

FAIR AGENDA

Public Hearing: opening statement from Fair Agenda

Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs on Universal Access to Reproductive Healthcare

28 February 2023

Fair Agenda is a national, independent campaigning organisation advocating for gender equity. We have over 43,000 members around the country that are jointly working for a fair and gender equal future.

While the terms for this inquiry are based on achieving the National Women's Health Strategy, an important and worthy issue, access to reproductive healthcare is not just an issue for women – it is an issue for everyone in Australia.

We must be careful not to conflate reproductive healthcare as being solely a women's issue, as that further entrenches issues of gender inequity, whilst simultaneously upholding binary notions of sex and gender, which can then exclude and invisibilise members of our community.

Everyone who lives in Australia should be able to access a world class healthcare system, that includes reproductive healthcare that is compassionate, timely and that addresses their needs.

I am here today to focus on the issues of access to abortion care, which impact women and pregnant people. Late last year, Fair Agenda launched a report that has been provided to the Committee, called "Achieving equal access: abortion care in Australia." I want to thank all the organisations and individuals who co-authored this report, and organisations who have endorsed it.

This report aims to demystify the various complex and intersecting issues in Australia around abortion access, using research, expert insights and sharing the lived experience of people accessing abortion care in Australia. The report was developed following on from various conversations we were having with parliamentarians, and members of the community.

Despite recent, hard fought reforms in Australia, contemporary conversations around abortion still revolve around criminality. While an enduring right to abortion care continues to remain under threat, addressing issues of access have been largely neglected.

This is concerning given an estimated 100,000 abortions take place in Australia each year and it is estimated 1 in 4 women in Australia will have an abortion in their reproductive lifetime. Abortion is not a niche issue.

The Achieving Equal Access report shows that in Australia, there is no guarantee of compassionate, timely and accessible abortion care– the delivery of this healthcare is broadly inconsistent.

Right now, too many people trying to access abortion in Australia experience physical, emotional and financial distress. Too often, the very institutions where people try to seek advice mistreat them or meet them with judgement.

The report outlines 5 barriers to access that must be addressed. These are: affordability, lack of clinical services, the health care workforce, medication regulation, and the lack of data.

It also provides 2 solutions: firstly - an immediate need to address affordability barriers which we estimate creates an out-of-pocket cost to women of \$36 million per year. We suggest the establishment of a national fund; and secondly – the need to establish a national taskforce that brings together all governments, experts and stakeholders, to address the varying issues around abortion care – that is, to address these 5 barriers and the issues stemming from them.

These solutions aim to recognise the time and collaborative effort it will realistically take to create a whole of system change, while ensuring immediate action is taken to address affordability barriers so women and pregnant people have better access to abortion care.

Thousands of Fair Agenda members have passionately campaigned for change to abortion care over many years and, indeed, decades. Over 150 members writing to the Committee to show their support for the report and many sharing their personal stories of accessing abortion, both recently and in the time before decriminalisation.

On behalf of these members and our community, I asked that the Committee consider the barriers, and support the solutions, outlined in the Achieving Equal Access report. Doing so will move Australia significantly closer to providing a world class healthcare system that provides timely, accessible and compassionate reproductive healthcare.