

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Inquiry into Gender Responsive Budgeting**

Melbourne—Monday, 25 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*)

Dr Niki Vincent, Public Sector Gender Equality Commissioner, and

Ms Kate Berry, Gender Equality Director, Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector.

**The CHAIR:** Welcome back to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. This time we welcome the Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee Inquiry into Gender Responsive Budgeting.

We note that members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards. We ask that mobile telephones be turned to silent.

All evidence that is taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you 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.

You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We welcome the witnesses. We invite you to make an 8-minute opening statement, and this will be followed by questions from the committee. Thank you for joining us today.

**Visual presentation.**

**Dr VINCENT:** Thank you very much, I am Dr Niki Vincent, the commissioner for gender equality in the public sector, and also we have Kate Berry, who is the director of the commission, with us as well. Kate is going to be managing the slides for me as we go through the presentation.

So I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands from which I am joining you today, the Boon Wurrung people of the south-eastern Kulin nation. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging and extend those respects to any other First Nation people who may be joining us today.

Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to speak to you about the benefits of gender impact assessments, including gender responsive budgeting.

Could we have the next slide, please, Kate. So the *Gender Equality Act* requires public sector organisations to collect data and to report on gender equality in their workplaces, which will be included in their gender equality action plans. These plans are required every four years, with progress reports due to me every two years. They must set out the strategies and measures to make reasonable and material progress against the seven workplace gender equality indicators in the Act. These indicators are gender pay equity, gender composition at all levels of the workforce, gender composition of governing bodies, workplace sexual harassment, recruitment and promotion practices, gendered work segregation and access to leave and flexibility.

Workplace gender audit data is due to me on 1 December this year—I have granted an extension due to COVID—and this will provide us with the clearest picture we have had to date on the state and nature of gender inequality in our public sector workplaces. Defined entities—those are the organisations covered by the Act—will now have the option to submit the strategies and measures that they develop for promoting gender equality in their workplaces to me by 31 March 2022. I have made another extension for that due to COVID.

Beyond the workplace, the *Gender Equality Act* requires organisations to assess how their public policies, their programs and their services impact people of different genders to ensure they do not unintentionally reinforce or create inequalities. The requirement to complete gender impact assessments began when the Act commenced, on 31 March this year, and it applies to all new policies, programs and services that have a direct and significant public impact as well as any existing ones that come up for review. A budget bid is the proposal for a new program of work and therefore requires a gender impact assessment. Organisations have to report back to me every two years on the gender impact assessments they have undertaken and how they use the findings of the assessment to improve gender equality in their programs, policies or services. Gender impact assessments are going to ensure that services are designed with equality front of mind.

Slide 3: structural gender bias is currently hidden by so-called gender-neutral policy processes that fail to consider the experiences of women and gender-diverse people, and this is compounded by the fact that women in general face barriers to decision-making processes, resources and economic opportunities. When programs, policies, services and budgets that impact women are made without considering women, perhaps because there is the assumption that the consequences will be gender neutral or because a male experience has been used by default to model impacts, then the structural inequalities continue unchallenged. For example, cars are designed using the male as default. Even when female crash dummies have been used, they generally are simply based on a smaller sized male body or male test dummy. This ignores anatomical differences and places women at much higher risk in a crash. In fact the data shows that women are 47 per cent more likely to be seriously injured than a man, 71 per cent more likely to be moderately injured and three times more likely to get whiplash.

While we can safely assume that most organisations do not set out to deliberately disadvantage women through the policies, programs and services they offer, unless a gender impact assessment is applied, there is a real risk that those policies, programs and services will perpetuate or reinforce inequality. And this disadvantage might be compounded for women from vulnerable or minority cohorts, such as those with disability, Aboriginal women and so on. My team has created a best practice toolkit for undertaking gender impact assessments, and the Department of Treasury and Finance's gender responsive budgeting unit will use the toolkit in developing their own systems and processes. This is going to ensure consistency in the work that they are doing to ensure a gender lens is applied to the budget process and budget bid development.

