

# **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE**

## **Budget estimates 2020–21 (Williams)**

Melbourne—Friday, 27 November 2020

### **MEMBERS**

Ms Lizzie Blandthorn—Chair

Mr Richard Riordan—Deputy Chair

Mr Sam Hibbins

Mr David Limbrick

Mr Gary Maas

Mr Danny O’Brien

Ms Pauline Richards

Mr Tim Richardson

Ms Nina Taylor

Ms Bridget Vallenge



## WITNESSES

Ms Gabrielle Williams, MP, Minister for Women,

Ms Louise Perry, Executive Director, Fairer Victoria, and

Ms Sarah Gruner, Director, Office for Women, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

**The CHAIR:** We declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee, and I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional Aboriginal owners of the land on which we are meeting and pay our respects to them, their culture, their elders past, present and future and elders who may also be joining us today.

Parliament is conducting this Inquiry into the 2020–21 Budget Estimates, and its aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

Please note that witnesses and members may remove their masks when speaking to the committee but must replace them afterwards.

We ask that mobile telephones be turned to silent.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Comments repeated outside this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible.

We welcome Minister Williams for a number of portfolios, beginning with Women, and the officers from her department. Minister, we invite you to make an opening statement of no more than 5 minutes, and this will be followed by questions from the committee.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Thank you, and thank you for your time today. Before I begin let me also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging and any other elders we may have here with us today.

### Visual presentation.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** To make a start on our presentation—I think we have already flicked forward to the first slide there—it is with great pleasure that I get to highlight the significant achievements of this government to progress gender equality in Victoria.

The 2020–21 state budget includes a range of initiatives that further demonstrate the Victorian government's commitment to gender equality—from economic security to education, health and wellbeing, support for women's sport and of course ending family violence. Before I get into the details of this year's funding I would like to highlight some of the government's significant achievements towards gender equality, ensuring it gets the priority it deserves.

We continue to drive actions so that all Victorians live in a safe and equal society; have access to equal power, resources and opportunities; and are treated with dignity, respect and fairness. And we do this through advanced implementation of our gender equality strategy, which is called *Safe and Strong*. These programs build the foundation of our successes in passing the *Gender Equality Act* and developing Victoria's first gender equality baseline report to provide a set of measures against which progress towards gender equality outcomes in Victoria can be monitored over time.

Our recognition is that gender inequality does not affect all Victorians equally and that Victorian women experiencing intersectional and compounding forms of disadvantage have been supported to increase their employment opportunities through our wraparound economic security programs. Our commitment to gender equality has enabled us to support more women into leadership roles in the public and private sectors and support more women to thrive in their workplaces and in their communities as well. We are also developing the

evidence base and progressing systemic change, from advertising to sport, and we are promoting more gender equal and informed sectors committed to preventing violence against women in the longer term.

Flicking to the next slide, we know there have been persistent issues of inequality within workplaces, and the public sector is no exception. We are committed to change and we are starting in our own backyard. The *Gender Equality Act* was enacted in February of this year and the Act requires over 300 Victorian public sector organisations, universities and local councils with 50 or more employees to consider and promote gender equality in the workplace and in the broader community through policies and programs.

The Act will support the Victorian public sector to respond to systemic drivers of gender equality, including the gender pay gap, gendered workplace segregation and under-representation in leadership roles as well as a lack of workplace flexibility and sexual harassment.

COVID-19 has further highlighted the urgent need to address workplace gender inequality, highlighting the toxicity of insecure work and the impact that this has had on women predominantly. By improving gender equality, the Act will support tangible social and economic benefits for Victoria, and this includes increased GDP, productivity and employee engagement associated with increased women's workforce participation. It will also reduce government spending on social services as women's economic security improves.

The 2020–21 budget commits a total of \$13.4 million over four years and \$3.2 million ongoing to implement the *Gender Equality Act*. This comprises \$11.9 million over four years to establish the commissioner for gender equality in the public sector, and \$1.5 million to establish a reporting platform for defined entities.

The 2020–21 budget also provides a record \$30.4 million and \$5.4 million ongoing for a women's portfolio to continue to implement our ambitious gender equality reform agenda as part of our \$435 million of direct investment to progress gender equality and end family violence. We will be advancing implementation of *Safe and Strong* and commencing implementation of the nation-leading GE Act. We will also provide important funding to the historic Queen Victoria Women's Centre to ensure the centre and its tenant organisations can continue to support women from all walks of life, and we will continue our gender equality programs which promote the participation, leadership and recognition of women in our community.

I think it is safe to say that this year has been unlike any other in our living memory. The Victorian government recognises that, and while our entire state has been impacted by COVID-19 we recognise that this pandemic has significantly and disproportionately affected women. Women have lost more jobs and more hours, and the participation gap is widening, with long-term consequences for women's economic security.

