



Until we are all equal



Moving the Middle

A guide for communicating
about gender equality



Acknowledgment of Country

The authors of this report recognise that Australia cannot realise people having the same rights, opportunities and outcomes no matter their gender without Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people having the same rights, opportunities and outcomes as non-Indigenous people.

We recognise the leadership of communities in the fight for equality, human rights and self-determination and are committed to working towards addressing all forms of inequality.

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work and pay respect to Elders past and present. We recognise that sovereignty was never ceded.

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Welcome

What is this?

This guide has been designed to help advocates of gender equality communicate effectively with a wide range of audiences. It translates key findings from the latest Gender Compass research into practical advice. The aim is to support communicators to build awareness and support for initiatives that drive positive change.

Why does it matter?

How we talk about gender equality matters. What we say and how we say it helps us to connect with people, and this connection is key to changing attitudes and behaviours.

Who is it for?

This guide is for anyone who wants to understand how to communicate effectively about gender equality. It is for communicators in advocacy organisations, businesses and government but it's also for anyone who wants to understand community attitudes and have more productive conversations about this issue with the people in their personal lives. While the guide is based on research conducted with Australian audiences, we hope it offers useful insights for anyone working to promote a more gender-equal world, wherever they are in the world.

What is Gender Compass?

Gender Compass is a first-of-its-kind study revealing what ordinary Australians really think about gender equality. Plan International Australia set out to develop a unique tool to support gender equality advocates to target specific audiences, shift their attitudes and mobilise them to take action. Since its launch in 2023, Gender Compass has been embraced by advocates in government, nonprofit and corporate sectors and is playing an essential role in helping to shift harmful attitudes by guiding effective communication with different sections of the Australian community.

A focus on the 'moveable middle'

This guide is particularly focused on how to effectively engage the 'moveable middle' in conversations about gender equality. The 'moveable middle' refers to people whose views on gender equality are not firmly set. This includes people who do not hold strong views for or against gender equality, and those who may hold conflicting and even contradictory views. The 'moveable middle', by definition, are open to new perspectives and with the right approach can be invited into the conversation and encouraged to support action to deliver equality for people of all genders.

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Introduction from Plan



We find ourselves at a pivotal moment in time, where backlash against gender equality, cuts to global aid, escalating humanitarian crises and political and economic instability are rolling back decades of hard-won progress. From limits on reproductive rights to restrictions on education and growing gender-based violence, these shifts are not just happening in far-off countries—they are reaching our own shores. In Australia, we're seeing rising rhetoric against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) policies and a growing resistance to the notion of gender equality as a fundamental human right. This context makes the work we do today even more critical.

At Plan International Australia, we understand that gender equality is not just a policy issue—it is a societal issue that impacts every part of our lives. In the face of increasing resistance, we must be strategic, empathetic, and determined in how we communicate the urgency of gender equality. This is why Gender Compass is so essential. It provides critical insights into how Australians view gender equality and, perhaps more importantly, how we can engage different segments of the community in meaningful conversations about this issue.

In September 2023, we launched Stage 1 of Gender Compass, a pioneering segmentation tool that breaks down the Australian public into distinct groups based on their attitudes to gender equality. The Stage 1 research revealed the segments—Trailblazers, Hopefuls, Conflicted, Moderates, Rejectors and Indifferent—but knowing who these groups are only scratches the surface. Stage 2 has focused on deepening our understanding of the 'moveable middle'—those in the Hopeful, Conflicted, and Moderate segments—who may not yet be fully convinced but are open to being persuaded.

There is real potential in this 'moveable middle' to create meaningful change. Despite their differences, these segments share key values: safety, and the freedom for everyone to live to their full potential. These common values provide us with an invaluable opportunity to engage in conversations that can shift hearts and minds. However, we know that this is not an easy task. Communicating effectively with these segments requires empathy, nuance, and respect. We need to approach the conversation in ways that acknowledge their concerns, meet them where they are, and avoid reinforcing divisions. Our research has shown that the term 'gender equality' means different things to different people, and that we need to communicate about it in a way that establishes relevance and a common understanding, making gender equality matter in the lives of all Australians.

As anti-rights movements continue to gain momentum, our task is clear: we must build understanding, continue to energise those who are already

supportive while gently moving those who are undecided toward greater support for gender equality.

Through focus groups, conversational AI research tools, and a nationally representative survey, we have gathered insights into how to communicate effectively with each of the segments identified by Gender Compass, that can be used to engage more people in the conversation and build mutual understanding and respect.

The results are clear: the key to engaging people lies in tailoring our messages to resonate with their values, and importantly, in understanding what to avoid in order not to alienate people in the process. This is where the Gender Compass: Moving the Middle guide comes in—it will help us craft messages that are relevant and respectful, enabling us to speak in ways that unite rather than divide.

Now more than ever, we need to engage with Australians from all walks of life to build support for gender equality. It's not enough to preach to the choir; we must work to move the middle ground toward better understanding and action. The current climate is one where gender equality is being contested, but it is also a time where we have the opportunity to build broad-based support for lasting change. Through the insights from Gender Compass, we hope to provide the tools to do just that—to communicate effectively, to energise those who already stand with us, and to bring others along in this critical movement for equality.

The stakes could not be higher. The rollback of rights we are seeing worldwide is not a distant concern; it is a warning sign. What happens abroad can quickly affect us here in Australia. When we look at extreme contexts like Afghanistan – where girls are now barred from secondary and higher education, women are excluded from many aspects of public life and the freedom to work, access healthcare, and even travel independently has been severely restricted – it's easy to think, "That could never happen here." But that situation didn't unfold overnight. The erosion of rights is often a slow, incremental process. When we allow regressive ideas to take root, they fester, gain traction, and that is how they gradually undermine the rights and freedoms of entire groups.

That is why we must continue to push forward in the fight for gender equality. Gender Compass is a call to action for all of us—to engage, to listen, and to act with empathy and determination. The world needs us to be united in this effort.

Let this guide remind us that, despite the challenges, it is within our power to shape a future where gender equality is not just a distant goal, but a reality for everyone.

Susanne Legena

Chief Executive Officer
Plan International Australia

The binary and intersectional elephants in the room

The binary nature of the language in this report, which often refers to 'men and women', is not reflective of the researchers' or Plan International's views on gender.

While advocates and other groups in the community are moving away from binary language and framing in efforts to recognise and respect non-binary and gender-diverse people, the research finds that the majority of Australians are still thinking in the gender binary.

This presents a unique challenge when seeking to understand the views of the broader Australian population on gender equality, especially when any mention of transgender, non-binary and LGBTQIA+ people can trigger a defensive response or prompt audiences to disengage. For this reason, the wording in the research instruments and tested messaging is often binary in nature ("men and women"), as are the descriptions of community attitudes and assumptions.

Evidently, there is a need to balance 'meeting people where they're at' (assumed gender binary) and ensuring that our language does not erase or block gender-diverse and LGBTQIA+ people from being part of the conversation and accessing the same rights, opportunities and outcomes as cisgender men.

