

Case Study: Civil Society Research and Advocacy



CASE STUDY 6: CIVIL SOCIETY RESEARCH AND ADVOCACY

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The importance of civil society

The involvement of civil society is important if gender-responsive budgeting is not just a token exercise. By investing in research, promoting research findings through campaigns and advocacy, and holding decision-makers to account, civil society supports gender-responsive budgeting.

However, the work of civil society in gender-responsive budgeting is not easy. Difficulties include the complexity of budget analysis and policy processes, lack of time and resources, competing priorities and lack of networks and understanding of gender-responsive budgeting work.

This case study draws on Australian examples of civil society engagement relevant to gender-responsive budgeting. It illustrates steps involved in translating research and analysis into campaigns to change policies and budgets in line with gender equality.

Providing the evidence of impacts of policies and budgets

There is a long history of civil society groups and researchers partnering on gender issues, including women's employment, superannuation, women's health, violence against women, childcare and social welfare. These partnerships are critical for civil society to strengthen members' economic expertise and its credibility in policy debates.

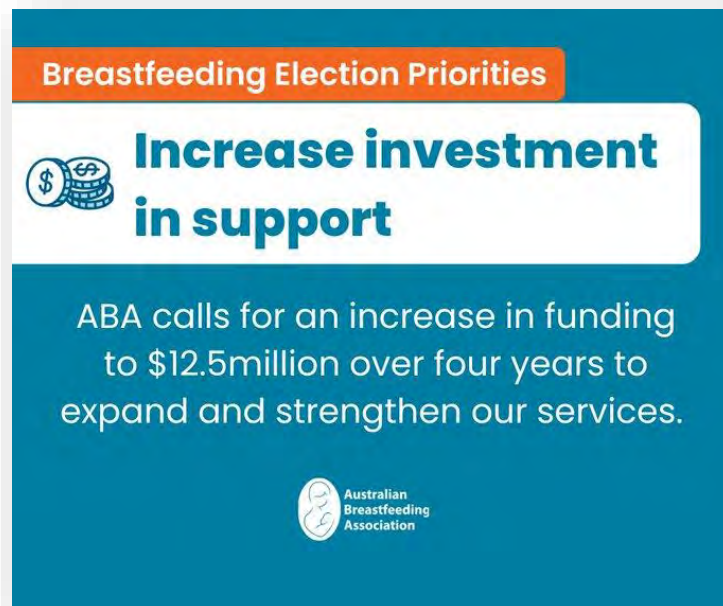
The Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) and researchers have established lasting and robust partnerships to influence conversations about what counts as part of the economy and its relevance for budgetary policy by highlighting the economic contribution of unpaid care work in Australia.

Breast milk

The importance of the economic value of breastmilk has gained some traction, with prominent international economists arguing that excluding human milk production from GDP would result in bias in policies and priorities.²

- In a pioneering study Australian researchers estimated the economic value of breast milk production to be at least \$2.1 billion in 1992 values. Policies to make breastfeeding available to all Australian infants would increase economic output by over \$3 billion a year.³
- ABA advocacy led to a 2006 parliamentary inquiry into the health benefits of breastfeeding. Julie Smith's research showed that exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months of a baby's life takes 17-20 hours a week. The research has focussed attention on women's lactation work, the trade-offs between paid and unpaid work and the economic impact of breastfeeding in terms of forgone current and future income.⁴
- Since 2017 Australian activists and researchers have taken a gender-responsive budgeting approach by using the World Breastfeeding Costing Initiative, an international costing tool, to show it would cost around \$16 million to implement a baby feeding health initiative.

The experience of developing the costings led the ABA to campaign for an increase in its funding prior to the 2022 federal election (see tile). The Albanese Labor government committed \$11.3 million for breastfeeding services in its 2023/24 budget, which include training for ABA Helpline volunteers and support to expand the donor milk delivery services of the Australian Red Cross.⁵



ABA, 26 April 2022 (X, formerly Twitter)

Building relationships and partnerships for gender-responsive budgeting

In Australia women's organisations have built diverse coalitions to advance a gender equality agenda and gender-responsive budgeting is increasingly recognised as being part of the strategy. Working through partnerships expands the resource base for gender-responsive budgeting, including access to knowledge of gender impact analysis, and how the public service and budget decision-making works. Partnerships enable the strategic use of influence by allocating particular tasks and activities to those partner organisations who are better placed to be effective. It also facilitates mobilisation of support around campaigns and in the face of exclusion from policy and budget processes.

