



**Leaving women behind:
The real cost of the
Covid recovery**

Australian **Unions**

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The ACTU acknowledges the work of Alison Pennington & the Centre for Future Work in the preparation of this report.



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Summary and Recommendations

Women have been uniquely and disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting recession. Unlike previous economic downturns where economic contraction started in male-dominated industries (like resources or construction), and men were disproportionately affected, the combined impacts of this recession (including impacts in workplaces and impacts at home) have disproportionately affected women.

Women were over-represented among workers in insecure and low-paid jobs and were shouldering the majority of unpaid domestic and care labour before the pandemic struck. Work predominantly performed by women – including much of the frontline and essential work which kept us safe during the pandemic – is more likely to be low-paid and insecure because of gendered assumptions and discriminatory views about the skills required and the value and complexity of the work. Government responses have not adequately addressed the way the COVID-19 crisis is reproducing and deepening existing structural inequality faced by women, and intensifying work and family pressures. In many ways, government policies have made it worse. Women already faced significant risks of violence and harassment pre-pandemic, and COVID-19 has exacerbated these risks, both at work and at home. For all these compounding reasons, the COVID-19 crisis has impacted on women more severely.

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, 21% of the female workforce (or 1.3 million women) has lost work or is experiencing pressures on their capacity to retain paid work. Workers in insecure jobs in customer-facing female-dominated industries like hospitality and retail were most affected by the initial pandemic job losses. Women have led the national pandemic response as frontline workers in healthcare, community and social services, education and retail, often putting their own health and safety on the line to keep essential services running. Women have also disproportionately carried the burden of an explosion in care and domestic demands from the pandemic. This increase in unpaid caring work at home places enormous strain on women workers, in turn reducing their capacity to do paid work.

The COVID-19 crisis has deepened the twin crises facing women: a shortage of good jobs, and an increase in the household caring burden. Without targeted action for women on both the paid work and unpaid care fronts, they face erosion of decades of collective advances toward decently paid work, and increased risks to their health and safety.

The Commonwealth budget and other policy responses have hurt women

Instead of providing countervailing supports for Australian women to address these unequal effects of the pandemic and recession, the federal government's 2020 budget showed callous disregard for women facing long-term unemployment, poverty, higher caring burdens, and heightened risks to their health and safety. This budget was an opportunity for the government to remedy existing gender inequities that prevent equal participation and economic outcomes. Instead, a miniscule \$250 million was allocated over five years under the Women's Economic Security Statement. And the scope of programs funded under this statement is far too narrow: restricted to small special initiatives and constituencies, and failing to address the challenges faced by the majority of Australian working women. Meanwhile, the decision to bring forward Stage 2 income tax cuts will widen structural economic inequality between men and women. This is because men are over-represented among the higher-income earners who will disproportionately benefit from the tax cuts: \$2.28 of the projected tax reductions will flow to men, for every \$1 that flows to women.



This pattern of failing to address the needs of women was well established before the budget. Indeed, the government's overall policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting recession have consistently failed to recognise the disproportionate harm being experienced by women and failed to respond appropriately with measures targeted at women. Indeed, federal policies have often exacerbated the disproportionate effects of the crisis on women:

- Restricting JobKeeper to exclude short-term casual workers – including hundreds of thousands of jobs in the female-dominated customer-facing sectors that experienced the worst impacts of the shutdowns (like tourism, arts, hospitality and retail). The new two-tiered wage subsidy program introduced in September will also disproportionately reduce women's incomes since they are more likely to have worked part-time before the crisis, and hence will have their subsidies cut. In fact, twice as many women will have their payment halved, as men.
- Cuts to free early childhood education and care supports, and the reintroduction of fees, meant mothers in cash-strapped households had to cut back paid work hours to care for children.
- Cuts to the JobSeeker Coronavirus Supplement in September will directly and unequally impact on women. Women will lose \$137 million more per fortnight than men – with an estimated \$465 million taken from their fortnightly incomes, compared to \$328 million for men. Women with dependents and older women already faced pronounced risks of poverty and homelessness, now made all the worse by these cuts.
- The superannuation early release scheme has increased risks to women's already inadequate retirement security. More than 1.7 million women have stripped \$13 billion from their retirement incomes. Over 300,000 women have emptied their accounts entirely. More women under the age of 20 years, and between the ages of 36 and 55 (prime working years pre-retirement), have made withdrawals compared to men during COVID-19.
- Women have been disproportionately affected by minimum wage and public sector wage freezes (imposed by all levels of government), resulting in thousands of dollars in permanent losses to women's individual lifetime earnings and superannuation accounts.
- In short, the federal government's entire response to the pandemic has ignored the particular challenges and risks facing women. To support a full economic and social recovery from this catastrophe and fully engage women's potential contribution to recovery, the government must recognise the gendered nature of this crisis, and urgently revise its policies to better support women through it

Policy recommendations

A comprehensive and effective response to COVID-19 crisis requires attention and hard work to ensure that all workers can fully participate in the recovery and to ensure that no-one is left behind. An inclusive, gender-equal recovery is a stronger, more sustainable recovery for all workers. Our recommendations to address the deeply gendered and unequal impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, and support a full economic and social recovery for all workers, are organised into three broad categories:

- i. **immediate measures to help women now**
- ii. **longer-run measures to strengthen gender equity as reconstruction continues**
- iii. **changes in economic governance to reflect the importance of gender equity in designing all our future economic and social policies.**



i. Immediate crisis responses

Several urgent measures should be taken immediately to address the pronounced risks to women's jobs, financial security, and health and safety experienced by women during this crisis:

- Reverse harsh and unnecessary cuts to the Coronavirus Supplement in the JobSeeker system, and permanently restore the \$550 per fortnight Supplement rate. Expand coverage to excluded carer benefit and Disability Support Payment recipients, and migrants.
- Expand JobKeeper coverage to all casual and migrant workers, abolish the two-tiered wage subsidy scheme which disproportionately impacts on women's hours and earnings, and return the original \$1,500 flat payment rate permanently.
- Insert a paid pandemic leave entitlement into the National Employment Standards (NES), and provide for federal government reimbursement to employers to facilitate this entitlement.
- Introduce a minimum of 10 days paid family and domestic violence leave into the NES.
- Implement the recommendations of the Sex Discrimination Commissioner's 2020 Respect@Work report and the 2018 Boland Review of Model WHS Laws to strengthen our workplace, WHS and anti-discrimination laws to keep women safe at work.

ii. A gender-equal and inclusive reconstruction plan

The modern Australian economy is driven by the services sector, including health, education, community and social services, retail and hospitality. Australia needs an ambitious public investment-led strategy to undo the damage of the crisis, generate good jobs and help all Australians to 'build back better'.¹ This approach would not simply undo the damage caused by the crisis but would remedy some of the barriers to women's participation and economic outcomes which have long held back women and our whole economy. It is a chance to right the wrongs of our economic system and achieve gender-equal outcomes that benefit all Australians.

This work and planning must start now. Key components of a gender-equal national economic reconstruction plan include:

- Investing in expanding the social infrastructure of the economy – including healthcare, education, disability and community and social services – as a major engine of growth in the post-COVID recovery. Targeting investments in social infrastructure reflects the contemporary structure and needs of the Australian economy, generates the best employment outcomes per investment dollar, and can form the building blocks for a gender-inclusive recovery, particularly in regional areas. Strengthening our social infrastructure will "anchor" economic and jobs growth across cities and regions and deliver high-quality services to the Australian community.
- Establishing a quality, permanently free, publicly funded early childhood education and care (ECEC) system for future years. Include permanent ongoing funding for at least 15 hours of preschool education per week for all 3- and 4-year-old children.
- Expanding direct public sector jobs at the Commonwealth, state/territory and local government levels within public services and administration.
- Requiring businesses and services funded directly or indirectly by government (including the not-for-profit sector) to deliver fair, stable and secure employment. Government procurement rules should require workers to be directly employed in good jobs with fair pay, appropriate skills and training, support for apprentices and trainees, and effective work health and safety practices. The government must ensure that public money is not used to support harmful employment practices such as insecure work, unpaid internships, underpayments, and sham contracting.

¹ The ACTU's proposal for a National Reconstruction Plan provides a good example of the potential for an integrated, sustained economic rebuilding plan for Australia's economy. See Australia's Economic Reconstruction after COVID-19: A National Jobs Plan, And Five Ways to Get Started, ACTU, July 2020, <https://www.actu.org.au/media/1449200/national-economic-reconstruction-plan.pdf>.



- Reinventing and recapitalising an integrated post-secondary education system, underpinned by accredited training delivered through publicly funded TAFE and not-for-profit Registered Training Organisations that can improve women’s educational opportunities and more effectively respond to the crisis in education-jobs pathways that has been accelerated by COVID-19.
- Commencing a national program of sustained public affordable housing construction and provision to address the growing crisis in housing security and homelessness for women. End unfair tax breaks for housing investors, and divert the billions saved into building public housing.
- Reforming the superannuation system to better reflect women’s full contributions (both paid and unpaid) and repair the significant gap in retirement incomes between men and women. Superannuation should be paid on every dollar for every worker. The \$450 per month minimum threshold for SG contributions should be abolished, and the ‘motherhood gap’ should be closed by making superannuation payable for all paid and unpaid care-related absences, including parental and carers leave. The government must proceed with planned legislated increases to the superannuation guarantee of 12% and legislate a pathway to a rate of 15%, with an expedited increase to 15% for women to help address the gender retirement gap. Early access to superannuation should be scrapped - women should not have to raid their superannuation to deal with financial hardship caused by COVID-19, natural disasters, or other crises such as family and domestic violence.
- Introducing strong, consistent and enforceable rights for women with caring responsibilities, including improving Australia’s gender-unequal and inadequate paid parental leave scheme. A minimum of 26 weeks paid parental leave should be accessible to both parents based on a shareable entitlement. Parents and carers need enforceable rights to part-time or reduced hours, and to return to previous hours when caring responsibilities have eased.
- Implement a national family and domestic violence strategy that acknowledges the central importance of secure, equitable and safe work to women’s ability to leave and recover from family and domestic violence, boosts funding for women’s specialist domestic and family violence services, establishes a network of wraparound services, and strengthens domestic violence capacity in the family law system.

iii. Build gender equity into the system

A gender-inclusive economic recovery requires changes to traditional economic policy governance. Gender equity issues must be integrated into core economic policymaking on an ongoing basis. The federal government produced a women’s budget statement from 1984 until Tony Abbott scrapped it in 2014. The women’s budget statement must be reintroduced. Public sector agencies need more capacity to assess the impacts of policies on women through gender-responsive budgeting, and improved data measuring the gendered impact of policy decisions to inform better policymaking.

A new expert tripartite body of government, unions, and industry representatives should be established to oversee government-financed job creation proposals and ensure there is gender balance in the jobs they create. This body should have powers to publicly report and make recommendations to government.

To ensure all workers share in the benefits of increased public investment and rising productivity through good jobs, urgent reform to our workplace laws is required, including:

- A clear and fair definition of casual work and stronger rights for workers to convert to permanent employment.
- Stronger rights for workers to bargain together for safer and fairer workplace conditions.
- Measures to protect and strengthen Awards.



- A stronger mandate for the Fair Work Commission to proactively tackle gender inequity across all of its functions, including measures to address the undervaluation of women’s work and an expert Gender Equity Panel.
- Stronger rights and protections for workers working at home.



This report provides a snapshot of how the COVID-19 recession has disproportionately hurt Australian women and outlines a roadmap for achieving a gender-equal reconstruction. The first section documents the gendered economic impacts of the crisis and then describes how the government’s budget and wider policy responses have failed to recognise and address those gender inequities (and, in many ways, made them worse). The second section of the report considers how long-standing gender inequity in Australia’s labour market and work/care systems disadvantaged women going into the pandemic. The paper concludes with an agenda of policy recommendations, guided by the overarching goal of boosting the inclusion of all workers in Australia’s economic reconstruction from COVID-19. These policy recommendations include immediate crisis-response priorities, long-term policy remedies, and new forms of economic governance to ensure gender-equal policymaking in the future.