I will not run through it all now, but this budget places women at its heart. In addition to the women's portfolio funding over which I have direct control and responsibility, this budget also introduces a wide range of measures that will support women's economic recovery and highlight our government's whole-of-government commitment to gender equality. We are removing barriers to women's workforce participation, ensuring stable housing is available and providing more opportunities for women to get the skills they need for the jobs they want in industries which will bounce back the fastest.

But all of this is just the beginning. We came to government six years ago with a commitment to improving outcomes for women across our state. We have worked tirelessly every day since then to ensure that commitment remains true. COVID has not slowed us down but rather strengthened our resolve, and in 2021 we will be supporting the Victorian public sector to improve gender equality through the *Gender Equality Act*, and we will be working in partnership with culturally diverse and faith-based communities to prevent family violence, addressing the impact of COVID-19 on women's economic security and working across all portfolios to support better outcomes for women. Thank you very much.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Minister. And just for your information, the opposition members have all ceded their time to Ms Vallence, as I understand it. So they will be in three separate blocks, but Ms Vallence will take her first turn now.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Sure. Thank you.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Minister, according to the ABS there have been 107 000 job losses for women in the last nine months. In light of this, can you describe the government's forecasts for female unemployment across each year of the estimates period—what you estimate?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** The forecast for women's unemployment?

**Ms VALLENCE:** Yes.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** I think it is fair to say, and I alluded to this in my opening remarks, what we have seen over the course of the pandemic so far, given that, is both a disproportionate impact on women in terms of their roles on the front line of this pandemic, in that they occupy about 80 per cent of the health and social care workforce, but also a disproportionate impact in terms of job losses and hours lost as well, and also their being disadvantaged through some measures—for example, the encouragement to effectively dip into super, which was one of the federal government initiatives being promoted, I guess. So what we have seen as a cumulative impact of that is that women have been financially and socially disadvantaged to a massive extent during the last few months.

We know, though, that the longer term implications of that are very, very severe. Women already retire with significantly less retirement savings than their male counterparts. That was an issue even pre-COVID. So in this environment, when many have had to dip into their superannuation, for example, in order to sustain themselves if they have lost work, we can anticipate that retirement savings are lower yet again. So in light of that, to go to your point about projections, I could probably refer to Sarah Gruner from the Office of Women, who may have some of the data that currently exists and projections. I think projections may be somewhat of an unknown quantity as we move towards recovery, and obviously what we are trying to do in our package is improve those figures. We are trying to bring women back into work at a faster rate, understanding that our economic recovery hinges upon engagement of that 51 per cent of our population. So just to frame that, in looking at what projections might be, what we are effectively trying to do in the package that we are putting forward in this whole-of-government approach is make sure that through better engaging that 51 per cent of the population that we know have been disproportionately impacted we can effectively minimise some of those projections that we might otherwise—

**Ms VALLENCE:** What are they?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** But if Sarah wants to add to that at all, based on some of the research that might have been happening out of the Office for Women, or Louise—

**Ms PERRY:** I am happy to do that.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Beautiful.

**Ms PERRY:** Thank you, Minister. That is right. So what we know about the disproportionate impact on women at the moment is that the female jobless rate in Victoria in October was 8.8 per cent versus 6.2 per cent for men. We know that 25 000 more women than men lost their job between March and August this year, and we know that the labour force participation rate for Victorian women declined almost four times as much as it did for Victorian men between March and October—so significant impacts there. We also know the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on women's employment and economic security have been driven by the over-representation of them in the casualised workforce.

**Ms VALLENCE:** So what are the projections? Have you projected what the prospective unemployment will be over the forward estimates?

**Ms PERRY:** Well, I think what we are trying to do is implement a number of measures that will influence positively any projections.

**Ms VALLENCE:** So, no. I understand that you have got measures that will influence that, but there are no projections for unemployment, how the measures that you have got will actually translate into tackling that unemployment rate?

**Ms PERRY:** Well, I suspect that is—sorry.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** No, I was going to add to that. A part of our challenge is also recognising that certain cohorts of women in our community are going to be further disadvantaged. For example, we know that older women are a cohort within our broader cohort of women who are going to be particularly disadvantaged at the moment. Knowing what the full impact will be for a very significant cohort of women is I think fair to say a bit of an unknown quantity at this point because, for example, there have been incentives through the federal COVID budget to recruit young people. That might mean, for example, hypothetically, if you are an older woman working casually in retail or hospitality and you have worked most of your adult life in insecure work, as we come back online you might be somewhat disadvantaged due to incentives in other areas in terms of your ability to be re-recruited. So hence the reason we have then put in place a targeted package through Minister Pulford's programs for women over the age of 45 in the hope of being able to make sure that they are engaged in the workforce more easily, recognising that if we did nothing, that is a cohort that is likely to be left behind. So again—

**The CHAIR:** I am sorry to interrupt you there, but the member's time has expired. We will pass the call to Ms Pauline Richards, MP.

