



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT AND
WORKPLACE RELATIONS

Reference: Pay equity and increasing female participation in the workforce

THURSDAY, 28 MAY 2009

CANBERRA

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

INTERNET

Hansard transcripts of public hearings are made available on the internet when authorised by the committee.

The internet address is:

<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard>

To search the parliamentary database, go to:

<http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au>

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS

Thursday, 28 May 2009

Members: Ms Jackson (*Chair*), Mr Haase (*Deputy Chair*), Ms Bird, Ms Hall, Mr Hayes, Mr Keenan, Mr Marles, Mr Ramsey, Dr Southcott and Mr Symon

Members in attendance: Ms Bird, Mr Haase, Ms Jackson and Mr Ramsey

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

The causes of any potential disadvantages in relation to women's participation in the workforce including, but not limited to:

- The adequacy of current data to reliably monitor employment changes that may impact on pay equity issues;
- The need for education and information among employers, employees and trade unions in relation to pay equity issues;
- Current structural arrangements in the negotiation of wages that may impact disproportionately on women;
- The adequacy of recent and current equal remuneration provisions in state and federal workplace relations legislation;
- The adequacy of current arrangements to ensure fair access to training and promotion for women who have taken maternity leave and/or returned to work part time and/or sought flexible work hours; and
- The need for further legislative reform to address pay equity in Australia.

WITNESSES

DUNDAS, Ms Roslyn, Director, Australian Capital Territory Council of Social Service..... 1

WILLIAMS, Ms Marcia, Executive Director, Women’s Centre for Health Matters..... 1

Committee met at 11.25 am**DUNDAS, Ms Roslyn, Director, Australian Capital Territory Council of Social Service****WILLIAMS, Ms Marcia, Executive Director, Women's Centre for Health Matters**

CHAIR (Ms Jackson)—Welcome. This is the 22nd public hearing for the committee's inquiry into pay equity and associated issues relating to increasing female participation in the workforce. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that this hearing is a legal proceeding of the parliament and therefore has the same standing as proceedings of the respective houses. I advise you that these proceedings are being broadcast on the internet. We have received your written submissions to this inquiry. Would you like to make an opening statement before the committee puts a few questions to you based on your submission?

Ms Dundas—Thank you very much, Chair. I will just start off by giving you a brief background on the role of the ACT Council of Social Service, who I am representing today.

The ACT Council of Social Service is the peak body for the community sector here in the ACT. We take on a dual role of representing the view of the community sector, advocating for the community sector, and providing a voice for those living with disadvantage in our community. We are part of the Council of Social Service network, so we are assisted with the COSSs in all states and territories and the Australian Council of Social Service. But the views that we are representing here today are those of the ACT Council of Social Service.

We are pleased that the committee is undertaking this inquiry. We think it is a very important issue that requires the investigation of a committee such as yours. We hope that there will be a range of recommendations on how to take steps to end the pay inequality that exists in our society today and that you can put forward some strategies for looking to overcome this.

One of the main areas where pay inequity is clearly evidenced is in the community sector itself. I draw the committee's attention to a recent decision of the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission. A few weeks ago, I believe, they made a determination around the award for community sector workers in Queensland. They made their determination based on the fact that they believe there is gender inequity that is resulting in lower wages for the community sector. They state in their determination:

When considered as a whole a pattern emerges that gender is at the core of present work value of the community services sector. Accordingly, the Commission finds, that—

based on their research and the evidence put before them, community sector—

... work has been undervalued on a gender basis.

They have recommended significant changes to the award in Queensland for community sector workers. This is a very important step in recognising that the work of the community sector has been traditionally undervalued because of the view of the community that it is gendered work and that this needs to be overcome.

There are a range of other issues outside of the community sector where we see evidence of ongoing pay inequity in the community. One of those is that women in the workforce are a higher proportion of those undertaking part-time work and they are generally those who will take time off work for caring responsibilities, whether that is for their own children, for family or for other members in their community.

This reduces the amount of time they have not only to earn wages day to day but also to accumulate superannuation for the future. Our submission was put to you prior to the recently announced government decision to introduce paid maternity leave, to come in in the 2011 financial year. We are very supportive of the government's move to finally introduce paid maternity leave, but we note that the scheme as outlined will not include superannuation payments, although that decision will be subject to review two years after the scheme has commenced.

