

WOMENS ELECTORAL LOBBY



CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

# WEL POLICY PRIORITIES 2022

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## Introduction

The pandemic recovery process offers the opportunity to build a better society, remedy past damage and, through bold and urgent action to address the climate and environmental crises, build a more sustainable future. WEL is keen to see the needs and interests of women addressed as an essential part of the post pandemic recovery process.

### *First Nations Women and Girls*

WEL acknowledges and pays respect to the past, present and future traditional owners of this land, and supports the Uluru Statement from the Heart call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice in the Australian Constitution. WEL also acknowledges the crisis and disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples including the many challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. WEL supports the call by the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Women's Alliance for the Federal and state governments to work more collectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait communities to adopt policies, legislation and programs that have a cultural, holistic and rights-based approach to the empowerment and safety of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

WEL recommends that the Federal Government address systemic issues affecting First Nations women and girls by supporting and funding all seven recommendations of the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report by June Oscar AO, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Social Justice Commissioner, Australian Human Rights Commission.

### *A pandemic recovery that works for women*

Women have experienced specific disadvantages during the pandemic. Government strategies have by and large supported economy advantaged male-dominated jobs (eg construction, manufacturing, utilities) over female-dominated jobs (eg childcare, hospitality, retail, tourism). Many formal care services for older people, children and people with disability were disrupted and/or over-stressed.

The exclusion of most casual workers from JobKeeper disadvantaged many women in the first wave of the pandemic. Women were more likely to lose paid work, to be called on to provide unpaid care, and to juggle remote learning and childcare with paid work. 8% of women lost their jobs and women's hours were down 12%, compared with 4% and 7% for men. Some female-dominated work (eg in tourism) will be especially slow to recover. Domestic violence surged during the pandemic.

Building the care economy (childcare, aged care, disability care) and ensuring decent work with adequate pay, hours and conditions are essential for a better, more equitable future.

Deregulation, casualisation of work and the gig economy have exacerbated existing labour market gender inequalities.

In WEL's view, a critical component of a more equitable future is a significant increase in the provision of social housing to deal with affordable housing shortages. The access by women in particular to affordable housing will be exacerbated by pandemic driven loss of income, wage stagnation, the consequences of domestic violence and relationship breakdowns, superannuation drawdowns, and ongoing rises in house prices, in both major cities and regional areas, fuelled by tax settings, government subsidies, low interest rates and other factors. Increasing female rates of housing insecurity and homelessness require urgent response.

A guaranteed provision of free childcare is a critical enabler of increased workforce participation by women, with related improvement in women's economic independence and contribution to the economy. Women's workforce participation rates have long been constrained by the high costs of childcare and extremely punitive tax and family assistance withdrawals for working more than three days a week, especially where a family has several children in childcare. Low rates of pay for childcare workers continue to contribute to labour shortages and turnover.

Stronger action and increased resourcing to reduce violence against women in all areas of life is a high priority.

The Royal Commission into Aged Care has identified shocking deficiencies in the level of investment in the aged care sector and the regulation of for-profit facilities. Low rates of pay and levels of education and training directly affect the care provided, predominately by a female workforce, while under-staffing is chronic with many workers juggling work across multiple facilities. In relation to people with disability, the Disability Royal Commission similarly revealed shocking levels of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation.

The effects of the pandemic on women's employment are likely to be long-term and cross generational unless gender-sensitive measures are taken. This is a sharp and compelling demonstration of what can happen when policies, programs and budgets are set without proper gender analysis of their design and impact.



## *Climate and environmental crises*

The last year has been one of slow recovery from the droughts and terrible bushfires of 2019-20 and the floods of 2020-21. Many people lost their homes and livelihoods; some lost their lives. While climate change affects everyone, its effects fall heavily on women and girls because of existing gender and other inequalities, especially race, ethnicity and class. In our region we see the effects of changing weather patterns, deforestation and rising sea levels. Gender mediates human/environmental interactions, and all environmental use, knowledge and assessment. Gender roles, responsibilities, expectations, norms, and the division of labour shape all forms of human relationships with the environment. That means that for environmental policy issues, as in all policy areas, intersectional gender analysis is a critical and useful tool for understanding who is affected and how by various policy approaches.

Women play a critical but often overlooked role in how communities prepare for and respond to bushfires and floods. After disasters, women do a great deal of unpaid work, providing care for children, elderly people and broader communities, often at the cost of their own opportunities for paid work. The loss of secure housing in natural disasters hits women especially hard, and they have less capacity to rebuild.

Australia's responses to climate and environmental crises need urgently to change. Women are under-represented in decision making about climate change and other environmental matters. A shift away from the leadership that brought us into the crises is critical. The key agencies for environmental management and climate change (agriculture, forestry and fishing, electricity, gas and waste management, engineering and technology and mining) are overwhelmingly led by men, especially in the professional and decision-making areas. Diverse women can lead and shape the transformation to a more sustainable society and environment, away from damaging approaches based on maximum exploitation of all the resources of people and our planet.

There is an urgent need for a shift away from high carbon emitting fossil fuel industries (coal, gas) towards renewable energy. The rearguard action in defence of these industries is fuelled by an emphasis on extracting all remaining profit and securing male-dominated jobs. There needs to be a well-articulated and well-funded transition plan and timetable for increasing employment in renewables and reducing emissions in transport, energy production and manufacturing. The jobs of the future include jobs that will be more accessible to women.

During the last year, we have seen young women from diverse backgrounds taking leadership and speaking roles in the climate strikes and support for them. This sends a very clear signal about the importance of environmental issues for those young women. It also signals the importance of intersectional gender analysis across all climate-related portfolios (environment and energy, infrastructure, transport, cities and regional development, industry, innovation and science) in understanding and addressing the needs and experiences of young women, migrant and refugee women, rural, regional and remote women, women with disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander women.



