

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Gender Responsive Budgeting

Melbourne—Monday, 11 October 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Danny O'Brien—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mrs Beverley McArthur

Mr James Newbury

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

WITNESSES (*via videoconference*)

Ms Julia Fox, National Assistant Secretary, and

Ms Katie Biddlestone, Industrial Officer, Shop, Distributive & Allied Employees Association Victoria.

The CHAIR: I declare back open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee for the Inquiry into Gender Responsive Budgeting.

We note that members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore witnesses are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you repeat the same things outside this forum, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege.

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We welcome the Shop, Distributive & Allied Employees Association, the SDA union, and invite you to make an 8-minute presentation. This will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you.

Ms FOX: Great. Thank you, Chair, and thank you for the opportunity to address this important Inquiry into Gender Responsive Budgeting. My name is Julia Fox, and I am the National Assistant Secretary of the SDA. Also with me today is Katie Biddlestone, who is our National Women's Officer and Work, Health and Safety Officer for the SDA. The SDA represents over 210 000 members who work across retail, fast food and warehousing. Retail is traditionally a feminised sector and our membership reflects that, with around 60 per cent of our members being women. I will focus my comments on the gendered impact of COVID and what is needed to build back better from a gender-equal perspective, and the importance of gender responsive budgeting in meeting that objective. And then I wish to briefly touch on some research that the SDA has recently undertaken with the University of New South Wales, which shines a light on widespread workplace discrimination for those with caring responsibilities and the impact this is having on workers' financial and emotional security and gender equality more broadly.

A lot has been written about the gendered impact of COVID. The impact has been so gendered because it simply has just exacerbated the existing inequalities that we already know exist in our economy and in our society. Some may say, 'But we've made great strides in gender equality', to which I would say, 'Yes, we have, but in recent times we've actually been going backwards in gender equality'. In fact over the last 15 years Australia has gone backwards on every gender equality indicator bar one, and that was before the COVID pandemic. In 2006 Australia was ranked 15th in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Index. Today, in just 15 short years, we have fallen down the rankings to 50 out of 153 countries. For some comparison, our close neighbour New Zealand is currently ranked fourth in the world on gender equality. In 2006 Australia was ranked 12th on the economic participation gap, and that measures wages, employment and workforce participation, but now we are ranked 70th. That is a pretty big fall from grace, and COVID really just added to this in so many ways. The COVID data tells us that women have been affected by job losses more than men. They have lost more hours of work than men. They are more likely to be employed casually and on lower pay than men, which has limited their access to support such as JobKeeper.

Unfortunately too we have seen significant increases in family violence levels experienced by women. Many frontline workers, our members working in retail, have also been subjected to huge increases in workplace violence throughout this pandemic. We have also seen the increased care burden which has fallen onto women, yet women's unpaid work, which is a significant contributor to economic growth, continues to not be counted or recognised as an economic measure.

With all the evidence about the gendered impact of COVID, it has been somewhat disappointing to see a rather traditional male recovery response. It is like the old recession playbook has been pulled out from 30-odd years ago, but with little consideration as to whether it is actually fit for purpose, and particularly whether it is fit for purpose for women and women's workforce participation. One good example of this disconnect can be seen

when we look at infrastructure investment. Too often infrastructure investment is considered physical infrastructure, like roads and rail and bridges, which is important, but is it the best return on investment in terms of jobs and economic growth, say, as compared to social infrastructure investment? How does it stack up when we apply the gender lens? In a study called *The Gendered Employment Gains of Investing in Social vs. Physical Infrastructure: Evidence from Simulations across Seven OECD Countries* the research has compared the employment effects of increased public investment in construction with the same investment in the care sector—the care sector being health, education, child care, aged care and disability care. They did that across seven nations, including Australia. Then they found that the employment gains from investing 1 per cent of GDP in the care sector would generate more total employment than an identical investment in construction, especially for women, and almost as much employment for men, meaning that it would actually create more jobs for both women and men. It also found that women in Australia would gain well over half the new jobs created under the care sector scenario but less than one-third of total new jobs generated if that investment was in construction.

