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**5 JUNE 2020**

**Rationale**

The severe health, social and economic impacts of COVID-19 have created a compelling opportunity to quickly address pervasive structural obstacles to Australia’s prosperity.

This discussion paper makes recommendations to inform governments and the private sector designing Australia’s economic recovery. Its practical suggestions can also inform the next Women’s Economic Security Statement (2020) and consultations for the next National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children.

Our economic recovery will be fastest and most successful if it leverages the labour potential of the whole population. Well established research has identified **increasing women’s participation in the paid workforce as the most effective lever to boost Australia’s GDP and household income**. The McKinsey Global Institute recently estimated that Australia could increase the size of its economy by 12 per cent (or AUD 225 billion) by 2025 by accelerating progress towards gender parity.

Australia has been making progress in some areas towards gender equality, but this is not guaranteed in a post-COVID-19 environment. The actions of government in combination with the private sector will be critical to a strong economic recovery. COVID-19 has revealed the extent to which structural and systemic barriers are the primary impediment to women’s full economic participation, and the real risks posed by gender inequality to the Australian community. It has also illustrated how quickly government and business can respond - and communities can adapt - when systems and structures are changed in the common interest. Our experience has also shown the need for new systems and structures to be flexible and responsive to the needs of diverse women.

The current period provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to remove structural barriers to women’s full participation in the workforce, including the high effective marginal tax rate created by childcare costs and undervaluing of feminised industries. However, focusing on economic leverage whilst failing to address societal constraints will undermine progress. Now is also the moment to take simple steps to tackle social scourges, including the epidemic of gender-based violence (both physical violence and other forms of coercive control) and the concerning trend of poverty and homelessness among older women.

This discussion paper draws on expertise and research from ten agencies and organisations with gender knowledge: the Australian Government’s Women in STEM Ambassador, Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety (ANROWS), the Australian Human Rights Commission, Gender Equity Victoria,  the eSafety Commissioner, Our Watch, PricewaterhouseCoopers, VicHealth, Women’s Health Victoria and the 50/50 by 2030 Foundation at the University of Canberra. In developing this discussion paper, the authors consulted with the Office for Women in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and the Ambassador for Gender Equality in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

**Key recommendations**

Action under each recommendation should consider the specific needs of women affected by multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and/or inequality, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, rural women, LGBTQI women, and women with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse women, and women on temporary visas.

**Recommendations to help boost the economic recovery**

1. **Increase women’s availability to work by providing access to affordable childcare**

Extend the early childhood relief package until September, and urgently review the level of support and access to the current early childhood education and care system.

1. **Ensure that job creation efforts are spread across industries** **to benefit women and men**

Ensure that any stimulus or economic initiatives aimed at maintaining employment be analysed for their differing impacts on men and women, and make maintaining women’s workforce participation an objective of these efforts. Ensure that new jobs are not limited to male-dominated industries, and create re-skilling opportunities for the under-represented gender in male- and female-dominated industries (such as construction and health care).

1. **Increase the STEM sector workforce** **by upskilling women in STEM and digital literacy**

Upskill women to enter STEM roles by creating incentives for the STEM and education sectors to create targeted online courses and apprenticeships for women, and by supporting capacity-building initiatives to increase women’s skills in online safety and digital literacy.

1. **Ensure that industrial relations reforms promote employment opportunities for women and remove barriers to women in the current system**

Ensure that industrial relations reforms are informed by gender disaggregated labour force data and gender expertise. In particular, reforms could clarify and improve opportunities for part time, casual, temporary and flexible work, address conditions which impede women’s and parents’ full participation in work, and provide better mechanisms to support gender-equal pay.

1. **Combat gendered poverty in older age** **by better supporting those who take time out of the paid workforce to deliver unpaid care**

Introduce measures to increase women’s superannuation balance, such as allowing ‘catch up’ payments and introducing superannuation contributions during parental leave periods. Consider targeted measures to boost future retirement income for women negatively impacted by COVID-19.

