

# **Workforce Gender Segregation in Australia**

A technical paper prepared by the interjurisdictional  
Women's Economic Outcomes Senior Officials Working  
Group of the Council on Federal Financial Relations

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Workforce Gender Segregation in Australia

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## Executive Summary

Addressing workforce gender segregation is important for workers, industry and the economy. Differences in the external constraints faced by people of different genders — such as social norms and workplace cultures — results in a sub-optimal allocation of resources across the economy, and a less productive and equitable economy and society. Promoting a more gender balanced workforce has the potential to improve equity and reduce the gender wage gap. This has broader consequences for Australia's economic performance, with more workers employed where they are most productive and innovative, and supporting women's longer term financial security.

While employment outcomes for women have greatly improved over the past 40 years, many industries and occupations remain segregated based on embedded societal stereotypes and norms. From ABS data, highly gender segregated occupations include construction trades, ICT workers, primary school teachers and nurses. Industrial segregation worsened during the 2000s and 2010s, as the employment share of the gender segregated healthcare and construction industries increased.

Female-dominated occupations and industries tend to have lower average rates of pay than gender-balanced and male-dominated occupations and industries, which contributes to the gender pay gap. In addition, females remain underrepresented in managerial and executive positions in both the private and public sectors, reflecting persistent vertical segregation. This is true in female-dominated industries, such as healthcare and social assistance, and female-dominated occupations, such as teaching and human resources.

While there is a myriad of factors that influence workforce gender segregation, four drivers are identified in this report as particularly notable in Australia at this point in time.

1. *Gender norms influence career decisions prior to entering the workforce:* There are still strong social views that some occupations are best suited for individuals of a particular gender. These influences shape education decisions, which, in turn, feed into workforce gender segregation.
2. *Workplace culture affects the attraction and retention of women in male-dominated industries and occupations:* Non-inclusive or 'blokey' workplace cultures can lead women to leave occupations and industries. Gender norms can play into unconscious biases affecting recruitment and promotion.
3. *Feminised industries and occupations are generally lower paid and can be undervalued, more precarious and insecure:* Feminised occupations (including nursing and social work) and industries (such as healthcare and retail) have historically attracted lower status, wages, and other fringe benefits than other occupations and industries. This makes it

difficult to attract a wider range of employees to these occupations and industries. The undervaluation of feminised jobs – that is, jobs that are female-dominated and often associated with caring – can be partly attributed to gender norms that devalue care and service work.

4. *The division of unpaid care remains gendered:* Australian women continue to shoulder a greater share of care responsibilities compared to men. Combined with rigidities in institutions (such as school hours), the high cost of childcare, and inflexible working arrangements in some industries and occupations, the greater burden of care restricts the types of jobs and roles available for women.

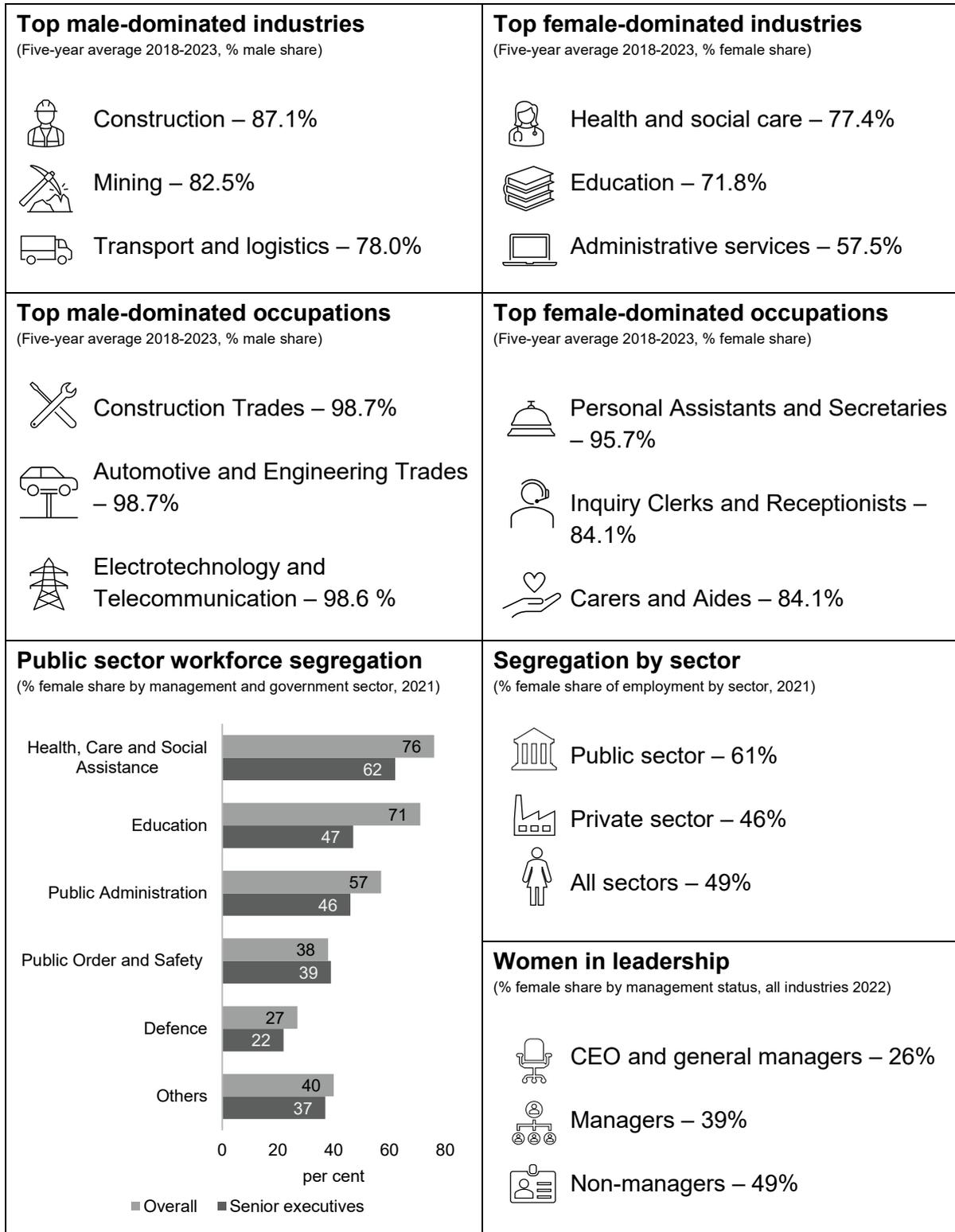
The influence of each of these drivers on workforce segregation is hard to isolate. Each also underpins the broader issue of gender inequality in the workplace and society more broadly.

Governments across Australia have implemented a diverse range of policies and programs that seek to address workforce gender segregation in industries and occupations. However, the policy challenge is significant and will require multifaceted and sustained effort to change social norms and address barriers associated with gender. This technical paper has been prepared by the interjurisdictional Women's Economic Outcomes Senior Officials Working Group of the Council on Federal Financial Relations to help inform this policy effort.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The working group included representatives from the Commonwealth and all state and territory governments.

## A snapshot of workforce gender segregation<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup> Five-year average estimates on industry and occupations and management status data are based on ABS labour force survey data. Sector data based on ABS Census 2021.

# Introduction

The purpose of this report is to inform the evidence base for policy action on workforce gender segregation by providing an overview of:

1. the case for a more gender-balanced workforce;
2. the current landscape of gender segregation in the Australian workforce;
3. the underlying drivers of gender workforce segregation; and
4. potential policy avenues that governments could consider to reduce gender segregation in the public sector and influence outcomes in the private sector.

This report is informed by an extensive literature survey, consultations with experts in workforce gender segregation across government and academia, analysis of relevant ABS and Household Income and Labour Dynamics of Australia (HILDA) survey data, and input from across jurisdictions through the Council on Federal Financial Relations (CFFR). More information on this analysis is available in the two background papers attached to this report:

- Key Findings from the Expert Consultations; and
- Analysis of the Supply-side Drivers of Workforce Gender Segregation using HILDA Data.

In this report, the discussion of the experiences of women includes all people who live and identify as women, including those who are transgender, intersex, gender diverse or gender fluid. However, it should be noted that there remain limitations in data and information based on sex and/or gender. For this reason, the majority of the data collected and reported in this paper relate to sex, based on biological attributes, not gender. Intersectional analysis has been incorporated in the report where possible. However, the analysis has been restricted by data limitations.

# What is workforce gender segregation and why does it matter?

## Definition and measurement of workforce gender segregation

Workforce gender segregation occurs when the gender representation in occupations (e.g., nurses and mechanics), industries (e.g., mining and healthcare), or occupational hierarchies (e.g., CEO and entry level positions) does not align with the overall gender balance of the workforce. In practice, industry and occupational segregation are closely related, as many occupations are closely linked to a single industry (e.g., nurses and healthcare).

Gender segregation can manifest in two ways – horizontal segregation and vertical segregation. Horizontal segregation refers to the under- or over- representation of females and males in certain occupations or industries, while vertical segregation refers to the imbalance between females and males in leadership categories (occupational hierarchies).

To shed light on the extent and nature of workforce gender segregation in Australia, this report employs two commonly used measures of workforce gender segregation: the Index of Dissimilarity (ID) and the female share of employment.

- The ID compares the distribution of females across industries, occupations and occupational hierarchies compared to males, in relation to the overall balance of the workforce.<sup>3</sup> The higher the ID value, the more segregated the industry or occupation, with the index representing the proportion of females (or males) who would need to change jobs to achieve a completely unsegregated workforce. The ID can take a value between 0 and 100, where 0 implies no gender segregation (i.e., each occupation or industry has the same gender balance as the overall workforce) and 100 implies complete segregation (i.e., each occupation or industry contains only one gender). Unless otherwise specified, the ID is calculated using the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupation (ANZSCO) at the 4-digit level and/or the Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC) at the 1-digit level.
- The female share of employment provides an indication of whether the workforce is female-dominated or male-dominated.

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<sup>3</sup> For further discussion on the relative strengths and weaknesses of various segregation indices as applied in the Australian context, see Lind and Colquhoun (2021).

There is no consensus in the literature on the threshold where an industry or occupation becomes female-dominated or male-dominated. This report follows the approach often taken in labour economics research where an industry or occupation is classified as female-dominated if the female share of employment is 70 percent or more, and male-dominated if the female share is 30 percent or less.<sup>4</sup> This approach allows the report to focus on occupations and industries where gender segregation is most pronounced. The Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), on the other hand, classifies a workforce as female-dominated if the share of female employees is 60 percent or greater and male-dominated if the female share of employment is 40 percent or less (WGEA 2019).

## Why does addressing workforce gender segregation matter?

A person's occupation and industry of employment is the result of many choices made across their life, shaped by both personal preferences and external constraints. Workforce gender segregation is a problem to the extent it reflects differences in the external constraints faced by people of different genders — such as social norms and workplace design — resulting in a sub-optimal allocation of resources across the economy, and a less productive and equitable economy and society.

### **Promoting a gender-balanced workforce would contribute to a more equitable society and improved economic outcomes.**

Workforce gender segregation remains a major source of gender inequality in the workforce. Greater women's participation in the workforce is often considered a key indicator of women's economic empowerment. However, simply increasing participation rates is not sufficient to achieve gender equality and improved economic outcomes for women if external forces are channelling women into lower paid, and potentially less rewarding, occupations and industries relative to men (Anker et al. 2003; Das and Kotikula 2019).