One of the issues we outlined in our submission is that when women do take time off work, for a range of caring responsibilities, whilst they might be able to access entitlements such as paid maternity leave or other things from their work, they are then not accumulating superannuation at the same time. This leads to inequalities in terms of their overall pay and receipt of pay into the future.

They are the main issues that I wanted to touch on outside of the work that is already done in the submission. I will hand over now to Ms Williams to talk about health aspects.

Ms Williams—Our organisation is a not-for-profit community organisation and we work to improve the health and wellbeing of women in the ACT and the region, with a particular focus on disadvantaged women. You might wonder what that has to do with the committee's work, but in the sort of work we do in researching issues around women—particularly in an area like the ACT—there are strong factors around the link between health and wellbeing and the issues of income and the distribution of income, in terms of education and literacy, unemployment and, obviously, the working conditions that surround employment. The research has shown that, when those conditions are good and when those issues are not there, you can actually provide better financial security, better social status, better personal development, better social relations and self-esteem, and a strong link to protection from physical and mental illness too.

In a lot of other countries, international research has shown that those social determinants of health are some of the issues that impact on health policy but that other policies, like employment policy, are just as important in terms of shaping the health policy; therefore, it needs to be linked strongly to it. In fact, I think some of the studies actually show that, the more income you have, the more likely you are to live longer and live healthier. From the point of view of supporting ACTCOSS, we bring some of those research items we have done, particularly in the ACT, which is a relatively wealthy territory.

In comparison, a lot of the things we have looked at have shown that it is easy to overlook the fact that there are high numbers of women who are disadvantaged here. For example, women on low incomes report poor health five times more than women with high incomes. So there are some real disparities in the ACT that we see for disadvantaged people. Those are the sorts of things we can support ACTCOSS with in terms of the information we have.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. Firstly, I will take up the question of superannuation. That has been raised with us by many people. There has been a question mark about precisely how we deal with it. You have touched on paid parental leave and the review of that decision in two years time.

Ms Dundas—Two years once the scheme starts, so we will not be seeing that until 2013.

CHAIR—I am curious about whether you think the current system of superannuation is somehow discriminatory. Are there aspects of the current arrangements with industry superannuation that you think are discriminatory?

Ms Dundas—The superannuation scheme that we currently have is dependent upon the individual's paid employment profile and their wage level. So it is based on current earnings and current engagement with the workforce. It systemically disadvantages those who, for whatever reason, are having their work valued at a lower level. This goes back to the pay inequality issues and also does not recognise work that might happen outside what is traditionally recognised as the paid workforce should be valued and it is not.

There are obvious reasons why the current system is inadequate. NATSEM research that we quote in our submission shows that 30 per cent of women aged 45 to 59 in 2004 had no superannuation at all. That is quite scary, in terms of how we, as a country and an economy, are going to be able to support those women once they retire from the workforce altogether or have less supports to turn to.

CHAIR—In particular I suspect my question went to the minimum number of hours worked. We have seen that, whilst women predominate in part-time work, it is not unusual for people on low incomes, both men and women, to have more than one part-time position. It is theoretically possible for someone to be working 30 or 40 hours a week in a number of part-time positions, none of which by themselves are eligible—

Ms Williams—Allows them to be eligible for superannuation.

Ms Dundas—Because of the \$450 per month benchmark before superannuation kicks in.

CHAIR—Anecdotally, would you say that there are people who are disadvantaged or on lower incomes who do work in that kind of pattern, that have multiple part-time positions?

Ms Dundas—Absolutely. So they are not accumulating superannuation, and, to be blunt, many of them, due to their circumstances, will probably say, 'That's an issue for tomorrow.' They are working hard to get all those different income streams in to deal with the day-to-day cost pressures that they are meeting at the moment. I think that is part of what Ms Williams was touching on, in terms of the health aspects around the pay inequity, in that those on lower incomes are more likely to be suffering health issues and will not have the same educational outcomes, and there are a range of other factors which mean that, any money they get in, they are keen to use to meet the current demands of their life, be that rent, food, medical bills—all of those kinds of things. They do not have the ability even to save personally for the future.

CHAIR—So you could have the best education and awareness program in the world operating about the benefits of superannuation, but if a person is not on a reasonable income they are not going to be able to save for the future.

