

For enquiries relating to this submission please contact Women's Health and Equality Queensland on 07 3216 0976 or admin@wheq.org.au

Submission to the National Gender Equality Strategy

Women's Health and Equality Queensland's vision is that all women have safe and inclusive communities in which they are resourced to live their best lives. For a National Gender Equality Strategy to achieve this, there must be a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, barriers, and enablers of gender equality in the Australian context, along with an intersectional approach to tackle the inequality that girls and women face throughout their life stages. Furthermore, Australia is moving backwards in gender equality, evidenced by the World Economic Forum's 2021 Global Gender Gap Index (Devlin, 2021). It is therefore paramount that the National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality effectively addresses climate change, free and universal childcare, women's economic security, gender and societal norms, women's health, and safe, affordable housing, with actionable targets and strict accountability measures.

1.0 Immediately address climate change.

Climate change does not affect everyone equally, with women bearing a greater impact. It is estimated that globally, 80% of the people already displaced by climate change are women and children (United Nations, 2022). This is due to the unequal sharing of power between women and men, the gender gap in access to education and employment opportunities, the unpaid care burden, prevalence of gender-based violence, and all other forms of deep-rooted gender-based discrimination (United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

Instead of falling behind in the action against climate change and exacerbating the very issue of inequality that the proposed Strategy aims to solve, the Australian government, public and private sectors must make a meaningful commitment. The United Nations has called for developed countries to eliminate carbon emissions by 2040 (Kaplan, 2023). This involves an immediate transition away from fossil fuels which the Australian Government has must lead, and ensure the private sector follows suit via the use of policy levers. Furthermore, when developing and implementing climate policies, budgetary action must equally benefit women and men. In return, climate policies that are integrated with gender equality objectives are more successful at achieving the deep transformations required to tackle the climate crisis and ensure social justice (United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

2.0 Introduce free and universal childcare.

Gender inequality is exacerbated by women's disproportionate share of family and caring responsibilities (Australian Gender Equality Council, 2023). Bearing the majority of the burden of this unpaid work significantly reduces women's ability to participate in the paid workforce relative to men. Not only does this care burden hamper women's economic security, but it also harmfully contributes to societally accepted gender norms (Australian Gender Equality Council, 2023). To create a more equal distribution of caring responsibilities between women and men, free universal childcare must be introduced to incentivise parents to remain in the workforce. Furthermore, there must be immediate introduction of 52 weeks of shared paid, flexible parental leave.

3.0 Ensure equal economic opportunity and achievement.

Women's economic security is one of the primary impacts of gender inequality, with measures which include the gender pay gap, median superannuation balances at retirement, skewed workforce representation, and homeless rates for women (Australian Gender Equality Council, 2023). We applaud the passing of *Workplace Gender Equality Amendment (Closing the Gender Pay Gap) Bill 2023* in Parliament, requiring organisations to report on their gender pay gap.

To ensure equal economic opportunity and achievement, the Australian Government must invest in reducing the gender pay gap, rectifying wage disparity between professions dominated by men versus women, addressing superannuation disparity between genders, improving executive leadership opportunities for women, and incentivising policies to improve workplace flexibility that encourage women to participate in the paid workforce. To help address the superannuation gap and older women's economic insecurity, Government must immediately commence paying the superannuation guarantee on paid parental leave, alongside reporting annually on the retirement gap.

4.0 Tackle gender and societal norms.

Culturally and societally accepted gender and social norms shape and influence gender equality in the community and the workforce. These gender and social norms are established and cemented when we are young and sets the trajectory for how we interact with society as adults (Chandra-Mouli, et al., 2017). Evidence shows that school and community interventions can promote gender equality and prevent violence against women by challenging stereotypes and cultural norms that give men power and control over women. Furthermore, programmes that target children early in life can prevent aggression, reduce involvement in violence, improve social skills, boost educational achievement and improve job prospects.

