



Australian Women's Coalition

**Barriers to Women's Employment  
Women and Recession Project**



**Perth  
consultation notes**



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## INTRODUCTION

The West Australian consultation on the Australia Institute's report *The Impact of the Recession on Women*<sup>1</sup> was held in Perth on 11 November 2009. It was organised by Business and Professional Women Australia (BPW), with the support of the Western Australian Department of Communities.

A copy of the invitation is at Attachment 1.

## BACKGROUND

The city of Perth is the capital of Western Australia – the largest land jurisdiction in the Commonwealth, with a thriving economy benefiting from major resource developments in minerals and energy in the north west of the state. The unemployment rate is lower than in other mainland states and territories. Women's employment is concentrated, however, in clerical, sales and service occupations<sup>2</sup>.

The following extract from the Western Australian Trade and Investment Office's website outlines some key features of the Western Australian economy<sup>3</sup>.

Western Australia is [...] an export focused economy. In 2007/08, total merchandise exports were AUD 68.1 billion (representing 39.4% of Australia's total).

These numbers are largely driven by extraction and export of minerals and commodities such as iron-ore, alumina, crude oil, LNG; precious metals and gems such as nickel and gold; wheat, wool, livestock and seafood as well as its beautiful natural attractions and clean environment.

The economy's close link to natural resources provides a comparative advantage in resource extraction, processing, as well as infrastructure development, innovation, services and financing around those industries.

Other unique factors and challenges such as isolation and distance also characterize Western Australia's economy and development. This has led to a spirit

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<sup>1</sup> David Richardson, 2009, *The Impact of the Recession on Women: Background Paper*, The Australia Institute, viewed 12 January 2010, <https://www.tai.org.au/index.php?q=node%2F19&type=1&pubid=698&act=display>

<sup>2</sup> Western Australian Department for Communities, 2009, *Women's Report Card: Measuring Women's Progress – 2009 Update*, viewed 15 January 2009, <http://www.communities.wa.gov.au/serviceareas/women/Resources/Documents/Women%27s%20Report%20Card%20Summary%202009%20Update.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Western Australian Trade and Investment Office, 2008, 'Western Australia: The Economy and Key Issues', viewed 15 January 2009, <http://www.tradewesternaustralia.com/?q=economy>

of self-reliance, innovation and development of technology to meet these challenges.

## **SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS**

Was the government response to the recession gendered enough?

### **Education and training**

- Women do have plenty of education and training but still say there is no work. They might have done a Certificate IV and completed many hours of voluntary work, particularly in the case of older women, but still have no success with jobs. Indeed, many women have significant tertiary qualifications and work experience but are still struggling to find permanent work at the professional end of the market.
- Women are encouraged to do more study but may be finding themselves overqualified. Comments were also made about the increasing cost of postgraduate study.
- Is being overqualified actually an excuse used by employers for something else?
- Does TAFE focus on casual and part-time work? Yes they do in WA.
- Balga TAFE reports that the New Opportunities for Women (NOW) and Wider Opportunities for Work (WOW) programs have been quite successful. The Federal Government has free skills training for skills shortage areas so women are often funnelled into 'caring' roles. There is an assumption that this is what women want to do. Where should we be sending women rather than into the caring professions? This needs to be analysed. Women might be good at caring but it is undervalued, underpaid and full of shift work and casual work.
- There are many structural barriers to training, let alone employment. This has implications for the funding and structure of training.
- TAFE NOW and WOW programs are well funded
- NOW dropped substantially over the past five years because Commonwealth employment rules discouraged any training for longer than three weeks. People just had to take any employment. What are the new rules about this?

- VET access – can be used for non-accredited training (although funding is very limited) and we need to do more to get that recognised. There is a need for more courses like the 'first step' course to increase self-confidence. Good career counsellors are thin on the ground and people don't know how to find them.
- Jobs, Education and Training (JET) – for single mothers (supportive and not draconian) used to give people the money for clothes etc., but I think this is different now as it now offers a more holistic approach – training should be person centred – what does she need rather than what does she have to do?
- Economic hegemony has made us lose all that flexibility. JET was fantastic and we need to get back to asking people what they need.
- Should there be an incentive for women getting into their own business and what sort of assistance and training could be given to them?
- Women opt out of the male workforce to set up their own business but need better training on actually running a business. It was noted that the Small Business Development Corporation (SBDC) is very male dominated and thus so is their thinking. Women in their own businesses at home need mentoring/advice on juggling everything – not so much on the skills they need to do the business, just how to cope with it all. (BPW Australia could give more assistance in this regard.)
- There were concerns raised about the Careers conference – people think that young kids who have been caring should go and do caring – this is the last thing they want to do.

