



SUBMISSION: Women in Adult & Vocational Education (WAVE)

**THE 55TH SESSION OF THE UN COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN
(CSW)**

Debrief 8th April 2011 Canberra.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Preamble

Access to relevant quality education and training is widely recognized as a human right, and foundational to the empowerment of women and girls, including enhancement of their economic, social and political well-being.

WAVE welcomes the Agreed Conclusions from CSW55¹, and looks forward to working to promote and implement these not only for the benefit of women and girls in Australia, and elsewhere, but also as direct economic, social and cultural benefit for local communities and the wider Australian society. We note that:

The outcome of the Commission's consideration of the priority theme takes the form of agreed conclusions, negotiated by all States. These identify gaps and challenges in the implementation of previous commitments. They also provide action-oriented recommendations for all States, relevant non-governmental bodies, mechanisms and entities of the UN System and other relevant stakeholders, in order to accelerate implementation.

The Commission on the Status of Women adopted agreed conclusions on the priority theme on 14 March 2011².

We are now at a moment in Australia where there is no current policy framework with a focus on women and girls in education and training in this country. Indeed, the last policy for girls in compulsory education was dated 1996. This signifies a serious gap in our collective knowledge of what is 'going on' for girls and women in education and training other than relying on broad data sets that do not investigate underlying complexities associated with gender, diversities and so difference.

¹ UN Economic and Social Council Commission on the Status of Women Fifty-fifth Session 22 February-4 March *Draft agreed conclusions submitted by the Chair of the Commission on the Status of Women on the basis of informal consultations* E/CN.6/2011/L.6 8 March 2011 Available at:

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/55sess.htm#agreed>

² UN Women Commission on the Status of Women Agreed Conclusions

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/55sess.htm#agreed>

Historically the barriers to equity faced by women in VET and (to a lesser degree) employment have been addressed through national policy frameworks including the last VET national policy for women, *Women: Shaping our future*. This expired in 2010; moreover it was never implemented. Current national and state/territory policy approaches take a 'social inclusion' approach. For the most, this approach does not include gender analyses, is not gender sensitive, has no accountability in relation to gender let alone women and girls, and is most often 'gender neutral' in its language, strategies and implementation. It is timely that Australia reinstates gender sensitive policies and practices relevant to the demands of learning, living and working in C21st for women and girls in all their diversity.

In line with CSW 55 Conclusions and international obligations, including recognition of related global agreements identified therein, WAVE seeks Australian Government commitment to implement education, training and employment policies based on gender analyses, including a new strategic framework for Australian women with a clear set of priorities and targets that take account of their diverse backgrounds, locations, life stages and needs.

The new framework must move beyond a gender-neutral stance to be based on gender analyses and be set in the context of key initiatives including the forthcoming COAG Reforms; the Skills Australia proposed reforms and the work of the National VET Equity Advisory Committee (NVEAC). The inter-related gap between VET and inequitable employment outcomes for women also requires urgent attention and structural change.

WAVE argues that:

- taking a gender neutral position is out of step with international human rights conventions and also with international Global Reporting Index (GRI), which has a committee addressing gender issues within its framework;
- taking a gender neutral position is out of step with the Australian Government's Office for Women, National Pay Equity Campaign and the considerable work being undertaken by the Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner;
- taking a gender neutral position is out of step with the numerous Australian women's organisations clustered under the National Women's Alliances, all of who express their concern regarding the status of women in Australia, women's economic sustainability and the relevance of education to this position;
- NVEAC is in a powerful position to counter many of the misconceptions that have gained currency about the irrelevance of gender to conditions of employment, under employment and hidden unemployment. There is substantial evidence that women are still disadvantaged in relation to pay equity, access to part time jobs of significance, that they are still disproportionately represented in low paid part time and casual employment with poor conditions and fail to be counted as part of unemployment figures as they are in unpaid carer roles within the family. When they do choose to return to work TAFE and other adult education offers them a pathway into further study and employment;
- young women and other women still study in gender-segmented patterns in VET and VET in schools. This reproduces patterns of gendered employment and employment outcomes;
- a failure to acknowledge these structural flaws and address them now following CSW 55 and through planned reforms would be a wasted opportunity. Embedding indicators and building on existing capacity in relation to the provision of gender sensitive policies and programs for women and girls in VET is critical.

