

# Stronger Together

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## Gender Equity in the WA Community Service Sector



Supported by



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Department of **Communities**

## About WACOSS & the Centre for Women’s Safety and Wellbeing

The Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS) is the peak body for the community services sector in Western Australia and works to create an inclusive, just and equitable society.

The Centre for Women’s Safety and Wellbeing (CWSW) is the leading voice for women and children affected by gender-based violence in Western Australia and the peak body for domestic, family and sexual violence services and community-based women’s health services in Western Australia.

## Acknowledgment of Country

WACOSS & CWSW respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Western Australia and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to them, their cultures, and to elders both past and present. We acknowledge the land on which we live and work is, and always will be, Aboriginal land. Sovereignty was never ceded.

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# 1. Executive Summary

## Context and Background

Progressing gender equity in the workplace is essential for building a fair, safe, inclusive and economically secure WA. As a significant employer of WA women, the WA community service sector plays an important role in supporting women's long-term economic security and gender equity more broadly. This research project examines the adoption of gender-equity supporting workplace policies in the sector, sector-wide attitudes and practical barriers to initiative implementation. Findings highlight the actionable opportunities for both government and employers to lead positive action to embed gender equity across the sector.

## Key Findings

1. Respondents demonstrated a relatively consistent understanding of gender equity and equality. Nevertheless, gaps in understanding and buy-in for gender equity were identified at all levels of organisations. Respondents also demonstrated a common misconception that the community service sector is ahead on gender equity because the workforce is female-dominated.
2. Contrary to respondent perceptions, and despite common use of Awards, employee respondent data indicated a significant gender pay gap, primarily at the more senior role level.
3. High workloads and burnout were raised repeatedly. Respondents feel that while their supervisors may be supportive of professional development, their workload and roles limited access to these opportunities.
4. Flexible work policies are offered by most respondent organisations. Sexual harassment and family and domestic violence policies are less frequent. Small and medium organisations are less likely to have these in place.
5. Employee respondents showed strong positive perceptions of their employer's policies and practices in relation to gender equity.
6. In relation to flexible work policies, employee respondents reported less availability than employer respondents. This may be due to limited awareness, lack of access due to job characteristics, or personal circumstances.
7. Employer respondents primarily promote awareness of policies through induction, though there is frequent training associated with sexual harassment policies.
8. Most employer respondents do not offer employer-funded paid parental leave.
9. Employees identified employer responsiveness to caring responsibilities, primarily through flexible work, as a very strong priority.
10. Current service resourcing levels was identified as a key barrier to implementing gender equity supporting policies.

## Recommendations

Funders	<b>1. Resource organisations</b> to implement workplace policies and supports that progress gender equity, this includes the following which are part of the real cost of service delivery: 1.1. Decent pay, comparative to other sectors, including Government 1.2. Employer-funded paid parental leave 1.3. Workplace policy development
	<b>2. Establish a Special Grants Program</b> to fund gender equity initiatives across the Community Service Sector
Organisations	<b>3. Improve staff awareness</b> of workplace policies and supports
	<b>4. Implement family and domestic violence and sexual harassment policies</b>
	<b>5. Create meaningful pathways for professional growth</b>
	<b>6. Establish staff consultation</b> and feedback mechanisms
	<b>7. Conduct audit of gender gaps in pay and senior positions</b> and implement action plans
	<b>8. Strengthen flexible work</b> policies and practices
Other	<b>9. Sector-wide education</b> on gender equity
	<b>10. Support</b> smaller organisations
	<b>11. Conduct more research into trans and gender diverse</b> workers' pay and conditions
	<b>12. Advocate</b> for funding increases, and special grants programs, to fund gender equity initiatives across the community service sector

## 2. Introduction

Western Australian women are currently facing the largest gender pay gap in the country.<sup>1</sup> A key driver of this gap is significant occupational segregation, where workers in traditionally female dominated industries – such as the community service sector – are paid significantly less than workers in other industries. Chronic underfunding further compounds the issue for female dominated sectors, limiting the ability of organisations to offer workplace policies and entitlements that support short- and long-term economic security. These include increased superannuation contributions, employer-funded paid parental leave, performance-based pay, bonuses, flexible working, and targeted leadership training. Consequently, workers in female dominated sectors are denied access to the supports that enable career growth and financial stability, reinforcing gender inequity across the workforce.

The WA community service sector (the sector) is a significant employer – with 72,000 staff representing 5.1 per cent of WA’s workforce. The sector is predominantly female workforce, with over 78 per cent (equivalent to 55,000 people) being identified as women.<sup>2</sup> Despite being such a significant employer of women in WA, to date there has been little information available on the extent to which workplace policies, conditions, or entitlements adopted by the sector are supporting women’s economic security.

The Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS), in partnership with the Centre for Women’s Safety and Wellbeing (CWSW), has conducted research seeking to understand the extent to which the workers in the sector have access to workplace entitlements and conditions known to improve gender equity outcomes. The research, enabled by grant funding through the Department of Communities’ Women’s Grants for a Stronger Future 2024-25 program, investigated:

1. The extent to which workplace policies are being adopted.
2. General sector attitudes towards gender equity.
3. Barriers to implementation of workplace policies.
4. Gaps or opportunities for improvement.

This research has resulted in recommendations for systemic change that will enable improvements to gender equity for workers in WA’s community service sector. Recognising the reality of funding constraints besieging the sector, this research took a practical view of the issue at hand. Recommendations include those that can be implemented by the sector on current funding levels as well as recommendations to government that focus on supporting the sector to deliver better outcomes for employees.

### **A few notes on language**

Achieving gender equity in the workforce is critical to ensuring economic security, safety and opportunity for all genders. While this report focuses primarily on women’s economic security, it is important to acknowledge that gender-based disadvantage is not exclusive experienced by

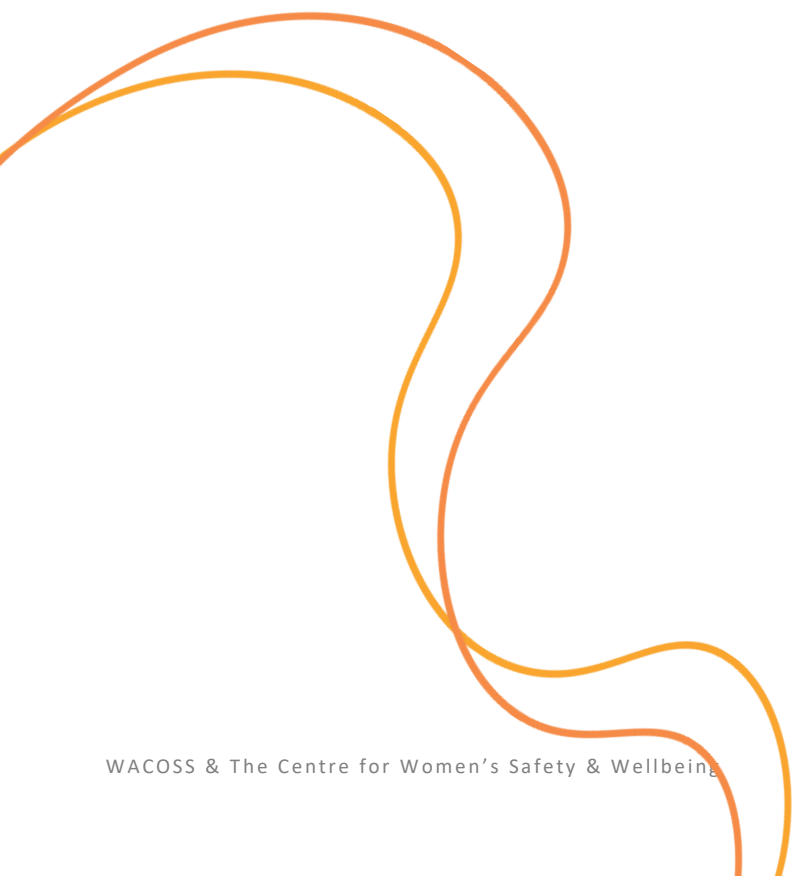
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<sup>1</sup> ABS, Average Weekly Earnings, Australia (May 2025). <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/earnings-and-working-conditions/average-weekly-earnings-australia/latest-release#state-and-territory>.

<sup>2</sup> CEWA & Nous Group (2024). *Leaving no one behind: the economic imperative to invest in WA’s community sector and its workforce*. <https://cewa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/leaving-no-one-behind.pdf>.

cisgender women. Trans and gender diverse people also face significant barriers to equity, including discrimination and exclusion. Inclusive approaches to address gender equity, that reflect the diversity of gender identities, are critical to achieving meaningful progress.

