

19 April 2023

The Office for Women
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
PO Box 6500
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Via Email: senator.katy.gallagher@aph.gov.au

Dear Minister Gallagher,

RE: National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality

This submission by Regional Development Australia Southern Inland (RDASI) is to inform the development of the Australian government's [National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality](#). RDASI understands that the National Strategy will guide whole-of-community action to increase equality between women and men.

RDASI is represented by local leaders and staff who are passionate about the communities in the Southern Inland region of New South Wales (NSW). RDASI is part of a national network of 52 Regional Development Australia (RDA) Boards across Australia, and its role is to support the Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the Southern Inland region of NSW, including Wingecarribee, Goulburn Mulwaree, Upper Lachlan, Hilltops, Yass Valley, Queanbeyan-Palerang, and Snowy Monaro. RDASI works with all levels of government, business, and community groups to promote economic and social development in the region by facilitating regional projects, collaboration, communication, and advocacy.

This submission addresses some of the factors that impact economic equality for women in the Southern Inland region of NSW, including:

- Gendered job segregation
- Gender stereotypes and biases
- Limited job opportunities
- Burden of care

A survey was conducted to gather information on experience and views regarding these issues and workable solutions, from RDA Southern Inland community members. The survey's experience-based questions included multiple predefined answers, with the option to select 'none of the above.' Respondents were also invited to contribute their own free text solutions to the issues discussed.

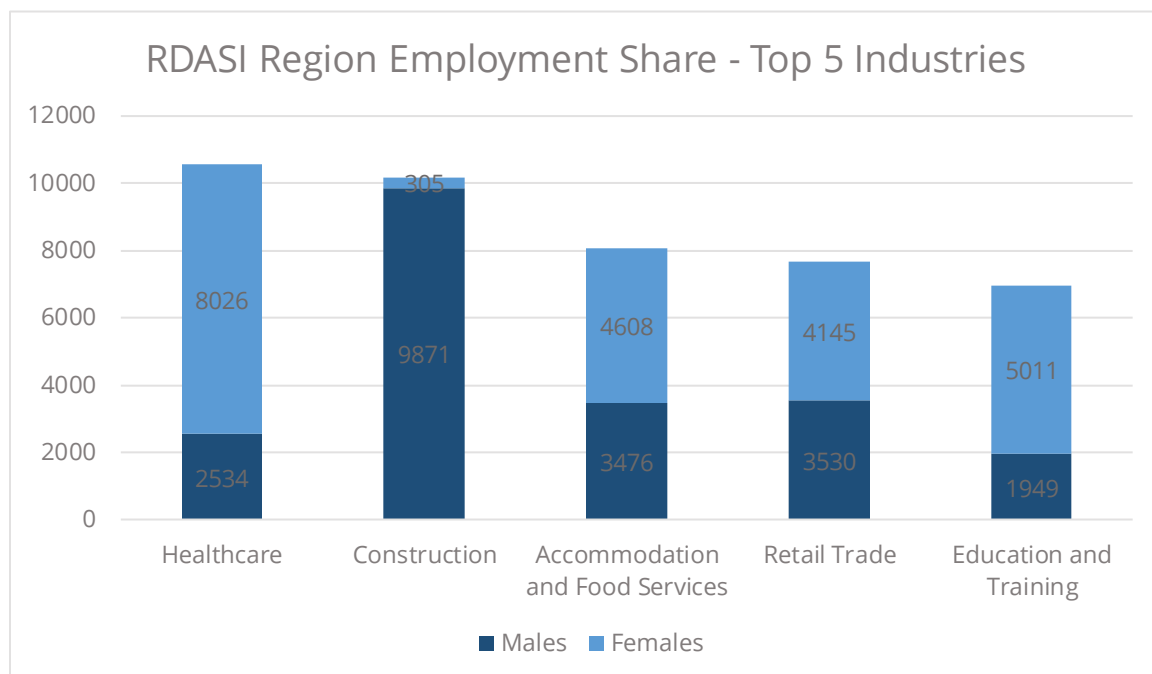
Addressing economic equality for women requires a multifaceted approach that involves promoting women's participation in male-dominated industries, promoting flexible and supportive work arrangements, addressing the gender pay gap, promoting equal access to education and training opportunities, addressing systemic barriers and biases, providing affordable and accessible childcare, and promoting women's leadership and representation in decision-making positions. Additionally,

cultural, and social norms around gender roles and expectations must be addressed to challenge and change traditional gender stereotypes and promote gender equality in all aspects of society.

