

Childcare and women's participation loom as key issues at jobs summit ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

An increasing shortfall of childcare workers will put the brakes on the government's productivity plans, Finance Minister Katy Gallagher acknowledges, as big business calls for women's workforce participation to be treated as a core economic issue.

Ahead of next month's jobs summit, economists and early childhood advocates say solving the childcare workforce crisis is key to unlocking women's participation and addressing broader skills shortfalls.

Gallagher, who is also minister for women, says addressing chronic problems in the care sectors is central to the government's productivity agenda.

"These aren't nice things that you do on the side, aged care and childcare and things like that, these are core and growing and massive parts of our service economy," she said.

"Part of our focus on investing in our cheaper childcare plan is to drive up participation and allow women to work more, and the workforce constraints are going to run alongside that."

There is an estimated shortfall of 6500 early childhood educators and teachers. The government's plan to increase subsidies to parents from July 2023 is expected to increase demand for places, requiring about another 9500 workers in the sector on top of the existing vacancies.

But workers were already being drawn out of aged care and childcare to higher-paid NDIS jobs, Gallagher said, and an anticipated significant wage rise in aged care being contemplated by the Fair Work Commission would compound the problem for the childcare sector.

The Business Council of Australia has called for the advancement of women to be one of the seven economic "resets" it wants to emerge from the summit.

"We need confirmation that one of the biggest injections to economic growth comes from increasing the participation of women in the workforce and enabling them to progress, advance and lead," BCA chief executive Jennifer Westacott said.

"But we must do more. Women's participation is a core economic issue, not a side issue."

The BCA also wants the summit to come up with ways to drive productivity harder, with Westacott saying it isn't a coincidence the past decade was the slowest in 60 years for both productivity and income growth.

Consideration of women and work will be embedded across all streams of the summit and Gallagher wants to see a gender-focused outcome from every section.

The government has also taken other steps to cast a gender lens over proposals going to cabinet in the lead up to the October 25 budget.

"I'm not going to say we're going to solve everything immediately, but we're going to have a real damn good crack at it," Gallagher said.

Impact Economics' lead economist Angela Jackson said Australia had many highly skilled women who weren't in the workforce, but she was hopeful that could change.

"There is clearly the economic need now, like never before, to really tap into women and their skills and to get women working more in numbers but also in their hours of work," she said.

She called for lateral thinking about immediate improvements as well as longer-term structural fixes, saying there was no one solution. This could include expanding existing programs that were helping women with older children get back into the workforce, as well as addressing the childcare needs of the cohort with younger kids.

The Parenthood's executive director Georgie Dent, who will attend the jobs summit, pointed out there was an existing pool of qualified

early childhood educators and teachers who had left the sector because of poor pay and burnout.

Wages would be part of the picture to draw them back to early childhood work and retain them, but all options should be on the table such as offering discounts for their own children to be in care.

“There’s no sign at this moment that, without some form of intervention, that is going to immediately resolve itself,” Dent said.

Region: Australia and New Zealand ^[3]

Tags: women's participation in the labour force ^[4]

child care workforce ^[5]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/australia-and-new-zealand> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/womens-participation-labour-force> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-care-workforce>