I. **The Gendered Impacts of the COVID-19 Recession**

The Disproportionate Impact on Women

Job losses

Women's employment has been severely impacted by the COVID-19 recession, declining by 210,000 positions or 3.4%, compared with a 2.9% decline for men between February and August.² Women already faced more challenges obtaining full-time jobs pre-COVID, holding just 37% of all full-time employee positions. The lack of full-time work has worsened dramatically since the pandemic: worryingly, 57% of women's jobs lost under COVID-19 have been full-time jobs, representing the loss of 120,000 full-time positions since February. Consequently, the number of unemployed women significantly increased, by 32% from February through August, reaching an unemployment rate of 6.6%. However, that official unemployment rate understates the true depth of the crisis in women's employment, because it excludes jobless people who stop looking for work and hence leave the labour force. Women have been more likely to leave the labour market altogether (about 50% of whom leave in order to undertake unpaid housework and caring roles) – and hence many non-working women 'disappear' from the official unemployment rate.³ Since February, female participation has decreased by 115,000 workers or 1.3 percentage points (more than the decline for men). Increased caring demands at home and the collapse in job openings means that only 60% of working-age women are now participating in the labour market (either working or actively looking for work), compared with 70% of men.

Women lost jobs across 13 industries between February and August. The highest rate of women's job loss occurred in arts and recreation (-25%), accommodation and hospitality (-18%), and administrative and support services (-16%). The largest absolute numbers of women's jobs lost were in accommodation and hospitality (-95,000), retail (-57,000), and professional, scientific and technical services (-53,000).

2 ABS Catalogue no. 6202.0, Labour Force, August.

3 Thus the fact that women's unemployment rate is slightly lower than for men (7% in August) is not an indication of better labour market outcomes; because women are more likely to have left the labour force (abandoning job search due to lack of available jobs, health restrictions, and/or family and caring responsibilities), the official unemployment rate does not accurately portray the extent of women's joblessness.



**Table 1: Women's Job Losses by Industry
(February–August)**

	% change Female	Number of jobs
Accommodation & food services	-18%	-95,000
Retail trade	-8%	-57,000
Professional, scientific & technical services	-10%	-53,000
Administrative & support services	-16%	-36,000
Arts & recreation services	-25%	-31,000
Other services	-10%	-22,000
Healthcare & social assistance	-2%	-22,000
Manufacturing	-7%	-17,000
Information media & telecommunications	-14%	-13,000
Financial & insurance services	-4%	-9,000
Agriculture, forestry & fishing	-2%	-3,000
Mining	-2%	-800
Rental, hiring & real estate services	-0.1%	-130
Total job loss		-359,000
Total jobs added across other industries		114,000
Net jobs loss		-246,000

Data: ABS Cat. No. 6291.0.55.003, August. Table 6.

However, formal unemployment statistics describe only a small part of women's COVID-era jobs crisis. Since women faced barriers to accessing jobs with enough hours and income before the pandemic, they were more likely to hold multiple jobs. ABS payroll data shows the number of secondary jobs (where a person works additional jobs, on top of their main job) declined by almost 200,000 or 20% between March and June, compared to a 6% decline in the number of main jobs.⁴ The fact JobKeeper was only payable to one employer per covered worker has exacerbated this problem of secondary job loss for women. Businesses offering staff less hours and/or pay than workers' main job would be ineligible for JobKeeper payments if another employer was already claiming JobKeeper for that employee. The highly gendered JobKeeper exclusions (including denying benefits to short-term casuals and early childhood education and care workers), along with other government policies (including eliminating access to free early childhood education and care), have damaged women's ability to undertake paid work and meet the explosion in household caring demands.

⁴ ABS Catalogue 6150.0.55.003, Labour Account Australia, June.



Now the impacts of the pandemic on women's paid work opportunities are compounding. Combining the total number of women unemployed, with those who worked zero or fewer hours than normal for reasons outside their normal work arrangements (i.e. shift work) and/or due to non-scheduled caring leave,⁵ an astonishing 1.3 million women have lost all or most of their work since February.⁶ This means approximately 21% of the female workforce has lost work or is experiencing pressures on their capacity to retain sufficient work to support themselves and their families.

With the gradual lifting of states' health orders and the resumption of economic activity, there has been a partial recovery in total employment, including women's employment. Women's employment increased by 270,000 between May and August, but only 12% of those positions were full-time – even though the majority of women's job losses during COVID-19 were full-time positions. This reduction in full-time employment clearly undermines women's earnings and job security. Second, the government's decision to impose major cuts to the JobKeeper and JobSeeker programs will dramatically reduce consumer spending and will jeopardise jobs supported by that spending. The mostly part-time jobs women have regained since May could soon return to the chopping block. Third, as a deeper macroeconomic crisis in aggregate demand unfolds across the economy, further brakes will be applied on continued growth in women's employment. Businesses who managed to retain staff during the pandemic (including with the help of JobKeeper) may review the stagnant economic environment and conclude that their market is not returning – and subsequently reduce their staffing levels permanently. Indeed, many companies are already engaging in these second-order lay-offs (including within the highly feminised retail sector). So, while women's employment has shown signs of a partial and badly needed recovery, the wider macroeconomic environment presents continuing challenges for rebuilding quality, secure jobs for women.

Increase in caring burden

The pandemic has dramatically increased the caring burden on households, especially parents juggling their jobs (many working from home), home-schooling, and caring for children. As large sections of the economy were shut down, more women held jobs suitable to working from home (36.5% of all women's jobs) than men (27.3%).⁷ But far from sparking a more supportive redistribution of paid and unpaid caring work within the home, women have taken on even more unpaid work.

Survey data suggests that in the pandemic men increased their time spent caring for children from an average of 2.2 to 3.6 hours per day - an increase of 1.4 hours per day.⁸ But women's child-caring hours increased by 1.7 hours per day, and from a significantly higher base – now reaching a daily average of 5.1 hours. Time spent on household tasks also increased for men (by 0.7 hours) to 2.4 hours per day. But women's time spent in unpaid household duties increased more (by 0.9 hours per day), to 3.1 hours per day now allocated to household tasks. As women continue to perform their paid work duties, they confront a clear and pressing 'double burden.'

Insufficient access to quality, affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) and existing gender inequities in work and care threaten to further undermine women's workforce participation and reinforce traditional gender roles. Of women who stopped working during the pandemic, 50% did so to undertake unpaid housework and caring roles – compared with only 17% of men who ceased work.⁹ Women who lost work during

5 COVID impacts on workers who worked zero or fewer hours combine those who worked fewer hours due to: (1) labour market factors including no available work or being stood down, starting or ending a job that week, and other reasons; and (2) (2) non-scheduled personal and caring leave absences. ABS Catalogue No. 6291.0.55.001, EM2a, Employed persons who worked fewer hours than usual by hours actually worked in all jobs and sex, January 1991 onwards, August.

6 767,000 women worked zero or fewer hours due to labour market factors and non-scheduled caring leave absences in August. Ibid.

7 Estimates from Pennington, A. and Stanford, J. (2020). Working from Home: Risks and Opportunities. Centre for Future Work: Sydney.

8 Craig & Churchill. (2020). Dual-earner parent couples' work and care during COVID-19, May. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Brendan_Churchill/publication/342472207_Dual-earner_Parent_Couples%27_Work_and_Care_during_COVID-19/links/5f1b8bad45851515ef478978/Dual-earner-Parent-Couples-Work-and-Care-during-COVID-19.pdf

9 ABS Catalogue no. 6291.0.55.001, EM2a - Employed persons who worked fewer hours than usual by Hours actually worked in all jobs and Sex, July 2020. Table 1.



the pandemic are also more than twice as likely to not actively seek work (13.8%) than men (5.7%). The COVID-era explosion in unpaid caring demands is falling disproportionately on women's shoulders, further reducing their capacity to participate in paid work.

Increased psychosocial risks, including violence and harassment

COVID-19 presents a wide range of risks to workers' psychological health and safety, as well as their physical health and safety. Increased job and economic insecurity arising from the COVID-19 pandemic is putting enormous pressure on workers, their families and communities. For those continuing in work, many have had significant changes to work arrangements to ensure social distancing, such as the requirement to work from home. Some workers who can work from home have not yet been permitted to do so. Workers in frontline care and service industries such as healthcare, education, retail, transport, cleaning and community services are facing extraordinary health and safety challenges during this crisis. All of these factors are causing very significant anxiety, stress and uncertainty for workers.

The "stay home, save lives" directive from health officials increased safety for the general public from infection, but increased the risk of family and domestic violence. Family and domestic violence was already all too frequent for Australian women pre-COVID,¹⁰ but multiple factors have now increased that risk. These factors include longer periods at home with abusive partners due to directives to work from home; social isolation and reduced movement (which prevents seeking help or escaping from abuse); and the rise of other pressures on households (such as job insecurity and financial stress). Research on the prevalence of family and domestic violence during the pandemic found more than one in 10 Australian women have experienced abuse, harassment and controlling behaviours since the pandemic started.¹¹ Many women reported it was the first time their partner had been violent, and more than half of those reporting violence said it had become more frequent or severe since COVID-19. Alarmingly, 58% of women experiencing abuse from partners did not seek help due to safety concerns. The inability of affected women to seek help for themselves and/or their children, combined with restricted capacity of professionals to engage with women during COVID-19, have substantially increased the risk of family and domestic violence. This also explains why police reporting data may not fully reflect the increase in incidents of family and domestic violence.¹² Although many women are now working from home, many workplaces have neither assessed for risks of family and domestic violence in the home nor put measures in place to control these risks.

Women are also experiencing increased risks of violence and harassment at work. Pre-pandemic, violence and harassment at work (including sexual harassment) presented a significant health and safety risk for working women.¹³ Women are overrepresented among frontline and essential services workforces which are more exposed to violence and harassment. Increasingly anxious and stressed customers, patients and clients have exacerbated this risk, as financial and other pressures take their toll on the mental health of the general public.¹⁴ For example, 85% of SDA members already experienced abuse and violence from customers pre-pandemic.¹⁵ In a survey of SDA members in WA, 63% said abuse and violence was 'worse' or 'much worse', and 22% had experienced violent behaviours from customers during the pandemic, including coughing and spitting.

10 Our Watch, "Quick Facts," <https://www.ourwatch.org.au/quick-facts/>.

11 Boxall, H., Morgan, A. and Brown, R. (2020). The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistical Bulletin no. 28. Canberra: Australian Institute of Criminology. <https://www.aic.gov.au/publications/sb/sb28>

12 Freeman, K. (2020). Monitoring changes in domestic violence in the wake of COVID-19 social isolation measures. Bureau Brief no. 145. Sydney: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research. Available at https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_publication/bocsar_pub_brief.aspx

13 See for example: Australian Human Rights Commission, 'Everyone's business: Fourth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces' (2018) 7-8; ACTU, 'Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces: Survey results' (Report 2018)

14 See for example <https://www.shoppingcentrenews.com.au/shopping-centre-news/industry-news/sda-nra-scca-urge-the-community-to-respect-our-retail-workers/>

15 SDA, "No-one Deserves a Serve," <https://national.sda.com.au/saferstores/>.



A further 33% said they witnessed violent behaviour towards others. The International Council of Nurses has received highly concerning reports of increasing violence aimed specifically at nurses and other healthcare workers who are on the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic – including ostracism, abuse and physical assault because they have been in close contact with COVID-19 patients.¹⁶

Stronger employment, work health and safety, and anti-discrimination laws are urgently needed to address these problems.

2020 Budget Leaves Women Behind

Despite acknowledging women have experienced disproportionate shocks to their jobs and incomes during the pandemic, the federal government's 2020 budget offered no strategy to support women facing long-term unemployment, underemployment, poverty, and heightened risks to their health and safety. This section reviews the major features of the budget and its impacts on women.

Income tax cuts will accelerate gendered economic inequality

The centrepiece of the budget is a plan to bring forward previously legislated Stage 2 income tax reductions by two years, to take effect in the current financial year.¹⁷ The Stage 2 benefits on their own provide no gain to people earning under \$37,000 per year, little benefit to those earning under \$90,000 per year, and maximum benefit (\$2430 savings per year) to those earning over \$120,000. The government has tried to disguise these blatantly unfair, top-heavy tax cuts with an additional temporary measure: an extension, for one year only, of a Low and Middle Income Tax Offset (LMITO), which was originally scheduled to disappear when the Stage 2 cuts came in. That will provide up to \$1080 in savings for some taxpayers earning under \$90,000 – but just for the current fiscal year. Next year the LMITO disappears, and taxes for those individuals will actually increase. The grossly unfair combination of permanent large tax cuts for higher-income households, with a small, temporary one-year concession for medium-income taxpayers (and nothing for low-income households), makes this a “two-tier” budget.¹⁸ 88% of the combined *permanent* benefit of the Stage 2 tax cuts (for 2021-22 and beyond) will go to the highest-income fifth of taxpayers. Those tax cuts will reduce federal revenues by around \$15 billion per year in 2021-22 and after.¹⁹ The government's Stage 3 tax cuts, scheduled to take effect in 2023-24, will further reduce taxes for high-income individuals. The tax system already discriminates against women because of the higher effective marginal tax rate imposed on secondary earners, most of whom are women. These fast-tracked tax cuts will only deepen the unequal treatment of women in the tax system.