Ms Williams—I think some of the issues that we have found, in terms of some of the disadvantaged groups that we have worked with in the ACT, relate to things like the extra costs that go to accessing work too. Particularly for women with disabilities, there are issues around the costs of transport that is particularly targeted to their needs. Child care is an increasing issue in terms of cost. Again going back to the women with disabilities, there are issues around—as Ms Dundas was saying—their money going on things that are essential. That extra money goes straight to things like support and care, for those women who require care or medication. It is a situation that keeps on going round and round.

Ms Dundas—I think there could be work undertaken that looks at how superannuation is calculated and whether or not we could look at an individual's monthly earnings, as opposed to an individual employer based scheme. Possibly through the tax system or another way, we could look at how a whole month's earnings are taken in or a whole year's earnings are taken in and then put the guarantee on top of that.

CHAIR—You are suggesting not that the government step in and pay the superannuation contribution in those circumstances but that there should be some mechanism to harvest it—for want of a better word—from the employer.

Ms Dundas—The employers that the people are working for.

CHAIR—Employers—plural.

Ms Dundas—This is not my particular area of expertise, so some economists might laugh at me now, but there is work being done in the ACT on portable long-service leave. We have had it for a number of years for the construction industry and the cleaning industry, and there is work being undertaken to bring it in for the community services industries. It is a scheme whereby—regardless of the particular employer you work with, as long as you are within the sector more broadly, and it is a defined sector—you will accumulate long-service leave. So your relationship with an employer might change, but because you are in the same industry you are still accruing that entitlement. After the mandatory time—seven or 10 years—you will be able to access it. I think we could look at similar schemes—

Mr RAMSEY—Funded by whom if you have had multiple employers?

CHAIR—It is all part of the employment on costs, so an employer does not pay for any more. For example, most employers have an accumulation towards long-service leave. If you are employed by one employer for a year, instead of that just sitting on the employer's books, it goes into the long-service leave fund, which is how it operates.

Ms Dundas—Then the fund can invest that money for the benefit of the whole scheme so, if there are significant shifts in the workforce profile for the industries, the fund has been able to accumulate to be able to manage those shifts. It is the entitlement that would have had to have been accrued anyway but, instead of it sitting in the employer's bank account, it sits in the

board's bank account, because they are managed by boards. It also means that, if any of these particular employers come to the point where they are no longer operational, those entitlements are protected for bankruptcy purposes. They are not at the bottom of the list.

Mr RAMSEY—It becomes an up-front cost of employment, rather than a tail-end cost.

Ms Dundas—Yes.

Mr HAASE—With respect, Chair, it does make a mockery of the term 'long service'. It is simply another employment cost and employee benefit.

Ms Dundas—It is in recognition of service to the industry. When there are so many small employers—

Mr HAASE—Long-service leave was designed to reward employees for their loyalty to the employer.

Ms Dundas—We see it as loyalty to the industry.

Mr HAASE—It needs to be renamed.

CHAIR—That is his view.

Mr HAASE—It needs to be called 'industry long service benefits', not something else.

Ms Dundas—That is certainly something that could be discussed here in the ACT, but I think that, when we are looking at pay equity issues, it is a model that could be discussed in terms of superannuation.

CHAIR—We might have to agree to disagree. I think the interesting thing about long-service leave funds, or those sorts of continuity funds, is that they generally apply in male-dominated industries—for example, construction. I am not aware of them—

Ms Dundas—It applies in the cleaning industry.

CHAIR—other than cleaning in the ACT, but that has only been in operation for six years, perhaps.

Ms Dundas—Yes. I put it forward as a model that could be considered when we are looking at supporting into the future those who work majority part time and those who work for a range of different employers and are not accruing superannuation

Mr HAASE—It is hardly a fair question to ask of you, but I ask it anyhow. You would understand that the idea of superannuation and compulsory employer contributions to superannuation was an accounting principle, almost, that recognised the high cost to the taxpayer of welfare upon retirement for those who had not accumulated a personalised nest egg.

Ms Dundas—Yes.

