



# WHISE Gender Analysis of the 2023-24 State Budget

What it means for women in our region.



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## Introduction

Women's Health in the South East (WHISE) is the regional women's health service for the Southern Metropolitan Region (SMR). WHISE is a not-for-profit organisation that focuses on empowering women.

We work to improve the health and wellbeing of women in our region by providing health information and education to governments, organisations, education providers, and community groups.

Our team of health promotion professionals work to promote gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, mental health and wellbeing and the prevention of violence against women.

## Summary statement

WHISE cautiously welcomes the 2023-24 Victorian State Budget. The investment in women's health is important but we are concerned about the lack of funding in prevention, which addresses the root causes of ill health.

With the introduction of Gender and Mental Wellbeing to WHISE's portfolio, we are pleased to see ongoing investment in the Mental Health and Wellbeing Hubs and Locals. The addition of a Local in Narre Warren is exciting as it provides equitable care to the women in our region.

There were many positives in the budget for sexual and reproductive health which included funding for sexual and reproductive health hubs, public fertility treatments, provision of free pads and tampons in public places as well as schools, and a pilot to improve access to oral contraceptives and treatment for urinary tract infections. WHISE hopes that this investment will be accompanied by health promotion activities that address intersectional barriers to accessing these resources and supports.

WHISE applauds the work of the Gender Responsive Budgeting unit. Though the Gender Equality Budget Statement provided clear advice of how the budget will support women it highlighted the need for Budget Paper No. 3 (BP3) to be more explicit in the ways that women are going to be supported. For instance, BP3 stated funds would be allocated to upgrade community sport and active recreation infrastructure but neglected to mention that this would include the creation of more female-friendly spaces with better changerooms. Therefore, in the pursuit of transparency and accountability, we ask government to provide clearer insights into how GRB is applied to specific programs and its intended application in future estimates. This transparency will be a valuable addition to future budgets, reflecting a commitment to equitable practices and inclusive decision-making.

This report provides a gendered analysis of the 2023-24 State Budget and includes a discussion of what it means for women in our region. Unless otherwise indicated, the figures presented throughout the report are for funds allocated to 2023-24.

# Gender analysis of the 2023-24 State Budget

## Gender responsive budgeting

The budget allocated **\$0.5M** to continue the work of the **Gender Responsive Budgeting (GRB) unit**. Their role is important for ensuring outcomes for women are measured and considered when resources are being allocated and decisions are being made. Part of the unit's work is the Gender Equality Budget Statement which provides greater transparency on the way that GRB is used and its benefits for all Victorians, particularly women.

## Preventing gender-based violence

The Department of Families, Fairness and Housing has said that it would like to ensure **"children, young people and families are safe, strong, and supported"**. This includes making sure that women are in "supportive and respectful relationships and are safe from harm, fear and neglect in their homes". This will be achieved through addressing the "compounding effects of abuse and violence; improving support and recovery for both victim-survivors and perpetrators" through primary prevention initiatives.

**\$30.1M** has therefore been allocated to fund **primary prevention** initiatives to end family violence and all forms of violence against women. This includes primary prevention programs and grants. A further **\$622.5M** will fund **family violence service delivery**. WHISE notes, however, that the budget's primary prevention investment is only **4% of the response investment**.

Within this funding, **\$26.5M** will be used to continue delivering **support for victim survivors and perpetrator intervention programs** including, but not limited to, Aboriginal-led services, adolescent in-home services, men's behaviour change programs, and financial support for victim survivors. WHISE is pleased to see support for Aboriginal-led services as the SMR is home to a high proportion of Indigenous residents.

**Elder abuse will receive \$1.4M** to continue the delivery of elder abuse prevention networks (of which WHISE is part of in Southern Melbourne) that provide **community-based primary prevention** and health promotion. This is especially **relevant for the SMR as some LGAs in the region have a particularly high proportion of people aged 65 and over**. For example, 2021 Census data shows that 21% of Bayside's population is aged 65+ and 27% of Mornington Peninsula's population also fall into this age group. This is in comparison to Victoria's whole of state population where 17% are aged over 65. Considering that older women are more at risk than older men of experiencing elder abuse, and older women are typically an invisible group, **WHISE would like to see more funding allocated to this issue**.