Whilst updates have been made to improve the Australian early learning and education curriculum (Australian Assessment, Recruitment and Reporting Agency, n.d.), not enough changes and commitments have been made to combat perpetuated narratives which enforce and reinforce cis-normative, racist and ableist stereotypes in our young people and society more broadly (Ending Violence Against Women and Children Queensland, 2021). It is imperative that all childcare centres, schools, workplaces and sporting groups are supported and mandated to embed equitable gender norms and attitudes and address the drivers of gender inequality and violence against women (Our Watch, n.d.). Not only will this improve gender equality more broadly, it will serve to prevent violence against women and children.

5.0 Ensure all women have equitable access to healthcare.

Equitable access to healthcare is a human right and has a direct impact on gender equality. As gender is a significant determinant of health, the Australian context shows that women experience poorer health and higher levels of comorbidities (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022). The Strategy must address equitable access to healthcare, and the Australian Government and public and private health sectors must commit to achieving this level of access.

Some of the ways in which equitable access to healthcare can be achieved include: Build and develop partnerships with not-for-profit organisations and community services that support women's health; Increase access to telehealth services and General Practitioner appointments, and advocate for broadened MBS billing; Increase nurse- and midwife- led care and endorse their capacity to work to full scope; Ensure all women can access local affordable pregnancy termination and reproductive health services; Increase funding of health data and research that is specific to women, and; Ensure the Australian healthcare system adopts a gendered lens.

6.0 Create policies to ensure women can access and own safe affordable housing.

The housing crisis disproportionately affects parts of the Australian population. Whilst the rate of homelessness is decreasing for males, it is increasing for women who made up 81.7% of the total increase of people experiencing homelessness in the most recent census data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Structural factors such as the shortage of social and affordable housing options contribute to the risk of homelessness however, domestic violence is one of the leading causes of homelessness (Mission Australia, n.d.). To improve gender equality and the health and wellbeing of Australians, it is imperative that the Strategy effectively addresses the housing and homelessness crisis. The Government must create policies to ensure women can access and own safe and affordable housing, including a commitment to building more social housing. Furthermore, there must be provision of exemptions of strict documentary evidence for social housing applications, including identity documents, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds and women escaping domestic and family violence.

To create women's long-term housing and economic security, the Government must invest in housing options delivered by government to women, including affordable rent-to-buy and no or very low interest loans. The ability to own a home is linked largely to income, and while women continue to experience a significant wage gap, the Government must support their housing security and pathways to ownership. Re-thinking housing and investment policies more broadly, such as repealing negative gearing, is important to increase housing affordability for all people, and becomes even more important once a gender responsive lens is applied.

7.0 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women face structural disadvantage in many spheres of their life. An effective Gender Equality Strategy must prioritise the needs of this group of women by supporting self-determination across housing, education, economic participation, health and wellbeing, safety and leadership. Furthermore, structural issues such as systemic racism and the ongoing incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women must end. Wiyi Yani U Thangani (2020) provides a framework to help achieve gender justice and equity for First Nation's women. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women must be substantially considered in a Strategy.

8.0 Gender responsive budgeting must occur at all levels of Government.

Gender responsive budgeting is essential for gender justice. In a society where social and economic opportunity is not equal, gender responsive budgeting at all levels of government ensures gender equitable distribution of resources and by contributing to equal opportunities for all. It should be based on in-depth analysis that identifies effective interventions for implementing policies and laws that advance women's rights. It provides tools to assess the different needs and contributions of men and women, within the existing revenues, expenditures and allocations and calls for adjusting budget policies to benefit all groups (United Nations Women, n.d.). Therefore, gender responsive budgeting must immediately occur at all levels of government.