This challenge is compounded by the need to consider intersectionality when discussing gender equality. While the researchers and Plan International recognise the significance of intersecting identities, which can create compounded barriers—particularly for women and gender minorities who may experience not only gender-based discrimination but also racial, economic, or ableist discrimination—it's crucial to first make gender inequality explicit. Otherwise, the research finds that the majority of audiences switch off before engaging with the message at all.

Our approach starts with a focus on gender to ensure that the fundamental issues of gender inequality are addressed clearly. We recognise that this focus does not capture the full complexity of intersecting oppressive forces such as race, class, and disability. However, by first addressing gender inequality head-on, we aim to build a foundation that will enable us to more effectively communicate and act on discrimination in all its forms, acknowledging how different systems of power intersect and shape the experiences and opportunities of individuals.

Ultimately, until all people, regardless of gender identity or other factors, have equal access to their rights and opportunities, the struggle for true gender equality cannot be fully realised. This approach lays the groundwork for expanding efforts to address multiple layers of discrimination in the future.

Q:

If the gender-binary is 'where people are at', how do we include people in the LGBTQIA+ community?

A:

We absolutely must ensure that people from the LGBTQIA+ community are not erased from the conversation. While acknowledging the gender binary as a starting point, we must also continue to incorporate inclusive language and highlight the importance of diversity. The goal is to engage with those who still think within the binary framework, but to do so in a way that also respects and reflects the identities of those outside it. We can communicate in a way that challenges the binary while still meeting people where they are. Over time, this approach helps move the conversation toward more inclusive perspectives and greater recognition of all gender identities.

There are several great guides that already exist, detailing how to effectively communicate about LGBTQIA+ people and issues.

What we did

In September 2023, Plan International Australia launched Gender Compass – a unique audience segmentation that splits the Australian community into distinct groups based on their attitudes to gender equality.

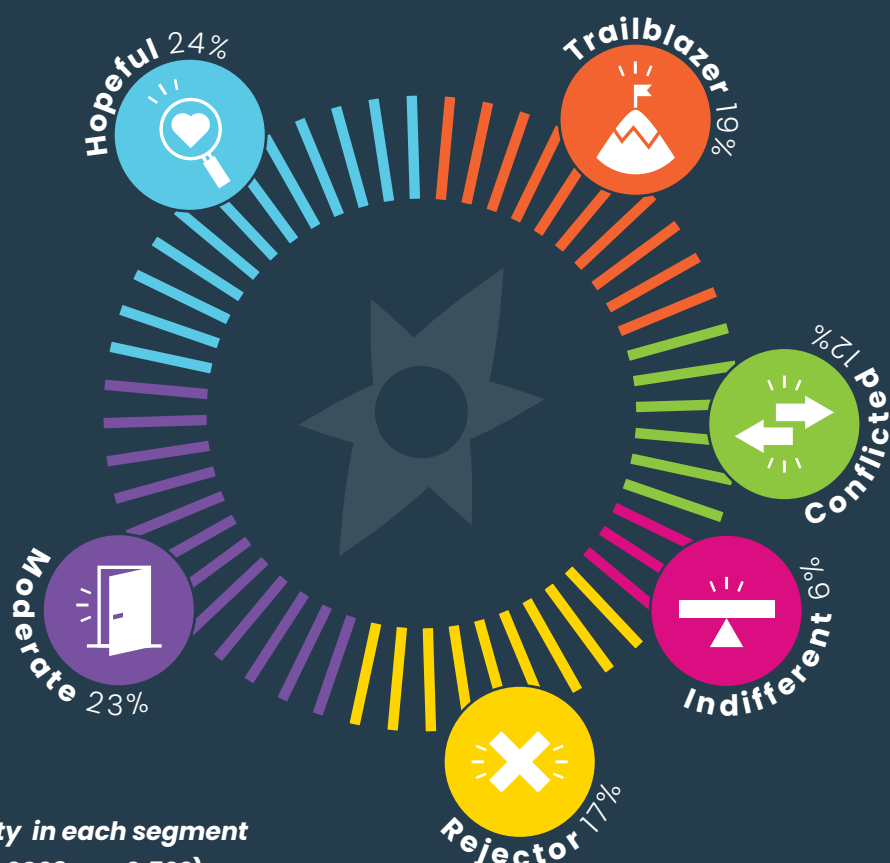
Stage 1 of Gender Compass revealed who the segments are, and provided the sector with a much-needed tool to bring these diverse audiences into focus.

Stage 2 has focussed on digging deeper with each segment to understand what shapes their views and how to talk to them (and critically, how *not* to talk to them).

In particular, we wanted to deepen our understanding of the ‘moveable middle’ – the Hopeful, Conflicted and Moderate segments – recognising that building issue salience means effectively engaging the persuadable centre and energising supporters (Trailblazers) without antagonising the most resistant (Rejectors).

Audience segmentation tools

have traditionally been used in public health to understand and engage different audience groups. Rather than sorting people into simple profiles, these tools offer a more nuanced view of how audiences perceive issues. This helps to build awareness, create targeted messages and drive behaviour change. Segmentation tools are particularly useful for advocacy as they provide a framework for strategic engagement and cross-sector collaboration.



% of the community in each segment
(Gender Compass 2023, n = 2,522)

Stage 2 Methodology

Stage 2 of Gender Compass commenced with an exploratory phase that combined findings from **ten focus groups**—two per segment, split by gender—and **1,089 responses to a conversational AI tool** designed to probe people in each Gender Compass segment about their views on gender equality. This phase uncovered unique drivers and barriers to support for equality solutions and pointed to the values, language and themes that resonate with each segment.

Next, we translated these findings into statements and messages to test in a nationally representative **survey and dial test of 2,048 community members (16+)**. The Gender Compass segmentation tool was embedded in the survey in order to allocate respondents into each attitudinal segment. This confirmed many of the previous findings and refined our understanding of what is more and less effective when it comes to communicating about gender equality across the segments.

Dial testing is a method that captures moment-by-moment responses to content to identify which parts of a message are more or less persuasive to different audiences. In this case, participants responded, in real-time, to five audio messages about gender equality, moving a slider to reflect whether they agreed or disagreed with what they heard. This method helps identify the most effective language and framing for building support for gender equality, while also highlighting words or phrases that may turn audiences off.



What we learned

By bringing each segment into sharp focus, Stage 2 of the Gender Compass research deepens our understanding of the breadth and nuance of community attitudes to gender equality. Most importantly, it reveals the fundamental barriers to engagement and action that underpin this evidence-based guide.

The key findings and challenges outlined below reflect a broad range of conflicting and at times contradictory beliefs that Australians have about gender equality. To effectively navigate and respond to these tensions, communicators must first understand them.