*Equality* refers to treating everybody the same, regardless of characteristic or need. *Equity* recognises that people need different kinds of support to achieve a fair outcome. This research explores gender *equity* – recognising the need to address the particular systemic barriers experienced by women and trans and gender diverse people. Quotes included from survey respondents may use equality and equity interchangeably.



## 3. Methodology

To achieve the goals of this research, the research included a desktop review, survey of sector employers and employees, qualitative and quantitative data analysis and engagement with sector leaders to test and refine recommendations.

### Desktop Review

A high-level desktop scan was completed, including academic literature and grey literature, to build comprehensive understanding of the issue, including known barriers to implementing entitlements that support gender equity in the sector.

### Sector surveys

An employer survey was designed to capture the extent to which key workplace conditions – such as flexible work and employer-funded paid parental leave – are being offered in the community service sector. This survey was based on similar tools already used by WGEA and BankWest Curtin Economics Centre (BCEC), to produce comparable data sets.

An employee survey was designed to hear from workers about the impacts of being able to access/not access workplace entitlements that support gender equity.

The surveys were distributed to organisations and employees via email direct to community service organisations and through WACOSS' sector news and kept open for completion over four weeks.

### Data analysis

The research team conducted primary qualitative data analysis on the survey data sets (employer and employee). To conduct qualitative analysis on the *employer survey* all free text responses were cleaned and reviewed. Initial review identified seven distinct categories (referred to as codes) discussed by respondents:

- Understanding of gender equality
- Organisational focus on gender equality
- The current state of gender equality
- Barriers to gender equality
- Enablers of gender equality
- Actions to improve gender equality
- Miscellaneous

To conduct qualitative analysis on the *employee survey* all free text responses were cleaned and reviewed. Initial review identified eleven distinct categories (referred to as codes) discussed by respondents:

- bias and discrimination
- caring responsibilities
- community need & service systems

- values & purpose
- people & culture
- emotional and physical demands
- employer responsibility & support
- opportunities and promotion
- pay and conditions
- resources & infrastructure
- systemic issues

Where quotes discussed more than one topic, they were attributed to more than one code. Quotes attributed to each code were then again reviewed in detail and clustered into relevant themes. Where, on review, quotes did not have sufficient detail for thematic analysis they were left 'uncoded'. Themes were then synthesised again to minimise overlap and ensure the nuance of respondent comments had been adequately captured. To ensure consistency, the initial analysis was conducted by one member of the research team, with all codes and themes later reviewed by other members of the team.

BCEC was engaged to conduct primary quantitative data analysis on the survey data sets (employee and employer).

BCEC also provided secondary data analysis of Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) datasets to compare the profile, policies and practices of WA's community service organisations with a broader cohort of social assistance organisations.

### **Project Advisors**

At the commencement of the project, a project advisory committee was established to provide guidance on project delivery and report recommendations. The committee membership was as follows:

- Amanda Hunt, Director, 54 Reasons
- Tim Grey-Smith, CEO Community Employers WA
- Kari Pnacek, Assistant Secretary, UnionsWA

A focus group of employers, who self-nominated in the survey process, was also constituted to provide advice on the report recommendations.

## 4. Desktop Review

This desktop scan reviews existing data and provides insights on workplace policies and entitlements that contribute to women's economic security and gender equality in Western Australia. It examines the current state of Western Australia's community service sector and the most prevalent factors that contribute to the ongoing undervaluation and underpayment of female-dominated industries. It provides an overview of workplace policies and entitlements that support and enable gender equity outcomes, outlining policies and entitlements that value care work and promote secure and fairly paid employment. Governments and employers can both lead positive change and progress towards women's economic security outcomes and help embed gender equity into the workplace.

### **Western Australia's community service sector: A female-dominated industry**

The community services sector is a major employer in Western Australia. Inclusive of volunteers, the community service sector is the largest employer of Western Australians<sup>3</sup>. In 2021, it provided jobs for 72,000 people, accounting for 5.1 per cent of the state's workforce. This is on par with industries like manufacturing, mining, and retail.

WGEA describes a female-dominated industry or occupation to consist of 60 per cent or more women, a male dominated industry or occupation to contain 40 per cent or fewer women, and a gender balanced industry or workforce with 41-59 per cent employees being either female or male.<sup>4</sup> The community services sector stands out for employing a much higher percentage of women, with 78 per cent of its workforce—more than 55,000 individuals—being women.

The proportion of women employed in the community services sector is comparative to the proportion of women employed in other sectors like education and healthcare. Community services sector wages, however, are significantly lower than comparable sectors, earning 17 per cent less than those in the public sector<sup>5</sup>. Chronic underfunding by governments have resulted in wages in the sector lagging far behind comparable roles in other industries with comparable skill and work requirements.<sup>6</sup> The nature of compensation in this vital sector can have multiple ricocheting effects, both for the fair treatment of the workers providing community services, as well as the quality and sustainability of the services they deliver.<sup>7</sup> Frontline community service workers frequently have jobs at the coalface of complex social issues that require a broad and extensive range of skills to effectively support individuals and families experiencing complex challenges and compounding disadvantage. Adequate remuneration and supportive workplace conditions can have a positive and powerful impact on both workers and the people they support.

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<sup>3</sup> Nous Group. (2024). *Leaving no one behind: The economic imperative to invest in WA's community sector and its workforce*. Community Employers WA. <https://cewa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/leaving-no-one-behind.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2023). 2022 Commonwealth Public Sector Gender Equality Snapshot: Voluntary reporting results

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Stanford, J. 2020. Briefing Paper: Pay Equity in Community Services: The Consequences of Federal Budgetary Decisions. Centre for Future Work.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## The impact of gender segregation

Gender segregation is one of the most important contributing factors in Australia's gender pay gap, with female-dominated industries and jobs typically attracting lower wages. Western Australia has a highly gender-segregated workforce, where high paying sectors, such as mining, are made up of a much greater proportion of men than women. In contrast, a relatively large share of women is employed in the public sector or in sectors dependent upon public funding, such as the community service sector, where wage growth has been slow.<sup>8</sup>

The Women's Economic Equality Taskforce found that women are largely working the same jobs they did several decades ago, and men still disproportionately hold leadership positions even in female dominated industries.<sup>9</sup> At an industry level, gender segregation has intensified over the last two decades, particularly in health care and social assistance, and in education and training. These sectors tend to be lower-paid than mixed or male-dominated sectors, and the wage rates set out in modern awards for these sectors are often very close to the national minimum wage.<sup>10</sup>

A University of New South Wales report on occupation segregation found that:

*“Many jobs where large numbers of women are concentrated disproportionately feature among the lowest paid, underpinning earnings and wealth gaps that accumulate across the life course. Segregation also constrains economic performance, contributing to skill shortages which affect the provision of essential health, welfare and educational services.”<sup>11</sup>*

## Undervaluation and underpayment of female-dominated industries

*“Women's economic inequality has become normalised and is often assumed to be ‘natural’ or the result of women's personal choices.”<sup>12</sup>*

The ongoing systemic undervaluing of women's work has deep historical roots, where female-dominated occupations have been viewed as work traditionally done by women at the domestic sphere, such as care work, without pay. This institutionalised undervaluation extends beyond workplace pay to also impact workplace entitlements and conditions. With many female-dominated industries being reliant on federal or state government funding – such as community services, education, and health care – the provision of workplace entitlements is restricted by the government's ability or desire to pay. Female-dominated industries and their employees are more likely to be on award-based, low paid, insecure work, which is a direct outcome of this arrangement and ultimately undervalues the work.

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<sup>8</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2021) Australia's Gender Pay Gap Statistics

<sup>9</sup> Women's Economic Equality Taskforce (2023) Women's Economic Equality: A 10-year plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy.

<sup>10</sup> Charlesworth, S., and Smith M. (2018) 'Gender Pay Equity' in Stewart, A., Standford, J., Hardy, T. (eds) *The Wages Crisis in Australia: What it is and what to do about it*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20851/wages-crisis>

<sup>11</sup> Cortis, N., Naidoo, Y., Wong, M. and Bradbury, B. (2023). *Gender-based Occupational Segregation: A National Data Profile*. Sydney: UNSW Social Policy Research Centre.

<sup>12</sup> Women's Economic Equality Taskforce (2023) Women's Economic Equality: A 10-year plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy.

Lower average wages in female-dominated industries, in particular, are a salient contributor to gender wealth gaps across the life course. As women continue to earn less than men and are more likely to be engaged in casual and part-time work, these combined factors contribute to lifelong lower earnings and can have a negative impact on their overall financial security.<sup>13</sup> This can translate into less accumulated superannuation and wealth, fewer savings for retirement, or an increased likelihood of living in poverty, particularly living in poverty in retirement.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to lower pay, female-dominated industries pay the lowest proportion of superannuation, bonuses and other discretionary pay when compared to other industries<sup>15</sup>. As such, these sectors often do not adopt performance-based pay, do not provide bonuses, offer less workplace flexibility, and do not implement progressive leave programs. This means that the total remuneration – including the value of salaries, bonuses, entitlements, and other benefits – is significantly less than male-dominated industries, which are often run by the private sector. Women working in female-dominated industries are therefore missing out on entitlements that are demonstrated to improve gender equity.

