



## WEL Australia (WEL A) Annual Report 2020/21

Next year is the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of **Women's Electoral Lobby**. If COVID 19 circumstances allow, we intend to organise a celebration in the national capital. A biography of WEL founder Beatrice Faust was initiated by Bea's Biography Working Group with Judith Brett as author. The Victorian Women's Trust set up a philanthropic fund to cover research expenses. Iola Mathews, who attended Bea's first meeting of WEL in 1972, is part of the group. The biography will be a welcome addition to the WEL historical record.

During this momentous year for women culminating in the **March4Justice**, WEL issued a Declaration which called on women to "help us ride this wave to the next Federal Election. We are inspired by this seismic, intergenerational and diverse feminist uprising." The uprising exploded in the face of years of Government resistance to deeply researched and profoundly felt advocacy for women's equality across every dimension of life. Alongside feminist organisations who are our allies and sisters, on March 15, we declared **ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!**

**WELA** was a member of two national women's alliances up to the period when new contracts were issued by the Federal Government. We will remain a member of **Equality Rights Alliance** with its new emphasis on women's economic security and leadership and we will apply to join the new **National Women's Safety Alliance** which has replaced AWAVA (Australian Women Against Violence Alliance). **WELA** monitored and circulated AWAVA's weekly round-ups and Quarterly Updates and that of ANROWS (Australian National Research Organisation for Women's Safety). **Economic Security for Women** was not refunded although this organisation is planning to continue in some form.

Philippa Hall was **WELA's** representative on **Economic Security for Women**. This national alliance worked with its 32 members and 20 partner organisations on policies and campaigns to improve women's economic well-being and financial sustainability. The alliance worked with economist Stephen Koukoulas to produce a range of white papers analysing the dynamics of economic insecurity and developing proposals to address them through improvements in child care, superannuation, education, jobs, and improving financial literacy. The alliance held various roundtables and meetings remotely over the last year. The alliance's website has many valuable resources on women's economic security.

During 2021, Jozefa Sobski attended ERA meetings via Zoom and one face to face meeting in Sydney. Reports of the outcomes of these meetings were circulated to the **WELA** National Coordinating Committee members. A major contribution by ERA has been its extensive work on Gender Responsive Budgeting.

**FEDERAL BUDGET:** Kerry Burton from the ACT attended the Federal Budget Stakeholder Lock-Up on behalf of **WELA** on 11<sup>th</sup> May and supplied feedback on key issues and the Women's Budget Statement. **WELA** issued a media release which was distributed with the assistance of Jenny Muir, WEL NSW Executive member. Jozefa Sobski, **WELA** Convenor worked on the NFAW Gender Lens Federal Budget Analysis making a contribution to Vocational Education and Training while Drs Mary O'Sullivan and Jane Bullen contributed to the sections on Health and Housing respectively. The Convenor also zoomed into the Federal Labor Women's Budget Statement.

**RESPECT@WORK:** This Australian Human Rights Commission report, which lay dormant on the Attorney-General's desk for nearly a year, was eventually unearthed in response to the **March4Justice** and the courage of Brittany Higgins in exposing the culture of sexual harassment and violence in Parliament House. The Bill produced by the Federal Attorney-General in response to the report – **Sex Discrimination and Fair Work (Respect at Work) Amendment Bill 2021** in WEL's view did not go far enough. WELA joined with other advocacy groups in pointing to its deficiencies, chief among which, was the fact that only six of 55 recommendations were being implemented and there was no provision in the Bill to introduce a duty for employers to take reasonable and proportionate steps to prevent sexual harassment in their workplaces. Aspects of the Bill, which were welcomed, by WEL together with other organisations that made submissions to the Senate Inquiry.

The Bill was debated by the Senate on 1<sup>st</sup> September. Amendments moved by the Opposition and the Greens were defeated and the Bill passed both houses on 2<sup>nd</sup> September without major amendment. So, the law which was passed, will remain deficient with Attorney-General, Senator Cash insisting that more complex reforms required additional consultation.

**NATIONAL WOMEN'S SAFETY SUMMIT:** WELA was not a delegate to the Summit held online on 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2021 like many other advocacy organisations. There was a lack of transparency in the process and there is still no full publicly available list of official delegates and the organisations they represented. We were informed that there were 200 organisations represented and 390 participants. There was a great range of preparatory caucusing and discussion around issues not addressed adequately or at all in the **Fourth National Plan to reduce Violence against Women and their Children**. Jozefa Sobski viewed the entire Summit proceedings on livestream and participated in Webinars on Integration of other National Plans and Strategies with the new Plan as well as post Summit debriefs organised by **Fair Agenda**. Jane Bullen participated in the Housing Summit organised on 6<sup>th</sup> September.

**WELA** added its support to a joint letter prepared by a group of eight migrant and refugee women's and multicultural organisational delegates to the Summit. The letter requested that the experiences of migrant and refugee women and their children be addressed in the next National Plan across all areas including prevention, early intervention, response and recovery.

**WELA** also supported **Fair Agenda's** call to governments to commit to 12 priority actions to end violence against women and their children included among the actions: increasing and extending investment in specialist support services, reforming the Family Law system and prioritising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community led initiatives.

