

**WHGNE Safe and Strong survey submission
October 2021**

Are you an organisation or an individual:

Organisation

If you are submitting on behalf of an organisation, what is the name of your organisation:

Women's Health Goulburn North East

What Local Government Areas (LGAs) does your organisation work with:

Moira, Greater Shepparton, Strathbogie, Mitchell, Murrindindi, Towong, Wodonga, Indigo, Wangaratta, Benalla, Mansfield, Alpine.

Victoria's Gender Equality Strategy will identify new and existing gender equality priorities across four thematic pillars: Safety, Health and Wellbeing, Economic Equity, Leadership and Representation, with the understanding that each of these pillars are interrelated and interdependent. On the sliding scale below, please indicate how you or your organisation view these pillars as aligning with advancing the rights and securing the wellbeing of women in Victoria:

3 out of 5 on the sliding scale.

Please select the pillars you'd like to comment on:

Economic equity

If relevant to you or your organisation, please share with us the five key issues facing Victorian women and your suggested solutions, when considering the economic equity pillar:

ISSUE 1: Gendered segregation of the workforce, gendered impacts of climate change, job insecurity

The solution: *Provide free or heavily subsidised skills development opportunities for women and gender-diverse people in sectors that are 'essential' to the Victorian economy.*

At Women's Health Goulburn North East, we're keenly aware of the intersections between economic activities, gender inequality, social wellbeing and community resilience in the face of disaster. Indeed, we have an eye to the future when we talk about economic equity and see a connection between the needs highlighted by COVID-19 and future needs that will arise due to climate change. Communities' capacity to adapt to climate change will also require strong, resilient localised economies built upon the principles of care, equality, wellbeing, restorative justice and self-determination.

As such, these are the areas in which investment in skill development is most critical and where we recommend the Victorian Government concentrate its efforts in building the capacity of women and gender-diverse workers as part of a radical, Victoria-led, economic transformation towards a steady, foundational economy that has gender equality at its very core. We also recommend that the government proactively create pathways for women and gender-diverse people working in ecologically unsustainable industries to retrain in these areas as a matter of priority.

The TAFE system is an accessible, pre-existing yet under-funded setting for greater investment for this purpose. Likewise, neighbourhood houses, vocational education settings, universities and workplace learning opportunities already located in regional towns and cities across the state provide pre-existing facilities for skill development in these critical areas. As such, we recommend greater state government investment in training opportunities – and support for women and gender-diverse people's skill development - via community-accessible educational settings across the following areas:

- Public Health
- Decarbonised, climate-safe housing construction/retrofitting/planning
- Local renewable energy generation, storage and networking
- Low- and zero-emissions transport
- Regenerative agriculture
- Land revegetation and restoration

ISSUE 2: Unemployment, underemployment, job insecurity

The solution: *Incentivise uptake of skills development opportunities by providing a non-coercive Victorian Government Job Guarantee, which provides government-guaranteed, fairly paid work opportunities with gender equal leave and entitlements*

We believe an additional incentive to support greater uptake of learning and training opportunities for implementation across the above-mentioned sectors/industries is introducing a Victorian Government Job Guarantee. That is, publicly funded, guaranteed work that focuses on the above-mentioned 'foundational' fields, ensuring job security, a decent living wage, superannuation, leave entitlements, pay equity, and gender equal working conditions for those who want work.

This work would not seek to replace work in other sectors but would rather supplement it, offering employment to people who are ready, willing, able and trained to work but who have not been able to find jobs. Nor would this work become a 'work for the dole' program, upon which other forms of social support are contingent. Instead, it would exist only to guarantee workers a meaningful and valued attachment to the workforce and community and a living wage when the private sector is weakened. Real-life examples of job guarantees – or "Employer of Last Resort" programs, as they are also known – can be found in Argentina's Jefes de Hogar program and India's National Rural Employment Guarantee. An Australian job guarantee is also the subject of ongoing research by a dedicated team at the University of Newcastle. This team has proposed a job guarantee as an economic policy measure that might support economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, and it has already commenced the work of surveying LGAs in NSW to gauge unmet community, environmental care and infrastructure needs, identifying hundreds of jobs that might fit such a scheme.

ISSUE 3: The gendered nature of unpaid domestic labour

The solution: *Actualise a shorter working week with no loss of pay*

We believe this maldistribution of work in Victoria should be addressed by serious consideration of a shorter working week with no loss of pay, which would help redistribute paid and unpaid work more evenly across the Victorian population. Moving to a shorter working week would also "bake in" more equitable working practices, attitudes and behaviours to the Victorian labour market, changing attitudes and values around gender roles and helping to revalue jobs typically regarded as "women's work". Models, such as Autonomy's shorter working time subsidy scheme, propose that employers pay four days' worth of wages. At the same time, the government "tops up"/subsidises earnings for the fifth day no longer worked to ensure no drop in pay, effectively reducing business wage bills by 20 per cent. This subsidy would be tapered off after five years, at which point the four-day workweek would be normalised.

