

National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality Consultation 2023 Response to Discussion Paper Questions

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1. What would a gender equal Australia mean for you, your family, and community?

Women's Health Grampian's (WHG) leads best practice health promotion and primary prevention work aimed at systemic change to improve women's health and wellbeing in the Grampians region of Western Victoria, a rural and regional area of the state. We are working towards a vision of a gender equal society, taking an intersectional, evidence-based and collaborative approach to improving the health, safety and wellbeing of women and gender diverse people in the region.

Women represent half the population and yet gendered biases, norms and practices mean they have poorer health outcomes across several areas, such as mental health, sexual and reproductive health, and family violence. Gender inequality impacts on education, employment, housing and is the main driver of violence against women and gender diverse people.

In rural and regional Victoria, indicators of gender inequality are often exacerbated. Women living in rural areas are more likely than those in urban areas to experience family violence, and they face additional barriers to reporting and escaping abuse. There is often a lack of women in leadership, fewer health services, limited or no childcare and greater financial insecurity and poverty when compared to metropolitan areas. There are differences in the use of and access to a range of health services (for example, for women, there are limited sexual and reproductive health service options, particularly abortion care). There is, in addition, an overlay of lower socioeconomic status compared to urban areas, and poorer health, educational and employment outcomes.

Addressing gender inequality can provide positive outcomes for women, men and gender diverse people in every life context, beyond metropolitan areas. Women, men and gender diverse people will be healthier, the skills of women and gender diverse people will be harnessed in decision-making, policy development and leadership, and violence against women and gender diverse people will be reduced. This is the potential of a gender equal Australia.

2. What should be the role of government, business and the community in achieving gender equality?

All levels of society, including government, business and the community, must be involved to achieve change. Multiple, complementary and focused actions are needed to reach a broad range of settings including federal, state and local government; a range of industries and workplaces; schools; health services; and community settings including sport and recreation.

Workplace level change is vital to improving outcomes, opportunities and financial security for women and gender diverse people - governments can lead, legislate for and role model this. For example, Victoria's Gender Equality Act is aimed at promoting workplace gender equality in the public sector - including local government, state government, universities, water catchment authorities and health services. This is overseen by the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector. At a federal level, the Workplace Gender Equality Act provides an important legislative framework for action at business level - the levers for change are already in place, although the scope and power of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency could be expanded (for example, to include the federal public service). Gender Impact Assessments could also be required for all new policies, programs and services delivered by the public service, as they are in Victoria.

Education is also critical for change. Challenging social norms around gender equality and implementing changes needs a whole of society approach - particularly within the education sector, from early childhood, through primary and high school, to tertiary settings and adult education settings. This is where stereotypes are often formed and take hold.

In addition to broad structural change, a focus on local needs and local priorities is essential for developing solutions that leverage multiple sector networks, investments and activities. For example in Victoria, work to prevent violence against women is coordinated through regional primary prevention partnerships, facilitated and coordinated by their local women's health service. These act as a cohesive primary prevention infrastructure to grow and deliver prevention of violence against women action and embed gender equity values into diverse communities and organisations. Strategic coordination enables public messaging and activities to be reinforced, as well as shared and collective evaluation approaches.

3. What are your priorities for achieving gender equality in Australia?

· Engaging men in gender equality

Women are under-represented at all levels of government and in key civil institutions. There is inequality in pay, savings and superannuation that disadvantages women. The uneven sharing of caring and household responsibilities leads to women being over-represented in part-time and casual work, compounding unequal access to resources and economic participation. This is well articulated in the draft National Gender Equality. What is not articulated is the role that men play in maintaining this inequality - whether intentionally or not. At present, the draft also omits the role that men need to play in challenging and ultimately changing structures to ensure gender equality prevails.

'Privilege is invisible to those who have it' (Prof Michael Kimmel).

There is much evidence to suggest that when men see the words 'gender' or 'gender inequality', they don't believe it applies to them, instead, they perceive 'gender' as synonymous with 'women'. This needs to change and should start with the National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality.