## Work

### PRIORITIES

1. Gender-based work undervaluation and underpayment must be remedied, with priority for services funded by government, notably childcare, health care and aged care.
2. Gender equality must be a core government objective of industrial relations policy and legislation:
  - a. Gender pay equity should be a specified objective of the *Fair Work Act 2009* and the Fair Work Commission, which should establish a specialist Pay Equity Panel.
  - b. The Fair Work Act's equal remuneration objectives, concepts, approaches and processes should be strengthened and any supposed requirement for comparators should explicitly be ruled out.
  - c. Policy settings affecting pay and conditions should ensure:
    - i. Casual employees and others in insecure work have a pathway to job security and conditions that align with other workers such as paid leave and accrued entitlements based on time worked;
    - ii. Improvements to leave entitlements for caring responsibilities and personal and family reasons. In particular, legislation should require employers to provide paid domestic violence leave, and paid parental leave of 52 weeks, paid at replacement earnings levels comparable with annual leave and sick leave entitlements as recommended by the World Health Organisation;
    - iii. An integrated gender equity framework for retirement incomes, covering superannuation, age pension and access to affordable housing that specifically includes:
      - Provision of carer credits comparable to those available in other jurisdictions;
      - Requiring superannuation payments to be made during paid parental leave and as a component of Family Tax Benefit B; and
      - A government scheme that ensures superannuation is paid to low income earners and eliminates the minimum hours threshold.

- d. All recommendations of the 2020 *Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report* should be implemented as a matter of priority and the recommendation to hold employers responsible and accountable for eliminating sexual harassment from workplaces should be legislated as a matter of urgency.

## RATIONALE

In 2021, Australian women continue to experience significant disadvantages and inequalities in their working lives. Women earn around 75% of male earnings; two-thirds of women's work is unpaid; for the 75% of women with superannuation, the amount is under half that available to men. Women are 7 out of 10 primary carers while fewer than 1 in 5 CEOs of Australian companies are women.

Genuine equality requires tackling the deep underlying causes of gender inequality: a prevailing model of workplace pay and conditions historically based on full-time and consistent workforce participation and where the concept of economically valued work excludes much of the caring (paid and unpaid) work undertaken by women. Nor does the industrial system help women workers.

Women are concentrated in lower paid jobs. Women cannot bargain successfully in a decentralised system without a legislative framework that enables and supports gender equality. Women are often in smaller, less unionised workplaces. A case-based approach to pay equity has proven too technical, expensive and protracted, especially as the industrial system fails to understand and address gender-related undervaluation.

The caring responsibilities women undertake - for children, people with disabilities, people with health problems and elderly people - are integral to inequality. According to the ABS, women constitute around 70% of primary carers. This results in lower participation in paid work - fewer hours, less security, fewer years in paid work, less access to higher level jobs. Systematic gender-related undervaluation and underpayment in government-funded industries in which women are concentrated (especially care-related occupations in aged care, disability services, early childhood education and childcare) have not been investigated and remedied.

Ongoing deregulation of the labour market has exacerbated gender inequalities. Almost half of all employed women are employed part-time compared to just over a quarter of men. It has brought increasing wage theft, reductions in penalty rates, wage stagnation, unpredictable changes to hours and employment arrangements, declining incidence and scope of genuine bargaining, reduced access to effective arbitral and complaint-handling processes, and reduced security of employment.

The cumulative labour force disadvantages of women result in lower retirement incomes, because of lower capacity to contribute to workforce-based retirement income, with lower levels and reduced periods of contribution.

Parental leave is still inadequate in payment and duration, and superannuation contributions are not provided for all women workers. There is no provision for leave for end-of-life care. Domestic violence leave is unpaid. Casual workers are still generally denied paid sick leave, personal and carers' leave, annual and other types of leave. The flexibilities of workplace and working time needed to support caring responsibilities are not available to many women and men.





These structural economic causes are compounded by a failure to eliminate sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace. Women's opportunities and experiences at work are diminished by persistent and pervasive sexual harassment, as was extensively documented in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission's devastating *Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report* (2020). Government has declined to legislate its key recommendation - making employers accountable for eliminating sexual harassment. Many women continue to suffer discrimination and disadvantage in paid work.

As set out in the following table, women with a disability, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have lower levels of workforce participation, lower than men with comparable characteristics.

*Table 1: Workforce participation rates for women and men*

Workforce category	Workforce participation rate %
All women	59.2
All men	69.3
Women with a disability	49.4
Men with a disability	57.8
Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander women	51.5
Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander men	65
Culturally and linguistically diverse women	47.3
Culturally and linguistically diverse men	69.5

Source: Australian Government, Towards 2025: An Australian Government Strategy to Boost Women's Workforce Participation

# Decent incomes for everyone: income adequacy and equality for women

## PRIORITIES

### Raise the rates

1. The Productivity Commission should conduct an inquiry into adequacy standards for social security benefits, including an examination of Guaranteed Minimum Income schemes.
2. Pending the outcome of this inquiry, there should be a one-off increase of all working age welfare payments to match the poverty line for different household types as calculated by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research. In particular, the Youth Allowance should be based on the poverty line for household types. Further, all benefits should subsequently be indexed, not by CPI, but by the ABS-recommended Pensioner and Beneficiary Living Cost Index (BPLCI).

### Remove punitive and arbitrary conditions and automated eligibility and compliance mechanisms

3. The Federal Government should review the mutual obligation requirements for social security benefits and abolish the Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF).
4. The ParentsNext program should be scrapped entirely in the next budget.
5. Social security support should not depend on visa/migration status. There should be no waiting period for newly arrived migrants to access Family Tax Benefit, Paid Parental Leave, Special Benefit or Carer Allowance. For other payments, the waiting period should be a maximum of six months. For immigrant women experiencing violence, the waiting period should be waived.
6. The Cashless Welfare Card should be scrapped.

### Generate income sources

7. A post-COVID-19 economic recovery plan should target stimulus measures to support income-generating activities of women with disabilities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander women, particularly in regional and remote areas of Australia.
8. A post-COVID-19 whole-of-government national multicultural employment strategy linking and ensuring collaboration between settlement, education and training, and employment services should be developed, identifying specific areas for targeted investment in employment transition programs for refugee and migrant women jobseekers.