Slide 4, please, Kate. Genders should be considered at every point in the policy program and service development cycle. Embedding gender impact assessments into the budget process means that at the earliest opportunity resources are allocated in a way that considers gendered impacts, and this is why I am really pleased that the DTF gender responsive budgeting unit will oversee this important work as part of the budget process.

To walk you through an example of how this will work, if the Department of Transport was developing a budget bid for bus routes to service a new residential area they would need to include a gender impact assessment in the budget bid proposal under DTF's gender responsive budgeting requirements and under the *Gender Equality Act's* requirements. The gender impact assessment would allow planners to examine the research and consider how different people experience the journey differently. Feeling safe travelling after dark is important for everyone, but women are more likely to feel unsafe, especially when walking home from their bus stop. This is a small proportion of the journey in distance, but it requires women to make a disproportionate level of decisions and adjustments to feel safer—texting a friend, changing their route to pass populated or better-lit areas, carrying their keys in their hands and so on. The gender impact assessment at the budget stage ensures that adequate funding is sought to meet the needs of all users—for example, by ensuring good streetlighting; live arrival information; wide, accessible footpaths; and clear lines of sight, all of which can improve safety. Once the funding for the project has been confirmed, the gender impact assessment may need to be updated or, for bigger projects, subsequent updates or new gender impact assessments might be required if there are changes—for example, to the proposed route and location of the stops. My commission is providing guidance for the department to do this sort of thing as part of its development and implementation.

Applying a gender impact assessment to a budget bid is a critical step, and it is important to have the gender responsive budgeting unit oversee this to share their particular expertise and understanding of the budget process, including how budget bids are assessed and the gendered impacts programs may have as well as best-practice approaches to measuring the gendered impact of a whole state budget, and to provide skill development through specific training for staff developing and assessing budgets. My commission will work with DTF to ensure we are collecting consistent data about which agencies require more targeted support to meet their gender impact assessment obligations.

Slide 5: gender responsive budgeting is critical to the work of the Victorian government to address gender inequality. As I have explained, it will help ensure that government policy and policy outcomes do not create or reinforce gender inequality, and it will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of policy and policy outcomes. Gender responsive budgeting tools have been adopted by nearly half of all OECD countries, including five of the seven largest economies in the world: Canada, France, Germany, Japan and the United Kingdom. As international evidence attests, benefits have included increased life expectancy for women in Mexico, lower healthcare costs for municipalities in Sweden and greater participation by women in the workforce in Australia.

Canada's gender-budgeting Act, for example, passed in 2018, enabled federal government departments to identify and develop strategies to offset the negative impacts on women of 15 per cent of budget measures.

Slide 6: this is the first time these requirements have been in place in Victoria, so there is a lot we do not know right now, and I am really looking forward to collecting data and measuring progress over time, which is a key part of my functions. The information that organisations provide to me in progress reports about their gender impact assessments, including their gender responsive budgeting, will help my team and me, as well as Victorians in general, understand how Victorian government investment is supporting progress towards gender equality. I expect that outcomes resulting from gender-impact assessments will mean that public sector organisations continue to improve their services and save money through increased efficiency in delivery.

Slide 7, please. Thank you. Over to you for questions.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. Mr O'Brien, Deputy Chair.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Dr Vincent. Can I just ask: on your last comment there about efficiency and saving money, is there an implied suggestion that gender responsive budgeting will cost more, or is that completely not the case?

**Dr VINCENT:** Well, there is no doubt that it will require additional work up-front. There will need to be an investment in training, obviously, and in taking the time to consider the gender impacts, but we expect the costs to be far outweighed by the benefits—so not increasing gender inequality and all the inefficiencies and costs associated with gender inequality.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** I guess I probably did not ask that question very well. What I meant was: to get gender responsive budgeting right, does it mean more money for women-specific programs, or is it your view that it is simply about considering it at the start and making sure that what we are doing—as you said, with the bus route example—is actually considering both things through the gender lens?

