



Submission to the  
NSW Government Women's Economic Opportunities Review

by  
Illawarra Women's Health Centre

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## Illawarra Women's Health Centre

Nationally accredited, the Illawarra Women's Health Centre has a focus on mental health, women experiencing domestic and family violence and sexual assault, and sexual and reproductive health. The community-based Centre sees over 5,000 women a year and has an exceptional reputation, providing integrated care and social support to women with complex needs using a social model of health and a community development approach to service delivery.

The Centre is a women's only space, and its doctors, nurses, psychologists, counsellors and social workers are all female, experienced and trauma informed. The Centre offers specialised domestic and family violence programs for girls, boys and young women, and women with intellectual disabilities. It also developed the first in Australia, Mothers and Sons Program which focuses on raising young boys into respectful men.

The Centre also runs a wide range of health and wellbeing programs and group activities.

The Centre is driving the development of and funding for a Women's Trauma Recovery Centre project. This Australian first model of care is informed by survivor advocates, interdisciplinary professional input and groundbreaking research to be adapted and replicated in communities across the state and country.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Women's Economic Opportunities Review and commend the NSW Government on taking the initiative to deepen understanding of the multitude of social and structural barriers impacting economic opportunity for women in our state. May your findings inform robust and equitable policy development and much needed systemic change.

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# Women's Economic Opportunities Review

## 1. Introduction

Thank you for this opportunity to make a submission to the NSW Government's Women's Economic Opportunities Review.

Our submission has two parts:

1. The impact of sexual domestic and family violence on women's participation in the workforce – and the critical need for recovery services.
2. Key areas of consideration, which we expect will be discussed in more detail in other submissions.

Domestic and family violence is a workplace issue.

The Australian Human Rights Commission notes *the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that between 55% and 70% are currently in the workforce – that is, approximately 800,000 women, or around one in six female workers. This means that a significant number of Australian workplaces will be impacted by women's experiences of domestic and family violence. Some common costs and impacts include decreased staff performance and productivity, increased staff turnover and absenteeism and negative impact on the organisation's reputation and image.*

This evidence is supported by the Australian Senate Inquiry into Sexual, Family and Domestic Violence, which found women living with domestic and family violence:

- : are more likely to change their job more often;
- : are more likely to miss out on promotions;
- : are more likely to resign or be terminated;
- : are more likely to be bullied at work.

Australian and international research demonstrates unequivocally that gaining and maintaining paid work is pivotal in creating a secure financial future for both those who have experienced domestic violence and their families. However, participation in employment can be seriously undermined by ongoing abuse and its subsequent effects.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our submission in person with the Expert Reference Panel.

## 2. Primary recommendation

We ask the Committee to:

- a. explicitly recognise the impact of sexual, domestic and family violence on women in the workplace; and
- b. recommend an investment by the NSW Government in a first-in-Australia **Women's Trauma Recovery Centre** in the Illawarra.

Recovery plays a major role in women's ability to be a productive member of the workforce. Equally, maintaining employment during and after domestic and family violence is a critical component to escape and recovery.

The Women's Trauma Recovery Centre is an evidence-based cost-effective and co-designed solution to the critical gap in services supporting a woman's recovery from the traumatic impact of violence and abuse.

### 3. Structural barriers to economic opportunities for women

Patriarchal constructs influence our society and limit the ways in which both men and women can reach their full potential. Women in particular carry a greater burden of unpaid caring duties and housework. They are also overrepresented as victims of sexual, family and domestic violence (SFDV) while men are more likely to be perpetrators. Research shows that attitudes that promote rigid gender roles and that deny gender inequality feed the manifestation of sexual, domestic and family violence (ANROWS, 2018, pp. 60-72).

To improve economic opportunities for women, bold measures to address the broader social and structural issue of gender inequality must be taken. Strong leadership and robust and transparent governance is critical to ensure these measures are implemented. The OECD Toolkit for Mainstreaming and Implementing Gender Equality notes the necessity for a whole of government strategic plan that is integrated at every level, measurable and gender sensitive is emphasized (OECD, 2018).