Specific interventions focused on engaging boys and men in gender equality that incorporate the way that gender inequality impacts on their own mental health, risk taking behavior, relationships and opportunities is vital. This includes the active take up of flexible work arrangement by men. (Flexible work arrangements are currently predominantly utilized by women.)

Challenging the gender binary

Gender inequality is premised on deep-rooted, socially constructed roles, norms and behaviours that are firmly based on binary notions of gender. The National Gender Equality Strategy must interrogate the notion of the gender binary, including addressing the heterosexist and gendered systems and processes that perpetrate harmful gender and sexuality stereotypes.

There is a strong correlation between traditional masculine ideals (and associated attitudes and behaviours), and violence against women, gender diverse people and people from LGBTIQA+ communities. For this reason, the National Gender Equality Strategy needs to incorporate strategies that support and expand the understanding and acceptance of different gender identities. The National Gender Equality Strategy must include strategies that actively challenge heterosexism, traditional notions of gender and harmful stereotypes, all of which contribute to inequality, discrimination and oppression.

• Parental leave

Evidence shows the benefit that paternity leave policies have to gender equitable outcomes within households, particularly 'use it or lose it' models. Paid paternity leave in particular has a positive impact on female employment. Men who take paternity leave tend to be more involved in childcare into the future, and one Swedish study showed that women's future earnings increase by an average of 7% for every month of leave taken by the father.¹

Applying a gender lens to climate, change, emergency and disaster situations

Women are disproportionately impacted by climate change, emergency and disaster situations, particularly women living in rural and regional areas. Research indicates that after bushfires and other disasters, violence against women increases, intensifies and may be more likely to be excused or justified because of the stress and trauma experienced by perpetrators. Disasters also place pressure on people to conform to gender stereotypes and exacerbate existing gender inequalities, causing unequal health, social and economic outcomes for people of all genders.²

This highlights the importance of applying a gender lens to emergency and disaster planning, response and recovery, and the importance of women in leadership roles. Strengthening women's

¹ Cited in Criado Perez, C. (2020) Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men.

² For more information, see: www.genderanddisasteraustralia.com.au

participation in leadership and in key efforts to manage change will reduce the gendered effects of change and lead to better outcomes for all communities in adapting to a changing society.

4. What are the underlying challenges for women's economic equality that the strategy could address?

The underlying challenges for women's economic equality have been researched, studied and articulated for decades - indeed they are set out in the draft National Gender Equality Strategy itself. Action is needed, and there are two structural and complementary mechanisms for change that stand out. One is through the commitment to a 'caring economy' and the other is through gender responsive budgeting.

A caring economy is one that 'prioritises the care of one another and the environment in which we live, ... (it) respects people's multiple roles as carers, community members, partners, parents and so on, alongside their role as paid workers'. More particularly:

'Good quality care services, such as adult social care, healthcare and childcare are critical for a good economy. But a caring economy extends beyond care services: it involves caring about the pay and conditions of workers, acting together to end discrimination, deprivation and poverty and eliminate violence against abuse, and caring about the planet on which we live together. A caring economy means acting together to improve wellbeing rather than to maximise economic growth.'

Some key elements of a caring economy that the Strategy could include are:

- Reimagine costs, efficiency and productivity so that social value, environmental value and unpaid time are taken into account, rather than only market value
- Ensure that the impact of all economic policies on equalities (which allows for an intersectional view of gender equality) is properly assessed and bold action is taken to mitigate any negative impacts.
- Introduce free, universal childcare provision, including early childcare education increase staff qualification levels and pay
- Increase investment in healthcare, including higher pay for nurses, healthcare assistants and other support staff
- Build sufficient energy-efficient social housing and genuinely affordable housing
- Implement a well-funded, caring education system that prioritises wellbeing and challenges gender stereotypes
- Make it easier for workers to combine paid work and caring responsibilities
- Ensure social security benefits meet the additional costs of caring for children and living with disabilities are non-means tested and reflect the real level of these costs
- Increased and improved access to affordable healthcare in regional and rural areas.⁴

³ Women's Budget Group, UK.

