

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Tuesday 21 May 2024

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Aiv Puglielli

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Natalie Hutchins MP, Minister for Women; and

Peta McCammon, Secretary,

Louise Perry, Deputy Secretary, Fairer Victoria and Engagement, and

Michele Clark, Director, Women, Fairer Victoria, Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee.

I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2024–25 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

As Chair I expect that committee members will be respectful towards witnesses, the Victorian community joining the hearing via the live stream today and other committee members.

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.

I welcome the Minister for Women the Honourable Natalie Hutchins as well as officials from DFFH. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask questions. Your time starts now.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Thank you, Chair. It is an absolute privilege to be here to talk about the women's portfolio. Can I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Visual presentation.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Victoria is proud to lead the nation with an ambitious gender equality agenda through the work of the women's portfolio and across our entire government. The agenda is guided by the *Gender Equality Act 2020* and our new gender equality strategy and action plan, known as *Our Equal State*. I am proud of the achievements over the last 12 months and happy to share just a little snapshot. Last year we released *Our Equal State*, Victoria's second gender equality strategy and first gender equality action plan. Through *Our Equal State* the Victorian government committed to 110 actions across all departments to drive gender equality over the next four years. We have invested \$2 million in grants that will boost women's participation in the energy and manufacturing sectors, and we continue to recognise the outstanding contributions of women through the Victorian honour roll, with 22 outstanding women included on the honour roll in 2023.

We hosted the inclusive regional Women Deliver event in Melbourne and led the delegation of representatives to Rwanda to attend the Women Deliver conference in July 2023. The Victorian public sector has led by example in addressing the systemic drivers of gender inequality in our workplace, and we have seen the public sector gender equality commissioner receive the first progress reports from identified identities under the Act on their gender equality progress, with data to be published later this year. In 2022 the Victorian government provided \$400,000 to deliver in the investing in women grassroots program, a small grassroots grant of up to \$10,000 to 44 local organisations to deliver gender equality activities in their community and to support the strategy going forward.

Investment in gender equality is a whole-of-government responsibility, and significant investment has been made across the entire government. The state government budget of this year has a total of \$6.1 billion, as outlined in the gender budget statement, to support women and girls in all settings. This includes investments of

around \$3.6 million over four years in the women's portfolio. This investment includes \$1.8 million to support the continuation of leadership and recognition programs for women, including women from diverse backgrounds, and these programs will support women who face barriers to reaching and thriving in leadership across Victoria and will celebrate the contributions women make to social, economic and cultural development here in Victoria. There is \$1.8 million over four years to support continued operation of the Queen Vic women's centre. The centre is the only Victorian government owned asset dedicated to connecting and supporting women and women's services.

Our Equal State is committed to providing outcomes for women in every setting at every stage of life through the development of our strategy. Victoria leads the nation in progressing gender equality, and this strategy represents another significant step forward in this critical work. The strategy takes a broad approach to life course, which includes focusing on childhood, youth, adulthood and older age, because we know women at different stages of their life face different barriers. Importantly, *Our Equal State* also recognises gender inequality is further compounded by intersectionality forms of discrimination such as racism, homophobia, ableism and ageism.

A total of 37 portfolios are responsible for delivering the 110 actions that we have identified through this work. Victoria is proud to be the first and only jurisdiction in Australia to have enshrined public sector gender equality laws, and the *Gender Equality Act 2020* reflects our commitment to systemic and structural reform.

Finally, portfolio priorities for the year ahead: in the year ahead we will progress the rollout of the free pads and tampons commitment in public spaces. We will prioritise the implementation of *Our Equal State*, the gender equality strategy and action plan, and gender-responsive budgeting. We will commence the second round of the landmark Victorian women's public art program, which will make significant contributions to making sure women are better represented in our communities. I look forward to working with my colleagues across government to deliver on the strategies.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. The first 7 minutes is going to go to Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. How terrific it is to have a woman head up the women's portfolio. Now, my definition of a woman is an adult human female. Can you confirm that is your definition?

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, I feel that we are in the twilight zone of going back to last year when you asked a similar question. I will remind you that I ruled that question out of order. If you would like to cite a budget paper reference and ask a question –

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. The whole presentation is about women, so we need to be very clear on what the minister deems to be her responsibility regarding women.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, I have previously ruled that question –

Bev McARTHUR: Stop running a protection racket, Chair.

The CHAIR: This is not a protection racket, Mrs McArthur, and you will respect my ruling, as you did last year when I ruled that question out of order. If you have a question that relates to this public inquiry, then I suggest that you ask it.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, I do, and it is very pertinent to the definition of women. I will go to budget paper 3, page 36, and it refers to the women's honour roll, and the minister has just waxed lyrical about that – 22 women. How many of those women were biological women, Minister?

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur!

