

# A LONG WAY TO THE TOP

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES FOR WOMEN IN THE SOCIAL SERVICES SECTOR IN NSW



## About NCOSS

NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) is the peak body for health and community services in NSW. NCOSS works to progress social justice and shapes positive change toward a NSW free from inequality and disadvantage. We are an independent voice advocating for the wellbeing of NSW communities. At NCOSS, we believe that a diverse, well-resourced and knowledgeable social services sector is fundamental to reducing economic and social inequality.

## About Impact Economics and Policy

Impact Economics and Policy brings together a group of expert consultants and affiliates with experience working for government, not-for-profits and big four consulting. Established at the start of 2022, our mission is to partner with clients for impact through providing robust evidence, fresh analysis and strategic communication to tackle Australia's biggest public policy challenges.

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COVER PHOTO: NCOSS 2021 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING PARTICIPANTS SUPPORTING THE *BUILDING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC SECURITY: A PINK HI-VIS RECOVERY CAMPAIGN*.

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SOCIAL SERVICES SECTOR IN NSW

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# A LONG WAY TO THE TOP

## Career opportunities and obstacles for women in the social services sector in NSW

As a major employer of women, the social services sector is just as critical to achieving gender equity in NSW as it is to building a strong and resilient economy, and supporting people through tough times. In this joint report for International Women's Day 2022 from the NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) and Impact Economics and Policy, we take a closer look at how the social services sector in NSW is delivering for women working in the sector. We also consider the strategies needed to underpin the sector's potential to address gender equity into the future, provide rewarding careers and support the NSW economy.

# KEY FINDINGS

- 1 The NSW social services sector employs 240,000 people and provides services to more than 1 million people each year.
- 2 Original research undertaken for this report by NCOSS finds that while 75 per cent of the social services sector's workforce are women, they are underrepresented in key leadership positions. In NSW's larger NGOs, less than 20 per cent of Board Chairs and less than 50 per cent of CEOs are women.
- 3 And with the sector's gender pay gap at its widest for the higher pay levels, those who make it into leadership positions are likely to earn less than their male counterparts.
- 4 Over a third of respondents surveyed for this report indicated that women in the sector are not routinely provided the same career development opportunities as men; and over half said not enough is done to support women from diverse backgrounds.
- 5 Low wages in the sector are also impacting the gender pay gap across the economy. Wages are often close to or at the minimum wage, despite jobs in the sector requiring post-school qualifications.
  - RETAIL ASSISTANT, BUNNINGS WAREHOUSE - \$25 per hour
  - AGED CARE WORKER, SYDNEY - \$22.11 per hour
  - CHILD CARE WORKER, SYDNEY - \$20.33 per hour
- 6 Rising rents, particularly in regional NSW, are taking up a higher percentage of incomes in the social services sector and undermining the financial sustainability of working in the sector. Median rent on a two-bedroom house in Newcastle now accounts for 62 per cent of a full-time childcare worker's income, up from 52 per cent prior to the pandemic. In Sydney, median rent on a two-bedroom house accounts for 83 per cent of a full-time aged care worker's income.
- 7 Analysis undertaken by Impact Economics and Policy finds that vacancy rates in the sector are soaring across NSW, up more than 50 per cent in Sydney in the past 12 months.
- 8 Across Australia, 1 in 10 childcare centres are now operating with special leave because they cannot meet minimum staffing requirements. Shortages of staff are also leading to the closure of Aged Care facilities, with residents being moved as a result.
- 9 Stress and burnout, better pay and conditions elsewhere, funding uncertainty and job insecurity were frequently cited as barriers to building a career in the sector.
- 10 53 per cent of NSW social services sector employees surveyed for this report cited low pay and/or insecure work as career impediments, and one in two indicated they are either planning to leave or are not sure if they will still be in the sector in five years' time.

