



**Pre-Budget Submission of the Equality Rights Alliance**  
**4 January 2021**

# Equality Rights Alliance

Equality Rights Alliance (ERA) is Australia's largest network advocating for women's equality, women's leadership and recognition of women's diversity. We bring together 64 non-government organisations and social enterprises with a focus on the impact of policy or service delivery on women. We are one of the six National Women's Alliances, funded by the Commonwealth Office for Women.

This submission is endorsed in whole or in part by the following members of Equality Rights Alliance and also by the Australian Women Against Violence Alliance:

- 2020Women
- Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement
- Alevi Federation of Australia
- Australasian Council of Women and Policing
- Australian Baha'i Community – Office of Equality
- Australian Centre for Leadership for Women
- Australian Graduate Women
- Australian Federation of Medical Women
- Australian Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement
- Australian National Committee for UN Women
- Australian Women's Health Network
- CARE Australia
- Children by Choice
- COTA Australia
- FECCA Women's Committee
- Feminist Legal Clinic
- Fitted for Work
- Gender Equity Community of Practice
- Girl Guides Australia
- Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand
- Homebirth Australia
- Human Rights Law Centre
- Immigrant Women's Speakout Association NSW
- International Women's Development Agency
- JERA International
- Jessie Street National Women's Library
- Justice Connect
- Maternity Choices Australia
- Marie Stopes Australia
- Migrant Women's Lobby Group of South Australia
- Multicultural Women's Advocacy ACT
- National Association of Services Against Sexual Violence
- National Council of Churches of Australia Gender Commission
- National Council of Jewish Women of Australia
- National Council of Single Mothers and Their Children
- National Foundation for Australian Women
- NSW Council of Social Services
- National Older Women's Network
- National Union of Students (Women's Department)
- Project Respect
- Public Health Association of Australia (Women's Special Interest Group)
- Reproductive Choice Australia
- Safe Motherhood For All Inc
- Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia
- Soroptimist International
- Sisters Inside
- Union of Australian Women
- United Nations Association of Australia Status of Women Network
- Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition
- VIEW Clubs of Australia
- Women in Adult and Vocational Education
- Women in Engineering Australia
- Women on Boards
- Women with Disabilities Australia
- Women's Equity Think Tank
- Women's Electoral Lobby
- Women's Environment Network Australia
- Women's Housing Ltd
- Women's Information Referral Exchange
- Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
- Women's Legal Services Australia
- Women's Property Initiatives
- Women Sport Australia
- Working Against Sexual Harassment
- YWCA Australia
- Zonta International Districts 22, 23 and 24



## Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic is both a public health and an economic crisis, with long-term economic impacts to the Australian population. Women, particularly young women, are one demographic group impacted in specific ways. This is not unexpected: disasters such as the pandemic have been shown to deepen gender inequality and amplify traditional gender roles, with negative effects for women, girls and gender diverse people.

Gender equality and women's economic participation is crucial to the GDP, to economic recovery and to Australia's future resilience. Women's contribution to the economy is estimated to have added 22% to GDP in 35 years since 1974.<sup>i</sup> The economic fallout from the pandemic has worsened and is worsening gender inequalities and threatens the broader economy. To date, COVID-19 has increased the disproportionate burden of unpaid care done by women in cis-heteronormative partnerships,<sup>ii</sup> and has set back women's economic equality by one year for every month of the crisis.<sup>iii</sup> Women's (particularly young women's) disproportionate loss of work and hours<sup>iv</sup> combined with the increase in unpaid care work has created a significant risk that women impacted by the downturn will become detached from the labour market long-term. Women will also experience greater future disadvantage from measures enabling early access to superannuation,<sup>v</sup> as they already accumulate less superannuation by retirement.<sup>vi</sup> It is concerning that people under 30 are the largest group wanting early access to superannuation,<sup>vii</sup> as negative impacts will be compounded for young women and non-binary people who experience multiple forms of disadvantage. Over time, these factors may lead to an exacerbation of the gender gap in retirement savings and a further increase to levels of homelessness among older women.

It is imperative that Australia's Federal Budget is responsive to the gendered nature of the COVID-19 crisis and is designed to optimize the role gender equality can play in Australia's economic recovery.