Gendered job segregation

Gendered job segregation explains around a quarter of the pay gap among full-time workers in Australia and is even larger for women in regional areas. ([Treasury. August 2022. Jobs and Skills Summit Issues Paper. Page 8](#)).

In the Southern Inland region of NSW several industries are male-dominated, such as construction and agriculture, while others are female-dominated, such as health and aged care, retail, accommodation services, and education and training.



Employment by Industry PoW (2021) – RDA Southern Inland Region - industries in which employed people aged 15 years and over work. Source: RDASI Data - Data AU. Industry share source - CEW (Chief Executive Women) (2002) Addressing Australia's critical skill shortages: Unlocking women's economic participation, Sydney.

Women who work in female-dominated industries are faced with challenges such as lower pay, limited career progression opportunities, and a lack of recognition for their work. Women often struggle to balance work and family responsibilities, as these industries often have inflexible working arrangements that are not conducive to caregiving responsibilities. In addition to this, average weekly earnings in the health care and social assistance sector are below the national average. ([Treasury. August 2022. Jobs and Skills Summit Issues Paper. Page 8](#)).

When asked via the survey, 'At work, have you experience any of the following,' the females who work in a female dominated industry, indicated:

- Receive a pay rate less than the national average
- Lack of support
- Imbalance between work and family responsibilities

When asked ‘What do you think could be done to address gendered job segregation issues?’ the same cohort indicated:

- Provide education and awareness training opportunities to employers
- Provide support and mentorship programs for women in male-dominated industries
- Develop government policies to ensure people are paid the same irrespective of gender
- Educate employers about providing equal pay for equal work
- Encourage employers to offer flexible work arrangements to accommodate flexible hours, job sharing, and remote work

On the other hand, women who work in male-dominated industries may face barriers such as discrimination, harassment, and a lack of support networks. This is evident in the responses provided by females working in the construction and agriculture, forestry, and fishing industries across the region, as outlined below.

When asked ‘At work, have you experience any of the following,’ female employees in male dominated industries indicated:

- Limited career progression opportunities
- Receive a pay rate less than the national average
- Lack of recognition
- Lack of support
- Imbalance between work and family responsibilities
- Bullying or harassment

When asked ‘What do you think could be done to address gendered job segregation issues?’ the same cohort indicated:

- Provide education and awareness training opportunities to employers
- Provide support and mentorship programs for women in male-dominated industries
- Develop government policies to ensure people are paid the same irrespective of gender
- Eliminate gendered language in job descriptions
- Educate employers about providing equal pay for equal work
- Encourage employers to offer flexible work arrangements to accommodate flexible hours, job sharing, and remote work
- Respondent suggestion: people to be paid on ability not gender

Gendered job segregation has a significant impact on economic equality for women in the Southern Inland region and was only exacerbated by the impacts of COVID. During the pandemic, women were more likely to lose their jobs, engage in unpaid work, and were less likely to receive government support. At the peak in April, almost 8 per cent of Australian women had lost their jobs, and women’s total hours worked were down 12 per cent. The figures for men were 4 per cent and 7 per cent. (Grattan Institute Report No. 2021-01, March 2021. [Women’s work: The impact of the COVID crisis on Australian women](#). Page 3).

According to the study by the Grattan Institute, the Federal Government’s recovery package did not adequately address the impacts of COVID on women. The focus was on personal income tax cuts, investment tax breaks, and infrastructure, with more support going to male-dominated sectors. The study indicated that more direct support flowed to the male-dominated construction and energy sectors than to all other sectors combined.

