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Women in Trucking:

Perceptions, Contributions and Experiences of Truck Drivers in Australia



Dr Catherine Deen, Associate Professor Sharron O'Neill, Dr Briony Lipton, and Dr Vindhya Weeratunga
Future of Work and Society Research Group, School of Business, UNSW Canberra

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About the authors

Catherine Midel Deen is Senior Lecturer in Human Relations and Organisational Behaviour at the School of Business, University of New South Wales Canberra. Her research focuses on gendered experiences and victimisation in work contexts and the dark side of leadership. Caths' publications cover a range of topics in organisational behaviour including work-related intimate partner aggression, micromanagement, and the plight of vulnerable workers.

Sharron O'Neill is Associate Professor in Accounting at the School of Business, University of New South Wales, Canberra. Sharron's interdisciplinary research focuses primarily on work health and safety governance and the role that resourcing, performance measures and organisational systems play in designing and managing safe, healthy and productive work.

Briony Lipton is a Research Associate in the School of Business at University of New South Wales Canberra. A sociologist specialising in gender, work and care, her research examines how institutional, cultural and organisational structures shape workplace inequality and leadership. Drawing on feminist theory, her work has influenced national and international debates on the motherhood penalty, equity in employment, and leadership culture. Briony is an active contributor to scholarly and public discussions on gender equity and inclusion in Australia.

Vindhya Weeratunga is Lecturer in Business Management at the School of Business, University of New South Wales, Canberra. A mixed-methods researcher, Vindhya's expertise spans human resource management, systems thinking applications to complex problems, and adaptive leadership. Her recent research has focused on enhancing employee outcomes through investigating well-being, the future of work, and HR practices and their impacts across different demographic groups.

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Project and report overview

This report is based on the Women in Transport study undertaken by researchers from the Future of Work and Society Research Group at UNSW Canberra School of Business. Sponsored by the Transport, Education, Audit, Compliance, Health Organisation (TEACHO) Ltd., the Women in Transport research project examined the work experiences of Australian truck drivers, including perceptions of training, licencing and working conditions and, importantly, generated important insights into the perceptions, contributions, and career experiences of women truck drivers in the Australian trucking industry.

In addressing the latter, this report offers evidence-based knowledge about the work experiences of female truck drivers in Australia. This includes how they are perceived as members of the trucking industry, their contributions to the sector, the challenges they face, how they navigate these challenges, as well as how workplace cultures and norms shape their entry, retention, and exit in this male-dominated context. The report draws on a rigorous mixed-method research design combining interviews, surveys and on-site, observational data. Together, these methods generate a nationally integrated, evidence-based analysis of the conditions shaping women's participation in the Australian trucking industry.

This research received human research ethics clearance from the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Canberra Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel A (iRECS8908).

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Executive Summary

Truck driving remains among the most gender-segregated occupations in Australia. According to Jobs and Skills Australia, women comprise just 6% of the broad truck driving workforce. Focusing on those who drive heavy trucks that require specially endorsed licences, women comprise an even smaller number of just 4% of this driver classification. These figures have improved only marginally over the past decade despite sustained industry labour shortages and the emergence of targeted advocacy efforts. With the aging workforce underpinning a driver shortage, the continued underrepresentation of women in the industry represents both an equity failure and an increasingly costly workforce constraint.

This report presents findings from a mixed-method study examining how women enter the Australian trucking industry, what they contribute, and what stands in the way of their full participation. In doing so, this report examines perceptions of both male and female drivers regarding the extent to which women are accepted, appropriately skilled and safe in the trucking industry. Data were drawn from semi-structured interviews with 20 participants (9 female drivers, 11 key informants), an anonymous national online survey of 489 truck drivers conducted between December 2025 and March 2026, and a site visit to Geraldton, Western Australia, hosted by the Pilbara Heavy Haulage Girls.

Key Findings

The central finding of this research is that women are not absent from Australian trucking by choice. They are present, capable and, where working conditions are supportive, demonstrably effective contributors to the workforce. Barriers to their full participation are visibly structural, not a reflection of individual capacity or inclination.

The evidence confirms a compelling case for women's inclusion. Female truck drivers were perceived to show attentiveness to vehicle maintenance and safety, sound communication skills, and a consistently documented positive moderating influence on workplace culture. These are not anecdotal observations; they are patterns that emerged across interviews, survey data, and the broader literature, and they carry direct operational and financial significance for the industry.

Notwithstanding this evidence, a substantial gap persists between the industry's stated openness to women, and the conditions women encounter in practice. While 86% of surveyed drivers agreed that opportunities exist for women to enter the industry, only 72% agreed that women are genuinely welcome and only 66% agreed that the transport industry will benefit from more women drivers. These discrepancies reflect a structural misalignment between formal inclusion rhetoric and the everyday realities of a workplace culture, physical infrastructure, and job design that remain calibrated to a male workforce.

The challenges documented in this research represent the predictable consequences of systemic under-investment in the conditions necessary to enable women to participate equitably. A persistent industry culture, widely described by participants as 'blokey' and resistant to change, creates an environment in which women are rendered largely invisible, required to prove their competence repeatedly, and frequently exposed to sexism, discrimination, and sexual harassment. Seventy percent of survey respondents considered sexual harassment of female drivers to be extremely or somewhat likely, yet only 20% of known incidents were formally reported, pointing to a profound accountability deficit that individual employer goodwill cannot resolve.

Work-life conflict presents a further structural barrier: trucking job design continues to reflect a gendered ideal worker favouring men with minimal obligations outside of work, a model that disproportionately disadvantages women with caring responsibilities and makes pregnancy, in particular, a professionally costly life event. Physical health and safety concerns compound these challenges, with inadequate hygiene infrastructure, poor lighting, and insufficient security at rest areas and service centres creating conditions of heightened vulnerability for women travelling alone.

Women in the trucking industry have responded with considerable resourcefulness and resilience, developing sophisticated individual strategies to navigate risks and barriers the industry has not addressed collectively. While this resilience is noteworthy, it should not be mistaken for evidence of an adequately functioning system. It is evidence of a structural deficit, managed through individual effort and at personal cost.

Results at a glance

- Opportunity for women to enter trucking is broadly acknowledged but they are not yet fully welcome. A significant gap between the number of survey participants who agreed that opportunities exist for women (86%) and those who agreed that women are welcome (72%) signals an observable gap between stated openness and experienced reality.
- Women contribute five consistently identified strengths to the industry: detail orientation, careful equipment maintenance, strong communication, empathy and patience, and a positive moderating influence on workplace culture.
- Women join trucking through various entry pathways including family connections and early experiences, having clear personal career aspirations, recognising the freedom and empowerment trucking careers offer, and lower entry barriers that do not require university degrees.
- Trucking presents a promising pathway out of domestic violence for some women, offering simultaneous access to employment, income, geographic anonymity, and mobile accommodation.
- Women in trucking face serious and overlapping challenges that persist in the masculine industry culture including work-life conflict, sexism and discrimination, sexual harassment, and physical health and safety issues.
- Women in trucking are at particular risk of sexual harassment with 70% of survey respondents expressing that female drivers will likely experience sexual harassment. Relatedly, sexual harassment appears to be substantially underreported with only 20% of survey respondents reporting known incidents.
- Women work to manage systemic challenges through individual resilience, in the absence of adequate industry-level support structures.
- Women navigate industry challenges through proactive strategies such as proving themselves and their technical competence, exercising self-protection and vigilance, seeking mentorship, networks, and training support, and exercising personal strengths.

Summary of recommendations

We applied a multi-level framework that covers societal, industry, and individual supports and interventions that can help improve the career experiences of women in trucking.

Societal level: Set national workforce targets for women's participation in heavy vehicle transport; strengthen regulatory oversight of psychosocial hazards including sexual harassment across the industry's fragmented, subcontracted structure; and formalise pathways connecting women in domestic violence situations with licensing support, training, and employment in the sector.

Industry level: Drive genuine culture change through bystander intervention training and consistently enforced reporting mechanisms; establish national minimum standards for rest area and roadhouse facilities; build a national mentorship register connecting women new to the industry with experienced drivers; and create a single accessible navigation point for industry support and resources.

Individual level: Promote licensing and upskilling resources with particular focus on reaching women in smaller companies and regional areas; expand mental health and wellbeing support to specifically address women's experiences in the industry; and ensure women have clear, accessible information about their rights and available recourse from the outset of their careers.

Conclusion

Recruiting more women into trucking is a worthy goal - but recruitment without retention is a revolving door. Genuine and lasting change requires coordinated action across government, industry, and organisations: setting targets, enforcing standards, investing in culture, and building the structures that make entering and staying in trucking not just possible, but worthwhile.

Introduction



The road freight transport industry is central to the functioning of the Australian economy. Representing approximately five per cent of national GDP, the sector underpins the safe and timely movement of goods across the country's vast geographic distances, connecting ports, farms, factories, distribution centres, and communities.¹ It is also an industry navigating a period of significant pressure, facing concurrent challenges of workforce shortage, an aging driver demographic, ongoing regulatory reform, and growing demands around decarbonisation and technological adaptation. Understanding who works in the industry, and the conditions under which they do so, is therefore not only a matter of equity but of sectoral sustainability. This report provides an overview of the industry's gender structure, reviews the academic literature on gender in road transportation work, and presents findings from a mixed-method study examining the perceptions of women truck drivers and their experiences of the challenges and opportunities shaping their participation in the Australian trucking industry.

1.1 Road transport industry overview

The nation's road infrastructure provides the most extensive, flexible, and accessible means of transporting freight across Australia, enabling just-in-time logistics, regional connectivity and economic productivity.² Operationally, the market spans local pickup and delivery, regional freight, interstate linehaul, and specialist freight including refrigerated goods, dangerous goods, livestock and mine supply, with trucks operating across all states and territories under a complex framework of laws, regulations, and access conditions.³ Even when larger bulk volumes are carried by ship or rail, critical inter- and intra-state road transport links connect the rail terminals, ports and airports to points of freight origin, such as producers, warehouses, mines and farms, and freight destination, such as distribution centres, worksites, shops and other customers. Road freight services are not just a mode of transport but can be better understood as the essential connector mode for the whole freight transportation system.

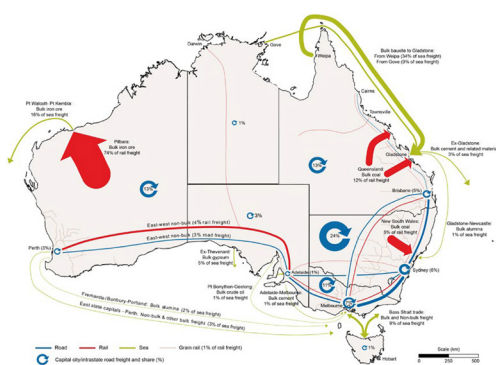


Figure 1: Australian freight flows map
(Source: BITRE Statistical Report (2025), p.19)



Figure 2: National road network
(Source: BITRE (2025), p.83)

Demand for road freight services has grown steadily over time (see Figure 3). In the 2024-25 financial year, approximately 252.9 billion tonne-kilometres of domestic freight were transported by road between Australia's producers, businesses, and consumers.⁴ This trajectory has been driven by population growth, the rapid expansion of e-commerce, infrastructure development, and ever-increasing supply chain complexity.

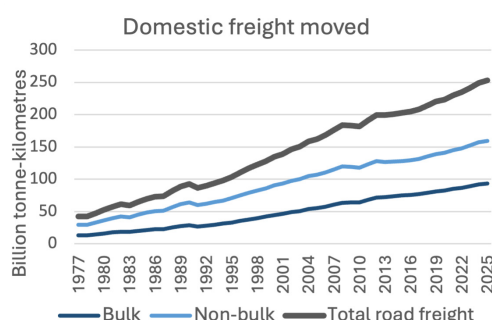


Figure 3: Australian domestic freight activity
(Source: BITRE 2025)

1.2 Workforce profile

The profile of truck drivers is characterised by an ageing worker demographic, a strong gender imbalance, and the pervasive presence of precarity. In fact, truck drivers have been described as one of the oldest workforces in the world.⁵ Jobs and Skills Australia, which works under the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, reveals the median age of heavy truck drivers is 48 years, significantly higher than the national workforce median age of 40 years.⁶ In the United Kingdom, the average age of road haulage drivers is 57.⁷

In Australia as of April 2026, the total truck driving workforce is estimated at 195,800 truck drivers. Contrasting sharply with the 'all occupation' average of 48% female share of employment, only 6% of the broader truck driver workforce are women.⁸ This participation rate reflects a gradual increase from less than 3% to 6% of drivers over the last decade due to targeted industry initiatives. Focusing on just truck drivers who drive heavy trucks that require specially endorsed licences, women only constitute 4%. Most women in the sector are employed in clerical, administrative and managerial roles.⁹

Table 1: Road freight transport workforce profile

Truck drivers in Australia	Truck (general)	Liquids tanker	Aircraft refuellers	Tow trucks	Furniture removal	Total truck drivers	All Occupations
Drivers (number)	148,400	3,800	710	2,600	5,800	195,800	
Median age (years)	48	52	46	45	32	45	40
Female drivers	4%	3%	8%	2%	5%	6%	49%
Part time drivers	16%	11%	22%	22%	54%	13%	31%
Average hours/week	50	52	42	49	43	49	44

Source: Jobs and Skills Australia 2026 (Note: the breakdown shows only the five primary categories of trucks as per Jobs and Skills Australia website)

1.3 Summary

Workforce sustainability is a salient concern for the road transport industry. NatRoad, for example, reports that the industry is navigating a sustained driver shortage of around 28,000 unfilled positions and, given the aging workforce profile and existing recruitment challenges, projects the shortfall could grow to 78,000 positions by 2029¹⁰. The future introduction of autonomous vehicles in road transport is unlikely to more than marginally offset these labour shortages, even in the medium to long-term, given the regulatory, OHS and other issues that would need to be addressed. This has led a focus on international recruitment strategies and fed pressure for faster licencing pathways to attract new drivers.

Crucially, the juxtaposition of a national workforce shortage despite untapped and disengaged workforce segments reinforces a need to examine structural barriers to women's participation. At 6% of the driver population, women remain severely under-represented. Yet tight margins threaten to compound the structural barriers women already navigate, reducing employers' capacity to invest in entry-level training, facilities for women or flexible job design, thereby intensifying barriers likely to discourage women. Given limited progress in attracting females to truck driving roles in recent decades, closer examination of the perceptions and experiences of female truck drivers is not only warranted but urgently required to inform policy and practice.

Literature review



2.1 The gendered nature of the trucking industry

Women are active, dynamic, and valuable members of the global workforce. While there is a strong case for gender equality, specifically highlighting women's contributions to national productivity, economic growth, and organisational performance,¹¹ few occupations reflect gender parity.¹² For instance, data from the International Labour Organisation¹² revealed that among top gender-segregated occupations, male-dominated occupations (MDOs) register between 95% (i.e., electronics installers) to 98.7% (i.e., heavy truck and bus drivers) male, while female-dominated occupations (FDOs) register between 57.3% (i.e., secretaries) to 86.5% (i.e., childcare) female. Apart from these 'gendered occupations' statistics, women's representation in the general workforce remains below men's across almost every industry the ILO study examined.

The global transport industry remains one of the most male-dominated industries; often characterised as "men's work" or a "masculine occupation".^{13,14} The most recent statistics from the 2025 World Bank¹³ report about women in transport revealed that only 12% of the global transportation and storage workforce are women. Women's representation varies across different sectors of the industry. Specifically, while women comprise 38% of the aviation workforce, they represent only 10% of water transport and 5% of land transport.

In Australia, these disparities are likewise pronounced. As earlier reported, Jobs and Skills Australia reported that out of 148,400 employed truck drivers, only 4% are female. In the heavy vehicle sector, the gender gap is more acute with only 2% of female truck drivers.⁸ This lack of female participation occurs despite the industry facing a national skills shortage with truck driving listed on the 2025 Skills Priority List as being in deficit across every Australian state and territory; a situation that has been largely consistent since 2022.¹⁵

2.2 A compelling business case for women in trucking

The general exclusion of women from driving roles represents a significant missed opportunity in the trucking industry.¹³ Recognising that women's continued participation in traditionally male-dominated occupations is instrumental in sustaining Australia's future workforce,¹⁶ the Workplace Gender Equality Agency¹⁷ expressed that "notions of 'women's work' and 'men's work' will need to be retired in order for the Australian economy to adapt to these [referring to Australia's aging population and technological advances] challenges".

Indeed, there is a compelling business case for welcoming more women into the road transport industry. As outlined earlier, the industry is grappling with workforce deficits manifested in reported labour and skills shortages. These shortages are not unique to Australia. The United States has described a deficit of 80,000¹³ truck drivers and the United Kingdom a deficit of 59,000.¹⁸ A major contributor to this labour shortage across the globe is the aging truck driver workforce⁷. These grim realities set the backdrop for a strong business case for gender diversity highlighting women as an essential yet untapped talent pool.^{13,18}

Women contribute a multitude of strengths and capabilities that result in valuable benefits for male-dominated industries such as the transport industry.^{13,19} These strengths range from improved safety and operational efficiency to enhanced financial performance, innovation, and diversity of thinking. First, in terms of safety and operational efficiency, research by the American Transportation Research Institute showed that female truck drivers were safer than their male counterparts in "every statistically significant category, as documented by fewer crashes, convictions and violations" (p. 6).²⁰ These superior safety records may be attributed to women's conscientiousness and lower likelihood of engaging in risky or counterproductive work behaviours.²¹ Relatedly, some employers reported that women are 'softer on the trucks', take better care of expensive equipment, which can potentially extend the lifespan of vehicles by as much as 1,000 kilometres.²¹

Second, research in related transport contexts suggests that women drivers may perform strongly in customer-facing roles, with one study of bus drivers in Ireland reporting 38% fewer complaints for female drivers on average.^{13,22} In another study among taxi drivers, passengers reportedly perceived women as more caring, compassionate, and empathic,²³ though the authors note that such findings warrant careful interpretation to avoid reinforcing gendered assumptions about women's natural aptitudes.

