

Progressing gender equality in the Australasian rail industry

Key Insights

Report commissioned by



National Women in Transport



Prepared by

Diversity Partners

Creating Inclusive Cultures

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of Australia, and their continuing connections to the land, waters and communities. We pay our respects to them and to their Elders past, present and emerging.

Diversity Partners is an Australian consulting firm specialising in diversity and inclusion research, strategies and leadership education. Since being founded in 2009 by Chief Executive Officer Dr Katie Spearritt, Diversity Partners has grown to be one of Australia's leading diversity and inclusion consultancies, guiding more than 600 organisations - ranging from blue-chip companies to small and medium organisations - to improve diversity and inclusion in their workplaces. Diversity Partners is passionate about building workplace cultures where employees feel respected and valued, new ideas are welcomed, breakthrough insights are generated, and the workforce profile is representative of diverse customers and communities.

Key Insights

Progressing gender equality in the Australasian rail sector: challenges and supportive practices

This report, prepared by specialist consulting firm Diversity Partners, was commissioned by the Australasian Railway Association (ARA) and National Women in Transport as part of the ARA's commitment to researching women's experiences working in rail. It identifies both supportive practices and barriers within the rail industry for attracting and retaining women and makes recommendations on areas for improvement.

Key Report Insights

- With \$155 billion in transport infrastructure investment planned from 2022-2037, the sector will need to recruit approximately 70,000 workers to meet the demand;
 - To help meet these skills shortages, the rail industry must attract and retain a more diverse workforce and compete with other industries seeking similar talent;
 - The rail sector's progress on gender diversity has not happened organically; it is the result of concerted initiatives to build more inclusive and diverse workplaces;
 - While the industry can be proud of the progress it has made toward greater diversity and inclusion over the past decade, there is more to do. Significant challenges persist for women working in Australia's rail sector; and
 - The rail sector must build a culture of respect and inclusion across workplaces and create the allies, employee groups and mentoring opportunities to educate and empower people to champion that culture.
- The key benefits of diverse and inclusive workplaces, according to employees, are:
 - * achieving a better understanding of the diverse needs of users;
 - * improved innovation;
 - * meeting skills shortages to deliver the significant transport infrastructure investment over the next 10 years;
 - * enhanced service delivery; and
 - * decision-making
 - Women who work in the sector value the sense of purpose in helping people travel safely, the variety and breadth of innovative work, and the increasing diversity of the workforce.
 - Eighty-one per cent of women see themselves staying in the rail industry over the next five years.



The industry has made huge strides in improving gender diversity over the past decade.

According to the ARA's Gender Diversity Data Report 2024:

- The representation of women in the rail workforce in Australia has increased from 17 per cent in 2014 to 28 per cent in 2023;
- Women hold on average a quarter of management positions and representation of women in all management categories has increased between 2017 and 2023;
- More women are being appointed and promoted and fewer women are leaving the sector in 2023 than in 2017; and
- Womens representation on Boards and holding CEO positions in the rail industry continues to increase.

Significant barriers to gender diversity remain and must be addressed.

They include:

- The perception that there are no barriers to diversity and inclusion, and that diversity efforts are wasteful. This view diminishes the experiences of many women, for whom exclusionary language and behaviours are part of their everyday reality;
- Imagery used in organisations and media generally that perpetuates the perception of a traditionally male-dominated culture;
- The limited supply of women for technically specialised roles;
- Perceptions of tokenism that result in women having to prove themselves repeatedly;
- The continuing prevalence of gender bias and exclusionary behaviours:
 - ◇ Among women, 56 per cent said they have experienced negative gender bias in the past year. For men, 23 per cent experienced negative gender bias;
 - ◇ Women are more likely to experience negative gender bias in the freight or heavy haul sector, and among the infrastructure contractor sector;
 - ◇ Women with disability and women who identify as LGBTIQ+ are even less likely than women overall to agree there is an inclusive and supportive culture in their workplace;
 - ◇ Exclusionary behaviours for women and gender diverse people in the rail sector take different forms - from devaluing or diminishing their experiences on a day-to-day-basis to gender role stereotyping.
- Lower levels of psychological safety for women:
 - ◇ A higher proportion of men than women in the rail sector agree that they can voice a differing opinion to their manager without fear of repercussion;
 - ◇ A lower proportion of women than men agree they feel safe to challenge inappropriate behaviour at work.
- Experiences of bullying, discrimination and harassment:
 - ◇ Women are much more likely than men to experience bullying, discrimination and harassment in the rail sector;
 - ◇ Sexual harassment is more likely to be experienced in the freight or heavy haul sector, and least likely in the consulting sector which has the highest proportion of women;
 - ◇ Among marginalised groups, women who identify as LGBTIQ+ experienced the highest rates of bullying, discrimination and harassment.
- Limited access to flexible work arrangements and limited flexible arrangements for frontline, shift and site-based roles.
- Inadequate infrastructure at some sites and stations, including basic facilities such as toilets, and private areas for breastfeeding.

"It's not a glass ceiling in the rail industry, it's a big steel reinforced ceiling."

"Gender diversity needs to be seen as a core issue like safety and not a 'nice to have' that you can address after the more important issues."

Progress that has occurred to date is due to a range of supportive practices that are helping to address these challenges.

