

# Union Action Plan

Women and Equity



**ACTU**  
CONGRESS 21



# ACTU Congress briefing: Gender Equity

## Why it matters:

Australian unions have a long and proud history of campaigning for workplaces free from sexism, racism and all forms of discrimination, violence, harassment and prejudice. Women workers - and all workers - deserve equality, equity and respect at work. Equality and equity at work benefits everyone. It's good for workers, employers, our economy, our families and our communities.

Right now though, Australia is going backwards on gender equity.

Women are overrepresented among industries and occupations that are award reliant, low paid and casualised. The gender pay gap persists, despite the fact that women led the pandemic response as frontline workers in sectors such as healthcare, community and social services and education and retail.

It was these workers who were putting their own health and safety on the line to keep essential services running.

Our legal and policy framework fails to support working parents and carers.

Gendered violence and harassment, including sexual harassment, remains widespread and prevalent. The shameful events that led to the March4Justice Rallies have enraged Australian women and united us around a set of clear and urgent demands for reform to keep women safe at work.

## Key facts:

- Over the 15-year period between 2006 and 2021, Australia has plummeted from 15th to 50th place in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report.<sup>1</sup>
- Women spend 64.4% of their average weekly working time on unpaid care work compared to 36.1% for men.<sup>2</sup>
- Addressing women's workforce participation would contribute \$70 billion per year in GDP. Free, universal early childhood education and care would pay for itself in higher tax revenues generated by women's increased participation.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report (Report, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/australian-unpaid-care-work-and-the-labour-market.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Centre for Future Work calculations from ABS Catalogues 6202.0, 6291.0.55.001 & 5206.0.

- Two in three women have been subjected to one or more forms of sexual harassment at work. Gender-based violence and inequality is widespread and sexual harassment at work is prevalent across all industries and all levels of work. It is experienced differently by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women of colour, gender diverse people, women with disabilities, younger women, older women, and low paid and insecurely employed women.<sup>4</sup>
- When full-time ordinary earnings are compared, the national gender pay gap is currently 13.4 per cent. If the reduced number of hours that women work due to caring responsibilities is included in the calculation, the gender pay gap is much higher, at over 30 per cent. Women retire with less than half the superannuation of men. Women aged over 55 are the largest growing cohort of homeless Australians.

## Australian Unions believe:

- All women have the right to equality, equity and respect at work, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women of colour, gender diverse people, women with disabilities, younger women, older women, and low paid and insecurely employed women.
- Australia's labour market is not gender equal. It is highly gender segregated and Australia is one of the most unequal countries in the world with respect to men's and women's sharing of unpaid domestic and care work. Work predominantly performed by women – including work in sectors like aged care and early childhood education - is lower-paid and less secure because of gendered assumptions and discriminatory views about the value and complexity of the work. This essential and skilled work must be properly valued by governments and employers.
- Our workplace laws were designed around an outdated idea of a male breadwinner without parenting and caring responsibilities. Lack of access to secure family-friendly working arrangements, to high-quality, affordable early childhood education and care, and to adequate and equitable paid parental leave continues to undermine women's workforce participation and drive the gender pay and retirement income gaps. Our system doesn't work for modern families. Women don't freely choose to sacrifice their job security and careers in order to manage their disproportionate amount of care work – they are left with no other choice by our outdated laws.
- We need significant long-term investment to build and expand our social infrastructure - such as aged care and early childhood education and care - creating safe, secure and well-paid jobs for women and reducing barriers to workforce participation. This will require a women's budget statement and gender-responsive budgeting to be a permanent feature of the budgetary process.
- Australia's regulatory framework doesn't keep workers safe from gendered violence and harassment. It requires individuals to undertake costly and risky complaints processes, with no clear requirement on employers to proactively address violence and harassment as a work health and safety hazard. The underlying cause of gendered violence and harassment is gender inequity in our workplaces and communities. Decent and equitable work is central to the economic security, health and safety of women and the prevention of sexual, family and domestic violence.

4 ACTU, 'Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces: Survey results' (Report 2018)



## Action Plan 2021-25

Australian Unions will work together to campaign for the following priorities:

- Investing in expanding and improving our social infrastructure, including:
  - Reforming aged care, including addressing chronic workforce issues such as inadequate pay, lack of access to training, and inadequate staff to resident ratios.
  - Providing free, universal access to quality early childhood education and care, delivered by highly skilled, properly paid and securely employed educators.
- Expanding and improving Australia's Paid Parental Leave scheme to provide equal access to both parents to 52 weeks paid leave at full-wage replacement (or the national minimum wage, whichever is greater). The concept of 'primary' and 'secondary' carers should be removed, with parents entitled to access the same amount of paid parental leave and to share the entitlement as they see fit. Families should be encouraged to share the care of children more equally through the provision of an additional 2 weeks of paid bonus leave to parents who take equal amounts of parental leave.
- Guaranteed and enforceable access to secure family friendly working arrangements.
- 10 days paid family and domestic violence leave per year for all workers as a minimum employment standard.
- Implementation of all the recommendations in the Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner's Respect@Work Report, with priority given to the SafeWork4Women reforms.
- Improvements to Australia's human rights and anti-discrimination law framework to better protect all workers, including the removal of unfair exemptions and positive duties on employers to eliminate discrimination.
- Reforms to superannuation to close the retirement income gap, including superannuation on all paid and unpaid care-related absences and a legislated pathway to a superannuation guarantee rate of 15%, expedited for women.
- A requirement for the Fair Work Commission to proactively tackle gender inequity across all of its functions, including strong pay equity provisions, measures to address the undervaluation of women's work, and the establishment of an expert Gender Equity Panel.
- Modern workplace rights that allow bargaining across workplaces and a living wage
- Action to make jobs more reliable and secure
- Reinstatement of the Women's Budget Statement and gender-responsive budgeting, with input from unions and the women's sector.