



# COVID-19 Is Not Gender Neutral

**The COVID 19 pandemic is deepening pre-existing inequalities, exposing vulnerabilities in social, political and economic systems.**

The year 2020 marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action and was intended to be ground breaking for gender equality. Instead, the spread of COVID -19 pandemic has placed at risk the limited gender equity gains that had been made in the past decades.

## **Pandemics and their resulting economic shocks affect men and women differently**

Emerging evidence on the impact of COVID 19 suggests that women's economic and productive lives are affected disproportionately and differently from men.

Across the globe, women earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs and are more likely to be employed in the informal sector. They have less access to social protections and are the majority of single parent households. As such their capacity to absorb economic shock is therefore less than men.

## **Economic insecurity disproportionately affects women**

Prevailing gender inequality in the workforce means that employment insecurity disproportionately affects women.

While women are 50% of all employees, they are 57% of employees without leave entitlements and 61% of award- reliant employees<sup>1</sup>, earning an average of \$242.90 per week less than men.<sup>2</sup>

In front line industries impacted by COVID 19, women comprise the larger part of the workforce, and are majority of casual employees. (graph 1 and 2).<sup>3</sup> Critical frontline services in healthcare, and social assistance have a workforce that is 80% female, with women accounting for 79% of casuals. In childcare and schools, women are 86.7% and 72.5% of the workforce respectively.

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<sup>1</sup> (ABS Aug 2019)

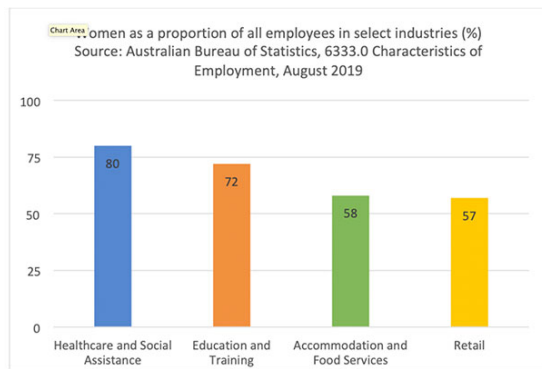
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wgea.gov.au/data/fact-sheets/australias-gender-pay-gap-statistics> Feb 2020

<sup>3</sup> ABS August 2019 ; WGEA 2019.

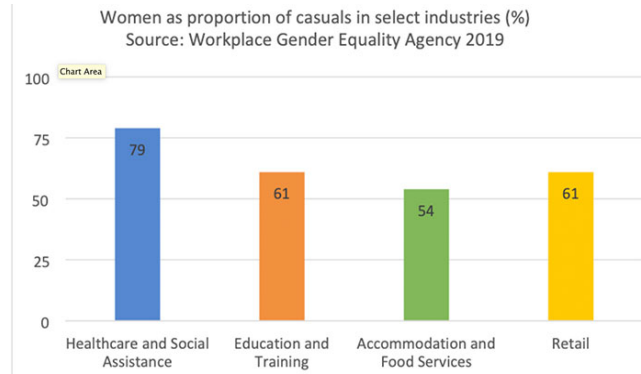
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*May 2020*



Graph 1



Graph 2

The ABS weekly Payroll Jobs and Wages data shows that the number of staff on payroll fell by 7.5% between mid-March and mid-April 2020, with losses across all industries for both male and female. However, the number of jobs slumped by a steeper 8.1% for women, compared with a drop of 6.2% for men.<sup>4</sup>

Data also is showing that accommodation and food services, an industry of 58% women majority casuals, has been the hardest hit with a third of its entire workforce being left unemployed.

## Women are living below the poverty line

Based on the data contained with the ACOSS 2018 report, more women than men live below the poverty line in Australia. The higher poverty rates for women reflect the lower incomes of female-headed households, including sole parent families, the vast majority of which are headed by women; and older women living alone, who outlive men on average and have lower private savings, including superannuation.<sup>5</sup>

Further, ABS data from December 2019, show that women were the majority of those receiving long term Newstart or Youth Allowance and the majority of those receiving parent payments<sup>6</sup>.

## Women undertake more unpaid domestic and care work

Australia is one of the most unequal countries in the OECD with regards to unpaid domestic and care work. A 2017 study by Price Waterhouse Cooper found that Australian women undertake 76% of childcare, 67% of domestic work, 69% of care for adults and 57% of volunteering; a total contribution of 20% of the Australian economy.<sup>7</sup>

The increased requirements for caring responsibilities and home learning during COVID 19 pandemic is more likely to be shouldered by women thus causing a change to their work arrangements, by either a decrease in take home pay or annual leave.

The disruptive effects of these responsibilities on women's employment are well documented.