Summary of recommendations

- 1.0 Government must immediately address climate change with a commitment to eliminate carbon emissions by 2040, with a gender equal lens when implementing climate action policies.
- 2.0 Immediately introduce free universal childcare and 52 weeks of shared, paid flexible parental leave.
- 3.0 Government must ensure equal economic opportunity and achievement by introducing mandatory public reporting of individual organisations of the gender pay gap, introducing policies that improve workplace flexibility for women, paying the superannuation guarantee on paid parental leave, and reporting annually on the retirement gap.
- 4.0 Tackle social and gender norms by upgrading the National curriculum to engage young people in open discussions about equitable gender norms and attitudes, and include contemporary understandings of gender and society.
- 5.0 Ensure all women have equitable access to healthcare by increasing access to telehealth and GP appointments, building and developing partnerships with NFP's and community health services, increasing nurse- and midwife- led care, ensuring women can access pregnancy termination and reproductive health services, increasing funding of women-specific health data and research, and ensuring the healthcare system adopts a gendered lens.
- 6.0 Government must create policies to ensure women can access and own safe and affordable housing, commit to building more social and affordable homes.
- 7.0 The Strategy must prioritise the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and support them across housing, education, economic participation, health and wellbeing, and safety and leadership. Systemic racism and ongoing incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women must end.
- 8.0 Gender responsive budgeting must immediately occur at all levels of Government.

Prompt points from discussion paper

1. What would a gender equal Australia mean for you, your family, and community?
 - a. All women have safe and inclusive communities in which they are resourced to live their best lives.
2. What should the role of government, business and the community be in achieving gender equality?
 - a. There must be implementation of gender responsive budgeting at all levels of government.
 - b. The government must resource community change at local and national levels.
 - c. Businesses and organisations must commit to reducing the gender pay gap, and improving workplace flexibility for women
3. What are your priorities for achieving gender equality in Australia?
 - a. Addressing climate change, introducing free and universal childcare, ensuring equal economic opportunity, tackling gender and societal norms, ensuring equitable access to healthcare, and ensuring women can access and own safe affordable housing.
4. What are the underlying challenges for women's economic equality that the strategy could address? (consider the gender pay gap, workforce participation and occupational segregation, workplace sexual harassment)
 - a. Lack of free universal childcare, 52 weeks paid parental leave, and superannuation guarantee during paid parental leave scheme
 - b. Personal leave being used by women as primary caregivers, resulting in more women opting for part-time or casual work to achieve desired workplace flexibility. Effects of this include not accumulating enough personal leave to consider their own and their dependants' needs. This result impacts workforce participation, income, and superannuation.
5. What are the underlying challenges in the way we value and allocate care that the strategy could address? (consider women bear the burden of care)
 - a. Gender and societal norms position women as primary carers across the lifespan
6. Australia has a National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children – how could the strategy contribute to ending violence and supporting the plan? (women experience high levels of gendered violence)
 - a. Deliver 1 billion per annum annual funding as called for by sector services.
(<https://fullstop.org.au/news/federal-budget-must-commit-1-billion-per-year-to-fill-urgent-gaps-in-frontline-sexual-domestic-and-family-violence-services>)
7. Australia has a National Women's Health Strategy – how should the Gender Equity Strategy support this effort and reflect the role of health and wellbeing in achieving gender equality?
 - a. Ensure funding and accountability for the
8. What do you think are the main challenges to achieving gender equal leadership and representation?
 - a. Embedded and long standing patriarchal structures
9. What are critical factors that exacerbate gendered disadvantage over the life course?
 - a. Disadvantage stemming from a young age within women, particularly with levels of violence experienced, workplace disadvantage, the care burden and economic disadvantage through the lifespan which ultimately leads to women more likely to care for children during partner separation, not own a home, and retire with less money.
10. Are there issues you would address first? Are there issues that should be addressed together?