### 4. Sexual, domestic and family violence impact on workforce participation

Sexual, domestic and family violence is a public health and social crisis that permeates every aspect of our society. It is known to be widely underreported and costs the Australian economy at least \$22.6 billion per year, based on 2015-16 estimates by KPMG (approximately \$7 billion for NSW).

The mental and physical health consequences of SFDV are significant, long lasting and evidence based - impacting women, children, future generations, our community, our economy and ultimately, our country.

Specifically, the impact sexual, domestic and family violence has on women's economic security and ability to actively participate in the workforce is significant. The psychological, physical, and financial cost of recovery from sexual, domestic and family violence should not be underestimated. It is immense. Fleeing a relationship is estimated to cost *at least* \$18,000. Homelessness, family law and child custody disputes, the burden of perpetrator debt, and the cost of mental health services can all be emotionally and financially crippling. The cost is not only in terms of money and health, but also in time. The time it takes to navigate a fragmented criminal, legal, social security and health system is extraordinary. The time and energy it takes to manage abuse after you have left, including harassment, stalking and financial abuse is for many women, unimaginable. This is multiplied when you are seeking support for your children who are also impacted by violence and need comprehensive health and wellbeing services. You just cannot work sometimes if you are simply trying to survive.

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In Australia, one in four women has experienced violence by an intimate partner since the age of 15 and one in five experience sexual violence across their lifetime [ABS, Personal Safety, 2017].

Beyond physical injury, women who have experienced sexual, domestic and family violence have increased rates of health service access, poorer physical health, increased rates of mental health disorders including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress and substance use, and are over-represented in prison [Weissbecker et al. 2017]

At the population level, partner violence has been shown to be a major contributor to disease burden (the impact of illness, disability and premature death) among women aged 25–44 years [AIHW, 2019].

Domestic and family violence is the principle cause of homelessness for women and their children

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Ensuring women have timely and appropriate support to escape and recover from the trauma of sexual, domestic and family violence is critical. It will significantly improve their health, safety and **economic security** - and therefore their ability to maintain employment and/or re-enter the workforce.

And yet, our public health system does not offer adequate or appropriate support to women who experience sexual, domestic and family violence, severely limiting their ability to recover from the trauma that results from this abuse [Salter et al., 2020].

### A solution: Women's Trauma Recovery Centre

The Illawarra Women's Health Centre and its partners have developed a new model of care for women recovering from sexual, domestic and family violence trauma: a Women's Trauma Recovery Centre. It is an evidence based, co-designed and cost-effective solution to this critical gap in services for women.

We ask the Committee to recognise the impact sexual, domestic and family violence on women's working lives and urge an investment by the NSW Government in a Women's Trauma Recovery Centre in the Illawarra as a first and bold measure to address this.

### Federal Inquiry into sexual domestic and family violence

A multi-partisan Federal Inquiry into sexual, domestic and family violence directly recommended the Illawarra Women's Health Centre proposal to establish an Australian first **Women's Trauma Recovery Centre** be funded for a five-year as a pilot project, given its national significance.

*'The Committee considers the establishment of a multi-disciplinary Illawarra Women's Trauma Recovery Centre as a pioneering and evidence-based response to the health impacts of family, domestic, and sexual violence. The Committee considers this initiative is worthy of funding by the Australian Government, with the New South Wales Government, in light of its potential for impact on a broader scale.'*

Recommendation #77

The overarching goal of the Illawarra Women's Trauma Recovery Centre is to **support the healing** of a victim/survivors mental, emotional and physical wounds, along with *restoration of their disrupted life circumstances*. This includes safety from further violence, emotional health to cope with daily life, including a sense of hope for the future, safe housing, employment or education, being meaningfully engaged with others, such as family and community, and having an income sufficient to meet their needs

Research undertaken by ANROWS (*"A deep wound under my heart": Constructions of complex trauma and implications for women's wellbeing and safety from violence*) and University of NSW (*Women's Trauma Recovery Centre: A new model of care for women experiencing trauma from domestic, family, and sexual violence*) supports the principles and operational framework of a Women's Trauma Recovery Centre.