**Ms RICHARDS:** Thank you, Minister, and thanks also to your officials for joining us on this rather warm Melbourne afternoon. Minister, I would like to refer you to budget paper 3, page 116. I am particularly interested in the line item that is marked 'Implementation of the *Gender Equality Act 2020*', and I am interested in understanding how the implementation of the *Gender Equality Act* will improve gender equality in Victorian workplaces and in the Victorian community more broadly.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Ms Richards, and thank you for your interest in what is a landmark piece of legislation here in Victoria. I am sure you are all aware—it is something that I am very proud of—that Victoria is the first jurisdiction in Australia to have enshrined gender equality in law, and hopefully we will not be the last. It is an important step towards improving the lives of not only women but all Victorians in support of our vision to build a state where everybody has equal power, resources and opportunities, and where we have environments that treat people with dignity, respect and fairness. Given we spend so much of our time at work, I think that is a very important objective to have within our workplaces, and why not start in our own backyard first?

We are immensely proud of the way the Victorian community has helped us shape this legislation. With their help, we have developed a tailored, progressive, evidence-based model that reflects those values and the circumstances and aspirations of the Victorian community. We are committed to the reform and we are investing the resources that it needs to create meaningful change within the community. The Victorian budget 2020–21 invests \$13.4 million over four years and \$3.2 million ongoing in the implementation of the *Gender Equality Act*. Now, as I outlined in my presentation, \$11.9 million over four years was to establish the commission for gender equality in the public sector and \$1.5 million in asset funding in 2021 to establish a reporting platform for those entities that will be captured by that legislation.

Now, this Act will improve workplace gender equality across our Victorian public sector but also included within that are universities and local councils, with flow-on and very tangible benefits for our whole community, particularly because one of the aspects of this legislation that I find most exciting is that it encourages us and those entities to look at the impacts of their policies and programs in terms of the impact that they have on different genders. I could wax lyrically about that for hours, but I will not; you have probably heard me do it many times before. By requiring the public sector to measure, to publicly report and to demonstrate meaningful progress against those key gender equality indicators, we hope to drive progress. These indicators include things like gender pay equity, gender composition at all levels of the workforce, gender composition of governing bodies—for example, workplace sexual harassment; recruitment and promotion, gendered workforce segregation, leave and flexibility et cetera. And on all of these indicators we need to see progress in order to see that overarching issue of persistent inequality start to be addressed.

There is currently a 10 per cent gender pay gap across the Victorian public sector. Like the gender pay gap anywhere, this is driven by a number of factors including unequal workforce participation, discrimination and occupational and industrial segregation. In Australia, of our 30 lowest paid occupations, 23 are women dominated. In addition, women still undertake almost double the unpaid care and domestic responsibilities when compared to men, and this means that women are less likely to participate in the workforce, and if they do, they more than likely end up in flexible arrangements.

We also know, though, that gender inequality affects men very negatively as well. Men may want to spend more time at home. Taking carers leave or parental leave is highly stigmatised in many areas, and, sadly, I think we are not immune from that in the public sector either. As an employer of around 380 000 Victorians, the public sector now has an opportunity to lead by example. This is a very bold reform. Very few countries in the world have legislation like this, and the organisations that are captured by the legislation will effectively be required to consider and promote gender equality in their workplaces but also, as I said, through their policies and programs in the community as well.

The Act also embeds an understanding that gender inequality is often compounded by disadvantage or discrimination that people can experience on the basis of other attributes—that might be their age, their ethnicity, their gender identity or their Aboriginality, for example—and I think it is very important that it does that. Unconscious bias and outdated stereotypes will continue to persist if we do not move to intervene in this way, and I think it is clear that for our government the status quo just is not good enough. This is a really effective way of ensuring that we are addressing this issue in a proactive way rather than only being reactive as issues emerge. We acknowledge that this legislation—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to stop you there, Minister, but the member's time has expired. I will hand over to Mr Sam Hibbins.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and your team, for appearing today. I will just continue on with something about the Act. Have the regulations been released?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** There are tranches of regulations in relation to the Act. The regulations that will actually work with the entities—I am assuming you are probably referring to the more substantive regulations which go to targets and the like?

