

Submission: Review of ACT Women's Plan

Ministerial Council for Women

Introduction

The ACT Women's Plan

The ACT Women's Plan is designed to provide strategic policy framework for working with the community to improve the status of all women and girls in the ACT.

The current Plan, which was the first Women's Plan in the ACT, arose out of one of the recommendations made by the Legislative Assembly Select Committee on the Status of Women Report *The Status of Women in the ACT*, which was released in November 2002.

The Plan is designed to provide a framework to address the still significant inequalities between men and women in the ACT, and between different groups of women. The Plan acknowledges the broad range of ways in which women are disadvantaged in the ACT – for example through lack of equality of employment opportunities and violence against women. It also acknowledges the important differences of women, which result in specialised services being required for women – for example, in relation to health and education.

The current Plan focuses on three key areas:

- Increasing knowledge and awareness around issues that impact on women and girls, particularly better data;
- Access to affordable and appropriate services such as those for mental health, education and training and options for women experiencing violence;
- Improved support for women to support their potential.

The current Plan has been structured around the following six objectives:

- Representation and recognition;
- Good health and wellbeing;
- Responsive housing;
- Safe, inclusive communities;
- Economic security and opportunities; and

- Flexible education and training.

The current Plan states that these objectives are interrelated and are of equal importance.

The current plan will expire in September 2009.

The Council

The Ministerial Advisory Council on Women is a body established by the Minister for Women in the ACT. The Council provides strategic advice to the ACT government, through the Minister for Women, on issues affecting women in the ACT and provides a link between the Minister and women in the ACT community.

The Council is comprised of 12 to 14 women, who have a broad range of experiences. The 2008-2010 Council membership includes mothers, young women, older women, lesbian women, indigenous women, business and professional women, and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. These women come from a variety of backgrounds including working in the union sector, the community sector, health and wellbeing, government policy and law enforcement. The Council also has a representative of women with disabilities. Many of the women who serve on the Council identify themselves as feminists.

The Council considers an important part of its role is to try to identify marginalised women in the community and to give those groups of women a 'voice'. More generally, the Council also considers the important ways in which law, government policy and the culture of Australian society affects women in particular ways. It is part of the Council's role to ensure that Australian governments appreciate women's lived realities and the affect of law and policy on women.

Executive Summary

The Council makes these recommendations:

- That the new Plan build on the style, form and substance established by the current Plan, with a view to making the next Plan more targeted and specific. This will assist in ensuring that the Plan is as effective in improving the lives of women and girls as possible;
- That the new Plan set out a preamble of basic principles concerning women and girls in the ACT. This will establish the basis for the substance of the Women's Plan. Further, that under each objective of the Plan, there be key specific principles which relate to that subject, and to which the relevant action items and the indicators of success are clearly linked;
- That the objectives within the Plan be reviewed and that consideration be given to adopting these changes to the current objectives:
 - Good health and wellbeing;
 - A violence free ACT;
 - Safe Inclusive Communities;

- Responsive Housing and Transport;
 - Economic Security and Opportunities;
 - Flexible Education and Training; and
 - Representation and Recognition.
- That an interdepartmental committee be re-established and maintained.

The Strategy

In formulating this submission, the Council has had regard to:

- The ACT Women's Plan (2004 -2009) (the current Plan);
- Taking Stock: Reporting on the ACT Women's Plan (2004-2009) Indicators of Success; and
- Looking Forward: a discussion paper to inform a new ACT Women's Plan.

The Council considers that part of the role of the Council is to help to provide a pathway for women in the ACT to engage with government about the lives, experiences and opinions of women in the ACT. Part of the purpose of this submission is to inform government about the views of women in the ACT about the Women's Plan. The Council also has an important role in trying to ensure that the government considers the interests of women when formulating law and policy in the ACT.

The Council has undertaken a three pronged approach in formulating this submission.

- First, the Council undertook a review of the Plan by forming a series of internal sub-committees to consider the substance of the Plan. The sub-committees were formed to discuss the six objectives of the Women's Plan, and each reported back to the Council. The Council prepared a working document based on these reports called 'Towards a Review of the ACT Women's Plan', which is **Attachment A** to this submission;
- Second, the Council participated in the Office for Women's Summit held on 22 July 2009 in Civic. The Summit was a public consultation, and amongst other things, discussed women's safety as a community responsibility. Members of the Council used the Summit as an important opportunity to hear the views and opinions of women from the ACT about this matter in the context of considering a new Women's Plan;
- Third, and perhaps most importantly, the Council conducted an Outreach Consultation Program to try to engage with as many women in the ACT as possible. The Outreach Program was designed to reach a broad range of ACT women, particularly those women who may not usually have the opportunity to engage with government.

As outlined in the current Plan, some groups of women in the ACT are marginalised and isolated for a range of reasons including violence, poverty and homelessness, mental health

issues, drug and alcohol issues, disability, children and age. Women from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island community and from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are also often marginalised and isolated.

The Council designed the Outreach Consultation Program to try to reach as many of these women as possible by conducting consultations with small groups of women wherever that was possible and convenient. The Council conducted consultations with a broad range of women including women who work in non-traditional areas, women with disabilities, family carers, women in prison, women lawyers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

A list of all of the consultations that the Council conducted is at **Attachment B**. A list of all of the reports made to Council by the facilitators of the consultations is at **Attachment C**.

The Council is incredibly grateful to all the women of the ACT who gave of their time and their expertise to participate in the Outreach Consultation Program. The Council hopes that this submission reflects their diverse and valuable views.

Attachments

- Attachment A:** Council working document called 'Towards a Review of the ACT Women's Plan', based on internal Council review of the Plan using a series of sub-committees;
- Attachment B:** A list of all of the Outreach Consultations that the Council conducted as part of the Outreach Consultation Program.
- Attachment C:** A list of all of the reports made to Council by the facilitators of the Outreach Consultation Program

Discussion

Style of the Plan

The Council notes that the current Plan was the first ACT Women's Plan. It sought to create a framework for dealing with a vast range of problems, obstacles and experiences of ACT women by engaging with the ACT community and demonstrating leadership in a number of ways. The Council considers that the time is now ripe to build on the work of the initial plan by creating a more robust, detailed and specific document.