## RATIONALE

Australia is a wealthy country. There is a growing gender wealth gap, largely based on property ownership. Income security and adequacy for women are heavily affected by intra-household distribution of unpaid work and finances, by women's lower earnings and the related superannuation gap. Current social security policy settings exacerbate these impacts. Social



Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF) is based on unrealistic job search requirements and is based on algorithms that effectively automate payment suspensions without the recipient being able to respond to the alleged basis for the suspension. Investigation has shown that more than 120,000 people whose welfare was suspended were not at fault (L Henriques-Gomes quoted in the Guardian, 8 August 2019). The inadequacy of the social security system falls most heavily on already disadvantaged people, including young women, single parents, women with disability, unemployed women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander women, migrant and refugee women, and older women who do not own homes.

**Young women:** Under 35s have accounted for almost 80% of jobs lost in the first waves of COVID-19 and young women were disproportionately impacted by lockdowns in their main employing industries. The scarring effects of youth unemployment and job insecurity are lifelong. The Youth Allowance is payable to people aged under 22 only when they are deemed 'independent', for example by gaining work after finishing school. The level at which it is paid is very far below the poverty lines for various household types. The youth Transition to Work program does not address the needs of young women with disabilities.

**Single parents:** 95% of recipients of single parenting payments are women. Since the 2007-2013 transfer to JobSeeker (formerly Newstart) of single parents of children aged 8-15, their poverty levels have risen dramatically. In practice few single mothers are able to supplement JobSeeker with child support payments: post-separation non-payment of child support now stands at \$1.7billion, yet Family Tax Benefit A and rent assistance are reduced assuming receipt. ParentsNext programs set 'mutual obligations' requirements (for example requirement to take a child out of childcare to attend a library reading group) that result in a high incidence of breaches and penalties, including non-payment of benefits for four to six weeks, creating significant child poverty and maternal deprivation.

For **women of paid working age**, JobSeeker is increasingly becoming a long-term income source, following the restructuring of social security for women formerly outside the labour market for care-giving reasons. According to the Parliamentary Budget Office, between 2009 and 2019 the share of women receiving Newstart (now JobSeeker) for more than one year increased from 48% to 71%. One-third of female recipients have been on this benefit for five years or more. 56% of female recipients are aged 45 or older. JobSeeker comprises only 6% of total social security and welfare spending. It is lower than any payment except Youth Allowance and is currently 41% of the minimum wage and 66% of the aged pension. It is indexed to CPI inflation rather than to a recognised minimum healthy living standard.

**Women with disability:** Before COVID-19, analysis by the National Foundation for Australian Women indicates that only 45% of working age women with a disability were in the labour force and only 37% of NDIS participants were women (but gender reporting has been discontinued).

Clients face financial stress accessing aids and services resulting from gaps in fragmented service provision.

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander women:** Pre-pandemic, 41% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander women were outside the waged workforce. 68% of those required to have their benefits sequestered by the Cashless Welfare Card are Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people, reflecting the placement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander women in a situation of conflict between non-Indigenous concepts of financial management and their community's cultural values. Half of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people have a disability but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women with disability receive lower amounts of funding on average through the NDIS than the broader disability population. COVID-19 is now devastating Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities in western NSW. Application of the Cashless Debit Card and income management particularly during the pandemic, is denying 25,000 people across Australia the flexibility to access funds required to meet essential needs, according to the National Council for Single Mothers & their Children/ACOSS in 2021.

**Migrant and refugee women:** COVID-19 has had a disproportionate impact in urban areas with high poverty levels and concentrations of recent migrants and refugees. The new four-year waiting period before new permanent migrants can access most welfare payments will adversely affect migrant women. JobActive is experienced as having deskilling effects, forcing a choice between English language learning and job search activity; not providing language and IT support, and not facilitating recognition of overseas qualifications.



## Affordable and safe housing for women

### PRIORITIES

1. Develop a gender-responsive national housing policy and strategy that addresses the factors affecting women's housing outcomes and includes actions and measurable targets. This should include a new national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing strategy with increased resourcing for Indigenous Community Housing Organisations to provide culturally appropriate housing in urban, rural, regional and remote areas and a new inter-governmental remote Indigenous housing agreement.
2. Provide Commonwealth funding for additional social and affordable housing including housing configured and targeted to women in each State/Territory, in particular women and children fleeing domestic violence, single women, single older women, single mothers, Indigenous women, women with disabilities and CALD women including refugees and those on bridging or temporary visas. Affordable housing should be in close proximity to existing social structures/networks and employment opportunity for women. WEL recommends the target be 300,000 new social and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander housing properties and 200,000 affordable homes over the next decade. WEL calls on the Federal Government to partner with state and territory governments to deliver an immediate boost of 30,000 dwellings to social housing and to renovate existing dwellings that have fallen below maintenance standards.
3. Increase the maximum rate of Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 50%.
4. Ensure adequate and sustainable funding to meet demand for homelessness services while ensuring that that funding goes to services that are appropriately specialised, competent, accessible, culturally appropriate and safe for the full range of diverse groups of women and children who need them. WEL calls on the Federal Government to commit to increased funding for homelessness services and women's domestic violence refuges, and rapid access to housing and support.

### Other policies and programs affecting women's housing

5. Implement a comprehensive strategy to address the current financial insecurity of older women. Special measures to address housing adequacy are required for women currently at retirement age who have not had the opportunity to accumulate superannuation due to lower lifetime earnings and caring duties. Federal government initiative is required to harmonise this approach nationally, including by requiring access to priority housing on the basis of age, and appropriate housing information and support for older people at risk of homelessness.

6. Ensure that national aged care policy and programs also address housing adequacy, especially for those programs that are predicated on delivering care to women in their own homes, to support women to be healthy, safe and secure in their own homes as they grow older.

## **RATIONALE**

Australia is facing a housing affordability crisis, with older women the fastest growing group experiencing homelessness, and women and children escaping domestic violence the largest group. The number of women aged over 55 counted in the 2016 Census as homeless increased by 31% in just five years from 2011 to 2016, and the numbers aged between 65 and 74 increased by 51% in that time. Domestic violence is the main reason for women's housing instability and homelessness, making up 41% of people, overwhelmingly women and children, requesting assistance from specialist homelessness agencies, according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2018).