# SUMMARY OF PROPOSED REFORMS



## Wages and conditions

The NSW Government should:

- Actively support the current wage case to lift wages for aged care workers by 25 per cent;
- Advocate for and support changes to the Fair Work Act to include gender equality as an express object, removing the need for a 'male comparator' and establishing a new Fair Work Commission gender equality panel;
- Advocate for the Commonwealth Government to extend the period of paid parental leave under the national scheme to at least 26 weeks shared across the primary and secondary carer; and
- Introduce a scheme that provides portability of entitlements, including long service leave, within the NSW social services sector, similar to schemes operating in other Australian jurisdictions.



## Representation and diversity

Boards in the social services sector should:

- Actively encourage women to join their ranks and take on the role of chairperson;
- Take necessary steps to develop female leadership capabilities and pathways, assess their organisation's gender pay gap and take corrective action to close it;
- Co-design, implement and monitor organisational diversity strategies to attract, support, retain and promote women from diverse cultural backgrounds; and
- Review and update policies supporting flexible work arrangements and paid parental leave to reflect industry best practice.



## Investment in social services

The NSW Government should:

- Increase funding across the social services sector by 20 per cent to address chronic underfunding, and equip the sector to respond to the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters.
- Commit to continuity of funding, longer-term contracts and adequate indexation as the norm, to support secure jobs, a stable work environment, better conditions and career opportunities for women.



## A strategic approach to leadership, career pathways and workforce development

The NSW Government should establish a NSW Workforce Innovation and Development Institute in partnership with the higher education, VET, and social services sectors.

The Institute should progress:

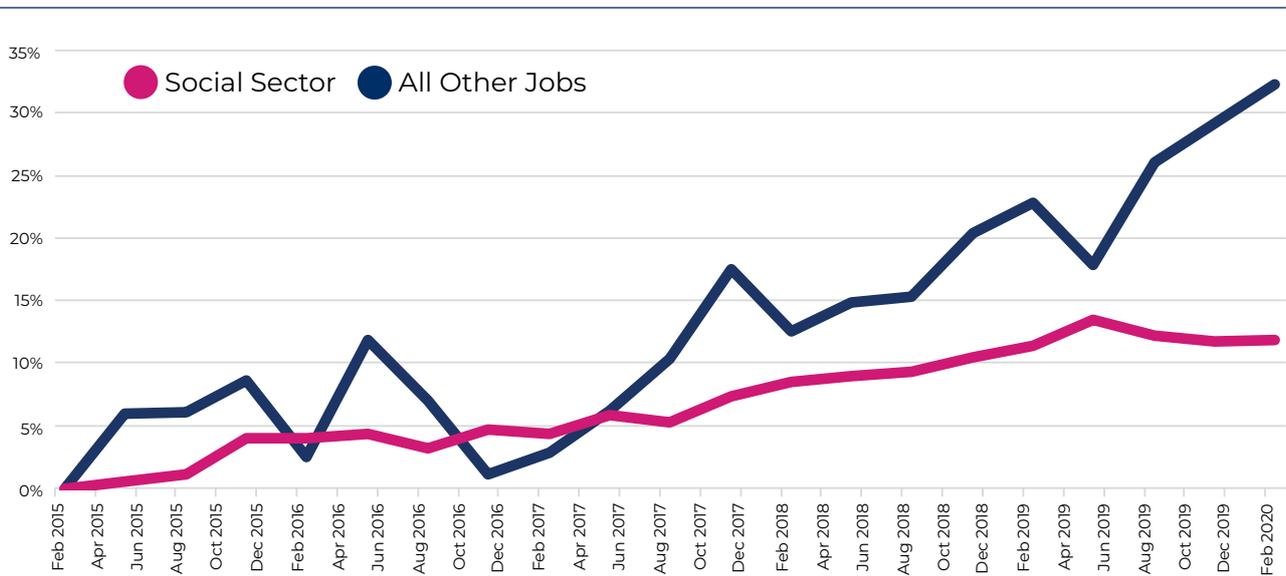
- An Industry Development Plan (including a workforce growth strategy);
- Initiatives to address system blockages, facilitate career pathways and support leadership development;
- Building an integrated dataset encompassing all areas of the social services workforce to inform planning, growth and transformation;
- A comprehensive research program; and
- Tailored education and training opportunities, alongside practical support, to address the needs of the sector and priority groups and local communities.

