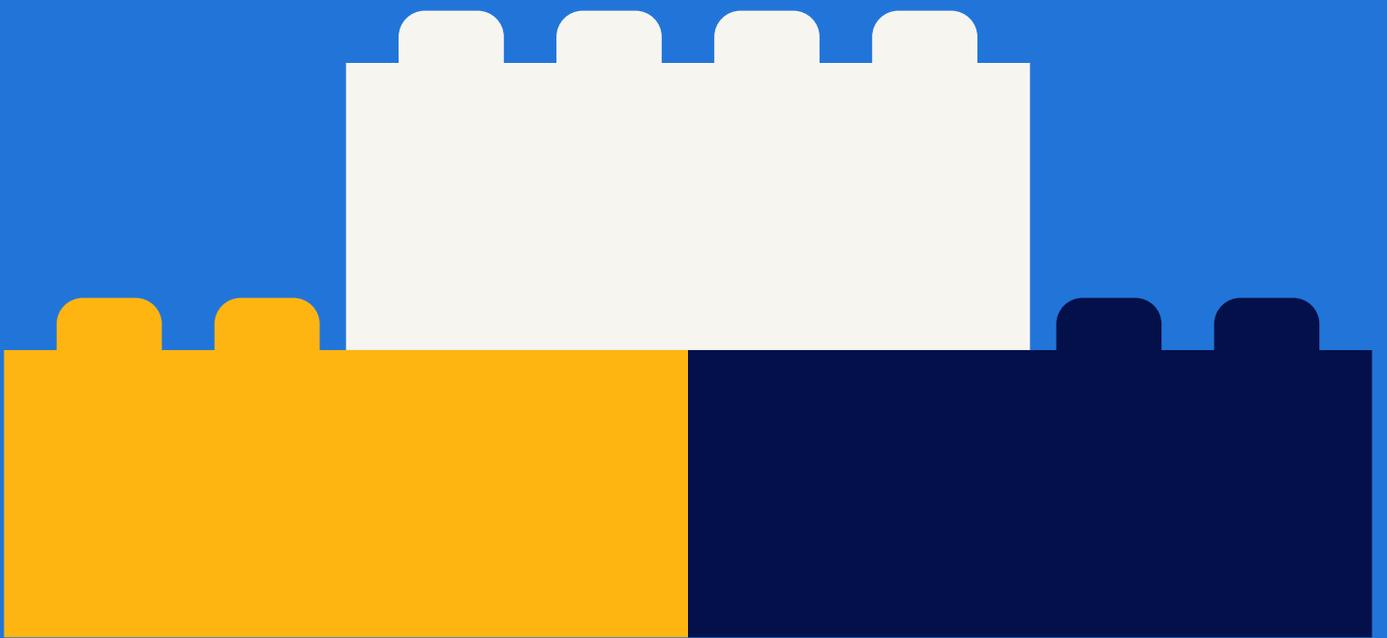




# women in construction



smashing through  
the concrete wall.

randstad

human forward.



the

building

blocks.



1

why gender balance is a business imperative.

2

why the industry is so male-dominated.

3

breaking down the barriers.

4

building equality brick by brick.

we must examine  
the foundations.

The challenges facing many women in fulfilling their career potential are often referred to as 'breaking through the glass ceiling'. Within the construction industry in Australia, these challenges would better be described as attempting to smash through a concrete wall.



Construction continues to be the most male-dominated major industry in Australia, where the proportion of women working in the sector has fallen over the past 20 years (12% in 2018 compared to 13.8% in 1998)<sup>1</sup>. The women who work in the sector are mainly clustered in support roles such as admin or HR, rather than on-site or senior management.

We've drawn on a Randstad-commissioned survey of 710 Australian men and women who are currently or have been working in the construction and engineering sector. The report looks at why boosting the number of women working in construction is a commercial as well as moral imperative. We also look at what's holding up progress and how these barriers can be overcome.

# 1



# why gender balance is a business imperative.

As a construction business, you may well want to do the 'right thing' on workforce diversity. Still, gender equality can quickly fall down the list of priorities when managers are under pressure to get a project completed on-time and on-budget.

Yet, far from being a 'nice-to-have', bringing in and promoting more women at all levels can help businesses win more contracts and boost capabilities.

## 1. bridge skills gaps

The construction industry is facing severe and mounting skills shortages. The latest Government figures for the country's two most populous states, Victoria<sup>2</sup> and New South Wales<sup>3</sup>, reveal that less than 40% of construction trade vacancies are being filled.

This shortfall could get even worse. To meet current projected demand, Master Builders Australia estimates that the industry needs an additional 300,000 employees, apprentices and independent contractors over the next decade and 50,000 new entrants a year to make up for the increasing number of workers entering retirement<sup>4</sup>.

