



Chief Executive
Women

SUBMISSION TO SELECT COMMITTEE

COVID-19 inquiry
into the Australian
Government's
response to the
COVID-19 pandemic

Chief Executive Women

Women Leaders Enabling Women Leaders

Founded in 1985, Chief Executive Women (CEW) now represents over 650 of Australia's most senior and distinguished women leaders across business, academia, government, the arts and not-for-profit sectors. Our shared mission is 'women leaders enabling other women leaders'.

We strive to educate and influence all levels of Australian business and government on the importance of gender balance. Through advocacy, targeted programs and scholarships, CEW works to remove the barriers to women's progression and ensure equal opportunity for prosperity.

CEW's members work actively to realise our vision of a community where women and men have equal economic and social choices and responsibilities.

Acknowledgment of Country

We acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which CEW works and pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

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Message From the President

Sue Morphet
President

In this time of crisis, we come together as a community to protect our most vulnerable and safeguard people's health and livelihoods. CEW commends the Federal and State governments on taking significant action to deliver substantial support to households and businesses; and applauds measures taken by all leaders across the nation to ensure the safety of Australians.

As Australia seeks to rebuild its economy, we need to capitalise on the productivity of our entire workforce and minimise barriers to workforce participation. The recovery must be business led and enable all our community to contribute and prosper.

We know that COVID-19 is not just a health crisis, but a social and economic one. This pandemic has drawn focus to existing inequalities, which leave many in our community less equipped to cope in times of crisis and hardest hit during these challenging times.

Research indicates that women have been disproportionately impacted on multiple fronts. Women are concentrated in insecure employment and overrepresented in industries that have been most impacted by job losses. In Australia, women constitute 68.2% of all part-time employees.ⁱ They make up 57.7% of the retail industry and within that 84.2% of the fashion industry, 66.1% of department stores and 71.3% of furnishing and homewares.

ⁱⁱ A report by Grattan Institute found that women, young people and low-income earners will be most likely to face unemployment. ⁱⁱⁱ

In addition, the combination of career breaks, part-time employment and the gender pay gap compounds throughout

women's lives restricting their economic security and leaving them less equipped to cope during a financial crisis.

Women remain a significantly untapped resource for workforce participation. There has been little progress in women's full-time participation over recent decades, with Australia lagging 10 percentage points behind the OECD average.^{iv} A key barrier is women's tendency to take on caring responsibilities. Prior to COVID-19, women in Australia on average spent twice as much time as men in unpaid work and domestic labour.^v

With closures of many educational institutions during COVID-19, and health services increasingly strained, the rising burden of unpaid care has been shouldered predominantly by women. KPMG estimates, based on the drop in female participation that occurred in April, in just a three-month period the cost to our nation has been \$11 billion in GDP.

Domestically and globally, we risk rolling back gains made in gender equality over past decades and deepening inequality.

This Submission sets out four key policy priorities for action in the recovery from COVID-19:

1. Embed a gender lens in policy
2. Enable women's workforce participation through accessible early childhood education and care
3. Strengthen women's economic security across the working life course and into retirement
4. Facilitate ongoing flexible work for both men and women

These align with priorities in *Towards 2025: an Australian Government strategy to boost women's workforce participation (Towards 2025)* and the *2018 Women's Economic Security Statement*.

As Australia seeks to rebuild, CEW's recommendations offer practical solutions. We face a unique opportunity to build the nation, economy, and society we want; one where all individuals stand to benefit from greater diversity and inclusion in every part of society, with truly equal economic and social choices and responsibilities. This investment is good for Australia's recovery, for business, for families, the economy and our wider community.