The point of the Women's Plan is to make life better for women and girls in the ACT. The Council thinks that the Plan could better achieve this aim if the language and style of the document was more focussed and direct. For example, there are some parts of the current Plan which are in passive language or where the comments made are of a broad nature. The Council considers that while there is some value in making statements of principle, it is important to clearly articulate the government's position and intended action.

As discussed below, the Council considers that the Plan should articulate a set of underpinning principles as part of a preamble to the Plan. Each of these principles should be carefully worded and supported by a body of evidence. If these underpinning principles are thoughtfully drafted, there will be no need for language which seeks to qualify the ACT government's position on women and girls. Rather, the Plan can clearly and justifiably set out the government's commitment to deliver programs which seek to address the specific needs and interests of women in the ACT.

The Council further considers that the language of the Plan could be better expressed to ensure that women and girls feel a sense of ownership over the Plan. For example, in Safe Inclusive Communities, it is recognised that 'protecting women's and girls' rights is essential if *they* are to have the opportunity to reach *their* potential'. It might be that referring to women as 'they' has a tendency to imply that the writer of the report (ie, the 'government') is us/men rather than them/women. The Council's view is that this is worth considering in the drafting of the new Plan.

Form of the Plan

A Preamble

The Council considers that it might be useful to set out a range preambles at the beginning of the document, much like an international convention. The point of the preambles would be to clearly articulate the accepted principles which underpin the Plan. The Council believes that there is value in acknowledging these principles, because they are not necessarily universally accepted or recognised. In addition, drafting the actions and ideas under each objective will be a lot easier if it is clear what the underpinning principles behind the objectives are.

For example, the preamble might acknowledge that *'discrimination against women and girls exists and is a barrier to our full participation in the government, public life, the community and family life of the ACT'*. If such a statement was made at the commencement of the document, then it would be clearer and easier to draft actions under, for example, Recognition and Representation, because it would be clear why it is necessary and desirable to try to remove barriers to help women to have full participation in public life.

In addition, the Council considers that it would be useful to adopt the same approach within each of the objectives. The Council thinks that it would be helpful to outline any underpinning principles which pertain only to that objective at the commencement of the discussion of the separate objective (and possibly in a designated, different place). This would greatly assist with the readability and clarity of the document. In particular, it would assist in ensuring that proposed actions can be readily identified.

The Objectives

Overall, the Council is of the view that the six objectives of the Plan seem to generally reflect the focus areas of interest and importance to women.

However, in line with the Council's comments above about strengthening the language and direction of the Plan, the Council is of the view that some consideration could be given to reformulating some of the focus and language of the objectives.

In particular, violence against women is a constant concern for women in the ACT and around the world. This is reflected in much of the material informing the Women's Plan including the United

Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, the discussion paper about a new Women's Plan 'Looking Forward', and many of the consultations. It is also important to acknowledge that the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children may soon be released and that the ACT will have an important role in implementing that Plan within the ACT.

In the Council's view, consideration should be given to creating an objective which sees reducing violence against women and their children at the heart of the objective. The Council believes that it is important to name this objective, and that there is community recognition in dealing with violence against women. The Council considers that it is important that this concept be identifiably reflected in the objectives of the document. The Council therefore suggests that consideration be given to creating an objective of 'Reducing Violence'.

There are some important issues currently discussed under the topic 'Safe, Inclusive Communities' which do not touch on violence against women. These include ensuring that the ACT has a viable community sector, eliminating sexism, and promoting reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ACT. The Council believes that these items deserve mention in the Women's Plan. Creating a separate section for those matters will ensure that they are not perceived as an 'add on' or tokenism. The Council would therefore recommend that the 'Safe, Inclusive Communities' objective remain as a separate objective.

In addition, the Community Outreach Consultation Program revealed that transport is a concern for many women across the ACT. Since transport is a matter within the direct responsibility of the ACT government, it may be that transport can be dealt with as an objective within the Women's Plan. The Council suggests that Responsive Housing and Transport may be an appropriate objective.

The Council therefore suggests that the following objectives be adopted (and in this order):

- Good health and wellbeing;
- A violence free ACT;
- Safe Inclusive Communities;
- Responsive Housing and Transport;
- Economic Security and Opportunities;
- Flexible Education and Training; and
- Representation and Recognition.

Interaction within the Plan

The Council considers that there could be greater interaction and cross-referencing within the Plan. It is not always clear how the different statements in the plan fit together and how they interact with each other. Certainly, many of the statements and different parts of the Plan interlink. The Council considers that it would be preferable if the links between the ideas could be made clear, at least in some crucial cases.

Substance of the Plan

As noted above, the ACT Women's Plan is designed to improve the lives of women and girls in the ACT. The Council considers that the Plan could be more effectively used to achieve this goal if it

more comprehensively reflected the idea that dealing with ACT women and girls is a 'whole of government' responsibility.

To this end, the Council believes that the Plan should make it clear on its face that funding and resources for 'women's issues' will be covered by government, and not, for example, by one particular part of the government such as the Office for Women.

Further, the Council believes that consideration should be given to the establishment of a fund to be used specifically to support ACT women, but that this amount should come from general revenue or a community chest established for this purpose. For example, a fund could be established and a small percentage of all land sales or all alcohol licences in the ACT could be allocated to the fund. An initiative of this nature would demonstrate the government's real commitment to the idea that the whole of government is responsible for 'women's issues'. It would also enable community ownership of women's issues. This idea is outlined in the Council's budget submission to the ACT government dated September 2009.

Regardless of whether a community chest or special purpose fund is established for this purpose, the Council is of the view that the Women's Plan should reflect the principle that the responsibility for dealing with issues of concern to women is a whole of government responsibility.

