



Employing Women in the trades

Myths, Facts and Remedies

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MYTHS, FACTS and REMEDIES: EMPLOYING WOMEN IN THE TRADES



This is a short guide to myth busting in the realm of hiring women in apprenticeships and the trades. SALT felt it was important to address myths as genuine concerns and queries even if the tradeswomen themselves felt that they were without base, as the myths expressed how others felt.

I have found, in previous research into barriers preventing women from entering the trades, that whilst women have worked in the trades for hundreds of years, the knowledge of women's capability is not maintained. Truth is replaced by unfounded myths and beliefs which support the views maintaining gender stereotypes in employment. Myths become tradition or considered to be true because people don't question what they hear when it fits with what they have heard before or what they want to believe. This enables myths to perpetuate and gain strength but they are not based in fact and it is important to remember this.

A non-traditional trade for women is one where women represent less than 25% of employees. There are unfortunately many myths when it comes to women working in these areas and this is a major part of why these jobs remain non-traditional.

There are many myths and they are often chameleon in nature, adapting to suit the circumstance they are used in. They are also used in multiples to backup and reassure the prejudices that they grow out of. The biggest problem is that they remain unchallenged so this is an attempt to answer those myths which reoccur and which we, as tradeswomen, battle against all the time.

Physical demands of the job – Myth: Women cant or wont be able to do the job that a man does.

The trades are jobs that involve physical work and should attract people who are physically active. It is generally accepted in terms of sport that you need to train to be able to perform properly. Most people who run regularly will notice a change in their fitness levels in two weeks if they stop their daily exercise. Trade is very similar, each trade has particular requirements for physical fitness and most people need a period of training to gain that fitness. It is not difficult to find men who do not look “fit’ for their trade

FACT: There are no longer set weights which can be lifted by individuals and Safe Work Australia Guidelines in the National Code of Practice for Manual Handling state “employers need to be aware of the enormous range of physical dimensions, for example height and reach, to be found in the workforce “ it goes on to say that “It is desirable to design activities and tasks to suit the capacity of the widest range of the workforce to avoid discrimination against particular groups. The employer is required to take account of the safety of each employee and not simply design a

system which might be safe for an average person of the workforce”



REMEDY: A good employer will be working to improve working conditions for all employees and ergonomic aids such as lifting tools benefit all employees, which is the way it should be. Technique and safety is also often more important than anything so ensure employees wear correct Personal Protective Equipment and are trained correctly.

WHAT TRADESWOMEN SAY

All apprentices face the same work and physical demand. Anyone who can't make it physically regardless of gender will be filtered out. There are women who can make it, and some who can't, the same as men. I personally am an average-sized woman and have never had a problem, though I have worked several transmission lines. I am physically strong and capable in my trade. One argument I've repeatedly heard from guys is their belief that women can't perform pole-top rescue. My rescue times and those of other women in the trade show this is simply not true. Besides, every apprentice has to demonstrate these skills in order to progress, and can be filtered out based on performance, not prejudice.

As a woman in my trade for twenty years and now in my mid fifties I don't have the capacity that I had in my thirties but nor do the guys. There was nothing I couldn't do

in my trade due to physical or height limitations. I have always noticed any time away from being on the tools you have to rebuild your fitness because my trade uses different muscles to day to day living. In fact in some ways I have fared better than some of the men because I wasn't so gun ho when I was younger. I can now lift things better than some men I know of the same age, who damaged themselves because they didn't want to show other men that they were struggling.

I was told I was going to slow the other guys down because I would need help picking up the heavier things.....Fact: women train and work out more at the gym resulting in less injuries than their male counterparts.



Many still think that women's weight limit is 16kg and men's 20kg – no I am not as strong as my male counterparts but on the first day of first year many of us are on the same level, I just use my tools better.

I use as many lifting aids and devices as possible ...I'd like to keep my back and not kill it off, your just smarter about how you work and lift.

I once asked a gentleman for help with an engine cowl (open, close – that type of thing because according to WHS was a two person job) his comment was “You think you can do this job then do it!” – so I did! I opened the engine, drained the oil tank, changed the quantity transmitter, calibrated and refilled the tank. Cleaned up the mess and closed the cowls all while he watched from some distance away. I earned his respect that night and I NEVER, EVER had to do a heavy, dirty, cumbersome job ever again by myself while he was around. He was always there first starting without me! We became good friends too!

I responded to the Canberra Times Newspaper in the late 80's regarding an article written by an automotive group stating that women cant be mechanics because their tits get in the way. I argued beer bellies were more of a hindrance!



