

# Women for Progress

2023-24 Pre-Budget  
Submission to the  
Commonwealth Department  
of Treasury

January 2023

Prepared by Impact Economics and Policy

# About Women for Progress

Women for Progress is a non-partisan group of women from diverse backgrounds and experiences who have come together to highlight the role of women and girls in our society and economy.

Australian women are the most educated in the world yet rank 38th for economic participation and opportunity.<sup>1</sup> Women with children get an average of \$2M less in their lifetime earnings than men with children.<sup>2</sup> By making it easier for women to work and improving the pay and conditions for care economy workers like aged care staff, disability carers and early childhood educators, we can build more equal opportunities for Australian families while securing our nation's economic future. The future of work is inextricably linked to the future of care and so we must better support essential workers and their families while they support ours.

COVID-19 and natural disasters continue to disproportionately impact women and exacerbate existing disadvantage, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disability, LGBTIQ+ and culturally and linguistically diverse women. The OECD and many UN forums recognise that policies which support gender equality will not only benefit women and children, but also boost the economy and reduce costs related to a multitude of social harms. We have identified a number of priority reforms and long-term investments in women and children that will support progress on women's safety and economic participation, to underpin strong and sustainable economic growth.

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The recommendations in this submission address some of the pressing issues for gender equality identified by the Women for Progress group. These recommendations are supported by the members of the group as a collective. Individual group members (and/or their respective organisations) may, of course, have their own separate views on the relevant issues and may lodge further submissions to government on that basis.

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<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2022

<sup>2</sup> D Wood, K Griffiths and O Emslie, Cheaper childcare: A practical plan to boost female workforce participation, Grattan Institute, 2020.

# About Impact Economics and Policy

Impact Economics and Policy brings together a group of expert economists, policy specialists and affiliates with experience working across government, non-for-profits and consulting. We partner with clients for impact through providing robust evidence, fresh analysis and strategic communication to tackle Australia's biggest public policy challenges.

## Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners throughout Australia and their continuing connection to both their land, rivers and seas. We also pay our respects to Elders, past and present, and generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples now and into the future.

# Executive Summary

The 2023-24 Commonwealth Government Budget is being prepared at a time of significant political momentum to address the stalled progress of Australian women. There have been major reforms announced and implemented over the past 12 months at a Federal and State level, and a greater focus on progressing the economic participation of women. Many of these reforms were part of Women for Progress '2022-23 Pre-Budget Submission, including:

- Increase in the rate of the Child Care Subsidy commencing on 1 July 2023 and the expansion of free three year and four year old kinder programmes in Victoria and NSW, which is moving Australia closer towards a universal and high-quality early learning system;
- A commitment to increase paid parental leave to 26 weeks by 2026 which is the first step towards providing 52 weeks shared leave between partners by 2030;
- Reforms to the National Employment Standards to include a minimum of 10 days per year of paid family and domestic violence leave;
- Additional investments in preventative and crisis housing including an additional \$415 million over four years for long term housing for women and children fleeing domestic and family violence, including \$100 million from the Commonwealth to deliver up to 720 additional Safe Places for women and children;
- A commitment to fully implement all 55 Respect@Work recommendations;
- Amendments to the *Fair Work Act* to include gender equity as an express object;
- A number of reforms to income support payments that disproportionately impact women including making the cashless debit card voluntary;
- A commitment to address the gender pay gap in the public sector; and
- Implementation of a number of recommendations from the Wiyi Uan U Thangani report including a National First Nations Women's Summit.

These reforms are all welcomed, but must be viewed in the context of the societal and economic progress of Australian women having stalled in recent years, and in some cases turned backwards with:

- Increasing rates and severity of domestic and family violence.<sup>3</sup>
- The burden of care on women continuing to grow, impacting employment and labour participation.<sup>4</sup>
- The gender pay gap holding firm and not narrowing for the first year since the collection of data began.<sup>5</sup>
- A lack of progress in narrowing the gap between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and non-Indigenous women on mortality and life expectancy.

The 2023-24 Commonwealth Budget is not a time to rest, but a time to build on the progress made and maintain the momentum in Australia towards gender equality.

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<sup>3</sup> Impact Economics and Policy September 2022, Aftershock: Addressing the Economics and Social Costs of the Pandemic and Natural Disasters, [https://www.ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/IE\\_Aftershock\\_Domestic-Violence-Family\\_V4\\_SINGLES-1.pdf](https://www.ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/IE_Aftershock_Domestic-Violence-Family_V4_SINGLES-1.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Wood, D., Griffiths, K., and Crowley, T. (2021). Women's work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian women. Grattan Institute.

<sup>5</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2022), Media Release: Stagnant gender pay gap a \$26,600 wake-up call for employers to pick up the pace, [https://www.wgea.gov.au/newsroom/WGEA\\_New\\_national\\_gender\\_pay\\_gap\\_media\\_release](https://www.wgea.gov.au/newsroom/WGEA_New_national_gender_pay_gap_media_release)

Women for Progress are proposing a number of priority reforms and long-term investments in women and children that will support progress on women's safety and economic participation, to underpin strong and sustainable economic growth.

- Early Years Reform to increase the availability and quality of affordable early learning, improve the incomes of women working in care, and encourage a more equal distribution of in-home care between men and women.
- Gender Responsive Budgeting and targets to propel policy making to support women's progress.
- Greater investment to underpin the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children to protect some of the most vulnerable in our society and reduce long-term economic costs.
- Innovative and ambitious solutions to help solve Australia's housing crisis and build the foundations for great economic growth into the future.

Through pursuing the reforms and investments supported by Women for Progress, the 2023-24 Commonwealth Government Budget can lay the foundations for a sustainable and inclusive economic recovery, lifting living standards and delivering a healthier, safer and stronger nation.

# Summary of Recommendations

## **Recommendation 1:**

Immediately implement an interim wage subsidy of at least 10 per cent for all educators and carers working in the ECEC sector and make provision to meet the additional costs through adjustments to the Commonwealth Child Care subsidy.

## **Recommendation 2:**

Remove the Activity Test for the Child Care Subsidy to ensure that every child has access to a minimum of three days per week of quality early childhood education and care.

