

CEW Women Leaders
Empowering
All Women

**Pre Budget Submission
2026/2027**



Investing in Women's Leadership and Workforce Participation: An Economic Imperative

About CEW

Chief Executive Women (CEW) is Australia's leading network of women leaders, united in the purpose of women leaders empowering all women. Since 1985, we have worked with business, government, and the community to advance gender equity and remove barriers to women's progression, participation, safety, and security.

Our 1,400 members are among the most senior and influential women across business, academia, government, sport, the arts, and the not-for-profit sector.

Through advocacy, research, targeted programs, and scholarships, CEW delivers practical impact: accelerating women into leadership, shaping policy, and influencing the systems that drive economic and social progress.

1400+,

CEW members consisting of Australia's most senior, influential, and respected women leaders from across every sector.

1.3+m

CEW members lead more than 1.3 million employees and oversee \$749 billion in revenue.

\$1.14+tr

CEW members represent over \$1.14 trillion in market capitalisation and contribute more than \$249 billion to Australia's GDP.

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and pay our respects to their Elders past and present. CEW celebrates the diversity of First Nations people and their continuing connection to land, water, and community, and acknowledges the strength of First Nations women leading their communities. We extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are part of the CEW community.

Message from CEW

Investing in women's leadership and participation is not only a matter of fairness; it is an economic imperative.

Despite being among the most educated in the world, Australian women face persistent structural barriers in work, care and safety that restrict their economic participation. At a time of pressing productivity challenges and workforce shortages, gender equality is one of Australia's most powerful levers to strengthen productivity and the economy.

Australia has made significant progress in gender equality, rising from 47th to 13th in the World Economic Forum global rankings since 2022 and achieving its most gender-balanced parliament in history. CEW commends the Federal Government's commitment to advancing gender equality and significant investment and reform to date, including: guaranteed access for all children to three days of early childhood education, wage increases for care sector workers, expanded Commonwealth funded Paid Parental Leave (including superannuation contributions), landmark investment in women's health, legislated requirements for large companies to set gender targets, and implementing gender responsive budgeting.

However, structural inequality continues to constrain productivity and prosperity.

- 90% of ASX300 CEOs are men.
- 80% of ASX300 CEO pipeline roles are held by men.
- 17 ASX300 companies have no women in executive leadership.
- The gender pay gap sits at 21.1%, which is about \$28,356 yearly difference.
- Women experience compounding financial disadvantage across their life course, retiring with 25% less superannuation than men.
- Violence against women is a national emergency, with the rate of women killed in gender-based violence increasing 30% in the last year.



Strategic investment in women's leadership and economic security will unlock Australia's economic potential. Continuing to limit and constrain our most underutilised asset, Australian women, limits our economic growth and innovation, leaving half our talent on the bench.

CEW's budget asks have been drafted knowing that Australia is adjusting to a changing geopolitical environment. Improving productivity is critical to the transition Australia is seeking to make, but it will disrupt the status quo. There will be opposition and pushback. Supporting the advancement of innovative leaders, including women, is essential for success.

The economic case is clear

- \$128 billion added to Australia's GDP by achieving gender equality.
- \$11 billion added to GDP from 2% increase in women's working hours.
- 1 million additional full-time skilled workers unlocked if women participated at the same rate as men.

To realise this opportunity, Australia must strategically invest and reform the systems that shape women's participation: Workplace design, care infrastructure, financial settings and safety systems. CEW's recommendations call for investment in scaffolding and gender equality infrastructure, being mindful of the current challenging fiscal climate.

When we empower women, we empower innovative Australians to transform the economy to achieve its potential.

This submission was developed in consultation with CEW members, senior leaders across business, academia, government, sport, the arts, and the not-for-profit sector. CEW members represent diverse perspectives from all areas of Australian community and economic life. In late 2025, CEW conducted a national survey of members and undertook state consultations across the country. CEW members identified the following key advocacy priorities for action:

- Increasing women's leadership representation.
- Improving economic security for women.
- Eliminating gender-based violence.
- Continuing CEW's long-held priority of investing in the care economy.