Gender segregation has been identified as a key factor underpinning Australia's gender pay gap, with recent research finding that it explained 24 percent of the gender pay gap in 2020 (Duncan et al. 2022; KPMG 2022). Historically, female-dominated industries and occupations have attracted lower wages than male-dominated ones. Moreover, female-dominated industries tend to make less use of performance pay (e.g., bonuses) and overtime compared to male-dominated industries (WGEA 2019). This disparity in pay results in lower lifetime earnings, wealth accumulation and retirement savings for women, compared to men (ASFA 2019). Consequently, women, despite being as economically active as men, face a higher risk of living in poverty later in life (AHRC 2009).

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<sup>4</sup> For examples, see Lind and Colquhoun (2021), and Preston and Whitehouse (2004).

Furthermore, gender segregation may reinforce traditional gender roles, perpetuating the household division of labour along stereotypical gender lines, where men are considered breadwinners and women are confined to caregiving roles. These societal perceptions, which can undervalue paid employment that is considered 'women's work' while elevating men's contributions, further entrench existing gender inequalities.

Workforce gender segregation may also reflect that individuals are restricted from pursuing careers that align with their interests and passions. Fostering a more gender-balanced workforce could help progress a fairer society where individuals have equal opportunities and resources to become economically and socially empowered.

Finally, the dominance of one gender in the workplace can lead to hostile and toxic environments for others (Foley et al. 2020). For example, workplace sexual harassment is reported across all industries. However, women, when compared to men, are far more likely to report sexual harassment in the male-dominated industries of mining, construction and transport, postal and warehousing (AHRC 2018).

### **A more gender balanced workforce would contribute to a more productive and resilient Australian economy.**

Workforce gender segregation also has broader consequences for Australia's economic performance. The concentration of men and women in specific occupations and industries because of external constraints, such as job design and social norms, results in the misallocation of scarce human resources, skills, and talents. Given this, a more gender-balanced workforce could help unlock higher levels of productivity. A flexible labour market where all genders are occupationally mobile will also help the economy better absorb and adjust to external shocks and structural change, such as the growth of the care and support economy (Anker et al. 2003; Das and Kotikula 2019). Occupations where the workforce is dominated by one gender are significantly more likely to be experiencing skills shortages than occupations where the gender balance is more even (Jobs and Skills Australia 2023).

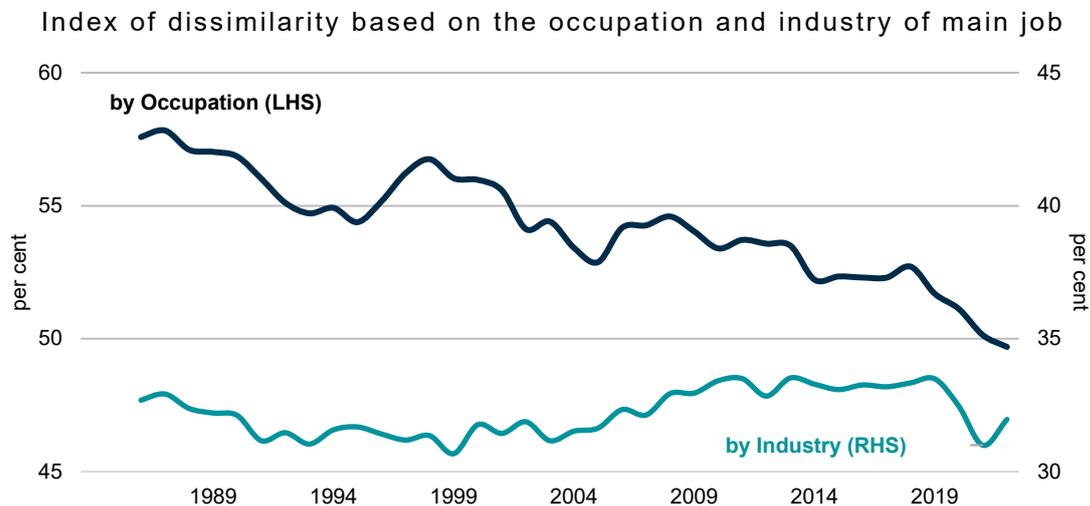
Studies also show a positive relationship between diversity and productivity. More gender-inclusive workplaces can also result in greater diversity of thought and collaboration between men and women, leading to more creativity and innovative product development (Turban et al. 2019; del Mar Fuentes-Fuentes et al. 2023). Firms and industries would be better positioned to draw on the full spectrum of skills and talent on offer to drive innovation and productivity gains.

# Workforce gender segregation in Australia

**Occupational gender segregation has been steadily improving since the 1980s, while industrial gender segregation remains stubbornly persistent.**

The overall level of occupational gender segregation in the Australian workforce has improved over recent decades but remains elevated (Figure 1). This trend is broadly consistent across all states and territories.

**Figure 1: Occupational and industrial gender segregation in Australia**



Source: Estimates based on ABS Labour Force Survey.

Note: Industrial segregation is calculated using 1-digit ANZSIC definitions, occupational segregation is calculated based on 4-digit ANZSCO occupations. Quarterly data have been presented on an annualised basis with 2023 excluded. General trends are consistent whether calculated on an hours-worked or employee basis.

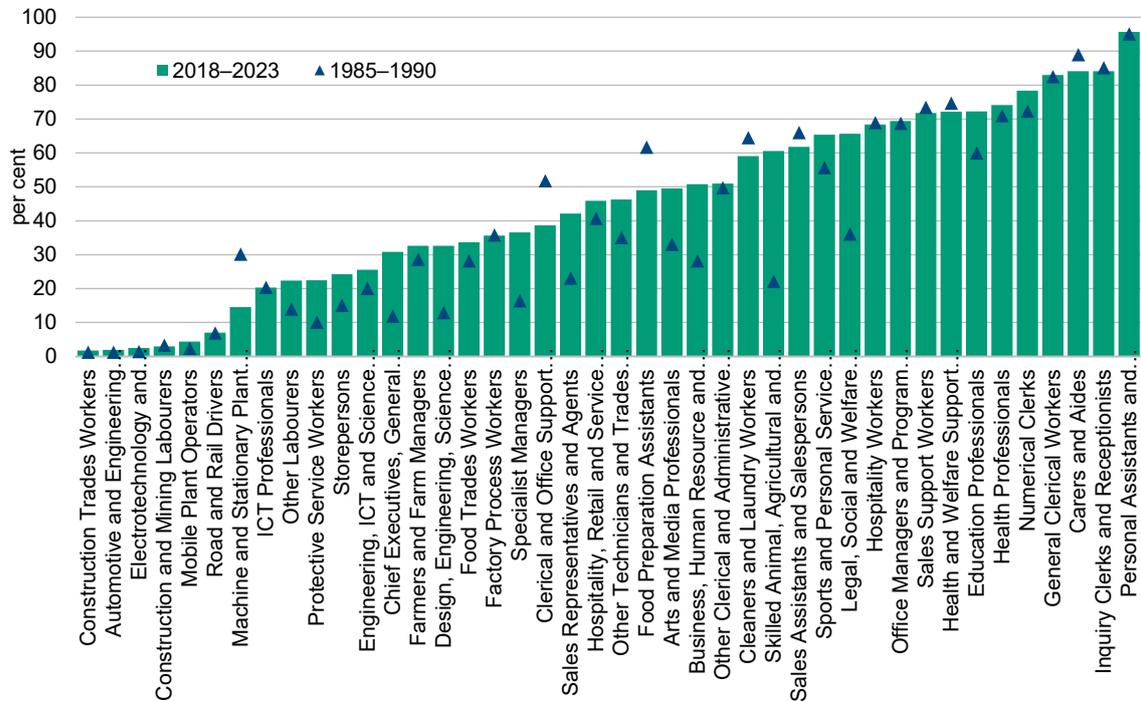
In contrast, industrial gender segregation, while lower in comparison, has remained stubbornly persistent. Industrial segregation improved slightly during the 1980s and 1990s only to worsen throughout the 2000s and early 2010s. Most of the increase in industry segregation since the 2000s has been driven by two industries alone — healthcare (female-dominated) and construction (male-dominated). ABS data show that both industries experienced relatively rapid employment growth without substantial changes in the gender balance of the workforce, leading to a substantial increase in the share of the workforce in these two gender-segregated industries since the 2000s.

**Despite the overall improvement in occupational segregation, many key occupations remain highly gender segregated.**

The overall decline in occupational gender segregation has been driven by more women entering historically male-dominated occupations. However, many key occupations have remained heavily gender segregated (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Female share of employment by occupation**

Five-year averages



Source: Estimates based on ABS Labour Force Survey data.

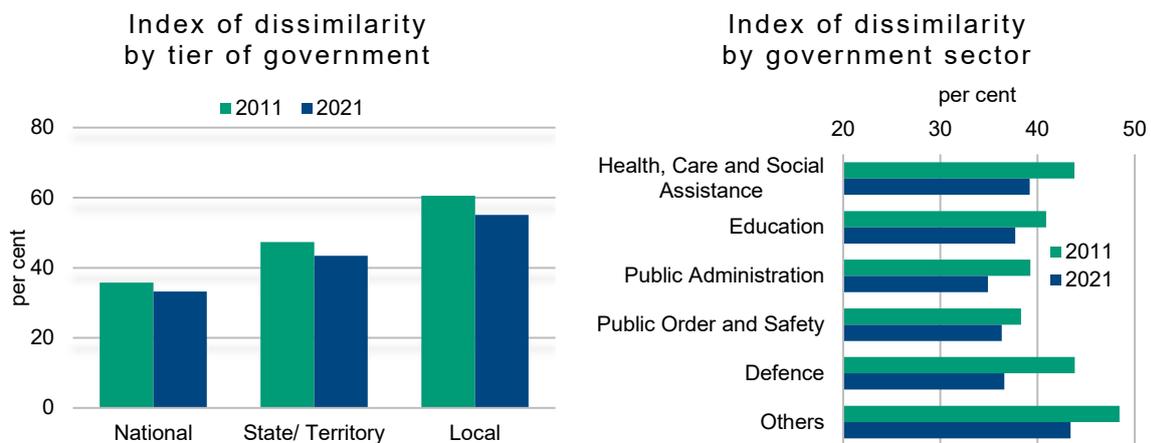
Some occupations have seen shifts in their gender composition over recent decades:

- Some occupations have become more gender segregated over time. For example, the occupations of machine and plant operators, construction, and mining labourers have become more male-dominated over time, while healthcare, education professions and numerical clerks have become more female-dominated.
- Some female-dominated occupations, such as carers and aides, have seen a slight improvement in the share of male participation. However, these occupations remain heavily female-dominated.
- Several occupations that were historically male-dominated, such as design, engineering, science, and transportation professionals, specialist managers, and skilled animal, agriculture and horticulture workers, have become more gender-balanced, with more women taking up employment in these occupations in recent decades.

**Consistent with the broader trends, occupational gender segregation in the public sector has declined across all levels and sectors of government.**

Occupational segregation in the public sector declined between 2011 and 2021 across all tiers and sectors of government (Figure 3).<sup>5</sup> However, considerable variation exists in the level of occupational gender segregation across both tiers and sectors within government. Overall, local government has the highest level of occupational gender segregation, followed by state and territory governments, then the federal government.

