



ACT
Government

ANNUAL STATEMENT

on the Status of Women and Girls in the ACT – March 2021

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We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the ACT, the Ngunnawal people. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

As the Minister for Women and the Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence, I welcome the opportunity to acknowledge International Women's Day, which occurred on 8 March, by providing a Statement to the Assembly on the Status of Women and Girls in the ACT.

The feminist cause is about collectivism. It takes the whole community, and it means working together, while also recognising and celebrating diversity.

Today I announced the establishment of a Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Working Group to coordinate the community, the service sector, unions, and relevant stakeholders on responses to sexual assault in the ACT.

On Monday 15th March, many of my Assembly colleagues and I stood beside thousands of other women at Parliament House to March 4 Justice. The treatment of women in workplaces and across the country is unacceptable. We are demanding a future in which women are treated with dignity and respect.

It is a momentous time and it is time to put survivors at the centre of how we respond to sexual assault.

Last week I met with Victims of Crime Commissioner Heidi Yates, Associate Professor AM and Senior Specialist Sexual Health and Forensic Medicine Vanita Parekh AM, CEO of Women's Health Matters Marcia Williams, and CEO of Canberra Rape Crisis Centre Chrystina Stanford to understand what needs to happen next with the Sexual Assault Reform Program. I heard the call for a different approach to change.

To quote the Victims of Crime Commissioner Heidi Yates 'We cannot continue to hold up the criminal justice system as the ideal justice response for survivors because that is a promise we simply cannot fulfill.'

To make long-lasting change to cultures of behaviour we need to bring everyone along on the journey for change. Our approach also needs to understand that the nature of sexual assault has changed over time including with technology.

The working group will be inclusive and intersectional about experiences of sexual violence across the community including people with a disability, the LGBTIQ+ community, children and young people, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and communities that are culturally and linguistically diverse. We know that there are many different experiences and that our response must provide more than just one pathway.

This work also needs to have a gendered lens as women make up 86.6% of victims of sexual assault in the ACT.

On Sunday 28th of March Women's Health Matters released a survey regarding women's experiences seeking help for sexual assault in the ACT. I encourage women in the community to do the survey to help us better understand women's experiences and their views about services and support.

This research and existing data on sexual assault and sexual violence in the ACT will be an important starting point.

We know the system has gaps and this work will identify the gaps and recommend actions to government.

The ACT Government takes this seriously and work is already happening in this space.

- Last year ACT Labor committed to a gender equality in schools initiative to provide a whole-school approach to respectful relationships education. This work will build on the Positive Behaviour for Learning program.
- Listening to young people about how they want to learn about consent and respectful relationship is an important part of this initiative, especially given the changes to the demographics seeking support are 14-25 year olds according to the CRCC.
- I initiated an annual International Women's Day congress for ACT students to discuss gender equality in their schools, sports clubs, workplaces and communities, and develop projects that they can implement in their schools. This year, students discussed period poverty and access to hygiene products at school, and the issue of consent education.
- I have also begun work to ensure staff in the Legislative Assembly are safe. The ACT Legislative Assembly Staffers Women's Network provides a place for all women staffers to share experiences and support each other.
- Last year I announced a Women's Caucus within the ACT Government to tackle important issues facing women and girls across the Territory and invited my women colleagues across ACT Labor and the ACT Greens to join this forum.
- Additional to this, the Speaker, Joy Burch, has coordinated a Women's Parliamentary Group.
- A review of the Legislative Assembly (Members' Staff) Code of Conduct is also underway.

Sexual assault and sexual violence requires a whole of government response and I will be working closely with my colleagues in the assembly to coordinate this.

In particular I will be working with Minister Mick Gentleman, Attorney-General Shane Rattenbury, Minister Rachel Stephen-Smith, Minister Tara Cheyne and Minister Emma Davidson, and Dr Marisa Paterson MLA who is a passionate advocate in this space, with a particular interest in communicative definitions of consent.

All political parties are invited to be part of this work ensure progress is made with a united front and not caught up in party politics.

The first meeting of the working group will be held in the coming weeks.

