

NFAW Statement to the Victorian Public Accounts and Estimates Committee's Inquiry into Gender Responsive Budgeting

We appreciate having the opportunity to appear before the committee.

Our evidence draws on the experience of many women who have technical expertise in the area of gender responsive budgeting and many with direct experience of how the Women's Budget Statement operated and was progressively compromised at the Commonwealth level. It also draws on our experience preparing and publishing an annual *Gender Lens on the Budget* since the Abbott government ceased reporting in the area in 2014.

Gender budgeting can be applied at a number of levels.

The first level of analysis is to examine **programmes that target people of one gender** to ensure that they are meeting their required goals.

- This is currently being done at both the Commonwealth level and the state level here in Victoria.

The second level of gender budgeting analysis is an examination of expenditure by government as an employer to ensure that **principles of equal opportunity** are being implemented.

- This practice has been put in place in Victoria by the Gender Equality Act, which provides for measures to entrench and to monitor substantive equality in the state employment sector. The Commonwealth has also flagged some action in this area with its commitment to bring the Commonwealth public sector under the obligations of the Workplace Gender Equality Act.

The third and most challenging level of gender responsive budgeting is preparing and assessing **all mainstream budget initiatives** to establish whether the outcome has a gendered effect, whether targeting women or not, whether intentional or not. This analysis should be applied to both the revenue and the expenditure side of the budget.

- This level of gender responsive budgeting has not been attempted by the Commonwealth, whose recent Women's Budget Statement applied to 0.14 per cent of total Commonwealth outlays over a four-year period. The third level of mainstream gender budgeting in Victoria is the focus of the Committee's work and our comments today.

Putting a gender lens to mainstream budget initiatives

In our experience the resources made available for applying a gender lens to mainstream budget initiatives have been matters of political will. Whatever operational resources might be available in the public service to do the work are simply reprioritised if government is apathetic or even antipathetic.

At the Commonwealth level, early Women's Budget Statements prepared within government provided a comprehensive statement from each portfolio agency, over time the Women's Budget Statement was removed from the formal budget papers, radically shortened (from over 300 pages in the mid-1980s to 34 pages in 2011), and progressively transformed into a public relations document for the government of the day.

Although the Commonwealth published a Women's Budget Statement with the 2021-22 Budget papers, as we have already noted this was essentially a reporting of targeted measures already in place.

Where the Treasurer or head of government argues that "you don't fill out [pink forms and blue forms on your tax return](#)", little by way of constructive gender responsive budgeting is likely to emerge.

Reflecting on the history of the Women's Budget Statement in the Commonwealth, our view is that it is critical that **both budget inputs and budget outputs** should be placed as far as possible outside the political reach of a given government.

Budget inputs

It is not easy for any government to put reviews of its own performance out of its own hands. We strongly congratulate the Victorian Government on the amendments to its Gender Equality Bill which strengthened the scope for ongoing, objective gender analysis of budget inputs.

- The Gender Equality Act provides that agencies must assess the effects that any of its policies, programs or services may have on people of different genders. NFAW recommended that rather than requiring this report every 4 years as originally specified, agencies should report annually. We made this recommendation so that gender-disaggregated data and gender specific analyses from the assessments could be used for annual budget inputs and post-budget analysis. The 4-year reporting cycle proposed in the bill has been cut down to 2 years in the Act, and agencies are also on notice that their annual data will be considered relevant.
- We also argued that rather than having agency actions mandated by the bill overseen by a mainstream department, oversight of the Gender Equality Act should be given to an independent statutory authority. This has been done with the establishment of the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector. The change is very welcome, and means that the quality of data inputs and of policy analyses will be guided and evaluated outside direct political reach.

These two measures in the Gender Equality Act mean that the new Treasury unit to advise on gender-responsive budget decision-making should have annual access to critical decision-making data and policy advice, and that the quality and comprehensiveness of this data should increase over time.

It also means that -- insofar as it is ever possible -- gender-specific data and analysis will be driven from outside the direct political will of government.

This appears to be a very promising model for securing reliable and meaningful gender-responsive budget inputs over time. However, we strongly recommend that it be supplemented by annual pre-budget consultations with women early in the pre-budget cycle.

If budget inputs are reasonably secured by current arrangements, it is time to look at how budget initiatives are assessed across the whole of government, and against previous budget measures.

Budget outputs

We strongly recommend that theses, too, should be placed as far as possible outside the political reach of a given government.

In our view, the Victorian Parliamentary Budget Office is the best place for the analysis of the state budget's impact on women. Its mandate is to provide 'ongoing, authoritative, independent and credible policy costing and advisory services . . . and to inform policy development and public debate in Parliament and the Victorian community' (s. 5).

The legislated involvement of the PBO would signal a serious Government commitment to examining and improving the impact of its budget on women.

We recognise that this remit would create resourcing issues for the PBO – though access to agency gender data and impact assessments prepared under the Gender Equality Act would make analysis considerably more straightforward. Remaining resource needs might best be managed through temporary secondment or other advisory relationship the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector.

Giving responsibility for post budget gender analysis to the PBO would also ensure ongoing political commitment to, and interest in, the women's budget process. Because the PBO is independent of government, there would be no 'whitewash' stigma.

At the same time, the existence of a properly informed and resourced and independent gender budget analysis would not pre-empt government's preparing and presenting its own document setting out its own view of budget highlights for women.

If gender responsive budgeting proceeded along these lines at the Commonwealth level, NFAW would be able to use its time and expertise in pre-budget submission and consultation with government about budget priorities.

That completes our opening statement.