CEW calls on the government to:

1. **Advance women's leadership** by building the pipeline of women in high-growth, male-dominated industries and promoting workplace flexibility.
2. **Strengthen women's economic security** by addressing workforce disincentives in the tax and transfer systems and supporting women out of poverty.
3. **Address gendered violence** as a national priority.
4. **Place care at the centre of the economy** through universal early childhood education and expanded Commonwealth Paid Parental Leave.
5. **Strengthen Australia's gender equality machinery** to drive equality for all women.

Summary of Recommendations

Gender Equality Pillars

1

Advance women's leadership

- 1.1 Build pathways for women into high-growth, male-dominated sectors. Scale targeted programs, training, scholarships, mentoring, and skills recognition reforms.
2. Drive a national shift to high-quality flexible work - modelling best-practice flexible work in the Australian Public Service.

2

Strengthen women's economic security

1. Modernise tax and transfer settings to reduce disincentives for carers and secondary earners. Apply a gender lens to address high Effective Marginal Tax Rates faced by women.
2. Increase JobSeeker to 90% of the Age Pension to support women out of poverty.

3

Eliminate gendered violence

1. Remove waiting periods for government assistance for people leaving violence and strengthen coordination and transparency.
2. Resource enforcement of Respect@Work Positive Duty and strengthen prevention.
3. Implement recommendations from national Domestic Family and Sexual Violence reviews

4

Place care at the centre of the economy

1. Progress universal early childhood education and care: with strong governance, workforce sustainability, access, quality and safety.
2. Strengthen Paid Parental Leave settings to normalise shared care, including "use it or lose it" provisions.

Enabler

Strengthen gender equality machinery

Build gender responsive budgeting capability and improve intersectional data.

Pillar One: Advance Women's Leadership

Women comprise half the population and a significant proportion of the workforce. Yet they remain underrepresented in senior leadership across industries. CEW's Senior Executive Census demonstrates the persistent gap in representation of women in leadership and leadership pipelines in Australia's largest publicly listed companies.

Women are particularly underrepresented in high-growth, high-wage industries, including energy, digital technology, manufacturing, construction and engineering.

Australia has one of the most gender-segregated workforces in the OECD:



- Fewer than 25% of Australians work in gender-balanced occupations.
- Gender segregation accounts for 24% of the gender pay gap.
- By 2030, 67 million new jobs are expected to be created, yet women are on track to hold only 25% of these roles.

This underrepresentation is not only an equity concern, it also constrains the economy and impacts on productivity. Diverse teams outperform on profitability, risk management, innovation, better decision-making and culture. Across the ASX, a 10% increase in women leaders correlates with a 6.6% increase in market value.

Male-dominated industries have persistent entry and retention challenges for women, including workplace safety, inadequate facilities, equipment, and role design for women.

Job design and flexible working arrangements are critical to enable women's workforce participation and progression into leadership:



- 1 in 5 women credit flexibility for retaining their employment.
- Women retire, on average, 12 years earlier than they want to, with almost half citing health issues and caring responsibilities.

Unlocking Women's Leadership Requires:

- **Inclusive pathways into emerging industries.**
- **Flexible work as a mainstream productivity driver.**
- **Safe, accessible workplaces that support entry, retention and progression.**
- **Targeted action for a full diversity of women, including First Nations women.**

Recommendations

Advancing Women's Leadership

1 Build the pipeline of women to contribute to the growth engines of the future

- Partner with industry, unions, and advocacy groups to scale training, scholarships, and mentoring for a full diversity of women (including First Nations women).
- Expand Building Women's Careers Program for STEM and male-dominated industries.
- Streamline skills recognition and visa settings to better recognise women's qualifications, particularly for migrant women.
- Embed gender equity in national industry growth plans, including Future Made in Australia.

