



Australian Women's Coalition

**Barriers to Women's Employment
Women and Recession Project**



**Mackay
consultation notes**



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INTRODUCTION

The Mackay consultation on the Australia Institute Report *The Impact of the Recession on Women*¹ was held on Friday 20th October, 2009 at the premises of James Bidgood MHR, Member for Dawson, at 2/21 Milton Street, Mackay, Queensland 4740. The event was facilitated through his office and supported by the Australian Federation of University Women (Queensland) (AFUWQ), the Queensland Working Women's Service (on behalf of Security for Women), the National Foundation for Australian Women (NFAW) the WomenSpeak Alliance, and the Office for Women (Mackay).

Invitations were distributed through AFUWQ, Office of Women (Mackay) and James Bidgood's office – see Attachment 1 for an invitation prototype. See Attachment 2 for a list of attendees.

Colleen Forrester (President AFUWQ) facilitated the meeting.

Dr Mary Crawford, (Queensland University of Technology (QUT), AFUWQ) summarised the discussions.

Attachment 3 outlines media coverage of the consultations.

BACKGROUND

Much of the following background information is based on, or extracted from, the Regional Economic Development Corporation's regional economic profile².

Mackay is the largest city in the Whitsundays in Queensland and is the centre for tourism, mining and education in the region. There is an estimated population of 167,666 people in the Mackay-Whitsunday-Isaac region, 2.5% more than in 2007.

The region's population is projected to grow to 255,614 by 2031, an increase of nearly 88,000 people over the next 23 years [...] The median age in the region is 35 years, younger than the Qld median age of 36 years³.

¹ David Richardson, 2009, *The Impact of the Recession on Women: Background Paper*, The Australia Institute, viewed 12 January 2010, <https://www.tai.org.au/index.php?q=node%2F19&type=1&pubid=698&act=display>

² Mackay–Whitsunday–Isaac Regional Economic Development Corporation (REDC), n.d., *Regional Economic Profile. Business. Lifestyle .Opportunity*, viewed 14 January 2010, <http://www.mwredc.org.au/images/regionalprofile/fullreport/rp090630mwi.pdf>

³ *ibid.*, p. 6.

While the median weekly income for families is \$1,200, the 2006 Census found that 10.1% of families had a weekly income below \$500 and 17.6% of families had income of \$2,000 and above. Further, 10.2% of the region's residents have tertiary education qualifications compared to 52.6% of residents in the Brisbane region.

Located halfway between Cairns and Brisbane, the Mackay–Whitsunday–Isaac Region incorporates the Mackay, Isaac and Whitsunday Local Government Areas (LGAs). The region boasts a relaxed, subtropical climate, a competitive business environment, and is underpinned by one of the largest coal mining deposits in Australia supplying Queensland with approximately half of all coal produced and three quarters of the total value of coal exports. The region is also one of the largest contributors to sugar cane production in Australia.

The region generated in excess of \$15.4 billion in economic value in 2007–2008, and is one of the fastest growing economies in Queensland. Despite global economic uncertainty, the regional outlook remains positive with more than \$42 billion in investment projects recorded at the end of January 2009.

The mining, construction, manufacturing, property and business services and transport and storage industries were the strongest performers in 2007–08, contributing significantly to the regional economy. Industries such as agriculture, forestry and fishing, wholesale trade and electricity, gas and water supply were also significant contributors, each experiencing rapid growth⁴. [...]

Employment status

At the time of the 2006 Census, 66.6% of individuals in Mackay–Whitsunday–Isaac identified as being employed full-time, 23.5% part-time, 3.4% were employed but away from work, 3% were employed but did not state their hours and 3.5% were unemployed⁵. [...]

Income and employment

According to the 2006 Census, the largest number of people in Mackay–Whitsunday–Isaac is employed in technical or trade roles. The median weekly income in Mackay–Whitsunday–Isaac is \$1,138, 10% higher than both the Queensland and National medians⁶. [...]

Tourism

In the year ended March 2009, there were a total of 1,364,000 visitors to the Mackay–Whitsunday–Isaac region, of which 271,000 were overseas travellers.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶ *ibid.*

Holiday and leisure (56%) was the most common reason for visiting the region, followed by business (20%) and visiting family and friends (20%)⁷. [...]

Housing costs

According to the 2006 Census, the average monthly home loan payment for the Mackay–Whitsunday–Isaac is \$1,300. Median weekly rental costs vary from \$280 for a 2 bedroom flat and \$350-\$375 for a 3 bedroom house⁸.