This submission acknowledges that the ongoing emergence of COVID-19 clusters in Australia and the rapidly increasing spread of COVID-19 internationally means that the crisis is far from over and the economy is operating in a highly unstable environment. To place Australians and the Australian economy in the best position for success, gender responsive measures and economic stimulus should remain a priority for Australia's recovery.<sup>viii</sup> Our recommendations therefore fall into three categories:

1. Gender responsive budgeting;
2. Economic recovery and stimulus measures;
3. Permanent investments in women's economic empowerment.

We consider these recommendations to be critical to developing a gender responsive budget and enabling a robust and gender equitable recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

### Recommendations:

#### *Gender responsive budgeting*

1. Apply Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) tools<sup>ix</sup> to track and monitor gender equality across the budget and the policy development cycle.

2. The Parliamentary Budget Office to implement the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit's recommendation to consider gender distributional analysis of all Budget measures.<sup>x</sup>

#### *Economic recovery and stimulus measures*

3. Extend the Coronavirus Supplement, and expand eligibility to include Disability Support Pension, Carers Payment, Carers Allowance and people on temporary visas.
4. Reinstate JobKeeper payments, and expand to include people on temporary visas, universities and other excluded industries.
5. Reinstate emergency relief for ECEC including JobKeeper eligibility.

#### *Permanent investments in women's economic empowerment*

6. Permanently increase JobSeeker and related payments in line with costs of living, and link rate to wage growth, and boost Commonwealth Rent Assistance.
7. Invest in the construction of social housing as economic stimulus, based on the successful 2009 Social Housing Initiative (SHI).
8. Invest in social infrastructure (including early childhood education and care, and aged care), supported by a review into the structure, funding and provision of care services to inform a coordinated strategy that will maximise investment for quality, fit for purpose client-centred services based on qualifications linked career pathways to decent, secure employment in care related occupations and industries.
9. Invest in job growth in feminised sectors (ie retail, services, hospitality, health, education and care).
10. Provide additional funding for the JobTrainer scheme to support VET providers and employers to run advertising and recruitment campaigns which challenge gender and racial stereotypes and norms underpinning enrolments, to address gender and other biases in enrolment and graduate outcomes.
11. Reform the Child Care Subsidy, including investigating an increase in the subsidy and taper to address the Workforce Disincentive Rate.
12. Increase resourcing to women's specialist sexual, domestic and family violence services, including women's and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled legal services, to respond to increased rates of gender-based violence during the pandemic.
13. Make sexual and reproductive health Medicare Benefits Schedule item numbers permanently available to all telehealth providers.
14. Fund a national women's health peak body to provide critical, timely and evidence-based advice on health, by returning resourcing to the Australian Women's Health Network.
15. Renew funding for the six National Women's Alliances for a period of four years (July 2021 to June 2025) to permit multi-year engagement with the Federal Government which bring women's voices to the COVID-19 recovery. A women's alliance for women with disability, auspiced by Women with Disabilities Australia, should also be established.

## Gender Responsive Budgeting

A gendered analysis of the Budget is essential to implement the Government's gender equality commitments of increasing women's safety, strengthening women's economic security and supporting more women into leadership.

The October 2020 Budget was a clear demonstration that the right processes and tools are not in place to deliver a budget that identifies and capitalises on opportunities to improve women's economic welfare and tap their economic potential. It has become clear that the federal budget process needs to be fundamentally changed to deliver a gender responsive budget.

Australia has regularly made international commitments to implement GRB or similar systems.<sup>xi</sup> We have also seen greater interest in and adoption of GRB at the state level in Australia and at the international level<sup>xii</sup>.

Gender Responsive Budgeting advances gender equality by:

- tracking government expenditure to improve accountability and transparency for the government's gender equality goals, in line with our SDG commitments;<sup>xiii</sup>
- recognising and making visible differential impacts across genders of all budgetary measures;
- comprehensively linking policies across areas through a gender equality lens to address policy incoherence and siloed approaches to gender equality;
- using this analysis to influence budgetary decision-making to limit the negative impacts on women of revenue or expenditure measures and identify measures to advance gender equality.