Key Findings	Key Challenges
Most Australians think gender equality is important.	<i>But... inequality is under-recognised. Many people think we are close to achieving equality in Australia and that women are treated fairly in most areas of life.</i>
There is broad recognition that gender equality benefits everyone.	<i>But... Australians are not on the same page about what gender equality means and looks like.</i>
Most people agree we should treat every person fairly, no matter their gender.	<i>But... for many Australians, freedom, safety and caring for others are more resonant values than fairness and equality.</i>
Many Australians are concerned about the pressures on men and boys.	<i>But... this ranges from the harm caused by rigid ideas about masculinity to broader concerns about men coming under increasing scrutiny, with some feeling there is a 'war on men'.</i>
Most are supportive of solutions aimed at addressing gender inequality.	<i>But... the belief equality is close to being realised in Australia creates ambivalence and contributes to a lack of urgency.</i>
There is broad recognition of a shared problem (rigid gender expectations holding us back).	<i>But... people of all genders can struggle to recognise the challenges faced by people of a different gender to them. Men especially exhibit a limited understanding of women's experiences of inequality.</i>
Most people are open to discussing gender equality at work and in other settings.	<i>But... the type of language typically used by advocates of gender equality can be polarising and risks pushing people further away.</i>
There is significant appetite for working together.	<i>But... working together requires us to include men in the story, presenting their concerns alongside those of women and other groups who are disproportionately impacted by inequality.</i>
There is potential to engage the 'movable middle' to create real change.	<i>But... it requires us to be creative and adapt our storytelling to meet people where they're at.</i>

Speaking to the segments

For more information
about the Gender
Compass segments
download the 2023
report [here](#).





Trailblazer

19% of the community

How they think

For the Trailblazer segment, gender equality is both vital and urgent. They are taking action to address gender inequality and believe we still have a long way to go. Trailblazers believe the root cause of inequality lies in patriarchal systems and structures, which they are determined to dismantle. They value equity (same outcomes) over equality (same treatment) and believe everyone benefits when cisgender women and gender-diverse people have the same rights, opportunities and outcomes as cisgender men.

Trailblazers are very informed and are concentrated on addressing systemic challenges impacting women, girls and gender-diverse people. However, there is also recognition — especially amongst Trailblazer men — of the negative effects of patriarchy on men and boys.

Who they are

Roughly 2 in 10 people are in the Trailblazer segment. Trailblazers are more likely to be cisgender women, younger, and to identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. They tend to be educated and growth-oriented. Trailblazers most value fairness and equality as well as feeling safe.

How to talk to them

Trailblazers recognise systemic bias, gender roles, and patriarchy as drivers of gender inequality and are comfortable using this language. Many identify as feminists and are therefore receptive to messaging phrased in this familiar lexicon that centres the experience of women, girls and gender-diverse people.

However, Trailblazers also recognise that change requires us to adapt how we talk to reach a wider audience. Encouragingly, this segment is just as enthusiastic in their response to messaging that writes women and men into the gender equality story and replaces references to structural injustice with accessible everyday examples. I.e. We can tell our story in different words and still energise our base.



Hopeful

24% of the community

How they think

The Hopeful segment, characterised by their optimism, believe gender equality is both necessary and achievable. They recognise that significant progress has been made but understand that reaching equality requires individual effort and broader cultural shifts. The people in this segment feel positive about the direction we are heading in but recognise the need to include men and boys in the conversation.

Overall, the Hopeful are supportive of measures to address inequality but do not reflect the insistence and urgency of the Trailblazers.

Who they are

More than 2 in 10 people are in the Hopeful segment. This segment is older on average and cisgender women are overrepresented. The Hopeful place a high value on fairness and equal opportunity, but also value feeling safe and caring for others.

How to talk to them

The Hopeful are comfortable identifying with feminism and using 'trailblazer' terminology such as *gender roles* and *patriarchy*. They agree with, but are not energised by, messages focussed on women being negatively impacted by patriarchal systems, and are put off by language that feels divisive.

Positive messaging that describes a shared problem and emphasises everyone working together are enthusiastically received by this segment.



Conflicted

12% of the community

How they think

The Conflicted segment holds strong but often contradictory views. They support gender equality in principle but feel women are mostly treated fairly these days.

Women in this segment are more likely to recognise persisting inequality while men are less aware of the challenges women face. Conflicted men are more likely to believe differences in outcomes come from the different choices men and women make based on their 'natural abilities'.

The blending of traditional values with progressive ideas is a defining characteristic of the Conflicted. This tension often surfaces when the Conflicted try to reconcile their evolving views on gender equality with the gender dynamics they observed in their households and communities growing up. This segment is particularly concerned that traditional gender roles are being undermined and that this is negatively impacting men and boys.

Who they are

More than 1 in 10 people are in the Conflicted segment. The Conflicted are more likely to be younger, cisgender men. They tend to be more urban, educated, employed, from a diverse religious and/or cultural background, and have young families. This segment values safety and security, personal freedom and caring for others over equality.

Note: The message testing phase confirmed the necessity of including culturally relevant examples so people can see themselves and their communities reflected. E.g. Using culturally specific examples of the shared domestic load.

How to talk to them

The Conflicted segment responds best to messaging that connects gender equality to their day-to-day experiences. The Conflicted, despite believing in the importance of gender equality, are uncomfortable self-identifying as feminists, and respond best when these ideas are expressed in plain English and connected to their core values. Since the Conflicted are turned off by abstract and confrontational language, messaging that incorporates everyday examples and shows how gender equality benefits everyone — including men and boys — resonates more.



Moderate

23% of the community

How they think

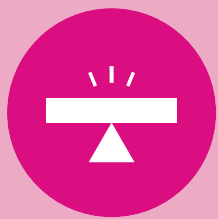
The Moderate segment are lukewarm in their attitudes. Their stance is not fixed or impassioned and most think gender equality has largely been achieved in Australia. This translates into a lack of urgency and low engagement with this issue. In fact, the Moderate are surprised that issues such as the gender pay gap are still being discussed with some seeing gender equality solutions as overblown, and potentially discriminating against men. Their views are influenced by a growing sense of discomfort and defensiveness, especially among men, who feel increasing pressure and scrutiny in response to shifting societal expectations. This segment tends to attribute gender differences in outcomes to individual choices, rather than seeing them as a reflection of structural inequality.

Who they are

More than 2 in 10 people are in the Moderate segment. They represent a broad cross-section of the population, though they are slightly more likely to be cisgender men. The Moderate segment value personal freedom, safety and security, and caring for others much more than they value equality and fairness.

How to talk to them

The Moderate segment responds best to messaging that directly connects to their everyday lives. Since they think gender equality has largely been achieved, framing the conversation in a way that makes persisting inequality impossible to ignore is particularly important. Messages that focus on how gender equality benefits everyone, including men and boys, are more effective as they acknowledge this segment's concerns. To engage them effectively, avoid overly urgent or divisive language, as this may make them feel defensive or uncomfortable. Instead, focus on highlighting shared values and the positive outcomes that come with gender equality, presented in a way that feels accessible and grounded in their lived experience.



