

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2023–24 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Tuesday 13 June 2023

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

Nicholas McGowan – Deputy Chair

Michael Galea

Paul Hamer

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Bev McArthur

Danny O’Brien

Ellen Sandell

WITNESSES

Ms Natalie Hutchins MP, Minister for Women,

Ms Peta McCammon, Secretary,

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

Ms Kate Berry, Acting Executive Director, Women, Equality and Multicultural Affairs, 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 2023–24 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 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 this afternoon 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 and officers from the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. Welcome. Minister, I am going to invite you to make an opening statement or presentation of no more than 5 minutes. This will be followed by questions from committee members. Your time starts now.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Thank you, Chair. Can I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, and I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging, and I give thanks for the opportunity to talk to the women's portfolio here at PAEC and to our investments in the most recent state budget.

Visual presentation.

Natalie HUTCHINS: We are proud to lead the nation on a very ambitious gender equality agenda in the women's portfolio area. Victoria has an unwavering commitment to improving outcomes for every woman and girl across all economic areas, in leadership, in representation and in health, wellbeing and safety. In Victoria our vision is for a gender-equal state that is guided by a new Victorian gender equality strategy that we are aiming to release later this year.

The Victorian public sector has led by example to address the systemic drivers of gender inequality within the workforce. A workforce audit was undertaken across 300 public sector organisations in Victoria, creating a comprehensive database to help us to understand the state and the nature of gender equality. We call this the baseline report, and it is really drawing a line in the sand.

We have invested \$1 million in our Victorian women's public art program, and we have continued to recognise the outstanding contribution of women through the Victorian honour roll – adding 23 women to that roll.

We have also made investment in gender equality a whole-of-government responsibility, and significant investment has been committed across government departments, including in women's health, in reducing gendered violence and in increasing women's economic security.

We have increased investment in the women's portfolio, which reflects the government's commitment to ongoing and overall improvement of the situation for Victorian women and girls. The investment in the women's portfolio has increased over the last four years.

In an Australian first we are investing \$23 million into free pads and tampons in up to 700 locations across the state. This initiative builds upon our leading free pads and tampons initiative that began in schools in 2019. We have heard recently about the prohibitive cost of period products and the extra burden it is placing on women who are already experiencing cost-of-living pressures. We have already consulted over 30 key stakeholders around the rollout of this program, and we have funded the Burnet Institute to conduct market research within communities to include accessibility to this program. We will continue to consult across the entire outreach of the program, and I was delighted to meet with health experts and stakeholders from across the community recently to talk through this program. An expression of interest for the procurement is currently available on the Buying for Victoria website for potential suppliers to demonstrate their interest and capacity in delivering this project, and it closes tomorrow. The next stage will be around contracting into place some of the machinery and equipment that we need. Acknowledging the scale of the program, a phased rollout is to begin in early 2024.

We will soon launch Victoria's next gender equality strategy and action plan, a road map for progress across key areas, including economic equality, safety, respect, health and wellbeing, and cultural change. The strategy will be informed by what we have learned from the workplace and gender equality auditing and will embed gains under which Victorian's first ever gender equality strategy was originally launched. Some of the details of the implementation of *Safe and Strong*, that strategy, are listed in our gender equality budget statement in detail. It highlights our whole-of-government commitments and our future directions to advance gender equality in our state. While we have come a long way, there is still a long way to go. Acknowledging that there are pay gaps that still exist, that there are barriers to women moving into leadership roles and there are also barriers to safety in some community settings and workplaces, we will continue to make the bold and progressive policy decisions that are needed to improve outcomes for women in Victoria. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Minister. Now, the first 7 minutes of this session are going to go to Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. From one woman to another woman, Minister, will you confirm that the definition of a woman is an adult human female?

The CHAIR: Excuse me, Mrs McArthur, that question –

Bev McARTHUR: We just need to know exactly –

The CHAIR: has absolutely no relevance to this inquiry before us.

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, it does.

The CHAIR: I would ask you to move on to another question. I am ruling that question out of order.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, we need to know exactly how we are describing women, don't we?

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, do you have another question?

Bev McARTHUR: Well, if the minister does not want to answer it –

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, do you have another question?

Bev McARTHUR: I have many questions.

The CHAIR: Then please feel free to ask one.

Bev McARTHUR: I take note the minister is not answering the question. Minister, do you agree that –

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, I have ruled that question out of order. It is not a matter of the minister not answering the question. I have ruled it out of order. It is inappropriate –

Bev McARTHUR: Why is it inappropriate?

The CHAIR: and it has nothing to do with the inquiry here before us.

Bev McARTHUR: It is absolutely to do with this portfolio, Chair.

The CHAIR: If you have a question, could you please ask it.

Bev McARTHUR: If this is a portfolio about women –

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mrs McArthur!

Bev McARTHUR: we need to know what the definition is. Anyway, you have ruled it out of order; that is how you operate. Minister, do you agree that Paul Denyer would be a danger to women if released from prison?

