

BLOG POST

BUDGET 2022

By NAWIC Director, Kristine Scheul

Budget increases for further Infrastructure Construction, but who will support the women who want a piece of this budget pie?

The Federal Budget delivered in Canberra on Tuesday night showcased another significant investment into the country's infrastructure. The total spend, incorporating the newly announced transport infrastructure spend, has increased the Federal Government's investment in infrastructure over 10 years to a new high of \$120B.

That is a good thing for our economy and for those who are working, or hope to work, in the construction industry. Although, for a significant proportion of the population, not all that much will change. Despite Infrastructure Australia reporting that all this work proposed in the infrastructure pipeline is going to need to be resourced, (and with a predicted 105,000-construction worker shortfall in less than 18 months), the budget should also be addressing how it is going to plug this gap in the skills shortage.

NAWIC's longstanding call for the government to support the attraction and retention of more women in construction has gained some traction in recent months. NSW announcing various funding policies to encourage more women to pick up a trade was a promising start. Victoria though came closest to the mark, by requiring targets for the number of women on government procured contracts across the breath of positions on a project and not just entry level.

This budget is promising a further \$38.6m over 4 years for women in trades which includes "wraparound" services, but it doesn't solve the fundamental problem still facing a significant number of women in construction – that of a lack of flexibility and support around childcare.

Certainly, the fundamental problem and restriction women face in gaining any kind of career height in construction is attached to the often looked over fact that women are more likely to be the primary carers for children and/or other members of the family. When childcare is either unaffordable, closed down (thank you COVID) or does not operate along the same working hours as those in construction, women will leave the workforce or take on roles in the industry that are either lower paid, part time or insecure. This has an impact on the long-term viability of having a career in construction and one of the main contributing reasons as to why the Construction industry has the highest gender pay gap out of every other industry.

Whilst the budget also allocates a further \$18.5M to support [WGEA](#) to focus on the private sector closing the pay gap, that will not change the fact that childcare hours don't suit the construction industry. Additionally, by its nature, the industry requires a portable workforce, however the leave entitlements, (which are so relied upon by women who undertake these primary carers roles), is not attached to the worker or has a chance to accumulate leave with them when they go.

As to the further \$1.3b to be invested in Women's safety issues, NAWIC applauds the announcement, particularly the Government's focus on Women's economic security, which includes the extension of paid parental leave and more training for women seeking a trade.

However unless those strategies are followed up with policies requiring companies to pay Super whilst women (and men) are on parental leave, and that there is some guarantee that

there will be adequate childcare to assist with the parents' return to work, then all of the investment in empowering female entrepreneurs and leadership training will not improve the number of women in male dominated industries.

Yes, there are more women participating in the workforce than over the last 10 years but how well are they participating? Are they still being funnelled into the "softer" industries already heavily dominated by women, and therefore attracting a lower dollar value? Where is the policy that states that the \$38.6m slated for encouraging more women to enter into a trade includes a construction trade?

There have been some ground-breaking and powerful initiatives promoted by State governments, but if women are to achieve any kind of economic security, it appears that they need to be involved more in this industry. The problem is that the industry does not always support or welcome their participation.

As our colleagues at Roads Australia so eloquently put it, fully unlocking the potential economic, employment and social benefits from these projects will require further policy reform in key areas to enhance industry capacity.

NAWIC has some recommendations on what those policies should be if government and the industry is serious about attracting and retaining more women:

- Subsidise childcare so that women can afford to take the time they need to develop their careers in the industry and just participate.
- The industry is a portable one with many projects stopping and starting and teams of skilled employees moving from one project to another, it's the nature of the work we do, why can't leave balances be as portable as the jobs?
- Flexibility of hours worked. The inflexibility and presenteeism in the industry makes it almost impossible for women or anyone with duties outside of work, to participate fully or ever advance in an industry where long hours and rigid time schedules have not changed for many decades.
- Quotas or targets requiring companies who contract for government work to increase the percentage of skilled female workers from tradespeople to corporate managers, diversity across the board and especially at leadership levels is crucial.

NAWIC calls on the Government to consider these recommendations to support the attraction and retention of more women in construction so as to plug this gap in the skills shortage and ensure these significant budget allocations result in maximum return on investment through practicable reforms.