

# Loss of work, isolation & worry: the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on young women

*29 April 2021*



# Always was, always will be.

## *Acknowledgement of Country.*

We would like to acknowledge that this report was researched and compiled on the stolen lands of the Kaurna people and to acknowledge the Kaurna people as traditional custodians of the lands and waters of the Adelaide region. We honour Elders both past and present and acknowledge their cultural, spiritual, physical and emotional connection with their land, waters and community. We also extend this respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from all other parts of Australia. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded, and that an important part of the COVID-19 recovery will be the fulfilment of the vision in the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

## *about us*

The Working Women's Centre SA Inc (WWC SA) is a non-government organisation that provides free and confidential information, advice and representation to vulnerable workers residing in South Australia about their rights at work.

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## *Content Note*

This report contains references to mental health issues, domestic and family violence and sexual harassment.

## *Acknowledgements*

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# The story of this project

*A snapshot of young women's experiences during COVID-19*

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic first made its mark on Australia in early 2020, when events started to be cancelled, classes moved online and restrictions first announced. No one has escaped the past year with their life unchanged. But in news report after news report, *young people* and *women* stood out as bearing the brunt of job losses and other impacts of the crisis. We wanted to find out more. In this report, launched a year later, the Working Women's Centre SA discusses young women's experiences over the past year.

This report is personal: it is written and compiled by women under the age of 30. Most of the issues we write about are very familiar: they have happened to us, to our coworkers, to our fellow students, or to our friends.

This report is also hopeful. Many young women have expressed that they feel lucky to live in South Australia, and that our strong health response to COVID-19 has helped to keep us safe and mitigate the impacts of the virus. There are clear opportunities ahead of us to pave the way to gender equality through the COVID-19 recovery. We end this report with recommendations for what can be done to address gender inequality and the impacts of COVID-19 on young women.

## The purpose of this report

We have written this report to elevate the experiences of young women in the pandemic and to imagine how the COVID-19 recovery can address issues of gender inequality. We have gathered and organised existing data, and run our own survey and consultations with young women. This report is not intended to be an academic report, however we have consulted with senior academics in the development of our survey, used credible evidentiary sources and partnered with researchers from the McKell Institute to analyze and apply existing data. Our goal is to provide a local snapshot on the issue from what we currently know, and provide a resource for government, NGO's and policy influencers. Please note that we have used the best information available at the time the report was compiled, however the story is always evolving as new data becomes available.



# The 'Young Women & COVID Survey'

*To find out how young women have been impacted by COVID-19, we ran a survey of women under the age of 30, to which we received 293 responses.*

We asked young women about their experiences since March 2020. The answers to this survey have shaped this report above all else. The survey was run from September 2020 to February 2021.

Survey responses were collected both online and via hard-copy, and promoted through a variety of different platforms including: outreach to other organisations who work with young women, the use of posters and flyers, promotion to our email list, social media organic reach and targeted social media advertising. The questions were both quantitative and qualitative, and we have shared both statistics and quotes from young women in this report. This survey is not comparative with other age and gender demographics and is intended rather to elevate the experiences of young women. However, in this report we do draw links between issues raised in our survey and comparative data.



# Who responded to our survey?

## Age

Most of the respondents to the survey were aged 20-29, with some responses from people aged 15-19.

## Background

86% spoke English as a first language and 14% spoke another language as their first language. 8% of respondents were on a temporary visa.

## Gender diversity

The vast majority of respondents to our survey were women. We have also included responses from non-binary and genderqueer young people in our data. This is because we know that these young people experience most of the same disadvantages as young women in a crisis like COVID-19. For simplicity, we use the phrase 'young women' regularly in this report, but we would like to acknowledge that these issues equally impact many LGBTQIA+ young people who are not women.

# Other Research

In researching for this report, we also looked at available data on the issue, and conducted several consultations:

- An online consultation open to all young women
- A consultation of female international students
- A consultation with female Youth Ambassadors from the Australian Refugee Association
- A consultation with Industrial Officers at the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation
- Interviews with young women working in male-dominated trades, and
- A consultation with young women working in education.

We attended many events, public forums and consultative events about COVID-19, gender and youth. We had dozens of informal conversations with people who have shared insights on the topic. This has also helped form this report.

# What we found - a summary

*The social and economic ramifications of COVID-19 have disproportionately affected young women compared to other demographics.*

## 1

### Loss of work

We found that they were significantly impacted by loss of work, and the associated mental and financial pressures. For many, the jobs have not recovered.

## 2

### Isolation

Isolation, and long periods of time spent at home, disproportionately impacted women when it comes to caring duties, violence and mental health issues.

## 3

### Worry

Many young women were working on the frontlines and experienced potential exposure to COVID-19, causing additional stress.

### Since March 2020, of those who responded to our survey:

- 22% lost their job
- 28% had their hours or pay reduced
- 53% had their way of working disrupted
- 40% had concerns about getting COVID-19 because of their work

# 71%

became more  
anxious, more sad  
or more depressed

# 44%

became more discouraged about the  
prospect of finding work.





# Loss of work

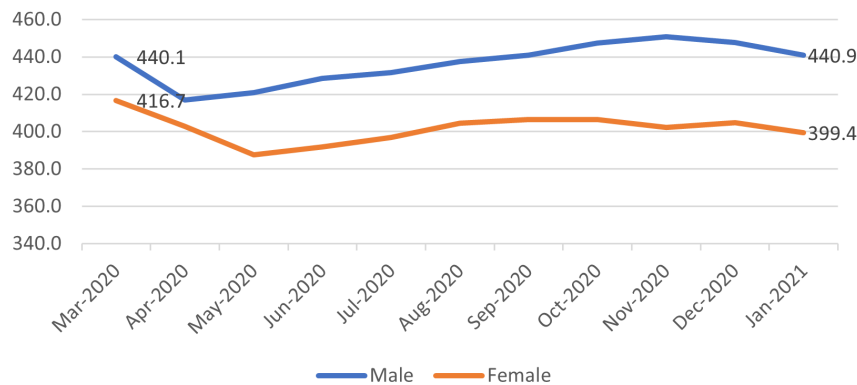
*COVID-19 has caused young women to lose work at high rates.*

For example, in April 2020, over a third of those who lost their jobs in Australia were aged 15-24.[1] 22% of those who responded to our survey had lost their job since March 2020. 28% of respondents had their hours or pay reduced.

Though many have since recovered work, unemployment and underemployment rates are still very high for young people.

The underutilisation rate for women aged 15-24 was 27.8% across the country in March 2021, compared to 13.5% for the labour force as a whole.[2]

Jobs in SA, male and female, since first COVID restrictions in March 2020



**Figure 1.1:**

Between the time that SA's first COVID-19 restrictions entered force in March 2020 and January 2021 all male jobs had recovered, while female jobs remained well below pre-pandemic levels. Source: ABS 6202.0

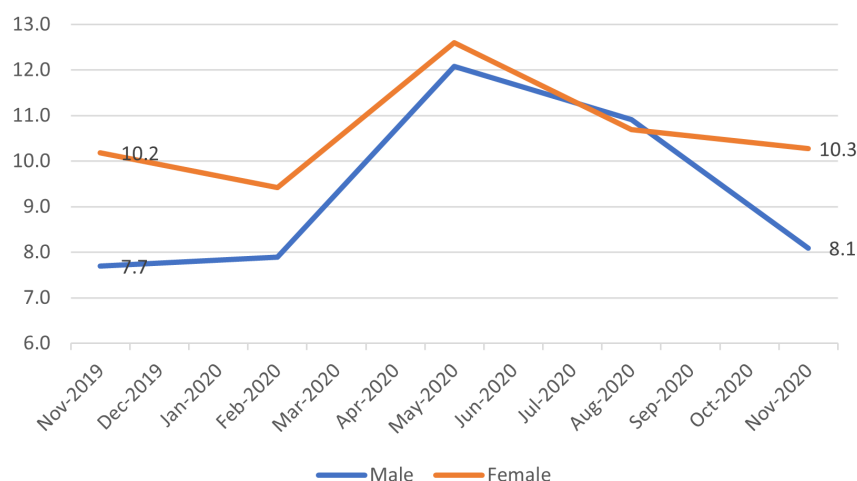
Change in total jobs numbers, male and female workers in South Australia, since COVID-19