Bev McARTHUR: These are obvious questions, Chair. We are in the portfolio of women, and the minister has talked about women thriving in leadership. That is what you said in your presentation. If women are to thrive in leadership situations, why do you encourage biological men to nominate for an honour in the Victorian Honour Roll for Women, or should it be called 'the People's Honour Roll of People'?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I have got to say, Chair, when we get caught up in debating who is and who is not a woman we lose focus around, I guess, gender equality for all women. As the Minister for Women, I include trans women in that definition because I do not think it is my role to discriminate against those that identify in that way. What I am focused on is making sure that gender equality is at the forefront of our decision-making in this state, and we want to acknowledge the achievements and leadership of women in this state. The Victorian Honour Roll of Women is an extremely important part of our work that we do here. There have been some really amazing women honoured on that honour roll who have made such significant contributions to this state, and I do not make any apologies for having an honour roll –

Bev McARTHUR: That includes men.

Natalie HUTCHINS: that continues to acknowledge the fantastic work that women do in this state.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, Minister, you are discriminating against biological women in this state. But I will go to the gender equality budget statement that the Treasurer gave. It was during a Q and A session at the Property Council of Australia budget breakfast on Friday morning, and the Treasurer said:

There's nothing necessarily unproductive about a period of time spent working from home ...

Certainly a lot of women see that it becomes liberating for them in terms of organising their home responsibilities.

So given the Treasurer is one of the most senior male members of cabinet, has he missed the government's gender equality message?

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, as much as I hate to interrupt your time – and now under 3 minutes that you have left – could you please give a budget paper reference –

Members interjecting.

The CHAIR: Mr O'Brien and Mrs McArthur, for my sake, could you please repeat the budget paper reference.

Bev McARTHUR: Budget paper 3. So, Minister, did the Treasurer miss the message?

Danny O'BRIEN: It was actually the 'Gender Equality Budget Statement', which I am sure you are very proud of.

Bev McARTHUR: We have spoken about it – the minister has spoken about it.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister.

Natalie HUTCHINS: I know for a fact that the Treasurer has been at the forefront of supporting the work that this government has done to close the gender pay gap, to look at ways to alleviate the unpaid burden of care for women by supporting Best Start, Best Life, or whether it comes to the under-representation of women in leadership roles and male-dominated industries. The Treasurer has been at the forefront of all those policies in backing them. That is why we have a standalone gender equality budget statement – because the Treasurer has committed to doing that. Now we have gendered budgeting commitments in legislation currently going through our Parliament. I do not think anyone can question his commitment to equality in this state.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Minister. Minister, let us go to the budget paper which is involved in the gender equality whole-of-government strategy. Can you answer the questions across the whole of government in this area – in the gender equality whole-of-government strategy?

Natalie HUTCHINS: The beauty of the gender equality strategy and action plan is it goes across every single portfolio. I can talk to any one of the 110 actions that we have committed to. But if you want to do a deep dive into each one of those, it is best directed to the minister responsible, whether that is health, education, environment.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, last year, Minister, PAEC was provided on notice – 13 July 2023 – that the gender pay gap for heads of the Victorian public service departments and agencies was at 20.5 per cent as at 30 June. How is it tracking now?

Natalie HUTCHINS: The Victorian mean base salary gender pay gap – I am sorry, did you say ‘leadership roles’? I did not get the –

Bev McARTHUR: Heads of Victorian public service departments and agencies.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mrs McArthur. We are out of time, but we are coming back your way shortly. We will go to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, Secretary and officials. Minister, you did reference in your presentation Victoria’s second gender strategy, *Our Equal State*, and I note that that has led the nation in a number of aspects. I also want to ask about the whole-of-government approach. Can you talk to us about the work that has led to us having this strategy in place and what has been done up to this point?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Certainly I can. *Our Equal State* was a second strategy, building on *Safe and Strong*, the first one, which was launched by a previous minister, Minister Richardson. Certainly this was driven out of the *Gender Equality Act* and the commitment given there in legislation that the government would have both a strategy statewide and an action plan that is reportable back to Parliament. We were very proud to engage all ministers in the formation of this but also held over 400 consultations across a whole range of sectors, with women’s organisations across the state and deliverers of services to ensure that we are capturing not only women’s economic participation but women’s safety and women’s health and of course rights. They are all streams that we have always focused on when we talk about gender equality, but for the first time we are looking at it through a lens of different age brackets, because the barriers that women face to participation in our society and in our workforce are not the same all through life, they change. We have seen dramatically that things change for women quite intensely the older they get in the workforce and their rights there. So these are some of the actions that we are taking here. But also the application of young women being able to enter male-dominated industries in a safe and productive and meaningful way is also a key feature in this strategy.

