

Workforce Gender Segregation in Australia

Background Paper: Key Findings from the Expert
Consultations held in June and July 2023

Workforce Gender Segregation in Australia – Findings from Expert Consultations
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Background

To inform the policy paper on gender workforce segregation prepared for the Council for Federal Financial Relations (CFFR), the project team undertook a series of consultations with academics and senior government representatives with expertise on workforce gender equality issues in June and July 2023.

A total of 8 experts (4 academics, 3 senior public officials and 1 not-for-profit sector representative) were consulted. An open-ended set of questions was developed to guide the discussion (Appendix).

This report contains a summary of the key findings from the expert consultations on the following themes:

1. the importance of addressing gender workforce segregation;
2. the underlying drivers of segregation, and their relative importance; and
3. potential policy ideas to address the underlying drivers of segregation.

The views expressed in this report reflect those of the experts consulted and should not be taken as necessarily reflecting the views of the members of the Women's Economic Outcomes Senior Officials Working Group.

Summary of key findings

Theme 1: Importance of addressing gender workforce segregation

All experts agreed that workforce gender segregation is an important issue to address. They argued that addressing workforce segregation will contribute to improved social outcomes while also contributing to economic growth and resilience. There was also general agreement that addressing gender segregation extends beyond bringing more women into traditionally male-dominated occupations or industries; it should aim towards a more gender-balanced workforce across all occupations and industries.

The arguments made for addressing workforce gender segregation can be grouped into two themes – providing economic benefits and improving social outcomes.

On economic benefits, the experts argued that addressing workforce gender segregation will strengthen women's economic outcomes and help lift productivity, as workforce gender segregation:

- **Underpins the gender pay gap:** Female-dominated occupations have a lower perceived value, resulting in workers in these occupations being paid less than workers in male-dominated occupations. Consequently, women on average are less able to accumulate wealth than men over their working lifetimes. Lower pay in female-dominated occupations also discourages men from entering and remaining in these occupations.
- **Hinders labour market mobility:** Limits the ability of economy to adjust and respond to structural change and shocks through creating a barrier to the reallocation of labour across sectors.
- **Hinders productivity growth:** Better utilisation of talent and increased diversity of thought would lead to more innovation, resulting in economy-wide productivity gains.

On improving social outcomes, experts argued that workforce gender segregation inhibits social progress as it:

- **Undermines fairness and equity:** Everyone has a right to the equal opportunity to pursue their desired career, equal pay for equal work, and equal working conditions.
- **Limits freedom of choice:** Individuals' career choices are dictated by societal norms which limit the choices of career paths that they wish to pursue.
- **Impacts workplace culture:** Gender-based segregation can perpetuate working environments that are hostile or toxic to the opposite gender, e.g., gender-based violence in the mining industry is in part viewed to be perpetuated by the unbalanced workforce in the industry.

- **Reinforces gender norms and can perpetuate existing gender inequities:** Occupational segregation perpetuates the household division of labour along stereotypically gendered lines, i.e., the ‘male breadwinner, female carer’ model. As a symptom, segregation reflects an economy/society that places lower value and status on work undertaken by women and elevates work undertaken by men.

Theme 2: Drivers of segregation

There was consensus among experts that workforce gender segregation is a thorny policy challenge as the drivers are multifaceted and interwoven. The key drivers raised in the consultations were:

- Societal norms related to gender;
- Childcaring responsibilities and flexible work;
- Issues retaining women in male-dominated fields;
- The undervaluation of ‘female work’; and
- Impact of educational pathways.

Details on these drivers from the discussions are provided below.

Societal norms and gender stereotypes

Most experts expressed the view that societal norms and gender stereotypes play a significant part in explaining workforce gender segregation. Several experts shared how cultural norms regarding which jobs would be considered ‘appropriate’ for men/boys vis-à-vis women/girls reinforce workforce gender segregation, not only by influencing individuals’ career decisions, but also by perpetuating bias and discrimination in employers’ hiring practices and working conditions. One expert made the point that traditional gender roles in society can also be exclusionary in that it makes it very challenging for gender diverse people to conform to those binary roles.

The experts highlighted various factors that influence education and career choices at a young age and had different views on the importance of role models. Most experts generally agreed that representation matters (‘you can’t be what you can’t see’), although some opined that other influences might play a larger role. One expert highlighted an OECD report which finds that teenagers’ career aspirations are increasingly narrowing to a limited range of jobs, suggesting a growing lack of understanding among teenagers of the diversity of career paths available to them. Another expert noted from their research that girls/women who are in trades-related professions (and remained in them) are more likely to have had male mentors in their lives that actively supported their career pursuits, indicating that the importance of role models can go beyond same-gender representation.

