Charles Sturt University

Gender Equality Scoping Study of the Australian Grape and Wine Sector

Phase Two Report: Focus Groups

Regional Work and Organisational Resilience Research Group, Charles Sturt University, and

Public Sector Research Group, UNSW

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Executive Summary

In 2024, Wine Australia, in collaboration with Australian Grape & Wine's Diversity, Equality and Inclusion in Wine (DEIW) Committee, commissioned a research team from Charles Sturt University's Regional Work and Organisational Resilience Research Group and the University of NSW's Public Sector Research Group to conduct a comprehensive study examining gender equity within the sector. Building on the foundation of a Phase 1 scoping study, this Phase 2 report provides detailed analysis of industry challenges and opportunities, while establishing frameworks for future action.

The study specifically focused on understanding three critical dimensions: the perspectives of women working in the sector and those who previously worked in the sector; the barriers and facilitators affecting diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) progress throughout the value chain; and the gaps between available support mechanisms and industry requirements. This comprehensive approach ensures that the findings extend beyond currently available data to provide new insights into the complex dynamics of gender equity within the industry.

This report presents thematic analysis of the research findings from 18 focus groups, representing 76 women from the Australian wine sector. The 2021 ABS Census identified 8220 women employed in grape growing and manufacturing; women represent 36% of the total workforce. The themes presented here examine the evolving industry culture, leadership challenges, persistent masculine cultural norms, flexible work arrangements, and enduring perceptions about women's contributions to the industry. Each theme is explored through the lens of both challenges and opportunities, providing a nuanced understanding of the current state of gender equity in the Australian wine sector and pathways for positive change.

Key findings

1. **Industry culture** has improved over the past 10 to 15 years, with women reporting greater acceptance and recognition in industry spaces, from vineyard operations to wine making. However, multiple barriers (discussed below) remain.
2. **Masculine norms** are still pervasive in the industry. These include the occurrence of everyday sexism; an implicit expectation that women will become “one of the boys” to fit in; and stereotypical assumptions that women are less competent than men, particularly in relation to physical capabilities.
3. **Sexual harassment** still exists in the sector, and some women considered that the problem is recognised yet concealed. Women are still not reporting sexual harassment, for fear of repercussions, including negative impacts on careers.
4. **Women’s leadership capabilities** often go unrecognised or are undervalued. This is most obvious in the double standards in how their leadership styles are perceived, and their achievements receiving less visibility than those of their male counterparts.
5. **Mentors and industry leadership programs** were spoken of favourably, and in particular, mentoring and wine tasting groups are a valuable avenue for women to develop their networks and careers.
6. **Flexible working** is hindered by industry requirements and fixed traditions. Most women concurred that few businesses have visible flexible work policies, which is a significant issue, particularly given the industry's reputation for long hours and physical demands.

Pathways to change

1. Participants consistently emphasised the need for improved representation and visibility of women across all industry levels, from technical roles to leadership positions, suggesting this visibility is crucial for inspiring and supporting the next generation.

2. The need for enhanced education and training opportunities emerged as a second critical theme, with participants highlighting the importance of both formal qualifications and ongoing professional development.
3. Third, participants identified specific resource requirements, including targeted scholarships and funding programs, as essential tools for breaking down barriers to entry and advancement.
4. Finally, the development of innovative approaches to flexible working arrangements was highlighted as crucial for enabling sustained career progression, particularly given the unique operational demands of the wine industry.

About the study

This is the second report in the gender equality in the wine industry project. It builds on the Phase One report, a scoping study of the wine industry, through extensive qualitative research. This research aimed to triangulate and extend the stage one analysis, identifying both existing challenges and emerging opportunities for advancing diversity, equality, and inclusion across the industry. Through 18 online focus groups conducted between October and December 2024, engaging key regional informants from across Australia's wine regions, supplemented by participation in an industry symposium on women in wine, the research team gathered rich qualitative data about current industry experiences and practices.

A key objective of this phase was to develop practical applications that can directly inform industry decision-making. The research findings enable clear delineation of roles and responsibilities among key sector bodies, while identifying examples of workplace gender equality excellence that warrant further exploration. Phase 3 will engage key stakeholders across the value chain and geographical spread of the industry to collect case studies of gender equality successes in the sector culminating in a final report. Additionally, this report establishes a framework of requirements for developing an industry toolkit, ensuring that theoretical insights can be translated into practical implementation strategies.

Ethics approval was granted from Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) in August 2024 (Ethics protocol number: H24250). Phase Two was designed to examine previously identified strengths and gaps in the existing data to establish challenges and opportunities for the sector's future work on DEI.

In recognition of the geographical distribution of the industry, online focus groups were determined by the research team as the most effective methodological tool for data collection, ensuring the generation of data through responses from a large number of participants for data saturation. Focus groups are well established as an inclusive approach to research that ensures insights from participant engagement with each other as well as with researcher questions (Wilkinson, 1998). Scoping and analysis undertaken in phase one was triangulated to inform focus group protocol.

Focus group recruitment, consent and scheduling

Our recruitment strategy an open invitation to employees, employers and industry bodies at key points of the value chain and across key geographic locations that are fundamental to the wine industry. By outreaching in this way, we maximised the opportunity of those to participate. By using an invitation as a method, we limit the risk of coercion and undue influence. In collaboration with Wine Australia, the Advisory Board and Industry partners, the invitation was distributed by a number of organisations and their associated social networks.

The target population for this study is specific. The sample included women previously and currently employed in wine and grape industry occupations specific to wine making, wine growing, vine harvesting and associated industry, ownership and governing body executive roles as well as on site (winery and/or vineyard) cellar and marketing roles.

Focus group participants

We anticipated conducting a minimum of five online focus groups consisting of five participants. The response to the call for participation far exceeded our expectations and is indicative of the interest in DEI in the industry.

Focus groups were undertaken in two rounds. Table 1 summarises total participants by region.

Region: Total participants	
Region	Number
SA	34
VIC	19

NSW	16
WA	6
TAS	0
QLD	0
ACT	1
Total	**76**

Overall, representation by state is reflective of disbursement of wineries in each state, with highest representation in South Australia and similar numbers in Victoria and New South Wales. We note limited participant numbers in Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory, with no participants in Tasmania or Queensland – this is a limitation of our data, discussed further in "Conclusions and Recommendations".

Table 2 summarises participants by role/occupation, noting some participants held multiple roles.

Participants by role/occupation (some multiple roles	
Winemaker	27
Vineyard / Viticulturist	11
Owner / Manager / Exec / Board	12
Cellar	7
Marketing / Sales & Distribution / Retail / Media /Brand)	14
Laboratory	3
Consultant (winemaking, vineyards)	3
Teach	2
Studying Viticulture	2
Left industry	4
Total	**85**

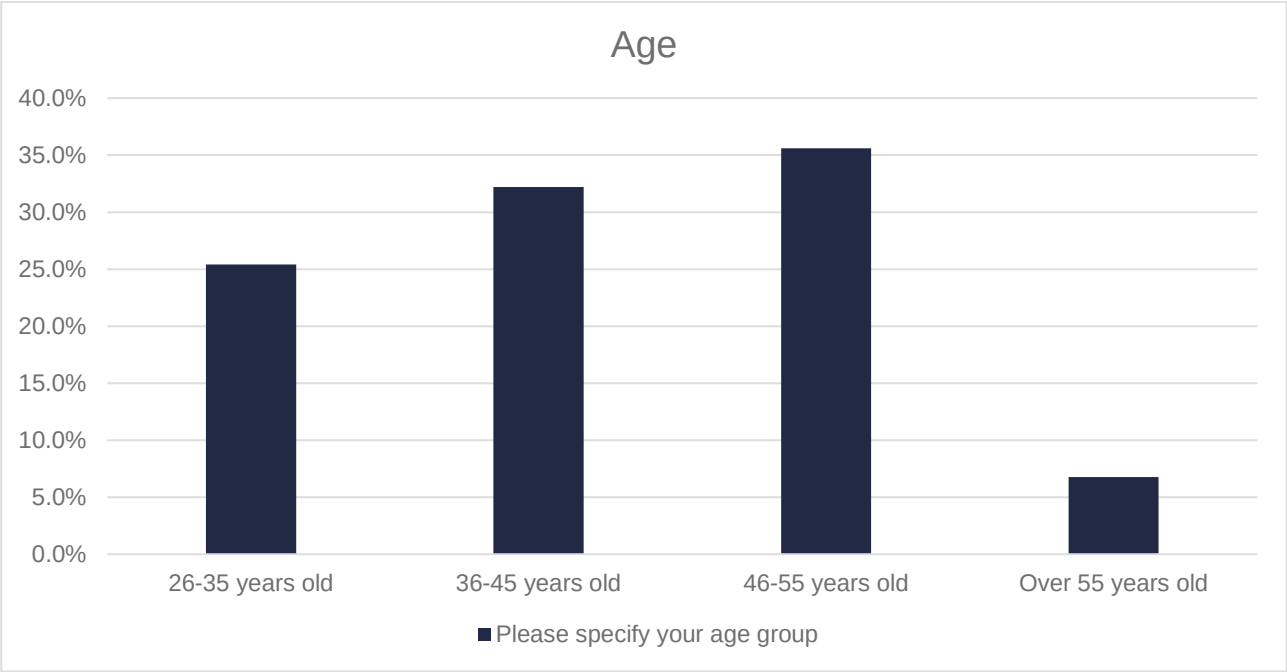
Participant demographics

Participants were asked to complete a brief anonymous demographics survey. The survey achieved a 79% response rate (n=60 out of N=76 participants), which exceeds the commonly accepted threshold of 70% for representative sampling. While participation was incomplete, this robust response rate minimises nonresponse bias and provides sufficient statistical power for drawing meaningful demographic insights. The sample size obtained (n=60) allows for reliable descriptive statistics and adequately represents the demographic composition of the study population with an acceptable margin of error.

Where applicable, insights into the employees across the Australian wine industry more broadly are included below, referencing the "A scoping study of gender equality in the Australian grape and wine sector - Phase 1 Report" to provide context to the study sample.

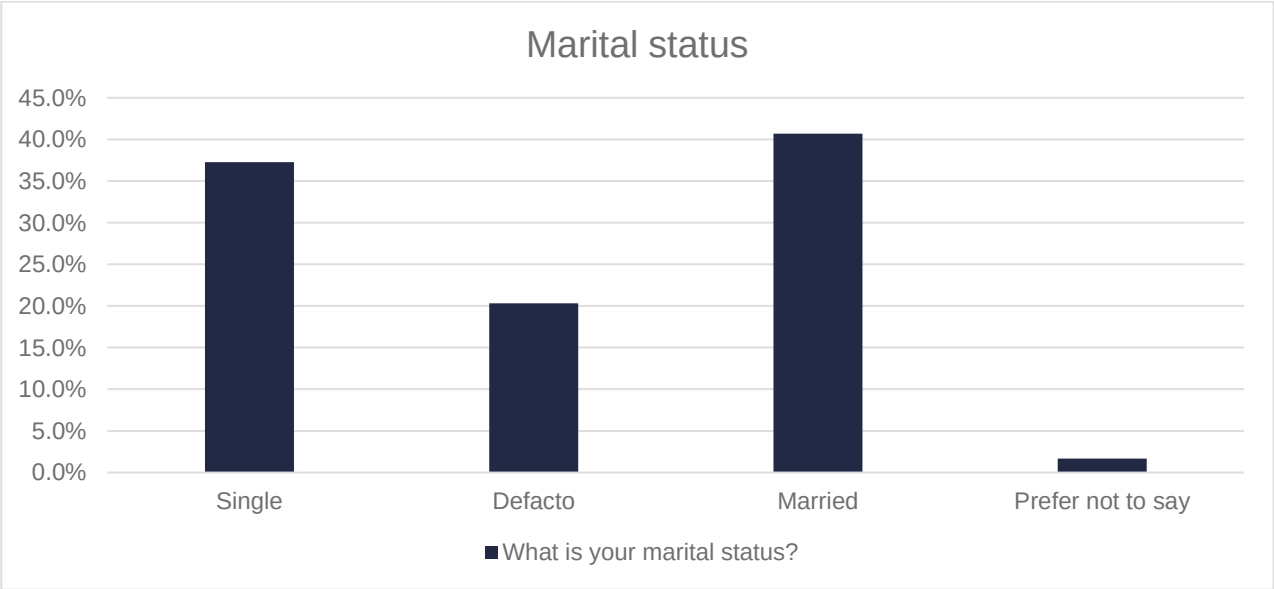
Age

Note: The 18 – 25 years old age bracket was included in options, but not represented in the cohort.