**Dr VINCENT:** Yes. That is what I expect. Once we consider gender, depending on the outcomes of what the gender-impact assessment finds, there may need to be adjustments made, which may require additional investments, but that investment I expect to be outweighed by the benefits of gender responsive budgeting and gender-impact assessments.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Just a quick one, Chair, if I may. When we talk about gender equality, is it literally gender equality, or is it only about assisting women to improve the status of women throughout society. For example, do you have a role in assisting men who might find barriers to entering the nursing workforce, or is it only for women?

**Dr VINCENT:** No. It is gender equality, so what we want to see is the things that have held women back decreasing, such as the fact that they have two jobs often because they are working both at home being responsible for child care and housework far more than men but they also have paid work. What we would like to see is men moving much more into taking care of their children and doing extra housework and those sorts of things which free up women, so that is a way that we would address inequality for men and women there. Obviously we would also like to see men moving into female-dominated workforces, just as we would like to see women moving to greater representation in male-dominated workforces. All of those things will create greater equality for both men and women.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr O'Brien. Mr Maas.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** It is me, Chair, Tim Richardson on deck here. I am stealing big Gary's thunder here. Thank you so much, Dr Vincent, for that fascinating presentation and the culture-changing journey that the public sector is on with gender responsive budgeting. Obviously acknowledging the extensive work that your agency has done in supporting the public sector to build that capability and understanding around gender impact assessments, I am just wondering what your organisation's lessons have been in learning from that process and how that could be applied to the gender responsive budgeting processes as well.

**Dr VINCENT:** That is a great question. It has been an unusual time, obviously, setting up a commission and implementing legislation under COVID lockdown conditions. I would not suggest that the learnings that we have had would necessarily assist in more normal times, if you like—as if there may be more normal times from now on. I have had a marvellous team that Kate Berry has led. We have recruited some extraordinary people into our team, and I think they have been absolutely inspired by the *Gender Equality Act* to really drive the implementation. It is early days yet. The Act only came into effect on 31 March. So we are seeing the rollout of gender impact assessment training. We have just put that in place. I think one of our learnings will be that we need to do a lot more of that, so we have had a first round of training out to defined entities. But we are getting a lot more requests now coming in for additional assistance, and we will need to put some more resources into that. I imagine this will be a process that is ongoing but perhaps for the next couple of years will need to be fairly intensive in terms of supporting people in government to get their heads around how to undertake gender impact assessments and undertake gender responsive budgeting.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Dr Vincent, how do you ensure that there is not a reporting culture and a compliance culture and that it drives that forward thinking and that outcome? Are there first movers in the public sector that you would point towards and say, ‘They’re a really great example as early adopters’, or how do you drive that rather than a compliance culture?

**Dr VINCENT:** I think the transparency under the Act is what will drive that. All of the data that organisations give us will be published. They publish it on their own websites, we publish it on ours. The public will be able to search our reporting platform for high-level data about each organisation as well. So there will be scrutiny, not just by my agency but also by their own organisations and by the public potentially, and then when they give us their plans about what they are going to do about any inequalities they find in their organisations, again, those plans are published and there will be public scrutiny. They then are required under the Act to make reasonable and material progress every two years. So they have to report to me about what progress they have made in terms of what they said they were going to do to address any inequalities that they found, and we will hold them to account for that. I do have compliance powers as well, but I hope I never have to use them. But again, all of those progress reports will be made public, so I think that public scrutiny is going to drive real progress as opposed to just tick-boxing as you suggest. We will be looking very carefully to ensure that organisations are making reasonable and material progress over time. That is what is required under the legislation.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** That is excellent. Thank you so much. That car accident example has just blown my mind, seriously.

**Dr VINCENT:** I know.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Hopefully that features in some of our transcripts. Thank you so much, Doctor.

