ECONOMIC EQUITY FOR WOMEN.

PREPARED BY

Women's Health Goulburn North East

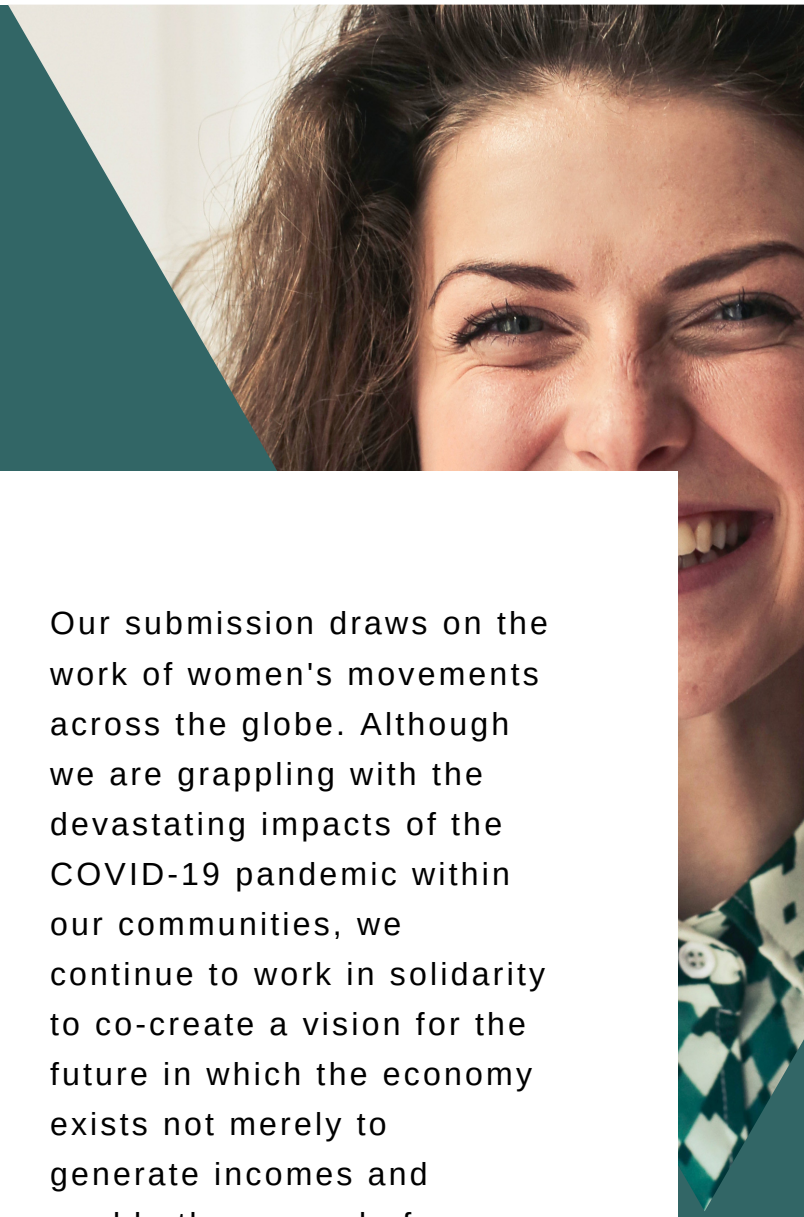
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We are intersectional in our approach and are proud to stand beside generations of great women whose work has brought us closer to equality for all.

We acknowledge the wisdom, living culture and connection of the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work and acknowledge the profound disruption of colonisation and the Stolen Generations on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We believe in shared and just cultural transformation that embraces diversity, and these acknowledgements are part of the ethical principles that guide our work and conduct.

Reimagining the economy means radical transformation is necessary. Our submission is grounded in the belief that economic activities should centre care: for ourselves, for each other and for Country. We commit to centring our work and lives around a culture of care for people and land, the recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander self-determination, true listening to and heeding of Indigenous voices, the valuing of First Nations wisdom around how we can connect ourselves with humility, love and compassion to each other and the Earth that nurtures us.

This always was, and always will be Aboriginal land.



WHO WE ARE

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) is a proudly feminist organisation supporting the creation of equal, just and resilient communities in rural and regional Victoria. We believe in shared and just cultural transformation and locate our work within an ecosystem of broad global alliances working across social movements. Gender and climate justice sits at the heart of our work, and the urgency of addressing what have become existential crises is what propels us to extend our visioning beyond reformative tweaks to inadequate existing systems, towards unapologetically bold and truly transformative change.

