



OPINION PIECE

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If we are not careful Chalmers' new economic vision will be man-heavy

Treasurer Jim Chalmers is reimagining capitalism and where policy needs to go. His essay extols the virtues of government and business co-investment, the reform of public institutions to build back public trust and the renovation of markets so investors are given more information to pursue 'impact investments'. Chalmers wants to line up Australia's social and economic goals.

This is a welcome vision for the common good.

But what would it look like to align the social goal of gender equality with the government's economic goals?

The question is important as the Albanese Government plans a National Gender Equality Strategy to advance gender equality and has committed to implementing gender responsive budgeting.

One unambiguous economic objective of the Australian Government is to provide cleaner, cheaper and more reliable renewable energy. This objective can dovetail with gender equality goals (beyond generally improving planetary health and household budgets), first and foremost in relation to labour force participation and job creation.

The growth of the renewable energy sector can create new job opportunities, particularly for women in traditionally male-dominated fields such as construction and engineering.

Occupational gender segregation is a worsening problem in Australia, with women overrepresented in traditionally female-dominated industries such as healthcare and education and men overrepresented in industries related to the energy sector: manufacturing (products such as solar panels and batteries), construction (of energy

infrastructure such as pipelines), and engineering (the design and development of energy systems and technologies).

A gender lens should be shone on the new and ambitious transmission agreements signed with the States under the Commonwealth's Rewiring the Nation Fund. Those agreements, aimed at delivering new transmission lines, promise to support thousands of jobs but who will get those jobs?

This new and emerging sector must not inherit or entrench old and gendered ways of working.

Our organisation, the Equality Rights Alliance (ERA), recommends the Commonwealth use the economic objective of moving to net-zero to also support gender diversity in the workplace. It could link financial support to progress towards gender equality and diversity targets. Public money should not prop up sectors that resist gender equity, just as the governments should not support companies that have been found to have modern slavery in their supply chains.

Minister Ed Husic, responsible for broadening Australia's industrial base with the new \$15 billion National Reconstruction Fund (NRF), is likewise urged to ensure the public service is clear about what they want the private sector to deliver, so both social and economic goals are met. Contracts could include requirements for reducing wage gaps and targeting training to women and other diverse groups.

The NRF is expected to invest across several areas including renewables and low emissions technologies, transport, agriculture and defence. The government is urged to integrate a gender perspective into the design, implementation, and evaluation of all new public-private infrastructure projects to ensure that they meet the needs and priorities of both women and men.

With new jobs in the energy sector comes opportunities for training and skills development for women to enter the industry (and men transitioning from the non-renewable energy sector). The new agency Jobs and Skills Australia can expedite the reform by building a gender impact analysis into all of its work, rather than treating women as a 'cohort' to be considered as an afterthought.

Another area where the government can explicitly connect gender equality goals with economic objectives is in disaster response and recovery management, an area Emergency Management Minister, Murray Watt announced this week as under review.

We know that each costly climate-related weather event sees men and women impacted differently. Adding a gender lens to the definition of 'response' will result in a wider range of activities being included, such as repair of social infrastructure (like getting playgroups, schools and childcare operational), access to the determinants of health (such as reopening women's refuges and providing medium-term low-cost housing for displaced people) and anticipating and addressing the emotional damage caused by disaster (providing trauma counselling and working to reduce domestic and family violence).

The Federal Government outlined plans in the October 2022 budget for a disaster response workforce that complements state-led emergency efforts and the Australian Defence Force. \$30 million has been allocated for a volunteer veteran organisation named Disaster Relief Australia.

Our members believe there is a risk that this new workforce reflects a government reflex to revert to militaristic and masculine ways of working which accept patriarchal ideas about what constitutes an adequate response to disaster rather than empowering attitudes that support consent or care.

This new workforce should be developed with an explicit gender lens to ensure it doesn't repeat the problems of the highly gendered emergency workforces in state-based services.

Housing is another area where the Treasurer can get high impact investments that matter.

The \$10bn Housing Australia Future Fund to help build thousands of new social and affordable housing properties with the private sector, is again an area where a gender lens is critical. That means asking, 'what are the specific needs of women?' New housing should be near work, public transport, childcare and other services so women (and men, families) are not paying extra costs.

Housing Minister Julie Collins knows older single women are the fastest growing cohort at risk of homelessness. How will the new social and affordable homes accommodate them? And, how can more women be part of the male-heavy industry that builds the infrastructure?

Getting better outcomes for everyone is possible if the public sector steers the partnership with business, rather than the other way around. The mandate and machinery of the Commonwealth women's ministry should dovetail with all areas of policy, so the needs of women are visible, acknowledged and responded to.

Helen Dalley-Fisher and Toni Hassan run the Equality Rights Alliance, Australia's largest network of organisations advocating for women's economic security and leadership.