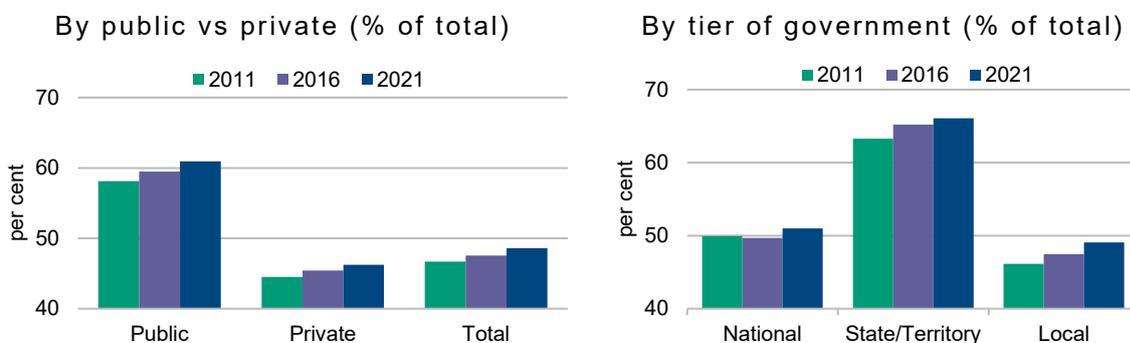
**Figure 3: Occupational segregation in the Public Service**



Source: Estimates based on ABS, Census 2011 and 2021.  
 Note: index of dissimilarity is calculated based on 4-digit ANZSCO occupations

The public sector workforce has a higher share of females than the private sector workforce (Figure 4). Census data shows that state governments have a higher share of female employment than the national and local governments, where the workforce is roughly gender-balanced. This likely reflects that state governments are responsible for the delivery of healthcare, education and other care services, which tend to have female-dominated workforces (Figure 5).

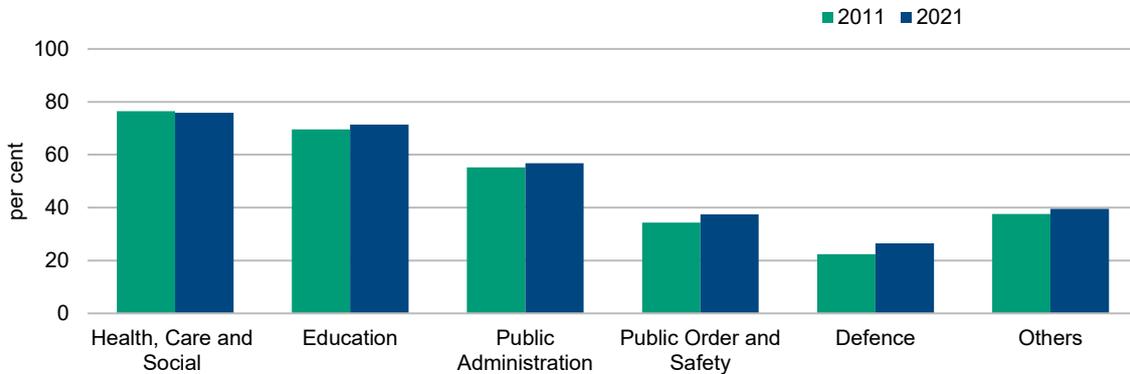
**Figure 4: Female share of employment**



Source: Estimates based on ABS, Census 2011, 2016 and 2021.

<sup>5</sup> For ease of compilation and consistency, data on the public sector workforce is sourced from the ABS Census of Population and Housing. The findings may differ from reports by WGEA and public sector commissions.

**Figure 5: Female share of employment by government sector**



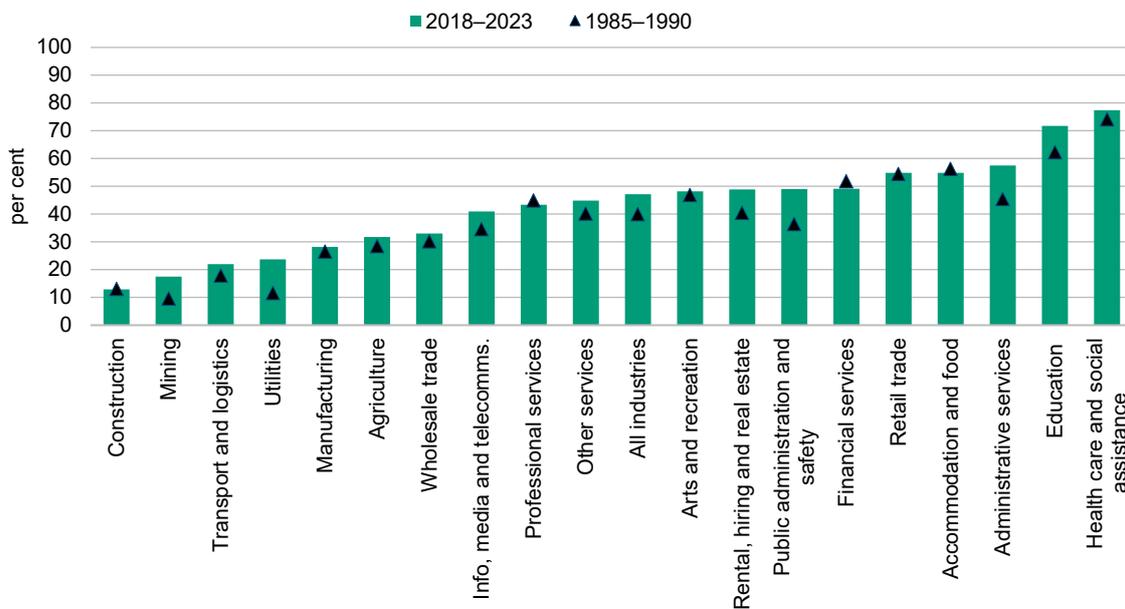
Source: Estimates based on ABS, Census 2011 and 2021.

**Consistent with the overall trend, many key industries remain segregated along gender lines.**

There has been limited improvement in gender segregation at the individual industry level (Figure 6 and Box). Though remaining low, the historically male-dominated mining and utilities industries have seen a slight improvement in gender segregation, with the female share of employment almost doubling over the past three decades. However, the education and health care sectors have become more female-dominated over time.

**Figure 6: Female share of employment by industry**

Five-year averages

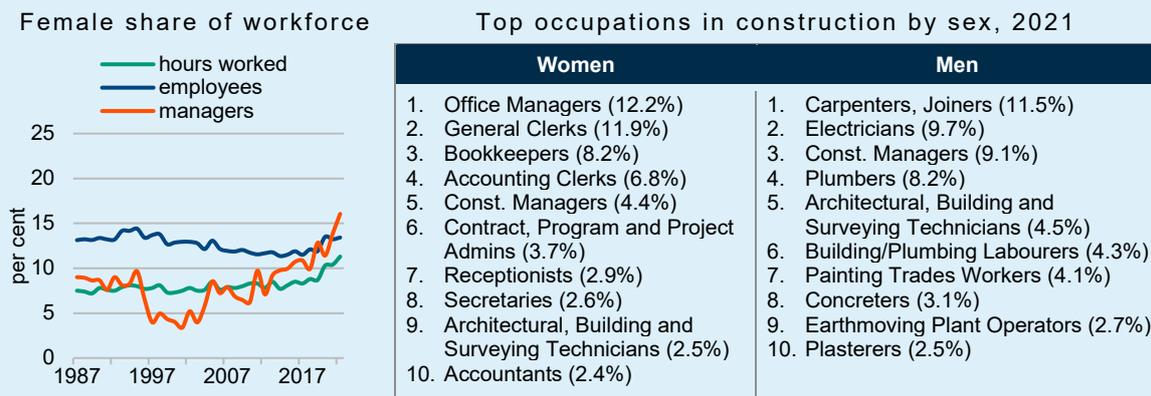


Source: Estimates based on ABS labour force survey data

**Box: Gender segregation in the construction and mining industries**

Construction is the most heavily male-dominated industry in Australia, with men making up 6 out of every 7 employees. While female employment in the industry has improved modestly over time, females tend to be mostly concentrated in clerical, administrative or support roles, while males make up the vast majority of trades and technical roles (Figure 7). Despite this, the share of female managers in the construction industry has improved steadily since the early 2000s.

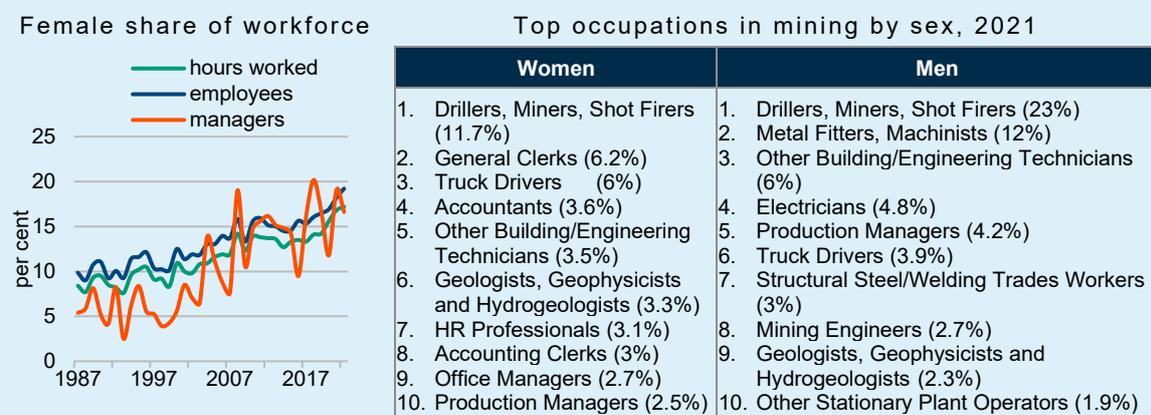
**Figure 7: Gender Segregation in the Construction Workforce**



Figures in parentheses refer to the share of the female/male construction workforce  
Source: Estimates based on ABS labour force survey data

Mining has similarly been historically heavily male-dominated. However, unlike construction, the female share of hours worked, employment and managerial roles in the sector has improved steadily (Figure 8). As in construction, females working in the mining industry remain substantially overrepresented in clerical and support roles — for example, 6.2 per cent of female mining employees are general clerks, compared to only 0.1 per cent of males. While there is still significant room for improvement, however, female representation among mining-specific occupations is relatively better than among construction trades — for example, ‘drillers, miners and shot firers’ is the most common occupation held by both males and females in mining. Females in mining are also similarly likely as their male counterparts to be truck drivers, mining engineers, and geologists.