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, could you please point to a budget page reference?

Bev McARTHUR: Yes, absolutely: the *Victorian Budget 2023–24: Doing What Matters – Gender Equality Budget Statement*, point 4:

Improving public safety, particularly for women.

So do you agree that if he was released, he would be a danger to women?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I think that is a question best directed to the Minister for Corrections and the adult parole board.

Bev McARTHUR: So would you support families of young women who were murdered and advocate to the Premier to support the opposition's effort to keep Paul Denyer in jail? You are here to protect women.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Absolutely, and I believe that a future where all Victorians are safe in their homes, in their communities and in their workplaces is of utmost importance to us as a government. It is certainly a big focus of the Royal Commission into Family Violence that this state has been through and a big focus of the department of women. I am not going to make individual comments about people that are currently incarcerated for unspeakable crimes, but I will acknowledge the pain and the hurt that was experienced by the families of those victims that that individual took the lives of and created havoc, but I am not going to talk about hypotheticals about whether he comes in or out of prison.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, do you have an opinion on this, Minister? Isn't it critical to your portfolio?

Natalie HUTCHINS: What is critical to my portfolio is ending violence against women, and I think that the biggest challenge facing women's safety is their safety within the home. That is something that we have not been shy in backing away from investing in: \$77 million towards ending family violence and assault through intervention strategies and crisis management and \$43 million to expand health services to assist. I have got to say, there are great women's health services out there, like GenWest, that do a great job in –

Bev McARTHUR: So do you think Paul Denyer should stay in jail, or should he be released?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I cannot see how one individual in incarceration is relevant to the entire women's portfolio. You need to ask the Minister for Corrections that question.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, let us go to the gender pay gap in the public service, page 2, 'Gender Equality Budget Statement'. The statement outlines a 'stubbornly high' gender pay gap at 13.5 per cent. What is the gender pay gap in the executive level of the public service?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Well, Victoria's base salary gender pay gap currently sits at 13.4 per cent for full-time employees, which is slightly higher than the Australian average, but this is exactly why we are going down the track of having a gender equality commissioner undertake the work of the *Gender Equality Act* to do that baseline reporting and put actions in place and action plans in place across more than 300 public sector entities and departments so that in two years time we can have a look at what progress has been made. The departments can have a plan. Whether that is around executive roles, leadership roles, safety, recruitment – these are all parts of the gender equality action plans that are publicly reported and addressed and analysed every two years going

forward, and I think this is great work that has been done. Unfortunately, there are a lot of Victorians out there that do not know about this work that has been undertaken, but I know that when we get to that two-year point of having had the baseline reporting in place and some action plans in place we will see that gap closing.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, Minister, you have had years to fix this up. You have been in government for quite some time. Is there a gender pay gap at the secretary level?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I might refer to my Secretary.

Peta McCAMMON: Thanks. I think that question would probably be best placed with DPC. I do not have in front of me secretary salaries.

Bev McARTHUR: Would you be able to take that on notice and let us know?

Peta McCAMMON: I am not sure I can take on notice a question for DPC, but we can –

Bev McARTHUR: Well, if you are talking about gender equality here and we have had a whole glossy slide show on the matter, surely you must know where your gender equality gaps are in the public service.

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, perhaps that is a question for question time. You may wish to put it to the minister.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, no, that is why we are here. The minister has been talking about the great job they are doing in solving the gender equality pay gap, but first of all we need to know that the government does this in the public service, so we first need to know: where are the gaps in the public service of the gender equality situation? And I would expect you would want to know, Minister and Secretary. I can appreciate you may not have the figures in front of you. I am very happy for you to go back and do the research.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Mrs McArthur, your time is up. We are going to go to –

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you. Can we get the research on notice?

The CHAIR: Mrs McArthur, your time is up. We are going to Ms Kathage.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Chair, Minister and officials. I want to go from the public service to public places, where we will have free pads and tampons available. The information there is in budget paper 3, page 41. Minister, can you speak about how this will improve gender equality in Victoria?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Thanks. This program is one of the most well received public announcements I have actually ever witnessed in terms of volume of uptake and feedback, both through online media and social media. It has just been quite phenomenal, and the fact that we are discussing it here does help break down some of the barriers and myths that exist around menstruation and the challenges that some women face – and some girls face – in terms of having access to the products but also having access to the health information that comes with menstruating. Victoria is leading the nation with the rollout commitment to these public facilities and products being placed in public places. The only other place to have ever trialed this that we know of around the world was Scotland, but that was only a short-term trial. The program that we are rolling out here is a first and certainly the biggest, at up to 700 locations. It will take us some time to get the machinery engagement right and the restocking right, but the fact that we are getting such positive feedback through the program we are already running in schools and through the public feedback that we have gotten since this announcement has come about – I would say that this is certainly already breaking down the substantial barriers that many girls have faced in relation to not having access to period products in a timely manner. For some people it is not just about stigma, it is about accessibility, and making sure that a woman is not caught out without resources available or accessibility is a really important part of this.