Should employers conduct physical assessments for all applicants to determine strength and ability to perform all of the requirements of the job?

Some employers do this and some do not. I think the key is:

1. Was the company doing this before the female applicants applied?
2. Or did they begin this process because the female applicants applied?
3. And are they applying the standards the same to all applicants?
4. And are the testing standards reasonable/realistic to an entry level position?

Heavy lifting requirements should be stated at interview and on a walk around of the environment, with applicants given the opportunity to see and assess the equipment to be used. I have never been given a physical assessment however I have always been a physically strong person and knew my capabilities - most people do. Muscles develop over time with use of equipment and this will come from repeated use. Even young males struggle with heavy power tools in the beginning, and develop over time. Most females know if the heavy work in the job is for them or not in a short timeframe.

The toilet issue – Myth: we don't have the facilities

This old chestnut rears its head in almost every conversation about taking on women into the trades and has more to do with the lack of current proper amenities for existing employees than the requirements of women. Part of the myth evolves around the concept that a) separate toilets must be provided, b) that all men's toilet habits are bad or c) even that a toilet now needs to be provided – and that men don't require toilets!

FACT: Regulations regarding amenities and facilities are outlined by different bodies in the different states of Australia, but on the whole they all say a similar thing. As an employer you need to provide access to basic human needs such as

clean drinking water, toilets and a way of washing hands, a place to eat that is hygienic and shelter in case of inclement weather. You do not need to provide separate toilets if the number of employees are under ten but they are supposed to be kept clean. In remote areas access to a toilet may mean a dash in a ute to the nearest service station or it may mean an area away from the work site that has had steps taken to ensure privacy and a camp toilet.

REMEDY: Improve facilities for everyone. In the near hysteria that surrounds this issue it seems to be forgotten that these requirements are for all not just women and men are not animals. Many men do the “Macca’s dash” to use a toilet which is clean rather than a filthy portaloos. Men and women do not use separate facilities at home and even if there is no facility on site all employers are required to provide time to enable employees to get to a toilet or private facility. In extreme conditions there are devices developed for mountaineering, that women could use which eliminate the problem and there are always solutions.



WHAT TRADESWOMEN SAY

When working in Suburbia, a bucket with a secure lid in the truck has been used - just like camping. Stopping at the local Macca or servo for a before and after job pee is acceptable. Also from climbing a tower up to 100mtrs, I was always the first down, and the guys acknowledge this. Jokes are made, laughs are had and a bush becomes your best friend. The males respect your need to pee and look the other

way and will stand still as the truck tyre is your best friend. This is not an issue if you're suited to the role, and accept all aspects are not office like..

It is a challenge sometimes, but the guys sometimes forget what a challenge it can be for them too when 'nature calls' after eating a batch of bad shrimp the night before... and yet they deal with it, without leaving their careers. I finally bought a type of funnel that allows me to go standing up behind a bin door. I know some utilities buy inexpensive portable toilet kits (such as 'brief relief') for their workers to go in the bucket of a bucket truck or a portable pop-up enclosure. This is used by the men who can't find a spot in urban areas- the utility doesn't want to risk the bad publicity of their workers being caught urinating in a school zone

Gender acceptance – Myth: women won't be accepted or accept doing the work required.

FACT: Women do get accepted and are happy to work in the trades. I am yet to find a trade where there isn't a woman.

Records go back to the 1500's in England of female apprentices in trades. Women have worked in the trades all over the world and continue to do so. Women have also historically stepped into the breach and worked in large numbers in the trades during war times with out problems. In rural Australia women constantly work in non-traditional areas were they are needed and capable.