In this respect, the Council considers that it would be useful to re-establish and maintain an interdepartmental committee. Experience has shown that implementing an effective, long-term committee requires that there be a solid basis of work underpinning the role of the committee. It appears to the Council that it may be too broad to simply task the committee with working through 'women's issues'. However, given the links between many of the matters raised in different objectives within the Women's Plan, and in the context of a government commitment that 'women's issues' are a whole of government concern, it appears to the Council that there will be some matters which appear to present themselves for committee business. For example, it appears to the Council that the ACT's response to and involvement with the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children will need support from across government. There may be a number of similar 'cross portfolio' issues which could also be referred to the committee.

Having made these general remarks about the substance of the Plan, the Council would like to address each of the objectives of the Plan. Each of the following sections outlines the Council's view about the current Plan and some ideas which may inform the drafting of a new Plan. Each section also contains a brief summary of the matters discussed by ACT women as part of the Outreach Consultation Program. The Council appreciates that not all of the matters raised are suitable for mention in the Plan, or even within the power or jurisdiction of the ACT government. However, the Council is of the view that it is important to outline these matters as part of this submission to properly inform government of the issues and priorities for ACT women.

Good Health and Wellbeing

As reflected in the general comments about the Plan, the Council considers that the list of preliminary dot points within Good Health and Wellbeing could be more focussed. The current list of items at the beginning of this section contains objectives, statements and descriptions. It would be desirable to sort out a number of preliminary principles, including and similar to those articulated in the Beijing Platform at the beginning of the section. For example, some of the current statements, such as those relating to access to health services, could be grouped together and re-

drafted as a principle (or a couple of principles). This would serve to focus the section and the beginning section would also be shorter and punchier.

The Council also considers that some of the content of these principles should be reviewed. The principles should refer to 'all women', in order to remain inclusive, and then refer to particular groups of women where specialist services are needed. For example, it would be useful to make specific reference to single mothers in relation to access to health services.

It might be useful, at the beginning of the Good Health and Wellbeing section to make an overarching statement about the government's commitment to women's health. The statement could be something like 'The government aims to provide appropriate and accessible health services to all women in the ACT as well as providing access to relevant relating to health and wellbeing so that they can fully participate in decision making and make informed choices for themselves.' It is clear that the ACT government is committed to improving the health outcomes of ACT women and girls, and this is reflected in the statements made in Taking Stock, the government's report against the indicators of success of the current Plan. The Council considers that the Plan could clearer reflect the government's commitments and actions in this respect.

The Council considers that the Plan could be more effective if the 'Areas for Action' section contained some firm commitments to action by the government. The Council realises that it may not be possible to articulate very specific goals, but is of the view that it is desirable to include more detail in the Plan. For example, the section under 'accessible services' (on page 7) is reasonably vague, and contains a number of statements including that 'women's health services...will continue to be addressed'. The section does not state what services will be targeted or why it is important or appropriate that a particular service be addressed. It would be useful, for example, if at least some meaningful actions could be linked to the principles listed in the preliminary section. For example, one of the statements in the preliminary section is that factors such as mental illness and substance dependency can have a major impact on women's lives. One action item could acknowledge that there is a need for women who may be impacted by mental illness and substance abuse to access support services and early intervention, and that the government is committed to providing these services.

A further example of the way in which the general Good Health and Wellbeing principles could be linked to action items is the statement (currently in the action items section) that 'privacy issues for women will continue to be addressed'. The Council thinks that it would be useful if the government could commit to taking some specific action in this respect. In the Council's view, it is a serious issue that, for example, the private counsellors' records of organisations like Canberra Rape Crisis are vulnerable to being subpoenaed in civil proceedings. The ACT government is moving to legislate to protect women's privacy in this respect, and it would be helpful to see a commitment to this action within the Women's Plan.

It is noted that Good Health and Wellbeing is strongly linked to violence against women, and that this is not currently reflected in the Plan. The Council is of the view that a clear link should be drawn between these two objectives in the Women's Plan.

The Council's Outreach Consultation Program revealed a number of key themes for ACT women in terms of Good Health and Wellbeing. Access to medical services remains an important issue, with the availability of medical practitioners and transport to those doctors being a major concern. It was suggested that the government consider developing a project with in the 'Live in Canberra' Campaign which is designed to attract more women general practitioners to the ACT. It was felt that medical clinics were not the answer to this problem, as it is important for people to have continuity

of care, and that medical clinics cannot provide that. The lack of availability of dentists was also cited as a problem, and it was suggested that a mobile dental care unit would be of assistance in this respect. It was also suggested that transport to medical centres that offer bulk billing or services for breast and cervical screening be made available.

Also with respect to access to medical practitioners, it was suggested that the ACT government work with the ACT division of General Practice to increase the percentage of doctors that bulk bill. It was also suggested that the government work with ACT division of General Practice for a long-term plan to ensure that all ACT doctor's surgeries are accessible to women with disabilities, including provision of adjustable height examination tables. The Council considers that the number of medical practitioners, as well as the number of medical practitioners who bulk bill, could be a possible indicator of success under this objective.

During the course of the Outreach Consultation, a number of other suggestions were also made with a view to enhancing the Good Health and Wellbeing of women and girls in the ACT. It was noted that:

- It would be useful to have some cultural awareness training in hospitals, particularly around Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people (for example, in the amputation hospital);
- Childcare is also an issue for women who need medical attention;
- It would be useful to have counselling for women in prison, especially in relation to not being able to be with their children;
- The range of foods available in prison could be improved, particularly in relation to vegetarians;
- Body image and eating disorders remain an issue, particularly for young women;
- It would be helpful to have menstruation and menopausal assistance;
- It would be helpful to have support measures to assist women with intellectual disabilities through all stages of pregnancy including post natal support;
- Smoking remains an issue, particularly with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island women and young women;
- It would be useful to have a second non-denominational hospice in Canberra.

