

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Monday 18 May 2026

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

John Pesutto – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Richard Riordan

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Gabrielle Williams MP, Minister for Women and Girls; and

Peta McCammon, Secretary, and

Alison Rutherford, Acting Executive Director, Equality, Seniors, Women and Equity Strategy, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and is broadcast live on the Parliament's website. The broadcast includes automated captioning. Members and witnesses should be aware that all microphones are live during hearings and anything you say may be picked up and captioned, even if you say it quietly.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards our witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream and other committee members.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check, and verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Women and Girls the Honourable Gabrielle Williams as well as the Secretary and officials from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you some questions. Your time starts now.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Thank you, Chair. Before I begin, please let me acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are currently gathered, the Wurundjeri people, and pay my respects to their elders past and present and any other First Nations people we may have here with us today. Alison Rutherford is going to be my clicker for this session, so thank you very much, Alison, in advance.

Visual presentation.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: I am proud, again, can I say at the outset, to lead this portfolio, or return to the women's portfolio, now with the addition of girls, because improving the outcomes for women and girls is not just a priority for this government, it is fundamental to building a fair, productive and inclusive Victoria.

Next slide, please. Gender equality is not an abstract concept. In reality it impacts women's safety, their health and their economic security each and every day. Women continue to be under-represented as leaders and decision-makers. Our achievements are more likely to go unrecognised, and our contributions undervalued and often underpaid. We shoulder most of the unpaid labour and care that is all so vital to our families and communities, and violence against women continues to affect far too many. At least a third of women have experienced violence since the age of 15, and on average a woman is killed by an intimate partner every eight days. Addressing this as a shared responsibility, and that is what this portfolio drives.

Starting in our own backyard, as a government we are leading the way through the *Gender Equality Act*. We have introduced new obligations for over 300 public sector organisations, shining a light on pay gaps and sexual harassment and requiring public sector workplaces to act, and the evidence is showing that progress is being made. Gender pay gaps are closing, gender segregation in industries, roles and workplaces is reducing and more women are rising to leadership and governance positions. We are driving systemwide reform and investment through *Our Equal State*, our state gender equality strategy and action plan.

Next slide. Thank you. We have made significant strides in the last 12 months. This government is committed to helping Victorians manage cost-of-living pressures, and that includes the particular costs that impact women. We are reducing period poverty with over 700,000 free pads and tampons dispensed in vending machines now available in every LGA across Victoria, and we are doing this so women and girls do not have to choose between essentials. We know that for a student or a woman in casual work access to free period products can mean participating fully in education or work.

We are also increasing the visibility of women's contributions through the Victorian Honour Roll of Women, because, Chair, representation matters, and through our whole-of-government strategy we are driving progress, like closing gaps in women's health care through the landmark inquiry into women's pain, driving reforms so that women's pain is taken seriously and properly treated. We are strengthening workplace protections by restricting the misuse of non-disclosure agreements, addressing power imbalances and supporting safer reporting of sexual harassment, and we are opening the first 18 of 50 new early learning centres to save families money and help more women get back to paid work.

One of the most powerful ways we can drive gender equality, Chair, is by changing what and who we celebrate. When we started our public art program there were more statues of animals than there were of women in Australia. Through this program we are delivering 12 more enduring public artworks of women across Victoria. We are ensuring women's contributions are visible in the places that we live and gather, and we celebrate and honour women like Aunty Marge Tucker, a Yorta Yorta and Wiradjuri woman and survivor of the stolen generations – her legacy in First Nations advocacy and women's wellbeing continues to inspire. The women's honour roll also highlights those who are shaping our state, and that includes people like Caterina Cinanni, inducted in 2025 for her work empowering vulnerable workers to speak out against exploitation, leading to improved legislation and rights. Caterina sits alongside almost 800 women and gender-diverse people who have been inducted since 2001 for their lasting, impactful contributions. These initiatives are not just symbolic – they shape how future generations see leadership, opportunity and possibility, and they ensure the historical record counts the contribution of women.

Next slide. The 2026–27 state budget makes targeted investments to continue our momentum. We are investing \$120,000 to grow the next generation of leaders. The budget also includes about \$100,000 in contribution to a nation-leading project to strengthen system responses to reproductive coercion and abuse, a serious and often hidden form of gender-based violence. This government's focus on improving outcomes for women and girls goes well beyond just this portfolio, with key budget investments across government.

Next slide. Looking ahead, our focus is on delivery, accountability and measurable progress. We will continue to deliver outcomes for Victorian women and girls through more locations for free pads and tampons, improving women's workplace safety and the honour roll, and will be publicly reporting on our collective statewide progress under our state gender equality action plan.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. The first 8 minutes are going to Ms Benham.

Jade BENHAM: Thank you, Chair. Morning again, Minister.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Morning.