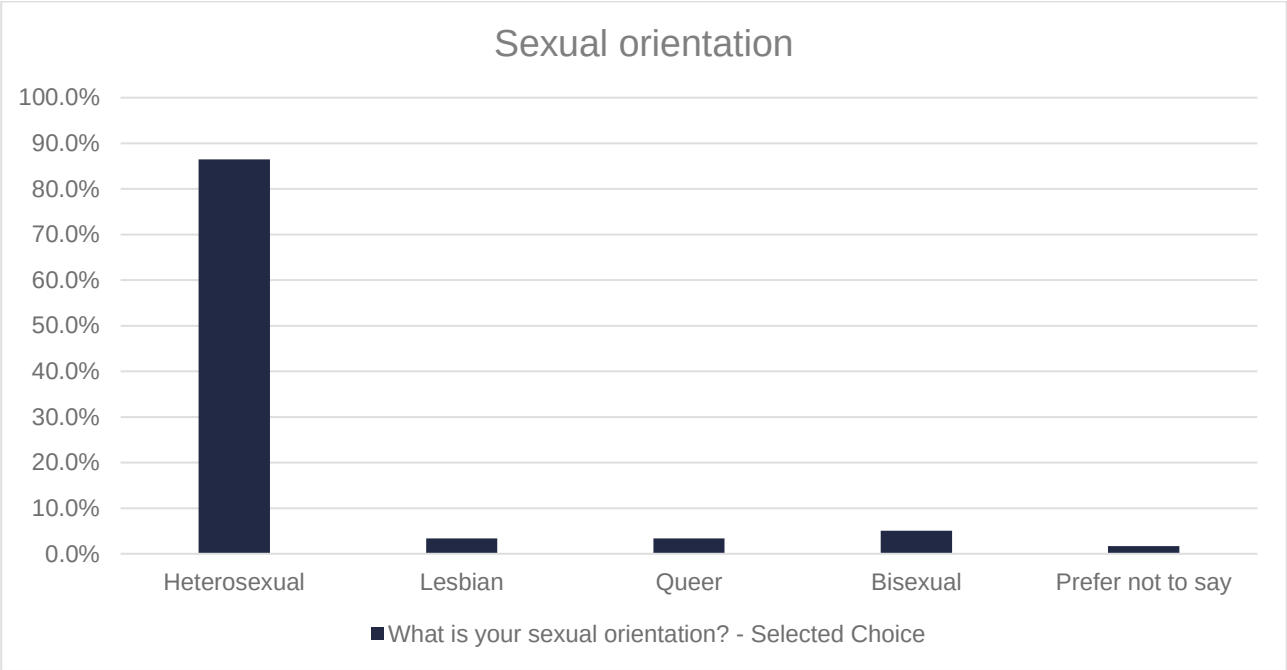


ABS Census data indicates that in 2021, 21% of women working in wine were 26-25 years old, 22% were 36-45 years old, 21% were 46-55 years old, and 27% were over 55 years old. The study sample overrepresents the 36-45 and 46-55 groups in particular; women over 55 years old are underrepresented in our sample.

Marital status

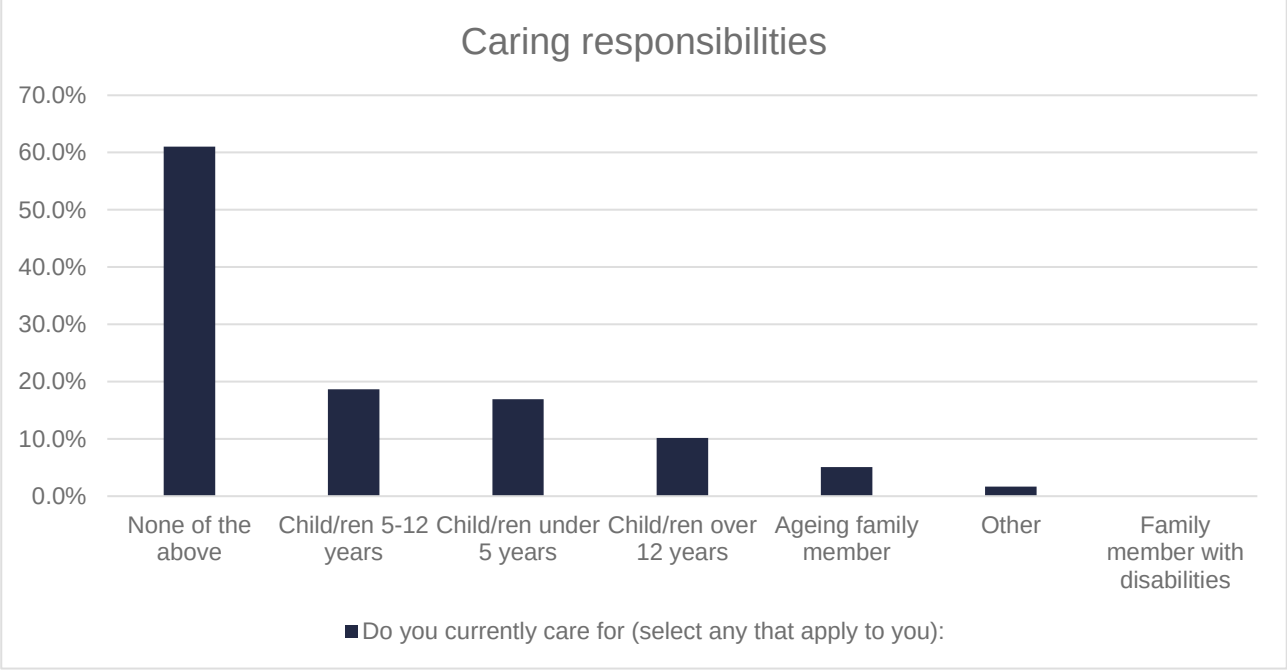


Sexual orientation

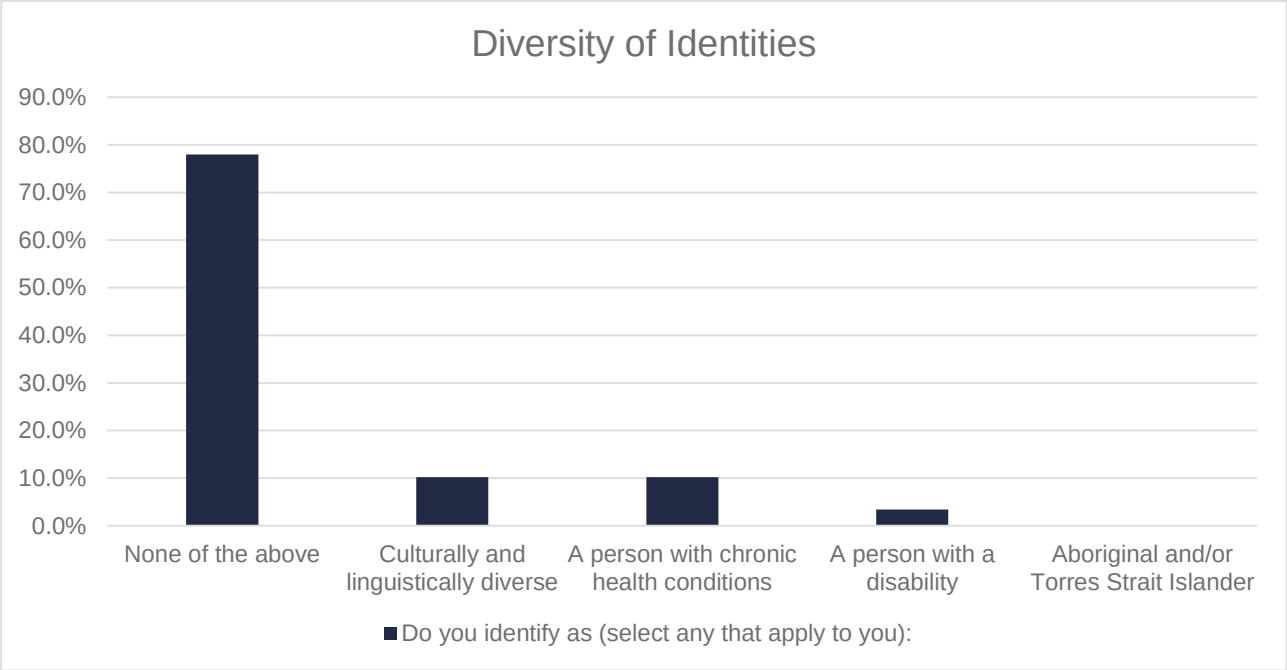


Caring responsibilities

Noting this question captures current rather than historical data – participants with children over 18 and/or no longer considered dependents are not captured here but have reflected on experience parenting and/or caring throughout career in their focus group responses.

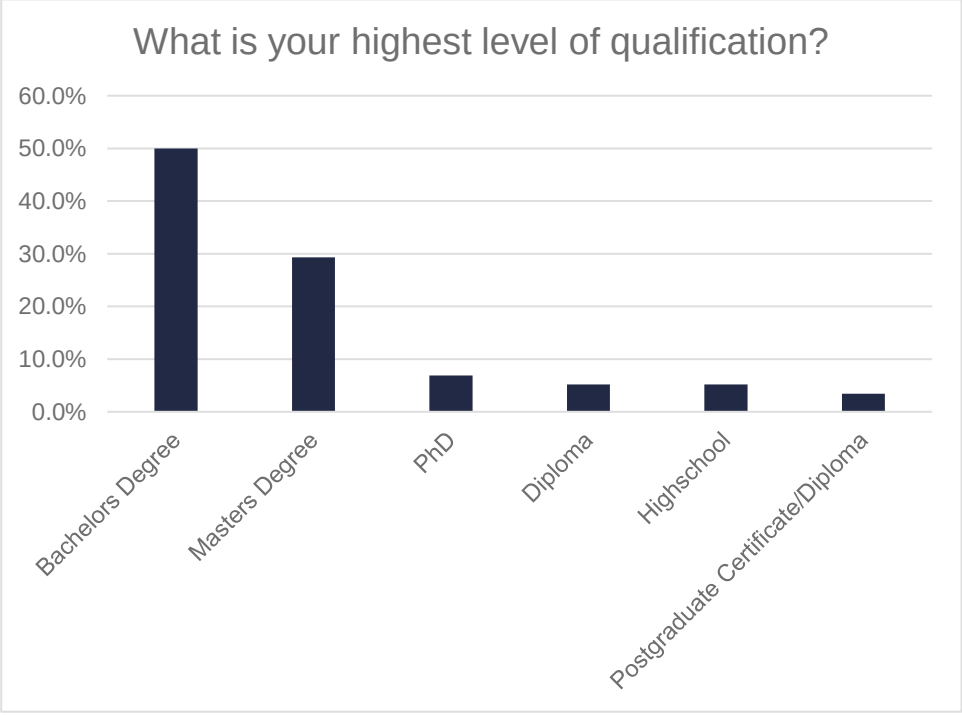


Diversity of identities



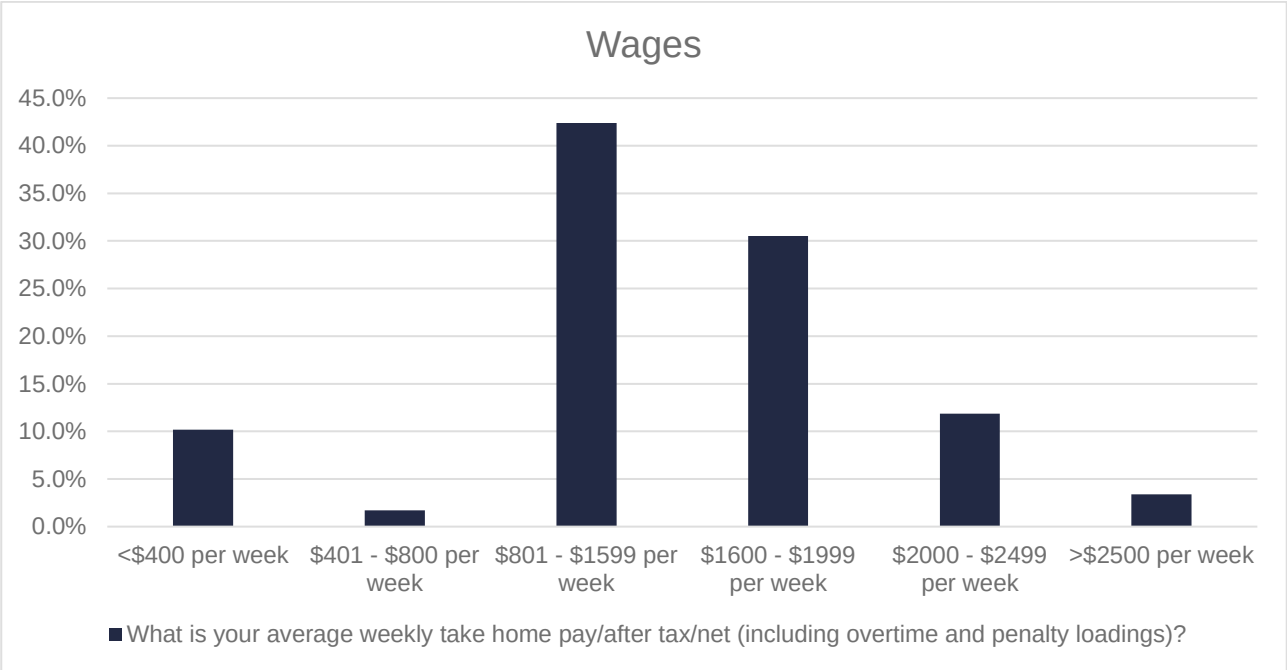
Qualification levels

Where relevant to discussion, participants indicated more specific detail about degree type and education provider in focus groups.