I know that this conversation is going to be triggering for some people. There are services available to support anyone who needs some help:

- Domestic Violence Crisis Service ACT: 24 hours crisis line, phone 62 800 900
- Canberra Rape Crisis Centre: 7am-11pm, 7 days a week, phone 6247 2525
- Victim Support ACT at the ACT Human Rights Commission: 9am-5pm, Monday-Friday, phone 6205 2222
- Women's Legal Centre ACT: 9am-5pm, Monday-Friday, phone 6257 4377
- 1800RESPECT: 24 hours, 7 days a week, for those impacted by sexual or domestic violence
- Legal Aid ACT Helpline: 8:30am-4.30pm, Monday-Friday, phone 1300 654 314

This statement is an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of 2020 and acknowledge how these achievements are improving outcomes for women and girls in the ACT. Although this statement is specifically about the status of women and girls, I would like to acknowledge that I am using these terms inclusively, referring to anyone who describes their gender as woman or female.

2020 has been a challenging year for many people in the ACT (and everywhere). It has been a year full of uncertainty, change, and insecurity.

In 2020, women have been particularly affected by the impacts of COVID-19 on the community. Women are particularly affected due to:

- > their economic insecurity,
- > the greater role they play in undertaking unpaid household and caring responsibilities, and
- > the feminisation of the 'frontline' education and healthcare sectors.

COVID-19 restrictions and isolation measures have also posed a significant risk for women and their children in the community who are victims of domestic and family violence.

The impact that this pandemic has had on women's wellbeing in the ACT can be seen in data collected by the University of Canberra, which showed that 32.9% of women reported low wellbeing in Canberra in 2020, compared to 21.3% in 2019. This is a significant increase and the rate of increase for women was higher than the average increase of the population as a whole.

Despite these challenges, 2020 was also a year where Canberrans learnt to 'Be Strong Together'. People in Canberra found creative ways to maintain a sense of community and look out for each other. Whether it was a teddy bear in a window or organising a shopping run for a neighbour. These were the small acts that signalled something much bigger – the community resilience which got us through 2020.

The community sector in Canberra also rose to the challenge over the past year – I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the incredible lengths that organisations went to, to adapt their way of working and continue to support women and girls in the ACT during this difficult and unpredictable time.

One of the ways that the ACT Government responded to the impacts of COVID-19 was to establish a number of response teams to provide additional goods and services to support those most in need during this time. For example, a Community Resilience and Crisis Response Team worked with community organisations and across the ACT Government to promote community resilience and ensure people in Canberra had opportunities to connect, to contribute, to feel valued and feel a sense of belonging at a time where the dangers of social isolation and detachment were high.

The themes of this year's International Women's Day were – **Choose To Challenge** and the UN Theme **Women in Leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world**. This acknowledges that women bear the brunt of problems ranging from poverty to climate change, but they also possess assets and talents to solve them. These themes remind us that we all have a role in questioning and challenging outdated norms and expectations, and that we all have the power to have a genuine impact to make better the lives of those around us and our community more broadly.

This year for International Women's Day I wanted to recognise the hard work of women who have been on the frontline of this pandemic. I had a gathering in my office with women members of the United Workers Union whose work in cleaning, hospitality and other industries keeps the community going.

On March 18, I was able to again present the ACT Women's Awards to some very amazing women:

> **ACT Woman of the Year – Sonam Chodem**

Since migrating from Bhutan, where English is not her first language, Sonam Chodem has worked at Calvary Public Hospital for four years. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sonam, who is a United Workers Union Delegate, led her colleagues at Calvary to achieve secure jobs and fair wages for the women employed as essential workers.

> **ACT Senior Woman of the Year - Liz Stephens**

Liz Stephens has made an outstanding contribution to improving the lives of queer women through her organisation and coordination of events and bringing together the community via her work at Diversity ACT.

> **ACT Young Woman of the Year - Dhani Gilbert**

Dhani Gilbert is a proud Wiradjuri young woman who is focused on achieving just and sustainable outcomes for Country, community and young people. Dhani furthers community discussions about the importance of our environment and the need for climate action.

I would also like to acknowledge and celebrate the contribution of Sue Salthouse, who was a disability advocate and respected community leader in the ACT. Sadly, Sue passed away in 2020, but the impact of her work will be long lasting.

Sue demonstrated an unwavering commitment to promoting an inclusive Canberra community that supports people with disability, and in particular women with a disability, to achieve their full potential.

Despite its significant challenges, 2020 was also an exciting year, in that I officially launched **Equity Together**, the *Second Action Plan 2020-22* under the *ACT Women's Plan 2016-26*.

Equity Together recommitted the ACT Government to working collaboratively across Government and with the community to support improved gender equality in the ACT.