## Supporting women's sexual and reproductive health

WHISE welcomes the investment in supporting women's sexual and reproductive health, and access to services. **\$5.9M** will be directed to ease **period poverty** with the continuation of free pads and tampons in schools and the introduction of free sanitary items in up to 700 public places. This will be especially welcomed in the SMR which is home to LGAs with a lower-socio economic status.

**\$58M** will fund the development of **20 new comprehensive women's health clinics** and a dedicated **Aboriginal-led women's clinic**. The clinics are set to overcome common barriers to accessing treatment such as cost, concerns of confidentiality, location of services, and cultural and communication barriers. Women will be able to access specialists (i.e., gynaecologist, urologist, specialist nursing and allied health) in one clinic which will increase ease of access. More **sexual and reproductive health hubs** will also be developed.

The first ever **sexual and reproductive health phone line** will also be funded which will provide evidence-based support for women who are unable to attend a physical service.

Access to screening and treatment procedures will be increased with:

- **\$65M to deliver 10,800 additional laparoscopies** which help treat endometriosis
- **\$18.9M** to fund a pilot for community pharmacists to provide services such as **treating straightforward urinary tract infections** and **reissuing contraceptive prescriptions**.
- Part of **\$289.9M for health protection measures** which will include tests for HIV and sexually transmissible infections and breast cancer screenings by BreastScreen Victoria. With six out of the 10 LGAs in our region falling below the state average in breast cancer screenings, we hope that more women will utilise this important preventative test.

**\$49.9M over three years** will extend and expand **public fertility services** so that more treatment cycles can be accessed every year. This will enable more Victorians to access fertility services including those in regional areas. **WHISE is excited about this announcement as we know that wait lists for fertility services in our region are long.** We hope that expanding public fertility services will shorten the wait times.

**Research initiatives** will receive **\$12M** to expand knowledge and understanding of women's pain management as well as early work to establish a Women's Health Research Institute. Women's pain has previously been invisible and minimised by healthcare professionals which has meant women have to advocate for themselves to receive care and treatment. WHISE therefore welcomes the research into more understanding of women's pain that will be possible by this funding.

## Clinical approaches to mental health care

We know that mental ill health is a much bigger issue among women than men as women experience higher rates of depression and anxiety and eating disorders. The COVID-19 pandemic saw the gap increase significantly. [Gender Equity Victoria, 2021](#), states

*Women have taken on a greater share of additional care responsibilities for children, other family members and at-risk community members during self-isolation. It has been observed that women are carrying a 'triple load' during the crisis, which includes paid work, care work, and the mental labour of worrying. Other forms of inequality and discrimination – in particular, racism, ageism and economic inequality – are compounding these mental health impacts for women. The frequency and severity of intimate partner violence also increase during and after emergencies, with confinement to the home creating additional risks.*

*All these factors lead to emotional, social and financial stress and anxiety, and can exacerbate existing mental health conditions, trigger new or recurring conditions, and impede recovery.*

At WHISE, our focus is on **primary prevention and health promotion**. In the context of mental health, we want to **prevent the onset of mental health issues by reducing people's exposure to risk factors and/or increasing their exposure to protective factors**. Primary prevention and health promotion have been employed to address mental health, and specifically, women's mental health, for some time. Indeed, the [National Women's Health Strategy](#) has included the following priority area: "Enhance gender-specific mental health education, awareness and primary prevention." Furthermore, the recommendations from the [Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System](#) also recognise the importance of prevention with three recommendations calling for the prevention of mental illness and suicide.

The absence of primary prevention and health promotion approaches is disheartening. The **current budget focuses solely on early intervention and clinical treatment**. However, we recognise our important role of working with government and the services in the SRM to stress the importance of primary prevention and health promotion and welcome the opportunity to do so.

**\$22.5M will fund the establishment of three new Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals** with one being in **Narre Warren**. This funding will also enable planning for a further 20 new Mental Health and Wellbeing Locals to provide accessible integrated mental health treatment and wellbeing supports that are conveniently located to overcome geographical barriers. With one of the initial six trial Locals in Frankston, it is great to see another Mental Health and Wellbeing Local in Narre Warren.