2 Drive a national shift to high-quality flexible work: Model best practice flexible work in the Australian Public Service .

- Establish an APS flexibility framework prioritising career-stage flexibility and measurable outcomes, including men's uptake.
- Expand flexible work entitlements to support life transitions such as perimenopause and menopause.
- Pilot models such as a four-day week (32 hours, full pay) or reduced-hours (10–3) models in selected Commonwealth departments.
- Use procurement levers to incentivise private sector flexible work.

Pillar Two: Strengthen Women's Economic Security

Women face economic disadvantage across their life course due to:

- lower earnings.
- part-time and insecure work.
- undervaluation of traditionally feminised industries.
- unpaid care burdens.
- interrupted careers.
- inadequate income support.
- structural tax and transfer disincentives.

The result is a lifelong compounding disadvantage, leaving women with a superannuation gap, reduced assets and higher poverty risk in retirement. These risks are even greater for women who face intersecting disadvantage, or women who have experienced violence.

Economic security is essential for strong democratic institutions and social cohesion. Economic marginalisation erodes trust in support systems. Strengthening women's economic security builds community resilience and prosperity. Investing in women's economic participation benefits families, communities, and the entire economy. CEW's focus ensures all Australians can participate fully in economic life, building trust and stability across society.

A modern tax and transfer system

Australia's tax and transfer settings reflect outdated assumptions about work and care. The interaction of income tax, payment tapers, and childcare subsidies can produce high Effective Marginal Tax Rates (EMTRs) for secondary earners, largely women. This weakens the financial incentive to work additional hours and locks many women in lower lifetime earnings. A gender lens review of the tax and transfer system is essential to remove disincentives, value unpaid care, and strengthen women's economic security across every stage of life.

A capable and willing workforce, particularly of carers, remains underutilised due to these disincentives embedded in tax, transfer, and care systems.

Reducing these workforce disincentives would add approximately 12 million working hours to the economy annually.



Pillar Two: Strengthen Women's Economic Security

Supporting women out of poverty

Inadequate income support payments trap women in poverty and limit their economic participation. JobSeeker payments have not kept pace with the cost of living:

- The current JobSeeker payment is only 40% of minimum wage and falls below the poverty line.
- Women, particularly older women, are the fastest growing group entering JobSeeker.
- 60% of women leaving violent relationships must rely on government benefits as their primary income.

Current income support settings fail to account for the unique barriers women face, including interrupted work patterns due to caring responsibilities, experiences of domestic violence, and age-based discrimination. Evidence demonstrates that increasing JobSeeker would not reduce workforce participation even at higher rates: income support remains substantially below labour market earnings, maintaining strong work incentives.

Without reform, inadequate income support perpetuates intergenerational poverty and reduces retirement savings, asset accumulation, and lifetime earning potential for women already experiencing disadvantage.



Recommendations

Strengthening Women's Economic Security

1 Review and modernise tax and transfer settings.

Immediate actions:

- Applying a gender lens to address high EMTRs.
- Pause HECS-HELP debts inflation during caring-related career breaks.

Longer-term reforms:

- Consider reforms that value unpaid care work, including carers' income tax offset and carer credit recognising unpaid care in superannuation.
- Introduce automatic superannuation top-ups after parental or care leave.
- Remove catch-up contribution restrictions.

2 Increase JobSeeker to support women out of poverty.

Immediate action:

- Increase JobSeeker to 90% of the Age Pension in line with recommendation of the Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee.

Longer-term reform:

- Set a pathway to adequacy for JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, and related payments (including indexation).



Pillar Three: Address Gendered Violence

Violence against women is a national emergency

- **Intimate partner killings increased by nearly 30% in the past year.**
- **One woman is killed every 4 days by a current or former intimate partner.**
- **Workplace sexual harassment costs the Australian economy more than \$8 billion annually.**

Economic security and physical safety are inextricably linked. Gendered violence undermines workforce participation, job security and economic independence. Financial insecurity can increase vulnerability and create barriers to leaving violence. Workplaces are also a key setting for prevention and accountability, including through the Respect@Work Positive Duty.