## **Recommendation 3:**

Increase government paid parental leave to 52 weeks by 2030 including superannuation and with incentives for greater sharing of leave between partners.

## **Recommendation 4:**

The Commonwealth Government's implementation of a Gender Responsive Budgeting process should include targets for women's progress and gender equality, to be used for Government-wide policy development and future budget decisions.

## **Recommendation 5:**

Provide additional funding to underpin the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children.

## **Recommendation 6:**

Increase rates of Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 40 per cent over four years and tie future growth in payments to growth in rents faced by low-income earners.

## **Recommendation 7:**

Government to engage with stakeholders across business and philanthropy to develop novel funding models, inclusive of impact investment, to support the National Housing Accord.

# Women's Progress Stalling

2023 is widely expected to be a year of slowing economic growth, rising unemployment and challenging times for many people both globally and in Australia.<sup>6</sup> Even if we avoid a technical economic recession, it will feel like a recession for many households with continued growth in the cost of living and insufficient movement in wages and earnings to keep up with cost burdens.

We enter this difficult period at a time when the progress of women has suffered from the global pandemic, natural disasters, and other events:

- Rates and severity of domestic and family violence increased during the pandemic, associated lockdowns and natural disasters<sup>7</sup>
- The burden of care on women grew, impacting employment and labour participation<sup>8</sup>
- The gender pay gap did not narrow for the first year since the collection of data began<sup>9</sup>

As we step into a year of worsening economic times, we risk further deterioration in the lives and wellbeing of women without additional investments and reforms.

Women for Progress are recommending to the Australian Government a number of investments and reforms that will maximise the safety and economic participation of women, and the future productivity of children. Failure to do so will undermine Australia's economic growth and future prosperity.

*"As countries emerge from the pandemic, taking action to address gender equality setbacks is not only relevant and timely but also critical for an inclusive, sustainable, and resilient recovery."*<sup>10</sup>

United Nations, September 2022

## Increased violence putting pressure on housing

Research published in 2015 estimated the annual per person cost for each woman experiencing domestic violence was \$26,780.<sup>11</sup> This annual cost has now escalated to \$32,970 in 2022-23 dollars<sup>12</sup> with the bulk being costs of pain, suffering and premature mortality of the women affected.

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<sup>6</sup> Reserve Bank of Australia (2022), Statement of Monetary Policy November 2022, <https://www.rba.gov.au/publications/smp/2022/nov/>

<sup>7</sup> Impact Economics and Policy September 2022, Aftershock: Addressing the Economics and Social Costs of the Pandemic and Natural Disasters, [https://www.ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/IE\\_Aftershock\\_Domestic-Violence-Family\\_V4\\_SINGLES-1.pdf](https://www.ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/IE_Aftershock_Domestic-Violence-Family_V4_SINGLES-1.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Wood, D., Griffiths, K., and Crowley, T. (2021). Women's work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian women. Grattan Institute.

<sup>9</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2022), Media Release: Stagnant gender pay gap a \$26,600 wake-up call for employers to pick up the pace, [https://www.wgea.gov.au/newsroom/WGEA\\_New\\_national\\_gender\\_pay\\_gap\\_media\\_release](https://www.wgea.gov.au/newsroom/WGEA_New_national_gender_pay_gap_media_release)

<sup>10</sup> United Nations (2022), Closing gender pay gaps is more important than ever, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1126901>

<sup>11</sup> PWC (2015), 'A high price to pay: The economic case for preventing violence against women', <https://www.pwc.com.au/pdf/a-high-price-to-pay.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Inflated by Impact Economics and Policy using CPI for Australia (ABS, September 2022) up to 2021-22 and RBA CPI forecasts for 2022-23 (RBA, November 2022).

Despite awareness of the immense and long-lasting costs of domestic and family violence, and its intolerably high prevalence (impacting more than 1 in every 6 women in Australia from the age of 15)<sup>13</sup>, rates of violence have been growing.

For the year ending September 2022, there was a 17.3 per cent increase in domestic violence incidents in Victoria relative to four years earlier.<sup>14</sup> Over this same period, domestic violence related assaults in NSW grew by 13.1 per cent, with even faster growth of 18.5 per cent occurring in the regions.<sup>15</sup>

The prevalence and severity of domestic violence was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and record-breaking floods of 2022 (continuing into 2023)<sup>16</sup>. However, violence was already increasing prior to these events.

Growth in Specialist Homelessness Service (SHS) clients highlights the circumstances that many victims of domestic violence are driven into. Over the ten years to 2021-22 there was a 32.1 per cent increase in the number of women experiencing domestic violence who used Specialist Homelessness Services, from 62,179 to than 82,146 women.<sup>17</sup> This is double the growth in all clients of 15.3 per cent. Alarmingly, there has been an even more dramatic increase (68.4 per cent) in the number of female Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander SHS clients.

These figures likely only scratch the surface, not capturing the unmet need, nor women who were unable to access support services.

**Figure 1: Ten-Year Growth in Specialist Homelessness Service Client Numbers, 2011-12 to 2021-22**



Source: Impact Economics and Policy calculations using AIHW (2022), Specialist Homelessness Services Collection data cubes 2011-12 to 2021-22, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shsc-data-cubes/contents/specialist-homelessness-services-collection-shsc-data-cubes>

<sup>13</sup> ABS 2017, Personal Safety, Australia, 2016, Table 3.3

<sup>14</sup> Crime Statistics Agency (2022), Victorian Crime Statistics Sept 2022, <https://www.crimestatistics.vic.gov.au/crime-statistics/latest-victorian-crime-data>

<sup>15</sup> BOSCAR (2022), NSW Recorded Crime Statistics quarterly update September 2022, [https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar\\_publication/Pub\\_Summary/RCS-Quarterly/RCS2022Q3-PageSummary.aspx](https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Pages/bocsar_publication/Pub_Summary/RCS-Quarterly/RCS2022Q3-PageSummary.aspx)

<sup>16</sup> Impact Economics and Policy September 2022, Aftershock: Addressing the Economics and Social Costs of the Pandemic and Natural Disasters, [https://www.ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/IE\\_Aftershock\\_Domestic-Violence-Family\\_V4\\_SINGLES-1.pdf](https://www.ncoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/IE_Aftershock_Domestic-Violence-Family_V4_SINGLES-1.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Impact Economics and Policy calculations using AIHW (2022), Specialist Homelessness Services Collection data cubes 2011-12 to 2021-22, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shsc-data-cubes/contents/specialist-homelessness-services-collection-shsc-data-cubes>



The mass growth in reliance of domestic violence victims and other at-risk women on homelessness services drives home the need for affordable housing options in Australia, especially now as housing affordability is a larger problem than ever before.