Gendered norms and bias plays out more subtly in hiring practices and career progression. A few experts observed that organisations can perpetuate segregation by including criteria in job ads that attract specific genders, in that the way jobs are described can impact people's interest in applying for them.

Childcaring responsibilities and flexible work

The experts unanimously agreed that the burden of care disproportionately affects women, which leads many to seek and opt into careers that provide flexible working arrangements (such as part-time work or flexible working hours). Given that flexible working arrangements are often concentrated in specific ‘family-friendly’ organisations, jobs, or sectors, this leads to a greater concentration of women in such fields.

There were nuanced observations made regarding childcare and work arrangements. Some experts noted that the prevalence of part-time work arrangements in Australia, while enabling more women to enter the workforce, may also inadvertently reinforce an archetype of ‘male breadwinner, female part-time worker/full-time carer’ among heterosexual couples, as women working full-time are more likely than men to be pressured into reducing their work hours to fulfill childcare responsibilities. Even with supportive policies for flexible working arrangements, there are organisations and sectors that favour a full-time uninterrupted work history for promotion opportunities, indirectly penalising women who take time off work for childbirth and/or childcare. Several experts cited academia as an example of such a sector, where career progression is influenced by the volume of publication output. Other experts highlighted the need to reset employers’ (and employees) expectations about women’s capacity when returning from maternity leave, as women will re-enter the workforce post-childbirth but be matched to a job below their capability.

Access to affordable and reliable childcare was often cited as important in providing women with the flexibility to balance work and family life. One expert described how inflexible school hours and lack of wraparound care (i.e., before and after school care) can affect parents’ availability to work, often resulting in mothers working fewer hours or opting out of full-time careers to accommodate their childcare arrangements. Another observed that it is unlikely that a big shift of women moving into more full-time work will occur even if these issues were fixed given that there is a perceived aversion in Australian society to young children being in paid childcare for five days a week. Many of the experts emphasised the importance of normalising flexible work arrangements for both genders and increasing men’s involvement in unpaid care and domestic work. For instance, one expert pointed out that actively encouraging men to take up paternal leave helps reduce the stigma attached to women taking maternity leave by resetting employers’ expectations of the availability of male vs female employees.

One expert argued that the working hours regime in Australia is highly polarised along gendered lines, in which not only are women more likely to be employed in short-hour jobs, but men are also more likely to be employed in jobs with disproportionately long hours. This reduces opportunities for men to participate in unpaid care/family life, which in turn hinders their partners from engaging in secure paid work. This disparity in working time underpins disparities in opportunity and income security because such long hours are impossible to combine with care, placing long hour jobs out of the reach of most Australian women. Long hours worked by partners also makes it hard for women in couple households to engage in full-time or longer hours part-time work.

Women in male-dominated fields: ‘it’s not just a recruitment problem, it’s a retention problem’

When asked about barriers that prevent women from entering traditionally male-dominated fields, the experts were overwhelmingly of the view that the larger issue is retaining women in such professions.

Significant resources have been invested in getting more women into STEM fields; however, retaining women in these occupations and industries has been a challenge. Many mentioned that women have higher departure rates in male-dominated industries (e.g. in firefighting and corrective services), often due to working cultures that were described as ‘chilly’ or hostile to women (‘blokey culture’). In such working cultures, several experts described how gender-based violence, gender discrimination and sexual harassment are more likely to impact women. In turn, the lived experiences of women who enter male-dominated fields and face such discrimination are likely to deter other women from entering and remaining in the field.

Men in female-dominated fields: devaluation of women’s work and ‘glass escalators’

The experts highlighted how feminised work has been historically undervalued, making working in feminised occupations and industries less attractive to men. When an occupation becomes feminised, the perceived value of the work itself decreases (which affects wages) and there is often lower unionisation (which impacts quality of working conditions and job security). Work intensification and extensification¹ is a commonly quoted issue for occupations such as nurses and teachers, which when coupled with lower pay, further reduces their attractiveness as career options for men.

One expert noted a different issue that arises when men enter female-dominated occupations (e.g., librarians and schoolteachers), in that they are more likely to experience faster career progression over their female counterparts (i.e., ‘glass escalator’ effect), which further perpetuates the gender wage gap.

