

Initiatives for gender equality: The creation of the Women in Economics Network as an evidence-based case study

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I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we are gathered, and recognise their deep and ongoing connection to country, culture and community



Economists are well equipped to provide our **analysis and advice** to improve the rest of society...

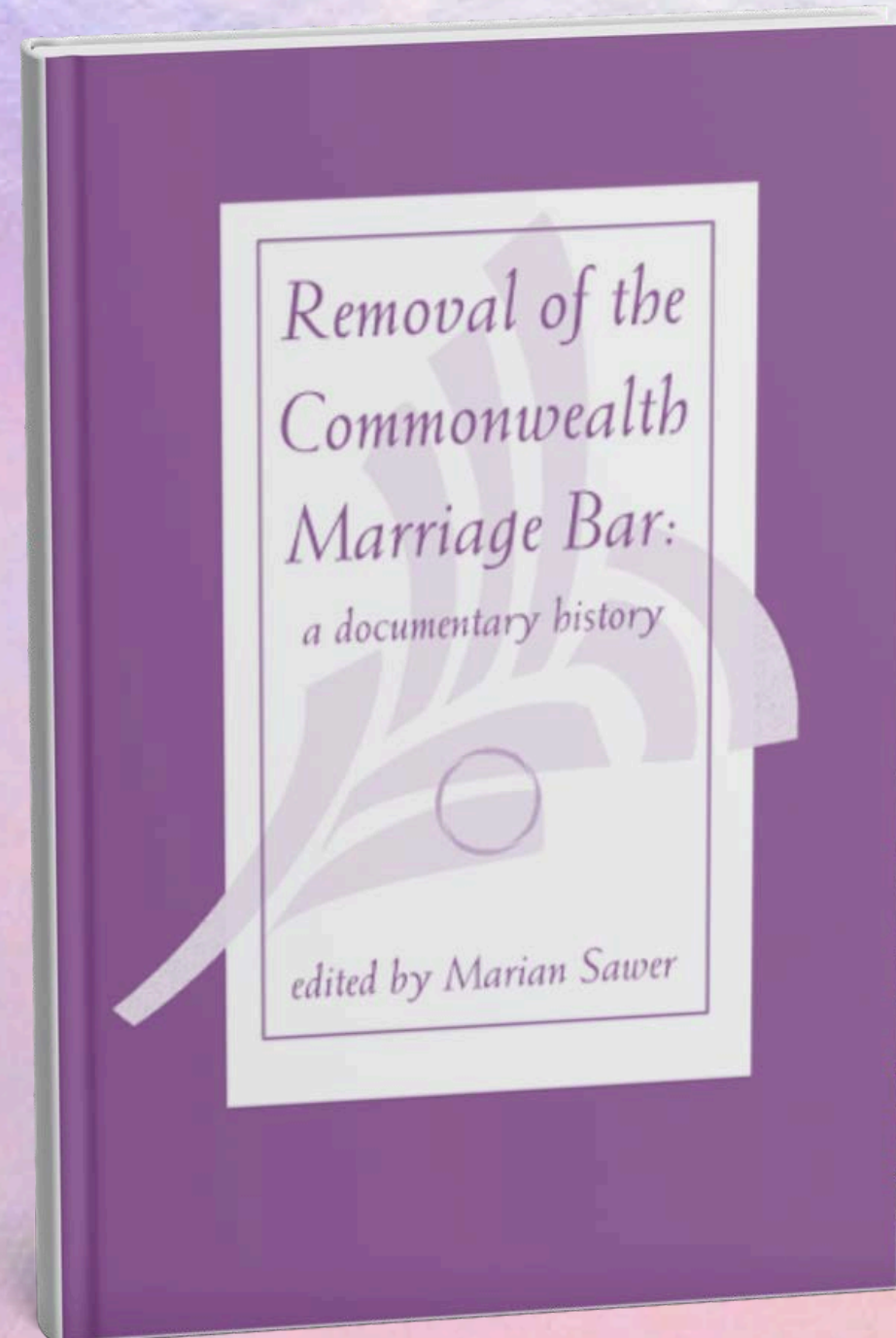
But what about applying this research knowledge and evidence to our own profession?

- **What works** (and what doesn't work) to close gender gaps in the workforce?
- How can we **practically apply** this to our own field of economics?
- What **barriers** get in the way of pursuing equality?



*Learning from the progression
of gender equality policies
over time*





Dismantling barriers to women's participation in the law

What can we **learn** from the history of progress in women's rights over time?

What were the factors that **catalysed** and **enabled** these changes?

- **Economic imperative** is often the real catalyst for change

Takeaways



“Women,
you just need to be
more confident!”





*"Women,
you just need to be
more confident!"*

Does the research and evidence support this advice?

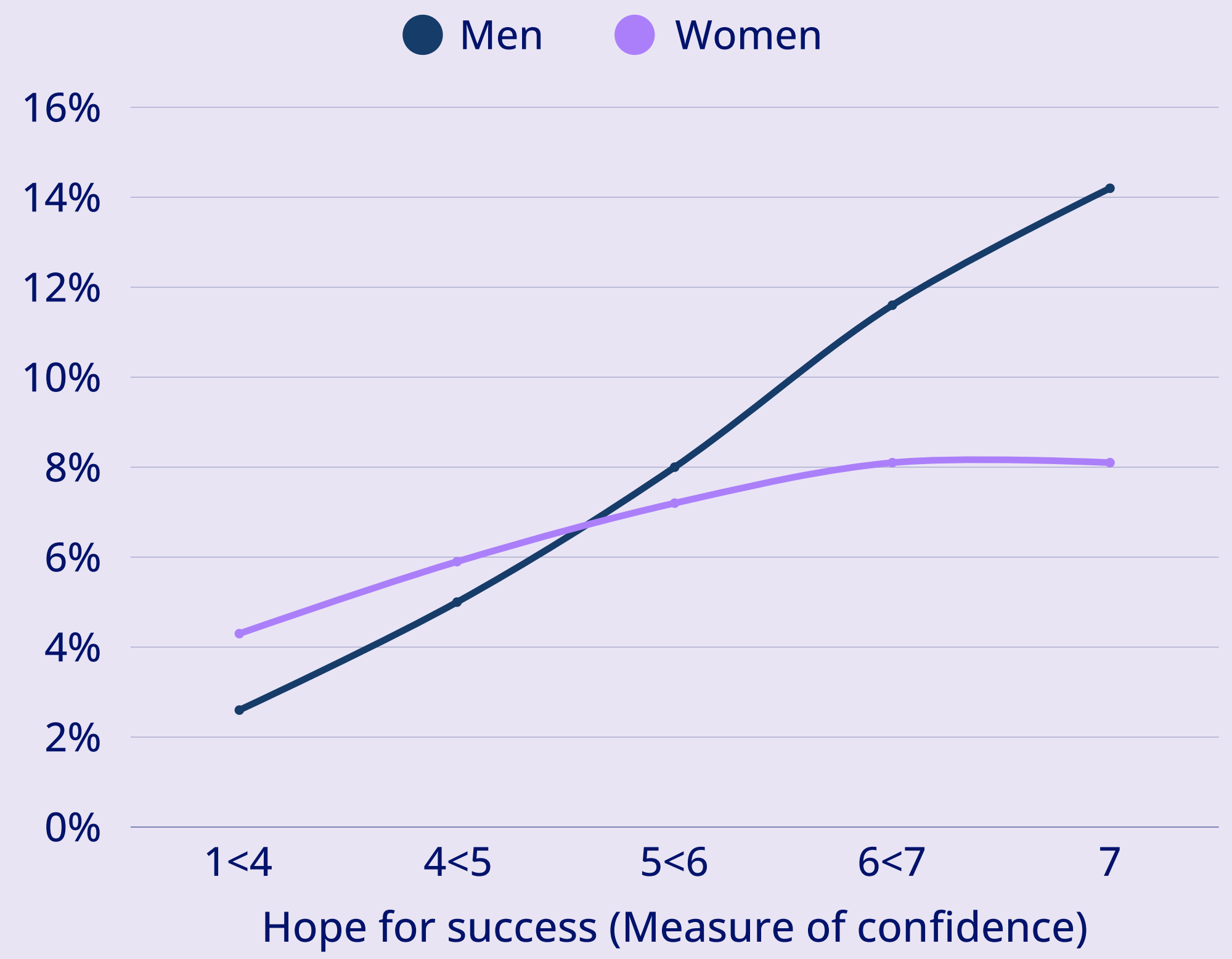
Is higher confidence linked to higher promotion prospects?

Is higher confidence linked to higher promotion prospects?

Yes... if you're a man

Source: Risse, L. (2020) 'Leaning In: Is higher confidence the key to women's career advancement?' Australian Journal of Labour Economics, 23(1): 43-78. Analysis uses Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey data

Predicted probability of job promotion



What does the **research** and **evidence** point to instead?








