

## Future Generation Women (FGW) – social investment guidelines 2025

### **ACCESS TO WORK – BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH SUMMARY**

This document provides background information on the research that has informed our 2025 grant round.

#### **Why is access to work a strategic pillar of FGW's social investment strategy?**

Australian women remain economically and financially disadvantaged relative to men in almost every measurable domain. On average, an Australian woman earns \$1 million less than an Australian man over the course of her career.<sup>i</sup> If current patterns continue, a 25-year-old woman today with, at least one child - will earn \$2 million less over her lifetime than a 25-year-old man who becomes a father.<sup>ii</sup> At the current rate of progress, the gender pay gap won't be closed for 136 years – or five more generations.<sup>iii</sup>

Despite this, only one in ten employers think their business perform below average on gender equity when compared to others in their industry. 30% of Australian men agree that gender inequality doesn't really exist – the highest rate of all countries except Saudi Arabia.<sup>iv</sup>

Women's access to work is defined as their ability to obtain and sustain paid employment or start/run businesses on equal terms with men. It encompasses equal access to opportunities and resources, such as training, finance, and networks, and equitable workplace conditions, such as pay, flexibility and safety. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) defines access to work using three measures: labour force participation, the employment rate, and the gender pay gap.

#### *Employment rates*

- 63.5% of working-age women are employed or seeking employment compared to 70.8% of men (labour participation rate)<sup>v</sup>
- These rates have improved over 20 years: female employment has increased 11.4 percentage points since 2004, but a gender gap remains<sup>vi</sup>
- However, women make up only 39.6% of full-time workers<sup>vii</sup>
- Young women's participation is high in their 20s–40s, then falls sharply after age 55, more than men's, often due to retirement or health<sup>viii</sup>
- Women are overrepresented in part-time and casual employment, often in lower-paid sectors such as healthcare, retail, and education<sup>ix</sup>

#### *Enterprise rates*

- Women own about one-third (35%) of Australia's small businesses<sup>x</sup>
- Women-led businesses tend to be smaller, less likely to scale or access high-growth sectors, and face systemic challenges in accessing finance and networks<sup>xi</sup>
- Women-led startups receive only a tiny share of venture capital, as low as 1% of funding to all-female teams, indicating barriers in enterprise access<sup>xii</sup>

#### *Gender pay gap<sup>xiii</sup>*

- The gender pay gap is the difference in the earnings of men and women, expressed as a proportion of men's earnings
- The gender pay gap is 11.5%. This has decreased 3.7 percentage points in the last 20 years

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Women’s access to work is restricted as a result of several intersectional and systemic factors including:

- *Caring responsibilities:* Caring responsibility is the most significant barrier to women’s access to work. Between 25-59% of women cited care as the main barrier to accessing work, with 59% women aged 25-39 providing this reason. Limited childcare availability and inflexible work and childcare hours force many women out of the workforce or into part-time roles and limit career progression in ways not experienced by men<sup>xiv xv</sup>
- *Gender norms:* Deep-seated beliefs about ‘women’s roles’ still push women into certain jobs and out of others. Domestic abuse can push women out of the labour market entirely. Female-dominated industries (care, education, retail) tend to be lower-paid and less secure. Meanwhile trades and tech remain male-dominated. Early socialisation steers girls away from science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) and business, so even at school many girls cite intentions towards traditionally female careers and fuel occupational segregation, a key driver of the pay and opportunity gap<sup>xvi</sup>
- *Workplace barriers:* Women often face discrimination, harassment or bias at work. Women are less likely to get promotions or pay rises when they ask and over 40% report workplace sexual harassment. Many workplaces are inflexible, e.g. long hours, rigid shifts, making it hard for women with care responsibilities to participate fully<sup>xvii</sup>
- *Economic factors:* Gender pay gaps, insecure jobs and poverty also limit access. Women earn 15–20% less than men on average. Lower superannuation and higher rates of poverty can trap women in precarious situations, making it hard to gain or keep employment or progress to better paid jobs. Limited access to business capital and entrepreneurial networks restrict women's ability to start or grow enterprises<sup>xviii xix</sup>

The 2024 *Working for Women* Strategy is the Government’s 10-year gender equality plan. Priority area 3 focuses on economic equality and security and includes commitments to reduce pay gaps, support women in emerging industries, and value care work. These efforts will help eliminate or reduce the various structural and institutional barriers that restrict women’s full economic participation. However, achieving the strategy’s goals requires the hands of many, not least the high impact and high potential non-profit organisations which work every day to make the vision of women’s economic equality a reality.