Gender budgeting should “eradicate gender asymmetry in budgets”<sup>xiv</sup> by covering both expenditure and revenue measures, including analysis of the investment required to achieve gender equality in Australia.<sup>xv</sup> It is critical that gender analysis is incorporated into tax and transfer measures to identify and address the differential impacts of policy across genders, particularly those tax settings that exacerbate gender inequality.<sup>xvi</sup> The Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit, has recommended <sup>xvii</sup> that the Parliamentary Budget Office give further consideration to the incorporation of gender distributional analysis in its costings. <sup>xviii</sup>

Implementation of Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB)<sup>xix</sup> tools would allow for these measures to be tracked and monitored across the policy development cycle. GRB tools can be adapted to understand the budget implications for different population groups, including people of different genders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culturally and linguistically diverse people, people with disability, LGBTIQ+ people, people of different ages, and others, where these factors are a more relevant starting point for analyzing budgetary impacts, and can be cross-cut with one another to provide an intersectional analysis.

To be effective, an Australian GRB process must:

- **sit at a range of points** across the policy and budget development cycle, not at a single point in the process. Key points are during policy development, at the point of assessing costs and benefits, and in the budget papers themselves;
- be **deeply embedded in the normal routines** of budget and policy development;

- **identify gender biases** and improve awareness of gender among policy and decision makers;
- **identify the resources** needed to achieve equality;
- increase **transparency and accountability** on gender issues;
- establish **measurable indicators** for public reporting;
- incorporate an increasingly sophisticated **intersectional analysis**, and
- **involve** actors both inside and outside government (such as NGOs and universities) to monitor and evaluate policy. This should include both internal review and review by resourced outside actors such as NGOs and researchers.

GRB must not become merely a compliance activity. Training and leadership in this area must stress that GRB is a vital tool for developing better targeted policy and more efficient use of resources. To be sustainable over the long term, the GRB process will require active parliamentary support and monitoring, a resourced and well-trained public service with oversight and leadership in Cabinet, Treasury and across all other Departments, and access to the necessary data for GRB analysis.

GRB is not possible without the systematic and properly resourced collection and use of gender statistics. Strong gender statistics:

- are collected and presented by sex as a primary and overall classification;
- reflect the concerns and lived experiences of women and girls;
- are based on concepts and definitions that adequately reflect the diversity of women and men and capture all aspects of their lives;
- take into account stereotypes and social and cultural factors that may induce gender bias in the data, and
- include data that uncovers different behaviours and experiences among genders (eg: time-use data or data on health outcomes).

Collecting gender disaggregated data requires adequate resourcing of and gender awareness in statistical offices, gender data transparency and availability, as well as civil society participation in identifying required datasets. There is also a need to review data standards on sex and gender so that the lived experience of people outside the gender binary are counted and included accurately.

#### **Recommendations:**

- ***Apply Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) tools<sup>xx</sup> to track and monitor gender equality across the budget and the policy development cycle.***

- ***The Parliamentary Budget Office to implement the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit's recommendation to consider gender distributional analysis of all Budget measures.<sup>xxi</sup>***

## **Economic recovery and stimulus measures**

### *Extend and expand eligibility for the \$550 Coronavirus Supplement*

The continuing emergence of clusters and associated lockdowns have negatively impacted on the expected stabilization of economic activity in Australia, resulting in ongoing economic loss for many people. According to the Australia Institute, the announcement to cut the JobSeeker Coronavirus Supplement by \$150 per work would push 370,000 Australians into poverty. ERA supports the calls of the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children to extend the Coronavirus Supplement at the \$550 rate, until the crisis has stabilized and the income support payment raised to support a quality of life above the poverty line and which is indexed to wages.

Maintaining the Coronavirus Supplement rate is critical given increasing rates of gender-based violence during COVID-19.<sup>xxii</sup> It is estimated to cost \$18,000 for a victim/survivor to leave a violent relationship and establish safety.<sup>xxiii</sup> Lack of access to capital therefore serves as a significant barrier to escaping violence. PwC estimates that violence against women costs \$21.7 billion a year (including to the Federal, State and Territory governments), including \$2.1 billion per year in lost productivity.<sup>xxiv</sup> Eligibility for the supplement should be expanded to include the Disability Support Pension, Carers Payment, and Carers Allowance. According to ABS data, 17.7% of people in Australia experience disability. People with disability are experiencing additional and unforeseen costs as a result of COVID-19.<sup>xxv</sup> It is worth noting that women with disability experience higher rates of gender-based violence, compared to women without disability. Government pensions are the main source of personal income for 42% of people with disability of working age; the median gross weekly personal income of people with disability is half that of people without disability; and more than 45% of people with a disability live in poverty.