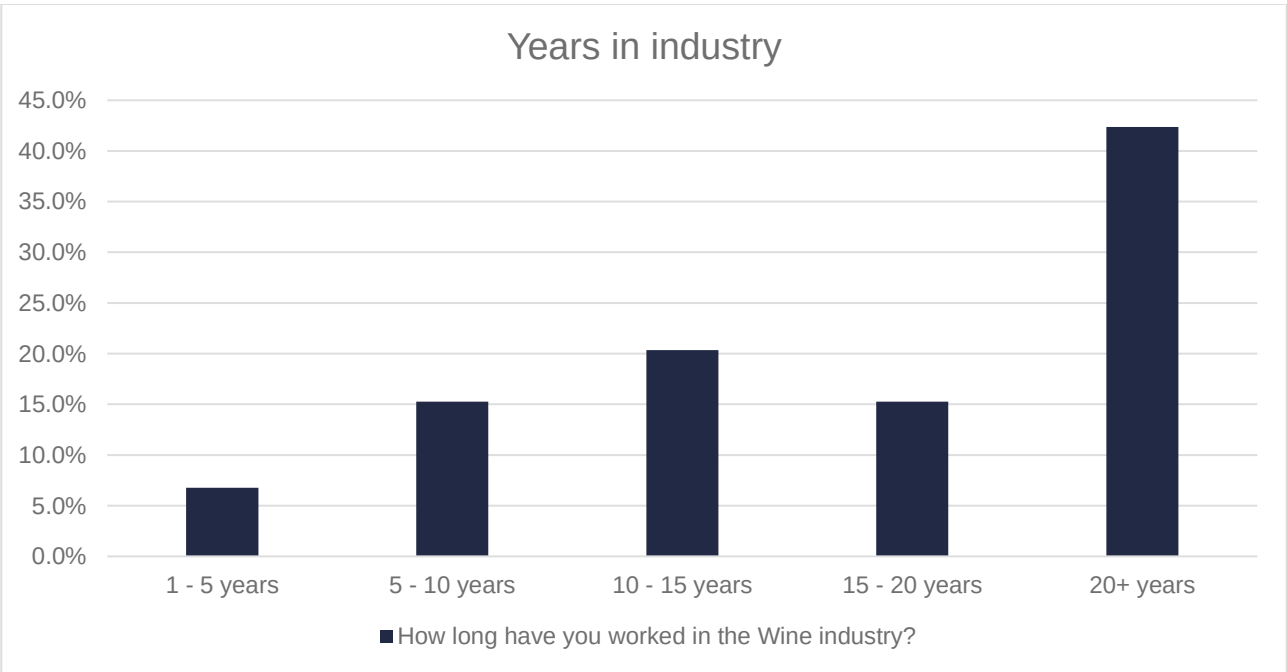
ABS Census data indicates that in 2021, 25% of women held Bachelor level degrees, 12% held Advance Diploma or Diploma level qualifications, 6% held Masters or postgraduate degrees, 3% held Graduate Diploma or Graduate Certificate level qualifications, and 3% held Certificate level qualifications. The focus group sample provides an overrepresentation of qualifications, particularly Bachelors and Postgraduate or PhD level qualifications, amongst participants.

Wages



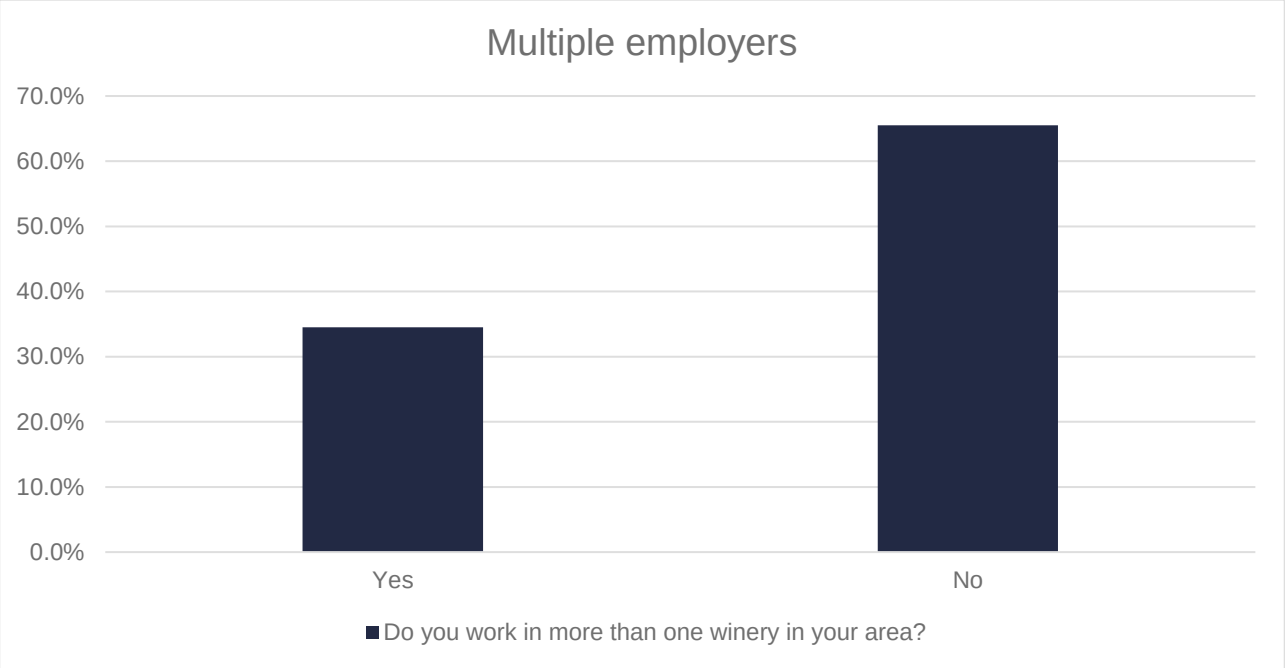
The 2021 ABS Census reports pre-tax salaries in broad brackets, limiting exact comparisons. However, wage ranges generally align with our study, except for an underrepresentation of those earning 401–800 AUD per week in take-home pay.

Years in industry



Multiple employers

Participants who worked for more than one winery indicated a range of numbers of employers. Of the 20 who indicated they did have multiple employers, 12 participants worked for two wineries, three worked for three wineries and three worked for four wineries. Two participants indicated they worked for 10+ wineries within a geographical area.



Data analysis

The data was coded thematically, drawing on a grounded, narrative analysis. This kind of qualitative analysis allowed us to delve further into the themes and patterns arising from the data by iterative reading (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Analysis of the data involved coding answers into categories and then into more focused and conceptual themes. A thematic coding frame was developed and applied to all focus group data. All quoted data has been provided with a pseudonym and the content is unaltered to reflect participant opinions.

Industry culture

The Australian wine industry is experiencing a marked evolution in its cultural landscape, particularly regarding gender dynamics and inclusion. This section examines emerging signs of inclusivity, where women report greater acceptance and recognition in industry spaces, from vineyard operations to wine making. However, our research reveals a complex picture: while younger women in particular report positive experiences in these areas, they continue to encounter significant barriers when seeking advancement into senior roles. This tension between progress and persistent challenges provides crucial insights into the current state of gender equity in the Australian wine sector and highlights areas requiring continued attention and reform.

Inclusivity

Focus Group participants identified an uneven evolution in the cultural landscape of the industry, with significant variations across different industry segments and generational cohorts. This section examines the complex dynamics of change through several interconnected dimensions revealed in our focus group research. While progress towards gender equity is evident, particularly in winery operations, our findings indicate that vineyard operations continue to present substantial challenges for women. We note the emergence of grassroots change, where women are actively educating their managers and colleagues about gender issues in their workplaces. Participants consistently noted that conversations about gender equity would have been unlikely as recently as 5-10 years ago, highlighting both progress made and the ongoing nature of cultural change. Through examining these interrelated aspects, this section provides insights into both the advances and persistent challenges in achieving gender equity across the Australian wine sector.

Focus group participants were asked to reflect on changes in the industry across their careers. Most participants working in the industry 10 years and over noted a range of changes to their workplace culture and the wine sector more broadly. These early experiences were used as a point of comparison to describe positive progress:

> When I first started out, there were - it was definitely male dominated. Opportunities for women, like women had to work a lot harder just to get those opportunities and to make it happen. Which I used to get quite - just feel like it was a real challenge sometimes. You felt like you were pushing uphill when the guys just seemed to get it handed to them on a platter. But I'm really grateful to say that I've seen things have changed a lot. I don't see as much as the old kind of boys' club attitudes that there definitely were, even going back 10 or so years ago which is wonderful. I know in my current workplace, we have as many women winemakers as male. It's probably about even which is absolutely fantastic (Annika, Lead Winemaker, NSW)[1].

Another participant described this change in terms of more conversation about gender equity issues, saying:

> There's no way we would've had this conversation 10 or 15 years ago. This didn't exist 10 or 15 years ago. I don't think we were talking about it amongst ourselves. The industry wasn't as supportive either. There was a silence (Dara, General Manager/Sales & Marketing, VIC).

The positive and inclusive changes that participants described reflected cultural aspects of their workplaces. Women are changing workplace and industry culture by owning and managing wineries. One of these participants explained:

> In terms of my own workplace, I think we've got a positive [culture] and in terms of the [parts of the business], it's my partner, it's a very even playing field in terms of running a business. If anything, he'd probably say I'm more in charge and make most of the decisions (Mary, Owner and viticulturist, WA).

[1] Note: Participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure privacy.

This participant expanded upon her observation to note the changes she has experienced over her career, comparing her first years as a small producer in an industry with much larger wineries to her current experiences. She also credited the support of other women leaders in her region, including a local politician.

Participants working in larger organisations indicated increased efforts to integrate values of inclusion into their workplaces. One participant described this work:

> I would say we concentrate a lot on team work, supporting each other, having good and open communication skills is an important aspect of our business as well and living by our values. Actually, as managers we're actually doing a values document at the moment which we're working on as something that we can remind ourselves that what we're focused on and what our shared objectives are and something that we can also share with new staff as they come on board (Lydia, Head winemaker, NSW).

Another said:

> Farming has definitely got a bit of a stigma towards that historic thing of being the men can do the work because it's heavy and it's machinery... but I am definitely a strategic manager and that's what you need for big business. That's where it's changing the thinking away from the traditional thinking…and definitely in the corporate structure that we're under they definitely see that that's more valuable than knowing how to drive a tractor (Adeline, Viticulturist/Manager NSW).

A number of participants offered examples of the way in which they were contributing to the industry to drive changes around workplace health and safety practices. From demanding changes to weights of packaged supplies to establishing safer lifting and moving procedures, participants highlighted these improvements as a reflection of their practical efforts to ensure equitable approaches to physical demands of on-site roles. One participant explained:

> Wineries have driven [change] with suppliers too […] I remember only in 2017, I was doing some work on a packaging line trying to improve it. And we had crown boxes of crown seals, which not many people use in the wine industry, but we're using them for sparkling. And they were like 30 kilos. And we just said to them, supply, you've got to repack them for us or supply them in smaller things because we're not going to handle them anymore. And it was a two-person [job] lifting them so we could get rid of that stock. So, the big companies in the industry would have driven that as well, which is really positive – (Rose, former winemaker, SA).

While participants presented overall agreement on the improvement of industry culture for women over the past 20 years, this progress was not without complexity. Participants indicated that they were working to advocate for their own equitable treatment, and to educate and encourage their managers and coworkers. One participant observed:

> I don't know if there's enough awareness there and not necessarily from a negative point of view, but in the sense that it probably has just never occurred to [my boss] because it's never needed to occur to him. But I think with me constantly fighting the good fight, starting to see a little bit of change there and bringing gender into the conversation… (Vivian, Assistant winemaker, NSW).

Many participants who had been in the industry longer indicated their seniority played an important part in the shift in their experiences. One participant recalled:

> … the jokes and the things happened but they're getting less and less because I'm getting older and there's people that, they're about the same age as my kids some of these guys that are working for us now, so it's kind of a - I've turned into being the work-mum instead of the work-whatever-that-you-call-it when you're picking on a female in the workplace. Unfortunately, you have to get old before you're accepted (Adeline, Viticulturist/Manager, NSW).

Age was also considered a contributing factor to coworkers, managers and owners who were more resistant to shifting cultures and making meaningful efforts towards inclusion. This is discussed further below.

Persistent masculine cultural norms

Masculine cultural norms refer to the dominant expectations and behaviours traditionally associated with men, particularly in workplace settings. These norms emphasise traits such as physical strength, competitiveness, risk-taking, self-reliance, and emotional detachment. Focus group interviews have identified that workplaces in the wine sector often have persistent masculine cultural norms that can shape workplace relations, expectations, and power structures and can lead to multiple barriers for women. These norms are often masked because they are deeply embedded in societal and gender structures and are therefore difficult to see and to problematise. Nevertheless, the way masculine cultural norms reinforce traditional gender roles and limit inclusivity, often make it difficult for women to navigate the workplace. The persistence of masculine cultural norms manifests through a complex web of assumptions, behaviours, and structural barriers. Focus group participants revealed how these norms operate at multiple levels, from everyday sexism to workplace sexual harassment, challenges to women accessing and performing in leadership roles and pressures to conform to the norms of the masculine body and to become "one of the boys". Family-owned businesses also present complex interplays between maintaining cultural norms in some instances and providing opportunities to women.

Everyday sexism and the reinforcement of masculine norms

Focus group findings reveal how masculine cultural norms are reinforced through subtle but pervasive forms of everyday sexism[2]. Everyday sexism, also referred to as gender harassment, is a frequent gender-based sexism that includes negative commentary about women that is diminishing and discriminatory, sexualised remarks, jokes about sex or competency, and gender stereotyping. The term refers to the everyday nature and frequency of these behaviours. In some workplace settings in the wine sector everyday sexism is socially normalised.

Women in the focus groups, regardless of their role or seniority, reported finding themselves being expected to manage housekeeping duties such as cleaning up after tastings, maintaining kitchen and bathroom facilities, and managing office supplies. Men were rarely expected to pick up these domestic duties.

> There is just this expectation … that as a female you top the toilet paper up or go and buy handwash if the handwash runs out and just stuff like that (Clara, Vineyard Supervisor SA).