National Foundation for Australian Women (NFAW)

NFAW, an independent feminist organisation, has been – and continues to be – an influential civil society driver in applying a gender lens to the federal budget.

Since 2014, the NFAW has drawn on its networks of gender and policy experts and partner organisations who work in teams with an overall coordinator and editor to publish each year an increasingly comprehensive analysis of the impacts of the budget on women and girls – the Gender Lens on the Budget. The analysis is sent to all politicians and uses a media strategy that targets a couple of key issues.

In addition, NFAW is active in contributing to policy debates by making submissions to inquiries and reviews of specific economic policies, lobbying politicians, providing briefings and appearing before parliamentary committees.

NFAW supports members' organisations of the Equal Rights Alliance (ERA), in particular young women, to confidently read, assess, and speak about budgets and contribute to budget debates, pre-budget submissions and monitoring budget outcomes.

Relationship building allows for strategic political activism. This was on display when eight women's organisations and other community groups were excluded from the 2019-2020 budget lock up, where the government grants early access to the budget papers. Coverage from the media organisation, Women's Agenda, and active lobbying from several women's organisations, including NFAW, and the Office for Women corrected this, and an invite was extended to two women's organisations.

Box 6.1 Lessons for working with civil society – the UK Women's budget group⁶

Find the right partners and take the time needed to build relationships with them.

Pairing policy driven organisations with grassroots women's organisations has advantages for both. Similarly, skills and knowledge can be expanded by forming alliances with organisations and individuals that are not focused on gender equality.

Tap into existing networks.

Find out what campaigns and relationships the existing networks of civil society organisations and campaigners are working on at the national, state and local levels, as it prevents replication and amplifies the results.

Recognise different forms of expertise.

Researchers, former bureaucrats and civil society organisations, particularly those working at the grassroots level, and those not dedicated to gender equality, can bring knowledge and expertise of the impact of policy on women's lives. Similarly budget expertise and data analysis can help strengthen a campaign.

Recognise barriers to participation.

Members of grassroots and sector-based organisations may face many barriers to participation – including multiple demands on paid work and unpaid care and lack of resources. Consider alternative ways for meeting, communication, sharing the work and building capacity.

Follow-up.

Ensure the goals of working with civil society organisations are clear and that the engagement is meaningful. If your aim is to provide training, consider how these skills will be used beyond the training and include time to follow-up.

Building gender-responsive budgeting capacity through intersectional work

A diversity of voices and experiences can be incorporated in gender-responsive budgeting with an intersectional approach that goes beyond gender to include multiple characteristics that intersect and contribute to our identities. Socio-economic class, race, ethnicity, age, LGBTIQ+ status, disability and their interactions influence the way we experience policies and budgets.

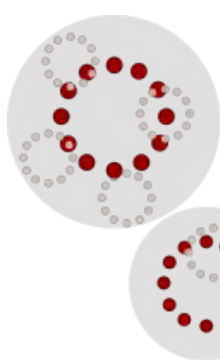
The COVID-19 economic and health crisis drew attention to the varied impacts between different groups of women and men and highlighted the urgency of an intersectional economic analysis. However, it cannot be assumed that there is adequate commitment and capability to do such intersectional work.

Shift Gender Equality Network (The Shift)

The Shift, an online network of gender equality advocates, has focused on intersectionality and their experience illustrates the importance of processes of working together to effectively include voices often marginalised.

The Shift developed an online workshop *Intersectional Movements and a Gender Equal and Just Future: Listen. Think. Trust. Act. Differently* during the 2021 National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week.

This workshop was led by First Nations women and aimed to strengthen collaboration, learn from past mistakes and create new ways of organising and advocating for change. It used the skills of visual listener Devon Bunce⁷ to capture the discussion and open new channels of understanding. Working closely with First Nations women led The Shift organising crew to think differently about the workshop content and its outcomes, both in the lead up to and after the workshop.



Our (the organising crew's) original plan looked very different to what we finally presented as we strived to listen and be led by First Nations women. With the leadership of Michelle [Deshong] and the guidance of June [Oscar] and others, the journey to this convening was itself an act of listening, thinking, trusting and acting differently.

The Shift Organising Crew

The lesson here is that without First Nations' women's voices and leadership gender equality movements will fall short of their aspirations for change.