The additional investment in the care sector would also be much more likely to draw new people into paid employment and therefore increase the overall number of workers in the economy. This is not a feature of most physical infrastructure investment. As the study noted, investment in construction increases the gender employment gap while investment in care decreases it, and that social infrastructure investment policy should be considered on an equal basis with physical infrastructure programs when economic stimulus is required. And that is what has been needed through this COVID crisis.

Of course investing in the care sector and the service sector is also important for improving gender equality, as we need to invest in decent jobs and secure jobs, we need to address the historical undervaluation of women's work and the gender pay gap, and we need to be eradicating workplace discrimination. Workplace discrimination in the retail sector is unfortunately too common, and it is greatly affecting women's economic security. In fact tomorrow the SDA, in partnership with the University of New South Wales, is launching a report—and it is the first of its kind—which looks into the challenges retail workers face in managing their care, their work and their family. Nearly 6500 SDA members responded to this survey, so it is a really substantial piece of research. And the results are quite shocking.

The research tells us about the issues facing retail workers, particularly the lack of predictability and security they have at work, the repercussions they face when they are trying to manage their care responsibilities, and the impact this is having on them not only financially but also in terms of their mental health. The report also highlights, and it is very concerning, the serious impact this is having on children of retail workers, who are simply missing out on access to life, and they are missing out on access to learning. Research too highlights the issues around affordability and access to child care and how women would like to work more hours but they end up paying more on child care than they actually earn, and that is partly because of the design of the childcare benefits and their interactions with the tax system. The research also shows significant levels of sex discrimination going on in workplaces and the punitive actions that occur to those who dare ask for hours that may fit into their life and their caring responsibilities. And it is not just a few bad eggs; it is systemic. It is systemic workplace practices, it is poor management practices and it is poor workplace culture—and it is actually against the law. It is against the law to discriminate on the basis of family and care responsibilities, but it is happening and it is widespread.

To address this we need strong workplace protections in place and access to justice to remedy this widespread systemic workplace discrimination. Access to justice, though, requires regulators and agencies being well funded and well resourced, like the equal opportunity commission—giving them the ability to proactively address systemic discrimination but also making sure they have the funding to do so, because discrimination is the single biggest cause of gender inequality. Gender equality does not just happen; it has to be designed in at every stage, in every way, in every policy, in every measure, especially if we are going to address the sharply declining gender equality in this country. With or without COVID, it is time that all governments invested in gender equality and women's economic security, because the benefits are felt by us all. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I will open it up to questions. Mr Maas.

Mr MAAS: Thanks, Chair, and thank you, Ms Fox, for your presentation. I note that there is a partnership that you have with the University of New South Wales. I was hoping that you would elaborate a bit more on

that and also share with the committee other steps that the SDA has taken to achieve a gender-equitable COVID-19 recovery.

Ms FOX: Thank you very much for your question. Well, the SDA has always worked very passionately around gender equality. We do a lot of research into areas that impact our members in this regard, such as pregnancy and return to work and this new piece of research around work and care.

Work and care, this research is very broad. It covers a range of issues like access to parental leave. We still see a lot of people in our sector, a lot of women, one in seven, do not have access to any form of parental leave, whether it is government funded, employer or unpaid. So that is really concerning. The research also highlights there is a real mismatch between accessibility and availability of child care for people working in retail. Over half of parents working in retail exclusively rely on informal care to manage their care arrangements. Only 9 per cent are relying on formal care, so that means the childcare system just does not work for retail workers. It just does not fit in with their work patterns and their lives, so that is one of the other important things that has come through.

The other part of the research really shows the work side. So there are care responsibilities, and then we have matched it up to how work interacts with people's care responsibilities. What we see is that there is widespread underemployment. Lots of retail workers are on really low base hours, and then they are sort of flexed up and down—that uncertainty, that unpredictability about work and when they are going to be required to work, drives some of the outcomes around informal care and their reliance on informal care. One of our members said really eloquently: child care requires regular bookings, but employers do not offer regular hours—and therein lies the problem for retail workers.

So we think this research is really important. It provides a really solid evidence base, and I think it is, as I said, a solid evidence base to many conversations going around about the value of care and how we value care as a society. This gives a really different flavour, I think, to the real lived experiences of retail workers.

