

VERIFIED VERSION

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Budget Estimates 2015–16

Melbourne — 21 May 2015

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Ms Fiona Richardson, Minister for Women,

Ms Rebecca Falkingham, Deputy Secretary, Social Policy and Service Delivery Reform, and

Ms Anna Faithfull, Acting Executive Director, Women and Equality, NDIS and Royal Commission
Engagement, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

The CHAIR — Minister, I ask you to talk to your presentation. This is a very short question session, so if you could limit your presentation to 5 minutes in length, that would be appreciated.

Ms RICHARDSON — Thank you, Chair, and thank you, committee members. The opportunity to talk to you about the women's portfolio in the context particularly of family violence is very much welcomed by me and by my department. It is a crucial area because we know that women's issues are a whole-of-government concern and we know too that attitudes towards women are directly driving rates of family violence. That is why we have put the women's portfolio under the Premier's department — to give it that whole-of-government focus and response.

The links between gender inequality and family violence, as I said, are well established and well understood. We have made the safety of women in particular a priority, and that is why we announced the family violence royal commission. It is about tackling women's safety first and foremost, and the royal commission will of course also have a look at the gender inequality questions and the attitudes towards women.

I will just provide for you a bit of a snapshot about gender inequality here in Victoria, and the reason we are looking at this is because it is one of these drivers of family violence. The gender pay gap is 18.8 per cent nationally and 14.8 per cent here in Victoria. That 18.8 per cent figure is actually the highest it has ever been since records were taken. There is also a significant imbalance between women and men with respect to superannuation. Also workplace discrimination as a consequence of pregnancy and parental leave is significant. One in two are experiencing workplace discrimination.

On boards, there has been very little movement despite a whole lot of talk over the years in addressing the number of women on directorships on ASX boards and on government boards. The consequence of that gender inequality for family violence, as I say, is at the extreme end of gender inequality and poor attitudes. The extreme end is family violence, and at the other end is of course just sexist attitudes, if I can put that in that context. That is why the Premier has committed to tackling the rates of diversity on public sector boards. We want to show some leadership with respect to our public sector boards, and he has committed that no less than 50 per cent of all future appointments on paid boards and in our Victorian courts will be women. I am very pleased to report that we are tracking this initiative very closely, as you can imagine, and so far we are at 48 per cent in terms of meeting the overall target — not just for paid boards, I must say, but for non-paid boards as well. So our commitment is certainly working for paid boards, but it is also working for non-paid boards as well.

This is a critically important initiative in the sense that it speaks to how women can provide leadership, to how they can be excellent role models and to the attitudinal view that women are somehow second-class citizens and not worthy of taking up a place on public sector boards or private sector boards. This all speaks to the broader objective that we have, which is changing community attitudes around women. That is the underlying concern with respect to family violence.

I will also just touch upon the changes we have made with respect to the government. We have pulled the women's affairs portfolio or office in under the Department of Premier and Cabinet to put it front and centre of tackling these issues. It was in the Department of Human Services formerly; it was shifted there in 2011. We think that it is easier to coordinate and easier to deliver our programs if it is under the Premier's department and delivering a whole-of-government set of policies. Our government has in truth just elevated women's policy to where it belongs.

There has also been a change to the performance measures that you would note in the budget. This has come from recommendations that were made by the 2014 Victorian Auditor-General's Office. In light of machinery-of-government changes the office of women has undergone several performance measure changes, which can be found in the performance statement in BP 3 on page 394. The new measures relate both to the prevention of family violence and the improvement of women's economic, social and civic participation. They include the number of meetings, forums and events held to consult and engage with stakeholders, that the office delivers on agreed outcomes for the prevention of family violence, the social and economic participation of women and time lines for programs. As I say, these changes are in line with what the VAGO recommended. They are designed to better reflect the department's objectives.

The set of programs that you see listed there that are provided by the office of women include the Queen Victoria Women's Centre Trust, the Victorian Women's Governance Scholarship program —

The CHAIR — Could the minister conclude her presentation?

Ms RICHARDSON — the Victorian Honour Roll of Women, the Victorian Women's Register and Thinking Ahead — Women into Local Government. These are all important initiatives that are provided by the office of women.

In summary, gender inequality and poor attitudes towards women are drivers of family violence. Linking these two portfolios — women and the prevention of family violence — is obviously critically important. Elevating that into the Premier's department to give a whole-of-government perspective to these issues has also been a critically important step for the portfolio.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. In the context of the 2015–16 budget and your own portfolio responsibilities, can you inform the committee how this budget acquits *Labor's Financial Statement*?