The Grattan Institute has identified that for every dollar of cash payments made to low-income households, through payments such as the Coronavirus Supplement, GDP is boosted between 60c and one dollar<sup>xxvi</sup> and serves as a vital support for the economy in the current uncertain environment.

### **Recommendation:**

- ***Extend the Coronavirus Supplement, and expand eligibility to include Disability Support Pension, Carers Payment, Carers Allowance and people on temporary visas.***

### *JobKeeper*

The ongoing emergence of clusters and hotspots highlights the importance of making it possible for everyone to stay home and quarantine when necessary. In addition to extending the period in which JobKeeper is available, JobKeeper eligibility must be extended to people on temporary visas. Under pandemic conditions people on temporary visas face a range of barriers to returning to their country of citizenship,<sup>xxvii</sup> and as the Grattan Institute has noted, many countries have extended financial support to people on temporary visas during the pandemic. Moreover, excluding people on temporary visas from accessing JobKeeper has unintended consequences as it means the scheme provides less generous and inequitable support to industries and businesses who employ workers on temporary visas. According to Grattan, extending the scheme to people

on temporary visas for six months would cost \$10.6 billion. Eligibility for the JobKeeper payment should also be extended to university employees. Tertiary education is an important employer of women, with 57.9% of the workforce female, a figure which increases among part-time (75.8%) and casual workers (58.8%).<sup>xxviii</sup> Extending JobKeeper to universities would support women, as well as the diversity and innovation of research and knowledge produced in universities. Savings made from changes to JobKeeper which reduce the rate available for workers who work less than 20 hours a week should be repurposed toward extending the scheme to people on temporary visas and university workers.

## **Recommendation**

***Reinstate JobKeeper payments, and expand to include people on temporary visas, universities and other excluded industries.***

*Provide a wage guarantee to the child care sector*

Quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) has significant benefits for the social, emotional and cognitive development of Australian children, and research shows the early years to be critical in setting children up for life. Economic analysis shows the benefits from access to quality ECEC have positive flow on impacts for the economy.<sup>xxix</sup> ECEC is also a critical driver of economic recovery and of women's workforce participation, while women's economic participation is in turn crucial to the economic recovery. Women's contribution to the economy is estimated to have added 22% to GDP in 35 years since 1974.<sup>xxx</sup> Addressing the risk to women's employment posed by COVID-19 is therefore crucial to both gender equality and economic recovery. Finally, ECEC is a highly feminized workforce, which makes it a good target for measures which aim to improve women's economic security.

Safeguarding the ECEC system is crucial for Australia's recovery. Additional support measures for the sector are needed until the economy is more stable and a comprehensive review of ECEC is possible. The withdrawal of JobKeeper payment and shift to transition support measures were detrimental to the sector.<sup>xxxi</sup> The early withdrawal of support indicates a failure in recognising the value of care work, and in particular the lifeline it provides to working families as a frontline service during the nationwide lockdown restrictions. A wage guarantee should be provided to ECEC to support the employment of early educators (the majority of whom are women - 95.6% of Child Care Services<sup>xxxii</sup> and 86.7% of the Preschool Education<sup>xxxiii</sup> workforce) and prevent further gendered employment losses, while ensuring the viability of an essential service.

## **Recommendation**

- ***Reinstate emergency relief for ECEC including JobKeeper eligibility.***

## **Ongoing investment in women's economic empowerment**

*Permanently increase the rate of JobSeeker and related payments and boost Commonwealth Rent Assistance*

ERA supports the widespread calls for a permanent increase to the rate of JobSeeker and a boost to Commonwealth Rent Assistance. A liveable JobSeeker payment is critical to both the ability to contain spread of COVID-19 (by ensuring secure income and housing) and to Australia's