So this is a \$23 million initiative that we will continue to roll out over the next few years, with the first locations being identified and worked on right now by my department, and hopefully we get those products rolling out in the new year. As part of the announcement we had already identified areas such as public hospitals, courts, TAFEs, places like the museum – very prominent places. On Saturday night I was actually at Flinders Street station on my way home. I went to the ladies toilets and noticed there is not even a machine there where you can purchase these products at Flinders Street station. Once upon a time there was; there is not anymore. That

facility on Saturday night at around 10:30 was absolutely chock-a-block. There was not a cubicle available without a line, and I could say that there would possibly have been some women there in need. This is something that will go a long way in helping with the health and wellbeing of girls and women.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister. Attitudes have changed a lot since I was a young girl. I am old enough that there were incinerators in bathrooms when I was young, I remember. Then we have had the blue liquid in the ads, and now we are sitting in a parliamentary committee talking about pads and tampons, so there has been a lot of change. Can you speak a bit about this initiative in terms of that change of attitudes and the change around the stigma that this will help to bring about?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes. Certainly there will have to be a bit of a public awareness campaign go on as these vending machines roll out, certainly educating people on where the locations are but also making sure that we are having the conversation, as we have done in schools, around what these products are used for. There are circumstances where boys see the products in place, and we want to make sure that boys understand what these products are used for so that they do not get misused and that there is a sense of understanding and respect, and I think that is really important when we are rolling them out in public places.

The other key element of the rollout of this program is making sure that these vending machines and products are accessible, and we have done some pretty good consultation with our stakeholders to identify needs that would not have been obvious for most of us. But if you have got a disability or you are blind, knowing what product is in the machine and making sure that that is accessible, making sure it is at a reasonable height for someone in a wheelchair and making sure that someone from a non-English-speaking background can identify what the products are are really important in the rollout of this program as well.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister. You spoke before about the expression of interest process. Are you able to talk a bit about where that is up to in terms of the implementation of this initiative?

Natalie HUTCHINS: That is currently open, as I mentioned, and closes – that expression of interest – tomorrow. But product type, range, the options for dispensing but also restocking the products are a really important part of the forward process and working that out. Of course there are already facility management companies in place that do similar work, but as I said, this is an Australian first, possibly even a worldwide first. Making sure that we get the setting right is going to take some negotiation going forward, making sure that we have some good contracts in place with suppliers to make sure that these machines are restocked adequately and that we keep a running tally on where the high-usage areas are and the needs are and making sure that those people that need it most, which are quite often those that are in a period poverty situation where they cannot afford the products, can access the products as well.

Lauren KATHAGE: Thank you, Minister. You spoke about making sure it is accessible for people from different groups. So is there a program of consultation that will take place to make sure that you have sort of heard from –

The CHAIR: Apologies, Ms Kathage. Your time is up. We are going to Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. I am going to Deputy Secretary Ms Perry. Can you tell us what the gender pay gap is at the deputy secretary level?

Louise PERRY: Thank you, Ms McArthur, for your question. I am sure you have seen that we have been scrambling to try to get the answer to your earlier question. I can tell you that the gender pay gap for VPS executives – so that would take in directors, executive directors and deputy secretaries – is 8.8 per cent.

Bev McARTHUR: Okay. And Secretary, can we go back to the secretary level gender pay gap?

Peta McCAMMON: We are still trying to get that.

Bev McARTHUR: Great.

Peta McCAMMON: We are trying, yes.

Bev McARTHUR: Well, just take it on notice. Thank you, Minister. That is all good, because obviously if we are suggesting out to the wider world that we need to solve the gender pay gap at executive level, we need to make sure that the public service is way ahead of everybody else, don't we, Minister?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Mmm.

Bev McARTHUR: Good.

Nicholas McGOWAN: Can we be assured that the pay gaps do not apply to the two of you?

Louise PERRY: Sorry?

Nicholas McGOWAN: Can we be assured that the pay gaps do not apply in your instances? How can we be sure that they do not?

The CHAIR: Mr McGowan, are you really asking the women sitting before you about what they are being paid?

Nicholas McGOWAN: I am not asking specifically what they are being paid. What I would like to know, and I would like to be assured, is that they are actually being paid every bit as much as their male counterparts in the same role. Yes, I think that is fair.

Natalie HUTCHINS: I think it is fair to say that our secretaries are women, the majority.

The CHAIR: Mr McGowan, I do not see how this is relevant to the inquiry before us. Please move on.

Nicholas McGOWAN: It is entirely relevant because it is about the pay gap. I am just wanting to make sure that they are getting exactly what we are trying to achieve for all women.

Bev McARTHUR: We are looking after their interests.