**Figure 1.2:**

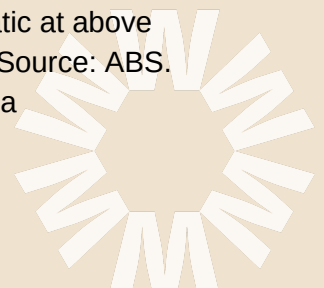
At January 2021, South Australian men had seen a net gain of 791 jobs since the first COVID-19 measures took force in March, 2020. In the same period, South Australian women saw 17,347 job losses that hadn't recovered. This is a stark demonstration of the vulnerability of female jobs to disruption. Source: ABS 6202.0

Underutilisation rates between men and women in South Australia during COVID-19 period



**Figure 1.3:**

As of November 2020, the underutilisation rate was higher for female workers than male workers in South Australia. At November, there was evidence that the male underutilisation rate was returning to its pre-COVID rates, while the female underutilisation rate remained static at above 10 per cent. Source: ABS. Cat 6291023a



# Loss of work

## There are a few reasons that might explain these impacts on employment.

Australia's labour force is segregated by gender, with roughly half of Australian workers employed by an organisation that is dominated by one gender.[3] Across different sectors, women dominate administrative roles, community and personal service roles and sales roles, while men dominate management and manual labour roles.[4]

On top of this, over half of workers in the industries most directly affected by COVID-19 restrictions were young people.[5]

Accommodation and food services is classified as a mixed sector, however 54.9% of workers are women.[6] Hospitality is highly casualised, and young people are far more likely to be employed casually.[7] Restrictions in this sector meant that many young women lost their jobs in hospitality when cafes, restaurants and pubs had to restrict their operations or close.

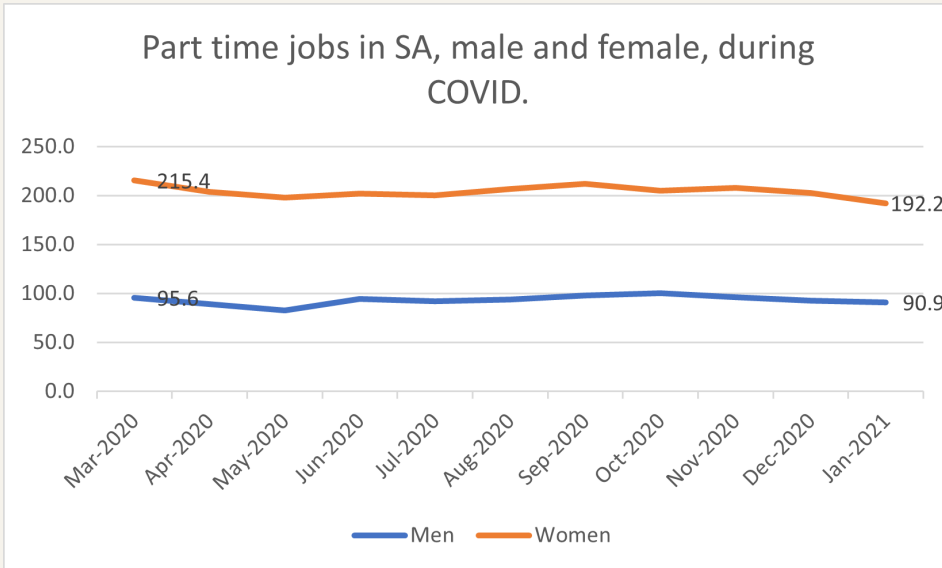
The Arts is a sector that is similarly casualised, and several young women spoke to us about being impacted in this sector.[8] Sex workers were also highly impacted by loss of work and financial hardship due to COVID-19.[9]

Young women are employed precariously at higher rates than other demographics. 68% percent of part time jobs in SA are held by women, and most jobs lost have been part-time. Young people make up a large portion of Australia's casual workforce.[10]

Women and young people are also more likely to work multiple jobs.[11] There was a collapse in secondary employment due to COVID-19. [12] From March to April 2020, there were 7% fewer main jobs and 33.4% fewer secondary jobs. By September, only a third of secondary jobs had been recovered, compared to half of main jobs.[13]

In comparison, full time jobs for women in SA were mostly stable over 2020.

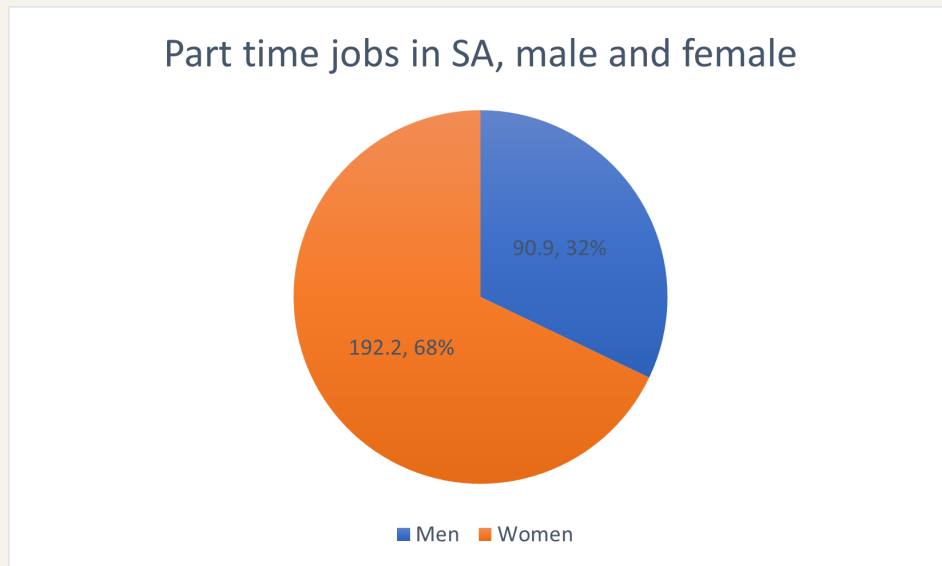




**Figure 1.4**

Most job losses have occurred for part time workers, and most part time jobs in South Australia are held by women. This remained consistent from March 2020 to January 2021.

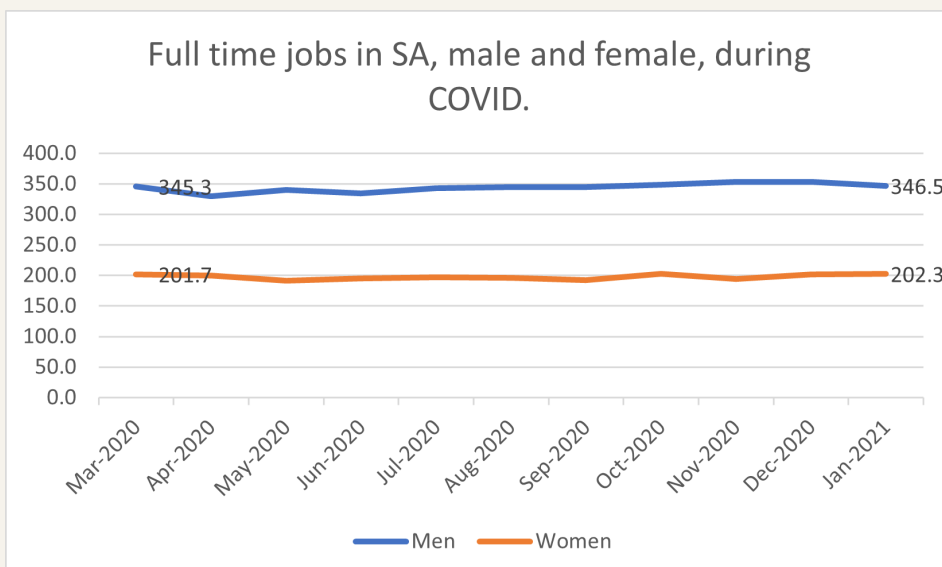
Source: ABS 6202.0



**Figure 1.5**

Given that as of January 2021, 68 per cent of all part time jobs in South Australia are held by women, COVID-19's impact on part-time, insecure work has disproportionately impacted women.