Michael GALEA: Thanks, Minister. I note that the commissioner for gender equality in the public service has been very active in working towards gender equality and representation within the public sector as well, and there have been initiatives, such as gender equality action plans, which they have had a role in supporting the public sector with. Can you please speak to that work and what progress has been made?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes. I am extremely proud to have a commissioner for gender equality and to see her also taking a role on the national stage in collaborating and working with other states and territories who are considering going down this path with policy and having a *Gender Equality Act*. But the Act that governs the commissioner is an absolutely groundbreaking piece of legislation that requires public sector organisations, inclusive of TAFEs and local government and higher ed facilities, to take positive action towards gender equality in the workplace and in the community. It is about their own workforce but also the settings in which our departments deliver policy as well. So that Act requires organisations to report on gender equality measures; to demonstrate how they plan to improve gender equality; to account for gendered impacts of all of the policies that they deliver, programs and services; and also to make measurable progress towards gender equality. It is called baseline reporting. It is basically having a look at where all these organisations sit in terms of their gender lens, but also, most importantly, what action they are taking to close that gap that may exist or break down the barriers. This means that there have been almost 300 organisations that now have a plan with key strategies and measures to undertake to improve gender equality in the workplace. I note that it is around about 12 per cent of the entire workforce of Victoria that is now covered by this, and we are also working with private businesses to encourage and support them to embed gender equality measurements and action plans as well.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Can you talk to me about some of the actions in *Our Equal State* which identify where the public service has an opportunity to lead by example. You touched on that you are hoping for private businesses to take it up. Are there specific areas within the strategy?

Natalie HUTCHINS: We know and we recognise that, as the state’s biggest employer, if we do not set the benchmark on gender equality, how could we expect the private sector to make these changes and lead as well? The government has set itself targets as an employer within this strategy to halve the gender pay gap in the Victorian public sector in the next five years, to reach gender parity in CEO roles in each portfolio in the next

five years and to reach gender parity in senior leadership positions in each portfolio in the Victorian public sector within five years.

Most important – well, not most importantly but very importantly – we want to also double the number of men taking available paid parental leave. This has been something that has been available to our public service for some time now, but there is a real imbalance in the take-up of fathers taking leave under the EBA negotiation outcomes, so we want to try and encourage men to do the care responsibilities within their own household. The commissioner for gender equality in the public sector is also developing a pilot to work on this particular part of the policy.

Michael GALEA: And a very good point about men taking that primary parental leave too – gone are the days of maternity and paternity leave. That is really good to see. In your presentation as well you spoke about gender-responsive budgeting. I am just wondering if you could quickly outline some of the measures in this budget and the significance of what gender-responsive budgeting is.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Well, it is certainly extremely important work because it means that every submission that goes into the budget process must have a gender impact assessment attached to it so that it can be clearly identified as being beneficial to women.

Michael GALEA: Thank you. Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We are going to go back to Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. Let us go back to the gender pay gap for heads of Victorian public service departments and agencies – 20.5 per cent at 30 June. I asked how it is tracking now. Have you got those answers?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Well, the submissions on the 2023 data to the commission who collects this public sector data has only just been collected and will be published later this year. But currently overall the pay gap in Victoria's –

Bev McARTHUR: Public service.

Natalie HUTCHINS: public service is 14.3 per cent, and for secretaries it is 20.5 per cent.

Bev McARTHUR: That is what it was before. So in which departments or agencies do the biggest gaps exist within the state?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Well, as I said, all departments and agencies have to report in to the commission data which will be published later this year, but in terms of doing a comparison based on last year's figures, currently some of the largest gaps exist in the transport and planning space.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. That is all?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you. Okay. Let us go again to the 'Gender Equality Budget Statement' and the minister's messages about equality and respect. Now, last week during Parliament the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence in her contribution to the gender-responsive budgeting Bill began by saying:

At the heart of family violence are disrespect and inequality.

The minister's contribution made many references to respect and disrespect; however, at each turn she showed disrespect for members of the coalition, for which she was challenged. Minister, isn't this the sort of disrespect you are trying to change?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I find it disrespectful that you would use this forum to attack another minister that is not before you instead of talking about the core issue of respect towards women, which is such a topical issue at the moment with a woman being murdered by a partner or an offender every four days.

Bev McARTHUR: That is my very point, Minister, because when the Member for Mildura, a victim of family violence who only recently found a voice 22 years after the event, began a contribution immediately after the minister, the minister walked out and was later forced to apologise. Do you think that behaviour is disrespectful?

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Mrs McArthur, there has been a point of order. Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you. I believe that Ms McArthur started asking about the gender-responsive budgeting, which I believe that Minister Hutchins is not responsible for.

Bev McARTHUR: No, no. You were not listening. ‘Gender equality statement’, I said.

Lauren KATHAGE: Okay. All right.