While the community services sector is overwhelmingly female-dominated, particularly in front-line and lower-paid roles, leadership roles (executive, management, or board level) are disproportionately held by men, or by women with privileged access to education, networks, and flexibility.<sup>16</sup> Cultural and structural barriers contribute to this phenomenon: long hours and inflexible working conditions in senior roles often conflict with women’s caregiving responsibilities, while funding constraints and uncertainty in the sector often lead to flat organisational structures with fewer career progression opportunities.<sup>17</sup>

Addressing the undervaluation in female-dominated industries requires systemic policy reform, recognition of care work, and investment in gender equity at every level.

### Why undervaluation of female-dominated industries matters

Impact	Description
<b>Income inequality</b>	<p>Lower lifetime earnings due to low wages and insecure work accumulates across the lifespan.</p> <p>Economic insecurity is a key risk factor for family and domestic violence, limiting options for women and child(ren), while economic security is a critical protective factor.</p>

<sup>13</sup> Charlesworth, S., and Smith M. (2018) ‘Gender Pay Equity’ in Stewart, A., Standford, J., Hardy, T. (eds) *The Wages Crisis in Australia: What it is and what to do about it*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20851/wages-crisis>

<sup>14</sup> Parliament of Australia. (2017). *Gender segregation in the workplace and its impact on women’s economic equality* (Report No. 1, 45th Parliament). House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations. [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/House/Employment\\_Workplace\\_Relations/Gendersegregation/Report](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Employment_Workplace_Relations/Gendersegregation/Report)

<sup>15</sup> Parliament of Australia. (2017). *Gender segregation in the workplace and its impact on women’s economic equality* (Report No. 1, 45th Parliament). House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations

<sup>16</sup> Cortis, N., & Blaxland, M. (2017). *Workforce issues in the NSW community services sector*. Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW.

<sup>17</sup> Parliament of Australia (2017). *Gender segregation in the workplace and its impact on women's economic equality*.

<b>Superannuation gap</b>	<p>Reduced superannuation contributions due to low pay, part-time or casual work, or time out of the workplace to raise a family.</p> <p>Women’s superannuation balances are typically more than 40% less than men’s.<sup>18</sup> This can contribute to poverty in retirement or dependency on the age pension.</p>
<b>Risk of poverty in retirement</b>	<p>Higher rates of poverty among older women.</p> <p>Single Australian women over 60 are the most likely household to live in poverty, earning less than \$30,000 a year<sup>19</sup> and are at much greater risk of absolute poverty when they retire<sup>20</sup>. More than three in four single women retirees who rent are living in poverty<sup>21</sup>.</p>
<b>Health and Wellbeing impacts</b>	<p>High rates of burnout and emotional labour in care industries, with little financial or structural recognition of this additional burden.</p> <p>Many employees in the community services sector choose to work unpaid hours (as much as 15 per cent) rather than leaving vulnerable people unsupported, creating high rates of burnout<sup>22</sup>.</p>
<b>Workforce invisibility</b>	<p>Women’s contributions are often invisible or devalued in public discourse.</p> <p>Entrenched and rigid gender norms and enduring bias maintain a social context where gender and economic inequality is assumed, accepted and encoded in society.<sup>23</sup></p>
<b>Gender pay gap</b>	<p>Gendered pay disparities and other labour market inequalities arise from concentrations of women in industries and occupations.<sup>24</sup> This directly contributes to economic inequality, impeding women’s capacity to</p>

<sup>18</sup> Riach, K., O'Hare, C., Dalton, B., & Wang, C. (2018). *The Future Face of Poverty is Female: Stories Behind Australian Women's Superannuation Poverty in Retirement*. AustralianSuper. <https://www.australiansuper.com/campaigns/future-face-of-poverty>

<sup>19</sup> Wilkins, R., & Lass, I. (2018). *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected findings from Waves 1 to 16*. Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne. [https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/2437426/HILDA-SR-med-res.pdf](https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2437426/HILDA-SR-med-res.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Coates, B. (2018). *What’s the best way to close the gender gap in retirement incomes?* Grattan Institute. <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/899-Best-way-to-close-gender-gap-retirement-incomes.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Coates, B., Bowes, M., & Moloney, J. (2025). *Renting in retirement: Why Rent Assistance needs to rise*. Grattan Institute. <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Renting-in-retirement-Why-Rent-Assistance-needs-to-rise-Grattan-Report.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Nous Group. (2024). *Leaving no one behind: The economic imperative to invest in WA’s community sector and its workforce*.

<sup>23</sup> Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce (2023). *A 10-year plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy*. Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Australian Government.

<sup>24</sup> Cortis, N., Naidoo, Y., Wong, M., & Bradbury, B. (2023). *Gender-based occupational segregation: A national data profile*. UNSW Social Policy Research Centre. <https://www.fwc.gov.au/documents/consultation/gender-based-occupational-segregation-report-2023-11-06.pdf>

	<p>accumulate savings and wealth, progress in careers and have the same economic opportunities as men.</p> <p>Economic inequality has greater and compounding impacts for women whose experiences intersect with other forms of inequality, bias and discrimination. This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, women with disability, LGBTIQ+ women and migrant women.<sup>25</sup></p>
<p><b>Reinforces unpaid family and domestic work structure</b></p>	<p>Patterns of gender segregation in the workforce also contribute to disincentives for men and women to share family and domestic responsibilities. Men’s access to highly paid, traditional male work acts as a reinforcer for women to taking on the majority of family responsibilities and take on childcare, contributing to women taking more time out of the workplace to raise a family than men, and further reinforcing patterns of paid and unpaid care.</p>

**Towards gender equity: Supporting policies and frameworks**

In 2012, the Fair Work Commission made a landmark ruling on equal pay under the Fair Work Act, determining that work in the heavily female-dominated social, community, and disability services sector across Australia had been systematically undervalued. The Commission also highlighted that government funding models played a role in this undervaluation and that modern understandings of the value of this work had not been reflected in award wages. As a result of the decision, many workers in the low-paid, female-dominated sectors received substantial wage increases.<sup>26</sup>

While the ruling was broadly celebrated as a significant step toward achieving pay equity for women, many sector and union representatives argue that current provisions in the Act are unlikely to be effective in addressing the gender pay gap.<sup>27</sup>

The Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce’s *10-year-plan to unleash the full capacity and contribution of women to the Australian economy 2023 – 2033*,<sup>28</sup> is an inspiring plan that sets out seven primary recommendations to the Australian Government to help drive women’s economic equality. Each recommendation outlines immediate steps for implementation, as well as medium- to long-term measures that, over time, will help progress gender equality, and in turn, build a stronger economy. These recommendations involve transformations to the areas of unpaid care and domestic work, professional paid work, education and skills, tax and transfers and the processes of all governments.

Workplace policies and entitlements, in particular, can play a powerful role in advancing gender equity and women’s economic security by addressing the broader structural and cultural

<sup>25</sup> Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce (2023).

<sup>26</sup> Parliament of Australia (2017). Gender segregation in the workplace and its impact on women's economic equality.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Women’s Economic Equality Taskforce (2023).

factors that influence women's workforce participation, leadership, and pay outcomes. Flexible work policies, for example, are instrumental in attracting, retaining, and advancing women in the workplace, while anti-discrimination and harassment policies play an important role in proactively facilitating safer workplaces for women.

### Overview of Workplace Policies and Entitlements Supporting Gender Equity Outcomes

Policy/Entitlement	Description	Gender Equity Outcome	Considerations/Challenges
<b>Paid Parental Leave</b>	Paid leave for primary and secondary carers following the birth or adoption of a child.	Supports women's workforce participation, reduces lifetime earnings gap and enables shared caregiving responsibilities.	Replacement wages or short leave periods can limit effectiveness. Access for casual or gig workers is often restricted.
<b>Superannuation on Paid Parental Leave</b>	Employer superannuation contributions paid during parental leave.	Helps close the superannuation gender gap caused by career breaks for caregiving.	Not mandated by all employers in Australia. Requires policy reform to be widespread.
<b>Return to Work Programs</b>	Support for women re-entering the workforce after extended career breaks (e.g. parental leave).	Helps retain skilled women workers and addresses career interruptions.	Programs must address discrimination against career gaps and provide upskilling opportunities.
<b>Equal Pay and Pay Transparency Policies</b>	Policies requiring employers to ensure equal pay for work of equal value and disclose pay gaps.	Reduces the gender pay gap and promotes pay equity.	Effectiveness may depend on enforcement mechanisms
<b>Flexible Work Arrangements</b>	Allows employees to request flexible working hours, remote work, or part-time work.	Supports work-life balance and increases workforce participation for women with caring responsibilities.	May reinforce gendered divisions of unpaid care work if not equally available to all employees.
<b>Sexual Harassment and Workplace Safety Policies</b>	Policies addressing sexual harassment, discrimination, and workplace bullying.	Creates safer workplaces and supports women's workforce participation.	Must be backed by leadership accountability.
<b>Domestic and Family Violence Leave</b>	Paid leave for employees experiencing domestic or family violence.	Supports economic security and enables women to seek safety without losing employment.	The sector may not see a subsequent increase in core funding to cover entitlements.