# THE NSW SOCIAL SERVICES SECTOR – A GROWTH INDUSTRY PROVIDING ESSENTIAL CARE AND SUPPORT

The NSW social services sector – part of Australia’s largest employing industry, Health Care and Social Assistance – employs more than 240,000 people, providing essential services to more than 1 million people each year.<sup>1</sup> This includes support to those impacted by poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, mental health challenges, disability and other complex issues.

The sector is a growth industry with annual economic output worth \$15.4 billion.<sup>2</sup> In the five years prior to the pandemic, one in eight jobs created in NSW was in the sector; and it is estimated that it will require an additional 62,000 jobs by 2030, with 27,000 in regional NSW.<sup>3</sup> The sector has been identified by the World Economic Forum as a key emerging job cluster.

FIGURE 1: PRE-PANDEMIC GROWTH IN JOBS



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022), Detailed Labour Force Statistics – January 2022

The NSW social services sector is dominated by females, with the latest statistics showing 75 per cent of employees are women.<sup>4</sup> The sector provides essential support to the community, and its social impact is highly valued by those working in the sector.



*'...it is a sector that is rewarding and filled with passionate, driven, inspiring, and successful women, who are often battling against the odds but who do so because they genuinely believe in the impact of their work.'*

Quote from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey



*'It's a brilliant, rewarding career where you'll meet passionate, educated women who will value your life experience, education, and value who you are as person and your values, and you'll get to make positive changes in the lives of the community.'*

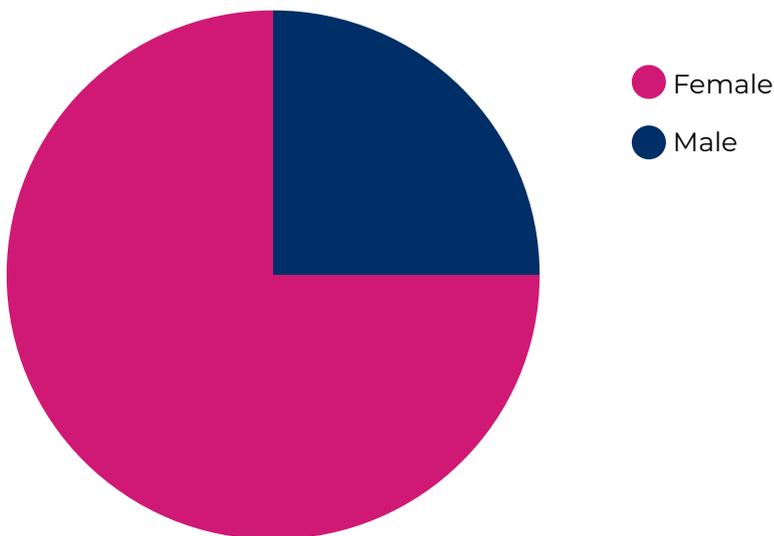
Quote from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey



*'...it's a very rewarding sector to work in - you can see the positive impact of your work in the community and have the opportunity to work with some amazing and passionate people as colleagues.'*

Quote from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey

FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGE OF WORKFORCE



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2021), Characteristics of Employment 2014-2021.

