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PAVING THE WAY FOR GIRLS INTO MALE-DOMINATED TRADES: Reducing Gender Segregation in the Trades

PHD THESIS SUMMARY

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Dr Karen Struthers
Griffith University, Queensland



Research Overview

Action to reduce gender segregation in the male-dominated trades has been elevated in the past five years in Australia and other developed nations. However, there is little evidence to indicate that this has translated to a significant increase in female participation in the male-dominated trades. For example, the female composition of trades in the manufacturing, automotive, electro-technology and construction industries in Australia has generally remained stagnant at under 2%.

This has negative consequences for economic growth and for the economic security of women. The focus of occupational segregation policy and action in Australia is predominantly targeting women in management and leadership. There is a risk that this area of gender equality will be a “middle class story of success” (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2013) with women at the middle-lower end of the labour market not receiving the attention they deserve.

Advocates of change have been increasing their efforts to reduce gender segregation of the trades. Yet this research indicates that action will be more effective if the low participation of women in male-dominated trades is elevated from a social issue to a social and economic problem of national significance.

Reduced gender segregation of the trades will benefit the economy, industry, and women's livelihoods. Paving the way for girls into male-dominated trades is worthy of national attention and action in the manner that breakthroughs in the “glass ceiling”—that is, management and leadership positions for women—are receiving. Improving the economic security of girls and women at the mid-to-lower levels of the labour market warrants heightened attention from industry, government and the public.

This research focusses on three areas of inquiry: (1) the extent of the gender segregation of the trades over the past two decades in Australia; and (2) the reasons why this gender segregation has been entrenched and (3) what action can be taken to rectify this occupational segregation.

In the first phase of the research, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) labour force trade composition data from 1994 to 2014 was disaggregated by gender, which confirmed the entrenched nature of gender segregation in the trades. The findings showed no significant positive increase in the numbers or proportion of female trade workers in male-dominated trades, above 2%, since 1994.

Furthermore, there is not a significant increase in females in the supply pipeline to the male-dominated trades. The disaggregation by gender of National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) data for the period 2000–2014 showed that the number of female students enrolled in school-based and post-school male-dominated trade courses is very low.

In the second phase of the research, interviews were conducted with secondary students aged 15–18 years and staff at four schools. In addition, interviews were conducted with educators and industry personnel in career advice, vocational education or trades around Australia.

The participants acknowledge that female students are capable of the doing the male-dominated trades. Their views that gender stereotypes; intimidation and lack of experience

of the male-dominated trades deter girls from these trades is consistent with Australian and international evidence.

A common theme expressed by female students is that they do not think much about the male-dominated trades, and they rule them out of their career choices. They commonly view them as jobs for the boys who don't do academic.

The barriers that limit female entry to these trades are compounded as few people have identified the lack of female representation in the male-dominated trades as problem that needs to be fixed. Yet this research shows that when informed about this issue, participants agreed it is a problem and they were forthcoming with ideas for action.

In recognising that the advocacy and action on this issue is largely adult-driven and piecemeal, this study concludes that the success of future change will depend on (1) the extent to which actions can be systemic across sectors, enduring and resourced adequately, and (2) the extent to which young people can become more aware of the benefits of reduced gender segregation of the trades, and more effectively engaged in the change process.

Motivation for the Research

Too many young women exist on the fringes of the labour market in highly insecure, low paid casualised jobs. The male-dominated trades can offer greater remuneration and economic security than female dominated vocations, like hairdressing and beauty therapy.

This research is motivated by a desire to advance economic opportunities for women by paving the way for more young women to pursue careers in the male-dominated trades.

Economic Benefits of Reducing Gender Segregation in Male-Dominated Trades

Benefits to the Economy. The benefits that could accrue from increased representation of women in male-dominated industries are summarised well by Toohey, Boak and Borkin (2014), who state:

Accessing the talent of highly educated and skilled labour already resident in Australia should help lift aggregate productivity, contain wage growth, assist in lowering the future strains on the pension system and importantly help engender a more diverse workplace and a fairer society (p.9).