Mr MAAS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Committee members? Mr Hibbins or Mrs McArthur?

Mrs McARTHUR: I am happy to go if there is nobody else. Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Ms Fox, and Ms Biddlestone, we have not heard from you, but thank you for being here with us today. I am just curious that you are talking about gender equality, when actually your figures suggest that there are more women in your workplace than men, so I am just wondering how that inequality exists.

But I just want to particularly go to your comments about infrastructure expenditure and how we ought to transition from perhaps physical infrastructure expenditure to social infrastructure expenditure. I would just like for you to comment on how that would affect rural women, because in many instances rural women need better roads, better rail, better bridges, better infrastructure, because poor roads disadvantage them dramatically inasmuch as we have many roads in my electorate where we have actually had to reduce the speed limit because the roads are so bad. That would add 30 hours in one particular area, from Vite Vite to Skipton, to take their children to school. So I would like to caution against advocacy for reducing physical infrastructure, especially as it affects rural people, not only in that physical infrastructure but in the connectivity area where we do need better mobile phone and internet coverage to allow women to do more in the home. So I would just ask you to comment about how reducing physical infrastructure might impact rural women.

Ms FOX: Great. Thank you for your question, and on your first point about the gender breakdown there is actually in retail quite a clear distinction around food retailing versus fashion retailing. So food retailing is more likely to sit at around 60 per cent female workforce and as low as 55 per cent in some of the supermarkets. Fashion retailing on the other hand, our Myer, our David Jones, our Just Group and the fashion retail stores, are more likely to run at between 85 and 95 per cent women. So there is a distinction. It is a very large industry, retail, and it employs over 10 per cent of all working Australians, but it is still a gendered industry. It is a great question on access for rural women, and we have also just done another piece of research into particularly the regional areas of Australia and access to, again, services and infrastructure, and I would make the point that we are not advocating for one or the other. It is about getting that balance right between infrastructure and physical. We absolutely need roads, rail, and we need all of the infrastructure in a physical sense, but we also need, and rural women would need, investment in health, education, access to services and also jobs for rural women as

well, which it creates. So I am absolutely not advocating that it is one or the other; it has actually got to be both and has to be balanced, recognising the value that social infrastructure investment actually has in the economy for everyone, and that is including women and men and families. But thank you for your question

The CHAIR: Ms Richards.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you so much for your insights and the evidence you are giving today. I think that was really compelling, just that data, then, about the number of women involved in retail and also its role as an employer, so I am really grateful to actually have caught that. That was really important, I think. I am very conscious that the SDA advocates for members at work, but also you are working to improve the rights and entitlements of working women. I am interested in perhaps having you elaborate on the ways that the SDA has been active in advancing the rights of women in the workplace.

Ms FOX: Thank you. I might also throw to my colleague Katie Biddlestone to answer this one as well, but it has been a long road of us always advocating for improvements in gender equality for women. That is things like increased and improved entitlements to parental leave. We are very focused on workplace violence as well, which is gendered unfortunately, but as I mentioned in my opening remarks, it has been a real feature of this pandemic and the numbers and the experiences of our members through COVID. I think one in five of our members has been deliberately spat on or coughed on during this pandemic, and it is just appalling some of the things that we have seen occurring in retail. In terms of some other things, I might throw to my colleague Katie.

Ms BIDDLESTONE: Thanks, Julia, and thank you for the question. We do a broad range of activities in relation to gender equality and promoting that for our members. I am a dedicated resource in terms of that work as the National Women's Officer. We have a national women's committee, which includes women's officers from all branches of the SDA, where we regularly discuss the work that we do around gender equality. We ensure that our officials are appropriately trained in things like sexual harassment and how we represent our members. We regularly appear at hearings such as this and different inquiries and make submissions on the work that government does, but the other key thing that we do is the constant engagement that we have with employers in the sectors that our members are working in to ensure that we are also influencing what happens in the workplace as well, and Julia has spoken to you about the recent research that we have done with the University of New South Wales. So we are putting steps in motion now to talk to employers about improvements that need to be made in workplaces, which is going to be really critical in terms of outcomes for our members. So it is multifaceted in terms of how we approach what we are doing to improve gender equality for our members. That just gives you a little bit of a picture of the types of work that we are doing in that space.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you. I have got maybe one follow-up, if that is okay, Chair. I am interested in perhaps getting some more insights. I am conscious that, you know, you have spoken already about the extraordinary responsibility that many women have for unpaid work and how that does reduce their availability for paid work, and I think that that insight before was really important. Perhaps you could help us understand what role gender responsive budgeting could play in assisting the union movement to better address this imbalance.