Sue Morphet
CEW President

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Embed a gender lens in policy

CEW calls on the Federal Government to embed a gender lens in COVID-19 response measures:

- Deliver gender responsive budgeting
 - reinstate the annual publication of gender budget statements
 - integrate gender impact assessments into budgetary decision-making processes
- Build gender diversity and gender experts into response teams and decision-making bodies

Recommendation 2 – Enable women’s workforce participation through accessible early childhood education and care

CEW urges the Federal Government to enable parents’ workforce participation and maximise productivity by delivering accessible, flexible, quality early childhood education and care (ECEC)

- Maintain ‘free’ or low-cost access to ECEC to enable parents’ participation and viability of the sector
- Undertake an expert review of Australia’s needs with consideration of an appropriate level of ongoing support coinciding with preparation of the October Federal Budget
- Reform the Child Care Subsidy to deliver accessible, flexible ECEC

Recommendation 3 – Strengthen women’s economic security across the working life course and into retirement

CEW calls on the Government to strengthen women’s economic security across the working life course and into retirement:

- Develop an approach to retirement savings that recognises and values unpaid work and caring responsibilities and addresses carers’ forgone earnings from interrupted work arrangements
 - Extend the superannuation guarantee to the Commonwealth Paid Parental Leave scheme
 - Explore extending superannuation guarantee payments to time spent out of the workforce for caring responsibilities, such as a caring credits model
- Invest in female dominated industries

Recommendation 4 – Facilitate ongoing flexible work for both men and women

CEW urges the Federal Government to facilitate ongoing flexible work for both men and women:

- Develop policies to promote greater flexibility in work for both men and women so that caring responsibilities are more equally shared and all parents are able to fully participate in the workforce
- Strengthen the Workplace Gender Equality Agency’s (WGEA) gender equality reporting scheme with the requirement for employers to specify targets, timeframes, and incentives for staff engagement on, and uptake of, formal flexible working arrangements by gender

Recommendation 1

Embed a gender lens in policy

CEW calls on the Federal Government to embed a gender lens in COVID-19 response measures:

- Deliver gender responsive budgeting
 - reinstate the annual publication of gender budget statements
 - integrate gender impact assessments into budgetary decision-making processes
- Build gender diversity and gender experts into response teams and decision-making bodies

Gender Responsive Budgeting

By embedding a gender lens in the budgetary process, governments can identify how policies will impact women and girls and direct more coherent and strategic policy approaches to address gender equality. Over half of all OECD countries currently employ gender budgeting to guide their development of policies and allocation of resources. Gender impact assessments ensure governments identify and address gendered impacts of initiatives prior to the enactment of legislation, appropriation of funds, or introduction of policy.

During crises such as COVID-19, and as we recover, gender impact assessments enable governments to consider the needs and circumstances of women before implementing stimulus packages and responses.

Without a systematic process in place to understand the differential impact of policy decisions on women and men, policies can often produce unintended gendered outcomes.

For example, the Government's announcement of early access to superannuation intends to relieve financial

stress. However, this intervention does not consider the long-term implications for women who have disproportionate retirement savings, with women over the age of 55 the fastest growing population experiencing homelessness.

A comprehensive, whole-of-government application of a gender lens to consideration of all new policy proposals is required to deliver coherent, effective policy. To ensure the needs of different groups of women are considered, gender impact assessments must include an intersectional lens that recognises and addresses the differential impacts on diverse women, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse women, women with disability, LGBTI communities and women living in rural and remote communities.

Gender responsive budgeting builds on the cross-portfolio priorities identified in *Towards 2025 and the Women's Economic Security Statement*. Critical to the effectiveness of gender impact assessments is the availability and use of sex-disaggregated data for modelling the cumulative distributional, social and economic impact of policies on women. The reinstatement of the Australian Bureau of Statistics Time Use Survey through the *Women's Economic Security Statement* is a crucial step to developing an evidence base for designing gender-equal policies.

Diversity in decision-making

Given evidence demonstrating differential impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls, gender analysis and involving women leaders and diversity experts is important to mitigate adverse impacts and deliver more effective responses. Increasing diversity across all levels of leadership helps deliver better decisions and shape systems, structures and policies with perspectives that represent our communities. Gender balance in leadership and decision-making is particularly important during times of crisis as women's needs and circumstances are more likely to be considered and a gender analysis undertaken.