In their workforce diversity statement, the Australian Mining and Minerals Association (AMMA, 2015, para. 2) supports the development of the Australian Women in Resources Association, which is: "Dedicated to drive business productivity and innovation through integrating a diverse mix of skills, AWRA seeks to build women's workforce participation in the resource, allied and related construction sectors to 25% by 2020".

With rapidly expanding technology, trades like auto mechanics require people with high-level electronic diagnostic and computer skills. Auto Skills Australia (2014) claimed that their industry required 21,800 additional skilled workers nationally. Auto Skills Australia developed a national strategy to attract female trade workers to help fill this skills shortage. Similarly, the Minerals Council of Australia (MCA) (2013) has reported that national skills shortages unnecessarily raise business costs, place upward pressure on wages in growth

sectors and create a sub-optimal investment climate for the mining sector, suggesting: “It is economically sound to expand the labour pool by tapping into underrepresented groups such as female and indigenous workers” (p. 4).

Benefits to Women. Increasingly evidence is demonstrating that reduced occupational segregation of the trades can improve economic opportunities for women. Male-domination of trades that attract higher on average earnings relative to female dominated trades (Table 4) contributes to the gender wage and gender wealth gap in Australia (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2013a, 2015)

Table 1: Earnings in Selected Trades: Australia

Trade	Av. Weekly Earnings \$	Av. Annual Salary \$
Hairdresser	688	35,776
Carpenter	1,160	60,320
Light vehicle Mechanic	966	50,232
Electrician	1,365	70,980
Engineering Tradesperson - Fabrication	1,331	69,212

Source: Extracted from Department of Education (2015). MyFuture. Career information and exploration service. Australian Government. Retrieved on March 4, 2015 from <http://www.myfuture.edu.au/explore-careers/browse-occupations>.

Summary of Research Findings

What Is the Extent of Gender Segregation in VET and Male-Dominated Trades?

Quantitative findings. The pattern of extremely low numbers of females employed in male-dominated trades has been persistent over the past 20 years. Female composition from the three male-dominated trade occupations of automotive, construction and electro-technology are shown in Table 2.

The actual number of female trade workers in 1994 in automotive and engineering (3,455) and construction (2,380) was higher than those in 2014 (2,069 and 1,529 respectively). There is no particular change in workforce demands, industry policy and economic activity within this period to account for this.

There is no increase in the female composition of the male-dominated trade sectors over the 20 years, consistently remaining at under 2%. This continuing gender segregation is a sign that gender stereotyping of occupations remains a powerful influence on the career paths for males and females.

The school-based manufacturing and automotive courses (Table 3) showed higher enrolments of females (13% and 6.8% respectively) than other courses, and some growth since 2006.

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Table 2: Females Employed in Selected Trade Occupations: Australia, 1994–2014

Occupation	1994		2004		2014	
	No. of Females	% of total employed persons	No. of Females	% of total employed persons	No. of Females	% of total employed persons
Automotive and Engineering Trade Workers	3,455	(1.1)	4,055	(1.3)	2,069	(0.6)
Construction Trade Workers	2,380	(1.7)	1,665	(0.9)	1,529	(0.7)
Electro-technology, Telecommunications Trade Workers	2,200	(1.6)	2,673	(1.8)	3,766	(1.8)

Source: Extracted from Australian Bureau of Statistics *Employed persons (STEO8) by Occupation (ANZCO occupation) and Sex, August 1991 onwards. Labour Force, Australia, Detailed, Quarterly, Feb 2014. (Series 6291.0.55.003)*. Retrieved on September 4, 2014.

<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/6291.0.55.003Feb%202014?OpenDocument>

Note: Percentages are not included in the source table. They were calculated from the total employed persons. I take responsibility that the information obtained from ABS SuperTABLES is appropriate for its intended use.