> Like if you do a big tasting in the in the tasting room, who puts the glasses away and puts them into the dishwasher? You know, sometimes the people get the lab to do that, but … the men just walk out and the female wine makers end up doing it. Or, you know, one of the assistant wine makers or graduate wine makers ends up doing it because they just think someone's going to come and clean up after (Rose, former Winemaker SA).

Everyday sexism extends beyond gendered expectations about domestic tasks to other inappropriate assumptions that diminish women's skills and abilities. Women said this occurs in front of colleagues and is constructed as an off-hand comments or as a "joke":

> My experience of discrimination has been around more like sexist jokes and … how you receive those jokes. Like when I was in one place I was at, just from either delivery drivers or colleagues when you're driving the forklift or something, they go, "Oh, don't drop that pallet". Just little jives like that I wouldn't imagine would have been said to a male. Then, if I wouldn't laugh … "you can't take a joke" … that's only a small thing which it is, but it's just it's frustrating and annoying (Lydia, Head Winemaker NSW).

The diminishment of women's capabilities by men colleagues was discussed by focus group participants as manifesting in both subtle and overt ways. Women's expertise was sometimes dismissed or they found that

[2] Bates, L. (2013, April 16). The everyday sexism project: A year of shouting back. Retrieved May 6, 2015, from http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/the-womens-blog-with-jane-martinson/2013/apr/16/everyday-sexismproject-shouting-back

colleagues set higher performance standards for them compared to their male counterparts. One woman said, “I definitely feel like as a woman in this industry, you do have to work twice as hard as men to prove yourself” (Esther Assistant Winemaker, VIC). Another said that whilst some colleagues were supportive, others were difficult to work with which required her to “really prove” herself (Zara Cellar/Viticulture and Assistant Winemaker SA). This bias often stems from the belief that women are less capable than men. For example, Vivian (Assistant Winemaker NSW) experienced constant challenges with new staff who felt the need to instruct and demonstrate tasks to her, despite her training and expertise. She said it is necessary to rely on her supportive colleagues to vouch for her abilities and clarify with new people that she already knows the job.

Women in focus groups also reported everyday sexism from buyers and sales representatives. Elise (Winemaker/Vineyard/Sales NSW) said she has encountered buyers who only want to deal with men and who are **“**really sexist and rude” toward her in their interactions. Another participant told of a buyer who wouldn’t even “do business” with a female sales representative “because she is a female” (Audrey, Sales and Distribution NSW). The woman below encountered a similar situation with men not wanting to work with her or assuming she was not capable, which lead to her feeling the need to prove herself.

> With different distributors … over the years where it's mostly men and myself. I've always been told what to do and how to do it. Which can be quite intimidating or also off putting and you know you always want to prove yourself as well in those scenarios (Cora, Sales and Marketing SA).

Daily interactions that diminish women’s abilities and send the message that the women are not adequately skilled are part of broader systemic gender discrimination. The everyday, almost normalised nature of these expectations puts women on notice that they need to prove they are competent and skilled and equal to men. Unlike her male counterparts, the woman below found that she was not given the benefit of the doubt when she had a ‘mishap’.

> In this one particular incident, I guess we were just loading, when a couple of the guys had sort of mishaps with this, it was all fun and games but with me it happened once and straight away I was told to do a different job because I just wasn't capable enough – (Esther, Assistant Winemaker VIC).

Sexualised comments and sexual jokes directed at women are a form of everyday sexism. The woman below recalls that comments were made to women safety officers that sexualised their role. Another encountered comments that relegated her role to both domesticity and sexual acts.

> Like as a very specific example, on site I'm the first aid officer and I would have had five men over the age of 50 all ask me at separate points if I would give them the kiss of life or perform CPR or just mimic some obscene things. But the male first aid person didn't get any of that (Vivian, Assistant Winemaker NSW).

> When I started in Sparkling, I was told by one of the senior guys that “women in wineries were for making coffee and giving blowjobs” (Josie, former Winemaker NSW).

Younger women who were early in their careers revealed that they faced an added layer of sexism. Their more recent entry into the field can lead to marginalisation from other, more experienced colleagues and managers. Adeline said that she felt a woman needed to “get old before you're accepted” (Viticulturist/Manager, NSW). Clara felt the ageing demographic in the industry made: “things a lot harder on the viticulture side of things and I think it is because it is still a … male dominated, over-55 industry” (Vineyard Supervisor, SA). Some younger women said that both men and women in the industry “block younger women to protect their position and because they had to do it tough to get where they were young (Rose, former Winemaker SA).

> I think the thing that's interesting for me currently is probably the [age factor]. There's also quite a big difference in age – which I don't know if that sometimes sort of plays into sort of how people treat you – (Esther, Assistant Winemaker VIC).

Daisy said that older men “do not want to answer to a woman” (former winemaker, NSW). Such attitudes, while they have their basis in age and gender bias, can also stem from attitudes in smaller towns. As Josie explained:

> It can also be within potentially a culture in smaller towns that's a learned culture from their father. So certainly when you're dealing with vineyards that are generationally passed down - the educational side of it where … the kids did not go away and experience anything outside the small town. I think they're harder to deal with than people who might've gone and did some study or gone and worked somewhere else and then come back (Josie, former Winemaker, SA)

These patterns of everyday sexism serve to maintain traditional gender roles within the professional context and contribute to the broader culture of normative sexism in the industry. They are micro-inequalities, often dismissed as minor or humorous by those perpetuating them, but which create an accumulative burden that reinforces gender stereotypes and undermines women's professional standing.

Pressure to conform

Fitting and being ‘one of the boys’

Focus group participants raised dynamics concerning industry social networks, where there is an implicit expectation that women will become “one of the boys” to fit in and conform to the masculine culture. While "being one of the boys" has historically been a survival strategy for women in male-dominated fields, its necessity points to a deeper problem: a workplace culture that values a narrow definition of professionalism, success, and leadership. A “boys' club” mentality often intensifies in social settings, especially those involving alcohol. This can also have implications for workplace sexual harassment. Additionally, it can create a double bind for women: pressure to assimilate into masculine cultural norms to 'fit in' or to be excluded if one doesn’t comply with informal social networks.

The term “being one of the boys” describes the way women, particularly in male-dominated industries, feel pressure to adopt behaviours, attitudes, and values associated with traditional masculinity in order to be accepted, respected, and taken seriously. At its core, this phenomenon is about assimilation. It is the idea that success and social belonging require women to align themselves with the dominant group. One woman said that this was like playing “a bit of a game to fit in … a little bit of a ‘one of the boys thing’” (Hazel Winemaker/Marketing/Cellar door, WA). The woman below expressed the concern that women have to become one of the boys to be taken seriously:

> You really have to adapt. You have to become “one of the boys” if you want to be taken seriously. … You've got to be part of it, and you got to adapt to become one of the boys (Stella, Cellar and Events Manager, NSW)

The woman below noted that being part of social networks in the industry are necessary to gain acceptance and to gain opportunities and that this also involved drinking culture.

> When I first started wine show judging there were more male judges than female judges. The attitude of being one of the team, or to be accepted … as a young woman you felt like you had to keep up in terms of going to the pub afterwards and drinking otherwise you may have been considered boring and not part of the team. That drinking culture was tied up in acceptance in the group. Sometimes I felt pressured to do that so I would still be asked to do more wine shows (Lydia, Head Winemaker NSW).

Other women noted that informal social networks play a significant role in accessing opportunities but that the networks often revolve around shared experiences, common interests, or physical spaces that women may find difficult to break into, as this participant explains.

> I think a large part of our industry is so much on networking and social. I find that that social aspect is where I feel the biggest bias … I don't care about the footy and I am not interested in engaging in that sort of conversation. Sometimes it will be that you miss out on things because you're not one of the

> boys or one of the lads, and there is just more men in higher positions in the wine industry. If you're not in that inner circle then you miss out on opportunities because you're not even in the room (Lilly, Winemaker, NSW).

> Like golf days. The girls don't get invited to the golf days but all the guys do. Yeah, lunch clubs and things like that. Unless you are - it would depend on the club and the people but I found actually working in the [winery] for many, many years, that was very misogynistic there and there were lots of little groups and clubs that - the boys' club - that was very hard to break into (Diana, Winemaking Consultant, SA).

This exclusion can further marginalise women, limiting their access to mentorship, visibility, and crucial professional connections. The lack of access to these networks can also perpetuate gender inequality, as women are left at a disadvantage in a system where success is often tied to who you know as well as the expectation that women will behave according to the hegemonic masculine ideal. Unfortunately, these expectations can lead to attrition. As Olivia said, "You don't stay long in places that expect you to be one of the boys and play that game" (Winemaker VIC).

Physical strength and the normalising of the masculine body

Associated with the expectation of being one of the boys is the attitude that women don't belong, don't 'fit in' or are a deficit, if they don't perform physically in the same way that men do[3]. In many male-dominated industries, there is an ingrained culture that associates physical strength and toughness with masculinity. Masculine cultures elevate characteristics such as endurance and hard work, which are perceived as desirable masculine traits[4]. This can create environments where women are expected to conform to these ideals. Focus groups revealed that despite workplace health and safety regulations specifying safe lifting limits for all employees, gendered assumptions about physical strength were found to influence role allocation and perceptions of capability.

This deficit model about women's competence (based on physical strength) was found to be operating in some workplaces in the wine sector. This was particularly strong in technical and operational domains, where women face scepticism about their physical capabilities - from driving tractors to managing vineyard operations, to heavy lifting in the winery and cellar. When Kamala first started in the industry she was the only girl in an all-male team: "it was expected that you would lift the heavy bag …I got told that I wouldn't be helped to open the door that was five times my weight" (Kamala, Senior Winemaker and Vineyard Manager SA). Kamala felt that if she could lift as much as the men, they would accept her. This was her trying "to be one of the guys".

The woman below was given a dangerous task when pregnant. This behaviour contravened work health and safety regulations. It may also have been a hostile act designed to flag to the woman that, as a pregnant woman, she should not be working in the role.

> I did really struggle. At work, with being pregnant and…for a small business that was quite a physical job. And they really struggled. Adapting to me being pregnant. …I think I was around 30 weeks and they put out about 15 barrels for me. …So, I guess even before I was pregnant, I did find that the like physical side of the job wasn't really designed for females (Elise, Winemaker/Sales NSW).

Stella (Cellar and Events Manager NSW) did not perceive her physical strength as a deficit; however, she did receive comments assuming this. She also pointed out that "when it comes down to general work health and safety, people shouldn't be lifting more than they can handle anyway".

[3] Foley, M., Oxenbridge, S., Cooper, R., & Baird, M. (2022). 'I'll never be one of the boys': Gender harassment of women working as pilots and automotive tradespeople. Gender, Work & Organization, 29(5), 1676-1691.

[4] Bridges, D., Wulff, E., Bamberry, L., Krivokapic-Skoko, B., & Jenkins, S. (2020). Negotiating gender in the male-dominated skilled trades: A systematic literature review. Construction management and economics, 38(10), 894-916; Cross, S., & Bagilhole, B. (2002). Girls' jobs for the boys? Men, masculinity and non-traditional occupations. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *9*(2), 204-226.

> You get the comments all the time. When the delivery drivers rock up with things and they're just like, are you going to be okay with that? It's like, 'I could probably lift more than you mate' (Stella, Cellar and Events Manager NSW).

Vanya said that women miss out on opportunities for training and experience because it is assumed that women cannot perform certain work – such as driving. Other women in the focus groups agreed that women are very rarely able to gain experience tractor driving because in such roles they are "not taken seriously".

> I also have done - have a bit of a vineyard experience and I still try and get out in the vineyard as much as I can but that's probably where I've found the biggest issues in terms of being taken seriously. They're much more likely to let the boys in the tractor… I actually still to this day really don't have much tractor experience because it's just so hard to get in there (Vanya, Winemaker VIC).

Some focus group participants faced pressure to perform physical tasks to "prove" themselves, despite this contravening work health and safety policy. Others found themselves excluded from important work. In both cases, this occurs due to gender bias, rather than being based on evidence of women's competence and achievements. As a result, their abilities are viewed through a lens of perceived inadequacies rather than being recognised for their strengths. These assumptions extend beyond physical tasks to create broader patterns of exclusion and discrimination.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature. It is defined as sexualised behaviour that is offensive, intimidating or humiliating, and/or hostile[5]. It has been identified as an issue in Australian workplaces and as more prevalent for women working in male-dominated sectors[6]. Some women shared personal experiences of sexual harassment, while others acknowledged its widespread presence and told of second-hand accounts; some said that the problem is recognised yet concealed. In one focus group, a woman asked, "Hands up if you've never been hit on by someone you shouldn't have in the workplace," (Dara, General Manager/Sales & Marketing, VIC) prompting widespread agreement among participants. Another described the sexual harassment of women by powerful men in the workplace as "an open secret", meaning that it is widely known yet deliberately ignored.

> One of the most celebrated people in the area I come from is known for it. [A young woman I know] worked for their company. He put his hand up her skirt, and she said, "You can't do that". She got fired the next day…It's an open secret (Josie, former Winemaker NSW).

Many employees are aware of sexual harassment but did not call out the behaviours for various reasons. These included: the difficulties standing up against cultural norms or because of fear of retaliation. Women in focus groups noted how the difficulty of speaking out reinforces a culture of silence, where perpetrators go unpunished, and victims feel isolated.