Bev McARTHUR: No point of order.

Lauren KATHAGE: So the gender-responsive budgeting discussion in the chamber is not relevant to this portfolio then. If you are asking about the gender equality statement, I welcome Ms Hutchins’s response to the gender equality statement in the budget papers.

Bev McARTHUR: I am just asking her about disrespectful behaviour towards women by her colleagues.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, whilst I appreciate you may like an answer to that, I remind you that this is a budget estimates hearing. If you would like to ask the minister a question in relation to the inquiry that is currently at hand or perhaps rephrase your question, we can move forward.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Well, the issue is about doublespeak, because if you promote the ideas of respect towards women, then you have to practise what you preach. And if your colleagues, other women in this Parliament, do not do that, then I think the minister needs to hold people to account. Wouldn’t you agree, Minister?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I absolutely think that every woman in every workplace should be able to work without fear without or without harassment. The situation that you are describing right now is not relevant to the budget process that we are talking about, and I welcome the opportunity to talk about women’s safety in households, in community and in workplaces and the great work that we are doing in response to the Royal Commission into Family Violence, the great work that the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence is doing but also the work that is being done by the minister for workplace safety, who is embedding some really good work across our workplaces to make sure that women feel safe to report workplace sexual harassment or abuse.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. Well, since, Minister, you are not prepared to call out disrespect publicly, we will go to crimes against women and the Victorian 2024 budget paper ‘Gender Equality Budget Statement’, page 18, ‘Safety’. Victorian crime statistics show that between December 2023 and December 2022 aggravated assault of females has almost doubled, rising about almost tenfold since 2014. Minister, has your department investigated how many of these assaults have occurred in the workplace?

Natalie HUTCHINS: We know that workplace violence is an issue, and that is why we have strategies and a focus in our gender equality strategy to actually tackle these issues and to make sure that women feel safe to report. But the really important work is done in the prevention space to make sure that women feel safe at work and are treated with respect at work, and that is at the heart of so many of our strategies of getting women into male-dominated industries in a safe and responsible and respectful way.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, Minister, clearly it cannot be working, because aggravated assault of females has almost risen tenfold since 2014. I note that your ‘Gender Equality Budget Statement’ in its section ‘Safety’ excludes initiatives for safety in the workforce. Why?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Well, there are plenty of commitments that we have made through the gender equality strategy on economic participation, on safety and on the rights of women, and I would say that there are so many programs across this government that do not necessarily sit in the direct responsibility of my portfolio but in other ministers’, particularly in the crime prevention space, that would go to addressing that

issue. At the end of the day the biggest challenge that we face as a community is preventing this violence from happening.

Bev McARTHUR: Your initiatives do not seem to be working.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur. Mr Tak.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister and officials. Minister, building on what you said in your presentations, in particular the reference in slide 6, can you please elaborate on where we are currently up to in the process of implementing the rolling out of free pads and tampons?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes. Thank you, and I know this is of concern to you because we were both at a local event where we talked about this with librarians I think in the City of Kingston –

Meng Heang TAK: That is right.

Natalie HUTCHINS: because quite often in public spaces we see women who are in need of sanitary products turn to other women to ask if they have a product, and we see that in libraries, we see that in train stations, we see it in so many public places. I am sure there are women on the committee and women in this room that have experienced being in a situation where they may be in a public toilet and they have been asked if they have a product to support a woman who might be in need. Really what this program is about is embedding free sanitary products in 700 different locations, public locations and well-utilised locations across the state with the rollout investment of \$23 million. Using vending machines to dispatch these products is a world first that we are undertaking. There is another program that does this exist in Scotland currently, but they do not use the volume that we are anticipating we will be using with these machines. We are going through a process to make sure that we are able to deliver these vending machines to the right locations in the right areas of need over the next 12 months. Some of those places I have just named also include public hospitals, courts, TAFEs and of course major cultural institutions.

The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing has undertaken significant stakeholder engagement to make sure that we get the rollout right. We have had about 80 women leaders engaged across different sectors. It is really important that we take into account all abilities when we roll this out and also language barriers that might exist, making it a simple process for people to be able to access the products. There is a complexity in the rollout of this project. That is why we have received independent expert advice to suggest a two-stage approach to the procurement to be undertaken, and the request for tender is planned for completion in June this year, with the rollout of the machines beginning in the second half of this year.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. It was such a wonderful feeling to be with you at the time and also with the mayor of the local government, the mayor of Kingston. Minister, can you talk more about what the benefits are of implementing this initiative and what it will mean for Victorian women and girls?