**Figure 8: Gender Segregation in the Mining Workforce**

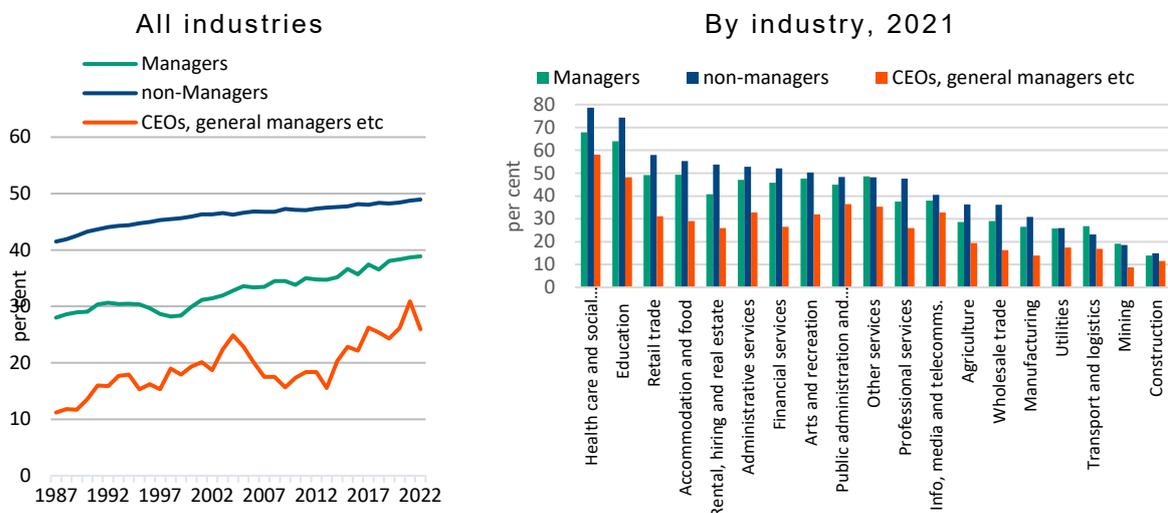


Figures in parentheses refer to the share of the female/male mining workforce  
Source: Estimates based on ABS labour force survey data

## Females remain underrepresented across managerial positions and occupational hierarchies.

On vertical segregation, the economy-wide gap between female representation in managerial roles compared to non-managerial roles has narrowed marginally in recent years (Figure 9). However, females continue to be underrepresented in management (both managers and senior executives) across most industries. In 2022, 39 per cent of managers across all industries were females, while females comprised 26 per cent of chief executives, general managers or managing directors.

**Figure 9: Female share of employment by management status**



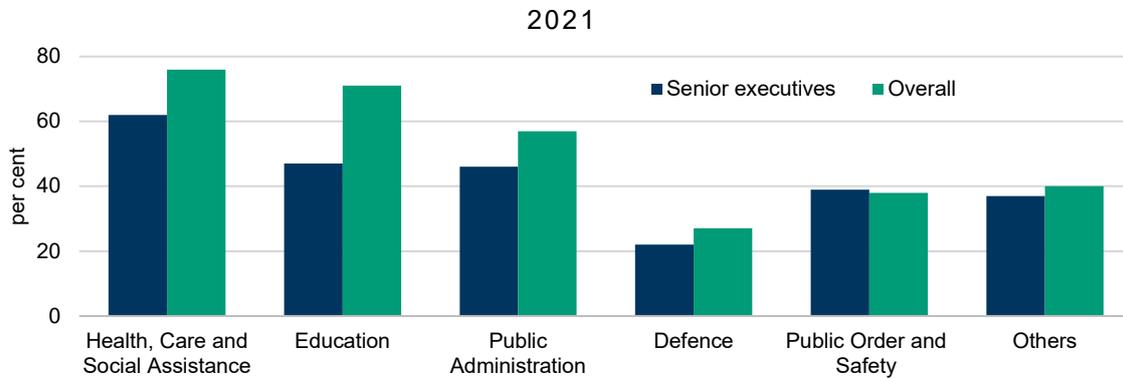
Source: Estimates based on ABS Census 2021 and Labour force survey data

Some occupational hierarchies in professions such as education, business services and retail have witnessed significant improvements to their gender balance over time. For example, the share of female school principals, education managers, finance and human resource managers have improved markedly since the 1980s. Females, however, continue to disproportionately occupy the lower tiers of the education and business service professions.

Similarly, in the public sector, the representation of females across management and leadership positions has improved significantly over time. Based on Census data, in 2021, females accounted for 52 per cent of middle level managers (compared to 46 per cent in 2011) and 43 per cent of senior executive positions (compared to 34 per cent in 2011) in the public service.<sup>6</sup> Despite this progress, significant disparities exist at the sectoral level. The education sector saw the largest discrepancy, with females comprising 71 per cent of the overall workforce but only 47 per cent of senior executives. This is followed by the healthcare and social assistance, and public administration sectors (Figure 10).

<sup>6</sup> Senior executives were derived from ANZSCO's classifications of 'General Managers', 'Managing Directors' and 'Chief Executives', and middle managers comprise the ANZSCO major group of 'Managers', excluding senior executives.

**Figure 10: Female share of public sector employment by management level and government sector**



Source: Estimates based on ABS, Census 2021.

**The industry and occupation mix are a driver of differences in gender segregation across jurisdictions.**

Differences in workforce segregation between states are long-standing and driven by differences in industry and occupational structure. In particular, the larger role that the mining sector plays in Western Australia and Queensland’s economies increases gender segregation, while the relatively large role of public administration and safety in the ACT and NT results in lower gender segregation (Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Occupation and industry index of dissimilarity by state**



Note: Based on 1-digit ANZSICs and 2-digit ANZSCOs due to population sizes.  
 Source: Estimates based on ABS Census 2021

At a more granular level, occupational segregation tends to be highest in rural areas and lowest in metropolitan and inner-city regions. Like interjurisdictional differences, regional variations are driven by differences in industry and occupational mix, with inner city areas containing more ‘gender balanced’ economic activity (including financial and professional services) and rural areas containing more ‘gender dominated’ activity (such as mining and agriculture).

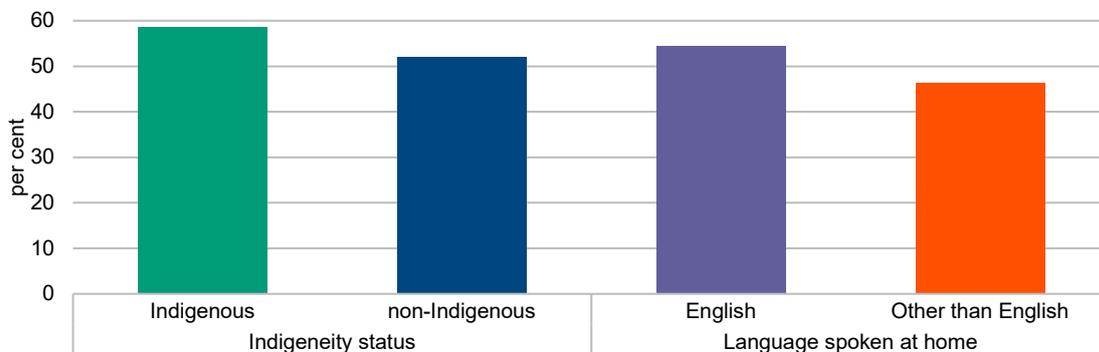
**Workforce segregation is higher among First Nations workers and lower among cultural and linguistically diverse groups.**

Gender segregation — across both occupation and industry — is higher among First Nations workers than non-First Nations workers (Figure 12). Conversely, the occupations of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) workers<sup>7</sup> are less gender segregated than those that speak only English at home. In both cases, these differences are largely explained by the industries and occupations in which the cohort is employed, rather than different levels of gender disparity within those occupations and industries.

First Nations workers of all genders are overrepresented in both the male-dominated mining industry and the female-dominated health care and social assistance industry. In both cases, however, the female share of First Nations workers within these industries are similar to the female share of non-Indigenous workers.

Census data indicates that the CALD workforce is relatively younger, with younger workers tending to be in less gender-segregated occupations in general. The CALD workforce is also relatively skewed toward less gender-segregated occupations and industries. That difference may reflect work or study related visa, residency, and immigration conditions.

**Figure 12: Index of dissimilarity by selected cohorts**  
2021



Note: Based on 4-digit ANZSCOs, excluding inadequately described, not stated and not further defined occupations.

Source: Estimates based on ABS, Census 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Proxied by whether a person speaks a language other than English at home.

## What drives workforce gender segregation?

Promoting a more gender-balanced workforce will require a sustained and holistic policy effort, as the drivers of workforce gender segregation are deep-rooted, interwoven, mutually reinforcing, and often fall outside the direct ability of government to change.

A review of relevant literature, consultations with experts in gender segregation across government and academia, and an analysis of HILDA data were undertaken to identify drivers of workforce gender segregation. While there is a myriad of factors that influence workforce segregation, four drivers were identified as particularly notable in Australia at this point in time. These drivers are closely aligned with those identified in *Working Future: The Australian Government's White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities* (Commonwealth of Australia 2023a).

1. Gender norms influence career decisions prior to entering the workforce.
2. Workplace culture impacts the attraction and retention of women in male-dominated industries and occupations.
3. Feminised industries and occupations are generally lower paid and can be undervalued, more precarious and insecure.
4. The division of unpaid care remains gendered.

The influence of each of these drivers on workforce segregation is hard to isolate. Each also underpins the broader issue of gender inequality in the workplace.

This section provides a high-level illustration of how these drivers shape distinct career decisions over the life course of an individual. However, given the nature of the drivers discussed, it is not intended to be exhaustive.

### Gender norms influence career decisions prior to entering the workforce

Gender norms around care and work have gradually evolved to accommodate women's participation in the workforce. However, as explored by Deloitte Access Economics, gender norms, whether conscious or unconscious, still have a profound and irrefutable impact on our choices (Deloitte Access Economics 2022). Gender norms incentivise men and women to behave in stereotypical ways, and, in effect, underpin all persisting gender gaps in Australia. This includes several occupations being dominated by individuals from a particular sex.

These gender stereotypes are the product of multiple influences, including family, cultural and social attitudes toward gender, available role models, media and literature, toys, and gender bias within school curricula and career counselling programs, all of which play a role in shaping career interests early in life. Children begin to aspire to careers in early primary school, with traditional constructions of gender heavily ingrained within justifications for desired occupations (Scholes & McDonald 2021). Teachers and parents are core influences at this stage of life (Broadley 2015). As children internalise gender norms and expectations present in their surroundings, their career aspirations can in turn fall along gendered lines. For example, research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies found that the most nominated set of jobs desired by boys were in engineering and transport, roles that were rarely mentioned by girls. In contrast, girls selected education, legal or social professions as their top career choices (AIFS 2017).

These influences shape the decisions that young adults make concerning their educational journeys. Australian females are more educated compared to their male counterparts, with 36 per cent of females aged 15-74 years holding a bachelor's degree or above, compared with 28 per cent of males (ABS 2023). Yet significant differences exist in terms of the types of education attained. In 2022, females accounted for 39 per cent of university STEM course completions, and only 15 per cent of STEM-qualified occupations (DISR 2023).

Traditional VET fields with gender stereotypes, such as motor mechanics or hairdressing, still permeate students' ideas about their future careers (Gore et al. 2017). Further, at points where career decisions are made, parents, teachers and career advisors may lack awareness of VET opportunities or perceive it as 'low status' (Training Services NSW 2022). Gender bias can also exist in enrolment marketing, with framing around VET subjects in trades suggesting it is 'not for girls' and failing to shift language from 'getting dirty and heavy lifting' to 'creating and fixing things' (Training Services NSW 2022). Many VET pathways are also inflexible in terms of delivery, which is not conducive to people with caring responsibilities and leads to issues in retention (Borgonovi et al. 2023).

Supporting diversity in key STEM fields such as engineering, maths and information technology also needs to start at an early age. A longitudinal study in the United Kingdom found that students who do not express STEM-related career aspirations at age 10 are unlikely to develop STEM aspirations as they grow up (Archer et al. 2013). Research on Australian students' participation in STEM in secondary school found that the intention to continue studying STEM subjects is weaker for girls, with boys significantly more likely to intend to pursue a career in STEM overall (DISR 2021).

Advocacy groups have highlighted that the design of the existing post-secondary education system can reinforce other drivers of workforce segregation, such as curriculum design, course delivery and funding models that favour skills development in male-dominated fields (for example, Equality Rights Alliance 2021). This is evident in a study on graduates' perceptions of the ICT curricula in Australia that suggests that expanding the ICT curriculum to discuss the use of technology in relation to society more generally would make it more attractive for women to pursue (Koppi et al. 2010).