In response, trade bodies are calling for more workers to be brought in from overseas<sup>5</sup>. Yet this can only go so far in meeting the vast numbers needed in the short-term and certainly won't tackle the current shortages. That's why we should be looking at the largely untapped pool of potential female apprentices and recruits.

## 2. better reflect consumer expectations

Need to know what home buyers want? Ask a woman. A survey of 25 leading Australian real estate firm directors and chief executives confirm that women have "the greatest say in the choice of property"<sup>8</sup>.

Bringing more women into your management team would enable your business to better understand and respond to what is driving these decisions. Yet, construction has the lowest proportion of women in management of any major industry in Australia (12.1%)<sup>7</sup>. Even the traditionally male-dominated financial services sector has now achieved 40%.

## 3. move towards tendering for public contracts

Federal, state and local governments account for a significant proportion of construction contracts. This source of business is likely to become even more prominent on the back of a surge in infrastructure investment<sup>8</sup>.

Is your workforce diverse enough to win these contracts? Promoting gender equality is a statutory Government priority<sup>9</sup>, which extends to procurement and tendering. Many listed businesses are now adopting similar requirements.

## 4. boosting innovation and productivity

Across the economy, studies consistently show that diversity increases productivity and returns<sup>11</sup>. A more diverse workforce would bring fresh ideas, experiences and perspectives at a time when Australian construction is facing challenges – from sustainable development to harnessing new technology.

## 5. inclusivity benefits everyone

Younger generations entering the workforce and moving up into management are actively seeking out diverse and inclusive organisations<sup>14</sup>. More women on-site can also help to strengthen inclusion across the board. For example, LGBTIQ and indigenous workers, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, may feel more comfortable bringing their true selves to work<sup>15</sup>.



“As diversity increases in our industry, we will see increases in productivity because we will see new ideas being brought forward.”

Jennifer Suerth  
VP of technical services  
Pepper Construction<sup>12</sup>  
(A US company where 30%  
of employees are women<sup>13</sup>.)



# case study

## The changing face of construction: Chelsea Whelan, ground-breaking apprentice.

Women coming into construction can sometimes feel like they're pushing against a wall of prejudice. However, Chelsea Whelan, the first woman to take on a bricklaying apprenticeship in Tasmania, isn't daunted.

"It's pretty cool, but I am not really fazed by it – it's exactly the same as any other bloke going for the job," Chelsea said in an interview with ABC News<sup>16</sup>. "You get a few double looks but it's not any different."

The ground was laid when Chelsea was young. Her father and grandfather are both bricklayers, so she spent a lot of time on building sites during her childhood. Having begun her apprenticeship in 2017, she's so far very pleased with her career choice. "I like when you finish the house you can be like, 'Man, I actually built that!,'" she said.

Chelsea's boss Andrew Crossin had been struggling to keep up with demand and therefore wanted more women to take up the trade. "I think it's a bit of an untapped resource," he said.

Andrew believes that being a good bricklayer has nothing to do with gender. "It just starts with attitude and then everything will follow once you're in the right headspace," he said. "Chelsea just gets in and has a go and wants to do it."





2

# why the industry is so male-dominated.

If there's such a strong case for boosting gender equality in the construction industry, why isn't it being translated into boots on-site and seats in the boardroom?

The 2019 Randstad Women in Construction Survey reveals several critical factors which deter women from entering or remaining in the sector – from gender discrimination to career opportunities, job flexibility and culture.

## 1. bad cultural fit

More than a third of women working in the construction, property and engineering (CPE) sector feel that a lack of gender diversity and the workplace culture that stems from this imbalance deter women from entering the industry or make them want to leave.

## 2. unfairly passed over

Many women aren't given a fair chance with new opportunities. An alarming number of women (30%) working in CPE report they've been passed over for a promotion or senior leadership position because of their gender, rather than as a reflection of their skills.

What's holding them back? A third (33%) of women surveyed feel that there aren't enough opportunities for career development within their industry. Nearly four in ten (39%) believe that a lack of female role models in senior positions is a key barrier to progression.

## 3. forced to confront discrimination

Is sexism still prevalent? Is the workplace opening up to women? In many cases yes, respondents have noticed a welcome shift in the way women are treated within CPE, with 71% believing that the industry has improved.

While encouraging, this positive picture is far from universal. An alarming 60% of the women surveyed have experienced gender discrimination in the CPE workplace at least once. Unfortunately, (37%) of female workers have experienced inappropriate behaviour from a male colleague. One in five have also felt excluded from male conversations and social events.