Source: ABS 6202.0



**Figure 1.6**

Full time jobs numbers were relatively static for both men and women in South Australia from March 2020 to January 2021, demonstrating the importance of job security during economic shocks.

Source: ABS 6202.0

# The impact of JobKeeper

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The federal government's JobKeeper scheme served to reduce job losses by 700,000 across Australia.[14] Many young women received JobKeeper, and survey respondents told us they felt grateful. However, many young women missed out on JobKeeper due to not having worked at the same employer long enough to qualify.

*Young people are far more likely to have been with an employer for less than 12 months.[15]*

Because of the eligibility criteria, over 200,000 women working in hospitality, retail, food and accommodation in Australia did not receive JobKeeper despite having lost work in the most impacted sectors.[16]

We also found that several young women we spoke with were expected to do more work than they were able or willing to do in order to receive JobKeeper, and 14 survey respondents told us their boss asked them to do things outside of their job description in order to receive JobKeeper.



# QUOTES

*From the young women in South Australia impacted by COVID19*

## 25-29 YEAR OLD WOMAN

"My contract was up for renewal in a role I worked, however Covid hit and the promises made were unable to be matched. My work is in a predominantly female dominated space and I do feel as though everyone was understanding to a degree, however I went from working 25+ hours a week in that role to 4 hours a week with the potential promise of more. I felt I was on a long suffering trail shift to try and make myself valuable in order to receive more work."

## 25-29 YEAR OLD WOMAN

"Lasting impact on the industries that I was working in - hospitality, tourism, etc. These industries can't just "bounce back" and are still overly competitive."

#COVID19 #jobkeeper

## 25-29 YEAR OLD WOMAN

"Before jobkeeper I had my hours cut from 25 to 3 a week with no notice. After jobkeeper started I was expected to work exactly the amount we were being paid, even though that was more hours than I was able to do due to uni commitments. The pressure to take no sick leave or time off has increased"

## 20-24 YEAR OLD WOMAN

"Lost my job as my employer needed less people and chose a guy since he can do more manual labour as a guy"

## 25-29 YEAR OLD WOMAN

"I am a casual worker and was working in two jobs. I lost one job altogether even though I had been there for 6 years and that was my preferred employment as it was close to my area of study. My second jobs hours increased by triple and I was required to do duties outside of my job description in order to stay on job keeper. I was forced into managing the space without any kind of incentives and still remain a casual employee with no benefits. As job keeper as lowered, so have my hours"

## 20-24 YEAR OLD WOMAN

"I was offered a permanent contract just before lockdown was announced. This was then revoked and meant I worked casually during covid without the job keeper payment. I worked more hours a week than friends and family who earnt more than me because of job keeper"

## 25-29 YEAR OLD WOMAN

"I work in the arts. I lost my gigs with state opera. I lost my performance opportunity to debut my first cabaret show. I teach singing for a living and lost students due to covid."

## 20-24 YEAR OLD WOMAN

"I graduated uni last year and am currently working three part time jobs to support myself, whilst also trying to find a permanent full time role. Two of my current jobs I lost during lockdown as they were working with children (and as a casual I wasn't eligible for job keeper)."

# Reduction of income

**Some women had their income reduced due to pay cuts, pay freezes or wage theft.**

Young people often work in casual work, which means they face issues such as wage theft, lack of stability, having to change jobs regularly, and risk losing work if they try to negotiate for better conditions.[17]

COVID-19 only served to exacerbate these vulnerabilities due to a highly competitive job market. One young woman told us she was 'afraid to demand more from employers' because she 'should be lucky to have a job.' Wage freezes became more common due to COVID-19.[18] **One young woman wrote:**

*'I was asked by my workplace to sacrifice 10% of my pay to help keep the business afloat then was in trouble for seeking advice from the union.'*

**Another young woman said:**

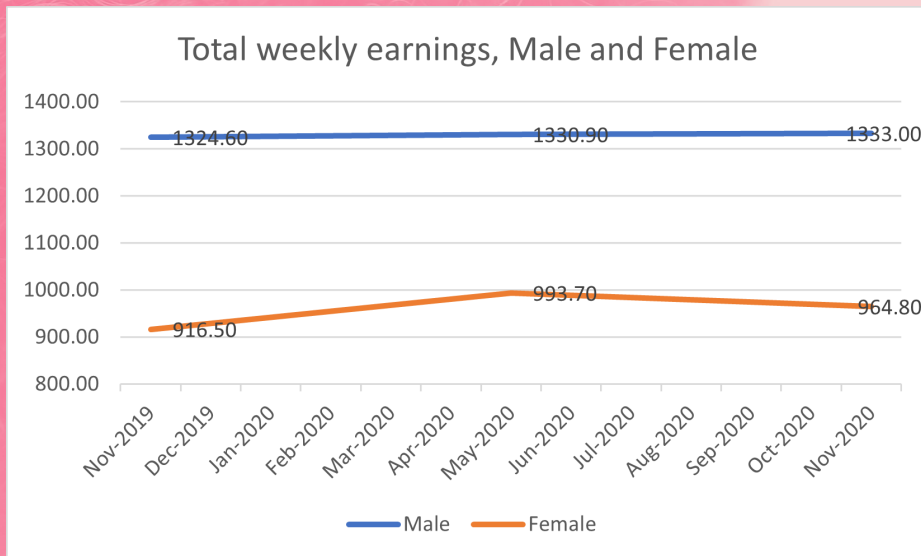
*'my pay was reduced but my hours increased.'*

10% of respondents told us that they know or suspect that they were not paid correctly for work done in the period since March 2020.

Not all women have seen a decrease in income: by November 2020, female workers were earning more per week than a year ago, buoyed by JobKeeper support. Female workers in full time work saw their pay increase over the 12 months to November 2020, which demonstrates the importance of secure work.

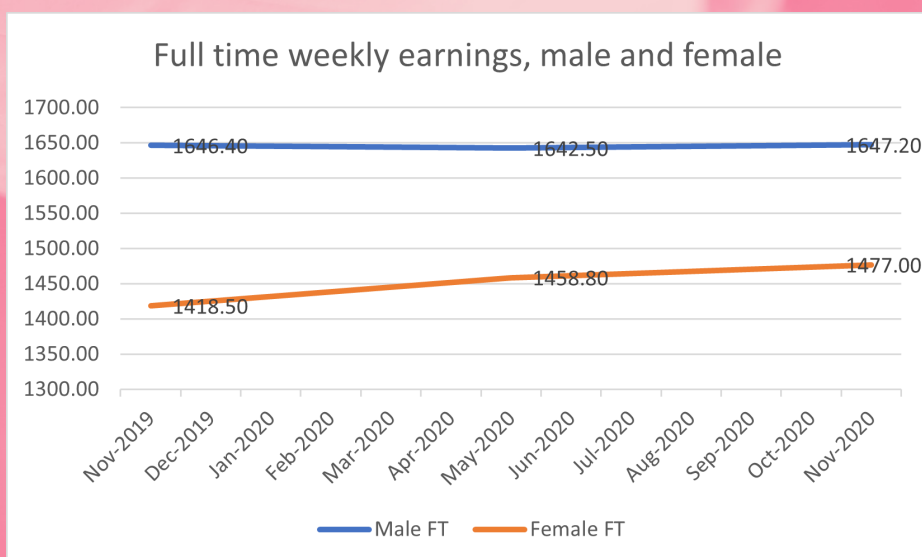


# Women's earnings



**Figure 1.7:**

As of November 2020, Female South Australian workers still in a job were seeing a reduction in their pay since the JobKeeper support was altered in Q3, 2020. By November 2020 (latest detailed data), females in the workforce were earning \$48 more per week than at the same time in the past year, but this was buoyed by the JobKeeper support which raised the income of lower-paid workers. Male wages in the same period in South Australia remained almost static, marginally improving by \$8.40 per week overall. Source: ABS. Cat 6291023a



**Figure 1.8:**

Female workers in full time work in South Australia saw a positive increase in their pay over the 12 months to November 2020. This demonstrates the importance of secure work for the female workforce. Source: ABS. Cat 6291023a

# Financial hardship

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COVID-19 has exacerbated the financial hardship experienced by many young women.