**Mr HIBBINS:** Yes.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Essentially what we will be setting up first is a process where the commissioner and her team work with those entities to set the baseline, so the outcomes into operation in March and the first gender equality action plan is due in October. In that 12 months the work will really be towards setting that baseline—seeing what data is available and what needs to be done to collect that data in order to be able to set the baseline for progress. The regulations will then be designed over that time, working with the entities and noting of course that across the 300-odd entities across the public sector the starting points are very different. I am sure as you can imagine when you think about some of those 300 entities some will start from a much stronger basis in terms of gender equality across that raft of measures I just mentioned when addressing Ms Richards's question. Others will be not so advanced in how they are structured and the sorts of outcomes that they are achieving. This will be very much done in a way that is collaborative with those sector entities, so the regulations will reflect the different starting points of those entities, if you like, to be able to make sure that we are supporting different entities to be able to achieve progress but doing that in a way that takes into account where they are up to, what kind of data they are already collecting, what kind of data they need to collect and what meaningful progress looks like for them. That will be developed in the time ahead as we work with those entities, but the priority in that first period is around setting the baseline and working out how to best collect that data so that we can determine what progress looks like in a meaningful way. Have I covered that off sufficiently?

**Ms GRUNER:** Yes.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Thank you. You mentioned 300 entities. Now, my understanding of the Act is that their action plans are due 31 October. Is that when the entities are due to—

**Ms WILLIAMS:** October next year, yes, the first one.

**Mr HIBBINS:** I understand there is some flexibility in the Act for that to be extended. How confident are you that the 300 entities will actually be able to meet that legislative—

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Look, as I have outlined, the office of the commissioner and the commissioner's role in this is to have a very hands-on implementation role with organisations and support them to be able to do this. There is obviously a power of work to be done. Many of these bodies will be already reporting under similar legislation. I am confident that the commissioner will be doing that work to bring all those organisations to a

point where they can set those benchmarks for them to move from. As I said, this is not about sort of throwing organisations into the deep end to work this out themselves. It is very much about the commissioner working with them, with her team, to bring them to the point where they can meet those deadlines and have something meaningful to show for them. I think if you look at the collaborative nature of this reform and the fact that it is very much designed to be supportive in that work and Dr Niki Vincent, who is the new commissioner—hopefully you have all had a chance to familiarise yourself with her because she is incredibly impressive and brings a lot of expertise in terms of research background but also hands-on expertise as a commissioner out of South Australia—we will be very well placed with her expertise to be able to support these entities to meet those deadlines.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Great. Thank you. You would be aware that the committee is also doing an inquiry into gender responsive budgeting. I guess my question is (a) has been any analysis across the entire budget—and I appreciate you have got the statement but across the entire budget—on the impact on women, and (b) will there be any reporting of the outcomes? For example, Jobs for Victorians has been cited in the statement, but will there actually be reporting on, for example, how many women have actually got jobs out of that program?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Sorry, what was that last bit?

**Mr HIBBINS:** Will you actually report on how many women have actually got jobs or employment out of the Jobs for Victorians program?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** The Jobs for Victorians program actually falls within Minister Pulford's area, so you might, in terms of the operation of that how that works and the detail of that, direct those questions to her. Obviously we have our gender budget statement, which highlights all of the initiatives across the budget that go to achieving gender equality, and I am sure you have all seen this. In terms of—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry to interrupt you there, Minister, but the member's time has expired.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Sure. Thank you.

**Mr HIBBINS:** Great. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** I will pass the call to Ms Bridget Vallence, MP.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Thank you, Minister. Throughout the last couple of months we know that many women have lost their work, as we discussed earlier. I think 146 500 women in Victoria are unemployed, and that is the highest on record. Many women are often doing work as sole traders or microbusinesses, such as cake makers, florists, beauty services, fitness, creative industries and artists. The government's response and funding through the budget for sole traders was severely lacking. Did you make any representations or object at all to the way that a very female-dominated part of our economy workforce, in sole traders, was completely left out by the government?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Sorry, what is your budget reference? I just missed a part of the start of your—

**Ms VALLENCE:** The budget paper 2, 21. We are talking about the number of women who are unemployed, and there is a predominant number of women in types of work that they operate as a sole trader or a microbusiness. And so those women, those female Victorians, it is about them in terms of the support that they were provided. Really what I am asking about is the representations you have made or any objections you might have made about how this budget has not supported them even in retrospect since they did not get upfront support through COVID?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** I would probably challenge your assertion that there has been insufficient sort of support for women in the budget. I think it has been quite well lauded out there in the public as a response to this budget that, unlike its federal counterpart, it has a very strong focus on women. I have highlighted that in my presentation in terms of the \$435 million of direct investment in gender equality and ending family violence. I say direct investment because that does not take into account a whole raft of other measures that do also have flow-on effects for women and many impacts on women that will be included within the cohorts, Ms Vallence, that you refer to. For example—