Fix the women

Fix the system



Evidence-based ways to de-bias systems

Current approach	Source of implicit bias	How to cleanse bias from the system
 <p>Assume interviews are meritocratic</p>	<p>✘ Unconscious favoritism towards people who remind us of ourselves (affinity bias)</p>	<p>✓ Use objective criteria, structured interview questions, skill-based assessment tasks</p>
 <p>Expect women to initiate pay rise negotiations</p>	<p>✘ Risk of backlash against women for showing ambition and assertiveness</p>	<p>✓ Conduct a pay audit; Report outcome to executive/board; Advertise salary range and openness to negotiation</p>
 <p>Expect women to apply for promotion</p>	<p>✘ Risk of backlash against women for showing ambition; Social norm that men are better leaders</p>	<p>✓ Automatically consider all candidates who fulfil the criteria (opt-in by default); Set targets for shortlist; Offer job-sharing for senior roles</p>
 <p>Onus on men to apply for parental leave</p>	<p>✘ Negative stigma doubting men's commitment to career; Pressure on men to fulfil breadwinner role</p>	<p>✓ Automatically allocate parental leave to men (opt-in by default); Non-transferable use-it-or-lose-it entitlement for fathers/partners</p>
 <p>Advertise job roles using stereotypical descriptions</p>	<p>✘ Language associated with masculinity ("competitive", "leading") attracts more men</p>	<p>✓ Apply 'gender decoder' to language used in job advertisements; Describe skills and capabilities in objective way</p>

See: 'What Works: Gender Equality by Design' by Bohnet 2016; 'MakeWork Fair' by Bohnet and Chilazi 2025

Takeaways



- **Economic imperative** is often the real catalyst for change
- Can't simply "**add women and stir**"

Correct overt gender biases in the system



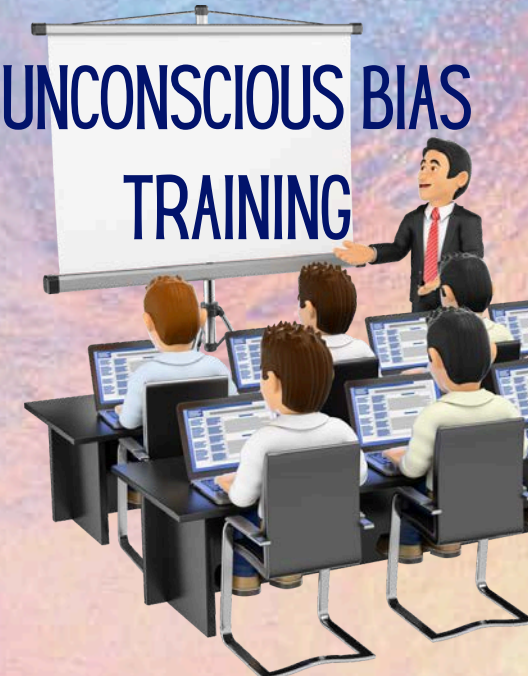
Support women to fit into the existing system



De-bias individuals



UNCONSCIOUS BIAS TRAINING



- **Intersectional** approaches teach us that gender equality is more than a “headcount”
- The origins of intersectionality focus on **structural imbalances in power**
- Intersectionality is about **voice and input into decision-making**
- An intersectional lens prompts us to ask:
 - Who **designed** the system?
 - Who are existing policy settings **designed for?**



Kimberlé Crenshaw

American Civil Rights Advocate
Professor, UCLA School of Law and
Columbia Law School

Correct overt gender biases in the system



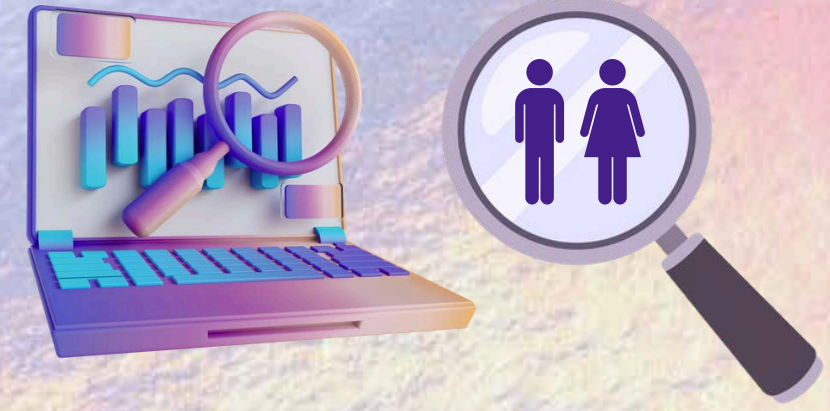
Support women to fit into the existing system



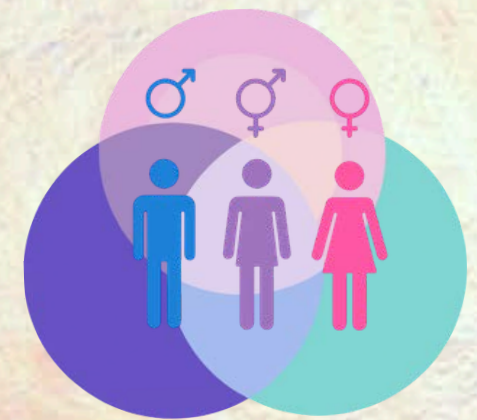
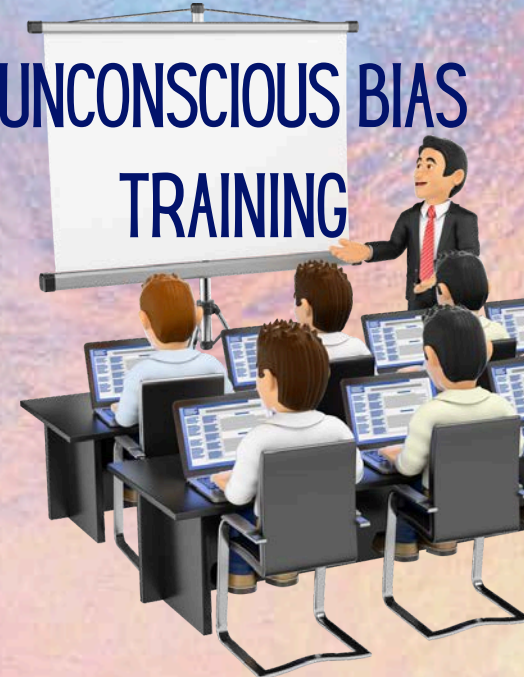
De-bias individuals



De-bias the system



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Takeaways



- **Economic imperative** is often the real catalyst for change
- Can't simply “**add women and stir**”
- The **research, data and evidence** is on your side – use it!

Applying this evidence-based approach
to our own profession of economics



The creation and impact of
the Women in Economics
Network in Australia

WEN



Women in
Economics Network



WEN



Women in
Economics Network



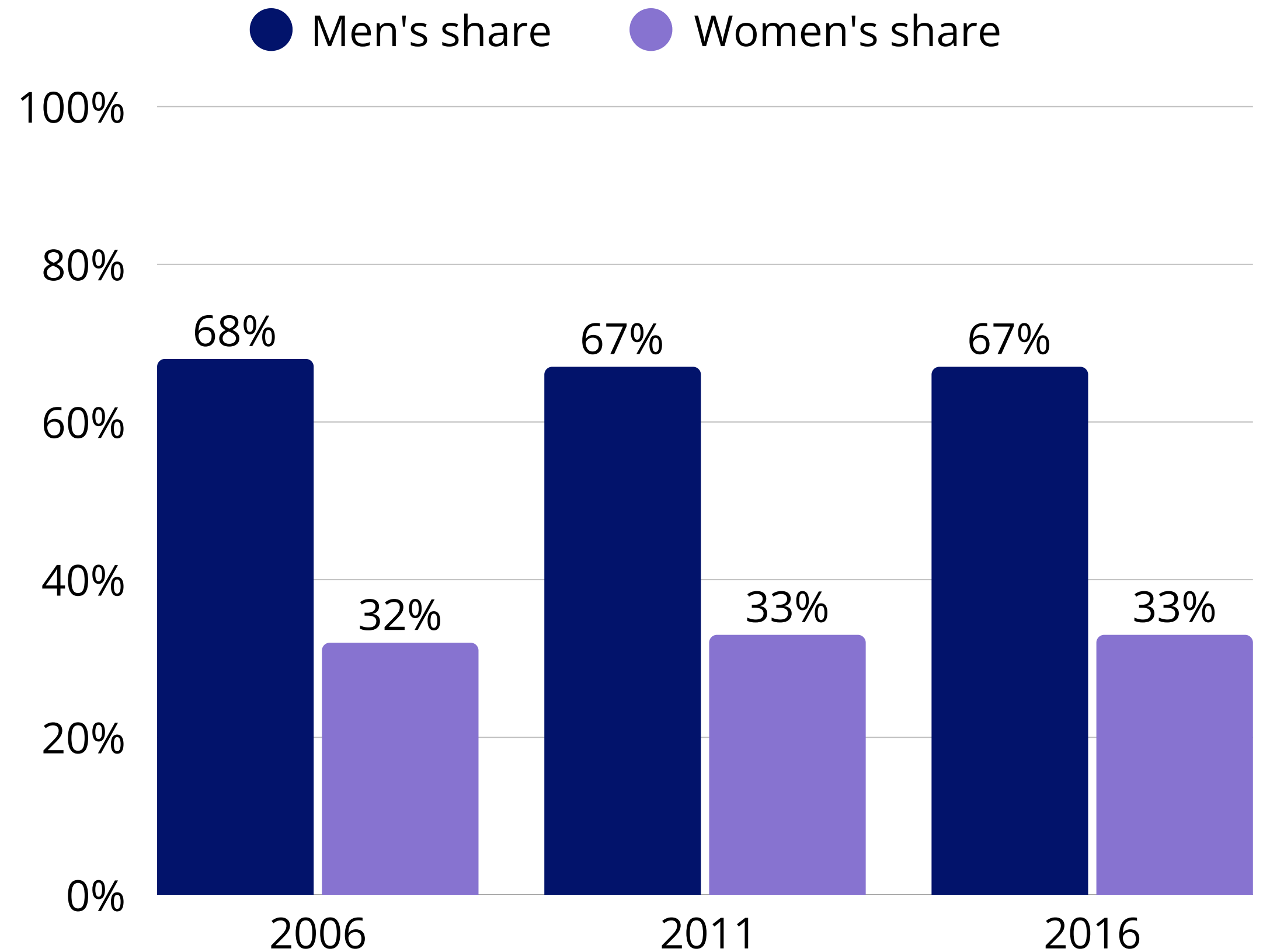
Lifting Diversity and Inclusion in Economics: How the Australian Women in Economics Network Put the Evidence into Action*

Rebecca Cassells,¹ Leonora Risse,² Danielle Wood³ and Duygu Yengin⁴

To support broader global efforts to improve diversity and inclusion in economics, this paper provides a statistical picture of the gender composition of the economics profession in Australia and the evidence-based initiatives taken by the Women in Economics Network (WEN) to improve women's representation and recognition. WEN's impact is evaluated across a range of metrics. This includes a case study of WEN's mentorship programme for university students that was delivered as a behavioural intervention and evaluated as a randomised control trial. Drawing on practical experiences in combination with research insights, the paper identifies some of the challenges encountered and the lessons that can be shared with similar organisations globally that are pursuing diversity and inclusion goals.