Even for those Australians who receive some savings from the accelerated tax cuts, the resulting increment in disposable income in no way compensates for the much more serious damage to workers' living standards that is resulting from the unprecedented stagnation in Australian wages. Consider a worker earning \$60,000. Wage increases of 3.5% would boost their disposable income by \$1400 in the first year: considerably more than their *one-time* Stage 2 tax saving. But after three years of such wage increases, their annual disposable income is about \$4300 higher: four times more than that one-time tax cut (which by then has disappeared into distant memory). The same is true even for higher-income workers. Someone earning \$120,000 per year gets a \$2430 benefit from the Stage 2 tax cuts, as noted. But just one year of 3.5% wage growth boosts their disposable income by close to \$2600. And three years of consecutive wage growth lifts their disposable income by more than \$8000 per year.

16 International Council of Nurses, “Governments must act to curb violence against nurses who are working with COVID-19 patients,” 20 May, 2020, <https://www.icn.ch/news/governments-must-act-curb-violence-against-nurses-who-are-working-covid-19-patients>.

17 Under the Stage 2 cuts, the top threshold for the 19% income tax bracket is raised from \$37,000 taxable income to \$45,000, and the top threshold for the 32.5% bracket is raised from \$90,000 to \$120,000.

18 See Ross Gittins, “Frydenberg's two-class tax cut is like no other we've ever seen,” Sydney Morning Herald, 14 October, 2020.

19 Australia Institute, “Tax Cuts: Temporary for Low and Middle Earners, Permanent for High Earners,” 7 October. Since the Stage 2 tax cuts were already legislated to begin in 2022-23, the actual “cost” of the measure as expressed in this budget (\$23.5 billion over the first two years) represents only its acceleration, and does not reflect the full loss of revenue on an ongoing basis.



Tax cuts (even permanent ones) only boost the level of annual disposable income once; wage increases, in contrast, have a compound effect year after year.

If the goal is steady, sustained improvements in living standards, tax cuts cannot replace the role of regular wage growth. Australia entered the COVID-19 recession suffering from several years of record-low wage growth: the slowest sustained wage growth, in fact, in our entire postwar history. Now the recession is making matters worse: the latest statistics show Australian wages growing at an annualized rate of just 0.9%. All workers need strong pro-active measures by government to boost wages and restore spending power to Australian households. And since women earn so much less than men to start with (on average, women's weekly earnings are 30% lower than men's²⁰), women especially need wage growth to boost their incomes over time – not one-time tax gimmicks.

From a macroeconomic perspective, income tax cuts are a very ineffective economic stimulus measure anyway, because so much of their value leaks out of the economy through enhanced precautionary savings by households – who set that money aside instead of spending it. Australia's personal saving rate hit an all-time record of 18% of disposable income as the pandemic struck;²¹ for high-income households, the savings rate is even higher. Tax cuts so concentrated on high-income households will have very little impact on overall spending and economic activity.

There is no doubt that the Stage 2 tax cuts will also widen gender inequity. Men account for most of the high-income earners (over \$120,000 in taxable income) who receive the maximum benefit. Estimates suggest that almost 70% of the ongoing Stage 2 tax cut savings will be received by men; \$2.28 of the projected tax cut savings will flow to men for every dollar that flows to women.²² These income tax cuts will fail to stimulate the sustained economic recovery that Australia needs, and they will deepen structural economic inequity between men and women.

The government should instead spend these resources on improving Australia's social infrastructure and income support programs: that would generate much more 'bang for the buck' in economic stimulus, and support a gender-equal, inclusive recovery.

JobMaker hiring credit for youth

The largest job-creation measure offered in the budget is the \$4 billion JobMaker youth wage subsidy. Employers would receive \$200 per week for hiring unemployed youth under 30, and \$100 for those aged 30-35, with recipients required to work an average of at least 20 hours per week over the quarter. It is payable for up to 12 months to employers who hire young workers aged between 16 and 35 and who are currently receiving JobSeeker benefits. The government optimistically claims the scheme will support up to 450,000 youth jobs.

But without safeguards to protect the jobs of *existing* employees, there is a significant risk that employers will use this new subsidy scheme to simply sack current, more expensive employees, replacing them (for a while) with young casual workers. This would be a lose-lose scenario for all workers, regardless of age, since jobs created under the scheme would be insecure casual positions. Without sufficient labour protections or requirements on employers to retain workers hired through the program, vulnerable young workers will be churned through low-skilled, low-paid work over 12-month periods.

In response to criticisms that JobMaker could be exploited by employers, the government claims businesses will be required to demonstrate the subsidy has led to an increase in employee headcount and payrolls compared

20 The oft-reported statistics that the gender wage gap is 14% refers only to ordinary time earnings of full-time workers; broader statistical measures gap confirm that the actual gender wage gap is much wider. ABS, Average Weekly Earnings, Australia.

21 Centre for Future Work, "Commonwealth 2020-21 Budget Update: Dropping the Ball on Economic Reconstruction," October 2020.

22 Early tax cuts as stimulus – gender analysis <https://www.tai.org.au/content/early-tax-cuts-stimulus-gender-analysis>



with September 30.²³ However, insufficient detail has been provided about how tests will be applied, who is authorised to regulate the scheme, and if workers and their unions will be able to contest its use. Replacing one worker with another is hardly a way to create new jobs.

Young women were disproportionately impacted by job losses in sectors like hospitality, arts, and retail; they were also hurt by the exclusion of short-term casuals from JobKeeper. Without strong protections to ensure jobs are retained at the conclusion of programs, paid at fair rates, with opportunities for skills and training, and covered by work health and safety protections, this program will likely further erode the quantity and quality of decent jobs for young workers.

A token gesture: Women's Economic Security Statement

The government released a Women's Economic Security Statement along with the budget, with stated aims of lifting women's workforce participation to pre-crisis levels, and addressing wider issues affecting women at work and in the home.²⁴ However, no measures were offered to repair the COVID-19 shock to women's paid work opportunities, nor the barriers to their workforce participation (like escalating ECEC expenses). Instead, a miniscule \$250 million was allocated over five years to strengthen job opportunities for a few selected groups of Australian women; this equates to less than 0.25 percent of the total \$110 billion in new tax and spending measures announced in the budget.²⁵ It is no surprise that the government has received widespread criticism that the budget is gender-blind, and fails to respond to the deepening crisis in women's economic and personal security.

Worse yet, the scope of the programs funded under the Women's Economic Security Statement is restricted to narrow, focused constituencies, and will fail to reach the majority of Australian working women. Measures include expansion of an existing mentoring and start-ups program to support some 300 new female-led businesses. Token funding was also announced for women's leadership programs to increase representation in male-dominated occupations. Only one of the 55 recommendations for reform from Respect@Work (the Sex Discrimination Commissioner's national inquiry into sexual harassment²⁶) was supported: the creation of a 'Respect@Work Council' to provide advice to the government. There is no information about whether workers and their representatives will be part of the membership of this body, or how its creation will make women safer at work. The closest thing to a job-creation measure offered for women is funding for 500 women over five years to undertake cadetships or advanced apprenticeships in STEM fields. Providing 100 new supported job pathways per year for women is a drop in the ocean of the hundreds of thousands of young women graduating high school and university in a recession, desperately seeking stable and secure jobs and meaningful careers.

Supporting women to pursue jobs in male-dominated STEM fields is important. But along with the small amount of funding allocated to encourage women into male-dominated sectors like construction, neither measure meaningfully addresses the reasons why women are funnelled into 'women's jobs' and men into 'men's jobs', or why women are systematically disadvantaged through lower pay and less secure jobs, or forced out of secure jobs in male-dominated industries and occupations because of discrimination or lack of access to family-friendly work arrangements for example. The budget offered no major funding or reform to the post-secondary skills system (let alone a gender-inclusive skills strategy), and no measures to achieve gender pay equity at work through wage-setting and collective bargaining reforms. These are the most critical determinants of the types of jobs women do, and how much they are paid to do them.

23 Hannan, E. (2020). "Budget 2020: JobMaker will not be rorted, says Josh Frydenberg", Weekend Australian, 7 October.

24 Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2020). Women's Economic Security Statement. Available at <https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/images/wess/wess-2020-report.pdf>

25 Calculated from Budget Measures, Budget Paper No. 2, 2020–21, Tables 1 and 2.

26 See Australian Human Rights Commission, Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report, March 2020, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/publications/respectwork-sexual-harassment-national-inquiry-report-2020>.



These budget measures clearly will not get 120,000 women back into the workforce who have given up looking since COVID hit, nor address gendered structural economic disadvantage. The budget threw only a cursory glance at unpaid caring work barriers to women's workforce participation: it changes the work test requirements for eligibility for Paid Parental Leave (from 13 months prior to the birth or adoption of the child to 20 months prior). This is estimated to benefit perhaps 9,000 individuals, and 3,500 more for Dad and Partner Pay (2 weeks at minimum wage). This does not begin to meet the scale of caring demands facing working families with new children. If the government is serious about lifting women's workforce participation, it should start by addressing the single largest barrier: the high costs of early childhood education and care, which are among the highest of any industrial country. Strengthening access to secure and stable family-friendly working arrangements and increasing the amount of paid parental leave accessible to families are also crucial measures.

The budget completely fails to dedicate adequate funding to key sectors that employ women (including education, healthcare, and social services); this will undermine the recovery in women's employment, and the economic recovery more broadly. The budget fails to recognise that supporting job-intensive social infrastructure leads to better whole-of-economy outcomes and delivers significant economic and social benefits for all Australians. After all, these sectors provide a dual benefit for women: they employ women directly, as well as freeing them up from unpaid caring work to in order to participate more fully in the paid workforce. These programs drive higher productivity and GDP growth that benefits all of society but have been neglected in this budget.

Despite Prime Minister Scott Morrison acknowledging the increased risk of family and domestic violence early in the pandemic, the budget also failed to provide additional funding to the family and domestic violence sector. In fact, more than \$1 million was cut from the government's anti-domestic violence education program in Australian schools, Respect Matters.²⁷ The government announced in 2019 it would commit \$2.8 million to Respect Matters over three years, but the budget shows only half that much has been allocated.

In sum, the federal budget is a glaring example of the need for gender-responsive budgeting, the reintroduction of the women's budget statement, and for more participation of women in setting the direction of economic policy: from the workplace, right up to parliament. Large, sustained investments in creating new jobs for women, reducing the barrier of high ECEC costs, and measures to address structural problems like the gender pay gap are all needed. This will require more gender-equal processes and practices in formulating all of our economic policies. The need for structural reform in how we make economic policy is addressed further in the policy recommendations below.

Other COVID Responses Also Hurt Women

This pattern of failing to address women's critical needs during the pandemic was established early in the government's policy responses to COVID-19. Instead of acting quickly to provide countervailing support for Australian women, the federal government implemented policy decisions that restricted eligibility and cut income support payments, cut free early childhood education and care, and froze wages in low-paid industries. These policies disproportionately harm women's ability to survive and recoup from the recession and to contribute to economic and social reconstruction – including the continuing recovery from the devastating natural disasters of the past twelve months.

JobKeeper ineligibility and benefit cuts

The JobKeeper wage subsidy has been effective at keeping some workers connected to their jobs and incomes, but the program excluded millions of workers – especially those already experiencing job and income insecurity before COVID-19 hit. Casual employees who had been with their current employer for less than 12 months at March 1 were excluded from coverage. This decision alone locked out some 1 million casuals (40% of all casual

27 Hislop, M. (2020). "The federal government has slashed funding for its anti-domestic violence education in schools", Women's Agenda, 14 October.



workers across the economy). This disproportionately impacted women and young workers, many of whom work in multiple casual positions to support themselves. The impact on older women has also been significant: the profile of the health and social assistance workforce has aged, with many older women working in casual positions for multiple employers (often supporting children or partners at the same time). There is a strong overlap between short-term casual work and female-dominated industries: indeed, 4 of 5 of the industries with the highest number of casual workers excluded from JobKeeper are also the largest employers of women.²⁸ Casual exclusions from JobKeeper were especially disastrous for workers in the customer-facing industries hit hardest by the initial health orders, and who needed income support most. This includes 385,000 short-term casuals within hospitality and retail, denied access to this important program.

The federal government then targeted early childhood education and care – and no other sector – for complete elimination of JobKeeper coverage in June. This had the doubly negative effect of both reducing women’s access to affordable early childhood education and care needed to retain or look for jobs, and cutting jobs and hours in a sector where 96% of all workers are women.

