



Research-informed principles for a gender equitable recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed and amplified inequalities in the labour market. It has widened gender gaps in earnings, savings, workforce participation and unpaid care work. Disruptions to working lives and increased reliance on unpaid care work created a perfect storm leaving women feeling weary and whiplashed.¹ Women's labour force participation is an urgent priority for economic recovery. In order to maximise this, labour markets, employment policies and care systems need to be transformed. This GEWL Insights paper proposes five research-backed principles for a gender equitable recovery that is employment-rich and supports good jobs for all.

Australian women are educated and ambitious, yet their careers are stalled

Half of Australian women between 25 and 34 have a university degree.² They are the best educated in the OECD, better educated than at any point in history, and more educated than Australian men. They are also strongly attached to employment and expect a long, rewarding career. Our research shows that young women's and men's career expectations are more aligned than ever.³

However, entrenched inequalities and discrimination in the world of work and care stymie women's opportunities and career success. Gender gaps in pay and superannuation, unequal career opportunities and progression, occupational and industry segregation, the undervaluation of feminised work, an epidemic of disrespect in the workplace, and the misalignment of work and care regimes are challenges that too many women face across their working lives.⁴

The Covid impact: a perfect storm and a missed opportunity

Over the past two years, women in Australia experienced greater loss in jobs, hours and pay than men.⁵ This was compounded by increased levels of stress and burnout from intensified frontline work in female-dominated industries like care and retail, alongside the additional unpaid work required to compensate for school closures. The shadow pandemic of domestic and family violence, deteriorating mental health and substance abuse completes the picture of women, particularly working mothers, suffering a 'Great Exhaustion'⁶ after two years of the pandemic. The Covid-19 impact poses a great risk to gender equality and to our economic recovery should women not re-enter the workforce or remain in low-pay, low-skilled jobs to manage work and care.

There are evidence-driven solutions to achieving an employment-rich and gender equal pandemic recovery. Investment in "shovel-ready" construction projects is not enough.⁷ A gender lens must be applied by including women's voices at decision making tables, collecting gender disaggregated data on impacts and assessing the gendered outcomes of recovery policies.



5 research-informed principles for recovery

1. Investment in the care economy

Underemployment and the withdrawal of women from the workforce will cost the Australian economy billions of dollars in lost productivity and growth.⁸ It is also a risk to women's economic security and well-being. Investment in the care economy and in social infrastructure is key to women's workforce participation. Women work in sectors that have grown strongly and will continue to do so but jobs in these sectors are undervalued and underpaid.⁹ Healthcare and social assistance, for example, is the largest and fastest growing industry in Australia. It employs 14.4% of all workers and is heavily feminised.¹⁰ The pandemic highlighted the vital need for high-quality care for a functioning society and economy and pandemic recovery provides an opportunity to reassess public investment to boost workforce participation, build better jobs and drive productivity. This will support our economic recovery and deliver future prosperity.

2. Good (not bad) flex

Before the pandemic, 90% of young women (under 40) and 86% of young men considered flexibility to be important for them to flourish in their careers.¹¹ In the last two years, extended lockdowns have induced a shift to remote working for many workers. Our research shows that high-quality flexibility has shared benefits for workers, businesses, communities, and the economy.¹² However, there is an undersupply of mutually beneficial flexible jobs and a proliferation of 'bad' flexibility, marked by high levels of insecurity and precarity. Designing gender equality into post-pandemic flexible work configurations will contribute to a gender equitable recovery from Covid-19.

3. Secure jobs on the frontline

A gender equitable and employment-rich recovery requires investment in decent, properly paid jobs particularly in frontline industries that are the backbone of our economy, such as healthcare, aged care, early childhood education services and retail. Recent research suggests

that frontline jobs in these sectors lack in many of the features we associate with decent work.¹³ Precarity is the norm, schedule control to reconcile work and care is lacking, customer abuse is common, and pay is typically low.¹⁴ Job security and decent pay will support workers in these essential sectors. To boost the economy and recover from the crisis, it is imperative to make sure we maximise the economic potential of all workers and create a gender equal society.

4. Mutually supportive work & care systems, and accounting for unpaid work

The realities of combining work and family are a logistical nightmare, a source of worry and a financial stress for many working women. Public care provision in Australia still does not meet societal needs or reflect the realities of labour force participation. The gaps created by this inadequate system are even wider in times of crisis; they are mostly filled by family members and primarily by women.^{15 16} Constraints on their time restrict women's ability to engage in paid employment to the extent they would like to. Action is urgently needed to enable this ambitious and educated workforce to participate more fully to the labour market and boost national recovery efforts.

5. Breaking down segregations

Our research shows that women are largely locked out of the most lucrative jobs in male-dominated sectors of the Australian labour market. High-paying, secure jobs are not fully accessible and attractive to women because of inflexibility in employment, unwelcoming cultures, and poor career progression in the most lucrative sectors of the economy.^{17 18} Creating gender-equitable, respectful work practices will invite more gender balance in these sectors, assist in building career sustainability for all employees, build more vibrant industries and organisations and will assist in addressing the gender gaps in earnings and savings that constrain women's economic security.



What can be done?

Government can:

- Collect robust data on different impacts of the pandemic on women and men
- Invest in and create good jobs in health, education and social services sectors: highly feminised, high-employment growth, low-carbon sectors of the economy
- Invest in gender-responsive economic planning
- Expand national paid parental leave and other carer leaves

Employers can:

- Ensure high-quality, mutually beneficial flexible work is available to workers and central to the future of work discussion
- Invest in best practice paid parental and carers leave
- Promote secure work and decent pay

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