



Women's Electoral Lobby | 8-10 Victoria Street, Newtown, NSW 2042

EMAIL: wel@welnsw.org.au

WEBSITE: www.wel.org.au

Mary O'Sullivan

WEL NSW Convener

041944889

maryosullivan@bigpond.com

Dear Women NSW

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in the consultation for a new Strategy for Women in NSW, to update and replace the 2018-22 Strategy.

Women's Electoral Lobby, NSW is an independent, non-party political, not for profit, feminist lobby group with the following objectives:

- (1) To promote, through political education and lobbying, a society where women's participation and potential is unrestricted at all intersections of injustice.
- (2) To foster policies and programs aimed to achieve cultural, social, economic and educational equality for women.
- (3) To pressure government to change laws or policies which restrict women's reproductive and other human rights.
- (4) To ensure that gender discrimination in all its forms is exposed and laws are made or amended to protect women's rights and entitlements equally with those of men.

WEL congratulates the NSW Government on embracing the ambition for the new Strategy to create a society 'in which there is gender equality' through 'increasing women's economic opportunities and participation in society.'

Guiding Principles

We welcome the Guiding Principles for development of the Strategy: Intersectionality, Meaningful Input, Partnerships and Immediate and Longer Term.

We are especially pleased to see the principle of Intersectionality. This recognises that women suffer interrelated levels of disadvantage, with inclusion of specific focus communities potentially enabling a strategic focus on improving outcomes for women who are most vulnerable.

To ensure 'meaningful input', WEL would have much preferred a more extensive and open consultation, with invitations for submissions and responses from community, service and advocacy groups and publication of these.

Instead, the consultation invites individual responses via survey questions, with a small number of face to face sessions across the state. Possibly ad hoc survey responses,

together with a three week consultation timeline are insufficient to obtain the 'meaningful' input the second Guiding Principle specifies.

The third Guiding Principle on Partnerships rightly specifies the Commonwealth as a key partner in driving the NSW Strategy.

We are concerned that the Strategy is being developed with a 'late 2022' completion date. This means that it will not take adequate account of the partnerships and opportunities flowing from the far reaching gender equity agenda outlined in the policies of the new Federal Government.

Proposed Federal Government reforms, in such areas as employment law and pay equity, childcare provision and funding, workplace rights, and prevention of violence and sexual assault may post-date completion of the NSW Strategy. This could diminish its currency, especially in relation to balancing immediate with the critical longer term gains that indicate 'tectonic' shifts to greater gender equality.

Four annual action plans underpinned the 2018-2022 Strategy. WEL looks forward to the development of action plans and reporting protocols accompanying the 2023-27 Strategy. We are especially interested in the ways in which data will be used to independently evaluate qualitative and quantitative impacts of action plan initiatives.

The development of the Women NSW Gender Equality dashboard is a good first step in providing accessible and authoritative, gender differentiated information on the key areas addressed in the Strategy Discussion paper and in the 2018-22 Strategy: economic opportunity, health and well-being and participation and empowerment.

It is hard to connect the stubborn persistence of gender inequality shown in these and other 'macro' data sets (with the exception of greater representation of women in Parliament, local government and in the senior public service) to any longer term and lasting improvements arising from the 2018-2022 Women's Strategy and action plans.

The action plans which drove the Strategy include apparently excellent initiatives such as rural women's projects, abortion law decriminalisation and access planning, instituting flexible work practices in the public service, financial support for women returning to work from outside the workforce, pilots to house homeless older women and provision of universal before and after school care. Many are listed on pages 3,4 and 5 of the Discussion Paper.

It is nevertheless difficult to objectively assess the individual or accumulated effects on gender inequality in NSW of these measures. Without specific comparative data it would be difficult to answer the second consultation question 'Since 2018 which programs, partnerships and initiatives have made a difference to women and girls in NSW?' ... other than from subjective and sectoral perspectives and anecdotally.

WEL recommends that action plans for the new strategy include fewer, broader high level cross portfolio initiatives and extend at least over two years, with most over the life of the strategy, with the aim of making a measurable and substantial improvement in women's equality in NSW. The Strategy should include evaluation and reporting measures and deadlines.

