

13 August 2021

Ms Carol Schwartz AO
Chair
Inquiry into Economic Equity for Victorian Women
Department of Treasury and Finance
genderinquiry@dtf.vic.gov.au

Dear Ms Schwartz,

Submission to the Inquiry into Economic Equity for Victorian Women

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence (BSL) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry BSL is an independent, non-government organisation with strong community links that has been working to reduce poverty in Australia since the 1930s.

We note that women cannot achieve lasting economic equity without structural reform across all levels of government. Many of the policy levers shaping women's economic circumstances sit with the federal government. Decisions regarding these levers, including income support, wages and conditions, child care, and regulation of the caring sectors, can undermine women's economic security. However, the Victorian Government maintains control of other critical policy levers including state employment services, skills development, before and after school care, social procurement, housing, and initiatives to address energy poverty, which have the potential to make vital contributions to women's economic equity.

We commend the Victorian Government on its efforts to date. In particular, the passage of the *Gender Equality Act 2020* and the introduction of universal funded three-year-old kindergarten are important steps in the right direction. We also commend the Victorian Government's policy innovation in areas traditionally regulated at the federal level, for example the trial of sickness or carers pay to compensate workers without leave entitlements. We encourage the Victorian Government to continue this innovative approach and to advocate for policy reform to improve women's outcomes at the federal level of government.

A grand challenge that requires collaborative effort

We understand women's economic equity as a grand challenge that requires an integrated mission-oriented approach. It is only by drawing policy domains together and working collaboratively that we can tackle the intersecting challenges that women face. However, policy is too often made in separate lanes. Without weaving together these policy threads, structural issues that shape women's economic equity cannot be addressed.

Our research into the overlapping issues faced by single mothers (Bowman & Wickramasinghe 2020) highlights the need for reform in multiple domains to improve outcomes for women. We proposed a framework to highlight the enabling conditions that single mothers and their children need as part of a just, compassionate and sustainable society. This provides a guide to ambitious reform. It aims to help policy makers and others in:

- explaining the interrelationships between domains
- avoiding fragmentation in separate policy or program responses to unemployment and care
- critically revisiting common assumptions about labour market disadvantage
- shaping research, policy and practice agendas
- developing appropriate indicators for measuring program ‘success’ or ‘outcomes’.

Having such a broader framework helps to build a coherent vision of a society that promotes gender equity and recognises the value of unpaid work and care (see Appendix).

We argue that investment is required in programs and policies that address well known core needs, particularly in relation to education and training, employment support and housing for women. Rather than developing bespoke responses to the specific barriers faced by particular cohorts of women or in specific locations, these core programs should be capable of addressing all of the varying needs of diverse populations and place.

BSL has delivered a range of local to state to national initiatives which demonstrate a place based model that provides meaningful pathways to work see for example, our work with the [National Youth Employment Body](#), [Education First Youth Foyers](#) and our [Work and Learning Centres](#), and we’re developing place based initiatives focused on women’s economic security and financial wellbeing.

Some practical initiatives to support women’s economic equity in Victoria

Based on our research and practice insights, we recommend the following initiatives that could demonstrate an approach to weave economic equity for women into policies and programs.

Additional funding subsidies for women to overcome barriers to education and training

We propose increasing subsidies for training pathways for women. These pathways should align education and training with jobs, with a focus on local opportunities. The Victorian Government could leverage existing initiatives to create genuine skill matching, such as through JobsBank.

A voluntary pre-employment program to assist mothers with young children

Mothers with young children face high barriers to economic equity (Bowman & Wickramasinghe 2020). We propose a program response that addresses the overlapping factors that shape these women’s economic equity. Multiple attempts at the federal level to improve mothers’ workforce participation have been punitive and largely incapable of addressing the structural causes of women’s poorer economic outcomes. An exception was the early iteration of the Jobs Education and Training (JET) program introduced by the Hawke Labor government in the late 1980s. The JET program was able to draw together multiple policy domains, including childcare, education and training and employment support. As a result, it could assist single mothers to gain qualifications to support their (re)entry into paid work. The following features were strong advantages of the JET program:

- voluntary participation rather than Parents Next’s compliance driven approach

- highly subsidised child care (up to eight years of child care at a nominal cost for mothers in education or training)
- specialist education and employment planning advice tailored to women's specific needs
- sustained case manager relationships with single mothers over a number of years as they sought to establish a more stable economic, social or personal footing in their lives (Banks 2011).

The Victorian Government could introduce a voluntary pre-employment program to assist mothers, modelled on the successful JET program.

Such an approach could be trialled in regional, rural, peri-urban and metropolitan Victoria to address place-based disadvantages. The program should also respond to the additional disadvantages experienced by women as a result of attributes such as class, race, disability, sexual orientation and age. It would offer:

- career guidance and support
- education and training
- enabling employment support
- child care and early learning
- financial capability and anti-violence programs to protect the rights of women and children.