**Recommendations for promoting social recovery**

1. **Protect women’s health** **and wellbeing**

Expand the number of Telehealth bulk billing sessions for sexual and reproductive health and mental health care. Target initiatives to encourage more women and girls to participate in sport, including through improved facilities, programs, coach development and leadership opportunities.

1. **Provide support to victims of gendered violence**

Recognise that violence against women is not limited to physical violence but includes coercive control (restricting autonomy and liberty). Improve violence against women response levers, including by developing a gender-responsive national housing strategy, expanding emergency lists and online service provision in courts, and building capacity in the response system to tackle technology-facilitated abuse. These measures should be implemented alongside consultation to ensure needs are being met.

1. **Prevent violence against women**

Provide sustained funding to implement primary prevention work addressing the underlying drivers of violence against women, including starting work on a Second National PlantoReduce Violence against Women and their Children which ensures funding and action across the entire spectrum from prevention to early intervention and response.

**Recommendations for more effective reform**

1. **Improve the effectiveness of decision-making through diversity and gender expertise**

Ensure that women, particularly with diverse experience and knowledge, are included in decision-making roles, and that decision-makers meaningfully engage with organisations with gender expertise. Establish a senior advisory body to government on unleashing the potential of women in the post COVID-19 recovery. Ensure that the ‘public face’ of government communications is diverse.

1. **Create evidence-based policy and budgeting drawing on gender disaggregated data and gender analysis**

Collect and use gender disaggregated data and apply gender responsive budgeting and policy-making to crisis and recovery planning and decision-making, including in the health sector and when evaluating industry performance.

**Evidence Base**

**Recommendation 1: Increase women’s availability to work** **by providing access to affordable childcare**

Increasing the affordability of early childhood education and care boosts economic output by directly increasing women’s participation and productivity in the paid workforce. The global pandemic has highlighted that early childhood education is an essential service. It has also exposed multiple vulnerabilities in Australia’s early childhood education and care arrangements, including over-reliance on unwaged labour to support the functioning of the economy, and poor remuneration of early childhood education staff. In 2018, full-time net childcare fees absorbed a quarter of household income for an average earning couple with two children in Australia, compared to the OECD average of 11%. These high childcare fees result in secondary earners (mostly women) facing high effective marginal tax rates, which limit their incentive to participate in the paid workforce, especially in a full-time manner (women constitute 37.7% of all full-time employees and 68.2% of all part-time employees in Australia). Evidence from other countries suggests that universal access to low fee childcare increases women’s employment and reduces the number of people on welfare. Reform options might include: increasing and simplifying the Child Care Subsidy (including providing access to two free days of childcare per child, per week and removing the Activity test); extending Paid Parental Leave to 26 weeks; extending Dad and Partner Pay to eight weeks; or making Paid Parental Leave available to both parents.

**Recommendation 2: Ensure that job creation efforts are spread across industries to benefit women and men**

The Australian labour market is highly gender segregated by industry and occupation. COVID-19 has exacerbated the associated unproductive outcomes, with a higher proportion of women (8.1%) than men (6.2%) losing their jobs between mid-March and mid-April 2020. Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that, in March/April 2020, women suffered a greater reduction in working hours than men, with female hours reducing by 11.5% compared to a 7.5% reduction in working hours for men. Gender segregation by industry has also left women disproportionately on the frontline of the pandemic - the majority of health care workers, social assistance workers and teachers are women, as are the majority of unpaid carers. Recovery investment announcements have so far focused heavily on male-dominated industries, including construction. Investment in industry recovery and job creation should include incentives and supports to recruit women, especially in traditionally male dominated sectors like mining, construction and trades. Recovery in female-dominated industries most affected by COVID-19 should be prioritised, including retail trades, hospitality and the arts. Action which supports the long term reduction of gender segregation across the Australian economy will better prepare the country for future crises. Investment in child care, aged care and disability services industries can accelerate immediate economic activity and build resilience for future crises. The Workplace Gender Equality Agency provides information about gender segregation, its risks to productivity and toolkits for change.

