

NATIONAL VICTORIA **WOMEN AT WORK**

## 'Interior design ... I hated it!': Push to boost tiny number of women in trades

By **Wendy Tuohy**

September 6, 2020 – 12.00am



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Fiona McDonald considers herself a "prime example" of how girls are being duded by not being informed what a great career a trade can provide.

"I got careers advice and it steered me into interior design ... I hated it!" says Ms McDonald, who found her vocation in the auto industry after male mechanics came into the cafe she worked in as a student asking if she knew any guys who'd like a two-week trial.



Fiona McDonald, a motor mechanic and head of Tradeswomen Australia, is encouraging women to get into trades in the construction-led economic recovery. JASON SOUTH

She did the trial herself and fell in love with the "problem solving" and systems analysis of diagnosing what is not right with an engine.

Still, Ms McDonald, now executive director of Tradeswomen Australia, despairs at the number of women in her field.

Nationally, just 16 motorbike mechanics, 55 diesel mechanics and 20 small-engine mechanics are women, according to the *One of the Boys* report by the University of Sydney.

Ms McDonald's group is working to break down stigma and get information into schools so girls consider trades rather than being funnelled straight to tertiary education whether it suits them or not.

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***There is still less than two per cent participation for women in trades even though we cannot meet demand, it's ridiculous.***

Susan Alberti, businesswoman, philanthropist and former construction boss

"We need young men and women to be educated that women can do these jobs – they're open to anyone, unfortunately it's not being projected that way," she says.

Former construction boss Susan Alberti is helping get the word out. Ms Alberti was the only woman in her course when she studied to get her building certificate after her first husband, Angelo, died in an accident in 1995 and she took control of their construction firm.

Ms Alberti says women's participation in trades is less than 2 per cent, a figure must be challenged urgently, particularly as many young women need to re-start careers after losing work in female-dominated industries hardest hit by the pandemic.

This is especially important, she says, given the government's emphasis on a construction-led economic recovery.

"I've had 45 years in the building industry and when I started there were no women, not a single one ... there is still less than 2 per cent participation for women in trades even though we cannot meet demand, it's ridiculous," says Ms Alberti, one of Australia's first registered female builders and a patron of Tradeswomen Australia.



"We've got so much building work to be done in this country and we don't have the tradespeople, and here we have this great untapped resource – women," she said.

Susan Alberti, Australia's first female registered builder (wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with 'Never give up'), is throwing her clout behind a push to get more girls to consider trades. Susan Alberti - Never give up.

She agrees with Fiona McDonald that it is especially important to get the trades message out to young women now, as they are [losing jobs faster than men in the pandemic](#).

Barriers that must be overcome include poor workplace culture, lack of role-modelling of women, lack of careers information given to girls and "social misconceptions" about trades being mainly for men.

"There are women out there doing great work, having great careers and earning good income; we've got to break down the barriers," she said.

Leanne Raynor, of the apprenticeship services network Mas National, says the group is working hard to boost visibility of trades among girls but that the main issue is "they can't be what they can't see – they're not seeing the opportunities available to women in electrical, carpentry, plumbing, that sort of thing.

"The more we keep talking about it the better."



**Wendy Tuohy**



Wendy Tuohy is a Sunday Age senior writer.