

CEW Submission to the 4th Universal Periodic Review



CEW

Women Leaders Empowering All Women

About CEW

Chief Executive Women's (CEW) purpose is 'women leaders empowering all women'. CEW's 1,400 members represent Australia's most senior and distinguished women leaders across business, academia, government, sport, the arts, and not-for-profit sectors. They oversee more than 1.3 million employees and \$749 billion in revenue. Members' organisations have a combined market capitalisation greater than \$1.144 trillion and contribute more than \$249 billion to Australia's GDP.

Since 1985, CEW has influenced and engaged all levels of Australian business and government to progress gender equity. Through advocacy, research, targeted programs and scholarships, CEW works to remove the barriers to women's progression, participation, safety and security.

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and pay our respect 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.

To learn more about CEW, and how our team can support your organisation's journey to gender equality, visit our website www.ceb.org.au or contact us at ceb@ceb.org.au

Executive Summary

Chief Executive Women (CEW) urges the Australian Government to enact a national Human Rights Act and deliver concrete, time-bound measures that advance women's equality, safety and economic security, with an explicit intersectional lens. Australia's absence of a federal Human Rights Act leaves gaps in protection and accountability, while policy and service systems too often fail women who face multiple, compounding forms of discrimination.

Drawing on the Joint NGO Coalition's analysis and recommendations for Australia's 4th UPR cycle, CEW puts forward practical, measurable actions across four priorities:

- A Human Rights Act.
- Women's equality and leadership.
- Intersectional economic empowerment
- Women's health.
- The prevention of gender-based violence.



Message from CEW

CEW is committed to working with Government and Advocacy partners to create a fair, safe and prosperous Australia, in which women participate and lead at every decision-making level.

Gender equality is essential for Australia's productive future and the community as a whole:

- Removing restrictive gender norms could boost Australia's economy by about \$128 billion each year, with an estimated 461,000 additional full-time jobs.
- Halving the labour force participation gap between women and men was modelled to increase Australia's GDP by \$60 billion over 20 years.
- Gender equality strengthens community safety and social cohesion; more equal societies are safer, healthier, and experience stronger economic growth.

CEW has welcomed Australia's recent gains in gender equality, rising from 43rd in 2023 to 13th in the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Gender Gap Index in 2025, largely due to improvements in Women's political representation and workplace reforms. The pay gap is the smallest in recorded history, but still material. The national gender pay gap sits around 11.9% on headline measures, while WGEA's employer data shows a 21.8% private -sector total remuneration gap, indicating persistent inequality in average earnings. The productivity gap has narrowed but is still impacting women and the economy as a whole.

Despite this significant progress, Australia still has a long way to go to see true gender equality. Gender based violence remains a national crisis, with 37 women killed by a current or former partner in 2024, and women's lifetime economic outcomes lag, including lower retirement savings.

CEW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to Australia's fourth UPR. This is a chance to build on recent progress and position Australia as an international leader in responsive equality legislation, creating a legal and policy environment where everyone can thrive. This can be achieved by embedding human rights through a Federal Human Rights Act, which would deliver measurable progress in women's equality, safety, health and economic security.



Recommendations

- 1. Enact a Federal Human Rights Act** with enforceable remedies, public authority compatibility requirements, and independent oversight. Require human rights and gender impact assessments for key legislation and policies.
- 2. Strengthen anti-discrimination laws** with comprehensive protections and minimal exemptions.
- 3. Fund evidence-based prevention and specialist services,** prioritising First Nations-led, disability-inclusive, culturally safe and regional approaches.
- 4. Establish national targets** for reducing women's poverty with public reporting.
- 5. Implement a women's health package** funding First Nations-led models, disability-inclusive and culturally safe care.
- 6. Address data gaps** through disaggregated, intersectional reporting and improve governance through scorecards, public targets, action plans, and building APS capability for gender-responsive and intersectional approaches.
- 7. Create tailored employment, education and entrepreneurship pathways** for priority groups, improving digital and regional access.
- 8. Fund the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children** with sustained investments.
- 9. Increase safe housing and economic supports,** including income support reform and financial services.
- 10. Advance First Nations justice reforms:** raise criminal responsibility age to 14, implement Royal Commission recommendations, and establish a Makarrata Commission.

A Federal Human Rights Act

Australia is the only comparable liberal democracy without a national Human Rights Act, resulting in fragmented and inconsistent protection for rights, including the rights of women and girls. Parliamentary and civil society processes have already charted a pathway to legislation.

Australia has demonstrated widespread support for a Federal Human Rights Act:

- A federal parliamentary inquiry recommended establishing a national Human Rights Act as its first recommendation to fix Australia's "piecemeal" protections.
- Public support is strong: 87% of submissions to the 2024 parliamentary inquiry supported adopting a Human Rights Act, mirroring the 87.4% support recorded in the 2009 national consultation.
- States show it works in practice: in the ACT, human rights complaints to the Human Rights Commission provide a more accessible, affordable route than court, illustrating how rights based decision-making- improves access to justice.

CEW Recommendations

- Introduce a Federal Human Rights Act within two years covering civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, with enforceable remedies and a duty of compatibility for public authorities.
- Establish an independent implementation governance structure, including a Human Rights Commissioner with powers to monitor, investigate and report annually to Parliament.
- Require human rights and gender impact assessments for all Bills, major policy changes and Budget measures, including distributional analysis for priority cohorts.



Women's Equality, Safety and Leadership

Gender equality is the bedrock of Australia's future prosperity, and Government, business and community partners must work together to ensure this future.