**Recommendation 3: Increase the STEM sector workforce** **by upskilling women in STEM and digital literacy**

The economic imperative for cultivating a diverse STEM workforce is overwhelming. PricewaterhouseCoopers recently found that upskilling just 1% of the Australian workforce into STEM roles would add $57 billion to our GDP over the next 20 years. Women are severely under-represented in the STEM industry, and more women are seeking alternative work as a result of the pandemic’s impact, making them a logical target STEM workforce.  Women are already underrepresented in VET pathways and apprenticeships, and the number of advertised apprenticeships has fallen due to the pandemic, from 1,731 positions in January to 880 in March 2020. This trend is removing skilled workers from key industries trying to rebuild after COVID-19. Harnessing the move to online learning resulting from the COVID-19 crisis would increase availability of STEM education for learners, be cost-efficient, and allow teachers to handle more students than face-to-face instruction. More broadly, digital capacity building helps assist women and girls to assess risk and harm and stay safe online, and equips them with the confidence and critical thinking skills they need to meet future technological challenges.

**Recommendation 4: Ensure that industrial relations reforms promote employment opportunities for women and remove barriers to women in the current system**

Industrial relations reforms will be more effective if informed by gender expertise supported by gender disaggregated labour force data, both historic data and data from the COVID19 period (including from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Workplace Gender Equality Agency). Traditional industrial relations arrangements have focused on the full-time work and traditional industries. Industrial relations reforms in response to the workforce impacts of COVID19 can leverage contemporary evidence about work, including gender trends. Reforms recognising the changing nature of work, emerging and essential industries, and trends in household patterns of care will ensure workers are able to maximise their working potential to accelerate economic recovery. ABS and WGEA data confirm that more women than men are in casual employment, temporary employment and short-term contract roles, and women are more likely to be under-employed than men. Female underemployment has risen to 14.8%, compared to 12.9% for men. In particular, reforms could clarify and improve opportunities for part time, casual, temporary and flexible work, address conditions which impede women’s and parents’ full participation in work, and provide better mechanisms to support gender-equal pay. Women are also more likely to be employed in lower-level roles, and highly feminised industries attract significantly lower rates of remuneration. These factors are the primary contributors to the gender pay gap that is measured by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency. COVID-19 has thrown into sharp relief the mismatch between caring industry salaries and the essential nature of caring work during pandemics and major crises. To close the gender pay gap, reform could involve amending the objectives of the Act, amending the equal pay provisions or addressing the requirement for a male comparator.

**Recommendation 5: Combat gendered poverty in older age** **by better supporting those who take time out of the paid workforce to deliver unpaid care**

Due in large part to their lower average wages, greater casual and part-time work and more breaks from the paid workforce to undertake caring roles, on average women retire with 20 per cent less superannuation than men, and are more likely than men to live in poverty in old age.  Older women were the fastest growing cohort of homeless people in Australia between 2011 and 2016. Evidence of the greater impact on women of job losses and reduced work over the initial period of COVID19 indicates that women could face an even greater risk of poverty in old age in the future. The ability for individuals to access up to 20,000 AUD from superannuation tax-free over the next two years may disproportionately expose women to economic insecurity in retirement. Older women in customer-facing roles may also find that employers are reluctant to let them continue to work in the COVID-19 context. The lack of obligation for employers and the Commonwealth to pay superannuation contributions during paid parental leave also contributes to women facing an elevated risk of poverty as they age.

**Recommendation 6: Protect women’s health and wellbeing**

Introduction of telehealth services is welcomed, in addition to face to faces services. Some women have reported difficulty accessing bulk-billed mental and sexual and reproductive telehealth consultations. Sexual and reproductive health care – including access to pre- and post-natal maternity care, maternal child health services, contraception, terminations and assisted conception – is essential health care. Experience from other countries shows that sexual and reproductive health services risk being deprioritised during times of crisis. Emerging data also suggests Australian women have been more likely than men to experience negative mental health impacts as a result of COVID-19, compounding existing mental health inequalities between women and men. Only two in five Australian women are sufficiently physically active, and they are significantly less likely to participate or have leadership roles in sport, depriving them of valuable physical and mental health benefits. Women can experience access and cultural barriers to sports participation, combined with a lack of role models and barriers related to caring responsibilities. This can be addressed through incentives for sports clubs to adopt flexible and family-friendly policies and promote women in leadership within their organisations.

