



Submission: Wage Justice for Early Childhood Education and Care Workers (Special Account) (Extending Support and Strengthening Safety) Bill

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Committee: Education and Employment Legislation Committee

Submission by The National Rural Women's Coalition

Acknowledgements

The National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and live. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and future. We value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, cultures, and knowledge. We extend our respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who for thousands of years have preserved the culture and practices of their communities on Country. This land was never surrendered, and we acknowledge that it always was and always will be Aboriginal land. We acknowledge that Australian governments have been complicit in the entrenched disadvantage, intergenerational trauma and ongoing institutional racism faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must lead the design and delivery of services that affect them for better life outcomes to be achieved.

About the National Rural Women's Coalition

The National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) is a national advocacy organisation representing women in regional, rural and remote (RRR) Australia. We support policies that enhance gender equity, social inclusion, and economic participation, particularly for women and children in under-resourced areas.

We play a critical role in advancing gender equity in health, education, and economic opportunities for women and children in RRR Australia. The NRWC works to amplify the voices of RRR women, ensuring that their unique challenges, such as limited access to services, geographic isolation, and economic disparities are understood, highlighted and addressed through policy advocacy, emancipatory programs and initiatives. By focusing on intersectional barriers like gender, location, and socio-economic status, the NRWC strengthens RRR women's capacity to influence system change, advocating for gender-responsive policies, and economic empowerment initiatives. This work is crucial because RRR women often face greater inequities and have access to fewer resources than their urban counterparts. The NRWC therefore, engages in targeted action essential to achieving true gender equity and social inclusion across Australia.

The NRWC works tirelessly to address systemic disparities in all aspects of women's lives in RRR Australia. We advocate for women, their children, families and communities arguing that gender is not an incidental label which confines and erodes choice, but it is the result of entrenched power structures that marginalise certain people, especially in RRR communities. Addressing these inequities requires targeted policy interventions that actively dismantle structural oppression and promote meaningful inclusion, ensuring that all women in RRR communities, particularly those historically disadvantaged, have equitable access to resources and opportunities.

The NRWC's represents women, in all their diversity, living in rural, regional and remote Australia and is supported through peak member organisations, Australian Local Government Women's Association, Australian Women in Agriculture, National Rural Health Alliance, Women in Seafood and Transport Women Australia Limited.

Executive summary

The National Rural Women's Coalition (NRWC) welcomes the Commonwealth Government's increased investment in childcare service provision through the Wage Justice for Early Childhood Education and Care Workers (Special Account) (Extending Support and Strengthening Safety) Bill 2026, but notes that this will not adequately respond to the needs of rural, regional and remote women and their families.

The NRWC strongly supports investment in high-quality childcare and ensuring investment is passed on to the frontline workers doing essential, undervalued work caring for and educating young children. The NRWC supports the extension of the 15% pay rise for educators that this bill delivers, committing \$3.6 billion over the next two years. The NRWC also supports the measures to strengthen quality standards (increasing the number of approved childcare services that hold a rating level of at least Meeting National Quality Standard for quality area 2) that this Bill delivers.

However, rural, regional and remote women and their families are often not able to access childcare at all. 'Childcare deserts' (areas where demand outstrips available services) are disproportionately located in rural and regional areas and where there are more families on lower income or below the poverty line.ⁱ Lack of access to high-quality ECEC entrenches existing disadvantages experienced by rural women, including their ability to participate in the workforce. It also means some of the children who can benefit the most from high-quality ECEC cannot access it. High-quality childcare is a critical protective factor for women and children experiencing violence. Rates of domestic violence are higher in rural, regional and remote areas, and lack of childcare access compounds this risk.

This Bill's investment ensures childcare workers and services can be paid what they deserve, without those costs being passed on to families. However, it does not increase investment in new services in childcare deserts. This Bill does not improve service provision for rural women and their families who can't access childcare within a reasonable distance from their home.

In 2024, NRWC joined an alliance of 76 organisations - the Access for Every Child Coalition - releasing a joint statement calling on the Commonwealth Government to implement six actions to ensure all children in regional, rural and remote areas receive equitable access to early education.ⁱⁱ This submission restates our support for tailored solutions including investment in new facilities, incentives to overcome operating cost barriers in rural and remote areas, as well as dedicated First Nations child care services.