Ms FOX: Thank you again for that follow-up question. I think it is really multifaceted. It has got to be effective. You know, for this research we have also seen the financial distress that people are in, and we do need better tax systems in place that actually recognise and value care. We work a lot on retirement outcomes for women and the superannuation system and the changes that need to happen there to make sure all across the life cycle for women we are not adding more and more deficit because of the care burden that they carry, and we end up with women retiring with very low balances compared to men. So there are important steps that governments can take at points of interaction where they need to intervene to ensure the right measures are put in place at the right points in time that mean we are not again impacted or further detriment is not placed on women as they go through their lives. It is discrimination. And it needs to be, as I said, resourced and funded properly so we can actually move the dial on the discrimination that is going on in workplaces.

It cannot just be one woman. In the retail environment—as I said, over 1.5 million people work in retail; it is over 10 per cent of all working Australians—if one woman raises the issue of pregnancy discrimination in her workplace or her inability to return to work because of her caring responsibilities and the workplace has made that really challenging, that is one case that may take us 18 months to run through the equal opportunity commission before we get an outcome. What it does not address is what is going on systemically, culturally, in

the workplace. When we looked at parental leave, as an example, we had lots of partners and fathers talk about their inability to access parental leave entitlements that already exist. So we have some really good things in place, but we actually need the supports and systems to be able to make sure we can access them and employees do not have to fight tooth and nail just to get access to basic entitlements. So we definitely need some more, I think, robust funding to allow those sorts of cases to move the dial.

The other area that we have done a lot of work in is sexual harassment. Retail is the fourth-worst industry in terms of sexual harassment. A lot of young people work in retail, and one of the stats that has always shocked me is that for our members working in fast food, if you are a female under the age of 18, you are more likely to be sexually harassed at work than not, which is extraordinary. We know that. Through the work we have done with the human rights commission and the research we have done into retail in particular we know these things are existing. What do we need to do to actually move the dial and change it? There is policy development, but there is also enforcement and making sure we can hold employers accountable for some of the things that are going on in workplaces. And even the gender pay gap—we need to move the dial on that. So we need to make sure there is accountability, there is transparency and those other important issues.

I do not know if you had anything further you wanted to add, Katie.

Ms BIDDLESTONE: No, just that gender responsive budgeting really needs to ensure that across departments there is a gender lens to the way that funding occurs. Also acknowledging that removing funding for certain programs—those sorts of things will have a negative effect on women, particularly those who are providing care if the funding relates to those sorts of services. It is ensuring that the gender responsive budgeting does not just happen when the budget is released but in all of the work and funding arrangements that occur throughout the year and through each department.

Ms RICHARDS: Thank you. Thanks, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Sam Hibbins.

Mr HIBBINS: Thanks, Chair, and thank you both for your presentation today. I think you quite rightly pointed out it would have been good to have some gender responsive budgeting when governments were obviously allocating the very large amounts of money in their response to COVID. But now I am just thinking of going forward. Obviously we are hoping to have some sort of sense of normalcy in society in a month or so, but do you still think, particularly given much of the hardships have been borne by women throughout the pandemic, that there still will be a need for investment in recovery for society at large and for their investment to be in areas that will benefit women—so still significant investment to be made and to make sure that there is a gender lens applied to that?

Ms FOX: Yes, thank you for your question, Sam. Look, there are a few things. The recovery in terms of women's job and workforce participation—we are seeing a lot of the jobs that might have been permanent are actually coming back as casual, and when you are casually employed, your ability to manage care can be even more challenging. It is also a financial detriment to people, because they do not have access to things like personal and carer's leave and some of those entitlements that help you financially survive when you are looking after your own kids and things like that. So there is that aspect to it. But I just think we also need to invest more in what decent work looks like for women. As I said in my opening remarks, we still have significant historical undervaluation of women's work, we still have a gender pay gap, we still have a retirement outcomes gap that is at 40-odd per cent, so we still need policies and responses that target those areas to make sure we are lifting women's economic security and it has a flow-on effect to everyone: members of their family, their partners but also their kids. I think we just need to be considering where we can invest in social infrastructure, where we can invest in service sectors and making sure we have a broad lens. We are not looking at just narrow aspects of the community, but we are really considering how the economy works and how it works for the women and what we need to do to build it back better.