Jade BENHAM: My budget paper reference is the Gender Equality Budget Statement foreword, page 1, four paragraphs up:

The Victorian Government has led on policies that help women work, keep them safer and address their health.

Minister, in your capacity as minister for women, do you accept that the allegations involving Women in Construction raise issues not only of transport integrity, but also of women's safety and women's participation in male-dominated industries?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: I have been very clear in previous sessions, Ms Benham, that the allegations that have come to light – and I think you are referring in particular to the Women in Construction allegations – are simply appalling. There is no place for criminality or misconduct or corruption on government sites, and that is why we have been working since allegations came to light – the initial broad allegations in mid-2024 – to stamp out that behaviour. That includes the behaviour that you are referring to in terms of Women in

Construction. And I do understand that to that end the Labour Hire Authority has indicated that they will not be renewing –

Jade BENHAM: But they have not cancelled that –

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: They have indicated that they will not be renewing the labour hire licence for Women in Construction, and –

Jade BENHAM: And yet they have not cancelled it though, immediately, have they?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: There is a process that the Labour Hire Authority undergoes when it is effectively investigating the suitability of somebody to hold such a licence –

Jade BENHAM: As the minister for women, are you satisfied that women are safe involved in that program?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: As the minister for women I want to ensure that we are creating opportunities and workplaces that fully encourage the participation of women –

Jade BENHAM: You will accept that that program has failed, then.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: and that includes, Ms Benham, in our worksites. There has been a significant body of work through our social procurement work to get more women, among others, into well-paid, skilled jobs – like in our construction industry – and through programs like free TAFE, which have sought to facilitate the entry of under-represented groups, including women, into good, secure job opportunities. This is why it is so distressing – these allegations that relate to Women in Construction – and why I think it is absolutely appropriate that the Labour Hire Authority has taken the action it has, and why the government continue to pursue the reform agenda we have to stamp out this conduct for all workers across our sites, including women.

Jade BENHAM: Were you ever briefed through the women's portfolio on Women in Construction and women's participation on Big Build sites or any other risks to women entering construction before 8 May 2026?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: As you would appreciate, Ms Benham, I have only recently returned to the women's portfolio, at that last cabinet reshuffle. I was clear in previous sessions about when I became aware of the allegations being made about Women in Construction. I outlined in previous sessions that my office was notified on 8 May of the show cause notice that the Labour Hire Authority had issued, and I am advised that VIDA were notified on 7 May – so the day before – that the Labour Hire Authority was issuing a show cause notice and that the authority did not intend to renew the licence of Women in Construction. The allegations that are being made are galling. It is a source of great concern to me, the nature of those allegations and the fact that that would be happening on government sites, on projects that provide such important job opportunities and where we have been so focused on ensuring that our investments in our Big Build benefit as many Victorians as possible, including women in our community. I would like to see those benefits delivered to women in our community, and that means delivering safe workplaces and workplaces that give full –

Jade BENHAM: Well, it has failed up to now. In your presentation earlier, Minister, the final point, 'Gender inequality continues to pervade the lives of women' et cetera, et cetera, said 'influencing systemwide change so policies, services and investments deliver better outcomes for women and girls across Victoria'. The line above that also states 'delivering targeted programs that improve women's safety'. Surely, to use a colloquial term, this government is taking the micky.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Well, this is why, Ms Benham, we have in place the measures that we do, in this instance, in this particular example, across our construction sites, to make sure that we are not only making reporting of incidents and allegations easier but that we are mandating them and that we have a framework that ensures that action can be taken, as it has been on this occasion, of course noting that there are provisions to strengthen the Labour Hire Authority that will soon be coming online, which will again demonstrate that we are always looking at ways that we can do more, always looking to make sure that if there are weaknesses in our systems then we are acting to address those. You have seen that through a very comprehensive reform agenda

over the last few years, including of course measures that go to strengthening the Labour Hire Authority, which is relevant to this particular example, but there are others as well.

Jade BENHAM: Minister, on the Labour Hire Authority, do you expect a young apprentice of 17, 18 years old to go to either their boss or the Labour Hire Authority to report inappropriate conduct on Big Build sites? Is that something that is reasonably expected of a young woman who is being intimidated in a government program on Big Build sites?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Ms Benham, this does relate more fully to my previous sessions, but there have been put in place dedicated referral pathways that are designed to meet just that challenge, allowing people to report with the confidence that they can do so without putting themselves at risk or without dealing with the sorts of challenges that you are –

Jade BENHAM: Do you accept that this government, via this program, has actively put women, and young women in particular, at risk?

Lauren KATHAGE: Men have to take responsibility for their actions.