A Violence-Free ACT

The Council is of the view that the Safe and Inclusive Communities section of current Plan is one of the weakest in the Plan. As stated above, the Council considers that it would be appropriate to split that objective into two objectives, and to name the reduction of violence (particularly against women and their children) as a key objective in the Women's Plan. It is important that the Plan articulate the importance of violence against women as a factor in women's health and wellbeing in the Territory and the effect that it has on our community. The ACT government is committed to reducing violence against women and this is reflected in (for example) Taking Stock, the government's report against the indicators of success of the current Plan. This commitment should be strongly reflected in the Women's Plan.

Splitting the single current objective Safe Inclusive Communities This would result in some of the other ideas, currently in the Safe Inclusive Communities would also ensure that priorities and actions which are not related to violence against women, are given an appropriate status in the Plan. At present, some of the principles and actions, most notably that of reconciliation, appears to be an 'add on' within a section which is largely devoted to dealing with violence against women. In the

Council's view, it is important that these matters be given the priority which they deserve within the Women's Plan.

The introductory principles of a section dealing with violence against women should be clear and unequivocal. The ACT government's stated position on this is that violence against women and children is a human rights issue and will not be tolerated in the ACT. Further, violence (of any description) is destructive in our community and has an enormous cost in terms of unfulfilled potential, damage to children and in economic terms. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the vast majority of violence in our community (against both men and women and in any situation) is perpetrated by men. All of this violence affects our whole community including women. Moreover, there are particular dynamics around violence against women, particularly sexual assault and domestic and family violence that need to be clearly acknowledged in the Plan. The Council considers that the Plan should state, in no uncertain terms, that violence (particularly gendered violence) is one factor which underpins women's disadvantage in the ACT.

Also in terms of the principles at the commencement of the section, the Council believes that it is important to clearly articulate the importance of educating young people about respectful relationships. Further, the current Plan does not mention the way in which violence against women in the home affects children. The Council considers that this is an important point to make.

The Council is of the view that the ACT government should clearly commit to taking action in relation to violence against women. The government is already taking some decisive action in this respect, and the Council believes that it is important to re-articulate the ACT government's commitment in this respect in the ACT Women's Plan.

For example, the Council considers that the Family Violence Intervention Program is an important part of the ACT government's response to domestic and family violence in the ACT (and this is mentioned in Taking Stock, the government's report against the indicators of success of the current Plan). The government could commit to continuing support for the Program, not simply in terms of funding but also in terms of longevity and sustainability of the Program. Further, the government could commit to continuing to support victims of crime within the criminal justice system, particularly in relation to support services such as witness support and counselling support.

In this respect, the Plan does not mention other ACT government activities or bodies such as the Domestic Violence Prevention Council or the Domestic Violence and Crisis Accommodation Initiatives, which the ACT government supports in its commitment to reduce violence against women. This would be helpful, as would some specific commitments to continue to support those activities and bodies. In addition, the Council considers that the Plan should outline the ACT government's commitment to working with the Commonwealth government to continue to support the implementation of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children (assuming that the National Plan has been finalised at the time that the Women's Plan is released).

Again, the Council is of the view that it is important to form links between the principles, actions and indicators for success in this section. It is important to note that there should be general 'understanding, acceptance and acknowledgement of the right of women to live their lives free from violence'. This sentence currently appears in the 'actions' portion of the section (although it is not particularly clearly set out). The Council considers that this sentence would be better placed with the key principles. Linking to the statement, it would be useful to see some government commitment to the support of early intervention programs and public awareness campaigns such as White Ribbon Day and the safety house program. It would also be helpful to see actions such as, for

example, a government commitment to withdraw funding from sporting clubs which, through their actions, appear to endorse violent or disrespectful behaviour towards women.

The Council further considers that it is important to acknowledge the level of violence in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, against younger and older women, and against women with disabilities. It is also important to acknowledge that some groups in the community find it particularly difficult to deal with violence, including women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The Council's Community Outreach Consultation Program disclosed that ACT women and girls remain concerned about the level of violence in our community. Many women stated that they did not feel safe to go out, particularly at night. It was generally thought that the lighting and transport in the ACT was insufficient to ensure that older women and shift workers (in particular) could travel safely within Canberra. In addition, it was noted that public housing in Canberra was not safe, and that women had been attacked coming in and out of big housing complexes on their way to an from their own homes. Younger women felt that there were insufficient numbers of 'safety houses' in Canberra, and that this program could be more widely supported. Some women felt that women victims of crime were not dealt with fairly by the criminal justice system, and that this could be handled better by police and prosecutors.

It is fair to say that many of the conversations conducted as part of the Outreach Consultation Program did not elicit comments about violence against women. The Council considers that this is due to the very fact that the Plan fails to specifically address violence against women, focussing rather on a more ephemeral idea of a 'safe community'. The Council considers that this is a good reason in itself to split the objectives and ensure that there is appropriate acknowledgement and community discourse about violence against women. Many of the Community Outreach Consultation Program comments are reflected under the objective Safe Inclusive Communities.

Safe Inclusive Communities

As noted above, the Council considers that there are a number of important ideas which are currently listed under the objective Safe Inclusive Communities, but which are not linked to the idea of reducing violence against women. Placing principles which underpin a safe and inclusive community in the ACT under this objective will serve to ensure that these matters do not become a tokenistic 'add on' to the idea that violence against women should be addressed.

Further, as stated above, it is important that the Women's Plan reflect the idea that women are an integral and important part of the ACT community and not some sort of 'addition'. It is particularly important that the language and tenor of this section reflect this idea. In addition, the Council also believes that it is important to ensure that the Plan reflect the idea that women are not an amorphous mass, but rather have a range of different needs and interests.