⁴ For further information: https://wbg.org.uk/analysis/creating-a-caring-economy-a-call-to-action-2/

A second mechanism for achieving economic equality is gender responsive budgeting, which ensures gender equitable distribution of resources and contributes to equal opportunities for all.⁵

'Gender responsive budgeting can act as a powerful enabler for the successful delivery of a gender equity strategy, both in terms of the direct impact on policy funding and the signal that it sends to the community about the transparency and accountability that the government is applying in carrying out the strategy.'6

Victoria has started to apply gender responsive budgeting as part of the implementation of the Gender Equality Act. Applying gender responsive budgeting is an important way of ensuring policies achieve the outcome of economic equality for women and gender diverse people. The National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality provides the authorizing framework for gender responsive budgeting, and gender responsive budgeting provides the means by which we can ensure that we are moving towards gender equality.

5. What are the underlying challenges in the way we value and allocate care that the strategy could address?

See description of caring economy above, in addition to a more detailed analysis of the impact of limited childcare in rural areas below, noting also that women within households are more likely to be responsible for providing after school care, care for family members with disabilities and care for ageing parents. To achieve economic equity for women, childcare must be widely available all year round, free or low cost, and of a high quality, and childcare workers must be remunerated in a way that reflects the importance of this role. There is a gap in documenting the difference between urban women's employment outcomes and those of rural women, particularly regarding support systems that are taken for granted in urban populations, such as childcare. The impacts experienced by women because of limitations with childcare is a regional development issue requiring structural change and investment.

Limited childcare options in rural areas severely limits the economic opportunities available to women living in these areas. As families make decisions about work and childcare, we see how deeply embedded gendered social norms are — at an individual level within a family, and at a wider workforce level in terms of how poorly remunerated traditionally female-dominated work often is.

Research within the Wimmera region of Victoria in 2020 has identified that in order to participate in the workforce when childcare is not available, women must pay for care that operates outside the approved system, paying far more to work than their urban counterparts as they cannot attract the Federal Government subsidy for childcare. Alternatively, women "choose" not to participate in the workforce, which leads to experiencing career gaps which place their skills and credentials at risk.

⁵ Oxfam 2018: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/rough-guide-to-gender-responsive-budgeting-620429/#:~:text=presentation%20(1%20MB)-,Overview,justice%20and%20for%20fiscal%20justice

⁶ KPMG Australia 2022: https://kpmg.com/au/en/home/insights/2022/08/budgeting-gender-equity.html#:~:text=GRB%20enables%20decision%2Dmakers%2C%20administrators,to%20achievement%20of%20the%20strategy

This is a significant equity issue in the region, which intersects with regional development and growth.⁷

The 2020 study found that women were excluded from workforce participation due to structural limitations around childcare availability, and culturally this was understood in the Wimmera as an individual problem for women, rather than a broader structural issue requiring policy change and investment. Women across all five Local Government areas in the Wimmera hold more than twice the number of post-secondary qualifications when compared to men in the region yet hold far less senior managerial positions. This was shown to be due to a culture that reinforces the acceptability of this outcome and limits the supports women can access to participate in the workforce and engage in regional leadership. This ultimately limits the ability of women to lobby for change in their own community.

Policy change is needed that allows a more effective response to market failure when economies of scale cannot be achieved. This is necessary for rural communities to more comprehensively address structural inequities which impact on rural women's workforce participation.

6. Australia has a National Plan to End Violence Against Women and Children - how could the strategy contribute to ending violence and supporting the Plan?

The pursuit of gender equality lies at the heart of the prevention of violence against women, as gender inequality is the main driver of violence against women and children. The evidence clearly demonstrates that promoting gender equality is essential for the prevention of violence against women, and structural level change essential for this to occur (*Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia*). The recent National Community Attitudes Survey data continues to show how this link can be difficult to grasp (ANROWS 2023).

The proposed National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality is therefore intertwined with the National Plan to End Violence Against Women. Both are part of the same effort to achieve an Australian community where women and children live free from violence, abuse and discrimination. The Strategy must articulate this clearly and prioritise communicating the link between gender inequality and violence against women and gender diverse people.