The gender segregation observed in post-secondary education feeds into workforce segregation. Our analysis of HILDA data suggests that, compared to academically trained individuals, vocationally trained individuals are more likely to be employed in male-dominated occupations and industries than female-dominated and gender balanced ones. Likewise, individuals with STEM qualifications are more likely to be employed in male-dominated industries and occupations compared to female-dominated and gender-balanced ones.<sup>8</sup>

## Workplace culture affects the attraction and retention of women in male-dominated industries and occupations

When asked about barriers that prevent women from entering traditionally male-dominated fields, the experts consulted were overwhelmingly of the view that more needs to be done not only to attract, but also to retain women in such professions.<sup>9</sup> For instance, within the female STEM workforce, a report by Professionals Australia (2021) noted that over one-third of the females surveyed aged 35 years and below intended to leave their profession within five years. Dissatisfaction and frustration with workplace conditions, pay, and a lack of career advancement were among the factors cited that contributed to females considering leaving their STEM-related professions.

Many male-dominated occupations and industries are reported to have non-inclusive or ‘blokey’ workplace cultures, which have led women to leave jobs they felt were unsafe or untenable.<sup>10</sup> In the resources sector, for example, women were more likely than men to have experienced some form of workplace issue<sup>11</sup> in the last 5 years (73 per cent of women surveyed vs. 40 per cent of men) and to feel isolated within their organisations (38 per cent of women vs. 19 per cent of men) (AusIMM 2023).

In such workplace cultures, women report being marginalised in various ways, such as: sexist remarks by male customers, colleagues, and managers; isolation or exclusion by male co-workers; and the undervaluing of skills and contributions of female colleagues, all of which lead to the unequal allocation of responsibilities and learning opportunities to the detriment of women’s career progression (AHRC 2013; Oxenbridge et al. 2019). The impact of workplace culture is also evident on women with intersecting identities. For instance, LGBTQ+ women may be less likely to choose a career in male-dominated trades, such as construction, due to anticipated sexual orientation-related barriers to future careers and concerns over homophobic harassment (Galea & Jardine 2021; García & Otto 2019).

<sup>8</sup> See Background Paper on Occupational Gender Segregation: A Supply Side Analysis.

<sup>9</sup> See Background Paper on Key Findings from the Expert Consultations.

<sup>10</sup> See Oxenbridge et al (2019) for the experience of women in automotive trades, AusIMM’s Diversity and Inclusion Survey 2023 for experiences in the resources sector, and AHRC (2013) for a broader discussion.

<sup>11</sup> In the form of gender inequality, ageism towards older people, bullying, racism, sexual harassment, homophobia, or ageism towards younger people.

Gender norms can also play out subtly in the workplace through recruitment practices resulting in gender-biased outcomes. For instance, the choice of gendered language<sup>12</sup> used in job advertisements can affect the job's attractiveness to specific genders (Gaucher et al. 2011). There are also gender differences in job application behaviour, with men more willing to apply for positions than similarly qualified women (Behavioural Insights Team 2022). Relying on informal recruitment practices, such as depending on existing employees to generate referrals, can also inadvertently introduce bias into the hiring process against applicants of the other sex. Individuals generally tend to have same-sex contacts. As such, referrals generated from current employees in female-dominated occupations and industries are more likely to produce female applicants, while employee referrals in male-dominated occupations and industries are more likely to produce male applicants, further reinforcing segregation, especially at higher levels of the occupational hierarchy (Fernandez & Sosa 2005; Galea et al. 2020; Reskin 1993).

The effects of these biases compound across each career stage, from recruitment and hiring to development and promotion, often putting women at a disadvantage. These biases affect which candidates get recruited and selected for certain roles, how managers provide feedback to their employees, and which employees receive access to career development and mentorship opportunities. For example, in organisations and industries that emphasise 'cultural fit' in deciding who to promote, women tend to find themselves at a disadvantage, as men's 'fit' for managerial positions are more likely to be presumed and uncontested, whereas women's leadership and technical capabilities are likely to be more closely questioned and scrutinised (Davidson-Schmich et al. 2023; Stephenson et al. 2023).

The appointment of females into top leadership positions remains low across all industries relative to their share of total industry employment. Challenges experienced by women in progressing to senior positions (the 'glass ceiling') in male-dominated industries is replicated in female-dominated industries where men experience faster career progression ('the glass escalator') (Brandford & Brandford-Stevenson 2021; Williams 2013). Cultural and ethnic diversity further compounds workplace inequity and vertical segregation by creating multiple and simultaneous barriers to leadership in all industries (Skouteris et al. 2023). Research from the Diversity Council of Australia revealed that while 88 per cent of culturally diverse women in the study planned to advance to a very senior role, only 10 per cent strongly agreed that their leadership traits were recognised or that their opinions were valued and respected (O'Leary et al. 2017).

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<sup>12</sup> i.e., words that are typically coded as masculine or feminine, such as those associated with gender stereotypes.

## Feminised industries and occupations are generally lower paid and can be undervalued, more precarious, and insecure

Poor job quality reduces the attractiveness for all genders to work in some occupations and industries. Some feminised occupations (including nursing and social work) and industries (such as healthcare and retail) have historically been undervalued, attracting lower status, wages, and other fringe benefits than other occupations and industries (WGEA 2017). Analysis by Impact Economics and Policy found that employees with a bachelor's degree or higher working in female-dominated industries earn 30 per cent less per hour than equivalently qualified employees in male-dominated industries (Impact Economics and Policy 2022). There are also historical international instances where the feminisation of an occupation is associated with a subsequent reduction in the perceived value attributed to the labour involved (Harris 2022; Levanon et al. 2009; Murphy & Oesch 2016).

As recognised in the Australian Government's White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities, the undervaluation of feminised jobs can be partly attributed to gender norms that devalue care and service work as 'women's work' (Commonwealth of Australia 2023a). This is supported by a recent review by the Fair Work Commission (Fair Work Commission 2022a), which found that existing minimum award wage rates do not properly compensate care workers in either residential or in-home aged care settings for the value of the work performed. The focus on the 'care' in paid care work is argued to obscure its characteristics as employment and affects its valuation in relation to other paid work (Charlesworth 2019).

Junor (2021) applies the Spotlight Tool to nursing roles and finds significant undervaluation in these roles based on under-recognition of both job size and 'invisible' skills being used at high levels of complexity.<sup>13</sup> The Fair Work Commission has also noted that the approach taken to the assessment of work value by Australian industrial tribunals and constraints in historical wage fixing principles have been barriers to the proper assessment of work value in female-dominated industries and occupations (Fair Work Commission 2022b).

In the retail sector, societal expectations around service work, such as the view that the 'customer is always right', can create power imbalances that enable retail workers to be vulnerable to gendered disrespect in the form of general incivility toward retail workers and high levels of gender-based harassment and abuse (Cooper et al. 2022). Women working in the retail industry were noted to be especially vulnerable to such gendered disrespect given that women predominantly occupy lower-status and lower-paying roles while management roles are disproportionately held by men.

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<sup>13</sup> The Spotlight Tool aids the identification of invisible skills by defining hard to describe process skills and identifying the level of these skills required in the job. For more information see [Spotlight: A skills recognitions tools | User guide 2. Adding value to job descriptions \(employment.govt.nz\)](#).

Several female-dominated industries and occupations (including retail and care work) are characterised by insecure work conditions, including having little or no access to paid leave, and the use of on-demand contracts with little predictability of income or hours (Charlesworth 2012; Cooper et al. 2022). The incidence of casual employment is higher among females, with males employed in more secure work with better access to leave entitlements (ABS 2022a).

The potential undervaluation and insecure employment of these feminised industries not only impacts significant female workforces, but females with specific intersectional characteristics. For example, females who are of CALD backgrounds are highly represented in the residential aged care workforce (DoH 2021). Women from CALD backgrounds are also overrepresented in insecure employment in industries such as accommodation, food services, and cleaning (FECCA 2017). The most common industry group among First Nations people in 2021 was health and social care, with female First Nations people disproportionately represented (AIHW 2023). Women with disability are more concentrated in informal and vulnerable employment than men with disability (Frohman 2014). Addressing the undervaluation of feminised sectors may not only increase the attractiveness of these sectors to a wider range of employees, but could also support women with intersecting marginalised backgrounds.

In terms of increasing men's participation in female-dominated fields, a survey of existing literature indicates that there are factors at play to both attract and deter male participation. Men working in feminised industries can experience benefits in the form of faster career progression and increased opportunities for specialisation; at the same time, men working in stereotypically feminine roles still find themselves disadvantaged in terms of financial rewards and status relative to men working similar functions in more masculine-coded occupations or industries (Moskos & Isherwood 2019).

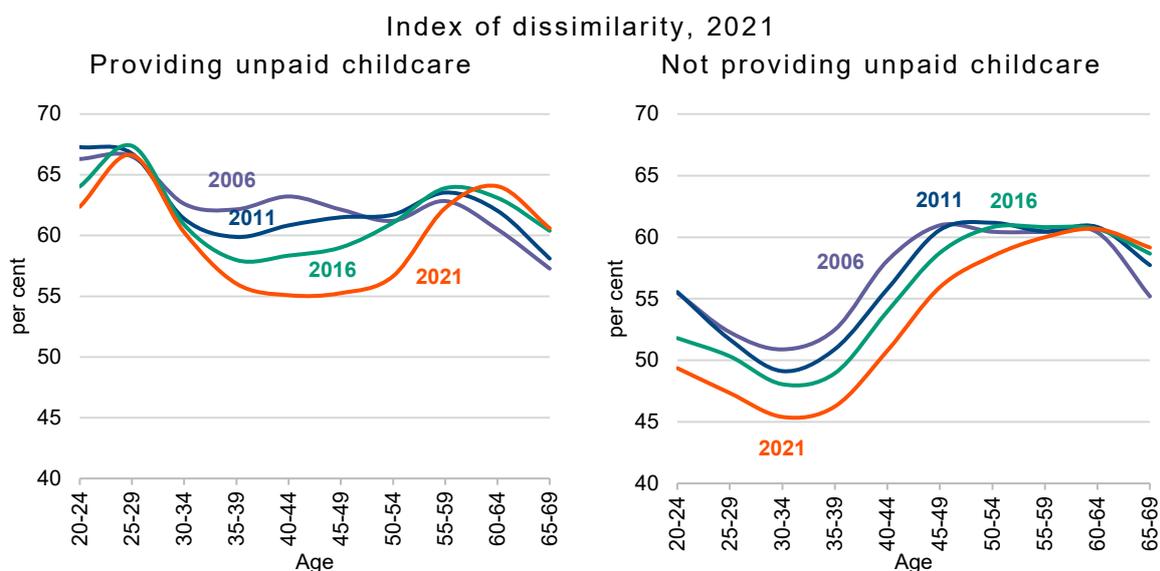
## **The division of unpaid care remains gendered**

Australian women continue to shoulder a greater share of unpaid care responsibilities compared to men, including both child and adult care (ABS 2022b, WGEA 2016). Combined with rigidities in institutions (such as school hours), the high cost of childcare, and inflexible working arrangements in some industries and occupations, the greater burden of care restricts the types of jobs and roles available for women.