The NRWC calls on the Commonwealth Government to:

1. Fund establishment of new ECEC centres in identified 'childcare deserts', ideally co-located with key industries or employment providers.
2. Financial incentives to attract and retain skilled staff in rural areas
3. Subsidise ongoing operating costs that are often higher in regional, rural and remote areas.
4. Increase funding for culturally safe First Nations ECEC centres in key identified locations.

Barriers to accessing childcare in rural, regional and remote areas

Rural communities are often 'childcare deserts'

Families living in rural, regional and remote Australia do not have consistent access to ECEC. An estimated 24% of Australia does not have access to ECEC (and effectively live in 'childcare deserts').ⁱⁱⁱ This access is linked to socio economic disadvantage, with research showing that for long day care services, there was generally better accessibility in more advantaged areas.ⁱⁱⁱ Childcare deserts are disproportionately located in rural and regional areas and where there are higher proportions of children and families on lower income or below the poverty line.ⁱ

Lack of childcare compounds barriers to employment for rural women

Caring for children is the number one reason why women are not in paid work.^{iv} In addition to lack of childcare, rural workers face barriers to employment including fewer job opportunities and seasonal employment. In some cases, low staffing rates and high workloads compromise workplace flexibility, which is especially problematic for women, who are more likely to have caring responsibilities.^v For rural women, additional barriers to paid employment include lack of childcare options as well as travel distances to school and childcare (if it is available). Lack of high-quality ECEC prevents women from increasing their participation in the paid workforce and increasing their financial security.

Lower quality services disadvantage rural families

Evidence suggests that families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and those living in regional and remote locations are under-represented in childcare services rated as high-quality.^{vi} This is likely due to lower demand and competition for services, as well as difficulties recruiting and retaining skilled staff in rural and remote areas.^{vi} These barriers present challenges in delivering equitable standards of ECEC in rural, regional and remote areas.

First Nations children have specific ECEC needs

Access to high-quality, culturally competent ECEC services is particularly important for First Nations children. There is evidence that First Nations families may experience barriers to accessing ECEC

including language barriers, cultural disconnect and mistrust of service providers. Culturally sensitive early learning programs lead to better outcomes for First Nations children, including:

- Improved developmental outcomes
- Cultural identity and resilience
- Family and community strengthening^{vii}

Because approximately 59 per cent of First Nations people live outside major cities and First Nations people make up roughly 30 per cent of the population in remote and very remote areas^{viii}, advocating for culturally appropriate childcare services for First Nations women and children is a critical concern for NRWC.

Disadvantaged children benefit from high-quality care

The benefits of high-quality ECEC are strongest for disadvantaged children. At the same time, these same children are often less likely to be able to access high quality and affordable childcare. The 2024 Productivity Commission report found that one in four three-year-olds and one in 10 four-year-olds were not enrolled in ECEC. These families were more likely to live in regional or remote areas, or to find services unaffordable or unable to cater for their child's needs.^{ix}

People living in rural, regional and remote areas have lower incomes and net worth than those living in metropolitan areas. First Nations peoples (59 per cent of whom live outside Major Cities) are disproportionately affected by poverty.^x Unemployment rates are higher outside major cities and secondary school, and higher education completion rates are lower. There are often high levels of overcrowding and high rates of people living in social housing in Remote and Very Remote areas, and elevated rates of homelessness are found in Outer Regional, Remote and Very Remote areas. Children living in Very Remote areas were more likely to be developmentally vulnerable.^x These indicators highlight that many of the children most in need of high-quality ECEC live in rural, regional and remote areas and face greater barriers to access than those in metropolitan areas.

Childcare and domestic, family and sexual violence

Women and their families living in rural, regional and remote Australia are at higher risk of being hospitalised from domestic violence.^{xi} State level data suggests overall prevalence of domestic violence is also higher in rural areas.^{xii} One of the biggest barriers preventing survivors of domestic violence from leaving abusive partners is the financial ability to support themselves and their children. Victim-survivors need affordable, flexible, and reliable childcare, housing, and transportation to create a pathway to safety and stability for themselves and their children. Without access to childcare, survivors are unable to look for work, attend job interviews, or go to work or school.^{xiii} Additionally, high-quality childcare can protect children who are experiencing violence at home, by improving access to support services, reducing contact with perpetrators and offering the opportunity for strengthened emotional wellbeing.^{xiv}