Again, the Council considers that it is important to state a range of principles which are to inform actions and indicators for success. For example, it is important that women, particularly women with disabilities, younger women and women who work in non-traditional areas, are safe to work in our community. That is a statement of principle, and there could be a number of action items which follow that. For example, the ACT government could commit to action to ensuring that sufficient reliable public transport is provided for people who work shift work. Failing that, the ACT government could commit to working with employers to try to encourage transport to be made available. In addition, the ACT government could renew its commitment to ensuring that

workplaces are free from (particularly gender based) harassment. It was clear from the Council's Outreach Consultation that many women, particularly women who work in non-traditional areas, still work in environments where harassment is prevalent.

The Council also considers that it is important that this section be crafted to ensure that women and girls who are less powerful in our community are considered within the terms of the Plan. One example of this is the treatment of women in prisons. The Council feels that it is particularly important that the interests and needs of women in our community who find it difficult to 'have a voice', such as those in prisons, are considered in the ACT. During the Council's Community Outreach Consultation program, for example, it became apparent that women in the ACT prison feel like they are 'living in a men's prison', and that they are an inconvenient 'add on' within the system. No special measures appear to be being taken for women in the ACT prison, and this is not acceptable given that most women have high needs and are a low security risk. Women in the ACT prison reported that, in general terms, the human rights of inmates in New South Wales prisons were generally better respected than in the ACT. The Council considers that the Plan could reflect an action item which is designed to ensure that the ACT government respects the interests of women who are less powerful in our community as part of government decision making.

The Council has similar concerns about ensuring that other groups of vulnerable women are reflected in the Plan. For example, homeless women may also find it difficult to have their needs and experiences considered in the ACT. Likewise, it is important that the government continue to ensure that the efforts it makes to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island women continue (and some of these are outlined in Taking Stock, the government's report against the indicators of success of the current Plan). It is important that the Plan reflect the principle that vulnerable members of our community be considered.

In the Council's view, statements such as 'measures that identify and support women and girls experiencing isolation will continue to be developed' are not specific enough. It would be more useful for the section to outline which groups may be isolated (and these are outlined at the beginning of the current Plan itself) and suggest some broad actions to address these isolation issues. It is important that this section of the Plan clearly state that diversity of women is valued, and then articulate actions which support diversity in the Canberra community, encouraging women to reach their potential in employment, public and family life.

The Community Outreach Consultation Program revealed a number of other matters which are of concern to ACT women. Transport was a key theme, with some older women reporting that they have trouble getting into and out of Canberra buses. Some women felt that it was important to maintain the train service to and from Canberra. In addition, it was thought that improved services for isolated, migrant women could be made available, particularly, for example, English education classes and possibly cultural education classes (perhaps including an element of respectful relationships). During the Consultation, it was also suggested that a program of microcredit could be made available to migrant women, who could then work from home using their skills whilst taking care of child rearing responsibilities. The Council notes that the ACT government intends to introduce such a program, and the Council supports this being reflected in the Plan as an action item.

The Consultation also revealed that some women also felt that petty theft and minor crime were on the rise. Some women felt that these minor criminals needed to be dealt with in a more effective way by the criminal justice system. In addition, it was suggested that more places be available for young people to gather, so that they are not so isolated, turning to petty crime and becoming a problem in terms of a safe, inclusive community for women.

Responsive Housing and Transport

Housing remains a critical issue in Canberra, and this is an area for which the ACT government has responsibility. The Council is of the view that this section of the Plan could be much more specific and targeted in terms of improving the lives of ACT women and girls. There are a number of specific actions that the government has undertaken in this respect, including a commitment to introduce a domestic violence policy with respect to housing in the ACT. These actions should be listed in the Plan.

The Council's Community Outreach Consultation revealed significant concern across a broad range of women and girls in the ACT about transport. The Council considers that it may be appropriate for this objective in the Women's Plan to deal with Responsive Housing and Transport. This would better reflect the priority that ACT women place on transport, and would help the government to articulate what it considers to be the main priorities for action in this area. Concepts around transport were raised in discussion about many areas of the Plan including Safe Inclusive Communities, Flexible Education and Training, and Economic Security and Opportunities. Given that, like housing, transport is the direct responsibility of the ACT government, the Council considers that it may be more effective to deal with transport in a separate section of the Plan.

In terms of the idea of responsive housing, again the Council is of the view that rather than simply list what the Beijing Platform calls on governments to do, it would be more useful to outline a set of principles which are to underpin the ACT government's action in this respect.

The Council considers that it is important to acknowledge that some groups of women find issues around housing especially difficult, and these include women with mental illnesses, older women (particularly those in a crisis situation due to domestic violence) and women headed households, particularly young women and mothers.

The Council notes that there is no mention of the support required by elderly people to live in their own homes in the current Plan. Linking the acknowledgement that housing is an issue for older women to an action, it may be appropriate for the government to articulate its commitment to supporting these women in their homes, for example by ensuring that proper equipment is installed (such as ramps and bathroom rails). Obviously, appropriate transport facilities and other support services are also necessary. In addition, it is noted that the financial crisis has had an adverse impact on the availability of places in aged care accommodation, and the waiting lists for aged care facilities is very long. It would be appropriate for the Plan to mention this problem.

The Council's Community Outreach Consultation Program revealed that, despite the government's actions in this area, housing remains a major concern for women in the ACT. Many women, particularly women from already isolated groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island women and older women, described dealing with the government about housing as particularly fraught. Words like 'nightmare', 'victim', 'no understanding' and 'nasty' were used. Housing was described as 'inadequate' and 'inappropriate', and it was clearly identified that the lack of appropriate housing is a safety issue. Many of these women described that they would like to own their own home instead of paying 'dead rent' but that they could not afford to do so.

A number of other points about housing in the ACT were raised during the Community Outreach Consultation. These included:

- many women across a number of the consultation groups described that the large public housing complexes were unsafe, and that they wanted access to safe housing;
- housing should be close to transport services;
- some women were leaving prison with no appropriate accommodation organised for after their release. The Council is of the view that this is a concern on a number of levels, and that the government could take action to ensure that these women's accommodation was appropriately considered as part of their release from prison;
- women should make up half of the ACT Government Housing Trust, which might ensure that decisions about housing are made with the interests and experiences of women in mind;
- there is a concern about adult people with disabilities who are being cared for by their elderly parents. The question is what will happen to these people when the parents are no longer able to care for them – will appropriate accommodation be available to them?
- Some landlords can take advantage of women tenants who do not know their rights.