Indifferent

6% of the community

How they think

The Indifferent segment do not feel strongly about gender inequality, nor do they express clear opinions for or against specific solutions. They are characterised by their general apathy and disengagement – it is not specific to this issue. Their predominant feelings are neutrality or uncertainty, and they exhibit low awareness of drivers or impacts of inequality. While they are not resistant, for this segment gender equality is simply not a priority. They are therefore less likely to recognise or engage with the challenges others face in relation to it.

Who they are

Roughly 1 in 20 people are in the Indifferent segment, making them the smallest segment. Demographically, they are reflective of the general population except for lower levels of education. The Indifferent most value safety and loyalty but are also more inward-looking and express values such as having fun and personal freedom. As a result, they are less likely to engage with or prioritise social issues like gender equality.

How to talk to them

The characteristic disengagement of this segment means they do not show a strong preference for particular language or messages – for this reason they are not considered part of the ‘moveable middle’ that this guide is focussed on. Given this segment is largely tuned out and uncertain, using an urgent tone or divisive rhetoric may disengage them further. Messaging that leans into the Indifferent’s core values and makes gender equality accessible and relevant will likely be most effective.



Rejector

17% of the community

How they think

The Rejector segment is defined by their resistance to gender equality – both in principle and in their refusal to recognise persisting discrimination against women. Most believe men are now the gender being treated unfairly and many dismiss women's experiences as being due to personal choices, biological differences or the actions of a few bad men.

Rejector men are particularly resistant to the suggestion of systemic bias and dismiss the notion that men's behaviour and rigid ideas of masculinity perpetuate inequality. They feel strongly that these conversations paint all men as the problem but do not acknowledge the pressures and challenges men face.

Rejector women are more likely to express conflicting views. There is some acknowledgement that women are still disadvantaged, but these women are deeply concerned that men are being demonised for being men. As they view men and women as inherently different and making different choices, they tend to be sceptical of the value or necessity of 'equal treatment'.

Who they are

Nearly 2 in 10 people are in the Rejector segment. They are more likely to be cisgender men, older, living outside of major cities and to have a TAFE/college education. This segment places a much higher value on personal safety, freedom, loyalty and economic security than they do on equality or fairness.

How to talk to them

Frustrated by what they see as a divisive feminist agenda being pushed by the media and society, many in this segment are tuning out of mainstream channels.

With some Rejectors switching off altogether and others seeking out content from anti-rights commentators, it is especially critical to avoid further polarisation. The Rejector segment is highly sensitive to any language or messaging that appears to point the finger at men. They reject systemic injustice framing, and are antagonised by 'supporter' language such as patriarchal systems designed to privilege men over women.

Acknowledging the pressures and struggles men face can help make the conversation more relatable for this segment and avoid pushing this segment further away. Encouragingly, Rejectors respond most positively to messaging grounded in their core values of personal freedom, safety and security and agree with solutions aimed at realising these values for men and women.

Q:

Does this mean Rejectors can't be won over?

A:

The Hopeful, Conflicted and Moderate segments are open to talking about gender inequality and are broadly supportive of efforts to address inequality. The 'moveable middle' are within reach. By contrast, Rejectors are defensive, dismissive and resistant when we talk about gender inequality. It will require considerable effort to convince this segment, and debating this issue risks adding fuel to the fire. Instead, we should aim to neutralise this segment. We can do this by communicating with the 'moveable middle' using language that doesn't antagonise Rejectors.

There are a number of specialist groups working directly with Rejectors, particularly men, to shift harmful attitudes and behaviours. This targeted work is crucial and urgent, and indeed is the only way to shift attitudes with this group. For communications targeted at a more general cross-section of the population, it is unlikely that Rejectors will be positively engaged, and therefore the primary aim should be to avoid pushing them further away.



Value–Barrier–Action–Vision

Our research confirms the effectiveness of our messaging principles paired with a version of the vision–barrier–action narrative framework.

This framework, commonly used by communicators advocating on a range of issues, leads with core values and a clear vision, highlights the problem, outlines the action required to deliver on the core values, and provides a vision for a better future.

This approach allows us to energise the Trailblazers and avoid polarising the Rejectors, but most critically, it helps us engage the ‘moveable middle’ and bring more people into the conversation about gender equality. Evidence-based Messaging Principles are described in detail in the next section.

VALUE

Lead with shared values.

The most effective messages open with a universal values proposition for people to identify with. The language is accessible, inclusive and simple.

VALUE: *Every person deserves to feel safe and cared for.*

BARRIER

Make the problem real and recognisable.

Next comes the straightforward statement of the problem — specifically how the problem is blocking the realisation of the value outlined above. Everyday examples of the impact on people of all genders in a range of settings make the problem recognisable and relevant.

BARRIER: *But old-fashioned beliefs pressure many men to hide their feelings and act tough, and it's hurting their mental health. This can lead to real danger when some men think it is ok to control and even harm women.*



ACTION

Outline a way forward, together.

Then, state the need for change and point to simple, practical solutions. Show how specific changes can deliver meaningful benefits for people of all genders. These 'solutions' should align with the initial values statement.

ACTION: *It's time to move forward. Caring for men and boys means encouraging them to express their emotions and ask for help when they need it. Caring for women and girls starts with modelling healthy relationships and boundaries and teaching consent and respect from a young age so women feel safe at home, at work and in our community.*

VISION

Link back to a positive future where shared values are realised.

Finally, return to the universal values statement. Inclusive, future-focused language communicates collective responsibility and invites people to work together to create a better future.

VISION: *Together, we can build a world where everyone feels safe and supported.*



Messaging Principles

The latest stage of this Gender Compass research confirms that understanding what pushes people away when it comes to communicating about gender equality is just as valuable as understanding what brings people in.

This guide provides gender equality advocates with evidence-based guardrails to help us bring the 'moveable middle' into the gender equality conversation.

Keep energising the base!

As advocates of gender equality, we have been very effective in energising the Trailblazers and encouraging them to take action. We share their values, understand their motivations and, most importantly, have an established shorthand for communicating that helps us to get them fired up and ready to act.

This guide does not seek to undermine or minimise the impact of messaging used by advocates of gender equality that embraces different principles to those outlined below. Energising supporters of gender equality is critical and speaking candidly and emphatically has proven to be very successful with audiences who care about this issue and are actively working to address inequality.

Engaging the 'moveable middle' requires us to adapt

The latest Gender Compass research confirms that the language that energises Trailblazers is not as effective for engaging other groups, in fact it can push them away.

Instead, the messaging principles outlined below describe how we can appeal to the 'moveable middle' and keep energising the Trailblazers whilst avoiding pushing Rejectors even further away. This will support communicators to cast a wider net and bring more people in our community into the conversation about gender equality.