Our submission 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.

women's health
goulburn north east
challenging inequity, embracing diversity

THE FOCUS OF OUR SUBMISSION

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 Panel 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.

As part of our submission to the Inquiry into Economic Equity for Victorian Women, we invite you to consider radical policy ideas for a Victorian economy that would achieve equity for women and gender-diverse people by truly valuing human life, relationships and nature.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

Our focus for this submission is the following four policy areas. Their alignment with the inquiry's terms of reference is demonstrated in brackets. These policy areas are outlined in greater detail below. We believe these policies begin to set the necessary social and economic conditions for women and gender-diverse people to realise safe, healthy, just and equal lives in Victoria. Please note, these conditions are contingent upon public investment in collective wellbeing, via the social determinants of health.

1) Provide free or heavily subsidised education/training for women and gender-diverse people in sectors that have been demonstrated to be 'essential' or foundational to the Victorian economy (TOR 2d. Skill development and access to promotional opportunities; TOR 3c. Retraining and reskilling support for women);

2) Incentivise this education/training and reduce unemployment/underemployment via a Victorian Government Job Guarantee, which provides fairly paid work opportunities with gender equal leave and entitlements (TOR 2c. Blocks to workforce participation, including unemployment and underemployment; TOR 2d. Skill development and access to promotional opportunities; TOR 2e. Work insecurity and rates of casualisation in women-dominated industries and other sectors);

3) Actualise a shorter working week with no loss of pay (TOR 3b. Measures to support the workforce participation of women with caring responsibilities and to encourage women's domestic partners and men to take on a greater share of these responsibilities);

4) Implement a Victorian Universal Basic Income (TOR 2a. ….value given to work performed in women-dominated industries and other sectors)

01.

Provide free or heavily subsidised education/training for women and gender-diverse people in sectors that have been demonstrated to be 'essential' or foundational to the Victorian economy

The impacts of COVID-19 have enabled our communities to recognise those services and industries that are truly 'essential' to liveability. These foundational economic activities – healthcare, food production, education, housing, transportation – are the industries whose breakdown has the gravest impact upon rural and regional people's resilience and their ability to live and connect, particularly during times of disaster. This is because these sectors are directly connected to the social determinants of health – the living and working conditions that form people's social environment.

At Women's Health Goulburn North East, we're keenly aware of the intersections between these 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:** public health has played a critical role in information sharing and preventative health during COVID-19. This role needs to be strengthened and expanded upon, with an eye to climate change's impacts on local communities.

- **Decarbonised, climate-safe housing construction/retrofitting/planning**: with a view to the transformation of Victorian housing stock to include a higher proportion of climate-safe, accessible and appropriate social and public housing (the provision of which would also support women's economic equity);

- L**ocal renewable energy generation, storage and networking**: to support the transition of Victorian energy networks to decentralised, renewable, community-owned resources in which women and gender-diverse people can share decision-making power;

- **Low- and zero-emissions transportation**, including freight and public transport;
- **Regenerative agriculture**; and
- **Land revegetation and restoration** via Indigenous-led land stewardship processes.

We recommend the Victorian Government incentivise women's skill development across these areas by making this training free or heavily subsidised. The thought buoys us that the Victorian Government is already embarking upon work in this regard, with its recent announcement of funding and resources to support Victorian TAFEs to encourage female students to enrol in non-traditional courses. We see our recommended policy initiative as further strengthening this work by ensuring that innovative courses focused on foundational economy work and climate adaptation are included in this mix.

02.

Incentivise this education/training, and address women's unemployment and underemployment by introducing a voluntary, non-coercive Victorian Government Job Guarantee, which provides government-guaranteed, fairly paid work opportunities with gender equal leave and entitlements for those who want but are unable to find work in the private sector.

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.

The following research provides greater detail of the intricacies and potential of job guarantees:

- Job Guarantee: Well-paid work for all who want it | Future To Fight For
- What Jobs Should a Public Job Guarantee Provide? Lessons from Hyman P. Minsky | Levy Economics Institute (levyinstitute.org)

03.

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 day's 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.

The following international research papers present thoroughly detailed policy and working models of the transition to a shorter working week:

- The Shorter Working Week: a report from Autonomy - Autonomy
- 21 hours: Why a shorter working week can help us all to flourish in the 21st century

04.

Implement a Victorian 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 Panel 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 Panel. 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.

The following research provides greater detail on Universal Basic Income models for Australia:

- Basic Income Australia
- Guaranteed Basic Income | Future To Fight For

For further information, please contact:

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