



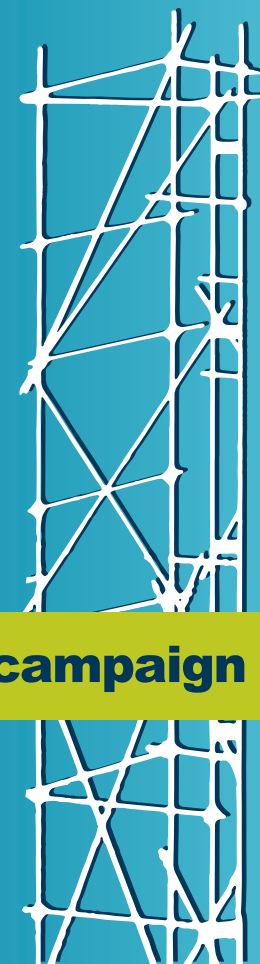
Victorian
Registration &
Qualifications
Authority

Campaign REPORT

SpeakUP

BuildUP

The women apprentices in construction campaign



CAMPAIGN INTRODUCTION

The Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) conducted a regulatory campaign focused on women civil construction apprentices and trainees.

This followed a complaint from a woman civil construction apprentice treated very poorly in the workplace – promised skilled work but given unskilled work, denied the right to workplace training, prevented from working on civil construction equipment like diggers and front end loaders.

We upheld the complaint and removed that employer's approval to employ civil construction apprentices and trainees in Victoria.

Is this a widespread problem for women apprentices and trainees in the Victorian building and construction industry?

To answer this question, in September 2023, we launched the BuildUP campaign.

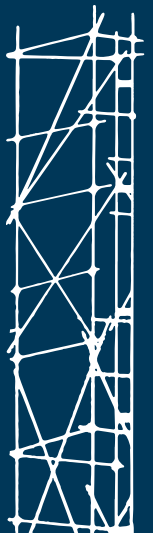
Regulatory approach

Our starting point is to seek compliance through education and support. However, where necessary, we will use our full range of regulatory powers and tools to secure compliance.



Our main sanctions are the power to cancel:

- an employer's approval to employ apprentices and trainees in Victoria
- training contracts.



CAMPAIGN SUMMARY

After reaching out to all women apprentices and trainees in civil construction in Victoria, we spoke to 60 women about their experiences. Our Authorised Officers visited them in the workplace or conducted phone interviews. Others contacted us through a BuildUP hotline.

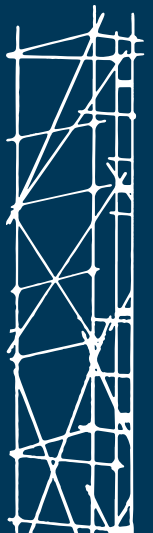
We checked employer compliance against regulations that say they must:

- provide proper supervision by a suitably qualified or experienced person
- assign apprentices and trainees skilled work and training that relates to the qualification
- maintain a training plan that records progress
- release the apprentice or trainee to attend training at their registered training organisation (for example, a TAFE institution).

We were also on the lookout for employers that force apprentices and trainees to work in unsafe conditions, don't pay them properly, bully them or do nothing to address bullying from other workers. The VRQA isn't the regulator for these matters, but we work closely with agencies that are, and we share information with them.

Information sharing Heads of Agreement

Victoria's regulatory agencies and authorities responsible for reducing the risk of harm for apprentices and trainees have agreed to timely sharing of information to improve the complaints resolution process for apprentices and trainees.



KEY FINDINGS

The good news is that we found high levels of employer compliance.

Mostly, we found suitable training plans in place, proper supervision, women provided access to the same tools and equipment as their male colleagues, and trained and assigned work across the depth and breadth of civil construction qualifications (Certificate III or IV in Civil Construction). Many women civil construction apprentices and trainees were very positive about their experience in the workplace.

The bad news is that we found a culture of silence when women apprentices and trainees are mistreated by employers.

Every apprentice and trainee that reported negative experiences did not want the VRQA to take action, due to fear of workplace reprisal or concern of being labelled a 'troublemaker' in the industry.