**Around a third of respondents said they were financially worse off since COVID-19 hit. The rest of respondents were financially the same, or in a better position, often due to JobKeeper.**

26 of our survey respondents had to skip meals due for financial reasons, and 36 were worried about not having a place to live.

South Australian foodbanks saw a huge increase in demand in 2020 due to COVID-19, with international students and casual workers being key new cohorts seeking assistance.[19]

48% of our survey respondents said they were very worried or anxious about money.

One young woman told us:

*“I was broke, could barely feed myself, wasn’t receiving Job Seeker yet and I was using napkins instead of toilet paper because of the supermarket hoarders.”*

Another expressed the difference made by the JobSeeker supplement:

*“I’ve been on Austudy, which was temporarily increased and that was a big help. But I’m worried about what will happen to my finances when the covid supplement is reduced again and then removed by the government - especially when there are still a lack of available secure jobs.”*

# Female International Students & temporary visa holders

**A large national survey of temporary visa holders, most of them international students, published in September 2020, found that an alarming number of them were devastated financially by the pandemic.[20]**

Almost three quarters of respondents to the national survey lost most, if not all, of their work due to COVID-19. [21] Many also received less money from family due to the impacts of COVID-19 overseas. Temporary migrants did not have access to JobKeeper or JobSeeker, in contrast to other governments including the UK, NZ, Canada and Ireland who all extended their wage subsidies to temporary migrants.[22]

*The Australian Human Rights Commission observed an increase in complaints of racism in 2020, the majority of them related to COVID-19.[23]*

These hardships were reflected in our consultation with international students.[24] The young women spoke about losing work and also receiving less financial support from family overseas. They also spoke about isolation, an increase in racism experienced and difficulties accessing mental health services. Some young migrant women had family members overseas pass away and were not able to travel to attend funerals.[25] International students found the once-off financial support provided by the government to be a significant help, but still struggled financially and faced additional barriers to finding work compared with Australian students. We noticed that our survey also reflected this: young women on temporary visas experienced financial hardships at a higher rate than other respondents.



# Words from female international students

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*“Covid-19 has changed the way of living now. As an international student who just moved in Australia in February, it was already difficult enough to familiarise myself with life here and settle down and Covid-19 made it even more difficult. For almost 6 months I was looking for a job but I couldn’t find any. Recently, I got a job and I am settling in now. However past 6-7 months have been testing times for me. I have felt anxious, sad and lonely than ever.”*

a 20-24 year old woman



*“As an international student, the uncertainty about whether I should stay or leave made me highly anxious. My dad has an autoimmune disease and I was worried about what would happen if he got the virus and still am.”*

a 25-29 year old woman

# Finding work is difficult.

Anglicare's job availability snapshot in late 2020 found that in South Australia, for every entry-level job, there were over 10 jobseekers, which had increased from the previous year and was the second-highest rate in the country.[26]

Some survey respondents told us they had chosen not to look for work due to a belief that there aren't any jobs at the moment. Across Australia, more young people became worried about finding a job in 2020.[27]

*"Work closed, and now it's reopened but at a smaller capacity and casuals are not needed. I'm having no luck on my job hunt and being a person with a disability makes it even harder"*

- 20-24 year old woman

Some young women expressed frustration at dealing with job providers who had unrealistic expectations.[28] Barriers to finding a job expressed by young women included high competition, lack of available jobs, having a gap in employment, mental health issues, discrimination, lack of experience and difficulty finding work in a new sector because of expectations of qualifications or years of experience.[29]

*"As an international student, getting the first job was difficult but with COVID, it has become more difficult. I am currently working as a casual employee with no set hours or pay and its very difficult to get a better paying job"*

- 20-24 year old woman

# Stuck at home

For many young women in South Australia, restrictions meant long periods of time stuck in the home despite the absence of prolonged lockdowns. As discussed, many lost their job, and 26% of those who responded to our survey started working from home. For most, this was an isolating experience.