Keywords: gender equality, economics, diversity and inclusion, discrimination.

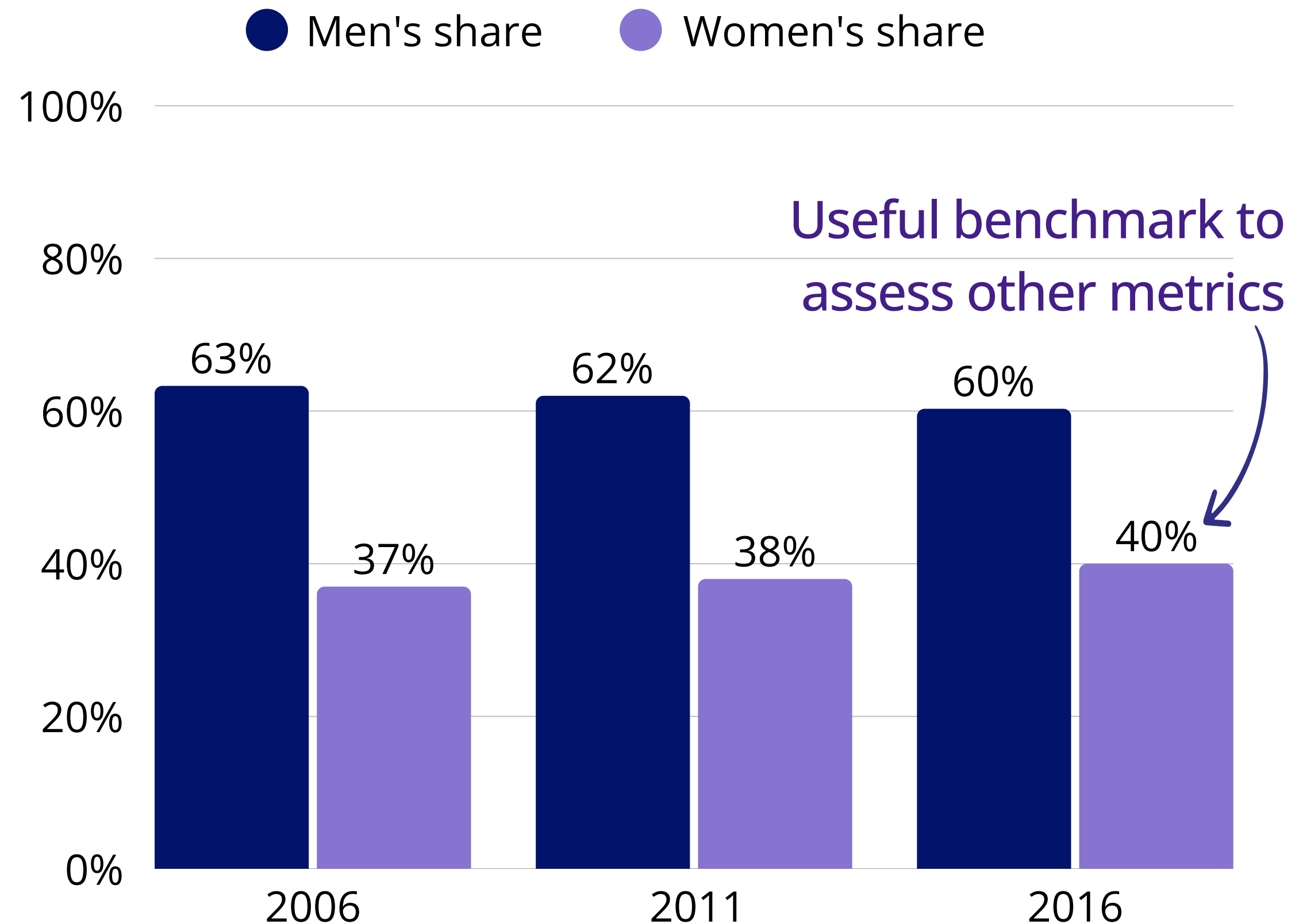
Gender composition of economists in Australia



What did the economics profession look like before WEN was created?

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, Australia

Gender composition of economics qualification-holders in Australia



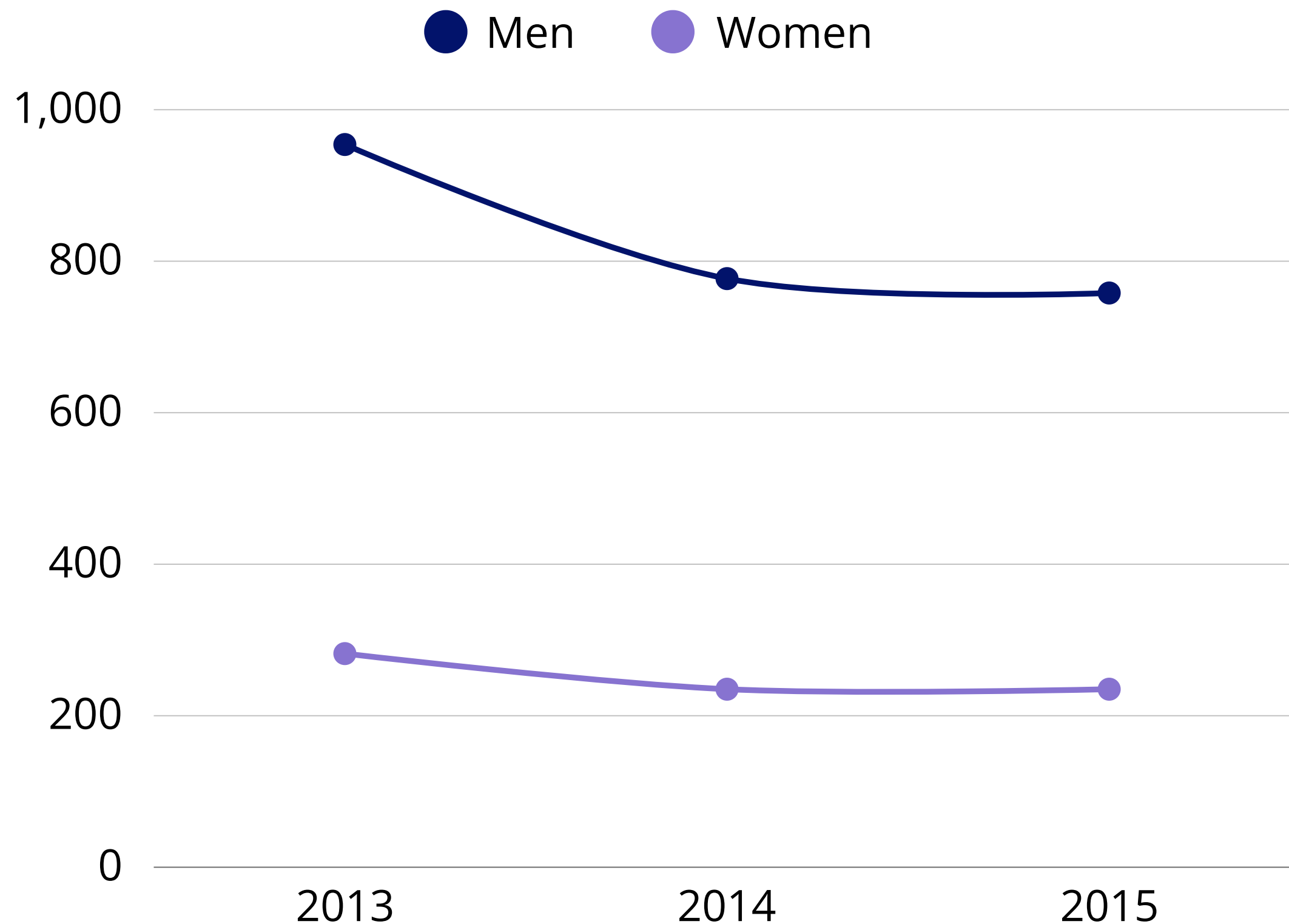
What did the economics profession look like before WEN was created?

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, Australia

ESA membership numbers were falling,
with women comprising only 1 in 5 members

What did the
economics profession
look like before
WEN was created?

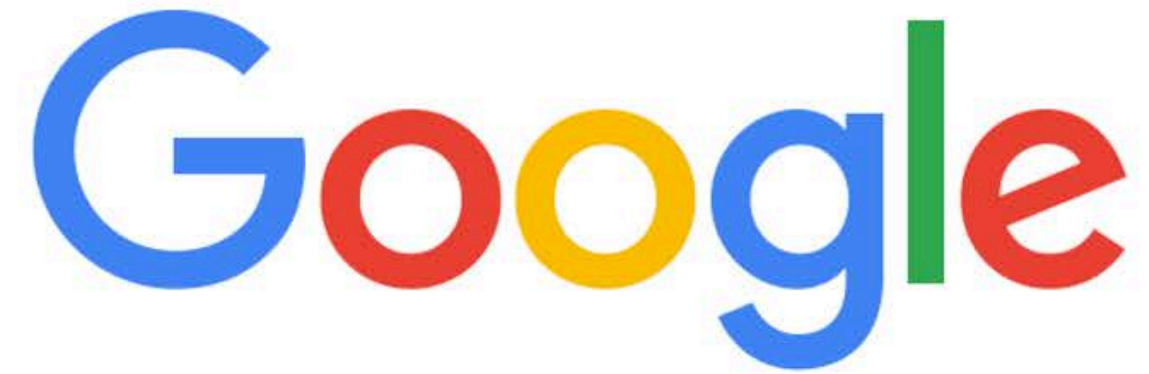
Source: Economic Society of Australia



“Australia has never had a female Treasurer. Or a female Reserve Bank Governor. Or Deputy Governor. Or female chair of the ACCC. Or APRA. Or ASIC. Or the Future Fund. Or the Productivity Commission. I think you get the gist.”