# WOMEN UNDERREPRESENTED IN SENIOR LEADERSHIP

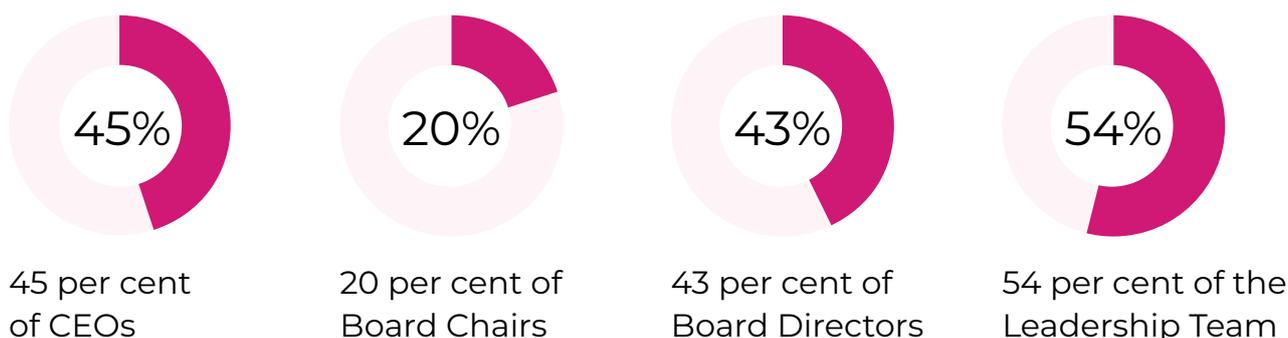
Given 75 per cent of employees are women, the social services sector should lead the way when it comes to female representation at the top. But our analysis suggests we still have a way to go.

Women in Australia are generally underrepresented in leadership positions, and this hinders progress towards gender equity. The 2021 Chief Executive Women Senior Executive Census tracks progress of gender balance and women's representation in the executive leadership teams of Australia's largest publicly-listed companies (ASX300). The survey found that only 6 per cent of CEOs are women, and 26 per cent of leadership teams are women. Worryingly, in terms of progress, of the 23 CEO appointments that occurred in 2020-21, there was only one woman appointed.<sup>5</sup>

How does the social services sector compare? Available evidence suggests that smaller organisations in the sector are more likely to have a female CEO. For example, analysis by Homelessness NSW indicates that of the estimated 240 Specialist Homelessness Services in NSW, 70 per cent have annual revenue of \$5 million or less, and 75 per cent of services are led by a woman.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, LCSA (the peak body for Neighbourhood Centres in NSW) advises that of its 169 member organisations, 91 per cent have annual revenue under \$5 million, and 87 per cent have a woman as CEO or Centre Manager.<sup>7</sup>

When it comes to larger NGOs, analysis undertaken for this report (see Appendix 1 – Methodology for details) paints a different picture. Using Australian Charities and Non-Profit Commission data, we found that while women make up 75 per cent of the workforce across registered charities and not-for-profits operating in the NSW social services sector, for those with revenue of \$25 million or more, women account for:

FIGURE 3: PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IN NGOS WITH REVENUE OVER \$25 MILLION



These results indicate that larger NGOs in the NSW social services sector are doing better than publicly-listed companies included in the Chief Executive Women Senior Executive Census. However, it remains a concern that despite women making up the majority of workers in the sector, they are underrepresented in key senior leadership positions.



*'...most volunteer roles are women, particularly older women, including on volunteer boards. This can lead to a lack of balance in decisions, culture and often a greater bias towards men in leadership roles.'*

Quote from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey

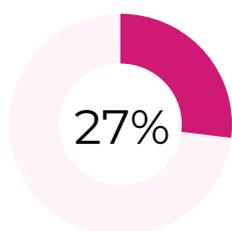


*'The challenge with supporting women into leadership positions is that we are a reasonably flat organisation with only limited opportunities compared to the number of women in the organisation. We could do more around the development of our people.'*

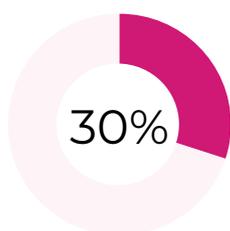
Quote from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey

Our analysis also indicates that there are differences across larger, faith-based organisations versus larger, secular organisations:

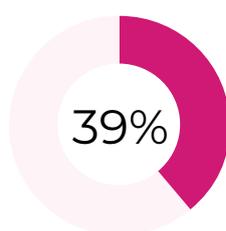
FIGURE 4: PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP IN LARGER, FAITH-BASED NGOs



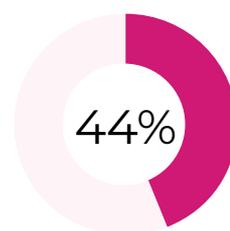
27 per cent of CEOs in faith-based organisations are women vs 50 per cent of CEOs in secular organisations.