> I've heard plenty of stories that are pretty negative, you know … male wine makers … some very misogynistic people. There are always stories about them, and you know who they are, but it's never really called out. You kind of told by people like, oh, be careful of that person or that person's not that great, and it's always just kind of behind closed doors … But there's never… hey, let's actually call them out and say, "this isn't on" (Audrey, Sales and Distribution, NSW)

In industries where men hold the majority of leadership and operational roles the problem can be exacerbated due to its normalisation. The woman below describes how some abuse their power and authority and how a dysfunctional culture can lead to the normalisation of sexual harassment and the enculturation of more recently employed colleagues.

> I have heard of some pretty horrible acts and things that often happen after work functions - including sexual assault, propositions, et cetera. Some of those people who are perpetrators sit at the top of some of our biggest organisations. So that's a real problem for culture. Another thing I see in larger

[5] *Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth)*

[6] Jenkins K. *National Inquiry into sexual harassment in Australian workplaces*. March 5, 2020.

> organisations is that you have people with that toxic culture. It's underground. They'll smile and get on board in front of people, including their leaders and other colleagues. Behind closed doors, if you sit in their office and the doors shut, they'll tell you what they really think about a women's leadership program or whatever. A lot of the 20s and 30-year old men are actually emulating those kinds of behaviours. That's how that culture continues (Rose, former Winemaker, SA).

Women's stories of sexual harassment often occurred when they were young. Younger women are particularly vulnerable to workplace sexual harassment as they often have less authority and are more dependent on senior colleagues for career progression. Their lack of workplace power makes them more likely to experience harassment. Kamala related an experience where she felt pressured to tolerate inappropriate behaviour to avoid professional consequences. This was some time ago, however, when she recently brought it up with a senior male leader, he blamed her, suggesting it was due to her own behaviour. She likened this response to blaming a woman for sexual assault based on what she was wearing.

> As a 17-year-old I was groomed by my boss and yeah, young, and feeling like you had to prove yourself and you had to do what your boss said, or you were never going to get anywhere in the wine industry. The chief winemaker knew exactly what was going on and did nothing about it... He's someone that … [is] located in the same region as me. I brought it up recently … I was like, "You knew what was going on, and you didn't protect me". He just completely flipped it back on me and said, "It was your fault" (Kamala, Senior Winemaker and Vineyard Manager, SA).

Another woman talked about an incident of sexual harassment that occurred when she was young. Unfortunately, there were no clear pathways for reporting and the precarity of her early-career roles reinforced her inability to respond.

> I asked him a couple of questions after the workshop. Then everyone was starting to leave and whatnot. He said to me, come and sit down. We'll talk about this a bit more... Then he put his hand on my leg. I'm like, "What the" - I was like, "I've got to go now. Catch you later". I didn't actually do anything. I didn't make a complaint. I didn't formalise it. With the consultant … he was working for himself … So, who do you complain to about that? Complain to him directly? I was the only female that was working in that winery. I look back now and go, "Well, what would've been the appropriate response to that?" (Mia, former Sales and Marketing / Board Member).

For some women, their early enculturation into male-dominated workplace norms led them to also tolerate or overlook sexual harassment in their younger years. Wanting to fit in and avoid professional consequences, they complied with dominant cultural expectations. The woman below acknowledges that she would behave very differently now that she is older. Influencing her decision to ignore the incident was that she did not have the benefit of appropriate leadership.

> I've had the worst experience, which I've feel terrible about now. … I had a staff member come up to me and say, I've been harassed by one of the male staff. Being younger and having … spent a long time in the job - the male in question was 25 years my senior ... I didn't do anything about it. I should have. I feel terrible about it. I think today I'd take very serious action about something like that … [and] I didn't necessarily have the backing of anyone else around me to do anything about it either (Dara, General Manager/Sales & Marketing, VIC).

Rose said that her failure to see sexual harassment occurring was because she had not seen it happening herself. She says, "Then I did see it. When I did see it - I saw a lot more - I heard a lot more about it when I started talking to other people" (Rose, former Winemaker SA).

Focus groups revealed a culture in some wine sector workplaces where reporting incidents of sexual harassment is perceived as potentially career-limiting, creating a silence that perpetuates harmful behaviours. Women described incidents that were not investigated, a lack of support for those who do report, and systemic failures by management in addressing occurrences. Women said that it can be a double bind to report sexual harassment because it can feel unsafe and can also have repercussions.

> I think also if - it's about whether or not you feel comfortable reporting … because if you do take that step, offices are small - businesses are small. If you do something like that, it's likely that everyone will know. Depending on the culture, you might not be supported … which is going to end up hurting you … You really need to think about that (Hazel, Winemaker/Marketing/Cellar door, WA).

Women in focus groups raised a number of challenging instances where reporting processes were not available, or not supportive. There was concern that the current system protects perpetrators who often go unpunished. One participant suggested the industry introduce a 'register of offenders' similar to the government proposal for the mining industry[7]. Another participant reflected:

> My very large concern with it is that as soon as you enter a grievance process, you're bound with confidentiality. You can never talk about it, and no one who's part of the investigation can talk about it. The person can resign. They can just go to a new company and do it again. That's a real problem for me. Personally, I just think - how can that person continue to get away with things time after time against more unsuspecting people (Rose, former Winemaker, SA).

In male-dominated workplaces, sexual harassment is known to be deeply embedded in workplace culture and is often sustained by power imbalances as well as a certain degree of tolerance for inappropriate behaviour.

Leadership challenges

Leadership remains a critical frontier in the pursuit of gender equity within the Australian wine industry. This is consistent with broader patterns observed across the agricultural sector and other male-dominated industries. Research has consistently demonstrated that leadership roles often represent the 'final barrier' to workplace gender equality[8]. Focus groups revealed how the wine industry has inherited and perpetuated many of these challenges, manifesting in multiple, interconnected barriers to women's leadership advancement.

At the core of these barriers are workplace norms and traits historically associated with masculinity. Masculine leadership norms tend to include traits such as competitiveness, presenteeism and inflexibility. In many workplaces across the sector success is still measured by one's ability to outperform others rather than collaborate. A high-stakes, results-driven culture rewards those who embrace assertiveness and undervalues qualities such as empathy, adaptability, and relational skills[9]. This has implications for perceptions about women's leadership styles. Our research identifies a particularly concerning pattern where women's leadership capabilities often go unrecognised or are undervalued. This manifests in several ways: women being typecast as technical specialists rather than potential leaders, facing double standards in how their leadership styles are perceived (particularly regarding assertiveness), and their achievements receiving less visibility than those of their male counterparts. One focus group participant said that leadership in the sector is defined through a narrow lens and because her style is different, it is perceived as a weakness.

> I think it gets harder as you get further up the hierarchy within an organisation … my leadership style [is] very different to many others within the sector. I lead by heart. I'm driven by emotion. That was often seen as a very bad thing in a sector that was very male dominated … I think that we've got a way to go still to be able to change that perception of what leadership looks like at the top end … I think there's a bit of education we can do around that (Aisha, Marketing Consultant NSW).

Others agree that softer leadership styles are perceived as a weakness in women and if women are assertive, it can be constructed as aggression. Yet, as Jae noted, assertiveness is celebrated in a man but is seen as a deficit in a woman, however, empathy and other softer skills are also underestimated or devalued.

> Those soft skills that I had of empathy really resonated with growers. And having those soft skills allows us I think to be very successful. It's not celebrated enough, but if we ever kind of cross that line into being assertive … we're very quickly … labelled as aggressive. And being aggressive … I've found is quite celebrated in a corporate environment in a man, but, disliked in a woman. When working overseas] I really excelled by being quite empathetic. Open and vulnerable and sticking up

[7] Reuters (2022) "'Appalling' abuse: Australia to push miners to set up register of offenders", *Mining.Com*, https://www.mining.com/web/appalling-abuse-australia-to-push-miners-to-set-up-register-of-offenders/, 23 June.

[8] Diehl, A. B., & Dzubinski, L. M. (2016). Making the invisible visible: A cross-sector analysis of gender-based leadership barriers. Human Resource Development Quarterly, 27(2), 181-206; O'Brien, W., Hanlon, C., & Apostolopoulos, V. (2023). Women as leaders in male-dominated sectors: A bifocal analysis of gendered organizational practices. Gender, Work & Organization, 30(6), 1867-1884.

[9] Campuzano, M. V. (2019). Force and inertia: A systematic review of women's leadership in male-dominated organizational cultures in the United States. Human Resource Development Review, 18(4), 437-469.

> for my team, and it was a really wonderful experience to kind of validate all those things that I knew that women are amazing leaders (Jae, Viticulturist SA).

> Empathy can, or kindness or certain qualities in me … and the way I manage people, has not been maybe seen as fierce enough by other members or leaders in the business (Cora Sales and Marketing SA).

Focus group participants expressed frustration about their leadership styles and capabilities being undervalued. Traditional leadership qualities such as assertiveness, decisiveness, and competitiveness are esteemed while attributes such as empathy and nurturing are often relegated to "soft skills" that are perceived as less effective or serious. Yet, women were clear that their leadership abilities are effective.

> The way that females do things … the diversity of the way that … my female colleagues [and I] handle issues and concerns. Our empathy can sometimes be seen as not fierce enough. Not strong enough, and it's not celebrated that you're kind, and that being kind can also be commercially astute. You know, one doesn't rule out the other, and I felt that that's not always celebrated. It's almost seen as a bit of a fracture in your DNA (Taylor, Vineyard Consultant SA).

Leadership barriers operate at both structural and cultural levels, shaping advancement opportunities, while career interruptions due to motherhood create additional challenges for women seeking leadership roles. Gaining leadership roles and being perceived as a "good fit" by management remain significant hurdles. Focus group participants experienced unsuccessful applications in their place of work despite their experience.

> It's always really hard when you're looking up and everyone's [a man]. That's really hard… men tend to get promoted faster… I've also had experience where I've been more experienced and I've been at a company for longer and then someone that's male has come in and they've been promoted earlier and that has been really hard… I went to my manager at the time and I said, look if this happens like too many times again, I will be looking for another position … and then you feel like maybe if you get too aggressive then they're not going to promote you either (Quinn Winemaker SA).

Others expressed concern that women with children are overlooked:

> We do not have very many women in leadership roles in the distribution business, and I cannot think of any mothers … There is a perception within that side of the business that men are favoured for the leadership roles (Roana, Sales and Marketing Manager SA).

> There was one place I worked where - it was a shared office space. I could hear the wine maker and the viticulturist… going through resumes for a Vintage winemaker… There was this one applicant with a massive reputation for being an excellent winemaker. The comment that I heard from the employing winemaker said, she might have to go pick up the kids from school. So we don't want her at Vintage (Mia, former Sales and Marketing, Board member WA).

The implications of leadership barriers impact on women's career trajectories because they are chosen less often for opportunities and advancement.

> At [winery] the top five people are all men… I think that that's where we're at the moment. Where there's plenty of female talent in the businesses, but how to elevate the talent into those management roles to create longevity and support and things like that - to allow those opinions or whatever's happening or the actual cultural shift to happen - I think that that feels - there's a ceiling in that sense still (Maeve, Marketing Manager SA).

The limited representation of women in leadership positions creates a cyclical problem: fewer visible role models for aspiring women leaders, reduced opportunities for mentorship, and persistent pay inequity. Focus group participants agreed that the industry isn't as bad as it used to be, but issues remain with getting women into top jobs in the industry and its peak bodies:

> Farming is very much a male dominated area. There's a lot of bias about what I can and can't do as a female in the workplace and leadership historically has been very male oriented … I've got new owners and they're really not like that … now actually I'm being seen for what I can do in that space (Adeline, Viticulturist/Manager NSW).

Our findings reveal troubling patterns in how women's achievements are perceived, with successful young women often characterised as 'getting ahead too fast', while similar advancement by young men is celebrated. Moreover, women's technical expertise is frequently overlooked, with male colleagues deferring to other men rather than recognising women's authority in their roles. Beyond individual experiences, the pressure to conform to masculine norms reinforces structural inequalities. When women feel they must adapt to an existing culture rather than the culture evolving to accommodate diverse styles of leadership and interaction, systemic change becomes more difficult. It sends the message that success for women comes not from transforming the workplace into a more inclusive space, but from learning to survive in an environment designed around male experiences and values.

> In the five to 10 years after I left viticulture, almost all of the women that I went through with have left. I'm the only one left and I think that's just that natural attrition of … you just get sick of it and you end up getting sick of being pigeon holed or just constantly having to fight to be seen as enough. To be seen as a leader. … In my experience too, all of the best leaders that I've worked with and worked for have all been women (Jae, Viticulturist SA).

Critically, the expectation to "be one of the boys" is not just a gendered issue—it also intersects with race, class, and sexuality. Women of colour, for example, may face additional pressures to conform not just to masculine norms but also to white, middle-class cultural expectations[10]. LGBTIQA+ women and non-binary individuals may find themselves navigating not only gender norms but also expectations around heteronormativity and traditional gender presentation. This makes assimilation an even more complex and sometimes alienating experience[11]. The real challenge is not for women to fit into these spaces but for these spaces to evolve, valuing diverse leadership styles, communication approaches, and ways of working. Only then can the burden of assimilation be lifted, making room for genuine inclusivity rather than conditional acceptance.

Family-owned business

Family-owned businesses present a particularly nuanced picture, where career progression often operates within a complex dynamic of inherited privilege. Participants consistently highlighted how family connections can create impenetrable advancement ceilings for non-family employees, particularly affecting women seeking to progress based on their professional capabilities. Paradoxically, these same family businesses also demonstrate potential for rapid cultural transformation when younger generations assume leadership positions, bringing contemporary perspectives on workplace equity that can bypass the institutional inertia found in larger corporate structures.