Quote by then Shadow Treasurer Chris Bowen, The Case for Gender Equality
Speech to NSW WEN, 2017

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The Google logo is displayed in its standard multi-colored font (blue, red, yellow, blue, green, red).

🔍 Australian economists



🔍 **australian** economists

🔍 **australian** economists **list**

🔍 **australian** economists **open letter**

🔍 **australian** economists **conference**

🔍 **australian** **business** economists

🔍 **leading** **australian** economists

Google search result 2020

Economists / Australia



Warwick McKibbin



John Quiggin



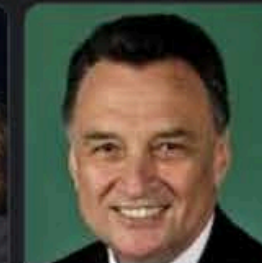
Richard Holden



Saul Eslake



Allison Booth



Craig Emerson



Gigi Foster



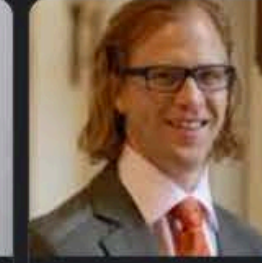
John Hewson



Ross Garnaut



Joshua Gans



Justin Wolfers



Bruce Chapman



Allan Fels



Andrew Leigh



Glenn Stevens



Bill Wentwo...
1907–2003



Adrian Pagan



Geoffrey Harcourt



Martin Parkinson



Alison Preston



Tony Aspromour...



Douglas Copland
1894–1971



Lyndhurst Giblin
1872–1951



Ian Macfarlane



Leslie Melville
1902–2002



Trevor S. Breusch



John Piggott



Peter Dixon



David Throsby



Paresh Narayan



Jason Potts



Margaret Gardner



Nicholas Gruen



Jim Cairns
1914–2003



James Wolfensohn
1933–2020



Steve Keen



Clem Tisdell



Kym Anderson



H. C. Coombs
1906–1997



Ken Henry



John Rickard



Peter Karmel
1922–2008



Martin Ravallion



Ameer Ali



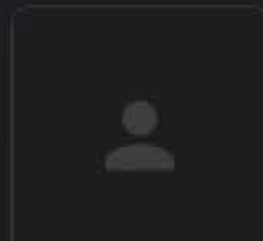
Max Corden



Guy Debelle



Ian Harper



Wendy Carlin



- WEN was created in 2017 as part of the Economic Society in Australia (ESA)
- Membership extends across academia, public sector, private sector, educators and general community
- Men and people of all genders are welcome to join to show their support for gender equality

WEN



WEN's aims



- 1 To professionally connect and support women in economics in Australia
- 2 To improve the representation of women at all levels of the economics profession
- 3 To promote public contributions by female economists
- 4 To encourage the next generation of women to study economics



WEN Women in Economics Network

**WEN's
evidence-
based
approach**



Improve perceptions about economics

- Focus on wellbeing, real-world challenges, practical relevance and applicability

Improve perceptions about economists

- Role models and visibility of female economists

Understand female students' career motivations

- To solve world problems and help others, not money

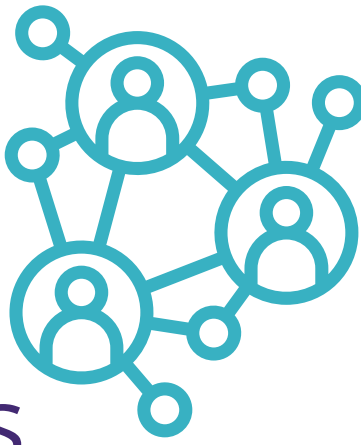
Undo gender inequities in male-concentrated fields

- Unconscious bias, “fix the system” vs. “fix the women”, inclusion and belonging, shifting norms for men too
- Bring more female voices on issues of economic analysis and policymaking

WEN's actions



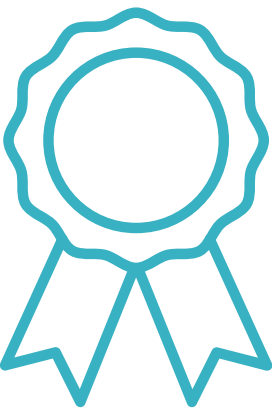
- Community building events and networking
- Annual mentoring retreat
- Tailored professional development opportunities



- Outlets for publication
- Media and public speaking register
- Female keynote speakers at ESA Annual Conference
- Annual Women in Economics Budget Panel at National Press Club of Australia



- Nomination of women for ESA Awards
- Changes in ESA Award eligibility conditions to account for career interruptions due to caregiving



WEN's actions



- Australian Gender Economics Workshop (AGEW) to promote gender equality research and policy
- Speaking with school students and educators
- Resources for students and teachers
 - *“Economics...Understand the world around you”*
 - *What is economics about? And where can it take you?*
 - *“Career journeys of Australian economists”*
- Committee service provides opportunities to build leadership credentials for career progression

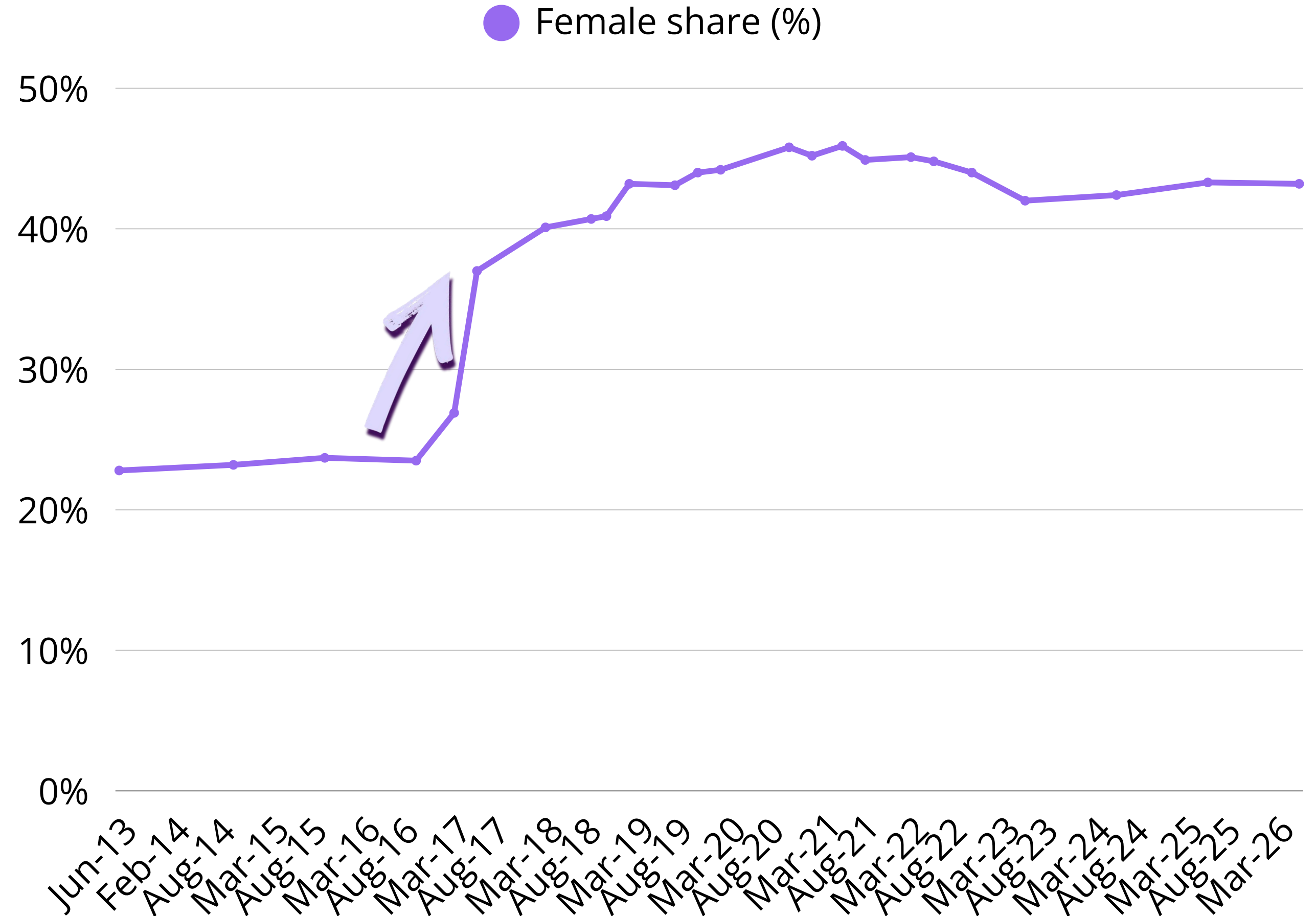




Since WEN was created, women's share of ESA membership jumped from 23% to over 40%

