

How work works:

getting young women into trades



Youth-led research into what schools can do to help young women consider higher paying (male-dominated) trades



This project was a Youth Take Over work experience project sponsored by Kirkland Lake Gold



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Other reports in the How Work Works series

Pope J, *How Work Works: getting young people employment in our growing industries:*

- Loddon Campaspe (2020). NCLLEN, CCLLEN and CRLLEN <http://www.ncllen.org.au/hww.html>
- North East (2021) NELLEN <https://www.nellen.org.au/the-how-work-works-project/>
- Greater Shepparton (2021) GMLLEN <https://www.gmlen.com.au/how-work-works/>

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How work works

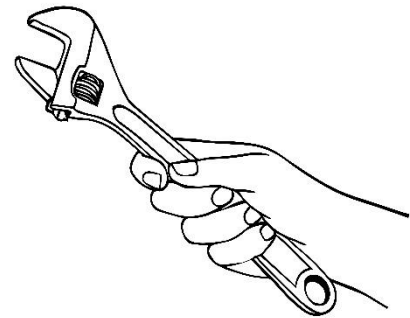
Australia has a gender pay gap. It exists partly because men work in different, higher paid, occupations than women, including in the high paying (and in demand) trades of electrotechnology, telecommunications, construction, commerce, and engineering. Few women take up these trades, and that has changed little over the past 20 years.

When we sent eight young interns out to interview tradeswomen, we found out why.

Our tradeswomen confirmed what other research has established, that girls go through a process of 'editing out' options about what they think they can be from an early age. It starts before school with messages about "girls don't do ...", and continues with negative messages about "university being the best pathway", "trades are wasting your potential" and "women are not strong enough". Teachers and career advisors in schools can be part of this process by actively discouraging young women to consider trades and not providing advice, support, role models, or opportunities to try them out.

As a result, a young woman for whom a trade might be their best job, arrives at the point of making the choice about a trade with significant doubt and a lack of confidence about doing so. Many of the tradies we interviewed took a female-dominated pathway first, before having the confidence to try their trade. This means young women start out towards the higher incomes 7 or 10 years behind their male counterparts.

The universal message given by the tradeswomen we interviewed was that they would highly recommend their trade to other women, and they just wanted young women to "have some confidence" and "just give it go". To be able to make the choice however, they argued young women need more contact with female tradies earlier in school ("you can't be what you can't see"), and more opportunities to try out and explore options to find out what suits them and develop their confidence ("get on the tools").



These are things we can fix.

This report outlines our research in three sections:

- » **4 messages schools (and young women) need to hear**
- » **4 barriers young women need to overcome**
- » **4 things we should do next to help (recommendations to government and schools):**
 1. Challenge gender stereotypes in primary school
 2. Upskill secondary school leadership, career advisors, and teachers so they can advise on vocational opportunities
 3. Fund a secondary career education model that gets trades on young women's radars
 4. Develop experiences to get young women "on the tools" so they can feel more confident in their decisions

By supporting young women to get to their best job, and addressing our skills shortages and the gender pay gap along the way, will ensure we have an innovative and thriving regional economy into the future.

"It's honestly been one of the most difficult but amazing experiences of my life. I want to do this for the rest of my life."

4 messages schools (and young women) need to hear...

1. Vocational education can lead to higher incomes
2. There are skills shortages in the vocational occupations
3. Gender stereotyping 'edits out' options from an early age
4. These tradeswomen highly recommend their trade

1. Vocational education can lead to higher incomes

- » **Australia's gender pay gap is partly the result of women working in industries and jobs with lower wages.** In Australia, men's take-home wage is on average 14%, or \$261 per week, more than women's (full-time equivalent earnings).¹ One of the reasons for this gender pay gap is that women and men work in different industries and jobs, with male-dominated ones attracting higher wages. Grattan Institute research has shown that vocational training in male-dominated occupations typically leads to higher lifetime incomes than vocational training in female-dominated ones (and many low-ATAR university courses).² Fewer women choose these higher-paying options; they make up just 3% of employees in the electrotechnology and telecommunications trades, and only 1% in construction and engineering.³ The number of women in these trades has "barely budged in 20 years".⁴
- » **Vocational pathways are as valuable as university pathways and can lead to higher incomes.** Many people still believe university is the best pathway, but research has shown that the median full-time income of a VET graduate is \$56,000 compared to \$54,000 for those completing a Bachelor's degree.⁴ Additionally, in 2014, only 67% of university students found work after graduation compared to 78% of VET graduates, and 92% of VET graduates who studied as part of an apprenticeship.⁶

"Occupations such as building, plumbing, automotive, engineering, and electrotechnology are still male dominated. This is not because women lack the skills to participate; rather, they lack the opportunities to take up technical or trade subjects in school [and] are not encouraged, and too often are actively discouraged, to undertake apprenticeships in these areas." (Tradeswomen Australia)



¹ Australian Government Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2021) Australia's Gender Pay Gap Statistics webpage.