Rural service provision needs a different approach to overcome cost barriers

Cost barriers to providing childcare in rural, regional and remote locations include both capital infrastructure costs, and ongoing higher operating costs. Fundamentally, this problem comes down to the population base being spread across large geographic areas making services unprofitable. Services cannot generate the economies of scale (enough children) and higher fees that support business development in urban areas.^{xv} Analysis done for the Loddon Mallee region in northern Victoria found that childcare subsidies would need to increase 9% to address running cost shortfalls. It found that there would likely still be shortfall in capital funding for infrastructure, even with co-location with other early education services.^{xv} Compounding these cost barriers are difficulties attracting, accrediting and retaining skilled staff in regional, rural and remote areas. Specific interventions that are needed to overcome these barriers include:

- Financial incentives to attract and retain skilled staff in rural areas
- Developing integrated early childhood facilities in priority rural locations, i.e. 'shared service' models with kindergartens, other early childhood services or even with large employers
- Introducing operating incentives for providers in rural childcare deserts to cover higher operating costs.
- New capital infrastructure grants for facilities in rural and remote childcare deserts.

ⁱ Hurley, P., Matthews, H., & Pennicuik, S. (2022). *Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare in Australia?* Mitchell Institute, Victoria University. <https://vuir.vu.edu.au/44440/> p.25

ⁱⁱ The Parenthood. (2024). *Access for every child: Regional, rural & remote*. https://www.theparenthood.org.au/access_for_every_child

ⁱⁱⁱ Victoria University. (2024, August 20). *Mapping the childcare deserts: Childcare accessibility in Australia*. <https://www.vu.edu.au/about-vu/news-events/news/mapping-the-childcare-deserts-childcare-accessibility-in-australia>

^{iv} Caring for children and health still the main reasons women and men are unavailable for work (no date) Australian Bureau of Statistics. Available at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/caring-children-and-health-still-main-reasons-women-and-men-are-unavailable-work> (Accessed: 04 December 2025).

^v Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector. (2023, November 2). *Special look: Rurality, gender and workforce participation*. Victorian Government. <https://www.genderequalitycommission.vic.gov.au/intersectionality-work/rurality-gender-and-workforce-participation>

^{vi} Tang, A., Rankin, P., Staton, S., & Thorpe, K. (2024). Access to high-quality early care and education: Analysis of Australia's national integrated data. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 67, 352-362.

^{vii} Martin, K. L. (2017). It's special and it's specific: understanding the early childhood education experiences and expectations of young Indigenous Australian children and their parents. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 44, 89-105.

^{viii} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2025). *Profile of Indigenous Australians*. AIHW. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/profile-of-indigenous-australians>

^{ix} Productivity Commission. (2024). *A path to universal early childhood education and care: Inquiry report* (Vol. 1, Report No. 106). Australian Government. <https://assets.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/childhood/report/childhood-volume1-report.pdf>

^x Social Determinants of health factsheet. Available at: <https://www.ruralhealth.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/NRHA-Social-Determinants-of-Health-Factsheet.pdf> (Accessed: 04 December 2025).

^{xi} Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2025). *Family, domestic and sexual violence: Factors associated with FDSV*. AIHW. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/rural-remote-australians/rural-and-remote-health>

^{xii} Australian Broadcasting Corporation. (2024, July 1). *Soaring rates of domestic violence in rural Australia*. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-07-01/soaring-rates-of-domestic-violence-in-rural-australia/103991078> and Australian Broadcasting Corporation. (2024, December 4). *Domestic violence rates in regional Victoria compared with Melbourne*. ABC News. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-12-04/domestic-violence-dv-rates-regional-victoria-melbourne-family/104671854>

^{xiii} Futures Without Violence. (2025). *Child care as a domestic violence issue: Policy brief*. <https://futureswithoutviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Child-Care-as-a-Domestic-Violence-Issue-Policy-Brief-2-1.pdf>

^{xiv} Nicholson, J. H., Ha, Y., DeVoe, E. R., Spencer, R., & Levendosky, A. A. (2025). "They need nurturance; they need to be seen": Early care and education for children exposed to intimate partner violence. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 169, Article 108073. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2024.108073>

^{xv} Productivity Commission. (n.d.). *Childhood attachment*. Australian Government. https://assets.pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/358855/sub011-childhood-attachment.pdf