**Dr VINCENT:** Pleasure.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Richardson. Mr Hibbins.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Doctor, for your presentation. In the same vein as Mr Richardson’s question, in regard to gender impact statements attached to budget bids, how do you ensure that they are credible and you do not have bids with assessments attached to them that are, you know, of questionable benefit or trivial benefit or benefits that just do not stack up? How do you actually ensure that those impact assessments are credible?

**Dr VINCENT:** Yes. It is a really good question. We have developed comprehensive guidance for defined entities under our Act. It is all available on our website. We have also, as I said, had training for all of the organisations that are covered by the Act, and I expect that the gender responsive budgeting unit will be rolling out the same sort of thing. What that ensures is that if organisations follow our guidance, they are going to do comprehensive gender impact assessments.

I think we also need to shift hearts and minds in this as well, so it is not something that people believe they just have to do to tick a box, but they also believe that it is a valuable, important and critical process—and that is a longer term thing. I think embedding the process itself and training people in how to do this and explaining why it is important and then demonstrating outcomes as a result of that will shift those hearts and minds over time.

We are going to, as a commission, be putting a lot of support for organisations as well, but a lot of scrutiny into how organisations are undertaking their gender impact assessments. Then where we find that there are perhaps inadequacies, we will go in and provide additional support and training and so forth. And if we find just wilful non-compliance, I will take action using the compliance powers that I have.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Terrific. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Mr Maas.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Dr Vincent, for your presentation. Look, just picking up on the crash test dummy example as well, I would like to maybe contextualise that example a bit more in terms of the 300 public sector organisations or so that now have to demonstrate progress on workplace gender equality as a result of the Act commencing in March of this year and the impact that that has had on policies, programs and services. Would you be able to share some examples of where an organisation, as a result of conducting a gender impact assessment, has adapted a program or service so that it does not reinforce gender inequalities?

**Dr VINCENT:** Well, it is early days yet; as you said, the Act only came into effect on 31 March. We are building a bunch of case studies as we find them, but organisations will not report to me on their gender impact assessments until 31 October 2023. So at the moment we have focused our attention on helping organisations understand what they need to do and put that into action. I do have some really good examples. Northern Health wanted to review its perinatal support. They looked at their program, along with an organisation called Baby Makes 3, and they found that they were not inclusive of the partner—they were addressing their correspondence to the birth mother only—and they were not inclusive of diverse families. So they changed their introductory letter to include the partner and they have made their materials more inclusive of diverse families, and as a result they have developed a better and more comprehensive service. There are quite a few small examples that we have on our website, and I can refer you to there for others. We will build case studies over time as we get more and more organisations reporting to us.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Maas. Mrs McArthur.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair. I am just wondering: what is the budget for your commission and how many people do you have in your extraordinary team?

**Dr VINCENT:** In 2020–21 the state budget allocated \$3.2 million ongoing to implement the *Gender Equality Act*. We have currently 14 people, including me, in our team. I think we have just recruited a couple of people. We call ourselves a small but mighty team. So it is not big. We have done a lot of things by also working in partnership with a panel of providers that are experts in gender equality. We have worked through the panel to roll out training. We have done a lot through guidance materials for organisations as well. But yes—a very small but mighty team.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you. Can we multiply that by three because we have got the gender equality commissioner for the public sector and the fairness commissioner? Would they have similar budgets and workforces, do you think?

**Dr VINCENT:** I do not know that there is a fairness commissioner, sorry. I am the commissioner for gender equality in the public sector; I am the only one as far as I know. You may be talking about the commissioner for LGBTIQ communities. If that is what you are talking about, that commissioner has a much smaller budget. They do not have an Act to implement. I think it is just a commissioner and one or two staff. But I am not sure—if you could be a bit more specific about other commissioners that you were talking about?

**Mrs McARTHUR:** I thought there is a gender equality commissioner and a gender equality commissioner for the public sector and there is also the fairness commissioner.