<https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/australias-gender-pay-gap-statistics> Accessed November 2021

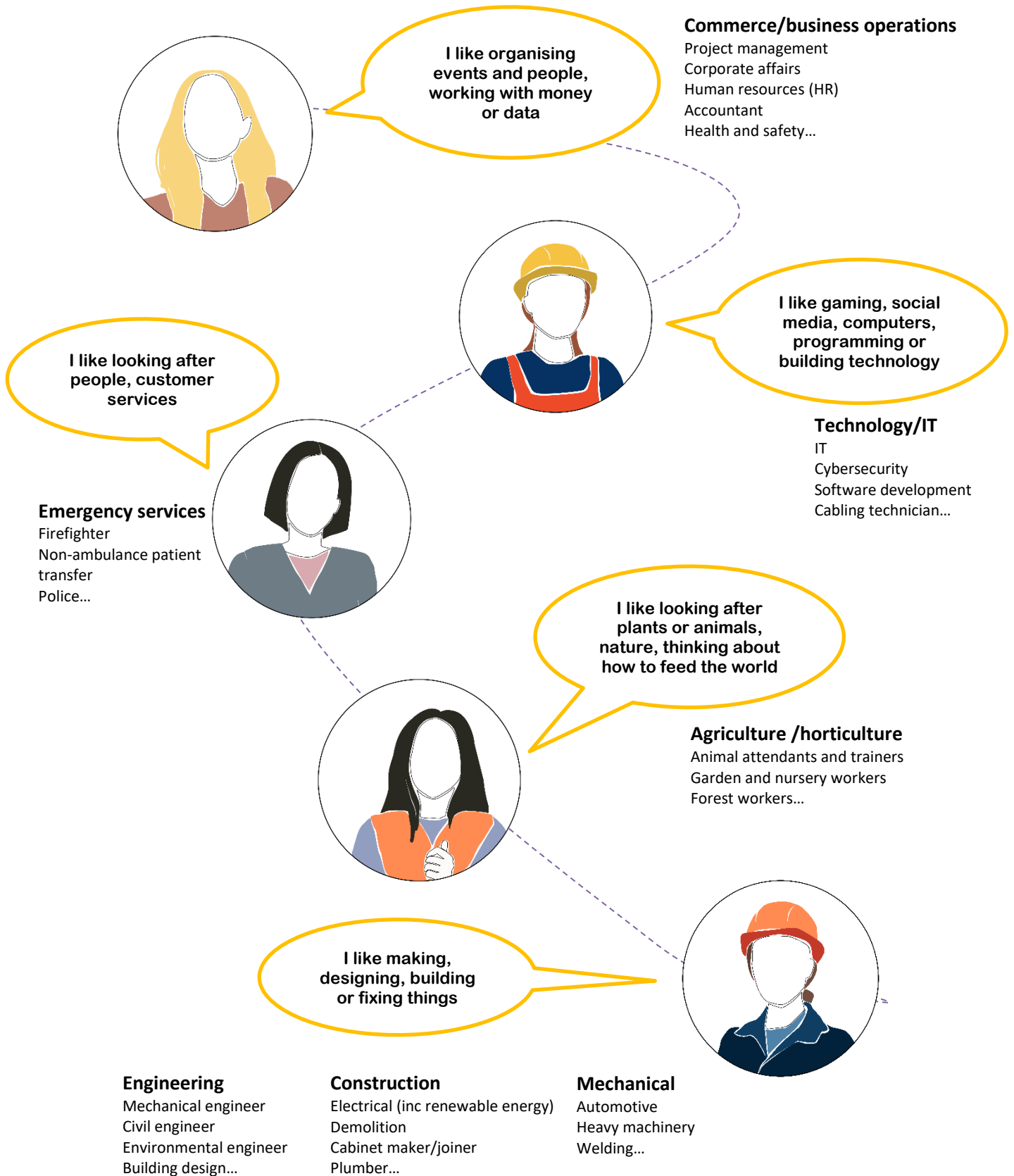
² Norton A & Cherastidtham I (2019) *Risks and rewards: when is vocational education a good alternative to higher education?* Grattan Institute. <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/919-Risks-and-rewards.pdf>

³ Bridges D et al. *The female tradie shortage: why real change requires a major cultural shift.* The Conversation, June 1 2018.