Education

There were mixed views regarding the importance of educational pathway choice on workplace segregation in recent times. One expert acknowledged that education and training is an important factor where men/women can find themselves ‘locked’ into a career they were trained for, but opined that its importance may be diminishing in younger generations due to recent trends towards more frequent retraining and career switching throughout the life course.

¹ Work intensification is defined as more workload for each worker, and work extensification as less deadtime or work rest and more overtime.

Theme 3: Potential policy responses to address workforce gender segregation

A myriad of policy proposals was advanced by the experts. These have been grouped into the various policy levers available to governments:

- **Government as regulator/lawmaker:** Actions that government can use to effect changes in organisational or individual decision making to address workforce gender segregation through legislative or regulatory measures.
- **Government funding and expenditure:** Actions that government can use to effect changes in organisational or individual decision making through public spending.
- **Government as employer:** Actions that government can control as an employer of the public sector workforce.
- **Government as influencer/information provider:** Actions that government can use to raise awareness of gender segregation but does not directly affect organisational or individual decision making.

Government as regulator and lawmaker

Nearly all the experts emphasised the need to amend industrial relations policies and systems to create working conditions that are supportive to women (for male-dominated fields) and attractive to men (for female-dominated fields). For instance, several experts suggested to enact (stricter) workplace regulations and policies to ensure that workers are able in a safe, equitable and respectful work environment regardless of gender.

There is also a role for governments to encourage (or legislate) workplace policies that destigmatize caring for children as a ‘woman’s job’ and foster a culture where both men and women feel comfortable using flexible work policies to take on a caring role, without fearing repercussions to career progression. The ‘take it or lose it’ parental leave policies in Nordic economies were frequently quoted as an example of such workplace policies. Another success story cited was in Quebec, Canada, where the government invested in paid parental leave for fathers at 70%-75% of the wage rate for at least five weeks, which led to an increase in female full-time workforce participation.

Several experts acknowledged that imposing explicit quotas or targets can be a useful tool to drive change, while others advocated caution on relying on quotas and targets to improve representation. One expert opined that when quotas and targets are imposed without complementary efforts to change existing attitudes and behaviours in the workplace, women often end up self-sorting into female-friendly niches or companies within male-dominated fields, which further perpetuates segregation. Another shared an airline company’s experience in introducing quotas/targets for women pilots – while the policy succeeded in increasing the number and seniority of female pilots, it was viewed by some male pilots as ‘offending the merit principle’, which then exacerbated workplace culture issues.

Beyond targets or quotas, one expert suggested that imposing a positive duty to senior executives to address gender inequities in their organisations (either through legislation or regulation) may be another way to influence behavioural change.

Government funding and expenditure

Beyond legislation and regulation, governments can also focus on creating financial incentives to influence organisations and individuals into the desired behavioural change. Examples that were put forth include state or local governments creating tax rebates or grants to encourage ‘female-friendly’ organisations to set up operations in their respective jurisdictions and/or providing low-cost training and scholarships to incentivise women to enter male-dominated professions (and vice versa). Several experts also suggested that governments leverage on gender-responsive procurement policies and gender-responsive budgeting to ensure that public spending does not create unintended gendered consequences² that perpetuate segregation.

Many of the experts agreed on the importance of government investment in paid childcare to improve the accessibility, affordability, and quality of care. One expert suggested that other than subsidising childcare costs, governments should also consider increasing access to formal early childhood care to give parents more flexibility to balance work and family life.

Government as employer

Many of the experts emphasised the role governments can play in setting policies that advance gender parity initiatives, given that some of the feminised industries (education and healthcare) are those in which governments are major employers. More specifically, several experts raised that increasing funding (and pay) to these sectors can go a long way in increasing the value of work in these sectors, making them more attractive for men to work in and help bridge the gender pay gap. Another expert called more specifically for governments to conduct a review of public sector wages policies, including the effects of measures to freeze wages or to award sign-on bonuses rather than wage increases.

Government as information provider

Some of the experts observed that when it comes to meaningfully changing cultural norms and attitudes to address gender segregation, governments are often limited by indirect policy levers to affect such changes. Nonetheless, the experts all agreed that governments still have a role in the education and promotion of safe, respectful, and inclusive workplaces and the dismantling of gendered stereotypes regarding the roles of men and women in the workforce and at home.