**Recommendation 7: Provide support to victims of gendered violence**

Many women suffer trauma from coercive control in relationships, without physical abuse at all, or with physical abuse escalating to physical assault, including homicide (as in the case of Hannah Clark in Queensland who suffered extreme coercive control, but not physical abuse, before her murder). Insecure housing is a key correlate with experiencing domestic, family and sexual violence: experiences of violence can trigger housing insecurity, and housing insecurity can put someone at increased risk of violence. Additionally, not having a safe place to go can be a factor when women assess whether they can or will leave a violent partner. Higher financial insecurity and reduced ability to travel in the COVID-19 environment have increased pressure in this area. Women and children experiencing or at risk of violence need access to specialist domestic violence refuges, stay-safe-at-home programs, and affordable long-term safe housing options. Funding should be directed to services with specialist capacity to address the gendered dynamics of violence and homelessness. Expanding emergency lists and online provision of services in courts has multiple benefits, including: enhanced security for victim/survivors; increased access in remote/regional areas; potential to expand access to domestic and family violence specialisation in courts; increased efficiency for lawyers; and potential to lessen the burden of the practical impacts of attending multiple court dates (including travel, time off work, and child care costs). Since 2018, more than two-thirds of the eSafety Commissioner’s complaints about cyber abuse and image-based abuse, excluding extortion, involve women. Over the COVID-19 period between 15 March and 14 May 2020, the eSafety Commissioner received over double the standard number of reports about some forms of online abuse, including cyber abuse, with women continuing to represent over two-thirds of complainants. Over the first half of 2020, traffic to eSafety’s information and training about technology-facilitated violence against women has doubled.

**Recommendation 8: Prevent violence against women**

Primary prevention of violence against women involves whole-of-population initiatives which target the underlying drivers of violence against women in order to stop violence before it starts. Evidence shows that violence against women is driven by pervasive gender inequality. The government has committed to a focus on primary prevention in the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children* *(2010-22).* Governments, in partnership with specialist organisations (including those working with a diverse range of population groups) should begin work on a Second National Plan toReduce Violence against Women and their Children. The Plan could ensure funding and action across the entire spectrum from prevention to early intervention and response as a key part of Australia’s COVID 19 recovery strategy. Long-term and sustained funding is needed to develop multi-faceted prevention strategies which include policy and legislative reform, strategies for organisational development and institutional change, direct participation programs, community mobilisation, and social marketing. Governments have access to many policy levers to promote gender equality and shift social norms surrounding violence against women and gender roles and stereotypes.

**Recommendation 9: Improve the effectiveness of decision-making through diversity and gender expertise**

Workplace Gender Equality Agency data shows that women are under-represented in higher level roles in reporting organisations. This is consistent with women’s under-representation in elected roles, community leadership, and across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. Substantial research supports the importance of gender balanced leadership for enhanced productivity, innovation, and better outcomes. Without diversity in leadership, decision-making (particularly rapid decision-making) is compromised by blind spots, and communication of decisions is undermined.

**Recommendation 10: Create evidence-based policy and budgeting drawing on gender disaggregated data and gender analysis**

Without applying a gender analysis, including drawing on sex and gender disaggregated data, policy-makers are unable to recommend effective policy responses which address different impacts on men and women and create positive outcomes for the whole of the Australian population. For instance, disaggregated data on industry recovery will help to identify whether male- or female-dominated industries are recovering at a disproportionately accelerated rate, and allow policy-makers to take steps to ensure all industries are appropriately assisted during the recovery phase. Australia has a strong record of collecting gender segregated data where funding allows, including through Australian Bureau of Statistics Gender Indicators and other agencies. Collection of data should be funded to expand, and analysed drawing on existing gender expertise across government departments and among civil society organisations. Gender analysis should also be applied to evaluate the effectiveness of existing policies.