Despite rising contagion in Victoria and a continuing deep recession, the federal government then announced cuts to the JobKeeper payment rate and reduced eligibility. From 27 September the flat \$1,500 per fortnight rate was replaced by a new two-tiered payment based on hours worked pre-pandemic: \$1,200 per fortnight for employees who worked full-time, and \$750 per fortnight for employees who worked less than 20 hours in February.²⁹ Since women are more likely to work part-time hours (due largely to the work/care collision), twice as many women had their payment halved as men.³⁰ This new two-tiered wage subsidy will ‘bake in’ women’s reduced hours and incomes, as employers will receive lower payment for short-hours workers. Far from supporting all jobs equally, the new JobKeeper payment creates new and deeper gendered economic disparities.

Cuts to early childhood education and care

In April, the Prime Minister acknowledged the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector’s “vital” economic contribution as essential to “running Australia”, and introduced an emergency relief package to support families and operators, including fee-free services.³¹ But after just three months, citing a return to ‘normal’ ECEC demand levels, the government cut these supports and reintroduced fees. The reintroduction of fees forced households under extreme financial pressures to make tough decisions about how to allocate the increase in unpaid caring hours required by the pandemic. Long-term structural inequality in women’s lower pay and pervasive job insecurity meant even women who managed to retain their jobs in crisis faced significant pressures to reduce their paid work hours in order to care for their families. Survey data reveals the increased pressure placed on working families: more than half (60%) of Australian households who accessed ECEC during the fee-free period indicated that one parent would have to reduce their paid work opportunities when fees returned. More than two-thirds (68%) of households who said one parent would stop or reduce work indicated it would be the mothers who reduced work.³² In sum, cutting ECEC supports removed a major pillar of women’s economic support and opportunity.³³

28 ABS Labour Force, Australia, Detailed, Quarterly.

29 From January 2021, payments will be cut again to \$1,000 and \$650, respectively. The scheme will be extended to March 2021.

30 Duke, J. (2020). “Women losing out twice as much from JobKeeper 2.0”. The Sydney Morning Herald, July 26.

31 Prime Minister of Australia. (2020). “Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package”. Media Release, 2 April.

32 The Parenthood. (2020). “60 per cent of Australian families will have a parent forced to reduce work when childcare fees return & 68 per cent will be women, survey of 2,200 Australian families reveals.” Media Release. 1 June, https://d3n8a8pro7vnm.cloudfront.net/theparenthood/pages/20/attachments/original/1590987325/200601_-_Full_survey_data_case_against_snap_back_MR.pdf?1590987325.

33 An indicator of the importance of child care fees to the budgets of working households was provided by the ABS in its most recent report on consumer prices. The government’s decision to reimpose full fees led to a measurable 0.9% increase in the overall level of consumer prices in Australia – accounting for over half of the total increase in national consumer prices in the September quarter of 2020. For the proportion of families with children in child care, the impact on their overall budgets was, of course, much larger.



JobSeeker income support cut

The expanded Coronavirus Supplement, introduced early in the pandemic, dramatically improved the lives of the unemployed, underemployed and low-income people, including single mothers and their children.³⁴ The increased benefit single-handedly removed 425,000 Australians from poverty: the biggest single anti-poverty measure in our history.³⁵ Yet despite this achievement, on 25 September the government cut the Coronavirus Supplement in the JobSeeker system by \$300 per week: from \$550 to \$250 per fortnight. More women rely on this critical income support than men; 14.6% of adult women received the supplement, compared with 10.7% of men. Reducing the Supplement directly and disproportionately damages women's economic security. Women will lose \$465 million from their fortnightly incomes, compared with \$328 million for men. Women thus lose \$137 million (or 42%) more per fortnight than men.³⁶ These cuts coincided with an end to early childhood education and care subsidies and eviction moratoriums in most states and territories.

The cut will increase women's poverty and deepen the recession. ACOSS survey data shows that reducing the total payment from \$1,115 a fortnight to \$815 will mean more than one-third of the 2.3 million people on the payment will have to live on less than \$14 per day after paying their rent.³⁷ Other research found 370,000 people (including 80,000 children) will be plunged back into poverty due to the payment's reduction.³⁸ Older women, too, are facing a further increased risk of poverty and homelessness, with new research estimating 400,000 women over 45 are now at risk of homelessness.³⁹ Not surprisingly, given women's increased prevalence of poverty, job loss, and additional unsupported caring demands, women also face higher risks of detrimental mental health impacts during the pandemic,⁴⁰ and there is no doubt the Coronavirus Supplement cuts will make that worse. In addition to harming the most vulnerable, this needless cut will also undermine economic recovery: taking over \$30 billion out of the economy that would have otherwise been spent by low-income recipients, thus supporting businesses across the full range of consumer goods and services industries. This will reduce the number of private-sector jobs that would have been supported by that spending – by an estimated 145,000 full-time-equivalent positions over two years.⁴¹

Superannuation early release

One of the first COVID-19 policy responses from the government – more than two weeks before announcing critical income supports in JobKeeper and JobSeeker in April – was to amend the 'hardship' provisions that enable individuals 'early access' to their superannuation savings before retirement age. Women already face a significant systematic disadvantage in the superannuation system, due to lower lifetime earnings, more career interruptions, lower superannuation accumulations, less likelihood of accruing long service leave, and hence reduced retirement incomes. Women are also less likely to own their own home and more likely to be homeless. On top of this, in the initial phase of the economic shutdowns, women experienced greater losses of jobs and hours. Government income supports were not yet in sight. JobKeeper was eventually implemented, but many young women and migrant workers found they were ineligible. Consequently, high numbers of women drew down their superannuation funds.

34 The higher payment had been life-changing for single mothers, dramatically reducing anxiety and stress due to being able to cover bills; the extra income most likely to be spent on groceries (79%), energy costs (56%) and car expenses (51%). See Henriques-Gomes, K. (2020). "Distress and fear: poverty looms for a million Australian children once coronavirus supplement slashed". Guardian, 11 September.

35 Matt Grudnoff, Poverty in the Age of Coronavirus, Australia Institute, July 2020.

36 Author's calculations from ABS. Catalogue no. 494.0, Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey, June 2020. Table 5.1.

37 Henriques-Gomes, K. (2020). "Jobseeker cut will leave 80% skipping meals, survey finds". Guardian, 11 September.

38 Grudnoff, M. (2020). "JobSeeker Cut to Push 370,000 into Poverty, Including 80,000 Children". Media Release, The Australia Institute, 24 July.

39 Lester, L., and Faulkner, D. (2020). At Risk: Understanding the population size and demographics of older women at risk of homelessness in Australia. Social Ventures Australia, in partnership with Centre for Housing, Urban and Regional Planning, and The University of Adelaide.

40 Jane RW Fisher, Thach Duc Tran, Karin Hammarberg, Jayagowri Sastry, Hau Nguyen, Heather Rowe, Sally Popplestone, Ruby Stocker, Claire Stubber and Maggie Kirkman. (2020). "Mental health of people in Australia in the first month of COVID-19 restrictions: a national survey", The Medical Journal of Australia. Published online: 10 June 2020.

41 Deloitte Economics. (2020). Estimating the economic impacts of lowering current levels of income support payments. Australian Council of Social Services, September.



Since April, more than 1.7 million women have withdrawn an average of \$7,430 each from their retirement savings under the superannuation early release scheme. A total of \$13 billion has been stripped from their retirement savings.⁴² Over 300,000 of these women have completely emptied their accounts. More women under the age of 20 years and women between the ages of 36 and 55 have made withdrawals from their superannuation accounts compared to men during this time.⁴³ Women now face an even greater risk of poverty and homelessness after retirement due to these superannuation releases during COVID-19.

This is not the first time this government has encouraged women to raid their own retirement savings as a 'solution' to hardship. In November 2019 the government allowed early superannuation access for women leaving abusive relationships,⁴⁴ while at the same time family and domestic violence services remained underfunded and women workers were denied access to paid family and domestic leave. But early superannuation access for victims of family and domestic violence only increases the long-run risks to their security and safety. Indeed, Women's Legal Service Victoria warned early superannuation release would increase risks of economic abuse for women experiencing family and domestic violence, as violent partners could force women to withdraw funds.⁴⁵

During the COVID-19 crisis, the federal government has effectively transformed the superannuation system into emergency personal bank accounts and social security funds. For women experiencing job loss, financial hardship, and family and domestic violence, the federal government expects women to fund their own emergency supports. The government's early release scheme has left 1.7 million women with lower superannuation savings balances. This will cause lasting financial damage to their retirement security.

Wage freezes in industries which employ women

Ironically, many women who managed to retain their jobs through the initial months of the pandemic then had their incomes frozen by governments and the Fair Work Commission (FWC). The annual minimum wage decisions issued by the FWC apply to all Award-covered workers – 61% of whom are women. They are important levers for closing the gender pay gap and securing wages growth across the economy. The role of the minimum wage is especially important in a recession when pressures to cut wages become severe, and wage stagnation and deflation threaten wider macroeconomic stability. In June, the FWC announced a very modest 1.75% increase in the national minimum wage. In addition, the Commission also decided to postpone that increase for up to seven months in several hard-hit sectors: including accommodation, food services, arts, recreation, aviation, retail and tourism. This further hurts low-wage women workers who comprise the majority of workers in these sectors.

Meanwhile, at the very moment public sector workers such as healthcare workers and teachers are performing vital tasks in their communities, the Commonwealth and several state governments imposed wage freezes and caps on public sector workforces. 61% of all public sector workers are women. Both morally unfair and economically counterproductive, these wage freezes impose tens of thousands of dollars in permanent losses on women's individual lifetime earnings, including via reduced superannuation balances.⁴⁶ They should be reversed immediately.



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- 42 Australian Prudential Regulation Authority. (2020). "COVID-19 Early Release Scheme". August 8. Commonwealth of Australia.
 - 43 Men aged 20-36 were more likely to draw down on their superannuation accounts than women the same age.
 - 44 Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet. (2019). Record funding to reduce Domestic Violence. Media release, 5 March 2019. Available at <https://ministers.pmc.gov.au/odwyer/2019/record-funding-reduce-domestic-violence>
 - 45 Women's Legal Service Victoria. (2020). 5 steps to take before you access your superannuation early. Available at <https://womenslegal.org.au/files/file/Coronavirus%2520Superannuation%2520Brochure%2520-%2520FINAL.pdf>
 - 46 See Henderson, T. and Stanford, J. (2020). The Same Mistake Twice: The Self-Defeating Consequences of Public Sector Pay Freezes. Centre for Future Work, April.



Across all these policies, the federal government has implemented a gender-blind response to the COVID-19 crisis, that has failed to recognise and ameliorate the disproportionate harm that the pandemic and recession are doing to women. At the same time, deliberate policy choices have been made that will accelerate and entrench gendered structural inequity – such as bringing forward tax cuts that mostly advantage men. The combined impact of these gender-biased policy responses, along with the highly unequal effects of the pandemic itself, is significantly exacerbating women’s economic and personal insecurity.



II. Why is the Crisis Hurting Women Most?

The COVID-19 health and economic crisis represents a 'perfect storm' for women's economic security. Women were over-represented among workers in insecure and low-paid jobs and were shouldering most of the unpaid domestic and care labour before the pandemic struck. Women were also over-represented in the customer-facing sectors hit hardest by the health order shutdowns from March. Government responses have not adequately addressed the way the COVID-19 crisis is reproducing and deepening structural inequality faced by women, and intensifying work and family pressures. In many ways, government policies have made it worse. For all these compounding reasons, the COVID-19 crisis has impacted on women more severely.

Over decades women have increasingly gained access to paid work, but they still experience widespread discrimination in the workplace and wider society that constrains their ability to work and earn.⁴⁷ Women are held back by a labour market without enough decent jobs and a society that still expects them to do the lion's share of unpaid work raising children and managing households. Insufficient supports for the additional and essential unpaid labour women do in their families and communities has meant their entry to the paid workforce has been on fundamentally unequal terms. It is important to understand the structural roots of economic inequality faced by women, in order to imagine and implement policies that will be most effective in reducing that inequality: during the COVID-19 pandemic, and beyond.