30 per cent of Board Chairs in faith-based organisations are women vs 20 per cent of Board Chairs in secular organisations.



39 per cent of Board Directors in faith-based organisations are women vs 44 per cent of Board Directors in secular organisations.



44 per cent of Leadership Team members in faith-based organisations are women vs 57 per cent of Leadership Team members in secular organisations.

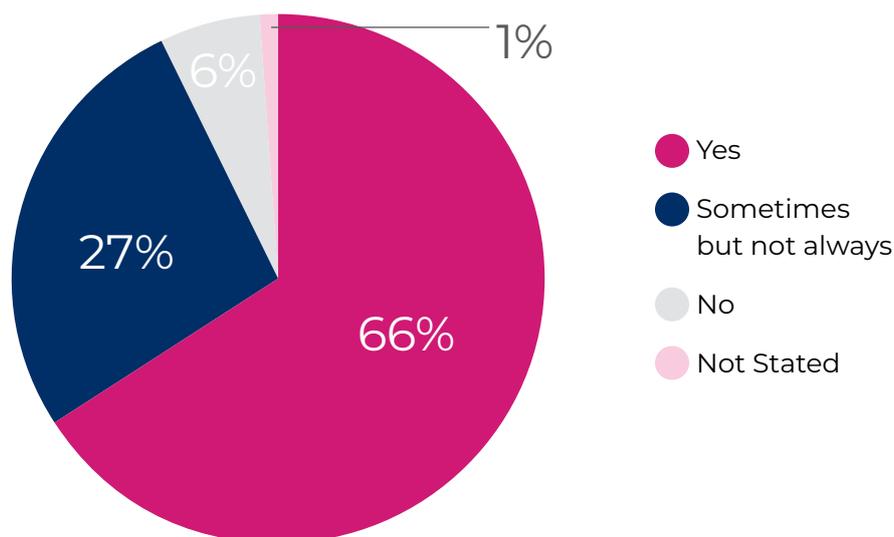


# MORE CAN BE DONE TO PROMOTE FEMALE LEADERSHIP AND CAREERS IN THE SOCIAL SERVICES SECTOR

A survey of 560 workers across the NSW social services sector\* asked respondents whether they felt their organisation gave women the same opportunities as men to develop a rewarding career, update their skills and progress into more senior or specialist roles, including management and leadership positions.

While only 6.6 per cent responded that this was not the case, over a quarter indicated that this was only sometimes the case – highlighting that there remains more that organisations can do to support women to fulfil their potential in the NSW social services sector.

FIGURE 5: DO WOMEN HAVE THE SAME OPPORTUNITIES AS MEN IN YOUR ORGANISATION?



\*See separate data report for full results and Appendix 1 for methodology.

In terms of the nature of actions taken by organisations to retain, support and develop women employees, 72 per cent reported that their organisation provides flexible work arrangements. However, others identified limited flexibility particularly in senior roles, little or no paid parental/ maternity leave, and no portability of entitlements as barriers impacting their careers. Some felt that progression was only possible in larger NGOs.



*'Working in the social services sector is very rewarding and does have a diverse range of roles however, there are few opportunities to rise up through the ranks unless employed in a larger organisation (say 100 or more employees). Smaller community organisations have small staff numbers and flat management hierarchies due to low level funding and funding that specifically forbids allocating funds to administration/management.'*