Third, the organisational and macroeconomic benefits of gender diversity are well-documented. At the national level, the Women's Economic Equality Taskforce²⁴ identified that barriers to women's full participation in economic activity cost the Australian economy \$128 billion annually, underscoring the scale of the opportunity forgone when women

are excluded from sectors like transport. At the organisational level, McKinsey's longitudinal research across more than 1,000 companies found that those in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 25 per cent more likely to achieve above average profitability than those in the fourth quartile, a relationship that strengthened across three successive studies between 2015 and 2020.²⁵ Gender diverse organisations have also been associated with stronger innovation outputs, more considered risk management, and better team performance.^{26,27} Another notable example relates to environmental sustainability. This is especially relevant since the transport industry is one of the greatest contributors to climate emissions.¹³ A study of 2000 companies across various sectors revealed that increasing female leadership representation by just 1% is related to a decrease in CO2 emissions by 0.5%.²²

2.3 Women in trucking: challenges and opportunities

While women have a lot to offer the transport industry, they also face a myriad of challenges in this male-dominated domain. These challenges are largely driven by systemic gender discrimination that manifests through (1) gender stereotypes and gendered work cultures, (2) inequitable career opportunities and progression, (3) mistreatment and harassment, (4) disparities in training opportunities, and (5) work-family conflict. These are not individual incidents but are structural barriers that hinder the attraction, recruitment, and retention of female talent¹³ in work conditions designed for a male-populated workforce.

Starting with cultural stereotypes, a primary barrier to female entry is the persistent misconception that heavy vehicle and truck driving, alongside related technical skills in the transport industry, require significant physical strength. The "King of the Road" mythology frames trucking as "men's work" rooted in traditional masculine physical traits. This established an ideal worker norm assumed to be a large, physically strong male who exudes "strength, independence, flexibility, spatial awareness, skills in driving complex machinery, and the ability to work in isolation, in difficult conditions with long, anti-social working hours".²⁸

In contemporary times, it is important to highlight that modern technological advancements have meant that assumptions about physical strength as a requirement in the transport industry is increasingly recognised as a misconception. The widespread adoption of power steering, automated cargo handling, and automatic gearboxes ensures that operating modern transport equipment no longer requires brute physical strength.²⁹ Despite these changes, however, prejudices against women persist. For instance, research among road safety instructors revealed stereotypes that women are biologically and temperamentally unfit for long-haul transport work serves as gatekeeping mechanisms that reduce women's access to the industry.³⁰ That said, women still face physical challenges in trucking's daily operations as most equipment is designed for a masculine default.³¹ A working paper circulated by the International Labour Office underscored that equipment remains unnecessarily heavy and could be redesigned to accommodate a more diverse workforce.³² Nonetheless, there is an acknowledgment that modern truck design has improved significantly and needs to continue to do so to support a more diverse workforce.^{7,29}

Relatedly, the transport industry culture is constantly described as governed by a "blokey" or "old boy's club" ethos that remains resistant to change.^{33,34} For female drivers, this environment results in pervasive scepticism about their technical skills and physical and professional abilities, with research showing that the primary challenge for 31.3% of American women drivers was inequitable social norms manifested through a general lack of respect and negative attitudes.²⁰ The challenge of navigating this culture for female drivers is profound. It results in them facing a "double bind" where they must overperform to prove their competence while simultaneously traversing patriarchal work cultures. To survive these conditions, women resort to patriarchal bargains³⁵ such as "acting like one of the boys", downplaying their femininity, and joining in masculine or sexual banter¹⁹. Ultimately, this exclusionary culture also leads to increased stress, social isolation, and women exiting the industry.^{34,36}

Second, gender segregation was found rampant in the transport industry. Characterised by both horizontal and vertical dimensions, segregation manifests through women being relegated to non-technical, lower status roles such as administrative or service-oriented roles which offer limited career progression.¹³ Women in male-dominated work contexts such as trucking often face the "sticky floor"³⁷ phenomenon where they are placed in supportive functions and perform so well that they become indispensable and, paradoxically, this results in them losing opportunities to ascend the corporate ladder (e.g., promotions, leadership).³⁴ Gender segregation not only has negative impacts on women's career progression but also access to career advancement resources and supports, such as professional development for specialised and high-prestige roles and exclusion from male-dominated formal and informal networks which are indispensable in gaining industry knowledge, job leads, and career advice.¹³

Third, women in the transport industry report being targets of mistreatment and gender-based violence (GBV) including sexual harassment. A study of heavy goods vehicle drivers in the UK revealed that female drivers were 270% more likely to report having experienced discrimination at work compared to their male counterparts.³⁸ Mistreatment and GBV include behaviours such as sexualized language, disparaging verbal remarks, and “boundary heightening” (e.g., exclusive cliques, silencing, sabotage) intended to signal that women are unwelcome in a traditionally male domain.^{21,34} The impact of this hostile environment on women’s health is profound, as persistent harassment and safety concerns contribute to chronic stress, loneliness, and sleep deprivation.^{13,39} Moreover, evidence suggests one in four women exit the trucking sector due to concerns over personal safety and harassment.²⁰

Acknowledging these dark realities, transport organisations have increasingly established policies and standard operating protocols to prevent negative behaviours. For instance, reporting mechanisms such as hotlines, mobile apps, and grievance systems are made available¹³ alongside other preventive measures including gender-segregated, well-lit infrastructure, security technologies (e.g., panic buttons, vehicle tracking) connected to law enforcement^{13,40}, and bystander training workshops^{13,20} that equip staff to recognise and de-escalate hostile behaviours. Collective support through professional mentorship programs and/or women-only networks also foster safe environments where female drivers can share survival strategies and advocate for systemic culture change as a collective.¹³

Fourth, training opportunities to prepare women for the transport industry are generally limited. The stark gender gap in the transport industry begins in the educational pipeline, where women are significantly less likely to pursue the training required for technical and operational roles. Globally, women comprise only 35% of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) graduates, a figure that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) highlights as unchanged for more than a decade.¹³ This gap is further reinforced by curricula that lack female role models. On the bright side, to support women entering and working in the transport industry, various organisations and advocacy groups have launched targeted initiatives that provide specialised training, mentorship, and financial assistance. In Australia, the “Foot in the Door” project managed by Women in Trucking Australia (WiTA) and funded by the National Heavy Vehicle Regulator (NHVR) bridges the gap between obtaining a license and securing employment. Since 2023, they have trained 53 female heavy vehicle drivers with over 80% successfully entering the workforce.⁴¹ Globally, there are other programs with similar purposes including the *Mujeres Conductoras* in Mexico,⁴² *She Trucker* in Ukraine,⁴² and “Trucks are for Girls”³⁹ in the USA.

Finally, the operational realities of the transport sector, defined by demanding and unpredictable schedules and extensive time away from home, result in work-family conflict. Combined with stereotypes about women’s expected family roles, it is not surprising that research revealed how work-family conflict disproportionately hinders the careers of women drivers.^{14,18} Many roles in the transport industry, such as long-haul roles, often require irregular shifts and overnight stays, which are incompatible with traditional domestic responsibilities.¹³ As such, women drivers often experience the “motherhood penalty” where those who have children may be perceived as less committed or reliable, leading to exclusion from high-prestige technical assignments.²¹

In brief, it is evident from our review of related literature that transport is a challenging male-dominated industry for women to participate in. The industry is characterised by pervasive stereotypes, ‘blokey’ culture, restricted entry and career advancement pathways, as well as heightened risks of mistreatment and harassment for women. Realistically, these systemic challenges serve as barriers for women entering the industry and can also become a push factor for women’s attrition.^{13,36} Still, momentum for reform is growing through technological shifts and local⁴³ and global advocacy networks^{7,32} that work to open doors, train, and improve working conditions for women in transport. Documenting, supporting, and institutionalising these emerging best practices will help foster an inclusive future where talent, not gender, defines professional success.^{13,20}

With Australian female participation in trucking reflecting global trends, there is a persistent and deeply entrenched gender gap that points to a significant untapped opportunity.

2.4 Summary

Our review of literature confirms that the transport industry remains one of the most male-dominated industries in the world, and Australia is no exception.

The business case for increasing women's participation in transport is compelling and urgent. With an estimated 26,000 unfilled positions in the Australian trucking industry⁴⁴ and an aging workforce deepening the labour shortage, women represent an underutilised talent pool the industry cannot afford to overlook. Available research on women in transport careers revealed that they contribute skills and characteristics beneficial for the industry including but not limited to statistically better safety records (e.g., fewer crashes, convictions and violations), as well as strengths in equipment care and customer service, which translates to operational and financial benefits.²¹ At the organisational level, workforce gender diversity has been associated with better team performance, stronger sustainability outcomes, and firm performance.^{22, 45}

However, these positive contributions remain difficult to fully realise in an industry that has significant structural and cultural barriers for women. The persistence of the "King of the Road" mythology which frames trucking as inherently "men's work" that requires physical strength and male toughness establishes a gendered ideal worker norm that women must constantly work against.²⁸ This gendered ideal persists despite strides in transport technologies that have made driving and handling transport equipment more inclusive and accessible. In addition, research among road safety instructors found that pervasive assumptions about women's biological and temperamental "unsuitability" function as active gatekeeping mechanisms further limiting industry access and career advancement opportunities.³⁰ The industry's broader "blokey" culture further compounds these barriers.

While there are undeniable challenges, there are also opportunities for women in trucking. Momentum for greater inclusion and reform is growing with efforts from international agencies such as the World Bank. Driven by industry initiatives and advocacy groups in countries like Australia, Mexico, USA, and Ukraine, there is a burgeoning group of practitioners, academics, and advocates who are working towards greater gender diversity and inclusion in the trucking industry.

Taken together, the current research makes clear that women have a great deal to offer the trucking industry in areas of safety, operational performance, and organisational culture among many others. Indeed, the transport industry stands to benefit significantly from their greater inclusion. Acknowledging these potential calls for more research to better understand what enables women to enter, remain, and thrive in this industry.

Method



3.1 Research aims

This study aims to offer evidence-based knowledge about the career experiences and contributions of women in male-dominated occupations (WMDO), with a specific focus on female truck drivers in Australia. The study gathered broad perceptions about women in trucking from the general trucking industry including truck drivers, trainers, advocates, and other key informants. The analysis included attention to the relative strengths and weaknesses of driver training and other factors that support the safe entry and ongoing participation of new truck drivers – particularly women – in the Australian transport workforce.

Specifically, this research was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do female truck drivers join the trucking industry?
2. How or in what ways do female truck drivers contribute to the trucking industry?
3. What are the challenges female truck drivers experience in the trucking industry?
4. How do female truck drivers cope with these challenges?
5. What helpful resources and/or interventions can be retained and/or developed to help female truck drivers thrive in this industry?

This study was designed to generate practical insights for transport company owners, policy makers, truck drivers, and other industry stakeholders.

3.2 Research method

This study employed a mixed-method research design,⁴⁶ combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to address the research aims. The rationale for this design was that qualitative and quantitative data are complementary: each strengthens the evidence base and together provide a more holistic understanding of the phenomena under study. Specifically, the goal was to establish holistic triangulation⁴⁷ capturing a complete and contextual portrayal of the studied phenomena by gathering multiple types of data from a variety of sources.

The research team utilised three complementary forms of data collection: (1) semi-structured interviews with female truck drivers and key informants, (2) online survey among Australian truck drivers, and (3) site visit and field observations in Geraldton, Western Australia.

3.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants: 9 female drivers and 11 key informants, 2 of whom also had direct experiences as truck drivers. Of the 20 participants, two key informants were male, one of whom was also a truck driver. Our interviewees were drawn from across the road transport sector and its diverse industries including agriculture, civil construction, mining, long haul freight, and local delivery as well as advocacy groups, industry associations, transport companies, and training providers.

Interviews were conducted online via UNSW's Microsoft Teams platform and ranged from 30 to 90 minutes in duration. Interviews were recorded with participant consent. Interview data comprises a total of 23 hours (1371 minutes). To ensure anonymity, interviewees were given identity codes. Key informants were designated as KI and female truck drivers were designated as D. Key informants who were also truck drivers were designated as KID. Since the majority of interviewees were female, male interviewees are identified as such when quoted in the findings (see Section 3).

3.2.2 Online survey

An anonymous online survey called “Australian Transport Industry Survey” was developed and administered to truck drivers throughout Australia. The nationally deployed survey gathered both qualitative and quantitative data using open-ended and structured survey items. The draft survey instrument was reviewed by industry and academic experts and piloted with a small sample of drivers prior to finalisation. A minimum sample of 384 respondents was targeted, based on Slovin’s formula applied to the estimated Australian truck driver population of 148,400.⁶ Since Australian truck drivers are active on social media as evidenced by numerous online trucking communities and channels, the online survey was primarily administered using a Qualtrics online survey link distributed through Facebook. Australian truck drivers were invited using targeted Facebook ads which showed the survey invitation directly to them. The research team, research partners and interview participants also helped disseminate the survey link through their networks and marketing campaigns. The survey ran from December 10, 2025 to March 31, 2026. The final sample included usable responses from 489 respondents, 27% above target.

Survey respondent demographics

Consistent with the demographic profile of the road transport industry, responses were dominated by male voices with over 96.5% of respondents identifying as male (females comprised only 3.3%). Also reflecting the age profile of this industry, 70% of respondents were aged 55 years or older and 71% had more than 20 years truck driving experience (See Figure 4). Qualitative responses about perceptions about women in trucking, their challenges, and contributions were also collected through open-ended questions. When quoted in the findings (Section 3), these are identified by survey participant number prefixed by S (e.g., S1, etc.).

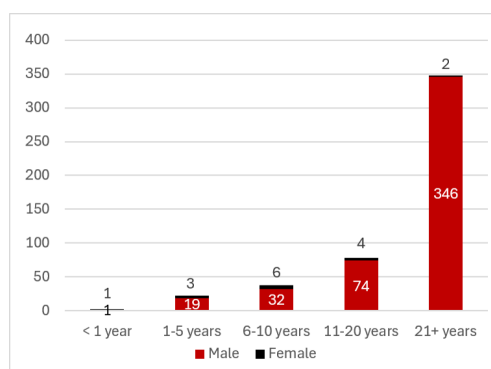


Figure 4: Gender and truck driving experience

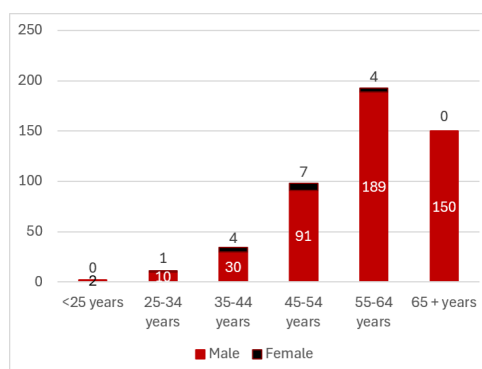


Figure 5: Age and gender profile of respondents

Most respondents (82%) reported driving for a single employer or contracting to a single company. The remaining 18% worked for multiple organisations, either as part time or casual employees, contract labour or owner drivers. Table 1 presents more information about the survey participants’ profile. More than 67% of all survey respondents were engaged as direct employees, while 11% were current owner drivers and 2% were casuals or contractors. A further 18% identified as truck drivers although were no longer employed in driving roles. They comprised both former drivers who had retired, had semi-retired and drove only in a volunteer, or seasonal ad-hoc capacity, as well as truck driver trainers and assessors, fleet owners, transport company managers, bus or coach drivers, or were currently unemployed. A majority of respondents (59%) did not affiliate with advocacy organisations such as unions or industry associations.

Table 2: Survey respondents' profile

Variable	Frequency	Percentage	Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender			Location[^]		
Male	473	97%	NSW	250	51%
Female	16	3%	QLD	217	44%
Age			VIC	201	41%
65+	150	31%	SA	126	26%
55-64	193	40%	WA	111	23%
45-54	98	20%	NT	50	10%
35-44	35	7%	ACT	50	10%
25-34	11	2%	TAS	12	3%
Below 25	2	0.4%	Language		
Employment			English	322	66%
Employee	329	67%	Other	16	3%
Owner driver	54	11%	No answer	151	31%
Retired/semi-retired	52	11%	Support / affiliation		
Former driver	21	4%	No affiliation	288	59%
Casual/Labour hire	8	2%	Transport workers' union	53	11%
Other	25	5%	Other trade union	9	2%
Experience			NatRoad	3	1%
>21 years	348	71%	National road freighters assoc.	3	1%
11-20 years	79	16%	Livestock bulk & rural carriers	1	0.2%
6-10 years	38	8%			
1-5 years	22	4%			
< 1 year	2	0.4%			

Note. [^]Many respondents operated in more than one jurisdiction. Percentage pertains to proportion of n=489 respondents

The survey captured drivers working across a diverse range of work sites and carrying a diverse range of freight, including consumer goods, bulk liquids, dangerous goods, livestock, grain and produce, construction materials, vehicles, oversize equipment, and bulk materials and resources. Local, line-haul and long-haul drivers were each well represented, as were drivers of multi-combination vehicles and, to a lesser extent, articulated vehicles.

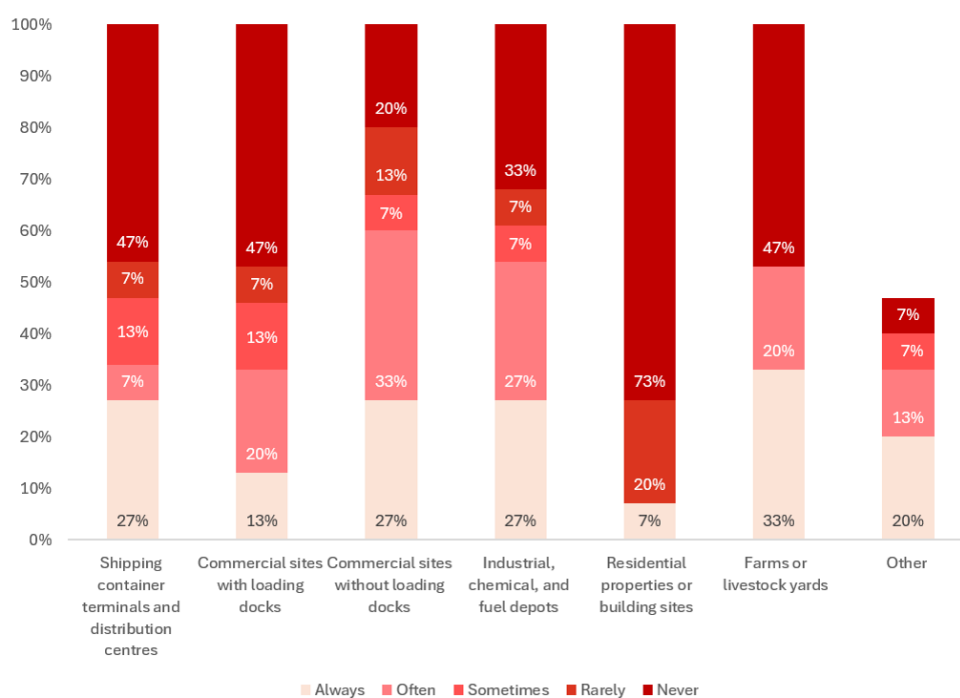


Figure 6: (Un)Loading sites (female respondents)

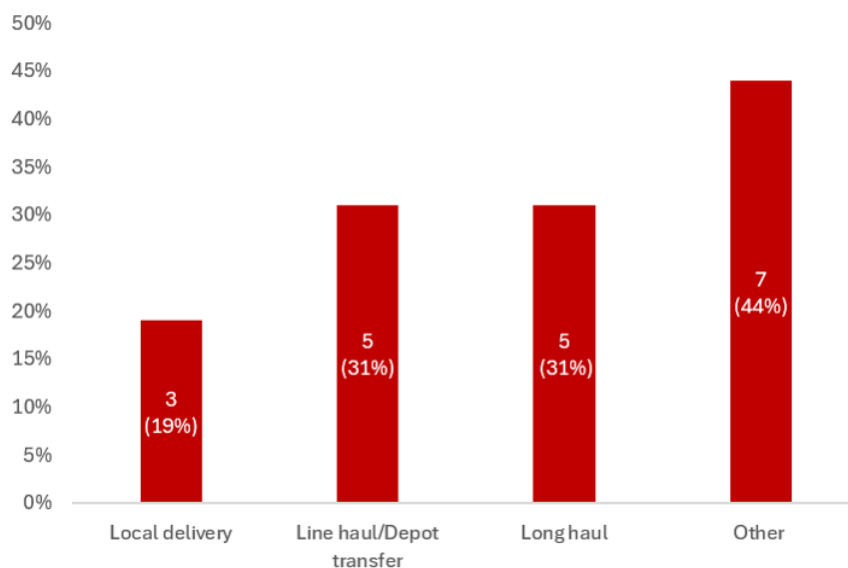


Figure 7: Type of driving work (female respondents)

The majority of workers reported driving very long hours, on average, per week. Only 18% reported driving a standard 40 hours per week or less. Most reported to drive more than 50 hours per week, on average, with 42% of respondents citing weekly driving hours of more than 60 hours per week. Drivers working less than 60 hours per week included an average 2-7 hours waiting and (un)loading time and non-driving work (e.g. cleaning, maintenance and completing documentation) in their weekly hours. Drivers working over 60 hours per week included, on average, 10-18 hours of non-driving work per week.

