

Office for Women and Violence Prevention

Submission to inform the development of a  
Queensland Women's Strategy



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8 October 2021

*This submission may be quoted in public documents.*

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## Introduction

Anglicare Southern Queensland (Anglicare SQ) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Office for Women and Violence Prevention in relation to the development of a new Queensland Women's Strategy.

We recognise, as the related Discussion Paper notes, that gender equality will not be achieved until all women and girls are safe, valued and able to freely participate in and benefit from the economic, social and cultural opportunities available in our society.

While there is no doubt that we have made progress in this sphere, we can be equally certain that we have a long way still to go. Women continue to be less economically secure, to be exposed disproportionately to violence, to bear more of the weight of domestic and carer duties, and to operate, in general, in systems designed by men for men.

Gender interweaves with Anglicare's work in multiple ways. Nearly two thirds (65%) of our clients are women, with a particular predominance in Community Aged Care and Disability (CAD), where more than twice as many clients are women as men. As a human services organisation, a significant majority (85%) of Anglicare staff are also women. As Margaret Alston writes about the social work profession: "Gender shapes not only how we work with women but also how our female-dominated profession operates".<sup>1</sup> It is no less true for Anglicare staff, and the broader range of services we offer.

We acknowledge the challenges faced by our female clients at the same time as we see certain of those impacts in the lives of some of our staff, in a sector historically characterised by lower salaries, contracts tied to government funding, and a general societal lack of recognition of the value and complexity of the work. At the same time, our organisation offers opportunities for female leadership and advancement that recognise the significant and vital contribution women make to society.

The Discussion Paper highlights several outcomes that a new Queensland Women's Strategy should address, including:

- prioritising addressing the immediate needs of women, tailored to their needs, whilst working to dismantle persistent barriers causing gender inequality
- giving urgent attention to women's economic security
- being inclusive and recognising diversity — being reflective of the voices and experiences of *all* women and girls.

## About Anglicare SQ

Anglicare SQ is a not-for-profit Anglican Church organisation that provides care and support services to more than 1 in 30 Queenslanders. Our first priority is a commitment to high quality, client-centred care, support and counselling, enabling those we work with to reach their own goals and to live a flourishing life.

Our 3000 professional staff and volunteers support Queenslanders across a geographic area double the size of the United Kingdom, stretching from Townsville to Coolangatta and across the southwest of the state. We work towards the promotion of wellness, social inclusion and social justice through our diverse and extensive range of support services. These include foster and kinship care; children and family services, including intensive family support and family intervention services; as well as targeted family support programs; mental health and family wellbeing; homelessness services; disability services; residential aged and community care; and spiritual and pastoral care.

This submission draws upon the on-the-ground experience and expertise of our staff in Homelessness Services (Women & Families), INSYNC youth services, Children & Families (Foster and Kinship Care), members of our senior management and Executive team, and our Mental Health and Family Wellbeing program area to inform the Strategy's addressing of these important issues.

## Prioritising the immediate needs of women, tailored to their needs, whilst working to dismantle persistent barriers causing gender inequality

*Debbie is nearing her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. She has little reason to celebrate, however — her hours in a local cafe have been cut back to a single shift each week, and she's struggling to pay rent where she lives alone in a private rental. She knows that if any kind of emergency arises, she'll have no way of meeting the costs.*

\*

Each aspect of Debbie's current situation increases her risk of homelessness. For women aged 55–64 years in a private rental, about 28% are likely to be at risk. Debbie's precarious employment raises the odds of homelessness to 34%; and if she were a lone parent, the risk would rise to over 65%.

Each risk factor intersects with the others, exacerbated by systemic barriers and social attitudes that, among others, devalue the contribution of older women, encourage conditions of under-employment, and refute the importance of supporting social and affordable housing.

Wood and Birrell 2020. *Little reason to celebrate: older women, trauma and homelessness*

The women Anglicare supports across many of our program areas have multiple vulnerabilities, that often include immediate and practical needs such as a roof over one's head, a liveable income and extended health care. These are indisputably urgent needs requiring the focused attention and resources we direct towards addressing them.