Using research in campaigns

As demonstrated by the experiences of ABA and NFAW (described above), research and analysis are powerful starting points for campaigns and activism. On occasion, anecdotal evidence provides a signal to civil society of a gender issue or gap. This can provide the impetus for further research and the development of campaigns to make the problem visible and advocate for its redress through a change in government policy and/or budget.

Housing precariousness

The Equal Rights Alliance (ERA) brought attention to the increase in **older women's housing precariousness**. Their experience is an example of a pathway to translating research into action, with the research and the actions evolving over time.

In the 2010s, some women's organisations began to notice a trend in older women experiencing housing stress. ERA responded by developing a research agenda and collectively campaigned for affordable and appropriate housing for older, single women.

Existing data and research failed to provide a complete picture of women's experience of homelessness and housing services and policy. Despite data on housing stress and assistance available, understanding of housing appropriateness and wellbeing was limited.

Housing Stressometer

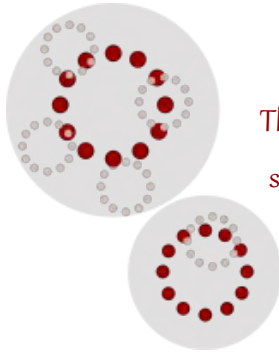
ERA amplified the case for further research by conducting a Housing Stressometer, a social media survey on housing wellbeing, which included 13 questions covering income, housing costs, safety, state of repair, accessibility, size, security and desire to move.

This survey found that 20% of the women, who were the majority of all respondents, were avoiding housing stress, paying less than 30% of their income on housing costs. However, they accepted housing that was less than adequate, with two or more issues related to housing condition.

These findings suggest that the lack of housing affordability is more significant than previously indicated by research. Furthermore, existing measures of housing stress pay limited attention to housing conditions and therefore fail to understand older single women's risk of homelessness.

A tsunami of older women

Becoming homeless was used to develop a campaign on older women's housing needs. ERA drew on the survey to create a relatable portrait of older women (your aunt, your mother) and the trade-offs between cost and wellbeing experienced by this age cohort. ERA was aware that the campaign needed to connect with and capture the imagination of parliamentarians and social media users. **The message that a tsunami of older women was about to crash into housing homelessness was developed.** After a couple of years ERA found parliamentarians remembered the message and would quote the phrase back to them.



The housing message of the tsunami took ERA around five years to even start to cut through on its links to the budget. Gender-responsive budgeting is a hard concept because it deals with bias and the way our structures are built. What is needed is a set of words that people can latch onto, then you can discuss meaning.

Equal Rights Alliance (ERA) Member

The research drew attention to the need for long term and national investment in affordable housing supply with accessibility and appropriateness at the heart of housing policy.

National Housing and Homelessness Agreements (NHHAs)

ERA's research and advocacy work on housing wellbeing gained momentum in the lead up to the 2018-2019 NHHAs which provided the policy framework for the disbursement of funds from the federal government to the states and territories.

ERA campaigned to have women considered specifically in the national partnership agreements, including mobilising partner organisations to lobby for gender-responsive agreements and sector policies, as well as additional investment to address the structural disadvantage faced by women.

As a result, agreements across states and territories referred to women in their policy overviews and, in a few cases, as a target for action. Commentators saw the inclusion of women in the NHHAs as a means of encouraging a coherent approach across states and territories in future agreements and facilitating campaigning on gender issues.

Creating accessible messages for campaigning

Various strategies are used to develop clear campaign messages. A popular method is to use a number which communicates simple, clear and relevant information. Such headline indicators have been used to highlight the economic impact of gender inequality, to quantify the benefits of implementing gender equality measures and to emphasise the need for urgent government action.

Costs of domestic violence and prevention

Women's groups have campaigned and advocated around the 'silent epidemic', and more recently termed 'national emergency', of domestic violence since the mid-1970s.