Messaging Principles



1. Lean into shared values.



2. Unite with inclusive language.



3. Write men into the story.



4. Make it real and recognisable.



5. Centre the solution.



6. Avoid polarising language.



7. Paint a positive future.

Some of this advice may be uncomfortable to read

What you're about to read may feel uncomfortable or even confronting at times, as it challenges the way we've traditionally approached conversations about gender equality. We understand that this shift may seem like a step back, but it's a strategic move to engage more people in the conversation, particularly the 'moveable middle.' This isn't about retreating from core objectives like structural change and addressing deep-rooted inequalities, but rather about meeting people where they are, gently shifting their perceptions, and expanding support for deeper, systemic changes over time. While we continue to prioritise structural change and encourage you to do the same, engaging this broader audience is essential to building long-term support for true gender equality.



1. Lean into shared values

Effective communication starts with recognising and reflecting the core values of the audience.

While equality, fairness, and social justice are foundational to gender equality, they are not the most compelling values across segments. Assuming these values are universal limits the impact of messaging as we try to reach people through the things we care about, rather than what *they* care about. While Trailblazers and Hopefuls value equality and fairness, other segments prioritise safety, personal freedom, and the ability to choose their own path in life. Loyalty and caring for others are also highly valued.

By positioning gender inequality as a threat to these shared values, we can increase relevance and engagement across the segments. While justice and equality are vital for activating certain groups, leveraging a wider range of values helps us meet the segments where they're at.

LESS effective

with the 'moveable middle'

VALUE: Every person should have equal access to opportunities and rights.

VALUE: Gender equality is a human right.

VALUE: Equality is essential for a fair and just society.



MORE effective

with the 'moveable middle'

VALUE: Every person should be free to be their true selves and choose their own path in life.

VALUE: Every person deserves to feel safe and cared for by the people in their lives.

VALUE: Every person deserves an equal chance to be the best they can be.





2. Unite with inclusive language.

Inclusive language helps people to see themselves in the story and feel part of the solution.

We can bring people together with *what* we say and *how* we say it. This means including a diversity of experiences—such as the impact of rigid gender expectations on men and women at different life stages—and using language that creates a sense of belonging. Simple words like *we*, *us* and *everyone* suggest togetherness, while phrases such as *working together* and *all of us* communicate unity. This emphasis is not only engaging and uplifting but crucially mitigates concerns about men and women being pitted against each other.

Across the segments, there is a clear preference for messages that unite people. An adversarial approach does not speak to people's lived experience of loving, living with and working alongside people of all genders. Instead, men and women across the segments respond positively to messages that outline a shared problem and emphasise everyone working together for collective benefit.

LESS effective

with the 'moveable middle'

VALUE: People should be free to live life on their terms.

VALUE: Narrow ideas about what men and women are capable of are holding people back.

VALUE: When men are encouraged as much as women to pursue careers in teaching and nursing, there are more passionate, caring people teaching kids and looking after people.



MORE effective

with the 'moveable middle'

VALUE: **We** should **all** be free to live life on **our** own terms.

VALUE: Narrow ideas about what men and women are capable of are holding **us** back.

VALUE: When **we** encourage men as much as **we** encourage women to pursue careers in teaching and nursing, **we** get more passionate, caring people teaching **our** kids and looking after **us**.





3. Write men into the story.

Demonstrating how gender inequality also affects men and boys is essential to making gender equality relevant and urgent for a wider audience.

Messages that focus primarily on women's experiences of inequality and highlight men's relative privilege can put people on the back foot. While this focus is justified given women are disproportionately impacted, it risks alienating people in segments that are sensitive to anything that feels like it blames men. This is particularly critical when many are concerned about the pressures on men and boys, with some worried men are being discriminated against.

To counter 'zero-sum game thinking'—where progress for women means a loss for men—we can include men's experiences in the narrative. Showing how gender inequality affects everyone provides an opportunity to connect the dots between the barriers people of all genders face, highlighting the mutual benefits of equality solutions.

LESS effective

with the 'moveable middle'

VALUE: *We want an equal future for all women, where it is not a disadvantage to be born a girl.*

BARRIER: *Women in Australia still don't have the same rights and opportunities as men.*

BARRIER: *Outdated systems designed to privilege men over women put the burden of unpaid domestic work on women and deny them access to equal pay, leadership roles and basic safety.*



MORE effective

with the 'moveable middle'

VALUE: *Every person deserves every chance to be their best, no matter their gender.*

BARRIER: *Narrow ideas about what men and women are capable of are holding us back.*

BARRIER: *Outdated expectations pressure men to put work first, denying them time with their families, while women are still expected to do the unpaid work of cooking, cleaning and caring — often on top of their paid jobs.*





Q:
If we are making this inclusive shouldn't we use gender-blind language?

A:
Gender-blind language, such as *every person* or *people in our community*, has an important role to play. It is inclusive regardless of gender identity and helps to communicate universality.

However, naming men and women does play a vital role. It makes explicit the ways that men and women are impacted by gender inequality and could benefit from equality solutions. This is critical when many in the 'moveable middle' do not recognise women's experience of persisting inequality and require specific examples of how women are affected. Not mentioning gender in this context risks diluting our communications. Mentioning men and their specific experiences is also critical to help cisgender men recognise themselves and see this as an issue that is relevant to them personally (and counter assumptions that gender inequality is a 'women's issue').

Using both gendered and gender-blind language is important if we want to make our communications inclusive and engaging.

Q:
Doesn't writing men into the story erase women's experiences?
Does making this about *all of us* ignore the disproportionate struggles women and gender-diverse people face?

A:
We need to write men into the story, but not as the main character. The aim is not to sideline women's experience, but to invite men to see themselves reflected. This is particularly important for engaging the 'moveable middle' who are less receptive to messaging centred solely on women's experiences. However, as women and gender-diverse people are disproportionately impacted by inequality, it is absolutely essential to represent the experience of people of all genders. We don't want to make this all about men, but by showing that gender inequality harms everyone we open the door to broader support and engagement.



4. Make it real and recognisable.

Relatable examples make inequality harder to ignore whilst making equality relevant and realisable. To engage the 'moveable middle', we need to meet people where they're at, using resonant shortcuts that connect to people's current values and lived experience.

Abstract concepts and language, including terms like *systemic inequality* and *power imbalance*, are less accessible and therefore less impactful – especially for segments who are not already convinced of the issue. Making inequality recognisable and equality tangible is crucial to building support for solutions. If our audience does not see the inequality, they may view gender equality initiatives as exaggerated or even unfair.

To engage a wider audience, we need to translate these concepts into specific, tangible examples that reflect people's day-to-day experiences. When people can see themselves and their loved ones in the story they are more likely to support equality efforts.

LESS effective

with the 'moveable middle'

BARRIER: *Women continue to be disadvantaged by a patriarchal system designed to privilege men.*

BARRIER: *Societal gender expectations create emotional repression in men, leading to a harmful cycle of toxic masculinity that negatively impacts men's mental health and can perpetuate harmful behaviours towards women.*

ACTION: *When gendered barriers in sport are addressed and women are given equal opportunities, they excel. The success of teams like the Matildas and women's AFL, rugby, and cricket has challenged traditional gender norms and inspired boys and girls to pursue their goals with confidence.*



Abstract arguments often fail to engage people in the 'moveable middle' and in some cases can push away people who find this type of language inaccessible and overwhelming.

