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Limited Progress on Reducing Inequality in ACT Labour Market

On Thursday 17 October the Women's Centre for Health Matters and the ACT Council of Social Service released an analysis of ACT labour market data and future trends, focusing on wages, levels of qualification and growth across major industries. The report, titled *Creating Opportunity or Entrenching Disadvantage? 5 Years on – ACT Labour Market Data Update* continues a gender-based analysis begun in 2014 in a report titled *Creating Opportunity or Entrenching Disadvantage? - Labour Market Trends in the ACT*.

It is important to share this analysis in the week when the ACT Minister for Women hosted a Women's Summit and in AntiPoverty Week.

Marcia Williams, Chief Executive Officer at the Womens Centre for Health Matters said: "Our report draws on existing publicly available labour market data to consider the labour market operation and outlook in Canberra, and how these affect the work opportunities and incomes that are earned by women in the ACT. What we learned was that whilst the ACT continues to have a strong labour market, the opportunities are shrinking for people looking for jobs with lower levels of formal qualifications. We also found the number of full time jobs is decreasing and lower wage occupation types are generally growing faster than high wage occupations.

"The trends we identified in 2014 that disadvantaged women in the labour market have continued in 2019, although there are some encouraging signs of a better future.

"Women are the majority of public sector workers, and continue to be over-represented in the lower wage classifications. However, the number of women in senior executive positions has grown from 41.9% to 47.8% over the past five years.

"In the education, professional, scientific and technological services industry occupations which have a very high proportion of women workers (book-keepers and accounting clerks) the wages are lower and wages growth is slower than the male dominated occupations of management and organisation analysis or software and application programmers.

"One trend we welcome is the growth in full time positions, wages and the number of degree qualified workers in the early childhood (pre-primary School) Teachers occupation which is 98% female.

“Another welcome finding is evidence of growth of women in the relatively high paid occupations of contract, program and project administration, intelligence and policy analysts, management and organisation analysis and software and application programmers,” Ms Williams noted.

The ACT Council of Social Service was especially interested in assessing changes in the Healthcare and Social Assistance industry, the second largest employer in Canberra. Healthcare and social assistance is projected to have the highest growth in jobs between 2019 and 2023. If this growth trend occurs, by 2023 Health Care and Social Assistance will employ twice as many people as the Construction Industry.

Susan Helyar, CEO of ACT Council of Social Service said: “Community services occupations we reviewed are between 75-90% female. Between 2014-2019 this workforce has become more highly educated. Wages have grown relatively well for personal care workers, but not as quickly for welfare or early childhood carers. Part timework has increased from 33% in 2014 to 46% in 2019. Across all occupations in the health care and social assistance industry we reviewed, the wages were below average earnings.

“Community services are vital to quality of life, supporting people going through difficult circumstances, assisting with activities of daily living, enabling social inclusion and nurturing children and older people. People working in those occupations are increasingly bringing sophisticated knowledge and skills to their roles – 48% have a degree qualification – but wages do not provide an equivalent reward for expertise compared with other industries.”

“Women continue to be disadvantaged in the ACT labour market because the industries they are most likely to work in, and the occupations they are most likely to be employed to do, are underpaid,” Ms Williams noted.

“At the women’s summit economic inequality, and discrimination towards women in employment and as entrepreneurs was a topic raised in many discussions,” Ms Williams noted.

“Women are more likely to be living on low incomes, and are over represented in the bottom 40% income groups. This is most likely for women who are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, over 80 years old, a single parent, a carer, in newly arrived communities or who have a disability. Eliminating inequality of opportunity and remuneration in the labour market is essential to reducing poverty for women,” Ms Helyar concluded.

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