**Ms VALLENCE:** I know through my office in my electorate, as an example, I can definitely talk to those examples of many, many women contacting me who are sole traders and who do not feel that this budget has done anything for them, and they feel that they have been really let down. So it is really about those women and whether you actually made any representations to have women who are in those microbusinesses and are sole traders reflected in this budget. But in terms of what you have provided for women in the budget, we know that much of this budget is focused on construction. In fact \$69 billion is dedicated to supporting the construction industry, which we know is a male-dominated industry—89 per cent of that industry’s employees are male. It is at a time when women really need support. As you have described, women are disproportionately impacted. Is this budget really prioritising male-dominated industries?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** No, I think there has been a very conscious effort to ensure that the support for women in this budget is strong, and more than that to ensure that we are rebuilding an economy on the back of this pandemic that is not only inclusive of women but is also empowering for women. To go to the point I was making before you expanded upon your question—and before I do that, though, can I please acknowledge that obviously the pandemic has had an enormous impact for all Victorians and, as I have outlined, a disproportionate impact on women. Included within that was the fact that in meeting public health requirements we know that many women made significant sacrifices, which is the very reason why we are now in a position where we are talking about not only \$435 million in support across a range of initiatives, many of which I went through my presentation, but also the fact that we are also talking about things which I think do bear on the outcomes for many women who are sole traders, for example, which is things like the subsidies for free kinder next year, the fact that there is extra support—

**Ms VALLENCE:** That is if they have children.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Of course, but I am not saying all of them. Many sole traders do have children. Some will not of course, but the support for the availability of before- and after-school care, which again frees up people to—

**Ms VALLENCE:** Direct support. I guess the question really is on direct support.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Vallence, could you allow the minister to answer.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Well, I think the minister may have misinterpreted the question: it is direct support for these women, not for their children.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Vallence, again you are wasting your own time with your rudeness—

**Ms VALLENCE:** You are wasting the time.

**The CHAIR:** Could you allow the minister to answer the question?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Chair. As I was saying, you have got to see this in the context of a very comprehensive suite of initiatives that go both to direct and indirect support. I think if you look at what was done—

**Ms VALLENCE:** That is not how these women are seeing it.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** If you look at what was done during the pandemic itself in terms of the Business Support Fund and measures within that—of course which fall outside of my portfolio area so I will not talk to the details of that, but you are more than welcome to dissect that with the relevant minister—there was a range of business supports and economic survival packages—

**Ms VALLENCE:** I will tell the women that they do not fall within your portfolio of women.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Vallence, your time has expired. Thank you, Minister. I will pass the call to Ms Nina Taylor, MLC.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Rightio. I wanted to explore intersectionality within the context of the *Gender Equality Act*. In my region we have a wonderfully culturally diverse population, and if you look at the state of Victoria more broadly, around half of Victorians were either born overseas or have a parent who was born overseas. How will

the implementation of the *Gender Equality Act* consider and respond to the needs of Victoria's diverse population?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Thank you for that question, Ms Taylor. Like you, I represent the most multicultural region in the country, with 157 different nationalities, over 200 languages and over 100 different faith groups. I agree with you fully in the fact that our multiculturalism is our greatest strength, and many of us in this place have cause to reflect on that regularly. Of course I highlighted earlier the fact that this piece of legislation, it has been critical to it that it take into account that diversity within our community and be able to respond to it. I do not think I need to offer this by way of preamble, but I will because it helps set the scene. Our diversity makes us a very vibrant, diverse and welcoming community, but I think it is fair to say that in it comes some complexities and that we need to ensure in everything we do as a government that we are making opportunities available to all of our residents and citizens, no matter their background.

Unfortunately equality in this state and in fact anywhere is not always shared equally, even when you talk about women as a cohort. Even within that, some women are more disadvantaged than others, and I spoke to that a little bit earlier. So in order to progress towards a more gender-equal community we also must recognise that gender inequality effectively does not impact everybody in exactly the same way. We all have slight differences in the way that we experience that as we move through our everyday lives and intersect with different parts of our world and lives. For many the impact of gender inequality is compounded by the way that gendered barriers interact with other forms of discrimination in particular—and I raised a range of different categories earlier as to how that might operate, whether that is gender inequality interacting or intersecting with somebody's Aboriginality, with their religious belief or activity, with their disability, age, sexual orientation or gender identity. The *Gender Equality Act* requires organisations to consider that—to consider the way that gender intersects with other forms of disadvantage—when developing strategies and measures to promote gender equality.

So the GE Act seeks to improve opportunities and outcomes for all women, with a particular focus on women who are more likely to experience disadvantage. I think this has been highlighted during recent months, in that COVID has highlighted that structural disadvantage embedded in our community leaves our most disadvantaged extremely vulnerable to economic shock, and with that threatens the prosperity of our whole community. We all need to understand that this is not about the impact that is being felt by one part of the community; we all ultimately end up feeling its impact, and so it is in our interests to make sure that our efforts are being felt in all corners of our community.