It is clear that crisis accommodation for women (and their children) who have experienced domestic or family violence remains inadequate. Many of these women are homeless or 'couch surfing', which is clearly an unacceptable outcome. The Council notes the government's commitment to addressing the needs of people exiting crisis accommodated outlined in Taking Stock, the government's report against the indicators of success of the current Plan. The Council considers that this is a useful commitment and believes that it would be helpful if the Plan could also re-articulate the government's commitment to providing adequate crisis accommodation on a more general level. The Council believes that this is of some importance, as some of the groups consulted were unaware of the government's actions in this area. Again, the Council is of the view that the link between housing and domestic and family violence is an important one, which should be made clear on the face of the Plan.

General housing (in addition to crisis accommodation) also remains a problem for women (and their children) who have experienced domestic or family violence. One woman stated 'it was good I got bashed so that I could get housed quickly'. Obviously, the Council is exceptionally concerned that the effect of a 'priority' listing for women who have experienced domestic violence may result in women feeling that experiencing violence has positive effect for them and their family. While the Council supports a 'priority' listing for these women, it is important that the government continue to assess the whole picture, including the lack of availability of affordable housing in the ACT.

As noted above, the Council considers that this objective should also deal with transport, which is an important and related issue for women in the ACT. The question of transport is raised in a number of different sections within this submission including:

- Good Health and Wellbeing – in terms of access to medical practitioners, particularly to medical centres;
- Safe Inclusive Communities – in terms of women travelling safely to and from work, particularly shift workers. This is obviously also related to Economic Security and Opportunities, as access to workplaces is important in that context;
- Safe Inclusive Communities – in the sense that it is important that older women and women with disabilities be able to participate in public and social life in the ACT, and that it is

important that a public transport infrastructure exists which can support that participation;
and

- Responsive Housing – in terms of public housing being close to reliable and affordable public transport.

Failing a separate and specific part of this objective dealing with transport, the Council considers that it is important to note the links between the provision of responsive housing and the availability of reliable and cost-effective public transport. These matters are also clearly linked to women's safety, and those links should also be clearly articulated on the face of the Plan.

Economic Security and Opportunities

Again, the Council felt that the principles at the commencement of this section could be redrafted to ensure clarity, relevance and specificity. This section is particularly broad and careful drafting will be needed in order to ensure that all aspects of women's concerns in this area are dealt with.

In terms of the key underlying principles, the Council felt that it is important within this section to acknowledge the factors that affect women's economic security. In the Council's view, these factors are:

- Education and Training: there continues to be 'gaps' in this area, for example, Aboriginal women have lower levels of education and migrant women may be restricted in being able to transfer their skills;
- Labour Market: a higher proportion of women work part-time, and in a period of economic downturn, the impact on women of reduced hours of work is higher than it is for men;
- Income and Earnings: women continue to earn lower wages than men, single mothers, older women, Aboriginal women and women who are members of a visible minority are at a higher risk of poverty than others;
- Work and Family: family responsibilities and personal commitments, including childcare and looking after elderly people, have a greater impact on women's participation in the labour force than men's, and this presents particular difficulties for single mothers in paid employment;
- Gendered nature of Power: women remain in the minority in political and senior leadership roles, and whilst gains are being made in the government sector with respect to representation on boards and commissions, similar gains are not being made in the private sector;
- Violence against Women and Sexual Harassment: violence and harassment results in significant personal and economic costs.

The Council considers that these factors should be reflected in the specific principles which underpin Economic Security and Opportunities.

Also reflected in the principles should be the idea that access to employment is of primary importance to many women as the basis for the development of economic security, independence, and taking advantage of other social opportunities. This is particularly important for groups of

women who might otherwise become isolated such as women with disabilities, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and women who have been out of the workforce (for example, raising children) for some time. In this respect, the Council notes the ACT government's Return to Work Grants Program, which is outlined in Taking Stock, the government's report against the indicators of success of the current Plan. The Council considers that this helpful initiative could be reflected in the action items in this section.

In the Council's view, it is also important to reflect in the principles that wages for the community sector and child care workers are unacceptably low (in the ACT and across Australia). This is a gender issue in that most of these workers are women. The Family Day Care workers, in particular, raised this as an issue as part of the Council's Community Outreach Consultation Program, stating that \$3.80 per child per hour was insufficient. The Council is of the view that this is clearly the case, and that many other areas in which women are traditionally employed are also underpaid. In terms of action items to follow this principle, the Council considers that the ACT government could articulate a commitment to ensuring that wages of community workers are properly supported by appropriate budget allocations in the ACT.

In this respect, again, the Council considers that the actions and indicators for success should be linked to the principles; and again, the Council considers that it would be more helpful to have greater specificity in both the actions and the indicators for success. For example, whilst information about superannuation for women is described as 'vital' in the principles, there is no specific mention of superannuation in the actions or the indicators for success. It would be useful for the ACT government to indicate its commitment to education about superannuation (at least for ACT public servants, for example) in circumstances where this is considered 'vital' for women's economic prosperity and wellbeing.

Again, the Council notes that the action items ought to be as specific as possible. For example, one statement made under 'actions' is that the 'government will undertake activities that assist in reducing poverty amongst women in the ACT through concessions and programs that supplement the costs associated with day to day living.' The Council notes that it is not clear from Taking Stock, the government's report against the indicators of success of the current Plan, how the government has acted upon this commitment, if at all. The Council considers that it would be useful if at least some government programs or initiatives could be outlined here, both to demonstrate the government's ongoing commitment in this area, and to ensure that the statement has clear credibility by providing specific examples of the government's intentions.