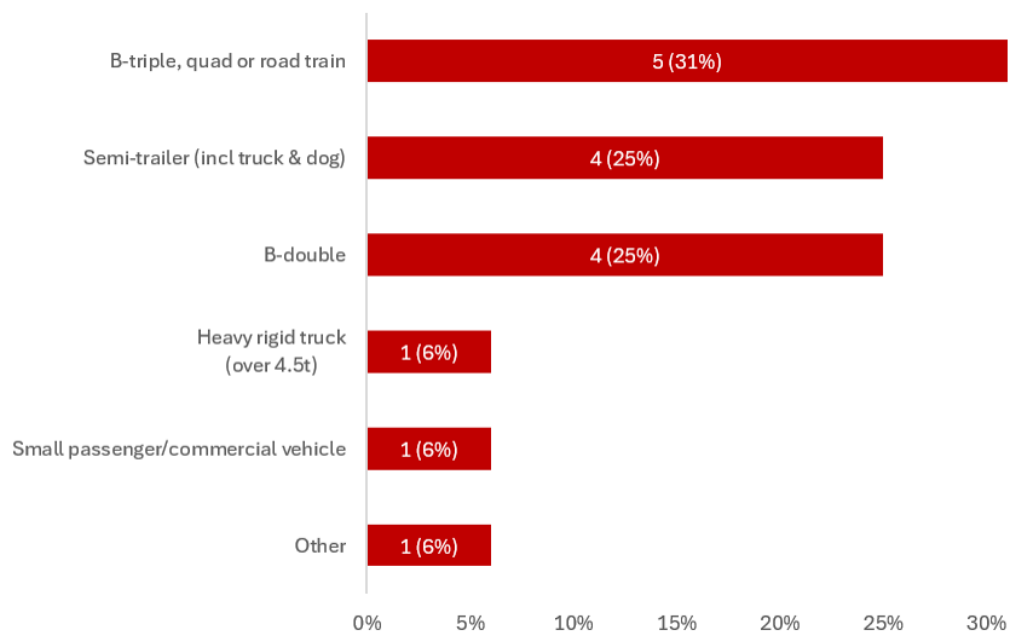


Figure 8: Largest vehicle driven (female respondents)

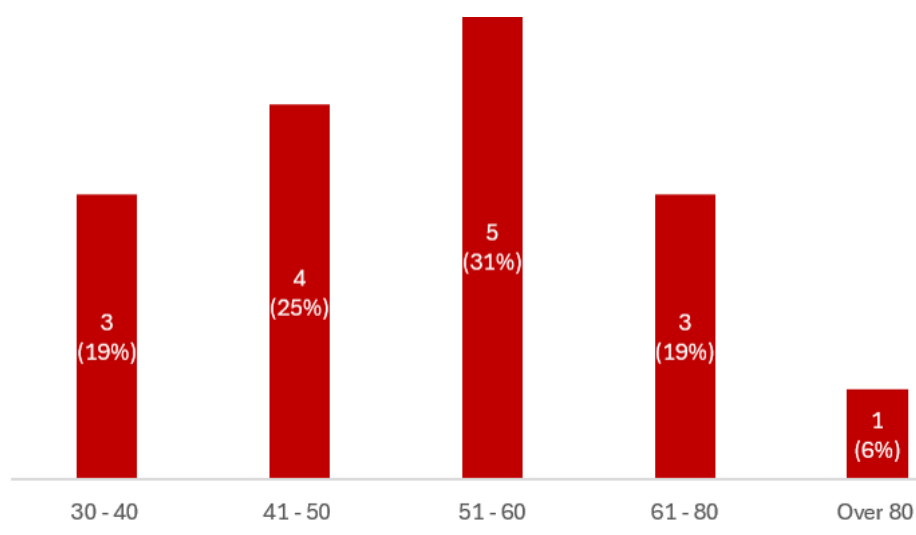


Figure 9: Average driving hours (female respondents)

3.2.3 Site visit and field observations

Two members of the research team, including the lead investigator, went on a site visit from November 9 to 14, 2025. The site visit was hosted by the Pilbara Heavy Haulage Girls (PHHG) in Geraldton, Western Australia. Geraldton is a strategically important regional freight hub, servicing grain, mining and agricultural transport corridors and providing a setting in which the structural conditions of regional and remote heavy vehicle work could be observed in context.

The site visit was conducted to capture the physical, sensory, and social dimensions of the trucking work environment that could not be accessed through interviews or surveys alone. During these visits, researchers applied reflexive ethnographic practice, taking detailed field notes with rich descriptions of sites, events, and interactions – including sensory impressions, spatial arrangements, gendered use of space, and the everyday rhythms of work.^{48,49}

3.3 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to examine qualitative data from the interviews and open-ended survey responses. Thematic analysis is a form of qualitative data analysis that principally focuses on identifying, organising and interpreting themes in textual data.^{50,51} NVIVO 12 was used for data management and analysis. Descriptive and statistical analysis of quantitative data from survey responses was undertaken using SPSS Version 30.

3.4 Ethics approval

This research received human research ethics clearance from the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Canberra Human Research Ethics Advisory Panel A (iRECS8908). The research was classified as low risk in accordance with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

Findings



"I'm the only girl out of about 70 guys." – DR9.

The findings are organised across four focus areas that together present a multi-layered picture of women's experiences in the Australian trucking industry. Rather than treating these areas as discrete or sequential, they are best understood as overlapping dimensions of a single, complex story about what it means to be a woman working in one of the country's most persistently male-dominated industries.

The first focus area establishes the broader industry landscape including the heavily gendered workforce profile that has increasingly brought questions of diversity and inclusion to the surface. Within this context, section 4.1 also presents other findings on perceptions of driver training and driver licensing as entry points into the industry. From there, the results presented in section 4.2 turn to how women are positioned within trucking: how they enter the industry, how the industry receives them, and what they bring to work.

This is followed by a detailed examination in section 4.3 of the cultural and structural barriers that continue to shape women drivers' day-to-day experiences, from overt sexism and inadequate facilities as well as the subtler dynamics of credibility questioning and exclusion.

The final focus area shifts from challenges to agency, documenting in section 4.4 the strategies women draw on to navigate and manage challenges and conditions surrounding the trucking industry. Across all four areas, the findings point to not only what needs to change, but to the considerable strengths and resilience that women already bring to the industry.

4.1 About the trucking industry

4.1.1 Male-dominated industry profile

The trucking industry is an essential pillar of world economies, moving the great majority of goods across roads and highways that connect producers to consumers. The importance of the road transport industry is similar in Australia. To quote the landmark national inquiry report by the Australian Senate's Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee led by Senator Glenn Sterle, 'Without Trucks Australia Stops'.⁵²

As established in our introduction, against the backdrop of its immense economic significance, trucking remains one of the most gender-homogeneous industries in the workforce.¹³ This perception about the male-dominated industry profile surfaces in our data as an undeniable fact with interview participants confirming that the gender profile of the Australian trucking industry is male dominated.

"Trucking is still very male dominated." – DR4.

"I heard a term the other day called male populated instead of male dominated, and that's like a nice twist on it. And it's definitely male-populated." – DR2.

Interviewees also mentioned many instances of being the only female in their team and how this can pose a myriad of challenges for them (for more details, see Section 4.3).

"Everywhere I've worked, I've been the only female." – DR8.

"I could be out on the road all day travelling like for 12 hours and I might see one woman." – DR2.

While the industry's worker profile is considered male-dominated, there is a clear recurring sentiment that the trucking industry is transitioning towards building a more diverse workforce which includes gender diversity.⁵³

"In my time...I guess the past 20 odd years...I've gone from being hired as a joke to then having to prove myself and then gaining respect in what I was doing...to a time where companies are screaming to put on female employees, especially in the transport industry." – DR3.

"I'm a firm believer that there's a big change coming, a huge change coming. There's a big shake-up coming and we're all at the forefront of that. Very exciting things are to come." – KI06 (when talking about women in trucking).

Despite these signals of change in the transport industry, other views indicated just how slowly this change is occurring and how far the current industry profile is from one that can be considered truly diverse and inclusive.

"This is the thing. They want more women in the industry, but they do nothing to accommodate women at all. Or like even, yeah, things like that that would make girls want to join the industry. They don't, it's always like an afterthought or a burden to have them." – DR9.

"Some companies advertise that they're specifically looking for women, they will train them to obtain and pay for their licenses... But then once these women are in the industry, that support sort of diminishes." – DR3.

"And there's another 10% (of companies) that are actually going backwards, who are absolutely not like we are. We are keeping this culture (inclusive), but they're like really like anti women, anti diversity and they're kind of almost having an allergic reaction to diversity." – KI01.

Understanding the trucking industry's male-dominated industry profile and culture (see Section 4.3.1) is a necessary foundation to deeply examining the career experiences of women who enter the industry. Indeed, this contextual characteristic of the transport industry helps illuminate why women who enter this industry face specific challenges but also have unique opportunities in their careers.

4.1.2 Labour shortage

Both survey and interview participants were keenly aware of the serious structural shortage of truck drivers in the road transport industry confirming the labour gaps discussed in the introduction. Many expressed the need for 'bums on seats'.

"They're desperate for drivers. The industry, mom and dad companies all the way through to the top of the supply chain are desperate for drivers." – KI01.

Participants also described harmful industry practices emerging from the need to quickly fill the industry's workforce gaps. This has dangerous implications for road safety, not just for truck drivers themselves but also for the general population with whom they share the roads. Emerging strongly from survey and interview responses, were perceptions of a sharp decline in the skills and competency of newer drivers. This concern was shared by drivers, transport operators and advocates.

"I think you know you talk to some of the people around, in the industry, and have been in the industry for a long time, they have to hire people whose skills and standards are less and less. They have to hire them because we need bums on seats." – KI02 (Male).

The acknowledgement of the industry's labour shortage further solidifies the business case for greater inclusion of women in the industry (see Section 2.2). Still, participants were particularly clear that numbers alone are not enough. Those who enter the industry must be well-trained, competent, and legitimately hold the necessary licenses to do the job safely and effectively. Next, we offer findings in relation to these important aspects including perceptions about driver training and driver licensing.

"It's a common saying in the industry here. It's bums on seats."
– KI02 (Male).

4.1.3 Driver training

Survey responses suggest truck drivers typically undertake short driver training courses of one to two days duration. Short driver training courses were undertaken by 267 respondents (67% of n=267), with 12% of these (n=47) taken in the last 12 months, 37% (n=149) more than 12 months ago, and 18% (n=71) undertaken multiple times. Very few drivers completed any form of truck maintenance training, with 74% (n=292) reporting never having training in truck maintenance. Approximately 44% of women and 34% of men had completed truck driver courses in preparation for obtaining or upgrading their truck licence. Training was also undertaken at the request of an employer by 34% of men and 25% of women.

Interviews with driver trainers revealed that they generally perceived women trainees to be more cautious learners and more open to training compared to male learners.

"I think like just in general, the men seem to have this overconfidence, and the girls seem to like, think it through a little bit more or be a little bit from the outside. It might look like they're a little bit more nervous, but the boys are like, oh, look, I can just do it. And I'm like, you have no training and that you may die. Don't do that. And the girl just like. Oh, OK. I've never done this before. Can somebody show me?" – KI01 Trainer.

"When you're talking to the guys, it's probably an ego involved and they've always done in a certain way. You know, I've had a lot of women who have horses, they have to get a horse truck license, and they come to me and great students. They know what they've got to do, listen, turn up, try, take advice and they and they do really well. Where as a lot of the time I get... blokes, it is a blokey industry and men need their truck license. So, they come along and they have an idea that they're gun operators, you know, and they don't listen to me, and they fail their assessment. I mean, I can talk about that for hours. So, there is a gender aspect to that. I'm all for inclusion and equality. And I've had some really good experiences teaching ladies how to drive trucks." – KI03 Trainer.

Moreover, in one of our trainer interviews, an example of observed differences in how male and female trainers deliver instructions was particularly noteworthy. The interviewee suggested their female trainer provides detailed, contextual instructions where some male trainers give minimal style directions. Demonstrating this male versus female approach to training instructions,

"This is a man's way of training... I said to him so, I know nothing, you tell me what to do, I know nothing. 'Yeah, we're gonna turn left down here', and I was in one of these trucks, four trailers. 200 ton. And it was like. on that second post. We're gonna turn left here some road. Then they're loaded, and there are these hills up ahead. Okay, so you need to know that because you need to be able to get your momentum to power up, otherwise you're stuck uphill and I said so, it was just this road. It's a bit windy and I've been sweating and sweating, going mate...I have been driving for 30 something years at that time, so I was an experienced driver. And I'm sweating, getting nervous. And when we get to the mine, he goes, yeah, go to channel 32. Okay, put your bins up when you park there. So, the tippers and the lid comes up like this. 'That's it. Tell me what to do next.' Oh yeah, put your boots down there. Here, go the way bridge. Yeah, good to go." – KID01 Trainer.

The female trainer further expressed,

"So, if I was training, this is what I would say. So about a kilometre down. Here, we're going to have a slip lane, so I need you to start, we're gonna turn left. I need to start gearing down now so that's a little slip lane. And then, when we get on that road, we're going to have some real challenging hills so I need you to be really down in the low here. Yeah, so you've got that momentum to go up and down. I'll talk you through the hills and what gear I think you should be in. Don't panic. I'm here, but just I'll tell you when to put the foot down. and when to back off. When we come into the inn to be loaded. I want you to just pull up, first of all, on the left, and we'll just do a little quick walk around and have a look. Have a chat. We use Channel 32 there. We're going to talk to the loader, and we're going to say yep, one, two in that one or whatever if you're not comfortable with that, they should know what to put in your trailer. So before that, head up so they could do it. Go around with a broom, make sure there's no dirt on the road, and it will pull over meet about the toilet over the toilet, you know, like, that's how I train. So the difference between men and women is so huge. So training new drivers on the truck is different because you experienced it. like "Yeah turn left. Yep". So that's not training, that's just giving/delivering instructions."

Perceived training quality

Interviewees were very critical of key aspects of driver training quality. Dominant themes were that courses are far too short to cover important skills and competencies, and that they lack sufficient, if any, practical 'hands-on' training. Cited multiple times were other criticisms, including a perceived mismatch between generic course content focused on compliance rather than the skills a driver needs for their role; an over-reliance on web-based, online training or paper-based training that provides limited opportunity for questions or clarifications; and the variable quality of trainers, which range from very experienced and knowledgeable to lacking skills in adult learning practices, or knowledge and experience of the transport industry.

"For [residents of] Sweden to be able to get into any truck...it's nine months before you let out in the road, [in] Australia it's four to eight hours. Germany's 12 months to five years, depending on what training you do before you're allowed to go by yourself. And America is three months. Okay, so you have to go to school for one month. Actually, go to the school and you learn all the paper theory. Then you have a driver trainer sit with you in the truck up to six to 12 weeks." – KID01 (on the inadequacy of training in Australia).

"It was awful. Tick and flick. Don't care if they actually learn anything. 'These questions are hard, so make sure that you explain—give them the answer because these ones are hard'. They can't just read it out of the book. They've actually got to think about it." I was like 'isn't that the point? To teach them to think about it?'
– KI01 (on generic course content).

"This is the problem—minimum standard compliance for things that are written by people that have never driven a truck before. Bless them, they're doing the best they can, but now we know better. So now I've been starting to get invited into round tables and things because I can drive, I can write programs and I can train."
– KI04 (on generic course content and trainer competencies).

"They talk about online truck training. What? You know, doing a trucking hitch, that's the obvious one. But the momentum, the physics of, the experience of, and all that industry related stuff, can only happen behind the wheel."
– KI03 (on the importance of hands-on training).

"Then industry goes 'well, why didn't the guy who gave you your truck license tell you that?' And then the truck license guy goes 'I've only got to teach them how to steer it, mate. It's not my responsibility.'
– KI01 (on variability of trainer competencies and perceived responsibility).

Suggestions for improving training

To address these concerns research participants offered a broad range of suggested improvements. Drivers were strong advocates for greater supervised driving during the training process, and an increased trainer focus on trainee skill development over throughput. Recommendations included a need for more training, and for training to be practical, relevant, and/or delivered in the truck by trainers with lived experience of truck driving. This included a need to better target the skills that drivers need on the road, such as load restraints, reversing trailers, rules around logbooks and rest breaks, training on the specific vehicle types the person would then be authorized to drive, and driving in poor conditions.

"Dedicate more time to physically loading and unloading vehicles in a safe and secure way, not out of a book. More practice time physically driving in various scenarios, loaded and unloaded. Performing proper vehicle inspections with the appropriate people to understand exactly what you're looking at so you know when there is a fault or problem (issues with brake boosters etc). Detailed on road training in driver etiquette (coming up to narrow bridges, overtaking long / large loads, proper use of UHF and appropriate terminology). Old school drivers teaching location names so other drivers know what you're talking about. Teach trailer swing paths in actual settings not a passing mention in a packed module dedicated to warehouse safety." – S266.