## Employment issues

- Comments were made about the transfer of skills between countries and states and how limiting this is (for example, between New Zealand and Australia). This is compounded by the fact that prior service is not recognised by many employers in Australia. If you take time out from the workforce to raise a family then it breaks your continuity of service for long service leave etc.
- Just because a woman takes 12 months off for paid maternity leave does not mean she has forgotten everything learned at her job. In fact she has developed a whole new skill set. Life experience actually ups your skills. A long break from the workforce could understandably affect certain jobs more directly, such as those in

IT industries or where industry networks are vital, but this is not the case for all jobs.

- There need to be more women on boards. It is now proven that having women on boards makes companies better because of the 'soft skills' women add. Although there is renewed emphasis for more women on boards there was agreement that a change of culture is really what is needed – but which comes first?
- There is an added discrimination of age, along with ethnic or aboriginal prejudice. Despite mothering and studying, they are still discriminated against.
- An example was given of women who are employed part-time and ran business part-time but young men still get the jobs over these women.
- Under-employment really dents your confidence at all levels, including at senior management: people often only consider these effects on those at the lower end of the workforce.
- Job Services Australia has no social outcomes – only economic outcomes. Fifteen minutes every three weeks does nothing to support the people. Training agencies tell people to 'keep in touch'.
- Do we want to increase the levels of female participation? If we do, then they need to decrease the barriers to that.
- Why not let people on an age pension work because it's better for them and for society.
- People are penalised by job freezes; there's not enough work available – just a job shortage.
- An example was given by a BPW representative about choosing kids over career and the costs associated with both.

### **Indigenous women**

- Personal situations need to be dealt with even before vocational education and training (VET) as many Indigenous women feel so undervalued and have very low self-esteem. If we don't address this then women will just continue to have kids instead because it is easier to do that. Most of the Indigenous women getting trained are the older ones as they get a bit more respect.

- Indigenous women generally don't trust sending their kids to child-care which only promotes 'white societal ways'. Everyone wants education for Indigenous children to be beneficial and successful, but there is little or no involvement of women experienced in this area. For example, in the early childhood education and care area, there were initially no Aboriginal women who are experts in this area on the WA steering committee.
- Comments raised re Indigenous employment, integration and mainstreaming – what does this mean to us if based on a White Anglo concept? Does it work in terms of safety/support/discrimination? We need to reconceptualise mainstreaming to be inclusive of all groups and need to have complimentary and supplementary programs that link into mainstream programs for Indigenous groups.
- There needs to be some mechanism to match people with the jobs they want – what is the point of offering an Indigenous person from a more tribally/traditionally oriented community a job with 12 hour shifts working underground in a mining operations (when they won't work underground) or a job that cannot accommodate their participation in tribal law activities which take priority and may be conducted from October to March? What is the level of flexibility that can be offered for Indigenous people from different groups? The same applies to matching women's needs for work.

### **Migrant and refugee women**

- Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) and disability groups experience similar issues. There is no chance of training, let alone a job.
- Funding for integration does not work if the people are not ready to be integrated.
- People need the first stage of self-confidence before anything else and that is what is required. The same applies to Indigenous women. They need transport and need to be trained collectively.
- They also need translators and interpreters.
- The Ishar Women's Health Centre Program at Mirrabooka has worked well with groups from Africa, Burma, and the Middle East etc., but there are still many disparities within those groups themselves. The women then link into community-based training

currently arranged through either the West Coast Institute of Training or Polytechnic West.