Ms RICHARDSON — With respect to the women's portfolio, we have focused front and centre on the need to address women's safety. The fact that one in three women will experience violence in their lifetime is a critical concern to our government, a critical concern, I know, to every person here in this room and is also becoming an increasingly critical concern to the wider community as well. So we have made tackling family violence our no. 1 priority in the women's portfolio space as well. We have also made a priority the establishment of the royal commission and all of the other commitments that have been made around improving safety for women in our courts, improving counselling services for women who are victims of family violence and providing foster care for pets, which are often used as weapons in the war within homes.

All of these measures are clearly designed to support and help women, who we know are predominantly the victims of family violence. I am pleased to say that we have delivered on each and every one of those election commitments, and they will make a difference to women. They will help keep women safe. We make no apologies for putting the safety of women at the forefront of initiatives that we put in place in the women's portfolio, as well as in the prevention of family violence portfolio.

Mr MORRIS — Minister, I refer to budget paper 3 on page 304, but more importantly to your presentation. We have already seen a number of females sacked or who have resigned — not necessarily voluntarily — from boards and positions during the term of this current government, including the chair of the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre, various members of water authority boards, the board of Ambulance Victoria, the chief health officer, the CEO of WorkSafe and the women's correctional services advisory chair. If I heard correctly in your opening comments, you indicated that the percentage of appointments that have been female in this term has been 48 per cent. I think I heard that correctly.

Ms RICHARDSON — That is just where we are currently tracking.

Mr MORRIS — That is close enough to 50; I am not picking that point. But given that there has been a substantial exodus as well as new appointments, can you provide the committee with a list of all female board members who have been sacked or have resigned since the election and a list all female board members who have been appointed? That is so we can get a feel for the balance there.

Ms SHING — On a point of order, you have used the terminology 'sacked or have resigned'. I think this came up in relation to other board appointments in relation to the Premier's attendance at this hearing. As the Premier indicated in his answer there, that ignores the fact that there have been operational changes which have resulted in appointments terminating. They have not necessarily occurred because of a sacking, as you have put it, or a resignation. So again I ask, through the Chair, that we be very clear in our terminology here around how it is that people have exited from various boards as you put it.

Mr MORRIS — Chair, would the committee prefer the term 'involuntary separations'? This is because Denise Cosgrove from WorkSafe, for example, resigned, but there was no question that it was not a voluntary resignation.

Ms SHING — The cessation of appointments is probably the least sensational.

Mr MORRIS — Cessation of employment or appointment — —

Ms SHING — It covers any species of a cessation of an appointment or employment under whatever circumstances, which I think is the sort of scope that you are looking for, if I understand your substantive question.

Mr MORRIS — So long as it includes voluntary boards, yes.

The CHAIR — I think if the question can be modified, that would be helpful. One thing, which the minister may wish to speak to herself, is that there may be some HR considerations that need to be taken into consideration in terms of answering the question. For example, there may well be a person who is no longer on a government board and may not want to be identified as having gone off that board since the change of government, for whatever reason, which we may not be aware of. So it may be difficult for the minister to give a categorical guarantee that she can provide that information when there might be those sensitivities there. I am flagging it. I will let the minister answer for herself, but I am just flagging that that may be an issue that springs to my mind from an HR perspective. But I am happy for the question to be put.

Mr MORRIS — We are talking about boards. We are talking about public appointments, so the appointment is made public.

The CHAIR — Yes, but sometimes people may not necessarily want to be identified.

Ms SHING — On a further point of order, Chair, can I just ask how this identification of individuals who have ceased either employment or an appointment is relevant to the achievement of the target for a minimum of 50 per cent of women as part of the policies expressed? I am asking this in good faith.

Mr MORRIS — I am not fussed about identifying individuals — and I take your point — except that the data is presented in a way that it can be verified. I am fine with that.

The CHAIR — Minister, after that lengthy exchange would you like to hear the question again; would that assist?

Ms SHING — We got there eventually.