Job Segregation

One major factor influencing women's high job loss during the COVID-19 crisis is the high level of gendered job segregation in Australia's labour market. There is more gender segregation in work in Australia than average in other OECD countries.⁴⁸ The unequal distribution of men and women in Australian workplaces cuts three ways: across occupations, industries, and workplace hierarchies. Work predominantly performed by women is undervalued because of gendered assumptions about the 'natural' role of women (for example as 'nurturers' or 'carers') and the discriminatory view that the work of women is not as skilful or valuable as work done by men. Women are more likely to be employed in industries such as healthcare and social services (where women make up four-fifths of that broad sector's workforce), clerical and administrative work, and hospitality jobs. Jobs in these highly feminised industries and occupations are more likely to be insecure and low paid, despite women's high levels of education attainment, skills and experience. Meanwhile, men are more likely to be employed in higher-paid industries like mining, construction, manufacturing and utilities; over two-thirds of workers in these industries are male.⁴⁹

Australia's most-feminised industries – healthcare and social services, and education – have been placed under considerable strain during the pandemic, despite the critical importance of this work to our collective welfare. Women also comprised the majority of workers in the customer-facing industries initially shut down to curtail the spread of COVID-19: including tourism and travel (66% women), retail (56%), and accommodation and hospitality (55%). Women also constitute the majority of those at highest risk of exposure to infection in the healthcare and social services sectors.

Another key dimension of job segregation impacting on women's higher COVID-era job loss is their under-representation in more senior roles. Where women do work alongside men, they are more likely to be working

47 For example, KPMG estimates that 39% of the gender pay gap is attributable to gender discrimination: KPMG, *She's Price(d)less – the economics of the gender pay gap*, 2019

48 Workplace Gender Equality Agency. (2019). *Gender Segregation in Australia's Workforce*. 17 April.

49 Peetz, D. (2014). "Regulation distance, labour segmentation and gender gaps". *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 39(2), 345-362.



for them, and more likely to be employed in junior or lower-paid roles. This is true for all occupational hierarchies across all industry groupings in Australia.⁵⁰ The economic shock from the COVID-19 health crisis threatened business incomes and profits, and the deepening recession has placed pressure on employers to decrease the number of staff on their books. With more women in junior roles (including administration and sales), and in short-term casual or insecure positions not covered by JobKeeper, employers were more likely to cut women's jobs. High levels of job segregation across industries, occupations and within companies have significantly contributed to women's disproportionate job loss in the COVID-19 crisis.

Insecure Jobs

Women have experienced worse job losses in the COVID-19 crisis because they hold jobs with less employment security compared with men. While the absolute level of women's employment has continued to rise over decades, the availability of good quality jobs has not followed suit. 57% of women workers experienced one or more forms of precarity in their work pre-COVID: with women more likely to be employed in reduced hours, casual, and temporary positions than men.⁵¹ Women's jobs are characterised by fewer and less predictable hours, and fewer standard entitlements like sick leave, long service leave, holidays and superannuation. Insecure work in the social and community services sector is also less likely to have access to redundancy entitlements. While women have been stuck on the treadmill of insecure work, full-time permanent work has been harder to obtain. Pre-pandemic, only 43% of employed Australian women worked in a full-time permanent job with entitlements such as paid sick leave. That compares with 57% of men in permanent full-time waged jobs.⁵²

Women are concentrated in short-hours jobs (which account for 46% of all women's jobs), in large part due to work and family life collision. Inadequate supports for working parents (such as access to secure and stable family-friendly work arrangements, affordable quality ECEC, and adequate paid parental leave) mean many women find part-time work is all they can manage. Part-time jobs can and should be secure and well-paid with access to pro-rated entitlements. However, about half of all reduced hours jobs are casual, meaning they do not offer paid sick or holiday leave or certainty of working hours: essential for workers with caring demands, and essential for allowing workers to follow health instructions when required to self-isolate or quarantine.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it undeniably clear that the work of low paid women in sectors such as aged care, disability services, ECEC and cleaning is critical to Australia's economic and social well-being.⁵³ Despite the risks faced in these industries, workers have continued to put their health and safety on the line throughout the pandemic, yet work in these feminised sectors continues to be undervalued. The work is often insecure and underpaid, with high rates of casualisation and underemployment; these and other workers experienced dramatic reductions in hours of work as the pandemic hit. A United Workers Union survey revealed that almost half of home care workers reported working fewer hours during the pandemic, and many early childhood educators also had their hours dropped to the minimum in their contracts. The pandemic proved that these jobs, undervalued and taken for granted for too long, are in fact providing essential services. It is well past time for society to treat them as such.

The fact women are disproportionately employed in insecure jobs undermines their economic security, making them more vulnerable to job loss and poverty. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and migrant workers face a double burden of discrimination and inequity, with less access to secure work and fair pay because of both their race and their gender. Insecure work means employers have little or no commitment to training, can cut hours, change rosters and terminate jobs without requirement to pay compensation. In any economic crisis, casual workers are simply the cheapest and easiest to fire; and the exclusion of short-term casuals from JobKeeper further exposed these predominantly female and young workers.

50 Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee Secretariat. (2017). "Chapter 2: Nature and extent of gender segregation in Australia", in Gender segregation in the workplace and its impact on women's economic equality. June 2017. Commonwealth of Australia.

51 Pennington, A. & Stanford, J. (2020). Gender Inequality in Australia's Labour Market: A Factbook. Centre for Future Work: Sydney.

52 Ibid.

53 See, for example, Lyn Craig, "COVID-19 has laid bare how much we value women's work, and how little we pay for it," The Conversation, 20 April.



There is significant evidence that insecure work is not safe work. Workers in insecure work are more likely to be injured at work for a range of reasons, including inadequate training and induction, fear of reprisals for speaking out about safety concerns, lack of access to participation and consultation processes, lack of regulatory oversight, poor supervision, inadequate access to effective safety systems, and exposure to frequent restructuring and downsizing.⁵⁴ The most recent figures from the Australian Human Rights Commission show that close to half of all sexual harassment perpetrated in Australian workplaces occurred within four industry groups characterised by very high levels of insecure employment: namely health care and social assistance, retail trade, education and training, and accommodation and food services.⁵⁵ Recent Safe Work Australia statistics show an increase in mental stress claims, with female-dominated industries such as community and social services, particularly at risk.⁵⁶ COVID-19 has not only exacerbated risks to workers' economic security and health and safety, but it has also exposed insecure work as a serious public health hazard: current estimates from Victoria are that 80% of COVID-19 outbreaks are connected with workplaces.⁵⁷ Casual and insecure work has been a significant common factor in almost every major COVID-19 outbreak.

Discrimination and other barriers to Workforce Participation

A lack of access to family-friendly working arrangements, high-quality, affordable ECEC, affordable training, inadequate paid parental leave, and discrimination has long undermined women's ability to undertake paid work.

When the pandemic hit, caring responsibilities for children and the elderly, and other household duties all dramatically increased. Working women were pressured to scale back paid work hours to meet this increase in unsupported household and caring responsibilities. Australia's weak supports for working parents undermine women's ability to get paid work, with lifelong impacts on earnings, careers and retirement incomes. The Australian Human Rights Commission has found that discrimination against mothers in the workplace is 'pervasive': 36% of women who returned to work after parenthood reported discrimination related to family responsibilities when returning to work, with half of those reporting discrimination when requesting flexible working arrangements and one in ten mothers still on parental leave could not find work, or could not negotiate return to work arrangements.⁵⁸ In 2015, the Productivity Commission found little change in the (limited) range of workplace flexibilities available to employees in the decade between 2006–13, demonstrating an institutionalised inflexibility in Australian workplaces.⁵⁹ While Australia performs well in most measures of well-being relative to most other OECD countries, it performs notably badly on the measure of work-life balance.⁶⁰ Only 15% of Australians, regardless of gender, feel they are able to balance their work and family responsibilities.⁶¹ The result is that many workers, mostly women, have little choice but to drop out of the workforce altogether, put promotions or training on hold, and/or accept lower paid or less secure work in order to manage their unpaid care and domestic work commitments.⁶²

54 See for example Richard Johnstone and Michael Quinlan, 'The OHS regulatory challenges posed by agency workers: evidence from Australia' (2006) 28:3 Employee Relations 273.

55 Australian Human Rights Commission, "Everyone's business: Fourth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces," 2018, p. 60.

56 Safe Work Australia, Key Work Health and Safety Statistics, Australia 2020 Report

57 See ABC News, "Workplace coronavirus transmission driving Victorian case numbers, including in aged care," 20 July, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-19/workplace-coronavirus-transmission-in-victoria-in-aged-care/12470704>

58 Australian Human Rights Commission, Supporting Working Parents: Pregnancy and Return to Work National Review Report (2014)

59 Productivity Commission. 2015. Workplace Relations Framework. Inquiry Report No. 76. Canberra: Productivity Commission.

60 OECD, "Better Life Index," Australia, <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/countries/australia/>.

61 Elizabeth Hill, et al., "Young women and men: Imagined futures of work and family formation in Australia," *Journal of Sociology* 55(4), 2019, pp. 778-798. See also OECD, 2014, 'How's Life in Australia?' Better Life Index, <http://www.oecd.org/general/Better-life-index-2014-country-reports.pdf>.

62 Dr Siobhan Austen, The Effects of Parenthood and other Care Roles on Men's and Women's Labour Force Participation and Experiences of Paid Work, May 2017 at [5]; Argyrous, G., Craig, L. and Rahman, S. 2017. 'The Effect of a First-Born Child on Work and Childcare Time Allocation: Pre-Post Analysis of Australian Couples'. *Social Indicators Research*, 131(2): 831–851; Charlesworth, S., Strazdins, L., O'Brien, L. and Sims, S. 2011. 'Parents' Jobs in Australia: Work Hours Polarisation and the Consequences for Job Quality and Gender Equality'. *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, 14(1): 35-57.



Barriers to women's participation in paid work include the barriers our system creates against men participating equally in family and domestic responsibilities. For example, our paid parental leave scheme is built on the premise that there is a 'primary carer', who has access to paid leave to care for the newborn or newly adopted child. The concept of primary and secondary carers is outdated, and entrenches cultural and social expectations that caring is primarily 'women's work'. Men either feel unable to ask for family-friendly working arrangements or are knocked back when they do ask.⁶³ This unfairness and inequity in our labour market is a significant driver of the gender pay gap.⁶⁴ Job insecurity and pay cuts should not be the trade-off for the essential work of caring for children and others.

Unsupported parenting and household labour responsibilities already reduce women's participation in the labour force well below potential – and lower than many comparable OECD countries, including most of Europe, Canada, and New Zealand, where stronger work supports exist for women and men. From aged 15, women's workforce participation in Australia increases steadily until women reach their 30s – the most common age to have children. But then tens of thousands of women leave the labour market, and women's labour participation falls. In contrast, men's workforce participation continues to grow. Women's participation rates bounce back in their 40s and 50s, but by then their significant absence from paid work during a large portion of their prime earnings years undermines their economic security for the rest of their lives.

The costs of holding women back from paid work are significant to women and their families, but the wider economy is worse off, too. If Australian women aged between 25 and 45 participated in the labour force at the same rate as men, the economy would benefit from almost 500,000 new potential workers – providing a boost of \$70 billion per year in GDP, \$30 billion per year in household incomes, and higher government revenues.⁶⁵ In fact, a free public ECEC system would literally pay for itself in higher tax revenues generated by women's increased participation.

The barrier that high ECEC costs create for women workers is clear. There are 670,000 wives or female partners with dependent children not in the workforce, compared with 183,000 husbands or male partners with dependent children.⁶⁶ Before the pandemic, over half of non-employed women with young children listed ECEC costs as the biggest influence on their decision not to engage in paid work.⁶⁷ As the federal government announced an end to the period of COVID-era fee-free ECEC, 60% of households with children in ECEC said one parent would have to reduce their paid work opportunities if fees returned – and more than two-thirds of these families said it was a woman parent who would stop paid work or cut hours.⁶⁸ Women's exodus from paid work is borne out in ABS data showing that from February to August, 42,000 women with dependent children left the workforce – more than double the 19,000 men with children who left the workforce.⁶⁹

Low Pay

The undervaluation of work in industries dominated by women workers has also contributed to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women. And lack of access to family-friendly working arrangements, affordable ECEC, affordable training, and adequate paid parental leave magnifies the impact of the gender pay gap. Multiple factors influence the choices of working families regarding paid work and unpaid care work, but how much each parent can earn is the most significant. While women's skills and qualifications

63 Melanie Sanders, et al., "The Power of Flexibility: A Key Enabler to Boost Gender Parity and Employee Engagement," Bain and Company, 2016, <https://www.bain.com/insights/the-power-of-flexibility>.

64 Workplace Gender Equality Agency, "Workplace Flexibility," <https://www.wgea.gov.au/terms/workplace-flexibility>.

65 Centre for Future Work calculations from ABS Catalogues 6202.0, 6291.0.55.001 & 5206.0.

66 Dependent children includes children under 15, and dependent children who are students. Author's calculations from ABS Cat. No. 6291.0.55.001 - FM1 - Labour force status by Relationship in household, Sex, State and Territory, January 1991 onwards.

67 ABS Catalogue no. 6239.0.

68 The Parenthood. (2020). "60 per cent of Australian families will have a parent forced to reduce work when childcare fees return & 68 per cent will be women, survey of 2,200 Australian families reveals." Media Release. 1 June.