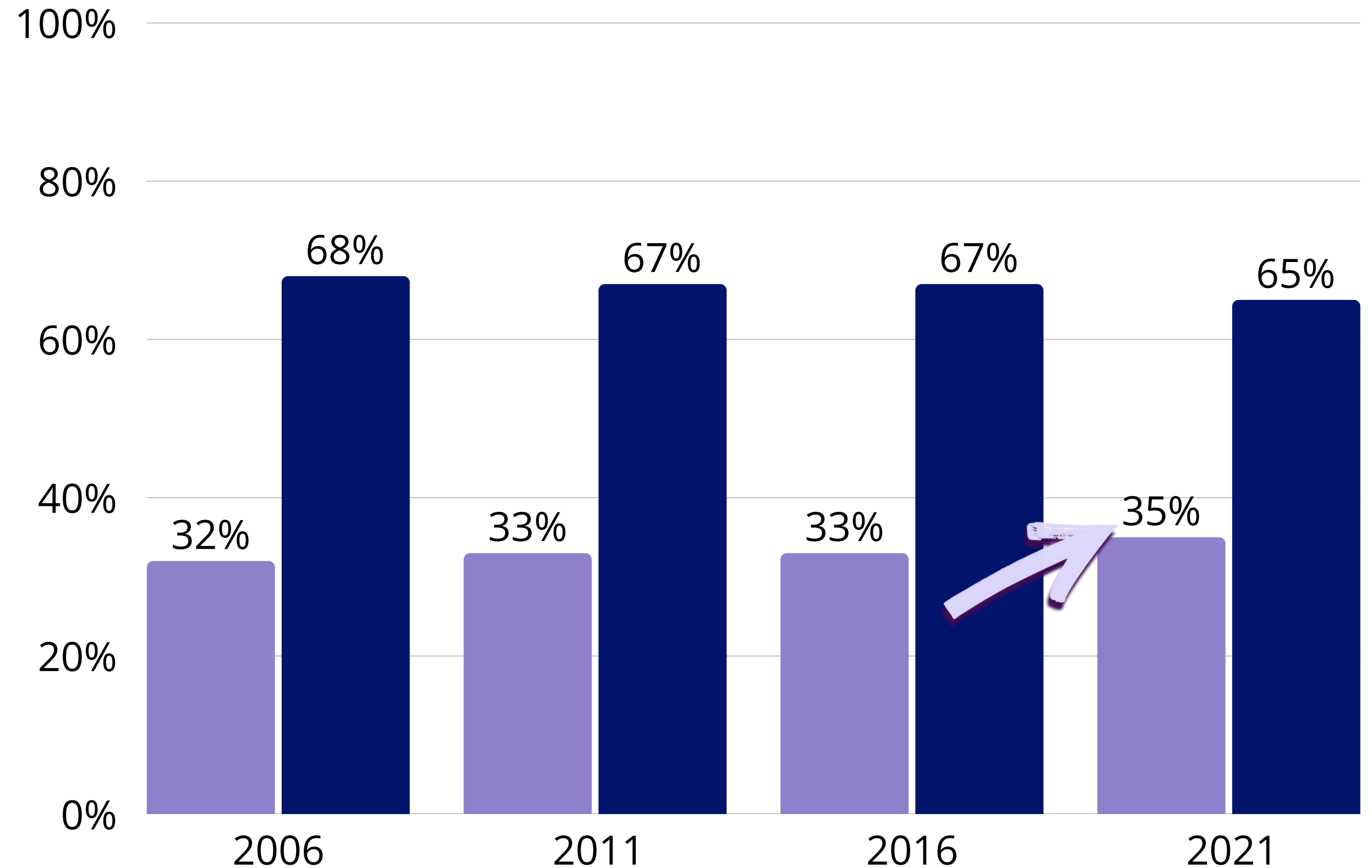
Source: Economic Society of Australia

Women's share of ESA membership



Gender composition of economists in Australia

● Women's share ● Men's share



Following WEN's creation in 2017, women's share of economists increased from 33% to 35%

Source: ABS Census of Population and Housing, Australia

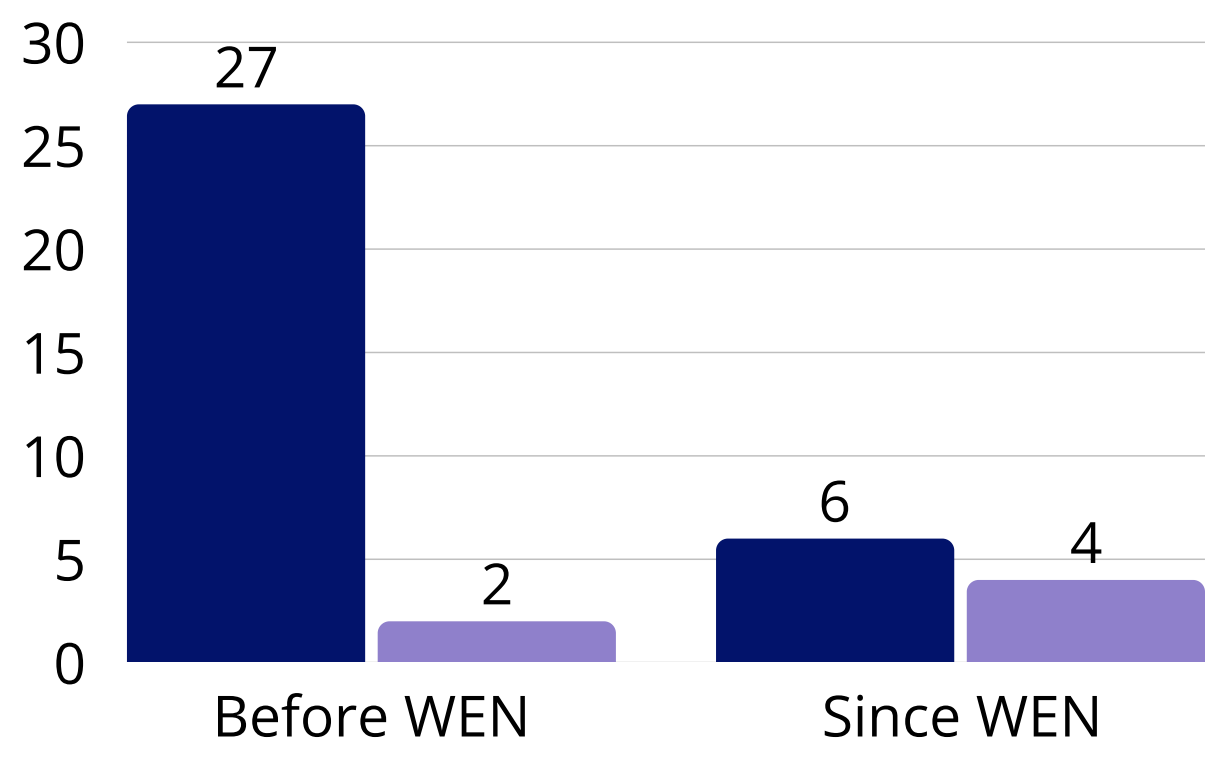
Following WEN's creation, women's share of ESA award recipients increased from 4% to 42% (tallying 20% across all years)