For the same reasons, callers to the BuildUP hotline who reported serious employer non-compliance chose to remain anonymous.

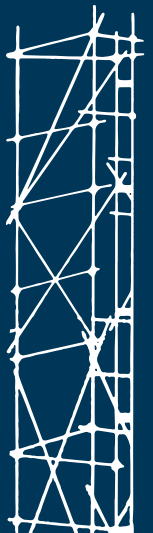
Other campaign findings include:

- 15% said they are not supervised at all and/or couldn't name their supervisor(s)
- some said they were supervised by other apprentices, which is not safe or compliant
- 3 reported current bullying through homophobic comments, rumours and ridicule.

We are following up with 2 employers regarding allegations of breaches to training contracts.

Supervision guidance

Apprenticeships Victoria has guidance and fact sheets on supervising apprentices and trainees.



CALL TO ACTION

SpeakUP

The culture of silence means that women apprentices and trainees in bad situations feel like there is nobody that can help them.

The culture of silence means that sexism, discrimination, bullying, and poor or absent supervision continues unaddressed.

This results in women apprentices and trainees not completing their qualifications and leaving the industry.

But if you're a co-worker of a woman apprentice or trainee, you can do something. You can offer support and call out bad behaviour. You can take action to make your workplace safe and productive for everybody.

The VRQA calls on the Victorian building and construction industry to end the culture of silence for mistreated women apprentices and trainees.

Access help

The BuildUP campaign demonstrates that apprentices and trainees often won't report employer non-compliance to the VRQA as their first option.

There is confidential help available.

Apprenticeship Support Officers (ASOs) help apprentices – and employers – get the most out of the apprenticeship system.

ASOs are located across Victoria and offer a free and confidential support and advice.

Call the ASO Hotline on 1300 311 820

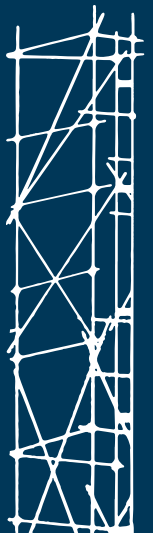
Email: apprenticeship.support@djsir.vic.gov.au

Website: www.apprenticeships.vic.gov.au/apprenticeship-support-officers/

Other places for help include:

www.youngworkers.org.au/

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/



WHERE VRQA CAN HELP

Sometimes VRQA intervention is needed.

Where we find employers who mistreat women apprentices and trainees and don't change their ways, we will remove their approval to employ apprentices and trainees in Victoria – simple as that.

Any apprentice or trainee with concerns can contact us on:

- vrqa.apprenticeships@education.vic.gov.au
- 1300 722 603

About the VRQA

The Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) regulates apprenticeships and traineeships in Victoria. It seeks to eliminate or minimise harm, and the risk of harm, to apprentices and trainees. The VRQA monitors training contract compliance.

VRQA's Authorised Officers visit apprentices and trainees in their workplaces to make sure apprentices and trainees are adequately supervised and work in safe environments that are free from exploitation and mistreatment. Authorised Officers will also look at apprentice and trainee progress against training plans to ensure they are learning the skills required for their qualifications.

Apprentices and trainees ...



Call **1300 722 603**

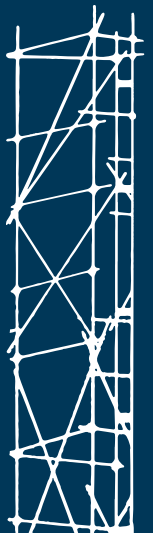


We're here
to help you

[Download our apprentice and trainee contact banner](#)



BuildUP



CAMPAIGN DETAILS

Who we spoke to

VRQA Authorised Officers interviewed 60 apprentices and trainees. Over 50% were in their first year, with most others in their second year.

They ranged in age range from 17 to 47. One in 3 were over 30 and 5 were under 18 (including 2 school-based apprentices).

The average age of those interviewed was 28, whereas the average age of women apprentices across all industries in Victoria is 22*.

The apprentices and trainees work for 32 employers of differing sizes and types:

- 7 large employers with over 400 employees
- 3 group training organisations
- 3 local councils.