# case study

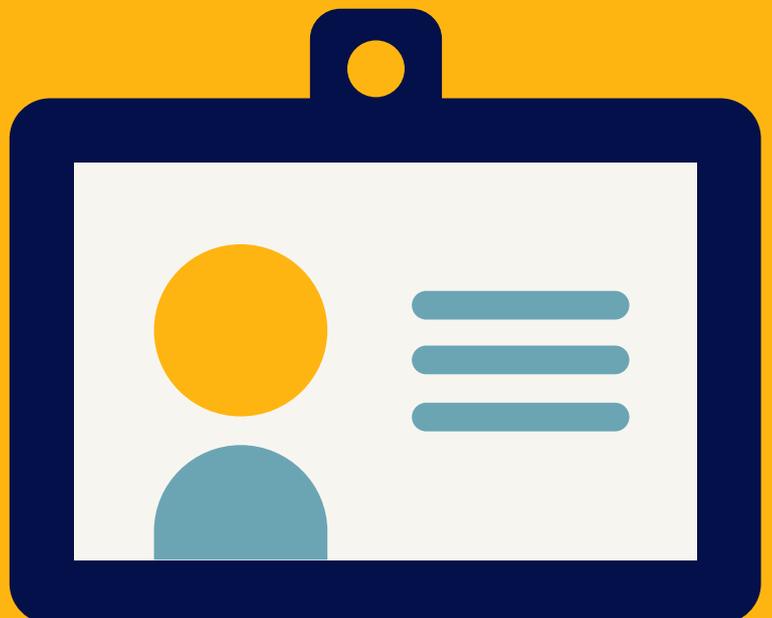
## The changing face of construction: Alison Mirams, rising to the top.

Alison Mirams, CEO of Roberts Pizzarotti, was awarded the 2018 Business Woman of the Year award at the NAWIC NSW Awards for Excellence.

Describing Alison as a 'visionary businesswoman', NAWIC NSW President Sarah Hogan believes that her award-winning achievements are a clear expression of the progress being made by Australian women in construction<sup>17</sup>.

Asked about the continuing challenges facing women in the industry and how to overcome them in an interview with the Newcastle Herald<sup>18</sup>, Alison said: "I believe the issue with diversity in construction doesn't stem from the demand side. Most companies are seeking to hire and support candidates who are underrepresented in the workforce – even if we aren't doing it as effectively as we could be. To make a dent in participation rates, we need to encourage more women to consider construction and engineering courses when they are looking at career pathways, particularly in high school."

Asked what advice she would give to women considering a career in the sector, she said: "It's a great sector to work in. Women bring a different way of thinking. You can take many pathways via university, TAFE or apprenticeships. If you are a school leaver and interested in uni, look for courses in construction management, engineering or architecture and seek out cadet-level opportunities to increase your understanding of the sector as you study."





3

# breaking down the barriers.

Our survey is a reminder that women want a fair and equal environment in the workplace, with more meaningful work and stronger development opportunities.

When asked to rank the top five factors that might attract more women to join or stay in the industry, men and women said:

1. opportunity for career progression
2. equal pay
3. meaningful work
4. learning and development opportunities
5. flexible working hours

# What can your business do to make this set of criteria a reality and reap the dividends of a more diverse workforce?

## 1. challenge stereotypes and shift perceptions

A study of female Year 11 students in New South Wales not only highlighted the extent to which many young women are put off by the lack of gender diversity within construction but also how few see this as an aspirational career<sup>19</sup>. One student said: "I can't see myself working in construction. Maybe I could be an architect, but what else is there?" Another said: "I don't see many women on construction sites that do more than hold up lollipop signs. The girls just do the traffic controlling."

The industry needs to sell itself better – not merely by repositioning it as a career path for both genders or championing high achieving female role models. But also in communicating the diverse and challenging roles that require a difference in character and skill. A lot of the images used to project construction are still implicitly or explicitly male. If young women could see themselves creating an attractive and sustainable work environment for future generations, more would connect with the construction industry.

## 2. fair deal on recruitment and progression

Selection for jobs and promotions is often based on who you know rather than what you know, with women largely excluded from these informal networks. Even if a woman does come up for a post, they may still need to overcome an unconscious bias that less progressive men possess. A study carried out by the University of New South Wales found that: "Men's capabilities as construction professionals are assumed; women's capabilities are frequently questioned, singled out or discussed. Women need to demonstrate they are better, not just equal to men. Men view actions to address gender equality as providing women with an unfair advantage."<sup>21</sup> It underscores the need for more systematic and objective selection in opening up equal opportunities for women in the industry.

“The building industry offers people a way to be creative and get involved in the design of buildings, or if they are good with numbers to get involved in engineering, quantity surveying, planning, building surveying and many other roles.

For people that want to be hands on, getting a trade qualification and working on-site can be rewarding and allows someone to stand back at the end of the day and say “I built that”.