Natalie HUTCHINS: This is a really important program to destigmatise women's periods. It is really heartbreaking to hear that one in five women improvise with the products that they use because they cannot afford to buy the products that they need. Period poverty is a real thing unfortunately in our community. But also women get caught whilst they are travelling or moving around to and from work or to and from a social engagement without the products and without the money to be able to purchase them, so this is about making sure that women have that support to contribute to daily life when they are menstruating and are able to be out and about and feel that they are supported with the availability of free products.

It also starts the conversation across our community in such a stark way because those products will be visible in so many public toilets. We know that pads and tampons are not necessarily a luxury, they are a necessity, and this is a really important program, I think, for impacting social views towards this. We have seen this program successfully roll out in government schools already, and I have got feedback from teachers and parents and directly from students around having these products available. But also explaining to young boys in the education setting what these products are and how they are utilised embeds change in our society for the long term.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you, Minister. I would like to bring you to economic participation, as discussed on slide 3 of your presentation. The Victorian government is currently focusing efforts to encourage women to

work in traditionally male-dominated industries by releasing a targeted strategy. Minister, can you please tell us more about the women in manufacturing and women in energy strategy?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes. Thank you. This is a result from the women's economic participation work that was commissioned by the Treasurer and that passed down some really practical recommendations that are being adopted by government. One of those is around formulating better strategies and supports as a government for women to enter into male-dominated workforces. This is at the heart of equality when it comes to pay in our private sector. So we are working to get more women with a focus on manufacturing and clean energy into meaningful jobs with pathways. These are not easy tasks, because when an industry has been male-dominated since the start of time in those industries it takes a lot to change attitudes and embed respect for women in those workplaces. We are working across the sector to make sure that we get the settings right. This is not the first time we have done this sort of work as a government, and it probably will not be the last time.

Meng Heang TAK: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Back to Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Minister, can you comment on the reports of unsafe and inappropriate behaviour on Big Build projects, and have you considered reporting on the number of harassment cases that have gone to court?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I am not aware of a particular case that you might be referring to. However, I do acknowledge there are still barriers to full participation of women across so many male-dominated sectors, and I absolutely believe that preventing and providing a safe workplace at work is a really fundamental obligation on employers to make sure that they are delivering in that space. But of course we have had a strategy, not in my portfolio but in the major infrastructure portfolios, around supporting women entering the construction sector, and a key part of that has been embedding Respectful Relationships and respect at work and anti-sexual harassment courses delivered across the construction sector but other sectors as well. We know that there is a lot of change that needs to happen. We have had a ministerial taskforce on workplace sexual harassment. We know that there are significant issues out there, and we will continue to implement the policies that are in our gender equality statement but also enforce the legislation that exists in the WorkSafe space.

Bev McARTHUR: Big Build projects are your much-heralded projects. Surely if there is inappropriate behaviour on those workplaces, you should be calling it out and you should know about the cases that have gone to court.

Natalie HUTCHINS: I am aware that there are issues that have reached that level of court intervention across many industries where –

Bev McARTHUR: We are just talking about the Big Build.

Natalie HUTCHINS: women have faced discrimination. But I want to acknowledge the work that WorkSafe is doing where they have allocated \$6.6 million to roll out a response to a particular recommendation of the taskforce that looked into sexual workplace harassment. They are rolling out a program to expand the WorkWell program to have a dedicated stream around anti-sexual harassment but also reporting in that space, and I think that is extremely important work for both the prevention and the supports that are needed for those women that come forward who have identified either sexual harassment or gendered violence at work.

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, what does it say about your accountability that you have in your portfolio only one quality performance measure for the 2024–25 budget?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I think having an action plan that is public with 110 actions is probably the best form of accountability to our community, to our society, around embedding gender equality. Gender equality is not just an issue for the women's portfolio, it is a whole-of-government response, and you will find our responses embedded throughout the budget.

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, the recent court case regarding the murder of Celeste Manno has highlighted the importance of taking harassment and stalking against women seriously. Despite the Victorian Law Reform

Commission's report back in 2022 on stalking and the Acting Chair's comments that little has changed, why has this government still failed to release its response to that report?

Natalie HUTCHINS: That report is in the responsibility area of the Attorney-General, and you are best to direct that –

Nick McGOWAN: I understand, Minister, but you have explained to this committee that you have a responsibility across portfolios.

Natalie HUTCHINS: But I will continue to work with the Attorney-General and the Minister for Prevention of Family Violence and the Premier on making this state a safer place for women.

Nick McGOWAN: Minister, the sector, as you well know, were promised the response to that report would be released before the last election. They are still waiting.

Natalie HUTCHINS: And I believe that there are some actions that this government has taken in that space, but that question is better directed to the Attorney-General.

The CHAIR: Deputy Chair, you will have the pleasure of the Attorneys-General's appearance later this week. Save that one for her.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Minister. Minister, a \$100,000 program in the women's economic security area funded in the 2023–24 budget has lapsed. Does this mean that you have decided not to fund valuable initiatives like this because it is in a seat you no longer hold – i.e., Richmond?