So it is important that we continue to take systemic and strategic measures to redress inequality within our community, to create safer, stronger and more resilient communities. The budget, as I have said, invests that \$13.4 million over four years and the \$3.2 million ongoing in the implementation of the *Gender Equality Act*, and the key focus of this implementation work will be working with defined entities to increase collective understanding about those intersecting forms of discrimination and disadvantage to ensure that approaches to improving gender equality improve outcomes for everyone in our wonderfully diverse community—obviously working with entities to better understand their workforces, both what they are currently and what they may well be, because obviously we want to work to make our workforces more diverse. So even if some of those settings may not currently look as diverse as we would like them to be, that may in itself indicate that there is a problem with those workforces in attracting the sort of diversity that you are talking about, Ms Taylor. So that initial work to set the baseline and then that work to determine what progress looks like I think very much has to take into account whether workplace settings—obviously including our very large public sector setting—are inclusive of and empowering for women of diverse backgrounds as well.

**Ms TAYLOR:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Mr David Limbrick, MLC.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you, Chair, and thank you, Minister and everyone, for appearing today. I have got a question about the Women in Construction fund. I am just wondering what this will actually be used for, because my understanding is that the *Gender Equality Act* will have the power to set up social procurement policies. It is also my understanding that the private sector, especially large companies that these construction projects would be targeted at, already have quite substantial programs to employ more women in construction. So what is this money actually used for?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Thank you for your question, for starters. It is probably worth noting that the Women in Construction Strategy actually falls within the remit of the Minister for Industrial Relations, so for some of the detail as to how that operates at a minuscule level you might want to refer to him. But a broadbrush comment about the role of those strategies is I guess recognising that many male-dominated industries in particular, whether that be construction or indeed transport, are effectively often male dominated for no particular or no good reason. These strategies are about trying to ensure that these industries are open and welcoming to and accommodating of women, recognising that often these industries offer quite significant job security too. And given, as has been highlighted in recent months, that women tend to occupy disproportionately low-paid, insecure jobs, the availability of more secure and better paid work is desirable. And many of the industries that enjoy that security tend to be male dominated. So I would argue in terms of your broader question about why is something like this needed when we have a *Gender Equality Act*—well, there are a couple of points there, I guess. For one, the *Gender Equality Act* has a focus on the public sector obviously and the 300-odd public sector entities. A lot of what we are talking about in targeted strategies, whether it be Women in Construction or indeed Women in Transport, is about trying to inspire change in the private sector as well and change the thinking on the way many industries that have traditionally been male dominated attract and recruit women into those roles as well.

For example, from my end as a Minister for Women, we do quite a lot of work looking at what drives some of that sort of segregation. A lot of it is basically very outdated thinking. We know, for example, that gender stereotypes still operate to make many of us believe that we are not welcome in certain work environments or to make those work environments seem off limits; we are effectively conditioned or raised, often, to believe that. Gender stereotypes are put in place from a very young age, and what we try to do with some of these strategies is really breathe life into that concept that you have to see it to be it. If we have more women on construction sites, if we have more women in the transport industry, it is more likely to be that other girls coming up through will see that as an option that is available to them.

What we effectively want is an economy that offers the same level of job diversity to women as it does to men and for these jobs that may have traditionally been regarded as the domain of men to be also equally regarded as open to women where there is no good reason why they should not be. So the point of those sorts of strategies, and in particular the one you raised, is really to put a particular amount of effort into an industry that we know is persistently quite male dominated when we also know that it offers great opportunities for many women in our community to be able to enjoy the benefits of that work that many men do—and they may want to. We are increasingly seeing, if you look in the education space, more and more girls show an interest in more vocational sort of work. There is still very much a stigma around it, and that gender stereotyping is still a persistent concern, but I think we are probably seeing now a greater interest among girls and young women, wanting to put their hand up for things that have been considered traditionally more male dominated, than we ever had before. And that is really a product of a cultural shift, I think, that we are seeing, whether that be in the workforce or whether that be indeed in the community or in sport, whether it is girls playing footy or any range of other shifts that we have seen. So this is really about trying to make sure that those male-dominated workforces can attract and recruit women as well.

**Mr LIMBRICK:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Bridget Vallence, MP.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Thank you. Minister, we know that there is not much in the budget for women who are in a lot of the industry types that women are currently in. You were taking us through a lot there about getting more women into construction and more women in transport. In terms of budget paper 2, page 49, which refers to that Women in Transport program that you have just discussed, looking at that program, at ‘Support for women’—and we know that, as you said, women make up 51 per cent of the population—we have got 107 000 females currently unemployed and this program only caters for 395 women. Do you really believe that that is actually going to make a dent in the problem?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Two things on that: if you are referring specifically to the Women in Transport program, of course that is a program that is administered by the Minister for Transport Infrastructure, so of course detailed questions should be directed to the relevant minister, but in terms of making some broad comments about that, I think it is somewhat misleading to take one comparatively—against the spend in the whole budget—fairly small program and suggest that that is all we are doing to create jobs among women, particularly

given the jobs programs within, say, Minister Pulford's area, in which there is \$150 million, \$50 million of which is targeted to older women, plus of course the programs that have gone across family violence, mental health and child protection, which tend to be also female-dominated areas, to bring in more workers and grow those workforces—