The highest median property price was recorded in Cannonvale (Whitsunday) at \$454,125. The lowest median house price recorded was \$258,000 in Sarina (Mackay)⁹. [...]

Thirty-five per cent of Mackay-Whitsunday-Isaac residents own their own home. A further 31% have a mortgage and 34% are renting¹⁰.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

- Despite the downturn in the mining industry during the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) there is currently \$45.7billion worth of development projects in various stages of completion in the area. However, there is no doubt that the GFC has had some impact on the region. Those present welcomed the opportunity the consultations offered to be able to discuss the issues which were of concern to the region despite the relatively low unemployment rate of 4.4%.
- Women make up close to 50% of the workforce in most industries in the region. There is recognition of the need for women to enter non-traditional jobs and for young people to be trained in the region and hence stay to become part of the workforce.
- The small number of women in executive positions in the area was raised. The need to have women in decision-making positions was seen as important for the individuals in particular and the community in general. All recognised that these women could demonstrate different role models within the region. One factor that was seen as being a barrier to women taking up such positions was the cost of the Company Director's courses. This was further exacerbated by the fact that they were usually held in Brisbane and required people to travel, incurring

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 13.

both travel and accommodation costs. It was felt that more direct action was needed in getting women into such positions and that the Office of Women could use its Queensland-wide network to provide resources and support to the region.

- This also means that women earn less than men in the region and this has a flow-on effect for superannuation for women. Women will be unable to be economically independent in their later years and be more dependent on the public pension. With the GFC there had been a loss for some self-funded retirees and this had led some older women to try to return to the workforce. However, they had been impeded by their experience of ageism. Many had simply not been hired and those women felt it was because of their age.
- With the overall growth of the mining industry in the area in recent years (not withstanding the impact of the GFC), there has been activity in the area to attempt to address the skills shortages. The Mining Centre was established by the Central Queensland University in Mackay and the Queensland Government has developed the Mackay Trade Centre to enable high school students to study engineering. James Cook University also has a Mackay campus and this focuses on education in the health area. TAFE also offers a wide range of courses in the region.
- Community organisations have also been active in providing training particularly in transferable skills. They are also central to ensuring women in the community have access to all available and current information in relation to work, health, training and finances. However, the unreliability of their funding makes it difficult for long-term planning. The other major issue for these centres is the lack of transport for many of the people, especially women, who wish to be involved in the courses and other activities available at the community and neighbourhood centres.
- Public transport remains an issue as many of those currently in under-employment or unemployment are unable to access either available work or training because of a lack of transport. Although the Regional Council does operate a bus service, it was argued that this was not regular enough to meet the needs of those currently outside the workforce. Further, it was noted that until people were in the workforce they were not able to purchase their own transport. This issue is of particular concern to women in households where there is only one car which is used by the male and hence not available for the woman to

use for training/job seeking or work. It was seen as a major deterrent, particularly when women are seeking education or training and need to travel to Mackay from within the region for classes. The transport issue is of particular concern for people in those areas where there are limited work opportunities but where there are jobs available in other parts of the region which they are unable to access.

- Child-care was also raised as an issue of concern as women in the region continue to be the major carers for children and other family members. There tends to be little child-care available for part-time workers and any that is, is very expensive. This acts as a major deterrent to women seeking employment. Much of the child-care that is available is in areas where the work is, so people need to travel to child-care centres, again requiring transport. For women in low-paid work such as aged care, the cost of child-care is a major disincentive for joining the workforce. Adequate outside school hours care was also identified as an area of need. Often it was not available in the areas required or the cost was too high and it is generally not flexible enough to meet the changing needs of employment in the region where work hours may fluctuate from time to time.
- The availability of affordable housing was raised as an issue of concern for maintaining young people in the area. While there are a number of places for study in Mackay the cost of housing for students and others not in full-time employment was seen as a deterrent. There was an acknowledgement that the Regional Council and the State and Federal Governments are involved in a number of projects to bring affordable housing to the area. However, this would take some time.
- Centrelink was identified as playing a leading role for job seekers within the community. However, the current approach of 'one size fits all' does not adequately meet the needs of job seekers, especially women. Aboriginal people were also recognised as needing a more culturally appropriate approach. There was a general consensus that a more individualised, holistic approach would address pertinent issues and enable more job seekers to gain entry into the labour markets.
- Other concerns were raised in relation to the 'Work Experience' program for high school students and the need for it to be expanded. The problems with the cost of volunteering were also raised as a deterrent for some of the job seekers.