Mr HAASE—Unless we are going to have the employer pay superannuation contributions during the absence of an employee at work, it is going to have to be paid by the government and that really does not take the pressure off the taxpayer; it puts the pressure on now rather than having the pressure put on at the end of the individual's working life. That would be a dilemma for us as a committee making recommendations, given that we hold true to the belief that compulsory superannuation is to ease the taxpayer burden eventually. Might you comment on that? You have proposed that the principle of payment of superannuation be maintained during the period of maternity leave, for instance. Do you reconcile that problem in your mind at all? Can you speak to that dilemma?

Ms Dundas—When we are looking at the fact that 30 per cent of women who are to retire in the next 10 years have no superannuation at all—and there is another significant proportion of the population who have less than \$8,000 in their superannuation fund and they are looking to retire in the next 10 to 20 years—we see that there will be a burden. I see this committee as having the opportunity to look at how we disperse that burden through industries and through different means now as opposed to forcing generation Y to work until they are 80 so that they continue to pay tax to ensure that people who live until they are 112 are able to do so in comfort. We have shifting demographics. We have problems that require new solutions and some shifts in the way that we value work and in what we value as work.

Mr HAASE—You might as an organisation recognise an equity problem. Is it something that comes to you from your members or those whom you represent? Do they say to you, 'If only I knew I was going to get a fair deal with superannuation, I would re-enter the workforce'? Keep in mind that our motivation for this inquiry is to encourage women back into the workforce. Do they come to you saying, 'We are not entering the workforce because we do not believe we are equitably treated when it comes to superannuation'?

Ms Dundas—I think that there are many who are not returning to the workforce because they are faced with a range of immediate life pressures, and conversations about superannuation and the future that is 10 to 20 years away are not on their radar because of the issues that they have to deal with right now.

Ms BIRD—I will ask something from another angle. One of the big issues—in fact, it was the previous government that identified it—was the demographic shift that you talk about. The other part of looking at things like paid maternity leave and better superannuation arrangements is to encourage people to have children. As you say, all of us who are going to be in retirement villages and so forth would like a generation available as a workforce to look after us and, if we are not reproducing, we are going to have a real problem there as well. For women putting off having families and choosing not to have babies, does this financial situation play a part in their thinking as well?

Ms Dundas—I believe so.

Ms Williams—Yes. I am just trying to think of what I could quote, but I cannot off the top of my head. I know I have read it, but I think there has been some recent research that shows that.

Ms BIRD—Okay.

Ms Williams—Back to the other question, I think it is not just around the absence of the workers; there are many women who are already in the workforce and working quite a few hours but not getting access to the superannuation because of the rules you talked about. That is the real issue where a lot of more disadvantaged women miss out on being able to accumulate superannuation, because it is generally people from low socioeconomic backgrounds who are in those casualised workforces or in those industries where those sorts of things apply and who group bits of work together. It is not that they are not considering going back into the workforce; they are already in the workforce and they are still not getting access to the superannuation.

Mr HAASE—My primary motivation in this is to attract employees to the workforce, whether it is to look after me in my old age or not. I appreciate that you would have a natural interest in this inequity or mistake—call it what you like. I know that our very efficient secretariat could find out for us—and I wonder if you know, Chair—but, with regard to the responsibility on the \$450 per month, do you know whether the legislation or regulation says nothing about accumulation from various employers?

CHAIR—Nothing.

Ms Dundas—Because it is an employer based scheme so, if one individual earns less than \$450 with you as an employer in that month, you do not have the requirement to pay superannuation even if that individual has earned \$300 from you and \$300 from a different employer.

Mr HAASE—Yes, of course. The tax act has something to say about that, and you have accumulating employers and pay advice slips on one taxation return.

CHAIR—They certainly do not miss out on that!

Mr HAASE—They do not, but, regardless of what you call the model, if there is an accumulation and note of total earnings for the purposes of superannuation, employers might find it odd. They would say it would make a nonsense, in many cases, of this stated \$450 minimum because the employer, who is paying a part-time employee well below the \$450, would say: ‘Why have I got to make a contribution to this employee’s superannuation when they are not working for me in excess of \$450 a month?’ It would have some impact.

CHAIR—It would but, if they were only paying for the same superannuation guarantee as they do for every other employee for the hours that were worked by them—I think what is being suggested is—

Mr HAASE—But it takes the exemption away, doesn’t it? It makes it irrelevant for a lot of this work.

CHAIR—What is being suggested, I think, is that the exemption is discriminatory—that it disproportionately impacts on the low-paid, and women are disproportionately represented in that group.