Recommendation 2

Enable women's workforce participation through accessible early childhood education and care

CEW urges the Federal Government to enable parents' workforce participation and maximise productivity by delivering accessible, flexible, quality early childhood education and care (ECEC)

- Maintain 'free' or low-cost access to ECEC to enable parents' participation and viability of the sector
- Undertake an expert review of Australia's needs with consideration of an appropriate level of ongoing support coinciding with preparation of the October Federal Budget
- Reform the Child Care Subsidy to deliver accessible, flexible ECEC

Increasing female workforce participation is one of Australia's biggest economic opportunities; and making ECEC more affordable is one of the best policy levers to do that. Investment in accessible ECEC will deliver real benefits in short-term, medium term and long-term economic recovery, workforce participation and productivity.

The ECEC system is more critical now than ever; yet remains in a state of high fragility. Around 350,000 parents using childcare either lost their jobs, were stood down or had their hours reduced in April. We commend the Federal Government's Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package, which has kept the sector viable and allowed essential workers and others to continue contributing to the economy.

As we recover, we need an environment where people have the maximum flexibility to respond to employment opportunities. This investment allows employers to maintain the connection with their employees and access the best skills and talent as job opportunities regrow.

Accessible and flexible ECEC means those who are re-entering the workforce, seeking work, considering increasing their hours or days of work or taking on a second job, can make this choice quickly, knowing their household will be better off financially. Every worker who is offered a job should

be able to take it. Every worker who is offered a shift should be able to take it. Every worker who is offered a few extra hours of work should have an incentive to work those extra hours. Continuation of accessible ECEC will strengthen household budgets and allow growth in household spending. It also minimises reliance on informal grandparent care, which is increasingly risky or even untenable due to health risks for the elderly.

Investment in quality, accessible and flexible ECEC delivers a fourfold return to our economy and society which will be especially important in the COVID-19 recovery:

1. A functional economy – boosting GDP and delivering a 2 to 1 return on investment^{vi}
2. Improved productivity and workforce participation for parents, predominantly women
3. Growing longer term human capital development by ensuring all children can access enough high-quality early learning to improve their outcomes – providing the foundation for cognitive, social and emotional skills they need to thrive throughout their lives
4. Addressing disadvantage and closing attainment gaps, noting these are likely to be amplified due to COVID-19

Economic recovery and productivity

Economic modelling by KPMG in 2018 showed that halving the workforce participation gap between men and women would increase Australia's annual GDP by \$60 billion by 2038.^{vii} Successive Intergenerational Reports have highlighted the importance of higher women's workforce participation to improving Australia's productivity, as stated in *Towards 2025*.

Research by The Front Project and PwC has demonstrated investment in ECEC delivers a 2 to 1 financial return on investment – for every \$1 invested, Australia receives \$2 back over a child's life. ^{viii}

\$4.8 billion of benefits are generated by every cohort of children attending early childhood education – from increased productivity, increased tax revenue, increased children's lifetime earnings, increased parent earnings and workforce participation, and reduced social costs (savings in health, education and justice budgets).

Without change, Australia will continue to squander the investment in, and productivity of, more than half its highly educated, well trained and experienced workforce. The most expensive form of childcare in economic terms is highly experienced women remaining out of the workforce to care for children. Investment in ECEC has flow on impacts allowing equal distribution of caring responsibilities and workforce participation within households; advancing women's leadership in their career formative years; and strengthening women's economic security across their life course and into retirement.

The risks of reversion to the Child Care Subsidy

The Child Care Subsidy (CCS) is a valuable component of Australia's tax and transfer

system, and since July 2018 has provided increased subsidies to lower and middle-income families compared to the benefit payments and rebates that it replaced. However, the CCS was not designed for emergency circumstances. The Government recognised this by stepping in with the relief package. Prior to the Commonwealth's intervention on 2 April 2020, around 650 centres closed, and attendances dropped by up to 50%. Full economic recovery is unlikely to occur for some time, so there is need for reform.