Nicholas McGOWAN: I do not need to know the actual sums involved, but what I would like is some sort of assurance, perhaps from the minister, that her own deputies and secretaries are, at the very least, at the same – that there is no pay gap here.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Well, we certainly have a baseline report for every department and for every entity that the government has, including a relationship where TAFEs have stepped up and also local government and in some cases tertiary education as well. They are all a matter of the public record. You are welcome to go and have a look at one of those 300 baseline reports and have a look at the action plans that we have put in place. We are not saying that there are no gaps; we are saying, 'Here is the benchmark by which we will measure it, and here's how we will improve it,' and I think that is a great step forward for any government to do. It is brave, and it is the way of the future in terms of addressing gender inequality.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, you mentioned the honour roll in your presentation. Why is it then that people from interstate and even men identifying as women can apply for an honour or be put forward for an honour?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I do not have the details of the application process, but I would assume in terms of the interstate avenue that it is possible that they have contributed to Victorian life in a significant way, whether that be in their chosen field, and then may have retired to somewhere else. That is a possibility, but they still deserve to be acknowledged for their contribution to Victoria. We acknowledge posthumously people who have passed away for their work. I am happy to come back to you around the criteria.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you.

Natalie HUTCHINS: But the selection process is undertaken by an independent committee.

Bev McARTHUR: But it is not just open to women, it is open to men identifying as women as well.

Natalie HUTCHINS: I do not know that it specifically says that in the criteria, but I am happy to come back to you on the criteria.

Bev McARTHUR: Many thanks, Minister. Minister, let us go to advertising and to the 2023–24 budget estimates questionnaire, page 125 of 174, question 21:

No costs for advertising have been incurred ...

or forecast for 2023–24, nor have there been any confirmed campaigns. What is the current and planned advertising program supporting women, and is there a summary list?

Natalie HUTCHINS: As I said earlier, within the allocated funding for the free pads and tampons in public places there will be some form of, I would assume, social media advertising and possibly even location-based advertising, whether that be posters or a range of sources. I am not going to pre-empt it because we are at the very early stages. It may not be the traditional radio/TV ads that you may be referring to in that questionnaire, but certainly we will be talking about that. We currently advertise our leadership programs through a range of women's organisations, utilising online materials wherever we can to put that out there. I would also just add to the answer the fact that women's equality is a whole-of-government commitment, and certainly the advertising of women's health services and the advertising of job programs specifically for women are all parts of different departments and a whole-of-government response.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Minister. Minister, the *Victorian Government Advertising Report 2021–22* indicates that more than \$6 million was spent by WorkSafe in areas including to 'reduce gendered violence in the workplace'. How much was spent on this component?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I am not the minister responsible for workplace safety or WorkSafe. That is a question best asked to the Assistant Treasurer, who has the responsibility.

Bev McARTHUR: Do you have no interest in the gendered violence in the workplace?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I absolutely have an interest, and I have watched this campaign with great enthusiasm. I think it is actually a really good campaign. I am just not responsible for the allocation of the funding for that.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, in the short time available, given WorkSafe is a basket case at the moment, do you expect them to be able to further assist in this regard with women-safe workplaces?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I have every confidence that the team at WorkSafe that are working on gendered violence in the workplace are doing a great job. I also acknowledge the fact that WorkSafe are one of the government organisations to have a gender equality action plan.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go to Mr Galea.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, Minister and officials. Minister, I would like to draw your attention to the 'Gender Equality Budget Statement', page 26 specifically, which references the new Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector. Minister, could you please provide us with an overview of the work that the commission has done to improve gender equality workforce outcomes in Victoria?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Thanks. Yes, this is really important groundbreaking work, and I am really pleased to have the opportunity to be here to talk about it. I do not think we should shy away from the fact that our *Gender Equality Act* is a first in Australia's history to have something that measures where we are at as a state when it comes to gender equality and actual measurement points but also, most importantly, action plans that come out of it and also the resourcing and appointment of a gender equity commissioner, again a first in Australia. As Minister for Women I get to attend the meetings with the federal minister and all the other state ministers in the women's and women's safety portfolios, and I was very pleased at our most recent meeting to have had acknowledged this work but also the fact that we have such a very capable gender equality commissioner, who has been recognised for her work and asked to present at a national level as well. She is highly sought after by not only other states and the federal government for her expertise, but she has also been approached by other countries to look at how they too can model gender equality measures and action plans for their countries.