The Business Case and research report for a Women's Trauma Recovery Centre were submitted to the NSW Government in July 2021. There has been no response to date. The proposal has multi-partisan support, across three levels of government and is endorsed by numerous organisations and individuals including Domestic Violence NSW, the Royal Australian and Zealand College of Psychiatrists, service providers and victim/survivor advocates. Over \$550,000 of pro bono work has been invested in the proposal.

The Business Case is compelling. We estimate a Centre will cost just over \$5 million per year when fully operational. This equates to approximately \$25,000 *per woman recovered*, based on an average three-year engagement with the Centre. For each woman who experiences domestic and family violence it currently costs the Australian economy at least \$31,000 per woman per three years. If this trauma is left untreated and unsupported, these costs will accumulate over a lifetime. Over twenty years that equates to approximately \$200,000 – per woman.

On these calculations, the Centre clearly presents a *financially attractive, economically feasible, and strategic investment*.

## 5. Other workforce considerations and recommendations

Highlighted below are key areas for the Panel to take into consideration, which we expect will be expanded in other submissions.

### a. Domestic and family violence leave

→ Recommendation 1: A minimum 10 days paid domestic and family violence leave for all workers.

### b. Paid parental leave

→ Recommendation 2: 26 weeks of paid parental leave for each parent, which cannot be shared. That is, the father must use or lose his entitlement as evidence shows this significantly increases the likelihood of uptake, mitigating the equity gap that begins for many women at childbirth.

→ Recommendation 3: Superannuation continues to be paid during parental leave. Women are already facing a steep gap in retirement income and must not be penalised for bearing children.

### c. Respect@Work

→ Recommendation 4: Implement all Respect@Work recommendations including and in particular Recommendation 17: *introduce a positive duty on all employers to take reasonable and proportionate measures to eliminate sex discrimination, sexual harassment and victimisation, as far as possible.*

→ Recommendation 5: Workforce based training on sexual harassment, sexual, domestic and family violence, bystander and anti-racism training, particularly in male dominated industries and systems of government.

### d. Childcare and early childhood education

→ Recommendation 6: fully fund quality childcare and early childhood education.

### e. Representation, decision making and accountability

→ Recommendation 7: address the barriers impacting culturally and linguistically diverse women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ people. Being informed by the perspectives of marginalised groups in our society and adopting policies that support inclusivity, multiculturalism and the decolonization of social structures underpin the creation of a more equitable, safer and prosperous society.

### f. Gender pay gap

→ Recommendation 8: address the casualisation of female dominated industries. Casualisation of the workforce disproportionately affects women. Apart from the general insecurity, economic shocks create added disadvantage. For example, women have been significantly impacted by loss of employment due to COVID pandemic. During the first year of the pandemic 1 in 3 women lost their jobs or were affected by reduced hours or pay cuts. Greater economic insecurity was linked to an increase in intimate partner violence in the same period (ANROWS, 2022, p.9).

→ Recommendation 9: address the remuneration levels of female dominated industries

g. Financial literacy

→ Recommendation 10: introduce financial literacy programs into the secondary school curriculum. Many women who have exited from relationships marked by coercive control, have been subject to financial abuse. Financial counselling and literacy programs are an integral part of the scaffolding that helps many women to build confidence, life skills and financial independence post separation.

h. Retirement income:

→ Recommendation 11: NSW Government adopt a policy framework that lifts women's superannuation and retirement income to equitable levels.

i. Refer recommendations 3, 8 and 9 above.

ii. NSW Government and its commissioned services to pay 12% by 2025.

Older women are the fastest growing cohort to experience homelessness in a climate where housing affordability and a lack of social and community housing is critical. Chronic illness and agism are barriers for many wanting to participate in the workforce. For those without significant financial assets or superannuation, being reliant on an aged pension for income has women living below the poverty line.

i. Support female entrepreneurs to start and run their own business:

→ Recommendation 12: Support regional development initiatives. For example, the University of Wollongong [iAccelerate innovation network](#), which enables women in regional and rural communities to access expertise and resources to grow their business ideas.

## Enclosed

1. Business Case: Illawarra Women's Trauma Recovery Centre
2. Research report: A new model of care for women experiencing trauma from domestic, family and sexual violence: Co-design report July 2021

## References

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