Access and equity of mental health service delivery will be improved with **\$28.0M** provided to the reform of mental health community-based and state-wide services. This includes **Eating Disorders Victoria and Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia (PANDA)** – two services that provide extensive support to women. WHISE welcomes this funding to support women in the SMR as our region has among the highest levels of psychological distress in the State according to 2020 Victorian Public Health Survey data. Furthermore, 2019 data from [Deloitte](#) has shown that the South East Melbourne Public Health Network has the third highest levels of eating disorders in the whole Australia.

## **Investment in community health**

WHISE recognises the key role of community health in providing equitable healthcare. We are therefore pleased to see that, in addition to the pilot for community pharmacists discussed above, a small investment of **\$0.2M** will enable the Water Well Project to deliver **education sessions to newly arrived refugees and at-risk migrants to help them navigate the health system**. While this service is not run in the SMR, our region nonetheless has a high proportion of migrant and refugee women who require support, particularly in Greater Dandenong. Given the high proportion of refugees and migrants in Victoria, WHISE would like to have seen a higher investment in this important service.

The Department of Health are targeting the advancement of health through ensuring that all local government authorities have **Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plans** and that **Local Public Health Units** with local population health plans reflect state-wide public health and wellbeing priorities. WHISE has previously provided advice to all councils in the SMR and the South East Local Public Health Unit on

how to apply a gender lens to their plans and will continue to do this crucial work to address significant systemic intersectional inequity that still persists in our health and social structures.

## Improving sports and recreation facilities to provide safe spaces for women

According to 2019 Victorian Public Health Survey data, 49.5% of Victorian women are not active enough, as they do not meet the recommended weekly guidelines for intentional physical exercise. According to [VicHealth](#), commonly reported **barriers for women engaging in physical exercise** include embarrassment, gendered stereotypes, lack of time, parenting demands, **perceptions of safety, and a perception that sporting clubs are not welcoming to women.**

WHISE is therefore pleased to see **\$6.0M investment into community sport and active recreation programs** that address key barriers to participation, such as Together More Active which aims to increase the equity, diversity and inclusiveness of the sport and recreation industry in Victoria.

A further **\$58.7M will deliver upgrades to community sport and active recreation facilities, including public parks**, which will include creating **more female-friendly spaces** with better changerooms and outdoor lighting. The Country Netball Program, a predominantly female sport, will also continue to be funded.

## Housing and homelessness

Housing and homelessness are gendered issues with a disproportionately higher number of women experiencing housing instability than men. Yet, homelessness is typically viewed as a male issue because women's experiences of homelessness are less visible. Rather than sleeping on the streets, a woman will stay with her family or friends, or sleep in her car. Therefore, on Census night when displaced people are being enumerated, women will often be counted as a guest staying at a friend's or family member's house rather than disclosing their homeless status.

The largest risk factors for homelessness among women is domestic violence. WHISE therefore welcomes the **\$674.2M investment into housing assistance** which will in part provide increased access to short-term housing **for victim survivors to reduce and prevent homelessness.** Though we note the lack of investment into long-term housing for victim survivors and urge the government to make this a priority in the next budget. Without long-term secure housing, many victims are forced to return to their abuser. The significance of this fact – that women do not have access to a safer housing alternative and must return to their abusive partner – must be underlined and should not be ignored by government.

## Economic security and education

WHISE can see that the 2023-24 budget has committed to investing in women's economic security. This will be achieved by supporting women to secure employment. For instance, **\$0.1M will fund SisterWorks Richmond** which provides skills-based learning programs for migrant, refugee and asylum-seeker women.

The community sector is a feminised industry with more women holding jobs in community service organisations. Over **\$13.1M** will assist with **easing cost pressures in community service organisations** to

reduce the risk of unemployment. This will include family violence services, housing assistance services, community health services, mental health community support services, and maternal and child health and early parenting services.

**Nurses and midwives**, another feminised sector, will receive **\$147.4M over four years** with funding directed specifically to nurses and midwives in maternity night shifts, aged care residential in-reach facilities, and other intensive unity. This funding is also intended to reduce administrative and financial burden, and to increase support on maternity wards with addition neonatal nurses. Furthermore, sign-on bonuses will be offered to new graduates to encourage them to enter the public system.