By the late 1990s attention had turned to policy development with the Partnership Against Domestic Violence under the Federal Office for Women providing funding to a variety of research activities. The first national study on the economic cost of domestic violence by Access Economics in 2004 changed the framing around domestic violence, showing that domestic violence was 'an expensive epidemic' with an estimated cost of \$8.1 billion a year borne by victims and governments (see also Case Study 3).⁸

A decade later Our Watch and the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation commissioned research that provided monetary indicators of the costs and the benefits of prevention to draw attention to the gap between the costs of inaction and action around domestic violence. In the absence of further action to prevent violence against women, costs would accumulate to \$323.4 billion over the 30 year period from 2014-15 to 2044-45. The potential benefits from actions to reduce domestic violence far outweigh these costs, with benefits from investing in prevention ranging from \$37.8 billion to \$74.7 billion over a lifetime.⁹

Counting Dead Women

A feminist digital network, **Destroy the Joint**, adopted the strategy of recording the number of fatal incidents of violence against women (femicide) in the *Counting Dead Women Australia* campaign (see social media tile).



Destroy the Joint , 17 September 2024 (Facebook)

In its first *Facebook* post in 2014, *Counting Dead Women* called out the federal government's cuts to domestic violence for their impact on the number of deaths.

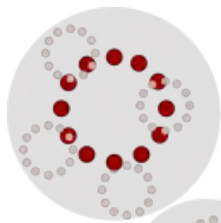
This campaign filled two important gaps:

- the lack of contemporaneous data on fatal violence against women
- the limited mainstream media reporting with its overwhelming focus on individual events.

Counting Dead Women illustrates in a headline indicator the structural nature of violence against women and underscores the urgency of addressing it. The hope is that this register will have the prominence of the national road toll and, similarly, attract significant funding to address it.¹⁰

Counting Dead Women is widely cited in the media, federal and NSW parliaments, and won in 2015 an award for the best social media reporting on domestic violence.¹¹

Following the death of four South Australian women at the alleged hands of their partners in one week, the federal government announced in 2023 the establishment of a statistical dashboard. This dashboard aims to provide up-to-date information on changes overtime in key measures on family, domestic and sexual violence to help policy makers better understand the scale and patterns of the problem. It is planned that in the future it will be integrated in the outcomes framework of the budget. Against this background, pressure from advocates led South Australian Premier Peter Malinauskas to call a royal commission into domestic, family and sexual violence.



Counting Dead Women Australia reveals to politicians it's an epidemic in the same way road deaths are an epidemic [which helped funnel massive funding into road safety].



Jenna Price (2018)¹²

Support for parents

Another strategy is to use international comparisons to create accessible messages. The Parenthood, a movement to support parents in Australia, has used a UNICEF survey of 41 developed countries in its communications to highlight Australia's poor international performance in terms of supporting parents.



The Parenthood, 21 June 2021 (X, formerly Twitter)

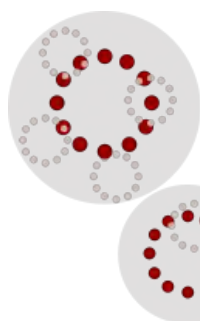
Comparisons of Australia’s performance in its management of early childhood education and care increase demand for greater accountability of government policies and funding. The Parenthood has used comparative data as part of a campaign to highlight the systematic lack of support for parents and the need to urgently address it. It has joined with others to advocate for gender-responsive budgeting with more robust public funding for childhood services.



The Parenthood, 25 June 2021 (X, formerly Twitter)

Pathways to change policies and budgets

Influencing policy and budgets to be gender-responsive is often not easy, even when there is good evidence to do so. Campaigns place a huge demand on voluntary, largely women’s, unpaid labour and sustaining the quality and momentum of this work raises a number of challenges.



We’re being recognised and our (policy and budget) contribution is being valued but it sets up this expectation, and we’re going to have to make sure that our systems are strong enough to maintain what we’re doing, given that we’re volunteers.

NFAW member

Successful campaigners understand that budgets are political, have a strong knowledge of the political landscape and draw on a variety of strategies. The choice of actions depends on the strategy being deployed and where you are in the process. Table 6.1 summarises the range of strategies, illustrated with Australian examples covered in this casebook.

Table 6.1 Strategies and actions for change

This table draws on materials developed in a community workshop on campaigning and change hosted in 2023 by South Australian Council of Social Services.

