

Senator the Hon. Marise Payne
Minister for Women
By email: ministerforwomen@pmc.gov.au

1 September 2020

Dear Minister

Commonwealth Women's Ministerial

The Australian Council of Trade Unions is a member of the Commonwealth Trade Union Group (CTUG), which represents over 70 million workers in over 40 Commonwealth countries, including tens of millions of women workers. I wanted to take this opportunity to share with you the priorities of the CTUG ahead of the Commonwealth Women's Ministerial meeting on 3 September.

In Australia and around the Commonwealth, women have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Women's over-representation in insecure work and in the sectors hardest hit – hospitality, retail, tourism, arts – has seen women lose a higher proportion of jobs and working hours than men. By the peak of the job losses in Australia, 53% of all jobs lost were by women, despite representing less than half the workforce. Women are also concentrated in the jobs that involve exposure to the virus, such as healthcare and cleaning. More women have also moved to working from home – many while also juggling caring responsibilities. Before the crisis, the gender pay gap in Australia was on average 14%; it is likely this crisis will widen the gap and lock women out of the workforce for many years to come unless strong action is taken by governments.

Even before the pandemic, global figures concerning domestic violence were horrific. COVID-19 has further increased the risk of gendered violence, both at work and home. Frontline workers in care and service industries are facing increased risks of violence and harassment from anxious and stressed customers, patients and clients. For people experiencing domestic or family violence, attending work provides a safe-haven and a means of accessing vital support. Rates of domestic and family violence have spiked around the world during the pandemic¹, and large numbers of workers are now being required to work from home, regardless of whether it's a safe and healthy work environment for them.

This pandemic has shone a spotlight on the profound inequality in the labour market, and this crisis could entrench this inequality for many decades to come. Governments need to take strong action to ensure that we can build back better - and more equal - from this crisis. The Commonwealth Charter makes clear the importance of fairness and equality. They are values we need to put into practice through instruments from global regulation to collective bargaining. Endemic pay inequality, the absence of adequate minimum living wages, exclusion from social protection systems, undervalued and underpaid work, as well as the disproportionate share of unpaid care work done by women in the care economy, all need to be changed as we seek to recover and create a resilient economy based on a new social contract and a universal labour guarantee, especially for working women, as the best way to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061052>

The key priorities for CTUG women workers are as follows:

1. More funding for quality public services, especially health, social services, care and education, but also water and sewerage, and to ensure accessibility for all
2. Greater priority on employment in the care sector, in particular: higher wages, action to reduce insecurity, and adequate personal protective equipment
3. Health and safety to become a fundamental right at work, recognising gender and intersectional aspects
4. Commonwealth countries ratifying and implementing ILO Convention 189 on rights for domestic workers
5. A global fund for social protection ensuring unemployment pay, adequate sick pay from day one, and decent pensions, all extended to cover women workers who may have interrupted employment records and endemic low pay
6. Commonwealth countries joining the Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC), and discussing measures to implement equal pay with social partners
7. Commonwealth countries ratifying and implementing ILO Convention 190 on violence and harassment in the world of work, which has a strong focus on gender-based violence
8. A greater voice and representation for working women in decision making, and mandatory systems of due diligence to prevent discrimination and exploitation in global supply chains
9. A new, reformed multilateralism providing global coherence and solidarity and new or strengthened global rules and standards
10. Commonwealth countries need to develop their Nationally Defined Contributions under the Paris Accord and commit to the urgently needed just and equitable transition of the economy to avoid climate catastrophe.

We would appreciate you taking the priorities of CTUG women workers into account in your contributions to the Commonwealth Women's Ministerial.

Yours sincerely



Michele O'Neil
President