An unintended consequence of the CCS is that while primary carers are supported in taking up part-time work, they face high barriers to taking up full-time work – as found by CEW's 2019 partnership report with KPMG *Unleashing our potential*.^{ix} The interaction of the family income-based CCS taper with the rate of withdrawal of other government transfer payments, such as Family Tax Benefit (FTB), contribute to the magnitude of what has become known as the Workforce Disincentive Rate (WDR).^x The WDR is the percentage of income from taking on an extra day's work that a person loses to income tax and Medicare levy, withdrawn FTB, reduced CCS and increased out-of-pocket childcare costs.

Under the CCS, women wanting to increase their days of work can face losing 75-120% of every dollar they earn on those extra days (See Appendix). As Australia seeks to rebuild economic capacity we cannot afford to return to a CCS structure where workforce participation (particularly for women) is inhibited by WDRs commonly in excess of 75% which can affect thousands of families.

Reform of the system should also deliver a sustainable workforce with the appropriate level of skills, experience and qualifications. Early childhood educators are currently some of the lowest paid professionals in Australia. Increasing remuneration for these workers will attract a more diverse workforce, recognise the vital contribution of this sector and address the gender pay gap – increasing wages for a highly feminised workforce.

Recommendation 3

Strengthen women's economic security across the working life course and into retirement

CEW calls on the Government to strengthen women's economic security across the working life course and into retirement:

- Develop an approach to retirement savings that recognises and values unpaid work and caring responsibilities and addresses carers' forgone earnings from interrupted work arrangements
 - Extend the superannuation guarantee to the Commonwealth Paid Parental Leave scheme
 - Explore extending superannuation guarantee payments to time spent out of the workforce for caring responsibilities, such as a caring credits model
- Invest in female dominated industries

Women's economic security in retirement

The cumulative impact of the gender pay gap results in lifelong lower earnings and restricted accrual of superannuation funds. Women's disproportionate retirement savings place increasing pressure on the Australian economy, social protection systems, and community services.

Superannuation

Women in Australia currently retire with less superannuation than men.^{xi}



Source [ABS, Gender Indicators, November 2019](#)

* Based on the median superannuation balance at, or approaching, preservation age (55-64 years).

Prior to COVID-19 women over the age of 55 were the fastest growing population experiencing homelessness.

COVID-19 has further weakened women's economic security. The impact of job losses and loss of income will be felt by many women for years to come and will exacerbate the superannuation pay gap.

The implementation of early access to superannuation during COVID-19 is of great concern for women, given their disproportionate retirement savings, who may access most, or all, of their superannuation at a period when the market is low.

This pandemic has highlighted that as a nation we must recognise and value the vast contribution that carers bring to our society and economy. PwC has estimated the total value of volunteering, domestic work, care of adults and children to be worth \$565 billion.^{xii}

Within the current superannuation system, there is an in-built gender bias, which assumes continuous work history to accumulate sufficient funds for retirement to live without pension support. This does not reflect women's experience of missing out on crucial years of superannuation accumulation due to career breaks, often a result of child raising or caring commitments. This is in line with the 2016 Senate Economics Committee inquiry report into retirement incomes for women, which found that Australia's retirement income system does not adequately accommodate the different experience of women from men in work.

Now, more than ever, the superannuation system requires reform to address carers' forgone earnings from interrupted work arrangements to ensure this crisis does not further escalate financial insecurity across women's lives.

CEW outlined a number of recommendations in our *CEW Submission: Retirement Income Review*, including extending the superannuation guarantee to the Commonwealth Paid Parental Leave scheme and exploring additional options such as a caring credits model. Parental leave continues to be one of the few types of leave yet to attract superannuation. Extending the superannuation guarantee to this leave is consistent with recommendations of recent Senate Committee inquiries into women's

economic security and gender segregation. Caring credits models have been adopted in different forms in many OECD nations.