Quote from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey

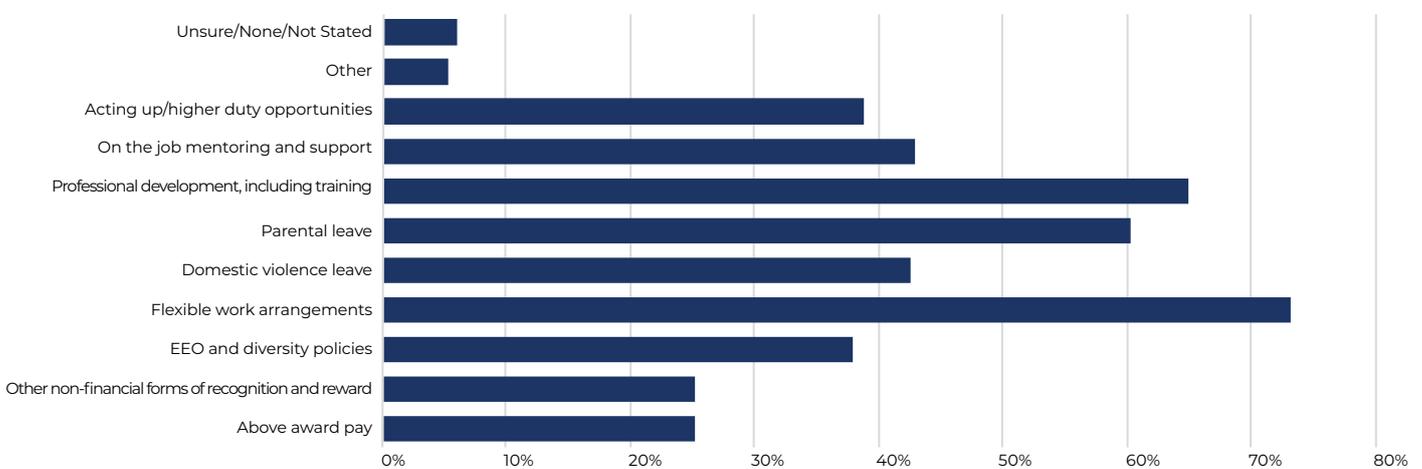


*'Biggest thing is the flat structure. Many women are employed at entry-level positions but there are very few ways to progress in the organisation, so they leave to progress elsewhere. People can progress upwards, but not many.'*

Quote from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey

Responses suggested that less than two-thirds of organisations offer professional development and training, and less than 42 per cent provide on-the-job mentoring – strategies which are critically important for women to develop the necessary leadership skills and for organisations to address gender disparities at CEO and Board levels.

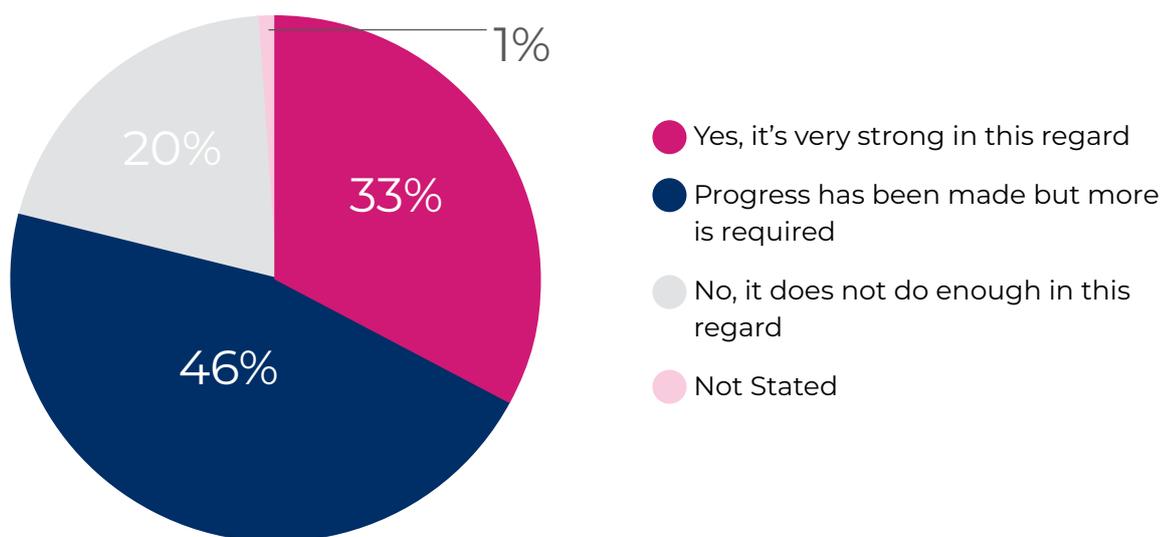
FIGURE 6: WHAT DOES YOUR ORGANISATION DO TO RETAIN, SUPPORT AND DEVELOP WOMEN EMPLOYEES?