<b>Targeted Leadership Development Programs</b>	Programs aimed at increasing women's participation in leadership and decision-making roles.	Improves gender diversity in leadership and addresses the glass ceiling.	Requires long-term investment and intersectional approaches to support marginalised groups.
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### Enablers of gender equitable workplaces

Enablers to gender equity in the community and care work sector include structural, policy, and cultural shifts that recognise and value the vital work predominantly carried out by women. One of the most impactful enablers is the implementation of equal remuneration orders or sector-wide wage increases that directly address the historical undervaluation of care work. Whether it is through permanent uplifts to community service contracts that reflect the true cost of delivery, or through the continuation of special supplemental payments, State and Commonwealth governments must commit to strengthening the fiscal foundation for pay equity in this vital sector.<sup>29</sup> In addition to government funding, the governments can utilise their legislative and regulatory powers to address workplace respect, health, safety and flexibility barriers for women.

Sector-wide collective bargaining and strong union representation also empower the workforce to advocate for better pay and conditions.<sup>30</sup> Reforming public funding models to reflect the true cost of quality care—including wages, training, and secure contracts—is essential to enabling providers to improve entitlements.<sup>31</sup> In addition, the formal recognition of relational and practical skills required in community sector settings in wage-setting practices can help elevate the intangible but essential elements of care work that have historically gone unpaid and unnoticed.

At the organisational level, gender equity plans, including pay audits, inclusive hiring, and leadership development, further support structural change, especially when they incorporate intersectional approaches that consider race, migration status, and disability. Creating culturally safe and inclusive workplaces where diversity is not only welcomed but embedded into policy and practice helps retain and empower women workers from marginalised groups.

Policies and entitlements that value care work, promote secure and fairly paid employment, and address the historical undervaluation of female-dominated roles will progress us further towards gender equitable workplaces in the community services sector. When care roles are recognised as skilled professions and compensated accordingly, this can narrow the gender pay gap, help remove inequities that perpetuate industry and occupational segregation and improve the economic security of women workers.

<sup>29</sup> Stanford, J. (2020).

<sup>30</sup> Charlesworth, S., & Macdonald, F. (2015). Gender Equality and Industrial Relations Reform in Australia: What's Fair is Not Always Equal. *Journal of Industrial Relations*.

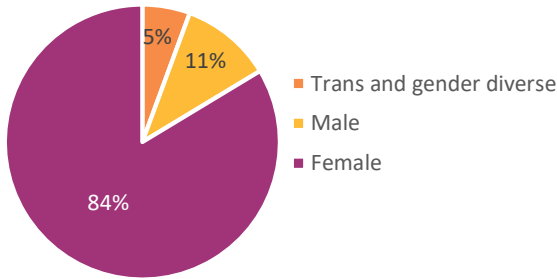
<sup>31</sup> Cortis, N., & Blaxland, M. (2020). *Australia's Community Sector and COVID-19: Supporting Communities Through the Crisis*. ACOSS and UNSW.

## 5. Survey Response

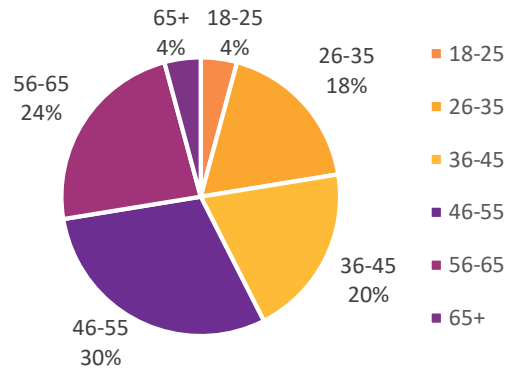
### Profile of Employee Respondents

214 people completed the employee survey.

#### Gender of Employee Respondents



#### Age of Employee Respondents



5.67% of respondents identify as trans and gender diverse. Although this is significantly higher than estimates of the proportion in the general population<sup>32,33</sup>, the small sample size limited the number of insights that could be drawn about this group. This highlights the need for further research and greater attention on workplace pay and conditions for trans and gender diverse people.

#### Other key information

- 105 respondents (49 per cent) reported they were a parent or guardian of a child.
- 78 respondents (36.45 per cent) reported they currently provide care or support to a family member in need of assistance either because they are elderly, have a disability or a health problem.
- 8 respondents (3.74 per cent) identified as Aboriginal
- 14 respondents (6.54 per cent) spoke a language other than English at home.
- 41 respondents (19 per cent) identified they lived with a disability, 10 of these respondents were trans and gender diverse, 29 were women and 2 were men. Of the respondents with a disability, nearly half also had caring responsibilities.

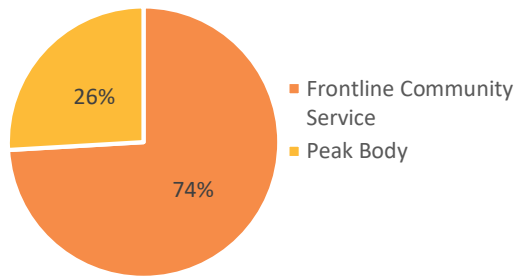
<sup>32</sup> Strauss, P, Lin, A, Winter, S, Waters, Z, Watson, V, Wright, T, D, and Cook, A. (2021) 'Options and realities for trans and gender diverse young people receiving care in Australia's mental health system: findings from Trans Pathways.' Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 55, 4, 391-399.

<sup>33</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022), Estimates and characteristics of LGBTI+ populations in Australia, ABS Website, accessed 30 July 2025.

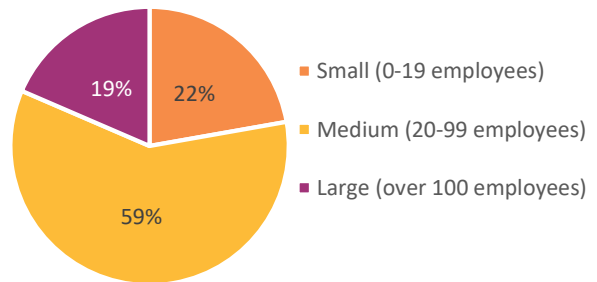
## Profile of Employer Respondents

27 organisations completed the employer survey.

### Type of Employer Respondents



### Size of Employer Respondents



### Locations where Employer Respondents operate

- 8 organisations operate in all of WA (metro, regional and remote)
- 6 organisations operate in metro WA only
- 5 organisations operate in regional WA only
- 3 organisations operate in regional and metro WA
- 5 organisations operate in remote WA only

### Pay determined by Award

85 per cent of organisations surveyed indicated that they operate under the SCHADS or SACS Awards, with the remainder using enterprise agreements, a different award, or the respondent was unsure.

## 6. Findings & Discussion

### Understanding of equality and equity

Employer respondents largely have a similar understanding of gender equality, with over 50 per cent of responses identifying importance of equal opportunity and participation. This sentiment was also reflected through the inclusion of themes such as equal responsibility, equal treatment, and equal pay. Several organisations noted that equal access, treatment and responsibility are inherently linked to fairness. Interestingly, many of the respondents who defined equality as equal opportunity and equal participation noted that this was reliant on the organisation building an inclusive and safe environment. For example, one employer respondent wrote:

*“All employees regardless of their gender have equal access to employment opportunities and we foster an inclusive and diverse working environment where all people feel safe.”*

Several responses identified the importance of moving beyond ‘equality’ towards ‘equity’ and that this required a level of organisational responsiveness to needs of individual employees. For example, one respondent wrote:

*“Equality means that everyone has access to the same opportunities in the same way - different to equity to me where everyone has the access, they need to enable them to take advantage of opportunities in the same way.”*

Other key themes that were tied to respondents understanding of gender equality include *“celebrating diversity, all voices are heard, addressing bias and discrimination, meaningful engagement, acts of allyship, and respect”*.

Concerningly, two employer respondents indicated that they are uninterested in definitions of gender equality – when asked what gender equality meant to them, one respondent wrote:

*“Don’t care!”*

Although such responses were in the minority, they do indicate there is scope for further education and awareness across the community service sector around the meaning, and importance of gender equity in the workplace.