**Dr VINCENT:** I do not think there is a fairness commissioner that I know about. There is me as the gender equality commissioner for the public sector, implementing the *Gender Equality Act*. There is also the equal opportunity and human rights commissioner, who you may be referring to, who covers the *Equal Opportunity Act* in Victoria and the human rights charter in Victoria.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Okay, and further, in rural communities in the public sector, especially referring to local governments, it is actually very difficult to find one person to fill a space, let alone ticking all these boxes that you require and others require. Do you take into consideration the lack of choice in people seeking employment in these areas in rural communities?

**Dr VINCENT:** Absolutely. In fact last week I was virtually in the Wimmera region talking about exactly those challenges, and we do take them very seriously. One of the things that we will look at doing in consultation with rural communities is developing a report around ruralness as an intersectionality for gender and equality. I feel very strongly about that, and what I heard in the Wimmera last week really was quite shocking in terms of the challenges. Our Act actually has intersectionality embedded within it—so things like women with disability, Aboriginal women and so forth, as I said. I think we can also layer living in a rural region onto gender inequality, and I think that is a very important consideration.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, and further, you mentioned the list of countries that were involved in gender diversity budgeting, but the two biggest economies in the world were not included. The People's Republic of China—China, the Communist Party of China—and the USA. What do you say about the two biggest economies in the world not being involved in this aspect of employment in the public sector?

**Dr VINCENT:** Well, obviously I am pretty passionate about gender impact assessments. There has been an entire book written about the disadvantages that women have faced as a result of gender impact assessments not being undertaken. It is called *Invisible Women* by Caroline Criado Perez and it has that example that I stated earlier about the crash test dummies. All I can say is that countries that do not do this will continue to disadvantage women, I am sure, in their programs, policies and services, and I do not think that is a good thing. I think that we have the opportunity in Victoria, amongst the other countries that I mentioned, to be leading the way and demonstrating that this creates better outcomes and better policy, programs and services in public organisations.

**Mrs McARTHUR:** Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Ms Richards.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Dr Vincent and Ms Berry, for your evidence today. Capturing those examples really brings it to life, actually, and thinking about the intersectionality of rural women and people who are experiencing other disadvantages has been really meaningful I think as evidence. And just to maybe segue from Mrs McArthur's interest in other jurisdictions, I know that international best practice does dictate that gender analysis should be considered across every aspect of the budget. We know that includes everything from the process of development of policies to decision-making and then of course the all-important implementation. I know you gave evidence at the beginning, and I am interested in perhaps seeing if you could explore a little bit further how the Victorian government can ensure that gender responsive budgeting is embedded in government decision-making and policy development to achieve meaningful and sustainable change into the future—so perhaps using those examples you had before but going a little bit deeper.

**Dr VINCENT:** I guess again I would say that because we often use male as the default in what we do when we develop and design policies, programs and services we do not think about gender; we think about it as being gender neutral. Often when we bring a gender lens we discover that we have been inadvertently discriminating. There is a great example that I often use from a Swedish municipality. It is the snowplough example—you may have heard it before—where the municipality did a gender impact assessment on its snowploughing operations. They were ploughing the roads first and then the footpaths and the side roads, so the main roads first and the footpaths and side roads later on. When they did a gender impact assessment they found that men were using the main roads and that women tended to use lots more of the side roads and footpaths and then public transport. So they would often have to get children to school or to child care, and they were pushing buggies, and then they might get on buses and so forth, or they might even be on bicycles. What they found was that with chains on car wheels, people using the roads were not as impacted by the snow, but women trying to walk with buggies and getting on buses and using side roads and back streets and so forth were often slipping in the snow, and this was creating a lot more accidents for women and a lot more hospitalisations and visits to emergency and so forth.

