

Submission: National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality

The National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality (Strategy) must prioritise addressing systemic inequality that impact on women's financial independence and commit to reforming harmful policies and laws that further embed gender inequality.

Addressing structural inequalities

Inequal pay, underemployment, lower superannuation and occupational segregation can all compound to negatively impact a woman over their life,¹ and is exacerbated for women experiencing intersectional forms of disadvantage, housing instability, family violence and relationship breakdown.

Women who take time from the formal workforce to be carers should not be financially disadvantaged. This can be addressed through an expansion of paid parental leave,² and reforming our taxation and superannuation schemes to recognise paid and unpaid contributions. Additionally, men must be supported to take paid parental leave.³

Women wishing to enter or return to work after a period as a carer are immediately faced with the 'crippling' expense of childcare.⁴ It is essential that families have access to quality and affordable early childhood education.

Greater recognition and remuneration is needed for women-dominated industries that tend to be care-based (including the community sector). These are currently undervalued due to the feminisation of care.⁵

We recommend that the Strategy sets out the government's specific commitments to addressing structural inequality through:

- **Addressing the gender pay gap.**
- **Implementing superannuation reform to recognise women's full contributions.**
- **Reforming taxation to better support women.**
- **Increasing paid parental leave for both parents.**
- **Increasing access to quality and affordable early childhood education and care.**
- **Improving the working conditions, job security and gender pay gap in women-dominated industries.**

¹ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality, Discussion Paper, p. 5.

² Australia is well below the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) average of 51 weeks. The OCED [Family Database](#) illustrates how Australia is falling behind other OECD nations on a number of measures for paid parental leave.

³ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Women's budget statement: October 2022–2023*, p. 37.

⁴ *Rebalancing the load of unpaid care and work*, VCOS Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Work and Care September 2022; Treasury, *Children and the gender earnings gap: evidence for Australia*, p. 6.

⁵ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality, Discussion Paper, p. 20.

Social security reform

Inappropriate and inadequate social security payments are harming women and our communities.⁶ The social safety net for women must be improved, including by expanding the eligibility for the Parenting Payment for Single Parents and increasing the rate of income support.⁷

We recommend the Strategy commits to improving and increasing the social safety net for women.

Embedding an intersectional approach

Gender equality cannot be achieved without addressing forms of intersectional disadvantage for groups of women who experience increased barriers.⁸ Financial disadvantage must also be recognised as its own added layer of intersectional disadvantage.

We recommend an intersectional approach be embedded in the Strategy.

Gender responsive policies

We endorse the position of the Victorian Council of Social Services that gender responsive budgeting and oversight be strengthened and scaled up across all levels of Commonwealth policy, program, services and decision-making processes.

We recommend the Strategy commits to the implementation of gender responsive budgeting and use of gender impact statements for all policies.

Access to safe, secure and affordable housing

Women are more vulnerable to housing insecurity,⁹ and domestic and family violence are leading drivers of homelessness for women.¹⁰ Women and children escaping violence must have safe and secure housing, across the spectrum from crisis to longer term, sustainable social housing.

Women in contact with the criminal legal system face specific barriers to accessing safe housing.¹¹ Women must not be criminalised, spend longer in prison or be released into homelessness due to a lack of affordable housing.¹²

We recommend the Strategy prioritises increasing investment in affordable, secure and safe housing for women, particularly for single women, women in contact with the criminal legal system and women experiencing family violence.

⁶ ACOSS, "It's hell": how inadequate income support is causing harm, March 2023, p. 3.

⁷ ACOSS, "It's hell": how inadequate income support is causing harm, March 2023, p. 3.

⁸ This includes migrant and refugee women, elderly women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ people.

⁹ Equity Economics, *Rebuilding for women's economic insecurity*, October 2021, p 7.

¹⁰ National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032, p. 1.

¹¹ See further, [Smart Justice for Women: Policy Platform 2022-2024 Reducing the criminalisation of women in Victoria](#), January 2023, p. 37.

¹² Ibid, p. 11.

Ending violence against women

Women continue to be disproportionately impacted by family, domestic and sexual violence, and elder abuse.¹³

We outline reforms necessary to improve safety outcomes for women in [our feedback](#) to the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (National Plan).¹⁴ We re-iterate that access to early legal help is critical in prevention, early intervention and recovery from gendered violence, including through community legal education and integrated legal services.¹⁵

Together with the National Plan Action Plans, we recommend the Strategy commits to increasing access to affordable, trauma-informed and culturally safe legal services for women experiencing family, domestic and sexual violence, and elder abuse.

Women on temporary visas experiencing family violence face specific systemic inequalities due to their visa status which can have devastating impacts on their lives.¹⁶ The *Blueprint for Reform: Removing barriers to safety for victims/survivors of domestic and family violence who are on temporary visas* (the Blueprint) calls for reforms to the migration system and greater access to support for women on temporary visas experiencing family violence.¹⁷

We recommend the Strategy commits to the implementation of the Blueprint to address the inequalities faced by women on temporary visas experiencing family violence.

Reforming the family law system

Women experiencing family violence are particularly vulnerable to economic abuse and hardship following separation, which can be exacerbated by a lengthy and expensive property settlement process.

We call for reforms to the family law system in [our feedback to the National Plan](#).¹⁸ Women must have access to cost-effective processes for dispute resolution to ensure they are not financially disadvantaged through the family law system, including resolving property matters where there are scarce assets.¹⁹

We recommend the Strategy commits to expanding access to legal assistance in family law matters to ensure women's economic security post-separation, particularly for women experiencing family violence.

¹³ 1 in 6 older Australians are experiencing some form of abuse. See further Australian Institute of Family Studies, Elder Abuse in Australia: Prevalence, August 2022. Data from Senior Rights Victoria indicates that there is a gendered element to elder abuse, with 72% of advice calls over 7 years being from women. See further National Ageing Research Institute in Partnership with Senior Rights Victoria, Seven Years of Elder Abuse Data in Victoria, August 2020.

¹⁴ See further Federation of Community Legal Centres, *Response to the Draft National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032* (2022).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032, p. 72.

¹⁷ National Advocacy Group on Women on Temporary Visas Experiencing Violence, *Blueprint for Reform: Removing barriers to safety for victims/survivors of domestic and family violence who are on temporary visas*, October 2022.

¹⁸ Federation of Community Legal Centres, *Response to the Draft National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children 2022–2032* (2022).

¹⁹ For example, we support the recommendation made by the Joint Select Committee on Australia's Family Law System to expand the Priority Property Pools under \$500 000 pilot to all Federal Circuit and Family Court of Australia registries. See Joint Select Committee on Australia's Family Law System, *Improvements in family law proceedings*, Final Report, November 2021 (Recommendation 2).

Ending sexual harassment

The National Plan recognises that addressing workplace sexual harassment is key to improving women's safety and economic security.²⁰

We recommend the Strategy commits to effective implementation of the Respect@Work recommendations to address gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the workplace.

²⁰ National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022–2032, p. 17; Australian Human Rights Commission, *Respect@Work: National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces*, 2020 (Respect@Work).