The gendered division of unpaid care is exacerbated when examining the intersection of cultural and age characteristics. Unpaid care is borne disproportionately by young CALD women due to the compounding factors of traditional gender norms and acculturative stress<sup>14</sup>, which can affect the reliance upon unpaid family and home-based care as alternatives to paid care services like residential care facilities (Deloitte Access Economics 2020). The 2021 Gari Yala Gender Insights Report highlights that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to provide care to children, family and members of their community, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women taking on significantly more of these responsibilities than men (WGEA 2021a). This makes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women with caring responsibilities a particularly vulnerable group in the workplace.

Analysis of HILDA data found that women with unpaid child caring responsibilities compared to those without, are more likely to work in female-dominated occupations and industries compared to male-dominated and gender-balanced ones.<sup>15</sup> Analysis of the degree of gender segregation across age cohorts of the workforce providing unpaid childcare compared to those not providing childcare, shows that caring for children is a persistent and key factor associated with greater workforce segregation, particularly around ‘typical child-raising’ ages of 20-45 years (Figure 14). However, there has been significant progress in reducing gender segregation across different cohorts over the past three decades, with the degree of gender segregation being lower for each age cohort for each Census period.

**Figure 14 Gender segregation by age and status in providing childcare**



Sources: ABS (2021), ABS Census data 2006-2021

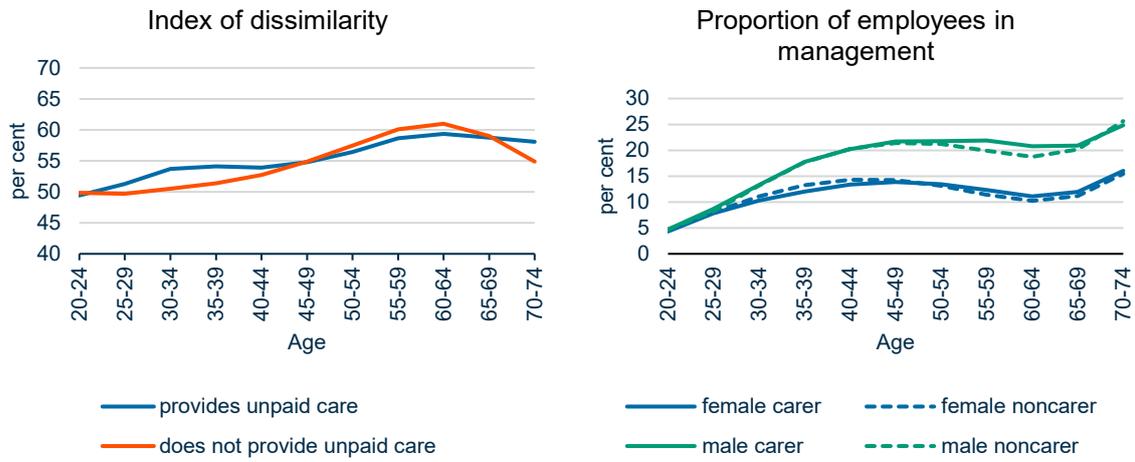
Note: Based on 4-digit level ANZSCOs

<sup>14</sup> Acculturative stress can be defined as psychological and physical stressors which emerge in individuals who are adapting to the dominant culture of a new country.

<sup>15</sup> See Background Paper on Occupational Gender Segregation: A Supply Side Analysis

There are also substantial differences in the degree to which males and females provide unpaid care for adults (i.e., older people, people with disability, and people with illness). For example, ABS data indicates that 5 per cent of females and 2.6 per cent of males participated in adult care activities in 2020-21 (ABS 2022b). The effect of the gender gap in broader caring responsibilities on occupational gender segregation, however, is more modest than that associated with childcare (Figure 15).

**Figure 15 Gender segregation by age and status in providing unpaid care other than childcare in 2021**



Sources: ABS Census, 2021

Note: Based on 4-digit level ANZSCOs

The ABS has similarly found that childcaring responsibilities have a much greater impact on the gender gap in labour force participation — 10.7 per cent of females cited caring for children as their main reason for not wanting a job compared to only 0.7 per cent of males. In contrast, 4.8 per cent females cited ‘caring for [an] ill, disabled or elderly person’ as their main reason for not wanting a job, compared to 4.4 per cent of males (ABS 2022c).

It is important to note that while these data indicate that broader caring responsibilities have a less substantial impact on labour force gender gaps than childcare, those broader responsibilities still tend to negatively impact women’s employment outcomes relative to men’s.

Often as the primary caregivers, women are likely to be drawn into jobs and roles that offer part-time or flexible work arrangements to help them manage care responsibilities around work commitments.<sup>16</sup> Women with child caring responsibilities find it difficult to enter and maintain 'greedy jobs' - that is, occupations and or careers that reward individuals for long hours and hours worked at specific times of the day (Sobeck 2022). Australia has one of the most gendered distributions of working hours in the OECD, with jobs with very long hours mainly worked by men, making it harder for women with child caring responsibilities in couple households to engage in full-time or longer hours part-time work (Charlesworth et al. 2011).

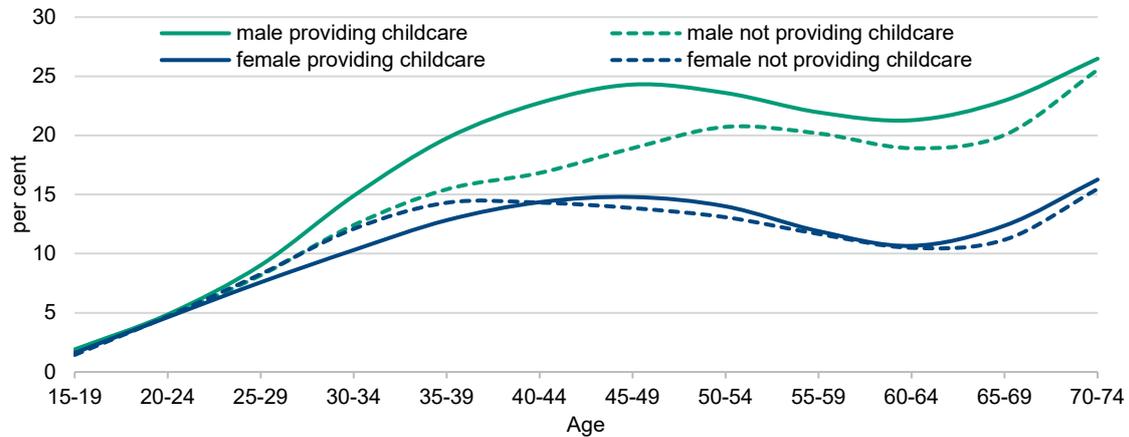
Data collected by WGEA indicates that most employers in Australia have a formal flexible work policy or strategy (WGEA 2021b). Notably, female-dominated industries (such as healthcare and education) were slightly less likely to offer remote working arrangements, although WGEA notes that this may be a result of them offering significantly more part-time and casual employment opportunities that may not be recognised in a formal flexible working policy or strategy. Consideration also needs to be given to the nature of the work undertaken in each occupation and industry, including the extent to which remote working arrangements are possible given the nature of the work (e.g., key service-based roles in health may require in-person interactions).

Even with supportive policies for flexible working arrangements, there are occupations and roles that favour a full-time uninterrupted work history for promotions, indirectly penalising women who take time off work for childbirth and/or caring responsibilities (AHRC 2014). In 2021, females aged 25 years and below held managerial roles at roughly the same rate as their male peers (Figure 16). Between the ages of 25 to 45, however, a 'motherhood penalty' is observed in the Census data, in that females providing childcare were less likely to work in management. In contrast, males caring for children were much more likely to be managers at every age compared to both males without childcare responsibilities and all females.

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<sup>16</sup> A flexible work arrangement is an agreement between a firm and an employee to change the standard working arrangement to accommodate an employee's commitments out of work. Flexible working arrangements usually encompass changes to the hours, pattern, and location of work.

**Figure 16 Share of employees who are managers, by sex, age, and childcare status**



Source: ABS Census, 2006–2021.  
Note: Based on 4-digit level ANZSCOs

Barriers to men accessing carers' leave and flexible working policies further foster an unequal division of unpaid care work. Research conducted by Diversity Council Australia (2021) identified that nearly half (48 per cent) of male carers who access flexible work arrangements experienced or witnessed discrimination at work, compared to 28 per cent of male non-carers who access flexible work arrangements and 19 per cent of males who do not utilise any flexible work arrangements. This may be indicative of a gendered stigma on men accessing flexible working policies for caring purposes.

Experts also highlighted that the lack of access to affordable and reliable paid childcare, inflexible school hours and lack of wraparound care (i.e., before and after school care) can also affect parents' availability to work, which results in some mothers opting out of full-time careers to accommodate childcare arrangements.<sup>17</sup> As women with caring responsibilities tend to concentrate into occupations and industries that allow them the flexibility to balance parental and unpaid care needs, it also leads to the creation of highly feminised occupations and industries that further perpetuate workforce segregation.

<sup>17</sup> See Background Paper on Key Findings from the Expert Consultations.

## How is the current policy landscape addressing workforce gender segregation?

Governments across Australia have implemented diverse policies and programs that seek to address gender segregation in industries and occupations. The following section provides a summary of the current policy landscape. Specifically, it summarises current government initiatives that address the key drivers identified in the previous section. These initiatives have been further grouped in this section according to the role government plays as regulator, funder and service provider, employer, and information provider.

This summary seeks to identify key actions already occurring across governments, highlighting commonalities, and unique approaches. It is not an exhaustive summary and is not intended as an endorsement or evaluation of the various approaches, but rather highlights examples of the major initiatives already being implemented across jurisdictions.

### Government as regulator

The following section examines how governments deploy legislative or regulatory levers to effect changes in organisational or individual decision-making that help address drivers of workforce segregation.

#### Legislating for gender equality (*Drivers 2, 3 and 4*)

In December 2022, the *Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Secure Jobs Better Pay) Act 2022* received Royal Assent (Commonwealth of Australia 2022). The Act provides extensive reforms to Australian industrial relations including enterprise bargaining, fixed-term contracts and gender equality in the workplace. This includes:

- prohibitions on and invalidation of pay secrecy clauses in employment contracts
- the establishment of two new expert panels within the Fair Work Commission on pay equity and the care and community sector to tackle low pay in female dominated industries
- new prohibition on sexual harassment in connection with work with principals vicariously liable for acts of their employees or agents
- expanded scope for employees to request flexible work arrangements
- expanded obligations on employers in response to requests for extensions of unpaid parental leave
- inclusion of breastfeeding as a protected attribute.

The *Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing Loopholes) Act 2023* amends the *Fair Work Act 2009* to introduce a criminal offence for intentional underpayment of employees' wages and certain entitlements and strengthens protection for employees who have been, or are being, subjected to family and domestic violence from discrimination in the workplace (DEWR 2024). The *Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing Loopholes No. 2) Act 2024* provides a pathway for casual employees to move to permanent employment if they choose (DEWR 2024).

Gender equity is embedded in the Fair Work Commission's decision-making process by establishing a statutory equal remuneration principle (DEWR 2022). That is, the Fair Work Commission can order a wage increase to address unequal pay and undervalued work where it is satisfied there is not equal remuneration for work of equal or comparable value. The equal remuneration principle clarifies that evidence of a reliable male comparator, which is often unobtainable given Australia's highly gender-segregated workforce, is not required for the Commission to find that work has been undervalued on the basis of gender. In addition, the Fair Work Commission's considerations must be free of gender-based assumptions and must consider whether the work has been undervalued in the past due to gender-based assumptions.