Drivers were also keen for greater mentoring, both before and after securing a licence. For example,

"You really do need to have the older guys on a mentor list. Mentors like, you know, a national register for mentors. I ran this by quite a few bodies. 'Oh, that's a good idea'. Nothing happens, nothing." – KI01.

"More actual on the job training needs to be undertaken for inexperienced drivers in properly equipped vehicles with real world experienced trainers." – S458.

"Allow upcoming drivers or potential younger drivers to [accompany] working drivers on shifts to gain industry experience before getting their license." – S425.

Experienced trainers also shared their strategies for driver training. For example, one shared,

"That's where we do storytelling, too...we do storytelling because the story will sit in your mind a lot better than anything else...and that's what I believe all of us should be using [talking about simulation]...like pilots, they go every year...when we're training nurses, doctors, they do simulation...the actual practical work to learn it. It's not theories you read." – KI01.

4.1.4 Driver licencing

Consistent with the concerns outlined above, and in opposition to current industry pressures for more rapid licencing and progression through heavy vehicle licence classes, the research participants supported mandating more, not less, training and experience for new drivers. Most prevalent were calls for more demonstrated driving experience before moving from one licence class to a higher licence class.

"I think to go from a car to a heavy rigid licence should be more than one day. Should be about 3 then employer training after that." – S98.

"More training, especially with obtaining your license." – S255.

"More time spent learning the job, not just handed the keys and "off you go"." – S356.

Research participants also raised concerns about a need for ongoing training. This included replacing the current 'get and forget' licencing model with a requirement to reconfirm driver knowledge and practical skills testing at regular intervals. For example,

"Completely overhaul the training for heavy vehicle licensing and impose mandatory testing on all license renewals as they come through (beginning with computer knowledge test on road rules)." – S266.

Both interviewees and survey respondents drew parallels between heavy vehicle licencing and trade licencing, suggesting an apprenticeship model would be a useful way to ensure greater supervised training and skill development was available to new drivers. They also noted that a structured apprenticeship scheme could attract new entrants by positioning truck driving as a genuine competitor to traditional trades in the minds of young people:

"There are systems in place. There's sort of things happening in the background now, but an apprenticeship scheme would be brilliant because you're attracting people into the industry competing with that trade age where they're going 'Oh, my goodness. What are we gonna do? I'm gonna do electrical, plumbing, building, whatever. But I can also choose truck driving.'" – DR9.

"Driver training programs and making Truck Driving a recognised trade. Incentive for young people to join." – S356.

Underpinning this argument was a strong conviction about the skill and professionalism a truck driver's job demands:

"It is a skill and it is an incredible skill. Where they back these trucks into, where they put them, where they turn, where they do stuff – they are big machines and they're phenomenal. A truck and trailer combination is worth a lot of money, and the load that they're carrying is worth a lot of money. So it's a really professional job and I think by having an apprenticeship scheme, it would also elevate – if you've got a trade or you've got a certificate saying what you've done, you're proud of that achievement." – DR9.

For this participant, formalising truck driving through an apprenticeship framework would serve a dual purpose: broadening the talent pipeline by making the profession competitive with traditional trades, while elevating the status and professional identity of those working within the industry.

International licence conversion

A need for stronger guard rails around the conversion of international licences was raised repeatedly, by both interview and survey participants. Current practices drew particularly harsh criticism; levelled primarily at perceived shortfalls in training and assurance for workers driving multicomination vehicles on converted international licences

"Be harsher on international drivers, and make sure that they actually understand our road signs and what they say/mean. It's all well and good to be able to steer a truck, but if you can't understand what the road signs say, you've got no idea." – S459.

"I would make it more uniform across the country that everyone has a high level of training before they get in trucks and that there's no loopholes to get your licence so that way everyone in the road you can't discriminate because you know that everyone's done the hard yards because at the moment there's a lot of what we call like cereal licences like, you know, like they've just got out of a box, kind of thing. ...hopefully that could cut out a bit of this racism. I wish that these international companies couldn't open up because we're ruining Australian companies that have been around for years and these other companies are price fixing." – DR2.

These criticisms highlight both the potential safety risk that unskilled drivers pose to themselves and other road users, and the palpable level of frustration and animosity that exists in the driving community. Importantly, the results suggest a failure to address concerns about ensuring the skills and competency of drivers with converted international licences has two important implications. First, overseas-born drivers who are appropriately skilled and experienced face significant risks of discrimination and harassment (see Section 5.3). Second, perceptions that newer drivers lack adequate skills is contributing to the problem of retaining experienced drivers.

4.2 Women in trucking: perceptions and contributions

4.2.1 Are women drivers welcome?

Survey participants were asked to give their perceptions as to whether women were welcome to fill the role of truck drivers in the road transport sector. The results reveal most survey respondents, 96.5% of whom were men, expressed support for the inclusion of women in the industry. These responses are summarised in Table 2.

Table 3: Survey participants' attitudes towards women in transport

Item	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Int
There is opportunity for women to enter the transport industry (n=449)	227 (51%)	159 (35%)	44 (10%)	13 (3%)	6 (1%)	4.31	SA
The transport industry will benefit from more women drivers (n=448)	169 (38%)	126 (28%)	126 (28%)	14 (3%)	13 (3%)	3.95	SA
Women drivers are welcome in the transport industry (n=448)	147 (33%)	174 (39%)	84 (19%)	33 (7%)	10 (2%)	3.93	SA

Note. Percentages are based on proportion of responses for each item. Mean pertains to the average responses for the item. Int refers to response interpretation. SA means "Somewhat Agree".

Importantly, this data reveals a notable gap between the perceived opportunity for women and their genuine inclusion in the industry. Survey respondents were broadly confident that opportunities exist for women to enter the industry, with 86% agreeing (51% strongly). However, when the question shifted, agreement softened considerably with only 72% agreeing (33% strongly) that women drivers are welcome and only 66% agreeing (38% strongly) that the transport industry will benefit from more women drivers.

As expressed by one female driver, if approached by a possible new female driver aspirant, she would be supportive but would also advise about the need for a “thick skin”, signalling industry challenges ahead.

“Sadly, I feel like as far along as we’ve come, or as things have come, I would still say to a young woman...If this is what you want to do, do it. Don’t let anybody stop you. You are more than capable of everything and anything. Have thick skin. That would be my advice.” – DR3.

As described in Section 3.1.1, while there is some acknowledgment that the trucking industry is transitioning towards becoming more gender-inclusive, the broad survey findings reveal a gap between perceived opportunities available for women and views about how welcome they are in trucking.

4.2.2 How women enter trucking?

Women gain work in trucking through a diverse range of pathways, and their motivations rarely fit a single narrative. Still, there are notable similarities in how women enter the industry.

For many participants, family connections and early experiences were foundational, revealing how knowledge of and passion for trucking can be distinctly passed down across generations.

“I grew up on a farm, so I’ve been driving a truck since I was about 10, just sitting around on the farm. As soon as I got my car licence when I was 15 so I could work on school holidays, it then led to me getting my HR when I was 17 and I got my MC when I was 18. So by the time I was 21, I’d already been driving B-doubles and triples, carting sheep and cows and grain and stuff like that. When I was twenty-one I got offered a job in Port Hedland driving a quad, which is the four-trailer, 60-metre long road trains.” – KI04.

“I’m actually a widow to a truckie. He wanted to do it together – we had this whole plan to drive together. And then unfortunately two years ago I lost him, and it really cemented in me that I want to do it for him, I want to drive for him... I want to continue that legacy on for him, and then I kind of fell in love with it – I don’t think I’ll ever get out of it.” – DR4.

Growing up around trucks, on farms, or in family transport businesses normalises heavy vehicles early in life and makes obtaining a licence a practical and logical step, whether to help out during harvest or keep a family operation running. For instance,

“They weren’t a big transport business or anything like that, but they had trucks. I spent a fair bit of time in the passenger seat with my mum, carting primarily dairy cattle around. So that’s where my love of livestock come from.” – DR6.

Some women described long held but closeted aspirations to drive trucks, career dreams they did not declare publicly or had set aside because the industry seemed inaccessible or socially off-limits, only to find their way in later through circumstance or encouragement.

“I went to school in Sydney, I would sort of, oh, you know, what is it you want to aspire to be? I learned very quickly not to say a truck driver because they just looked at you like, what? Like, why? Why? You’re a girl. Why would you want to be a truck driver?” – DR6.

“Essentially, I was pretty well born into it. Mum and dad had trucks”
– DR6.

Others come to trucking from other male-dominated trades, particularly diesel mechanics (DR7), where they had already weathered significant gendered discrimination, harassment, and exclusion, and where trucking presented itself as a lateral move into adjacent, accessible work.

"I was working in traffic control, to be honest, and I was standing there freezing and shaking that hard and I had that many clothes on. And I just looked at the truck drives and went, that looked nice and warm and dry. Yeah, okay, I reckon I could do that [drive trucks]." – DR7.

Further, interview participants articulated clear career aspirations. Remaining in the industry was rarely borne out of necessity or lack of alternatives. From the outset, many women were already looking ahead, planning next steps and setting their sights on longer-term goals within the industry. Whether that was progressing to larger vehicle combinations, obtaining their MC licence, moving into owner-operator arrangements, or building long-term careers in specialised sectors, women truck drivers found their work to be genuinely rewarding, with candid statements revealing the pleasure in the work itself:

"Who doesn't want to drive a big truck? Like, it's pretty cool. It's really cool." – DR2.

"I get paid to see the countryside, I get paid to go places no one else goes." – DR4.

Women overwhelmingly spoke of the freedom and sense of empowerment that comes with driving a heavy vehicle as something that sustained them in the work. The open road, independence from close managerial oversight, and the confidence that comes from mastering a physically demanding and skilled occupation were recurring themes across interviews. DR2 captured something of this directly:

"I like the freedom of being out on the road and not having to have a manager looking over my shoulder... I loved like the confidence I got from that, and like the camaraderie." – DR2.

The lower formal entry barriers are also significant. Unlike many professions, truck driving does not require a university degree and can be entered directly from school, making it an attractive option for young women seeking well-paid, independent work without first needing to complete years of tertiary study.

"Look, if you're gonna work all the time, like a lot, you'll make good money. This what I think to put it in perspective, this is something you can get into without graduate qualifications. No HECS debt." – KI07.

Finally, one of the more unexpected findings of this research was the degree to which the trucking industry functions as a pathway to safety and independence for women fleeing domestic violence. The combination of mobile accommodation, financial autonomy, and geographic anonymity that long-haul driving provides can represent a genuine lifeline for women escaping dangerous situations. Unlike many industries where entry requires lengthy qualifications, financial investment, or stable housing as a precondition, trucking can be a job, an income and a place to live:

"I come from a really bad domestic violence situation, so I was married for seven years ...nearly lost my life a few times. ...[when he left] a friend of mine said to me. 'If you promise the girls won't get in the truck, you can come and drive for me'. I already had my truck license and motorbike licence and everything." – KID01.

This participant went on to become a trainer and now actively channels that experience into supporting others in similar situations, demonstrating how the pathway can become self-reinforcing when women who have navigated it are positioned to bring others through:

"We do a lot of work with domestic violence survivors, so we've got four at the moment." – KID01 (trainer).

The practical aspects of this pattern were also observed by a male industry stakeholder, who noted that interstate driving, in particular, offers a rare combination of employment and accommodation that can be transformative for women who are homeless or financially precarious following relationship breakdown:

“An aspect of interstate driving is that if you get a job interstate, you get a mobile home as well as a job and a lot of ladies that’s of an age and marital status, divorced, homeless. It’s an incredible untapped resource there to give ladies a job driving interstate, moving freight around the country and living in the truck.”
– KI03 (male).

Participants consistently emphasised that truck driving is well paid work, with many describing the immediate financial rewards as one of the industry’s most compelling drawcards. For women entering from a position of financial vulnerability, this is particularly significant.

Across these varied pathways runs a common thread. Trucking offers autonomy, direct financial reward for hours worked, and a kind of freedom from office-based hierarchies that appeals to women who want to work on their own terms, even if the industry they enter is far from welcoming once they arrive.

4.2.3 Women’s contributions to the trucking industry

Participants across the interviews identified a range of qualities that women were seen to bring to the industry, though it is worth noting that these observations reflect perceived patterns rather than fixed characteristics, and risk reinscribing gendered expectations if taken too literally.

Detail orientation

Detail orientation and care towards assets and equipment were among the attributes most consistently cited by women. KI06 observed that women tend not to take shortcuts, regardless of the task, whether strapping down a load, completing paperwork, or maintaining a vehicle, describing an attitude in which precision is applied consistently across all aspects of the job:

“Women do not cut corners in the trucking industry. Regardless of what they’re doing, whether they’re strapping down or they’re filling out paperwork or whatever they’re doing, they make sure it’s done properly and they don’t cut corners.” – KI06.

“I think we’re more accurate, where men they just go... blinkers on and just go... I’m more observant of my surroundings, and I’m always double checking everything. And I’m always, I’m very particular when it comes to my deliveries and my customers, because I’ve got regular customers. Yeah, I make sure everything’s up like 110% and perfect, so you’re very, very detailed about.” – DR1.

“[Women] do take care of equipment...a lot of us look after it like we're looking after a child, or our home.”

Equipment care

Some participants observed that women tend to treat vehicles with a sense of custodial responsibility, understand the significant financial, economic and practical value that a truck represents, and more likely to raise issues, such as equipment faults or required maintenance, proactively rather than letting problems go unreported:

“A lot of us look after it like we're looking after a child, or our home... I'm in the truck more than I am at home, so I look after it very well. I drive it nicely. I've seen a lot of men who drive very rough — their bunk is probably really messy, they smoke in the cab. I feel like women are a good asset. They look after the gear, they're smooth on the gear. It's probably that softer nature — being kind and gentle. I've seen some men out there that are just so grotty, and it's no wonder they appreciate women in the industry.” – DR5.

A recurring observation across interviews was that women tend to be safer and more considered in how they approach both driving and vehicle maintenance. Participants noted that women are less likely to take risks on the road, more attentive to the condition of their vehicles, and more willing to flag mechanical issues before they become serious problems:

“Women bring a different style of driving—a calmer, safer, more measured approach to driving.” – DR10.

This was attributed not to any inherent difference but to the particular care and conscientiousness that women were seen to bring to work in which the stakes, financial, physical, and legal, are high. In an industry where vehicle condition directly affects road safety and where the costs of breakdowns or accidents fall on drivers, operators, and the broader public alike, these qualities carry real operational significance.

Communication skills

Communication skills were also identified as a professional strength with tangible operational benefits. KI06 drew a direct line between women's communication practices and client satisfaction, suggesting that consistent, clear communication produces better outcomes for companies and contributes to stronger working relationships across the supply chain:

“Females communicate really well. As a result of good communication, they're communicating with dispatch, they're communicating with clients, which means companies have happier clientele because they're getting that communication.” – KI06.

Empathy and patience

Several participants also pointed to empathy and patience as qualities women brought to workplace interactions. KI02, a male respondent, reflected that women tend to be more attuned to what colleagues might be going through personally, contrasting this with a prevailing masculine culture in which emotional difficulty is more likely to be dismissed:

“They'll know this person might be having some problems at home. And they can have a bit more empathy, whereas the guys in the industry, it's, we're a little bit more like, just toughen up princess. Don't be a sook.” – KI02 (Male).

“I think, in my experience, most of the time women just have that, by nature they're generally maybe a little bit more patient, and a lot more understanding.” – KI02 (Male).

Foster positive work environments

Perhaps most interestingly, KI02 (male) also reflected on the effect that women's presence had on his own behaviour and that of male colleagues more broadly, noting that men tended to moderate their language and conduct around women in ways that made the workplace more respectful overall:

"I think sometimes men have changed their attitude a little bit around women in the workforce. And I like to think generally... men have a little bit better manners around women. They swear a little bit less. The topics of discussion change a little bit better. You know, a little bit more family friendly, you might say...and that's a good thing... I've found that I tend to be a little bit more polite. Use my manners a little bit more." – KI02 (Male).

While this kind of improvement should not depend on the presence of women to prompt it, the observation nonetheless points to the broader cultural and social benefits that greater inclusion can generate.

4.3 Challenges for women in trucking

Table 4 summarises the perceptions of survey participants about the likelihood of specific challenges for women in the transport industry. Almost a third of survey respondents (33%) expressed that women are extremely likely to face scrutiny of their technical competence while a quarter (26%) expressed that they are extremely likely to face work-family conflict and be at risk of sexual harassment. On average, respondents perceived that women are somewhat likely to experience those challenges, and also experience harassment, gender discrimination and tensions with male drivers. These are summarised in Table 5 by perceived likelihood.

Table 4: Survey respondents' perceptions of challenges for women in the transport industry

Item	Extremely Likely	Somewhat Likely	Neither Likely nor Unlikely	Somewhat Unlikely	Extremely Unlikely	Mean	Int
Scrutiny of technical competence (n=445)	147 (33%)	182 (41%)	93 (21%)	19 (4%)	4 (1%)	4.01	SL
Work-family conflict (n=446)	116 (26%)	205 (46%)	116 (26%)	5 (1%)	4 (1%)	3.95	SL
Risk of sexual harassment (n=445)	110 (25%)	200 (45%)	100 (22%)	23 (5%)	12 (3%)	3.84	SL
Gender discrimination (n=446)	97 (22%)	184 (41%)	115 (26%)	26 (6%)	24 (5%)	3.68	SL
Tensions with male drivers (n=446)	57 (13%)	188 (42%)	159 (36%)	31 (7%)	11 (2%)	3.56	SL
Unequal access to career opportunity (n=445)	70 (16%)	160 (36%)	140 (32%)	45 (10%)	30 (7%)	3.44	N
Isolation from the transport community (n=446)	41 (9%)	155 (35%)	168 (38%)	55 (12%)	27 (6%)	3.29	N
Tensions with female transport drivers (n=445)	21 (5%)	106 (24%)	231 (52%)	60 (13%)	27 (6%)	3.08	N

Note. Percentages are based on proportion of responses for the item. Mean pertains to the average response. Int pertains to response interpretation. SL means "Somewhat Likely", N means "Neither Likely nor Unlikely"

4.3.1 Industry culture

In Section 4.1.1, we discussed the male-dominated trucking industry profile and sentiments that the industry is in transition towards building a more gender-diverse workforce, despite slow progress in this regard. Our interview findings also reveal that workplace culture in the trucking industry was by no means uniform. Participants described meaningful variation by geography, sector, and company size. A participant described the overall culture as:

"Women often have to earn it twice as hard. There's a mix of mateship, resilience, high expectations and strong personalities. There's also still sexism, gatekeeping and harassment in some workplaces." – DR4.