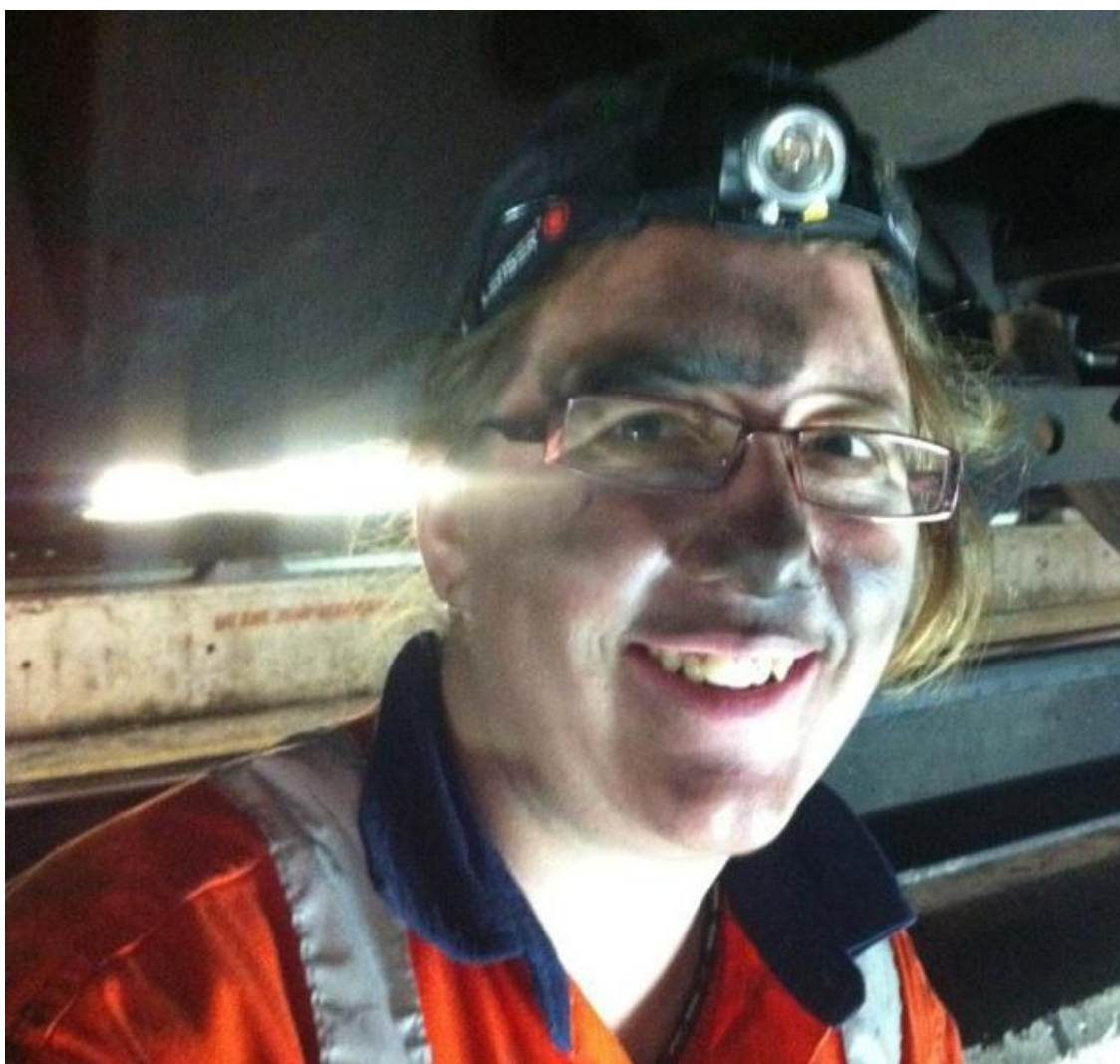
REMEDY: It is important to have a company with zero tolerance for harassment towards all its employees; this benefits everyone. Ensure that employees are wearing the appropriate PPE correctly; this not only keeps people safe but maintains professionalism. It may be a benefit to allow employees to express their concerns and then combat them in a training day, which includes tradeswomen with a number of years experience. Mentors within the work place can also help women gain acceptance, male mentors in particular may also help change attitudes of their peers so choose mentors wisely.



WHAT TRADESWOMEN SAY

I officially had a female mentor and unofficially had a male mentor as an apprentice. There was value in both cases, I think they helped me build the confidence to become the trades/craftsperson I am. I think having women already working there was the biggest help although the male mentor was an old fitter foreman who wasn't afraid to get me into the heavy lifting and dirt jobs. In later years he said he didn't like seeing me miss out on those things as I was missing valuable learning. So I guess, in a way, he helped a lot with losing the "keep the girl clean" attitude that existed and in gaining ability to pull my own weight

I've always been of the thought that the workplace shouldn't change because I'm the one who is different. I expect clean toilets and to be spoken to equally and



respectfully. If people choose to tippy toe around because I'm female, then that's their problem. Nine times out of ten if I cant lift it on my own then a bloke shouldn't be lifting it alone either. If they choose to modify their language or their behaviours then they must have been behaving inappropriately already. When I do run into

someone who has an issue I ask them if their daughter, wife, mother or sister would be proud to hear them be so rude.

I know from my interviews trying to get an apprenticeship more than one employer made it very clear that I was quite small and they doubted that I would be strong enough to carry my own weight on the team. But I can proudly say that during my entire four year apprenticeship I never once allowed any tradesmen to carry my paint, ladders and scaffold. The first thing I said to the boys on my first day is that I am happy to be treated like an apprentice and earn my way but I would not accept being treated like a girl.....and I was very lucky that this team had the respect to allow me to learn my trade just the same as anyone else.