We are really taking positive action by taking a step forward here. The results show that there is so much work still to do, and there is no doubt about that. It has brought to light the pay gaps, resulting in an average pay gap between men and women emerging and really unfortunately being quite evident across our public sector. But

most important is having an action plan to tackle that. The commissioner Dr Niki Vincent is playing a pretty key leadership role in helping us address that. Those baseline reports are available online for people to look at through the gender equality commissioner's website.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. Could you also please elaborate on the role of the gender equality action plans?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes. Those plans are basically a plan that each organisation puts in place and that is valid for the next two years, and they get to measure themselves against that. I would love to see these plans expand across the private sector even further. Whilst there are some regulations federally around reporting on gender equality for some of the biggest companies in the nation, it only goes part of the way of telling the story for gender equality and putting some actions in place. Here in Victoria we have put ourselves out there by saying, 'Let's measure at least 300 different organisations that fall under the state's remit or that we work in partnership with, like local government. Let's have a look at what our gender equality looks like and get a plan to address that, measure it and really engage strategies around how to do that.' I would say that that is maybe some of the most important work that has happened in this state in the last few years. I know once this comes to fruition and is measured numerous times, we will see the closing of the gaps that exist and a widening of opportunities for women in the workforce and across our public sector.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister. We know there has been a lot of discussion already in the last few minutes about gender equity in terms of the public service, but I would like to ask you about government boards, because I understand this is an area that a fair bit of attention has gone into. What progress has been made towards gender equality on government boards?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I would say a power of work has been done on gender equality on government boards. This is something that the Premier committed to very soon after becoming the Premier of this state. Since 2015 the government has made a commitment of having no less than 50 per cent of all future appointments to paid government boards be women, and we expanded that commitment just a few years ago to require that no less than 50 per cent of appointments of chairs be women. I am really pleased to say that our tracking against those goals that were set by the Premier has really reached a fantastic point. We have now reached the point where women represent 53 per cent of the members across public boards, and that is an increase of 14 per cent from 2015 and a real result of the intervention that was put in place by the Premier. We have also met the target for board chairs, which is now sitting at 57 per cent of chairs being women. I do not know that any other state has achieved that. I think it is really reflective of the Victorian community's desires and wants. It really shows, I think, that some of the investment that we have put in place as a government has come to fruition to ensure that we have women's leadership programs in place that reach out to a whole range of different women with different expertise from across the state. Those programs have been going for some years now, and I think they are directly feeding into these opportunities for female directors and female board members.

Michael GALEA: It is really great to hear those statistics. Just in the last few seconds we have, Minister, in terms of the baseline report that you mentioned in your presentation, can I ask: what data is being used to guide and inform this policy in this space?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Certainly. We are making sure that we have got the commissioner well resourced and the commission well resourced. We have a former member of the commission at the table with us today, who is very experienced in this area. But having a comprehensive picture is probably the most important thing we could have done in implementing the outcomes of this Act and making sure we have comprehensive data.

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Minister.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. We will go to Mrs McArthur.

Bev McARTHUR: Thank you, Chair. Victorian crime statistics show crimes against the person and sexual offences have risen between December 2021 and December 2022. Minister, there have been increases in rape, sexual assault and other sexual offences. Obviously, women are the most affected here. What work is being done to keep women safe in the workplace, particularly in male-dominated spaces?

Natalie HUTCHINS: That is a really great question, and I want to acknowledge the work that the minister for workplace safety is doing in this space, but certainly I am proud of the work that this government has done in putting together a task force on workplace sexual harassment. That was established in 2021. And we announced that we were accepting most of the recommendations just last year, and the implementation of the task force work is underway. We have expanded WorkSafe's WorkWell program, as you have mentioned.

But I think also it is worth mentioning that the gender equality impact statements and the baseline reporting and the action plans that we have going forward – there is an element in every single one of those that deals with workplace safety, reporting sexual harassment, how it is investigated, how it is followed up and how workplace bullying is dealt with, and that is a really important part of that work. Workplace sexual harassment, we know, is a safety issue for all of us, and gendered violence and behaviour should not be tolerated. Gendered violence is just unacceptable in our workplaces and in our community.

Bev McARTHUR: So, Minister, have instances of rape and harassment of women in male-dominated worksites been reported to you and/or your department, and what have you done about it?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Well, I look at the crime figures like everybody else does, and certainly I do not shy away from the fact that the biggest challenge faced by women in their safety is within their homes. That is evident by the number of responses police make, particularly in peak times on weekends, to the calls of women. There is no doubt about that.

But to go back to the issue of workplaces, we know that the economic impacts of sexual harassment are significant, and of course rape is an issue for the police. I would urge anyone that that has happened to in the workplace to report, to press charges and to pursue that, and it is something that we take very seriously.

Bev McARTHUR: Have you, by chance, spoken to the CFMEU or other unions to get them on board and make these workplaces safe for women?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Currently our government has a program in place coming out of the women's economic participation inquiry into male-dominated sectors and getting more women engaged and employed in those sectors. That includes the construction sector, the manufacturing and transport sector and the clean energy sector. We know if we change the dynamic of the number of women that work in these sectors and we support them with mentoring and wraparound procedures and processes in their workplace, that that makes it a safer workplace and a more viable option for them to be able to stay in that workplace.