Mr HAASE—I understand the motivation, but I am looking at the reception to this idea. No, it is a good point and I am surprised that it has not been addressed in some other forum in the past.

CHAIR—I think they have tried.

Mr HAASE—It needs to be addressed. I think it is something that I would want to recommend.

Mr RAMSEY—I have some more questions along the lines of superannuation. Firstly, are you sure that that is \$450 a month and not \$450 a fortnight?

CHAIR—It is \$450 a month.

Mr RAMSEY—Okay. From my recent recollection of being an employer, I had \$450 a fortnight stuck in my head. Anyway, I accept \$450 a month. That is going to be about \$550 a year. Even if they have three employees or something like that and amounts of money of less than \$450 on average—which is what it will be; not everyone will be sitting on \$449—this, in total, is not really going to be a very big pool of money. It will come as just another administrative workload on employers. I think that is one of the reasons the figure is there: that type of money going into the superannuation fund tends to get chewed up, just about, in administration costs. Whether or not it is really worth making serious recommendations about this when we are dealing with something that is not big enough to make a real impact or whether it is other things we need to be looking at, I don't know.

Ms Dundas—I think we need to start somewhere. When we are talking about groups of the population who have no superannuation at all or have very little amounts of superannuation, a little bit more can help overcome the administration fees that are chewing up their current low rates of superannuation. We talk about building nest eggs; we talk about starting from little. There is the superannuation co-contribution scheme, but a lot of people cannot even think of accessing that because they are not even getting the little bit of support from their employers to put some money away. So I certainly do encourage the committee to think creatively and think broadly—do not necessarily throw out an idea because you think it is too small. When you are looking at individuals who are earning less than \$450 a month, a little bit of savings is better than nothing.

Ms BIRD—My understanding of the issue is that there would not just be \$500 in the year's superannuation, because they are probably holding two or three jobs.

Mr RAMSEY—Yes, I understand that.

Ms BIRD—It could actually be \$1,000 or \$1,500 a year.

Ms Williams—And it removes, from my understanding of some of the reading around, the disincentives of trying to piece together, to get that income, a number of jobs. At the moment, that is a disincentive, and people—women, in particular—are trying to find those full-time ones. We know that many of those groups will not be able to access those because they are in the sorts

of industries or sectors where they cannot. So it is actually about a disincentive to being able to piece more of those together to get more as well.

CHAIR—And make them eligible for co-contribution schemes and the like.

Mr RAMSEY—Can I throw another idea at you that I have put up a couple of times at this committee—and I think it has gone down like a lead balloon. Given that the accumulation of superannuation in a partnership can be divided at a time when a partnership divides, do you ever give any thought to the idea that, rather than dividing superannuation at the time the partnership divides, the accumulation of superannuation should be in separate accounts? Given that we have family tax benefits here and all these types of things, we could offer incentives in the tax scheme—and these would be big changes—for people to register as partnerships because there is an advantage to do so. Pooling income for taxation purposes may be a bridge too far, but you can do things. So, when you took time off and decided as a couple that you were going to raise a family, and one person sacrificed their job for that time, the superannuation—the accumulated joint superannuation—would still accumulate in separate accounts all the time. In the event of a breakdown of that relationship, it would be something you would not even have to fight about. In fact, it would empower people to make decisions about the future. Has the balloon got any more air in it today? I do not know.

Ms Dundas—It is certainly an interesting proposal.

CHAIR—I was just thinking about it from a personal perspective.

Mr RAMSEY—You said to think outside the square!

Ms Dundas—It takes a very ‘white picket fence’ view of relationships and how—

Mr RAMSEY—It is planning for failure? I would not have said that, but anyway.

Ms Dundas—Maybe I will answer this in another way. There is some research that we talk about in this report and there was a second lot of research that we did with NATSEM, after this submission was made to you, around the make-up of low-income and disadvantaged households in the ACT. Thirteen per cent of the ACT population is in what we call the lowest income quintile, which means that they are living in disadvantage. These households are most likely to be headed by single women with children. I cannot go back and look at each of these households and tell you when it went from being a partnership that brought forth a child to being a single woman headed household, but I doubt there would have been very much time in some of those relationships to accumulate the superannuation for it to be divided. I do not think that scheme may work for what we see as the target in addressing disadvantage, just because of the way that relationships and support networks are formed in some of those instances.