In addition, the Council notes that the drafting of the key indicators within this section means that there is no acknowledgement of the different position of specific groups, such as women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds or women with disabilities. As noted above, the indicators could link to the principle that many of these women face discrimination in seeking employment and in the workplace (and that the ACT government considers this to be unacceptable). It would be useful if the government could at least indicate its commitment (perhaps through the Human Rights Commission) to ensuring that discrimination will not be tolerated in the ACT and to ensuring that the ACT public continue to be educated in this area through public awareness campaigns.

The Council's Community Outreach Consultation Program highlighted a number of concerns of ACT women in relation to Economic Security and Opportunities. It was noted that the availability of appropriate child care was a barrier to many women finding and maintaining paid employment. (Again, the Council notes the Return to Work Grants Program, although that program is clearly limited to the initial obtaining of employment rather than maintaining employment.) It was also

noted that women's child bearing and child rearing continues to present issues for women in terms of breaks in paid employment, particularly in relation to superannuation. Women working outside the public sector continue to experience issues around maternity leave, part time positions and flexible working hours. Women across the workforce continue to experience difficulties with balancing all their responsibilities (including child care and elder care responsibilities) with paid employment. Women's contribution to non-paid work continues to interfere with their capacity to earn money, to be promoted to senior positions, and to build up appropriate levels of superannuation. Patronage which favours men over women continues to be an issue, both for women who work in trades and for women in professions.

It was also noted that young women felt that careers as tradespeople were not open to them, and that other people felt that they lacked the skills to be competitive in that environment. In particular, some college-aged girls described their experience of taking woodwork and metalwork subjects at school, only to have the teacher treat them differently from the boy students. The girls described that the teacher would often say 'here, let me do that for you' instead of encouraging the girls to obtain the skills necessary to do the job. The Council notes that there is a clear link, evident in this example, between Education and Training and Economic Security and Opportunity. Again, it would be good to make the link between the educational opportunities for women and girls, and their later opportunities in the workplace, explicit in the Plan.

Flexible Education and Training

Again, the Council is of the view that this objective could be better supported by more specific language, particularly around the action items. The Council is of the view that this section of the Plan is particularly light on detail and could be reviewed in order to ensure that it contains all the pertinent information about the government's position in this area.

For example, the statement 'flexible pathways to further education, training and employment are being encouraged' is not specific enough to provide a useful basis to understand the ACT government's commitment in this area. It would be good if the government could specifically outline what commitments or actions it is undertaking to support women in the way that it suggests is necessary in the principles. Again, the principles ought to be specific enough to identify what barriers exist to women and girls in terms of education and training, why that is important, and what action can be taken to ensure that those barriers are removed.

During the course of the Community Outreach Consultation Program, the following matters were highlighted:

- Books and education material available to women prisoners was insufficient (with only three books being able to be borrowed per week);
- Women and girls from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds face tension between mainstream education schedules and the freedom at school and a different cultural approach at home. This can mean that some teenagers do not assimilate well, and this can translate to health issues or homelessness;
- Women with disabilities sometimes find it difficult to access training or courses, and this could be improved by offering specific scholarships to women with disabilities.

- Education should be delivered as flexibly as possible, so that a wide group of women can participate, including women with disabilities;
- Some migrant women have overseas qualifications which are not recognised;
- Some education and training schemes are not conducive to attracting and keeping women in the workplace; for example, women family day care workers described a requirement that childcare traineeships place a requirement to commence training within three months after the worker has started employment. This is difficult in practical terms, and may dissuade workers from the opportunity to undertake training; and
- Childcare is also an issue to accessing education and training. Childcare should be woven into education programs.

Representation and Recognition

The Council is of the view that there are many ways in which this objective is the least important of all the objectives, and that it should be placed last in the Plan. The Council considers that if all of the other objectives within the Plan are met, then it will follow that women will have achieved appropriate Representation and Recognition in our community. Of course, that is not to say that taking action to ensure that women attain appropriate representation and recognition in our community is not a necessary part of the ACT Women's Plan. Indeed, the Council considers that it is again important to ensure that this section is as specific and targeted as possible, with a view to ensuring that improvements can be made in the ACT. This is because women are not currently appropriately represented or recognised in our community.

In line with the comments made in other sections, the Council is of the view that the principles, actions and indicators of success within Representation and Recognition need to reflect a greater level of specificity. In terms of the principles, the Council considers that an overarching principle may be of use, such as 'Discrimination against women and girls is preventing women from participating in the leadership of the ACT. The failure to recognise women's experiences and perspectives as valuable sometimes stops women from being invited to participate in our community's senior leadership positions. The ACT Government is committed to taking action to address this issue.'

The Council notes the boxed quotation in this section, which highlights the fact that women are under represented in the Order of Australia awards. The Council considers this to be an important matter, and thinks that it should be a part of this section of the Plan to ensure that women's contributions are properly considered for government and community awards. However, it appears to the Council that by placing this quotation in a prominent place on the page, this sends the message that the criteria for appropriately valuing the contribution of women in our community is established by government awards. These awards have long been granted on the basis of criteria which undervalues the areas in which women have traditionally worked (including raising children, unpaid caring work for disabled and elderly people, and work in the community sector). The Council considers that it should be an important consideration within this section of the Plan to try to challenge these assumptions and reinforce the message that women's contribution to our community is to be valued and appreciated.

The Council is of the view that it is important to again craft the key principles in this section to recognise the diversity of ACT women, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island women,

women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and women with disabilities, as well as younger and older women. The contribution that these women can make to our community is significant and often goes unnoticed or underappreciated. It is important that this be acknowledged in the Plan and to articulate that a richer and more inclusive community will be fostered by leadership which includes these women.