<https://theconversation.com/the-female-tradie-shortage-why-real-change-requires-a-major-cultural-shift-97091>

⁴ McCrindle Research (2017) Perceptions are not reality: myths, realities & the critical role of vocational education & training in Australia. Skilling Australia Foundation. <https://saf.org.au/vet-sector-key-to-future-proofing-economy/>

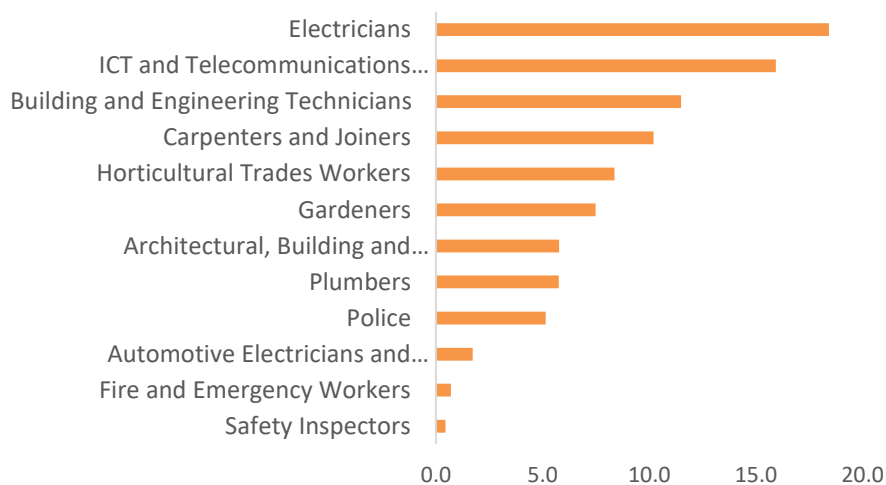
Figure 1. Could a trade be right for you? What do you like doing?



2. There are skills shortages in vocational occupations

- » **The male-dominated trades can be a good choice as they make up 11 of the 20 highest ranked occupation shortages in Australia.** These include: IT, electrical, carpentry, construction, metalwork, plumbing, motor mechanics, welding, engineering, and painting. Not only are these areas of skills shortages in Australia, but jobs in these trades are projected to grow (Figure 2).

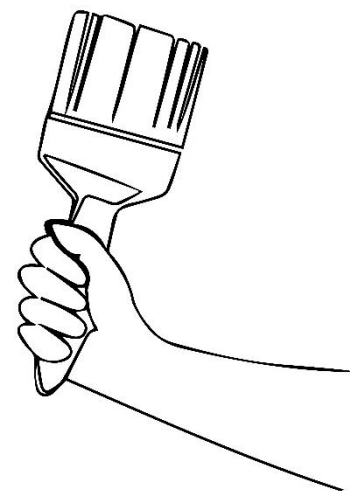
Figure 2. Trades with the greatest projected employment growth, 5 years to November 2025, National Skills Commission Projections ('000 jobs)



3. Gender stereotyping 'edits out' options from an early age

- » **Gender stereotyping impacts on how young people work out what career might suit them, and what they aspire**

to be. The process starts by children watching and listening to people in the families around them. Research shows children 'edit out' options when they hear attitudes along the lines of "that's not a job for girls/boys ..." and by the age of four, children show a gender bias about jobs. 'Editing out' continues over school years, including through the attitudes of teachers, and the opportunities schools provide. By Year 8, young people have eliminated potential careers, jobs, and interests based on who they perceive themselves to be, and what is appropriate to do. When school subjects become optional after Year 10, further curtailing of occupational choices can occur.⁵ If this process does eliminate the aspirations of young women interested



⁵ Kashefpakdel E, Rehill J & Hughes D (2018) *What works? Careers-related education in primary schools*. The Careers & Enterprise Company. <https://cica.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Careers-Enterprise-Company-Education-and-Employers-Research-What-works-Career-Related-Learning-in-Primary-School-December-2019.pdf>

in trades, it is likely to have a huge impact on their confidence, which can prevent them from taking up the “downstream” opportunities created by governments (e.g. apprenticeships targeted at young women).

“When I started my job, I was the first female on the floor. My boss's daughters were 13 and 14 and have been going into work with their father since they were like five, and they just did not know that they could be a sparky until I came along.”

- » **Poor career advice is part of the problem.** A 2018 review of government schools found widespread anecdotal evidence that vocational education suffers more than higher education from poor career advice.⁶ It also found that only 40% of students surveyed received any information about vocational education from teachers, and just 27% from career counsellors (‘career expos’ were the most common source of information). Poor quality career education increases the risk that students make decisions that are not in their best interests, and studies have shown there is a mismatch between career aspirations, projected labour demand, and the jobs young people eventually get in Australia.⁷ For young women who are interested in trades, this can lead to costs associated with delaying the start of their careers, and/or changing or dropping out of other courses they try first.

