Victoria's Second Climate Change Strategy

Submission by Women's Environmental Leadership Australia April 2025

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into Victoria's Second Climate Change Strategy ("the Strategy").

This Strategy presents an opportunity, in the present moment, to centre caring for people and caring for Country within our climate and environmental policy frameworks. As we witness an increase in heatwaves, climate related extreme weather events and disasters in Victoria, it is essential that a transformative approach to climate policy is adopted that centres the experience of those most impacted, including women and gender diverse people.

Our submission focuses on integrating intersectional gender equity as a cross-cutting issue in the new Strategy. Gender-responsive climate action requires consideration of three key elements (UNFCC 2019):

- Recognising gender differences in impacts, needs and capacities.
- Gender-equitable participation and influence in climate-related decision making.
- Gender-equitable access to finance and other benefits resulting from investments in climate action.

Our submission is informed by our 2024 report *Gender, Climate and Environmental Justice in Australia*, the first comprehensive overview of data and literature on the gendered impacts of climate and environmental issues in Australia.

Summary of recommendations:

1. **Cross-cutting principles:** The Strategy includes guiding principles of gender equity and First Nations leadership (with reference to First Nations women's leadership).
2. **Rights-based language:** The Strategy includes language that is rights-based and moves away from disempowering terms such as "vulnerable communities".
3. **Priorities:** Gender-responsive community-based adaptation is a priority issue in the new Strategy and includes actions to partner with diverse women in communities, value lived experience, co-design solutions and elevate the leadership of women experiencing intersectional inequity.
4. **Promoting women's leadership:** The Strategy includes commitments to promoting diverse women's participation and leadership across all areas.
5. The Strategy includes reference to Victoria's Gender Responsive Budgeting and Social Procurement Framework (both of which promote gender responsive outcomes).
6. **Gender responsive financing:** The Strategy includes a commitment to promoting gender equity in climate financing and innovation.

Women's Environmental Leadership Australia

Women's Environmental Leadership Australia (WELA) is a national non-governmental organisation and the fastest growing community of women transforming Australia's response to our environmental and climate crises. We build understanding and inspire action to address the gendered impacts of climate change and strengthen the leadership of women and gender diverse people in meeting our greatest environmental and climate challenges.

Gendered impacts

Our climate and environmental crises are not gender neutral.

Women and gender diverse people are disproportionately impacted by climate change and these changes affect all spheres of life including their health, housing, economic security, caring responsibilities and workforce participation. Women and gender diverse people are also active participants and leaders in climate and environmental solutions. In order for the Strategy to be gender-responsive it must consider:

- **Health & safety:** There is a clear body of evidence of the gendered health impacts of climate change. Maternal and perinatal health is particularly impacted by climate related hazards, as recognised by the World Health Organisation. Extreme weather events and bushfire smoke can trigger adverse outcomes in pregnant women and babies including gestational diabetes, hypertensive disorders of pregnancy, preterm birth, low birth weight and stillbirth.[1]

  Multiple studies in Australia and overseas have consistently tracked a marked increase in gender-based violence during and after disasters. After the 2009 Victorian fires studies found that violence against women increased, with women's responsibility for children and other dependents placing them at greater risk.[2]

- **Care workforce:** There is little acknowledgment that some of the sectors hardest hit by environmental change are care-based and feminised sectors. Internationally, two-thirds of paid care workers are women.[3] Care workers working in childcare, aged care, disability care and social work carry a higher load during disasters because they serve vulnerable populations.[4] Many of these sectors already struggle with low pay, insecure work, and limited workplace protections, and tend to have higher numbers of Australians from culturally diverse backgrounds.

- **Economic security:** Climate-fuelled extreme weather is placing additional burdens on households. Global and domestic crises are sparking increased costs of fuel, energy, food and more, exerting significant cost of living pressures on Australian households. In the 2024 Heat Survey, conducted by the ACOSS in partnership with the First Nations Clean Energy Network, women (59%) were more likely than men (50%) to say they struggle to cool their home and women (85%) were more likely than men (77%) to be struggling to pay for essentials like energy, food, and medicine.

- **Intersectional identity exacerbates impacts:** Intersecting aspects of a person's identity influence disaster vulnerability, including gender, ethnicity, age, health, disability, and sexuality.[5] Research into the 2019-20 Black Summer fires found that First Nations people were disproportionately affected by the bushfires, both in terms of the percentage of the population but also because of their deep connection to Country.[6]

  Women and gender diverse people living with disabilities also experience distinctive challenges during and after disasters. One study of people with disabilities and their carers during a major 2017 flooding event in the Northern Rivers found that they had a higher risk of having their home flooded.[7]

Women and gender diverse leadership

However, women and gender diverse people are not passive victims of climate change. They are at the forefront of climate and environmental solutions, applying their expertise, knowledge, leadership and skills to mitigating, adapting and responding to climate and environmental crises.

The Climate Action Survey run by Griffith University found that Australian women are more concerned and active than men in regard to climate change, and have a greater understanding of the issue.

When women are involved in or lead conversation projects, natural resource management and climate change adaptation activities, there is a greater likelihood of success.[8] Nature-based solutions and women's climate leadership represent the kinds of systems-level, transformational actions needed to respond to climate change. Yet both remain under-funded at the international level. Currently less than 1% of global charitable funding goes to women-led environmental action.[9]

First Nations women hold key knowledge systems and care practices that are essential for sustainable climate solutions, yet they continue to be overlooked in conventional climate policy frameworks.

Additionally, First Nations women are leading in many climate and environmental spaces as evidenced by the First Nation Women Ranger programs and the expertise of First Nation women leaders in clean energy, native title and food security. It is essential that First Nations women's leadership is reflected in the Strategy.