Ms RICHARDSON — You did. Can I say that of all the board changes that you have identified, none of them fall within my portfolio responsibility. I would not like to see an analysis about changes on boards diminish what is in reality a very important policy initiative for women in our state. I appreciate that there are confidentiality concerns as well that might impact upon other ministers releasing information with respect to boards that they are responsible for, but for the member's benefit, let me just explain that the way this information is conveyed to our office is by virtue of the number of women; it is not individuals. So I do not have at my disposal the ability to give to you names and details of individuals —

Mr MORRIS — No, names are not required.

Ms RICHARDSON — Sure. So what we are doing in order to ensure that we are delivering what is in fact a very important initiative not just for women but also for our efforts to tackle gender inequality is that we are auditing all of the paid boards and all of the non-paid boards. The Attorney-General is having a look at the courts as well to look at how it is that we can meet our target and ensure that in the future we can say that we, for example, in Victoria have the same number of women represented on boards as South Australia, which has 48 per cent, and that is certainly where we would need to be, at the very least, I would think. I am very disappointed to say, too, that the federal government is ahead of us with respect to the number of women that are represented on public sector boards federally.

Ms SHING — Lucky there are so many in Parliament.

Ms RICHARDSON — Perhaps I will not comment on that, Chair. This is a very important initiative. It is something that we want to work with all departments, all ministers, to ensure that we can actually improve gender diversity, not just on paid boards but perhaps on non-paid boards as well.

Mr MORRIS — Chair, I understand the minister to have effectively responded, 'No, I don't have the information', and I am not seeking to put words in your mouth or verbal you, but can I just seek clarification on that point, first of all?

Ms RICHARDSON — Yes. Of the boards that you identified in your question, none of them actually fall under my area of responsibility — —

Mr MORRIS — I appreciate that.

Ms RICHARDSON — However, what we are doing is auditing and tracking paid boards and non-paid boards to get a sense of how the commitment is being delivered. What we can then do to ensure that the commitment is met. Because of course there are a set of boards, only 16 per cent of boards, that go through the cabinet processes. All other boards, as you know, go through departmental processes and other processes, so trying to provide in a sense a whole-of-government response, a whole-of-government set of initiatives that will make sure that we make a difference in both those areas is something that I am clearly responsible for. Efforts to achieve those outcomes, as I say, to date have been tracking well, in that we are at 48 per cent with respect to the current crop of appointments that have been delivered since this initiative was announced by the Premier.

Mr MORRIS — I take it that that is a yes. You have referred a couple of times to the information that is reported. Is that information restricted to appointments, or do you keep track of separations as well?

Ms RICHARDSON — We keep track of appointments, and vacancies as they arise become obviously important to us because it is then the appointments that will determine whether or not we are meeting our commitment to have 50 per cent of future board appointments made up by women — —

Mr MORRIS — So we cannot get a picture of what has happened since 1 December, basically? We can only go from the audit point forward?

Ms RICHARDSON — What happens in our audit process is we have a look at the vacancies, not just those that have come from resignations or decisions to terminate. We have a look at all vacancies; we have a look at the crop. Just to give you a sense, there are thousands of boards that you have to take in and thousands of appointments that fall into either the paid board or the non-paid board categories. That audit process is underway and we are working with ministers who then obviously make the appointments, and hopefully also with government departments, to make sure that we can extend the initiative beyond just paid boards to non-paid boards as well.

Ms FALKINGHAM — Deputy Chair, I will just reiterate that the Victorian Public Sector Commission does keep track of all separations, so that is reported annually.

Mr MORRIS — That is reported annually?

Ms FALKINGHAM — That is.

Dr CARLING-JENKINS — I have a question to ask on behalf of Ms Pennicuik, who, again, was unable to make it afternoon. It is in reference to budget paper 3, page 394, on the Office of Women's Affairs. In the footnotes to a number of line items on this page, the budget paper suggests that this performance measure is proposed to be discontinued, as it does not accurately reflect government priorities regarding policy and programs for women. Performance measures to which this footnote attaches include the number of women engaged with the Office of Women's Affairs through the delivery of funded projects; the number of women participating in funded programs, projects and events; the proportion of funded OWA projects that meet agreed project objectives; and the level of participant satisfaction with OWA programs and projects.

While these measures contain plenty of their own problems, they and similar performance measures have been part of the budget papers since at least the late 1990s. Ms Pennicuik asks: can the minister further explain what the government priorities are regarding policy and programs for women and why these performance measures are not seen as aligning with them?