**Ms VALLENCE:** Minister, just in terms of picking up from what Mr Limbrick was referring to there about the Women in Transport, and you referred yourself to getting more women into transport, in relation to a program that will support only 395 women, is that a concern to you—that it was so low?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** I think that you have got to start somewhere in an industry that is, as I have outlined, very male dominated. Opening the door for hundreds of women to come into a sector that currently accommodates very few women, I think, is a really important way to sort of tip the balance and ensure that from that point on we have enough women in the sector to also make it a welcoming space as an entry point for many more women to come into the sector. You need that sort of tipping point, and I think opening the door for hundreds of women to be able to enter a sector that is currently—again, for no good reason—very male dominated has a huge flow-on effect.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Is there a reason that there is such a focus on construction and transport as opposed to perhaps a focus on industries where women are already working?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** There is a focus on both, Ms Vallenge, but I suppose I think it is a point of pride that we would look to areas where there will be significant jobs growth as well. We have the biggest infrastructure agenda in the state, in the history of Victoria, so we know that construction and transport are our high-growth industries in terms of jobs growth and also job security. So targeting these industries sounds like to me a sensible thing to do if you are looking to create new avenues for women to come in. But more than that, it is also about changing the culture of some of these industries. So not only would we seek to have more women come into areas where there is a need for more workers, why confine your worker pool to only 49 per cent of the population? If you need workers, why not open it up to the other 51 per cent of the population? It seems, even from a business point of view, I would have thought, that having a greater pool from which to draw workers would be a smart first step. But more than that, why not also take that opportunity to sort of break down some of those gender stereotypes that persist in some of these industries by proactively welcoming more women into these industries and, in doing so, inspiring more women again to enter these industries, which we know is what happens when more women come in.

So it is a starting point. It goes back to that 'You've got to see it to be it' proposition. By having 300-odd as a starting point come into a sector that is very male dominated, that means there are more little girls around our community watching female truck drivers, for example. That sends a very loud and clear message to them that that is something that they can do if they want to, and it starts to break down over time that stereotype.

**Ms VALLENCE:** Fantastic for those girls.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** So this is about both growth industries and culture.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Sorry, Mrs Vallenge, and sorry to cut you off, Minister, but the time has expired. I will pass to Mr Gary Maas, MP.

**Mr MAAS:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Minister, for your appearance today. I would like to take you back to the *Gender Equality Act* and the important work of implementation support for that Act. It is obviously important that organisations are supported to make the necessary changes required and are brought along the journey to understand how and why gender equality is so important. In that context, Minister, how will the government support defined entities such as Casey council in my electorate to prepare for implementation of the Act?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Thank you, Mr Maas. We share Casey council in our electorates. It is a very good question, and I think it flows on from some of the comments I made earlier around this being a very collaborative model, or a supportive model, in the sense that the commissioner's role and her office take a very proactive role in being able to support entities. I outlined some of the time frames for that earlier in terms of saying that the obligations commence from 31 March next year and that there needs to be a range of implementation support in place for organisations to commence their obligations under that Act from that point

but also in preparation for submitting their gender equality action plans, which are a requirement of the Act, by October next year. Implementation pilots concluded in September, which involved actually seven public entities and 10 local councils, and this is a really important piece of work in ensuring that we take away from that the learnings that have informed the development of a range of guidance materials to support all entities to comply with the Act. So having had councils take part in that pilot I think sets us up very well to continue that work through this implementation stage and to support other councils, understanding from what we have learned on the pilots what they might need—what kind of support they might need—in order to make the process of meeting their requirements under the Act as seamless as possible.

A practice leaders group of defined entities who have demonstrated meaningful success in the pilots has been established as well. That is in addition to those guidance materials I was just referring to. That group is comprised of a mix of public sector entities of varying sizes and practices, entities that are at various points in their gender-equality journey, and they effectively share learnings and inform this reform going forward, which is extraordinarily valuable.

A *Gender Equality Act* implementation advisory committee has also been established to provide expert advice on the development of guidance materials and implementation support to assist defined entities to meet their obligations. Tailored support will also be made available to entities from a panel of providers with relevant gender, industry and regional expertise as well to help those defined entities comply with the Act. So the commissioner's office will publish and circulate those guidance materials I have referred to and provide advice to defined entities based on those pilot learnings and also from input from consultation with governance groups from VPS departments, councils, universities et cetera. So this is an ongoing and very deep discussion that we are continuing in order to make sure that entities are supported, and feel the value of the work as well, and that we get the best possible understanding too, so as we move through it we can continue to make sure that this reform works, and works well.