Bev McARTHUR: Minister, the Victorian Women's Health Atlas 2020 shows a direct correlation between young women getting pregnant and the lack of access to women's health. This can increase the risk of socio-economic disadvantage. The VAGO report tabled 17 May 2023, page 1, concluded that there are areas in Victoria where women cannot readily access sexual and reproductive health services and further that the department did not have an understanding of the service gaps and demand across the state and that they were relying on data from 2016 – seven years ago, Minister. Is this the same data now being relied on to establish sexual and reproductive health hubs?

Natalie HUTCHINS: I am certainly proud of our investment in sexual and reproductive health hubs for women. As part of the government's commitment, and it was an election commitment, we have expanded those hubs to nine new locations. Certainly statistics around abortion in Victoria are very hard to ascertain. Studies estimate that one-third of Australian women who experience an unplanned pregnancy at some time in their lives may access an abortion. Certainly we are investing in new locations for women to get this support; there is no doubt about it. I might ask one of my department people – maybe Lou or Kate – to supplement.

Peta McCAMMON: I can make a start maybe, Lou. Obviously in the 2023–24 budget there is an investment of \$58 million to establish 20 new women's health clinics and a dedicated Aboriginal-led clinic, which was through the Department of Health. Also there was funding of \$65 million for an additional 10,800 laparoscopies and \$10 million for nine sexual and reproductive hubs, in addition to the 11 existing hubs the Victorian government has rolled out since 2017–18.

Bev McARTHUR: Secretary, perhaps you can also go to this one, then: how is the 1800 My Options phone service going with prescribing the medication to teenagers in remote and disadvantaged communities?

Peta McCAMMON: I am not familiar with that phone line. That might be the Department of Health.

Bev McARTHUR: Oh, sorry.

Louise PERRY: I can talk a little bit about the 1800 My Options phone line. Almost 18,000 callers have accessed that service within the first four years. In 2020–21 the service took 4064 calls. Should I keep going?

The CHAIR: I am going to call time, just because I have been calling it over the past week and a bit.

Danny O'BRIEN: And you keep saying you are unhappy about it.

The CHAIR: No, I am not happy about it, particularly when it is you, Mr O'Brien. I will go on to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you so much, Minister. Thank you, departmental officials. I appreciate your time this afternoon. In your presentation, Minister, you mentioned the investment in women's leadership programs. I am just wondering if you can outline what these leadership programs are.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes. We have six leadership programs that we have been supporting as a government, and these are fantastic programs that really take the opportunity for women to be able to be mentored in a very specific space. The commitment to this year's leadership programs builds upon previous investments that were made back in 2020–21, when there was \$6.6 million put in place over four years to run those programs.

Specifically, these programs include the women's board leadership program, which supports 94 women to develop board governance skills and develop Australian Institute of Company Directors' qualifications through that program. Another program is the Joan Kirner Emerging Leaders Program, which supports 80 emerging women leaders to undertake and develop strategies that advance their leadership. We also have the rural women's scholarships, which again are delivered in conjunction with a partnership with Future Women and support 16 women business owners and entrepreneurs from across rural and regional Victoria, supporting them and their leadership.

There is also a co-designed First Nations women's program called ECHO, which stands for Elevating Connections and Healing Ourselves, which helps advance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women to reach their potential in regard to leadership and also is delivered at an on-country location, so it is culturally sensitive. Also we have the Women of Colour programs. There are two specific programs in that area, which are the Women of Colour executive leadership program, which is developed by Women of Colour and delivered by Women of Colour, and also we have the Women of Colour executive leadership program with an executive sponsorship mentoring program, which is ongoing for women in executive positions to be able to get that support. I was really pleased to be at that program launch not all that long ago and see just how excited the women were to be in that program. This is about breaking down intersectional barriers that exist for so many women in taking on leadership roles, whether it be the colour of their skin, their economic background or their cultural background or their faith beliefs. We are making sure that these programs reach out to everyone.

Mathew HILAKARI: And I was so pleased to hear that part of that program delivers to some of the paid government boards and those great statistics that you went through earlier. I might take you to another section of your presentation, 'Women Deliver Regional Convening Partner'. Would you be able to just describe this and also Victoria's role?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Sure. Women Deliver is an international organisation that stands for the rights of gender equity of women and girls across the world with a particular focus on developing nations. They are not only champions of gender equality but also champion the rights of health and reproductive rights of women and girls across the world. Every three years they hold a global conference at a different location. Somewhere between 4000 and 6000 women attend that conference from all over the world. This year it is due to take place in Kigali in Rwanda in July, and Victoria, in partnership with the federal government, has taken on a role as a regional sponsor and support.