The 'old school' attitude was infrequent but nonetheless evident in survey responses, such as:

"They [Females] can't do the job. The physical stuff. When my boss ask me to help them I tell him to piss off. You want your DEI hires that get paid the same as me and can't do it, fuck off. I am not carrying them." – DR4.

However, those attitudes were in the minority. Other (male) drivers said:

"Some ladies are more petite than others and some of the equipment used in the industry can be quite heavy. However, a smaller framed man can have the same issues but it is acceptable for him to ask for help. A smaller lady asks for help and there are too many who would just frown and shake their heads instead of rolling their sleeves up. Team work makes the dream work." – S238 (Male).

"I have worked with a fantastic female colleague for over three years now that does nothing but give everything a go to the best of their ability." – S258 (Male).

Invisibility of women in transport

A recurring theme across interviews was the invisibility of women in transport. Participants consistently described working in environments where female drivers were rare, and where encountering another woman on the road was a notable event. For some, this isolation was a daily reality within their own workplace. As one participant reflected:

"I'm the only female driver within the company. I've only ever worked for one other trucking company that had female drivers." – DR4.

Others spoke of a similar experience across entire regions. One participant, who had done much of her driving in remote areas, noted:

"Very rarely would you meet another female in the industry, particularly up north where I did a lot of my driving. I worked with a couple of women at some places, but they were typically part of two-up teams." – DR10.

Yet despite this scarcity, participants also spoke of the quiet camaraderie that formed when women did find one another. One participant offered a nuanced picture of the women she had encountered across the industry:

"It's mostly men. However, ... I've met a few females. I'd say the age range is probably 40 to 50. We have a young lady who's about 28, and another who's 30... There's a diverse range of us out there. Every time I pull up for fuel somewhere, every now and then a woman pops up out of nowhere and comes to talk to you. There are a lot of women out there, but it's just hard to find them." – DR5.

"A lot of the culture is old school. There are some supportive men and great workplaces, but there are also environments where women consistently have to prove themselves. Respect isn't always given."
– DR4.

This sense of dispersal - women present but scattered - was echoed in recollections of working in remote settings, where being one of only a handful of women among dozens of men could give rise to an unexpectedly close community:

"It takes—if you're gonna go out to an exploration camp, one of my favourite jobs ever. We lived in tents. I lived in the truck for like 6 months. There were four women and about thirty-seven blokes, and we were cooking our own dinner on the campfire every night if we wanted to. There was a caravan where you could go and get your food. There was no mobile phone reception. There was nothing. We had to connect with each other. We had the best time because people had to connect with each other. We had to sit around. That was it. We'd all—'right, you're in charge of music tonight, great. You go and pick something. And tomorrow it's [name] turn.' And we'd get to know a bit about you through the music you liked. And then we'd all talk, have something to talk about." – KI04

Taken together, these accounts paint a picture of an industry in which women have long been present, but rarely in sufficient numbers to form a visible community.

Where this did vary, geography and sector were identified as key factors. DR3 observed that regional workplaces, particularly in agriculture, tended to be more accepting of women in non-traditional roles than metropolitan construction environments, where gender norms were more rigidly enforced. DR4 drew a similar geographic distinction, describing Queensland as less supportive and more cliquish in its culture, while southern regions were characterised as more family-oriented and helpful, though the challenges were acknowledged as persisting everywhere. At the sectoral level, DR6 noted that agriculture and livestock transport retained more of the mutual assistance culture that has gradually diminished in general freight, while DR7 and DR5 both described concrete and construction trucking as carrying a more challenging masculine culture compared to sectors such as grain or water trucking.

Together these accounts suggest that a woman's experience of the industry can vary considerably depending on where she works and what she hauls, and that efforts to improve culture and inclusion need to be sensitive to these differences rather than treating the industry as a single, homogenous environment.

Excessive hours

A culture of excessive working hours emerged as a serious and recurring concern across the findings, with participants describing an industry in which long shifts are often treated as an expectation rather than an exception. As shown in Figure 8, 36% of our survey respondents reported working between 61 to 80 hours per week and 24% reported working between 51 to 60 hours. Some reflected an awareness of their own limits, even while acknowledging the difficulty of stepping back:

"I need to try and back it off a little bit more because I've just been pushing too hard." – DR2.

For others, the hours were not a matter of personal choice, but of workplace culture. One participant recalled the sheer scale of the hours demanded earlier in her career:

"I don't have any bad memories, just the hours. They were ridiculous hours. We'd start at like midnight some days and go till 7 o'clock that night. They were ridiculous." – DR7.

The same participant went further, describing how pressure from employers extended beyond long hours to the falsification of records - placing drivers in an impossible position between legal compliance and their livelihoods:

"When I was driving concrete trucks, I did 2 16-hour days and then a 20-hour day...so the company gets audited, obviously, as everyone does. And on our time sheets for that 20-hour day, I had to do, say, 2 hours on the Wednesday and then put two hours from the 20 hours onto a Thursday and things like that. So, it didn't look like I did a 20 hour day." – DR7.

This dynamic, in which drivers bear the risk while employers hold the power, was identified as a systemic issue. As the same participant put it:

"I think there's so much pressure in this industry. And it all comes down to bosses. Like, we're only doing what we have to do, and even if it is, I'm not proud of the hours that I've done sometimes, and I'm very, very lucky and thankful that I haven't had an accident or anything like that. But it's all got to do with the higher ups of, well, I'm paying you, so this is what you're going to do." – DR7.

The long hours carry a broader social cost. As one key informant observed, the difficulty of maintaining a social life outside of work pushes drivers toward insularity:

“So they can be long hours, you know, and it’s hard, it’s hard to have a social life... it’s a bit like police officers, you know they, they would find it hard to socialise, so they tend to socialise amongst themselves.” – KI02 (Male).

Taken together, these accounts point to a work culture in which fatigue and isolation is unmistakable yet normalised, accountability is unevenly distributed, and the human cost — physical, psychological, and social — falls disproportionately on drivers themselves.

Isolation and mental health

Isolation and its impact on mental health also emerged as significant concerns across the findings, with participants describing the psychological toll of long hours, limited human connection, and the particular pressures of life on the road. For many drivers, the challenges began early. As one participant recalled their introduction to the industry:

“The first six months was rough. No one spoke to me, and if they did, they were quite short and abrasive and rude.” – DR3.

The relentless pace of interstate work compounded this further. The same participant reflected on how the structure of the working day left little room for rest or recovery:

“For me, with my mental health, it was hard running full throttle every day. You also have waiting times that eat into your day. So you pull up and it’s like, I’ve only got 7 hours — I go have a shower, have dinner, and then I’ve only got 5 or 6 hours left for sleep. It’s not long enough. And then you want to be able to relax. Working full throttle definitely plays with your mental health. You sleep, you eat, you wake up, you do it all over again.” – DR5.

Key informants reinforced this picture, noting that artificial urgency and staff shortages within the transport sector create unnecessary stress, reduce opportunities for community-building, and contribute to burnout. Drivers also face limited control over external factors such as traffic, weather, and customer interactions — all of which add to the significant psychological load.

The isolation of long-haul driving added another dimension to the picture. For example, participants described how the transition from local to long-distance driving marked a significant shift in mental well-being - one that many were unprepared for:

“And with mental health — something I never realised is that going from local to interstate is a very big mental health jump. It’s a lot different being stuck in that cab every day and not getting out of it.” – DR5.

DR5 described bringing a dog on road trips as a personal strategy for managing the loneliness of extended time on the road, though noted that restrictions at some facilities limited the viability of even this option. Small as it may seem, the detail speaks to something larger: the ways in which women in the industry develop individual coping strategies to manage conditions that the industry itself has not adequately addressed.

Nevertheless, key informants and drivers observed that the isolating nature of truck driving can be offset by brief but meaningful social interactions at delivery sites, where established relationships can create small but supportive communities. However, increasing automation has reduced face-to-face contact, with women, who may be more likely to seek conversation and social support, are disproportionately affected by its absence (KI10).

“Prior to coming across Women in Trucking, I felt very isolated in terms of having a sisterhood in the industry. A lot of the time, I was the only female.” – KI04

Across participants and key informants alike, there was a shared recognition that the industry’s mental health support structures remain inadequate. Men, in particular, were noted to often struggle to open up, meaning that existing resources must work harder to accommodate different ways of seeking and receiving support (DR5, KI10), while ensuring that both men and women can access what they need.

Perhaps the most striking account came from a participant who spoke candidly about the emotional vulnerability that can arise when personal and professional pressures collide on the road:

"...when you're out in the truck and you've got all this stuff going on and there's a lot of moving parts, if you get a phone call from home and something at home has gone wrong, you walk a thin line. All of a sudden, you're dealing with emotional stress on top of mental stress, and it can be very fragile because you're not at home to deal with that situation. You're still at work and you have to try and turn that off to keep your mind on the job, and that can get extremely hard. I've been in that position twice where I've had absolutely gut-wrenching, horrible, heartbreaking news out on the road, to the point that I've had to pull the truck up and I've collapsed on the ground. It's like 'I'm in the middle of nowhere. How am I going to pull myself together?' You do face those things out on the road, on top of all those moving parts." – KI06

This account captures the profound emotional weight of long-haul driving, where geographic isolation from sources of social and emotional support intersects with the sustained cognitive and physical demands of operating heavy machinery and difficult road conditions, creating a form of occupational vulnerability that remains largely unacknowledged in the industry, yet must be managed while operating safely and professionally.

4.3.2 Work-life conflict

"To drive full-time and have particularly young children, it just wouldn't work unless you've got somebody or your partner's willing to stay home and be the primary parent."

– DR6.

Caring responsibilities

The survey data reveal that caring responsibilities are widespread across the trucking workforce (n=254), with 52% of mostly male respondents reporting to have caring responsibilities. This challenges any assumption that care is primarily a concern for women or a minority of workers, and suggests it is in fact a majority experience across the industry.

The distribution of who participants care for adds further nuance. While young children are often the default focus of carer responsibility discussions, only 10% of drivers reported obligations to care for young children. Importantly, adolescents, adult children and aging parents/family also posed significant carer responsibilities for surveyed drivers. Taken together, this suggests that the caring load extends well beyond early parenthood and spans a much wider range of life stages and relationships than industry policies and practices tend to acknowledge. Elderly parents and spouses present an overlooked carer load and the relatively significant proportion caring for a person with a disability (6%) also points to a dimension of caring responsibility that is rarely visible in industry discussions.

"I've got kids now, and I mean, it's a thing that we have our own business so we can organise our business around us, but to drive full-time and have particularly young children, it just wouldn't work unless you've got somebody or your partner's willing to stay home and be the primary parent." – DR6

"I don't have kids at the moment, but we would like to have kids and I'm like, well, this isn't a job I could do with kids. It's just not realistic...I don't want this to come out the wrong way, but like the other truck drivers, a lot of them are just single." – DR9

Table 5: Caring responsibilities of survey participants

Item	Frequency	Percentage	Male		Female	
			Freq	%	Freq	%
Have caring responsibilities?						
Yes	254	52%	243	51%	10	63%
No	230	47%	225	48%	5	31%
Who they care for?						
Adult children	66	13%	63	13%	3	19%
Elderly parent/family	58	12%	54	11%	4	25%
Adolescents	57	12%	55	12%	1	6%
Young children	48	10%	45	10%	2	12%
Person with a disability	30	6%	29	6%	1	6%
Spouse or partner	27	6%	27	6%	0	0%
Did caring responsibilities affect work?						
Yes	112	47%	107	47%	4	40%
No	92	39%	87	38%	5	50%
Prefer not to say	33	14%	32	14%	1	10%

Note. All Frequencies (Freq) refers to frequency of affirmative responses. For male and female results, percentages refer to proportion of submitted responses within the gender category. Only those who had caring responsibilities were asked if these affected their work (n=237 responses received).

Perhaps most striking is the impact of caring responsibilities on truck drivers' work. A survey question exploring that interaction, found that 47% of the 237 responses to that question reported that caring responsibilities did affect their work. That nearly half of sampled carers reported to experience conflict between their caring duties and their work is a finding that warrants serious attention, particularly given the industry's ongoing difficulty retaining drivers. Only 39% of carers said their responsibilities did not impact their work and further 14% preferred not to say; which may itself indicate sensitivity or concern about disclosure.

"We make it work and I think because we both love what we do, we just, we find a way to make it work. And sometimes whether the kids like it or not, they've got to jump in the passenger seat and come for a ride." – DR6

This tension was not experienced by women alone. KI10 observed that both men and women struggle to balance extended periods away from home with their family responsibilities, and advocated for job design that better accommodates caring duties across the workforce. DR6 offered a partial illustration of how some of these tensions are managed in practice: owning their own business provided drivers with greater flexibility, with partners alternating work responsibilities and drawing on extended family support during busy periods.

These results reveal caring is not a niche issue in heavy vehicle road freight but a structural one, and that job design, rostering practices and workplace culture need to account for a workforce that is, in the majority, balancing work with significant responsibilities outside of it.

Work-life balance issues

The survey data reveal that caring responsibilities are widespread across the trucking workforce (n=254), with 52% of mostly male respondents reporting to have caring responsibilities. This challenges any assumption that care is primarily a concern for women or a minority of workers, and suggests it is in fact a majority experience across the industry.

The demands of truck driving create significant challenges for work-life balance as expressed by female drivers and key informants. Childcare-related absences create vulnerability in employment and DR3 described the difficulty of being both a reliable employee and a primary carer; identifying the need to find a flexible and understanding employer as critical to making the work sustainable.

For DR9, the long and unpredictable hours made it difficult not only to spend time with friends and family, or to plan for having children in the first place. Even time to pursue personal interests was difficult and DR9 described the work as better suited to those without significant commitments outside of it.

"I like going out and doing stuff after work and having more of a work-life balance type thing. Whereas I think it's more of a job for people who are just happy to finish whenever and go home, have dinner, go to bed and just do that. Yeah, whereas that's not me at all." – DR9

This points to a structural tension at the heart of the industry: a job design that assumes a truck driver has few or no caring responsibilities continues to disadvantage those whose lives do not fit that model. Those women who value relationships and family are disproportionately affected.

"I'm really struggling with it. I reckon the last like a year I've really struggled with it...we're being expected to work all these hours. And then if we don't work the Saturday, you kind of get made to feel a bit guilty... if you're desperate [referring to employer] and you need me to work a Saturday, I'll do one every now and then I go, but I get two days off a week. We've already done...average of 55 hours during Monday to Friday. I don't want to work Saturday. Like I just don't want to do it. I want to hang out with my partner, take the dog somewhere, overnight time, go to the gym and then cook dinner...How am I meant to do exercise for myself, exercise the dogs, cook dinner, actually have a conversation with my partner and go to bed at a time where I can still get 8 hours sleep. Like that's, it's just not realistic." – DR9

DR6 and KID01 also described the value of shuttle run arrangements, where long-haul routes are split into shorter segments allowing drivers to return home more frequently. Still, it must be noted that these arrangements are harder to implement in specialised sectors such as livestock transport where the nature of the work resists that kind of predictability.

Career costs of pregnancy

The experience of pregnancy presented a particular issue for female drivers. One described becoming pregnant, only to find that her workplace had no policy in place to cover the situation, and that when she raised the need for a safe job, management was unsympathetic and unwilling or unable to accommodate her. Her pregnancy became a problem to be managed around existing structures, with the burden falling on her, rather than on the organisation.

KI04 described a similar experience of institutional inflexibility, losing her assessor accreditation at thirty-six weeks pregnant because she could no longer physically climb in and out of a truck to complete the required number of assessments. Rather than exploring what adjustments might allow her to maintain her accreditation, the response was to apply the existing process without question. As KI04 put it,

"they were like 'we've never had a pregnant assessor before, we don't know what to do'... instead of stopping and asking you a question about what would suit you, it was like 'well, this is the standard.'" – KI04

Pregnancy and motherhood remain largely unsupported and unplanned for, and the costs of that unpreparedness are borne almost entirely by women.

For this interviewee, the loss of accreditation was not simply an administrative inconvenience but a significant professional setback. Furthermore, KI04 also spoke to the social dislocation that accompanied leaving the industry to care for a child, describing the abruptness of moving from supervising forty people in a workshop to being at home alone with a baby, virtually overnight. The social fabric of working life, the daily contact, the sense of purpose and belonging, disappeared suddenly, and with it a significant part of professional identity. These experiences, taken together, point to an industry in which pregnancy and motherhood remain largely unsupported and unplanned for, and in which the costs of that unpreparedness are borne almost entirely by women.

4.3.3 Sexism and discrimination

Women drivers routinely navigate a workplace culture shaped by entrenched gendered assumptions about who belongs behind the wheel. Despite their experience and competence, the women interviewed expressed frequently encountering aggressive language and dismissal of their capabilities based on their gender. They also experienced undermining behaviours in relation to their skills:

"I have people say, oh, where's the man who drives the truck? And I always say, I am the man who drives the truck. Like, it's, and they'll always be like, oh, we could, we could get our trailer in there, but you might not be able to, so just let us know if you want one of the boys to jump in." – DR9.

Many of the industry's older generation carry attitudes towards women that belong to a bygone era. The "make me a sandwich" mentality, widely understood as shorthand for dismissive, domestically-confined views of women, has become a cultural punchline precisely because it is so outdated. Yet in the trucking industry these attitudes continue to circulate in everyday interactions, largely unchallenged and often normalised. For women entering or persisting in the industry, this means navigating culture of condescension rooted in assumptions about gender that the rest of the working world has largely moved on from.

Sexism

Women drivers frequently encounter sexism in ways that range from subtle condescension to overt hostility. One common form is unsolicited "guidance" from male colleagues. This is advice that implicitly questions women's competence regardless of their experience:

"I'll have some of the guys come up to me and say, hey. What you need to do is you need to go up, um, this, this hill, and this gear and... myself, oh, thank you. That I've been doing this for 20 years." – KID01 (when she received unsolicited advice from male drivers).

The male-dominated culture can tip from 'rough-and-ready' camaraderie into overt gender-based hostility, with sexist put-downs treated as ordinary and acceptable:

"You'll have four or five of them turn up at a construction site and there's a big burly fella in the loader and they're all yelling at each other and swearing... the obvious one is, you know, you're just a chick, you can't do it or they'll just give you a hard time and that's accepted in the industry." – KID01

This culture can also operate from within management. DR3 described how discriminatory attitudes were openly expressed by a supervisor, despite women performing the same work as their male counterparts:

"We started to experience a bit of sexism, I guess, from our manager. Just comments like, I would never hire any more females. We need more blokes to do the heavy lifting. Mind you, we were doing the exact same work as the guys, if not more. So it was really hard to hear those sort of comments." – DR3

"You're just a chick, you can't do it or they'll just give you a hard time and that's accepted in the industry." – KID01

This credibility-questioning extends to women in training and instructional roles, with men often undermining female trainers by suggesting their expertise is invalid because they use modern equipment:

"Oh, you're only teaching people in an automatic. And you know, they're not a real truck driver." – KID01.