Investing in female dominated industries

The Australian labour market is highly gender-segregated by industry and occupation, a pattern that has persisted over the past two decades.^{xiii} Traditionally, female dominated industries and roles have been undervalued and lower paid.

As Australia rebuilds the economy, it will be vital to invest in female dominated industries and regrowing job opportunities for women. After the Global Financial Crisis, stimulus investment was largely concentrated in male dominated industries of construction and physical infrastructure projects. Now is an opportunity to address income inequality and prioritise investment in feminised sectors – such as nursing, healthcare, teaching and ECEC which have been shown as vital to support the continued function of our nation and economy. This investment will improve women's ongoing financial security in line with priorities in the *Women's Economic Security Statement*.

Recommendation 4

Facilitate ongoing flexible work for both men and women

CEW urges the Federal Government to facilitate ongoing flexible work for both men and women:

- Develop policies to promote greater flexibility in work for both men and women so that caring responsibilities are more equally shared and all parents are able to fully participate in the workforce
- Strengthen the Workplace Gender Equality Agency's (WGEA) gender equality reporting scheme with the requirement for employers to specify targets, timeframes, and incentives for staff engagement on, and uptake of, formal flexible working arrangements by gender

Workplace flexibility is an enabler of gender equality, retaining women in the workforce and supporting more men to take on caring responsibilities. Several studies show positive connections between flexible working arrangements, improved productivity and revenue generation.^{xiv}

COVID-19 has required flexible working arrangements from the home for many men and women. This is widely believed to have produced significant productivity benefits in relation to congestion, infrastructure, and general efficiency.

Beyond the immediate crisis, there is an opportunity to capitalise on a new 'normal' of flexible work, to strengthen and implement best-practice flexible working and work from home practices – in turn unlocking workforce participation and productivity.^{xv}

However, to capitalise on this will require cultural and systems change. Research by [CEW and Bain](#) shows that men are twice as likely to have their flexible work requests rejected than women.^{xvi}

Work policies or strategies

72.7%
of employers have flexible work policies or strategies in place



5.6%
have set targets for employee engagement

2.3%
of those have set targets for men's engagement

Source: [WGEA, Gender Equality Scorecard November 2019](#) ^{xvii}

The Government has a role to play in enabling and promoting flexible working practices of employers and the take up by both women and men.

Along with policies for flexible work, reporting and accountability are key to driving behavioural change. Aspirational objectives are unlikely to be effective in improving gender diversity unless they are backed up with appropriate numerical targets. CEW calls for an enhancement

of the regulatory reporting framework to encourage employers to develop gender equality policies and strategies with targets, timeframes and incentives for men's uptake of flexible work. Including employer-set, measurable and timebound flexibility objectives in WGEA reporting will significantly strengthen employers' capacity and likelihood of achieving targets around workplace gender diversity and equality.

Appendix

Workforce Disincentive Rate created by Child Care Subsidy

Example 1

A parent earning the FTE of \$40,000 per annum (around the national minimum wage), whose spouse is also earning \$40,000 per annum, would take home only an extra \$7.80 an hour upon increasing work days from three to four (WDR = 64 per cent), and an extra \$3.40 an hour upon increasing working days from four to five (WDR = 84 per cent).

Example 2

A parent earning the FTE of \$80,000 per annum, whose spouse is earning \$80,000 per annum, would take home only an extra \$8.30 an hour upon increasing work days from three to four (WDR = 81 per cent), and an extra \$6.40 an hour upon increasing working days from four to five (WDR = 85 per cent).

Example 3

A parent earning the full-time equivalent (FTE) of \$100,000 per annum, whose spouse is earning \$100,000 per annum, would take home only an extra \$13.70 an hour upon increasing work days from three to four (WDR = 75 per cent), and go backwards by \$11.50 an hour upon increasing working days from four to five (WDR = 121 per cent).

All examples assume 2 children in long day centre-based care. Example 1 assumes hourly cost of approximately 80 per cent of the CCS cap, Examples 2 and 3 assume cost equal to the CCS cap.

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Women leaders enabling women leaders