### Pay and Conditions

#### General attitudes to remuneration

Responses strongly demonstrated that employees feel that pay rates in the sector do not adequately reflect the experience, performance and responsibility of the roles and people. Only 5.61 per cent of respondents indicated satisfaction with pay and/or conditions, while 15.89 per cent indicated dissatisfaction. For example, one respondent identified the following as a key challenge working in the community sector:

*“The low wages comparative to similar roles in the private sector and the expectation that you work more hours because you care”*

Several comments from the employer survey reported that the work of the sector was undervalued and under remunerated – particularly when compared to other industries. This sentiment reflected employers’ experience when expressing concerns to government about sector sustainable funding, and in some instances employees’ experience when they expressed concerns to their employers.

38.32 per cent of respondents indicated that their household income didn’t always cover their living expenses:

	Never	Sometimes	Most of the time	Always	Didn’t respond
<b>Employee Respondents</b> (by number of responses)	4	21	57	93	39

*“Pay needs to increase due to cost of living, pay does not match living standards, if you want to maintain a healthy lifestyle and wellbeing”*

A number of employee respondents had accessed emergency relief and other hardship supports in the past 12 months. 5.1 per cent of all employee respondents had accessed emergency relief, with 7.5 per cent of respondents receiving some form of income support payment and 3.3 per cent accessing rent assistance and 6.1 per cent using financial counselling services.

### Perceptions of Gender Pay Gap

Several organisations noted that the workplace make up – being a female-dominated workforce – was an enabler of gender equity. Some participants noted that a female-dominated workforce meant they had to adopt some of the policies mentioned, while others said they felt that meant gender equity is an issue more deeply considered.

When considering the current state of gender equity in the workplace, participants were specifically asked how pay rates were determined within their organisation. The majority of organisations stated that pay is determined by the relevant award (most commonly SCHADS or SACS), with roles classified at a specific band and then an employee’s level within a band chosen to reflect past experience.

Several small organisations indicated they were unsure how relevant gender equity policies were to their organisation. In these responses, employers noted that this was because over 80 per cent of their workforce was women and that they felt strict adherence to the SCHADS award ensured that employees received equal pay for equal work.

It was noted that several organisations have a standard practice of offering positions at the bottom of the relevant pay level – and it is up to a potential employee to negotiate a higher level based on previous experience. A smaller cohort of respondents noted that pay was determined by experience and performance, with one organisation noting that pay reflected candidate

expectations and another organisation indicating there was room for negotiation within the pay determination.

Several organisations noted that low rates of pay across the sector were impacted by the rate of funding provided by government, and that this greatly impacted the sector's ability to recruit and retain talent and in turn this was a significant driver of the gender pay gap in WA. Organisations also noted that low rates of pay meant they had to offer a broader range of workplace entitlements, and that workplace flexibility provided by many organisations in the sector is required to substitute for lower pay.

*“We need to start by offering better wages to women, the work we do is very undervalued and as its tied to government funding that is competitive, we are often forced to pay less than people are worth. This is made up for in flexibility, additional leave entitlements and the like but we should have the resources to be paying better wages.”*

*“We follow the rules of the Award but are then as flexible as we can be depending on the situation.”*

Throughout the survey, there was a common perspective that the sector is likely to be ahead on 'gender equality' because most workers and leaders are women. For example:

*“Our sector is likely ahead of others, given we have many women in senior leadership roles...”*

Employees overwhelmingly had the perception that pay between genders was fair with 57.75 per cent of employees either agreeing or strongly agreeing and only 7 per cent disagreeing or strongly disagreeing to the statement: “I believe women and men are paid the same for performing similar work within my workplace”, the remainder of respondents were neutral or didn't respond.

Employee respondents also felt that there was no gender bias in regard to promotional opportunities, with only 4.67 per cent of respondents disagreeing/strongly disagreeing with the statement “Promotion panels in my workplace do not make assumptions about people's capabilities based on gender.”

However, the gender make-up of the workforce was a strong theme amongst responses from employees that referenced bias or discrimination. Four respondents noted that their organisation is female dominated, with some suggesting that hiring more men would improve gender equity. Three responses also noted men are more likely to be in senior positions.

Four respondents stated that gender discrimination does not exist at all, or that focusing on gender rather than individual skills and capacity is not appropriate.

Three respondents felt that their workplace was fair and equal, or that gender equity was a strong focus of their employer.

### **Data on Gender Pay Gaps within the community services sector**

Despite the perceptions of participants in both the employer and employee survey, that people are remunerated equally regardless of gender, the survey found significant pay gaps between men and women respondents, particularly in the higher paid roles.

The survey indicated that despite being a female dominated industry, men hold a disproportionate number of senior roles and that there is a significant pay gap.

There was significant difference across genders in terms of full-time work with 78.3 per cent of men employee respondents in full time positions in comparison to 25 per cent of trans and gender diverse people and 44.7 per cent of women.

Roles were divided into three categories based on job titles provided by respondents in the employee survey and then cross referenced with respondents' responses on if they had management responsibilities. Titles where it was difficult to categorise were excluded.

The broad categories were:

- Director/manager
- Coordinator/specialist
- Officer/support work/counsellor

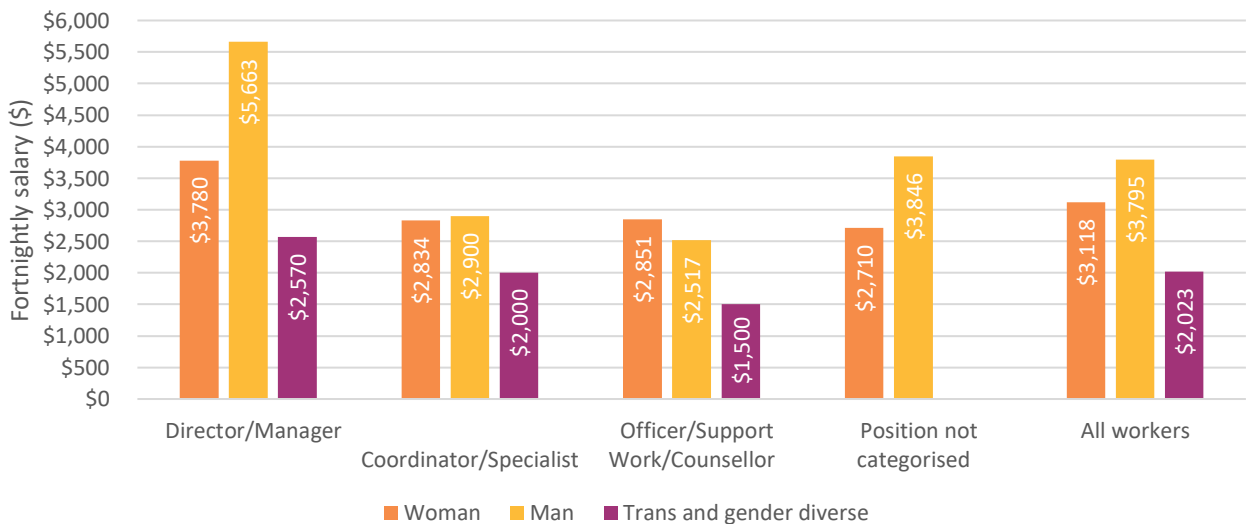
Pay gap trends were apparent across the different categories.

When survey respondents in full time work were compared there was a \$677 pay gap between average fortnightly earnings of men and women with men averaging \$3,795 per fortnight and women receiving \$3,118. Trans and gender diverse people received an ever lower average salary at \$2,023 per fortnight – though it needs to be noted this was a much smaller sample size.

The largest pay gap was in the senior roles with an average fortnightly pay of \$3,780 for women and \$5,663 for men, and trans and gender diverse people receiving a much lower average of \$2,570 (note this is a small sample size).

Trans and gender diverse people received lowest remuneration across all categories, men received the highest across the top two categories and women received the highest in the lowest paid category.

Full time worker pay (fortnight) by employment category:



17.7 per cent of men and 10.6 per cent of women earned \$4000 or above a fortnight.

In the employer survey data, only 22 per cent of all organisations conducted pay audits. There was a clear trend that smaller and medium sized organisations are less likely to conduct pay audits than larger organisations, identifying an opportunity for improvement in this space.

	Small	Medium	Large	All
<b>Organisations that conduct pay audits</b>	17%	6%	80%	22%

### Employee consultation on Pay and Conditions

Employee respondents were asked to agree or disagree with a range of statements regarding pay:

- My workplace has transparent pay structures
- I understand pay decision making criteria and processes
- I am part of pay decisions
- I have had open pay discussions with my supervisor in the last year

There was a mixed response to these questions while over half of employee respondents indicated they agreed that their workplace had transparent pay structures and they understand how pay decisions are made in their organisation, just over a third of respondents signalled that they had had a discussion regarding pay in the last year and less than a quarter of respondents signalled that they were part of pay decisions.