When they did the gender impact assessment, they reversed that process, and they started ploughing the side roads and the footpaths first and then the main roads. They found that that reduced accidents and injuries and hospitalisations and visits to emergency and so forth, so it had outcomes for women but also outcomes for the economy and the health system in terms of saving money and not having as many injuries and so forth, whereas it did not have consequent rises in accidents for men who were using the roads or anyone who was using the roads. So it is that kind of thing that we need to be looking at even when it appears that things are gender neutral and there is certainly no intention to discriminate. What gender impact assessment requires of us is to think about gender at every step of the way so that we do not inadvertently discriminate or reinforce inequalities.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Is Mr Newbury with us, and does he have a question? No? Ms Taylor.

**Ms TAYLOR:** That was extraordinary, the snowplough thing. That had me—wow. It is just amazing, isn't it? It just shows how critical this work is in ways that you do not even imagine. Anyway, I was just thinking about how we have seen acute impacts of systemic inequality play out in homelessness rates of older women. We have seen a lot of census data which is showing this is the fastest growing cohort of homeless women. How does an initiative like gender responsive budgeting enable government and the private sector to intervene earlier and prevent poverty in retirement?

**Dr VINCENT:** Well, that is a great question. I am not an economist, and so I think the gender responsive budgeting unit has that but also has expertise around budgets will be in a better position to describe how that might have those flowthrough effects. It seems like obviously if we start to think about gender and we start to think about the gendered impacts of everything that we do in government potentially, you can only anticipate that it will have those kinds of outcomes that you suggest that will be better for women who are the fastest growing group of homeless, as you say. We also have to think long term about these things as well. We have to think about what will be the impacts over the longer term of a policy, program, service or budget in fact, and so that is why these processes are so absolutely critical, I think, for the kinds of outcomes that we want to see in addressing these problems.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Excellent. Yes. And apologies if I narrowed in a little bit too much there with an economic focus, but to your point: I think broadly this embedding of these policies, we would like to think, is going to drive really effective change and perhaps mitigate the risk of those kinds of outcomes anyway. So thank you for that.

I do not know how I am going for time, but I am just wondering: when you are looking at effective implementation of GRB, I should say, it requires not only leadership but whole-of-government buy-in from policymakers and decision-makers. What practical measures are necessary to implement GRB to ensure buy-in from all levels of government throughout the budget development and decision-making processes, do you think?

**Dr VINCENT:** Yes. I think we need a lot of things. I mean, there is no silver bullet here. You absolutely need leadership to be on board and driving that change. You need everyone trained, anyone who is going to be involved in that process trained, and understanding how to use them but also, very importantly, as I said, that shift in hearts and minds of understanding why it is important and being able to see outcomes from that that make sense—and so there is a training piece. There is also a communication piece of feeding back to the public sector about the outcomes of this, which is very much what my commission is going to be involved in.

You also need checks as well. You need to have as a last fallback some piece of paper or some sort of process that is required for you to say, 'Yes, we have undertaken this', you know, to tick those boxes, as we say, to say, 'This has all been done'. It should never just be the tick boxes, but at least if you have a tick box at the last point before the budget gets approved or before the policy program or service gets approved, you will be reminded that if it has not been done, it should have been done and you need to take it back out of those approval processes and get that done. So you need all sorts of mechanisms in place.

Leadership is very important. I think leadership does understand this. When I talk to leaders, they do get this. We then need to see that translated down to the next level and the next level and all of that training. There is no silver bullet, as I say, and it is going to be a process that needs a lot of support in the system to make sure that

the entirety of the public sector gets its head around this, understands what needs to be done and why it needs to be done and then makes sure it is done.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Ms Taylor? If there are no further questions—no. That concludes the time we have set aside for consideration with you today, Doctor. So we thank you very much for appearing before the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee and making your contribution and answering our questions. You will receive transcripts of the evidence for you to check and verify. The committee will now take a short break before moving to consideration of its next witness, so we declare this hearing adjourned. Thank you for your time.

**Dr VINCENT:** Thank you.

**Witnesses withdrew.**