# DIVERSITY IS AN ISSUE

While 65 per cent of respondents felt their organisation provided as much support for women as men, only 33 per cent thought their organisation did enough to attract, support, develop and promote women from diverse backgrounds. This clearly requires more focus from leaders to ensure that they are attracting and retaining a diverse workforce at all levels of their organisation.

FIGURE 7: DOES YOUR ORGANISATION DO ENOUGH TO ATTRACT, SUPPORT, DEVELOP AND PROMOTE WOMEN FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS?



The need for more action to attract, support and promote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and women with disabilities were strong themes emerging from the survey's qualitative data:



*'We are limited by funding, i.e. small team. We have an organisational commitment to develop the Aboriginal workforce in this region, but it must be supported by appropriate funding.'*

Quote from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey



*'The Executive is all White and the senior leadership also very White. While the organisation is mostly women, there are a disproportionate number of men in Exec and senior leadership and the women who are in senior leadership are almost all White women.'*

Quote from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey



*'We have a strong workforce of women from CALD communities, and a high percentage of employees with a lived experience of mental health challenges.....however more can be done to recruit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, as well as women with physical or intellectual disabilities. I would like to see us improve in this regard.'*

Quote from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey



*'I think it is still a whitewashed industry.'*

Quote from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey



*'Disabilities are ignored, hidden and not acknowledged although on paper we tick boxes for inclusiveness.'*

Quote from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey



*'It is challenging to get across a different perspective. Sometimes organisational culture needs to change to accommodate diversity. And at times it is the frontline staff that need to shift perspectives.'*