Source: Economic Society of Australia

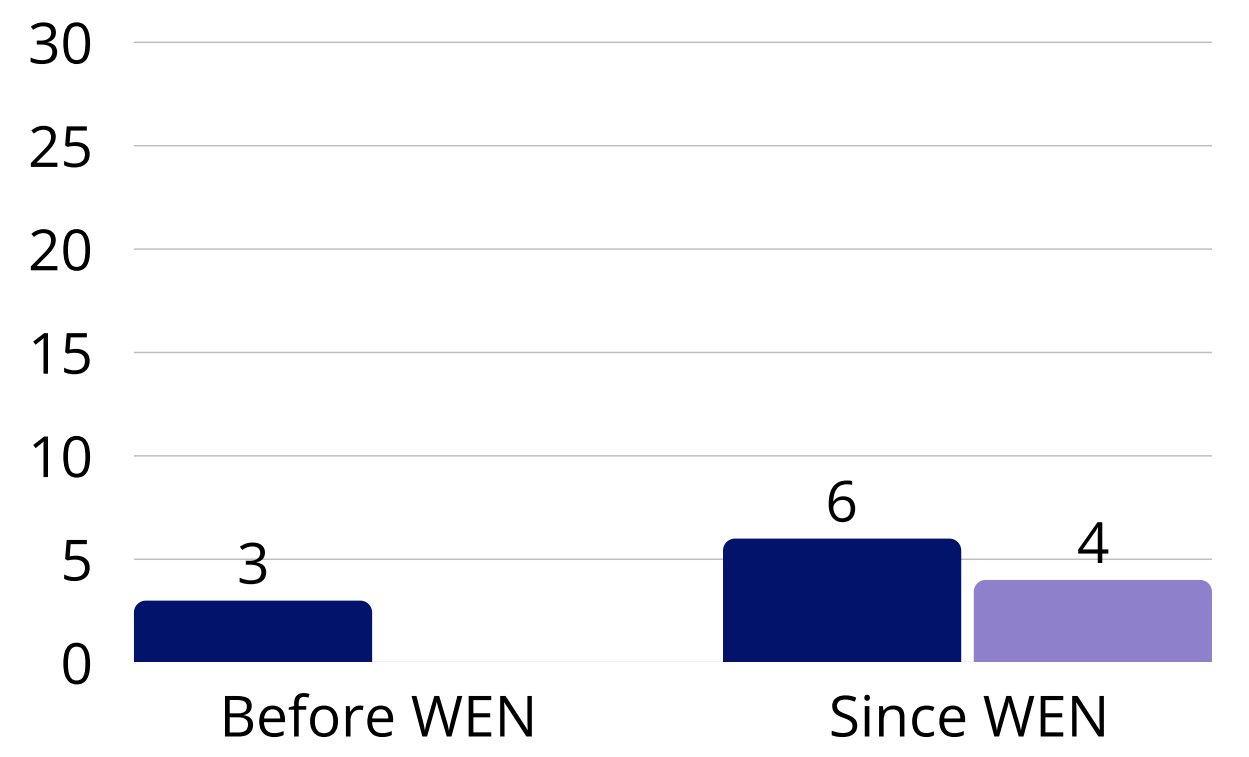
Gender of ESA Award recipients

● Men ● Women

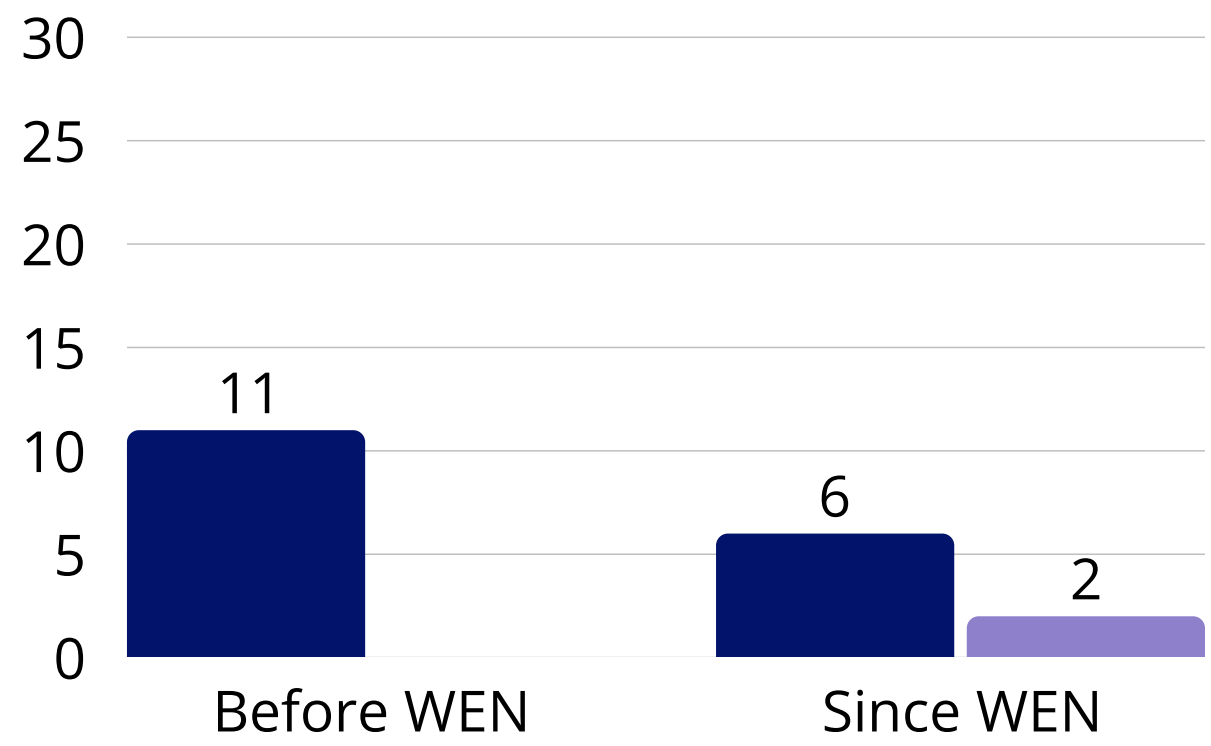
Distinguished Fellow Award



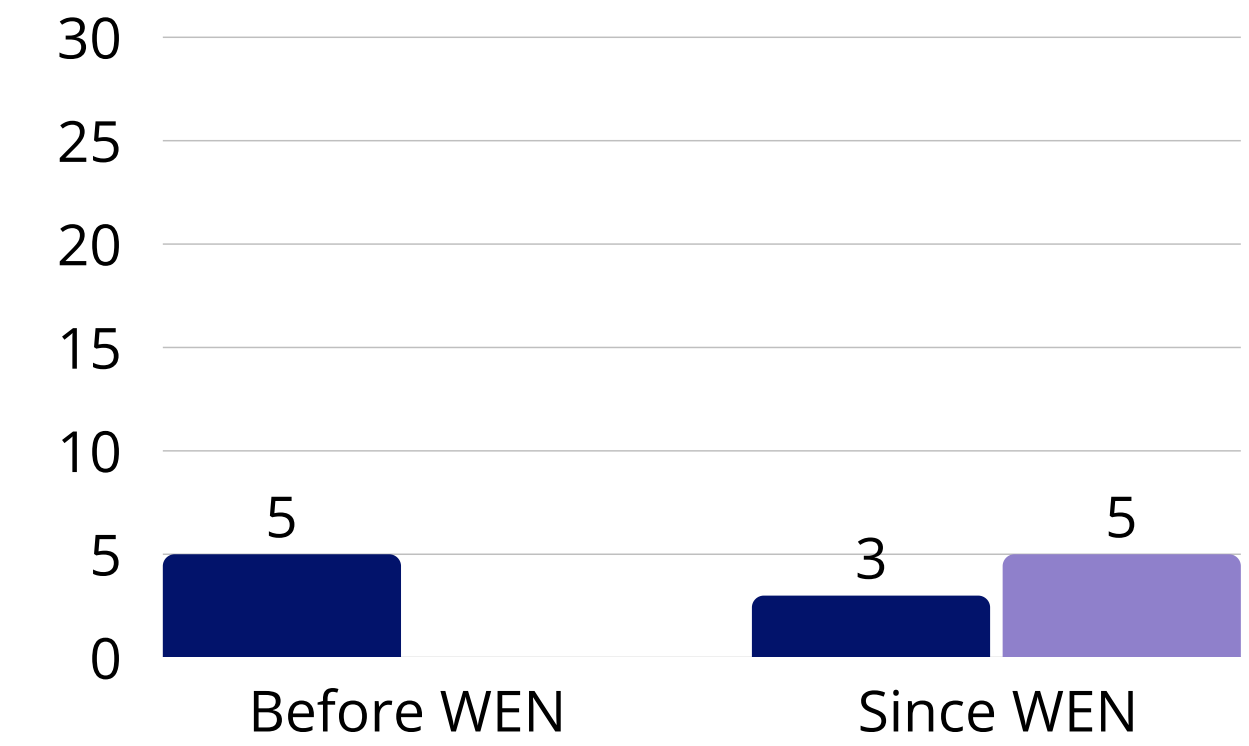
Distinguished Public Policy Fellow Award



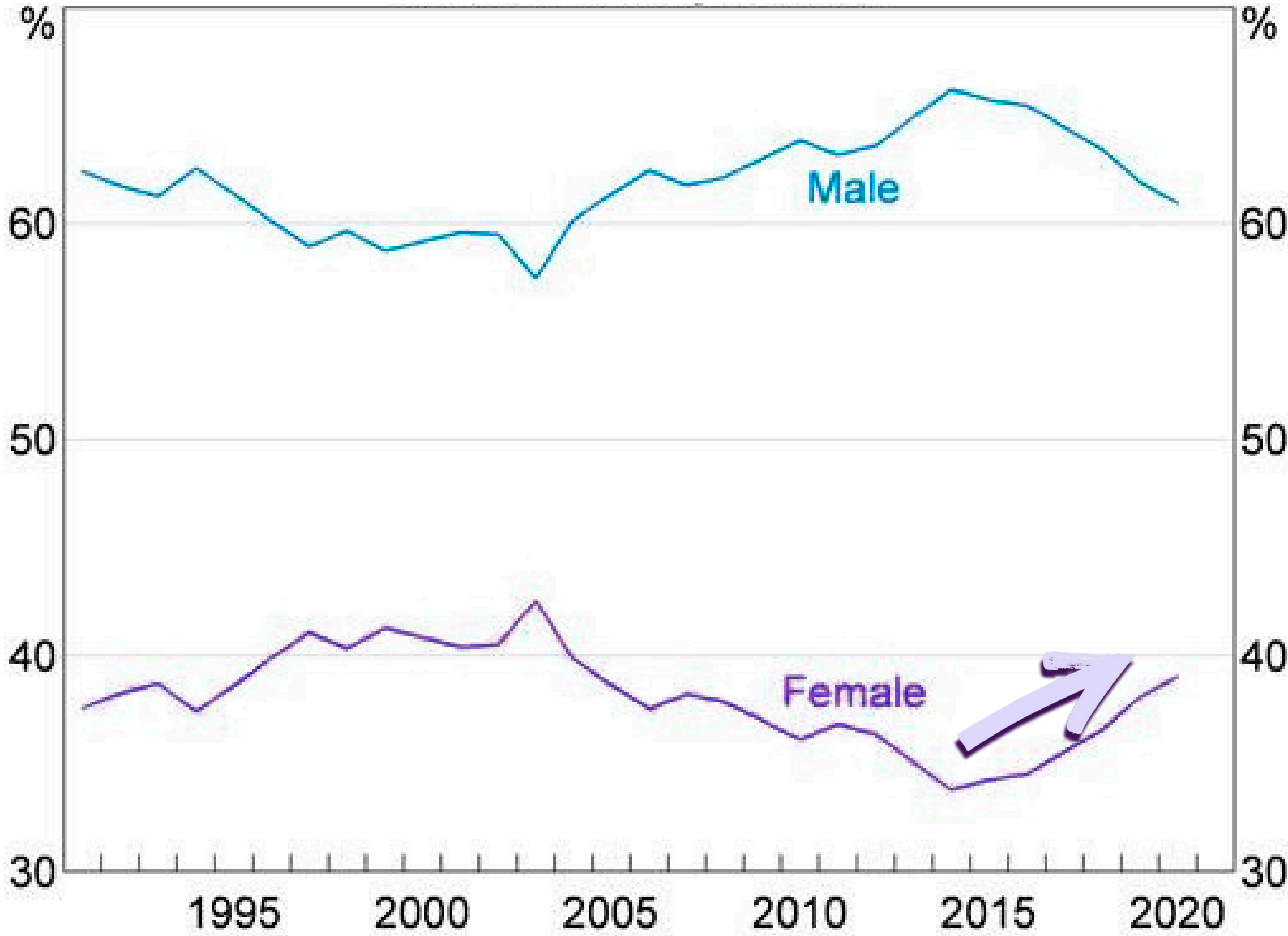
Honorary Fellow Award



Young Economist Fellow Award



Gender composition of undergraduate student economics enrolments in Australian universities