Pay transparency and review was also identified by a significant number of respondents as an issue. For example,

*“Work part time and was paid at the same level for 5 years, even though my role changed, and I took on more responsibility. My pay scale was never reviewed until I requested this. The only reason it was reviewed was because I was about to leave. Annual reviews and pay increases should be clearer and better enforced in this sector.”*

In its totality, these findings indicate a need for pay gap audits to be conducted more commonly throughout the sector, along with plans to address gaps such as formalising pay determination processes, conducting regular reviews, providing career progression pathways and setting measurable goals. Regular and transparent performance reviews and pay increases are also important to ensuring equal and fair pay.

Clearly, appropriate resourcing from funders to support fairer wages is also critical in supporting economic security of the sector’s workforce.

## Retention and Support of Workers

### Experiences in the Community Sector Workforce

The issue of retention was raised by a number of employees.

Many the responses received regarding what respondents enjoy about the community services sector or why they plan to still be working in the sector in one-five years' time were significantly values driven.

*“Having a job with purpose and that is contributing to the wellbeing of others.”*

Responses strongly referenced positive impact, connecting and supporting community, work with purpose and creating change/social justice.

*“The people who work in the sector, the vast majority of the time, work in the sector because they care. This means that often the people I get to work with are genuine and kind and we have a lot in common.”*

Other responses with a positive view of working in the sector noted an inclusive and supportive culture, and a shared vision.

A strong theme arising from responses was the emotional and physical demands of working in the community services sector.

*“...burn out, due to always operating beyond organisational and often personal capacity”*

High workload, overwhelm and stress and burnout were issues raised repeatedly. Vicarious trauma and challenging client behaviours also came up multiple times – speaking to the complexity of challenges many in the sector are seeking to provide support for.

*“excessive 'extra' expectations of workers above and beyond their funded role. You get bumped up an Awards level or two, but are not permitted to work extra hours or reduce your previous deliverables, so the minor pay bump is not worth it at all. But also you can't refuse, because 'its what is needed'.”*

Two respondents identified stress and burn out as a reason they may leave the community services sector.

There were several people who raised issues of the challenging nature of the work, particularly that it is underfunded.

One respondent stated *“The work is challenging and we often face service-gaps, where people fall through the gaps and there is not much you can do. This is frustrating and painful to see”.*

Concerningly, four responses identified problems with culture within community service organisations. While these views are in the minority of responses, it may raise an issue for consideration.

## **Promotion, Progression and Training**

Career progression and promotion was seen as important by employees. The most common comment was that the sector offers limited opportunities for promotion. Respondents also noted a lack of transparency in promotion. While many responses identified the small size of their organisation as a key barrier to promotion pathway, others identified issues in hiring practices. For example,

*“There is never any scope for promotions. There have been two occasions in 15 years where internal staff have been encouraged to apply for upcoming positions - but both times they were*

*rejected by the board in favour of external candidates through paid recruitment agencies. We have no Promotion Panel.*

The lack of secure ongoing funding was also raised as a barrier to promotion.

Regarding training and development, while a few responses indicated this was available and accessible, the majority raised concerns about limited resources, support, time and access. Multiple respondents raised funding limitations as a key barrier, including being unable to take time out of their usual workday to attend training due to resource constraints, and/or being expected to attend training outside of work hours. For example, one respondent noted:

*“We can't afford even the basic number of hours required to do our jobs properly. PD doesn't even get a look in”*

While there were some instances of professional development opportunities, these often required employees to take on more work.

*“My workplace routinely encourages staff to undertake work outside of their defined role, which is fantastic for upskilling and professional development, however it is usually expected that staff will manage to fit the additional work into their regular work day on top of their existing workload. Staff are often not allocated extra hours or additional pay for the work they take on outside of their roles.”*

Access issues included regionally based employees unable to attend Perth based trainings, particularly those with caring responsibilities at home.

Some responses indicated a need for training opportunities that are more relevant to their roles, particularly for those not in management positions. For example,

*“Upskilling more prevalent in management levels, not lower rungs. Mandatory training met but nothing else.”*

Several respondents stated that these circumstances left them feeling undervalued.

Career progression and professional development for the sector workforce is critical in supporting women's, and other workers', economic security and wellbeing. These findings demonstrate the importance of supporting meaningful professional development and reviewing progression policies to support internal mobility. It is clear this work must also be supported by appropriate resourcing from funders.

## Organisational Policies

### **Employer responses on gender equity supportive policies on offer at their organisation**

The employer survey asked whether the following types of policies were on offer in respondent organisations:

- Flexible work
- Sexual harassment policies
- Family & domestic violence policies

- Paid parental leave and policies to support return to work following parental leave

**Across all categories** large organisations tended to report more gender equity supporting workplace policies on offer, compared to medium and small organisations. Front line community service organisations also tended to report more relevant workplace policies on offer, compared to peak bodies.

The type of policy with the strongest showing amongst respondent organisations was **flexible work policies**. Organisations of all sizes generally reported a reasonably complete and comprehensive set of flexibility policies. 100 per cent of large organisations, 94 per cent of medium, and 83 per cent of small organisations reported they offer some type of flexible work options.

The most common flexible work options reported on offer are:

Policy	How many employers offer
Flexible hours	89%
Time-off-in-lieu	78%
Remote work/work from home	89%
Part-time work	78%

Less available options include:

Policy	How many employers offer
Compressed week	41%
Job sharing	33%
Purchased leave	30%

Responses indicated that **sexual harassment policies** are more likely in place at large organisations, than medium or small organisations. Large organisations also reported comprehensive sexual harassment policies, with all but one of the policy options in the survey offered by 80 to 100 per cent of large respondents. On the other hand, a third of medium sized organisations and half of all small organisations reported no sexual harassment policies in place at all.

Across all responses, the sexual harassment policies least frequently offered are:

Policy	How many employers offer
Guidelines for HR or other designated staff on confidentiality and privacy	44%
A system for monitoring outcomes of sexual harassment and discrimination complaints	41%
Disclosure options (internal and external) included in policy	44%

Again, implementation of formal **family and domestic violence policy** varied according to organisation size. 100 per cent of large organisations reported having a family and domestic violence policy. Concerningly, just 50 per cent of medium organisations and 33 per cent of small organisations reported having a formal family and domestic violence policy. In all, 56 per cent of respondent organisations have a formal family and domestic violence policy in place.

Comparing this finding to WGEA datasets indicates that the WA sector may be lagging behind. Nationally, social assistance services of 250 employees or less (which report to WGEA) demonstrate a much higher rate of family and domestic violence policies in place (89.7 per cent). It must be noted this data may be skewed by large organisations.

The following is a snapshot of the rate of relevant policies offered by respondent organisations. Note, some of the respondent organisations without a formal family and domestic violence policy report extending some of the following policies to staff impacted by family violence.

Policy	How many employers offer
Confidentiality	85%
Flexible work	81%
Access to Employee Assistance Program (EAP)	81%
Workplace Safety Training	52%
Referral to specialised support services	56%
Training for key personnel	33%

The family and domestic violence related supports reportedly offered by small employer respondents provided an interesting picture. Just 67 per cent have a confidentiality policy and just 50 per cent offer access to EAP. However, 33 per cent of this group offer financial supports (advanced bonus or pay), compared to six per cent of medium and zero per cent of large organisations.

More than two thirds of respondent organisations (62 per cent) do not offer **employer-funded paid parental leave**. This was consistent across the different sizes of organisations. Of those that do, two thirds offer employer-funded paid parental leave to all genders, while the rest use primary and secondary carer definitions. This low offering of employer-funded paid parental leave is of particular concern and points to inequity between government-funded community organisations and government agencies. Under the Public Service Award 1992, government employees can access 14 weeks of employer-funded paid parental leave.

Supports for those returning from parental leave are mainly part-time options, or keep in touch programs. Just 26 per cent of respondents offer breastfeeding facilities. Very few offer mentoring or onsite childcare.

These findings demonstrate gaps in organisational policies supporting gender equity. Family and domestic violence policies as well as sexual harassment policies should be developed as a priority. These policies are critical to workplace safety and gender equity. Moreover, employers now have a positive legal duty to take proactive and meaningful steps to prevent sexual harassment, sex-based harassment, and discrimination in the workplace.<sup>34</sup> Rather than reactive measure, organisations are expected to embed preventative strategies in their operations.

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<sup>34</sup> *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth). Australian Human Rights Commission, *The Positive Duty in Sex Discrimination*. <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/positive-duty-sex-discrimination-act>.

## Employee access to organisational policies

The employer and employee surveys revealed significant differences in perception of policies and supports in place. Employee respondents tended to report much lower rates of policies and supports on offer to them, compared to employers.