Table 3: VET in Schools Students in Courses within Selected Major Industry Skills Councils: Australia, 2006–2012

Major Industry Skills Council	2006			2012		
	Total students	No. of females	% females	Total students	No. of females	% females
Construction and Property Services	6,510	365	5.6	14,027	511	3.6
E-Oz Energy	726	12	1.7	3,067	69	2.2
Manufacturing	9,177	793	8.6	15,359	2,418	13
Auto Skills Australia	3,475	191	5.5	3,799	259	6.8
Community Services and Health	6,440	5805	90.1	18,125	15,522	85.6

Source: NCVER VET in Schools Collection. Retrieved September 6, 2014 from <https://www.ncver.edu.au/wps/portal/vetdataportal/data/menu/vocstats>.

Notes: Administrative collection of courses undertaken by students in recognised VET qualifications, including certificate I, II and III, and senior secondary certificate and achievement. Sourced by NCVER from student enrolment records through the relevant state/ territory boards of studies. I take responsibility that the information obtained from VOCSTATS is appropriate for its intended use. Percentages were calculated manually from the NCVER database totals.

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Table 4: Apprentices and Trainees within Selected Major Industry Skills Councils: Australia, 2004–2014

Major Skills Council	2004			2014		
	No. of males	No. of females	% females	No. of males	No. of females	% females
Construction and Property Services	45,368	7,607	14.36	64,382	4,275	6.2
E-Oz Energy	22,417	264	1.2	43,393	972	2.2
Manufacturing	41,128	3,909	8.6	58,543	5,884	9.1
Auto Skills Australia	39,787	1,699	4.1	38,981	1,986	4.8
Community Services and Health	3,213	21,233	86	4,805	38,429	88

Source: Extracted from NCVER Apprentices and Trainees Collection, March 2014. Retrieved September 6, 2014 from VOCSTATS via registered log-in. <https://www.ncver.edu.au/wps/portal/vetdataportal/data/menu/vocstats>. Source table did not include percentages. These have been calculated manually.

Note: Administrative collection on apprentices and trainees. Sourced by NCVER from state training authorities via Australian Apprenticeship Centres. I take responsibility that the information obtained from VOCSTATS is appropriate for its intended use.

Industry-specific data collections show similar or slightly higher levels of female composition in their workforces. For example, Auto Skills Australia (2015) reported that females “on the tools” comprise 4% of the auto workforce in Australia. The MCA (2013) reported that women make up 15% of the minerals workforce in Australia, and Master Builders Australia (2015) reported that women in construction comprise 12% of the workforce. The related industry bodies acknowledge that these figures for mining and construction include females in non-trade roles, such as project management and health and safety.

Qualitative Findings

Student Views

Overall, it appeared that female students are not dismissing trades as a career option altogether; rather, they are not factoring them into their career options due to a lack of knowledge. This is expressed by one student as: “More girls would do it [male-dominated trades] if we knew more about it—if we had a lot more exposure to it to find out what it’s really like.”

As a researcher motivated to increase career options for female students, I am encouraged by the finding that girls are not completely dismissing the option of pursuing traditionally male-dominated trades. I was discouraged, but not surprised, to hear that the female students have little knowledge of the trades. However, the interviewed students showed an encouraging level of interest in, and willingness to know more about the male-dominated trades. The finding that girls are not dismissing the trades because they do not like them or think that they cannot do them is significant; it creates an opportunity. It seems simple, yet instructive: if girls know more about the trades, and they feel less intimidated by gender stereotypes, they will be likely to do more.

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The four main student themes are discussed below.

Table 5: Themes on barriers that limit female participation in male-dominated trades: Student views.

Main themes (in the words of students)			
1. “More girls would do it if they knew more about it”	2. “Girls don’t think about the male-dominated trades – they are jobs for the boys”	3. “Students feel free to choose their careers, but”	4. “Only one or two girls do it, and you feel intimidated”
This theme was evident in: Female students had limited knowledge of the male-dominated trades. Girls with trade parents were more likely to pursue a male-dominated trade.	This theme was evident in: The low value students had of male-dominated trades. Girls preferring to pursue jobs their peers were doing. Girls stating they don’t think about the trades as an option for themselves.	This theme was evident in: Female students mostly said they feel free to choose their careers ... “parents don’t tell us what to do” was common. However, students made comments, such as: “gender stereotypes are really powerful”.	This theme was evident in: Very few girls said they were enrolling in male-dominated trade courses at school, with a number stating they would if more girls did them. “If you are the only one, you feel intimidated”.