Such dismissals reveal an underlying tension in how legitimacy is constructed in the industry. Physical effort and older, more demanding driving technology are coded as masculine markers of 'real' driving, and where the adoption of modern, more accessible equipment is reframed as a deficit rather than progress.

Discrimination

The consequences of sexism extended into economic and professional life. DR8 described potential clients withdrawing interest upon discovering a woman would be driving, and recounted situations in which their husband was initially presented as the driver in order to secure work. This kind of gatekeeping, whether enacted by clients or enabled by industry culture, directly constrained women's access to employment and income.

Other types of discrimination include excessive scrutiny of the work or competence of female drivers. As shown in Table 5, 74% of 430 male respondents indicated that scrutiny of female drivers' technical competence was 'extremely likely' (32%) or 'somewhat likely' (42%) to occur. Only 5% felt the targeted scrutiny of women's competence as 'somewhat' or 'extremely unlikely'.

Deliberate disadvantage and mistreatment

Many participants described navigating deliberate testing and, at times, outright hostility from male colleagues and supervisors. For some, this testing was framed as a form of initiation, unwelcome, but not necessarily malicious:

"If they're not taking the piss out of you, they don't want to be your friend. But you don't know until they've tried to take the piss out of you and then you've reacted in the way—they're testing you. They're testing you to see if you're gonna be friends." – DR3.

In some instances, the hostility was more explicit and sustained. DR3 also recalled being targeted by supervisors who were openly opposed to her presence, and who sought to force her out through deliberate mistreatment:

*"Some people are just a***holes and they're testing you to see if they can bully you because hurt people hurt people, don't they? I've literally had supervisors abuse the sh*t out of me and go "women have no place [here]". (I was the first woman to do it). "You won't be here long." I was like "OK, cool. Cool story, bro. No worries." They were horrific. Absolutely horrific. And they would give me the job that everybody hated to try and push me out. And me being me, went "I'll do it. I don't care." And then they gave up after about 3 months. They're like "oh, we can't get rid of her. We may as well use that for her advantage." And then "oh, she's not actually doing that bad of a job." – DR3.*

There were accounts of inappropriate behaviours being deliberately ignored and female drivers being assigned unwanted tasks to push them out:

"I've worked in a company where the behaviour is ignored or sometimes the behaviour comes from the top. It's that culture of masculinity where you basically keep your head down, get your work done, you get all the crap work, and you just have to take your licks. If you don't like it, there's the gate. It's like "push her and see how tough she is." – DR4.

Experiences like this point to a form of gendered sabotage that is difficult to prove and easy to dismiss, but which carries real consequences for women's safety, job security, and sense of belonging in the industry. One particularly stark account was shared by a participant describing the experience of a woman they had mentored:

"One of the girls I mentored was given the worst truck in the yard. They actually went out to the paddock where this truck had been put out to pasture and brought it in. That's your truck. Obviously, the truck wasn't roadworthy. She kept taking it down to the workshop and they'd say "there's nothing wrong with it. You're trying to cause trouble. Stop tagging the truck out. You're just a pampered woman who wants a new truck." The truck was not roadworthy. It should never have been on the road. She was stuck between a rock and a hard place because they told her if she keeps tagging the truck out, they're going to sack her. Either drive the unroadworthy truck or lose your job. She was in a really bad predicament." – K106.

This account is troubling on several levels. What began as the allocation of an unfit vehicle escalated into a situation where a woman was effectively coerced into accepting a safety risk or forfeiting her employment. Her legitimate and legally grounded decision to tag out an unroadworthy truck was reframed by management as personal fussiness and an attempt to cause trouble, drawing on gendered stereotypes to delegitimise a straightforward safety concern. That she was threatened with dismissal for exercising a basic workplace right illustrates how gender bias and institutional power can combine to place women in positions of acute vulnerability, with their safety and their livelihoods held in tension by those with authority over both.

Beyond the more visible forms of harassment, male survey respondents and several interview participants described subtler, but no less harmful patterns of mistreatment directed at women. These included various forms of illegal and harmful behaviours, from “jokes” to the deliberate sabotage of equipment, allocation of inferior resources and the use of workplace authority to silence legitimate safety concerns.

“When I very first got into an MC truck, I’d been driving water trucks for a couple of years. I finally got my grubby little self into an MC and I’m like “yes!” Some of the boys weren’t happy about it, so they used to tinker with my truck and trailers. Because I had no knowledge of any of it, I had to get some of the other fellows to tell me what’s wrong with the truck. It was as simple as the boys turning the air off on my dolly. It’s like “why would you do that?” – KI06.

“Deliberately failing to perform tasks, refuel, clean etc., meaning victims [of this harassment] left to do additional tasks to have clean/safe vehicles and work environments.” – S266.

4.3.4 Sexual harassment

70% of male survey respondents perceived that it is likely that female drivers will experience sexual harassment.

Sexism and discrimination challenges are manifested in serious inappropriate behaviours. Experiences of sexual harassment were reported across all interviews, ranging from persistent low-level comments to serious incidents of physical danger, intimidation and assault. These were not isolated events but part of a pattern of exposure to risk and hostility that male colleagues did not share.

Sexual harassment

Male survey respondents were asked how likely female truck drivers were to experience sexual harassment. Of the 430 respondents, 70% perceived that sexual harassment of female drivers was ‘extremely likely’ (25%) or ‘somewhat likely’ (45%), while only 8% perceived it to be unlikely.

We also asked survey participants if they experienced SH or know another driver who had the experience. The results in Table 7 are therefore based on both actual experience or a second-hand experience from someone they know. Of these incidents actually experienced, only 20% of respondents (n=52) reported the incident, while 48% (n=124) remained silent. The remaining 31% preferred not to say (n=80) which signals ongoing reluctance to reporting these incidents.

Other truck drivers were reported to be the most prevalent perpetrators of actual incidents experienced by drivers. Notably, other perpetrators included supply chain partners (customers and clients) and other road users.

Table 6: Types of sexual harassment male and female drivers experienced

Types of sexual harassment	Frequency	Percentage
Suggestive comments	151	31%
Intrusive personal questions	77	16%
Prefer not to say	63	13%
Sexual gestures	61	12%
Inappropriate leering	56	11%
Unwelcome touching	41	8%
Inappropriate physical contact	34	7%
Others	26	5%
Explicit images or messages	22	4%
Repeated invitations to date	18	4%
Online harassment	13	3%
Pressure for sex	10	2%

Note. N=489. Percentage pertains to proportion of total respondents.

Table 7: Perpetrators of sexual harassment male and female drivers experienced

Perceived perpetrators	Frequency	Percentage
Other truck drivers	84	17%
Customer	32	7%
Site manager	30	6%
Other road users	27	6%
Scheduler	20	4%
Law enforcers	11	2%

Note. N=489. Percentage pertains to proportion of total respondents.

Table 8: Who male and female drivers report sexual harassment to

Perceived perpetrators	Frequency	Percentage
Don't know	109	22%
Supervisor	59	12%
Colleagues	20	4%
Site/customer manager	16	3%
Others	11	2%
Union	7	1%
WHS authority (e.g., SafeWork, NHVR)	5	1%

Note. N=489. Percentage pertains to proportion of total respondents.

DR3 described gradually hardening over time to these experiences of unwanted physical contact and inappropriate remarks as a necessary coping strategy. The need to develop such resilience in the first place points to the normalisation of conduct that should never have been tolerated. DR4 described wearing a fake wedding ring as a deterrent to unwanted attention and relying on informal mutual support networks among female drivers; practical adaptations to an environment that had not adapted to them.

"There was one day I had a flat tyre on a 50-degree day in the middle of the desert. It took it out of me but I got that tyre changed. I got in my truck and stripped all my clothes off with the air con going, trying to cool my body down. I just had this gut feeling—because I knew the boys—that one of them had driven past. I had this gut feeling to put my radio on scan. I did and I caught them on another channel, badmouthing me. So I recorded them. When we got down to the other end, I had a meeting with the bosses. The next morning, the owner of the company flew in overnight from Alice Springs to speak to these boys. He ripped them across the coals and said "absolutely not, we will not treat anybody in this manner." They all got a verbal warning over that behaviour. I almost left my job because of that—I was like, I don't deserve that." – KI06.

KI09 noted that while management in some companies was increasingly recognising and responding to sexist behaviour, rumour-spreading about women, like in KI06's above account, is also used as a deliberate tool by some colleagues to intimidate women. This is a reminder that cultural change remains uneven and that progress in some areas does not reflect the industry as a whole.

"The most common I've seen is sexually charged joking or commentary when there's a female in the group. Some women either bite back or brush it off. However, some women take offence at it and if they do, they make a deal out of it (calls it out/ask to make it stop, or make a complaint. The latter is very seldom, and only after calling out several times she's not happy with those jokes)." – S424 (Male).

Harassment

Harassment also occurred through communication channels in ways that were structurally enabled by the industry itself. DR9 documented five incidents of sexual harassment over UHF radio in a single week, including threats of sexual assault, and this experience was echoed by other participants.

"She got me like an incident report book where I have to write down all the incidents that happened like towards me. And within like, I think seven days, I'd already filled, had to fill out five incident reports of like sexual harassment." – DR9.

*"She [my female colleague] is always getting harassed by people...just looking into the truck staring, people opening their mouth about the way she could be dressed or looks (even wearing company uniforms hi vis and pants/work shorts), snide comments and just absolute w*okers on the UHF asking for her number, sexual comments and just being absolute pigs. Everyone I hope would stand up for this and for what is right but unfortunately it doesn't happen. Most of us would have a partner/kids at home, now I'm sure they don't want their wife/daughters going to work and having to put up with this crap on a daily basis but [they] think it's okay to treat others like that, it's wrong, I hate it and I'll gladly be one to stand up for women in the work-place and for what is right, I hope more and more do the same to stop it completely." – S258 (Male).*

The anonymity afforded by radio communication allowed perpetrators to avoid accountability in ways that face-to-face interaction would not, making it a specific and underappreciated enabler of gendered harm.

Other forms of harassment were more interpersonal but no less deliberate. DR2 described inappropriate comments about her, being communicated to her a father who also works as a truck driver, an indirect mode of gendered communication designed to avoid confrontation while still achieving its effect.

Other women were more directly targeted.

"Being touched inappropriately. I can say that's happened in the past. I don't know what some men think. I don't need to be smacked on the bottom when you think I'm doing a good job... I'd take off into the mine site and then half an hour later you pull up to wherever and you look at your phone to see what the time was to write what time you arrived and I'd have like 3 text messages because people got my phone number off the sign in sheet. 'Oh, hi. I met you out the front. I think you're a lovely lady. If you wanna go on a date, blah blah blah.'" – K104.

Reporting challenges

Asked about the likelihood of reporting sexual harassment, we received a total of 327 survey responses. Majority indicated reporting these events was 'unlikely'; with more than a quarter indicating that reporting was extremely unlikely (n=91, 28% of responses), and almost a quarter expressing that this is somewhat unlikely (n=73, 22% of responses). Only a quarter of respondents perceived likelihood of reporting sexual harassment as 'likely' (i.e., extremely likely, n=24, 7%; somewhat likely, n=58, 18%), while a quarter said reporting was neither likely nor unlikely (n=80, 25% of responses). Reporting sexual harassment was generally unlikely.

DR9 described her employer calling the director of another trucking company after she was harassed over the radio by one of their drivers. They proposed a collaborative approach, suggesting the two companies could work together so that if something was heard on the radio directed at DR9, they could address it jointly. The other company flatly rejected this, saying he did not believe the harassment happened and that it was "just the industry."

These behaviours and inadequate responses should be unacceptable in any workplace - and may breach WHS Act duties to ensure physical and psychological safety of workers. Yet, participants recounted how management were sometimes reluctant to address the problem.

"Something happened, and I reported it, and just yeah, like, swept in under the rug." – DR1.

"One of these supervisors took two of my girls by himself, one at a time in the four-wheel drive up in the hill to started touching her hair and then I went to HR about it, I quickly learned that HR is not there for [them]. To protect the business. They said, if you didn't see or hear it, it didn't happen." – K101.

"If the woman is (sexually) harassed then it is swept under the carpet. I have seen this firsthand and I quit when I found out about it." – S90 (Male).

"Dismissal of raised concerns by management, accusations of over-reaction when safety concerns are raised or general concerns/questions are asked. Lack of concern around the needs of female drivers' hygiene and safety. Consistent abuse over the UHF or online when starting out and asking questions to improve knowledge of safety and industry." – S266.

With Australia's recent regulatory reform to impose a positive duty on employers to prevent sexual harassment under the Sex Discrimination Act⁵⁴ alongside increased labour law jurisdiction under the Fair Work Act 2009, it is undeniably important to address this issue. Apart from compliance, trucking companies and small business owners may work closely with industry associations to facilitate cross-company prevention, training, and accountability mechanisms so that harassment does not go unaddressed.

4.3.5 Physical health and safety

Physical health and safety risks were also raised as significant concerns for female truck drivers. These ranged from health concerns about the lack of access to nutritious food options and hygienic facilities at service centres and road houses, through to experiences of physical assaults and fear for life.

Hygiene and public health concerns

Toilets and showers presented multiple health and safety risks for female drivers. These included the lack of available toilet and shower facilities, either because rest areas have no facilities, or because service centres have toilet and shower facilities for male, but not female drivers. Female research participants described these challenges.

"Difficult accessing onsite toilet facilities, even less access to sanitary disposal facilities." – S266.

"[The] shortage of suitable toilets and sanitary facilities disproportionately affects women, leading to health compromises including dehydration and the use of extended birth control to avoid menstruation at work." – DR2.

"Scarcity of toilets and showers at ports and along highways requires drivers to plan ahead; drivers sometimes resort to makeshift solutions." – DR5.

DR4 and DR8 were also among those who described how the lack of suitable rest stops meant significant additional effort was required to plan rest stops around locations with necessary hygiene considerations. Even where toilets and shower facilities were available, these were often described as filthy, unhygienic and posing public health concerns. Drivers described having to carry personal hygiene supplies (hand sanitiser, soap and toilet paper) because on-road facilities cannot be relied on to be clean or well-stocked (DR9).

One in five male survey respondents also cited inadequate facilities as a significant problem, with many recognising the additional challenges this posed for women. Specifically, male truck drivers observed a lack of *"female"* toilets and showers (S287, S331, S370, S449, S482), and that the facilities provided are *"filthy"* (128), *"not set up for women"* (S207, S299), *"unsuitable"* (S57, S387), *"few & far between"* (S120) and *"mostly male based"* (S299). Male drivers said,

"If a woman was to be driving bigger trucks there are minimal facilities to plan for rest that can accommodate the level of personal hygiene that we would expect for women." – S310, (male);

"It's [tough] on men's health. Can't be good for women." – S206 (Male);

"The lack of clean toilets and showers is a problem for men, must be dreadful for women." – S245 (Male);

"Women obviously have different needs to male counterparts, facilities are barely adequate for men, let alone women." – S229 (Male);

Reflecting on the generally poor standard of facilities, female drivers perceived a "Lack of concern around the needs of female drivers' hygiene and safety" (S266), and acknowledged mixed results from efforts to bring about change. For example, respondents reported,

"Frequent situations on job sites where female toilets are absent, substandard, or lack hand soap and bins for sanitary products. Requests for improvements are often met with confusion or resistance from site managers." – DR9

"Those people that make the decisions have never had to use the facilities that we do... probably one of the issues is toilets, black hole for them, lack of cleanliness." – KID01.

Although,

"Some truck stops and sites are beginning to provide dedicated female toilets, but this remains inconsistent across the network." – DR8 (also DR5, similar response).

"Requesting better facilities led to practical improvements at one worksite that benefited all staff [male and female], illustrating the broader value of raising these concerns." – DR7.

Personal security

In addition to the availability and cleanliness of facilities, drivers also revealed concerns for their personal safety at rest stops and road houses. In some cases, women faced discomfort and privacy concerns while having to use men's facilities,

"I experienced it a little bit in the general freight, you would pull up to some places like a busy depot or something, and they've got truck drivers amenities, but there's only like 1 toilet and it's got a urinal and a toilet and it's very set up for men and it's like, well, where do I go?" – DR6.

"Showers at truck stops are often located within male toilet blocks, creating access and safety concerns for women." – DR4.

"Introduction of unisex bathrooms has eroded safety, cleanliness, and hygiene standards." – S478.

Drivers revealed a heightened awareness of their vulnerability to physical assault when on the road alone. Recognising the "Lack of security in rest areas." (S449) and the "significant barrier for women [that a] lack of safe, well-lit roadside facilities" presents (KI10), drivers spoke about avoiding parking at isolated or poorly-lit rest areas and service centres. Concerns included,

"Inadequate roadside facilities – particularly in long-haul and remote areas – are a significant barrier for women, impacting sense of security and ability to manage basic needs." – KI10.

"Plan rest stops based on safety – preferring locations with cameras or other truck company; and will move locations even if it means breaching rest regulations if feeling unsafe." – DR4.

"...I've been threatened, with rape before, sexual assault." – DR9.

Despite the deliberate care drivers took to protect themselves, a number recounted incidents of intimidation and assault. These included,

"I got up about 2:00 in the morning and jumped out of my truck to go to the toilet and there were people siphoning my truck. It gets pretty confronting when you're standing in the middle of nowhere with absolute strangers and anything could happen." – KI06.

"I got sexually assaulted. And I got pushed up against a shed because I had a bloke go 'who the F do you think you are?'" – DR3.

"I was dragged under a road train by a colleague. And being sent alone to remote worksites, often as the sole woman in the workshop or on site." – DR7.

Physical limitations and workplace injury

Interestingly, male drivers were more likely than female drivers to raise concerns about the physical limitations of women; specifically with regard to tasks such as changing tyres, pulling tarps and fixing load restraints. Some male survey respondents were sceptical of women's physical ability to complete manual tasks,

"The majority do not have the physical strength to do heavy arduous work." – S247 (Male).

"Lack of physical strength to pull down lead restraints effectively." – S88 (Male).

"Not being physically capable of doing some tasks." – S452 (Male).

"Not physically strong enough for certain tasks." – S197 (Male).

"Some issues such as flat tyres would be more physically difficult for women to deal with." – S111 (Male).

While other male survey respondents were far more confident in women's abilities, observing,

"I've only seen some have had issues throwing straps over high loads on log trucks but they always find a way to do it." – S428 (Male).

"Just because they aren't as strong as men doesn't mean that they can't do it." – S90 (Male).

