

BRIEFING 16th July 2020

COVID-19: Women in lockdown - inequality and domestic violence

The National Council of Women Victoria (NCWV) agrees that we are all experiencing difficulties due to COVID-19. However, recent articles and research has described how there are women who are living through challenging times and much of their difficulties are due to gendered discrimination.

“Anxious, overworked, insecure; it's not where Australian women hoped we'd be, going into this new decade”, stated journalist, Annabel Crabb in a recent article (ABC News, 24 May). She explains that COVID-19 has drawn attention to traditional gendered stereotypes in the community. It appears that whether in the paid workplace or in the home, women's time is valued less.

A recent University of Melbourne Work and Care in the Time of COVID-19 survey collected 2,722 responses from Australian residents in double-income heterosexual households. They showed that women were still picking up more of the domestic workload than men although both were doing more, housework remained a predominantly female task.

Economist, Professor Emeritus, Barbara Pocock, stated that we are witnessing a 'pink recession' (ABC News, 10 June). Today 55 per cent of job losses due to COVID-19 measures are women's jobs. Women were more likely to be employed as casuals and in sectors like hospitality, arts, accommodation, caring, catering, education and retail. The gendered difference in numbers of casuals in the health care and social assistance sector, are 89,100 women, and 17,700 men (Bankwest Curtin Economics ABS). Most casuals were ineligible for the government's job seeker support. The Government has decided to end free child-care and remove the JobKeeper subsidy for childcare operators. Then it announced a \$700 million in grants to boost home building. Though welcome, it's a male dominated industry where only a handful of women work.

Even though national and international research finds that increasing women's participation rate in the workforce boosts the economy, the impact of COVID-19 and the Government's response is restricting women's participation. At a time when Australia's economic and social recovery is urgent the government should be making changes to support women's employment opportunities.

Social distancing measures are restricting people to stay home. Financial and unemployment stress caused by COVID-19 restrictions affects the home environment too. These changes can create a greater risk of domestic violence. Victoria's Women's Information Referral Exchange (WIRE) recently found that the COVID-19 lockdown has prevented women from seeking help because they cannot escape their abuser. There has also been an increase in calls to men's help lines. Women are abused and may be murdered during domestic violence episodes. Women and children at great risk of abuse and associated stress, due to COVID-19 restriction, have their health, particularly mental health, jeopardised.

The Prime Minister has formed a COVID-19 Coordination Commission (NCCC), charged with dispensing advice to the Government on actions to mitigate the economic and social effects of the pandemic and build a bridge for recovery. However, it is made up of 8 men and only 2 women. This paper has described the major roles played by women during the COVID-19 pandemic. As entrepreneur Bianca Hartzel Hazelman, the founder of Financy, advised on the repercussions of COVID-19, *“One thing we really need to do is understand the real extent to which women carry the burden of unpaid work and support the economy.”* (ABC News, 24 May 2020). Australia's economic and social recovery needs the full participation of women. It follows that more women need to be represented on the NCCC, so they make up 50 per cent of the NCCC membership.