A number of female students clearly articulated their preference for an academic pathway or career in a female-dominated area. Some of these students expressed interest in knowing more about the trades. One student expressed this as: “Maybe if there were more workers coming to schools talking about what it’s like in industry we would wake up to ourselves. It might be dirty . . . it might be hot, but it’s worth it”. Female students commonly made statements indicating that they did not know much about the nature of the work in the typically male trades, the skills required or wages. A number of students raised the roles played by media, popular culture and people around them in determining what professions are mostly women’s or men’s work. Their comments were consistent with the literature showing that gender stereotypes significantly impact male and female students’ career decision-making and limit choices.

A key issue canvassed in the literature, and that applies in this research, is the need to find ways to engage young people effectively in problem identification and change processes (Centre for Study of Social Policy, 2007; Maddaleno & Breinbauer, 2005). Currently, the concern and action related to the issue sits predominantly with adult activists, educators, unionists and industry, rather than with young people. The students generally did not indicate any action they would take – mostly they made suggestions that teachers needed to do more to attract mentors into school and work experience for them.

Adult views

Adult participants stated that there is a public view that “trades are not as good as uni”. Like the students, they also said that trades continue to be seen as jobs for boys and that girls are at risk of intimidation and harassment if they pursue a male-dominated trade.

Comments included:

- “Parents and the public often feel that trades are for boys who don’t do well at school—who are not OP students;”
- “...it concerns me that trades are seen as a lower level”;
- “If a child has ability then they [parents] want them to aspire to uni;”
- “Trades are seen as an under-qualification...“the exception is parents who have trade experience;” and
- “Trades, that’s seen as being for kids who aren’t academic . . . but in fact you have got to be smart to do a trade” and “It’s a hands-on job, doesn’t mean you don’t use your head.”

Table 6: Themes on barriers that limit female participation in male-dominated trades: Adult participant views.

Main themes			
1. Trades are not as good as Uni	2. “Gender stereotypes influence careers at a young age”	3. “Students are encouraged not influenced in their career choices”	4. “Employers perceptions need to change too”
This theme was evident in comments like: parents and the public have limited knowledge of the male-dominated trades. parents and educators encourage young people to aspire to Uni more than trades.	This theme was evident in comments like: “Gender stereotypes are set by year 10.” “...we need to get in early to change the stereotypes” “...the whole system needs to change from a young age” Maths is an important pre-requisite to the male-dominated trades, yet fewer females enrol in senior Maths	This theme was evident in: School based adults spoke of the under-resourcing of career advice and their difficulties in running career days, work experience and more. Industry representatives spoke of the need to influence and excite students, not simply encourage them.	This theme was evident in comments like: “There is a need to deal with hostility in workplaces.” Parents are open to trades if workplaces are not harassing.”

The views of adult stakeholders affirmed the research findings (Sikora & Pokropek, 2012) that gender stereotypes of work are set by Year 10 and that Maths is an essential subject choice for the pursuit of non-traditional career – yet fewer female students pursue Maths to senior levels.

Comments from adult participants included: “Gender stereotypes are still there . . . you constantly have to open their eyes, alert them to possibilities . . . stereotypes are set by Year 10, and mostly girls wouldn’t even consider a trade” and “Year 8 boys and girls are segregated straight up—boys primarily into [industrial learning technologies] and girls into

[home learning technologies].” Adult participants also said comments like: “...gender stereotypes are set by year 10.” Some of these adult stakeholders stated that career education needs to begin in primary school to break down the gender stereotypes.