The danger of focusing on one issue at a time however is that disadvantaged or struggling women of all ages are complex beings, and focusing on individual issues, outcomes or events in women's lives is unlikely to unravel the 'web of vulnerability' most are dealing with.

The undeniable and significant increase in older women's homelessness, for example, to which women's greater longevity, fewer financial resources, marginal housing and carer responsibilities are often contributing factors, has been on social policy agendas for several years now. Many traumatised homeless older women were in fact traumatised *young* women, and the years have made it nearly impossible to disentangle the impact of interwoven systemic barriers and risk factors that have accumulated over time.

In a different kind of example, staff in our counselling services regularly see conflict that emerges as families consider the return to work after women have children. Pay inequity often influences decisions within families about how paid work and caring responsibilities are shared. Cultural stereotypes still impact on men's share of caring responsibilities, their access to flexible work, and their ability or willingness to take parental leave.<sup>2</sup> Domestically, women still do substantially more housework than men (62% of women compared with 35% of men spending 5 or more hours/week on unpaid indoor housework in a 2021 survey); and take on more childcare responsibilities (38% of women compared with 28% men), and care of adults (16% compared with 7%).<sup>3</sup>

Even in the most supportive of relationships and workplaces, women talk of the mental load of thinking ahead and taking major responsibility for the smooth running of the household, and the emotional and financial toll that often accompanies the necessity of childcare arrangements. These are not trivial issues, despite the historically devalued status of the domestic sphere in Australian society.<sup>4</sup> To various degrees, they affect vast numbers of women

from diverse social backgrounds — including both our clients and our staff — and cannot be addressed in isolation.

Anglicare services operate on a systems approach that considers the needs of women holistically. We address, with the women themselves, pressing and urgent issues (such as housing) in the context of broader systemic challenges (such as competition for private rentals in a tight housing market). So, for example, we will walk alongside a female client as she navigates the housing system, providing individual advocacy for her within the system and support as she negotiates bureaucracy, as well as working at a systemic level to help to weaken persistent barriers and attitudes. In this example, this includes advocacy and information sharing with private real estate agents through ongoing conversations and relationship building, as well as initiatives such as our 'Supporting Successful Tenancies' workshop.<sup>5</sup>

A Queensland Women's Strategy also needs to draw from this holistic, systemic approach.

***The Strategy needs to clearly address cross-agency or cross-jurisdictional barriers that disproportionately impact women, and particularly women in need.***

- While **childcare** subsidies are largely a Federal initiative, the QKFS Plus Kindy Support program provides a precedent of Queensland Government support for vulnerable or disadvantaged families with children. As one Anglicare staff member notes:

*Childcare is vital to support access to our programs and to enable women to participate in community. Inaccessible and unaffordable childcare is a huge barrier for them.*

The cost and availability of childcare can also be a barrier for women already in or returning to the workforce. Many women return to work in full knowledge that much if not all their wage will be directed to childcare:

*We pay \$1000/fn with the rebate for childcare for our two children, and they're not even in full time care. That will increase next year when we hit our cap.*

For those who choose not to return to work, there is also an economic impact that can make women more financially vulnerable than men, many years into the future:

*If I don't go back to work I'll lose touch — there's constant change, particularly with Covid, so I'd be trying to get up to speed again in a different kind of environment, and my networks will disappear. Those things could affect any promotion I might have in the future, and my future income and super ... there's such a flow on effect.*

- Access to **transport** is a major barrier for many women — particularly women who must manage not only the cost of public transport but also the logistics of managing solo travel with one or more small children and babies, additional bags, prams and often multiple changes of bus or train. What might be considered simply an inconvenience by transport policy makers can be sufficient to prevent women seeking support, as one of our staff points out:

*Brokerage to enable people to travel to us or to their appointments can make a big difference to their access.*

- Access to **housing** is critical. In Queensland there are more than 9000 women who are homeless at any given time, with both older and young women over-represented.<sup>6</sup> Additional focus on and investment in women's housing, with wrap around support, would have long term and generational flow on benefits that help to keep women out of the system now and in the future, and offer significant cost savings to government.

***The Strategy needs to provide cross-agency leadership that ensures services accessed by Queensland women are flexible, responsive and inclusive***

Many of the women we work with at Anglicare, as noted above, struggle with multiple disadvantages that makes them particularly exposed and vulnerable to systemic barriers.