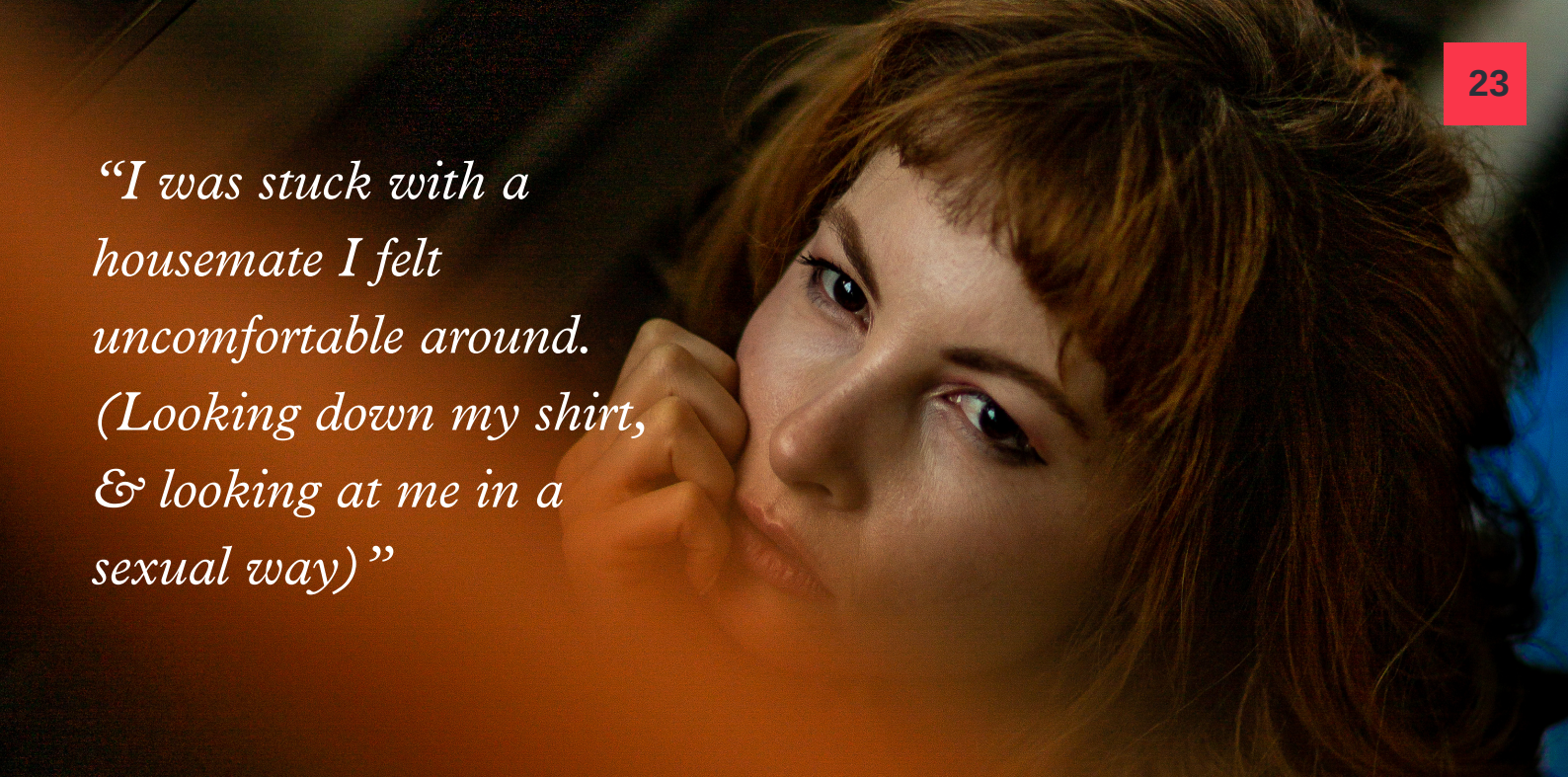
## Working at home

COVID-19 has increased 'time poverty' for women.[30] 32% of those who responded to our survey said they found it hard to balance work with home life. The women we consulted with said they had found it difficult to find time for family and friends, getting enough sleep, doing things they enjoy and getting exercise since COVID-19 hit.[31] A large number of young women had to work or study from home. Working from home has benefits, but also carries challenges. Not all young women have access to internet or appropriate study spaces at home.[32] Those who were studying found it difficult to learn through online teaching.[33]

There was an increase in unpaid caring responsibilities. Early studies of dual parent families showed that on average during lockdowns, both parents took on more care work than normal, but women still took on more hours and more additional hours due to COVID-19.[34] On average, this meant 10.5 additional hours of care work in the home due to COVID-19.[35] Many young women were both working and providing some unpaid care work at once. One young woman was studying her final years of high school while also caring for her immunocompromised mother. She stopped going to school due to COVID-19 risk, and fell behind in school.[36] One young mother who responded to our survey wrote:

*'I was working from home with my two small children and found it difficult to manage both working and caring roles at the same time.'*





*“I was stuck with a housemate I felt uncomfortable around. (Looking down my shirt, & looking at me in a sexual way)”*

## Isolation, violence and housing difficulties

Many young women spoke to us about the isolation and loneliness of spending prolonged periods of time at home. 71% of survey respondents told us they became more anxious, more sad or more depressed since March 2020. A survey of young people aged 15-19 in SA found that young women were struggling with stress and mental health issues in 2020 at a far higher rate than young men of the same ages.[37] ABS data tells us that women and young people reported high levels of psychological distress more than other demographics in March 2021. [38] COVID-19 led to an increase in loneliness in South Australians, and young people remain one of the loneliest demographics.[39]

More time spent at home and other COVID-19 related factors meant that there were increased domestic violence risks for women. Domestic violence services noted a large spike in demand for emergency accommodation in 2020.[40] A study of women on temporary visas experiencing domestic violence in Victoria, found that women were more reliant on perpetrators during COVID-19 lockdowns because of job losses and no access to government financial assistance.[41] 10 people who responded to our survey said an intimate partner or family member was violent or controlling towards them. One young woman wrote: *'My partner has become increasingly controlling through COVID and has started threatening me in a way he never had before after losing his job. I have tried to leave but restrictions have made it hard to.'*

COVID-19 caused housing difficulties for young people. According to the 2016 census, almost half of people aged 20-39 in South Australia are renters, while many others remain in the family home.[42] Young women had to navigate the difficulties of COVID-19 safety in sharehouses, escalating tensions with family or housemates, and a lack of independence for those who were living with family. Adelaide is the second least affordable city for renters, especially those on low-incomes as found by a rental affordability assessment in December 2020.[43] Pre-COVID, young people under 24 were already more likely than other groups to have more than 50% of their income going towards rent.[44] Rent prices did not drop significantly in Adelaide due to COVID-19 compared to other cities.[45]

# Women on the frontlines

Young women who work in essential services have also been placed under increased pressure. Women make up 79% of workers in the health and social sectors, 73.2% of education workers and 55% of retail workers.[46] Young women have been working on the frontlines: they are teachers, supermarket workers, healthcare workers, and aged care workers. The prevalence of women in these sectors not only puts them at a risk of contracting COVID-19, but also means women have often faced the brunt of the stress and emotional reactions to this pandemic from others.

40% of those who responded to our survey had concerns about getting COVID-19 because of their work. Frontline work is impossible to be done from home, and often carries other vulnerabilities with it. For example, young women in aged care often work in casual or part-time roles across multiple sites and multiple employers.[47] In healthcare, large numbers of young women workers are on casual or short-term contracts.[48] Education and childcare workers spoke about not being able to implement social distancing working with children.[49] Even within the health sector, women often work in front-line roles. Overseas data demonstrates that female health workers are far more likely to contract COVID-19 at work than their male colleagues.[50]

In our consultations, we heard that many young women were very concerned about contracting COVID-19, especially if they had health vulnerabilities, were pregnant or had vulnerable family members. Many had to choose between getting paid and keeping themselves safe. Young women spoke to us about losing income when they had to stay home sick.[51] A lack of masks and other PPE was raised by women in multiple frontline sectors.[52] Some graduate healthcare workers, mostly young women, were 'terrified' working in risky environments.[53] These issues were compounded by additional vulnerabilities faced by young people with disabilities, who faced increased accessibility issues due to COVID-19.[54]

Similarly, the socio-economic and health inequalities faced by Indigenous people meant that they were at a much higher risk of contracting COVID-19.[55]

Healthcare was also impacted for young women. In our survey, we heard from young women working in healthcare who were worried about their ability to provide adequate assistance to women around COVID-19 risks and restrictions. There are some health issues which disproportionately affect young women which were made harder by COVID-19. For example, the Butterfly Foundation had a 57% increase in people contacting its eating disorder helpline in August 2020 compared to January 2020.[56] One young woman wrote about how COVID-19 impacted abortion healthcare:

*“...I decided to have an abortion simply due to my financial status and was denied a support person at the clinic as per COVID standards. I was so scared. The start of 2020 really bloody sucked”*

# Women on the frontlines

"I didn't feel comfortable working in a department store where I had lots of contact with people" – 20-24 year old woman

**"...I was worried i could contract covid as i was still working in child care all throughout the pandemic and had cases in the same suburb as my workplace" – 25-29 year old woman**

"Working in childcare, my hours were reduced but my fear was being exposed to people in the community / centre and then passing it along to housemates and family unknowingly" – 20-24 year old woman

**"Working in essential services, I was fully exposed to COVID constantly, which was very stressful"**  
– 15-19 year old woman

"Working in a grocery store it was apparent that if covid appeared in my area I would be exposed and likely to get the virus. My job did not have gloves or masks and they found it difficult to acquire them."  
-15-19 year old woman

**"I'm immunocompromised and work food/customer service  
- had to take unpaid time off in fear of contracting COVID"  
- 15-19 year old woman**

"I think it made me realise that retail workers are not well protected. I am part of a union, but I still felt uncomfortable bringing up more safety measures where I work."  
20-24 year old woman



# Increased pressure at work

28% of survey respondents said their workload increased since March 2020. An increased workload due to COVID-19 was reported by young women working in healthcare and education due to the increased safety requirements and other factors.[57] There was an increased burden of emotional labour for some essential workers who had contact with many people struggling with the impacts COVID-19. Young women spoke to us about increased customer aggression. Young women in healthcare and education expressed a sense of being undervalued for their skills despite their essential contribution to society during the pandemic.[58] There are concerns that early career burnout will increase in these sectors due to the increased pressures of the pandemic.[59]