economic recovery. We endorse ACOSS' statement that, *'[i]nstead of cutting JobSeeker Payments by \$300 per fortnight, the Government must permanently secure the basics, including incomes and housing; create jobs and restore employment, avoiding another recession. This requires the certainty of a permanent, adequate increase to the JobSeeker payment...'*<sup>xxxiv</sup> According to the Grattan Institute, permanently increasing the rate of JobSeeker would help the economic recovery by ensuring people have capacity to search for a job and are equipped to commence employment where available. We commend to Treasury the submission made by Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand, which showed how the low rate of JobSeeker (then Newstart) payment acted as a barrier to women's employment, because of the financial outlay required to seek and successfully find employment.<sup>xxxv</sup> We further echo the calls of ERA member NCSMC to consider gender-based violence when rebuilding the income support system after the COVID-19 crisis, and particularly to consider the inadequacies of the pre-existing rate in light of the waiting times for meeting the needs of women escaping violence. This is particularly critical in light of findings from the Australian Institute of Criminology that sexual, domestic and family violence has increased during the pandemic.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The [\*550 Reasons to Smile\*](#) campaign has highlighted the stories and benefits of the \$550 Coronavirus Supplement to single parents, including victims/survivors of violence. ERA recommends permanently increasing the rate of JobSeeker in line with a living wage, and boosting Commonwealth Rent Assistance in order to support economic recovery and achieve positive economic outcomes for women.

## Recommendation

- ***Permanently increase JobSeeker and related payments in line with costs of living, and link rate to wage growth, and boost Commonwealth Rent Assistance.***

### *Investment in social housing construction*

Women, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, are overrepresented as users of housing support systems including social housing, of which there is a significant shortfall. Before COVID-19, single, older women were the fastest growing cohort at risk of homelessness.<sup>xxxvii</sup> 4.6% of clients accessing homelessness services in 2018-19 were women aged 55 and over,<sup>xxxviii</sup> and recent research estimates that as many as 405,000 women aged 45 and over are at risk of homelessness.<sup>xxxix</sup> Older women's homelessness is driven by lifetime accumulation of economic insecurity which may be compounded by experiences of violence.

There is a risk that the factors which have led to older women's risk of homelessness in the present time are being recreated for the current cohort of young women. During the early stages of COVID-19 women, particularly young women, lost employment at a higher rate than men (men's employment down 6.2% and women down by 8.1% between 14 March and 18 April).<sup>xl</sup> Women will also experience greater future disadvantage from measures enabling early access to superannuation, as women accumulate less super over their lifetimes due factors such as the wage gap and time spent out of the workforce while providing unpaid care.<sup>xli</sup> It is concerning that people under 30 were the largest group accessing superannuation,<sup>xlii</sup> as the negative impacts of reduced balances will be compounded over time for young women and people experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage.

Equity Economics estimates that by June 2021 rising unemployment and the removal of the JobSeeker supplement will combine to increase homelessness across Australia by 9 per cent, representing 7,500 more people experiencing homelessness. At the same time the number of Australians experiencing housing stress is also forecast to rise with the number of households estimated to be under housing stress to increase by 24 per cent to almost 880,000 families.<sup>xliii</sup>

The construction of social housing should be considered a priority recovery measure. The \$5.6m 2008 Social Housing Initiative (SHI) has been credited for adding \$1.1 billion per annum to the GDP over the 4 years of the initiative, and for increasing employment in the construction sector by an estimated 14,000 FTE during its duration.<sup>xliv</sup> The SHI had positive benefits for the social housing system including the addition of almost 20,000 dwellings. Almost 100% of dwellings achieved 6 star-energy ratings and adaptability, constituting additional savings and poverty alleviation for social housing users.

Despite the success of the SHI, Australia still has a critical housing shortage, which must be addressed urgently. In 2019 the UNSW City Futures Research Centre estimated that the existing deficit of 651,300 social and affordable homes will blow out to nearly 1,024,000 by 2036.<sup>xlv</sup> In the long term, Equity Economics estimates that an additional 30,000 social housing units would reduce the number of Australians experiencing homelessness by around 4,500 per year and save \$135 million in direct support costs.<sup>xlvi</sup>

A proposal put forward by the Community Housing Industry Association and National Shelter entitled *Social Housing Acceleration and Regeneration Program* (SHARP) calls for \$7.7 billion allocated to build or upgrade 30,000 social housing dwellings over four years, and will generate 18,000 FTE jobs in each year<sup>xlvii</sup> and an increase in economic output of up to \$18.2 billion per year over four years.<sup>xlviii</sup> New housing stock must also be appropriate to the needs of all women, including energy efficient and universal design as standards and considering adaptable designs which would permit repurposing or re-sizing where appropriate.