Local level primary prevention work is critically important in reaching and tailoring efforts to a range of communities. Women living in rural areas are more likely than those in urban areas to experience family violence, and they face additional barriers to reporting and escaping abuse, including: geographic isolation; limited access to services; a lack of anonymity; community members with conservative attitudes; higher levels of gun and weapon ownership; and the experience of natural disasters (e.g. floods, bushfires etc.) which can increase the risk of family violence. Local regional primary prevention partnerships led by women's health services in metropolitan and rural regions of Victoria, such as Women's Health Grampians' Communities of Respect and Equality Alliance, support

⁷ Tischler, McDonald & Reeves. (2020). Unlocking Aspiration, Outcomes and Equity by unpacking Childcare Issues in the Wimmera Southern Mallee – Research Report. Federation University, December 2020.

workplaces, clubs and networks to connect gender equality practices within their work with the prevention of violence against women.⁸

Recently, a growing evidence base has emerged that supports the need for primary prevention strategies that focus on healthy masculinities, including in the National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children 2022-2032. This must be drawn out in the National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality. At present, 85% of the primary prevention workforce in Victoria identify as female, yet it is tasked with addressing the drivers of violence against women and shifting deeply entrenched gendered social norms across the entire population. Men must be engaged in change, including as practitioners. Male practitioners must demonstrate an understanding of the way in which patriarchy works, how complicity reproduces it, and must also engage in feminist analysis and accountability to feminist organisations. This should be explicitly addressed in the National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality as well.

7. Australia has a National Women's Health Strategy supported by an Advisory Council - how should the National Strategy for Achieving Gender Equality support this effort and reflect the role of health and wellbeing in achieving gender equality?

Historically, the lack of a gendered lens on the burden of disease and health systems across the world has resulted in gendered inequities. Women and gender diverse people experience particular health inequities and disadvantage due to their sex and gender, and a gender analysis of these additional priorities will reveal the different ways that they are impacted. The National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality should reference the National Women's Health Strategy and enhance understandings of the need for a gendered approach to health.

For example, endometriosis is a chronic condition that often comes with severe pain that can drastically impact people's ability to live their lives. Early diagnosis and treatment is key to reducing the long term impacts of endometriosis. Yet there is an average of a 6.5 year delay between the start of symptoms and a diagnosis. One of the main reasons for this is medical misogyny which is the social prejudice, medical ignorance and research exclusion that women and girls experience. Medical misogyny dismisses women and gender diverse people's pain. It is reinforced by medical structures that achieve a similar effect - men's bodies are seen as the standard in research, so medical training focused on men and was only later applied to women. Clinical factors such as non-specific symptoms and lack of accurate diagnostic tools also impacted women negatively. In conjunction with other forms of systemic discrimination, medical misogyny can further impact health outcomes for First Nations people, culturally and linguistically diverse and LGBTIQA+ communities, as well as people living with disability.

In this way, the National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality can bring a gender equity lens to the work of the National Women's Health Strategy, thereby enhancing outcomes and shining a spotlight

⁸ See: https://whg.org.au/our-work/prevention-violence-women/core/

⁹ Family Safety Victoria workforce census 2019-20.

¹⁰ Criado Perez, C. (2020) Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men.

on health inequalities. Not only that, a focus on prevention activity is vital for effective and enduring outcomes, and long-term investment is required for this to happen.

8. What do you think are the main challenges to achieving gender equal leadership and representation?

Limitations on women's independence and decision-making occurs in both the public and private spheres. Within the public sphere, this takes the shape of lower numbers of women (particularly women from diverse backgrounds) in politics, at decision-making levels throughout the community and in leadership roles within organisations. To foster a more equitable society, we must create space for women, girls and gender-diverse people to participate on an equal footing with men and boys - economically, politically and socially. As noted in the draft Strategy, frameworks and legislative change, such as the Victorian Gender Equality Act or the Respect at Work Report, point the way to increasing the number of women and gender diverse people in leadership positions. 11