Updating the pillars and their priorities

Which are the most important issues that need to be addressed to create a positive future for women and girls?

Creating a positive future for women demands linked policy platforms that recognise and respond to the pervasive, intersectional and deep rooted nature of gender inequality in Australia.

The most important issues are economic and job insecurity, low levels of workforce participation relative to men, insufficient income and consequential poverty, inflexible work arrangements, violence, sexual assault and harassment, housing scarcity, cost and insecurity, inequitable sharing of care responsibilities, the high cost and unequal distribution of childcare services and differential access to maternal and reproductive health care across rural, regional and NSW and within metropolitan NSW.

Most of these issues have remained priorities for WEL since our foundation and first campaigns fifty years ago, in 1972.

WEL believes that the 2023-2027 NSW Women's Strategy should encompass policy and program responses across relevant portfolios, albeit without the detail in specific frameworks and plans such as the NSW Women's Health Framework, other plans that may emerge from the Economic Opportunities Inquiry and from the NSW response to the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children.

As we have already emphasised, setting the timeline for completing the NSW Strategy as the end of 2022 will mean that it omits major policy developments at the Federal level.

We recommend that the Gender dashboard data set be expanded to include sources on childcare cost and access, housing security and access – especially for women leaving violence – and for access to health services with a priority on access to reproductive and maternal health services.

Increasingly the gendered impacts of climate crises and health emergencies need to be built into emergency response planning and implementation.

Schools and vocational education and training are critical vehicles for responding to gender inequality and above all for creating positive futures. The 2018-21 plan included a range of initiatives, such as programs to support women moving back into the workforce, attract women in to stem careers and to move into construction and other well paid trade apprenticeships.

WEL recommends that the next Strategy and plan include more TAFE and VET initiatives, but with an equal focus on training and career pathways in industry areas where women predominate and which are often the lowest paid and most insecure types of employment. This would build on the Government's 'targeted investment in the care economy in order to support job growth and improve worker quality' cited in the Discussion Paper as an indicator of progress.

We note the NCOS submission to the Economic Opportunities Review emphasised that the social services sector is a major employer of women and is a *'growth industry that makes a significant contribution to the NSW economy, and has been identified by the World Economic Forum as a key emerging job cluster. But it is part of a highly gender segregated industry – Health Care and Social Assistance – and has the third highest gender pay gap*

*across 19 industries. At 20.7%, this is greater than, and contributes substantially to, NSW's overall gender pay gap of 14.5%*¹

WEL recommends that the 2023-2027 Strategy should acknowledge that, as contractor of social services and a partner with/ advocate to the Commonwealth Government, the NSW Government has practical levers to support implementation of the key recommendations in the NCOSS submission.

The Government can : facilitate better wages, entitlements and access to childcare to grow workforce participation, economic security and career opportunities in the social services sector; enable community organisations in the social services sector to provide secure jobs, supportive workplaces and career opportunities for women; provide strong stewardship and a strategic approach to industry and workforce development by establishing a NSW Workforce Innovation and Development Institute in partnership with the higher education, VET, and social service sectors; and invest in social housing to take pressure off the social service system and deliver social and economic benefits across NSW.

Building on this, we recommend that the Government adopt a proactive approach for the 2023-7 Strategy through modelling flexible work arrangements and secure long term work with training and career progression, providing affordable and accessible childcare to employees, incorporating pay equity into pay negotiations and taking a proactive approach to violence prevention with support for women employees undergoing domestic violence, including domestic violence leave.

With a view to a much broader remit for the 2023-7 NSW Strategy, WEL recommends the following additions and alterations to the 3 Pillars proposed in the Discussion Paper.

Pillar 1: Economic opportunity and advancement

Improving women's financial wellbeing and security. Supporting diverse and flexible employment opportunities for women and girls. Creating employment opportunities across occupations and industries where women remain under-represented.

WEL recommends a number of additions to this focus area: radically improving women's access to secure and affordable housing, with a priority on housing for women fleeing violence and on older women renters and on creating secure and well paid employment in industries where women predominate, with the first priority as women in the social services and care industries.

We also recommend that preventing and eliminating violence against women and children and elimination of workplace based sexual harassment be included in the economic pillar. Violence and harassment are major impediments to women's economic inclusion and advancement.