The **mental health and wellbeing workforce**, which we know to be a feminised workforce, will receive **\$4.1M** to strengthen and support. The Earn and Learn and Aboriginal Traineeship programs will continue to be funded to attract new people by providing opportunities for concurrent education and on the job learning.

The budget also aims to increase **female participation in male-dominated industries by funding a range of strategies**.

- The **Women in Construction Strategy** will receive **\$0.8M** to draw more women into the building, construction and infrastructure sectors.
- The **Women in Manufacturing Strategy** will receive **\$21M** to increase women's participation in manufacturing by supporting parental leave and flexible working arrangements, reducing sexism and sexual harassment in the workforce, and identifying pathways for women.
- **\$12M** will support the trade sector including the **Global Victoria Women group** to provide women with opportunities to broaden their trade networks and participate in trade and export activities.

WHISE is pleased to see the ongoing investment to increase women in male-dominated industries such as construction and manufacturing however, to address gender segregated labour markets, and discrimination, future work must be systemic and structural rather than just focussing on attracting women to the sector.

We know that workplaces within these industries are often not safe for women and conditions are not suitable and hope that the Women in Manufacturing Strategy's approach will be adopted across the board to **ensure that workplaces are safe for women to enter**. Furthermore, **parental leave benefits and flexible working arrangements should be made available to all employees – not just women – as employers should be encouraging men to share the caring duties and undertake structural and systemic change work to address the pay gap**.

While WHISE welcomes the budget's focus on increasing female participation in male-dominated industries, we ask that the next budget also include strategies for increasing male participation in feminised industries. For example, increasing the number of male educators in early learning facilities and primary schools, as well as nursing and administration.

**\$9.5M will provide respite support to unpaid carers**. This will include assistance with the physical and emotional demands of caring. This funding is particularly useful for Victorian **women who are more likely**

to provide unpaid assistance to a person with a disability of mental illness. WHISE welcomes this support as around 1.5 times more women provide unpaid care compared with men in the SMR.

**\$20.2M will fund free kinder and three-year-old kinder** to help families balance work and care. While this will support mothers *and* fathers, we know that women's employment is overwhelmingly more likely to be impacted by expensive childcare fees with women either delaying their return work or working part-time. Providing free kinder will mean women can return to work without concern for expensive fees.

In addition to increasing female participation in male-dominated industries (and in the workforce in general), the budget will also target education. The budget states that **\$116M will build six new tech schools which will encourage more girls to study science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)**. While WHISE supports this endeavour, **it is not clear how this will encourage more girls to study STEM**. WHISE welcomes the opportunity to work with government to discuss the approach and how to apply a gender lens to the development of the schools and delivery of the programs.

**\$17M** will be directed to the **Student Excellence Program** which will include **training teachers to identify how high ability can present differently in girls**. Due to different socialisation norms and gender stereotypes, girls are more likely than boys to avoid standing out in the classroom which leads to silence when they know the right answer and not wanting to draw attention to their intelligence. It is therefore important that teachers are skilled in identifying intelligent female students so that they can encourage them and provide the support that they need to achieve their absolute best.

## Observations for government

WHISE cautiously welcomes the funding support for sexual and reproductive health screening and treatments as well as the focus on increasing women's economic security through employment opportunities.

We are concerned about the limited focus on primary prevention in the current budget. Indeed, the way that prevention has been described suggests a misinterpretation of prevention as being early intervention. While ideas for prevention have been recommended throughout the budget, the initiatives are more accurately targeting disease management.

WHISE recognises and appreciates that election promises are being met and we can see that women are not being left out or left behind. However, in applying a gender lens to the budget, we invite government to consider changes for men as well as women by, for example, increasing male participation in feminised industries. Furthermore, the budget states that its priority is to keep women and children safe, however, we would like to increase focus on changing male behaviours that make women and children unsafe.

WHISE notes the reduced funding on primary prevention of gender-based violence while in contrast, investing \$87M over four years to support the racing industry to ensure Victoria remains the home of major racing events. It has been long established that gambling is a significant risk factor for perpetrating violence against women and children. While the racing industry generates money for the State, WHISE questions if there is any acceptable dollar amount that can be placed on the safety of Victoria's women and children.



WHISE welcomes the opportunity to work closely with the State Government to share our expertise in how to implement the objectives of this budget with an intersectional gender lens.