Many women experiencing violence make the momentous decision to leave their homes, often with children, for their safety. In recent years some programs have been developed for women to stay at home where it is possible and safe to do so. Many however are unable to do so because of reasons including risk, fear, financial issues, emotional and cultural issues and problems with enforcement of protection orders. Only 3.2% of these women and children are accessing the long-term housing that they need, as indicated by Equity Economics research for Everybody's Home in 2021. Lack of access to affordable housing is a reason why women remain in or return to violent and dangerous situations. Women on temporary visas who experience violence and homelessness are ineligible for most forms of assistance and lack avenues to achieve safety and stability.

For older women, long-term inequality causes loss of housing, disadvantage in accessing housing and homelessness. Older women's economic disadvantage and poverty result from multiple lifetime factors, including gaps in paid work and superannuation and women's greater responsibility for caring for children and other family members. In addition, older women's experiences of domestic and other gendered violence including the impacts of trauma, injury, dislocation, financial abuse and disproportionate loss of wealth upon separation cause immediate and long-term economic and other disadvantages that reverberate throughout women's lifetimes.

COVID-19 has negatively impacted women and their housing security, particularly for women living with violence and women who have lost income. Women at particular risk of housing instability and homelessness include women in a range of situations who are on low incomes, in casual work and/or experience other disadvantage, such as single mothers and their children, women with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women.

While many women do approach homelessness services, women's homelessness is often hidden, with many not assisted by services. Women also generally avoid visibly sleeping rough, and few are assisted by programs for rough sleepers. Instead, they stay temporarily with family, friends and acquaintances or in other temporary places such as hostels or house sitting; remain at home in a violent situation; live in severely overcrowded dwellings; live in a car or sleep



outside in hidden locations. As a result, women's homelessness may be unrecorded and its extent obscured.

There is a lack of affordable private rental housing in Australia, together with increasingly reduced availability of social housing in recent decades as demonstrated by Anglicare Australia's 'Rental Affordability Snapshot 2021'. There has been a continuing fall in the proportion of Australian households who live in social housing, from over 7% of all households in 1991 to 4.2% in 2016. Between 1991 and 2017, lettings by social housing providers declined from 52,000 to 35,000, a reduction of around one third, or a slump of 53% proportionate to population. Social housing is tightly targeted with long waiting lists. This has led to the emergence of a cohort of people on low incomes who are in precarious housing situations, for whom an adverse event may trigger homelessness.

There is a need to ensure that suitable housing is available for all women and children in need, and that if women do experience domestic violence and/or homelessness, that services are appropriately specialised and resourced, competent, accessible, culturally appropriate and safe. In 2018 it was estimated by a report for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute that there was an overall backlog of 433,400 social housing dwellings needed, and that it would grow to almost three quarters of a million by 2036. Each year there is an immediate need for around 17,000 additional social housing dwellings for women fleeing domestic violence alone (Equity Economics (2021) Report).

# Women's health and wellbeing

## PRIORITIES

### **1. Planning, expertise and accountability for women's health**

Federal Government to establish an expert, representative National Women's Health Council, comprising women's health experts, community-based experts and service providers and state and territory women's health representatives, to advise on planning, priorities, funding and transparent reporting to implement the National Women's Health Strategy.

### **2. Respond to health impacts of family, domestic and sexual violence**

Federal Government to ensure that the next National Plan for Reducing Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence Against Women funds services to support women and children suffering the health impacts (including trauma) of domestic violence and sexual assault.

### **3. Universal access to reproductive health care regardless of your income, resources and where you live**

Federal Government to fund improved access to reproductive health care services for women across Australia including community based public health centres in remote and regional Australia and disadvantaged communities, free abortion care complemented by permanent provision of telehealth on Medicare for reproductive health consultations, prescriptions and referrals.

### **4. Reproductive health services designed, managed and delivered by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities**

Federal Government to fund 'Country' specific reproductive health services designed, managed and delivered by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

### **5. Free contraceptives and contraceptive consultations and procedures, with some contraceptives available through pharmacists without prescriptions**

Federal Government to fund and deliver a national program for free contraceptive advice, services, procedures and products including Long-Acting Reversible Contraception (LARC) and Emergency Contraception (EC).

### **6. Community information to promote consent based sexual and reproductive health and counter menstruation shame and disadvantage**

Federal Government to fund a national information program in communities and workplaces to support positive, safe sexual and reproductive health that addresses consent and sex, gender and sexual diversity, and is culturally and linguistically appropriate. It needs to include culturally and linguistically tailored strands to address menstruation shame through increasing knowledge of and better community and workplace support for women during menstruation and menopause.





## RATIONALE

The COVID pandemic has exacerbated domestic and family violence, employment and housing insecurity in combination with a dramatically increased burden of care. Women have suffered in ways that will have long term implications for their health and well-being. In particular the evidence on the links between domestic and family violence, sexual assault and poor health, including trauma is overwhelming (See for example the August 2020 submission from UNSW and Illawarra Women's Health to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Family Domestic and Sexual Violence).

Access to reproductive health services in Australia is still seriously hampered by the cost and limited geographical accessibility of privatised abortion care with terminations not easily available via public hospitals in most states. In addition access is restricted by limited training of GPs, with serious underutilization of health practitioners, especially s and pharmacists in menstruation and menopause management, contraceptive options and medical and emergency abortion. Profound disparities in women's reproductive health care persist for women in rural and socio-economically disadvantaged areas, younger women, women experiencing violence and those from diverse backgrounds.

The 2021-22 Federal Budget reinstated access until the end of 2021 to Medicare funded reproductive health services via telehealth, without requiring recent GP referral. Reports from reproductive health providers indicate that telehealth has significantly expanded access to these services for young people and women from isolated and rural areas and should be permanently continued.

There is strong evidence that health services designed and run by Aboriginal communities which draw on cultural knowledge and practices are the best foundation for improving Aboriginal women's health outcomes (see for example, Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) Chapter 4 Australian Human Rights Commission 2020).