Mr HIBBINS: Terrific. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Bev.

Mrs McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. I am just interested whether you would like to comment, Julia or Katie, on the issue of taxation as it affects women in the workforce. Would we be better to design a tax system

that allowed women to keep more money rather than have all the other services that they might be able to access that they could then decide on? Do we undervalue women when they are at home caring for children? Is this something that ought to be looked at through the tax system?

Ms FOX: Thank you for your question. Yes, the tax system I think is really important and one that does need to, I think, reflect the way the world of work works for women and the care responsibilities that women have. And it is not only children—there are many in our sector, for example, in the age group that they are, that have care responsibilities for children but they also have them for their elderly parents, and that elder care is a significant contribution as well. Therefore through the life cycle for women it is not just younger kids; they might have teenagers and then they are also managing older parents as well. The other thing for retailers is we have a lot of sole parents in our industry. It is double the national average, so it is quite high. The take-home income that members have is quite low, and the tax system needs to reflect that. I mean, the tax cuts coming forward—the ones scheduled next year—\$7 out of every \$10 goes to men, and they are already high-income earners. That is not really a well-thought-out tax outcome if it benefits 70 per cent men and only 30 per cent women. So how do we get the balance right to make sure it is effective, it interacts with childcare benefits and it interacts with their work? There are issues around people with second jobs, and in retail our stats show that about 12 per cent of retail workers work two jobs, so again that can impact tax rates as well.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Ms Taylor.

Ms TAYLOR: You mentioned before about workers being literally spat on et cetera, and I thought that was very disturbing. I just wondered if there is a gender lens to that, if it tends to be more one gender or another that commits that kind of activity or receives that activity and what mechanisms you might foresee. They may already be in place; it just might be a matter of cultural change. How do you reflect on that?

Ms FOX: I might hand that one to you, Katie.

Ms BIDDLESTONE: Thanks, Julia, and thank you for the question. The SDA has been doing a lot of work in relation to customer abuse and violence over the last few years with our No-one Deserves a Serve campaign. We actually surveyed our members at the end of December last year and found that around 21 per cent of our members had been coughed or spat on during COVID, and this does not seem to be going away at all. Whilst abuse and violence was bad before, it has been exacerbated during COVID. We have worked really constructively with employers over the last two to three years in particular. Lots of different things have been implemented. Two-thirds of our members have now been trained in dealing with aggressive customers, whereas before it was around a quarter. We now have customer-facing signage in most stores asking people to respect retail and fast-food workers. Most employers have implemented policies and procedures, so a lot of work has been done to try and prevent abuse and violence by customers. But where we think we need more work to be done now is some improvements in laws around banning and trespass, and enforcement of those, so particularly repeat offenders, which is a common thing when we talk about abuse and violence by customers, dealing with those repeat offenders is really important. And also we are advocating for a separate offence to be introduced to customers who are violent towards retail and fast-food workers, because we think that not only will that mean that customers will know that they will be breaking the law and there will be consequences for those sorts of actions but it will also give our members a little bit more agency to actually make complaints to their employer or to the police when these sorts of things are happening to them. And it is gendered in nature. Sorry, I should have added that. It is definitely gendered in nature. Our female members are much more likely to experience violence and harassment in the workplace—a little bit less when we talk about physical violence, but definitely verbal abuse, sexual harassment and also sexual assault by customers, which does occur, are more likely to be experienced by our female members.

Ms TAYLOR: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Are there any further questions from anyone? No. Okay. Thank you very much to the SDA for your time here today and for providing evidence to our inquiry. You will be provided with transcripts to check that your evidence is accurately recorded. The committee will now take a lunchbreak, and we thank you for your time today.

Witnesses withdrew.