Men hold the majority of leadership roles in boards, ASX companies, in local government, education, health services, sporting clubs, and across parliaments throughout Australia. This is undeniable and requires specific action aimed at encouraging men to take action on gender equality. But further interrogation is also required into traditional understandings of effective leadership, which are often premised on 'masculine' norms. The National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality could actively define, support and promote different ideas of what leadership looks like, drawing on theory and practice relating to feminist leadership, which is characterised by:

'accountability, transparency, respect, courage, and an explicit awareness and ongoing critique of power structures... An intersectional approach to feminist leadership strives to bring the diversity of women's voices and experiences to the centre, and to problematise and raise awareness of the intersections between sexism and other forms of discrimination, marginalisation and oppression.'¹²

The structures and barriers for women in relation to leadership should also be examined. A recent study of part-time and insecure work within the public sector in the Grampians region of Victoria found that in rural areas, the issues that impact on women's financial security and employment also affect their participation in leadership. Limited childcare and after school care has a major impact on working hours. Women are usually the default caregiver and caregiving responsibilities affect the workforce participation of grandmothers as well as mothers. All of this means that women are more likely to be employed part-time and take up flexible work arrangements - particularly in mid-level professional roles. Low paid positions and management positions are more likely to require a physical presence and be perceived as having limited flexibility. Furthermore, in rural areas,

https://www.wgea.gov.au/tools/gender-targets-toolkit

Gender Equitable Recruitment and Promotion Guide:

https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Guide for organisations.pdf

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¹¹ Useful resources: Workplace Gender Equality Agency's Target Setting Toolkit:

¹² From Dangerous Hope: Feminist Leadership, available at:

management turnover can be slow, due to limited senior opportunities. As a result, it was found that women are not aspiring to leadership, and are making choices not to progress their careers without engaging the workplace in a discussion about how to make flexibility work.¹³

9. What are critical factors that exacerbate gendered disadvantage over the life course?

Gender is only one way of understanding the experience of women and gender diverse people. Intersectionality acknowledges that gender inequality is compounded by the overlapping effects of other forms of disadvantage or discrimination that a person may experience due to characteristics such as: race; Aboriginality; religion; ethnicity; disability; age; sexual orientation; rurality and/or; gender identity. The following extract provides a useful guide to taking an intersectional approach, defined as:

- Going beyond explanations or solutions that use single categories to describe people or issues and acknowledging that we are shaped by many factors interacting together.
- Identifying and transforming systems of power and privilege that negatively shape individual outcomes, building coalitions and working towards social equity.
- Actively reflecting on and addressing our own relationships to power and privilege as bystanders, researchers, workers or advocates.
- Understanding that there is no fixed hierarchy of disadvantage and that we may
 experience or understand the ways our lives are impacted by power or oppression
 differently.
- Recognising that people can experience privilege and oppression simultaneously, depending on the specific context or situation.
- Centring marginalised experiences, voices and leadership, wherever possible.

Available at: https://www.mcwh.com.au/wp-content/uploads/Intersectionality-Matters-Guide-2017.pdf.

A useful example of the integration of an intersectional approach into gender equality policy is found in Victoria's Gender Equality Act. One of the principles of that Act is:

Gender inequality may be compounded by other forms of disadvantage or discrimination that a person may experience on the basis of Aboriginality, age, disability, ethnicity, gender identity, race, religion, sexual orientation and other attributes.¹⁴

The Act also requires that defined entities take an intersectional approach to meet their Gender Equality Act obligations.

An intersectional approach to gender inequality must be taken throughout the National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality - not as an add on.

¹³ Tischler, McDonald, Reeves (April 2023). Rurality and workforce participation: exploring prevalence of parttime & insecure work in Grampians public service roles. Federation University: Report for Commissioner for Gender Equality in the Public Service.

¹⁴ https://www.genderequalitycommission.vic.gov.au/about-gender-equality-act-2020

10. Are there issues your organisation would address first? Are there issues that should be addressed together?

- Expand the role of the Workplace Gender Equality Act to include the federal public service.
- Include the need to undertake Intersectional Gender Impact Assessments across all new or reviewed policies, programs and services at federal level.
- Implement Gender Responsive Budgeting processes.
- Fund strategies to engage men in gender equality action, and ensure they are accountable to feminist gender equality principles.
- Establish a Commissioner for Gender Equality that could lead action on the National Gender Equality Strategy.