The 2021/2022 Budget ignored Aboriginal controlled women's domestic violence, legal services as well as Aboriginal controlled birthing services. Commonwealth funded research on 'Birthing in our Community' programs led by Aboriginal medical researchers has shown such services can halve the rate of preterm births for Aboriginal women.

The ability of women and girls to control their fertility is essential to health and empowerment and to achieving gender equality. Unrestricted and free access, based on health practitioner support and advice to the full range of contraceptive options underpins women's economic and personal autonomy and should not be constrained by costs or unnecessary barriers.

Priority area 1 of the National Women's Health Strategy 2020-30 (Maternal, sexual and reproductive health) commits the Government to: 'Increase access to sexual and reproductive

health care information, diagnosis, treatment and services' by promoting 'access to resources for students and parents to learn more about sexual and reproductive health'.

The 2021-22 Budget failed to mention or fund this priority women's health commitment, which has increased urgency in the context of extensive evidence of young women's experiences of sexual assault, young women's calls for positive and high quality sexuality and consent education and the uneven quality of much sexuality and consent education, including programs produced by the Federal Government.

WEL's education policy advocates that the Federal Government delivers on this priority through funding roll out of a national schools program, but to support gender equity the broad Australian community needs expert and up to date information on sexual and reproductive health care information, diagnosis, treatment and services.

### **Menstrual health and equity**

In a positive move the 2018-19 Federal budget removed the tax on sanitary products. There is nevertheless extensive evidence of the negative impact on women and girls of inadequate information on menstruation, the shame still associated with menstruation and limited access to menstruation products as well as the severe impact of pain from menstruation and associated conditions such as endometriosis. The 2021-22 Budget extended a relatively small amount of funding to the Pain Foundation to address information on endometriosis pain and treatments.

Recent research evidence in Australia highlights that menstrual health also presents challenges to Indigenous Australians, people from low socio-economic backgrounds and marginalised cultural communities as well as communities that are remotely located.



## Reducing and eliminating family, domestic and sexual violence against women

### PRIORITIES

1. The Federal Government should commit substantially increased funding for the implementation of the next National Plan for the Reduction and Elimination of Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence (FDSV) from 2022.
2. A framework for the implementation of the Plan also needs to be developed which incorporates coordination across jurisdictions, clear and realistic performance outcomes and measures and annual reporting to the Federal Parliament to ensure public accountability for progress. The National Data Collection and Reporting Framework needs to be finalised and functional by its target date of 2022.
3. In the context of the next National Plan being inclusive of the diversity of victims/survivors, the funds allocated for its implementation need to have targeted components for specialist domestic and family violence (DFV) services and primary prevention and intervention programs which work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women living with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse women, LGBTQI women and all children impacted by violence.
4. The Federal Government (with state and territory governments) should provide forward financial commitments under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) for funding certainty and so that the DFV component of the funding under the bilateral agreement can be increased and allocated to women's refuges or shelters and accompanying emergency, temporary and transitional accommodation. No woman or her children fleeing violence should be turned away from these services anywhere in Australia.

### RATIONALE

The *Report of the Inquiry into Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence* by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Social Policy and Legal Affairs was released in March 2021. This Parliamentary Report of 471 pages with 88 recommendations provides a comprehensive overview of the issues and legislative and program responses required from governments at all levels to address this scourge. WEL believes it provides a firm foundation for future policy and programs.

The most recent Personal Safety Survey (PSS) results available are for 2016 and these are testimony to the spread and impact of violence on mainly women. The Report of the Inquiry into

Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence recognises that most of the violence is “perpetrated by men against women”. The impact of this violence and accompanying abuse is profound and enduring on victim/survivors, on their families and friends and “the very fabric of our society”.

The economic cost of this violence was estimated in a KPMG report prepared for the Department of Social Services in May 2016 to be \$22 billion a year and if certain under-represented groups of women in the PSS are accounted for, then a further \$4 billion could be added.

A national planned approach is needed, led and coordinated by the Federal Government, with programs funded by all jurisdictions at their level of responsibility. This cannot be just tokenistic or window-dressing. The gravity and seriousness of this violence and its damage to individuals and communities must be reflected in the level of financial investment.

The level of funding, though increasing in recent months, has not been commensurate with the ambition of successive National Plans. WEL considers that measurement of performance and outcomes has been inadequate for proper accountability. Funding top-ups during a crisis like COVID 19 pandemic, while welcome, do not enable services and programs to be expanded in short time frames and delivered with the requisite quality if experienced staff cannot be recruited or emergency accommodation is not suitable or available.

Family, domestic and sexual violence affects different groups in different ways. There are cultural barriers and pressures on women to prevent their reporting violence and accessing services. Responses to violence in diverse communities need to be nuanced and programs and services to be co-designed rather than extrapolated from more general models. The Parliamentary Report acknowledges there needs to be “a greater focus on groups with particular vulnerability” (p.44).

Responses to violence should take into account the frameworks and measures of success adopted by other peak sector organisations such as the Australian Women’s Health Network and Women with Disabilities, Australia among others. Services, including wrap-around services such as counselling need to be culturally appropriate. Online and telephone services need to have interpreters available. Police, legal and support organisations need to be trained to provide culturally appropriate services. Services funded to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD communities need to be specialised in providing culturally appropriate support and guidance, not just providing a repetition of online triage services. Cultural safety and cultural competence need to be at the heart of service delivery and staff appropriately trained.

WEL has for some years advocated for a separate program under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) to fund specialist domestic and family violence services. WEL recognises that this is unlikely to occur and acknowledges that in each of the state and territory bilateral agreements under NHHA, the cohort—women and children affected by family and domestic violence—is reported on separately with the proportion of funds allocated. In this vital area of frontline crisis services essential to saving lives, however, there has been no increase in funding since the NHHA came into force in July 2018.



In 2020, 54,000 women and girls experiencing family and domestic violence came to homelessness services needing accommodation, but one-third or 18,000 were unable to be housed. A funding increase is overdue, and the Federal Government must take the lead so that 24 hour accessible women's refuges, frontline outreach services and emergency, temporary and transitional accommodation is adequate to meet the needs experienced by these crisis services.