4. These tradeswomen highly recommend their trade

- » **Trades suit some women and all our tradies would recommend their trade to young women coming through school.**

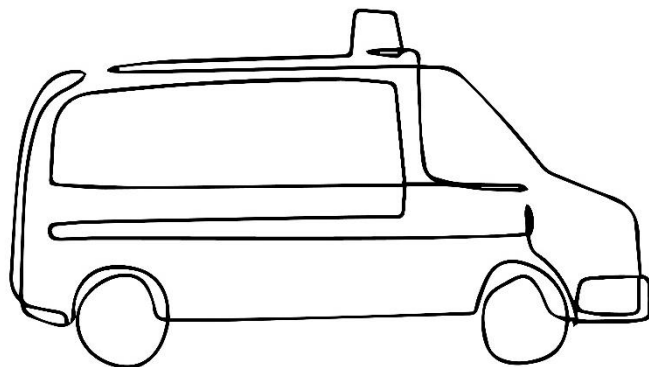
“Absolutely recommend. IT was originally female-dominated. There’s so much flexibility in it and so many places you can go.”

“What I love is that it’s a job that has meaning. In this [patient transport] job we’ve got a life to save. It’s a true sense of teamwork. It’s a great career path for women.”

“I still find it exciting that we do jobs for the likes of Coca Cola, CUB and Cadbury's...all those big names. It's still exciting walking into their factories and being a part of how their product gets from nothing to a product on our shelves.”

“Definitely the best decision that I’ve made. At one point, I was making more money than my sister, who is a doctor.”

“Just go for it. There is nothing stopping you. If you are interested in something, do it. You’re fine.”



⁶ Joyce S (2018) *Strengthening Skills: Expert Review of Australia’s Vocational Education and Training System*. Prime Minister and Cabinet, Australian Government. <https://www.pmc.gov.au/resource-centre/domestic-policy/vet-review/strengthening-skills-expert-review-australias-vocational-education-and-training-system>

⁷ NCVER (National Centre for Vocational Education Research) (2012) *Student Outcomes: Australian Vocational Education and Training Statistics*. NCVER: Adelaide

4 barriers young women need to overcome ...

1. For some women, trades are the best job choice, but many take a long time to get there
2. Schools still preference university pathways
3. Teachers and career advisors do not know enough about trades
4. Negative messages also make some women doubt the choice

1. For some women, trades are the best job choice, but many take a long time to get there

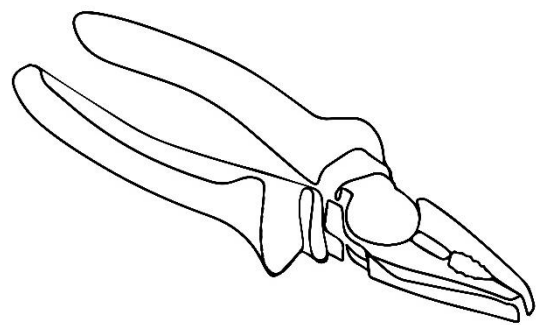
- » **Some women are ‘hands on’ with an aptitude for making, designing, and fixing things.** Many of the tradies we interviewed reported they had been interested in their trade area, or making and fixing things, from early on. Some came from households where the activities of their trade were around them from a young age.

“I was always fiddling with the TV, keen to know how things worked and problem solving. I have never lost that interest.”

“I always loved trucks. Dad had machinery at home.”

“I did woodwork in school and I wanted to continue, so I chose a Cert II in Carpentry. That led to two weeks of work experience with the local joinery. And then that’s where I found my trade.”

“I really just hated school and the idea of sitting at a desk. In Year 10 I started looking at what I could do. Thinking about it, I wanted to be a mechanic.”



- » **It is common for women to do something else first, causing a delay in getting to the higher incomes.** It is common for women to start a trade later than men do. For some, this is the result of a natural progression in their career, or they switched industries because the higher wages or flexibility are good for having children.

“I had been working in the arts and I picked the trade because I needed a stable job when we decided to have children. I thought, ‘what’s another job I could do?’, and saw non-ambulance transport. It really suits the skills I got in the arts: I’m good with patients, I’m super organised in setting things up, and I’m good at trouble shooting.”

“I actually had no clue you could be a tradie as a girl. When I was in school, I was looking more into becoming a chef ... [but] I got a job at Bunnings, and I saw a lot of tradies come and go so I thought y’know I want to try one of these trades, despite constantly hearing it’s a man’s job.”

Others we interviewed entered a trade later as a consequence of not being provided better advice earlier, or not having the confidence to pursue it directly from school. This means some women waste time moving through their careers to higher salaries.

“Not having trade subjects offered to women in school hindered me getting into this career. It made me go around the long way. I already did seven years of something else before trying the one I’m in.”

“I never thought I could do it. It took a year of working and talking to others to realise it was an option.”