Sometimes that vulnerability is long term, wherein a ‘crisis’ may not be the temporary state that most funding and service frameworks assume it to be. Being responsive to women’s needs can be made more difficult when working within rigid systems and short term funding parameters:

*We’re not just ticking boxes. We need to be responsive to women, not telling them what to do. There’s no flow chart style process when supporting people. We need to be sensitive to changing needs and adapt to make sure we are person centred.*

The Strategy needs to make clear to program funders in all agencies that it takes time and flexibility to build trust with women who are deeply disadvantaged, and to establish formal and informal networks of social support and connectedness that will support them to live safe and satisfying lives.<sup>7</sup> As our staff point out:

*We can’t give them a list of tasks and expect they will be able to navigate systems. We need to advocate for and walk alongside them because the systems they have to deal with are exclusionary and re-traumatise women.*

It is important for the Strategy to articulate a cross-government view of what it means to provide effective services to women of all ages and backgrounds, because so much of this support work happens in partnership across agencies and sectors. Our staff and others in the sector recognise the need to build bridges to other services as we provide support to our female clients:

*We need to support women with opportunities to participate at different levels and with different forms of engagement with other community services. It’s critical to remember that we can’t supply everything that women need. What we can do is support women to engage with a broader network, but this takes time.*

***The Strategy needs to support attitude change through action and education***

Gender inequality is deeply rooted in attitude and cultural stereotypes, and requires a whole-of-community shift in beliefs and perspectives that impact every area of women’s lives.

- Discrimination and harassment, for example, are part of a continuum of gender-related violence<sup>8</sup> that requires multi-faceted, intensive and ongoing efforts to shift the dialogue. One important effort in this space can be seen in Queensland’s *Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Strategy 2016–2026*.
- Covid has gone some way to help educate the community on the value of the caring professions but this is a message that needs to continue to be heard.
- Flexible work practices, similarly, may possibly now be considered in a less gendered way: this may give us some foundation to build on when, or if, we return as a society to ‘business as usual’ work practices. (In other situations, however, Covid has more deeply embedded aspects of gender inequity. Women have borne the brunt of erratic work hours and our staff report fewer women engaging in programs because they “have to stay home and do the home schooling — women are taking the responsibility to take care of the children”.)

We need to acknowledge how many of our systems have been built by men, designed with a male lens on the world. We need to establish active and inclusive channels to question and change systems and processes that don’t work for the approximately 50 percent of our population who are women. This includes ‘generic’

or ‘mainstream’ policies in areas such as transport, labour relations, housing, education and the environment that may not have, at first glance, any gender implications. These are often the policies that do, in fact, have unintended impacts on women.

## Giving urgent attention to women’s economic security

Some of the challenges women face regarding economic security have been touched upon earlier in this submission, and the Queensland Women’s Strategy Discussion Paper also highlights key inequities in workforce participation, lower levels of superannuation, over-representation in lower paid industries (including the community sector) and the second biggest gender pay gap in the country, of 13.4%.

Covid has had a disproportionate impact on women’s economic security, exacerbating the above issues. Female-dominated industries and industry segments have been the hardest hit by Covid closures and reductions in trade; and women are over-represented in more precarious employment, including casual work without access to paid leave.<sup>9,10</sup> The Grattan Institute has pointed out the impact on mothers, many of whom are already on a ‘stop/start’ career path. Six months out of work, they note, can add another \$100,000 to the \$2 million average lifetime earnings gap between men and women. Mothers in couples, and single parents (four-fifths of whom are women), were also more likely to leave the labour force than other groups.<sup>11</sup> Macquarie University researchers also noted an immediate impact on family wellbeing, given that women often invest their earnings into the household.<sup>12</sup>

For many of the women Anglicare works with, poverty is a day-to-day reality. Layers of trauma may undermine women’s ability to gain employment, and there can be precursor issues such as mental health that need to be prioritised before a job search is feasible. Commonwealth financial supports such as JobSeeker and Youth Allowance are clearly inadequate, and campaigns such as Raise the Rate<sup>13</sup> have repeatedly demonstrated that these allowances are not enough to cover even basics such as housing, food, bills, and transport.