"Whilst physical strength can differentiate between men and women, sometimes you may encounter a load that requires strength. However, I've seen men asking other men for assistance so there's no shame in that." – S356 (Male).

"I think there is still a little bit of that misnomer, and I think, you know, physically most, most women don't have the exact muscle structure to what the job sometimes entails. But it doesn't mean they can't do it. Yeah, just need to be shown how levers can work to help. You don't have to be able to lift 50 kilos with one hand. You can lift 20. So, some of the physical sides of it are a little bit more challenging." – KI02 (Male).

4.4 Navigating industry challenges

4.4.1 Proving oneself

A persistent theme across interviews was the expectation placed on women to prove themselves in ways that their male counterparts were simply not required to. While some male survey respondents framed this as a matter of equal standards -

"They just need to do their job to the same standard as a man. Lift the same, do everything to same standard as a man. No discrimination." – S432 (Male).

- the lived experience of women in the industry told a more complex story. Equal standards, in practice, rarely translated to equal treatment. For many participants, entry into the industry was accompanied by a sustained period of heightened scrutiny, in which mistakes were expected and criticised, and acceptance had to be earned:

"You've got to really prove yourself. Once you've proven yourself, then it's fine. But you always feel like everyone's waiting for you to stuff up, or stuff like that. It's kind of like. Good luck. I still get it. I still get it where it's like sink or swim." – DR2.

This pressure, while challenging, was also described as a catalyst for self-reliance. Over time, some participants found that navigating difficult situations alone had built a confidence that remained with them:

"You learn to find ways to handle situations that you know, you ordinarily might be like, oh my God, like, what am I going to do? Whereas once you've worked on your own and you've got no one else to help you but yourself to get out of that situation, something comes up and you're like, I've got this." – DR6.

Yet the bar for acceptance was, by any measure, set disproportionately high. Key informants were candid about just how much was required before women were afforded the same baseline respect extended to men by default:

"But it took me saving a dude's life to get the same respect as a man just walking in off the street. But once I had their respect, that was it. One of the team, no issues." – KI04.

"Spend a long, long time having to prove who I am. Yeah. At least sometimes. You do have to do 150% to be accepted." – KI01B.

Proving Technical Skills

Technical competence was a particularly acute battleground for this dynamic. Demonstrating skill behind the wheel, especially in tasks that visibly challenged male peers, could shift attitudes in ways that words alone could not. As one participant described:

"But then I proved myself. I think once they see that you can do the job, they kind of lay back and think, wow, she can actually do this. And a lot of people reverse onto the bunkers in Brisbane, and surprisingly, a lot of men actually can't reverse as well as others...I drive in there in reverse and they're like, 'whoa,' and then they come in and can't do it. Just close your mouth." – DR5.

Across these accounts, a clear pattern emerges. Acceptance was not freely given, but conditional. Women entered the industry on a kind of probation that their male colleagues did not face, and the terms of that probation were rarely made explicit. That so many participants ultimately succeeded in earning respect speaks to their resilience, but it also points to a structural inequity that places an undue burden on women from the moment they arrive.

Women in trucking have developed sophisticated, often exhausting repertoires of self-protective behaviours.

4.4.2 Self-protection and vigilance

A recurring theme across the interviews was the extent to which women in the industry have developed sophisticated, often exhausting repertoires of self-protective behaviours simply to manage the risks that come with being female in a male-dominated workplace. They represent a significant and largely invisible dimension of what it means to be a woman doing this work. These strategies took many forms. Some were about managing appearance and the social signals it sends. Women described deliberately downplaying their femininity in order to be taken seriously:

"High vis clothing and no makeup. And that's been really hard because now I've completely lost myself from the feminine person that I quite am, but I knew that I needed to remove my looks to get respect. So if I was showing up, dolled up and looking my best and showing my figure, you're instantly just discredited. So how do I show up as I am?" – DR2.

The following response from a male survey participant suggests women's concerns at being discredited for presenting their authentic, feminine selves, arise from (some) men's need to see female drivers as 'one of the boys'.

"It's surprising how often you meet them in the first week and they blend in well with the males. [But it] doesn't take long for them to start wearing makeup and tight clothing." – S394 (Male).

Others adopted subtler signals of unavailability, managing not just how they looked but how they were read by male colleagues:

"The older guys like hitting on us younger females. I wear a fake wedding ring around." – DR4.

Beyond appearance, women also described the everyday practical challenges of managing basic bodily needs in an environment built around male bodies and male working patterns. Adequate toilet facilities are scarce along many routes, and women consistently noted that using a bottle, as male drivers routinely do, is not a practical or comfortable option for them. The absence of facilities means that even the most ordinary physical needs require planning, improvisation, and a degree of exposure that their male counterparts simply do not face:

"Look, changing a tampon on the side of the road in a dirt parking bay. Not fun, not fun. So it's just all these things. You just have to be better prepared for it. Do you know what I mean? I had a whole feminine hygiene kit thing that I used to take. I used to have a little loop with a shower curtain on the side if I didn't have anywhere to pee." – KI04

Physical security presented another layer of vulnerability. The design of trucks, governed by safety regulations that prohibit locking cab doors from the inside, creates a structural vulnerability that women have had to improvise solutions to, sometimes trading one risk for another:

"So I used to put a strap between the two doors so that no one could open the doors, which then puts me at risk of my truck setting on fire and killing me, or someone just being able to get in my truck and either steal all my shit, which has happened a few times, or get to me. So you're kind of like "what's worse? What's gonna be worse?" – KI04

For women sleeping in their trucks overnight, vigilance extended into their rest periods. Several participants described elaborate routines designed to conceal their presence and deter unwanted attention, routines that take time, energy, and planning, and that sit in stark contrast to the straightforward rest period that driving regulations assume:

"For me personally, I take my personal safety pretty seriously. If it's night time and I'm pulling up for the night and I roll into a parking bay, I will never sleep anywhere I don't have reception. I hook up all my lights—you can have lights that are under your truck cab. I'll set those lights up along with all my interior lights. If a door opens, those lights come on. It doesn't matter if it's a dog box door or one of the cab doors, those lights come on. When I roll into a parking bay, I will pull my cab curtain shut before I turn all my lights off and turn my truck off and turn my interior light on. I don't know who's in the parking bay and I don't want them to see that there's a female on her own in the truck. I lock my doors, pull my curtains before I do anything else. Then I use a bucket at night time to go to the toilet so I don't have to get out of my truck." – KI06

Vigilance was not confined to rest stops. Women also described managing their safety while working, in environments where the presence of a watching audience of male co-workers could tip from uncomfortable into threatening:

"There were seven workers, all men, and they all pulled up a chair and watched me service this tractor and was saying... horrible, horrible things to me, to the point where I was actually carrying a big bar around with me just in case." – DR7

Sharing location with trusted contacts emerged as another common strategy, with participants describing informal check-in systems they had built and maintained independently. However, this too carried its own complications. While letting friends and family know their whereabouts offered a degree of reassurance, some participants noted that sharing locations publicly, such as on social media, carried real risk, with police advising against it due to the potential to alert strangers to a woman's movements and whereabouts. This strategy, while providing a sense of comfort, does not reflect direct practical security or protection against harm:

"I try and stay in the well-lit [rest stops]. Coming up from Moree to Goondiwindi, there are a couple of bays I just avoid because I've heard horror stories. But if I do stop there, I've got people who have my location. I text them when I pull up and when I wake up, especially if I don't feel overly safe. I just make sure someone knows where I am at all times." – DR4

For some, the investment in connectivity was not just about convenience but safety in the most fundamental sense:

"I've had a few sleepless nights - tossing and turning, hearing sounds. You try and get as much rest as you can. And if you get to that point where you don't feel safe, ring your boss. I've rung my previous boss saying, 'I don't feel safe, move?' You can't legally move on your seven-hour break. I don't care - if I don't feel safe, I'm moving. Simple as that. I don't care what the legislation is if I don't feel safe. But I also have Starlink in my truck, so I've got service at all times. That was a big investment for me last year - having Starlink and having service at all times." – DR4

The strategies and personal investment documented in this section reflect the degree to which the burden of managing safety and dignity in the workplace has fallen on women themselves.

4.4.3 Mentorship

Mentorship emerged as a significant theme across participant accounts, with many women describing how both formal and informal mentoring relationships either had shaped their experience in the industry or would benefit women in the industry. Unwilling to accept the loss of talented women to poor treatment and hostile cultures, experienced women described going out of their way to help retain women on the verge of leaving. For one, this involved drawing on her own networks, knowledge, and persistence to find her a better path forward:

"The industry pushed her to the point where she was going to leave. I was like 'no, no, no, I promise you, the whole industry isn't like this. You will find your place. Let me help you.'" – KI06.

Notably, much of the most meaningful mentoring described in interviews was organic mentorship that would arise from everyday conversations, road-side chats, and peer relationships built over time rather than structured or official programmes:

"I said I had a lot of mentors in the industry with what I do. They didn't even know that they were mentoring, but just from chats and things like that. So, I've joined up as part of the Transport Women mentoring programme and I have a young girl that I'm supposed to be mentoring, but I think she's mentoring me. She's so intelligent. She's so good. She's amazing. She just spins me out with what she does. But it's lovely just to have that. And we've always had that. I sort of had mentors, maybe not an official - looking after and you just ring them and say, you know, just have a chat and talk about things. I think that mentoring is very important. I think it's lovely for—and just growth. It's like, you know, you're always learning things, always learning things." – KI05.

This sense of mutual, reciprocal learning was echoed by others. For some women, particularly those new to the industry, mentoring came through the informal adoption into male-dominated teams, where experienced colleagues provided practical guidance and a sense of belonging:

"You never stop learning – the amount of times I ring the boys and ask, hey, how do I do this? You can never ask a stupid question in this industry. I ring the boys going, am I allowed on an M road, not thinking it's a motorway? I'm down in Victoria going, I hope I'm on the right road. And they're like, yes, kiddo – because I'm known as kiddo; I'm the youngest of my team, the only female, and the shortest. A lot of the older boys have taken me under their wing like a little sister or daughter." – DR4.

These accounts highlight how mentorship, even when informal or unintentional, plays a critical role in retaining women in the industry by providing practical knowledge, emotional support, and a sense of legitimacy. As one experienced female trainer put it, this accumulated knowledge is not just good for the individual but serves the industry more broadly:

"That knowledge is valuable. That expertise...It still keeps them in the industry as well." – KID01.

4.4.4 Networking

Alongside mentorship, peer networks (both formal and informal) were identified as a key source of support and resilience for women in trucking. Organisations such as Women in Trucking Australia provide national platforms for connection:

"Finding that sisterhood within the industry has been instrumental to where I am today. Organisations like this are so crucial in the industry because you meet other women who are walking the same path. We all face challenges that might look a little different, but they've all got the same kind of aspects. Having an organisation where you can go for support, mentorship, advice and help—and just meeting other women that are out on the road—is phenomenal." – KI06.

Beyond the ongoing support these organisations provide, participants also pointed to the value of coming together in-person. Industry conferences and events offer something that online resources cannot fully replicate:

"A long time ago now we started going to the Australian Trucking Association conferences and the NatRoad conferences and I would suggest to anybody coming into the industry to become part of—become members of your organisation and go to the conferences because that networking is like a little reset on your computer. It's social, it's networking, it's people in your own industry." – KI05.

"Finding that sisterhood within the industry has been instrumental to where I am today." – KI06

However, participants noted that formal networks and events often struggle to reach women in smaller companies or more isolated and regional roles. For many drivers, informal networks built through encounters on the road, at truck stops, and increasingly via social media, have filled that gap, offering a space to share experiences, seek advice, and counter the isolation that can accompany being the only woman in a workplace:

"I think it's great that there are platforms, especially on social media, like the Women in Transport Facebook page. You'll often see jobs advertised, which I think is great...that was a great way to transition from one workplace to another and have something lined up, especially in an area that I was new to." – DR3.

Participants were clear that simply knowing other women were out there, and having a way to reach them, made a meaningful difference to their confidence and sense of belonging:

"The Women in Trucking Australia is incredible, that Facebook page. Everyone is unbelievable and I think once a week they do a ask a truckie a question and it's just women helping women." – DR7.

These accounts point to the critical but underappreciated role that networks, both formal and informal, play in attracting and keeping women in the industry.

4.4.5 Exercising personal strengths

Personal strengths that help women deal with the challenging work culture in trucking can be identified across the interviews. These strengths are not innate or incidental. They are developed through experience, refined through repetition, and deployed strategically in a workplace that rarely makes space for them.

Personal advocacy

A consistent theme across interviews was the extent to which women drivers shoulder the advocacy burden by educating male colleagues, managers, and industry contacts about gender inequality on a daily basis. This is unpaid and largely invisible labour: the ongoing effort of making women's experiences legible to men who have not been required to consider them. It operates across multiple registers, from explaining the need for a sanitary bin in a portable toilet to challenging entrenched assumptions about who belongs behind the wheel of a heavy vehicle. Across participants, this labour was described not as exceptional or occasional, but as a constant feature of working life.

The cumulative toll of this work was articulated with particular clarity by DR9, who works in civil construction and is routinely the only woman on site. Describing the daily navigation of male attitudes, she reflected on the constant calculation of whether and how to intervene:

"Do I just shut up and just not say anything? Or then do I go down the rabbit hole of trying to educate them why you can't say that, why that's wrong?" – DR9.

Educating men

DR9 recounted asking a building site manager for a bin in the female toilet and being asked what she needed it for, requiring her to explain menstruation to a man who had not anticipated the logistics of feminine hygiene:

"Do I really have to explain to you why there needs to be a bin in the female toilets?" – DR9.

Such moments, individually minor, accumulate into a substantial burden. Each one requires a woman to interrupt her working day, compose a response, and perform an educational intervention that no male colleague would be expected to undertake. This effort does not only take time out of her day but also has an emotional toll that involves overcoming personal discomfort and/or embarrassment to courageously explain to men, especially those from an earlier generation where these things are not openly discussed.

DR7 described a comparable dynamic around the recognition of workplace competence. Her manager would routinely dismiss her suggestions, only to accept the same idea when it was raised by a male colleague:

"If I have an idea, he'll go, nah. But if someone else said it, oh yeah, that's a good idea." – DR7.

When she raised this directly with him, he denied it, requiring her to do the further work of substantiating the discrimination as she named it. The labour here is doubled: first performing the job, then making the bias visible to the person enacting it. DR7 also identified a physical dimension of this dynamic, describing how three months of reporting repeatedly a faulty air conditioner, this went unaddressed until her manager drove the truck himself and experienced the heat directly. Only then was it worthy of rectification.

A further difficulty identified by participants was the navigational challenge of educating men without triggering defensiveness:

"it's hard trying to educate men because you don't want to come off as attacking them because then they're not going to be receptive to it." – DR9.

This places women in a structurally constrained position, where they are expected to undertake the work of educating men, but must do so in a manner that protects male ego and receptiveness, meaning that the responsibility for managing men's emotional responses to education about male behaviour falls, again, on the women themselves. DR7 offered one practical approach, using interrogation rather than assertion as her preferred strategy:

"Any opportunity I get, I challenge people, like, why? You know, my favourite question is: why? Explain that to me, why? And they usually backpedal a little bit." – DR7.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that advocacy in the trucking industry is not the exclusive domain of organised networks and formal programs. It is also performed quietly, persistently, and without recognition, by women who show up every day and do the work of change from within.

Choosing their battles

Alongside this advocacy work, participants were candid about the limits of their energy and the pragmatic decisions they made about when to engage and when to let something pass. This was not resignation but strategy: a considered reading of when intervention would be productive and when it would simply cost more than it was worth:

"You can't say that type of stuff! And then I have to kind of make a decision on, okay, do I just shut up and just not say anything? Or then do I go down the rabbit hole of trying to educate them why you can't say that, why that's wrong? But yeah, it changes the dynamic and sometimes they'll say, oh." – DR9.

"Do I want to have this argument today or do I want to just eat my smoko in peace?" – DR9.

Sometimes the decision to disengage was less about self-preservation and more about recognising that the problem lay with the other person, not with themselves:

"It's not you. It's him. It's him that's lost it. It's his issue, not yours."
– KID01B (after being screamed at by a male driver she offered to help).

Wit and humour

Where direct challenge risked entrenching defensiveness, and sometimes exposure to abuse, many participants described humour as a more effective and sustainable tool for navigating hostile or testing interactions. Rather than confronting sexist attitudes head on, wit allowed women to signal confidence, disarm tension, and establish themselves as someone who could hold their own on the terms the industry understood:

"Men will test you. They'll be like 'Oh yeah, what are you doing here? Shouldn't women be in the kitchen?' And I'm like 'oh mate, you haven't seen my cooking, it'll kill a dog.' And then they're like 'right, we've got you. We understand who you are, what we can laugh about, and then you're fine.' But if you backpedal from that, they'll just go 'oh, you're just gonna be another pain in the bum that we have to coddle along.'" – KI04.

Humour also proved to be a long game. Patience and a light touch, sustained over time, could shift even the most resistant attitudes:

"I was so frustrated, but I never let him roll me...and I didn't knock his building down or anything...and I said to him, 'Well, you have a lovely weekend now,' and he goes to me six months later, 'You know what? It (you) turned out to be better than most of the boys,' and he actually apologised to me." – DR8.

Participants were also careful to distinguish between humour that humanised and banter that demeaned. The line was not always obvious, but most described a felt sense of when an exchange was genuinely collegial and when it had crossed into something else:

*"There's a line. No one deserves to be spoken down to or bullied or anything, but a light-hearted jibe or jab here and there—they're just trying to—how do men greet each other? How do really good mates greet each other? "You di*khead." They take the Mickey out of each other." – KI04.*

And sometimes, humour was simply the most practical tool available for keeping the day moving forward:

"Turning a negative situation into a positive and just having a laugh and having a laugh...it brightens everyone's day." – DR1.

4.4.6 Training support

Access to structured training and upskilling opportunities was described as a pivotal factor in women's ability to enter and progress in heavy vehicle transport. Formal programmes such as the Foot in the Door initiative were credited with keeping women in the industry at critical moments, including when hostile workplace cultures had pushed them to the brink of leaving:

"Through Women in Trucking, I managed to get her through the Foot in the Door programme. We upskilled her, we got her MC licence, we did a heap of work with her. We got her a job with Cube. She had a negative experience there—this girl can't win. I was like "I promise you the industry is not like this. Just hang in there." She got this job after Cube and she is not looking back. She's moving up in different sizes of trucks. She's doing well. " – KI06.

However, access to training is uneven across the industry. Participants noted that certain sectors remain far more open to women than others.