### *Recent progress*

Women for Progress welcomes the actions taken by the Albanese Labor Government in late-2022 to advance women's safety. The release of the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (2022 to 2032) was a valuable step towards improving action and investment addressing gender-based violence.

We particularly welcome the delivery of two of Women for Progress's 2022 Recommendations:

- Change the National Employment Standards to include a minimum 10 days per year of paid family and domestic violence leave for all employees.
- Implement all recommendations of the Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner's Respect@Work.

Our 2022 Pre-Budget Submission also called for "Investment in preventative and crisis housing for older women and people experiencing family and domestic violence (including those on temporary visas)". Some of the spending plans for the returns from the Housing Australia Future Fund (to be established), will support the improvement of housing options for vulnerable women<sup>18</sup>, particularly:

- Building 4,000 properties for women and children fleeing domestic and family violence, and older women on low incomes who are at risk of homelessness.
- \$100 million for crisis and transitional housing options for women and children fleeing domestic and family violence, and older women on low incomes who are at risk of homelessness.

While these investments are welcomed, they are unlikely to go far enough in light of the scale of need for these housing options demonstrated above.

### **Progress on pay parity stalls**

Australia's gender pay gap held constant at 22.8 per cent in 2021-22, according to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency's (WGEA) annual Employer Census.<sup>19</sup> This was the first year in the data collection's 8-year history that there was no improvement in gender pay parity, leaving women earning an average of \$26,596 less than men in 2021-22.

This comes off the back of women experiencing the bulk of employment losses during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia<sup>20</sup>, cutting into income and economic security<sup>21</sup>. Fortunately, women's employment and workforce participation recovered through the second half of 2022, but

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<sup>18</sup> Ministers for the Department of Social Services (2022), Media Release: Helping more Australians into homes, <https://ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/9511>

<sup>19</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2022), Media Release: Stagnant gender pay gap a \$26,600 wake-up call for employers to pick up the pace.

<sup>20</sup> Risse, Leonora, and Angela Jackson. "A gender lens on the workforce impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia." *Australian Journal of Labour Economics* 24.2 (2021): 111-143

<sup>21</sup> Andrews, D et al (2020), Australian Government Department of Treasury Working Paper - The Career Effects of Labour Market Conditions at Entry, <https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-06/p2020-85098-202006.pdf>

the scarring effects of prior employment losses and reduced participation in education should not be underestimated.<sup>22</sup>

Women now account for 47.5 per cent of all employed persons and are participating in the labour force more than ever before, with a 62.4 per cent participation rate.<sup>23</sup> But not all women have benefited from the jobs recovery. While total employment of women returned to and surpassed pre-pandemic levels at the start of 2021, it took a year and half longer for employment of women in their 20s to recover, only reaching pre-pandemic levels in mid-2022. This comes despite 20 to 29 year old women having greater rates of higher education degrees and participating in the labour force at higher rates than other age groups.

Even though other age groups saw a rapid recovery in employment, women are still overrepresented in insecure casual employment (which provides no paid leave entitlements) and in lower paying industries such as hospitality, retail, administrative services and care-based professions.

The persistence of a stubborn and substantial gender pay gap is a disincentive against growth in women's labour force participation. This compounds the immense barriers already facing women seeking to enter or return to the workforce, primarily being caring responsibilities, disability and illness<sup>24</sup>. At a time when skills shortages are rife across a growing number of sectors<sup>25</sup>, targeted action to reduce the barriers and disincentives against women's workforce participation is critical. This includes making progress on closing the gender pay gap. Australia cannot afford another year of gender pay gap stagnation.

### *Recent progress*

To support the advancement of women's participation and employment, Women for Progress provided the Federal Government with the following recommendations at the start of 2022:

- Change the *Workplace Gender Equality Act* to require public reporting by all organisations with more than 20 employees, on all indicators including gender pay gap, cultural background and progress towards women in leadership targets.
- Commit to targets and public reporting on women in leadership in the political and public service sector from 2023.
- Support and fund for all seven recommendations of the Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report.<sup>26</sup>

We welcome the steps that have been taken towards these recommendations, including the announcement and funding of several initiatives in the October 2022-23 Budget. These initiatives included increasing data collection and publication by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency

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<sup>22</sup> 19 Borland J (2020). Scarring effects: A review of Australian and international literature, Australian Journal of Labour Economics (AJLE), Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC), Curtin Business School, vol. 23(2), pages 173-187.

<sup>23</sup> Impact Economics and Policy Calculations using ABS (2022), Labour Force, Detailed, Australia – November 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia-detailed/latest-release>

<sup>24</sup> ABS (2022), Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation, Australia, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/barriers-and-incentives-labour-force-participation-australia/latest-release#wanted-a-job-or-more-hours>

<sup>25</sup> National Skills Commission (2022), 2020 Skills Priority list released, <https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/news/2022-skills-priority-list-released>

<sup>26</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2020), Wiyi Yani U Thangani Report, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/wiyi-yani-u-thangani>

(WGEA) as well as funding some of the recommendations of the Wiyi Yani U Thangani (Women's Voices) report.

We look forward to seeing further action on these topics in the 2023-24 Budget.