While the 'less effective' statements still resonate with Trailblazers who are familiar and comfortable with this language, it is critical to translate these concepts into relatable and tangible examples for the 'moveable middle'.

This means leaning into things people care about and experience day to day, such as relationships, work, domestic life, raising kids and sport.

MORE effective

with the 'moveable middle'

BARRIER: *Outdated ideas about what men and women are capable of mean many women still get paid less than men.*

BARRIER: *Old-fashioned beliefs pressure many men to hide their feelings and act tough, and it's hurting their mental health. This can lead to real danger when some men think it is ok to control and even harm women.*

ACTION: *When we give women in sport the same opportunities as men, they excel. The success of the Matildas and women's AFL, rugby and cricket has given our community more of the sports we love and inspired boys and girls to pursue their goals with confidence.*

Q:

Does 'making it real' mean providing clear evidence?

A:

While facts and evidence have an important role to play, on their own they don't change minds. To make inequality real and recognisable, we need to connect the issue to people's everyday experiences. This means translating abstract concepts, like *systemic inequality* or *power imbalances*, into concrete, relatable scenarios that resonate with individuals on a personal level. Instead of just presenting statistics, we should show how these issues play out in familiar situations—whether at work, in family life, or in social interactions. By doing so, we help people see themselves and their loved ones in the story, making the issue more tangible and relevant. When people can relate to the experiences being shared, they're more likely to feel motivated to support equality efforts. This approach shifts the conversation from abstract ideas to real-world impacts, which is crucial for engaging a wider audience and building long-term support for solutions.

Q:

Does 'avoiding the abstract' risk making structural drivers of inequality invisible?

A:

While we may use simpler language to engage a broader audience, we are still talking about the same thing. Our research found that although talking about abstract concepts like *structural inequality* resonate with Trailblazers and some Hopefuls, it often alienates others, rather than inviting them in. By starting with practical, everyday scenarios, we help people connect with the issue, building understanding and trust. This approach doesn't avoid the deeper, systemic aspects of gender inequality; rather, it opens the door for more nuanced conversations over time. The goal is to make space for broader discussions, without pushing people away at the outset.





5. Centre the solution.

Highlighting the reality of gender inequality is crucial, but effectively engaging a broad audience requires a focus on meaningful, actionable solutions.

While it's necessary to highlight examples of ongoing inequality to bridge the awareness gap, too much focus on the problem can make the issue feel overwhelming or can feel too much like pointing fingers. Since guilt and shame aren't conducive to changing minds, and hopelessness undermines motivation to act, it's important to focus on what can be done to change things for the better.

The middle segments, in particular, respond positively to messages focussed on solutions. Sticking to this rule allows us to acknowledge the reality of the problem but focus on motivating people with relevant and tangible equality solutions that connect to their values.

LESS effective

with the 'moveable middle'

BARRIER: *The gender pay gap has existed for decades, and there seems to be little progress being made. Systemic discrimination continues to impact women's career progression and many women continue to be paid less than men for the same work, despite efforts to address this imbalance.*

ACTION: *We need equal pay for equal work.*

ACTION: *Rigid ideas of what it means to be a man or a woman are contributing to high rates of domestic violence. Men often feel pressure to conform to a traditional masculine ideal, harming their mental health. Meanwhile, women continue to face the threat of abuse and harassment, which keeps them feeling unsafe in their own homes and communities. These harmful stereotypes prevent us from experiencing safety, happiness, and connection.*

ACTION: *To address this, we need to let men be vulnerable and keep women safe by teaching respect.*



While Trailblazers are not put off by a focus on what's wrong, for the 'moveable middle' this feels too much like blaming and can make the problem feel insurmountable. This prompts people to tune out.

Making the problem (BARRIER) real and relevant, then focussing on meaningful solutions (ACTION) is most effective in engaging this group.

A ratio of 1 part BARRIER: 2 parts ACTION is a useful guide.

MORE effective

with the 'moveable middle'

BARRIER: *Women's contributions continue to be devalued with women still being paid less than men for the same work.*

BARRIER: *It's time to value everyone's contributions. We can do this by supporting all businesses to transition to transparent pay policies and providing government-funded training on fair pay practices to ensure equal pay for equal work.*

ACTION: *Rigid ideas of what it means to be a man and a woman deny us the opportunity to feel safe and be happy.*

ACTION: *It's time to move forward. Caring for men and boys means encouraging them to express their emotions and ask for help when they need it. Caring for women and girls starts with modelling healthy relationships and teaching consent, respect and boundary setting from a young age so women feel safe at home, at work and in our community.*



6. Avoid polarising language.

Language that is heavily associated with a Trailblazer worldview can alienate the middle segments and polarise Rejectors, distracting from the core message.

Segments that believe biological differences between genders and/or women making different choices to men explain inequality of outcomes are acutely sensitive to the type of language used by people who see inequality as a systemic issue. Messages phrased in the language of those they fundamentally disagree with can trigger a defensive, emotional response or prompt people to tune out as it doesn't feel aimed at them.

Even terms such as *gender equality* and *gender roles* can be a barrier and are better expressed in other words. Avoiding terms that trigger defensive reactions helps prevent further division on this issue and ensures the segments we most need to engage are receptive to our communications.

LESS effective

with the 'moveable middle'

Gender equality

Gender roles

BARRIER: *Patriarchal systems designed to privilege men over women*



The language in the 'less effective' column is very successful with the Trailblazers, but it can antagonise Rejectors and put the 'moveable middle' on the back foot.

It's important to communicate the same ideas using accessible, neutral language and relatable examples that can connect with a wider audience.

MORE effective

with the 'moveable middle'

Women having the same rights, opportunities and outcomes as men // Every person having an equal chance to be their best.

Narrow ideas about what it means to be a man or a woman.

BARRIER: *Expectations about the roles men and women are meant to play at home, at work and in the community can make some aspects of life easier for men whilst limiting women's opportunities.*

The more divisive the issue, the more important to apply these rules.

While this research did not specifically explore how to talk about more difficult and often polarising topics such as gender-based violence, trans inclusion or reproductive rights, many of the findings can be applied to help us minimise polarisation and make even the most divisive topics more accessible, relevant and resonant to a wider audience. When there is an even greater risk of resistance or reluctance to engage, it is especially important to embrace these principles.

Note: How this message is delivered and by whom will likely be even more important for these more challenging topics.

Q:

So, we need to stop talking about equality?

A:

Not at all. The issue of gender equality is central to everything we do, and the ultimate goal remains unchanged: a world where everyone, regardless of gender, has equal rights, opportunities, and respect. We understand that the issue of gender equality resonates deeply with those who are already engaged and acting to address inequality – it does for us too. But for other segments, it's not as central to their concerns. So, what we're suggesting is that we need to communicate about gender equality in ways that resonate with different audiences. For some, this might mean starting with broader, more accessible language that focuses on shared values like safety, freedom, and potential. Once we've engaged them, we can begin to introduce more complex and nuanced discussions around structural inequality, making sure we move toward true equality for all.