# Strengthening women's representation

## PRIORITIES

1. The Federal Parliament should have 50% female representation. A proportion of these women should be CALD, Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander, LGBTQI and women with a disability so as to reflect the diversity of the Australian population. This can be achieved through political parties actively encouraging increased female membership and participation in politics.
2. The Federal Government should increase funding to the Office of Women who, assisted by the government funded Women's Alliances, can advise the government effectively on issues and policies affecting women.
3. Federal Government Boards should have 50% women representation within 2 years and this representation should include CALD, Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander, LGBTQI and people with a disability to reflect the diversity of the Australian population.
4. A minimum gender equality target should be established for the Senior Executive Service in the Australian Public Service, with compliance publicly reported annually.
5. Listed Boards should commit to 50% female representation (including CALD, Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander, LGBTQI and people with a disability) within 3 years. If this is not achieved, the Federal Government should legislate to require publicly listed companies and other large employers to achieve a mandatory minimum of 40% of women within a specified timeframe. Those who fail to achieve the target will be subject to specified sanctions such as not being awarded grants and contracts.
6. The Federal Government should commit to implementing all recommendations of the Australian Human Rights Commission's *Set the Standards* Report, 2021.

## RATIONALE

WEL is dedicated to creating a society where women's participation and their ability to fulfil their potential are unrestricted, acknowledged and respected and where women and men share equally in society's responsibilities and rewards.

To achieve these aims it is imperative that women's representation in the Federal Parliament (and all others) reaches 50% as soon as possible. Currently, less than a quarter (23%) of the Coalition Members of Parliament and one third of Coalition Senators are women. In contrast, women make up 47% of Labor's ranks in the lower house and outnumber the men in the Senate. This is a direct result of the Labor party's implementation of a quota system. The Greens have a similar approach and list candidates for Senate seats by alternating men and women on the ballot paper instead of placing long-standing candidates mostly men on the top of the list.

WEL supports the adoption of similar schemes by all political parties to ensure women's voices are heard and included in policy development and discussion on all sides of politics. The best way to ensure that there are more women in Parliament is to increase female participation in



political parties. Systems need to be developed to encourage and support greater female membership in political parties and to mentor women to nominate as candidates.

Providing a safe and respectful work environment in Commonwealth Parliament workplaces is also critical for actively encouraging women to participate in political life. On 30 November 2021 Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins released her report *Set the Standards*, an Independent Review into Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces conducted on behalf of the Australian Human Rights Commission. That report made 28 recommendations to support the Parliament to perform in line with standards in other workplaces. WEL believes that all political parties should commit to implementing all the recommendations.

In virtually all sectors of the paid workforce, women are under-represented in leadership positions. For example an Australian Public Service Commission Report in 2020 indicates that in 2019-20, women comprised 60% of all Commonwealth Public Service employees but less than 50% of SES staff. According to the Gender Balance on Australian Government Boards 2019-20 Report, 48.5% of all board positions relating to federal government portfolios are filled by women. This is an improvement but is still short of the 50% target announced in 2016. There needs to be a date by which the target will be achieved.

The findings for 2019-20 in this Report also show that action is required if there is to be no further decrease in overall board positions. The report states that:

- Of the 622 new appointments made over 2019-20, 50.5% of nominees were women – a decrease of 2.2%.
- The representation of women on Government boards decreased across six portfolios since 30 June 2019, including in two portfolios where women filled 50.9% of board positions on 30 June 2019.

The statistics in corporate Australia are even more concerning. The Australian Institute of Company Directors reports in its Board Diversity Statistics that the percentage of women on ASX 200 boards is still only 32.9% while 13 boards in the ASX 300 have no female directors. For ASX All Ords companies, the percentage of women on boards comprises 26.9% while 79 boards have no women (28 February 2021). Under 6% of CEOs of ASX 300 companies are women.

# Gender Equality in School Education

## PRIORITIES

1. The review of national curriculum by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) should include gender equality, respectful relationships, safe and consensual sexuality education as core components of the relevant curriculum from Foundation-12 or K-12. These curriculum components should be inclusive of sex, gender and sexual diversity and be age, stage and culturally appropriate.
2. A national agreement should be developed by the Federal Government in cooperation with states and territories to mandate respectful relationships, sexuality and consent education across Australian schools.
3. The four key drivers of gender-based violence should form part of the content of these core components of the curriculum, that is:
  - a. Condoning of violence against women.
  - b. Men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence.
  - c. Stereotyped constructions of masculinity and femininity.
  - d. Disrespect toward women and male peer relations that emphasise aggression. The participation of students in such education should be with the approval of and in cooperation with parents or carers.

## RATIONALE

There were over 4 million students enrolled in all schools across Australia in 2020. There were 288,000 Full Time Equivalent teachers in these schools of whom 206,000 were female. This is a vast community.

The school sector has been the site of debate and contest about funding, curriculum, teaching quality and practice, governance, parental authority and participation, among other issues. Schools are critical to the education and social development of students. Schools should be socially and culturally supportive and safe environments for all students.

WEL has strongly advocated over decades for schools to ensure that student participation, performance and achievement are not adversely affected by rigid notions of gender and gender stereotype setting different expectations for girls than for boys or excusing unacceptable behaviours based on gender.

The groundwork for this was laid by a number of seminal reports on girls and schooling produced in the 1970's and 80's: the Schools Commission in November 1975; the Australian Education Council in September 1985 and the Commonwealth Schools Commission in May 1987. Every state and territory had a policy on sexism or non-sexist education or equality of opportunity and the elimination of sexism.





Despite this, and despite the passing of the Australian Sex Discrimination Act (1984), the power imbalances in schools, sexual harassment and discrimination are still present nearly four decades later.

The development of school curriculum is led by ACARA in collaboration with state and territory authorities and the non-government education sector. It has been conducting a review of national curriculum and this review must address the scourge of violence against women by ensuring that there is content built into curriculum which aims for primary prevention of violence against women.