We were really pleased to be able to host a regional convening partners conference just last week here in Melbourne with over 300 women, many of those women coming from First Nations backgrounds and Islander

Pasifika backgrounds – it was an Oceanic Pasifika focus. It gave us an opportunity to really bring those women together that will be going to that international conference from this region to prioritise what the issues are affecting women in this region. I have got to say that high on the agenda was economic participation and also concerns around environment and how that is affecting both the security and safety of women – climate change challenges and environmental challenges particular to women living on the islands of the Pacific. We also had some pretty good discussion around disability and inclusion and also around family violence and some of the substantial issues that face women in this region and women here in Victoria as well. I was really pleased to be able to host that. My department has done a great job in supporting that, and I look forward to being able to join the delegation that will be going from Australia to the conference in July, where we will focus in on economic empowerment, unpaid work, the care sector, the environment, women’s leadership and women’s political and health rights.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you for mentioning particularly women’s economic security. The state government announced in this budget a program related to that, and I will take you to budget paper 3, page 41. What does this funding entail, and in a practical sense what will it do? I am taking you to page 41 of the budget papers.

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes, just under ‘Women’s Policy’. This is about rolling out the recommendations that came out of the women’s economic participation inquiry, which really also drilled down on some of the effects on women post COVID or during COVID.

The CHAIR: Apologies, Minister. I hate to interrupt. We are going to go to Ms Sandell.

Ellen SANDELL: Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon, everyone. I would also like to talk about gender split across the VPS. My understanding is with the COVID debt repayment plan we are looking at somewhere between 3000 and 4000 full-time equivalent jobs lost and it is up to the secretaries to determine how to manage that budget item within their own departments. Has there been any analysis done of whether this level of job cuts would disproportionately affect women across the VPS?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Yes. A gender impact assessment was undertaken as part of the development of all revenue initiatives by DTF for the state budget, and the gendered impacts of revenue measures are expected to be neutral.

Ellen SANDELL: Neutral in this case. Do we have any information about the split across the VPS in terms of just in total how many? What is the gender split like across the whole VPS?

Natalie HUTCHINS: All I have got is a reference to DTF’s questionnaire, but certainly I am –

Peta McCAMMON: I can maybe supplement that in that secretaries are working through that detail, so in terms of the gender impact in terms of individual departments, I do not have that to hand. The other thing I would say is that it is not just in terms of the gender impact but I know within our department we are also keen to look at what the impact is in terms of making sure the VPS still continues to reflect the Victorian community. So what does that mean for our staff who have a disability? What does that mean for our Aboriginal staff? So there is a lot of detailed planning that will need to go into that work before we have the final definitive detail.

Ellen SANDELL: And so you are still working through that now and putting that lens on. So is that up to secretaries to be doing that analysis?

Peta McCAMMON: Yes. Secretaries are at the moment working through their budgets and will work back in with central government. We are working really closely with the department of treasury in terms of what that impact might look like across the VPS.

Ellen SANDELL: I understand that there are certain areas that are quarantined, so there is police and other front line, but I imagine that the VPS, particularly at those lower levels, might have higher levels of women in the workforce. I mean, in your department, is that your understanding?

Peta McCAMMON: In our department those areas that are quarantined are child protection and housing officers. That is our frontline workforce, and that would be a predominantly female workforce.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay. You talked a little bit about reproductive health, so I want to ask about access to termination and abortion services. In many areas of the state it is still really hard to access and also cost prohibitive. The ACT has just made medical and surgical abortions free for all residents, including those who do not have access to Medicare. It was about \$4.6 million, I think, that cost the ACT. Has the Victorian government looked at doing something similar?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Well, the funding of the additional nine sexual and reproductive hubs across Victoria – and I am just looking for the locations, but I cannot see them; I am not sure what they are, but I am happy to provide that if it has been determined, because it sits in the health portfolio – certainly I think goes some way to helping address the gap that you have just identified. But also there is \$5.3 million for a mobile women’s clinic, particularly targeting remote Victoria, and I would assume that will go some way to it as well. But certainly I know it is touched on in the ‘Gender Equality Budget Statement’. I am not sure; do you have more information, Louise?

Louise PERRY: We do not have the locations.

Natalie HUTCHINS: No.

Ellen SANDELL: That is okay. We have heard that in some locations there is a difference in how much services cost. So in some areas, say, getting an IUD, a long-acting reversible contraception, might be free and in other areas, particularly some regional areas, there is still an out-of-pocket cost. Do you have any sense of why that is? The health minister could not shed any light on that when I asked her.

Natalie HUTCHINS: No. We might have to come back to you on the detail of that.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay. Yes, no problem. And lastly, I just want to ask about reproductive leave. I know this is something that has come up as an idea given that often women in particular are having to run down their leave for essential medical care. That might be accessing IVF, it might be due to endometriosis or things that are unique to women and particularly unique to needing reproductive leave. Is the government willing to consider a pilot for additional reproductive leave for public sector employees?

Natalie HUTCHINS: Look, I think there are certainly opportunities as EBAs come up for renegotiation for these sorts of claims to be put on the table and for our government to give consideration. We were the nation leaders when it came to leave for family violence. Even though I think the federal government like to claim it as their idea, we actually had it in place I think probably five or six years ago. But certainly it is the nature of our government to consider these sorts of claims as they are put forward by our women in the workforce. I would never rule it out, but I think it comes with the natural process of negotiating EBAs as they expire and need to be renegotiated.