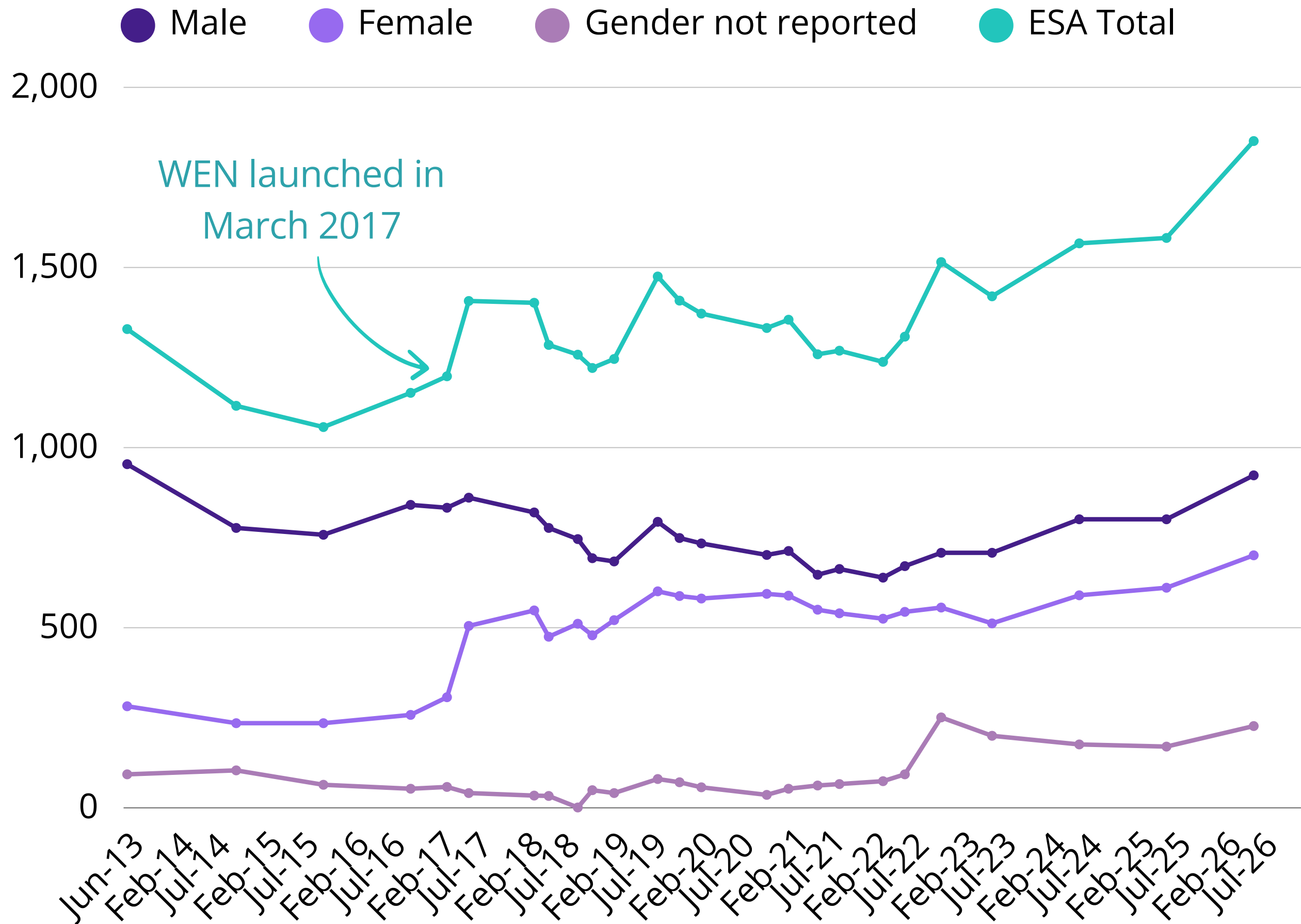
Following WEN's creation 2017, female students' share of university enrolments accelerated

Source: Reserve Bank of Australia

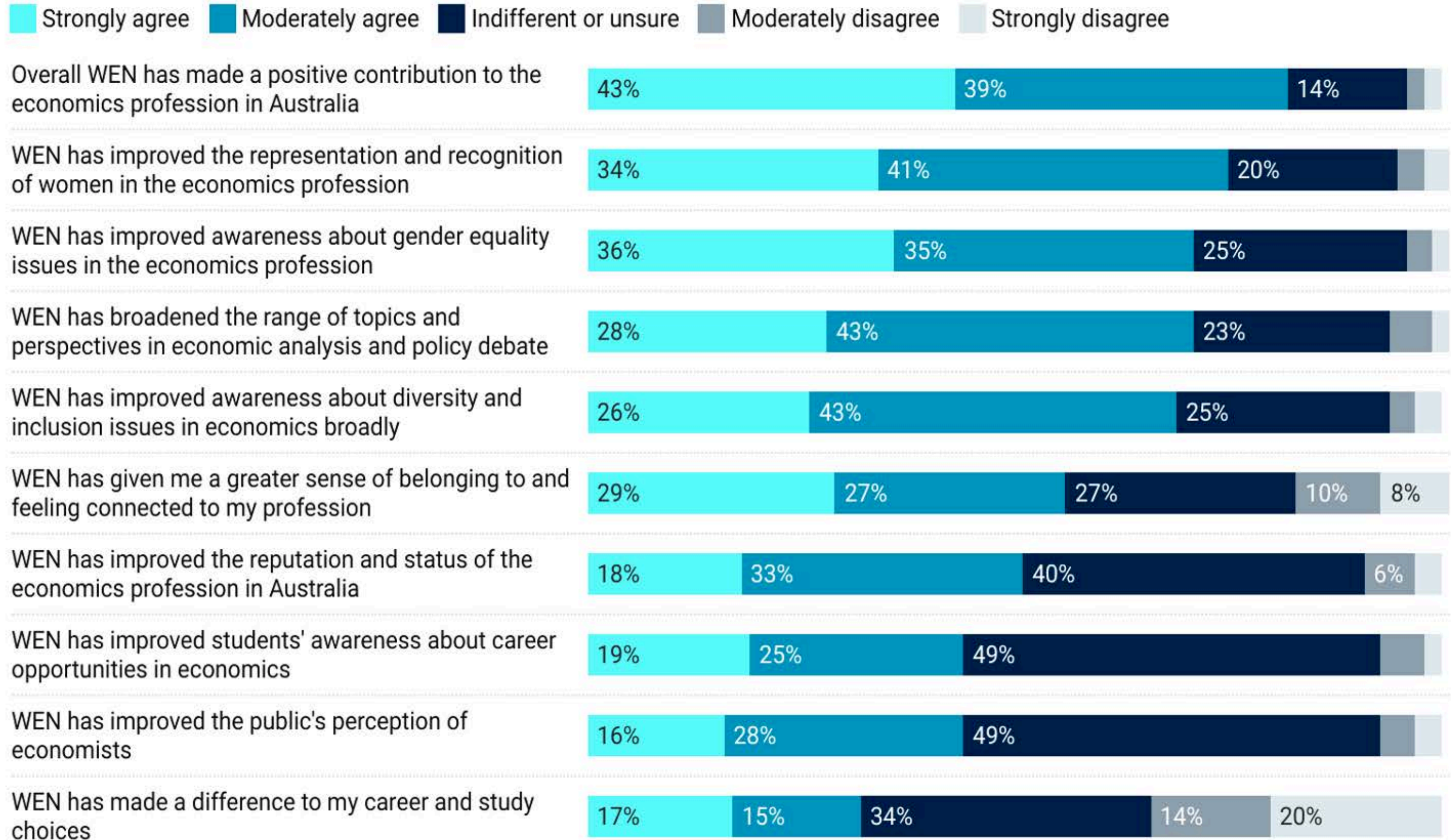
The rise in women's membership numbers helped halt the decline in ESA membership numbers

Source: Economic Society of Australia

ESA membership numbers



82% of respondents believed that WEN has made a positive contribution



Source: WEN Survey 2021

“In broad terms, I think that WEN is a fantastic concept. It is really important to broaden the **purview of economics** in terms of which topics are researched.

It's also crucial for young women to have **role models** to look up to in the field, and to think "I can do that too".

It's just as important for **young men** to look up and see both genders represented, and for them to broaden their thinking around economics – and to think about "women's issues" as actually being “**human issues**”.”