69 Author's calculations from ABS Cat. No. 6291.0.55.001, FM1.



are now broadly equivalent to men's (in fact, young women now have superior educational qualifications to young men), they still earn far less. This gender pay gap exists due to entrenched labour market discrimination which undervalues women's paid work, and ongoing barriers to participation that mean women cannot get enough hours. On average, employed women earn almost one-third (30%) less per week than employed men.⁷⁰ This enormous wage gap reflects the combined impact of fewer hours of work, lower hourly earnings, and less income from bonuses and overtime.⁷¹



Deep-seated structures of gender inequity have thus shaped the way in which the current health and economic crisis has disproportionately impacted women. Women were over-represented in insecure, lower-paid jobs before COVID-19 hit, and this resulted in women's higher job losses during the initial shutdowns. The pandemic has increased caring demands and restricted ECEC access for financially stressed households. Despite glacial progress toward an equal sharing of unpaid work in the home, the resulting caring labour crisis has fallen disproportionately on women's shoulders, reinforcing traditional gender roles. Women are cutting back paid work, and the 'double burden' is reaching new heights. Without urgent measures to support women's work – both in workplaces and in the home – the COVID-19 pandemic will permanently damage our prospects of achieving gender equity.

III. Policy Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting recession have had terribly unequal impacts on Australian society. Some Australians have experienced little economic impact or job loss (especially professionals who kept their jobs, and are able to work from home); some have even profited from the pandemic (as evidenced by strong revenues and share prices for many companies). The harshest effects, on the other hand, have been concentrated on those who could least afford the resulting losses of work, income and security: including women, young people, older workers, workers in casual and insecure jobs, and migrant workers. Rebuilding Australia's economy, and repairing the damage of this catastrophic series of events, will require a pro-active and focused policy response to help the most disadvantaged segments of the labour force first.

This section of the report proposes a set of urgent crisis measures required to address the deepening crisis for women, including immediate easing of risks to women in poverty, and workplace protections from COVID-19 contagion. But the crisis has also shown that the pre-pandemic 'normal' was neither acceptable nor sustainable. So, we need a more ambitious policy agenda to support an inclusive reconstruction that enhances gender equity. Finally, we also need to elevate gender equity into the core of economic policymaking and governance on a permanent basis, to ensure that the gender inequity that contributed so much to women's disproportionate suffering during the COVID-19 crisis is recognised and addressed. In short, we must work consciously, collaboratively and ambitiously to build a new normal – not just a 'snap back' to pre-COVID conditions.

I. Immediate Crisis Responses

Above-poverty income supports

The government should reverse harsh and unnecessary cuts to the Coronavirus Supplement and restore the payment to its original rate to protect vulnerable women at risk of homelessness and poverty – including single parents, elderly women who live alone, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. Access to this vital

70 Pennington, A. & Stanford, J. (2020). Gender Inequality in Australia's Labour Market: A Factbook. Centre for Future Work: Sydney.

71 The commonly cited gender pay gap of 14% only refers to the difference in ordinary time earnings between male and female full-time workers, and thus excludes the differential effects of access to full-time jobs and bonus/overtime income.



income support should be expanded to the millions currently excluded from eligibility: including people on carer and Disability Support Pension payments, and migrant workers locked within our borders without the financial or logistical means to leave Australia.

All the reasons for the initial increase in income supports during the pandemic remain, including battered incomes and high unemployment. JobSeeker and the supplement payment are the only income protection available for millions of unemployed Australians displaced by the crisis and denied access to emergency measures like JobKeeper. Australia must maintain these elevated income support payments as part of our public health response.

Mutual obligations and payment sanctions should be suspended. Mandatory training, particularly when it is not accredited training, does not enhance people's capacity to find work, and punitive benefit cuts during a labour market crisis only increase destitution, survival crime and ill health.⁷² In the long run, the government should introduce an inclusive income protection system that covers everyone who needs it and permanently increase benefits to above-poverty levels.

Expand and restore JobKeeper coverage

The decisions to exclude short-term casual and migrant workers from JobKeeper, and cut payments for part-time workers, have had disproportionate impacts on the jobs, incomes and livelihoods of women workers. Extending JobKeeper to casual and migrant workers should first support the reconnection of those workers employed at March 1 (regardless of employment tenure) when the policy was announced. The government's planned introduction of a second lower-tier payment for almost 200,000 part-time workers in September should be abandoned, due in part to the concentrated impacts it will have on incomes of women workers. Australia's JobKeeper program has focused on making it feasible for employers to retain existing employees. But with many casual and migrant workers laid off now for several months due to ineligibility, and many more in need of work, the JobKeeper program must also take on a wider wage subsidy function assisting employers to hire new people (of all ages) as the economy recovers.

Paid pandemic leave

Protecting the health of workers and the public from the spread of COVID-19 in workplaces requires urgent paid pandemic leave entitlements for all workers. Currently, 1 in 3 employed workers in Australia have no access to paid sick leave. Meanwhile, women workers in insecure jobs are most exposed to the virus because they work in industries like healthcare, disability services, social services and retail industries that continue to provide essential services to the community – including people without financial support to self-isolate. This endangers the health and financial stability of women workers and their families and undermines public health efforts to contain COVID-19 spread.

A paid pandemic leave entitlement should be added into the National Employment Standards (NES). A paid pandemic leave scheme should provide for reimbursement to businesses from government, similar to the JobKeeper and Paid Parental Leave programs. A publicly-funded paid pandemic leave scheme is an urgent public health measure to minimise the risk of further waves of dangerous and costly infection.

Reforms to address violence and harassment

COVID-19 has increased the risks of violence and harassment for women at work. Even before the pandemic, Australia's regulatory framework was failing to keep workers safe from violence and harassment. It places the burden on individuals to complain at their own cost and risk, while at the same time there is no meaningful requirement on employers to implement effective, proactive measures to address violence and harassment, and

⁷² University of York, "Welfare conditionality is ineffective, authors of major study say," 2018, https://www.york.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/2018/research/welfare-conditionality-is-ineffective/#.X2E-7QEs_0I.twitter.



no effective enforcement or compliance mechanism. The complaints process under discrimination laws is costly, time-consuming and risky, and many individuals do not complain at all for fear of victimisation or other reasons.

Violence and harassment is not adequately addressed by employers or regulators as a workplace health and safety issue. Urgent reforms are needed to address these shortcomings and keep women safe at work, including:

- Implementation of the recommendations of the Respect@Work Report, including in particular:
 - » A new capacity for the Fair Work Commission to deal with workplace sexual harassment and discrimination
 - » A Model WHS Regulation which addresses psychosocial hazards at work, including risks of violence and harassment
 - » A commitment to ratify the ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment 2019 (C.190).
 - » The *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (SDA) should be strengthened, including by empowering and resourcing the Sex Discrimination Commissioner to conduct own motion inquiries into particular sectors, industries or workplaces.
- Implementation of the recommendations of the Boland Review,⁷³ including a new WHS Regulation addressing all psychosocial risks, including violence and harassment.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has also increased the risks and severity of family and domestic violence in Australia. Financial and domestic pressures on households have exploded, while women have experienced reduced income and job security and greater isolation. A minimum of 10 days paid domestic violence leave for all workers should be introduced into the National Employment Standards as a matter of urgency. Paid leave would assist workers to escape and recover from family and domestic violence without causing them financial hardship. It will protect women's jobs, economic security, and health and safety.

II. A Gender-Equal Reconstruction Plan

The preceding urgent crisis measures will provide a critical floor of support for women facing the worst economic consequences of the pandemic right now. But they will not repair the damage already done to women's jobs and incomes or prevent a post-COVID depression that shuts women out of paid work for years on end. The government must therefore prepare and implement an ambitious reconstruction plan for the Australian economy; merely waiting for the economy to 'snap back' once health restrictions are ultimately lifted (and we don't know when that will be), and relying on the private sector to lead the way, is a recipe for sustained depression. Instead, government must play a leading role in rebuilding employment, incomes and confidence for years to come.

Strengthening women's economic security must be a core component of a public-led post-COVID reconstruction plan. Economic policies must prioritise a gender-inclusive economic recovery that expands women's opportunities for good jobs, sufficient incomes, a dignified retirement and quality services. Public services are critical to communities across regional and remote Australia in particular: they provide essential services and secure and fair jobs that remote and regional communities rely on for their survival.⁷⁴

There is a fitting historical analogy for the national task of rebuilding after the pandemic. In the late 1940s, after the conclusion of the Second World War, Australia launched a comprehensive, national, planned reconstruction effort.⁷⁵

73 Marie Boland, Review of the model Work Health and Safety laws: Final report, December 2018

74 See for example Dan Nahum, Public Service in Challenging Times: The Economic and Social Value of Public Sector Work in Queensland, Centre for Future Work, October 2020 at pp. 23-26.

75 See Pennington, A., and Stanford, J. (2020). "Rebuilding After Covid-19 Will Need a Sustained National Reconstruction Plan," Journal of Australian Political Economy 85, pp. 164-174.



Governments made large investments in building manufacturing capacity and critical infrastructure, expanding public education and vocational training, and creating thousands of jobs for the unemployed. Australia faces a similar need for a COVID-era reconstruction agenda.⁷⁶

But the post-Depression reconstruction effort in the 1940s worked with fundamentally different parameters: paid workers were mostly male, and blue-collar industries were the norm. Today women make up almost half of the paid workforce, and modern services industries (including public services like healthcare, education and social services) now employ the majority of Australians. The devastating impact of recent bushfires, floods and the ongoing drought reinforces that we must also plan for an economic recovery that addresses current and future environmental changes. But governments and policymakers have not caught up with this labour market reality. Economic stimulus policies are still largely framed with old-fashioned ideas about 'shovel-ready' construction and physical infrastructure projects. Instead of blowing the dust off old policy solutions to economic crisis, we need new ones. A comprehensive and effective response to COVID-19 crisis means doing the hard work to ensure both men and women can fully participate in recovery, and ensure that no-one is left behind.

Without swift and targeted action to rebuild women's jobs, skills and incomes, the COVID-19 downturn will permanently cut women's workforce participation, deepen their economic insecurity, and drain hundreds of billions from the Australian economy in lost productivity and growth. An ambitious and long-term public-led investment and reconstruction program could generate plentiful good jobs for both women and men, and help all of Australia to build back better. But this work and planning must start now. Some key priorities for an economic reconstruction for Australian women are outlined below.

Building social infrastructure

A gender-inclusive reconstruction agenda should invest heavily in repairing and expanding our social infrastructure. Healthcare, education and social services need more investment: including aged care, education, ECEC, disability services, and vocational training. The collapse in business investment and high levels of unemployment, together with long-term trends like the ageing population and the impact of climate change have only increased demand for these human-centred services, particularly in regional and remote areas. A macroeconomic strategy focused on building social infrastructure could contribute enormously to ongoing jobs, growth and improved standards of living.⁷⁷

The healthcare, education and social services sectors are relatively labour-intensive, and they are more likely to hire women. This means more 'bang for buck' when it comes to government stimulus spending. If the \$16.9 billion in revenue forgone from bringing forward the gender-unequal Stage 2 income tax cuts to 2021-22 was instead invested into jobs-rich public services like healthcare, education and the arts, it would create up to 12 times more jobs.⁷⁸ The jobs-generating benefits of social infrastructure investment for women are two-fold: not only does it create jobs for women directly employed in those services, but it also frees women up to participate more fully in the workforce by making caring services more widely available.

Our social infrastructure should be embraced as a major engine of growth in post-COVID recovery in its own right. It will maximise the potential number of people working and earning and will increase productivity across the economy. Workers receive higher wages (with bargaining rights), employers gain higher revenues, and governments can increase tax revenues.

These revenues can then be invested back into further improving public services and infrastructure, expanding jobs and lifting standards of living.

76 Australian Unions have developed a National Economic Reconstruction Plan, with 5 concrete ideas to tackle the issues of job insecurity, inequality, and record-low wage growth. The full plan is available at <https://action.australianunions.org.au/nerp>

77 Hill, E. (2020). "Reducing gender inequality and boosting the economy: Fiscal policy after COVID-19." The Power to Persuade, 15 September, <http://www.powertopersuade.org.au/blog/reducing-gender-inequality-and-boosting-the-economy-fiscal-policy-after-covid-19/15/9/2020>.

78 The Australia Institute. (2020). "Opportunity Cost: At Least 160,000 Jobs Lost by Backing Tax Cuts Over Investment". Media Release, 6 October.