Ellen SANDELL: Okay, thanks. No further questions.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Sandell. We are going to go to Mr Hamer for the last 7 minutes.

Paul HAMER: Thank you. Thank you, Minister, and thank you, department officials. I would like to start by just asking some questions about the women’s public art program you mentioned in your presentation. I was just wondering if you could expand on what that program is.

Natalie HUTCHINS: I think, yes, we popped up an image there in the presentation of one of our statues, which is of the remarkable Stella Young. It is a statue that was part of the program that we have put in place under the public arts program, and that is partnering with local governments in place or local organisations. The Queen Vic women’s centre was another location, but that particular one was unveiled in Stawell. I think it is an amazing thing creating a landmark that honours a Victorian woman for amazing achievements that maybe the rest of the community never knew about or appreciated or that got buried in history, particularly Stella’s story. Having that located in Stawell was really important, as was making it an accessible, fitting tribute. Stella was in a wheelchair all of her life, and we made sure that the statue reflected all abilities. It has a QR code attached to it so that if you are blind you can actually listen to her story. Also, kids can climb that statue; it is not elevated off the ground, because that is something that was important to her. It was quite amazing to be at that launch with the people of Stawell, who came out in full force.

But of course that is just one of six that we have in place. We know that these are really important in immortalising the achievements of women. It is something for us to be able to celebrate woman trailblazers here in Victoria, but there is a way to go. Currently there are 581 statues of men and only 11 statues of women. We are continuing to build on that, and I acknowledge that there have been commitments made by the City of Melbourne around them contributing to more statues. I want to acknowledge the former department of sport and rec, before it merged with the department of jobs. They have actually committed to a number of sports stars, particularly Sharelle McMahon, which is a fantastic statue down at Olympic Park. It is all about improving the recognition of women in place. Whether you are a father of daughters or a mother of daughters – or sons – you want to be able to see your kids have the opportunity to see the achievements of women in Victoria that have done remarkable things. There is, I note, a public book available around the 50 unbuilt statues of women in Melbourne that are still required called *Daughters of Melbourne*. So there is a list out there already that has been established in the public domain of work that still needs to be done. But the women that we have honoured so far have played a critical role in changing Victoria's history forever. One statue in particular, which has been done in the Queen Vic women's centre, is the image of a woman's hand holding a basket, and it is representative of First Nations women across the state. Every level of the basket that was handwoven and cast in iron was done by a different First Nations group to signify coming together in the hand. For me and for many women it is a true sign of strength and resilience of our First Nations women in this state, and I would encourage all members to have a look at it, down on Lonsdale Street, out the front of the Queen Vic women's centre.

Paul HAMER: Thank you. Yes, those statistics of the divergence between the number of statues honouring men versus honouring women are quite stark. You mentioned I think six artworks had been commissioned. Those other four – who are those statues of, and where are they located?

Natalie HUTCHINS: It started with the unveiling of the Stella Young one back in March in Stawell. Subsequent to that there have been a number of others. I am just looking at my list, but certainly the women's resilience First Nations one at Queen Vic women's centre. A woman called Vera Scantlebury Brown, who has a statute now in Linton, in a prominent place there, was one of the first women to graduate in medicine and as a surgeon but was not allowed to practice at the time of her graduation. She took it upon herself to fund herself to go to England and work in a suffragette hospital after World War I broke out, came back here to Victoria after being a successful surgeon overseas, continued some of her work here, but most importantly took up the first woman secretary of a department here in Victoria, which was the first entity of the maternal and child health service here in Victoria. Now a statute stands her honour in Linton, an amazing woman, who went on to have some amazing children who have changed the face of medicine here in Victoria as well.

There is also Zelda D'Aprano, a woman who advocated for pay equality and getting rid of the pay gap. She started her campaign in the late 60s and actually was an activist who chained herself to the Commonwealth Bank's head offices and the arbitration offices and started a very well-known campaign around pay equality. She has been immortalised now in a statue outside Trades Hall. And of course we have a new statue that has been formed in conjunction with Mildura Rural City Council which is yet to open.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Minister. The time has come for the end of questions for today. Minister and department officials, thank you very much for appearing before us this afternoon. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses will be required within five working days of the committee's request.

I understand this topic may distress some people watching this afternoon. If you are experiencing family violence and need assistance, you can call the Safe Steps Family Violence Response Centre on 1800 015 188. If you are in immediate danger, please call 000. I also affirm that equality here in Victoria is non-negotiable, and the Rainbow Door service, run by Switchboard, can be reached at 1800 729 367.

I would like to thank all ministers and officers who have given evidence to the committee today, as well as Hansard, the committee secretariat and parliamentary attendants. I also want to thank the very generous hospitality, security and cleaning staff who have taken very good care of us here today. The committee will resume its consideration of the 2023–24 budget estimates tomorrow, Wednesday 14 June, at 8:30 am. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.