## Burden of Care

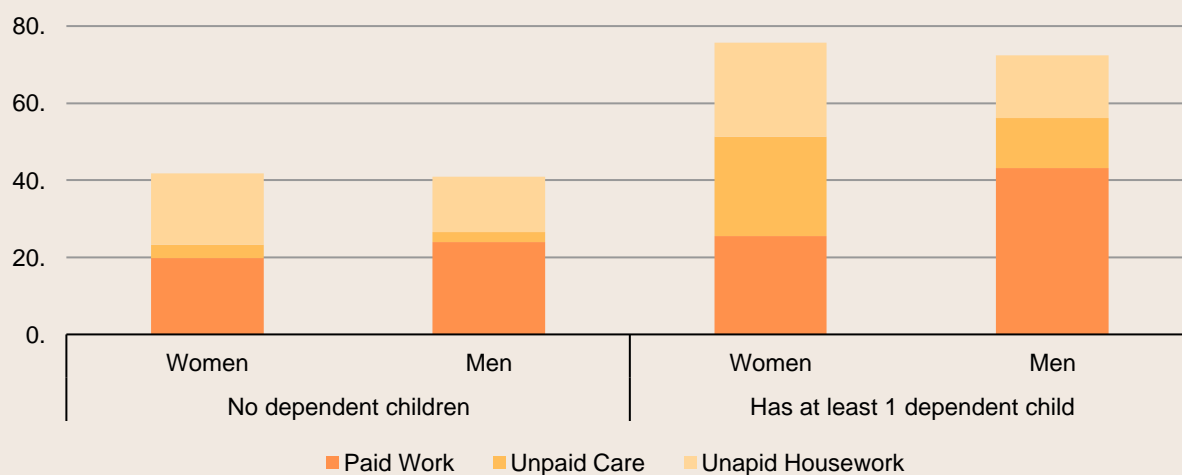
Gender differences and gaps in the labour force are partly influenced by the highly gendered division of unpaid work and care. The expectations on women to be the primary caregivers to children (and other family members) consistently limit women's ability to participate in paid work.<sup>27</sup>

While men in Australia typically spend more time each week in paid work than women, the gap in time use is more than made up for by women's unpaid work caring for children, caring for disabled and elderly family members and carrying out errands and other housework.<sup>28</sup>

On average, women with dependent children spend 50 hours each week on unpaid care and housework. This is 21 more hours each week than men who also have dependent children. Even women without children spent 5 additional hours per week on care and housework than their male counterparts.

This all adds up to women spending more hours each week on all paid and unpaid work combined than men, detracting from the time available to women for sleep, recreation and general wellbeing.

**Figure 2: Average hours per week on paid and unpaid work and care**



Source: Impact Economics and Policy calculations using Melbourne Institute (2021), Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey Data 2021.

Time spend in paid work includes commute time. Care includes caring for children as well as caring for ill, disabled or elderly family members.

The extent of the care burden placed on women is intensified when affordable early childhood education and care options are not readily available. At latest measure in 2021, 3 in every 4 people who had used or thought about using paid early childhood education and care reported

<sup>27</sup> ABS (2022), Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation, Australia, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/barriers-and-incentives-labour-force-participation-australia/latest-release#wanted-a-job-or-more-hours>

<sup>28</sup> Melbourne Institute (2021), Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey 2021

experiencing at least some difficulty with costs.<sup>29</sup> More than half also reported at least some difficulty finding a place at a child care centre.

The legislated changes to the Child Care Subsidy that will come into effect on 1 July 2023, will be welcome relief to many families.<sup>30</sup> But further reform involving the Activity Test on accessing the Child Care Subsidy will be needed for early childhood education and care to become truly accessible and universal.

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<sup>29</sup> Impact Economics and Policy calculations using Melbourne Institute (2021), Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey Data 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2022), <https://budget.gov.au/2022-23-october/content/cost-of-living.htm#m1>

# Investing in an Equitable Future

Australia's future economic prosperity relies on investments in its people that lift the key drivers of economic growth – participation, productivity and population, or the “3 Ps”.<sup>31</sup> Economic equity for women, and the promotion of gender equality more broadly, represents one of the most effective approaches to deliver the “3 Ps” of economic growth.

Not only can lifting female participation in the labour market deliver significant economic benefits, but policies that improve connection with the labour market and fully utilise female skills and education can help lift productivity.<sup>32</sup> Policies that reduce the ‘motherhood’ penalty can also help to lift Australia's falling birth-rate and increase natural population growth.<sup>33</sup>

Policies that strengthen women's economic position can also strengthen their position at work and at home. This can help to reduce the levels of discrimination and harassment they face.

## Early Years Reform

Early Years reform can support and strengthen our economy, improving our wellbeing and global competitiveness by increasing female participation, and giving our future leaders and workers the best start in life during the critical early years of their development.

Women are increasingly highly educated, with Australia ranked number one globally for literacy and tertiary education enrolment in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index.<sup>34</sup> But we are failing to translate this immense potential into economic success, ranked 38<sup>th</sup> in the world for our gender gap in economic participation and opportunity.<sup>35</sup>

The larger share of caring responsibilities that is undertaken by women is one of the main barriers to women's participation and lost productive capacity. And women who are participating in the workforce are vastly overrepresented in low-paid care-based sectors.

The reforms proposed by Women for Progress would increase the availability and quality of affordable early learning, improve the incomes of women working in care, and encourage a more equal distribution of in-home care between men and women.

Women for Progress calls on the 2023-24 Commonwealth Government Budget to deliver:

- Immediate implementation of an interim 10 per cent wage supplement for all educators and carers working in the early childhood education and care sector and make provision to meet the additional costs through adjustments to the Commonwealth Child Care subsidy.
- Removal of the Activity Test for the Child Care Subsidy to ensure that every child has access to a minimum of three days per week of quality early childhood education and care.

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<sup>31</sup> Australian Department of Treasury (2021), 2021 Intergenerational Report – Australia Over the Next 40 Years. [https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-06/p2021\\_182464.pdf](https://treasury.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-06/p2021_182464.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> Iáh, L. S. (2011). Should governments in Europe be more aggressive in pushing for gender equality to raise fertility? The second “YES”. *Demographic Research*, 24, 217-224.

<sup>33</sup> Weinstein, AL (2017) Working women in the city and urban wage growth in the U.S. *J Regional Sci.* 57: 591– 610. doi:10.1111/jors.12336.

<sup>34</sup> World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report 2022, <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2022>

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*

### *Government support for higher wages across the early childhood education and care sector*

The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector is in the midst of a critical worker shortage, with a record 7,254 vacancies recorded in September 2022.<sup>36</sup> Staff shortages undermine both the availability and quality provision of childhood education and care.