This is highlighted further through the federal government's 'HomeBuilder' Program. The Program included 137,621 applications for the HomeBuilder grant with an estimated potential economic boost of \$120.62 billion for supported projects, with the program directly supporting 374,340 full-time jobs. (Ministers Treasury portfolio. Dec 2023. [Media Release: HomeBuilder program is the economic gift that keeps on giving](#)).

This had a significant impact in the RDASI region, where the construction industry holds the second largest employment share, accounting for 12.5% of jobs in 2021 (Data Au, Employment by Industry PoW - 2021), with only 3% estimated to be filled by women.

In addition to this, the impacts of COVID on females working in female dominated industries, were felt harder due to the inability to access Job Keeper. According to a report by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, '[Gendered impact of COVID-19](#)', (May 2020), it was estimated that 950,000 casual workers would not be eligible for the JobKeeper payment. The report indicated that these workers were mostly employed in the accommodation and food services, retail trade, and health care sectors, three of the top four employing industries in the RDASI region.

Gender stereotypes and biases

Gender norms and stereotypes are beliefs we hold, consciously and subconsciously, about what men and women should or can do. They inform everything from toys to marketing and create barriers to individual choices and opportunities, leading to different outcomes and reinforcing gender gaps.

Gender norms have a significant impact on various economic decisions and outcomes, such as who is employed, how much they work, and the types of jobs they do. Gender stereotypes can influence individual decisions and translate into population-level outcomes. Therefore, changing how we think about gender could have a significantly positive impact on the economy. ([Deloitte Access Economics \(2022\) Breaking the norms, November 2022](#)).

The health and care workforces in Australia are mainly made up of women due to gender norms and stereotypes that care work is "women's work." This contributes to a gender pay gap caused by casual, part-time work arrangements and low pay. The stereotype that care work is done out of love rather than for pay or recognition also leads to discrimination against men about their ability to do their job in these sectors. ([National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality discussion paper](#). Page 10).

Health Care and Social Assistance is the highest employing industry in the RDASI region. Examples of gender stereotype and bias experienced by female survey respondents that work in this industry include:

- Undervaluing of care work
- Limited leadership opportunities
- Discrimination about ability to do a job

When asked 'What do you think could be done to address gender stereotypes and biases in the workplace?' the solutions included:

- Provide workplace training and education programs to raise awareness about gender stereotypes and their negative impact
- Provide support programs and services to help employees manage their caring

responsibilities

- Challenge gender stereotypes and biases in the workplace as they occur
- Provide flexible work arrangements such as job sharing, flexible hours, and telecommuting to allow both women and men to balance work and family responsibilities
- Ensure employees are paid fairly by conducting regular pay equity audits and taking action to address disparities
- Implement bias-free recruitment and promotion practices to ensure that gender bias does not influence hiring and promotion decisions
- Promote women in leadership as role models for other women in the workplace

Limited job opportunities

Limited job opportunities in regional NSW can have a significant impact on economic opportunities and financial security. Limited options for employment can lead to lower rates of workforce participation and lower earning potential, exacerbating the gender pay gap and contributing to financial insecurity.

People living in regional areas may face additional challenges in accessing jobs due to geographical barriers such as distance, lack of public transportation, and limited internet access. This can limit their ability to work in higher-paying or more specialised fields.

Additionally, limited job opportunities can lead to greater competition for available jobs, which can reduce bargaining power in relation to wages and working conditions. Women may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination in these circumstances, particularly if they are in low-paying and low-skilled jobs.

Overall, limited job availability in regional areas such as that represented by RDA Southern Inland can have a significant impact on economic equality, particularly in terms of workforce participation, earning potential, and access to high-paying and specialised jobs.

When surveyed about limited job opportunities in the RDASI region, 36.84% of respondents indicated that they had experienced 'unemployment due to lack of job opportunities', and 26.32% experienced 'limited earning potential'.

