

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**12 May 2021**

### **BUDGET 2021/2022 THROUGH THE LENS OF WOMEN IN CONSTRUCTION**

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This time last year, after all the discussion about the recovery-led budget, many analysts and advocates for women were of the view that women and issues impacting women had well and truly been sidelined as the focus was squarely on the delivery of infrastructure and construction projects. For women working in construction and infrastructure, it was potentially a double edged sword - plenty of work to go around but with only 0.3% of the budget earmarked "for women", none of the usual barriers for women being able to fully participate in their chosen industry were being removed.

At the time of the last budget, many women in the construction industry looked at the meagre 12.7% (according to ABS data) of women employed in construction-related roles and thought – well, now is the time for women to benefit from an industry commencing the bounce back from COVID. The problem was with the paucity of the 0.3% of budget that had been earmarked for women. If we are to start looking at encouraging the other half of the population into the industry and start improving the skills shortage being complained of, we must look at what services and policies are required to support them to do that.

This budget year, the government has promised more of a focus on women with investment in childcare, aged care, disability care, education and training. It was closely followed by the promise of about a \$15B spend over 10 years on major infrastructure projects to "spearhead" the government's efforts to boost both jobs and productivity. The cynical view would be that the first announcement to fund issues concerning women was to win back the female vote after a rather calamitous year to date around the treatment of women. On another view, women in the construction industry may be one of the few demographics where the promises coming out of this budget could actually combine to work in our favour.

The Treasurer has pledged a fiscal blueprint that will increase skills, plug workforce shortages and boost aged care and childminding services. This could be the perfect budget confluence for women in construction. The "women's issues" being targeted in this year's budget, ahead of the talk about infrastructure spend, are just as important for many women in construction who bear the majority of the care

burden which has historically kept them out of the full-time work force and impacted on their current and future economic security. This is what the government must do to allow one of the most rigid of industries to then do their bit, namely, recruit more women into construction. The industry then has both a fiscal and social responsibility to actively recruit more women and pay them accordingly.

One year on from last year's budget, the cash splash on construction and infrastructure has not improved the participation rate of women in the industry and the construction industry pay gap has continued to hover at 26.1%. Both the government and the construction industry share the responsibility for turning that around. Now that the budget has been delivered, the support for women's economic security in this industry must be shared. It is not enough for the government to say that the industry has a role to play in ensuring it is investing in improving gender parity in their workforce. The government needs to follow through on this and last year's investment with stringent procurement policies that incentivise the industry to recruit more women. Some states and Territories have procurement policies in place to require "gender on the tender" but it is far from commonplace. Last year NAWIC spent a significant amount of time talking about how the government could fix the problem it had with the perception that the last budget was about "jobs for the boys" by ensuring that a proportion of that construction and infrastructure stimulus spend was directed at ensuring more women were recruited into those industries.

Complaints about an insufficient pipeline of women to fill these positions can be addressed through the creation of pathways for women into these industries. Funding for tertiary training institutions and school pathways programs to focus on attracting a new generation of young women into the industry are fundamental and not just a nice-to-have. The government's aim to spend their infrastructure money over 10 years allows plenty of time to build a pipeline of women to get into the industry but without funding and the cooperation of education departments, these programs will not be sustainable.

If industry want to address the skills shortages complained of then they must look at their role in attracting and retaining more than just 12% of half our population. Last year, the WGEA report card on the gender pay gap in the construction industry was dismal. In a country where older women are recognised as the fastest growing group of homeless people, where there is a 35% super pay gap between men and women, the 26.1% pay gap in our sector is made even more deplorable when we know it is the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest industry and employer in this country. If the government is being asked to make Australia "a nation in which all women can live and work freely and safely and reach their full potential" then the economic and social barriers to maintaining a career in construction need to be addressed.

NAWIC calls on State and Territory governments in receipt of the infrastructure spend to quarantine a portion and direct it towards ensuring these are sufficient programs in place to support the small but growing number of women looking to work in this

industry. Look at specifically focusing some of the training spend on introducing more women into the industry as NSW has done recently by funding 3000 training places for women in trades.