Ms RICHARDSON — Thank you for conveying the question, once again. There are, as I said in my presentation, a number of changes that have been made to the BP3 performance statement that you have identified. These changes address the recommendations that were made by the 2014 Victorian Auditor-General's Office. That audit of public sector performance measurement and reporting made a series of recommendations, and these changes reflect those recommendations by the Auditor-General. The machinery-of-government changes and the departmental restructure obviously took place in early 2015.

The current BP3 measures for the Office of Women's Affairs were developed when the office was then part of the Department of Human Services and were created to conform with the Department of Human Services delivery target and output measuring processes. Moving the office of women has then had an impact also on the performance measures. In line with those recommendations, my department has reviewed the performance measures for the office of women to better reflect the department's objectives and the objective indicators.

The new measures that are detailed in the budget papers are the number of meetings, forums and events held by the office to facilitate consultation and engagement with key stakeholders, and that the office deliver on agreed outcomes for the prevention of family violence, the social and economic participation of women and time lines of programs. Can I also supplement the changes that are there in the budget paper and make the obvious point that my discussion about the Family Violence Index and the lack of measurability, in a sense, and being able to come up with a set of measures that will tell us how we are performing over time for family violence and for women is something that the Family Violence Index in itself is going to address above and beyond what the budget papers are addressing with their measures and performances.

Being able to do that, I think, will in time — not just in 12 months but in 5 or 10 years — provide a very useful tool not just for family violence but for women and gender inequality issues and those attitudes towards women as well. They are very important measures.

Ms WARD — Minister, in our previous hearing you spoke at length about equality and the importance of promoting gender equality and how this reflects on violence against women, but in particular it affects women in a whole variety of ways, and inequality can be overt as well as subtle. Can you have a look, again, at budget paper 3, page 304? It shows that 12.5 million has been put aside as an output cost for women and equality policy and programs. Can you please outline how this will be used to support women and to promote gender equality?

Ms RICHARDSON — Thank you very much for your question. The 12.5 million that is provided for the Office of Women's Affairs delivers a range of current programs under that office. The Queen Victoria Women's Centre Trust, for example, provides services and facilities for women's organisations at the Queen Victoria Women's Centre in Lonsdale Street. I would encourage everyone to make use of their services and facilities. It is a fantastic venue and a fantastic set of organisations that are there within the women's centre.

Ms WARD — There are some excellent organisations there.

Ms RICHARDSON — Excellent indeed. The Victorian Women's Governance Scholarship program is also supported by that output measure. It has ongoing funds of \$187 000 a year, and most importantly it strengthens women's board skills and increases representation of women on boards and committees, which is obviously a key priority of the Andrews Labor government. This government's governance scholarship program provides 34 women each year with corporate governance training and one year's membership of the Australian Institute of Company Directors.

The Victorian Honour Roll of Women, which was put in place by the former Labor government and I must say is very much supported by the former Liberal government, is also an initiative that is supported by that output. It is held around International Women's Day and, with other associated activities, has an allocation of \$72 000 per year.

Ms WARD — It was a wonderful event to attend this year.

Ms RICHARDSON — Yes, it was. In fact Rosie Batty was inducted, as was Lynne Kosky as well. That was a very significant event this year. The honour roll does, as we know, recognise and celebrate not just those women's outstanding achievements but a range of achievements by Victorian women. It acknowledges their contribution to our community.

There is also an initiative, the Thinking Ahead — Women into Local Government initiative, which is also to be delivered by the Victorian Local Governance Association. It has funding of \$132 000 over two years and will support women to stand in local government elections in October 2016, so that is another very important initiative.

The Victorian Women's Register, speaking of board appointments once again, is an electronic database of approximately 1500 women who have identified themselves as being suitable for government boards and committee appointments. It is accessible to all approved users as well and has an allocation of \$10 000 per year. That funding also provides for ongoing management and maintenance of the register. We are having a look at the register to see what we can do as well to encourage its use as we try to meet our important initiative with respect to 50 per cent of board appointments and court appointments as well.

The Rural Women's Network newsletter was a quarterly distribution and it was a ministerial online newsletter. It acknowledged the achievements of women living in rural and regional Victoria but the last edition of the e-newsletter was distributed in December 2014. It did not have as big a reach as we would have liked, so the Rural Women's Network e-newsletter is something perhaps that will evolve into another initiative in order that we make sure that it has the reach that it was originally intended for.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. I would like to thank the Minister for Women, the Honourable Fiona Richardson, Ms Falkingham and Ms Faithfull for their attendance today.

Witnesses withdrew.