Principles set out in the National Policy of 1987 should serve as a foundation for this review, namely that:

Schooling for girls and boys should reflect the entitlement of all women, in their own right, to personal respect, economic security and participation in, and influence over, decisions which affect their lives (p28).

The Federal Government with states and territories supports Our Watch. It has been established as a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children. It works to embed gender equality and prevent violence where Australians live, learn, work and socialise.

Our Watch has developed the *Respectful Relationships Education Toolkit* designed “to help schools develop and implement a whole school approach to prevent gender-based violence by promoting equality and respectful relationships”. This Toolkit needs to be the basis of effective programs across Australia.

Schools can normalise or challenge gender-based violence. They can contribute to addressing gender inequality and stereotyping by introducing gender responsive and sensitive content throughout the relevant curriculum.

Whole school approaches to curbing gender-based violence which are in-depth, ongoing and use a wide range of teaching methods, can have a positive and enduring influence on students. But there are many challenges for teachers and schools in delivering such programs. Teacher preparation and training and school planning is essential and this needs to involve parents and the broader community.

The March4Justice, 15 March 2021 brought thousands of Australian women onto the streets in rallies demanding a government response to male violence and sexual assault. While the prevention of violence against women is everybody’s business, it is schools which can construct the foundations for prevention by contributing to changing attitudes, behaviours and practices

and building knowledge and beliefs about gender respect. Gender equality needs to be woven into the school's culture, policies and practices.

WEL considers that mandated respectful relationships education programs are a critical part of an intricate tapestry of measures required to end all forms of violence against women.



## Vocational Education and Training (VET)

### PRIORITIES

1. The care economy, where women predominate as workers, should attract increased government training investment through the allocation of subsidized training places for entry level courses together with courses for re-training or upgrading skills.
2. Affordable tertiary education opportunities through TAFE or a VET provider, should be available for part-time women workers in low paid industries and in insecure work to assist them to diversify and expand their occupational choices as well as advancing to better paid decent jobs.
3. The JobTrainer Fund established to address the economic impact of COVID-19 and targeted at school leavers and the young unemployed should be extended beyond 2022 and places allocated to support aged care and other care industries with skills gaps and shortages identified by Royal Commission inquiries (aged care, disability).
4. The entry of women into better-paying male-dominated occupations, which attract training subsidies and assured job security, should be facilitated by targeted specialised training support which is gender sensitive, culturally safe and appropriate and customized to address their learning requirements.

### RATIONALE

Women's skills and their paid and unpaid labour are an essential part of Australian society and its economy. Recovery from the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic needs to take account of the loss of jobs by many women in industries where they are the major employees: hospitality, retail, arts and tourism. Indigenous women, CALD women and women with a disability, whether they are young or older face particular challenges in accessing training. Low paid workers in the care industries are often also low-skilled. Opportunities for all these groups of women to upgrade their skills or retrain are dependent on a receptive and supportive employer as well as availability and affordability of VET courses.

The Government in its Women's Budget Statement, 2021-22 pp.48-49, acknowledged that graduates of VET tend to have strong labour market outcomes. Female students comprised 46% of total VET students in 2019, but were concentrated in education, health or natural and physical sciences fields of study.

VET is critical to gender equality. Lack of access to affordable courses or inadequate support to complete courses does result in fewer options for women. The gendered links between women's participation in VET and decent well-paid work must be better acknowledged and understood. TAFE, the public VET provider, had over many years developed the policies to pursue improvement in women's participation in the full range of VET courses particularly in emerging industries.

WEL with the National Foundation of Australian Women has argued that the restoration of TAFE as the major VET publicly funded provider is essential to the future of Australia's economy and the recovery from the pandemic, as well as the well-being of women so that they can contribute to their financial independence and economic security.

The extension of the JobTrainer Fund beyond 2022, given the support it has so far provided for women working in the aged care sector, would be a boost to women's skills, employment prospects and potentially their wages and could contribute to major improvements in the quality of aged care delivered by current providers. Measuring the outcomes from this additional funding should be a requirement of all VET providers. Enrolments and completions by gender and field of study are not collected in a timely way nor further disaggregated by language, CALD background, disability and Indigenous groups.

The Australian Apprenticeship Support Network delivering 5000 additional Gateway Services for in-training support for women commencing in non-traditional occupations is another model of targeted funding which needs to be expanded and integrated into VET system student support. This program should be a priority of the Federal Government given the parlous state of the structured and subsidised apprenticeship and traineeship system.

The obsession by all governments with having industry-led, user-pays vocational education and training, reflected in successive budgets and reviews and then restructuring and reform, has simply resulted in dramatic declines in apprentice and trainee numbers. As of September 2020, according to NCVER figures on commencements of apprentices and trainees, only 2% of workers were employed as apprentices or trainees. Of the 126,665 commencements, there were only 60,115 trade apprentices – a decline of 15.7% from 2019 and 66,545 non-trades down by 21.4% from 2019. Of the total, 81,955 were male and 44,710 were female, down 18.6% from 2019. Overall the decline in commencements as well as completions has continued its downward spiral. Between 2016 and 2020, commencements fell by 25.4% and completions fell by 22.4%.

During 2020, there was significant disruption to this part of the training system, dependent as it is on workplace-based training, due to COVID-19 restrictions. Recent analysis conducted by Michelle Hall for NCVER on the impacts of COVID-19 on training activity in that year, showed, for example, contract suspensions increased by nearly 600% for females in the March and June quarters of 2020; for males it was between 200% and 300%. The industries that experienced some of the most substantial disruption to contract commencements included: administrative and support services; transport, postal and warehousing, and information, media and telecommunications. The industries that experienced the most prominent increases in contract suspensions in the first half of 2020 included arts and recreation services; accommodation and



food services; transport, postal and warehousing; retail trade, and agriculture, forestry and fishing.

WEL calls on the NCVER to collect data by sex and publish this data at other intersections of disadvantage: Indigenous, people with a disability, people from CALD communities as well as regional breakdowns. Good policy and program development requires a sound and contemporary evidence base.