These issues are particularly critical in regional Australia, with 85.3 per cent of people living in childcare deserts compared to 28.8 per cent of people living in major cities.<sup>37</sup> Staff shortages drive much of this shortage, alongside funding mechanisms that do not incentivise provision of services in regional and remote areas.

Improved childcare access (which can be supported by growing the ECEC workforce) for children outside of cities is increasingly critical as recent evidence shows an increase in the developmental vulnerability of children living in regional and remote areas.<sup>38</sup> This is likely a result of the compounding impacts of living in childcare deserts with pre-existing disadvantage and the increasing frequency and severity of natural disasters primarily impacting regional and remote locations.

Despite having better access than regional and remote areas, access to childcare is still not an easy task in major cities<sup>39</sup>. More than half of parents living in major cities still experience difficulty finding a childcare centre in the right location and with finding an available place for their child.<sup>40</sup>

Some positive action has been taken in 2022. The Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Secure Jobs, Better Pay) Act 2022, offers the prospect of significant future wage increases for carers in the sector, and the endorsement of a ten-year workforce strategy by all Australian Education Ministers sets out a pathway towards improved attraction and retention of ECEC workers.<sup>41, 42</sup>

However, early childhood education and care providers have noted that there will be a long lead time on either of these advancements bringing about wage increases in the sector, putting access and the development outcomes of children at risk.<sup>43</sup> In their appearance before the Senate Committee on Education and Employment Legislation, spokespeople from both Goodstart Early Learning (Australia's largest non-for profit ECEC provider) and the Community Child Care Association (an industry body for community-based ECEC providers in Victoria) called for the Commonwealth Government to fund an interim 10 per cent wage supplement for early childhood workers from January 2023.<sup>44</sup> This should be administered through increase Child Care Subsidy (CCS) payments to ensure that costs do not increase for parents, and services remain viable, and would bridge the gap.

**Recommendation 1:** Immediately implement an interim wage subsidy of at least 10 per cent for all educators and carers working in the ECEC sector and make provision to meet the additional costs through adjustments to the Commonwealth Child Care subsidy.

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<sup>36</sup> National Skills Commission 2022, Internet Vacancy Index, <https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/topics/internet-vacancy-index>

<sup>37</sup> Hurley, P., Matthews, H., & Pennicuik, S. (2022). Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare? Mitchell Institute, Victoria University, <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/how-accessible-is-childcare-report.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> 2021 AEDC National Report, <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2021-aedc-national-report>

<sup>39</sup> As defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2011), Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS): Volume 5 - Remoteness Structure <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/1270.0.55.005July%202011>

<sup>40</sup> Impact Economics and Policy calculations using Melbourne Institute (2021), HILDA Survey Data 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Commonwealth of Australia (2022), Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Secure Jobs, Better Pay) Bill 2022

<sup>42</sup> Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority 2022, National Workforce Strategy

<sup>43</sup> Parliament of Australia (2022), Education and Employment Legislation Committee 14/11/2022

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*

**Impact on Underlying Cash Balance (\$m):** The cost is estimated to range from \$900 million to \$1.6 billion per annum.<sup>45</sup> The interim supplement would need to last until ECEC Workforce Strategy measures providing a sustained uplift in sector wages are implemented.

### *Reform of the Activity Test for the Child Care Subsidy*

Access to quality care and education in early childhood is critical, with 90 per cent of brain development occurring before the age of five.<sup>46</sup> Investing in quality early childhood education and care supports children to continue flourishing into adulthood, paying ongoing dividends through a more productive workforce.<sup>47</sup>

Improved access to early childhood education and care also assists parents to participate in the workforce. Limited access to high quality and affordable early childhood education and care kept 120,000 women from working in 2021 – and improving access could provide an instant boost to labour supply and productivity, lifting economic growth and living standards.<sup>48</sup>

As well as adding to participation, greater access to early childhood education and care would enable many parents to increase the hours they work. It has been estimated that almost 450,000 Australians with children under the age of five would like to work more hours.<sup>49</sup>

The current Activity Test for the Child Care Subsidy limits access to subsidised child care and is contributing to 126,000 children from the poorest households missing out on critical early childhood education and care.<sup>50</sup> As a result, these children are more likely to start school behind their peers, with many never catching up.

The Activity Test aims to encourage participation in the workforce, but does the opposite by creating higher search costs for those looking to engage in work and creating uncertainty for parents in casual employment. Parents in casual employment with uncertain hours face an ongoing risk that they will fail to meet the test and generate overpayment debts.<sup>51</sup>

The Plan for Cheaper Child Care announced in the October 2022-23 Budget<sup>52</sup>, reduces the Activity Test barrier for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, but effectively only guarantees 1.5 days per week of child care. This is short of the three days recommended by experts<sup>53</sup> and fails to improve child care access for other vulnerable families such as single parents, non-English speaking families and low-income households.

The Activity Test for access to the Child Care Subsidy currently stands in the way of universal access to childcare, and its removal would deliver significant benefits:

- Greater access for children from low-income families to early education and care
- Improved participation for low income parents that are currently dissuaded from work due to the uncertainty created by the Activity Test and risk of incurring debts with Centrelink

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<sup>45</sup> Cost estimates developed by Thrive by Five in 2022-23 dollars. Wage range for ECEC staff (for all levels of qualification) was determined, then multiplied by estimated number of staff (from ABS Labour Market Information) with a 10% pay rise.

<sup>46</sup> First Things First (2018), First Five Years, <https://files.firstthingsfirst.org/why-early-childhood-matters/the-first-five-years>

<sup>47</sup> Centre for Policy Development (2021), Starting Better: A Guarantee for Young Children and Families

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>49</sup> Dixon, J. (2020), A comparison of the economic impacts of income tax cuts and childcare spending

<sup>50</sup> Impact Economics and Policy (2022), Child Care Subsidy Activity Test,

<https://www.impacteconomics.com.au/home/education>

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>52</sup> Services Australia (2022), Plan for Cheaper Child Care, <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/budget-2022-23-october-9.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> Centre for Policy Development (2021), Starting Better: A Guarantee for Young Children and Families



- Reduced red tape for Government and providers, improving the efficiency of the system.

