

Workplace Gender Equality Amendment (Setting Gender equality Targets) Bill 2024

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Kate Raymond & Georgia Holmes

16 December 2024



Master Electricians Australia (MEA) is the industry association representing electrical contractors recognised by industry, government and the community as a leading business partner, knowledge source and advocate. You can visit our website at www.masterelectricians.com.au

MEA strongly supports policies and initiatives that advance workplace gender equality. While the *Workplace Gender Equality Amendment (Setting Gender Equality Targets) Bill 2024* ("the Bill") primarily targets large companies with 500 or more employees, it has impacts on businesses throughout the construction industry. As representatives of the electrical industry, we are deeply concerned about the ongoing skills shortage. This challenge is exacerbated by the trade's significant gender imbalance, with "women accounting for just 3 per cent of the country's electricians"¹. We must increase the number of women in trades in Australia. However, we must do so in a way that does not take female workers from smaller businesses or create negative experiences for women in our sector.

To address the construction and electrical industries' longstanding gender imbalance it is essential for the industry to adapt workplaces and operations to better support female workers, prioritising their safety, well-being, and mental health. Creating a more inclusive and welcoming environment is crucial to encouraging greater female participation. MEA therefore commends the Federal Government for its proactive efforts in addressing workplace gender imbalance issues through a balanced approach that also aims to minimise the regulatory burden on Designated Relevant Employers (DRE).

MEA acknowledges the importance of the intent behind setting targets to address gender imbalance but raises concerns regarding the numeric targets for workforce and governing body composition. While we support efforts to increase female representation, these targets must account for the limited pool of skilled female apprentices and employees available to the construction industry.

Without addressing this fundamental issue of low female apprentice attraction rates, numeric targets risk becoming unattainable as employers compete for candidates within the same constrained pool. Larger contractors with reporting obligations are able to offer higher wages to attract female workers from smaller businesses, leaving those small businesses facing high staff turnover rates which is disruptive and costly. It is quite common in the electrical contracting sector for large businesses to attract 3rd and 4th year apprentices from small businesses. This has the impact that a small business has trained the apprentice for 2 years, during which time they require constant direct supervision (taking the time of a qualified electrician as well as the apprentice), only to lose the apprentice when they become more productive.

It is essential that the federal government include requirements in its targets that workers not be 'poached' from smaller businesses, or at least that the smaller businesses be compensated for training the apprentice during the initial stages of apprenticeship.

To achieve meaningful and sustainable change, initiatives must focus on increasing the number of women entering the construction industry at an apprentice level. Otherwise, quotas and numeric targets risks becoming short-term solutions with unintended negative impacts, rather than sustainable ones.

¹ Euan Black "Energy transition needs more women, says Jobs and Skills head" *Australian Financial Review* [14 August 2024] <Gender equality: Skills boss Barney Glover says the energy transition needs more women (afr.com)>

While there is no single solution to addressing the attraction rates of female apprentices, MEA advocates for the following initiatives to support the Bill:

- *Apprenticeship Grants* - The Federal Government could introduce "female electrical apprentice grants" to encourage increased female participation. Female electrical apprentices could receive 50 per cent of the grant at the start of an apprenticeship and the remaining 50 per cent upon its completion. This structure ensures that the grant supports long-term commitment and reduces the risk of misuse, while the initial payment helps offset any deterrent from waiting for the full funding at the end of the four-year apprenticeship.
- *Employer Grants* - The Federal Government could offer incentives to employers who hire and obtain female electricians for a certain period of time. This incentive is preferable to mandatory procurement quotas, as it encourages employers to improve recruitment practices and working conditions to attract and retain female employees, growing the pool of women in the sector rather than competing over a limited pool. Unlike compulsory mandates, which can feel burdensome and may not effectively address working conditions, financial rewards motivate employers to make meaningful changes. This is also likely to alleviate the pressures on large companies to improve female participation as smaller contractors will be incentivised to amend workplace practices to encourage more female employment.
- *Secondary School Education* - MEA advocates for better integration of Vocational Educational Training within the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) framework as a crucial measure to sustainably address the electrical industry's skills shortage and enhance diversity. While students may undertake a Cert II or III VET Electrotechnology course during high school, additional efforts are needed in the secondary school curriculum to provide greater exposure to students interested in and excelling in electrotechnology. MEA suggests a senior schooling subject be developed as "Electrotechnology", as an ATAR scaled subject, with a curriculum that includes renewable energy technology as well as covering the content of the first 'block' training of the Cert III in electrotechnology (block 1A). MEA believes this initiative could drive societal and systemic change towards the perception of electrical industry employment and increasing diversity of apprentices and workers in the electrotechnology industry.
- *RTO Trainers* - More female trainers, as well as providing training in mental health awareness and/or 'accidental counsellor' training would benefit both trainer and students.
- *Wage subsidies for mature-age female apprentices* – The government could provide wage subsidies to attract 'mature-age' female apprentices into trade roles, including mothers wanting to re-enter the workforce.
- *Cultural change initiatives* – It is imperative that workplaces have inclusive and positive cultures for the women joining them, so they communicate a positive experience to friends and associates and hopefully encourage other women to start a trade-based role. Measures to improve the understanding of all workers of their obligations to be inclusive and respectful of everyone at work are necessary. This could start with additional requirements in White Card training.

Conclusion

MEA commends the Federal Government for implementing a world-first initiative aimed at addressing workplace gender imbalances through meaningful and sustainable solutions. Systemic change within the construction industry is essential to increasing female participation in the workforce. The implementation of this Bill is expected to have a positive ripple effect throughout the construction supply chain, leading to a welcome rise in female employment within the electrical industry. MEA believes this initiative will play a significant role in alleviating the skills shortage currently affecting Australia's electrical sector.

While this Bill is likely to accelerate efforts by employers to improve workplace composition to enhance gender diversity, it does not address the deeper issue of entrenched societal perceptions that view the electrical and broader construction industries as predominantly male careers. The Bill limits employers to drawing from an already constrained pool of female employees without expanding the available talent pool. MEA has proposed complementary initiatives that should be considered alongside the Bill to enhance its effectiveness, easing the restrictive burdens placed on employers and fostering more inclusive outcomes.