### **Priority groups<sup>xx xxi xxii xxiii</sup>**

The high priority groups for access to work are:

- *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women:* Only 52% participate in the labour force, earning less on average than other women, and are over-represented in low-income jobs. Many live in remote areas with few job opportunities and experience systemic racism in the labour market
- *Women with disability.* Only 50% participate in the labour force and they are more likely to work in part-time, low-paid roles, experiencing systemic discrimination and accessibility barriers
- *Migrants and refugees:* Culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women often have language barriers and unrecognised qualifications. They work disproportionately in insecure, low-skilled jobs
- *Single mothers and carers:* Single mothers and carers juggle work and childcare/caring for the elderly. 68% of single mothers work compared to 75% of single fathers. 36% of single mothers are experiencing poverty
- *Regional and remote women:* Women living outside major cities face fewer jobs opportunities, limited access to reliable internet and transport, a persistent digital divide and entrenched traditional gender norms

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- *Older women in poverty:* Many women over 55 on low incomes have chronic underemployment, limited opportunities to re-enter the workforce, and heightened financial insecurity as they approach retirement
- *Previously incarcerated women:* Only 33% of women who have been incarcerated are in employment after 10 months, compared to 50% of men.

These cohorts experience the greatest barriers and/or need the most support to improve their work access, even in light of recent structural and policy reforms. Essentially, the highest priority women are those facing multiple and compounding ('intersectional') disadvantages and barriers.

### **Access to work: what works?**

FGW undertook a high-level scan of publicly available Australian and international literature exploring 'what works' to improve women's access to work - particularly for those who are most excluded. The scan included initiatives with a strong evidence base, such as government evaluations and peer-reviewed journal articles, as well as emerging approaches that appear highly promising but not yet supported by robust evidence.

The findings from the scan are generalised and summarised below. The initiatives serve as a reference point for FGW when assessing applications, helping to determine the extent to which proposed initiatives align with principles of good practice in improving women's access to work.

The types of initiatives identified in the literature scan include:

#### 1. *Holistic models which bundle skills and support*

Initiatives which provide skills and support while simultaneously countering material or structural barriers have more success than initiatives which focus solely on one issue. Examples include programs which offer coaching, networking and small grants to women with barriers (single mothers, older women, those fleeing hardship) who want to run micro-businesses.

Integrating business training and broader economic participation programs with financial education for women is also effective when delivered in a culturally responsive and context aware way. Initiatives combining affordable finance, mentor networks, training, procurement links and market access also show good results.

#### 2. *Targeted support*

There is strong evidence supporting tailored and customised support programs. Targeted approaches are more effective in addressing the root causes of work exclusion and the specific needs of women in different groups, e.g. Aboriginal women, women with disability, women experiencing abuse and migrant women, including those facing intersectional disadvantage.

For example, mentoring schemes designed for specific priority groups or to address particular barriers have good evidence of impact. Mentees benefit from the safe, peer-led learning environments and practical support, while mentors gained insight into inclusive leadership.

Programs specifically co-designed with Aboriginal communities are essential for First Nations women. Top-down models often fail, while initiatives that are designed with cultural safety and involve Aboriginal people at every stage are more effective. Examples includes locally-led training courses, supported apprenticeships, or enterprise grants managed by Aboriginal organisations.

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### 3. *Peer-led coaching and mentoring*

There are various effective approaches which strengthen women’s capabilities through peer support. Personalised career preparation programs - particularly mentoring and job-readiness coaching - have demonstrated strong outcomes. Similarly, vocational training that includes peer-led support in high-demand sectors has proven effective in building both skills and confidence, especially for women facing significant barriers, such as regional, migrant, and mature-aged women.

Peer-driven business networks and industry-specific accelerators also play a valuable role. They provide women business connections, mentoring, and visibility – helping to accelerate enterprise growth and resilience.

### 4. *Childcare*

Australian and international research consistently finds that accessible, affordable childcare is one of the most cost-effective ways to increase female workforce participation. Programs that improve childcare affordability - such as higher subsidies or free early learning – have a direct impact on female labour supply. Paid leave, income supports and similar initiatives for family caregivers help free up women’s time for paid work. Initiatives that encourage men’s involvement in caregiving, including parental leave for both parents have also demonstrated positive outcomes.

