

# Improving gender diversity in rail

The Australasian Railway Association has a number of focusses for 2024 but is placing a particular emphasis on one that is intended to help meet the current skills shortage.



Caroline Wilkie, Chief Executive Officer, Australasian Railway Association

Improving gender diversity and inclusion in the Australian and New Zealand rail workforce is a key focus for the ARA and the rail industry.

We know that having more women in our workplaces plays a vital role in the long-term sustainability of the industry and also leads to innovation and better outcomes.

The ARA, on behalf of the rail industry, collates diversity data to benchmark the us against the national average and to measure the progress over time.

The information that we gather enables the industry to identify areas of success and to develop initiatives and programs to address gender diversity and support workforce inclusion.

We recently launched the *Gender Diversity Data Report 2024*, which is based on the

Australian Government's Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), and it shows some promising progress.

It is a particular passion project of mine because I feel strongly that we cannot move female participation forward in a meaningful way until we fully understand the representation across sectors, roles and responsibilities.

This is the ARA's fourth WGEA survey and provides an important platform to guide future policies and programs. Organisations from the ARA's diverse membership contributed to the data, including passenger operators, freight and heavy haul operators, suppliers and manufacturers, and consultants.

The report, based on 2022/2023 data, shows that there has been an overall increase in the participation of women in the rail industry to 28 per cent. This is a four percentage point increase from 2020-2021, which followed an improvement of two percentage points from the previous reporting period of 2018-2019.

Female representation is steadily increasing across management categories. Twenty-six per cent of CEOs are now female, up from 16 per cent in 2020-21. This is positive improvement compared with the WGEA average of 22 per cent and highlights the steady progress the rail industry is

making in key management personnel roles. In regards to non-managerial roles, females hold 24 per cent of positions, with the highest representation in clerical and administrative positions (37 per cent).

The report also shows that resignations of females has dropped to 20 per cent of all resignations, from 29 per cent previously. This remains a significant outlier compared with the WGEA average of 54 per cent.

Governing bodies had 30 per cent female representation. However, we have seen a drop in the number of women who held positions as Chair, from 27 per cent to 14 per cent.

Across all the rail sectors, the most notable jump was for freight, with female participation increasing from 23 to 30 per cent. Consultants continue to have the highest proportion of women in their workforce at 39 per cent, and rail manufacturers and suppliers have the lowest at 13 per cent.

The ARA was pleased to see that the majority of our members have formal policies or strategies in place that specifically support gender diversity, at 80 per cent of respondents to the survey. The majority of those also have specific recruitment policies or strategies to improve gender equity overall in their organisations.

It was also encouraging to note that of

those surveyed, 91 per cent of respondents had conducted a gender pay gap analysis within the last 24 months, up from 44 per cent since 2020-21.

However, while this survey data shows that the rail industry is headed in the right direction, we are still a long way from achieving gender parity which, at the current rate, will take until 2049.

For example, on average, the WGEA data shows that 86 per cent of respondents have formal policies surrounding performance management processes, whereas the average for the rail industry is only 47 per cent. A large policy gap remains in several areas including training and development, succession planning and talent identification.

The push for change is more critical than ever given the estimated 70,000 workforce shortage across Australia in the rail industry, which is exacerbated by a looming retirement cliff (the ARA's 2023 *Rail Workforce Report* shows about 35 per cent of the Australian rail workforce will retire by 2035, with almost a third of train drivers currently aged over 55).

The ARA has a Women in Rail Committee, founded in 2016, with the goal of developing a national strategy and action plan to achieve gender diversity across the industry. The group is also focused on improving the representation of women across industry and addressing systematic barriers preventing the success of women in the industry.

In 2023, the ARA welcomed new Board member Rebecca Want, Market Leader – Transport, GHD, who is also the Chair of the Women in Rail Committee, as an ARA Board Appointed Director until the 2025 AGM to reflect the importance of the diversity and inclusion work of the ARA.

Last year, we also released an updated Women in Rail Strategy 2023-2026 aimed at breaking down barriers for women in rail and creating a more diverse and inclusive industry.

It outlines the ARA's initiatives to support and promote female rail professionals and is guided by four strategic areas of focus:

- Industry Knowledge – measure successes and understand the issues.
- Organisational Impact – encourage inclusive and respectful workplaces.
- Professional Development – grow capacity and capability of women in rail.
- Promote Rail to Women – increase female participation in rail.

One of the key initiatives of our Strategy is the Women in Rail Mentoring Program. This is the sixth year of our program, which has grown to more than 90 mentee and mentor



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pairs from our original group of 40 pairs when the program first began in 2019.

The Program was established to support, guide and retain women working in rail through a tailored professional and leadership development program.

This year's mentors are drawn from a pool of rail professionals from various rail organisations, including Alstom, Rio Tinto, Sydney Trains, Laing O'Rourke Australia Construction, Arup, John Holland, Downer, Arc Infrastructure, and Aurecon.

Also as part of our strategy, we have partnered with National Women in Transport to engage Diversity Partners to conduct qualitative research into gender diversity in our industry, to understand the 'why' behind the numbers in the ARA's WGEA Gender Diversity Report.

This research will help us better understand the barriers and challenges hindering greater gender diversity and identify best practice initiatives aimed at achieving gender parity.

The research sought the voice of rail employees via a survey, focus groups across the industry sectors, and written submissions, where industry shared their personal lived experiences. The ARA will share recommendations coming out of the research with industry in coming months, which will highlight responsibility for the sector as a whole, rail organisations, and individuals.

Participants also shared good practices across industry, as well as challenges, providing valuable insights as to the key priority areas we as an industry should focus on.

Improving gender diversity and inclusion will continue to be a focus for the ARA because it is essential for a sustainable rail industry for the future.

Having a diverse workplace fosters innovation and enriches the talent pool, driving economic growth. We are at a crossroads, faced with gaps accelerated by rapid technological advancements and a retiring workforce, and must do all we can to build a more resilient and adaptive industry. Increasing the representation of women in rail is not just a moral imperative but a necessary one for a successful future.

## KEY FIGURES FROM THE ARA 2022-23 GENDER DIVERSITY REPORT:

- 28% of the rail workforce are women (24% in 2020-21)
- 33% of key management personnel are women (26% in 2020-21)
- 26% of CEOs are women (16% in 2020-21)
- 100% of organisations have paid parental leave for both men and women (93% in 2020-21)
- 30% female representation on governing bodies (26% in 2020-21)
- 36% of promotions were awarded to women (32% in 2020-21)
- 80% of organisations have formal policies in place to support gender diversity (79% in 2020-21)
- 34% of new appointments were women (32% in 2020-21)
- 77% of respondent organisations have a formal policy/strategy to support employees who are experiencing family or domestic violence (61% in 2020-21)
- 91% of organisations had conducted a gender pay gap analysis the past 24 months (44% in 2020-21)



The ARA wants to see more women in rail to support a growing skills shortage.