Natalie HUTCHINS: That is ridiculous.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, why has it lapsed?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Can I get you to identify which program exactly you are talking about? There are a number of programs.

Bev McARTHUR: The \$100,000 program in the women's economic security area, which was budget paper 3, chapter 1, in lapsing programs.

Natalie HUTCHINS: If you are referring to the SisterWorks –

Bev McARTHUR: SisterWorks in Richmond.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes. SisterWorks was a one-off investment to assist the work that they do in getting migrant and refugee women into employment, a really fantastic program that I have seen firsthand with my own eyes. That was a one-off commitment made at the last budget, and that has been provided for.

Bev McARTHUR: And it is so successful it does not need continuation in funding.

Danny O'BRIEN: Fantastic! 'It's great, but we've stopped it now.'

Bev McARTHUR: So it is obviously finished. It is wonderful?

Natalie HUTCHINS: It was a one-off allocation. There are other allocations in the budget over the years that have been made towards SisterWorks for their expansion of programs that they deliver, and not all of those are in my portfolio space.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, do you support the degendering of language where women are now being disadvantaged?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I am not sure how that relates to the budget.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, it relates to your portfolio.

The CHAIR: Well, could you please provide a budget paper reference, Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: There will be references all over the place where we no longer talk about women.

The CHAIR: Be specific, please. I am sure the minister –

Danny O'BRIEN: Well, it is specifically the gender budget statement, which is all about gendered language.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Natalie HUTCHINS: I am happy to talk gendered language when it embeds respect in any environment, and I think that needs to be the lens in which we approach combating gendered violence, and that is putting respect at the front.

Bev McARTHUR: Aren't women the prime priority for your portfolio, Minister?

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mrs McArthur. We are out of time. We are going to go straight to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister, officials. I am proud of our government. I am proud of what our government is achieving, thank you, for women under multiple portfolios, not just sitting under one ministry. We think of health, we think of education and all the work that we are doing. It makes me extremely proud, and I want to commend you, Minister, for what you are doing. And I do not want to focus on fringe issues; I want to focus on issues that impact women in our state and things that women actually really care about. We know that women's leadership is something that is really important. We have seen the impact of that, having half of cabinet as women, and what women's leadership creates. So I want to ask you about the women's leadership programs that are detailed there on page 42 of budget paper 3. Can you talk to why the government believes these are important to fund.

Natalie HUTCHINS: We know that when women make up a significant part of a workforce – and certainly when they make up more than 50 per cent or 50 per cent – change is inevitable. Absolutely there is no doubt about that. Change for the better for our community in representation is absolutely proven. Our budget commits to \$1.8 million of additional funding to our leadership programs, and those leadership programs have helped us to underpin the 52 per cent women board leaders that we now have in this state through a commitment that we made around equality some time ago, and that is delivering more positive policies and outcomes for women across our state. The programs really go to the heart of addressing what barriers women face and reaching out in helping them thrive in positions but also to stay in the sectors that they have chosen rather than leaving feeling unsupported, and that does contribute to productivity. It contributes to productivity in our public sector. It contributes to productivity in the private sector. That continuation of employment and support and engagement for women is extremely important and really underpins in particular professional development. I can think of a fantastic program that has been supported in the department of jobs and industry that has underpinned and supported women's participation in cybersecurity. I actually got to launch a program in this place just last week, a second-stage program which delivered outcomes that are absolutely phenomenal around the 90 women participating in that program, who have all gone on to in some way, shape or form either be promoted or changed into a higher paying position. Two of the women who went through that leadership program have been nominated for national awards since participating in the program, and I think it is more than 50 per cent have gone on to have higher earnings since that program. It might even be higher than that.

But we know that women's participation in our economy is so dependent on their ability to participate safely and respectfully at work, and we want to make sure that women do not remain under-represented in leadership roles in our workplaces but also under-represented in certain industries. The 2023 Chief Executive Women senior executive census revealed that women occupy only 9 per cent of CEO roles and 29 per cent of executive leadership roles across our ASX 300 companies. Projections based on current trends indicate that gender balance in executive leadership teams will not be achieved until 2033. That is just the balance in leadership teams. That is still some time away, and I know that there are a lot of young women up and coming that would hope to fill those roles into the future. If government is not playing a role in providing that leadership support, then those goals will not be achieved.