### 5. *Employer reform (e.g. flexible work and employer policies)* <sup>xxiv</sup>

The strongest evidence points to workplace flexibility as a key driver of female workforce participation. Employers adopting an ‘all-roles flex’ policy and culture, which allows staff to choose when and where they work, have reported a range of benefits. For example, advertising roles as flexible has been shown to boost applications by 20–30%. Many employers are now formalising part-time and job-share options even in senior roles, and are training managers to lead remote teams, and linking leadership performance to flexibility goals. These measures have been shown to support parents and carers stay in jobs.

### 6. *Gender-inclusive training and recruitment across industry*

Programs that actively address occupational segregation have demonstrated positive outcomes. ‘Trade samplers’ and apprenticeships or cadetships aimed at women have been shown to double the intake of female trainees in construction and STEM fields. Industry-led partnerships that bundle skills training, employer commitments and public awareness campaigns have also contributed to increased female apprenticeships in participating companies.

### 7. *Digital and AI skills training*

Bridging the digital divide for women is an important and growing focus within access to work initiatives, enabling women to participate fully in an increasingly AI-driven economy.

### 8. *Social enterprises*

Enterprises that directly employ disadvantaged women directly - alongside support services - have been shown to empower participants. While still generally small in scale, there is early evidence that women gain confidence, skills and work experience, validating this model as a promising pathway out of disadvantage. Social enterprise incubators that address both business skills and social barriers (such as housing instability) report that graduates have higher success rates.

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- <sup>i</sup> [Women Earn \\$1m less than men & \\$136,000 Less in Super over Working Life - The Australia Institute](#)
- <sup>ii</sup> [Dad days: How more gender-equal parental leave could improve the lives of Australian families](#)
- <sup>iii</sup> [Pandemic Pushes Back Gender Parity by a Generation, Report Finds > Press releases | World Economic Forum](#)
- <sup>iv</sup> [iwd-survey-2022.pdf](#)
- <sup>v</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/latest-release>
- <sup>vi</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/measuring-what-matters/measuring-what-matters-themes-and-indicators/prosperous/broadening-access-work>
- <sup>vii</sup> <https://genderequality.gov.au/status-women-report-cards/2025-report-card>
- <sup>viii</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/latest-release>
- <sup>ix</sup> <https://www.aigroup.com.au/resourcecentre/research-economics/factsheets/factsheet-gender-and-the-australian-labour-market/>
- <sup>x</sup> <https://www.asbfeo.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/women-owned-small-business>
- <sup>xi</sup> <https://www.agec.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/2017-Australian-Government-Workforce-Strategy-Towards-2025-strategy-Womens-Workforce-Participation.pdf>
- <sup>xii</sup> <https://www.deloitte.com/content/dam/assets-zone1/au/en/docs/services/economics/deloitte-au-economics-accelerating-women-founders-090922.pdf>
- <sup>xiii</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/measuring-what-matters/measuring-what-matters-themes-and-indicators/prosperous/broadening-access-work>
- <sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/childcare-still-largest-barrier-female-participation>
- <sup>xv</sup> <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/eds-blog/accessing-childcare-and-flexibility-are-still-barriers-for-women-getting-a-job-in-australia/>
- <sup>xvi</sup> <https://genderequality.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-03/working-for-women-a-strategy-for-gender-equality.pdf>
- <sup>xvii</sup> <https://genderequality.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-03/working-for-women-a-strategy-for-gender-equality.pdf>
- <sup>xviii</sup> <https://genderequality.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-03/working-for-women-a-strategy-for-gender-equality.pdf>
- <sup>xix</sup> [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-employment-outlook-2025-country-notes\\_f91531f7-en/australia\\_dd6ed473-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-employment-outlook-2025-country-notes_f91531f7-en/australia_dd6ed473-en.html)
- <sup>xx</sup> <https://genderequality.gov.au/sites/default/files/2024-03/working-for-women-a-strategy-for-gender-equality.pdf>
- <sup>xxi</sup> <https://phidu.torrens.edu.au/notes-on-the-data/aboriginal-notes/indigenous-labour-force>
- <sup>xxii</sup> <https://www.paulramsayfoundation.org.au/news-resources/new-report-reveals-severe-impact-of-domestic-violence-on-womens-employment-and-education>
- <sup>xxiii</sup> <https://correctiveservices.dcj.nsw.gov.au/documents/research-and-statistics/rp68-empirical-review-of-the-pathways-to-employment.pdf>
- <sup>xxiv</sup> [https://www.wgea.gov.au/newsroom/WGEA\\_Flexible\\_work\\_media\\_release](https://www.wgea.gov.au/newsroom/WGEA_Flexible_work_media_release)