



AUSTRALIAN MANUFACTURING WORKERS' UNION  
NSW BRANCH

# SPECIAL REPORT

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## Breaking the perspex ceiling



**Creating better jobs for women  
in blue collar industries**



## Breaking the perspex ceiling

It's time to identify and dismantle the barriers to women's advancement and satisfaction at work in blue-collar manufacturing and engineering industries.

Every morning, many thousands of women get up early to go to work in factories, workshops and laboratories across NSW.

Women workers are an important part of the employment mix in manufacturing. But they aren't getting a fair go.

Women in manufacturing are lower paid, hold fewer skills qualifications and don't have the same opportunities to progress to supervisory or senior roles as their male co-workers. A distinct lack of family friendly flexibility in manufacturing is also a prohibitive barrier for many women.

The AMWU has a vision for manufacturing in Australia – for a sector that offers secure, skilled jobs with genuine career opportunities, producing high-end products for Australian and world markets. Lifting the representation, skills and status of women in manufacturing is an important part of that vision.

Women manufacturing workers deserve access to all the opportunities our industries can offer: for their own reward, for their families who rely on their incomes, and to meet the ongoing need for skilled labour. In an era of projected skills shortages a failure by manufacturing and engineering employers to engage with potential women employees, apprentices and trainees means that half the potential labour force is excluded, limiting Australia's capability.

Some industries, particularly for professional women have made good progress in identifying and grappling with the barriers to their career advancement and fulfillment. And while there's still a way to go before we have gender equality in boardrooms and in the management teams of banks and law firms, the concept of the 'glass ceiling' has shone a light on the practices that undermine women in the workplace at senior levels; and prompted action.

There is much more to do.

In blue-collar industries, there has been very little attention paid to identifying and dismantling the barriers to women's advancement and satisfaction at work.

Our union intends to change that, by working with our members, with employers, with government, with the education sector and with other unions to create better opportunities for blue-collar women workers.

Our goal is for women in our industries to have more secure, skilled and satisfying work.

This report, launched at our women's conference in the centenary of the first International Women's Day, aims to generate discussion and debate about how we work towards this goal.

*Tim Ayres NSW Secretary, AMWU*

## Frustrating lack of opportunity

### Case study

Sara\* is the only income earner in her household and supports her child. She is paid the award wage and always has been during her 13 years service with a large manufacturing company.

While about 70% of her colleagues are women, the managers are predominantly men.

Sara has never been offered a promotion even though she has applied for several positions as they have become available.

Instead, she says: "External people who don't know the company and are less qualified than myself have been hired above me."

Sara says this is because of a workplace culture of favoritism

and a lack of vision from management who don't invest in staff.

Managers have made it clear to Sara that even if she boosted her skill level through training, it would not result in a pay rise or any change to her status.

Now Sara is facing the threat of redundancy as the company cuts staff every few months. A workplace of 350 staff has shrunk to 90 in the last year as jobs are outsourced.

"There are three things that would make this a better job," says Sara. "They are: a pay rise, increased workplace incentives, and job security." *\*not her real name*

### Women say

"I recently had to train a male employee that earns \$2.20 per hour more than me for the same job."

"I have been told not to ask for part-time (four days) as it will not be considered."

"I've been 30 years with the company and I'm still on the basic wage."

"I'd like support from supervisors and managers, less bullying and equitable treatment."

"The current culture (in my workplace) favours men and that's not going to change in the short term."

"Most of us are casual, we have no choice about doing 12 hour shifts."

# Melita's career looking ship-shape

## Case study

**M**elita is in the final months of her four-year apprenticeship as a Shipwright with Sydney Ferries.

Traditionally a male domain, Melita works with just one other woman 'on the floor' of the ship yards where the gender ratio is close to one woman for every 40 men.

"I was a bit nervous when I first started, but once I got in there I forgot about all that.

"I was generally accepted there right from the start, but it's true that a ship yard can be a bit of a 'boys club' so it did take time for things to change.

"I find the work really enjoyable and I have just as much fun as the boys do while getting the job done. I feel pretty lucky."

Her duties include helping to 'dock' vessels, the underwater maintenance of hulls and repairs to the seats, locks and windows of the Sydney Ferries fleet.

Although still an apprentice, Melita is currently paid higher than the award wage and says there are multiple opportunities for her to



grow in her profession.

"I'm studying a TAFE course in Marine Craft Construction right now. After that I can opt to do the TAFE course in supervising as well as the internal training courses at Sydney Ferries."