**WELA** lodged a submission on its priorities on the issues raised at the Summit for the new Plan [www.engage.dss.gov.au](http://www.engage.dss.gov.au)

**FEDERAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM BILLS:** Inspired by conservative government actions in the US, the Federal Government proposed a package of religious freedom bills in 2019. The content of these Bills attempt to conflate reinforcement of the doctrinal power of patriarchal religious leaders with more covert attacks on women's reproductive rights and the rights of LGBTQI+ people. WEL made submissions on the first and second consultation drafts of these Bills. While WEL supports discrimination protections on the basis of an individual's religious belief and practices, we do not support provisions which will in effect override other rights. **WELA** argued that the provisions in the Bills would have serious implications for women's reproductive rights and the rights of LGBTQI+ people as well as for the employment of tens of thousands of women who work in faith-based charities delivering community services, including employment, health and the care industries.

A third version of the Bills is to be released in the last session of the Parliament in 2021. WEL NSW will continue to monitor any developments and advise members of progress in our newsletters and through social media.

**COVID AND NATIONAL HEALTH ISSUES:** COVID- related restrictions threatened to have a devastating impact on women's access to reproductive services. In 2020, the Federal Government introduced Medicare funded telehealth services as a COVID emergency measure. These covered a broad range of consultations including reproductive health. After the late Federal Budget of 2020/21, the Federal Government excluded reproductive health services from this support. WEL campaigned with partner organisations to reinstate the service. The 21/22 Budget has again extended telehealth for reproductive health services until the end of 2021. WEL will campaign to make this a permanent budgetary provision.

**FEDERAL ELECTION POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND REVISION:** Philippa Hall, Convenor WEL NSW is leading the Election Action Group in developing draft policies in seven priority areas: Ending Violence against Women, Housing and Homelessness, Work, Education and Training, Child Care, Strengthening Women's Representation, Decent Incomes for Everyone and Women's Health. Progress reports were sent to WELA NCC members. This process has and will continue to involve consultation with other women's organisations and research centres as relevant.

**DEPUTATIONS AND DELEGATIONS:** Menaka Cooke, Cat Gander and Jozefa Sobski from NSW met with Senator Jenny McAllister, Shadow Assistant Minister for Communities and the Prevention of Domestic Violence on 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 2021 The meeting covered issues related to WELA's Submission to the *House of Representatives Inquiry into Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence*; outlining WEL's policy and priorities and raising issues such as the paucity of funding for the Federal Office for Women and the review process being undertaken by the ALP for policies it will be taking to the next Federal Election.

Senator McAllister was keen to understand different service models in each State and what issues faced services in NSW. Cat Gander organised for Senator McAllister with local member Trish Doyle, to visit several women's refuges managed by DV West. Menaka Cooke highlighted issues faced by CALD women and how these differed from other women and the culturally appropriate responses required from services.

Letters were sent on behalf of WELA to Senator Marise Payne, Minister for Women in support of the National Women's Alliances. A letter of congratulations was sent to Tanya Plibersek on her appointment as Shadow Minister for Women advising of our process of policy review and revision that WEL is currently undertaking in preparation for the next Federal Election and indicating our wish to meet with her at the conclusion of our process. Letters advising of our policy process were also sent to Shadow Ministers: Jenny McAllister (Communities and Prevention of Family Violence), Amanda Rishworth (Early Childhood Education and Youth), Jason Clare (Housing and Homelessness) and Richard Marles (National Reconstruction, Employment, Skills and Small Business).

**JOINT CAMPAIGNS AND MEDIA RELEASES:** WELA issued media releases on: Cabinet Reshuffle Fails the Credibility Test (29<sup>th</sup> March), Women's Budget Statement. Rationale and Rations (12<sup>th</sup> May). WELA supported campaign letters initiated by the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children on problems experienced with **ParentsNext** and supported its submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights on 4<sup>th</sup> May. It was also a signatory to a campaign letter to the Prime Minister and Minister for Women on 22<sup>nd</sup> February initiated by the **50/50 by 2030 Foundation** regarding action required in response to the Brittany Higgins case and parliamentary

workplace culture. A campaign letter to the **Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety** initiated by the NSW Aged Care Roundtable was also signed by WELA.

Following events in Afghanistan in August, 2021 with the withdrawal of all NATO troops and the resurgence of the Taliban, we joined the Refugee Council of Australia in seeking urgent action from the Federal Government to evacuate those at grave risk and offer additional refugee resettlement places among seven important actions required of the government.

**MEMBERSHIP:** Kerry Burton from the ACT is working to build a membership base in the ACT. Heather O'Connor is putting in a great deal of work to form a local group in Cobargo/Bermagui while Inbal Steinberg and Priscilla Todd are revitalising WELVIC.

It is important for all WEL members to contribute to our campaigns. WEL NSW is still the largest and most active state group. WEL NSW has been in recent years the most active contributors to national campaigning, lobbying and policy work. This is recompensed by contributions from **WELA** funds. Where there are no active state groups, people join **WELA**. All WEL members anywhere in Australia receive the regular WEL Informed newsletter produced by WEL NSW and can access WEL information via the WEL website and social media.

**WELA National Coordinating Committee: Jozefa Sobski AM Convenor, Priscilla Todd, Secretary, Deborah Poulton, Treasurer, Philippa Hall, Inbal Steinberg, Menaka Cooke – Members.**

**Other national members: Cheryl Arnold, Diane Coward, Felicity Lord, Jenny Muir, Lena Lind, Kerry Burton, Helen L'Orange, Ruth Greble.**

*WEL Australia is the Australian affiliate of the International Alliance of Women (IAW) an NGO comprising 41 member organisations involved in the promotion of women's human rights, of equality and of the empowerment of women. The IAW has general consultation status at the UN Economic and Social Council and is accredited to many UN specialised agencies.*

**ERA Coffee Chat. 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2021 in Sydney**