### **Authorising workplaces to address sexual harassment (*Driver 2*)**

The Respect@Work report by the Australian Human Rights Commission produced findings based on the 2020 National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian workplaces (AHRC 2020). The inquiry examined the nature and prevalence of sexual harassment in Australian workplaces, the drivers of this harassment and the measures to address and prevent sexual harassment. The Respect@Work report provides policymakers in jurisdictions with 55 recommendations on how to best deal with gender discrimination, sexual harassment and unsafe and unwelcoming workplace practices in the workplace (AHRC 2020).

In response, the *Anti-Discrimination and Human Rights Legislation Amendment (Respect at Work) Act 2022 (Cth)* amended the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth)* to introduce a positive duty on employers to eliminate workplace sexual harassment, sex discrimination and sex-based harassment. The changes to Australia's legal framework governing sexual harassment requires that employers and persons conducting a business or undertaking to shift their focus to actively prevent workplace sex harassment and discrimination, rather than reacting to it after an incident has occurred (Respect@Work 2023).

Though not legislative, some jurisdictions have authorised workplaces to address sexual harassment in different ways. The Northern Territory Government will progress relevant Respect@Work report recommendations through multi-agency implementation plans developed through its second action plan under the Domestic, Family and Sexual Violence Reduction Framework 2018-2028 (Northern Territory Government 2021). The Tasmanian Government is developing a toolkit of resources to support industries to keep women safe at work (Tasmanian Government 2022). The Queensland Government has issued a new standalone directive on preventing and managing sexual harassment in public sector workplaces, elevating it beyond the broader grievance and complaints system and giving greater rights to complainants (Queensland Government 2023a). The Western Australian Government Mental Awareness, Respect and Safety Program (MARS) addresses the recommendations to the Enough is Enough Report regarding sexual harassment against women in the fly-in-fly-out mining industry (Government of Western Australia 2023a). The Western Australian Government is also developing a whole of government approach to addressing sexual violence covering prevention, early intervention, response, and recovery and healing (Government of Western Australia 2023b). The NSW Government has launched its *SafeWork NSW Respect at Work Strategy: preventing sexual harassment*, a four-year plan to prevent gender-based harmful behaviours across NSW workplaces, with an initial focus on sexual harassment (SafeWork NSW 2023).

Our Watch, which is supported by the Commonwealth and all State and Territory governments, has developed a Workplace Equality and Respect toolkit to assist workplaces to promote gender equality and prevent sexual harassment and gender-based violence in the workplace (Our Watch 2024).

### **Legislating to improve transparency on gender segregation within workforces** (Driver 3)

Legislative reforms to the *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 (Cth)* (WGEA Act) mean that from April 2024, businesses with 500 or more employees must have policies or strategies that cover all six WGEA gender equality indicators, which cover issues like gender composition of workforce and governing bodies, equal remuneration, flexible work and support for caring arrangements, staff consultation on gender equality, and preventing sexual harassment. In February 2024, WGEA published gender pay gap data for all private sector companies in Australia with 100 or more employees to improve transparency and accountability (WGEA 2024).

From 2023, employers in the Australian Government with 100 or more employees are required to comply with WGEA's mandatory reporting requirements (WGEA 2023). These requirements do not extend to states and territories, however all jurisdictions have committed to participating and are working through the Women's and Women's Safety Ministers Council to achieve this. There is currently a voluntary scheme in place for jurisdictions to report to WGEA if they choose to do so.

## Government as funder and service provider

The following section examines government's role in direct funding and the provision of services.

### Gender responsive budgeting and policy making (*Driver 1*)

Applying a gender lens is a process of analysing how a policy, program or service can have different impacts on people depending on their gender. A policy that seems 'gender neutral' can have unintentional consequences by reinforcing gender norms and widening segregation in the labour market. Gender lensing can be undertaken across all types of policy – expenditure, taxation and subsidies, transfers, regulation – and through all policy development and budgeting stages.

Governments across Australia have implemented components of gender lensing through gender-responsive budgeting, including gender impact assessments and gender budget statements. These have been implemented using different models and methods.

### Programs to support girls and women in STEM subjects and careers (*Driver 1*)

There are several initiatives across jurisdictions dedicated to enhancing students, families, and teachers' engagement in STEM education and women in STEM careers.

Research suggests that high quality STEM extracurricular activities and work experience can enhance interest and student achievement (Krishnamurthi et al. 2014; Atkinson et al. 2015).<sup>18</sup> The NSW Industry Schools Partnership Program and Queensland's STEM Girl Power Initiative facilitates real-world STEM educational opportunities and workshops for students (NSW Department of Education 2023; Queensland Government 2022). To boost engagement, incursions and online modules are used such as Western Australia's Techtrails. Scholarships have also been established in some states, for example, the South Australian Government funding underrepresented students to pursue higher level STEM subjects (Government of South Australia 2023a).

The Australian Government funds a suite of nine programs through the Department of Industry, Science and Resources to support women and girls to see themselves in, and pursue, STEM education and careers. Programs include the Girls in STEM Toolkit, which aims to provide resources to help girls to see how their skills and interests link to STEM study and careers, and Elevate, which provides scholarships and support for women to undertake STEM undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

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<sup>18</sup> For further information on the other common types of STEM education initiatives and evidence regarding their effectiveness, see the [National STEM education resources toolkit](#).

The Australian Government has established the independent *Pathway to Diversity in STEM Review* (the Review) to establish what is working, what is not, and where lessons can be applied to improve overall diversity in STEM. As part of the Review, an independent panel was commissioned to evaluate the suite of women in STEM programs to understand their effectiveness and impact on systemic and cultural change. The Review's recommendations aim to drive coordinated and impactful actions to increase diversity and inclusion of people underrepresented in STEM education and jobs. It includes actions for industry, governments, the education sector, not-for-profits and individuals (DISR 2024).

### **Supporting women in non-traditional vocational education pathways (Driver 1)**

The National Skills Agreement includes the Australian Government partnering with state and territory governments to deliver 180,000 Fee-Free TAFE and vocational educational places from January 2023 (DEWR 2023). The Fee-Free TAFE will be prioritised for a number of priority groups, including women undertaking study in non-traditional fields. The impact of offering Fee-Free TAFE on encouraging women into traditionally male-dominated fields is not yet known.

A reform area of the National Skills Agreement is women's participation and gender equality, with an emphasis on women accessing skills in better paid occupations including trades traditionally dominated by men (Commonwealth of Australia 2023b). This has been reflected in the development of Skills Plans in Victoria and South Australia which aim to increase women in trades and male-dominated occupations (Victorian Skills Authority 2022; Skills SA 2023).

Increasing women in trades is also a focus for many programs and initiatives across the country. The NSW Infrastructure Skills Legacy Program and Trade Pathways program, Qbuild projects in Queensland, the Australian Government's Australia Skills Guarantee as well as Victoria's Apprenticeships Innovation Fund aim to address skills shortages and increase diversity in trades. Many of these initiatives adopt minimum targets for women on government infrastructure projects and create supported pathways from start to finish. Grants and scholarships are also used, such as the Northern Territory's VET scholarship for women in non-traditional trades. There are also programs being run in secondary schools to shift perceptions about women in the construction industry, such as the ACT's Understanding Building and Construction Program.

The Queensland Government has accepted all 12 recommendations from the Queensland Training Ombudsman's report *Review of Support Provided to Queensland Apprentices and Trainees, with a focus on female apprentices in male dominated occupations* (Queensland Government 2023b). This includes actions related to preparing prospective employers and apprentices and trainees; supporting apprentices, trainees, and their employers throughout their training contract; and ensuring that where intervention is required it happens in a coordinated manner and as early as possible. The Queensland Government is investing in the Women in Trade Apprenticeships Mentoring program to support women undertaking trade apprenticeships and improve completion rates (Apprenticeships Queensland 2023).

## **Programs targeting boys and men into careers in feminised industries**

### *(Driver 1)*

The Northern Territory Government has introduced a VET scholarship program that provides men pursuing training in healthcare, teaching, nursing or early childhood education with \$5,000 and \$15,000 scholarships (Northern Territory Government 2023). The results of this program and any evaluation of it could be used to better understand and build the evidence base around programs targeting men to enter feminised industries.

## **Strategies and reviews into increasing women's economic participation, including in male-dominated sectors** *(Drivers 1 and 2)*

There are a number of reviews and strategies that have been developed or are underway to increase women's economic participation, including in traditionally male-dominated fields. Working Future: The Australian Government's White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities, released in September 2023, builds on the outcomes of the Jobs and Skills Summit and outlines the Government's vision and roadmap for an inclusive labour market, which includes a focus on women's economic participation and equality (Commonwealth of Australia 2023a). The Australian Government's Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality will also elevate and prioritise actions that will achieve gender equality (Commonwealth of Australia 2024a). The Pathway to Diversity in STEM Review looked at how to increase participation and retention of underrepresented cohorts (including girls and women) in STEM education and work (DISR 2024).

Industry-specific strategies have also been developed. Western Australia's 'Future jobs, future skills' strategy aims to ensure that everyone can participate in a STEM future (Government of Western Australia 2020). Queensland's Women in Manufacturing strategy is aimed at attracting and retaining women in the Queensland's manufacturing industry (Queensland Government 2023c). The Australian Government's draft National Care and Support Economy Strategy recognises that public funding of care and support services can alter the distribution of work in society, provide women with economic autonomy, and free up women to participate in the broader workforce (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2023).

Jurisdictions are also beginning to target emerging and innovation industries that will drive future economic prosperity to drive women's economic participation in male-dominated sectors. In Western Australia, funding agreements for the State Innovation Hubs in cyber security, data science, life sciences and creative technologies require hubs to increase the participation of women (Government of Western Australia 2022). Embedding a gender lens into these significant whole of government strategies has potential for significant long term economic benefits that can reduce gender segregation in male dominated fields.

## **Collaborating with industry to improve culture and safety in workforces**

### *(Driver 2)*

The NSW and Victorian Governments have set up the Construction Industry Culture Taskforce between the government, the construction industry, and leading academics. The Taskforce is working to develop a Culture Standard for the construction industry to lift productivity and performance and address the major issues impacting the industry and its workforce including excessive work hours and fatigue, poor mental health, and the failure to attract and retain a diverse workforce. It recognises that the current working environment and a lack of successful role models is hampering the attraction and retention of women. The National Construction Industry Forum has been established to provide advice to the Australian Government on issues relating to work in the building and construction industry including industry culture, diversity and gender equity.

Similarly, the Victorian Government has Women in Construction (2019-22) and Women in Transport (2021-24) strategies designed to support the attraction, recruitment and retention of women by dismantling barriers to participation (Victorian Government 2022; Victorian Government 2023).

The Tasmanian Government's 'Supporting Women to Succeed' grant program was available for programs that support cultural change and improve outcomes for women in non-traditional fields of employment (Tasmanian Government 2021a).

The Queensland Government also announced the Women in Network grant program to support women and girls' participation and leadership in male-dominated industries (Queensland Government 2023d).

## **Early childhood education and care *(Driver 4)***

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) enables women's workforce participation. There are several reviews underway relating to ECEC:

- the Australian Government is currently developing a national Early Years Strategy;
- the Productivity Commission has delivered its draft findings and recommendations to address barriers that affect access to ECEC, with a final report due to be delivered to the Australian Government in June 2024;
- the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) has delivered its final report into the inquiry into childcare services, including childcare costs (ACCC 2023);
- the NSW Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal has published its final report on the NSW ECEC sector to understand affordability, accessibility, and consumer choice; and
- in August 2023, the South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care released its final report with 43 recommendations aimed at helping children and families, as well as improving the quality and connectivity of early childhood education and care.