Now, we recognise that this Act affects Victoria's largest workforce with broad-ranging diversity within and between public sector bodies in terms of their size and type of organisation. I touched on in responding to Mr Hibbins before the fact that many of these entities are in very different places in their journey—very different starting points, very different compositions—and that may go to their purpose and function as well. So we acknowledge that there is very, very significant variation between entities at their current level of capacity to meet their obligations under the Act. And even with a class of entities—for example, local councils—there is a wide range of starting points. Even there, some councils perform much better than others, I think it is fair to say, though we have been really pleased, particularly in working through the pilot stage, at how eager many local councils have been to participate, to really want to showcase what they can do. Some felt that they were doing pretty well as a starting point, but I think by the end of it were able to recognise too that they could do a lot better. Others recognised that they had a way to go. So it is a supportive environment and we have a number of mechanisms to ensure that, and we cannot wait to get going and to spread the value of the work.

**Mr MAAS:** Thanks, Minister.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. And I will pass to Mr Tim Richardson, MP.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Minister, for joining us here today. Can I take you to the preventing family violence in multicultural communities space, and this is a really critical area in our community and our state, Minister. I refer to budget paper 3, page 116, which allocates \$9.7 million over four years to prevent family violence in culturally and linguistically diverse communities. I know in my electorate, multicultural committees and multifaith communities—sharing Dandenong with you and Kingston—have been supporting families in need throughout this very challenging time, including those at risk of experiencing family violence. How will this funding benefit and be allocated to these groups?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Thanks, Mr Richardson, for that question.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** On a point of order, Chair, I do not mean to be churlish to Mr Richardson but that is clearly a family violence question. We are doing women at the moment. I am not sure whether you get the opportunity later. I am not going to cause a huge hullabaloo over it but—

**Ms WILLIAMS:** If I am able to, I think there is bit of muddying of waters and complexity with my portfolios by way of explanation to Mr O'Brien. A lot of the prevention work within family violence actually

sits within the Office for Women. What I gleaned from Mr Richardson's question was that it was largely looking at the prevention space within multicultural communities. Was that right? Which under the budget paper sits within women, if that makes sense—I know it is quite confusing.

**Mr RICHARDSON:** And to clarify how that disproportionately affects women, which is the portfolio that we are in as well, and multicultural communities as well.

**The CHAIR:** Excellent. Thank you. There is no point of order then, if Mr O'Brien is satisfied.

**Mr D O'BRIEN:** Yes, that is fine.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Thank you. I appreciate the complexity there. It trips up many people. But thank you, Mr Richardson, for your question. I do, as a starting point, want to commend all of our multicultural and multifaith organisations across the state who have supported our community. I suppose for many of us who represent multicultural communities—which is probably to some extent all of us in this room to various levels, given that half of Victorians were either born overseas or their parents were born overseas—we have really been reminded I think during COVID just how important that multicultural community support is in reaching into some parts of our community that can be challenging for mainstream services. I just want to give a shout-out to those multicultural, multifaith communities who have done an incredible job supporting vulnerable Victorians, including those, particularly in recent months, who are at risk of family violence.

I am very proud to say that we have committed funding to continue working with organisations and these multicultural organisations to prevent family violence. The funding that we have allocated will administer grants for building capacity within multicultural and faith-based organisations to design and deliver family violence prevention outreach and also early intervention activities. We hope that this will secure women's immediate and longer term safety through enduring behaviour change, working with multicultural communities, and also send a very clear message to some of these communities that abuse, family violence and some of the other coercive behaviours that we know rise to the surface are not okay and that they are not allowed, but more than that that support is available for you. But the role of multicultural, multifaith communities in that narrative is really to make sure that the hand-holding, if you like, into the mainstream services system is a safe one and that that message is also communicated in a way that is culturally appropriate and sensitive to the different circumstances that may exist within those communities. We know from the fact that there is significant under-reporting, for example, of family violence within multicultural communities that that has been a real challenge. So having this injection of funding into that prevention and early intervention space is a really important way of making sure that, across the whole continuum of prevention to response in family violence, we are able to support those communities and ensure that those, predominantly, women who are affected are getting the support they need.

Our previous budget funding in this area funded the Safer and Stronger Communities pilot, which funded five organisations to address the attitudes and behaviours that cause violence in multicultural communities and test what works to best prevent violence against these communities. Early findings have suggested that the pilot built internal capability and leadership of those funded organisations to be able to model gender equality, particularly in workplace settings, which is incredibly valuable. It also built the capacity though of partner community organisations to raise awareness of family violence and violence against women and to connect diverse communities with those support services and to safely refer, which is very important in that landscape.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Minister. That concludes our time for consideration of the women's portfolio. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within 10 working days of the committee's request.

The committee will now take a short 5-minute break before moving to consideration of the portfolio of Aboriginal affairs.

**Witnesses withdrew.**