



GENDER LENS ON THE 2024 BUDGET

Key policy in discussion	Employment Services Reform
Portfolio and or agency	Employment and Workplace Relations
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Key Portfolio Issues

Australia spends over \$9.5 billion dollars on its employment services, which is less than 50 per cent of the OECD average. The [House of Representatives Select Committee investigating employment services found that full marketisation had failed](#). This package is the first suite of changes with further changes to follow after the next range of consultations. The initiatives include the digital platform, moderations to mutual obligations, compliance and a new complaints process. The changes are incremental and represent a very modest first step.

[Working for Women](#) lists as a future priority (see Priority No. 3), building the capabilities of employment services to help women overcome barriers to work and break cycles of disadvantage, and ensuring employment services systems (such as Workforce Australia and Disability Employment Services) can support women's economic participation. This is the first modest round of changes to employment services. Further consultations are to be undertaken this year.

Budget Measures

The Government will provide \$13.2 million over five years from 2023–24 (and savings of \$36.9 million per year ongoing) for improvements to the employment services system and to support future reform.

The National Foundation for Australian Women is a feminist organisation, independent of party politics and working in partnership with other women's organisations. NFAW is dedicated to promoting and protecting the interests of Australian women, including intellectual, cultural, political, social, economic, legal, industrial and domestic spheres.

Employment Services Reform

Payments (\$m)

	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28
Services Australia	0.5	16.2	0.1
Australian Taxation Office	-	1.3	-	-	-
Department of Social Services	-
Department of Employment and Workplace Relations	-2.9	37.9	3.5	-14.4	-29.2
Total – Payments	-2.4	55.5	3.6	-14.3	-29.1

Budget Paper No. 2, p.91

Gender implications of this budget measure

Working-age women face an ineffective and punitive employment service which encourages short-term employment solutions instead of creating viable career pathways. Gender bias in social security and employment policy obscures the different ways women experience inequality. It does not recognise the value of unpaid care work but rather is based on a conventional view of ‘productivity’ as paid employment. Women’s contributions in the unpaid care economy are not recognised or valued and full social participation is constrained.

[A 2018 Senate Committee inquiry](#) found that *jobactive* (the Workforce Australia predecessor) had not delivered equal outcomes for women and men. Although 51 per cent of participants are women, only 44 per cent of participants assisted by the Employment Fund are women and they make up only 40 per cent of employment placements.

The Budget provides funding to trial a wage subsidy program for people experiencing long-term unemployment; as well as funding for social enterprises and business for job placements for people with high barriers to unemployment. Given that men are more likely than women to have access to wage subsidy programs due to women’s lower participation and unemployment rates, the trial should include an analysis of gender equity and access as part of its evaluation.

Recommendations

NFAW calls for the Government to:

- create a watchdog to monitor employment services
- incentivise providers to reach out to women experiencing disadvantage and sustain their engagement
- reframe the current one-way notion of mutual obligation as mutual accountability, to foster reciprocity
- focus on advancing women’s aspirations and strengthening their capabilities and opportunities
- provide flexibility for providers to respond to the distinctive needs of individual circumstances and of different groups of women
- appoint organisations with the expertise and capacity to engage their community

- preference organisations that co-locate with early learning and care centres or family and community hubs, to enable easy linkages to complementary supports
- involve women and providers in co-design of the next iteration
- ensure employment services trials include gender equity and access as part of any evaluation criteria
- establish local and national governance structures to enable women, and employers, providers, government and local communities to report on their experiences, monitor system performance against goals and identify opportunities for improvements, and
- commission regional communities of practice, supported by continuous improvement mechanisms, where providers share learnings and use data to drive improvements.