

BRIEFING 1 June 2020

COVID-19: Highlights the Gender Pay Gap in the Nursing Profession

Professions such as nursing and others dominated by women, have been the most affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic. Today, we see nurses with their qualifications, skills, and experience, on the front-line of health care and prevention, but they continue to be underpaid compared to others in male dominated jobs. There is also a nursing shortage. Recently, economist at Equity Economics, Angela Jackson reminded us of the significance of participation and productivity to Australia's economic recovery and how women's participation is key to this business case scenario (*The Age*, 18 May 2020). Her piece, other newspaper articles together with government and industry reports about gender equality in workplaces have confirmed the National Council of Women Victoria's (NCWV) concern about the lack of progress towards women's economic equality. Last year, before the COVID-19 crisis, the NCWV planned a seminar to be entitled *Gender Equity and Equal Pay*. Various experts were invited to inform members about Equal Opportunity legislation and the Fair Work Commission. Afterwards we would follow up with strategies. The Forum had to be cancelled, however, an in-depth discussion on the topics was had at the Council ZOOM meeting on 7 May. It was resolved that regular statements will be released to develop public opinion on the question of gender equity and equal pay.

On the recent occasion of the International Day of the Nurse and the 200th anniversary of the birth of Florence Nightingale on 12 May, the World Health Organization (WHO) joined hundreds of partners worldwide, including the Secretary General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, to highlight the importance of nurses in the healthcare continuum and thank nurses for what they do. The theme for this year is "Nursing the World to Health". In April, WHO and partners launched the first ever 'State of the Worlds' Nursing Report, which provides a snapshot of the global nursing workforce as well as highlighting the scale of the challenge we face and provides feasible policies for governments to invest in nursing so that Health for All can become a reality.

The NCWV is one of the oldest women's organisations in Victoria. Founded in 1902, it has advocated for women's rights and other social reforms in many fields. Many aspects of community life and practice and the wider involvement of women in society, which we take for granted today, were initiated, and fought for by NCWV. At a meeting in 1903, equal pay was on the agenda of the first NCWV's Congress. By 1957 the NCWV's Equal Pay Committee collaborated with other organisations agitating for equal pay. In 1969 Australia's industrial relations system endorsed the principle of equal pay for equal work. In 1974 a minimum wage was set for adults. Yet, in 2020, in the health care sector in Victoria, which mostly employs women, we find that the gender pay gap is increasing. Recently it increased to 25 per cent for healthcare workers, which includes nurses, when the overall wage gap has narrowed to 14.6 per cent (<https://financy.com.au/>). Why is this so?

Nurses, accounting for 66 per cent of the health workforce in Australia, are at the forefront of dealing with all types of emergencies, none less than today's pandemic. It's a stark reminder of the vital role nurses play. Without nurses, also, other health workers, we will not win the battle against outbreaks, such as COVID-19, which as we know, seriously affects Australia's economy today and in the future. Nor will we have equitable accessible health coverage.

The National Council of Women of Victoria urges the Victorian Government to support ALL Victorian nurses and health care workers by taking immediate action to reverse the widening pay gap. An unacceptable anomaly which cannot wait the estimated 217 years to be corrected.

Patron in Chief: Her Excellency the Honourable Linda Dessau AC, Governor of Victoria

Patron: The Right Honourable the Lord Mayor of Melbourne Sally Capp