**Recommendation 2:** Remove the Activity Test for the Child Care Subsidy as the next step towards ensuring that every child has access to a minimum of three days per week of quality early childhood education and care.

#### Impact on Underlying Cash Balance (\$m):

2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
710 - 1730	730 - 1780	750 - 1840	772 - 1880

Source: Impact Economics and Policy estimates based on Centre for Policy Development (2021), Starting Better: A Guarantee for Young Children and Families

### Strengthening Paid Parental Leave

In the October 2022-23 Budget, the Albanese Labor Government announced the expansion of the Paid Parental Leave (PPL) scheme, a long overdue reform. Yet further reform is needed, with Australia's PPL scheme still presenting multiple issues:

- The expansion of PPL to 26 weeks is still half the OECD average
- There is a lack of incentives for fathers to share parental leave
- Not paying superannuation on PPL leaves women with a major financial disadvantage

Access to maternity leave is linked to higher rates of post birth labour force participation by mothers.<sup>54</sup> This is because it maintains the link between mothers and employers, and makes it easier for women to balance the caring responsibilities associated with a newborn child and returning to work.

While the Government's current plan to progressively increase the Paid Parental Leave scheme up to 26 weeks by 2026 is a step in the right direction, it would still leave PPL for mothers in Australia at half the length of the OECD average.<sup>55</sup>

Women for Progress calls for the government to improve the scaling up of the PPL, to reach 52 weeks by 2030. This will benefit the participation and productivity of mothers while also improving child development outcomes, lifting future productivity of the workforce. This would see the annual ramp up in PPL continue and pick up pace after reaching 26 weeks in 2026-27.

The expansion of PPL for mothers is still just part of the story. More equal sharing of care between mothers and fathers improves outcomes for children (including later in life), and for both parents. Children who receive more equal provision of care from their father benefit from forming greater attachment to both parents, having more resources available to them (from both parents participating in the workforce) and being more likely to engage in more gender equal behaviours in adulthood.<sup>56</sup> Fathers who are more engaged in caring for their children reap benefits from improved wellbeing and health, with mothers also experiencing improved health outcomes from greater

<sup>54</sup> Equity Economics and The Parenthood (2021), Back of the Pack, [https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/theparenthood/pages/794/attachments/original/1638942108/Back\\_of\\_the\\_Pack\\_report.pdf?1638942108](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/theparenthood/pages/794/attachments/original/1638942108/Back_of_the_Pack_report.pdf?1638942108)

<sup>55</sup> Impact Economics and Policy analysis of data from OECD Stat's Family Database 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Behson, S. and Robbins, N., (2016), "The Effects of Involved Fatherhood on Families, and How Fathers can be Supported both at the Workplace and in the Home", Paper presented at the UNDESA Expert Group Meeting on Family Policies and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.



ability to access health services, lighter workloads and a lower risk of post-partum depression.<sup>57</sup> As well as improving the balance of unpaid care responsibilities at home, studies suggest that every month of parental leave taken by fathers can improve mother’s annual salaries by 6.7 per cent.<sup>58</sup>

Increasing the rate of pay, as well as use or it or lose it provisions and other incentives for fathers to also take parental leave are needed to support more equal patterns of caring within the household and improve outcomes for parents and children.

Current policy settings will set aside two weeks of PPL for fathers or another non-primary carer. As with the length of PPL provided for primary carers, this falls far below the OECD average of 10 weeks<sup>59</sup> and is not conducive to incentivising more equal sharing of child caring.

We call for the expansion of paid parental leave for both mothers and fathers, with additional use or lose it provisions to incentivise more equal sharing between partners. We also call for the addition of superannuation on all paid parental leave.

Not paying superannuation on PPL overwhelmingly disadvantages women by contributing to the huge gender gap in retirement savings.<sup>60</sup> Women on average retire with one third of the superannuation balance of men. Paying superannuation on parental leave would improve financial equality for women and may also remove one of the disincentives for fathers taking up paid parental leave.

**Recommendation 3:** Increase government paid parental leave to 52 weeks by 2030 (following the currently planned scale-up to 26 weeks in 2026) including superannuation and with incentives for greater sharing of leave between partners.

**Impact on Underlying Cash Balance (\$m):**

2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
20	40	60	90

Source: Impact Economics and Policy estimates based on Wood, D., Emslie, O., and Griffiths, K. (2021). Dad days: how more gender equal parental leave would improve the lives of Australian families. Grattan Institute.

**Gender responsive budgeting**

The Federal Government has committed to implementing Gender Responsive Budgeting in its annual budget process. Gender Responsive Budgeting involves analysing all policy measures to identify how they can either advantage, or potentially disadvantage, different cohorts of the population on the basis of gender.<sup>61</sup> When done most appropriately, Gender Responsive Budgeting also incorporates the intersection of gender with other factors such as age, cultural background, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and socio-economic circumstance.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Levto, R., van der Gaag, N., Green, M., Kaufman, M., & Barker, G. (2015). State of the World’s Fathers: A MenCare Advocacy Publication. Promundo, Rutgers, Save the Children, Sonke Gender Justice, and the MenEngage Alliance.

<sup>58</sup> Johansson E-A. (2010). The effect of own and spousal parental leave on earnings. <https://www.ifau.se/globalassets/pdf/se/2010/wp10-4-the-effect-of-own-and-spousal-parental-leave-on-earnings.pdf>

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>60</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, The gender gap in retirement savings, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/gender-gap-retirement-savings>

<sup>61</sup> Queensland Council of Social Services (2021), Gender Responsive Budgeting, <https://www.qcoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/QCOSS-2022-23-pbs4-Make-the-Queensland-budget-work-for-everyone.pdf>

<sup>62</sup> Government of Canace (2020), Gender-based analysis plus (GBA+), <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/departmental-plan-2020-2021/gender-based-analysis-plus.html>

Including indicators of and targets for the progress of all women through a Gender Responsive Budgeting process will drive policy making at a federal level that is actively focused on advancing gender equality across all realms for all women. It will also make the Federal Government a national leader, setting the standard for State and Territory Governments.