Higher quality, expanded healthcare, education, and social and community services will require more stable delivery models. Decades of privatisation and marketisation of our essential public services (including aged care, ECEC, employment services, and now disability services) have failed the community and undermined the quality of jobs for their highly feminised workforces.

Early childhood education and care

Reconstructing the economy after COVID-19 must finally fix the long-standing barrier to women's full workforce participation posed by Australia's sky-high early childhood education and care (ECEC) costs. A full-fledged plan for a quality, permanently free, publicly-funded, not-for-profit ECEC system should be developed and implemented. A new national Early Childhood Education and Care Strategy should entail the following components:⁷⁹

- The design and implementation of a free universal public ECEC system. The new system should include permanent ongoing funding for at least 15 hours of preschool education per week for all 3- and 4-year-old children. This would create about 30,000 new jobs for ECEC teachers and support educators.
- Construct new high-quality publicly-funded not-for-profit ECEC facilities. An endowment of \$2.5 billion allocated over three years would create 6,500 jobs in construction and make a significant contribution to alleviating capacity constraints in ECEC as women return to paid work after the pandemic.
- Extend the current 25% wage subsidy to support the ongoing employment of staff, with the level of support increased to 30-35% of fee revenue, and requiring employers who receive this funding to implement a wages guarantee that protects the pre-COVID income of all educators.
- Address gendered pay discrimination in ECEC with increased funding targeted at delivering wages at a level consistent with the skills and value of the work performed.

The economic and social benefits of establishing a free, accessible and expanded ECEC system are substantial. A new ECEC system would support the creation of an estimated 50,000 new direct jobs, and help secure the jobs of the over 160,000 Australians – mostly women – who already work in the sector. Greater access to ECEC would also facilitate the faster return to work for hundreds of thousands of working parents (especially women), boost women's workforce participation and hence economic growth long-term, and expand access to high-quality early learning to children. By getting more parents into well-paid work, this strategy will increase tax revenues and allow the ECEC system to literally 'pay for itself'. Public ECEC provision should be viewed as foundational to the future Australian economy.

Direct public sector employment

Shattered business confidence and weak consumer spending after the pandemic will result in long-term underutilisation of labour in the private sector. Unemployed women, including the thousands of young women without access to decent, full-time work opportunities, cannot wait for a 'business-led recovery' that will not come. Commonwealth and state governments must commit to the immediate expansion of direct public sector jobs for women in public services. This includes the creation of tens of thousands of entry-level and graduate training roles for young women facing long-term barriers to accessing quality full-time jobs, in addition to a significant expansion of the overall public sector workforce.

The public sector is a highly effective jobs-generator for women: 18% of employed women work in the public sector and 61% of all public sector workers are women. Moreover, the public sector is doubly important as a source of relatively high-quality jobs for women: women hold 54% of all full-time roles in the public sector,

79 As outlined in ACTU (2020), Australia's Economic Reconstruction after COVID-19: A National Jobs Plan, and Five Ways to Get Started, pp. 9-13.



compared to only 35% of full-time roles in the private sector.⁸⁰ This is due to factors including better access to family-friendly working arrangements, better parental leave entitlements,⁸¹ long-term career nurturing, and greater union presence.

Better jobs in government-funded services

Government-funded organisations delivering services like ECEC, disability care, and community and social services provide work for hundreds of thousands of Australians, the majority of them women. The experiences of women in these sectors both during the peaks of COVID-19 and throughout the partial recovery are indicative of the nature of insecure work, particularly in the NGO and not-for-profit sector. Systemic underfunding and the lack of wage regulation in funded services creates constant pressures to cut costs, cut jobs and suppress wages. The competitive tendering process for small to medium providers creates an illusion that the cost to the public sector for outsourcing service delivery is falling. However, this reduction in external costs only results in direct and deliberate reductions in wages and conditions for the employees (or contractors) of the service provider who made the lowest bid application and secured a contract.⁸² Competitive outsourcing does not truly reduce costs; rather, it shifts costs to workers and their families in the form of reduced wages and conditions.

Government-endorsed low-wage business models in health care and social services are not only a major contributor to the gender pay gap⁸³ but pose a serious risk to worker and public health. The public health implications of low wages and poor conditions in government-funded services during the COVID-19 crisis have been nothing short of catastrophic. The aged care and residential disability care sectors in Australia are examples of a much larger issue: contracting-out has major flow-on consequences for service delivery, quality of services, insecure work, poorly trained labour and increased work health and safety risks. There are also examples of women continuing to work throughout periods of illness due to job insecurity and poor access to paid leave, causing increased rates of COVID-19 infection.⁸⁴

The issues of conditionality of external contracts should be addressed through a comprehensive public sector procurement framework which compels external contractors to meet the wages and conditions of the public sector (including all training, work health and safety, and workplace equity requirements) for the duration of the contract, with extensive public sector oversight. If these requirements are not met in the initial stages of the tendering process, or in subsequent stages of contract maintenance, a debarment regime which terminates existing contracts and precludes suppliers from winning contracts in future should take effect. The ACT and Western Australian governments have made steps towards a more effective and sustainable procurement strategy; however, further improvements are required to meet the needs of women who are disproportionately affected by poor procurement practices. Governments must attach stronger work-related conditions to the funding they award to businesses and organisations (including in the not-for-profit sector) to provide services to the Australian community.

80 ABS Catalogue no. 6291.0.55.003, Labour Force, Australia, Detailed, Quarterly, February 2020. Table 26b.

81 Workplace Gender Equality Agency. (2020). Gender equitable parental leave. Australian Government. Available at <https://www.wgea.gov.au/topics/gender-equality-and-men/gender-equitable-parental-leave>

82 B. Cook, V. Quirk and W. Mitchell (2012), 'The Impact on Community Services of Staff and Service Reductions, Privatisation, and Outsourcing of Public Services in Australian States', Centre of Full Employment and Equity, University of Newcastle, pp.143-144.

83 Macdonald, F. and Pegg, M. (2020). "Contracting Out Community Services, Marketisation & Wages", in A. Stewart, J. Stanford & T. Hardy (eds.), *The Wages Crisis in Australia*, Adelaide University Press: Adelaide, pp. 129-142.

84 H. Dickinson and A. Kavanagh, "Let's heed the warnings from aged care," *The Conversation*, 20 August, 2020.



Governments can strengthen the quality of women's jobs and the services they deliver to the community through the following measures:

- Require all organisations delivering government services to meet minimum work standards which deliver fair, safe, and secure direct employment for workers. Organisations which do not meet these minimum work standards should not be permitted to continue to receive funding.⁸⁵
- Use public spending to end insecure work, underpayments, temporary and irregular hours, unpaid internships, and sham contracting arrangements.
- Remove unfair limits on multi-employer bargaining from our workplace laws. These limitations lock too many workers out of the benefits of collective bargaining, many of whom are women in lower paid funded-services sectors. Workers should have the capacity to bargain together as a sector or industry, with funding bodies required to come to the table to negotiate.

Getting the spending on healthcare and social services right will save governments money in the long term. A higher-skilled workforce will improve the quality and safety of services, and hundreds of thousands of better-paid workers will generate more spending in the community to fuel more jobs. All this additional economic activity will increase government taxation revenues, further supporting improvements in essential services through post-COVID recovery.

High-quality post-secondary skills

High-quality and affordable education and training will be critical to helping women adjust to changes in employment patterns and find new careers after the pandemic. Young people entering this depressed labour market will be desperate to find concrete pathways into decent work. But decades of failed marketisation experiments and systemic underfunding have left Australia's whole post-secondary education system in terrible shape to face the massive reconstruction challenge ahead. It's time to reinvent and recapitalise an integrated post-secondary education system (including a revitalised public TAFE system) that can improve women's educational opportunities and more effectively respond to the COVID-accelerated crisis in education-jobs pathways. A new Training for Reconstruction program should include several components:⁸⁶

- A new nation-wide free TAFE program in priority areas for any students who wish to enrol. 150,000 free TAFE spots per year would cost \$1 billion per year and would support an estimated 10,000 ongoing jobs (mostly women's) in the TAFE system.
- A new national framework to lift women's work participation across all sectors of the economy by addressing gender inequity through the vocational education and training system. Long-term reform of education and skills should address barriers to women's participation in traineeships and apprenticeships, including access to portable training entitlements, set retention and recruitment targets for women in male-dominated courses (and for men in female-dominated courses), and support stronger pathways to good jobs.⁸⁷
- Commonwealth and state governments must commit to urgent repair of the underfunded VET sector. Funding to the VET sector should proportionately match that provided for schools and universities.
- Implementing a national skills reconstruction program with gender equitable training practices will depend on experienced, reliable, quality, national vocational training infrastructure. Only TAFE fulfils this remit.

85 Stanford, J. (2018). Raising the Bar: How Government Can Use its Economic Leverage to Lift Labour Standards Throughout the Economy. Centre for Future Work: Sydney.

86 Training for Reconstruction is one of 5 key priorities outlined in Australian Unions' National Reconstruction Plan. The present report includes additional measures to tackle gendered inequality in the vocational education system.

87 Gender Equity Victoria, WAVE, GET Project, Productivity Commission Submission, 2020.



- A minimum of 70% of all government vocational education funding should be channelled through the TAFE system.⁸⁸
- The catastrophic decline in apprenticeships since 2012 requires urgent government action to support the uptake of apprentices and trainees in employment. The 2020 budget included some temporary measures in this direction, but support for apprentices should be expanded and made permanent. The Commonwealth government should introduce a 50% wage subsidy to employers of apprentices and trainees. 100,000 subsidised apprenticeships would cost about \$2.5 billion per year. Gender targets could be integrated into the wage subsidy program to support women's apprenticeships and accredited training opportunities.

Reforming aged care

One of the most horrifying dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic was the focused risk of contagion and premature death in Australia's aged care facilities. COVID-19 deaths in aged care facilities account for about three-quarters of all fatalities from the disease in Australia. The vast majority of workers in the sector are women, often in insecure, underpaid and dangerous working conditions. The neglect of the workforce and the underfunded and poorly-regulated state of aged care homes, especially privately-owned and operated facilities, made our seniors critically vulnerable to the pandemic. The Royal Commission on Aged Care was already documenting the failings of Australia's aged care homes before the pandemic struck. Now, in light of COVID-19, those failings must be addressed and quickly.

Reforms that will be necessary to address the failure of private aged care include:

- Mandated minimum staffing levels, with a required mix of skills and qualifications, in every residential facility, over every shift.
- Transparency and accountability in all government funding, including subsidies to privately operated facilities.
- Mandated training requirements (including infection control and ongoing professional development) that are accessible to all staff, and paid by employers.
- Increased government funding, linked to the provision of care and the direct employment of permanent staff with decent pay and enough hours to live on.

Repairing Australia's aged care system will have many social and economic benefits for the whole community, and for women in particular. Most workers in the aged care system are women, so they will benefit from better, safer jobs. And ensuring that elderly Australians are decently cared for will reduce the burden of caring labour on family members, which disproportionately falls on women.

Stable, quality public housing

Decades of underinvestment in public and affordable housing threatens to unleash a housing and homelessness crisis as the pandemic and resulting recession continue. Government investment in more housing for low-income households is critical to strengthening women's social safety net. Australia's reliance on private housing markets makes housing less affordable and less secure for a growing number of people – particularly young people, and older single women who are at greatest risk of homelessness. Housing prices have become so high that dual incomes are a necessity for accessing credit, with the requirements of mortgage contracts undermining women's economic independence (including their ability to leave family and domestic violence situations) over their entire lifetimes. The number of low-income private renters (those in the lowest 40% of incomes) has doubled in number over the past two decades to 2.7 million people.

⁸⁸ TAFE institutes are best positioned to rebuild the VET skills pipeline and support mass labour market transitions through the post-COVID recovery. But additional and guaranteed funding will be critical to overcoming decades of underfunding & policy neglect. The significant economic and social benefits of the TAFE system and what's needed to rebuild a quality public TAFE system are outlined in Pennington, A. (2020). An Investment in Productivity and Inclusion: The Economic and Social Benefits of the TAFE System. Centre for Future Work: Sydney.



Most spend more than 30% of their incomes on rent, a benchmark considered to constitute living in 'rental stress'.⁸⁹

Public housing construction was a centrepiece of Australia's post-WW2 reconstruction. We need a new COVID-era program of sustained public housing construction and provision. This could enhance the housing security of millions, and generate thousands of jobs in construction, fit-out and maintenance.

The crisis of the private housing market is more obvious and unequal than ever before. Australia's generous tax concessions for investor housing are increasing inequality, driving up the price of housing, and contributing to some of the highest private household debt levels in the world. The federal government should end unfair tax breaks for housing investors and divert the billions saved into a public housing construction program.