In addition to this, the following negative impacts have been experienced across the region:

- Unemployment due to lack of public transport
- Unemployment due to limited internet access
- Limited employment opportunities within your qualified field
- Limited opportunities for career advancement
- Limited earning potential

When asked 'What do you think could be done to increase the job opportunities within regional NSW?' the same cohort indicated:

- Encourage businesses to relocate or expand into regional areas by offering incentives such as tax offsets or funding
- Invest in education and training programs that align with the needs of local industries
- Improve digital infrastructure and connectivity to enable remote work
- Provide financial assistance and support for small businesses and entrepreneurs to start and

- grow their businesses in regional areas
- Grow the public transport network
 - Respondent suggestion: Remove payroll tax from regional businesses
 - Respondent suggestion: Increase income-tax offset
 - Respondent suggestion: Increase access to affordable housing
 - Respondent suggestion: Provide essential services

Burden of care

Although there have been some shifts in traditional gender roles related to caregiving, such as more women entering the workforce and an increase in caregiving responsibilities in areas like parenting, women continue to bear most care responsibilities.

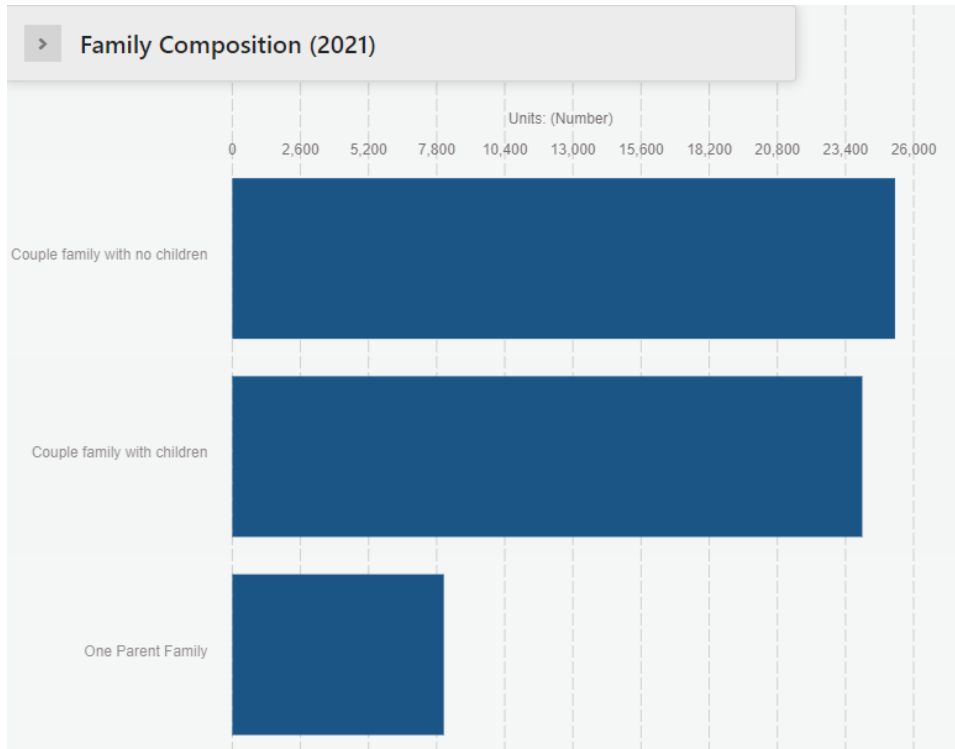
Gendered care norms that position women as primary caregivers for children, ageing parents, and people with disabilities are reinforced by social and economic structures. This is reflected in the uptake of parental leave and other forms of care, where women overwhelmingly take on primary carer roles while men take on secondary carer roles.