For improved sustainable outcomes for women and girls through reinvigorated gender sensitive education and VET, policies (including those based on social inclusion discourses) require:

- recognition that increased qualifications for women do not necessarily result in improved employment outcomes and that structural reforms are needed;
- promotion and provision of gender sensitive counseling, including career counseling, to result in broader subject selection (including science and technology) by women and by girls in schools to prevent the perpetuation of segmented fields of work and study;
- a reinstatement and re-commitment to the value of pre-vocational programs for women returning to work after raising children, caring or moving from income support; and
- promotion of industry and employment based training programs to women to address skills shortages, opportunities in emergent industries and occupations and viable career pathways to full employment and decent work.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

In recognition of the key theme for and Agreed Conclusions of CSW 55, WAVE recommends the following as necessary for VET policy and programs to achieve substantive equality between men and women in Australia.

We call on the Australian Government to:

- make women's learning needs central to all VET strategies and policies, including the forthcoming National Equity Blueprint. This requires an explicit recognition of women *per se*, to adequately redress issues of intersectionality (indigenous women, women with disabilities, CALD women, low SES women, rural women and so on);
- implement strategies for VET based on gender analyses to inform a training framework able to provide opportunities for women at different stages of their life cycle and appropriate to their needs and circumstances. Again, such analyses must include attention to issues of intersectional issues and related disadvantage;
- ensure gender expertise on all national VET equity advisory committees & VET working groups;
- ensure gender analysis and provision for implications of such analyses informs all COAG consultations especially those relating to VET reform³;
- implement a VET strategic framework for women with clear priorities & accountability mechanisms, including linking VET funding arrangements to key performance indicators for women, especially those most disadvantaged (indigenous and disabled women and girls);
- collect, analyse and publish performance and outcome data that include trends over time and are disaggregated by gender and demographic characteristics. Such data will assist in the identification of trends and issues, development of strategies to address these, and ongoing monitoring;
- provide accessible gender sensitive career counseling (including VET in schools) to broaden subject and course selection by girls and women in schools and VET, to enhance career pathways and meaningful employment outcomes for women and girls as well as addressing Australia's gender segmented labour force;
- reinstate and recommit to the value of pre-vocational or 'stepping stone' programs for women returning to work after raising children, caring or from income support;

³ Of high significance at the moment are Inquiries relating VET system reform including: Foundation Skills; Apprenticeships and Traineeships; Assessment in VET; Teaching in VET.

- develop, implement and monitor programs that promote women into non-traditional trades and professions, with particular attention to addressing preconceived ideas about the capabilities and attributes of women and the workplace cultures and requirements of such trades and professions;
- design and implement a national program in partnership with strategic corporate and industry partners to redress entrenched cultures in masculinised industries and occupations to increase enrolments in VET and higher education and so critical mass of women in such industries and occupations;
- ensure that employment creation programs and employer based incentives designed in response to skilling Australians for future employment opportunities, for skill shortages, emergent industries and occupations include initiatives that benefit women and girls, and include quotas &/or targets where necessary to address Australia's gender segmented labour force⁴;
- ensure provision of local, accessible, flexible and culturally sensitive training, at low or no cost, so that training-related initiatives and policies benefit all who are currently outside the workforce or seeking to improve their existing employment status and security;
- promote industry and employment based training programs aimed at recruiting women into industries that value flexible work practices for men and women to enable caring responsibilities to be met.

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⁴ Of significance here for example is the recent announcement of \$200 million Critical Skills Investment Fund to improve skills in the resources sector – a heavily masculinised sector