

Key Policy in discussion

Older Women – an Overview

Portfolio and or agency

Multiple Portfolios

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Key Portfolio Issues

The 2023-24 Budget, and notably the narrative that underpinned parts of it, can be viewed as a positive step forward for recognition of some important issues confronting older women. It also moderately raises the visibility of older women, in general. The stand-out new measures included in the Budget with the potential to improve the lives of older women – especially those on low incomes – are in aged care (where women predominate), healthcare and income support.

Budget Measures

The 2023-24 Budget contains a number of measures in aged care reform of importance to older women.

The **Aged Care Regulatory Reform** measure will provide additional funding of \$309.9 million over 5 years from 2022–23 to implement the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety and other initiatives to strengthen the regulation of the aged care sector and improve the health and safety of older Australians receiving aged care ([2023-24 Budget Paper No 2](#), p. 125).

In the **Funding Pay Increases for Aged Care Workers** measure, the Government will provide \$515.0 million over 5 years from 2022–23 (and \$956.9 million over 10 years from 2022–23) to fund the outcome of the Fair Work Commission’s decision on the Aged Care Work Value Case. The decision was to increase award wages by 15 per cent from 30 June 2023 for many aged care workers including registered nurses, enrolled nurses, assistants in nursing, personal care workers, home care workers, recreational activity officers, and some head chefs and cooks (2023-24 Budget Paper No 2, p. 131).

The **Implementing Aged Care Reform – home care measure** will provide additional funding of \$338.7 million over 4 years from 2023–24 to improve the in-home aged care system (2023-24 Budget Paper No 2, pp. 132-133).

The **Improving Aged Care Support** measure will provide \$827.2 million over 5 years from 2022–23 to continue to improve the delivery of aged care services and respond to the Final Report of the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (2023-24 Budget Paper No 2, p. 134).

A specific measure, **Improving Health Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People**, also contains \$77.3 million over 4 years from 2023–24 to improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in aged care, including:

- \$52.1 million over two years from 2023–24 to increase the funding available to aged care providers in very remote areas under the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Flexible Aged Care Program by calculating funding levels for residential care services using the Australian National Aged Care Classification price
- \$8.1 million over 3 years from 2023–24 to support providers transition to new accountability measures and obligations under the proposed new Aged Care Act
- \$7.6 million over two years from 2023–24 to fund capacity building of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations to potentially provide aged care services
- \$4.1 million over 4 years from 2023–24 to develop mandatory cultural awareness training for aged care staff
- \$3.8 million over 4 years from 2023–24 to support project and program assurance activities
- \$1.7 million in 2023–24 to appoint an interim First Nations Aged Care Commissioner (2023-24 Budget Paper No 2, p. 135).

A significant group of healthcare measures in the Budget is also of importance to older women.

The **Long Term Dental Funding Reform Developmental Work and Interim Funding** measure will provide \$219.4 million over 4 years from 2023-24 to progress work on longer-term adult public dental reform, extend the existing Public Dental Services for Adults funding agreement to 30 June 2025, and fund the 2023–2026 National Dental Care Survey. The Public Dental Services for Adults funding agreement supports dental health services for adults who rely on the public dental system through the states and territories (2023-24 Budget Paper No 2, p. 138).

Medicare Urgent Care Clinics – additional funding will provide additional funding of \$358.5 million over 5 years from 2022–23 to deliver Medicare Urgent Care Clinics by the end of 2023, including for 8 new Clinics. The Medicare Urgent Care Clinics will reduce pressure on hospital emergency departments and improve access for urgent, but not life-threatening, care (2023-24 Budget Paper No 2, p. 138).

The **Reducing Patient Costs and Improving Services through Community Pharmacies** measure includes the much talked about initiative to allow 2 months’ worth of certain PBS medicines to be dispensed by pharmacies from 1 September 2023. Per year, per medicine, concession card holders may save up to \$43.80 and general patients may save up to \$180 (2023-24 Budget Paper No 2, p. 146).

The **Strengthening Medicare** measure contains a number of components of particular importance to older women, including \$3.5 billion over 5 years to address the decline in general practitioners’ bulk billing of patients on low incomes, and children. This funding will triple the

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bulk billing incentive benefits for consultations for Commonwealth concession card holders and patients aged under 16 years of age (2023-24 Budget Paper No 2, p. 147).

In the area of income support, a few measures are of particular importance to older women.