However, many women are being left behind. Outcomes for many women are worsening on key indicators of safety and justice, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women facing some of the highest rates of violence and incarceration growth. National protections against discrimination remain uneven:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are imprisoned at 21 times the rate of non-Indigenous women, with their incarceration rates growing faster than any other demographic group in Australia.
- In Australia, one in three women has experienced physical violence since the age of 15, and on average, one woman is killed by a current or former partner every 9 days.
- Women retire with approximately 25% less superannuation than men, placing older women at higher risk of poverty and homelessness.

To address these gaps, CEW recommends strengthening the national gender equality framework, strengthen anti-discrimination laws and support and empower specialised services for vulnerable groups.

CEW Recommendations

- Implement a national gender equality framework with targets for women's leadership, gender pay and superannuation equity, flexible work and safety outcomes across public and private sectors; publish annual progress dashboards.
- Harmonise and strengthen anti-discrimination laws to ensure comprehensive protections for sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, disability, age, family and carer status, with narrow and proportionate exemptions only.
- Fully fund evidence based primary prevention and scale specialist services for those most at risk, including First Nations led initiatives, disability inclusive and culturally safe services, and regional and remote coverage.

Intersectionality and Economic Empowerment

For Australia to truly achieve its economic and productivity potential, gender equality work must be viewed and implemented through an intersectional lens. However, the current policy and legislative frameworks in Australia means that some vulnerable communities are unfairly disadvantaged:

- Women with disability face a gender pay gap of 41%, more than three times the national average, with many working in lower-paid, insecure roles.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have a labour force participation rate of only 51.5% compared to 77.9% for non-Indigenous women, reflecting systemic barriers to economic participation.
- Migrant women on temporary visas experience up to 34% higher rates of financial abuse but often have restricted access to social security and support services.
- The superannuation gap is more severe for women from diverse backgrounds: culturally diverse women retire with 53% less superannuation than men, compared to the national average gap of 25%.
- Women from non-English speaking backgrounds earn on average 33.9% less than men from English-speaking backgrounds, facing compounded disadvantage through both gender and cultural barriers.

Compounding discrimination drives economic insecurity for many women, including First Nations women, women with disability, women from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and migrant and refugee women. Certain social security and migration settings can entrench dependency and enable economic abuse. To bridge this gap, CEW recommends:

CEW Recommendations

- Adopt a national target to reduce women's poverty and financial stress, with public reporting disaggregated by cohort.
- Reform income support and workplace laws to address economic abuse and dependency, including reviewing partner income tests and improving access to supports for women on temporary visas.
- Invest in tailored employment, education and entrepreneurship pathways for priority cohorts, including digital inclusion and regional and remote access.

Women's Health

Despite progress, Significant health inequities persist, including life expectancy gaps and higher rates of preventable disease affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, along with barriers to sexual and reproductive health, mental health for many women and gender diverse people:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have a life expectancy approximately 7.8 years shorter than non-Indigenous women, representing one of Australia's most significant health equity gaps.
- Up to 87% of women in rural and remote areas face barriers accessing reproductive healthcare services, with many needing to travel over 100km for basic services.
- Women with disabilities are up to 10 times more likely to face barriers in accessing appropriate healthcare and are often excluded from routine preventative screening programs.
- Over 30% of transgender and gender-diverse Australians report postponing or avoiding healthcare due to discrimination concerns, with out-of-pocket costs for gender-affirming care reaching thousands of dollars.
- Women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds experience poorer health outcomes across multiple measures, with interpreter services available in less than 45% of healthcare settings.

CEW Recommendations

- Deliver a national women's health and wellbeing package with dedicated funding for First Nations led models of care, disability inclusive services, and culturally safe care for CALD communities.
- Guarantee access to sexual and reproductive healthcare.
- Close critical data gaps through disaggregated, intersectional health data and transparent reporting.

Preventing and Responding to Gender Based Violence

Preventing and Responding to Gender Based Violence

The rate of gendered violence in Australia is a national crisis:

- The Australian Institute of Criminology reported an almost 30% increase in the rate of women killed by intimate partners in the last twelve months.

Gender based violence remains widespread, with heightened risk for First Nations women, women with disability, CALD women, LGBTQIA+ people, and women on temporary visas. System responses can misidentify victims and are often under resourced.

CEW Recommendations

- Fully fund the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children with multi-year, indexed investments across prevention, early intervention, crisis response and recovery.
- Expand safe housing and economic safety supports, including income support reform, paid domestic violence leave for insecure workers, and access to debt relief and financial counselling.
- Improve justice and policing responses with independent oversight, trauma-informed practice, and protocols to prevent misidentification of victims; embed specialist approaches for priority cohorts.

First Nations Justice and Partnership

CEW supports justice targets, raising the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 14, and full implementation of the 1991 Royal Commission recommendations. Partnership is essential, including establishment of a Makarrata Commission for truth-telling and treaty processes, consistent with UNDRIP.

Governance, Transparency and Data

- Publish annual human rights, gender equality and intersectionality scorecards with disaggregated data and clear accountability for delivery.
- Require public entities and large employers to set targets, publish action plans and report outcomes.
- Build capability across the APS and funded services for gender responsive budgeting and intersectional policy design.

Conclusion

A Federal Human Rights Act is the linchpin of a coherent human rights architecture. Coupled with targeted measures for women's equality, intersectional economic empowerment, health and violence prevention, Australia can meet its UPR commitments and deliver tangible improvements in women's lives. CEW stands ready to partner with government, business and civil society to implement these reforms.

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