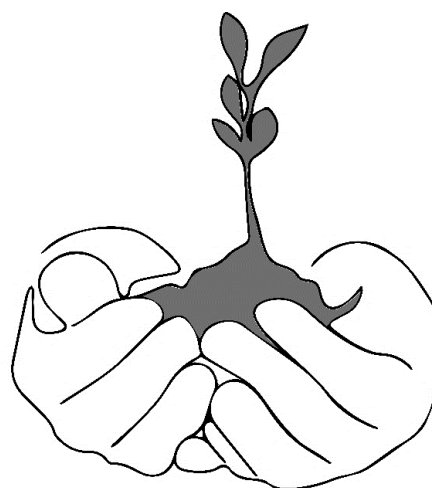
“I didn’t start until I was 21. I went and did all the things that I was supposed to do as a female. I went straight out of school and did business administration at a hospital and then went into sales. It came to a point where I was looking out the window and seeing the greenskeeper or landscaper, and I’m just sitting there thinking, gee, that’s what I’d rather be doing than sitting here at this desk.”

Even once in the role, women might not think they can eventually be in charge.

“When I was on the tools, you didn’t see many women. When I first saw a female project manager, I was blown away.”

One (successful) older woman was thwarted by industry rules that prevented women from working in certain jobs. These things have changed, but surprisingly not that long ago.

“My dream job was to be a wildlife officer. My career teacher at school said that they don’t take females. So, the police force was next best thing. When I started, the roles for women were only in the family violence unit. We were not allowed to go into the dog squad, which was what I was interested in at that time. There’s still only one female in the dog squad.”



2. Schools still preference university pathways

- » **Schools are still providing advice that university is the best pathway, putting doubt in young women’s minds.** All of our younger tradies reported university was still the pathway most valued and supported by school and career advisors. Some reported trades were not spoken about as an option, “not even for guys”, and some did not receive career education in school at all.

“When I was in school, it was universities up here and TAFE’s down here. If you went to TAFE, there was a stigma, you were like a lower person. I think the first massive

step is to treat them as two completely viable options that are both as valuable as each other.”

“In school it was definitely all uni, uni, uni. Trade-leaning was if you were not good enough to go to uni.

“I went to a private school, and they really pushed us to go to uni, they didn’t even give a trade as an option. This was probably part of the reason why I thought I couldn’t pick up a trade. They should have presented trades as an option for everyone.”

3. Teachers and career advisors do not know enough about trades

- » **Some of our tradies reported teachers and career advisors did not know enough about the myriad of options in industries.** This was particularly the case in civil engineering and IT. This lack of knowledge coloured their advice.

“Once there was subject choice, women just dropped away from trade subjects. By Year 11 there were only two of us and it wasn’t great curriculum. Teachers had very limited understanding so they tell you what they think it is. But there’s 60 or 70 disciplines in IT – from network technicians to coding to software development to cybersecurity. It’s certainly not what they thought it was.”

“Teachers actually approached me saying you should do something else. They didn’t know anything about the trade – the industry is changing so fast. Teachers are not equipped to advise on the pathways. I ended up going to uni because of it, but I would have benefited more from TAFE. The uni stuff I did was redundant. If I had to do it again, I’d just go straight to TAFE and get into it.”

“I walked into the career’s office in Year 12 and I said, I’m not going to uni, what are my options? I want a career, not a job. And he said, come back to me tomorrow. When I went back, he put three uni degrees in front of me. He just didn’t give it a second thought, that a trade was an option for me.”

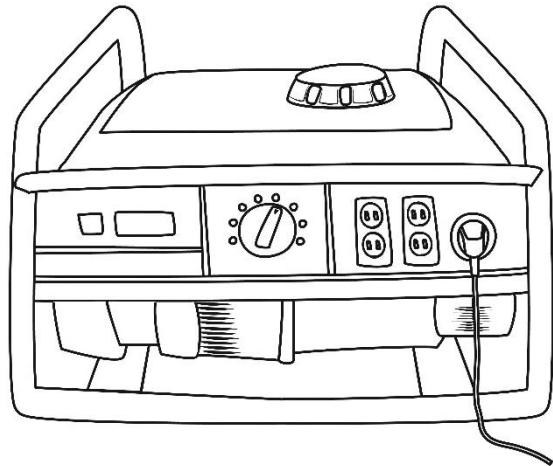


- » **There is gender bias in how teachers and career advisors think about pathways, creating further barriers.** Some teachers and career advisors are giving gendered advice.

“I think they definitely shouldn’t have underestimated [me] just because I am female. When I said I want to do a vocational training pathway they suggested hairdressing,

and trades that were typically female. Even though they had my school record, and knew what classes I took, they still made a suggestion like that.”

“Teachers actually approached me saying you should do something else because you’ll want to make a family someday, and pushed me towards health and domestic science as electives. But this will be a better job for when I want to have kids.”



4. Negative messages also make some women doubt the choice

- » **Other negative messages make women doubt themselves.** While many women were supported by family and friends, our tradies overwhelmingly reported there is still considerable doubt they have to overcome when making the decision. This is a consequence of a lifetime of negative messages alongside less opportunity to try the activities of the trade.