The actions in **Equity Together** contribute to five Objectives to improve outcomes and opportunities for women and girls in the ACT. These are:

1. Improving the **mental health and wellbeing** of women and girls in the ACT;
2. Fostering **gender equity in Canberra workplaces**, including through improved gender equality in leadership and workplace participation;
3. Building a community where women and girls are **safe and supported to participate**;
4. Improving **housing support and sustainability** and **reducing homelessness** for women; and
5. Developing **appropriate and accessible services, programs and policies** for women and girls, ensuring consideration of those from diverse backgrounds.

The ACT Government has shown an ongoing commitment to the delivery of the actions under this plan – despite the resources that had to be redirected to support our community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

After only one year of implementation, **one** of the 29 actions have already been fully delivered and an additional **27** actions being delivered through **Equity Together** are already underway. The remaining action was put on hold due to resources being diverted in response to COVID-19 and will commence in the next two years of the Plan.

To support the delivery of **Equity Together**, the ACT Government committed to holding Implementation Workshops over the life of the Plan, to ensure that we continue to consult with the ACT community on important and complex issues.

This first Implementation Workshop was held on 1 December and considered the topic of how to get more women into roles in construction in the ACT. Data from the last census tells us women made up only 2.4 per cent of people working in the Carpentry, Plumbing, Electrical, Automotive and Telecommunications trades in the ACT. Data like this is why increasing the participation of women in the construction industry is so important, and why it is a focus of the Second Action Plan.

The Implementation Workshop, which brought together government, industry, unions, peak bodies, women's community groups and women in the industry, was just a small part of the work that the ACT Government did in 2020 to continue to work towards our goal of getting more women into industries that currently employ high proportions of men. It is essential that we do this, so that we can break down the gender divide in these fields, have visibility of women in these jobs and make a career in these professions an attractive option for girls and young women in the ACT.

Through **Equity Together**, the ACT Government is working collaboratively to deliver a number of actions to support increased numbers of women in the construction industry. Importantly, the Second Action Plan has committed to a target for 10 per cent female employment in the construction industry in the ACT.

So that we can encourage and measure success against this target, we are doing work to progress changes to our Procurement Framework. In 2020, the Government launched a Charter of Procurement Values. The supporting procurement Direction requires all government procurement to consider Diversity, Equality and Inclusion impacts and opportunities before approaching the market.

There are also already requirements in place for companies that tender with the ACT Government on larger scale projects through Major Projects Canberra. These companies are required to include a Detailed Implementation Plan which outlines how they plan to deliver diversity and social procurement outcomes. There are also targets applied to contracts through these implementation plans, including a target on the percentage of women working at all levels on the project. Successful contractors have a requirement to report against their agreed social procurement targets monthly from 2021.

This will ultimately mean more opportunities for women-owned businesses in government procurement and the supply chain, job opportunities for women through encouraging greater diversity on the delivery of government contracts and more suppliers that do business in Canberra demonstrating gender equal practices and policies.

The Canberra Institute of Technology is also encouraging women to consider careers in construction – you may have seen the great “Her Trade” campaign being run by them encouraging women to **“Trade in the stereotypes and become a skilled tradeswoman”**.

It is fantastic to see that the commitment to getting women into roles in the construction industry has also reached the Alexander Maconochie Centre, where a new course for women called "Build-It" was delivered for the first time in 2020. Women undertaking the course had the opportunity to gain the skills and knowledge required to work safely and competently across a range of work tasks that are carried out regularly within civil construction.

I’ve told you a lot about the work that the ACT Government is doing in this space, but we are not working alone. There is so much engagement and passion coming from industry, unions, the women’s sector, and the broader community to support improved uptake and retention of women in the construction industry. This is a big job and it’s great to see so many people working together and pushing for improvements. This is a perfect example of what we mean by **Equity Together**.

But the Construction industry is just one of many industries where women are underrepresented. Another is contemporary music. To help address this, the ACT Government has provided arts program funding to GirlsRock Canberra for 2020 and 2021. The funding will deliver a suite of programs specifically targeted at girls and non-binary young people to empower them to perform and operate in the currently male-dominated field of contemporary music.

Supporting women into leadership roles so that their voices can be heard equally, is another essential element of achieving gender equality. This is why the ACT Government continues to work towards the target for 50 per cent female representation on all ACT Government boards and committees. Our progress towards this goal continues to improve and I am proud to say that as of January this year, 49.2% of representatives on ACT Government boards and committees were women.

Under the First Action Plan, we also had a target for 40 per cent female representation on triennially funded sporting organisations’ boards and under the Second Action Plan we are expanding on this approach by applying it to Government funded arts organisations. ACT arts organisations have demonstrated strong leadership and a commitment to gender equity and have taken this challenge in their stride. As of 30 November 2020, they had an average composition of 61 per cent female representation on their Boards.