Strategies	Actions	Example
Direct action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Formal lobbying of Members of Parliament (MPs) – Social media (tagging MPs posts) – Election specific actions (report cards) 	GenVic has hosted events such as pre-state budget breakfast with MPs invited. As part of the 2021-22 budget GenVic undertook an analysis of the budget against the priorities of the sector to produce a score card.
Parliamentary processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Feed questions to MPs – Submissions, presentations and petitions to MPs, Parliamentary committees, reviews and inquiries – Work with cross-party parliamentary groups and champions 	NFAW provides submissions and presentations to a range of parliamentary committees – e.g. presentation to the 2018 Senate Economics Legislation Committee on the gender impacts of the proposed personal income tax plan.
Executive, regulatory processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Direct lobbying (ministers, departments and committees) – Membership of committees and reviews – Formal reporting/compliance processes – Submissions to consultations – Freedom of Information requests 	Women’s organisations were involved on the Expert Reference Panel to the NSW’s government 2022 Women’s Economic Opportunity Review that shaped the 2022-23 Women’s Opportunity Statement.
Public communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Campaign events and materials – Social and traditional media (eg opinion pieces and talk back radio) – Independent media sources – Commercial advertising – Statements of experts and celebrity support – Surveys and polling 	The independent women’s media, Women’s Agenda, elevates the concerns of women’s organisations (e.g. exclusion of women’s organisations in the 2019 budget lock up).
Mobilisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Social media mobilisations (petitions, calls to action) – Events (shows, seminars, public meetings) – Education and consciousness-raising – Industrial action – Mobilising support of others (voting in unions, local governments) 	<p>ERA strategically used a social media survey - Housing Stressometer - as part of a campaign on older women’s housing precariousness.</p> <p>Destroy the Joint’s Counting Dead Women used social media to highlight the epidemic of domestic violence deaths.</p>
Legal action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Calling for a Royal Commission – Legal threats and cases – Legislative instruments 	In the aftermath of the four women killed by their partners in one week in late 2023, domestic violence prevention campaigners demonstrated on the steps of South Australia’s Parliament calling for a Royal Commission on intimate partner violence.
Direct action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Physical action (pickets, demonstrations) – Cooperatives/mutual aid – Service provision 	The March4Justice took place in March 2021 with tens of thousands of women across Australia marching against sexual violence, demanding for safety at home and at work. Their direct action led the government to launch an advisory body focusing on violence against women and raised the profile of gender equality ahead of the 2022 elections.

Notes, Case study 6

- ¹ Costa, M., & Sharp, R. (2025). Civil society participating in gender-responsive budgeting. *Women Count Australia: A Casebook for Gender-responsive Budgeting*. Adelaide, Australia.

We would like to thank Mary-Ann Stephenson, author of Working with other civil society groups. In UK Women's Budget Group. (2018). [Women Count: A Casebook For Gender-responsive Budgeting Groups](#). United Kingdom.
- ² Stiglitz, J., Sen, A., & Fitoussi, J.P. (2009). [The measurement of economic performance and social progress revisited: Reflections and overview](#). Working Paper OFCE 33/2009. Paris, Science Pro.
- ³ Smith, J., Ingham, L., & Dunstone, M. (1998). [The economic value of breastfeeding in Australia](#), NCEPH Working Paper #40. Canberra, ANU.
- ⁴ Smith, J. (2007). Time use among new mothers, the economic value of unpaid care work and gender aspects of superannuation tax concessions. *Australian Journal of Labor Economics*, 10 (2), June, pp., 99-114; (2014). Making mother's milk count. In M. Bjørnholt & A. McKay (Eds.), *Counting on Marilyn Waring: New advances of feminist economics*. Bradford, Ontario, Demeter Press, pp. 267–86.
- ⁵ Australian Government. (2023). [Women's Budget Statement 2023-2024](#). Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia.
- ⁶ UK Women's Budget Group. (2018). *Op. cit.*
- ⁷ Devon Bunce's work is available at <https://devonbunce.com>.
- ⁸ McKinnon, M. (2004). \$8bn cost of domestic violence. *Weekend Australian*. October 22-23.
- ⁹ PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). (2015). [A high price to pay – The economic case for preventing violence against women. Our watch](#). Melbourne, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation and PwC.
- ¹⁰ *The Hack*. (2018). [October most violent month for women in six years](#), Destroy the Joint says. Triple J 1 November; Koubaridis, A. (2015). [Counting dead women: The issue we need to talk about](#). News.com.au 4 May; Baker, N. (2018). [Counting dead women: The project keeping toll of Australia's hidden epidemic](#). SBS 23 October.
- ¹¹ Price, J. (2019). *Destroying the joint: A case study of feminist digital activism in Australia and its account of fatal violence against women*. Doctoral thesis. Sydney, University of Sydney.
- ¹² In *The Hack*. (2018). *Op. cit.*