When they are making the decision, messages include:

- **“You are wasting your potential”**

“The career councillor said with my [good] VCE results I should go to university, rather than go into a trade ... which was ‘a waste of my potential’.”

“When I got the job everyone was surprised and thought it was a real pity I was giving up what I was doing to ‘step down’.”

- **“You are not strong enough, let the boys do it”**

“I would have been 18 and I was in trade school and I didn't understand something, and I said ‘I don't get it’. And this kid turns around, and he's like, maybe if you don't get it, you should just quit, get an office job, and let the boys do it.”

“They're like, oh, you can't be a landscaper, you're not strong enough. If there's anything I've learned in my job, it's that there's always more than one way to do it. It might take you longer, but you get the same result in the end. You just learn so much about yourself, all these things that you didn't think you were capable of doing.”

“Women hold themselves to such a high standard... we expect to be good at something before we've even done it. That's just the pressure women put on themselves. Which is unrealistic. You're not going to be good at something if you've never done it before, that's why it's called training.”

Negative messages can persist once they are in the job, including:

- **“Women are only here because of special treatment in hiring”**

“Some say you can only get a job on the mines because they are only hiring females to even up the numbers. I want to be the right candidate for the job. And if I happen to be a female, I happen to be a female.”

“People make such a big deal over being a female in the trade. I'm just like, yeah, I'm just doing my job. There should be more of us because the job's so amazing.”

“Male-dominated industry is full of little challenges, like trying to find overalls in my size, having to go to a unisex toilet in overalls, etc. But I want to prove my capability so they can't turn around and say “this is why we don't hire women.” I want to prove I am capable and gain respect.”

- **“Excuse me, receptionist, can I speak to the mechanic?”**

“Still to this day I'll be cabling an office building and people will come in and assume I'm the receptionist. There's still this massive perception about what someone in this industry should look like.”

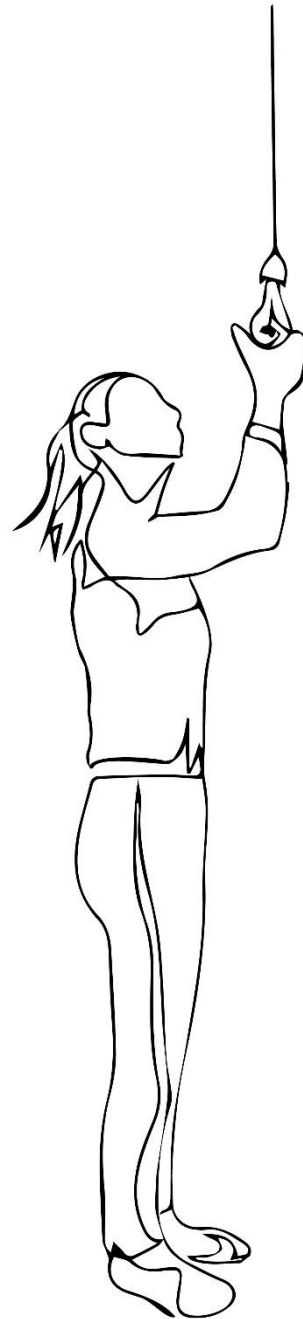
*“When I rock up to site inspections I forget that they aren't expecting a girl and they start up like “holy ***!”. I'm reminded I'm a girl in a male-dominated industry all the time.”*

- » **There is still sexism in workplaces.** It must be recognised that there are still issues with sexism and bad behaviour in some male-dominated workplaces, but some of our tradies pointed out that workplace culture change was needed across all industries, not just trades. Due to the age of our interns, we did not explore this issue in this research, but it is discussed elsewhere in detail.

“My dad was a trade teacher, he didn't try to put me off, but did warn me about workplace culture. Union members have worked on culture though, stopping people watching porn on-sites, etc.”

“There are often no women's toilets. I've been on-sites where I've had to drive to the shops to go to the bathroom while men went on the back wall of the building.”

“I've been slapped on the ass and called rude things but I'm still here, I didn't give up. Don't put up with people's shit and don't give up. Make sure you choose something you love doing. And find a good boss who knows your worth and supports you.”