# Early childhood education and care

## PRIORITIES

**1. Federal Government to lead a national transition to free early childhood education and care.**

Free early childhood education and care would remove cost and conditions as impediments to children's participation, simplify what is presently a complex subsidy system for parents to navigate and remove disincentives for primary carers, who are overwhelmingly women, to enter and remain in full-time employment.

**2. Federal Government to work with states and territories to establish universal pre-school for all 3 and 4 year olds.**

Universal pre-school for 3 and 4 year olds has the potential to improve children's cognitive, emotional and social development and their school performance.

**3. Government action to boost pay, conditions, professional recognition and career pathways for early childhood educators and teachers.**

High quality early education and care requires a well-trained, highly skilled professional workforce with good pay and conditions. Improved pay, professional recognition and career pathways will lead to greater stability in the industry which is currently facing a staffing crisis related to high staff turnover and difficulties in attracting professional educators.

**4. Align early childhood education and care policies and delivery with 12 months paid parental leave shared between parents and legislated flexible work and leave provisions for parents and caregivers.**

An increase to the OECD average of 12 months paid parental leave shared by parents, with an option of staging the leave in blocks over 2 years, would help parents to care for children in the first 2 years.

Transition to early childhood care and education with more flexible work provisions in awards could follow shared paid leave. Single parents should be eligible for 12 months paid leave in recognition of the additional burden of parenting.

**5. Review the market driven system for early childhood education and care, including responsibilities for funding, delivery and standards.**

A fully independent expert review into Australia's current market based childcare and early learning system should consider: the levels of government which are best suited to fund, regulate and deliver services; avenues for more diverse community control and input; the appropriateness of profit driven services, and opportunities for more direct government leadership and involvement in the sector.

**6. Develop a clear national vision for early childhood education and care as a basis for funding decisions to drive improvements in standards and frame service design and delivery.**

Australia needs better public and political understanding of the multiple ways a well-funded universal early childhood education and care system could play in future 'nation building':



reduce costs for rearing children; enable women's full workforce participation; foster all children's cognitive, social and emotional development and, through pre-school, assist education equity through school preparation and improved education outcomes.

## RATIONALE

*The counting the cost to families: Assessing childcare affordability in Australia report* (August 2021) models the impact of the Federal Government's recent childcare subsidy announcement. This found that one in three families are spending more on childcare than groceries to feed their family and 85% of families are spending more on childcare than on their utility bills. The report uses an international benchmark of no more than 7% of disposable income spent on childcare to determine childcare affordability for families. Up to 50% of households spend more than 7% of their income on childcare costs.

A complex fee subsidy system, intersecting with tax and other allowances, discourages mothers' full time workforce participation, contributing to Australia having one of the lowest proportions of women in full time work in the OECD. Women constitute 38.0% of all full-time employees and 67.6% of all part-time employees.

Activity test conditions which restrict access to subsidized childcare to children whose parents either work or engage in approved activities have limited the access to childcare of some of the poorest children who could benefit the most from quality early education and care.

The Federal Government spends around \$9 billion a year on childcare subsidies. Free childcare could triple this but would be more than compensated by gains in productivity from women's workforce participation and improvements in school performance.

Relative to other advanced economies such as the UK and NZ, Australian children are significantly less likely to participate in formal childcare in the crucial developmental years of ages 3 and 4. Only 66% of 3 year old Australians are in any type of formal care compared with 100% in the UK and 95% in New Zealand. This is particularly the case with children of poor and geographically isolated families and Aboriginal children who are most disadvantaged in the formal education system. Australia has some of the most inequitable education outcomes in the OECD. There is a range of research showing that participation in 2 years of pre-school is linked with later cognitive, emotional and social development and school achievement.

The overwhelming proportion of early childhood educators are women. Their average take home pay is around \$21 an hour. Recent attempts by industry unions to make the case for work value cases have failed. There is consensus amongst advocates, researchers and most peak bodies that due to low wages, low levels of professional recognition, very limited career

pathways and worsening conditions, including staff shortages and provider expectations for unpaid work, the sector is undergoing a worsening staffing crisis with low levels of recruitment and retention and high turnover.

A recent workforce survey *Big Steps*, by the United Workers Union, found that 37% of educators did not intend to stay in the sector long-term and of this group 74% intend to leave within the next 3 years.

At 18 weeks, Australia's paid parental leave scheme, paid to the primary carer, is one of the shortest in the OECD. The average length of paid parental leave in the OECD is around 55 weeks. Despite 2 weeks paid 'dads' leave' on top of the 18 weeks, Australian fathers take very little leave and spend less time with their children than their OECD peers. In conjunction with flexible work arrangements, a staged increase to 12 months paid parental leave to be shared by both parents and taken in blocks over 2 years would help parents to care for children in the first 2 years, with supported transition to flexible care services and more formal early childhood education and care.

The current market driven system for early childhood education and care is fragmented and expensive for parents, while being dependent on multiple funding sources from state and federal governments. 50% of providers are private for-profit with around 35% private not-for-profits and the remainder a mix of state government schools, state government, local government and a few private and Catholic schools.

Pre-school and long day care services overlap and vary across states. Large ASX listed for-profit providers dominate the long day care sector, alongside small for-profit operators, large not-for-profits and some community providers. Parents are confused by the fee subsidy based on income, regular unregulated fee increases following new government funding to providers, the activity test - which especially impacts single mothers and poorer communities - and other conditions such as the number of children a family already has in childcare and pre-school.

This complexity and the confusion it creates for parents contributes to Australia's low participation rate in formal early childhood education and care relative to other OECD countries.

Government inquiries, advocates and researchers (such as the Productivity Commission Inquiry Report on Childcare and Early Childhood Learning in 2014) agree on the multiple benefits to Australia from investing in a high quality and universal early childhood education and care system. The sector is rightly seen as the major economic driver for women's workplace participation and associated productivity increases, but there is less emphasis on the related long-term benefits for children, parents (particularly equalizing with fathers the current care burdens carried by mothers), parental well-being and the community.

A national vision statement would clarify and spell out the roles early childhood education and care can play in strengthening Australia's economic life, social inclusion, education equity and well-being, and would help shape future planning and funding priorities.