**Recommendation 4:** The Commonwealth Government's implementation of a Gender Responsive Budgeting process should include targets for women's progress and gender equality, to be used for Government-wide policy development and future budget decisions.

# Securing Women's Safety

There is an urgent need for the 2023-24 Commonwealth Government Budget to address gender-based violence and the housing needs of women, particularly those escaping domestic violence.

Given the documented increases in rates of family and domestic violence, and increases in the reliance of victims of violence on specialist homelessness services, failing to address gender-based violence will add to the already high cost to the Australian economy.

We need a future where everyone is safe, free from violence and supported to contribute equally.

## **Additional funding to underpin the National Plan to End Violence**

Last year's release of the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children (2022 to 2032) was a significant step towards improving action and investment addressing gender-based violence.

However, the current funding provided to implement the national plan has been deemed insufficient by the women's safety sector to support achievement of the plan's goals.<sup>63</sup> The women's safety sector has called for an increase of total funding to \$1 billion annually in order to reduce wait times for support, build more capacity for preventative action and better enable victims of violence to safely escape their abuser.<sup>64</sup>

Specialist sexual assault services, including those providing trauma counselling, are currently unable to keep up with the need for their services, with waiting periods reaching several months for victims to access support. Some services are limiting the number of sessions they provide so that they can take on new clients, while victims in some regional and rural areas are not able to access specialist support at all.<sup>65</sup> Increased funding to the women's safety sector would support the expansion of specialist sexual assault services so that more victims are able to access support.

Current sexual assault and family violence services are focused on women and children who are primarily the victims of violence. While this is appropriate, it has led to insufficient capacity within the sector to respond to men who may be at risk of perpetrating violence, and support them into alternative pathways.<sup>66</sup> Additional funding to lift the capacity of the sector for preventative action will help save some of the economic and personal costs associated with each instance of violence.

When violence has been perpetrated and prevention is no longer an option, women and children must be supported to safely escape perpetrators. But a lack of available social and affordable housing is driving many women to return to their perpetrators and the risk of violence, or into homelessness.<sup>67</sup> Based on pre-pandemic incidence of domestic and family violence each year, 7,690

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<sup>63</sup> Pro Bono Australia (2022), Funding for plan to end gender-based violence in one generation, <https://probonoaustralia.com.au/news/2022/10/funding-for-plan-to-end-gender-based-violence-in-one-generation/>

<sup>64</sup> Fair Agenda (2022), Full fund women's safety, [https://www.fairagenda.org/fund\\_womens\\_safety](https://www.fairagenda.org/fund_womens_safety)

<sup>65</sup> National Association of Services against Sexual Violence as quoted in the National Tribune (2022), Sexual assault victims will continue to face lengthy waiting times, <https://www.nationaltribune.com.au/sexual-assault-victims-will-continue-to-face-lengthy-waiting-times/>

<sup>66</sup> Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (2016), Domestic violence and women's economic security: Building Australia's capacity for prevention and redress. <https://www.anrows.org.au/publication/domestic-violence-and-womens-economic-security-building-australias-capacity-for-prevention-and-redress-key-findings-and-future-directions/>

<sup>67</sup> Equity Economics (2021), Nowhere To Go - The Benefits Of Providing Long-Term Social Housing To Women That Have Experienced Domestic And Family Violence,

women are returning to perpetrators due to having no-where affordable to live and 9,120 a year are becoming homeless after leaving their homes due to domestic and family violence and being unable to secure long-term housing.

For some women, an inability to safely escape a violent partner is complicated further by their visa status, further increasing their reliance on their violent partner. A significant portion of people on temporary visas are ineligible for any commonwealth income support payments, making it even harder for women on temporary visas to escape domestic violence.<sup>68</sup>

While some funding has been provided by the Government under the Housing Accord to support more long-term housing options for women and children fleeing domestic violence, the current investment will not be enough to support the full need.

Women for Progress call for increased funding to support the implementation of the National Plan, noting the calls from the women's safety sector to increase funding up to \$1 billion per year to support improved provision of sexual assault support services and reduced wait times, improved capacity to providing preventative services and a greater ability for more women and children to safely escape violence.

The National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children will only be successful if the appropriate investment is made to back it up.

**Recommendation 5:** Provide additional funding to underpin the National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children.

#### Impact on Underlying Cash Balance (\$m):

2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
520	530	550	560

Source: Impact Economics and Policy estimates based on current funding of the National Plan.

### Support for housing solutions

Available and affordable housing is a basic need that supports economic participation and productivity as well as fundamental health and safety. As the reliance of women (including those escaping family violence) on homelessness services continues to grow, investment in more and more affordable housing options is crucial to women's safety and economic inclusion.

The reforms proposed by Women for Progress would support the housing needs of low-income earners and encourage innovative funding solutions to the nation's housing challenge.

Women for Progress calls on the 2023-24 Commonwealth Government Budget to:

- Increase rates of Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 40 per cent over four years and tie future growth in payments to growth in rents faced by low-income earners.
- Investigate and develop novel models of funding that engage both private business and philanthropic investment in housing to support the National Housing Accord.

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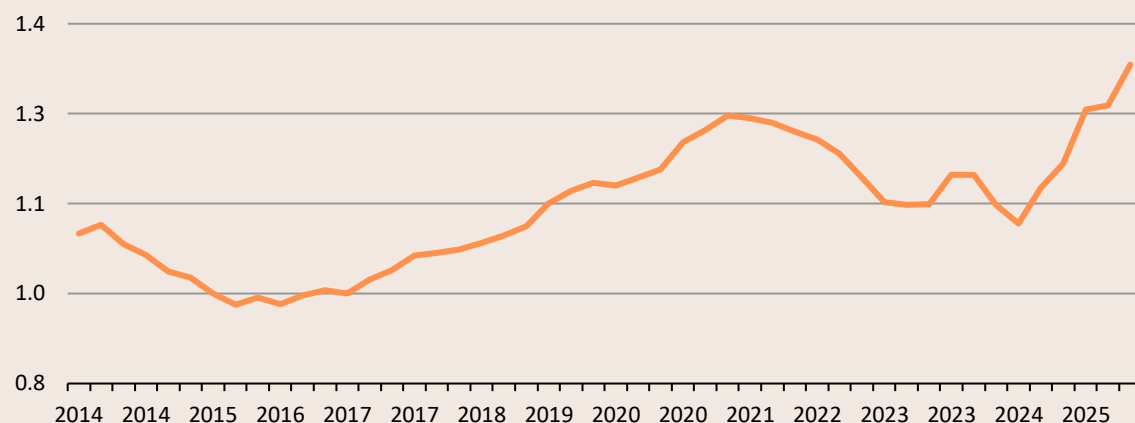
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<sup>68</sup> Domestic Violence NSW (2020), Ministers urged to better protect women on temporary visas experiencing violence, <https://www.dvnsw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/200806-Ministers-urged-to-better-protect-women-on-temporary-visas-experiencing-violence.pdf>