Many participants worked in family-owned wineries, either as members of the family or as employees. Claire described a workplace where “[the family] are all men because that’s how the family worked out…I think as long as - while it’s family-owned businesses and - I mean nepotism sounds very negative, but that’s just the fact of how the company works out” (Winemaker, VIC). This same participant recommended that the appropriate body, such as the Chamber of Commerce, undertook a compliance role, to ensure that such companies continued to comply with any legislative and industry requirements.

[10] Bell, M., Thach, L., & Fang, F. (2023). Examining motivations and challenges of black wine entrepreneurs using the push–pull theory of entrepreneurship. *International Journal of Wine Business Research*, *35*(3), 445–466. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJWBR-07-2022-0026 ; Ojediran, O. (Funmi), Discua Cruz, A., & Anderson, A. (2022). Identities and the pursuit of legitimacy: A study of black women wine industry entrepreneurs. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*, *28*(8), 2182–2207. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEBR-05-2021-0382

[11] Mattheis, A., De Arellano, D. C. R., & Yoder, J. B. (2020). A model of queer STEM identity in the workplace. *Journal of homosexuality, 67*(13), 1839-1863.; Corlett, S., Di Marco, D., Munduate, L., & Arenas, A. (2023). Manifestations and reinforcement of heteronormativity in the workplace: a systematic scoping review. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *70*(12), 2714-2740.

Long-established family businesses can also have a more limited focus on diversity as corporate wineries. As one participant stated:

> [T]hey might've had long tenured people in roles where they hadn't been challenged by it. It was new people coming into the business that were challenging some of the old things that had happened in the past. Whereas you think about corporates, they've got - they have people coming in and out all time – (Naomi, Marketing Manager, SA).

This is particularly the case with smaller family wineries, where there may be less impetus to change. As one participant stated:

> I think there's a lot of entrenched, this is the way we did it, this is the way we'll be doing it…there are traditions and then when you buck those traditions, or say let's do this differently, and …when you challenge that, because of the makeup and the nature of the businesses, they just don't want to sort of – they're not actually opening it up. I must admit as a woman in the industry, that's the sort of stuff I'm finding frustrating, is to make change, which I think is going to be really important for our industry (Eva, Owner, VIC).

Such businesses may also not have dedicated human resource officers who are aware of DEI issues. Being in a rural town, and in a small family-owned winery can also mean that new ideas regarding gender equality and DEI are not adopted as quickly as other businesses in larger towns and cities, with corporate areas. Yet belonging to a wine-making family was also seen to be beneficial.

> Family businesses I think can be probably the most … difficult to manage culturally. Certainly I've seen in my experience people not stay very long. …When the culture's good, the people stay longer, and the businesses generally do well. …Again, working as a consultant, there's a hell of a lot of women out there, particularly in family businesses that are running it, that have got senior roles (Eden, Managing Consultant and Winemaker, VIC).

Ruby stated that it "gave me a level of credibility that meant that I didn't probably have to fight the same battles as if I hadn't been in that position" (Consultant & Board Member NSW). Ruby and Zoe found belonging to a family business assisted their careers (General Manager, VIC). Others found working with family to be supportive and fostered a good culture of teamwork. (Lydia, Head winemaker, NSW; Eva, Owner VIC; Mary, Owner and Viticulturist WA). In one instance, Faith was aware of this privileged position, which made her "more determined to not let other factors and other biases come into how we operate our business [and] also how we respond to others within the industry" (Winemaker, VIC). Callie believed that those in family businesses can also set the culture, including hiring women (CEO, NSW).

Starting and developing careers

The development and implementation of effective human resource (HR) practices emerges as a critical factor in advancing gender equity within the Australian wine industry. Our focus group research reveals complex interactions between formal HR processes, professional development opportunities, and informal industry practices that significantly impact women's career progression and workplace experiences. This section examines several interconnected aspects of HR management: structured industry training and professional development; formal and informal mentoring programs; the role and effectiveness of gender equity policies at both organisational and industry levels; and the ongoing debate around quotas and targets. Our research indicates that businesses of all sizes are grappling with how to effectively implement HR practices that promote gender equity. Of particular significance is the finding that traditional HR approaches may need adaptation to address industry-specific challenges, including the seasonal nature of work. Through examining these various dimensions, this section highlights both successful practices and areas requiring further development to create more equitable workplace environments across the sector.

Education, training and networking

The development of professional expertise in the wine industry relies heavily on both formal education and experiential learning, with mentorship emerging as a crucial bridge between these domains. Our focus group participants consistently highlighted the transformative impact of female mentors, both in structured programs and informal relationships. These mentoring relationships serve multiple purposes: providing technical knowledge, offering strategic career guidance, and helping navigate industry-specific challenges faced by women. The presence of women in educational roles, particularly in tertiary institutions, was identified as especially significant. Participants emphasised that achieving gender parity among educators not only provides essential role models but also helps challenge traditional gender-based assumptions about wine expertise and authority.

A particularly noteworthy finding was the importance of wine tasting groups as sites of both professional development and network building. These groups, whether formally structured or informally organised, serve multiple functions: developing sensory evaluation skills, building knowledge of diverse wine styles and regions, and creating supportive professional networks. Participants highlighted how women-led tasting groups often create more inclusive learning environments, encouraging open discussion and questioning. However, they noted that the ideal scenario combines both women-specific spaces and mixed-gender groups, allowing for diverse perspectives while maintaining supportive environments for skill development. This multilayered approach to education and training - combining formal instruction, mentorship, and practical tasting experience - emerged as a crucial pathway for advancing women's participation and recognition in the industry.

University education

A number of participants reflected positively on their experience with higher education as an introduction to the industry or a formalisation of their professional expertise. One participant studying viticulture described the dynamics of her university experience:

> My cohort at university was actually 50/50 women [to men], so I'm hoping that that will shift in time because there are definitely more women coming through the viti[culture] degree from Adelaide, so yeah. … University was, I felt probably the most included at university. I think we're all kind of equal playing grounds. …And I've I found it the most wonderfully inclusive group that I've probably ever been a part of. And in terms of lecturers, I think … there were more women lecturers than men (Zara, Cellar/Viticulture and Assistant Winemaker, SA).

Another participant in this focus group noted her own experience at university in the 1990s, where her cohort was also 50/50 women to men. Even when participants noted they were in a more male-dominated cohort, university was described as inclusive by “celebrating diversity” (Taylor, Vineyard Consultant SA). It was also very supportive:

> At the time that I went through Viticulture at Adelaide University, viticulture in particular was very male dominated, but was a cohort of extremely supportive men and women that I'm still very, very good friends with to this day. I had male supervisors and they were extremely supportive. And it was just a really supportive environment generally and I still kind of I still do see that across research in Australia (Jae, Viticulturist SA).

Other participants described the benefit of university education for network building, most commonly mentioning Charles Sturt University and University of Adelaide. While some participants highlighted the positive experiences of higher education, others described persistent challenges of representation and visibility. One participant who graduated in 2010 recounted her experience at university:

> I had no concept of basically women being even really existing in the Australian wine industry. It was definitely not promoted by Charles Sturt at that time. I have no idea what they're doing now, but yeah just zero awareness that it was even possible, really, which is a miracle that I finished (Shea, Owner/Winemaker, VIC).

Another participant in the same focus group shared her experience at the same university in response:

> I'm in my final year. I've got one subject left next year. Throughout my whole course there, over six years - I've been in the industry six years - we've not had one female winemaker come and visit us and talk to us. We've had plenty of male winemakers come. All our lecturers are male. There's just nothing happening in that realm. This is a university that probably spits out 50 per cent of Australian winemakers between that - and the Adelaide Uni. I just think - I never really thought about it until you mentioned (Marli, Winemaker, VIC).

One participant posed a question in terms of pipeline challenges, considering how 50/50 representation in formal education translated into employment in the industry:

> There's a lot of people going through and females going into university courses and TAFE courses but there's something happening, is it the fact that they're sold a dream and it's not true or they get spooked by something? […] The real issue is there really aren't a lot of viticulturists that are females that are coming into the industry and staying in the industry and that's worrying when we're trying to fill those leadership roles because who's actually going to fill those pathways? (Jude, Viticulturist, SA).

Other participants agreed and made similar comments about the "huge disparity" between 50/50 representation in degrees and women moving into careers in the wine industry (Vivian, Assistant winemaker, NSW).

Industry training

A significant number of participants referenced training and professional development they had accessed at industry level. Programs referenced consistently throughout the focus groups included the Wine Industry Mentor Program, as well as Next Crop, Future Leaders and Rootlings all funded by Wine Australia.

As a formal mentorship program, the Wine Industry Mentor Program, a joint initiative between Wine Communicators of Australia, Wine Australia, ASVO, WISA and the University of Adelaide, was repeatedly noted as a key resource for participants looking to develop. One participant explained the benefit of this program for her longevity in the industry:

> I just thought jeez, how am I ever going to have a stable career? It's only because I went through a formalised mentorship program… that's where I got my first proper experience with having a female mentor in the industry. Then I sought out a couple of others and that's what kept me in industry, with their support. So yeah, I've got - yeah, my experience of it is really great. Recommend it to everybody (Nora, Winemaker, SA).

Another participant described the impact of this program on her ability to advocate for salary and workload:

> I actually found [the program] really helpful because just to have those conversations - I guess that you can't really or don't feel super comfortable having in your workplace about salary expectations and that sort of thing. So [my mentor] has been really helpful for me in that sense… I came in at a

> graduate level, I'm very mature aged so I've had to really fight for more money and stuff. I'm really doing the same workload as anyone in the business now and I'm still continuing to fight. But [my mentor] has given me a little bit more fire in my belly to push even harder. So yeah, that program is amazing. Highly, highly rate it (Lena, Viticulturist, SA).

Participants described a range of ways in which the mentorship had increased their confidence and understanding of their next steps in pursing professional goals and career progression.

Other programs like Wine Australia's Next Crop and Future Leaders programs were mentioned as examples of resources for support to develop leadership skills, with participants noting these were accessible to all genders and offered important resources. One participant noted "I was talking to a couple of those [Next Crop] participants last night, actually. They were just saying how amazing it is" (Mia, former Sales and Marketing, WA).

Rootlings was also mentioned as an upcoming initiative to engage with people under 35 years of age:

> [Rootlings] has been absolutely amazing for New South Wales. It's not just females. It's for everyone, and it's for all departments in wine. That was amazing for – we did conferences and that sort of thing… That was really, really good (Stella, Cellar and Events Manager, NSW).

Participants had overwhelmingly positive experiences and opinions of the range of development opportunities currently available from industry bodies.

Mentorship

Participants reflected on access to and value of mentorship, including aspects of expectation placed on both mentor and mentee. One participant who had taken part in the Future Leaders program observed:

> Mentoring is time consuming. If you do it well, it's time consuming. I think that it's probably more of a female instinct to - once you've had one of those opportunities to actually return the favour. (Maeve, Marketing Manager, SA).

Participants across many focus groups also acknowledged the value of men engaging in the mentorship process. One participant who was more progressed in her career observed of the Future Leaders program:

> The Future Leaders program with Wine Australia … such an evolution in how that's supported by not just females but also some incredible male … role models and mentors. I think that's worth calling out. Because when we're talking about women in leadership, we tend to focus on some incredible female role models. But equally, if we're going to see progress here, we need to bring men to the table - in my career, some of the most supportive mentors I've had have been men who have got my back and who have championed my cause (Aisha, Marketing Consultant, NSW).

We also heard from participants about their less formal experiences of mentorship, often taking place in the workplace. Some participants shared the impact of working with other women winemakers:

> When you're in the workplace, it's who is around directly in your team or in your company that you can also get some mentoring from in a less official capacity. I think my first vintage, the assistant wine maker was a woman. She was not much older than me. She's the only female wine maker that I worked with. I was in wineries for 15 years (Hazel, Winemaker/Marketing/Cellar door, WA).

Many participants referenced influential experiences with first or early employers or managers, often crediting these relationships with giving them support to progress their careers in the wine industry:

> [My mentors] have all been women and they've all really helped me get to the next stage of my career. One of them was my boss at my last job and we worked together for five years. The first one was one of the winemakers [at winery] and she just sort of took me under her wing and she'd be like, "oh after work do you want to stay behind and taste some barrels with me or something" and we would just talk. That was really good… she just taught me so much and I'm really grateful for having her … teach me some stuff off to the side (Quinn, Winemaker, SA).

Another participant, currently in a more junior role, described the importance of her mentor as a role model:

> The very first person who hired me in a winemaking job is still very much – she's still a very close friend and even though I don't work for her anymore, she's definitely been the biggest mentor that I have had in the production side of things. When we would work together, we often would have a lot to discuss because she owns her own business and she'd said some truck driver would pull up with pallets worth of glass and she'd pull them all off with a forklift and it happened more than once that the driver would say to her, "Your boss should know that you're doing a very good job" and she'd be like, "Actually, I own this business. I am the boss" (Katrina, Vineyard Assistant, VIC).

Another participant highlighted the load on senior women in the wine industry in terms of their commitments to providing more informal support and mentorship:

> Some of those female mentors, you know that they're taking on a lot of a big role …, a lot of people. I'm always very aware of just the load they take on, which is amazing and … they're kind of paving the way for the next generation, but there's definitely that big workload on some of those older female mentors … the females will go out of their way to help younger females (Audrey, Sales and Distribution NSW).