I have found that the best way for me to get acceptance is to work hard and to the best of my ability. I have succeeded in changing people's perceptions by the caliber of my work and my work ethic. I find a good tradie will appreciate another good tradies work and barriers are broken down that way. I bring my personal skills and strengths to my work not as a woman but as a tradesperson.

Pregnancy – Myth: no point employing a woman she will get pregnant

FACT: yes women do get pregnant but they are not the only ones responsible for having babies and for caring for them after they are born. There are no guarantees with any employee that they will stay, particularly if the conditions they are working under are poor and they can find a better job. The attrition rates of men in the trades are huge so most employers are already dealing with employees who leave in large numbers. Just because a woman has a baby doesn't mean she wants to loose her job. Women today normally return to work and a well-trained and committed tradesperson is worth having.

REMEDY: ensure that your policies are orientated to paternal concerns and not just pregnancy. Provide pathways for women to move into other areas as they need to during pregnancy and facilitate their return to the workforce.

WHAT TRADESWOMEN SAY

On the pregnancy issue, its not an issue. I've worked through two pregnancies, both times until eight months. Yes I had to limit what weights I carried and the amount I went up and down the ladder but there were plenty of ground work to be done in most jobs too. Both times I returned pretty quickly after bubs, three months first time and eight weeks second one. So I spent less time being pregnant and off work than most but companies still hire girls in reception and other office duties so what's the difference? One of those pregnancies was in my second year of my apprenticeship. I still completed and my argument to them was that boys quite often use the twelve months off allowed in an apprenticeship to go on a long trip

(backpacking e.t.c.) so again what is the difference?

Ironically it was my surrounding boys that fussed more than I did. It was “their” baby too. I was in denial (unplanned and unsure) and carrying on like normal through all their fussing and worrying

With the pregnancy issue, you cant guarantee any guy wont just up and quit leaving them in the lurch either.

Chances are you’ll get at least seven years before then [pregnancy] not that many seem to leave upon pregnancy or arrival of the first child. I was able to work to 18 weeks when lifting hatches (which is a two person lift) was giving pain where it shouldn’t and in reality could have continued with all duties other than heavy lifting until much later if it weren’t for butt covering policy.



Working conditions – Myth women could not work in the conditions such as - remote areas its too ‘dangerous’ for them – cant have them working very close to males, where they are actually pressing and touching against each other – there will be sexual harassment complaints or worse

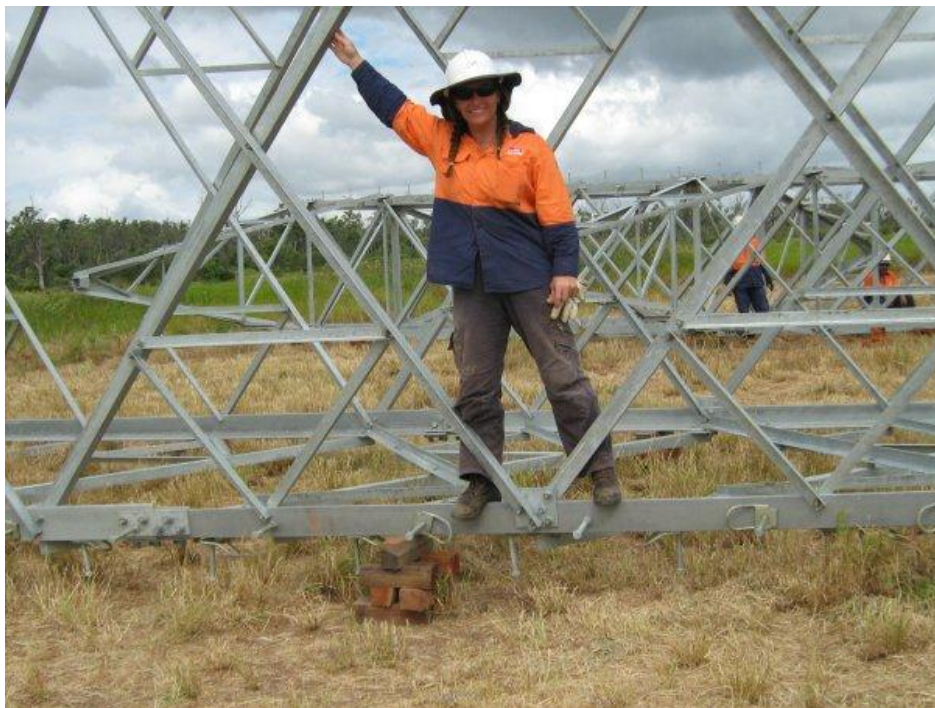
FACT: If the aggression in your work culture is such that it is considered unsafe for a woman then it is unsafe for a man. Exposure to violence is considered a risk which needs to be controlled in the same way as unsafe scaffolding. Simply by saying it is not safe to send women means that men are being exposed to this risk.