When employee respondents were asked what **flexible work policies** are available to them:

Policy	Women Respondents	Men Respondents	Employer Respondents
Flexible hours of work	43%	60.9%	89%
Time-off-in-lieu	44.1%	39.1%	78%
Remote work/work from home	40.2%	65.2%	89%
Unpaid leave	38%	43.5%	74%

Employee responses when asked if their employer has **family and domestic violence policies** told a similar story.

Policy	Women Respondents	Men Respondents	Employer Respondents
Confidentiality of disclosure	40.2%	52.2%	85%
Protection from adverse action due to disclosure	27.4%	21.7%	59%
Access to EAP	51.4%	69.6%	81%

Nevertheless, almost 82 per cent of respondents stated that they know who to go to at work for family and domestic violence support and almost 77 per cent would be comfortable asking for family and domestic violence leave.

This discrepancy between datasets suggests employers may need to take steps to ensure their staff know of and can access relevant workplace policies and supports.

Additionally, the above data indicates availability of some entitlements varies according to gender. For flexible hours, remote work and access to EAP, a much higher proportion of men respondents report these as available than women respondents. This is an interesting result. It is unclear whether this is due to differences in awareness, or difficulties in accessing those supports due to job characteristics or personal circumstances. It is another indicator that there is not consistent understanding of what policies and supports are available in support of gender equity.

## How employers make their staff aware of policies in place

Employer respondents who stated yes to offering a type of policy, were asked to identify how employees are made aware of the policy or work option.

Collectively, this data indicates that there tends to be an absence of common strategies other than induction to raise awareness of relevant workplace policies (except for harassment policies). Large organisations also tend to have more strategies to raise awareness of relevant policies with staff compared to small organisations.

For **flexible work policies**, induction and role modelling were the most common method (85 per cent and 70 per cent respectively). A combination of both induction and role modelling was the most common approach (40.7 per cent). This approach was more common among smaller organisations (66.7 per cent) compared to large organisations (40 per cent).

For **parental leave** policies, induction was the primary awareness method used (85 per cent). For small organisations however, just 67 per cent included parental leave information in induction. Other methods were infrequently reported. Ad hoc training and role modelling reported by just 26 per cent, this was primarily large organisations.

For **family and domestic violence policies**, employers primarily reported induction and ad hoc training. However, respondents were less likely to include family and domestic violence policies in induction packages than flexible work or parental leave policies.

Induction was again the primary awareness raising method for **harassment** policies (100 per cent of large organisations, 69 per cent of medium and 50 per cent of small). Interestingly, there was stronger training report for harassment policies (41 per cent) than other policies. Community services reported more likely to include harassment policies in induction, and training compared to peak bodies.

These findings indicate an opportunity to improve awareness raising methods within organisations to promote understanding and uptake of policies and supports.

### **How organisational size impacts gender equity supporting policies**

Emerging throughout the data above is that smaller organisations tend to have less policies in place that support gender equity, and have fewer mechanisms in place to promote policies in place with staff. The free text responses from employers may provide further illumination on this issue.

Some small organisations noted that the size of their organisation significantly impacted their ability to implement gender equity initiatives. Several smaller organisations noted that without dedicated HR resources, or general capacity, no one was available to take on this work and that there is no 'fat' in their budgets to accommodate this.

On the other hand, several small organisations saw their size as a strength in this instance as it enabled them to be flexible as needed. This may indicate that small organisations are more likely to offer ad hoc access to support. While flexibility can be a positive, without formalised policies in place, employees may face additional hurdles to access.

Support is needed for small organisations in developing and implementing relevant policies and supports. This may be through shared resources, templates and pro bono support. Both funders and sector organisations should provide this support.

## **Caring Responsibilities**

Responsiveness to caring responsibilities came through as a strong priority from employee respondents. Respondents felt strongly that balancing the demands of work with caring

responsibilities was a challenge, and that while many employers currently support caring responsibilities, more could be done. 37 per cent of employee respondents reported they hold caring responsibilities.

Employee quantitative responses indicated that employees feel that their organisations are attempting to provide support, yet employees still find it difficult to manage care and work.

88.9 per cent of women respondents reported their supervisor is responsive to their caring needs; 84.6 per cent of women respondents reported that leave arrangements are sufficiently flexible for their caring responsibilities. 100 per cent of men respondents answered positively to each of these questions.

Despite this strong positive showing, fewer respondents feel they can easily manage work and care demands – 55.6 per cent of men respondents and 63.8 per cent of women respondents. 74.1 per cent of respondents reported it easy to take time off for personal/family matters.

Employee responses also suggested that caring responsibilities may impact their career progression. Just 62.4 per cent of women respondents and 50 per cent of men respondents agreed that promotion panels make no assumptions based on family. 23.3 per cent of women respondents and 33.3 per cent of men respondents reported feeling that employees have to choose between advancing their careers or devoting time to their caring responsibilities.

One employee respondent stated

*“I have had to turn down opportunities because the pay has been too low. I work part-time as covering child care fees would be too difficult if I worked full-time. I do the majority of childcare and domestic responsibilities in my household, as my pay is lower than my partners and I work less outside the home. I would need to work full-time to advance my career, but this would impact on my caring responsibilities too much.”*

Employee qualitative responses frequently identified flexible work policies as critical employer actions to support staff caring responsibilities.

One employee respondent clearly linked the lack of flexibility for caring responsibilities with additional financial pressure:

*“not being able to do school runs so having to pay costly after school care fees”.*

As outlined above – while employers report strong offering of flexible work, the employee experience is more limited. Whether this is due to lack of awareness or difficulties in accessing those supports due to job characteristics or policies not flexible enough to reflect personal circumstances, there is room for organisational examination of uptake, awareness and appropriateness of flexible work policies.

Four respondents in the qualitative responses noted that the level of support offered is supervisor dependant – raising concerns about sustainability of these supports.

One respondent recommended;

*“clear policies and processes for, and the availability of working from home for all staff, rather than being ad-hoc and dependent upon individual managers and relationships”*

Employee respondents recommended:

- Clearer policies (not dependant on individual supervisors); and
- Broader applicability of flexible policies – including for a diversity of caring responsibilities (for example, caring for elderly parents), and those in positions where flexible hours or remote work is more challenging

Employee respondents also identified other areas for improving support for caring responsibilities. These included:

- Leave notice policies requiring notice which doesn't allow for sudden illness;
- Employers providing insufficient notice on shift changes which doesn't allow for employees to make childcare arrangements; and
- High workloads interfering with family needs.

When asked about whether other caring related supports/policies were on offer at their organisation:

Policy	Women Respondents	Men Respondents
Carers Leave	38%	39.1%
Info packs for staff with caring responsibilities	4.5%	4.3%
Referral services to support staff with caring responsibilities	11.2%	4.3%
Support to secure school holiday care	3.4%	0%
Additional leave days during Christmas holidays	28.5%	30.4%

These responses indicate an opportunity for services to consider how they can better support staff with caring responsibilities. Noting that carer's leave is an entitlement required by the Fair Work Commission, it is unclear whether respondents are unaware that their personal leave can also be used as carer's leave, or if respondents interpreted the question differently.

Nevertheless, it may support the emerging theme that employees may not be aware of or find it simple to access all the supports on offer to them.

## 7. Barriers

All but one of the employer respondents indicated they face a range of barriers when looking to implement gender equity policies and initiatives.

### **Lack of resources**

Most commonly, employer respondents indicated that a lack of resources to implement or develop policies, including a lack of financial resources and time, was a significant barrier to implement gender equity policies. Financial resources were most commonly discussed when speaking about implementing policies that provide employees with additional entitlements, such as employer funded paid parental leave. For example, one organisation shared that:

*“We will be considering all our leave entitlements in the next 12 months. We would like to offer paid parental leave but this has not been possible to date due to budgets.”*

For some organisations, this was related to incredibly limited funding and the pressure to operate within very tight budgets. Some organisations felt that funding constraints were so extreme that it limited their ability to offer competitive salaries or entitlements that are now considered to be relatively standard, such as flexibility. For example, one organisation noted:

*“Limited funding - it costs more to have two part time employees than one full time, because both part time employees need training, coaching, supervision time etc, so with very thin margins on our programs we sometimes have to make a choice between offering highly flexible roles and having sustainable programs.”*

*“[We are] trying to recruit male staff for some roles for balance but pay is not enough for most.”*

This was particularly the case for smaller organisations. As outlined above, without HR resources and with budgets already stretched thin, capacity to implement gender equity initiatives is very limited. This attitude was echoed by some employee respondents. For example, one employee respondent stated:

*“Some workplaces (usually larger ones) have the ability to do it right, even though smaller orgs can have the best intentions they don't have the capacity to enact some of these actions like miscarriage leave or flexible working etc and it's such a shame.”*

It is apparent throughout the survey responses that funding that reflects the true cost of service delivery, including staff support, is essential to enabling organisations to implement policies that support gender equity.