Lauren KATHAGE: I think also celebrating women's achievements contributes to that, like with the Victorian women's honour roll. Can you talk a bit about the importance of that and how it promotes women's leadership?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Certainly. Having women recognised for their work and then having that reported through our social media and through the general media outlets is extremely important. There are a number of women who have posthumously been awarded, and it is really important to acknowledge publicly the extraordinary contribution of women who maybe at a time 50 or 60 years ago were doing extraordinary things but unable to be recognised for what they were doing, whether that was in the field of science or health or in fact community leadership. It is really important to acknowledge these women. We have about 750 women now on the honour roll, and we are looking to roll out our second public arts grants around identifying women in public art, particularly statues. Where better place to go than to look at our honour roll for examples of women that have done extraordinary things?

A great example of how this honour roll has contributed to give back to Victoria as well is that two years ago two of our honour roll participants, Aishwarya Kansakar and Professor Marilyn Fleeer, came together – one an AI engineering expert, one an expert in play and early childhood development – to work on a new program to promote STEM education to women and girls. They collaborated on that program and did that out of their commitment to gender equality, and I was really pleased to launch that on International Women’s Day this year, really role modelling to children the importance of STEM careers.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Kathage. We will go to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. Thank you all for being here. Migrant and refugee women in particular face significant barriers to accessing healthcare services, and that includes discrimination, it includes structural racism. So with respect to this budget, how much funding is there specifically for multicultural women’s health services, and has this funding increased from last year’s budget to reflect the growth of our migrant communities, who represented 60 per cent of population growth in Victoria over the past decade?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Certainly the implementation of funding for women’s health services comes through the Minister for Health, but I know that there has been, in my particular area that I represent, some significant increases to the funding of services that GenWest delivers out to the broader western suburbs of Melbourne, and many of the recipients of the services are from diverse backgrounds. But certainly there are a number of programs that I am really proud that we have been able to support through our programs in women, particularly in regard to the 272 migrant and refugee women who participated in the program called PACE, which is the workforce support program called the Participate, Advocate, Communicate and Engage leadership program. We have also run an exclusive program called Women of Colour to promote women in executive leadership roles. I know that is different to what you are asking me, but it is important that we have women across our public sector who are promoted into roles that will then have that lens over policy that is delivered across our government. Also our budget is providing \$18.3 million, as I said, over Victoria’s women’s health services, which includes the Multicultural Centre for Women’s Health.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Minister. Moving on to further subject matter, in March it was reported that two in three women said they had experienced bias and discrimination in health care, notably when it comes to sexual and reproductive health. So I would just like to ask the minister: what work are you undertaking to eliminate that bias and discrimination?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Well, firstly, I welcome the question, because gender equality and gender-based discrimination is not just an issue for women, it is an issue for men as well to basically tackle and work on as an entire community. In terms of discrimination within the health system, I have certainly been working closely with the Minister for Health and the Minister for Mental Health in regard to the rollout of the 20 new women’s health clinics to give women access to the intense treatment and multidisciplinary approach that is needed to deal with women’s pain and women’s issues. So I think that is a pretty significant investment. In terms of discrimination within health services, there is no bigger champion to take on the cause of women than the current Minister for Health in this space, and I would welcome any examples that you have that you would like me to take up with her in regard to some of the issues that you are raising in specific terms.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay, I appreciate that offer, Minister. The end of the Victorian government’s sick pay guarantee is going to have a pretty significant impact on women, particularly migrant and refugee women, who

are disproportionately employed casually. The decision makes it seem that the analysis and the understanding of intersecting disadvantages which entrench inequality for many women have been forgotten or put to the side, and that includes socio-economic status. So, Minister, in your capacity, have you made representations to your ministerial counterparts expressing concern about the cut to the sick pay guarantee, and would you see it reinstated?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Firstly, it is the responsibility of the Minister for Employment, who was administering this program, but I do note that this was a program that was stood up during COVID for the spread of COVID amongst our workforce – to prevent that spread from happening. I believe that that program has been able to deliver in spades, and I would welcome the opportunity to extend that program federally if the federal government saw fit to stand up that program for our casual workforce. But I do acknowledge that this government has done a power of work when it comes to licensing labour hire companies that would employ these people to ensure that their industrial relations treatment of their staff is of a higher standard than it has been in the past.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Minister. Given the comments that you have just made, would you perhaps commit to making representations to your federal counterparts to ensure that they fill the gap that is being left by the state stepping out of the sick pay guarantee?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Look, I think they are making some great changes at a federal level in the industrial relations space to protect the rights of workers, and vulnerable workers in particular, particularly around their advocacy around the minimum wage. But certainly there are many programs that exist federally around the supplementation of wages and those that are most vulnerable in our community. I do not see that this would be any different, this program, to being given consideration down the track at a federal level if the need is there, particularly in a health crisis.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you. With my remaining time, as you have noted, it was a measure that was put forward during the times of COVID. Nonetheless there are many, many women who are employed casually, and as I have noted, this has disproportionate impacts on many groups, particularly women. If it were up to you, would you see the program continue?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I do not think that the burden of the cost on the government is needed right now, post COVID lockdowns. But certainly I acknowledge that there needs to be change around the vulnerabilities and supports for vulnerable workers in insecure work.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. We will go straight to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister and officials. I really appreciate your attendance this morning. I might take you to your presentation, Minister, particularly page 3 of the presentation, which goes into the women's grassroots grant program. It is a \$400,000 program, and I understand 44 local organisations achieved success in that. I am just hoping you could outline some of those organisations and what work they are doing.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes. Thanks. I was really pleased with the rollout of these grants to be able to attend I think it was the Collingwood legal service, who were in partnership with Carringbush Adult Education to deliver the Women behind the Wheel program, which is a program for women of a refugee background with very significant language barriers to be able to give them an opportunity to do driving lessons in language and to really lift up their independence and economic participation through that support of getting a licence. But also part of the education program was about their rights and responsibilities on the road and as a consumer purchasing a car and purchasing a licence. These are things that are not necessarily taught to new migrants that come to our great state, and these sorts of programs really do open up opportunity for women to participate in our economy and really grow their own family opportunities as well.