“It took more than a century, but women are taking charge of the economy – here’s why it matters”

THE CONVERSATION



Duygu Yengin

Associate Professor of
Economics, University of Adelaide



Danielle Wood

First female Chair of the
Productivity Commission

Gina Cass-Gottlieb

First female Chair of the
ACCC

Jenny Wilkinson

First female Treasury
Secretary

Michele Bullock

First female Governor
of the RBA

Sarah Court

First female Chair
of ASIC

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Belinda Allen Head of Australian Economics, CBA

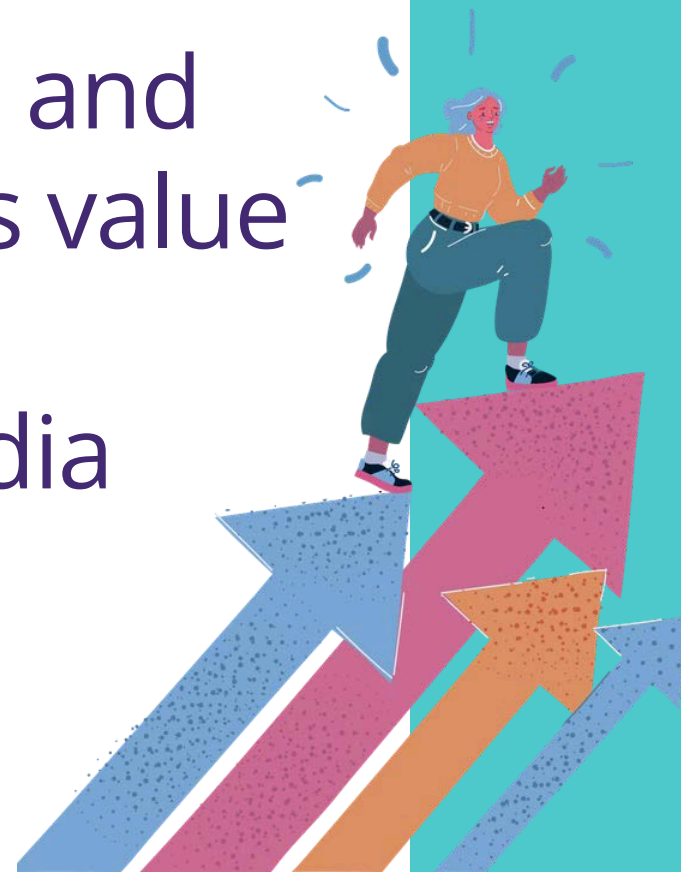
A few words from the Australian...

Strengths

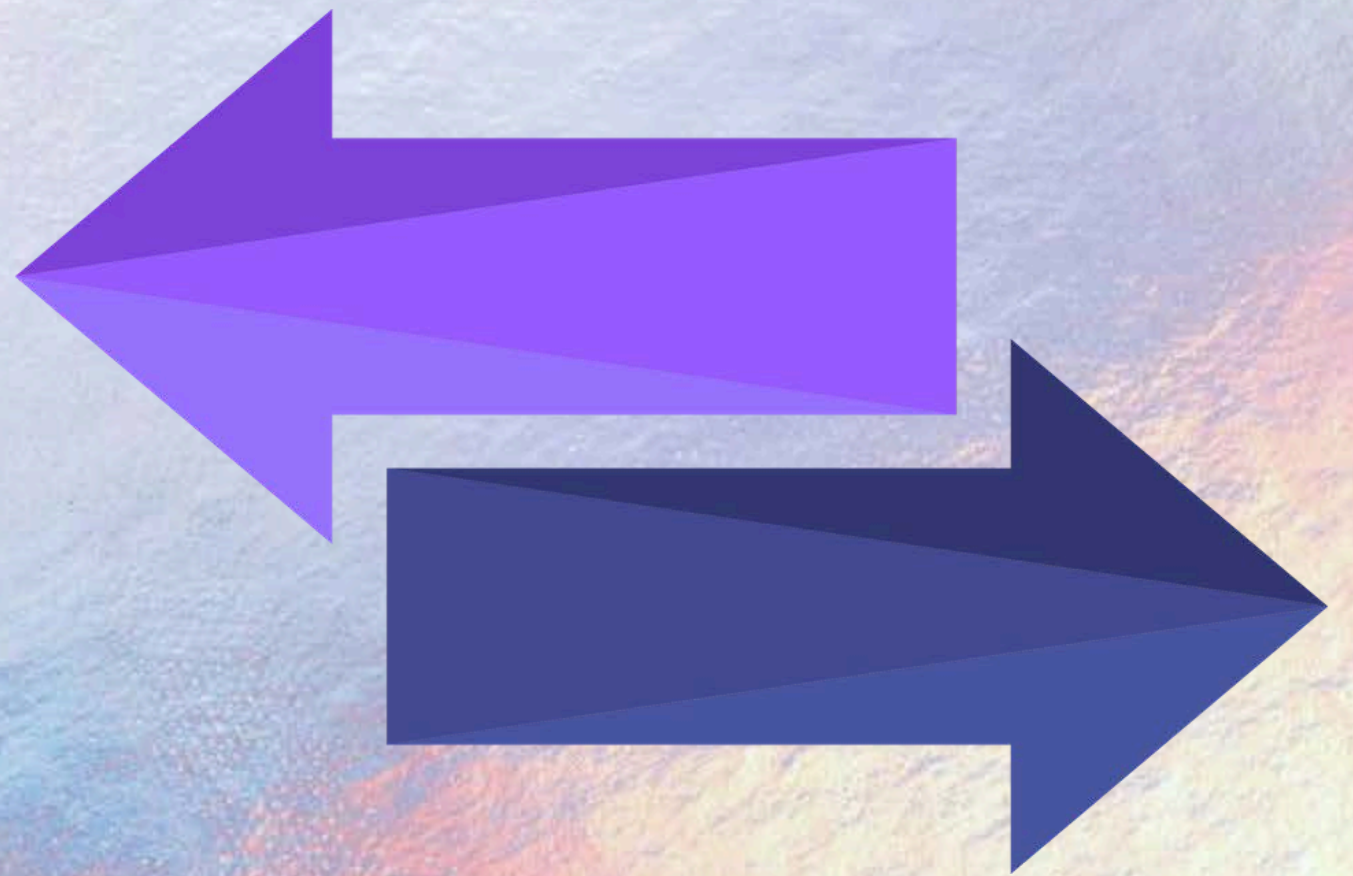
- Multi-sectoral, grassroots approach
- National reach (state branches)
- Institutional backing of ESA and strong sponsorship support
- Access to data, research and evidence to prove WEN's value
- Technology & social media

Challenges

- Limits to volunteers' capacity
- Churn in committee membership
- Sustaining momentum into the future
- Diversity beyond gender
- Resistance to equality initiatives



*Understanding resistance
to equality initiatives*



“I am worried that diversity efforts going too far become **discrimination by another name.**

As a white, male researcher, I already experience the flip-side of affirmative action when my applications for some positions don't stand a chance through no fault of my own.”

“The historical gap is providing an **unfair disadvantage** to younger men. ... We are tackling issues created by previous generations that are now falling on the shoulders of younger generations. There are definitely many men who know their chance of getting the next higher grade are greatly affected by the gender parity strategy.”

Sources: Survey response received by the American Economic Association Committee on Equity, Diversity and Professional Conduct 2019; UN officials cited in ‘Why aren’t there more women economists at the United Nations?’ Foreign Policy, 2021

"I am concerned that the push that lies behind this survey will alter the climate in economics in a negative fashion by discouraging the **field's long-standing emphasis** on challenging our colleagues to defend their work in seminars. The temperament behind this survey is **not that of the discipline I entered years ago.**"

"Devoting any time or attention to "diversity" and "inclusion" is a ridiculous **"politically correct" waste of time** in the field of economics, as in most if not all fields of academia and workplaces generally. While there are certainly cases of sexual harassment, these should not be lumped together with **non-existent problems and non-existent issues**. The profession should instead focus attention on real issues, such as the suppression of free speech."

“This week, when he announced the appointment of new ASIC boss Sarah Court, Treasurer Jim Chalmers boasted of having “ushered in a wave of female leadership across Australia’s top economic institutions”.

“This appointment is another milestone,” Chalmers enthused, noting he had also appointed women to lead the Reserve Bank, the Treasury and the Productivity Commission.

“Is it too much to ask that we appoint the best people to these positions, male or female?”

Of course all these women are highly competent and intelligent public servants, but why draw attention to their sex, especially in 2026?”



Commentary by Adam Creighton, Economics Editor, The Australian. ‘A scarcity of female leaders? Don’t buy the progressive myth’, 2026



See: 'Predicting employee attitudes to workplace diversity from personality, values, and cognitive ability', by Anglim et al. 2019; 'Motivating action: closing the gender pay gap in Victorian businesses' by Jackson et al. 2024; Kanter 2012; Nordgren & Schonthal 2021; Kegan & Lahey 2001; Akerlof and Kranton 2005

Resistance to diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives is strongest among people who place high value on:

- **self-enhancement** – opportunity for personal achievement and power
- **conservatism** – preservation of tradition and status quo

Resistance to change is associated with:

- loss of control, uncertainty
- status quo and loss aversion bias
- low “openness to change” and innovation
- perceived threat to social identity
- competing commitments
- concerns about additional resourcing demands



See: 'Target Setting for Gender Equality: A Review of the Literature',
Report prepared by
Leonora Risse for
the Workplace
Gender Equality
Agency, 2024

- Articulate initiatives in a way that **aligns with the entity's values** (eg. fairness), identity and function
- Articulate initiatives in a way that **empowers** stakeholders with choice, autonomy and agency
- Present initiatives as an evolving **expansion** of current practices and a continuation of existing **legacy** – not a radical disruption or reform
- Identify how to **leverage** existing processes, rather than add to resource demands

Takeaways



- **Economic imperative** is often the real catalyst for change
- Can't simply "**add women and stir**"
- The **research, data and evidence** is on your side – use it!
- Gender equality not simply about numbers – it's about **visibility, voice, recognition and respect**
- Seek to **understand resistance** through a researcher's analytical lens
- Embrace the **synergy of community** – Your sisters across the ditch are cheering for you!

Thank you

Dr Leonora Risse

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Website www.leonorarisse.com



www.esawen.org.au



Gender equality
Evidence Hub

www.genderequality.com.au