Ms BIRD—Plus there is the issue that a lot of young couples and families now hold separate accounts. They do not have a view of ‘what is yours is mine’. Partnerships are in the old business sense and I think there would be real resistance, even from beneficiaries. I am sure my partner would love my superannuation, even with the reduced scheme that the newer members are on! But I think the presumption that people have a shared view of their income has changed.

Mr RAMSEY—They do not have to, in this case.

Ms BIRD—I appreciate that.

CHAIR—Keep trying. I will move to another area now. You talk about something called the Women's Data Warehouse website. I am not that familiar with it. You seem keen to have it reinstated. I preface my question by saying that one of the irritations for us has been that sometimes the quality of the data that is being kept is kind of questionable. We have had lots of submissions saying that we not only need more data but we need better data because there is no one factor causing the pay equity gap but there are a multiplicity of factors and, to be able to identify them with greater precision, we need more information. I am curious as to how reliable you felt the information was that you were getting through that website. Was it good disaggregated data on women's access to training?

Ms Dundas—I do not think it was data at the level you are talking about. What is disappointing is that now there is not even that. Whilst there may have been significant improvements that could have been made to the data that was available or the questions that were asked to lead to the data that was available, the reaction of 'It's too hard; let's shut it all down' was not the outcome that we were looking for. We understand that there are flaws with the data collection. The outcome that we were looking for was a decision to work to improve that and make that information publicly available.

CHAIR—How were your organisations using that data? Why do you think it is important to have it back?

Ms Dundas—To speak more broadly, we use a range of data all of the time, be that ABS data or data that we collect independently through research with organisations like NATSEM. The women's centre has been doing a range of surveys. It is this data that helps develop evidence based approaches to the work that is going on and allows us to keep better track of how we as a society are progressing. The absence of data is an absence of information—an absence of the evidence base.

CHAIR—And you are using it to better target your assistance and programs to your client groups as well, I assume?

Ms Williams—From my perspective it is more about influencing government about the impacts on those groups of some of the policies and how they link. So it is not just about the delivery of services, although a lot of the women's services groups do use it for that in terms of thinking about their submissions and what services need to be delivered. But I guess it is more about being able to shape policy and link some of those outcomes.

One of the biggest issues we have in the ACT in particular is around small sizes in the territory. When you average out ACT stats, the average does not show that diverse group. I guess the other issue for us is that that disaggregation is really not by all the things you need, to be able to figure out the impact of those policies that we have been talking about: things like gender, yes—although even in the ACT a lot of that is not in the numbers that we need—but also things like age, and Indigenous or CALD backgrounds. Those are the issues around the data.

CHAIR—Do you know why it has been decommissioned or why it is no longer available?

Ms Dundas—I believe—and this is not necessarily true—that it was to do with the efficiency dividends that were being asked of departments, especially around the ABS and their ability to collect data, but it might have happened at a time also where the ACT Office for Women was at a point where it was reassessing what activities it was undertaking.

Mr HAASE—When was it dropped?

Ms Dundas—I cannot give you an exact date on that, I am sorry.

Mr HAASE—When were you aware that it was no longer in existence?

Ms Williams—I will have to give a caveat: I have not been in my job very long—only nine weeks. So neither of us were around when the submission was put in.

Mr HAASE—Okay. That is not a fair question to ask you, then.

Ms Williams—But we could find out for you.

Ms Dundas—I think what needs to be stressed and is important here is the need for both quantitative and qualitative data around the impact of programs and the targeting of programs. Just getting a statistical profile that says, ‘This is a population of 50; 20 of them are women and 30 of them are men, and 17 of them are paid this much and 12 of them are paid this much,’ does not actually give us a true gender analysis. The ACT government has made a commitment to start implementing a gender audit of programs, and that will, we believe, roll out later this year as a trial. But there is a lot of work happening both nationally and internationally on how we provide or gather more useful information around the targeting of programs through a gender lens.

CHAIR—And the ACT government has recently announced that it intends to apply this gender audit to all its programs.

Ms Dundas—It will be doing a trial, I believe, in the second half of the year on our women’s health program. But I am sure the ACT government, if you were to write to them, would be happy to provide you with more information on that.

CHAIR—Are there any other questions? I have a couple more, if I can hog the floor for a bit.