11. In what areas are stereotypes a key barrier to achieving gender equality?

Gender stereotypes are present in our everyday lives and have a cumulative impact over time, profoundly influencing outcomes for women and men across the life course. They are played out in relationships (through unequal sharing of domestic labour, for example), in schools (where girls are excluded from certain team sports) and in workplaces (in hiring and promotion practices). For boys, gendered norms (for example, that men are unable to control their anger) can lead to the perpetration of violence against women. Gendered norms and practices are how people internalise, maintain and act out gender privilege and gender inequality.

Applying a gendered lens across different policy areas is vital and this helps to surface stereotypes that might be reinforced, or indeed, challenged, by a policy, program or service. Addressing stereotypes throughout education - from early childhood, school and beyond - is paramount. They infuse how we understand gender inequality, and challenging stereotypes must be integral to the National Gender Equality Strategy, including heterosexist stereotypes that negate differences and diversity in gender identity.

There are also certain sectors that play a significant role in rural areas, such as agriculture, tourism or emergency services. All of these sectors have gender inequalities and stereotypes that are specific to that setting and must be challenged. This is why a workplace approach, as discussed in question 2 above, works so well - particularly if supported by expert gender equality organisations, such as women's health services in Victoria.

WHG is currently working to increase the recruitment and retention of women in male dominated industries in our region. Data shows that women in these industries face more barriers and progress more slowly than their male counterparts, making them less likely to receive bonuses or work in management positions. Women, men and gender diverse people that challenge gender stereotypes must be supported and celebrated. But this work must start with the way certain careers are promoted to girls and boys at school, and it continues into workplaces. Male-dominated industries must be supported to create safe, healthy and gender-equal workplaces - programs such as WHG's

Act On Site (currently funded by the federal government) provides intensive support to male-dominated industries that are seeking to change their culture.¹⁵

12. When building the evidence base and assessing progress, where should we focus?

Data that is disaggregated by gender and a range of other intersectional characteristics, as well as geography, is vital to understand the picture of health, wellbeing, outcomes and opportunities in our communities. Policies, programs and services need to respond to the influences of sex and gender, and for that, data is needed. Current and comprehensive data also provides us with the ability to measure changes in progress towards gender equality, determine new priorities, targets and areas for action as well as the opportunity to inform the broader community on both the need for and the value of this work.

Policy changes are needed now to ensure this data is collected and made available to the public and researchers. The Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data sets out some important steps that could be resourced in order to build the evidence base and assess progress, including:

- Establish a commitment to centring the voices of individuals at the greatest risk of
 marginalisation or discrimination in all aspects of data systems and practice. This means
 accepting that lived experience is a valid form of evidence of inequality or discrimination.
- Promote equity across the entire data value chain.
- Ensure that institutional data systems are inclusive and safe.
- Engage data to increase context awareness and reduce inequality. Intersectional approaches to
 data should be adopted by governments and organisations to improve the quality of life of
 people who have been affected by intersecting inequality.
- Build inclusive data institutions. High priority should be placed on diversity and inclusion in the workforce, and analysts should critically assess how elements of their own identity shapes the data they collect, analyse and use.¹⁶

13. What accountability and reporting mechanisms would you prioritise?

- Establish a Commissioner for Gender Equality that could lead action on the National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality.
- Develop a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework to run alongside the National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality.
- Embed gender responsive budgeting as it 'enables decision-makers, administrators and the public to evaluate how policy decisions are contributing to a government's gender equity strategy.'¹⁷

https://www.data4sdgs.org/sites/default/files/file uploads/JN 1286 IDC KP WhitePaper 24pp A4.pdf

¹⁵ More information: https://whg.org.au/our-work/projects/women-in-trades/

¹⁶ More information:

¹⁷ KPMG Australia 2022: https://kpmg.com/au/en/home/insights/2022/08/budgeting-gender-equity.html#:~:text=GRB%20enables%20decision%2Dmakers%2C%20administrators,to%20achievement%20of%20the%20strategy