In 2020, the ACT Government worked to help women onto pathways to employment, particularly as it became apparent that COVID-19 was significantly impacting the casual workforce, hospitality and retail industries, areas in which women are more likely to work.

The Women's Return to Work program continued to provide individual grants of up to \$1,000 for eligible women for training and education; IT; car registration; childcare; textbooks- anything that supports them to return to work. All women who received the \$1,000 grant were also given one-on-one career mentoring and wrap-around support. This included access to emergency food relief, free or subsidised work clothing, parenting programs and domestic and family violence support.

Supporting women and girls' mental health, physical health and wellbeing is critical to ensuring that they can thrive and participate fully in our community. The ACT Government has stepped up again in the last 12 months.

We recognise the physical and mental impact of losing a baby late in pregnancy is profound. Acknowledging this, in December 2020, the ACT Government launched the Safer Baby Bundle initiative. This initiative will be implemented across the ACT in the coming months with the aim of reducing the rate of stillbirth after 28 weeks' gestation by 20 per cent by 2023.

Supporting young people in the ACT throughout 2020, has also been a priority. ACT Public Schools did a great job responding to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on school communities, including putting additional supports in place for families and students. Given that women were more often impacted by remote learning requirements, effective support from schools was essential in supporting women in the ACT in 2020. As was making sure that the ACT's amazing public school teachers were safe at work.

Some of the supports provided by public schools included making Safe and Supervised Sites available for students who could not learn from home, putting in place a telehealth service staffed by school psychologists, providing internet access and devices to students who needed them, and doing "wellbeing checks" on students.

The government is very aware of the pressures on young people at the moment, including the high rates of psychological distress experienced by young women. Supporting their mental health and wellbeing is a major priority.

Public schools also supported female students by implementing programs to drive cultural change in schools and the broader community. We need to build a community where women and girls believe in themselves and their worth, and where men and boys believe in this too. This cultural change needs to start young, that is why the ACT Government is committed to teaching and modelling gender equality in public schools.

ACT Public Schools take an age-appropriate and whole-school approach to respectful relationships education through Positive Behaviour for Learning, which is a framework that schools use to get everyone on the same page to create a safe and supportive learning environment for all students. Schools also regularly question and challenge stereotypical ideas about gender roles while supporting students to enter non-traditional career pathways.

This can be seen through the Women in Construction Pathways Program which is providing 40 school-based apprenticeships for ACT female students in years 10 and 11, and also through the Girls in STEM grants which support girls and young women to enter study and employment in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

The safety of women and girls in their homes and in public continued to be a priority in 2020. If women and girls cannot feel safe and be safe, then they cannot participate as equal members of the community.

The ACT Government continued work to consider and cater for the needs of women through city design and development, including making path and lighting improvements to connect with public transport in

response to concerns about women's safety. When determining locations for new bus stops considerations were also made to avoid secluded areas where possible.

The introduction of light rail in April 2019 has also seen an improvement in the safety and security of lone travellers with well-lit stops, 24/7 CCTV monitoring and help points for customers to be able to get assistance if they feel unsafe. There have been a number of occasions over the last year where people have travelled to a stop and requested assistance from either the Light Rail Operator, Canberra Metro (CMET) or police.

Canberra Metro has been working closely with the police to make both the Light Rail Vehicles and stops a safe place.

For many women, the most significant concern is safety in their own homes, for themselves and their children. While these issues occur in individual households, they occur because the perpetrators believe that this is an acceptable way to behave. As feminism has taught us, the personal is political.

Many members of the community still do not challenge the negative ways that people speak about and treat women and girls. Real change requires commitment from all of us and it also requires a government-wide approach, supporting those who are impacted by domestic and family violence.

In 2020, the ACT Government continued to work with family violence support services to prevent family violence incidents and ensure that victims were supported and protected. In October 2020, a Multi-Agency Family Violence Model was established, with ACT Policing, Youth Protection Service, Domestic Violence Crisis Service, Victims Support ACT, the Victims of Crime Commissioner and the Coordinator-General for Family Safety.

This model involves establishing a Multi-Agency Hub, where key stakeholders liaise and share information. This information allows agencies to develop proactive intervention strategies and reduce the risk of future offending. The Model also saw the co-location of agencies on Friday and Saturday evenings, supporting a unified multi-agency response to family violence incidents.