### **Women with disabilities**

- For disability groups, there is no infrastructure and training is simply not accessible. Jobs need to be close to where the people live because they are vulnerable and cannot use public transport.
- Even experienced women with disabilities still get knocked back in the boom times – there is always an excuse. An example was given of a girl who did her degree and part-time work and worked overseas, but that was still not enough to gain employment here. She ended up working in disability area but that is the last place people with disabilities want to work – they get typecast.
- The current system discourages people with disabilities from seeking work. For example, if you work more than 15 hours per week you lose your disability pension. You get three days child-care free but once you start working you have to start paying rent and child-care. It's similar to the age pension where you have to ring and report whenever you work – it's very arduous.

### **Women on low incomes (care industry)**

- Carers WA said they have two male staff (the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and a counsellor). Most people who apply are women because of the hours of work, but they are very lowly paid. Over 250,000 carers (73% of whom are women) spend a very long time looking after their patients. We don't have good statistics in this area at all. Rearing children to be the carers for their elderly parents or whatever means that they never get a chance to get a real job. An example was given of a woman on New Start who was desperate for something different but was automatically funnelled into being a carer. Even worse is the fact that carers have the lowest health and wellbeing index in our society.
- There needs to be proper funding or we will end up with an underclass of low pay and low superannuation and lowly paid child-care workers.
- Silver Chain [a care provider] does not provide 24 hour support as it is too expensive, so now people at home do it – this is dangerous for occupational health and safety (OH&S) and other reasons.

- Is there an underlying motive to keep an underclass of lowly employed such as cleaners, carers etc.? A debate ensued about what constitutes 'fair wages' etc. It was suggested that it is not just about the level of wages; it's also about the way the workers are regarded – what status they are given.

### **Superannuation and retirement incomes**

- The lack of superannuation as you get older has long-term effects. Women do desperate work and are poorly paid as they have no other means to increase their superannuation.
- Discussions touched on the recent 'Henry Review of Taxation and Superannuation'<sup>4</sup>. It was noted that the massive changes to superannuation has increased the level of interest in doing things to decrease dependency on government in retirement. What needs to be done – for example, should there be a government default fund or private funding? Concerns were raised about a 'white picket fence policy' – an increased transfer of family payments, but also increased 'middle class welfare'. The government needs to reduce 'disincentives' to both partners working and stimulate greater workforce attachment.
- Superannuation should not be classed as income when it is very low. It seems that you are damned every way you turn.

### **Child-care and out of school hours care**

- The big issue is child-care: it must be culturally appropriate. Mothers need to be confident that their kids will be dealt with in an appropriate manner – food, speech, etc. They need people of their own culture to be trained but how do we achieve this if we can't train them in the first place?
- There is a real need for age-appropriate child-care. The Australian Out of School Hours (OSHC) Association has stated that the Rudd Government's Building the Education Revolution (BER) program has been poorly implemented. OSHC are tenants in a lot of the school buildings and now they have nowhere to go while BER renovations are being done (a recent case it Mt Lawley was used to illustrate the problem). OSHC programs have to cease and evacuate and have nowhere to go. This is a real failure of a systematic approach to concerns about out of school hours care programs.

<sup>4</sup> For detailed information on the Henry Review see:  
<http://taxreview.treasury.gov.au/Content/Content.aspx?doc=html/home.htm>

- In New South Wales, the Department of Education increased school premises rents by 20% and consequently OSHC programs could not afford to operate. In Broken Hill the YMCA could not afford the risks associated with OSHC programs. The Commonwealth has not provided sufficient resources and is very vague about the issue. There has been a Senate Committee enquiry into it but the reporting date has been extended because of so much interest. It is possible that recommendations might be to decouple OSHC from under-five years child-care. Cases like Mt Lawley need to be used as examples. There were also comments about cases where providers state they can't run the programs properly and still be commercially viable. They use young teachers who don't get paid over Christmas and New Year or otherwise they would not be able to continue to operate.
- There are very few age-appropriate programs for child aged 10–14, If kids don't want to go it is very difficult. Security4Women (S4W) will support research by National Centre for Social and Economic Research (NATSEM) to look at the characteristics of staff in after hours care.
- The Australia Institute will release information on the benefits of increased training in child-care for productivity.
- What constitutes good care?
- It took 40 years of pushing to get early childhood seen as a career. Why not expand the industry of education from pre-school to out of school hours care for older kids? The shire puts buildings on the grounds and there is an excess of teachers; utilise those. Job-sharing needs more consideration too, especially for teaching.
- Service responses around child-care and OSHC need to reflect the ongoing developmental journey of children.
- In WA there are gaps in service provision particularly in country areas. There are over 200 OSHC services in WA. The issue of stable venues in schools is a concern for the Department for Communities.
- It would be good to support research and evaluation into other models of OSHC delivery, and the use of local authority recreation halls which provide many opportunities for play and choices with access to facilities.