The relatively low labour force participation of Aboriginal women noted in the Discussion Paper should be a focus area, but from a perspective of the strength of Aboriginal women's community authority and engagement.

We therefore recommend an emphasis on supporting employment pathways for Aboriginal women through Aboriginal community led and controlled initiatives.

¹ Submission to NSW Women's Economic Opportunities Review, NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) March 2022,p1

As the Discussion Paper points out, Women from CALD backgrounds, including refugee and migrant women, have lower workforce participation relative to other women and CALD men.

We therefore recommend that the Economic Opportunity and Advancement pillar and plans include creating work and careers pathways for CALD women through targeted community support, as well as TAFE and VET.

Pillar 2: Health and wellbeing

Promoting and supporting a holistic approach to women's and girls' health across the lifespan. Addressing health needs to maximise women's physical, social and economic potential.

WEL recommends four additions to this focus area and the inclusion of violence prevention from a health and trauma perspective:

- The gendered impacts of climate change and health emergencies, such as the ongoing pandemic, need to be identified in crisis response strategies and in the initiatives proposed under Women's Strategy.
- Ensuring easy access to reproductive health services and comprehensive sexuality education, regardless of geographical location,
- Ensuring easy local access to maternal health services and supporting Aboriginal controlled maternal health services with a priority on Birthing on Country hubs.
- The 2023 -27 Strategy and Plans should include services to support women and children suffering the health impacts (including trauma) of domestic violence and sexual assault.

We are aware that the 2020 NSW Women's Health Framework envisages state wide reproductive health services.

However, Family Planning's submission to the Legislative Council Inquiry into health outcomes and access to health and hospital services in rural, regional and remote New South Wales outlines ongoing major geographical inequities in access to reproductive health services including support with maternity services, contraception and access to abortion.²

*The submission states that 'On average, people living in rural, regional and remote areas of NSW experience poorer reproductive and sexual health outcomes than people living elsewhere in NSW, including higher teenage fertility rates, higher rates of maternal death, and higher rates of some sexually transmissible infections (STIs). In rural, regional and remote areas, the ability to easily access reproductive and sexual health services as well as continuing supplies of contraceptive pills and emergency contraception, condoms and other contraceptive devices can be limited'*³

There is powerful evidence that fragmented maternity care increases pre-term birth by 50% for Indigenous women. There are already successful Birthing on Country hubs in NSW. WEL strongly supports Aboriginal community initiatives to replicate this model⁴. We believe that

² Family Planning NSW Submission 2020 December 2020

³ Family Planning submission:p3

⁴ Roe, Yvette et al 'Returning birthing services to communities and Aboriginal control: Aboriginal women of Shoalhaven describe how birthing on country is linked to healing'. *Journal of Indigenous Wellbeing- Te Mauri-Pimatisiwin* (2020)

the Strategy should recognise community controlled and led birthing and maternal health services.

Finally, 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 Federal Parliamentary Inquiry into Family Domestic and Sexual Violence).

Pillar 3: Participation and empowerment

Supporting women's engagement through social networks, access to information. Building confidence using diverse representations of women and girls.

WEL agrees that this focus area presents an opportunity for the 2023-27 Strategy to draw on the strengths and unleash the contributions of women in focus communities, who often suffer compounded disadvantage.

We recommend that the Strategy seek to build support for diverse representative and community organisations articulating the wide range of interests, needs and initiatives of CALD women, rather than favouring a peak body model. The Strategy and plans need to place much greater emphasis on communication with CALD Communities in different languages and on fostering different models of inclusive leadership with CALD Women at their centre.

WEL also believes that ending violence and harassment is critical to building women's confidence and fostering leadership.

We recommend that the Participation and Empowerment focus area of the 2023-27 NSW Strategy allow for inclusion of the NSW response to the next National Plan for ending Violence against Women and incorporate projects and strategies for women to exercise leadership in combatting and overcoming violence and harassment in workplaces, public, local community and domestic settings.

We agree with the Discussion Paper's endorsement of the *Wivi Yani U Thangani* report and expect that the 2023-7 Strategy will include components which highlight Aboriginal Women's Leadership within and beyond the Aboriginal Communities.