## Recommendation

- ***Invest in the construction of social housing as economic stimulus, based on the successful 2009 Social Housing Initiative (SHI).***

### *Investment in social infrastructure*

Investment in the care sector has more positive implications for GDP and women's employment than investment in physical infrastructure. The 2016 *Investing in the Care Economy* report by the Women's Budget Group estimated that a 2% investment of GDP (\$17.9 billion), in conditions of high unemployment, would lead to the creation of 600,000 jobs in Australia and a 2.3% growth in employment, in comparison with 0.5% growth in employment from a similar investment in construction, which importantly, would '*increase rather than decrease the gender gap in employment*'.<sup>xlix</sup> Similarly, The Australia Institute<sup>1</sup> estimates that for every \$1 million investment in the education and training, and health care and social assistance sectors, 14.9 and 10.2 jobs would be created respectively.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, most of these jobs would benefit women (The Australia Institute estimates 10.6 and 7.9 respectively)<sup>ii,iii</sup> which would substantially progress the Government's commitment to women's economic security.

Quality and resilient social infrastructure, including aged care and ECEC, are critical to Australia's capacity to cope with the impacts of COVID-19. Investment in social infrastructure is therefore an opportunity to build a more resilient Australia for both this and future crises. Both ECEC and aged care have emerged as essential services, yet workers are highly casualised and paid relatively low wages, resulting in their needing to work across multiple sites to make ends meet. There is a clear requirement for further investment to maintain and provide quality services to meet need safely,

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<sup>1</sup> The difference between these figures is accounted for by the fact that the *Investing in Care* report estimates both direct and indirect employment, while The Australia Institute report only considers direct employment effects. When focusing on direct employment effects only, Investing in Care estimates would equate to roughly 15 jobs generated per \$1 million of investment.

effectively and efficiently. To enhance the capacity and quality of investment in these critical sectors and maximise outcomes, there is a need for a comprehensive review into the structure, provision and funding of care services and their relationship with gender equality. Findings of this review would provide the evidence base for development of a coherent national strategy to maximize investment for quality, fit for purpose client-centered services based on qualifications and career pathways to decent, secure employment in care related occupations and industries.

## Recommendation

- ***Invest in social infrastructure (including early childhood education and care, and aged care), supported by a review into the structure, funding and provision of care services to inform a coordinated strategy that will maximise investment for quality, fit for purpose client-centred services based on qualifications linked career pathways to decent, secure employment in care related occupations and industries.***

### *Gender equitable VET reform*

JobTrainer is a welcome investment in Vocational Education and Training (VET) and retraining Australians for new employment opportunities as is the Government's commitment of \$25.1 million for the Women in STEM Cadetships and Advanced Apprenticeships to create STEM career pathways for up to 500 women through industry-sponsored advanced apprenticeship-style courses, starting in 2021.<sup>liii</sup>

However, ERA is concerned that the benefits of the stimulus will primarily flow through to men. Part of the issue is that Australia has a highly gender-segregated workforce, which is reflected in VET. VET has both gendered enrolment trends and graduate employment gaps. Men have higher VET enrolment rates than women<sup>liv</sup> and are more likely to report improved employment status after training.<sup>lv</sup> Men who complete a VET qualification will earn just \$700 less a year than if they complete university, but women earn almost \$10,000 less.<sup>lvi</sup> This difference in graduate outcomes is particularly pronounced for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Gender-disaggregated data also shows that men are also more than twice as likely to be apprentices and trainees linked to a VET program.<sup>lvii</sup> Further, the courses tipped for free and low-cost course places under JobTrainer will primarily benefit men. Out of the six industries identified, only health care and social assistance (which are some of the lowest paid jobs in the country) is women-dominated,<sup>lviii</sup> and retail trade is relatively gender equitable, (although women are overrepresented in lower paid roles).<sup>lix</sup> Wholesale trade, transport, postal and warehousing, construction, and manufacturing are all industries which disproportionately employ men in comparison to women.

Transforming how we view gender roles and work is key to delivering gender and socially equitable outcomes from JobTrainer that address the fall in women's employment. Women in Adult and Vocational Education (WAVE), Gender Equity Victoria, and the Gender Equity Accredited Training Project (Women's Health Victoria) have called for a specific gender equity framework for the VET sector that aims to drive more equitable uptake of VET and outcomes for graduates, not unlike the Advancing Women in STEM strategy, and which could be additional to the JobTrainer program.<sup>lx</sup> Such a framework would include strategies to address gender, racial and other stereotypes in student and graduate recruitment and person-centered career counselling for those who have lost their jobs and need to retrain as a result of COVID-19. Improvements to pedagogy and teaching practices to support and include alternative styles of learning are also needed, alongside access to fee-free courses in foundation skills including literacy, numeracy and digital literacies to ensure that VET-enrolled students receive quality education and training. By way of comparison, the Federal government provided \$4.5 million over four years to encourage more women to pursue STEM education and career in the 2018-2019