### **Paid parental leave (*Driver 4*)**

The Australian Government is encouraging shared care between parents by increasing the Government's Paid Parental Leave Scheme and improving flexibility in how parents share it (Department of Social Services 2023). Paid Parental Leave is a key tool in lowering the barriers for women to return to work and improving gender equality in the way work and care responsibilities are shared in society. The Australian Government has also announced that, subject to the passage of legislation, for babies born or adopted on or after 1 July 2025, eligible parents will receive an additional 12 per cent of their Government-funded Paid Parental Leave as a contribution to their superannuation fund. Paying super on Government-funded Paid Parental Leave will help normalise parental leave as a workplace entitlement, like annual and sick leave, and help to reduce the impact of parental leave on retirement incomes (Commonwealth of Australia, 2024b).

## **Government as employer**

The following section examines government's role as an employer of the substantial public sector workforce.

### **Legislating for gender equality within the public sector (*Driver 2*)**

The Victorian and Queensland Governments have legislated for gender equality by requiring the public sector to take positive action towards achieving workplace gender equality and diversity, and considering and promoting gender equality in their policies, programs and services (*Gender Equality Act (Victoria) 2020, Public Sector Act (Queensland) 2022*). The South Australian Government has committed to introducing a Gender Equality Bill to require different sectors take positive actions across a range of areas to advance gender equality (Government of South Australia 2023b). The ACT Government's Response to the Respect@Work report committed to establishing a Gender Equity Strategy for the ACT Public Service. Further, larger public service entities in the ACT are required to have gender action plans, undertake gender impact assessments and publish their results (ACT Legislative Assembly 2020).

As part of their legislation, Victoria established the Public Sector Gender Equality Commissioner to provide education and to support implementation and compliance with the legislation (Victorian Gender Equality Commission 2023). Gender equality action plans are also mandated across the public sector in Victoria's legislation, which is now also occurring in different states (however most are not legislated).

The Queensland Government has also established the Office of the Special Commissioner, Equity and Diversity. The Special Commissioner's role is to identify and address gender-based disparities in the Queensland public service, guide diversity and inclusion policy, procedure and practice, monitor new legislated obligations for chief executives to progress equity and diversity, and contribute to work designed to prevent and manage sexual harassment (Queensland Government 2023e).

The Australian Public Service (APS) Gender Equality Strategy 2021-26 provides a flexible framework to enable agency-level conversations, and integrates the principles of gender equality into all aspects of work (Commonwealth of Australia 2021).

The *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 (Cth)* requires Commonwealth public sector employers that employ 100 or more employees in total to register for the Public Sector Reporting program and submit data to the WGEA annually. The Commonwealth Government's commitment to update the *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012* to require public sector reporting to WGEA (mandatory from 2022-23) was part of its response to the Respect@Work report. The States and Territories joined this commitment in late 2021, making an in-principle agreement at National Cabinet to provide public sector workforce data to WGEA. The Australian Public Service (APS) Gender Equality Strategy 2021-26 provides a flexible framework to enable agency-level conversations, and to integrate the principles of gender equality into all aspects of work (Commonwealth of Australia 2021).

### **Representation in leadership (Driver 2)**

Most jurisdictions have introduced gender diversity targets for government boards and committees, with most already achieving the goal of having 50 per cent female representation. Targets for public sector senior executive positions are also in place across most jurisdictions. However, reporting on these targets differs.

### **Promoting gender-sensitive public sector human resource management (Driver 2)**

The NSW Behavioural Insights Unit sets out several evidence-based interventions to reduce biases at all stages of the attraction, selection, and promotion process and have tested behaviourally informed interventions to encourage women to reapply for senior roles in the NSW Government after they had narrowly missed out, to reduce the gender gap in recruitment for senior roles (Behavioural Insights Unit 2020). The Queensland Government has issued a public sector directive that prioritises holistic selection based on suitability for the position considering applicants' abilities, past employment, potential contributions, and alignment with organisational equity and inclusion obligations.<sup>19</sup>

### **Wage setting in feminised, lower-paid industries (Driver 3)**

Women are over-represented on awards and in low-wage work across sectors where government is a significant employer such as health and aged care, social assistance, and education. Through mechanisms such as the national minimum wage and the modern awards system, the Australian Government influences wage-setting in these sectors. A recent example of this is the Australian Government's investment of \$11.3 billion to fund the Fair Work Commission's 2023 decision for a 15 per cent increase to the minimum wages of aged care workers, over 85 per cent of whom are women (Department of Health and Aged Care 2023).

<sup>19</sup> For further information, see Queensland's [directive on recruitment and selection](#).

The NSW Government has abolished the public sector wages cap and established an industrial relations taskforce to consider how to implement a cooperative interest-based bargaining approach that would give feminised workforces greater opportunity to negotiate pay and conditions.

Recent research has also shown that in countries such as France, Spain, Italy, Austria and Sweden, sector-level collective bargaining (unions) has been successful in negotiating targeted increases of wages for workers – especially non-standard<sup>20</sup> workers in female-dominated and low-paid sectors (OECD 2020; Pillinger 2014). The *Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Secure Jobs, Better Pay) Act 2022* now permits bargaining across multiple employers in low-paid industries (such as aged care, disability care, and early childhood education) and those who may face barriers to bargaining.

However, the merits of public sector wage setting as a policy lever need to be carefully considered in the context of broader economic and fiscal considerations. Wage increases that are not supported by productivity improvements or evidence-based work-value may create distortions in the allocation of labour resources, with the caveat that there are challenges in measuring productivity in feminised industries. As highlighted in the draft National Care and Support Economy Strategy, in a fiscally constrained environment, higher pay in care and support services funded by the Government needs to be carefully balanced. Increasing demand for care and support services, rising service costs amid high inflation and a shrinking working population are all expected to increase the cost of providing these services.

#### **Flexible working and parental leave (Driver 4)**

As women with caring responsibilities tend to be concentrated in occupations and industries that allow them the flexibility to balance parental and unpaid care needs, governments have recognised the need to increase the provision of flexible work arrangements in the public sector and in doing so can also influence other sectors. For example, the APS Commission has agreed to introduce rights for all APS employees to be able to make a request for a flexible working arrangement, including working from home, with no caps to be imposed on the number of days they can work from home in a week.<sup>21</sup>

Removing the gendered language in which some of these policies and guidelines are written is the first step in making it more inclusive of all genders. An example of this is in NSW, which has removed the distinction between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ carers in their paid parental leave policy (NSW Public Service Commission 2022).

<sup>20</sup> Workers who are genuinely hard to classify as “employees” or “self-employed”, and who share vulnerabilities with salaried employees.

<sup>21</sup> This will build upon the APS Secretaries Board’s [All Roles Flex: Principles of Flexible Work in the APS](#), a principles based approach to flexible work released in March 2023.

Other ways in which jurisdictions can encourage more equal take up of flexible work arrangements is by spotlighting senior male role models using flexible work arrangements and by considering ways to improve uptake of parental leave by men. Queensland's Flex-connect framework includes that senior leaders role model flexible work and seek innovative and practical ways to embed access across the organisation.<sup>22</sup>

## Government as information provider

The following section examines government's role as information provider.

### Establishing role models and networks to challenge gender norms (*Driver 1*)

Government initiatives challenging social norms have largely focused on raising the profile of role models, champions, and professional networks for women in non-traditional industries and leadership.

Several current Australian Government programs focus on raising the profile of girls and women in STEM. For example, the Women in STEM Ambassador is an Australian Government initiative to address gender inequities in STEM (Women in STEM Ambassador 2023). The Superstars of STEM, created by Science & Technology Australia, is a two-year program for women and gender diverse people that provides specialist training on communication and media, social media and writing with impact to address the gender inequity of diverse role models in STEM media coverage, speaking and networking opportunities (Science and Technology Australia 2023). The Investing in Queensland Women Grants, Queensland Women in STEM Prize and NSW's Women's Week Grant and Awards are also examples of initiatives supporting women into non-traditional fields.

More broadly, governments are connecting women to women's networks within male-dominated fields, such as Queensland's 'Connecting Women in the Workforce' website (Queensland Government 2023f). Further, Tasmania's 'Girls in Property' pilot aims to provide young girls an opportunity to meet female leaders right across the sector, and to increase awareness of the career opportunities within the property industry (Tasmanian Government 2021b).

Further evidence would be useful on how establishing high profile role models and senior level champions can translate to impact within organisations and social change.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> For further information, see [Flex-connect framework: agile and flexible working in the Queensland public sector](#).

<sup>23</sup> The independent Champions of Change Coalition, which was established in 2010 by the then Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick, and now includes over 260 leaders from across the world, produces annual impact reports based on voluntarily provided data from members. The [2022 Impact Report](#) showed ongoing improvements in gender equality among member organisations across the board.

### **Public information campaigns and advertising (*Driver 1*)**

There are examples of innovative interventions such as the regulation of gender misinformation and the addressing of stereotypes through government support for information campaigns. In 2018, the Victorian Government funded Women's Health Victoria to engage the advertising industry, brands, regulators, and community members to deliver a project to address sexism in advertising, and in 2020, Women's Health Victoria launched shEqual, a movement for advertising equality (Women's Health Victoria 2024).

The Victorian Government also funded a world-first project to address sexual abuse and violence against women online. The Online Active Bystander Project worked with moderators at media organisations and developed a social media toolkit and video, the first of this kind in the world, to help people become active bystanders on social media (Gender Equity Victoria 2023).

The Queensland Government is supporting industry-led action to build safe and inclusive workplaces with the Let's Protect Respect campaign (Queensland Government 2024). The campaign empowers industries to take positive action to embrace gender equality and ensure sexism and unfair treatment has no place in the workplace.

## Conclusion

This report has outlined that gender segregation remains entrenched within Australian industries and occupations. While gender segregation within some occupations has improved over time, industrial gender segregation has worsened over the past two decades. This is the case in every state and territory, with the extent of gender segregation influenced by the industry mix across different jurisdictions.

Gender segregation should not be an accepted feature of the labour force. As described in this paper, it restricts choice for individuals, results in gender gaps in earnings, lessens economic security for women and causes a misalignment of skills and talents, all of which impede productivity and economic growth.

There are numerous potential policy avenues that governments could consider in reducing gender segregation across occupations and industries. Part 4 has provided examples of current policies aimed at addressing some of the identified drivers. It also highlights that there are challenges with identifying the appropriate policy responses as the drivers are interwoven and mutually reinforce each other, are grounded in longstanding traditional gender norms, and are pervasive across the life-course of individuals. For instance, it is important to note that programs aimed at shifting boys and men into feminised industries may not necessarily achieve their intended outcomes if issues regarding the undervaluation of care work, and stigma against men in care roles remain. Similarly, programs aimed at getting more women into male-dominated industries may not be successful if those industries are not flexible enough to accommodate caring responsibilities for women and men, and do not address cultural barriers for women and discrimination. In essence, there is no simple solution to this issue.

The Australian Government's White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities identified reducing workforce gender segregation as one of the cross-cutting principles guiding action across each of its objectives and policy priorities, observing that:

*“Reducing gender segregation requires action on multiple fronts. It involves encouraging young people to follow their aspirations and not be restricted by gender stereotypes. It needs a focus on retention, including through eliminating discrimination in hiring and promotions, and providing safe workplaces for all. It requires sharing unpaid care more evenly within households and encouraging job design which allows flexibility for both men and women. And we need to value traditionally female-dominated sectors and see more women in high-paying roles.”* (Commonwealth of Australia 2023a, 66-67).

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