The **Increase to Working Age Payments** will provide \$4.9 billion over 5 years from 2022–23 (with \$1.3 billion per year ongoing) to increase support for people receiving working age payments including the JobSeeker Payment. This measure will increase the base rate of working age and student payments by \$40 per fortnight. This increase applies to the JobSeeker Payment, Youth Allowance, Parenting Payment (Partnered), Austudy, ABSTUDY, Disability Support Pension (Youth), and Special Benefit. It will commence on 20 September 2023. The measure will also extend eligibility for the existing higher single JobSeeker Payment rate for recipients aged 60 years and over to recipients aged 55 years and over who are on the payment for 9 or more continuous months. The increased support for recipients aged 55 years and over, the majority of whom are women, acknowledges the additional challenges older Australians face in re-entering the workforce, such as age discrimination or poor health (2023-24 Budget Paper No 2, p. 199). (See **Social Security**.)

Increased Support for Commonwealth Rent Assistance Recipients will provide \$2.7 billion over 5 years from 2022–23 (and \$0.7 billion per year ongoing) to increase the maximum rates of the Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) allowances by 15 per cent to help address rental affordability challenges for CRA recipients (2023-24 Budget Paper No 2, p. 200). (See **Housing**.)

Background: current circumstances of older women

A few key, background metrics are useful to understand the importance for older women of the Budget measures highlighted above.

Women tend to live longer than men. This is seen in the differences in life expectancy and is particularly apparent in the oldest age groups.

Older women predominate in aged care, reflecting the different sex ratio of women and men in older ages. At 30 June 2022 (or during the 2021–22 financial year for home support): around 2 in 3 people (65 per cent) using aged care services were women. More women than men were using permanent residential aged care (66 per cent women, 34 per cent men), home care (65 per cent women, 35 per cent men) and home support (65 per cent women, 35 per cent men).

Older women are also significant users of aspects of the healthcare system. For example, people over 85 (a group in which women predominate) have the highest rate of Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme prescriptions dispensed.

Older Australians are a national priority homelessness cohort for the Australian and state and territory governments to reduce the incidence of homelessness. Repeated studies from Anglicare Australia also demonstrate that single full Age Pension recipients (most of whom are

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women) are among the least likely people to be able to afford private rental properties, in a context of declining home ownership across all ages.

this year's Women's Budget Statement summed up older women's economic location in the Budget papers in the following way:

Lower workforce participation combined with lower levels of pay for women results in significantly lower lifetime earnings and lower superannuation balances upon retirement. For many older women, particularly older single women, this increases their risks of experiencing financial hardship and housing insecurity and makes them more likely to rely on government supports later in life. (p. 23)

Further, the experience of job seeking and unemployment in later life generates additional hardships for many older people, especially women. The largest age and sex subgroup of people in receipt of JobSeeker Payment are women over 50, who also tend to remain on the payment longer than other groups.

Gender implications of these budget measures

This Budget contains detailed and targeted measures in aged care that have the potential to move reform of the system forward, even if at a slow pace, contrasting to stalled attempts at change over nearly 20 years. Measures invest in some of the key actions needed, including: wage improvements to attract and retain care workers (see **Employment – the Care Workforce**); wholesale regulatory change (drawing on recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety and other key investigations); and modest but important changes in aged care for First Nations peoples (noting that First Nations women outnumber First Nations men over the age of 50). While these measures will be important for the quality of life and wellbeing of all users of the aged care system, it is important to recognise that women are the predominant users.

Similarly, the significant announcements in the Health Budget are important for all Australians; especially those with chronic illness and on low incomes. Many older women fall into this category and are high users of GP services and pharmaceuticals. Measures to make health services more affordable and accessible will benefit this group. (See **Health**.)

The extension of a higher level of JobSeeker Payment to unemployed job seekers over 55 (down in age from 60 years and over) has been publicly controversial, in the context of across-the-board poverty level income support for job seekers of all ages. However, the Government narrative accompanying this measure specifically addresses the stark reality facing older female job seekers as a group (referred to in the section above). The measure acknowledges the stubbornly entrenched and unyielding discrimination against and exclusion of older women as a group from jobs.

However, there were no measures included in the Budget to try to shift attitudes and employment practices that draw heavily on the intersection of ageism and sexism to exclude

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older women from work. The increase in JobSeeker Payment for this group of women is a welcome and realistic band-aid, but still a band-aid.

On the matter of women's employment, it is also important to note that the wage increase for most aged care workers is a significant employment factor for older women, given that they are prominent in the aged care workforce.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- the Productivity Commission undertake an inquiry into the economic costs of ageism, ensuring that the intersection between ageism and sexism is clearly addressed
- the Government drive a public and workplace conversation about ageing and ageism, promoting contemporary, positive narratives about ageing, older people in all their diversity and an ageing society
- there be no further slippage in implementing the aged care reform agenda, based around a comprehensive response to the Royal Commission's recommendations
- a new human rights-based Aged Care Act be drafted and consulted as soon as possible, placing older people at the centre of the system.

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