7. Paint a positive future.



To inspire action across the segments, messages should put forward a hopeful vision for the future.

In all segments, people respond positively to calls to action that invite them to be part of creating a better future. Ideally, these statements link back to the initial values proposition and show how the realisation of this value, for example every person being free to choose their own path in life, delivers meaningful benefits. Phrases such as it's time to move forward convey momentum, while expressions such as together, we can... are unifying and neutralise concerns about men and women being pitted against each other.

By painting a picture of a better future we can build together, we encourage people to connect with and contribute to change.

LESS effective

with the 'moveable middle'

We've been stuck for too long.

Right now, not everyone feels safe and supported.

We've seen how a lack of respect for women and girls has led to an unsafe, unequal world.



In the BARRIER section of a message, clearly stating what is wrong right now is important.

However, in the ACTION and VISION sections of our message, we should flip negative statements phrased in the present or past tense to positive, future-focussed statements about what we can achieve together.

MORE effective

with the 'moveable middle'

It's time to move forward. // It's time to move on.

Together, we can build a world where everyone feels safe and supported.

When we value and respect women and girls, we are on our way to building a safer and more equal world.

Examples

These messages were tested with the segments as part of the Stage 2 survey and dial test with 2,048 community members aged 16+. On average, more than 9 in 10 people found these messages convincing, and more than 6 in 10 were very convinced.

Examples	Free to choose your own path	Equal chance to be your best	Safety and caring for others
VALUE	<i>Every person should be free to choose their own path in life.</i>	<i>Every person deserves an equal chance to be the best they can be.</i>	<i>Every person deserves to feel safe and cared for.</i>
BARRIER	<i>But outdated expectations pressure men to put work first, denying them time with their families, while women are still expected to do the unpaid work of cooking, cleaning and caring – often on top of their paid jobs.</i>	<i>But narrow ideas about what men and women are capable of are holding us back.</i>	<i>But old-fashioned beliefs pressure many men to hide their feelings and act tough, and it's hurting their mental health. This can lead to real danger when some men think it is ok to control and even harm women.</i>
ACTION	<i>We should all be free to live life on our own terms. Flexible work arrangements can give men more time at home to share the load and enjoy time with their kids, while access to fair pay in rewarding careers supports women to choose their own path.</i>	<i>When we give women in sport the same opportunities as men, they excel. The success of the Matildas and women's AFL, rugby and cricket has given our community more of the sports we love and inspired boys and girls to pursue their goals with confidence. And when men are encouraged as much as women to pursue careers in teaching and nursing, we get more passionate, caring people teaching our kids and looking after us.</i>	<i>It's time to move forward. Caring for men and boys means encouraging them to express their emotions and ask for help when they need it. Caring for women and girls starts with modelling healthy relationships and teaching consent and respect from a young age so women feel safe at home, at work and in our community.</i>
VISION	<i>When everyone is free to choose what works for them and their families, we all benefit.</i>	<i>When we give every person the chance to be their best, we all win.</i>	<i>Together, we can build a world where everyone feels safe and supported.</i>

Note: We also tested a message that described systemic injustice and emphasised the impact of inequality on women and girls. This message did not mention men, except for in the problem articulation “outdated systems designed to privilege men over women”. This type of messaging, full of ‘supporter language’ was very convincing to the Trailblazer segment. However, this message – particularly the problem articulation – did not engage the ‘middle’ as successfully as other messages. Most crucially, the focus on women’s disadvantage and descriptions of structural discrimination were very polarising and antagonised the Rejector segment.

This confirms the importance of expressing the problem in simple, accessible language that doesn’t push people away and writing men into the story to avoid activating defensiveness among the less supportive segments.

Messengers

What we say matters, but *who* says it and *how* it reaches people are just as important.

The *messenger* and the *medium* through which a message is delivered can shape how a message is received.

Trusted messengers aren't that clear.

Australians have some awareness that gender equality is spoken about by various messengers in various contexts, but the Hopeful, Conflicted, Moderate and Indifferent segments are the least sure who they would listen to.

Trailblazers and Rejectors are most likely to purposefully engage with chosen messengers.

These segments are seeking out (and being fed) people and channels which reflect and affirm their core beliefs. These segments found it easier to identify who was talking about these issues (though some Rejectors say they don't listen to anyone and prefer to make up their own mind).

The 'middle' segments would prefer to hear from people they have a connection to.

The Hopeful, Moderate and Conflicted segments found it more challenging to think of specific media, commentators, influencers, institutions and channels they would listen to and trust. When prompted, they were more likely to suggest people and settings that they had a direct connection to and which felt personally relevant to them. These segments focussed on the types of people they would trust and feel most comfortable talking about this issue with.

Messenger insights

Most Australians want to hear from women *and* men on this issue.

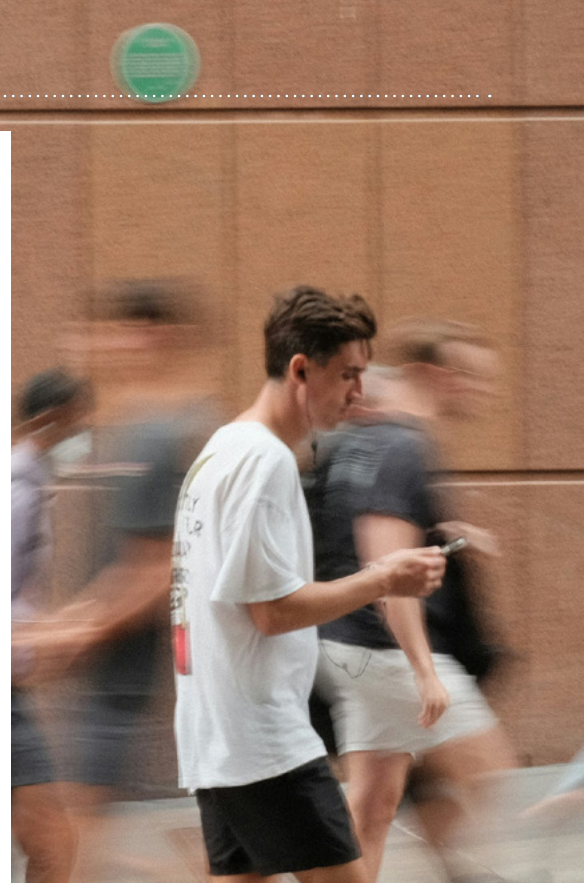
- When audiences see people of all genders speaking on this issue it signals this affects all of us and requires us to work together.
- Adding the voices of cisgender men in particular to the chorus of loud, passionate cisgender women and LGBTQIA+ advocates can increase our reach and challenge assumptions that gender equality is not just a 'women's issue'.

Broadly speaking, the 'middle' segments mention types of people rather than specific messengers they'd listen to.