The Prime Minister addressed the rally against gendered violence in 2024, saying that gendered violence is a problem for our entire society. Pushing back against the appalling level of gendered violence is aligned with the values of our nation.

The cost of leaving violence

Leaving violence is a significant economic cost to victim-survivors, and the community at large:

- **It costs approximately \$18,000 to leave a violent relationship and establish safety.**
- **Around 15% of women return to abusive partners because they have no financial resources or safe accommodation.**
- **1 in 5 women become at risk of poverty after experiencing partner abuse.**



Pillar Three: Address Gendered Violence

Investment priorities to eliminate gendered violence

- Adequately resource frontline services.
- Prioritise primary prevention.
- Implement National Rapid Review recommendations.

Creating Safe, Inclusive Workplaces

Creating safe and inclusive workplaces is fundamental to women's economic participation and advancement.

- More than 40% of women and 26% of men have experienced workplace sexual harassment in the past 5 years.
- Marginalised groups face the highest rates, with elevated prevalence among young workers, LGBTQ+ and intersex workers, First Nations peoples, and people with disability.
- Evidence shows that investing in holistic employee health can create almost \$12 trillion in global economic value.

Full Implementation of Positive Duty

CEW welcomed the implementation of Positive Duty legislation in 2022, which shifted workplace focus from reactive responses to preventative actions that eliminate sexual harassment. To ensure best practice and holistic implementation, CEW recommends that the Commonwealth Government adequately fund regulators to provide guidance and enforcement of the Positive Duty. To maximise the legislation's impact, Positive Duty must be embedded and practiced through an intersectional lens.





Addressing Gendered Violence

Recommendations

1 Strengthen economic security for victim-survivors and improve coordination.

- Remove waiting periods for government assistance for people leaving violence.
- Review transparency requirements of federal funding through the National Partnership Agreement to strengthen coordination and accountability.

2 Resource enforcement, prevention, and accountability.

- Resource enforcement of the Respect@Work Positive Duty.
- Fund community-led, culturally safe prevention initiatives.
- Implement recommendations from national DFSV reviews, including the National Rapid Review and Australian Human Rights Commission's report *Speaking from Experience*.

Pillar Four: Placing Care at the Centre of the Economy

The care economy underpins Australia's productivity and economic prosperity.

Universal access to high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is one of the most effective levers to increase women's workforce participation and support child development.

- **Universal ECEC has the potential to boost GDP by \$24 billion annually and enable 264,000 women to enter the workforce.**
- **Every \$1 spent on quality preschool education in Australia returns \$2 to government and the wider community.**
- **90% of brain development occurs before age five.**
- **Children with access to quality ECEC demonstrate better school success, decreased crime rates, less substance abuse, and increased long-term employment.**

Australia's ECEC system remains costly, inaccessible in some areas and has critical workforce challenges. Workforce shortages undermine quality and "childcare deserts" in regional and remote areas prevent families from participating in the workforce. 95% of ECEC workers earn below the Australian average, with one in five intending to leave the sector.

The ECEC workforce must be sustainable, and child safety and quality must be embedded as foundational principles. Safe, high-quality early childhood environments are essential for children's wellbeing and development, and fundamental to enabling workforce participation. Investment in safety measures and quality standards across all childcare centres nationally directly supports the workforce participation goals of universal ECEC by building family confidence and trust in the system.

Shared care, in particular men's uptake of parental leave, is also critical to increasing women's workforce participation. When fathers take parental leave and participate more equally in childcare, research shows improved outcomes for children, stronger parental relationships, and enhanced workforce participation and career progression for mothers.

Recognising and valuing shared care responsibilities is essential to building a resilient Australian community. When we support those who care for others—whether children, elderly parents, or loved ones with disabilities—we strengthen the social fabric that holds our nation together and enables us to face challenges collectively.