Recommendations

a) Rights-based framework

Creating a gender responsive Strategy requires an overarching rights-based framework that recognises existing inequities experienced by Victorian communities and commits to addressing these.

The new Strategy can embed gender responsiveness through recognition of intersectional gender equity and First Nations leadership (with specific reference to women's leadership) as cross-cutting principles. We recommend an approach similar to the National Health and Climate Strategy which has five cross-cutting principles including the right to health and First Nations leadership.

The cross-cutting principles of the Strategy could be framed in the following ways:

"Principle 1: The Strategy adopts an intersectional gender equity approach to all climate actions taking account of existing inequities and ensuring they are addressed through rights-based approaches

Principle 2: The Strategy is informed by the leadership, knowledge and experience of First Nations communities, in particular the unique perspectives and knowledges of First Nations women and gender diverse people.

Existing inequities mean some groups – such as people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and social marginalisation, First Nations people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, people with diverse sexual identities and people living in rural and remote areas – are at a disproportionately increased risk of climate change"

There must also be a shift away from the language of "vulnerable communities" to language that recognises "communities disproportionately impacted by climate change."

Recommendation 1: The Strategy includes guiding principles of gender equity and First Nations leadership (with reference to First Nations women's leadership).

Recommendation 2: The Strategy includes language that is rights-based and moves away from disempowering terms such as "vulnerable communities".

b) Prioritising community-based adaptation

The change in Victoria's climate of warming temperatures, drier conditions, and more frequent and intense climate hazards like heatwaves, droughts, and bushfires, highlights the urgent need to scale up and invest in community based adaptation.

In the current Climate Change Strategy, place-based adaptation is an action, however there is scope for this to be expanded in the new Strategy.

We recommend that the new Strategy include commitments to:

- Partnering with communities, including diverse women experiencing disproportionate impacts of climate change.
- Valuing lived experience and knowledge of diverse women and centring this.
- Co-designing adaptation solutions.
- Elevating the leadership of women experiencing intersectional inequity.

Recommendation 3: Gender-responsive community-based adaptation is a priority issue in the new Strategy and includes actions to partner with diverse women in communities, value lived experience, co-design solutions and elevate the leadership of women experiencing intersectional inequity.

c) Elevating diverse women's participation and leadership in all sectors

Women's participation and leadership are crucial for effective climate action, as their unique experiences and perspectives are essential for developing inclusive and sustainable solutions.

We recommend that the commitments in Victoria's Gender Equality Strategy and Action Plan (2023-2027) are referenced and reflected in the Strategy particularly the commitments in relation to workforce participation.

The Australian Governments "Equal by 30" commitments in promoting gender equality in energy can also guide and inform the Strategy.

Recommendation 4: The Strategy includes commitments to promoting diverse women's participation and leadership across all areas including resilience, transition to clean energy and innovation.

d) Gender equitable access to finance and opportunities

The Victorian Government has demonstrated positive steps in applying a gender lens to funding for disaster response with the $1.2 million allocation to women's health services in 2022.

We would recommend building on this both in the Strategy and in the budgetary investments that sit alongside the Strategy.

We recommend that an equitable percentage of investment in energy transition and innovation across communities, business and industry are allocated to women-led businesses and include conditions around gender in workforce participation.

Recommendation 5: The Strategy includes reference to Victoria's Gender Responsive Budgeting and Social Procurement guidelines (both of which promote gender responsive outcomes)

Recommendation 6: The Strategy include a commitment to promoting gender equity in the Victorian Government's climate financing and innovation.

Conclusion

An inclusive and equitable climate change strategy in Victoria will ensure that no one is left behind in the state's approach to tackling our most pressing climate and environmental challenges.

Alongside this, a gender-responsive policy framework can meet the Government's objectives and advance progress on gender equality and First Nations Truth and Treaty.

The Strategy has an opportunity to reflect a more expansive understanding of our climate and environmental challenges, recognising that the whole community and economy is affected, not just physical infrastructure and certain industries. By rethinking these issues more holistically, appreciating that our environment, society, and economy are interconnected leads to truly transformative responses that meet the needs of all Victorians.

We wish you well in finalising the Strategy. If you have any questions or wish to discuss further, please don't hesitate to contact Pasanna Mutha-Merennege, Policy & Advocacy Manager via email - pasanna@wela.org.au.

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[2] Debra Parkinson and Claire Zara, *The Way He Tells It: Relationships after Black Saturday* (Women's Health Goulburn North East, 2011); Debra Parkinson and Claire Zara, 'The Hidden Disaster: Domestic Violence in the Aftermath of Natural Disaster', *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* 28, no. 2 (2013): 28–35.

[3] International Labour Organization, 'Mainstreaming Care Work to Combat the Effects of Climate Change', Chapter VI.2, *Green Jobs, an Opportunity for Women in Latin America: Climate Change, Gender and Just Transition* (International Labour Organization and European Commission, 2023), https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---americas/---ro-lima/documents/publication/wcms_888607.pdf.

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[6] Bhiamie Williamson, *Aboriginal Community Governance on the Frontlines and Faultlines in the Black Summer Bushfires* (Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University, 2022).

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[8] Sophia Huyer, Jennifer Twyman, Manon Koningstein, Jacqueline Ashby and Sonja Vermeulen, *Supporting Women Farmers in a Changing Climate: Five Policy Lessons* (CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security, 2015), https://hdl.handle.net/10568/68533; Robyn James, Bridget Gibbs, Laura Whitford, Craig Leisher, Ruth Konia, and Nathalie Butt, 'Conservation and Natural Resource Management: Where Are All the Women?', *Oryx* 55, no. 6 (2021): 860–67.

[9] Christen Dobson and Steven Lawrence, *Our Voices, Our Environment: The State of Funding for Women's Environmental Action* (Global Greengrants Fund, 2018).