Mr HAASE—Chair, before you move on: this ACT Women’s Plan—is that something that you are inquiring about?

CHAIR—That is what I was going to ask about.

Mr HAASE—Then I give way.

CHAIR—Never on the important stuff! I just wanted to know a little bit more about this Women’s Plan. I take it that it is a government initiative that has involved a number of women’s

organisations and representative groups, but could you tell me a bit more about the plan and how long it has been in place and whether—subject to how long it has been in place; if it has been in place for a year or so—you have any views about its success or otherwise.

Ms Dundas—To provide a little bit of context, the ACT government has a number of plans—

Ms BIRD—A lot of plans!

Ms Dundas—and the ACT Women's Plan sits underneath that. There is what is called the Canberra Plan and underneath that there are three main plans: the Social Plan, the economic white paper and the sustainability environmental plan. The Women's Plan is a step down from the Canberra Social Plan. The Women's Plan was established or released, I believe, in around 2003 after an ACT parliament inquiry into the status of women in the ACT. It is, I believe, due for review very soon, perhaps in the next 12 months.

Ms Williams—In the next six months. They are just about to review and reassess how much of an impact it has had and what sort of things need to go into it for the reshape.

Ms Dundas—It is split into a range of different categories and provides the framework for targeting the ACT government's response to addressing what were raised through that committee inquiry as inequalities and areas of need for the female population—and, in its entirety, the whole ACT population—and to address gender issues.

Mr HAASE—To press the point, you are not aware of any of the outcomes, positive or negative?

Ms Dundas—Certainly, there have been positive and negative outcomes of the Women's Plan. Because I do not have a full plan in front of me, I hesitate to provide you with a detailed analysis. But certainly the assembly committees have been looking into that. The ACT government itself has been going through estimates for its own budget, this week and last week. There was some conversation about the ACT Women's Plan and some of the strategies underneath that, including targeted women's grants for women's groups but also for individuals looking to return to the workforce. An ACT government program was established to provide small grants of \$1,000 or less to women who are looking to re-enter the workforce but who need a step, whether that is getting the car serviced so they can get to work—

Mr HAASE—Transport, yes.

Ms Dundas—or providing for child care while interviews are taking place or helping people to access appropriate clothing. If somebody has been out of the workforce for a number of years they no longer have suitable attire for an interview process. It was a very small grants program targeted at that. Whilst we certainly support the intent of that government program, we recognise that it has not been as well utilised as was anticipated. That may be due to how information was provided stating that this scheme was available, how easy that information was to access and how easy it was to access the program itself. But the number of jobs out there which will work for somebody who is looking to re-enter the workforce but who still has a range of other commitments that they are looking to maintain still remains an issue.

Ms Williams—From my understanding in the short time, one positive out of the ACT Women's Plan was that it was a cross-departmental thing. The real positive was that it was not seen as an ACT Office for Women issue. Each department actually had targets that they had to meet underneath the Women's Plan. For example, the health department was actually focused on women's issues as part of that and had to address some targets. I think from the sector's point of view it actually started to have much more of a focus on women—which would not have been there—without it being across the whole lot. It actually made them focus more on that. I would not be able to comment on whether they were the right targets.

Mr HAASE—Our major interest would be from the perspective of any positive impact. We are confronted with some magnificent theory that will change the world. It is wonderful to observe just a modicum of positive change as a result and that is what I seek and we as a committee seek.

Ms Dundas—I think there have been some positive changes arising out of the Women's Plan of articulating a focus on issues and supporting the whole-of-government approach and the community approach to how these identified issues are addressed. I am sorry that I do not have a copy in front of me to talk that through with you.

Ms Williams—Yes. I am just thinking about the sorts of things. There has been quite a bit of movement around mental health issues and also around domestic violence issues. It has driven much more of a whole-of-government approach and much more involvement of the sectors. Particularly, the Women's Plan came out of a lot of involvement by the sector in influencing what a lot of those were. I know the review is very much going to be about where the successes are and what needs to change.

CHAIR—So there is a review currently?

Ms Williams—I was at a meeting just the other day. My understanding is that in the next six months they are going to start reviewing it.

Ms Dundas—The assembly committee inquiry took place over 2002, so I believe the plan was probably launched in 2003.

CHAIR—So it has been in place for some time.

Ms Dundas—Yes.