POLICY ISSUES

- Child-care costs should be reviewed to examine how child-care costs prohibit many women from entering/re-entering the workforce.
 - The review should also consider the issues around outside school hours care – in particular flexibility, cost and adequacy of provision in areas where employment is not high but where transport costs prohibit job seekers, especially women, from seeking child-care outside their area.
- A survey of Women on Boards and in Executive positions should be undertaken in the Mackay/Whitsunday region and barriers to women's participation identified.
- The delivery of Company Director's Courses for women in the Mackay/Whitsunday region should be explored by the local Office for Women.
- Employment programs need to be holistic to ensure that particular needs of job seekers can be met to ensure people – especially women – are given the appropriate support needed to enter/re-enter the workforce.
- Institutions in the Mackay/Whitsunday delivering education and training courses should consider providing transport for participants.
- The Queensland Government should investigate how community centres are funded and the impact this has on the continuity of operations in these centres.
- The Queensland Government should investigate the operations of the school 'Work Experience' program and examine the way in which it impacts on people's ability to gain entry into the workforce.

REFERENCES

Mackay–Whitsunday–Isaac Regional Economic Development Corporation (REDC),
n.d., *Regional Economic Profile. Business. Lifestyle .Opportunity*, viewed 14
January 2010,
<http://www.mwredc.org.au/images/regionalprofile/fullreport/rp090630mwi.pdf>

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Paper*, The Australia Institute, viewed 12 January 2010,
<https://www.tai.org.au/index.php?q=node%2F19&type=1&pubid=698&act=display>

ATTACHMENT 1

Prototype invitation

Dear

I am writing on behalf of Security 4 Women (National Women's Secretariat, the Queensland Working Women's Service, the National Foundation for Australian Women (NFAW) and the Australian Federation of University Women Queensland to invite you to attend a consultation with Queensland women on the topic of the impact of global recession on women. This will be held at the meeting room of the office of James Bidgood MHR, Milton St. Mackay from 10:00am till 12:00 noon on **Friday 20th November 2009**.

The consultation will be based around a recent report commissioned by S4W and the NFAW undertaken by the Australia Institute that revealed a number of concerns about the hidden nature of women's unemployment. Our organizations are conducting the consultation and hoping to attract around 8-10 key stakeholders from the women's employment and training sector to participate in the discussions that will then be utilised to feed back into broader public policy discussions.

The report highlights the labour market consequences of inadequate child care arrangements, especially out of school hours and vacation care and also found that:

- the Budget Papers suggest hidden unemployment is likely to rise significantly in the next 12 months
- there is concern that the current stimulus packages have been 'male orientated' rather than encouraging 'female orientated' jobs in human services where many women work
- there are significant regional and state variations of female unemployment
- there is considerable churn in female workers who aren't recognised as unemployed by the ABS and who don't register as unemployed with Centrelink.

A copy of the report is attached for your information.

Please respond to Jane.Casey@aph.gov.au if you or your organization is able to attend.

Regards,

Colleen Forrester

Colleen Forrester

President AFUW-Q

colleenf@powerup.com.au

0412154291



ATTACHMENT 2

Attendees:

The attendees were chosen as people who represented a large number of people through their organisations and were familiar with the difficulties people, and women in particular were experiencing in the region following the Global Financial Crisis (GFC).

Christine Brinkley– Mackay Regional Council for Social Development Ltd
community@mrcsd.org.au

Cr. Karen May – Mackay Regional Council karen.may@mackay.qld.gov.au

Erin Mulherin – Mackay/Whitsunday Region Office for Women
erin.mulherin@women.qld.gov.au

Narelle Pearse – Regional Economic Development Corporation – Mackay
and Whitsunday n.pearse@mwredc.org.au

Jill Richardson – Centrelink, Mackay

Bronwyn Smith – Department of Communities (Qld Gov)
brownyn.smith@communities.qld.gov.au

ATTACHMENT 3

Outline of media coverage

The local television station interviewed Colleen Forrester and Mary Crawford and ran the item on the news that evening.

There was also a number of radio interviews carried out by Mary Crawford.

The local MHR James Bidgood (in whose office the consultation was held) was also interviewed by the local television station for his comments on the consultations and this was run as a media item.