- One big issue is that older school children don't want to go into many current care services designed for young children ,so women frequently drop back and work part-time from then on.
- There need to be forums in WA about this.
- It is important to remember inclusive child-care; providers are not educated in this regard.

## **POLICY ISSUES**

Messages to deliver - What specifics do we want to address?

- Policies need to consider the impact of economic development of care across the ages for women who want to be in the workforce. What investment are we prepared to make?
- Potential partnerships need to be identified.

## **Child-care and out of school hours care**

- Policies need to revisit the issue of who provides child-care and the cost arrangements. What is the value to parents? Is it worth the trade-off? In the old days child-care was provided by the government, not private organisations.
- Services should be both community-based and corporate, instead of market dominance by corporate bodies. (The risks associated with dominance by private corporations is illustrated by the case of the ABC fallout).
- Commonwealth policy on financing child-care needs to enable research on and support for other models.
- Family day care must not be ignored – it plays a big part. There needs to be an holistic approach to solve the problem the way they want to have it solved.
- State governments need to be talking to each other about security of venues for OSHC.
- Families with disabilities need to be able to access a range of child-care and respite services. There are WA Government specialist resource units in geographical areas who can help with access to the programs.
- Funding allocations to disability areas need to be reviewed to address transport, informal training and child-care for children with

disabilities. The Department of Education does look after it to some degree, but once a child leaves school they are on their own. They need ongoing and meaningful training once they leave school and need skilling and meaningful employment opportunities.

### **Younger women**

- Young women without children have a sense of isolation from older women, and lack a relationship with the women's movement (an anti feminist backlash). We need to ensure that we mentor and collaborate with younger women so they don't fall into the same traps we did. Young women become socialised into thinking they will always stay in the sector. They know they are low paid and have long shifts etc but still can't imagine where else they would be. It is important to revalue low-paid work. Many women love their work but it is very stigmatised both socially and economically.
- It is important to encourage young people to go to university, but we need to ensure it is culturally appropriated. The same applies to flexible employment – it needs to be culturally appropriate.
- There are a number of issues that need to be addressed in relation to the needs of young mothers (possibly teenagers) in obtaining training. Child-care is paramount, so that they can have face-to-face training. On-line or distance education is generally not suitable for this group (due to a lack of access to computers, difficulty in concentrating with one or more babies in the house etc.). Child-care in this instance could also provide a support role for the young mothers (many of whom are Aboriginal, and so may face extra problems).

### **Employment, career paths and working arrangements**

- Assistance to people who have become unemployed as a result of the global economic crisis is fine – but does not help people who were not employed, but want to become so.
- Better career paths need to be provided for women in female dominated areas, for example, nurses don't have a strong career path.
- More men should be involved in the debate, especially in relation to flexible work practices – they might also enjoy the same flexibility. There was some discussion around the idea of partnerships and men and women being equal partners – but 'as long as they are willing to show commitment we will work with them'.