*“I worked at a grocery store where we experienced an influx of customers often panic-buying. there were some stressful moments for both my colleagues and manager trying to maintain the store” - 15-19 year old woman*

## Now & the future

We are now well on the road to recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 in South Australia. In spite of the challenges faced, young women have shown extraordinary resilience over the past year. Some spoke about challenging themselves to learn new ways of working, like teaching children online.[60] They spoke about self-care strategies such as setting better work boundaries, spending time outdoors, keeping in touch with friends, prioritising sleep and leaving unsafe work environments.[61] Across Australia young people and women were more likely to prioritise their mental health due to COVID-19.[62] For some, COVID-19 has helped clarify their career priorities: one young woman said she was more motivated now to become a doctor.[63] One young woman told us:

*“COVID-19 forced me to become more adaptable in planning my extracurricular and school activities, as well as prepare me to overcome unpredictable situations, like the cancellations of events that I was looking forward to.” - 15-19 year old woman*

# "The rest of the world stopping has helped me to focus on what is important to me."

However young women face a future of uncertainty. Many expressed a lack of optimism about job opportunities. Of our survey respondents, 30% became more afraid of losing their job since March 2020 and 44% became more discouraged about the prospect of finding work. One woman in her early 20s wrote:

*"It was really difficult planning for my future career and lifestyle when we all went into isolation around April. As the state started to open back up it felt great, but my qualifications and talents weren't as useful in a post-COVID world as those of my friends, which only exacerbated my anxiety. I still feel like I might never fully catch up or get to the places I want to be; the places that felt so attainable a year ago and then were taken away in the span of a week."*



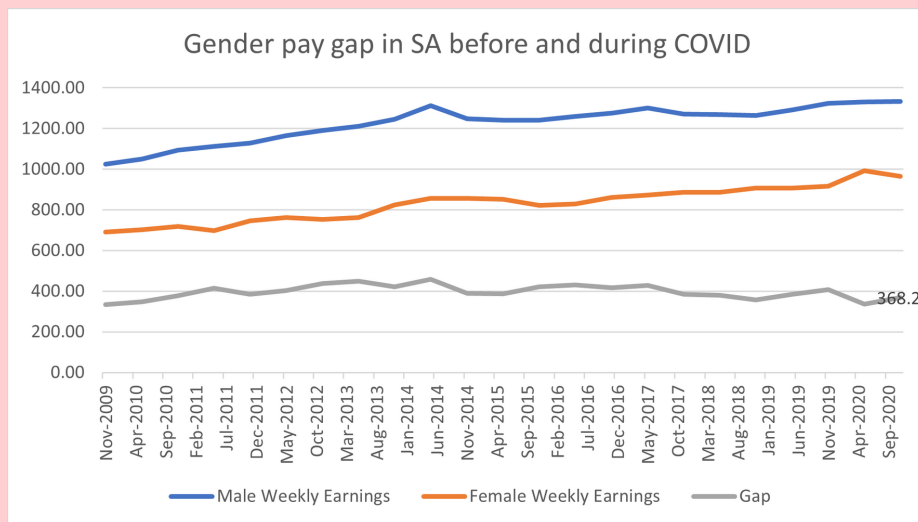
While there is jobs growth in areas such as STEM and construction, young women face significant social and economic barriers to careers in male-dominated fields. Even from a young age, young women are far less likely to plan to work in areas like maths, engineering or computing.[64] On top of gender work stereotypes, a range of factors can create an unwelcoming working environment for women, discouraging them from working in these fields.

Women who do work in male-dominated trades have spoken to us about 'boys clubs', lack of women in management roles, lack of access to appropriate toilets, lack of flexibility around parenting, lack of empathy and gate-keeping.[65] The women we spoke with said that they found work in these fields meaningful and secure, and that they would like to see these barriers removed for women.[66]

Education is an important part of the COVID-19 economic recovery. However, in November 2020 there had been a 7% drop in female university enrolments since the COVID-19 recession hit, likely due to increased caring responsibilities and loss of income.[67] Women are also underrepresented in traineeships and apprenticeships.[68]

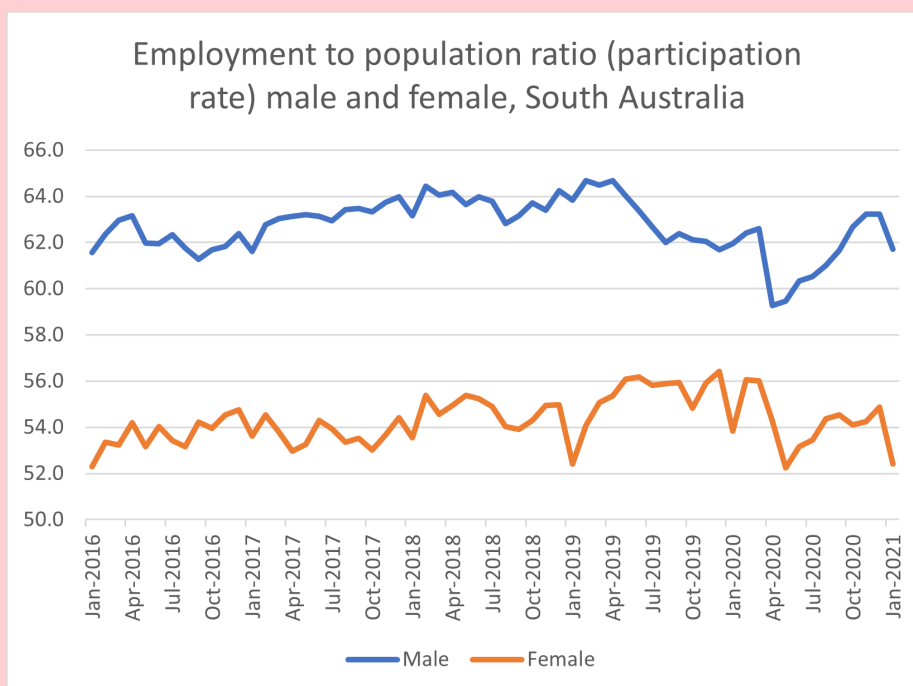
# Young women continue to have troubling economic prospects.

There has been very little real progress on workplace gender equality since COVID-19 began, with the gender pay gap remaining relatively static. Women have withdrawn a greater proportion of their super through the early withdrawal of super scheme than men.[69] The superannuation gap for women aged 25-34 has doubled, and the long-term effects of having less superannuation and less income will see women affected more significantly by economic insecurity and poverty in their later years.[70] There are fears that we will go backwards, with analysts predicting that it will take decades to reach financial equality post-COVID-19.[71] Those who enter the labour force during a recession are less likely to get work and their earnings are reduced for at least a decade.[72]



*Figure 1.9:*

Female workers overall earn \$368 per week less than male workers in South Australia as of September 2020. The overall pay gap has remained relatively static for the past decade. Source: ABS. Cat 6291023a



*Figure 1.10:*

The participation rate for South Australian women hit its lowest point in five years in May 2020, and by January 2021 still had not recovered to where it was prior to the pandemic. Source: ABS 6202.0

# Throughout our consultations, young women made it clear to us what they need in the COVID-19 recovery.

They need secure employment opportunities. Young people also need accessible education and training, work experience opportunities and access to mental health services.[73] Young women spoke strongly with us about a need for guaranteed stable, secure and well-paid employment, greater access to childcare and better safety nets.[74] Young women, especially those from a migrant background, spoke about the need for opportunities to gain experience in the workplace. [75] To access jobs in male-dominated industries, young women need subsidised and flexible training and support with training spaces specifically for women, as well as long-term efforts to change attitudes and make workplaces safer for women.[76]

**Young women also need to be consulted with and listened to on the issues that affect their lives. A young woman working as a teacher said that decision-makers should 'ask what it is we want, don't just assume.'**[77]

Young women told us that they felt grateful to be in South Australia, and were glad that governments listened to and followed health advice.[78] Many hold optimism about the future. The experiences of young women throughout COVID-19 are connected to pre-existing inequalities, and we need to build back better to avoid ongoing inequalities, lingering impacts and aftershocks.