- The most common 'types' include
 - Someone "close to them" – many in the Moderate, Conflicted and Rejector segments suggested they would trust and listen to people they felt close to.
 - Local leaders and people in their community including faith leaders, sports coaches.

Note: Discussions about the trust and respect they have for the views of people they are "closest" to was often contrasted with a lack of trust in "politicians" more broadly. Sometimes, the preference for listening to people around them was also reflective of a deeper fatigue with media, news and social commentary altogether, and a greater comfort with hearing from people where there was established values alignment and therefore where they are less likely to be challenged.

Further research and knowledge sharing between advocates is recommended to enhance our collective understanding of how to make the most impact.



Q:
Were the tested audio messages recorded in a man's voice or a woman's voice?

A:
The audio messages tested in the survey and dial test were voiced by a cisgender man with a general Australian accent. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, advertising and political campaign-testing studies have shown the voices of cisgender men have broader appeal than those of cisgender women and are generally perceived as 'neutral'. This was important if we wanted to minimise polarisation and avoid prompting certain groups to tune out.

The decision to use the voice of a cisgender man for the dial testing makes this topic more inclusive and 'relevant' to people of all genders and normalises cisgender men caring about and talking about this issue.

Settings

Encouragingly, the vast majority of Australians are open to having conversations about gender equality.

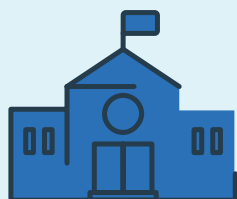
Whilst the segments are at different starting points, and bring their unique views and experiences to these discussions, there is broad support for talking about gender equality topics such as fair treatment and respectful relationships in a range of settings.

How many Australians think it's appropriate to discuss gender equality topics in these settings:

% who believe it is 'appropriate' or 'very appropriate' to discuss gender equality topics such as fair treatment and respectful relationships in each setting



86%
at home



78%
at school



77%
at university/
TAFE



76%
in the media



75%
in the
workplace



73%
in community
settings



69%
on social
media



65%
in faith settings

Base n=2,048

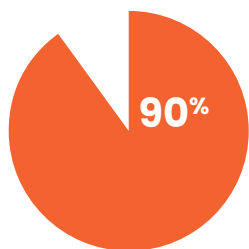
Trailblazers are the most supportive of discussing gender equality – 90% on average think these settings are appropriate. While Rejectors are more likely to feel these settings are inappropriate, the majority are still open to discussing gender equality in these settings – 60% on average.

The workplace

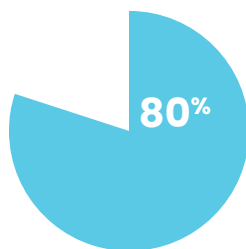


The workplace presents a real opportunity, with three in four Australians believing work is an appropriate place to discuss gender equality.

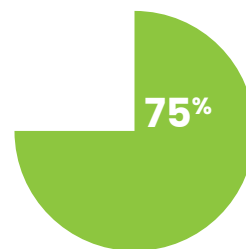
In all segments, the majority believe workplaces are an appropriate setting to discuss gender equality topics such as fair treatment and respectful relationships.



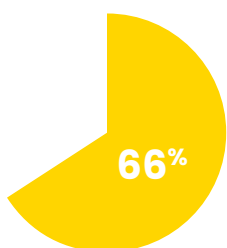
9 in 10
Trailblazers



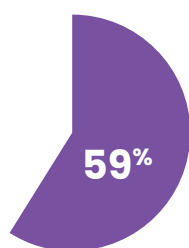
8 in 10
Hopeful



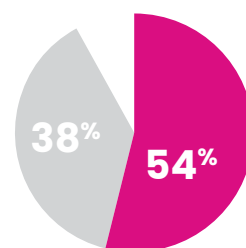
Nearly 8 in 10
Conflicted



Nearly 7 in 10
Rejectors



6 in 10
Moderates



More than 5 in 10
Indifferent

Note: High proportion are neutral (38%)

Total employed (n=1,347)

The good news is, Australians are open to discussing gender equality topics at work.

Positive feelings such as *hopeful*, *proud*, *safe*, and *enthusiastic* were the most common responses when segments were asked how they would feel about gender equality topics being discussed in their workplace. Even in more resistant segments, positive sentiments far outweighed negative ones.

There is broad support across different workplace sizes and types, and this presents an opportunity to establish a culture where gender equality is seen as a positive and essential part of the workplace.

Ensure that the discussions are inclusive, respectful, and grounded in real, actionable outcomes.

By creating a safe and open environment for dialogue, you can help break down barriers, build understanding, and drive meaningful change across all employee segments.

Openness may be influenced by examples of gender equality topics provided.

The difference in level of perceived 'appropriateness' may have been different if more polarising topics were listed such as 'reproductive rights', 'trans inclusion' and/or 'LGBTQIA+ issues'.

So how do we do that?

Tailor discussions to your audience

Views on who should lead gender equality discussions are mixed and you should consider asking your audience who they would feel most comfortable hearing from. To engage your audience, consider who is best positioned to lead the conversation. For some segments, having colleagues lead the discussions can help build comfort and trust. For others, consider bringing in external experts to provide an unbiased perspective and credibility. For Trailblazers and Hopefuls, internal leaders can guide discussions, but this audience only wants to hear from leadership if discussions are backed up by genuine actions such as equal pay, parental leave policies, and other tangible gender equality initiatives.

Acknowledge men's concerns about increasing scrutiny:

Some cisgender men and women in the Conflicted, Moderate and Rejector segments feel uncomfortable with the changes required for gender equality in the workplace. They often worry about doing or saying the wrong thing, and believe men are coming under increasing scrutiny. Acknowledge these concerns and create a supportive space where men can voice their discomfort without fear of judgment. Frame the conversation as an opportunity for everyone to grow together, and emphasise that gender equality benefits all employees, not just women. Offering reassurance and focusing on shared goals can help reduce resistance and increase engagement.

Start with broad topics and align with shared values:

How comfortable people feel discussing gender equality topics at work depends on what is being discussed and how it is communicated. While the Trailblazers and Hopefuls may be ready to get into heavier and more uncomfortable topics straight away, for others a more considered approach is needed. Building trust and ensuring people feel safe, comfortable and able to share their views openly is critical to having meaningful conversations. For workplaces with more people in the Conflicted, Moderate and Rejector segments, consider starting with a focus on respect and fair treatment, before moving onto topics such as sexual harassment, consent or LGBTQIA+ inclusion. At every stage, connect these topics to shared values and frame them as integral to a respectful and inclusive workplace culture.



If you're interested in understanding how your workforce or audience is segmented, the Gender Compass segmentation algorithm is available upon request. It can empower workplaces to craft more tailored, thoughtful messages and identify the most effective messengers when communicating about gender equality. Contact Plan International to learn more info@plan.org.au

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Minderoo Foundation

Oxfam
Respect Victoria
Trawalla Foundation



Until we are all equal

For more resources on understanding and using the Gender Compass, please visit:

planau.me/gender-compass

plan.org.au **13 75 26**

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