- Questions were raised in relation to the trades industry and fair pay consultation. Do women want to be brick layers? Does raising the debate about women in trades help? It was noted that some progress was being made in the trades – for example the 'Tap Girls' program for female plumbers.
- Issues were raised about women who are of workforce age, but are also carers. Child-care is now on the table, but respite services for other carers are few and far between. Respite care is very difficult to obtain and women eventually give up trying because they have to prove disability of the person being care for, which is incredibly insensitive. It is degrading in the extreme for the women to even just fill in the paperwork to do it. Female and male employees in government who are in caring roles have been given flexibility, for example, paid maternity leave which is now part of the Fair Work Act. But it needs to be recognised that many people provide long-term care. We need to tap into those men who are also carers. How much more do we need to say and when? We have the answers but they cost money! Continuous turnover in Commonwealth agencies might mean that a lot of people don't have any history of policy in that area. Corporatisation of policy agendas means that people don't have the knowledge and experience.
- There was a comment about the invisibility of women once they are on paid maternity leave or on leave due to caring responsibilities. We need to make sure they are still attached and have strong links to the workforce. This can occur through ongoing inclusion in professional development and invitations to work functions while on carers leave or parental leave. Many women get deleted from email lists and so on when they go on leave. Truly flexible conditions are very hard; since 1996 it's been very hard to work part-time; and women have to turn down promotions etc. to juggle caring responsibilities
- Equity of wages is an essential step. For example, Community Employers WA is organised so they can pay better wages. Flexible employment is essential as it allows for caring, which is necessary for both men and women. People want to work for the agency even though the pay is bad and funding is at risk.
- Commonwealth policy is disappointing re Job Services Australia. One participant mentioned not even being able to get a Certificate I training through them. This is very detrimental to women. Some providers are not accredited training organisations so do not have

recognition. There were also some complaints about cost of fees for women who are self-funded. For those who have lost jobs in the economic downturn, some fees are paid. But if not in work in the first place this assistance does not apply.

- Income support while training is a disincentive – Austudy is less than Newstart.
- Career counselling needs to be available through well-promoted channels and undertaken by properly qualified persons.
- Assistance could be considered to provide incentives for employers to take on persons who are disadvantaged.
- It is important to look at the supply of jobs. Barriers for women in senior positions were there before the recession and are now just amplified.

## Training

- Fees are too high (training used to be free). It is very expensive for some courses. Competitive tendering is a huge issue in the provision of job services, and you get what you deserve.
- There are difficulties in training people appropriately. Income support while studying can be a disincentive; Austudy is less than Newstart.
- Properly trained career counsellors is an issue. From 2012, a minimum qualification of Certificate IV (or above) will be required nationally. But what if career counselling is called something else (for example, student services)? People are sometimes funnelled into those areas when the training provider needs more people to enrol, although it might not be the area that people want to work in. There are professional standards, but they are not necessarily being met.
- There is cause for optimism about the future. The new Western Australian Department of Training and Workforce Development may be able to address some of these issues. Likewise, the new National VET Advisory Council might help the situation, as it has a broad based charter of guiding equity reform in the national training system.

- Job Services Australia needs to consider eligibility criteria and the lack of support for meaningful training that is appropriate to the individual client.
- The federal allocation of training money needs to acknowledge the important role played by non-accredited training for lower level training (Certificate 1 and below).
- Fees for training can be prohibitive and need to be reviewed.

### **Migrant and refugee women**

- In relation to the Australian Migrant English Program (AMEP), an example was given about African women with six children using up six out of their allocated 10 child-care places in one day. The programs need to be more culturally aware. Career counselling has also been downgraded in the AMEP providers in Western Australia. (They used to have psychologists employed in this area, in recognition of the complexity of working with people who may be traumatised etc.).
- Some sort of system is required whereby people can get assistance to get experience. Employers may need incentives to take disadvantaged groups on. Potential employees need to know about Australian working conditions and requirements, for example turning up on time. Policies need to recognise that some people have survival skills, not social skills.
- Child care provision in the AMEP program (English for new migrants) is inadequate.
- Support and career counselling in the AMEP program has been down-graded (at least in WA).

## REFERENCES

Richardson, David, 2009, *The Impact of the Recession on Women: Background Paper*, The Australia Institute, viewed 12 January 2010, <https://www.tai.org.au/index.php?q=node%2F19&type=1&pubid=698&act=display>

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Western Australian Trade and Investment Office, 2008, 'Western Australia: The Economy and Key Issues', viewed 15 January 2009, <http://www.tradewesternaustralia.com/?q=economy>

## ATTACHMENT 1

### Invitation

#### PUBLIC CONSULTATION

# The Recession and its Impact on Women

Wednesday, 11 November 2009

9.00am – 12.00pm

Department of Sport and Recreation

246 Vincent Street, Leederville

RSVP by 6 November 2009

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