Closing the gender pay gap

Rebuilding women's economic security from the COVID-19 crisis demands a fundamental change in how the work done by women is recognised, valued, and funded. Our current workplace rules entrench the gender pay gap and fail to adequately value the essential work women do – both paid and unpaid. Restrictions on the rights of women to organise, bargain, and take industrial action to pursue their economic and social interests must be eliminated to bring us into line with other advanced democratic nations. Stronger and fairer bargaining laws will enable workers to close the gender pay gap and act collectively to create safe, healthy, fair and secure work environments. It is essential that workers can bargain at different levels, including for agreements across a sector or industry. Australian women need stronger pathways to address the historical undervaluation of the work they do.

Reforms are needed to ensure all workplace policy levers are aligned in a consistent, systematic effort to boost women's wages, including:

- Reducing insecure work, including a clear and fair definition of casual worker and stronger rights for workers to convert to permanent employment.
- Unfair limits on multi-employer bargaining should be removed from our workplace laws. These limitations lock too many workers out of the benefits of bargaining, many of whom are women in lower paid publicly-funded sectors. Workers should have the capacity to bargain together as a sector or industry, with funding bodies required to come to the table to negotiate.
- Review of terms and conditions in modern awards, in light of historical gender-based undervaluation of work in female-dominated industries.
- Additional government funding to increase actual rates of pay in underpaid, feminised sectors such as nursing, ECEC and aged care, and ensure that NDIS funding protects the wages and job security of workers in the sector.
- A set of clear Pay Equity Principles which expressly confirm that no 'male comparator' is required to prove that work is undervalued on gender grounds.
- Gender equity should be included as an object of industrial legislation, and the FWC should be legislatively required to promote gender equity in performing all its functions and exercising all its powers. The FWC should establish a Gender Equity Panel, comprised of Commissioners with the skills and experience to ensure gender equity is actively pursued in all matters before the FWC.
- Stronger workplace rights for parents and carers, discussed in the section below.



Workplace supports for caring responsibilities

Strong, consistent and enforceable rights for women with caring responsibilities will be needed to support women in the post-COVID recovery. Australia's workplace policies have long lagged behind the care demands of modern working families. Paid parental leave of only 18 weeks is available for the primary carer of a child, with a paltry 2 weeks available for non-primary carers and partners, all paid only at the minimum wage. The result of inadequate policies to support men to take up care responsibilities is that only 25–30% of male parents in Australia access paid parental leave.⁹⁰ Australia needs a more equitable parental leave scheme.

A minimum of 26 weeks paid parental leave that is easily accessible to both parents based on a shareable entitlement should be inserted into the National Employment Standards, with superannuation payable.

Australia ranks 40th of 41 comparable EU and OCED countries on paid parental leave provided to mothers – providing the full-time equivalent of only 8 weeks paid leave. Australia ranks 27th on the amount of parental leave provided to fathers, providing only the full-time equivalent of 0.8 weeks paid leave.⁹¹

The distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' carers in paid parental leave legislation has helped to entrench the cultural norms in Australia that women undertake unpaid caring roles while men continue uninterrupted in paid work. It should be removed. Parental leave entitlements should be fully shareable by both partners as the family sees fit, regardless of gender or gender identification, and should include kinship care arrangements.

Supporting families to balance paid work with shared time to care would lessen the gender pay gap in retirement savings for women, be more inclusive of LGBTQI and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, and give fathers the opportunity to spend more time with their children.

Access to flexible working arrangements

Under the *Fair Work Act 2009*, the only rights which workers do not have the right to appeal are an unreasonable refusal of a request for flexible working arrangements, and an unreasonable refusal of a request for an extension to unpaid parental leave.⁹² These exclusions discriminate against women as they are most likely to use these rights, and are out of step with community standards of equity and fairness. In 2018, the Fair Work Commission found that:

- Workplace culture and norms play an important role in the treatment of requests for flexible working arrangements, and individual supervisor attitudes can be powerful barriers to (or enablers of) flexibility.
- A 'significant proportion' of employees (including many men) need family-friendly working arrangements but do not request a change, for reasons including that their work environment is openly hostile to flexibility, suggesting that there is a 'significant unmet employee need' for flexible working arrangements.
- A lack of access to working arrangements that meet employees' needs is associated with substantially higher work-life interference.⁹³

The current regulatory framework presents an unreasonable barrier to access to family-friendly working arrangements for too many employees. The Fair Work Act should be amended to allow workers to appeal an unreasonable refusal under s 65 or s 84 to the Fair Work Commission. Workers should have the right to revert back to their previous working arrangements once their caring responsibilities reduce.

90 Workplace Gender Equality Agency. (2020). Gender equitable parental leave. Australian Government. Available at <https://www.wgea.gov.au/topics/gender-equality-and-men/gender-equitable-parental-leave>

91 See Yekaterina Chzhen, et al., Are the world's richest countries family friendly?, UNICEF, p. 6 and p. 9, https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/Family-Friendly-Policies-Research_UNICEF_%202019.pdf.

92 See ss. 76(4) and 65(5) and ss 44(2), 146, 186(6), 739(2) and 740(2) of the FW Act.

93 [2018] FWCFB 5753 at [36]



Fair superannuation

Women retire, on average, with about 47% of the superannuation of men, despite their higher need for retirement savings (since they live longer on average than men).⁹⁴ Women receive only one-third of the value of government tax concessions for superannuation.⁹⁵ Superannuation can be reformed so it does not reproduce the same structural inequities women already face in paid work and in the home. Factors contributing to women's unduly low superannuation benefits include fewer paid hours of work, lower wages and more career interruptions (including an average of five years absence from the paid workforce to undertake caring duties).

Australian women need targeted measures to boost their superannuation savings and offset the negative effects of lower wages, lower accrued entitlements and career interruptions. The following specific legislative, regulatory, and employer-focused changes are required to ensure the superannuation system better reflects women's full contributions:

- Abolish the \$450 per month minimum threshold for superannuation guarantee eligibility to address clear disadvantages for women in low paid, insecure and temporary work. An estimated 220,000 women miss out on \$125 million in superannuation contributions because they do not meet the current earnings threshold.⁹⁶
- Close the 'motherhood gap' in retirement income by making superannuation payable for all paid and unpaid care-related absences, including parental and carers leave.
- Proceed with planned legislated increases to the superannuation guarantee of 12% immediately, and legislate a pathway to a rate of 15%, with an expedited increase to 15% for women to help address the gender retirement gap.
- End early access to superannuation and provide government superannuation balance top-ups for individuals who accessed the early release scheme for emergency supports under circumstances of experiencing domestic violence (since November 2019) and COVID-19.
- Replicate superannuation entitlements in the National Employment Standards. This would enshrine superannuation as a fundamental right of employment upon commencement and increase avenues for women to recoup unpaid superannuation.

III. Elevating Gender in all Economic Policy Making

Australia is failing to ensure that women's voices are heard in political and policymaking processes.⁹⁷ Women must be equally represented in policy development at the highest levels to ensure gender-equal policy outcomes. Achieving an effective gender-inclusive economic recovery requires changes to traditional economic policy governance. Gender equity must be integrated into core economic policymaking on an ongoing basis. Public sector agencies need more capacity to assess the impacts of policies by gender. New tripartite mechanisms to engage government, business and unions in a joint effort to systematically address gender inequity should also be integrated into the policymaking process. The key components of a new gender-lens framework for achieving more gender-responsive economic policymaking, and hence building a more equal and inclusive economic recovery, include:

Tripartite body to plan gender-equal recovery

A new expert tripartite body should be urgently established with government, unions, and industry representatives to guide, oversee and advise on a gender-equal recovery effort. It is clear that any effective post-

94 Hetherington, H. and Smith, W. (2017). Not So Super, for Women: Superannuation and Women's Retirement Outcomes. Per Capita and the Australian Services Union.

95 Women in Super. (2020). The Facts About Women and Super, <https://www.womeninsuper.com.au/content/the-facts-about-women-and-super/gjumzs>

96 Ibid.

97 The World Economic Forum's 2020 Global Gender Index now only ranks Australia 44th out of 153 countries, a reduction of five places in two years.



COVID reconstruction plan will require women's participation and leadership in its planning and implementation. Working women and their unions know what capacity, skills and training, and resources are needed to meet new demands, and they know how to improve the quality of their jobs and services to the community.

This new tripartite body on gender-inclusive recovery could undertake other assessments on issues like job quality, environmental impacts, and local industry effects. The body should have powers to solicit expert advice, undertake research and inquiry, publicly report, and make recommendations for gender-equal job creation. Governments and public agencies should be required to respond to these recommendations.

Gender-responsive budgeting

Gender-responsive budgeting should be a permanent feature of the annual budget process.⁹⁸ The differential impacts of government spending and taxation decisions on men's and women's outcomes should be assessed across all policy areas – including taxation, welfare, education, healthcare, housing and other relevant areas. The women's budget statement should be immediately reintroduced, and Gender Equity principles must be integrated permanently throughout all Commonwealth planning and reporting. Implementing a gender lens in budgeting would guide policymakers in placing more emphasis on rebuilding women's opportunities. It would also ensure that any unintended negative gendered impacts of new policies are identified early and improved so that policies promote economic and social equity. Other factors, such as the distributional impacts of government spending programs, impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and environmental implications of policy could also be assessed within this framework.

Data on women's economic and social condition

Detailed and comprehensive data on issues critical to women will be essential for guiding appropriate policy responses to the gendered impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. Expanding public data and information on key aspects of women's lives can inform gender-responsive budgeting and enrich understanding of women's issues across Australian communities more broadly. Some key requirements of a revitalised public data program for women include:

- Expand investment in gender-based data and analysis capacity at the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).
- Bolster all employment, household labour, and workplace-level wages and working conditions surveys to provide more information on the gender dimensions of economic and social conditions.
- Provide additional funding to the ABS to meet these increased public data demands.

98 Gender-responsive budgeting is already official practice in other OECD countries including Finland, Netherlands, Mexico, Norway, Spain, Sweden. See Downes, R., von Trapp, L. and Nicol, S. (2017). "Gender budgeting in OECD countries," OECD Journal on Budgeting, 2016(3).



Conclusion

Women have suffered disproportionate economic and social consequences from the slowing Australian economy, twelve months of natural disasters, the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting recession. Women face greater risks of economic insecurity in both the short and long term due to greater job losses, higher levels of insecure employment, greater threats to incomes and career status, and increased risks to health and safety – whether they are front-line or essential workers, or women confronting violence in the home.

Long-standing gender inequities that existed prior to COVID-19 have been exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic. Prior to COVID-19, women were over-represented in insecure, lower-paid jobs. This resulted in disproportionate job losses and underemployment during the initial shutdowns. But the pandemic also brought an explosion in demands for unpaid household and caring labour, which also fell disproportionately on women's shoulders. This has resulted in women cutting back paid work, and a severe intensification of the 'double burden' for women who managed to keep their paid jobs.

Instead of providing countervailing supports for Australian women, the federal government has implemented a range of policy responses to the COVID-19 pandemic that have ignored the critical needs of women, and disproportionately undermined their ability to survive and recoup from this expanding social, economic and health catastrophe.

Without targeted, immediate and long-term policy remedies (during the pandemic, and in the recovery that will last for several years), gender inequities will widen further – and structurally embed lifetime disadvantage for future generations of women. Failure to address women's economic hardship exacerbated by and arising from the COVID-19 crisis will compromise our collective long-term economic growth and prosperity: reducing productivity, growth, and our progress toward a more inclusive, equal society.

Urgent income and workplace entitlements, including paid pandemic and family and domestic violence leave, will provide a critical floor of support for women against some of the worst economic consequences right now and into the future. But we must do more to repair the damage already done to women's jobs and incomes and prevent a post-COVID depression that shuts women out of paid work for years-on-end.

Investing in getting Australians back to work, reconstructing the economy and our communities will need 'all hands on deck'. But that economic and social reconstruction agenda must respond to the unique severity of this crisis for women. Australian women need a sustained public investment and policy effort to undo the damage of the crisis, and ensure women can play an equal role in an inclusive economic and social recovery: with access to good jobs, skills and training, and fair wages.

The plan for a gender-equal recovery outlined in this report builds on the ACTU's existing 5-point plan for National Reconstruction. Policy recommendations outlined in this report provide a roadmap for achieving a gender-equal and inclusive recovery. They would create hundreds of thousands of much needed jobs, provide essential services, and rebuild the capacity of women to engage in secure paid work, save and spend. The severity of this health and economic crisis is unprecedented. The plan set out in this paper will not only help women but everyone in our communities. Now is the time for the government to intervene with ambitious, strong reforms to promote a gender-equal and inclusive recovery that leaves no-one behind.





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