Jade BENHAM: Well, I am asking the question to the minister for women: do you accept that this government, your government, has actively put women at risk in construction?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Ms Benham, I would disagree with your characterisation and say what we have sought to do, through our through our social procurement policies and through the many other initiatives that we have championed and implemented, many of which gender equality initiatives were opposed by the Liberal–National coalition – we have sought –

Jade BENHAM: How did the fact that the Women in Construction management, the people in charge – a quick Google search would have showed the convicted charges, the family violence perpetrators, the repeated breaches of family violence orders. None of that raised a flag within the Minister for Women and Girls portfolio at all? I would have thought, even if it was missed in other departments –

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Ms Benham, again, just to remind you, I returned to this portfolio a matter of weeks ago. I have outlined the timelines that I became aware of this particular incident – VIDA becoming aware on 7 May, me on 8 May. I was keen to ensure that all appropriate referrals had taken place, and I share your outrage about the claims. I share your concerns that any woman on a government site may feel at risk or be at risk. That is completely counter to our initiatives and to the many investments we have made to try and improve women's representation in male-dominated workforces.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are going to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. I draw your attention to the list of initiatives there on page 37 of the 'Department Performance Statement'. They are the ones supporting gender equality and better outcomes for women. Are you able to give us an update on the progress of those initiatives?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: I sure can. Thank you for the question, Ms Kathage. The data collected under the *Gender Equality Act*, a great Labor initiative and one that is fundamentally at its heart about structural change within one of Victoria's largest workforces, being our public sector workforce, is beginning to show some very significant structural progress across parts of the Victorian public sector, particularly in areas that have been historically resistant to change. So while many gender inequalities remain deeply entrenched, and sector-wide change does take time, and we do want to acknowledge that, there is some emerging evidence of movement in leadership representation, in occupational segregation, in gender pay gaps and men's uptake too of things like flexible work and parental leave, which are an important part of the equality equation. Importantly, some of the strongest improvements are occurring in traditionally male-dominated sectors and occupations where structural and cultural barriers have historically been most pronounced. For the first time Victoria now has this longitudinal sector-wide data capable of tracking whether public sector organisations are making measurable progress on workplace gender equality outcomes over time, and this transparency and accountability framework is in and of itself a very significant reform in its own right because it effectively ensures that we continue to shift the dial in a persistent and consistent way over time and holds governments – all governments – to account. At the same time, it is worth acknowledging that progress can be a little lumpy and can be uneven

across sectors. We know, for example, that sexual harassment continues to be one of the most concerning areas that sit within our datasets, and I think this highlights the importance of maintaining strong accountability, compliance, oversight and of course a sustained organisational focus to make sure that some of these persistent disparities, which have been with us since time immemorial, can finally start to be addressed in a meaningful way. We have started in our own backyard, acknowledging the significance of the work that the public sector does and the ability of that also to influence the lives of thousands if not millions of women in our communities. So it is an important place to start.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister. Girls have recently been added to the portfolio. As the mum of two young daughters, my personal request is if we can get rid of the child skincare routine market, which has emerged crazily, but it is great to see girls in there with the women's portfolio. What sorts of opportunities are you seeing there to support girls through the work of the commissioner or through the portfolio more generally?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Thank you, Ms Kathage, for the question and for the tip on something to do a bit of a deeper dive into in terms of children's skincare, which I would not have thought necessary when we are at an age where we are still producing collagen. We will put the science to the side on that particular debate, and I will take that as a comment and progress it outside of the committee and in my work responsibilities. Look, I have really welcomed the addition of girls to this portfolio. Now all programs can work to improve equality, community participation and leadership opportunities across the entire lifespan, and I think that is a really valuable way of looking at our work. We know that the messages young girls receive from a very early age can have an enormous impact on the trajectory of their life, and by increasing the opportunity for girls we will set them up for a bright future, to further reduce the pay gap and have more women in leadership positions.

Addressing issues like eating disorders; the effects of AI and social media; the manosphere, which has obviously been very topical recently; and also things like the fall-off of girls participating in sport or any other areas of community life and areas that we would like to see girls participating in, those are all areas – now I can add skin care regimes for children and girls – that I would like to do further work in. As we further develop the goals of the girls part of the portfolio, we will be working really closely with the gender equality commissioner to determine what other measures could address these concerns and where there are emerging issues.

Also I know, Ms Kathage, you reflected on being a mum of two girls and the insight that that gives you into the challenges. Similarly you were young once, as was I, and as one of four girls I often reflect on the inherent misogyny that we sometimes encounter as children navigating the world. The greatest example I have often been given cause to talk about is of going places with my father when I was young. I used to love going to the tip and to the hardware store. They were very exciting places. The tip was very exciting. My dad will tell you he can still remember the day I first told him I did not want to go with him; it was quite heartbreaking apparently. I often think about things like my dad being asked questions. 'This is your daughter?' 'Yes.' 'How many children do you have?' 'Four.' 'What are they?' 'Girls.' 'Oh, you poor man. Were you trying for a boy?' Those were all said in front of me, as they have been said in front of little girls since time immemorial, in a way that highlighted from a very early age that there were some who did not regard you as the preferred. I think changing the conversation – I hope that has changed. I think it is changing. Having the girls aspect of the portfolio now gives us a real opportunity to also think about those subtle and not so subtle messages that get given to children from a very young age and how that then informs the way they see themselves in a room or even informs the way they see their right to speak in a room. There are some really exciting opportunities in having girls attached to the women's portfolio.