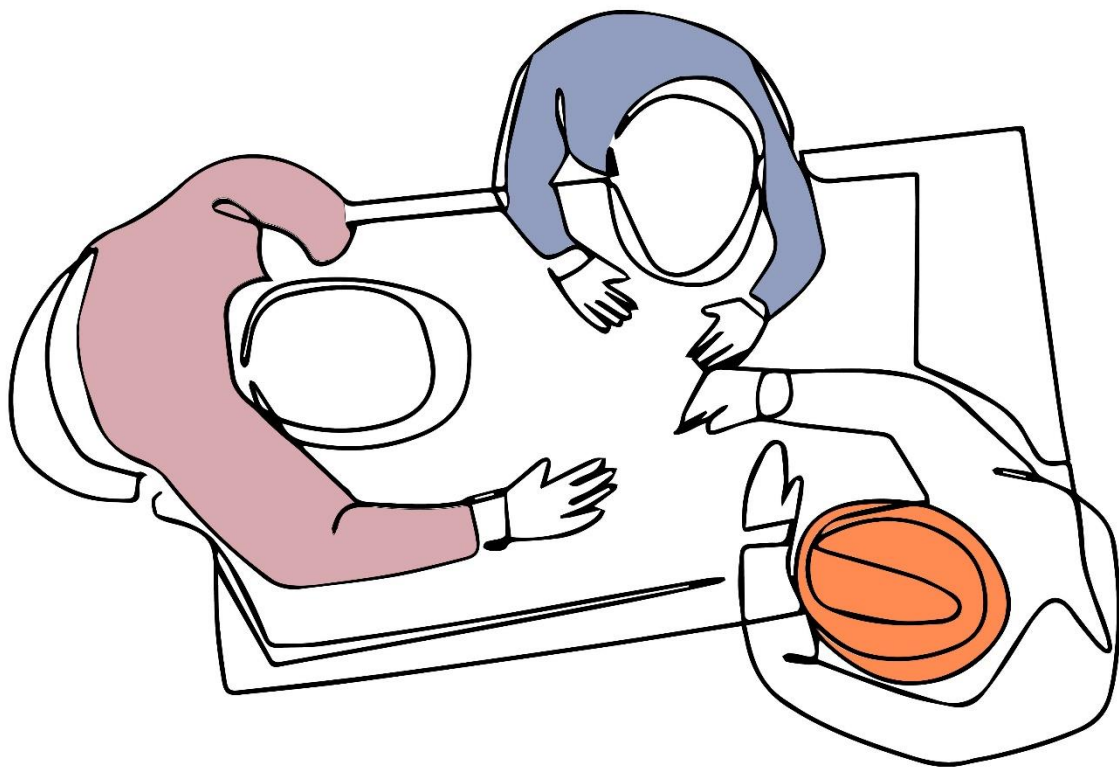
“As bad as it is, we are coming into their world. It is their world. Males hold the majority of “manpower” on-site. So, I get that I’m a minority. I hope that over time that will break down and there’ll be more younger women who are keen to give it a go, just get on-site, knowing that there is support for them.”

» **Many of our tradies found support to ignore negative messages.**

“I didn’t really get negative messages. Rather, people convinced that it was a good idea because they were telling me that the industry is pushing for more women so you can be a part of that, it would help other women get into the industry.”

“Ignore the messages. As long as you have the interest, follow it. Find people who can give you proper advice.”

“I think it’s important to have that conversation and just open trades as an option. Remove the gender and actually just say these are career paths for everyone rather than just focussing on if they are male or female.”



4 things we should do next to help (recommendations to government and schools) ...

1. Challenge gender stereotypes in primary school
2. Upskill secondary school leadership, career advisors, and teachers so they can advise on vocational opportunities
3. Fund a secondary career education model that gets trades on young women's radars
4. Develop experiences to get young women 'on the tools' so they can feel more confident in their decisions

1. Challenge gender stereotypes in primary school

- » **Gender stereotyping creates barriers that make it difficult for young women to choose a trade.** Young women must not have these options edited out early so they can explore them later on. Goldfields Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) has developed a successful program, *Passions & Pathways*, that challenges gender stereotypes in careers education (called career learning) in primary schools. It trains primary school (year 6) teachers to run a Victorian curriculum aligned subject, in which students explore their interests and the world of work through workshops, workplace visits, and hands-on learning experiences with employers and Young Industry Ambassadors.⁸

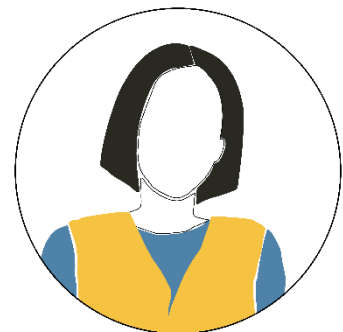
Recommendation: Fund the Goldfields LLENs *Passions & Pathways* program to break down gender stereotypes in career education for all Victorian Year 6 students.

“So much of it starts from a young age and society. The things you hear and talk about the most is in your head. If school was to change the structure it already built, there would be more conversations about all the pathways available.”

“Make it seem like an option from the beginning. Make sure it isn't gendered. Talk about it as an actual career path for anybody, women included. And providing living proof is so important.”

“The idea was never put in my head when I was younger. I never saw anyone's parent as a woman tradie. If they could get it into the education system earlier ... in primary school .. and break down the gender roles and make it more, 'you are what you are and you do what you do'.

Women can do this; men can do this.”