# Recommendations

*Factoring young women into South Australia's COVID-19 recovery*

These recommendations have been developed through our examination of the barriers and issues facing young women, and the thoughts and ideas proposed to us by the young women we consulted with. Many of the recommendations echo policy solutions being enacted elsewhere for the purpose of gender equality and empowerment of young people.



# Recommendation 1:

*Invest in the creation of secure jobs for women through:  
1) a commitment to minimum job security requirements in services that receive government funding, and  
2) investment that will create jobs in feminised sectors.*

What would it look like if there was a secure job available to every young woman who was looking for work in South Australia? This is possible through job creation in feminised sectors in the COVID-19 recovery.

While there are several areas where new jobs will emerge over the years to come, our economy needs targeted government stimulus to create jobs and reduce unemployment and underemployment, especially as federal government supports are wound back.

Many of the available jobs are in male-dominated sectors such as technology, defence and trades. While work needs to be done to address barriers for young women in entering these sectors, that work will take years. Investment in job creation in feminised sectors will reduce underutilisation for young women and address crucial social needs.





## **Job creation is needed to stop young women from moving interstate for work.**

We know that many young women leave South Australia to find work despite preferring to remain in SA. When looking at data released pre-COVID-19, we found that interstate migration of women aged 20–34 makes up more than half of South Australia's net migration loss.[79] We are missing an opportunity to keep young women in South Australia through better employment opportunities. Many young women have returned to Adelaide due to COVID-19, and this presents an opportunity to retain those workers through the creation of jobs and an investigation of why these women left SA in the first place.

## **A commitment to minimum job security requirements**

would mean government tender processes and funding contracts would mandate job standards for organisations receiving government funding to provide services. This would include paid personal leave entitlements for all workers, a low percentage of casual workers in the organisation, a positive obligation on employers to provide permanent employment after 12 months and fair and secure rostering.

# Investment in feminised sectors could take many forms.

For example, secure jobs could be created for young women through investment in the creation of secure jobs in mental health or domestic violence services. These areas are highly feminised, and a larger workforce would have a significant social benefit, as mental health and domestic violence are both issues that were raised many times in our survey. Secure jobs could also be created by increasing the number of state government graduate positions available.

Another issue that was raised by many young women was lack of access to affordable childcare. While this is largely a federal issue, we note that job creation in this area and increased accessibility would have huge benefits for young women in terms of both employment and access as young parents.[80] We ask all governments and organisations to support the goal of universally accessible childcare.

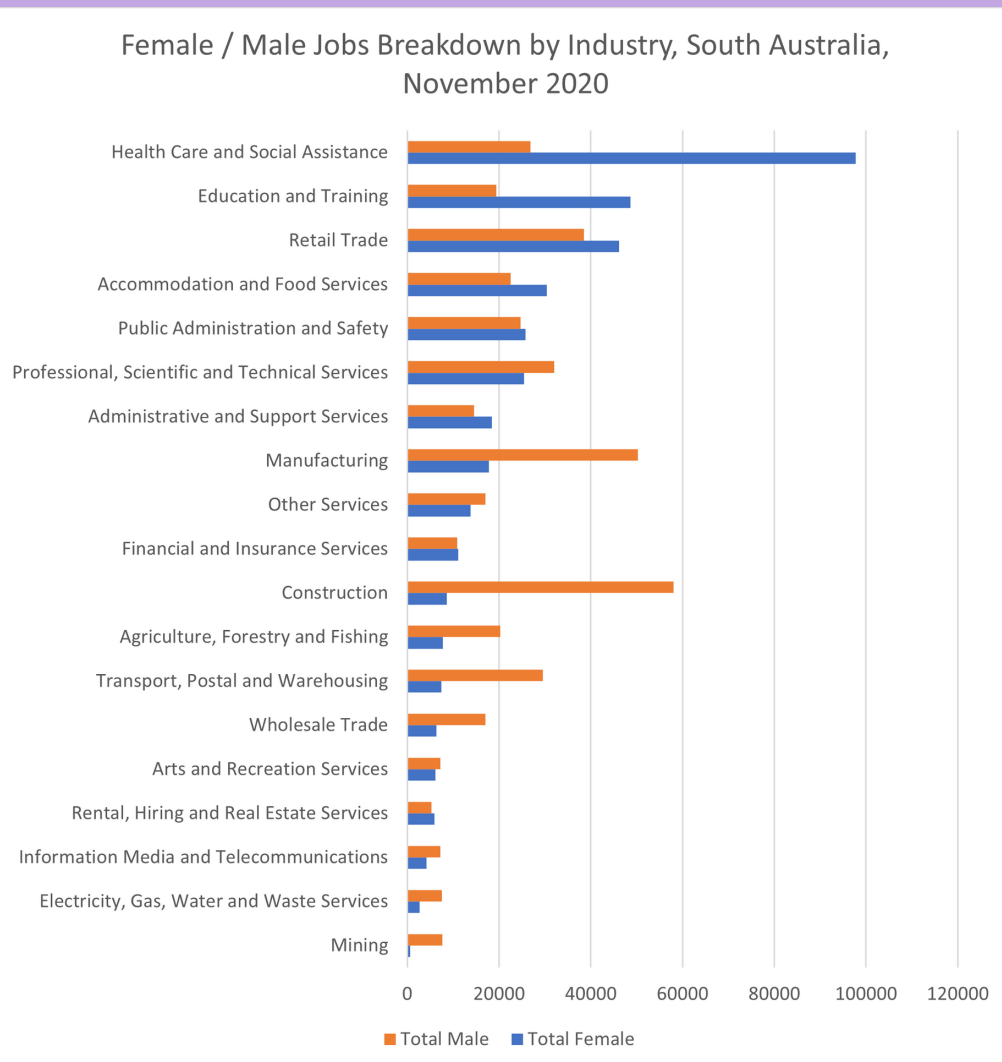
Here in South Australia, we can also invest in job creation through providing further financial supports for international students. The financial hardship experienced by many international students due to COVID-19 has damaged their enthusiasm about studying in Australia and ability to pay university fees.[81] Financial support for living expenses would greatly assist the young women most detrimentally affected by COVID-19, and would enable them to continue studying in Adelaide, contributing significantly to our economy. Every four international student enrolments in South Australia creates one local job. By assisting international students in need, we can encourage international students to study in South Australia and nurture the jobs that this sector provides.[82]



The economic benefits of secure job creation in these sectors are enormous. Investing in the care economy would create a similar number of jobs for men as the same investment in construction, but would create four times as many jobs for women.[83] Similarly, for every million dollars spent on new construction spending, 0.2 jobs go to women, whereas the same amount spent on education would create 10.6 jobs for women. [84]