Adult participants also engaged in lively discussions on the role of media, toys, literature and popular culture in fostering gender stereotypes. School-based participants expressed the limited capacity they have, despite daily contact with students, to overcome the influence of media and popular culture in determining what are acceptable male and female behaviours, identities and career aspirations.

Adult educators described the career guidance tradition was commonly described as one in which students are encouraged, not influenced; the time and resources available for career advice/guidance in schools are limited; and the focus on the manual trades for girls was variable across the schools and regions.

Comments for educators included:

- “We offer Doorway to Construction, but no girls do it. We could encourage them;”
- “Schools don’t have much funding for careers counselling”;
- “Resources are needed to give staff time. There is no dedicated VET/career advisor staff. They are not doing the job as well because there isn’t the time.”

Overall, the issues and barriers raised by adult educators aligned with those in the literature (Bimrose et al., 2014; Wright, 2011). Yet it was instructive to hear industry representatives differ from school based educators in citing the need for national industry strategies, advertising and programs that *influence and excite* female students and women about the possibilities male-dominated trades offer. Educators were cautious in using the term *encourage* students.

A number of adult participants also raised concern that poor employer attitudes and harassment of females in the male-dominated trades exists. They indicated that perceived employer attitudes and behaviour were “putting girls and parents off” the male-dominated trades, with one educator suggesting:

We need to get knowledge out to them early. For example, in Year 7, that trades are a valued pathway . . . we need to identify the skills of girls early . . . The girls don’t use their trade skills. There needs to be more encouragement from schools.

All adult participants recognised that girls have the capability to do all trades. They cited the success of girls in male-dominated courses and try-a-trade days as evidence of this. A barrier operating at the micro or individual level for some female students in this research was their own expressed lack of experience and ability to do the trades. The self-efficacy of these students—their judgement of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of action (Lent & Brown, 1996; Rogers & Creed, 2011)—was discouraging them from considering a male-dominated trade career.

Several adults suggested that female students are weighing up how well they may achieve in a given role, whether they would like it, and how it would affect their self-identity (in some cases, whether they would be considered as gay or “butch”).

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Conclusions

New Opportunities and Impetus for Change

This research affirms existing knowledge and evidence, while offering new insights and impetus for action. The results of the study show the pattern of low female participation in the male-dominated trades has been consistent over the past two decades, with little sign that increasing numbers of women are in the supply pipeline to these trades.

Many barriers limiting female participation in the trades that operate at an individual, community and society-wide levels were identified. These are consistent with contemporary research and reports (economicS4Women, 2014, 2015; Human Rights Commission, 2013; Shewring, 2009).

In this research actions are proposed that build the current momentum for change. The aim is to elevate action to be system-wide to overcome entrenched attitudinal, behavioural and structural barriers that steer girls away from occupations that continue to be seen as “jobs for the boys”.

It is clear from this research that female students are not dismissing the male-dominated trades as a career for themselves. Rather than girls not liking the male-dominated trades or feeling that they cannot do them, they know very little about them. This lack of awareness leads to lack of interest and lack of female participation in the male-dominated trades. Gender-essentialist views that distinguish careers as primarily male or female continue to act as barriers to girls having interest in careers in electro-technology, automotive, construction and other trades that are deemed typically male. It seems that more girls would pursue male-dominated trade careers if they had more experience of them, more positive role models and media images of girls in male-dominated trade roles. In sum, the influence of gender stereotypes needs to be overcome.

It is evident that ad-hoc action is not enough. To reduce gender segregation of the trades, a national plan of action that takes a system-wide approach to this issue is needed.

From the many ideas and actions raised in this research, I experienced three empirical and theoretical insights that helped to crystallise my thoughts and explain why the current actions are having little impact in attracting more girls and women to careers in these trades. These insights are as follows:

- The importance of youth participation, whereby young people act as agents of the change, rather than solely targets to be changed.
- The status of gender segregation of the trades as a social issue, not yet a social problem of national significance, means that very few people, let alone young people, think about or act on this issue.
- The significance of systems theory to guide analysis and a national plan for action— a plan that allocates responsibilities and targets action system-wide to many areas of government and industry.