"The medium rigid class is, you know, for those big horse trucks and for local general freight, you know, the early morning distribution centre work. They're very keen and very open to the idea of ladies. But then there's the option which is, which is a definite no go, which is, you know, the mud carters, the truck and dog, they call them mud carters around city and construction sites. That's still very much testosterone driven male." – KI03 (Male)

Discussion and recommendations



5.1 Understanding women in trucking: an integration

The ecological systems framework^{55,56} offers a particularly fitting lens for understanding the experiences of women in the trucking industry.

At its core, this framework recognises that individual experiences and development are not shaped in isolation but through ongoing interactions within nested systems; from the most proximal and personal (i.e., microsystem at the individual level), through to broad cultural and temporal contexts that give those interactions their meaning (i.e., mesosystem at the industry level; and macrosystem at the societal level).⁵⁷

This multi-level framework (see Figure 10) makes it especially well-suited to gender research, where factors shaping women's experiences are rarely located at a single level but are instead produced and reproduced across the interplay of various systems.

Specifically, broad gender norms and structural inequalities that persist as a grand challenge⁵⁸ at the societal macrosystem cascade downward to shape industry work cultures and practices at the industry mesosystem (e.g., gendered occupations, gender segregation, gender pay gaps, others). These conditions, in turn, impose real costs at the individual microsystem, where women must draw on their own resources, strengths, and strategies to navigate what should be shared challenges. While this shows a trickle-down effect, given their nested quality, these systems constantly interact and impact each other through an ongoing feedback loop. As such, the dynamic interplay between and among systems cannot be solely described as a trickle-down effect but can also occur in other forms of trickle-effects such as trickle-up, trickle-out, trickle-in and trickle-around effects.⁵⁹

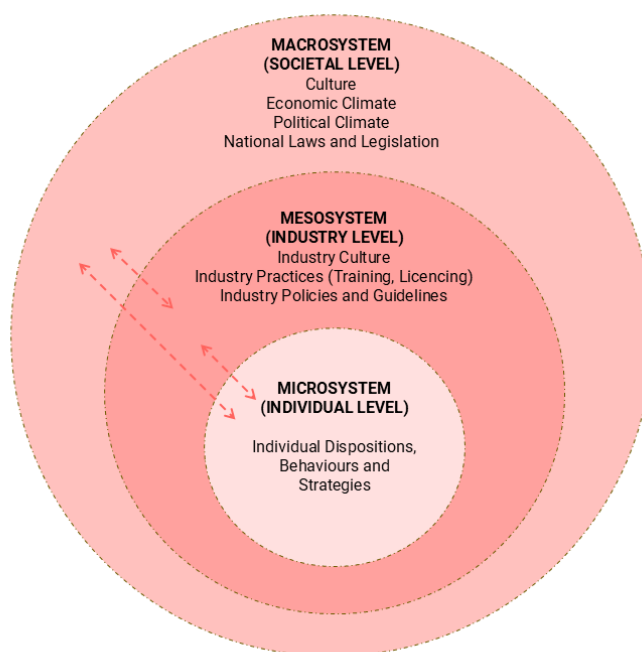


Figure 10. Ecological Systems Framework

The findings of the present study can be integrated through the ecological systems framework; where they are largely organised across the industry mesosystem and individual microsystem levels.

At the industry level, the male-dominated profile of the trucking industry, labour shortage, industry practices around driver training and licensing, and the identified challenges women encounter, collectively constitute the external context shaping women's experiences. Notably, while women are increasingly framed as a welcome addition to the trucking workforce, the enduring 'blokey' culture and resulting challenges and inhospitable industry practices reveal a significant gap between this stated openness and the conditions women truck drivers actually encounter as truck drivers. While there were some sentiments that the industry is already transitioning to a more gender-inclusive work culture, this change is perceived as slow and still far from reaching gender inclusivity.

At the microsystem level, the findings illuminate how women truck drivers navigate the mesosystem realities, relying heavily on their own resourcefulness, resilience, and self-directed strategies to persist in a work environment that offers them little in the way of structured support. Viewing our findings from the ecological systems framework make visible what this pattern ultimately reflects: that efforts towards inclusion largely built on individual effort is fragile and insufficient. It is clear from our findings that women drivers currently bear the responsibility of facilitating their own industry acceptance and success.

While a comprehensive examination of macrosystem level factors including national regulatory frameworks, governing policies, and broader cultural norms around gender and work falls outside the scope of our study, their influence on the conditions women encounter in trucking is undeniably real and consequential. The shadow cast by these macro-level dynamics is felt at every level, shaping what industry cultures consider normal, what policy guidance and opportunities are available to organisations, and ultimately what women themselves feel empowered (or disempowered) to do. As each ecological system carries its own dynamics of power and culture, it is only when supports are mobilised across all ecological system levels including macro-level conditions of national policy, regulatory frameworks, and cultural norms that conditions for genuine and sustainable inclusion can be a feasible reality.

It is with this understanding that the recommendations arising from our study are organised across the societal, industry, and individual levels of the ecological systems framework. In doing so, we aim to offer recommendations addressing industry structures, practices, and cultures that shape women's experiences, as well as the individual supports that can better equip women to navigate and thrive within the trucking industry. We do this with keen awareness that lasting change will ultimately require attention to societal macrosystem conditions that set the stage within which all these efforts are deployed.

5.2 Societal level recommendations

The barriers women face in heavy vehicle transport are not simply the product of industry and/or organisational workplace cultures. They reflect broader structural conditions, including the absence of coherent national policy frameworks that treat gender equity in transport as a serious workforce and safety priority. At the national level, the government has a role to play in setting expectations, resourcing change, and ensuring accountability across this highly fragmented industry.

The persistent and severe underrepresentation of women in truck driving — at just 6 percent⁸ of the national trucking workforce — should be explicitly recognised in national workforce strategy as both an equity issue and an economic one. With the industry facing a projected shortfall of up to 78,000 drivers by 2029,¹⁰ the continued exclusion of women from the sector represents a significant and avoidable constraint on workforce sustainability. National workforce policy should set clear targets for women's participation and link funding for recruitment, training and capability building, licensing, and industry development programmes to demonstrable progress toward those targets.

Workplace health and safety legislation already provides a framework for addressing physical and psychosocial hazards, including sexual harassment, as occupational risks. Regulators should ensure that heavy vehicle transport is not treated as exempt from these obligations by virtue of its dispersed, fragmented structure. Further, regulatory attention should extend to the supply chain relationships that characterise much of the industry, so that the fragmentation of employment arrangements does not become a shield against accountability.

Finally, the industry's intersection with domestic and family violence, documented in the findings of this research, warrants dedicated attention at the policy level. Pathways that connect women fleeing unsafe situations with licencing support, training opportunities, and employment in the transport sector represent a largely untapped avenue for both workforce development and social support. Coordination between transport, employment, and domestic violence policy portfolios would help formalise and resource these pathways.

5.3 Industry level recommendations

The findings of this research point to a clear need for coordinated action across multiple levels; from national policy through to industry culture and organisational workplace practices. The recommendations below are organised according to the scale at which change is required, reflecting the layered nature of the barriers women face in heavy vehicle transport.

Culture change

The persistence of a 'blokey' industry culture remains one of the most significant barriers to women's entry and retention in the trucking industry. Addressing this requires more than individual goodwill. It necessitates deliberate, sustained investment in culture change at the industry level. This includes recruitment and communications campaigns that actively feature and normalise women in driving roles, moving beyond tokenistic representation toward a genuine reframing of who belongs in the cab. Campaigns developed in partnership with women currently working in the industry would carry greater authenticity and reach.

Alongside visibility, respect and accountability need to be embedded into everyday industry practice. Bystander intervention training, of the kind already used effectively in other male-dominated industries, should be introduced across the sector, equipping drivers, trainers, and managers to recognise and respond to harassment and discrimination rather than normalise it. Complaints and reporting mechanisms must be functional, accessible, and consistently enforced, with clear workplace policies in place so that women know their rights and employers know their obligations.

Safe and adequate working conditions

Inadequate facilities remain a tangible and daily barrier for all drivers but acutely felt by women in the industry. The absence of safe, clean, and appropriately equipped rest areas and roadhouses along major routes is not a minor inconvenience. It is both a health and safety issue that disproportionately affects women and signals, structurally, that they are not expected to be there. A national minimum standard for rest areas and roadhouses should be established, covering safe and well-lit parking, accessible and clean shower and toilet facilities, and properly equipped female amenities including sanitary provisions. Compliance with these standards should be monitored and enforced, not left to individual operators or site managers to action inconsistently.

Mentorship

Formal mentorship structures have a demonstrated role in supporting women's entry and persistence in the industry, but access to mentorship is currently uneven and largely dependent on personal networks or geography. A national mentorship register, connecting women new to the industry with experienced drivers willing to offer guidance, would help formalise and scale what currently happens informally and patchily. Such a register should be practical in design, prioritising peer-to-peer connection and day-to-day troubleshooting support rather than high-level career coaching alone.

Advocacy and navigation of the support landscape

A fragmented ecosystem of industry bodies, peak associations, advocacy organisations, and support services currently exists, but women, particularly those in smaller companies or remote locations, often have little awareness of what is available or how to access it. A single, accessible navigation point that maps and connects this landscape would help drivers find relevant support, information, and networks without needing to already know where to look. This could take the form of a curated online directory, a partnership between existing advocacy organisations, or an expanded role for a body such as Women in Trucking Australia or Healthy Heads in Trucks and Sheds. This does not intend to duplicate existing infrastructure but to make it more cohesive and reachable for the women who need it most.

Career navigation support

Support for career planning in an industry that is far more varied than it may appear from the outside will also be meaningful for women drivers. Trucking spans an enormous range of sectors, vehicle types, working arrangements, and regional contexts. The difference between finding the right fit and ending up in a poorly matched work environment can be the difference between staying in the industry, or not. Training providers and industry entry programmes should offer structured career navigation support that helps women understand the landscape of the industry early, identify sectors and roles that suit their circumstances, skills, and lifestyle, and plan a pathway that is realistic and sustainable. This kind of informed entry is likely to improve retention as much as any cultural intervention.

Domestic violence pathways

The finding that trucking functions, for some women, as a genuine pathway out of domestic violence and toward financial independence and safety deserves serious attention from both industry and government. This dimension of the industry's social role is almost entirely absent from public policy discussions, yet the evidence from this research suggests it is both real and significant. The combination of employment, income, and mobile accommodation that long-haul driving provides can represent a lifeline for women who are leaving dangerous situations with few material resources. Formalising and resourcing this pathway, through partnerships between domestic violence support services, training providers, and industry bodies, would help connect women who need it with the licencing support, training opportunities, and employment pathways that could change their circumstances. This is an area where relatively modest investment could yield substantial social benefit, and where the industry has an opportunity to play a role that extends well beyond workforce supply.

5.4 Individual level recommendations

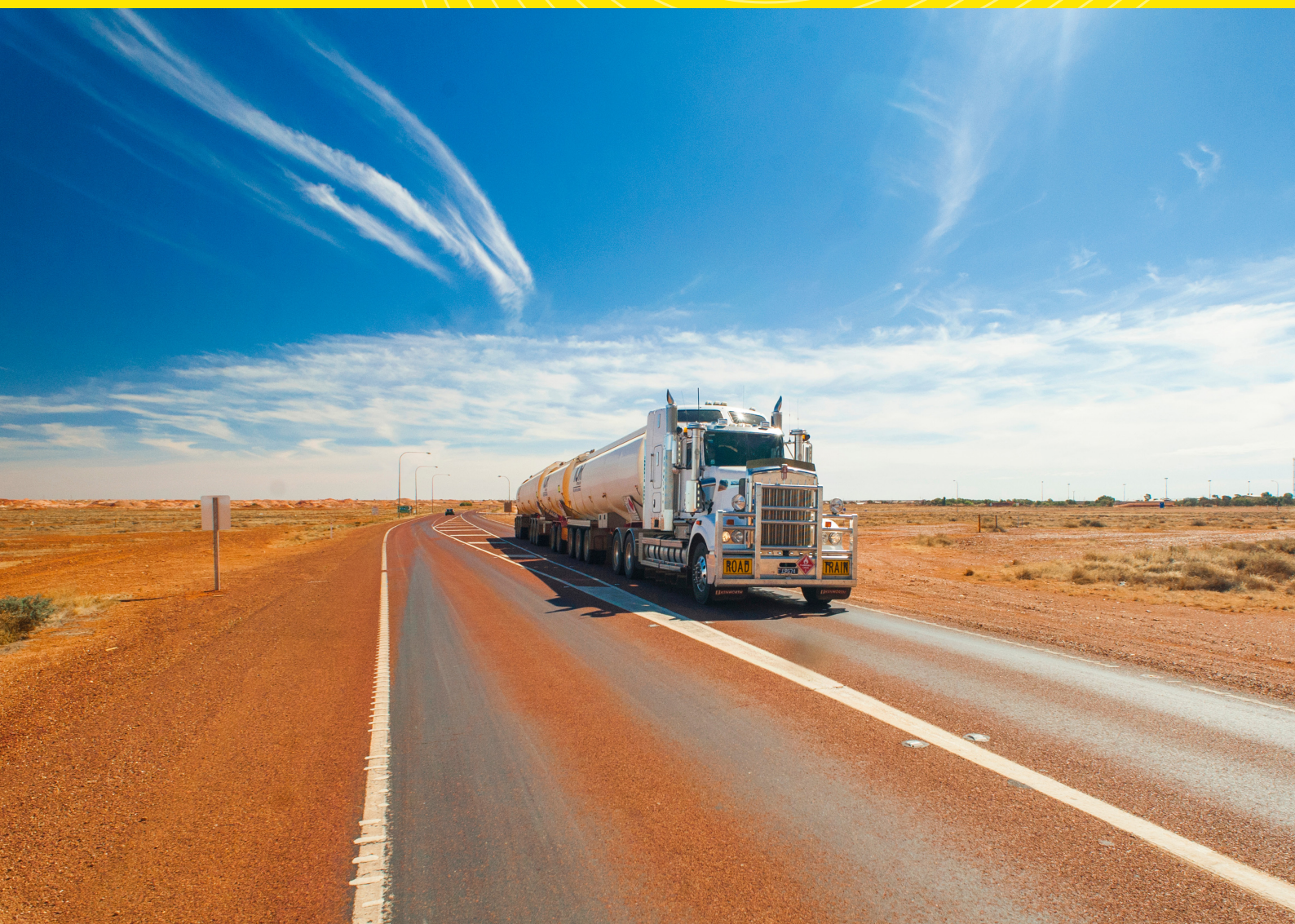
While systemic and structural change is essential, individual women in the industry also benefit from targeted support that strengthens their capacity to enter, navigate, and remain in the sector. The findings of this research point to several areas where individual-level interventions can make a meaningful difference.

Access to licensing and upskilling support is a persistent practical barrier. Grants and subsidised training pathways, of the kind offered through programmes such as the "Foot in the Door" program administered by the National Heavy Vehicle Regulator (NHVR) in coordination with Women in Trucking Australia (WiTA) and funded by the Commonwealth have demonstrably enabled women to progress to higher licence classes and more varied roles. These programmes should be better resourced, more widely promoted, and designed to reach women in smaller companies and regional areas who are currently less likely to be aware of or access them.

Mental health and well-being support should be explicitly tailored to the experiences of women in the industry. The hypervigilance, isolation, and cumulative toll of operating in a hostile or unwelcoming environment carry real psychological costs that generic driver wellbeing programmes do not always address. Resources developed through initiatives such as Healthy Heads in Trucks and Sheds should be expanded to include content specifically relevant to women's experiences, including dealing with harassment, managing safety concerns on the road, and building peer connection.

Finally, women entering the industry should have access to clear, practical information about their rights and processes and supports available to them. Too often, women in this research described enduring poor treatment because they did not know what recourse was available or feared the consequences of speaking up. Simple, accessible resources, distributed through training providers and industry entry points, could significantly reduce this information gap and help women advocate for themselves from the outset of their careers.

Conclusion



This research set out to offer evidence-based knowledge about the career experiences and contributions of women in the Australian trucking industry as well as to gather broad perceptions and attitudes about women entering the trucking industry. Guided by these aims, the research brings to the fore women's contributions to an industry that stands to gain from increased gender diversity, especially at a time of stark industry labour shortage that is projected to continue and worsen over the years.

While the research was designed to highlight women's contributions, it would be neither accurate, nor fair, to those who participated to conclude without acknowledging that the challenges women face in this male-dominated industry are real, persistent, and varied. The challenges were not sought as a primary focus, but they still surfaced strongly and organically in conversations with female drivers and key informants.

Women in trucking continue to navigate an industry culture that, despite notable shifts in recent years, has not fully shed its exclusionary 'blokey' character. Specifically, women drivers manage significant work-life conflict, given the demanding and often unpredictable nature of trucking schedules. Of even more concern are the experiences of sexism, discrimination, and sexual harassment that were not uncommon among participants. Physical health and safety issues arising from poor facilities and work conditions designed for a masculine default add further stress. That said, there are also findings that point to the trucking industry in transition such that over the last decade, women have become more visible. There is a burgeoning acknowledgement of women's potential, professionalism and value to the trucking workforce. This is a silver lining and an encouraging shift that the industry can build upon, deliberately and strategically. Nonetheless, there remains a considerable distance to travel in terms of culture change, policy support, and dedicated resources and interventions before women can enter, remain, and thrive in trucking on genuinely equal footing.

At this juncture, it is important to express that while completing this research, practical realities surfaced relating to data collection among the focal participants—female truck drivers. Recruiting female truck drivers to participate in the interviews and survey proved to be a considerable challenge in itself—a direct reflection of their small numbers within the industry and the demanding and irregular nature of their schedules. These participant recruitment challenges are, in their own way, findings—they speak to just how thin the pipeline of women in trucking currently is, and how much effort and resources are required to simply locate and engage them as research participants. This study is among the very few to have examined this topic directly, signalling that considerably more research is needed before a complete picture of women's experiences in trucking can be claimed.

What is clear from this research is that women represent a largely untapped resource. However, potential alone is not enough. Without a sustained, multi-level approach to making the trucking industry genuinely safe, inclusive and supportive, women will continue to encounter the kinds of challenges that discourage potential new entrants and push out those who are already in the industry. Recruiting more women into trucking is a worthy goal but recruitment without retention is a revolving door. Achieving genuine change will require coordinated effort across industry, organisations, and policy. This concerted effort will ensure that the welcome extended to women is genuine and reinforced by structures and supports that make entering and staying in trucking not only possible but also meaningful and worthwhile.

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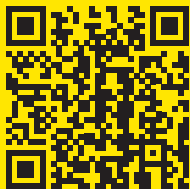
Contact Us

UNSW Canberra at ADFA

✉ school.business.cbr@unsw.edu.au

Building 27

Northcott Drive, Canberra ACT 2600



@UNSWCanberra



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