- a. Economic disadvantage between workforces, and implementing legislation that rectifies the average wage between male and female-dominated industries.
 - b. Addressing climate change, and immediately moving away from fossil fuels.
 - c. Gender responsive budgeting at all levels of government.
11. In what areas are stereotypes a key barrier to achieving gender equality?
- a. Women's workforce capacity, and discrimination and/or bias in the evolution of women's performance and capability or the value of their roles
12. When building the evidence base and assessing progress, where should we focus?
- a. A focus on disadvantaged and marginalised women (specifically Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and girls, culturally and linguistically diverse women, and women with disabilities).
13. What accountability and reporting mechanisms would you prioritise?
- a. Data on the rates of men's violence against women and children, wage gap, global index, superannuation gap, rates of incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women
 - b. Mandatory public reporting for each department on how their work is impacting gender equality, including gender responsive budgeting

References

- Australian Assessment, Recruitment and Reporting Agency. (n.d.). *Review of the Australian Curriculum*. Retrieved from Australian Assessment, Recruitment and Reporting Agency: <https://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/curriculum-review>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2023, March 22). *Estimating Homelessness: Census*. Retrieved from Australian Bureau of Statistics: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/housing/estimating-homelessness-census/latest-release#:~:text=122%2C494%20people%20were%20estimated%20to,from%2012%20to%2024%20years>
- Australian Gender Equality Council. (2023, January). *2023 Pre Budget-Submission*. Retrieved from Australian Gender Equality Council: <https://www.agec.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/2023-01-28-AGEC-Pre-Budget-Submission-January-2023.pdf>
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2022, July 7). *Chronic conditions and multimorbidity*. Retrieved from Australian Institute of Health and Welfare: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-health/chronic-conditions-and-multimorbidity>
- Chandra-Mouli, V., Plesons, M., Adebayo, E., Amin, A., Avni, M., Kraft, J. M., . . . Malarcher, S. (2017, October). Implications of the Global Early Adolescent Study's Formative Research Findings for Action and for Research. *he Journal of adolescent health : official publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, 61(4 Suppl), S5–S9.
- Devlin, M. (2021, June 2). *Time to gender parity has blown out to 135 years. Here's what women can do to close the gap*. Retrieved from The Conversation: <https://theconversation.com/time-to-gender-parity-has-blown-out-to-135-years-heres-what-women-can-do-to-close-the-gap-160253>
- Ending Violence Against Women and Children Queensland. (2021, July 6). *EVAWQ submission to the Australian Curriculum Review consultation*. Retrieved from Women's Health and Equality Queensland: <https://wheq.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/EVAWQ-Feedback-to-Australian-Curriculum-Review.pdf>
- Kaplan, S. (2023, March 20). *World is on brink of catastrophic warming, U.N. climate change report says*. Retrieved from Washington Post: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/03/20/climate-change-ipcc-report-15/>
- Mission Australia. (n.d.). *What is homelessness?* Retrieved from Mission Australia: <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/what-we-do/ending-homelessness/what-is-homelessness#:~:text=Every%20night%2C%20more%20than%20122%2C000,6%25%20of%20the%20homeless%20population>
- Our Watch. (n.d.). *Our Watch*. Retrieved from Preventing gender-based violence: <https://education.ourwatch.org.au/respectful-relationships-education/preventing-gender-based-violence/>
- United Nations. (2022, July 12). *Climate change exacerbates violence against women and girls*. Retrieved from United Nations Human Rights: Office of the High Commissioner: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2022/07/climate-change-exacerbates-violence-against-women-and-girls>
- United Nations Development Programme. (2023, February 28). *What does gender equality have to do with climate change?* Retrieved from Climate Promise: <https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/what-does-gender-equality-have-do-climate-change#:~:text=The%20impacts%20of%20climate%20change,labour%20to%20make%20a%20living>
- United Nations Women. (n.d.). *Gender Responsive Budgeting*. Retrieved from United Nations Women: <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/focus-areas/women-poverty-economics/gender-responsive-budgeting>



Wiyi Yani U Thangani. (2020, December 9). *Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report*. Retrieved from Australian Human Rights Commission: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/wiyi-yani-u-thangani>