## Improving Rent Assistance

Housing affordability has deteriorated throughout the latest decade, and particularly in the last two years. By the end of 2021, the ratio of property prices to household income was higher than ever before (see Figure 3), and has risen further throughout 2022.

**Figure 3: Ratio of residential property price index to household disposable income**



Source: Impact Economics and Policy calculations using ABS Property Price and National Accounts data 2022.

This decline in housing affordability has contributed to growth in homelessness, with victims of domestic violence and older women at particular risk.<sup>69</sup> This is especially an issue for renters. Advertised rents across Australia grew nearly 10 per cent over the year to mid-2022, leaving more than half of low-income renters suffering rental.<sup>70</sup>

Commonwealth Rent Assistance supports pensioners and some other Australians who meet the income threshold, but it has failed to keep pace with rental costs, risking the housing security of many low-income Australians.

Women for Progress calls for the Government to increase Commonwealth Rent Assistance rates by 40 per cent to bring the support payments back in line with rental costs, and help bring low-income Australians out of rental stress and housing insecurity.

To ease the immediate impacts of this on the Budget, the increase could be phased in with a 10 per cent increase each year over four years. We also call for the increased rate of Commonwealth Rent Assistance to be linked to the rents faced by low-income earners rather than to overall inflation. This will provide ongoing protection for those reliant on Commonwealth Rent Assistance into the future.

**Recommendation 6:** Increase rates of Commonwealth Rent Assistance by 40 per cent over four years and tie future growth in payments to growth in rents faced by low-income earners.

### Impact on Underlying Cash Balance (\$m):

2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27
520	1070	1650	2250

Source: Impact Economics and Policy estimates based on Coates, B. & Moloney, J. (2022), Where's the cost-of-living relief for renters? Grattan Institute.

<sup>69</sup> Impact Economics and Policy calculations using AIHW (2022), Specialist Homelessness Services Collection data cubes 2011–12 to 2021–22, <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shsc-data-cubes/>

<sup>70</sup> Coates, B. & Moloney, J. (2022), Where's the cost-of-living relief for renters? Grattan Institute. <https://grattan.edu.au/news/wheres-the-cost-of-living-relief-for-renters/>

## *Investigating models of private investment under the National Housing Accord*

The Federal Government has recognised the immense housing challenges facing Australia's population and economy.<sup>71</sup> The National Housing Accord sets out the shared ambition of all Australian governments to build one million new homes by 2030.

This is a welcomed policy development that will support the growing housing needs of Australians, including vulnerable women who are increasingly relying on homelessness support services.<sup>72</sup> However, to realise its goal, the National Housing Accord will require substantial additional funding on top of that which has currently been committed.

To support funding of the National Housing Accord, Women for Progress call on the Government to research novel models of investment in housing, including those that engage with private business investment and philanthropic investment.

There are many examples of philanthropy contributing to affordable housing solutions in Australia including deposit loan schemes, shared ownership models, share purchases and philanthropic collaborations with the construction sector.<sup>73</sup>

But philanthropy and public investment alone are unlikely to provide enough funding to support the Government's ambitious housing agenda. This provides an opportunity for the Government to also engage private business in impact investing and other novel investment models to bridge the housing supply funding gap.

This may be a role that the Interim National Housing Supply and Affordability Council<sup>74</sup> can provide. We also encourage the National Housing Supply and Affordability Council to consider options for incentivising state governments to increase the supply of housing.

Investigating innovative models to unite state governments as well as philanthropic and business investment to support national housing ambitions can support the National Housing Accord becoming a reality.

**Recommendation 7:** Government to engage with stakeholders across business and philanthropy to develop novel funding models, inclusive of impact investment, to support the National Housing Accord.

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<sup>71</sup> Treasury (2022), National Housing Accord, <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/jim-chalmers-2022/media-releases/national-housing-accord-working-together-help-tackle>

<sup>72</sup> AIHW (2022), Specialist Homelessness Services Collection.

<sup>73</sup> Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation (2022), Philanthropy's role in home ownership, <https://www.lmcf.org.au/knowledge-hub/philanthropys-role-in-home-ownership>

<sup>74</sup> Minister for Housing (2022), Media Release: Interim National Housing Supply and Affordability Council, <https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/julie-collins-2022/media-releases/interim-national-housing-supply-and-affordability>

# Conclusion

As we leave the immediate pandemic response in the rear-view mirror and focus on the long-term economic success of Australia, it is critical that we do not leave women behind. Women's progress and equality has faced severe setbacks in the last three years, making action now more important than ever. As well as supporting the most vulnerable, we should be utilising the untapped potential of women to propel the economy forward.

Australian women have in recent years fallen behind globally in the march toward equality due to a lack of reform and investment in key drivers of female advancement.<sup>75</sup> Women for Progress is calling for that to change, and for the 2023-24 Commonwealth Government Budget to start with priority reforms and investments to both improve equality now and build the foundations for tomorrow. These reforms will deliver a stronger future for Australian women and for our economy.

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<sup>75</sup> Equity Economics (2021), Back of Pack – How Australia's Parenting Policies are Failing Women and Our Economy, [https://www.theparenthood.org.au/back\\_of\\_the\\_pack](https://www.theparenthood.org.au/back_of_the_pack)