Participants also mentioned the value of male mentors in more informal work relationships, and reflected on how mentorship is often an accumulative experience as a career progresses:

> I've also now got a group of people that I can call upon when I need help from previous roles. Previous jobs, a lot of them are female. Not all of them are female, so we can catch up a coffee to have chats, particularly when I'm deciding on going for a job. For the last few years I've been trying to figure out my directions, and that's been the best thing that I've had to help support me through the transitional changes of my career so far (Eden, Managing Consultant and Winemaker, VIC).

A number of participants mentioned the impact of Australian Women in Wine in putting and keeping gender equity on the agenda in the wine industry. One participant reflected:

> I remember when Jane started [Australian] Women in Wine. That movement and those awards - I really feel that she's actually made such a big difference in calling out things…she was quite open about calling things out and celebrating women in roles. I feel like that was a major step for the wine industry (Mia, former Sales and marketing, WA).

Participants also highlighted inclusive social practices beyond workplaces that contributed to a positive workplace culture. These included networking and social groups for wine tasting – one participant described a women winemakers tasting group in McLaren Vale meeting "sporadically… every couple of months", explaining:

> It's just an opportunity for us to taste wine together and to discuss wines without any male egos around. [Laughs]. But also, generally - so the older women will bring along younger female staff members. So new grads or early cellar hands and they'll come as well (Nora, Winemaker, SA).

Vanya described a tasting group, explaining the value for women winemakers in creating "safer space" for women to build their confidence to share opinions and "just talk about the wines … it's really lovely and supportive" (Assistant Winemaker, VIC). Diana, who had been in the industry for over three decades, reflected on a group she and other women winemakers had established as an environment to "bring a wine, have a chat, very informal … it's good for the younger girls to just network and for me, I like to help out where I can, point the younger girls in whatever direction" (Winemaking Consultant, SA).

Informal networks and groups extended beyond women only membership – participants described mixed groups and the support these offered:

> I've got quite a good network of women and men around me that I can talk to and bounce ideas and vent and pull my hair out with and stuff. But yeah, then I also belong to a group that I've met through social media where we sort of vent and share ideas and stuff and support each other that way as well, which has been really good (Shania, Assistant Vineyard Manager, SA).

Informal and formal networking opportunities were met with appreciation and enjoyment from participants, offering encouragement, information, support and advice.

Human resource policies and processes

Insights from participants varied across a range of different types of workplaces. They shared changes that have been effective as well as instances where more traditional HR approaches were not meeting needs for employees in the business.

A number of participants reflected on the necessity of formalised systems and processes for change in the industry:

> I think sometimes formal systems are the only way to actually create the change. It seems to be pretty slow moving in an industry that probably prides itself a bit on being progressive and inclusive. It's actually not really (Mia, former Sales and Marketing/Board Member WA).

One participant shared an example of how her workplace is approaching changes to human resource processes to benefit the whole workforce:

> My partner is also a winemaker. Something that's really interesting that's come out of it is - as we've navigated the situation and worked out what works for us and works out for our family – what he's noticing is – you've got to be… responsible for people within a winery, is really thinking about how he can change the situation for other people. It's really interesting. Now he's got males that are asking for flexible hours to take time with their children. He is working his ass off to … figure out how that can be done.
>
> So where the senior people want flexibility, he's really thinking about the younger people … (he's got a lot of younger females coming through). How can he give them the opportunity to fill the gap and learn to give this other person flexibility and get a more cohesive team that is looking out for each other. It's not about - this is me, and you're making my life difficult by doing this. It's - we move forward as a team. (Josie, former winemaker, NSW).

Quotas

Participants mentioned quotas as a practice to promote gender equity. Opinions on the practice were mixed. Some participants saw this as a necessity:

> I've been thinking about having quotas on boards, so balancing male and female contribution to boards. I know it's quite controversial, but the more I think about it, the more I think that it is, would be a quite efficient and quick way to break this cycle (Keegan, General Manager/former Head Winemaker, SA).

Another participant commented, "I'd say that we - at least now, they feel the need to fill the quota. Whereas beforehand that wasn't even - that wasn't even a thing. There was no quota to fill" (Vivian, Assistant Winemaker, NSW). Yet another highlighted the importance of scaling quota-based approaches to representation, noting:

> I definitely don't think that works for smaller companies because you might only be hiring the odd person here and there and it's more important for that person to fit with the team rather than just because of their gender. But yeah, maybe for your big corporates, I think there is a place potentially to look at introducing quotas for positions – (Clara, Vineyard supervisor, SA).

Some participants gave examples of the limits to using a quota-based approach, noting the potential for tokenism, saying, "I'd feel like a bit of a token - young girl invited into things maybe just because I - it felt I needed to be there or someone - a woman needed to be there" (Hazel, Winemaker/Marketing/Cellar door, WA). This participant went on to reflect on shifts in this experience:

> Now - I think there's still a little bit of that definitely. I think there's a bit - a little bit more awareness. So I - there's - I definitely see more women around in the industry and in positions - making decisions and bringing people together. Which is really great because I think it makes it a bit more balanced. It's pervasive. It's still there. It might not be quite as obvious as it was when I was younger. Again, maybe I'm just a bit older and I just don't put up with it quite as much as I did (Hazel, Winemaker/Marketing/Cellar door, WA).

The framing of quotas as 'controversial', noted above, surfaced in responses from other participants. Some reflected on how the concept of quotas had been used against them in the industry:

> What we're talking about with quota filling as well - it's good that that's happening now. What I'm finding is I'm getting the comments of - that's really great that you've accomplished that. It's probably because you're a female. You're just - I'm achieving these really cool things, which I'm just like, that's really great that I'm getting these positions. I've started wine show judging and getting scholarships. These comments are happening like, it's probably because you're a female. I'm finding that now. Which sucks a little bit. It's like, well, maybe it's because I'm good at things maybe (Stella, Cellar and Events Manager NSW).

Mia responded:

> Because I deserve it. There's a thought (Mia, former Sales and Marketing/Board Member WA).

Challenges to flexible working

Flexible work refers to arrangements that allow employees to make choices about how often they engage in work, where they do that work, and when. This can include options like remote work, flexible hours, compressed workweeks, job sharing, and part-time work[12]. The goals of flexible work arrangements are to improve work-life balance and to maintain productivity whilst still balancing caring responsibilities and other commitments outside work[13]. Flexible work has also been found to support business efficiency[14], however, concerns about the lack of provision of flexible work and the stigma attached to it was raised as a key theme in every focus group. Participants highlighted various barriers to achieving flexible work arrangements, particularly during periods of high production. Concerns included the pressures of presenteeism, the difficulty of maintaining visibility and career progression while balancing caregiving responsibilities, and the limited representation of women successfully navigating parenthood in the wine industry. The absence of clear policies for flexible work was found to directly shape the types of opportunities available to women who were caring.

The wine industry, particularly in viticulture and winemaking, is seasonally driven, requiring intense labour at key times (e.g., harvest, bottling, export deadlines). The absence of flexible work arrangements means that workers with caregiving responsibilities often struggle to balance their roles over these periods. Focus group participants often raised concerns about work/life balance being a problem for the industry, particularly during the vintage period and flexible work was certainly presented as a 'wicked problem' for many women.

> Vintage continues to hold unrealistic expectations [regarding the] time workers have to be on-site … I think women often delay starting a family because of the challenges … it's like you'd just get ruled out completely for having the opportunities to progress … [and] having a work/life balance in the wine industry because vintage is such a challenge (Annika, Lead Winemaker, NSW).

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[12] Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA). (n.d.). Flexible work. https://www.wgea.gov.au/flexible-work#:~:text=A%20flexible%20work%20arrangement%20is,that%20allows%20for%20remote%20working.

[13] Cooper, R., & Baird, M. (2015). Bringing the "right to request" flexible working arrangements to life: From policies to practices. Employee Relations, 37(5), 568-58; Skinner, N., & Pocock, B. (2011). Flexibility and work-life interference in Australia. Journal of Industrial Relations, 53(1), 65-82.

[14] Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA). (2019). Flexible working is good for business: The business case. https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/business_case_for_flexibility_0.pdf

> One of the biggest problems is from a production perspective. Flexibility is pretty hard when it's such a seasonally heavy business. For small business to try and actually manage the flexible working hours when … basically in a small business ... when you're on your own and it's very difficult to try and balance that. And I think I don't know how they're ever going to get around that because you can't necessarily bring another wine maker in ... So ... it's kind of a tricky one and I don't actually know how everyone's ever going to get around that harvest period. …But there are noticeably a lot of women who have done well in the wine industry who don't have children, it's not necessarily a choice (Eden, Managing Consultant and Winemaker, VIC).

Jade notes that women taking time out to have children are penalised:

> I do notice now from a winemaker's perspective, the female winemakers who are having babies, when they … come back they …probably don't progress as quickly as some of the guys do of similar age. I guess that comes back to the workplace and there needs to be a focus on making sure that they're not in any way penalised … by being six to 12 months or slightly more depending on how long they choose to take off having children, behind their male colleagues of a similar starting point (Jade, Winemaker SA).

Most women concurred that few businesses have visible flexible work policies, agreeing that "[t]here are hardly any businesses that have parental leave policies or anything like that" (Lydia, Head winemaker, NSW). The absence of a clear and enforceable flexible work and caring policy in the wine industry is a significant issue, particularly given the industry's reputation for long hours and physical demands. This gap in policy disproportionately affects women, who are still more likely to have primary caring responsibilities. One woman was forced to leave a position because the employers felt unable to provide flexible work arrangements. She was advised by her employer that a new role she was being offered would require her to "have a family member look after [her] son for like three months of the year". She said "I had to leave the company because there was no way I could do that (Annika, Lead Winemaker NSW).

Women report feeling discriminated against during the employment process, particularly if they are of childbearing age. An employment stigma exists where employers assume that they're going to have children and therefore become unviable. One woman even said of that she has been quite clear in cover letters and interviews that she has no intention of having children saying to prospective employers "I don't need to worry about school pick up. I don't have any children". In one situation after she had signed the contract the employer said, "just don't go and get pregnant now" (Hazel, Winemaker/Marketing/Cellar door, WA).

Many women leave the industry during the child rearing years:

> The thing is, with women coming into the industry … it's the furthest thing from your mind. … That's where the talent goes. You either get spat out when you're 18 because you had a bad first experience with the industry or when it's time to have a child, is really when … you would have a lot of attrition of females in the industry (Maeve Marketing Manager SA).

Others discussed how parental responsibilities had shaped the type of opportunities they accessed earlier in their careers:

> I felt for a fair whack of my early career particularly I had to say "no" to a lot of things and put my family first, which of course is what you do. I've found that sometimes that fell on unsympathetic ears further up, so opportunities were given to the people that could say "yes", which in this industry is predominantly males, or the other females who maybe didn't - weren't in the same position as me with a family (Jade, Winemaker, SA).

Participants generally agreed that their experience with women employees who were also parents were exemplary and reliable hires. One General Manager stated "I'd employ a woman in a part-time role because she had a family, over lots of people. So, very fortunate and I think I've been very fortunate in the people that I've come across" (Juliana, General Manager, VIC). One woman indicated feeling a lack of visibility of other women managing work and family. This reoccurring theme had many participants asserting that parental responsibilities gave them stronger time management skills that translated to their workplaces. One participant stated:

> I think - and I'm not trying to denigrate anyone who doesn't have children, but I suspect as a woman, once you have children, your ability to time manage, and get outcomes goes through the roof. You thought you were good before you had kids, but you're really bloody good after you've had them, because you have to make it work (Ruby, Consultant, NSW).

Implementing sector-wide flexible work policies, including structured part-time options, job-sharing, remote work where possible, and supportive parental leave, would not only improve gender equity but also enhance workforce retention, productivity, and industry resilience for all employees[15]. A shift toward more inclusive and adaptable workplace practices would position the wine industry as a forward-thinking sector, ensuring it attracts and retains top talent in an increasingly competitive and evolving global landscape.

[15] Aksoy, C. G., Barrero, J. M., Bloom, N., Davis, S. J., Dolls, M., & Zarate, P. (2022). *Working from home around the world* (NBER Working Paper No. 30446). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://www.nber.org/papers/w30446; Chung, Heejung, Ameeta Jaga, and Susan Lambert. 2022. "Possibilities for Change and New Frontiers: Introduction to the Work and Family Researchers Special Issue on Advancing Equality at Work and Home." Community, Work & Family 25(1): 1–12; Williamson, S., Taylor, H., & Weeratunga, V. (2024). Working from home during COVID-19: What does this mean for the ideal worker norm?. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *31*(2), 456-471.

Industry Priorities: Pathways for Change

The focus group discussions yielded rich insights into practical and strategic initiatives that industry participants believe would meaningfully advance gender equity in the Australian wine sector. This section synthesises these participant-driven recommendations, focusing on four key priority areas identified through our research.

First, participants consistently emphasised the need for improved representation and visibility of women across all industry levels, from technical roles to leadership positions, suggesting this visibility is crucial for inspiring and supporting the next generation.

Second, the need for enhanced education and training opportunities emerged as a second critical theme, with participants highlighting the importance of both formal qualifications and ongoing professional development.

Third, participants identified specific resource requirements, including targeted scholarships and funding programs, as essential tools for breaking down barriers to entry and advancement.

Finally, the development of innovative approaches to flexible working arrangements was highlighted as crucial for enabling sustained career progression, particularly given the unique operational demands of the wine industry. Through examining these participant-driven priorities, this section provides valuable insights into practical interventions that could accelerate progress towards gender equity in the sector.