According to a Treasury Working Paper, '[Children and the Gender Earnings Gap: Evidence for Australia](#),' the burden of care on women has a large and persistent impact on the gender earnings gap, reducing female earnings by 55 per cent, on average, in the 5 years following parenthood. Personal income tax data indicates that this gap remains high in the 10 years following the arrival of children. This gap in earnings is attributed to lower employment participation rates by women and reduced working hours. Women with greater access to workplace flexibility are more likely to remain employed after having children.

Access to affordable and reliable childcare impacts significantly on women's workforce participation. As does the ability to share care responsibilities with men, which should be enabled as soon as a child arrives in a family. According to the paper '[Designing and supporting gender equitable parental leave](#)', (WGEA. 2019), Men who take parental leave are more likely to continue their involvement in childcare and unpaid domestic work following the parental leave period.

Shared care becomes an even greater issue when children are brought up in single parent households. In addition to this, single mothers, who are often employed in jobs that are short-term, unstable and low paid, often receive little financial benefit, once the costs of childcare, taxation, loss of income support and associated benefits are considered.

According to the Australian Bureau of statistics (ABS), 79.9% of one-parent families include a female as the care provider. Of the 58,075 family households within the RDASI region, 8,072 are one parent families. The ABS data suggests that just under of 11% of these families are supported by a single mother.



Source: Data Au – 2021 Census, Family & Households, Family Composition.
References: ABS (2022). Census of Population and Housing, 2021. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra

These women are impacted not only by the burden of care, but also live in a regional area with limited job opportunities, where almost 75% of the employment share is within a female or male dominated industry.

The unpaid care that these women and other Australian's perform is often unrecognised and undervalued, despite increasing individual productivity and contributing to the economic activity of both the individual and the country. Economists classify unpaid care work such as domestic work, taking care of children, the elderly, or family members with long-term health conditions or disabilities, as well as voluntary community work as productive work called "household production". Economists recognise that household production contributes to the social and economic well-being of individuals, families, and societies, however, it is not included when calculating our nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In 2016, it was estimated that the value of unpaid work in Australia was \$650.1 billion, 50.6% of the GDP. (Workplace Gender Equality Agency, '[Unpaid care work and the labour market](#)'. Nov 2016. Page 3).

Over a two-week period in the Southern Inland region:

- 23,979 people provided unpaid assistance for a person with disability, a long-term illness or problems related to old age.
- 50,011 people cared a child aged less than 15 years (including own child)

In addition to this, 137,105 people from across the RDASI region engaged in domestic work for their own household over the course of the week and 33,377 people engaged in voluntary work through or for an organisation or group over a twelve-month period. (ABS. 2022. Census of Population and

Housing, 2021. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra)

Including unpaid work in the GDP would lead to a greater appreciation of the economic value of unpaid work such as the above examples, and the contribution it makes to society. It would acknowledge the sacrifices that unpaid workers make to allow others in the household to engage in paid work, leading to a stronger workforce. Ultimately, including unpaid work in the GDP would promote gender equality and positive societal change.

Of the survey respondents, 73.68% identified as the primary provider. When asked 'What do you think could be done to address the way care is valued and allocated?' an overwhelming 78.95% of all respondents indicated 'Allow for all child care, including in home care to be a tax-deductible expense', and 68.42% responded with 'Provide flexible working arrangements to enable men and women to balance work and care responsibilities'.

Other solutions to address the way care is valued and allocated include:

- Encourage men to take on more caregiving responsibilities
- Increase accessible and affordable childcare and allow for child care to be a tax deductible expense for paid working purposes of children below school age
- Provide education and awareness campaigns that challenge gender norms that place the burden of care on women to help shift cultural attitudes and expectations around care and gender roles
- Develop policy and legislative changes that promote gender equality
- Restructure taxation for single women households who hold the higher level of care
- Enable family tax benefit for higher income earning single women households with the higher burden of care
- Include the value of unpaid work in the calculation of Australia's GDP

I thank you for the opportunity to provide this regionally targeted submission to the National Strategy for Gender Equality and congratulate the government on recognising the need for innovative policy progression.

Kind regards,



Carisa Wells
CEO and Director of Regional Development