Many of the suggestions thus focused on increasing awareness and transparency surrounding the extent of workforce segregation and its negative consequences. Sharing existing statistics on occupational segregation with executives in organisations as well as the wider public was highlighted as an important first step in this space. Several experts also flagged the need to collect more data on the extent of gender inequities in both public and private sectors, not only vertically but also by firm size as well.

² For example, the COVID19 crisis had a disproportionate impact on ‘feminised’ jobs (e.g., service industry) compared to ‘masculinised’ jobs (trades) where women lost more jobs and more hours compared to men, yet a fair amount of fiscal stimulus was aimed at propping up jobs in male-dominated industries like construction.

Several experts advocated for more transparency of wages and remuneration. In this instance, recent legislation³ requiring Australian businesses to disclose their gender pay gaps has been useful for generating external pressure for change. Iceland was highlighted to have a potentially useful model to look at on gender pay gap reporting, as it also requires reporting by small businesses.

Finally, the experts suggested possible topics for future research, which are listed below:

- Sectoral variations in gender regimes – how segregation and discrimination can manifest differently (e.g., engineering vs trades)
- Deconstructing the differences in how men and women view gender and racial inequality in the workplace.
- Deconstructing the differences in how employers and employees view gender and racial inequality in the workplace.
- Occupation-specific studies to examine how an occupation's 'value' (economic and social/prestige) changes when women become a larger share of its workforce.
- Understanding the firm's/enterprise's role in driving the differences in earnings by gender.

³ *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012*

Appendix: Consultation Questions

1. From your expertise, do you think occupational gender segregation is an important issue to address? Why?
 - a) Do you consider achieving gender parity in the workforce a desirable policy goal for policymakers to pursue? If so, what do you see as the main benefits and impacts of achieving gender parity?
 - b) What do you see as the primary role of government in addressing gender segregation?
2. Through your work and/or research, what do you identify as the key factors on the employer side (demand-side in the literature) that contribute to gender-based occupational segregation? Key factors on the employee side (supply-side in the literature)?
 - a) From a supply-side perspective, our research using HILDA data suggests that the choice of post-school education can have a segregating influence.
 - i. Do you consider the choice of education pathway an important factor impacting occupational gender segregation?
 - ii. Why do more girls choose academic qualifications and why do more boys choose vocational and STEM qualifications? What are your thoughts on ways to address this?
 - b) Our analysis also suggests that childcaring responsibilities can have a segregating influence, i.e., women who are responsible for caring for dependent children or contemplating having children in the future are less likely to seek employment in male-dominated ones.
 - i. What do you think is driving this finding, and what measures would you recommend to address this?
 - ii. What can be done to make the burden of child-caring more equal between men and women?
 - c) What role do gender stereotypes and historical cultural norms play in influencing gender-based segregation?
 - d) What do you see as some of the main barriers women face when wanting to choose to enter male-dominated industries and occupations? Male entering female-dominated?
 - e) Are there any industries/occupations with significant 'leakages' (i.e. when and why are women leaving the industry or occupation?) which are causing issues of gender segregation?

- f) Are there policy or regulatory barriers impeding gender equity in the workforce?
 - g) What role do institutional structures and systems play in influencing gender-based occupational segregation?
3. What do you think should be the priority areas of focus for policymakers to address gender workforce segregation in the private sector?
- a) How can government policies and regulations be changed to influence gender workforce segregation in the private sector? Are there occupations/industries that are more likely to be changed by government involvement (most likely those which government procures from)?
 - b) Can you elaborate on the examples? Would you be able to share with us any evaluations that you are aware of?
 - c) What factors influence the success of these policy interventions or initiatives?
 - d) Which initiatives may be suitable for consideration in Australia?
 - e) Are there any that you observe to have the least success? Why?
 - f) What are your views about making feminised industries more attractive to men?
4. How can government policies and regulations be changed to address gender workforce segregation in the public sector?
- a) From your experience or observations, are there specific policy initiatives or interventions that have successfully reduced gender segregation, either in Australia or other countries? Can you elaborate on the examples? Would you be able to share with us any evaluations that you are aware of?
5. On intersectionality:
- a) How can policymakers ensure that the needs and experiences of marginalised groups are adequately reflected in policies targeting occupational segregation?
 - b) Are there policies/initiatives in place currently that you view might be at odds with or is actively hampering efforts to reduce gender segregation?
6. What challenges do you anticipate in implementing policy responses to address gender workforce segregation?
7. Are there data or research gaps that need to be addressed to improve our understanding of the drivers and policy responses to gender segregation?
8. Anything else you would like to raise? Do you have any questions for us?