The effective and timely communication of information between agencies enabled by this Model ensures that both victims and perpetrators of family violence are given appropriate support and access to services. This proactive approach aims to prevent family violence from occurring, breaking the cycle of violence that affects all aspects of the community.

The ACT Government partnered with the Domestic Violence Prevention Council's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Reference Group to work towards fulfilling recommendations in the 'We Don't Shoot Our Wounded' and 'Change the Future - Share What You Know' reports.

To further inform this work, community consultations were held in October 2020. These consultations were attended by 92 Indigenous community members with different sessions held for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, domestic and family violence sector workers and detainees at the Alexander Maconochie Centre. The long-term aim of this work is to develop community-led responses for domestic and family violence which decrease the violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women by improving early supports and the effectiveness of service delivery and response.

The Act Government also rolled out its Domestic and family violence Training. 2989 staff have now participated in Foundation e-Learn of which 1085 were managers. This training is for all ACT public servants and focuses on developing a shared understanding of domestic and family violence including the gendered nature and impact of this violence on women and girls. The training includes the key drivers of gendered violence and the attitudes and values that perpetuate this violence. This shared understanding and language around the complex dynamics of domestic and family violence, including its coercive and controlling elements, will benefit the broader ACT community with earlier identification, advocacy and connection with specialist supports to increase safety and reduce risk.

In 2020 a number of initiatives were also introduced at the Alexander Maconochie Centre to provide better support for female detainees. These included a new Yoga Mindful Movement program and a Women's Wellness and Stress Management session for women entering custody.

A Women Offenders Framework, informed by women with lived prison experience, is currently being developed. This Framework will guide development of operational planning and strategies for the management and support of women offenders both in custody and supervised in the community.

Access to secure housing upon release is also an essential requirement for women in custody. If women are able to spend less time in custody and be released to accommodation with supportive case management, they may maintain and strengthen ties to the community. Since October 2020, five women have been accepted into the Justice Housing Program and in November 2020, the first female resident moved in.

Access to safe and secure housing is essential for all women. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the ACT Government announced that under the Community Support Package, \$3 million would be allocated as additional funding to the ACT Specialist Homelessness Sector and domestic and family violence services. From this, \$150,000 was provided to CatholicCare to establish and operate Mackillop House during the COVID-19 and winter period, responding to the growing need for safe supported housing for women experiencing homelessness. Mackillop House was opened in June 2020 with capacity to accommodate 20 single women and 6 women with children at any one time. As at 30 November 2020, Mackillop House has accommodated a total of 40 women, with and without children, affected by homelessness and domestic and family violence. I am happy to report that this important service has received an additional \$820,000 in funding to continue to expand its services over the next couple of years (\$241,000 in 2020-21 and \$579,000 in 2021-22).

Funded by the ACT Government Community Support Package and with assistance from the National Partnership on COVID-19 Domestic and Family Violence Response, the Client Support Fund was established through OneLink to provide additional tenancy support for people experiencing homelessness throughout COVID-19. The Client Support Program commenced in May 2020 and by 30 November 2020 it has provided tailored and flexible support to 55 families and individuals with 50 accompanying children. The program also offered 40 additional properties currently providing a home to clients including 22 families affected by domestic and family violence.

These initiatives developed in collaboration between Housing ACT and community service partners have contributed to a sector wide response, providing additional targeted accommodation support throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The construction of Common Ground Dickson began in 2020. Common Ground is a model of multi-unit permanent supportive housing based on 'Housing First' principles designed to provide long-term, high-quality housing options for people facing homelessness and those in need of more affordable rental housing. There will also be a focus on supporting older women, single parents and families.

We have two female cadets, who are currently undertaking training in building and construction, who will be involved in the construction of this project.

These are just a few of the many things that the ACT Government and ACT community delivered in 2020 to continue supporting women and girls. There is a clear commitment across Government and community, but there is still a long road ahead to achieve real and lasting change and to gain equality for women and girls.

I would like to respectfully remember the 55 women who were killed due to violence against women in 2020, in Australia, and acknowledge the Counting Dead Women Australia researchers of Destroy the Joint for providing this figure and counting these deaths. Violence is never okay, and these deaths remind us how pervasive gender-based violence is, and how crucial it is to challenge harmful gender norms.

These women remind us of the importance of working together, calling out gender discrimination when we see it, continuing to support all members of society and striving for genuine equality for all. As Aboriginal visual artist, activist and academic, Lilla Watson, said:

'If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.'



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