Further investment in supported rental accommodation for women

Safe, affordable and stable housing is a critical precondition to women's economic participation (Bowman, Mupanemunda & Wickramasinghe. 2021). We acknowledge that the Victorian Government has made the largest investment of any state in social housing through its Big Build initiative and has made good progress to support women through this work.

We propose further investment in supported rental accommodation for women experiencing disadvantage, contingent on participation in quality employment support, education or training. The focus should not be on compliance and penalties on building genuine capabilities for women. This would draw together solutions to inadequate housing circumstances and skills gaps.

We look forward to meaningful reform arising from the Inquiry. We would welcome the opportunity to provide further information regarding our proposals and to work with the Victorian Government to implement these.

Yours sincerely

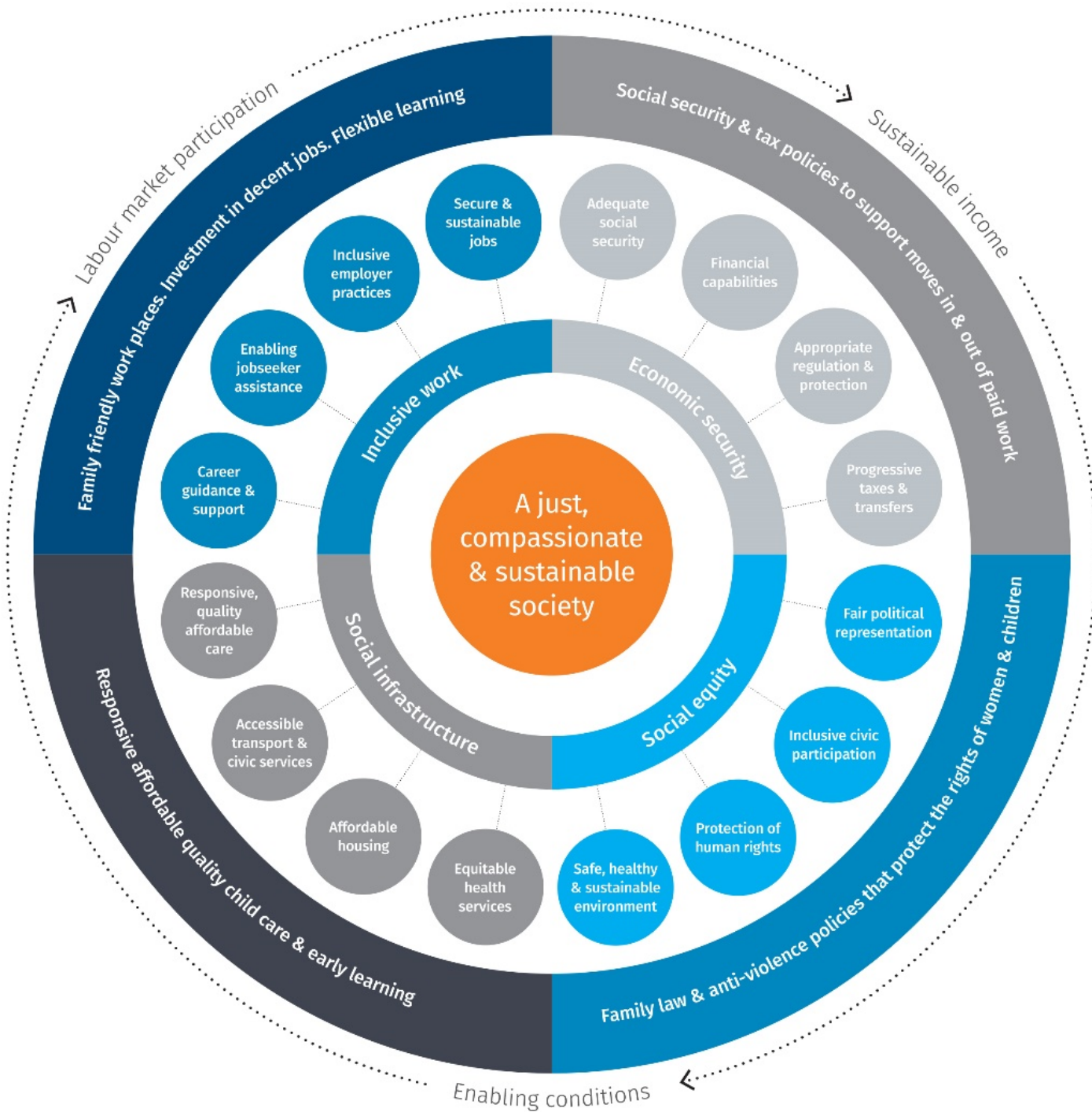
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Appendix: A work and economic security framework for women and their children



References

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