So that was just one program. Another recipient, Africare Community Services in Wodonga, received a grant for their TechVantage program, which was a six-month project empowering migrant African women to achieve their goals and supporting them in technology, particularly digital literacy training, including computer skills and internet usage and most importantly résumé writing. These are one-off grants that we know equip women's organisations to deliver skills and knowledge and really practical outcomes to increase women's economic participation.

Mathew HILAKARI: It is just incredibly important, that employment and participation. I know many people come to my office and talk to me about CV writing, in particular women, just that starting point. But also with the driving, the confidence to participate in the community, that is really great work. I might take you to page 6 of your presentation around the Victorian women's public art program. I am just hoping you could explain what some of this program is about and what it seeks to achieve.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes. This is about I guess promoting women's achievements more visibly. We have the honour roll, with 750 women acknowledged on that, but in and around Victoria and across Melbourne we have 583 statues of men and only 12 statues of women. 18 months ago that was around seven statues. We have managed to lift it to 12, and now we want to make sure that we are depicting the real achievements of women going forward, and real women, because I have got to say that there are a number of statues of fairies across the state which are not necessarily depicting women's achievements. Unfortunately, we still have a high level of statues depicting dogs and horses as well. We want to make sure that women that have played a critical role in activism, literature, sports, medicine, science and the economy are recognised in a public sense and have their accomplishments and achievements recognised. So I was really pleased to announce at the start of this year a second round of this program where Victorians can learn the stories behind the images that they see of women and really celebrate the incredible women that we have had achieve some pretty amazing things in our state.

Mathew HILAKARI: And I certainly know one of the ones that I have seen erected recently is the Zelda D'Aprano statue over there near Trades Hall. That was unveiled – was it last year by former Prime Minister Julia Gillard?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes, it was.

Mathew HILAKARI: So it is a really great opportunity to tell those stories across the state. She was certainly a trailblazer in women's equality and achieving fair pay.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes.

Mathew HILAKARI: What an extraordinary person. I will take you actually to the gender equality budget statement, and page 2, talking about international jurisdictions and how we can lead the world. But I know that you have recently been in attendance at a conference in Rwanda to talk about women's equality. I am just hoping you could tell me some of the learnings that you have had from that conference, some of the things that you have brought back from overseas but also some of those things that we were able to talk about as a state, about how we are leading the world on gender equality and the sorts of things that we could exchange.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes. I think the importance of our government leading the delegation from Asia Pacific to that conference was certainly the ability to bring together women of the Pacific to engage with us ahead of that conference here in Melbourne. I am not sure how many members in the room would acknowledge and know the fact that the worst family violence and rape figures in the world are in our Pacific nations neighbours here. To meet with those women and to share our experiences here and support with them ahead of going to that international conference was extremely important. We know that many women choose to leave their communities and come to Australia to make it a home because of the experience that they have had with violence, and with sexual violence, in those areas, and we have a responsibility as a state and a nation to be supporting our neighbours in that space. So in going to Rwanda –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister.

Mathew HILAKARI: I will hear more about it, I know that. Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Everyone knows I am quite a harsh timekeeper. Minister and department officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee today. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

If anyone listening to or watching this session has found any of content distressing, help is available. You can give Rainbow Door a call on 1800 729 367 or send a text message to 0480 017 246. Alternatively, you can call QLife on 1800 184 527. In relation to the discussion around family violence, I would like to remind those listening or watching that if you are experiencing family violence, help is available. You can phone

1800RESPECT on 1800 737 732, or if it is unsafe to call, you can send a text message to 1800 RESPECT. If you are in immediate danger, please call 000.

The committee is now going to take a short break before beginning its consideration of the police portfolio at 11 am. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Witnesses withdrew.