CHAIR—I know in your submission you referred to some of the issues associated with women re-entering the workforce, and it appears from the information available that, unusually, for example, more females than males enrolled in vocational education and training in 2006, which would run against the trend of the traditional male/female jobs. Maybe we will look forward to what comes out of the review.

Mr HAASE—That could be a great foundation, couldn't it? If we can communicate the availability of a fund that assists somebody to get that set of clothes or have the children minded or get the transport and the result is that they successfully sit an interview and get a job and stay

in that job, that would be very instructive for this committee in our recommendations. But I believe those things exist already, Chair, through Centrelink services and employment services.

CHAIR—Yes, but only if you are eligible for Newstart. I think that is the problem.

Ms Dundas—Yes, and the eligibility for the particular ACT grant was different to meet those identified gaps. It is interesting how the work of this committee will overlap with the rollout of the new—and I am sorry if I get the name wrong—Jobs Australia program with the changes to those providers and the work that they will be doing to support those who are unemployed return to the workforce. There has been a significant shift in how that will be rolled out, and from 1 July we will start to see that take place. You are not immediately going to have a new raft of information for the committee, but there is some work that has already been undertaken to recognise what it is that people will need.

CHAIR—That just highlights, at least in my mind and perhaps for the members of the committee, the need to have some sort of evaluation system that does in fact deal with gender equity related issues as part of an evaluation of any program that is in place.

Ms Williams—And including more than just gender. I will just make a comment on how people access that information. One of the issues that we find with health and wellbeing information is that that mainstream approach to how you advertise a new program or a new policy is not necessarily the way that women in those most disadvantaged groups would access that information. We are going to do a new survey in the new financial year around that to try and get a little bit more data and evidence from across the ACT. There are issues around the way people access that information which probably—

CHAIR—We know about that in our own electorate offices with our own job of trying to get our messages out, or just our names out, sometimes. There is so much information out there now, and you are hit, bombarded, by information all the time. It is not necessarily useful to you or relevant. I think that is why there is more of the case management type model going into the job services area. People regularly say, ‘Wouldn’t it be fantastic if there was a one-stop shop that you could go to that told you every government program that was available to assist you!’ Yes, well—I agreed.

Do committee members have any other questions? Is there anything that you would like to add as a result of our questioning of you?

Ms Dundas—I would again like to thank the committee for undertaking this work. It is very timely. You can provide some real discussion about how we can work to address these issues, which have been around for far too long in terms of both the community sector workforce and the workforce more broadly. If we can look to address some of the inequalities that exist in our society, hopefully it will lead to a more engaged and a more resilient society overall.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for that.

Mr HAASE—Before you close, Chair, one of our colleagues on this committee—I think it is this committee—repeatedly asks the question, and it is a valid one today because we have a little bit of time: if there were one instruction you could leave with this committee that you believe

would make the greatest impact on pay equity and returning women to the workforce, what would it be?

Ms Dundas—This may seem like a cop-out answer to that very important question but, as I said in my opening I would strongly advise you to read the determination of the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission and to repeat their findings in terms of recognising that the community sector work in itself has been devalued through a gender lens and that needs to be addressed. I say that for two reasons: I represent the community sector here in the ACT, and we recognise that wages and conditions in the community sector are lower than they should be for the work that is being done. Also, the community sector as an employer employs a significant number of women—I think, 70 to 80 per cent. We also have a range of flexibilities built into the work that we do, so we employ a range of people who themselves were once living in disadvantage or living with poverty or with a range of other experiences. So, as a start, addressing the equity problems that are found in the community sector across jurisdictions, not just in the ACT, will be a great step towards not only supporting families and individuals who are in crisis but also supporting those who work in the sector to be able to do their jobs and to address the structural inequities that are there.

Mr HAASE—Thank you. That was good.

CHAIR—I would like to thank both of you very much for your attendance here today. I do not think we have asked for you to provide any additional information but, if we have, could you please forward it to our committee secretary. I will put you on notice that we may also have additional questions following this hearing, which the secretariat will forward to you for your response. You will be sent a copy of the transcript of your evidence, to which you can make corrections of grammar and fact. On behalf of all the committee members, I would like to thank you very much for your attendance today.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Haase**):

That this committee authorises publication, including publication on the parliamentary database, of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 10.31 am