Lauren KATHAGE: As the fifth daughter in a row to my family, I see your four and raise you one. When you think about the representation of women in the government and in the cabinet, looking across this budget you can see a lot of reflection of things that have come from having good representation of women, like free kinder, dental, free pads and other services. The gender equality commissioner, though, brings a different angle, and the data that you spoke of earlier as well. All of this is contributing to the initiatives on table 7 of the 'Department Performance Statement'. You spoke quite a bit about the data that we have got on different sectors of the pay gap and leadership before, but a general update on the initiatives that are listed related to women under table 7 of the output summary –

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Some of those policies.

Lauren KATHAGE: I can see there is ‘Women’s policy’ as well as the family violence work and ‘Community participation’, but ‘Women’s policy’ especially.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: So you are seeking just an update in particular?

Lauren KATHAGE: Yes, the progress.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: I will go back, if you do not mind, a little bit to the work of the gender equality commissioner and really the structures that we put in place through the *Gender Equality Act* to make sure that we were measuring our own work, and that is beyond just our own representation in our entities but actually the impacts of our policies and programs, making sure that they were not falling prey to unintended bias. It is not always the headline-grabber in a policy sense publicly, but it is crucially and critically important if we are going to shift the dial and have a better understanding of some of the unintended consequences of the way we deliver policy. It is really founded in the basic premise that you cannot manage what you do not measure. Much has been achieved, according to recent data from the gender equality commissioner, who will release a more fulsome report later in the year, gathering some more contemporary data than some of the data that we currently have to have to hand. For example, the data indicates a gradual improvement in, say, gender pay equity across the public sector. The proportion of organisations with, for example, a total remuneration gender pay gap within a narrow range of parity has increased by 4.3 per cent since 2021. Organisations within what they have called the small gap range have increased by 1.4 per cent. The proportion of organisations with moderate to large gender pay gaps has declined by 5.5 per cent. That does not mean there is not still a lot of work to do, because I think it is very clear that there is. But I suppose what is important to take away in terms of progress and how things are tracking is that some of the strongest reductions in, say, this measure and gender pay gaps are occurring in historically male-dominated industries and occupations, including areas like police and emergency services, water and land management, labouring roles, machinery operation and trades-related occupations. That does give us cause to believe that some organisations are beginning to actively address some of those structural drivers of inequality.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon. I will go to budget paper 3, page 42. Previous budgets have included support for the women of colour executive leadership program. Can I ask, Minister: has that funding been continued into this budget?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Just bear with me. This was one of the leadership programs that you are referring to?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: This is the women of colour executive leadership program.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: Yes, executive leadership. Some of our leadership programs have recently concluded following the completion of what was a funded delivery period. Those programs supported a very diverse range of women, as you have highlighted, across multicultural communities and also First Nations women and women of colour, as you have identified. They were obviously designed to strengthen leadership pathways and participation. What we tend to do as a part of those programs is build in evaluations and program outcomes so that we can assess whether those programs are effectively achieving what we intend for them to achieve and also to inform future investment decisions. I am not sure, Secretary, if you want to add where this particular one is up to in its evaluation cycle, if you have that information to hand.

Peta McCAMMON: I do not have that to hand. I will check if Alison does. But I would also say, notwithstanding some of the broader leadership we also have within the department, we have a number of leadership programs within the department that focus on women of colour. But in terms of where that evaluation is, we might have to take that on notice.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: That is all right. That would be appreciated. If the program is concluding, has that been effectively achieved in terms of what it was seeking to do? If we are concluding the program, I suppose why would be good to know.

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: I have just been informed by my colleague here Ms Rutherford that evaluation is actually currently underway of that particular program. It is not yet complete. When we get an idea, as we often seek to do when we fund programs like this, it is around informing us as to what sorts of programs we should continue to fund into the future. Evaluations are important for programs like this because we want to make sure that, effectively, our investment is having the desired impact that it should. I am happy to update you when that evaluation is complete and inform you then.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Do we know when that will be complete?

Alison RUTHERFORD: It is underway at the moment.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So no end date in sight?

Gabrielle WILLIAMS: We can keep you informed.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. That would be much appreciated. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mr Puglielli. Minister, Secretary and officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

The committee will now break for lunch before beginning its consideration of the portfolio of mental health at 1 pm. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.