The Council considers that this principle could be linked with an action item and possibly an indicator of success. For example, during the Community Outreach Consultation Program, the Council was informed that the Women's Centre for Health Matters has found that there is a lack of women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds at senior levels in the ACT. This has meant that issues which are important to these women are not on the agenda at senior levels within the ACT. It might be that the ACT government can commit to placing consultation with women from culturally and linguistically diverse women to ensure that these women have a voice at a government policy level within our community. In addition, it might be that the ACT government can commit to ensuring that a diverse range of women, including women with disabilities, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island women are selected to serve on government advisory boards.

The Council also considers that it is particularly important within Representation and Recognition to make links with other parts of the Plan. For example, it strikes the Council as important to make the connection that if women are supported to stay in the workplace (or return to the workplace) after raising children, then longevity in the workplace may result in greater seniority for those women. In turn, it can be hoped that this will lead to a greater representation of women on boards and commissions. In addition, it seems to the Council that if women's skills in raising children better appreciated, then it would be appropriately acknowledged in other spheres (such as workplaces) and women would be more likely to be recognised in a range of ways across our community.

In this respect, the Council considers that the Plan could articulate that the ACT government will seek to recognise the contribution that people make in all spheres of life, in terms of their capacity to contribute to the workplace. This would ensure that women who have been able to raise children and contribute to our community on a voluntary or unpaid basis can be recognised as having performed an important role in our community as well as obtaining a valuable set of skills. A statement of this nature from the ACT government could be important in terms of demonstrating some leadership around this issue.

The Council believes that this section could also be linked to the idea expressed above in Safe Inclusive Communities that groups who are very disadvantaged in our community be considered in the ACT. That is to say, one of the reasons that it is important to have women on boards and committees, particularly in the public sector, is to try to ensure that the experiences of a variety of women are considered in the making of government policy. In ensuring that a variety of women engage with government and are involved in government decision making is one way of ensuring that disadvantaged women, such as women in prisons and homeless women, are considered.

The Council is also of the view that it is important that this section articulate the problem with underpaying community sector, health care and child care workers. In Western society, it is the case that the value of something is often expressed in money or economic terms. In this respect, it is a real problem that workers in our community such as community, child care and health care workers, who are so often women, are very significantly underpaid. This leads to the perception that, for example, child care workers are 'just baby-sitters' (as was reflected in the Community Outreach Consultation Program). As noted above, there could be a commitment from the ACT government in

the women's plan to review wages in the area of community workers, and to try to ensure that an appropriate level of value is placed on these types of paid employment in the ACT.

The Council notes the ACT government's commitment to ensuring appropriate representation for women in leadership in the ACT, as outlined in Taking Stock, the government's report against the indicators of success of the current Plan. The Council supports the government's commitment to achieving and maintaining 50% representation of women on its boards and committees, and considers that this commitment should be outlined in the Women's Plan.

Conclusion

The Women's Ministerial Advisory Council has been pleased to be involved in the ACT's review of the Women's Plan, in particular in the Community Consultation Outreach Program. The Council hopes that the remarks made in this submission can meaningfully inform a Women's Plan which improves the lives of women and girls in the ACT.

The Council would be pleased to brief the Women's Plan Advisory Group or the Minister about any matter which is raised in this submission.

Veronica Wensing
Chair
ACT Ministerial Advisory Council for Women

October 2009

MACW CONSULTATIONS

WOMEN'S PLAN

2009

GROUP CONSULTED	CONSULTATION DETAILS	FACILITATOR	COMMENTS
A group of Aboriginal Women, workers with community organisations.	Several over the phone surveys conducted and outreach where women were visited to talk about these issues.	Betty Connolly	The women access the service through the Nguru program.
Women prisoners at the AMC in Canberra		Kiki Korpinen and Veronica Wensing	
Multicultural women living in the ACT	26 August, Board room of YWCA, Civic	Sally de Souza	
Year 10 students	15 and 16 year old girls	Kiki Korpinen	
Women with Disabilities (ACT)	20 June 2009, at a regular WWDACT meeting August 2009, At a forum on the relocation of the Independent Living Centre to Village Creek PS	Sue Salthouse, Kerry Snell and Louise Bannister	This consultation was not 'women's plan specific' but drew on consultations held by WWDACT for a separate purpose. However, a separate report addressing the specific consultation questions was prepared.
Women working in non-traditional areas	1 September, Fyshwick Trade Skills Centre	Nicole Stenlake	

GROUP CONSULTED	CONSULTATION DETAILS	FACILITATOR	COMMENTS
Winnunga workers and Aboriginal women from their community	28 August, 12 women, Arranged with the Australian Women's Health Network Talking Circle	Gwen Gray	
National Council of Women of the ACT	30 July, Approximately 10 women, Consultation for approximately 1 hour	Coral Fleming	Particular focus on Health and Wellbeing and Safe and Inclusive Communities
Pan Pacific and SE Asia Women's Associate members of the ACT	1 August, Approximately 8 women, Consultation for approximately 1 hour	Coral Fleming	Particular focus on Responsive Housing and Safe Inclusive Communities
Older Women's Network (ACTION)	3 August, Hellenic Club, Approximately 8 women, Consultation for approximately one hour	Coral Fleming	Particular focus on Health and Wellbeing, Responsive Housing and Safe Inclusive Communities
Women Lawyers ACT	27 August, Regular Women Lawyers ACT Board Meeting, Approximately 8 women	Katie Firster	
Family Day Carers	Spence, Approximately 10 women	Manja Visschedijk and Lyndal Ryan	

GROUP CONSULTED	CONSULTATION DETAILS	FACILITATOR	COMMENTS
Marginalised women including homeless women and women who have experienced mental health issues	Inanna Inc, Approximately 6 women	Kiki Korpinen	
Parliament House Cleaners	Bundy Room, Basement, Parliament House, Approximately 7 women	Lyndal Ryan	
Baringa Child Care Centre	2 women	Lyndal Ryan	
University Preschool and Childcare Centre	6 women	Lyndal Ryan	
ANU law students	28 August, Approximately 5 women.	Louise Taylor	
Narrabundah College	17 September Approximately 9 students and 2 staff	Louise Taylor	