

# FW's submission to the Productivity Commission's Economic Reform Roundtable

FW (Future Women) is pleased to contribute to the Productivity Commission's Economic Reform Roundtable process. In this submission, we propose that women's workforce participation be prioritised as a primary mechanism for improving Australia's productivity and long-term economic resilience.

## The challenge of a larger, more skilled workforce

Australia is experiencing an acute labour and skills shortage. While a strong migration program is supplementary, it will not be sufficient on its own to meet Australia's workforce needs into the future. Jobs and Skills Australia is reporting nationwide skills shortages in 33% of occupations<sup>1</sup>.

Shortages are more acute in industries and occupations with greater gender segregation<sup>2</sup>, including health and aged care, social services, clean energy, construction and defence industries. In May 2025, 339,400 job vacancies were recorded nationally, despite the labour market operating above full employment<sup>3</sup>. In a tight labour market, gender segregation can exacerbate labour shortages, limiting mobility, flexibility and productivity.

The Australian Government's White Paper on Jobs and Opportunities, *Working Future*, explains that our nation is going to need a larger, more highly-skilled workforce than the one we have today. Innovation and investment are essential to meeting the sheer scale of future labourforce demands and address worsening skills gaps.

## Barriers to women's equal economic participation

In 2024, there were more than 1.5 million Australians who wanted to find a job or had a job and wanted to work more hours, nearly two thirds of whom are women<sup>4</sup>. With the right support these women could enter or return to the workforce sooner, unlocking a potential \$128 billion in national productivity<sup>5</sup>. But our employment services system isn't working to effectively facilitate women's increased participation.

Women require targeted support to return to work because they face different barriers to participation. This is partly due to the disproportionate share of unpaid caring and domestic responsibilities. Government investment to increase paid parental leave and make early childhood education and care more accessible and affordable is having a positive impact in this regard but more support is needed.

When women take a break from paid work, they find it harder to get a job when they're ready to return. Skills erosion, technological advancement, career break stigma and loss of professional networks exacerbate the challenges of structural bias and lack of flexible working arrangements. This has a cumulative impact on women's confidence, sense of agency and motivation to find work, and can be compounded for women from disadvantaged and diverse backgrounds.

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<sup>1</sup> Jobs and Skills Australia. (2024) [Australia's skills shortage on the mend](#).

<sup>2</sup> Jobs and Skills Australia. (2023) [Current skills shortages](#).

<sup>3</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2025) [Job Vacancies, Australia, May 2025](#).

<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2024) [Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation, Australia](#).

<sup>5</sup> Deloitte Access Economics. (2022) [Breaking the norm: Unleashing Australia's economic potential](#).

## **A jobs services system that's not fit for purpose**

The Government's *Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality* recognises that mainstream employment services aren't working for women. Providers are focused on rapid job placements and are not equipped to address the specific barriers faced by women in the modern era. The sole focus on place-based service delivery is out-dated, making it harder for women to engage as they are more likely to have caring responsibilities and live with chronic conditions.

Analysis by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations in 2024<sup>6</sup> reveals that women on income support have lower job placement rates in every cohort and age group, compared to men, with Australia's long-term unemployed cohort becoming increasingly feminised. Women receive a lower spend on work-related training and receive a smaller share of job placements that attract wage subsidies.

Reflecting on the Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services' 2023 report, Chair Julian Hill said, 'It's harsh but true to say that Australia no longer has an effective coherent national employment services system; we have an inefficient outsourced fragmented social security compliance management system that sometimes gets someone a job against all odds'<sup>7</sup>.

## **Unlocking productivity: FW's Jobs Academy**

FW's Jobs Academy is a national pre-employment program unlike anything else available in Australia today. Jobs Academy is building the job readiness, workforce participation and economic security of Australian women. Delivered flexibly and online, the program has already supported thousands of Australian women and gender diverse people into work and study.

Comprehensive monitoring data shows the program improves women's career clarity and confidence, skills and knowledge to search and apply for work and connections to the job market. Through mentoring, workshops, online learning and community, Jobs Academy helps participants feel included, supported and energised about their future. By partnering with hundreds of employers, FW is creating meaningful pathways for women into work.

Over four years, 11 cohorts, between 54 and 72% of Jobs Academy participants have successfully commenced new paid employment or achieved training outcomes. An independent evaluation of Jobs Academy in 2023 found that 'women are achieving outcomes in line with the program logic, including improved confidence and employment.'

Innovative programs like Jobs Academy provide a blueprint for improving Australia's employment services. By supporting women who want to work to find meaningful, long-term employment, we can unlock the full potential of Australia's human capital, creating greater labour market mobility and filling critical shortages. This is linked to GDP growth, reduced welfare costs, and reduced gender pay and superannuation gaps, with a multiplier effect on consumption and innovation<sup>8</sup>.

FW recommends that strategies proven to boost women's workforce participation be prioritised as an area of reform at the Economic Reform Roundtable. These are a key mechanism for boosting national productivity and future-proofing our economy over the long term.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. (2024) [Secretary's speech at the Workforce Australia National Forum](#).

<sup>7</sup> Parliament of Australia. (2023) [FINAL REPORT TABLED: Rebuilding the employment services system](#).

<sup>8</sup> Workplace Gender Equality Agency. (2018) [The business case](#).