Women in domestic and family violence situations may find themselves the recipients of ‘sexually transmitted debt’, with the perpetrator accumulating huge debts on credit cards or cash advances. Such debt accrued by the partner makes it much harder for the woman to leave the relationship because she has insufficient funds to care for herself and/or children; and it can lead to blacklisting on rental databases due to arrears. It remains very difficult for a woman to have her name removed from a lease unless there is evidence of physical violence.

Economic security is key to women’s quality of life, and the Strategy needs to be very clear that this is not just an issue for one or two departments to address. The Grattan Institute suggests that making childcare cheaper is the biggest thing that can be done to support women’s employment (noting that this measure is not specifically *for* women but underpins women’s labour force participation).<sup>14</sup> While childcare subsidies are largely a Federal concern, as noted above, there is certainly scope for the Queensland Government to provide further support in this area, particularly for disadvantaged women. An expanded focus on education and training for women would also be valuable.<sup>15</sup>

Importantly, Grattan points out that measures specifically for women, while worthwhile, will always be small in the context of an overall budget, but the benefits that accrue when a gender lens is applied more broadly are significant:

*The much greater benefits come when governments design their broader supports with careful thought to the impact on women. Applying a gender lens helps ensure that the major measures work for women and deliver for the whole economy... Governments should make gender analysis part of their budget development processes, to reduce the*

*risk of women being overlooked or suffering unforeseen consequences from policy decisions.<sup>16</sup>*

The Queensland Women's Strategy could be an important lever in ensuring a gender lens across the policy and program activity of all Queensland Government departments.

## Being inclusive and recognising diversity — being reflective of the voices and experiences of all women and girls

*Sorry business is women's responsibility. I'm the oldest woman left across three families now, and I have to support that whole family and community as they work through their grief. Having the workplace flexibility to deal with that responsibility, not as an exception but as an accepted part of who I am as a valued staff member, is so important.*

*Cultural safety for an Indigenous woman doesn't just mean the easy things like hanging Aboriginal art on a wall or celebrating significant days. These are important but culture is so much deeper than this – it's a way of life that involves obligations to family and community.*

*So cultural safety for me means addressing the hard things as well — effort and investment and understanding — and it needs policies to be living things that reflect the realities of the women they impact.*

*Female Indigenous staff member*

An effective Queensland Women's Strategy must recognise the unique challenges of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women from non English-speaking backgrounds, young women, older women, women who identify as LGBTIQ+, women with a disability, and those who live in rural and remote areas. As researcher Margaret Alston comments: "It is important to understand that any discussion of women as an undifferentiated group is naive and simplistic".<sup>17</sup>

The Strategy cannot be generic. To be meaningful, it will need to encompass the diversity and individualism of Queensland women, and to be informed by multiple lenses — not just a gender lens, but also the perspectives of First Nations women, women with disabilities and others.

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission provides examples of the stark differences in what mattered to the diverse women in their *Listening Tour Community Report*:<sup>18</sup>

*[I]ssues of primary concern to many Indigenous women in remote communities were basic living conditions, such as the ability to live safely, access to housing, access to education or employment and access to healthcare.*

*For women in low paid industries, particularly those in female dominated sectors, better pay and basic workplace conditions, such as tea breaks and access to toilets, were the important concerns.*

*For refugee women, access to education and employment without the fear of racial discrimination was most important, along with the need for social acceptance of cultural difference.*

*For women with disabilities, the ability to live safely and have autonomy over one's life decisions was critical, as well as the ability to access education and employment.*

Without the benefit of these various perspectives, we cannot assume that strategies and policies and programs addressing diversity are actually making a positive difference to the lives of women affected by them.

The Strategy has a responsibility to support meaningful action that assists organisations and businesses in their ongoing journey to make their spaces and policies equitable, safe and welcoming for *all* Queensland women.

## Conclusion

At its core, achieving gender equity will be dependent on long term attitudinal change. Attitudes however shift with action, and a Queensland Women's Strategy, informed by women themselves, has the potential to drive activity contributing to such change if the Queensland Government is willing to take brave steps.

It is only by chipping away at the barriers that the walls come down.

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