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The co-ordination and implementation of national, state, and territory skills plans aimed at increasing female participation in male-dominated trades, including setting targets to facilitate the recruitment of female trade workers, could provide the much-needed momentum on this issue. A mechanism such as gender-responsive budgeting could be usefully applied to allocate funding and responsibility across all relevant government portfolios and industry sectors. In the current mix of worthy yet ad hoc actions, the missing element is responsibility. No specific agency or organisation is assuming responsibility to implement action to raise awareness of, and reduce gender segregation of the male-dominated trades. To convince more people of the problematic nature of gender segregation of the trades, on-going research to generate evidence will be invaluable.

It will also be important to determine the most effective ways to engage young people in future research and action. This study canvassed youth-participation models and change theories. While the views of young people featured in the study, it did not engage young people in decision-making and implementation of the research process and findings. Future research that is effective in engaging young people on the issue of gender segregation in the trades, will be help to shift research and action from adult-led to youth-engaged and youth-inspired action.

Future research that localised data analysis to particular states, regions, industry sectors or training and educational settings will be better placed to identify where particular initiatives may be having success in increasing enrolment of women and girls to trades in a specific locality or sector.

A National Plan of Action: Recommendations from this Research

Reducing the gender segregation of the trades matters to women and men who are determined to eradicate the gender pay gap and improve economic opportunities for women. It matters to industry. It matters to the economy. The economic benefits derived from filling skills shortages, and increasing productivity through increased female participation in the male-dominated trades is being recognised.

This research explores issues through a feminist and systems theory framework. This framework therefore recommends system-wide action to reduce the inequality arising from gender segregation of the trades.

I recommend the opportunities identified in this research to industry, union, government, education and training representatives—and to young people—for consideration in a national plan of action. The application of any one or some of these actions will be unlikely to achieve enduring change. To move beyond the status quo—to elevate gender segregation of the trades from a social issue to a social problem that captures the attention of decision-makers—all of the eight recommended areas for action must be undertaken together in a planned manner.

This is not an exhaustive list of areas for action and the details underpinning these areas are canvassed in the Findings and Discussion chapters. In summary, the eight opportunities recommended in this thesis are:

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Table 7: Opportunities Identified in the Research to Overcome Barriers That Lead to the Gender Segregation of the Trades

