

# National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality: Consultation – Care Economy Meeting Summary

21 November 2022

*The government is developing a new* [*National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality*](https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/national-strategy-achieve-gender-equality)*. The National Strategy will guide whole of community action to help make Australia one of the best countries in the world for equality between women and men.*

*Consultation with diverse stakeholders is key to developing a strategy that speaks to the experiences and ambitions of women and girls around Australia. The first phase of consultation took place in late 2022 and summaries of these discussions are shared to support further consultation and input into the development of the National Strategy.*

*This note summarises a consultation meeting held on 21 November 2022 focused on the care economy, which included representatives from industry, academia, not-for-profit organisations, non-government organisations, and community service organisations. The consultation drew on a* [*discussion paper*](https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/national-strategy-achieve-gender-equality/national-strategy-achieve-gender-equality) *prepared by the Office for Women. This summary note reflects the discussion amongst the participants. These are not the views of Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.*

### Summary of key points raised by participants:

1. There is a need to increase pay for workers employed in the care economy.
2. There is a need to increase the value placed on paid and unpaid care work.
3. There is a need to encourage more men to take up jobs in the care sector, take paid parental leave and engage in unpaid care work.
4. Government funding for child care as an extension of funding for primary and secondary education.
5. There is a need to adjust existing social security and effective marginal tax rates to better align with gender equality and workforce participation objectives.

### Discussion at this roundtable focused on four questions.

### What is a key barrier to gender equality in Australia that you believe this Strategy is opportune to address?

Participants noted that boosting pay for workers in the care economy, reducing gender segregation in the workforce and mechanisms that boost men’s uptake of paid parental leave and unpaid care work are important to achieving gender equality. Increasing pay for workers in the care economy will increase the value placed on an overwhelmingly female workforce. This would also help to change the undervaluing of paid and unpaid care work, which is largely considered to be “women’s work.”

A pay increase will incentivise more workers to enter the care workforce. This will also be supported by a stronger vocational education and training (VET) system which enjoys whole of government support. Partnerships and connections to higher education and more work-study integration will ensure women can start working in the sector while completing formal training.

Government should fund early childhood education as a necessary, critical extension of the public education system, rather than through a different payment model.

Jobs in the care economy are often stressful, exhausting and risky for the long-term health of women. The unintended the consequences of legislation must be considered when developing solutions, including social security eligibility and requirements, childcare and tax incentives.

Government procurement should be used to drive greater change in the private sector. The expansion of independent contracting and the ‘gig economy’ are threats to women’s economic equality.

There is an intersection between the recipients of unpaid care and paid care, and the people that may be providing paid and unpaid care.

### What are the barriers to achieve greater gender equitable outcomes in the care economy?

NDIS and Aged Care have to rely on an industrial framework which is extremely time and resource intensive.

Pre and post-employment models need to be more inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, need to foster relationships between training organisations, and take measures to ensure more equitable access in metropolitan, regional and remote areas.

Participants said that jobs in the care economy low paid but tough and risky. The environment is unsupportive and people are strained, and advocating for yourself when you’re already tired is hard. This is compounded by a lack of government intervention, and could benefit from more regulation. This can also be exacerbated by the use of independent contractors. There’s also a lack of support for reproductive issues, such as IVF, or leave in the event of pregnancy loss.

Carers are also under strain, which means they can’t deliver the care they want. This impacts on those who are receiving care, and contributes to the undervaluing of the profession.

Participants identified user pay systems as one of the biggest barriers in both aged care and Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), and queried why teachers in early learning aren’t paid by the government.

Participants said it was important to separate the formal and informal sectors, and noted the pressures on unpaid carers.

Men still do less unpaid care work than women. There’s a need to get more men into caring roles, but also, when men do enter these industries, they’re more likely to fill an executive or senior position. This may be an incentive to enter the sector, but it needs to change. Government could establish pipelines similar to getting more women into STEM, as without targeted intervention it’s unlikely this change will occur. People who have experience as carers are unable to take on paid work in this capacity because it means they will lose carers payment for their family member.

### What are some concrete policy options that should be considered as part of this Strategy?

Participants noted that it was important to look at which providers are included in care. Need to reconsider the intersection between income support and income, specifically fringe tax benefits, as this is keeping people in part time work. Also reconsider the impact of permanent child care places.

Increasing the pay of ECEC workers, and making ECEC more accessible is critical as ECEC is a key enabler for women’s workforce participation. This can also be facilitated by universal access to childcare and early learning. Increased wages will also increase workforce retention, encourage more men into the sector (which should be underpinned by a clear strategy), and increase job security. In addition, the early childhood care industry needs to consider how it can be appealing to employees, including mechanisms for career progression, increased superannuation, and moving away from a gig economy approach to employment which leaves women with less superannuation and less economic security.

Participants also suggested to review the State government public service wage policy, and greater predictability of funding for ECEC. Clarity is also needed on whether this is a state or federal responsibility, and whether it’s considered education or care. We also need to shift the stigmatisation of care as women’s work. The language we use matters.

### What will success look like and how can that be measured?

Participants viewed success as:

* Jobs that are sustainable, physically and financially, and that allow people to live in a way that allows people to live safely.
* Low turnover rates, retaining staff. People are finding the work and payment unsustainable.
* Movement across the sector rather than leaving the sector.
* Career progression.
* People wanting to apply, the work spoken about with respect, and a reduction in  
  non-completion of courses.
* Accreditation standards.

The racialised nature of this work was noted, with a need to address issues with visa conditions and access to social services.

There are many indicators that could be used for baselines and targets. There is a lack of robust data and data that is easy to access across varied sectors of the care economy, difficult to track and evaluate measures. Success looks like better data collection.