Practices helping to attract women to the sector include:

- Gender equality plans (and broader diversity and inclusion strategies) with targets and key performance indicators for leaders as part of a systemic approach;
- Government social procurement frameworks that incentivise suppliers to adopt and maintain fair, inclusive and sustainable business practices;
- Gender impact assessments of services and processes that highlight the importance of gender diverse teams in designing appropriate facilities and services used by diverse population segments;
- Industry promotion of the sector's role in helping to deliver sustainable and accessible transport solutions and connect communities, and breadth of roles available in the sector;
- The increasing value placed on communication, teamwork and interpersonal skills as well as technical skills in the hiring process;
- Targeted campaigns to attract women, particularly into entry-level roles and traditionally male-dominated roles;
- Innovative partnerships with schools, community organisations, sporting organisations and universities to promote job and training opportunities;
- Minimising bias in recruitment processes through education for hiring managers, advertising in a range of non-traditional sources, gender-balanced hiring panels for senior roles, and using a range of new technologies to remove gendered wording.

Initiatives and actions helping to retain and develop women include:

- Providing education to leaders and employees on respectful and inclusive behaviours;
- Providing education to support cultural awareness, LGBTIQ+ inclusion and disability awareness;
- Male allies and sponsors who actively promote diversity and inclusion, and who support opportunities for high potential women through job rotations, lateral appointments and shadowing senior leaders on major projects;
- Mentoring and networking programs that allow women to connect with other women in the industry;
- Employee resource groups that enable communities with shared experience and interest to collectively drive change and education initiatives;
- Innovative flexible working practices in frontline and non-frontline roles;
- Increasing use of parental leave and flexible work arrangements by men.

"We have a culture which encourages, supports and celebrates diversity. When done right, it becomes second nature within an organisation's DNA."



Everyone – individuals, organisations and industry associations – has a role to support the sector’s transformation to a more diverse and inclusive sector.

- ‘Improved leadership on diversity and inclusion in my workplace’ was a top rating priority by survey respondents for the sector to take meaningful steps towards being more diverse and inclusive.
- Individuals at all levels of the rail sector have their own leadership role to play in supporting inclusive workplaces. This includes educating themselves on diversity issues, sharing their experiences, and acting as ambassadors for inclusion within their organisations.
- The efforts of individual leaders and employees must be supported by systemic practices at both the organisation and industry levels to achieve greater and more consistent progress.

Recommendations for organisations

These practices are offered as ideas for progress over time. We recognise that implementation will vary, depending on organisation size, resourcing, and organisational maturity in efforts to support a diverse workforce and inclusive workplace.

1. Develop gender equality strategies which are underpinned by clear targets and key performance indicators – not just for the organisation but for individual leaders.
2. Promote the use of gender impact assessments to create safe and inclusive spaces and practices, that further the understanding of diversity and inclusion.
3. Partner with the ARA to promote the benefits of working in the rail sector – including creating targeted campaigns to attract women.
4. Minimise bias in the recruitment process through education of hiring managers, advertising in a range of non-traditional recruitment sources, and using new digital tools to reduce gender-stereotyped wording and attract broader talent pools.
5. Provide education on respectful and inclusive behaviours in the workplace that supports new legislative requirements in Australia whereby employers have a positive duty to actively prevent workplace sexual harassment, sex discrimination, and other relevant unlawful conduct.
6. Support male allies to sponsor and champion change, providing visible diversity leadership.
7. Invest in mentoring opportunities and networking programs that allow women to connect with other women.
8. Support employee resource groups that allow communities of shared experience and interest to collectively drive change and education initiatives.
9. Continue to promote the use of flexible working arrangements that support employees of all genders to balance work with other responsibilities, including caring responsibilities (in both frontline and non-frontline roles).
10. Promote gender equitable policies and facilities that help to ensure employees have equal access to parental leave, protective equipment and clothing, and appropriate facilities on sites.

Recommendations for the industry

1. The ARA to lead the establishment of an industry Code of Conduct on respectful behaviours and a commitment to eliminating harassment and discrimination.
2. The ARA to provide industry-wide education on inclusive leadership.
3. The ARA to encourage member firms to participate in Champions of Change Coalition program and investigate the establishment of a Champions of Change Rail Group.
4. The ARA to partner with industry to consider targets for working towards greater gender diversity in different sectors across the industry.
5. The ARA to continue to facilitate its industry wide mentoring program and provide networking opportunities.
6. The ARA to partner with industry to continue to raise the attractiveness of the sector to women and gender diverse people via a Work in Rail campaign.

Methodology

Employees from across the ARA's 230 member organisations were invited to take part in this research in different ways:

- Across the industry, 573 people contributed through confidential survey responses and verbatim accounts of their experiences working in rail. Participants were asked a range of demographic questions to learn more about intersectional experiences based on gender, race, cultural background, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability. The demographic questions were completed by 505 people.
- Women and gender diverse people were invited to participate in six focus groups. Sixty-five people took part in focus groups divided into sectors of Passenger, Heavy Haul and Freight, Suppliers and Consultants, Infrastructure Contractors, and two others for people working across the industry. Participants were asked about initiatives helping to progress gender equality, diversity and inclusion, as well as barriers to progress across the rail industry. They came from organisations of varying sizes and held diverse roles spanning engineering, management, project delivery, project design and management, operations, sales and marketing, customer service, human resources, and consulting.
- Eleven women executives and subject matter experts from the ARA's Women in Rail Committee shared their perspectives on industry best practices and opportunities in a workshop. Organisations represented included GHD, McConnell Dowell, Wabtec, UGL, National Transport Commission, Metro Trains Melbourne, Laing O'Rourke, Arup, and Alstom.
- Some employees and organisations also volunteered their perspectives through written submissions and one-on-one interviews.





Australasian Railway Association
ara.net.au

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