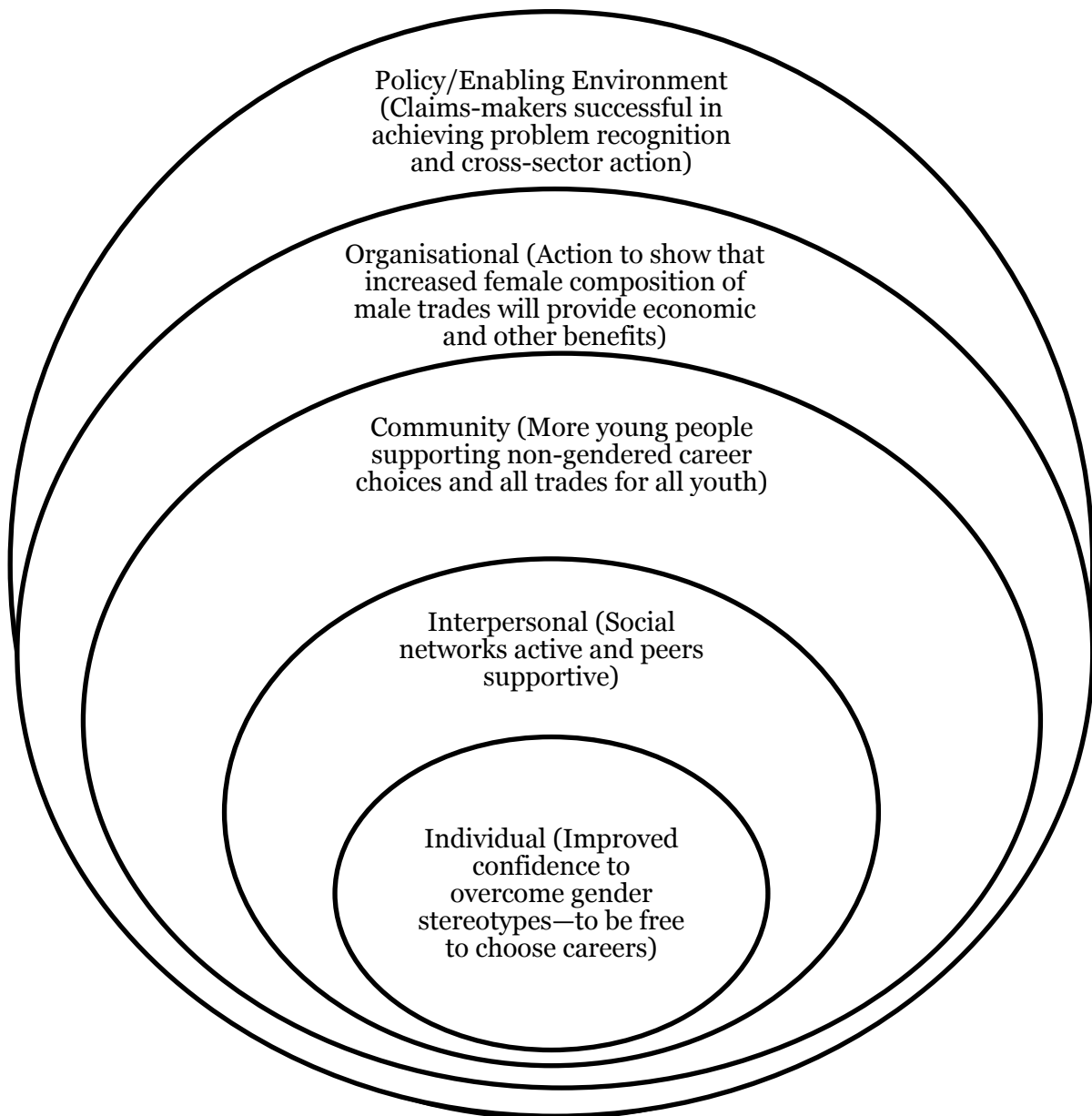
Opportunities	Level of Action
1. Extend gender disaggregation and public reporting of trade and VET data.	National and (organisational or regional) level of data collection required.
2. Promote gender-disaggregated school-based VET data to schools.	As above.
3. Provide more trade information, experience, mentors and role models to girls as they are not dismissing the male-dominated trades; they want to know more about them.	National action by industry, government, media and more and organisational level of action in schools and organisations.
4. Apply learnings from the break-throughs in gender stereotypes in sport and hospitality to the trades.	National planning and policy, and organisational levels of action required.
5. Elevate the importance of STEM subjects for female students, encouraging more to pursue a male-dominated occupation, including a trade.	As above.
6. Elevate action and awareness to engage young people, rather than relying on adult-led action.	All levels, with a focus on engagement of individuals through networks and communication.
7. Develop more gender aware education and training policies and career interventions.	National planning and policy and organisational level.
8. Implement more systemic action across industry, unions, education and training sectors and government that is sustained and resourced.	System-wide action at all levels (refer SEM model Figures 1 & 2).

It is difficult to overcome the individual and structural barriers that block female entry to these trades unless the issue can capture the hearts and minds of many more people in industry, government and the public—and particularly young people. My aim is for media interest, public awareness activities, and publications to be generated from this research to provide further impetus for ongoing change.

The challenge is for young people to see that gender segregation of the trades can impact negatively on them and their peers. The goal is for young people to be free to choose from the full range of careers, and not the gendered range that has been cultivated in books, media screens, toys, and magazines.