# South Australia gender jobs breakdown.



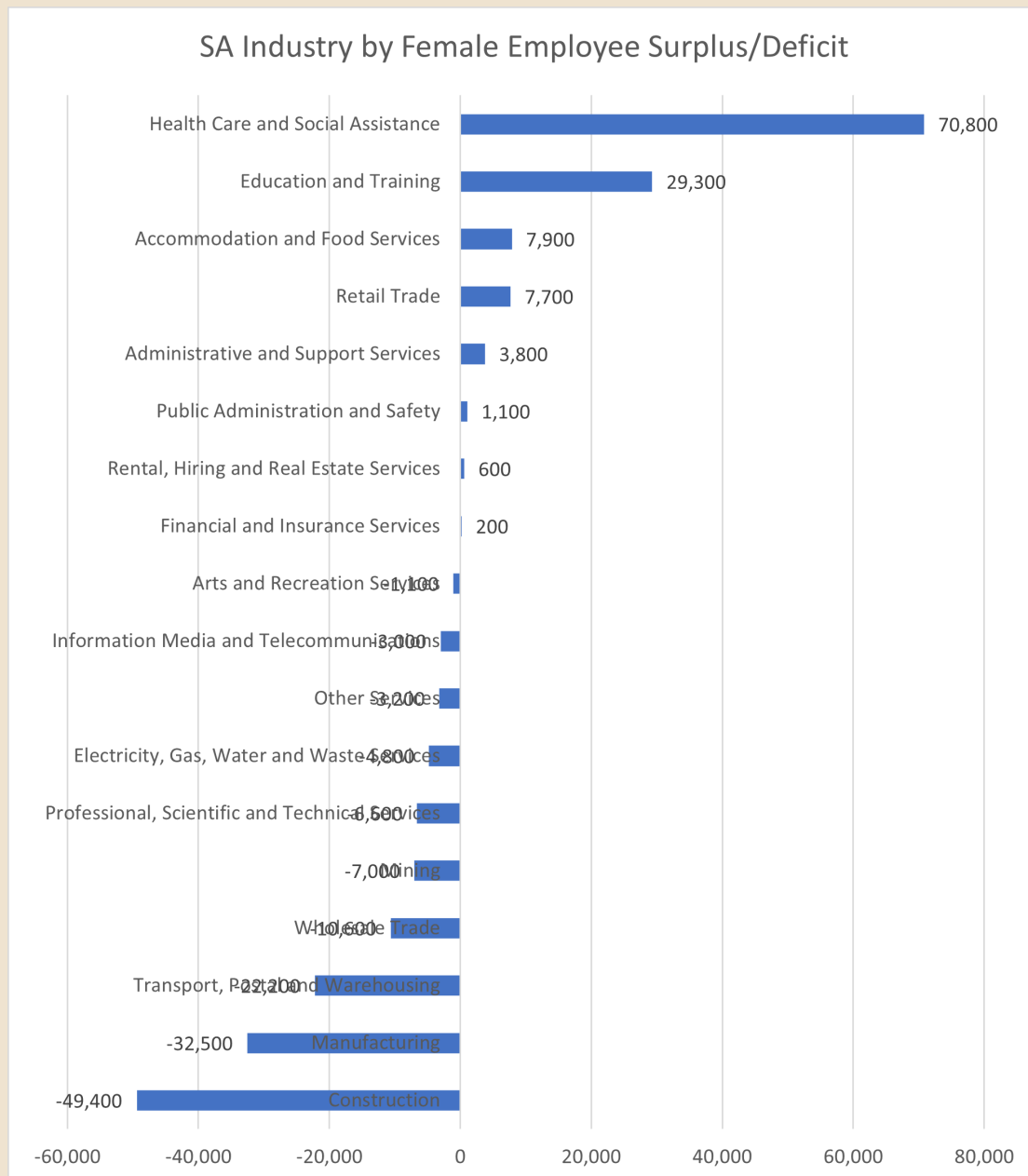
*Figure 1.11:*

Female / Male Jobs by Industry, South Australia. Source: Employment Region - Employment by Industry, November 2020

# Investment in feminised sectors could take many forms.

*Figure 1.12:*

South Australian industries ranked by surplus/deficit of female employees. Health Care and Social Assistance has 70,800 more female employees than male employees, while construction has 49,400 more male employees than female employees. Targeted job creation in sectors with a surplus of female workers is more likely to benefit female workers than job creation in sectors with a deficit of female employees such as construction. Source: Employment Region - Employment by Industry, November 2020/ McKell Institute analysis.



# Recommendation 2:

## *Fund a program of dedicated apprenticeships or traineeships for women*

Apprenticeships and traineeships will be a key part of the COVID-19 recovery. It is positive to see that commencements for female apprentices and trainees increased over the year until March 2020.[85] Likewise, it is positive that there is a federal subsidy scheme for apprenticeships in the wake of COVID-19, and that the 2020-21 state budget included funding for 750 new traineeships and apprenticeships in government agencies and funded projects. Women are more likely to be precariously employed, and direct funding towards traineeships and apprenticeships will help young people and women to gain secure work.

However currently young women are underrepresented in apprenticeship and traineeship positions. **As of June 2020, there were only 4,640 women in-training in South Australia, compared to 13,405 men.[86]**

This means that women entering the workforce are being left out of opportunities for the secure and well-paid careers that can flow from apprenticeships and traineeships.[87] Young women want to work in these roles. Women we interviewed spoke to us about the relatively good pay, the physical work, the variety, being outdoors and the problem-solving aspects of the work.[88] 61% of the young people we surveyed told us they would be willing to start a new career to improve their employment prospects. To address the barriers for women in doing apprenticeships and traineeships, a program of dedicated apprenticeships and traineeships should be created for women.



# Recommendation 3:

## *Introduce gender responsive budgeting*

When budget and funding decisions are made, thorough gender impact assessments should be conducted to determine the likely gender impact of the proposed measures. An analysis should also be conducted as to how the decision could be altered to address gender inequality and ensure better job and education opportunities for young women, and these changes should be implemented.

# Recommendation 4:

## *Create a mechanism for young women to be heard at a policy making level*

Young women are underrepresented when it comes to policy decisions, and many young women spoke with us about their desire to be heard. A youth representative body, that compliments and works with youth peak bodies, is needed to communicate the needs of young people to decision-makers regularly.

## Where to from here

To build a COVID-19 recovery that factors in the needs of young women, we need everyone on board.

To be part of this movement, you can take the following actions:

- Sign on with your organisation's support of these recommendations
- Spread the word by sharing this report with others
- Get in touch with the Working Women's Centre to find out more about our work in this area.

### *How to find us:*



[wwcsa.org.au](http://wwcsa.org.au)



[@working\\_womens\\_centre](https://www.instagram.com/working_womens_centre)



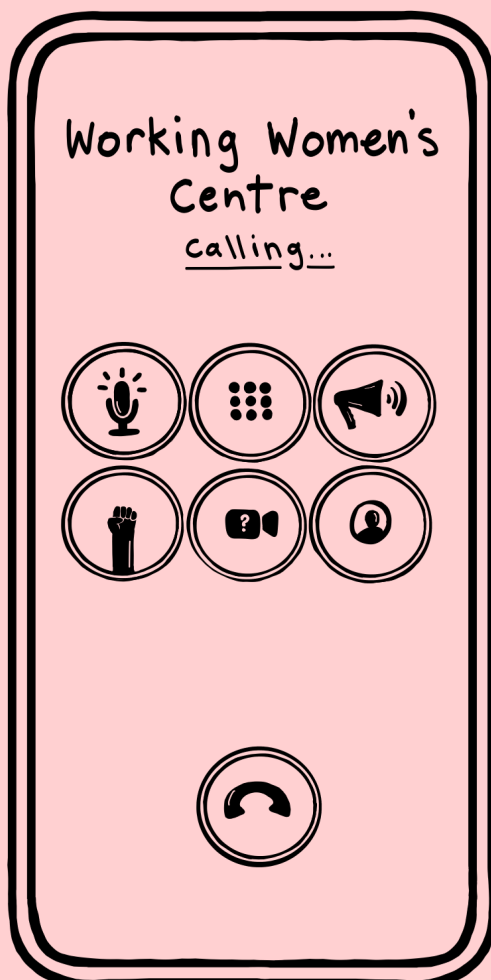
[@WWCSA2](https://twitter.com/WWCSA2)



[facebook.com/workingwomenscentre](https://facebook.com/workingwomenscentre)

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## *about us*

The Working Women's Centre SA Inc (WWC SA) is a non-government organisation that provides free and confidential information, advice and representation to vulnerable workers residing in South Australia about their rights at work.



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