### **Knowledge, Awareness and Buy In**

Gaps in knowledge and awareness was a common barrier discussed throughout employer respondent answers. Several employers noted that senior management and board members are not aware of the importance of gender equity in the workplace, and at times are resistant to change. This is summed up in a quote provided by an employer respondent, who noted:

*“Have encountered resistance from some Board members who may not understand the imperative of gender equality policies.”*

Employer respondents also highlighted knowledge gaps within their workforce – noting they are lacking the expertise to develop and implement relevant policies. The survey highlighted a need for upskilling and education, particularly on the types of workplace policies that support gender equity.

Building knowledge and buy in across organisations is in turn limited by organisational resource constraints. Educating board members on the importance of equity in the workplace, upskilling leaders in how to implement relevant policies and increasing staff understanding all require appropriate resourcing. One respondent summed this up when identifying board understanding as a barrier:

*“[A key barrier is] The time required to help some Board members understand that these policies - such as flexible working and working from home - are not "perks" for the employee but add value to the organisation.”*

## 8. Recommendations

### Recommendations for Funders/Government

#### 1. Resource organisations to implement workplace policies and supports that progress gender equity

Appropriate resourcing is critical in enabling the community service sector to advance gender equity. Service funding should be sufficient to cover HR infrastructure, policy development and implementation, staff training, and internal monitoring. These are all part of the real cost of service delivery and necessary to progressing gender equity.

This research has identified several key areas where funding is currently lacking, and thereby hindering gender equity progress. Future commissioning should include resourcing, in particular, for the following:

##### 1.1. Decent pay, comparative to other sectors, including government

Governments should factor appropriate pay into funding, recognising caring professionals as skilled and valuable workers. As outlined in 'Background', wages in the community services sector tend to be lower than other sectors. Such undervaluation of a female-dominated sector contributes to gender inequity and undermines workforce sustainability. Awards such as SCHADS and SACS set the minimum pay levels for the sector workforce. It is crucial that government funding is commensurate to award pay levels and the expertise of the workforce. Services may otherwise be forced to reduce staffing hours, compromising care quality and putting workers at risk. Sufficient salary funding would significantly progress women's economic security and reduce the gender pay gap more broadly.

##### 1.2. Employer-funded paid parental leave

A majority of surveyed organisations do not offer employer-funded paid parental leave. Respondents identified insufficient funding as the key barrier to implementation. This is a clear point of inequity between government-funded community organisation workers and government employees, who are entitled to 14 weeks employer-funded paid parental leave under the Public Service Award<sup>35</sup>. Government grant funding should include the cost of employer-funded paid parental leave that is inclusive, gender-neutral and designed to encourage uptake by all parents.<sup>36</sup> This is critical to achieving equitable employment conditions, and promote women's economic participation and economic security.

##### 1.3. Workplace policy development

Some organisations, particularly smaller organisations identified that lack of resourcing for HR infrastructure and internal policy development was a barrier to progressing gender equity initiatives. Funding conditions should consider resourcing for internal gender equity review, including pay gap analysis, and policy development and implementation.

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<sup>35</sup> Public Service Award 1992. <https://www.wairc.wa.gov.au/resources/awards?id=PUB007>.

<sup>36</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2024). *Advancing Paid Parental Leave and Flexibility in the Workplace*. <https://www.wgea.gov.au/flexible-work/advancing-gender-equitable-take-up-of-ppl-and-flexible-work>.

## **2. Establish a Special Grants Program to fund gender equity initiatives across the Community Service Sector**

Respondents clearly identified funding as a critical barrier to progressing gender equity initiatives. Funding is fundamental to achieving gender equity in the community services sector, a special grants program would enable community services to conduct important shorter-term activities. This would include activities such as: delivering employer-funded paid parental leave for the remainder of existing grant terms; implementing a gender pay gap review and action plan; and implementing an action plan to embed flexible work, FDV or sexual harassment policies into the culture of the organisation.

# Recommendations for Organisations

## **3. Improve staff awareness of workplace policies and supports**

Policies and supports can only be effective if staff are aware of them and know how to access them. The discrepancy between employer and employee reports of policies on offer indicate there are significant improvements to be made in employee awareness. Employers reported primarily educating staff on policies during induction, with an ongoing mechanism to raise awareness much less common. Relevant information should be embedded into the induction process and provided in an ongoing way through staff meetings, role modelling, distribution of resources, ad hoc conversations and training. A multi-pronged approach to communication is critical, recognising that there are a variety of ways that people absorb information. Efficacy of communication may be reviewed by looking at uptake of policies within organisation over time.

## **4. Implement family and domestic violence and sexual harassment policies**

Significant portions of medium and small employer respondents reported having no family and domestic violence and/or sexual harassment policies in place. Implementation of family and domestic violence and/or sexual harassment policies should be accompanied by regular review and appropriate training for all staff.

## **5. Create meaningful pathways for professional growth**

Efforts to ensure women and trans and gender diverse staff can progress into senior roles and advance in their careers are important in progressing women's economic security and gender equity more broadly. Community services organisations, particularly when small or with flat structures, can have limited opportunities for promotion and leadership development. Employers can still foster career progression by offering meaningful professional development. This includes access to training, mentoring, and leadership development. Organisations should assess barriers to employee progression and, where possible, implement strategies such as prioritising internal recruitment for senior roles.

## **6. Establish staff consultation and feedback mechanisms**

By consulting staff on their experiences in the workplace and perceptions of gender equity organisations can identify gaps in their policies and make improvements that reflect the needs of their staff. This can be achieved through discussion at team meetings, regular surveys,

working groups and other feedback channels. Further guidance of conducting staff consultation can be found on WGEA's website – [here](#).

## **7. Conduct audit of gender gaps in pay and senior positions and implement action plans**

This research demonstrated significant gender pay gaps at senior staff levels. This is despite common use of the SCHADS or SACS Award. Organisations should conduct pay gap audits, review of gender gaps in senior positions and develop action plans to address any inequity. This includes formalising pay determination processes, conducting regular reviews, providing career progression pathways and setting measurable goals. Regular and transparent performance reviews and pay increases are also important to ensuring equal and fair pay. Further guidance on actions to take to ensure equal pay can be found on the WGEA website – [here](#).

## **8. Strengthen flexible work policies and practices**

Flexible work is critical to gender equity and a clear priority for employees, particularly in supporting caring responsibilities. While most employers reported offering flexible work policies, employees were significantly less likely to report access. Qualitative responses indicated this may be due to lack of awareness, difficulties in accessing those supports due to job characteristics or policies not flexible enough to reflect personal circumstances. WGEA recommends all employees have access to flexible work policies regardless of gender, age, caring responsibilities, tenure, seniority or role.<sup>37</sup> Front line workers are likely to find it more difficult to access flexible work and may require creative rostering, job-sharing or alternate technologies.

Organisations should:

- Review flexible work policies to ensure, insofar as possible, all staff are entitled to access.
- Consider supports, process adjustments or tools and technologies needed to ensure as many staff as possible can access.
- Ensure managers and other staff have the skills to manage flexible work effectively and equitably.
- Ensure senior staff actively model engaging flexible work policies.

Further resources on developing and implementing equitable flexible work policies can be found on WGEA's website – [here](#).

# Other Recommendations

## **9. Sector-wide education on gender equity**

Lack of understanding or buy in amongst the sector will hinder progress to gender equity. This research suggests understanding of the importance of progressing gender equity can be

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<sup>37</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency (2024). *Flexible Work Checklist*. <https://www.wgea.gov.au/flexible-work/flexible-work-checklist>.

improved across all levels of organisations. Further, this research suggests many organisations and employees erroneously believe gender inequity is not an issue in the sector due to it being a female-dominated sector. Sector-wide campaigns, training and resources can support cultural change, creating an enabling environment for progress on gender equity.

### **10. Support smaller organisations**

This research indicates that smaller organisations are less likely to have gender equity supportive policies in place due to limited capacity. Smaller organisations can be supported to progress gender equity initiatives through shared resources, templates and pro bono support. Both funders and sector organisations should provide this support.

### **11. Conduct more research into trans and gender diverse workers' pay and conditions**

Unfortunately, the sample size of trans and gender diverse employee survey respondents was too small to draw significant findings in this research. There is otherwise limited data on the experiences of trans and gender diverse workers. To progress towards truly inclusive workplaces, more research should be conducted to understand and address inequities affecting trans and gender diverse staff.

### **12. Advocate for funding increases, and special grant programs, to fund gender equity initiatives across the community service sector**

Ongoing advocacy is critical to progressing the above recommendations for increased funding and grant opportunities for the sector.