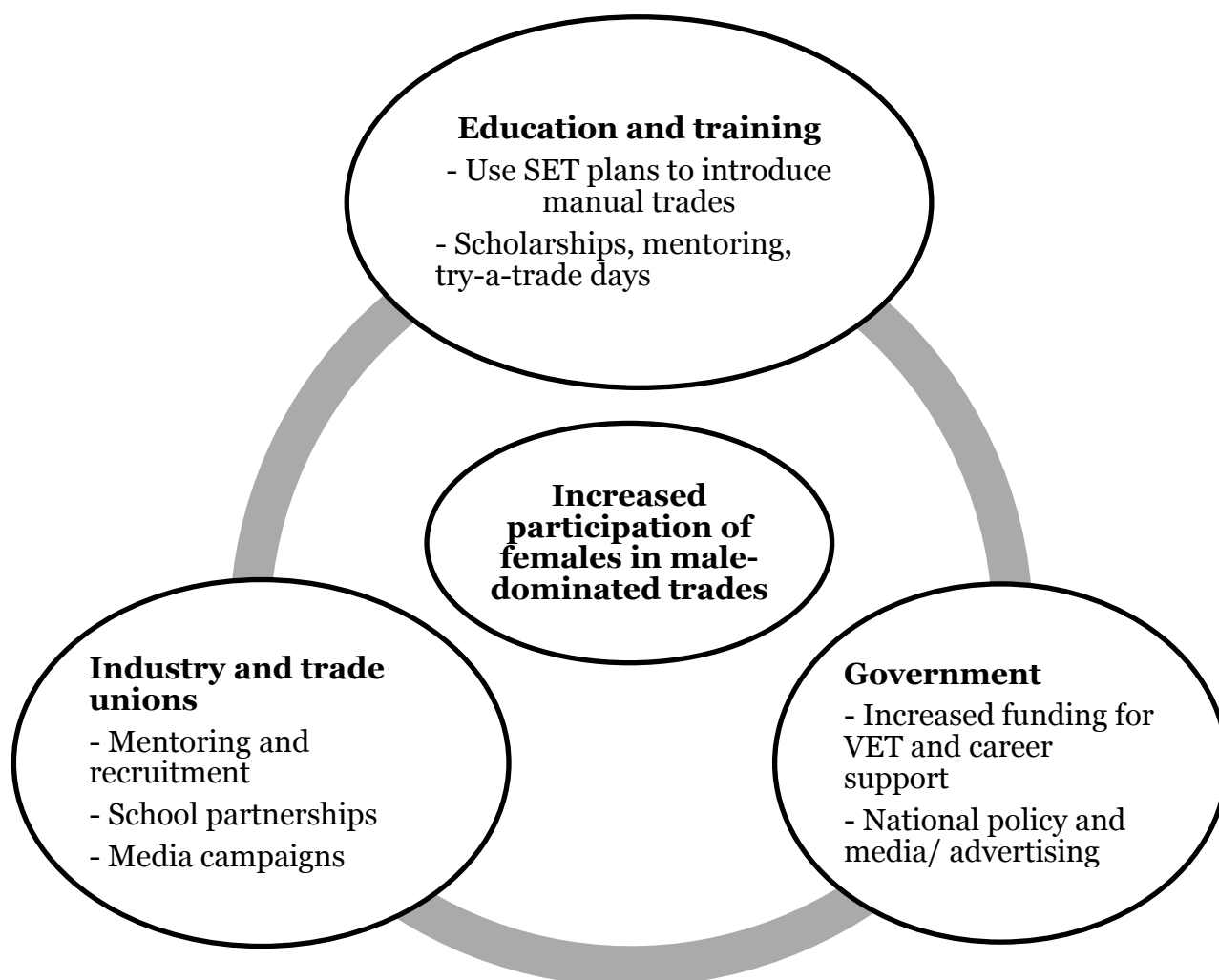
Appendix 1

Figure 1. The Social Ecological Model applied to the gender segregation of the trades.



Adapted from UNICEF (n.d.) Social Ecological Model. Retrieved from www.unicef.org/cbsc/files/Module_1_SEM-C4D.docx

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Figure 2. System-wide actions to increase female participation in male-dominated trades.



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