My advice to anyone thinking about this industry is to try before you buy and talk to people already involved.”<sup>20</sup>

Kristin Brookfield  
Chief Executive, Industry Policy  
Housing Industry Association



### 3. sort out working conditions for everyone

For some, equality on-site goes no further than providing separate male and female toilets, though even this isn't always a given. Family-friendly, flexible working is often dismissed as inappropriate on a 7am-4pm site, though these restrictions certainly wouldn't apply to professional posts such as surveying and building control, which benefit from the mobility and agility of flexible working. Even on a building site, there is no reason why some posts can't be carried out on a shared or staggered hour basis or allow for parental leave.

Many rigid working practices within construction are rooted in culture rather than any practical imperative. Workers who diverge, risk exclusion or even shame for not being 'up to the job' or 'true team players'. There is only so long that such attitudes can persist when they lack commercial foundations. A lot of good employees – men as well as women – will simply vote with their feet if they're forced into long hours and presenteeism just to fit in. Underpinning all this is the reality that flexible working isn't just an issue for working parents, but a desirable and efficient approach for the entire workforce.

### 4. time for women to 'lean in'

It's crucial men embrace change and drive conversations for gender balance to improve, given that management within construction is predominantly male. The good news is increasing numbers are getting onboard, as demonstrated by the work of groups such as the Property Council of Australia's Male Champions of Change<sup>22</sup>.

However, a lot of male managers still believe that gender equality is a second-order priority or even something to resist. Women, therefore, have to take the initiative through mentoring, setting up networks and communicating the case for diversity. "It's controversial, but women have to learn to lean in, speak up and speak out," says Romilly Madew, the Chief Executive of the Green Building Council Australia (GBCA) and member of the leadership group Chief Executive Women<sup>23</sup>. "While men have to think about their unconscious or conscious bias and behaviour, women in our industry can't sit back and leave it to men to fix gender inequality; they have to participate and help themselves. Women have to get on committees, put their hands up in the organisations, ask for mentors, look for coaches, call out any sexism and apply for those top-tier jobs – because they're not. It's for both sides of the gender line to work at this, not just the men."

### 5. the government should look beyond tick box targets

Governments are influential clients and want to boost diversity in the industry – for example, New South Wales advocates a 2% target increase for women in trade-related work<sup>24</sup>. This might help, but it looks like a drop in the ocean. Targets, even worse quotas, can create a backlash to the progress of equality within construction. A better approach instead would be asking tendering companies to set out qualitative as well as quantitative objectives on diversity and inclusion and the benefits they hope to achieve (e.g. improving employee well-being and retention). At the very least, this would help to make this more than a tick box exercise. At best, it can lead to a genuine re-think of the culture that holds back women and how it can be challenged.



“It’s for both sides of the  
gender line to work at this,  
not just the men.”

Romilly Madew  
Chief Executive of the Green  
Building Council Australia (GBCA)

# 4



# building equality brick by brick.

Creating a more gender diverse construction industry can seem like an overwhelming challenge, especially considering our survey highlights the barriers and biases still standing in women's way.

Yet, with the industry being stretched by the increasing demand for new housing and infrastructure projects, it's now more important than ever to encourage more women to join the workforce and help plug the skills gap. Boosting diversity within your business is also an unmissable opportunity to get closer to customers, enhance your reputation and win more business.

With a will, there is a way. The role models featured in this report show that it is possible to smash through the concrete walls. Part of this new movement relies on more women taking the same initiative to follow in the wake of these inspirational female leaders.

You might assume factions of your male workforce will be resistant or face an insufficient supply of motivated female candidates, but times are changing. People are now recognising the benefits for themselves, as well as the wider industry, of improving workplace diversity. So, let's lay down the foundations and start building equality brick by brick. Eventually, we can look at a thriving, diverse industry that reflects modern Australia and say, "We built that".

# case study

## The changing face of construction: Jeff Fitch and Sherry Woodhouse, mentor and mentee<sup>25</sup>.

Caterpillar's Melbourne-based District Manager, Jeff Fitch, is a seasoned industry professional with more than 25 years of experience around the globe. Jeff is a passionate advocate for opportunities for women in the industry. In addition to mentoring employees within Caterpillar, Jeff is active within the Australian Women in Resources Alliance (AWRA) e-mentoring programme.

Jeff's pairing with information technology specialist Sherry Woodhouse has seen him both pass on knowledge and provide invaluable male insights into gender and career matters.

"I've been in the industry for a while and wanted some direction as to how I might be able to progress my career further," said Sherry. While a female mentor may have been the obvious choice, instead she opted for a male mentor in Jeff. "Women will bring a certain perspective, but I was actually looking for a male perspective of how women are perceived in the construction industry," she says.

"Jeff was able to, from a senior manager point of view, contribute to what he thought my career would look like."

"Sherry wasn't looking for me to do her job," said Jeff, praising her work ethic. "Being a mentor isn't about having the answers; it's about being willing to share our experiences, whether they turned out well or not. Literally, all that I did was just unleash what was inside of her already."



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