Extra training to gain higher qualifications is generally incentivised with pay rises.

"I can definitely see opportunities; there is a possibility of applying to transfer onboard the ferries as a member of 'floating staff' working as a deckhand with the engineers and skippers."

Melita says she would like to stay in maritime industry and work up to being a supervisor or manager in the next five years.

When asked what could make the job better she says, "Obviously I have good conditions, a strong union in my workplace and a great collective agreement, so I'm probably one of the lucky ones.

"The opportunities for training and promotion are important to me.

"I realise that many women in blue collar jobs might not have the conditions that I do, but I really want to get the word out that women in blue collar jobs can do it and don't have to be scared about taking on a role in a male-dominated area.

"Just because we're women doesn't mean we can't do it. Give it a go – we can do it just as well, if not better."

## Women in manufacturing: a snapshot

- 74% have never been promoted to a more senior or higher paying role
- 74% see no opportunity for a promotion in the next five years
- 63% say they don't receive workplace training
- 44% are the main income earner in their family
- 35% struggle to meet weekly bills and expenses
- Higher pay (39%), job security (20%) and workplace training (10%) are the top priorities nominated by women to improve their job.



About a quarter of manufacturing workers are women. While jobs in manufacturing span from process work through to engineering - women in the industry are concentrated in the lower skilled, lower paid jobs.

There are few women with qualifications in the kinds of skilled trades that can deliver well-paid and satisfying careers in manufacturing. Whether making confectionery or high-tech medical devices, the majority of women in the manufacturing sector are

engaged in process, assembly or administrative work.

Women in manufacturing commonly work in the same business for years or even decades, with no opportunities for skills training or promotion.

Low pay and insecure jobs – with many women employed on a casual basis – are common throughout manufacturing, particularly in non-unionised workplaces.

Bullying and a hostile workplace culture can also present barriers to women's advancement and satisfaction in manufacturing workplaces, with significant numbers of women members reporting difficulties in dealing with managers and supervisors.

Issues that arise for AMWU women members at work include: inadequate bathroom facilities, not being allowed to speak to colleagues in a language other than English and an inability to adapt work hours to caring responsibilities.

Source: 2011 AMWU women's member survey

## Taking action

**C**reating more skilled and satisfying jobs for women in blue collar workplaces will require attention and effort from government, employers, unions and education providers.

The AMWU is committed to working with our women members and with all interested parties to better understand and to break down barriers to equal opportunity for women in our industries.

### We are calling for:

#### 1. More trades apprenticeships and traineeships for women

Skills qualifications are the key for opportunities to move into higher-skill, better-paid jobs. Women currently working in manufacturing report few training opportunities and consequent opportunities for promotion or higher pay.

It is important that young women entering our industries have opportunities to build a life-long career based on sound skills and qualifications.

For two decades manufacturing firms have cut costs and failed to invest in training - this trend not only contributes to skills shortages but it disproportionately impacts on women, who are already under-represented in skilled trades jobs.

The NSW Government should work with industry to set targets on apprenticeship and traineeship numbers to meet future skills needs and work with TAFE and employers to deliver real apprenticeship and training opportunities to women.

#### 2. Fair, open workplaces

Too often, women in manufacturing face barriers to satisfaction and advancement at work because they feel socially and professionally excluded.

Manufacturing employers must work to create fair and open

workplaces, where women are confident they have real opportunities to progress to supervisory or managerial roles and feel respected in the work environment.

Manufacturing employers should strive to be 'employers of choice' for women in skilled and semi-skilled jobs, through providing workplaces that offer:

- flexibility to attend to caring responsibilities
- opportunities to apply for promotions and take part in training
- a respectful work environment, where women feel comfortable to participate in all aspects of working life.

Our industries should build a reputation around the quality of our workplaces so that young women aspire to take up jobs and apprenticeship or traineeships.

#### 3. Better understanding of the barriers to equal opportunity in our industries

The work done in identifying barriers to career progression and leadership roles for professional women demonstrates the importance of closely examining the realities for women in the workplace.

The AMWU will commission regular research into women's experience in our industries to enable us to better identify and develop solutions to the challenges blue collar women face.

Alongside that, we reaffirm our commitment to organising women into the AMWU and building better workplaces.

Union membership leads to better outcomes for women workers. Women who are union members have higher wages, better conditions and entitlements and better job security than their non-unionised counterparts.

