



ENGINEERS
AUSTRALIA

Inquiry into sexual harassment against women in the FIFO mining industry

Submission to the WA Parliament Community Development and Justice Standing Committee

August 2021



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1. Submission

1.1 Introduction

Engineers Australia is the peak body of the engineering profession in Australia. We are a professional association with over 100,000 individual members. Established in 1919, Engineers Australia is a not-for-profit organisation, constituted by Royal Charter to advance the science and practice of engineering for the benefit of the community.

Engineering is the largest employer across all STEM fields, in both University and Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualified people, yet has the lowest female participation in both of all the STEM fields, with females making up just 16% of the University and 5% of the VET qualified population.

Of the engineering labour force, women make up only 13.2%, a statistic that has not increased much in the last decade (Australian census data shows that in 2006, females represented 10.5% of the engineering workforce compared to 13.6% in 2016). Engineers Australia is committed to increasing female participation within the profession and a major contributor to retaining women in engineering roles, is to ensure that their workplaces are safe, respectful and inclusive.

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1.2 Responses to inquiry questions 1 & 2

The following responses have been informed from input received from a survey sent out to a number of Engineers Australia members in Western Australia and distributed to others through members' networks.

The responses were reviewed by a small group of members from Engineers Australia's Western Australian Diversity and Inclusion Committee, Engineers Australia's National Manager for Professional Diversity and the Engineers Australia General Manager WA.

1.2.1 Question 1

Is there a clear understanding of the prevalence, nature, outcomes and reporting of sexual harassment in FIFO workplaces?

No. Engineers Australia believes the practice of requiring complainants to sign NDAs means that the prevalence, nature, outcomes and reporting of sexual harassment in FIFO workplaces is not understood as it is not transparent.

Engineers Australia believes women are deterred from reporting sexual harassment to their organisations for fear of not being believed, not being credible (he said/ she said) and/ or potential retribution.

1.2.2 Question 2

Do existing workplace characteristics and practices – including but not limited to workplace cultures, rosters, drug and alcohol policies and recruitment practices – adequately protect against sexual harassment?

No. Some general characteristics and practices, relating to workplace culture, rosters, drug and alcohol policies and recruitment practices, that have a bearing on protection against sexual harassment are outlined below.

It is noted that workplace culture will vary significantly across companies and individual sites. Protection against sexual harassment is variable depending on company culture, leadership impact and site-specific culture.

Workplace cultures

Sites can be “out of sight and out of mind” for corporate leaders who may be promoting best practice workplace cultures at the head office. This lack of visibility can enable site-specific, sub-cultures to form – led by local influencers regardless of formal positional power.

This can lead to an actual or perceived lack of psychological safety, which impacts deleteriously on professional development, an ability to maintain high professional standards, general continuous improvement, ability to innovate, safety and risk management.

The mining industry tends to be male-dominated, and so women are almost always a minority on mining sites. This is particularly true at leadership and management levels. This can impact the workplace culture in ways that does not always benefit women, and companies need to be proactive to ensure women feel safe and included.

A respectful, inclusive and safe (psychological and physical) working environment for all offers greater protection against sexual harassment.

Rosters / remote work environment

Remote mine site FIFO rosters can be a barrier to the participation of older, experienced women (and men) in site work due to family caring responsibilities and so lead them to jobs in the head office, roles in consulting or regulations, or career changes at around age 35-40.

There can be a lack of a critical mass of older, more experienced professionals (both men and women) on site to role model good behaviour and help moderate interactions.

Long periods of time away from people’s support base (e.g. family and friends) can impact mental health over time, and can lead to or exacerbate issues experienced on site.

Security measures in the form of physical presence of senior responsible supervisors and infrastructure are needed to increase protection. Considerations include the ability to lock accommodation doors, sufficiently lit (with surveillance) routes to accommodation rooms and adequate supervision in wet messes including ability to reprimand unacceptable behaviour with consequences.

Drug & Alcohol Practices

Historically drug and alcohol consumption has been a big problem in mining, but over time it has improved due to screening and consumption limiting policies on site. These initiatives send a message to all on site that they are responsible for their behaviour during working hours and after hours at camp or on R&R.

However, for sites where rules have not been implemented or enforced, this means there are still risks to people’s safety.

Women have mostly had limited positional power or informal influence to be able to promote and effect more appropriate behaviour in a safe way.

Recruitment Practices

A critical mass of diversity at all hierarchical levels of the organisation, of all professions, is needed to achieve an increase in psychological safety leading to improved culture and performance.

Currently, there is not a critical mass of women, and broader diversity of employees, on most mine sites (with women making up approx. 18% of the workforce in mining overall and 13% in engineering) that is required to overcome the ingrained cultures realised through male-dominated work environments and traditional model of work (long hours working away from home).

In the case of underground mining, the situation is more severe as the work is more physically arduous and in dangerous, uncomfortable conditions.

Awareness of unconscious bias varies across organisations. When the workforce and management are predominantly male (as it is in mining), the recruitment panels are more likely to be male. When the recruitment panel is all male, unconscious bias result in more men being hired. This may also result in job descriptions and requirements also being less favourable to women, and women being less like to feel comfortable asking for what they need to feel safe.

With the digital transformation of mining (e.g. autonomous operations with remote operations centres in regional cities), it is hoped diversity will improve. This could take some time to become mainstream, especially in underground mining and in small to mid-cap mining companies.

1.3 Further comments

Engineers Australia calls for the collection of more granular data than the data currently collected and reported to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA). There is currently only anecdotal and empirical evidence which makes evidence-based policy advocacy on retention and development of women in engineering in mining difficult. There is a need to understand the types of professional women who work in the industry and their advancement to higher paid, more senior leadership roles. This will assist identify the opportunities for women to do so and barriers that are preventing more women from doing so.

Engineers Australia calls for the development of a framework for annual reporting to collect the data relating to engineers/ STEM women retention and development. This is needed to support Engineers Australia's endeavours to encourage girls and more women to take up a broad variety of engineering roles. We need to have more women currently in engineering and STEM related roles promoted into positions where they can exert more influence on workplace culture to be more inclusive, respectful and high performing across a range of measures.

To enable more reporting of sexual harassment in order to fully understand the situation, Engineers Australia calls for a mechanism to enable independent reporting; anonymously if required. No information would be required to be provided that would identify the organisation thus negating any stigma or consequence to an individual for reporting. This would not provide a mechanism for prosecution, however, the reporting would provide information on the number, type and severity of harassment taking place.

An example from the engineering realm is CROSS (Collaborative Reporting for Safer Structures Australasia). They welcome reports about structural safety issues related to buildings and other structures in the built environment. More information is on their website: <https://www.cross-safety.org/aus/about-cross-aus>

Engineers Australia would be keen to work with Government to contribute to further research into sexual harassment (and other barriers to women entering and progressing in engineering careers) through providing access to members within FIFO mining, as well as mining more generally and other industries in which engineers are represented.



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