Excessive amounts of unpaid care work impacts on women's ability to gain formal employment and

<sup>4</sup> ABS Weekly Payroll Jobs and Wages Data April 2020

<sup>5</sup> R Cooper, M Foley and M Baird, Women at Work: Australia and the United States, The United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney, 15.

<sup>6</sup> ABS Dec 2019

<sup>7</sup> Understanding the Unpaid Economy May 2017 Price Waterhouse Cooper

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affects women's health. It also creates what the ILO calls 'job quality penalty', an increase likelihood that women will be in low quality work

## **Gendered Violence; The Shadowed Pandemic**

Before the COVID 19 pandemic, it was reported that 1 in 6 women had experienced sexual or physical violence at the hands of a current or previous cohabiting partner<sup>8</sup>.

The impact of COVID 19 pandemic has seen an increase the risks of gendered violence, both at work and at home. The pandemic is placing greater financial, health and domestic pressures on households, and at the same time increasing women's isolation and reducing their financial and job security.

The social distancing and forced isolation requirements are changing home arrangements. For many, the home is now the workplace. For people experiencing domestic or family violence, attending work provides a safe-haven and a means of accessing vital support. Large numbers of workers are now being required to work from home, regardless of whether it is a safe environment to do so. Women have not been able to seek the support of friends and family due to social distancing and isolation measures.

At the workplace, front line workers in care and service industries are facing increased risks of violence and harassment from anxious and stressed customers, patients, parents and clients.

## **How does the Federal Government responses impact women?**

While the Federal Government has made several national responses to the COVID 19 pandemic, no gender review has been applied to these responses. As such the needs of women and girls have been overlooked.

## **Early Access to Superannuation**

Under the Federal Government's policy workers will be able to access \$10 000 before 1 July and \$10 000 from 1 July from their superannuation. Tax is not payable on the withdrawal amount and it will not affect other payments. However, there is a significant gender gap between the retirement savings of men and women. Women's superannuation balances are 47% lower than men's and 1 in 3 women have no superannuation at all to draw on.<sup>9</sup> Some of the industries most affected by COVID 19 closures including hospitality, retail and entertainment are lower paid and dominated by younger female employees. This means that many people seeking early access to superannuation are likely to be women, further compounding the gender gap.

## **JobKeeper Payment**

The Federal Government has also introduced a JobKeeper Payment of \$1500 per fortnight delivered through the ATO. While this is a more welcomed policy than early access to superannuation, the low rate of payment excludes casuals with less than 12 months service and temporary visa workers. This

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<sup>8</sup>(wgea.gov.au) June 2019 Family Domestic and Sexual Violence in Australia; Continuing the National Story 2019 Australian Government; Australia Institute of Health and Welfare

<sup>9</sup>Not So Super For Women. Hetherington D and Smith W. Per capita

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disproportionately impacts on women. Data from ABS shows that a significant proportion of women of child bearing age employed on a casual basis have less than 12 months service.

## **JobSeeker Payment**

The Federal Government also introduced a temporary 6 month Coronavirus supplement of \$550 per fortnight for existing and new recipients of JobSeeker Payment, Youth Allowance Jobseeker, Parenting Payment, Farm Household allowance and Special Benefit. The eligibility for payment has been broadened and the income test for partners has been raised to \$79000. This was an essential action as the initial partner income threshold disadvantaged lower paid women as secondary earners.

## **COVID19 is not only a challenge for health systems, but also a test of our human spirit. Recovery must lead to a more equal world that is more resilient to future crisis**

It is crucial that national responses place women and girls – their inclusion, representation, rights and social and economic outcomes, equality and protection – at the centre if they are to have the necessary impacts.

This is not only about rectifying long standing inequalities but also about building a more just and resilient world. While women are being hit the hardest by this pandemic, they will also be the backbone of recovery. Every policy response that recognises this will be the more impactful for it.<sup>10</sup>

To achieve this, in its recent policy brief *The Impact of COVID 19 on Women*, the United Nations have emphasised three cross cutting priorities:

1. **Ensure women's equal representation** in all COVID 19 response planning and decision making. Policies that do not consult nor include women and women organisations in decision making are simply less effective and do harm.
2. **Drive transformative change for equality** by addressing the care economy, both the paid and unpaid sectors.
3. **Target women and girls in all efforts** to address the social economic impact of COVID 19. It will be important to apply an intentional gender lens to the design of fiscal stimulus packages and social assistance programs to achieve greater equality, opportunities and social protections.

## **Campaigning for a more gender equal future**

COVID 19 presents governments with an opportunity to effect systemic changes that could protect women from bearing the heaviest brunt of shocks like these in the future. As union members, we must campaign for this to occur. **By campaigning for women and girls to be placed at the centre of economies, we can fundamentally support a more rapid recovery, drive better and more sustainable development outcomes for all and set communities on the path to achieve gender equality.**

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<sup>10</sup> Policy Briefing The Impact of COVID 19 on women United Nations

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