The ACT Government is currently considering a shorter working week, and the ACT's experience could be beneficial to the Victorian Government investigating such a scheme for this state. The Netherlands implemented the four-day working week in the early 1990s. It is a policy that has also gained traction at the private company Unilever in New Zealand, Iceland, Ireland, Scotland and Spain.

ISSUE 4: Poverty, undignified and insecure work, unethical working conditions

The solution: *Implement a Universal Basic Income*

We recommend implementing a Victorian Universal Basic Income scheme, that is, a regular, automatic, unconditional payment to all Victorians that is set at a high enough level to guarantee all people protection from poverty. There are many UBI models available for consideration; however, we would urge the government to consider a model that would work alongside existing income support payments as a means of establishing social and economic equity in Victoria. We also direct the Government to the University of NSW Sydney's Minimum Income Standards for Low-income and Unemployed Australians, as evidence of work that has already been done to determine what a "basic income" might need to be.

New Economy Network Australia has its own Universal Basic Income research hub, dedicated to advocating for an Australian UBI; work which would be instructive for this investigation. The UBI hub notes that "A basic income gives everybody the security to say "no" to unsafe, illegal, unpleasant or unethical working conditions and financial dependencies within abusive relationships". We believe that being able to afford one's basic needs without resorting to being exploited for one's labour is essential to any definition of economic equity and empowerment.

What features and considerations would make the renewed gender equality strategy most valuable or useful:

We contend that economic equity for women cannot be achieved in an economy that prioritises private wealth for the few and growth at any cost. Economic equity requires a radical economic overhaul, a complete economic transformation to

- 1) ensure the social determinants of health are publicly funded;
- 2) respect the fact that human life has intrinsic value, beyond its capacity as labour or a resource for profit-making, and;
- 3) ensure the economy serves human need and planetary restoration. We will always advocate for universal free early childhood education and care, paid parental leave, and pay equity in the strongest possible terms.

But we believe these measures are only as good as an economy's ability to more equally distribute and value (in both a cultural and economic sense) care work, especially unpaid care work. It's only once care work - paid and unpaid - is prized for the foundational role it plays in every human life and the health of our planet, that we can begin to recalibrate gendered ideas of what work is, how work is distributed, what work is genuinely good for us as a community, and how work can be just one part of a balanced, healthy, safe and happy life. We seek to recommend policy that will set a course for Victoria to begin this economic transformation. We are confident the Victorian Government already has evidence and policy recommendations around universal childcare and pay equity at hand, particularly considering the good work already spearheaded as part of the implementation of the Gender Equality Act. We throw

our support behind such policy, as detailed by The Parenthood, Thrive by Five and the Workplace Gender Equality Agency.

Our understanding of economic equity draws on the work of women's movements across the globe. Although we are grappling with the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic within our communities, we continue to work in solidarity to co-create a vision for the future in which the economy exists not merely to generate incomes and enable the accrual of personal wealth, but to ensure the care of people and the planet and collective liberation, through preventative health and wellbeing, restorative justice and First Nations self-determination. We strongly encourage the Victorian Government to embrace the same considerations as it plans for a renewed gender equality strategy.

What do you think the Victorian Government needs to do to make sure we seek, hear and respond to issues affecting Victorian women and to help advance gender equality:

There are decades of research on women's experience of safety, health and well-being, and economic equity - much of which the Victorian Government has commissioned and published - and we encourage the use of this evidence to develop new policies and strategies to promote gender equality. We strongly advocate for lived-experience experts to be acknowledged as the most qualified people to speak about the issues that impact them, and we urge that their voices are not only heard but prioritised in this review. We call for meaningful engagement with the demands of First Nations women, women with disabilities, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, young women and gender-diverse people.

If you could change one program, initiative or policy in Victoria to advance gender equality, what would you change:

We would immediately and permanently stop the proposed 106-bed expansion of the Dame Phyllis Frost women's prison. Evidence shows jurisdictions that spend more on prisons and less on housing and social services have higher crime rates. Conversely, increased spending on housing is associated with decreased violent crime and lower rates of incarceration.

We work in solidarity with the Homes not Prisons coalition. We encourage the Victorian Government to meet the demands of this campaign by immediately diverting the \$188.9 million of funding to expand the women's prison towards building and supporting 1,000 new public homes instead.