Recommendations

Placing care at the centre of the economy

1 Progress Universal ECEC

Immediate actions:

- Improve wages and conditions for ECEC workers.
- Implement a stewardship model with an independent ECEC Commission.
- Establish a national childcare educator register.
- Strengthened child safety, quality assurance and reporting mechanisms.
- Implement the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy.

Longer-term reforms:

- Establish publicly owned centres in “childcare deserts”.
- Increase inclusion support program funding.

2 Expand Commonwealth Paid Parental Leave

Immediate action:

- Implement “use it or lose it” provisions in the Commonwealth Paid Parental Leave scheme to promote shared care.

Longer-term reform:

- Expand Commonwealth Paid Parental Leave settings to align with OECD best practice.

Enabler: Strengthen Australia's Gender Equality Machinery

Achieving sustained progress requires strong architecture, data capability and a whole-of-government approach.

Australia has sophisticated gender equality machinery and gender data. Building capacity and implementing an intersectional lens is important to strengthen this progress.

A comprehensive, whole-of-government application of a gender lens to all new policy proposals is required to deliver coherent, effective policy and avoid unintended gendered outcomes. Gender impact assessments should include an intersectional lens that recognises and addresses the differential impacts, including on First Nations women, migrant and refugee women, women with disability, LGBTQIA+ communities, and women living in rural and remote communities.

CEW supports a granular and fit-for-purpose dataset and reporting framework:

- Establishing a national dataset capturing intersectional data on women's experiences of domestic violence, including disability status, racial and cultural background, LGBTQIA+ identity, age, and location, to inform targeted support and policy.
- Ensuring impact assessments consider diverse needs of First Nations women, migrant and refugee women, women with disability, LGBTQIA+ communities, and women in rural and remote communities.
- Strengthening WGEA's data collection and reporting to address gender gaps in pay, leadership, and participation, with enhanced compliance supporting workplace gender equality.

CEW commends the Federal Government implementing the WGEA Gender Targets legislation. CEW supports leveraging government purchasing power to incentivise businesses advancing pay equity, addressing gender segregation, building respectful workplace cultures, and embracing diversity and inclusion.

Legislative reform

CEW recommends that the Government introduce legislation which would integrate gender impact assessments and gender responsive processes into policy design, implementation, evaluation, and budgeting to ensure that the unique challenges faced by women in all their diversity are considered. This is in line with OECD best practice and will ensure that gender equality is foregrounded in the work and investments of government.

CEW recommends considering a federal Human Rights Act. This Act would provide a clear, accessible framework that requires government to consider rights early in policy design, strengthens accountability through compatibility statements and proportionality tests, and offers practical, low-cost avenues for remedy. It would complement (not replace) existing anti-discrimination and integrity laws, maintain parliamentary sovereignty, and align Australia's domestic law with obligations under the ICCPR, ICESCR and other treaties.

Critically, a Human Rights Act would improve outcomes for groups who face structural disadvantage. This includes women, First Nations peoples, people with disability, migrants and children. It would embed preventive duties on public authorities and drive better, more coherent decisions across the Commonwealth.

Recommendations

Immediate actions:

- Establish a cross-agency gender responsive budgeting taskforce.
- Expand WGEA data to include intersectional indicators.
- Develop national targets with published dashboards for participation, pay gap, and leadership.
- Create a Women's Economic Empowerment Taskforce across key ministries.

Longer-term reforms:

- Legislate gender responsive budgeting.
- Strengthen the Office for Women as a centre of gender expertise.
- Consider a federal Human Rights Act to protect gender equality.

Gender equality is one of Australia's strongest economic levers. Investment in women's leadership, participation, economic security, safety and care infrastructure will deliver sustained productivity gains and social progress.

CEW members, as community and business leaders, will continue to collaborate with the Australian Government in building a stronger, more prosperous economy for all Australians.

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