⁸ Goldfields LLEN *Passions & Pathways* <https://passionsandpathways.org.au/>

2. Upskill secondary school leadership, career advisors, and teachers so they can advise on vocational opportunities

- » **School teachers and career advisors do not have the knowledge to provide young women with trade advice.** A simple, online, self-guided professional development program could get school staff to challenge and review their role in perpetuating myths about vocations and could provide them with knowledge and resources about the practices and opportunities offered in the modern industries involving trades.

Recommendation: Fund Tradeswomen Australia and LLENs to develop an online professional development program for school leadership, career advisors, and tech teachers in secondary schools so they can promote vocational opportunities across the curriculum.

“All the stuff I said about how teachers and career advisors don’t know what trades are – that needs to be addressed.”

“Make girls aware they can do it. Have some girls come in and talk and make everyone aware, including teachers.”

“There needs to be support in the school system for you when you want to get into trades. Women don’t have that background so they need to know they are not expected to know everything. You’re not on your own. The help and support are there to try it.”



3. Fund a secondary career education model that gets trades on young women’s radars

- » **The emphasis is still on university pathways in secondary schools.** We need to develop a model of career education for young people who want to pursue vocational pathways after Year 12. This stream of careers advice could include:
 - conversations in schools with tradeswomen to provide female role models
 - come and try resources (e.g. courses, pre-trade Apps, meet-ups, etc) that allow young women to explore whether a trade might suit them
 - ensuring gender balance in existing careers activities
 - activities to help students who want to do a trade get job-ready and stay engaged with education (e.g. White Cards, First Aid or other safety certificates, work finance and basic business skills, a driver’s licence, etc).

Recommendation: Develop a secondary career education model that values vocational pathways and gets trades on young women’s radars.

“Get female tradies into schools to get trades on the radar of young girls and women.”

“Until you see it, until you see someone else doing it, or you hear about someone else doing it, you’re not going to think about it... I work that way too, when I see someone else doing it, I’m like, oh yeah, I can do that.”

“If it’s something that you think you might be interested in but you’re not willing to commit to a full apprenticeship yet, try out the Pre-App first, and find someone you can try it out with. If you like it, you can join a ‘tradie lady club’. [I’m in one that] has thousands of Instagram followers now. Know there is always someone there to speak to. [We can] band together, and support each other.”

4. Develop experiences to get young women ‘on the tools’ so they can feel more confident in their decisions

» **Young women often have not had as many opportunities to try out trade activities.** We need to develop different types of work experience that allow young women to try a trade, possibly in groups, before sending them into male-dominated workplaces. Activities could include:

- come and try experiences in school that get young women ‘on the tools’ (e.g. Hackathons, basic electrical, plumbing or bike maintenance workshops, fun challenges, or a ‘get on the tools’ trial, etc)
- buddy programs that let young women buddy up with a woman in the industry for a day
- community-led team challenges that build or solve something for the community (e.g. a group of young students in Shepparton built a library for students in a disadvantaged school)
- using a specialist organisation to advise on, or arrange, traditional work experiences that will be good experiences with support for young women.

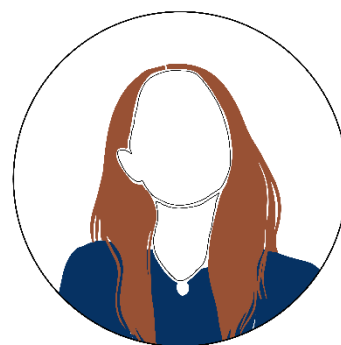
Recommendation: Develop alternative forms of work experience to get young women to experience trades they might be interested in.

“Don’t take anything off the table before you try it. Don’t let anyone change your mind before you experience it for yourself.”

“I would love to see more try-a-trade programs and hands-on learning for women in schools. Show the options, get girls to just think about trades, and become aware of the trades. There’s got to be a way to give things a go.”

“My sister in Year 10 did a trial where a group of girls tried each trade and they got shown what roles were out there.”

“The advice I’d give anyone is get work experience. I got my job through work experience, and you don’t know until you go out there and give it a try and obviously you’re going to be awkward, just overcome that first hurdle, stepping out of your comfort zone, and watch where the world takes you.”



Appendix A. The Tradies

Electrical	
Kelly Shotton (VET Champion)	Electrotechnology
Mel Bull	Electrician
Jess Bowles	Electrician
Kate Lucas	Electrician 4th year apprentice
Emma Dalton	Engineering Trade
IT	
Bonnie Wilde	IT officer
Plumbing	
Breanna Szitarity	Plumber
Construction	
Tara Kelly	Cabinetmaker and joiner
Tess Ovens	Builder
Karly Gaffy	Painter
Machinery	
Louise Azzopardi	Heavy vehicle and mobile plant mechanic
Hollee Chambers	Trucker and farm hand
Emergency services	
Megan Cameron	Patient Transport
Bernadette Brooks	Police
Shannon Bending	Police
Nikki Lesser	Police
Mining (health and safety)	
Yan Lim	Stawell Gold Mines