

Report to the ILO from Marie Coleman, Chair Social Policy Committee, National Foundation for Australian Women.

Empowering women – monitoring Australia’s response to the GFC

Australia has emerged from the Global Financial Crisis in much better shape than virtually all of the developed Western economies. This is due to a range of Keynesian-style stimulus interventions by the Commonwealth Government, its inheritance of a strong balance of financial reserves, and long-standing bi-partisan support for strong regulation of the banking and financial sectors.

That said, once the stimulus packages began to focus on job creation, after significant new direct cash transfers, a group of the Australian national women’s organisations took a decision to monitor the impacts on women, and to test whether women and girls were getting fair shares of stimulus related project spending. This was triggered in part by the fact that it simply was not possible to obtain from Government sources gender disaggregated data on how many women and girls were benefitting from new stimulus investments in training.

First, we commissioned a research report from an independent research body, The Australia Institute, which analysed available official data. This showed that while job losses for women were not as substantial as we had feared, we could identify a very significant degree of under-employment, and of hidden unemployment, among women. This was strongly regional in its impact.

The hidden unemployment arose from methods of counting- if an individual cannot stake a job within four weeks, whatever the reason, then despite telling the Bureau of Statistics he/she is wanting work, the individual is not counted in official unemployment figures. In consequence, without being officially unemployed, the individual will most likely be not eligible for the relevant GFC related re-training packages. The statistical analysis found that at prime working ages, up to 80% of the hidden unemployed were female. The report can be found at www.nfaw.org and www.TAI.org.au.

The women’s organisations decided to take the statistics, and hold national; consultations in both urban and regional centres with women, to get the human stories, the information from women themselves. Reports were prepared for each consultation, and cleared with participants before being published. See www.nfaw.org for these

A staffer from the YWCA of Australia accompanied the NFAW on most of these consultations, and developed a DVD report from interviews with parents attending about their issues with child care. (available from YWCA Australia.

A consolidated national report was launched in February 2010 at Parliament House, Canberra, in association with the Federal Sex Discrimination Commission, Elizabeth Broderick. See www.nfaw.org for the executive summary. The DVD was launched at this event.

Some of the key problems hindering women seeking jobs, but not being counted in official data included: exclusion from funded re-training programs; problems accessing affordable child care including care for school aged children; problems in accessing affordable transport between home, child care and workplaces; problems accessing respite care for those caring for frail parents; difficulties in obtaining enough hours of paid work (under-employment), often linked to deliberate employer policies of keeping hours low so as to avoid an obligation to pay employment related benefits such as superannuation contributions.

The position of women from migrant and refugee groups and of women from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island groups was particularly vulnerable. This highlighted the need for greater investment in English language and other pre-formal re-training programs.

The report received wide media coverage. It was handed personally to relevant Federal ministers and departments.

The findings have been taken into account in subsequent submissions to Commonwealth policy developments.

Marie Coleman

ILO

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