What we asked

In addition to the standard VRQA regulatory questions, we asked apprentices and trainees if they:

- felt they were treated differently, or otherwise disadvantaged due to being a woman
- had experienced or witnessed bullying
- felt unsafe in the workplace.

What they said

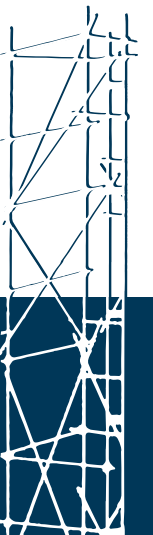
Overall, feedback from apprentices and trainees was positive.

83% did not report any current issues, with many positive about their experiences.

'They treat me so well. They are so kind and supportive, and I have to say I feel a part of the team. No picking on me because I am a girl. I really like where I am.'

Some who experienced problems raised the issue within the workplace and the problem was resolved.

* point in time analysis of Epsilon data, median age of all women Victorian apprentices with an active training contract.



'They treat me very well. If not, I can always report this to my boss, and they will fix it. I had issues in my last job, and they fixed it and moved me [to a different host].'

Most recalled signing a training plan (65%) or thought they had (28%), and believed they had a copy.

78% reported being supervised appropriately (described as with one or more senior/more experienced supervisors always in close proximity) and many knew their supervisors' qualifications and years in the industry.

97% stated they could access the same tools and equipment as other apprentices or trainees.

'I 100% do. I have never had an issue at all regarding any access to tools. I am treated just like everyone else. I am seen as an equal.'

There was great variation in the delivery and frequency of off-the-job training – 90% were satisfied with some combination of blended, block release, and trainers visiting their workplace.

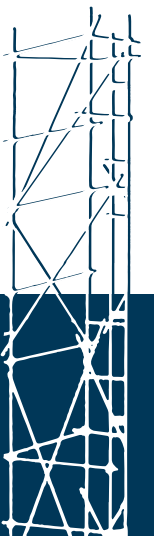
All reported they were paid appropriately – once their training plan was signed. A few mentioned arguing with their employers about being paid as a labourer while waiting to transition to an apprenticeship.

What they need – safe work environments and supervision

While the headline results are positive, the culture of silence over mistreated women apprentices and trainees indicates that often apprentices put a positive spin on their workplace circumstances.

In one workplace, an apprentice told the Authorised Officer that everything was fine. Then her colleague left the room. The apprentice then confided to the Authorised Officer that they experienced workplace bullying. The Authorised Officer maintained her confidentiality and followed up with her after the interview. An investigation is ongoing.

The Authorised Officer noted that *'during the course of these interviews, staff were very reluctant to expand on the details other than provide generic comments as they were afraid of possible repercussions'*.



Quotes from apprentices and trainees were consistent with this, showing that some employers are not doing enough to create a safe work environment:

'I asked a question of another colleague in training, and there were sarcastic comments about me not being able to keep up. This has kept going throughout the course. They make jokes at my expense and it has been horrible. I raised it with them directly and they apologised but I have felt that I have been excluded in some ways from the rest of the group since then. I reported it to the supervisor who has spoken to them and has been really supportive but it's been a horrible experience to go through. I cannot provide any specific details on names as I don't feel comfortable and feel it might impact me further.'

'Wouldn't say bullied, it's hard to explain, gender equality is a hard thing to explain, for example, when a female steps into a higher role there is talk that she is in that role because she is a female. The talk is from male counterparts, not a lot of them, most of them are supportive but there is a few who believe it's purely because of my gender I was afforded the opportunities I have been.'

'I have been bullied here. I think when you are working with older men sometimes they have issues when women come into the workplace and there are comments made.'

Building and construction apprentices and trainees attend workplaces where there is a higher risk of injury or death. If they are poorly supervised, this increases the risk. A core role of the VRQA is to go to workplaces to make sure that employers are meeting their obligation to provide proper supervision by a suitably qualified or experienced person.

'Not supervised at all, I do my own work, I work alone in a car supplied to me and constantly on the road...'

15% of apprentices and trainees said they are not supervised at all or did not know if anyone in their workplace had that role – 1% would be too much.