budget,<sup>lxi</sup> including the appointment of Women in STEM Ambassador Lisa Harvey-Smith whose role is to advocate for gender equity in STEM. The initial funding was extended by 3.4 million in the 2019-2020,<sup>lxii</sup> out of which \$1.5 million was committed to a digital awareness campaign led by the Ambassador<sup>lxiii</sup> and with further funding allocated in the 2020-21 Budget to extend the Women in STEM Ambassador Role in 2023-24 and for the Women in STEM and Entrepreneurship (WISE) Grants Program<sup>lxiv</sup>.

## Recommendation

- ***Provide additional funding for the JobTrainer scheme to support VET providers and employers to run advertising and recruitment campaigns which challenge gender and racial stereotypes and norms underpinning enrolments, to address gender and other biases in enrolment and graduate outcomes.***

### *Reform the Child Care Subsidy*

Currently, the cost of ECEC can be a significant barrier to the ability of women and secondary earners taking on additional work.<sup>lxv</sup> Recent research has identified that the interaction of ECEC costs with Australia's tax and benefit systems commonly results in Workforce Disincentive Rates (WDR) of 75-120%, where a WDR of 100% means there is no economic benefit is gained from working additional days. Even among low income earners, there is a WDR of more than 100% for a fifth work day.<sup>lxvi</sup> In a context in which the Prime Minister has stressed that: "*if there is a job to be taken and a job that is being offered, then it is an obligation... to take those jobs where they're on offer*"<sup>lxvii</sup> to rebuild the economy, there is a clear economic case for reducing disincentives to work arising from the cost of ECEC. One option put forward for addressing the WDR is a combination of increasing the percentage of the Child Care Subsidy available to all families, and replacing the Child Care Subsidy cliffs with a taper.<sup>lxviii</sup> The Grattan Institute has estimated that increasing the CCS to 95% with a gradual taper, would cost \$5 billion and deliver a boost to GDP of \$11 billion a year.<sup>lxix</sup>

## Recommendation

- ***Reform the Child Care Subsidy, including investigating an increase in the subsidy and taper to address the Workforce Disincentive Rate.***

### *Increase resourcing to women's specialist sexual, domestic and family services, including specialist legal services*

A recent Australian Institute of Criminology study<sup>lxx</sup> found that the number of women experiencing sexual, domestic and family violence (SDFV) for the first time has increased during COVID, along with increases in the frequency and severity of SDFV for those women who had experienced violence prior to COVID. Further, more than one third of those who have experienced SDFV during COVID on at least one occasion have not sought help due to safety concerns. There are also concerns that the pandemic has made it harder for support services to reach those in need.

Services are already responding to an increase in complexity of issues relating to SDFV and need to be resourced to respond to an expected surge in numbers of victims-survivors seeking help over time as conditions ease and they feel it is safe to do so. There is an urgent need for increased funding for specialist services including specialist women's legal services and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled legal services. Prior to COVID-19, the 2014 Productivity Commission report<sup>lxxi</sup> recommended an immediate investment of \$200 million (\$120

million from the Federal government) a year for legal assistance services providing civil, including family law services, as well as a proper assessment of further additional funding requirements for legal assistance services.

The Federal Government has announced \$63.3 million additional funding for the legal assistance sector to address additional legal needs caused by COVID-19. This includes \$49.8 million for legal assistance services, 40% of which must be used in matters relating to domestic violence. This is welcomed, but the Productivity Commission recommendations must also be implemented. Further, as noted by our sister alliance AWAVA,<sup>lxxii</sup> the Federal government has provided a \$150 million package to address increased gender-based violence arising from the pandemic in response to advocacy by the sector, with \$20 million allocated directly by Federal government, and \$130 million between the States/Territories. We support AWAVA's view that this funding must be expanded to support the sector, which was in funding crisis prior to COVID-19, to respond to evolving and increased need over time.

