

Politics

Ignored and given scraps: Office for Women demeaned by Morrison government

It is given no say, has meagre funding and few staff. Just another example of the regard in which women are held by the government.

AMBER SCHULTZ FEB 24, 2021  27



(IMAGE: TOM RED/PRIVATE MEDIA)

The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet’s Office for Women is supposed to “deliver policies

It's a big job. Yet it has just a handful of staff, offers meagre grants, and is rarely consulted about topics within its jurisdiction.

The office hasn't responded to Australia's landmark report on workplace sexual violence, and has yet to comment on the multiple allegations of rape and assault in Parliament House.

Spoken over and not consulted

The Office for Women was not consulted about plans to allow Australians early access to superannuation — a plan which raised concerns about widening the gender super gap and the potential for domestic or family violence victims to be financially abused by their partner.

It wasn't consulted about JobSeeker and JobKeeper. It had minor input on early education and care at the beginning of the pandemic — but its input was ignored — and wasn't consulted when free childcare was removed later in the year.



**eigning men in the
ison government —
no let-up in sight**

The office wasn't even consulted about the \$150 million scheme to boost females in sport or about the latest round of tax cuts. It's not clear whether it was consulted about the closure of the Family Court or the Respect@Work workplace sexual violence

In the report, sex discrimination commissioner Kate Jenkins called for her office to have new powers to investigate harassment claims in the workplace. Attorney-General Christian Porter, who has been accused of repeatedly making offensive and sexist comments, is in charge of responding to the report and has yet to do so.

The office's lack of input might explain why the latest budget threw women under the bus, with very little allocated to benefiting women. The budget instead stimulates male-dominated jobs and industries.

The only grant available through the office currently is under the Women's Leadership and Development Program. \$4.9 million is available for women's alliance groups, which can receive a maximum of \$820,898 across two years.

The role of the office and its lack of transparency around staffing levels (which were revealed nearly two months after the question was posed) has routinely been scrutinised in question time.

A spokesperson for the National Foundation for Australian Women told *Crikey* the office has been silent on key issues including pay equity, women's participation in superannuation and industrial relations.

"You would expect the office to be taking a stand ... there is very little evidence that it's being an advocate [for women]."

Trish Bergin was the first assistant secretary at the office between 2017 and 2019. She is now co-director of the 50/50 by 2030 Foundation. Bergin says she left because it was an “impossible job”.

“It’s under-resourced,” she told *Crikey*. “It does not have any structural power. You have to scramble the whole time to try and find out what’s going on [as] the office is not looped into the policy process in a systematic way.”

The Office for Women has just 39 staff — less than half it had before 2010, Bergin says.

During her time working there, Bergin says she was repeatedly denied access to information such as modelling and data around tax cuts.

“The treasurer’s office particularly just refuses to allow any kind of input from the Office for Women,” she said, citing the government’s refusal to acknowledge gender disparity.

In 2019 Treasurer Josh Frydenberg triumphantly — and erroneously — said the “gender pay gap has closed”. The national gap sits at 14%.

Bergin has called on Prime Minister Scott Morrison to name Jenkins to the independent inquiry into the Parliament House workplace.

A shadow of its former self

terms of gender impact.

Since the mid-'90s, however, beginning under John Howard, the office's scope and relevance have been cut down.

It was moved to the Department of Family and Community Services (only moving back to the cabinet in 2013) and in 2014 the women's budget statement was abandoned by then-minister for women Tony Abbott.

"It's a shadow of its former self," Bergin said.

Karen O'Connell formerly worked at the Australian Human Rights Commission and is an expert in discrimination. She told *Crikey* many groups set up to deal with gender inequality were chronically under-resourced.

"What tends to happen with these parts of government is they're very easily disempowered," she said.

"My sense is that they spend a lot of time just focused on their own survival."

O'Connell isn't convinced the office is well suited to respond to the allegations of parliamentary abuse.

"[It should] play a part in improving and providing expertise to the government internal processes that need fixing," she said.

part of the government that could truly say that they stand outside of the system.”

The government has announced four internal reviews to look into parliament’s culture and its response to Brittany Higgins’ allegations.

Update: A spokesperson from The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet told *Crikey* the government is in the process of implementing a number of the Respect@Work report’s key recommendations, including establishing the Respect@Work Council, and conducting a survey on sexual harassment in the workplace.

“The government is considering the remaining recommendations in detail,” the spokesperson said.

They did not respond to questions about whether the office had been consulted about the closure of the Family Court or whether it will respond to Brittany Higgins’ rape allegations.

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Amber previously worked for Nine News and *The Age* and created student comedy talk show *The Struggle*. She was a Young Walkley



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