With regard to working in a confined space or at very close quarters as a team this occurs every day in other occupations with no cries of sexual harassment.

REMEDY: Again zero tolerance and direct policies that eliminate risks need to be implemented to protect all employees. Sexual harassment cannot be tolerated and nor can false accusations from either men or women. Training to ensure that everyone is clear what harassment constitutes help to set the tone for zero tolerance.

WHAT TRADESWOMEN SAY

I was told that I couldn't do FIFO because they couldn't guarantee my safety – implying that I would be raped. What type of culture are they allowing or what type of men are they employing and what are they doing to others out there?



This squeamishness about working around women is based on inexperience. I have run into it a few times, but really there is too much focus on getting a job done. If you are in a bucket truck trying your hardest to pull on a hoist, are you really worried about what the other person helping you looks like? Men and women work in close quarters in many, many areas of the workforce. It's only where men have never worked around women that there is fear over it.

If there needs to be boundaries set out before the work needs to be complete, then so be it. I'm not the type of female (or person in general), to complain if I'm assisting or someone is assisting me with a job where we're close to each other and/or touching/pressed against each other. In this trade, if you can't joke around and get

the job done, it doesn't matter who you are, this trade won't be for you. There will always be crude humour and risky jokes, but that goes on at ANY work place, not just in trades. If you can't handle it (whether male or female), go find a new area to work in.

I have been in an elevated work platform bucket countless times with blokes. I have witness the blokes cringe at the thought of sharing a bucket with one of the other guys. They much prefer going up with me. When pruning trees from power lines no one gives a toss about close proximity. I have been straddled, done the straddling, been on the floor of the bucket between a blokes legs, I've had old guys holding a handful of the back of my trousers. Personal space is the last thing on my mind when electricity is buzzing away next to me.

Recruitment – Myth: Women don't apply so they don't want to do this work

FACT: Currently most advertising is aimed at men. Company websites often don't show women in these roles and some may not have a single image of a woman on the whole site. Women are generally put under far more scrutiny and dismissed more easily before they even have a chance. At the present time women also don't realize that they can do this work but awareness is changing and more and more women are trying to get into these areas.

REMEDY: Look at the imagery used on your website and in any job advertisements. Ensure that people conducting interviews are on board with this concept; don't use HR personnel who have little or no idea about what makes a good tradie. Engage the trade families who already exist in your company, fathers can be fantastic support for daughters. Create outreach programs and liaise with schools and further education institutes; you need to let people know you are that you are an equal opportunity employer. Give women the opportunity, and provide support. This would be a great way to start with your pledge to employing more women in trade.

WHAT TRADESWOMEN SAY

When I went for my Apprenticeship you had to do an aptitude test and you were offered the job on that basis without an interview. It was the last year it was done that way. I had one of the teachers tell me that if I had been interviewed, as they were doing for the next intake, I wouldn't have got the job. Yet here I am 35 years later still working at it.

I rarely come across someone on the tools who have any issues. Its always recruitment, office johnnies or external people!

In the past five years my issues have been with HR. My referees have all told me that

the question they are asked is about my ability to work with men not my capabilities on the job. Also HR has not believed I have the qualifications and skills I have and state so. For two years I applied for 324 jobs across Australia. I got one rejection letter saying I was not qualified enough, the other (a job agency) gave me the gig – a two day shut [down on a mine] with the comment “I’m going to give you a go, don’t let me down!”. I knew more than any other bloke on that shut, and it got me to where I am now. That shut was an eye opener for me and a realization that female tradies are a threat to the not so talented, switched on or skilled man. Those that know their trade are the ones that accept me and I have a rapport with. I have done my time without a mentor however have continual support and encouragement from my family which is enormous.

In conclusion look at policies and procedures which are going to improve things for the workforce as a whole. A balanced workforce helps to maintain good work force dynamics and culture, which in turn affects production and output. The issue is not gender and all employers want reliable and hard working employees. Unhappy employees will leave if possible at the first opportunity and a good tradesperson should be valued for their skill, work ethic and ability - not their gender.