Visibility and representation

Many participants called for greater visibility of gender equity and representation of women in the wine industry, stating “you can’t be what you can’t see”. As one participant paraphrased, “if you can’t see it, you can’t always believe it” (Emily, Director of Marketing, SA). She continued, “you also need women who want to give back. It’s no point putting a woman up there who’s just about themselves”. Later in the same focus group, another participant continued:

> You do need to be somewhere that you look at, and then you’re like, oh, you look like me. So, it’s possible. Then you know it’s possible, then you have a goal to work towards. I think diversity in senior manager position or top leadership, all the decision makers that actually matter in policy making and enforce those rules. If those groups in those photos can look more diverse than what it is now… (Reece, Vineyard Machinery Operator WA).

Other participants explained the importance of visibility in terms of role modelling gender equality:

> I just think having pathways - showing people what a really good way looks like. Find people within the industry, find companies within the industry who have figured it out to some point and use that as a model to roll out (Daisy, former winemaker and viticulturist, SA).

Participants also emphasised the need for broader considerations of diversity in representation. One participant reflected:

> I love this industry, but it certainly does need to build - to bring in this diversity. I don’t know if anyone was at the tech conference, I think it was last year or it was the year before and an African American woman came to the stage. She looked around, she asked where all the Black women were? It was stale pale male, definitely (Emily, Director of Marketing, SA).

An understanding of the importance of including people in the industry in addition to gender was evident in many focus groups and highlights a growing interest in more intersectional approaches to inclusion. This was noted by participants in a range of ways, including identifying “old white men” as current and previous leaders and owners in the industry. One participant stated:

> I think that it’s important that, yes, we consider the gender opportunity, but I actually also think that we create a cultural opportunity because I actually think we’re a really white industry. I think that

> particularly in production and viticulture. When we think of the diversity of the people that work in our industry, yes - there are groups from the Pacific Island groups, or they might be from Timor-Leste … but they're working the grunt sort of work in the vineyards. Often, all that kind of labour side of things. What I think would be great to see is not only more women in positions of, I guess, executive positions and management positions, but also more people of colour and diversity so that we are an industry of choice for the breadth of our community that is in Australia (Tara, Consultant Winemaker/Board Member, WA).

Another participant reflected:

> One of the big things that irks me in all of the gender in wine conversation is we are just so critically hyper-focused on women and men, and there's no conversation about race or sexuality or all of the ability levels (Nora, Winemaker, SA).

Repeated mention of the whiteness of the industry made it very clear participants were not only focused on gender, but broader inclusivity concerns.

Training and education

Participants spoke often of how adjustments to education and training approaches were needed to encourage a broader range of new employees into the industry. One noted:

> I think we really need to focus on yes, degree level, but also diploma level and really the vineyard worker level and our school kids and getting them so that they can see that there's an industry out there for them (Simone, Educator, SA).

Participants recently or currently enrolled in study advised of a need for TAFE-level qualifications and more accessible programs to undertake while already working in the industry. Before undertaking formal training, however, many participants emphasised the importance of women joining the industry to ensure they gained hands-on experience before committing to formal education. One participant explained:

> [G]et experience before going to university. Because what you learn in university about viticulture and winemaking, it's very different to the real-life application. So, work out if you actually enjoy working in the industry first before spending all that time at university (Nora, Winemaker, SA).

Another winemaker framed this building of experience as a way to understand how to advocate for safe and equitable workplaces:

> [M]y advice would be to see as much as you can as early as you can, different sizes of workplace, different wineries, different regions, different countries. Take the time when you're early in the industry to see as much as you can because then you'll be so much better at advocating for what's right and for yourself (Vanya, Assistant winemaker, VIC).

Participants also framed this building of experience as important skill building in an industry where there may be adjustments, changes and different roles available, rather than a consistently linear path of progression:

> Connect yourself, but also not to be concerned about the sideway steps you might have to go through before you go up. Often, those sideway steps are as valuable, if not more valuable, to achieving your final objective, whatever that is, as just to kind of get one foot onto the run and up. I would encourage them to look at all opportunities with equal merit and how they can build themselves as a person of value to any business. They can do anything. There's no limitations to what they can do. It's just creating the skillset for that (Ivy, Head of Sales, SA).

Most participants viewed their range of experiences over the course of their career – given the majority of participants had worked more than 10 years in the industry, and 42 percent of participants had worked 20 years and over, understanding careers as non-linear in many instances was a helpful insight.

Other types of training were suggested, including building an awareness across the workforce of unconscious bias in recruiting practices:

> [U]ntil we can get to that more balanced point - and maybe we won't. Maybe the best is going to be a 70/30 male/female gender split. But making sure that the men are educated and guarding against that unconscious bias. At the end of the day, you tend to hire people like yourself. If you're aware of that as a hiring manager and it's like, okay, I need to hire someone who's complementary to me. That might be gender or it might be background or experience or whatever. Just making sure that you're guarding against that unconscious bias (Claire Winemaker, VIC).

Participants emphasised that creating a more accessible educational ecosystem requires both expanding the range of formal qualifications and strengthening informal skill-building networks.

Resources and funding

Participants offered suggestions on ways to direct funding and resources in order to further and support gender equity in the Australian wine industry. This included extending existing successful programs as well as revisiting diversified educational options and offerings. Overall, this indicated that participants wanted expansions of existing programming rather than an entirely new set of resources.

We heard a range of examples of these. One participant mentioned colleagues who had co-ordinated fundraising through events to fund a scholarship that supported professional development for women in the industry, noting that although this was no longer running it had offered tangible benefits for a number of years (Ivy Head of Sales SA). We heard a number of examples of initiatives and scholarships that had previously been funded, including study scholarships as well as a broader range of education options:

> [There were] different levels of education too, so you could do an 18-month course, or you could do a three-year course, or you could just do six weeks of tasting, there was all sorts of levels and accessible to women because a lot of times there was night lessons or they changed the times around and it was great. Then the funding disappeared (Paula, Vineyard Management Consultant, NSW.

A number of participants highlighted the importance of a range of educational options to ensure accessibility for a more diverse work force. Participants agreed that the cost of attending conferences as networking and development opportunities could prove challenging in an economic climate where businesses had limited money to invest in staff development.

We heard that the current economic climate in the wine industry poses a risk to diversity initiatives. Research has shown that in times of economic downturn, diversity and inclusion initiatives are often discontinued[16] . Financial pressures may lead to reduced opportunities for women, particularly those perceived as higher risk due to potential family commitments. As one participant noted:

> I think at the moment, a real risk to women in the industry is just the downturn, the economic downturn that we are all working under. That some of the opportunities which were progressing nicely could be the first ones to go… it would be really easy for management to make choices where they don't take as much risk or what was perceived risk. So women around child bearing age potentially and also maybe some of the new grads could get passed up (Nora, Winemaker, SA).

Ivy accordingly advised potential entrants to the wine industry to consider the economic climate, and longer-term trends, before committing to work in the industry (Head of Sales, SA).

Participants make clear that funding to ensure more women participate in industry and technical conference had a positive impact not only for the woman participating, but also her workplace and networks:

> I think some more funding to get women into things like the tech conference. There's often a lot – a lot of the senior positions within wineries and viticulture side of the business go and then the information isn't shared […] I received a bursary from Wine Victoria to go a couple of years ago and I came back with all the information and shared it with everybody else in my team which was great but,

[16] Pierson-Bonin, R., & Piatak, J. (2025). Making Sense of Gender Equality in the Public Sector: Do Economic Downturns and Recovery Impact Social Equity in the Workplace?. In *Making Sense of Identity and Equity in Public Sector Workplaces* (pp. 191-206). Routledge.

> yeah, I think if you get more women in to those spaces, into technical knowledge… (Stacey, Viticulturist, WA).

Other participants highlighted the importance of formalised and government funded initiatives for professional development alongside more informal networks. This included conferences and other mentoring opportunities in a call for continued and additional formal funding commitments (Vivian Assistant Winemaker, NSW).

Participants acknowledged growing awareness of opportunities but agreed that more communication and visibility of opportunities would continue to ensure a sense of support. Participants called for additional intakes of successful programs like the Wine Industry Mentor Program (Clara, Vineyard supervisor, SA).

One participant stated:

> I find that that network is often just such an incredible group of people that know the industry, are in it for the right reason and really want the industry and amazing people to succeed. It would be a shame to see those sorts of programs not continued to be funded. I know there's a new level that's just being rolled out … that Jenna Vaughan has just taken up a role of being able to set up [Wine Australia/ASVO]. I'd love to see more of that happening, because those informal networks within the industry are pretty incredible (Aisha, Marketing consultant, NSW).

Participants strongly advocated for continued and increased financial investment in diverse professional development pathways to overcome the current barriers that disproportionately affect underrepresented groups. By committing to expanded funding mechanisms, the industry would not only nurture individual talent but also cultivate the innovative perspectives necessary for the continued evolution of industry culture, and success in an increasingly competitive global marketplace.

Improvements to Flexible work

Many participants highlighted flexible work arrangements as a key motivator to change jobs in an industry where more work has to be done to structure key roles with flexibility in mind. One participant shared:

> I read the wine sector plan that came out and how they're trying to get, instead of offering people more money, because that's not what's going to happen, really offer that flexible work/life balance. Which, me still having young children, was a really good push the way they put it into words and stuff like that. But then trying to show that to my potential boss' type thing is a thing. But that's probably - as an initiative, that would help me stay in the industry if I couldn't chase money (Alice, Lab technician, NSW).

Another participant presented an optimistic view of the sector, and possibility for flexible arrangements in future:

> I think it's that mentality that the role of a marketing manager needn't necessarily be 9:00 to 5:00, five days a week. It might be 9:00 to 2:00, two days a week, and then split between three other people. It's just it's rejigging what that that process looks like in a workplace, and I think wine sector's pretty flexible. We're open-minded. I think we're a good industry to give that a whirl, perhaps not doing it enough quite yet, but I'm sure it could happen (Kasey, Owner/Winemaker, SA).

A number of participants indicated that a cultural shift in attitudes has a role to play, one participant reflecting:

> [W]hat can we influence, I hate to say governance in different things but even local governance, in terms of what the resources and the mechanisms are around in regional areas to support diverse workforces, if that makes sense. That's educating even business owners and everyone as well to understand that you can bring children into certain environments, and you can't in others sort of thing whatever. It's that flexibility to come and go and manage life, I think (Robin, Winery Owner VIC).

Others considered this cultural shift in terms of gendered roles in family relationships:

> I think men also need to step up and realise that women have been wanting it all but doing it all. They need to step up a bit and do a few more things on the other level to balance it out slightly in the private space. Then some of the backlash about men having caring roles - there's still a bit of that going on because we have this normalised idea of the separation. The more men who also step up to support that flexible work - quicker it might get through, hopefully (Josie, former Winemaker, NSW).

This same participant also offered advice for young women entering the wine industry around family planning; this sentiment was echoed in a range of ways by other participants who were parents:

> For me, you really have to think about things a bit earlier. If you're planning to have kids, when do you want to have kids? Plan that out. Do you want to get to a certain point in your career? Start talking to HR or talking to your boss about what it looks later on if you have… Just ask a lot of questions early, openly, and just try and find a community that you can feel comfortable asking those questions and getting feedback. I think the more you know, the more you can take a step forward with a bit more confidence of - to know the options that are available (Josie, former Winemaker, NSW).

Participants highlighted that meaningful progress in workplace flexibility requires organisations to move beyond basic policy compliance toward actively supporting employees in balancing professional advancement with family responsibilities. By normalising flexible arrangements that accommodate parental and caring commitments across all organisational levels, the industry can retain valuable talent while demonstrating genuine commitment to inclusive practices that reflect the diverse realities of its workforce.

Conclusions

The Australian wine industry stands at a critical juncture in its journey towards gender equity. Our research reveals a sector experiencing uneven progress, where significant advances in some areas exist alongside persistent barriers and deeply embedded cultural challenges. The evolution of industry culture, while promising in many respects, continues to be shaped by generational differences and varying approaches between large corporate entities and smaller family-owned businesses. This diversity in practice creates both opportunities and challenges for achieving systematic change.

The research identifies several interconnected barriers that require coordinated attention. Leadership remains a critical frontier, with women facing multiple challenges in advancing beyond technical roles into senior management positions. These challenges are compounded by the persistence of masculine cultural norms and deficit thinking about women's capabilities, creating a complex web of obstacles that impact women's career progression and professional experiences. The prevalence of everyday sexism, while perhaps less overt than in previous decades, continues to reinforce gender stereotypes and undermine women's professional standing.

However, our findings also highlight promising pathways for change. The increasing recognition of diverse leadership styles, the emergence of supportive networks among women, and the growing awareness of gender equity issues among younger industry members all suggest potential for positive transformation. Large organisations are demonstrating how formal equity programs can create systematic change, while some small family businesses are showing how direct influence over workplace culture can foster inclusive environments.

The way forward requires a multi-faceted approach involving coordinated action from large employers, small businesses, and industry bodies. This includes developing robust policies and procedures, creating effective mentoring and sponsorship programs, and establishing industry-wide standards for behaviour and advancement. Crucially, success will depend on addressing both structural barriers and cultural attitudes, particularly around leadership capabilities and workplace expectations.

As the industry continues to evolve, maintaining momentum towards gender equity will require ongoing commitment, resources, and cultural change. The recommendations outlined in this report provide a framework for action, but their success will ultimately depend on sustained engagement from all industry stakeholders. The potential benefits - including enhanced innovation, improved workplace cultures, and better representation of the industry's diverse consumer base - make this investment in change both necessary and worthwhile. Additionally, we find that strong collaborative relationships and shared goals for gender equity across the sector will be key to ensuring meaningful action from stakeholders in education and government.

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