### **Recommendation**

- ***Increase resourcing to women's specialist sexual, domestic and family violence services, including women's and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled legal services, to respond to increased rates of gender-based violence during the pandemic.***

*Make sexual and reproductive health MBS item numbers permanently available to telehealth providers*

Temporary Medicare Benefits Schedule item numbers issued during the pandemic enabled improved access to health services via telehealth, including access to a range of sexual and reproductive health services, at a total cost of \$669 million.<sup>lxxiii</sup> Many of these services were delivered by specialist doctors with specific sexual and reproductive health training and qualifications. Telehealth reforms announced on 10 July rolled back temporary MBS item numbers to General Practitioners (GPs) only, which further hindered access to time-sensitive sexual and reproductive health services,<sup>lxxiv</sup> including medical termination of pregnancy, STI testing, and PREP and PEP for HIV prevention, for women across Australia. In order to achieve our national commitments to sexual and reproductive healthcare access, sexual and reproductive health MBS item numbers should be made permanently available to all telehealth providers. Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) item numbers should be issued for all services related to sexual and reproductive telehealth. This would assist in timely delivery of the Australian Women's Health Strategy (2020-2030).

### **Recommendation**

- Make sexual and reproductive health Medicare Benefits Schedule item numbers permanently available to all telehealth providers.

*Funding for the Australian Women's Health Network (AWHN)*

This pandemic has enhanced existing gender inequalities for women across communities in Australia. For example, the health sector is at the epicentre of COVID-19: women are disproportionately impacted as front line staff and health settings are one of the only places women can safely go under restrictions. It is vital the decisions made relating to health in both

these areas has a gendered analysis. A funded Australian women's health alliance would be in a much better position to provide timely, evidence-based advice to government representing the experience of women across the country. AWHN was established in 1986 as a peak body, representative of the Australian women's health sector. Since being defunded in 2014, it has operated in a voluntary capacity with no secretary or office. Despite this, AWHN is the only women led, representative national peak body for women's health in Australia. Given the current strain on health and hospital systems and the gendered implications of COVID-19, it is more important than ever to fund a national women's health peak body. Base level funding of \$300,000 per annum<sup>lxxv</sup> would enable AWHN to provide critical evidence-based advice on women's health.

## Recommendation

- ***Fund a national women's health peak body to provide critical, timely and evidence-based advice on health, by returning resourcing to the Australian Women's Health Network.***

### *Renew funding for the National Women's Alliances*

The National Women's Alliances (NWAs) collectively have significant experience in providing support and commentary to government on the effects of policy on women across the country. They also have links to thousands of women across Australia, including those experiencing exacerbated marginalization as a result of the COVID-19 crisis including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and women on temporary visas. The voices and expertise of these women is critical to the effective and efficient targeting of COVID-19 recovery measures. The NWAs are a key element of the Federal Government's infrastructure for promoting gender equality and are therefore an essential tool for assisting the Federal Government to effectively target COVID-19 recovery measures to the needs of women. At present, the NWAs are funded until 23 August 2021 under the Women's Leadership and Development program, and a tender process has recently been announced for a further three year contract at the same level of funding.

We recommend the refunding of the existing six NWAs for a period of four years (July 2021 to June 2025) to permit multi-year engagement with the Federal Government on a gender aware COVID-19 recovery. ERA estimates this would cost \$7,088,010 over four years, allowing for an annual CPI increase of 2%. ERA further recommends funding for a women's alliance for women with disability, auspiced by Women with Disabilities Australia, at a cost of \$1,181,335 over four years for the same period, to permit whole-of-government engagement and which is critical considering the significant implications of COVID-19 for women with disability.

## Recommendation

- ***Renew funding for the six National Women's Alliances for a period of four years (July 2021 to June 2025) to permit multi-year engagement with the Federal Government which bring women's voices to the COVID-19 recovery. A women's alliance for women with disability, auspiced by Women with Disabilities Australia, should also be established.***

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- <sup>xi</sup> See for example Australia's commitments under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the 25% by 2025 G20 agreement, and various Agreed Conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) - Australia committed to the establishment of gender responsive budgeting at the Federal level at the 63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women in New York in 2019.
- <sup>xii</sup> As of 2017, almost half of OECD countries (15 out of 34 members) had introduced, planned to introduce or were actively considering the introduction of gender budgeting.
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- <sup>xvi</sup> The Senate Standing Committee on Economics Report "A Husband is Not A Retirement Plan" recommended that the issue of effective marginal tax rates for second earners be referred to the Productivity Commission, noting the significance of women's workforce participation.
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