Quote from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey

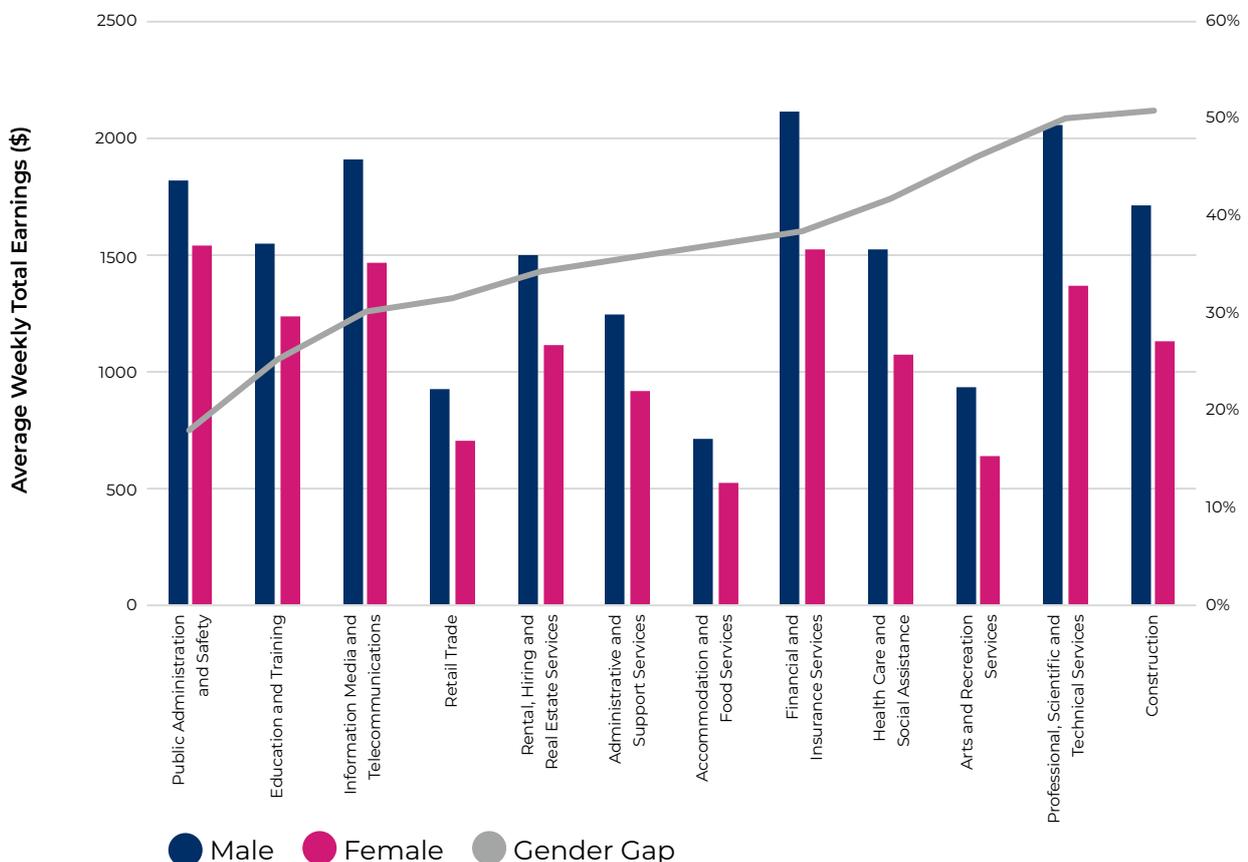


# GENDER PAY GAP PREVALENT IN THE SECTOR

Currently, Australia’s national gender pay gap sits at 14.2 per cent (14.5 per cent in NSW), the result of a pay gap favouring full-time working men over full-time working women in every industry and occupational category in Australia.

When it comes to the Health Care and Social Assistance industry – of which the social services sector is a subset – the gender pay gap is 20.7 per cent, the third highest across 18 industries.<sup>8</sup> Analysis by BankWest Curtin Economics Centre and the Women’s Gender Equity Agency (WGEA) indicates that this pay gap is at its widest at the highest pay levels, rising to 27.1 per cent. So while there is less gender disparity in leadership roles in the social services sector, women leaders are still earning less than their male counterparts.

FIGURE 8: GENDER GAP IN WEEKLY EARNINGS



# LOW WAGES ARE ENDEMIC

Regardless of advances made by women in leadership across the sector, the majority of staff are not in leadership positions, and many are impacted by poor pay and insecure work, endemic across the social services sector. In our survey of 560 employees, 44 per cent reported that better pay and conditions outside the social services sector was an issue for women in their organisation.

## Stress Burnout a Major Issue

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a large increase in demand for services across the social services sector,<sup>9</sup> and it is not surprising that more than 60 per cent of respondents to the survey reported burnout and stress as barriers to women in their organisation. Half of respondents also indicated that they were either not sure or did not see themselves working in the sector in five years' time. Quotes from the Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW survey below illustrate the range of issues identified as contributing to this:



*'Pay is low and burnout rate is high.'*



*'Continual fighting for long term funding to continue the sound work we do is exhausting.'*



*'Uncertainty / lack of long term project funding impacts on pay available, program resources available and also on job security for some positions, so these factors can contribute to stress. My current organisation could do with some improvement in flexible work practices to support staff with caring and support responsibilities for children, aging parents, such as capacity to work from home (outside of COVID lockdowns) and temporarily change work hours/days.'*



*'The pandemic has shown our sector is fragile and at breaking point. I am sick of being expected to jump through endless hoops for our polities and bureaucrats, yet I am paid at 28 hours per week and have to work over 40 hours per week. I am considering going back to public service. The stress and pressure has taken a toll, this is not sustainable.'*



*'There are compensations personally but it can be a stressful environment.'*

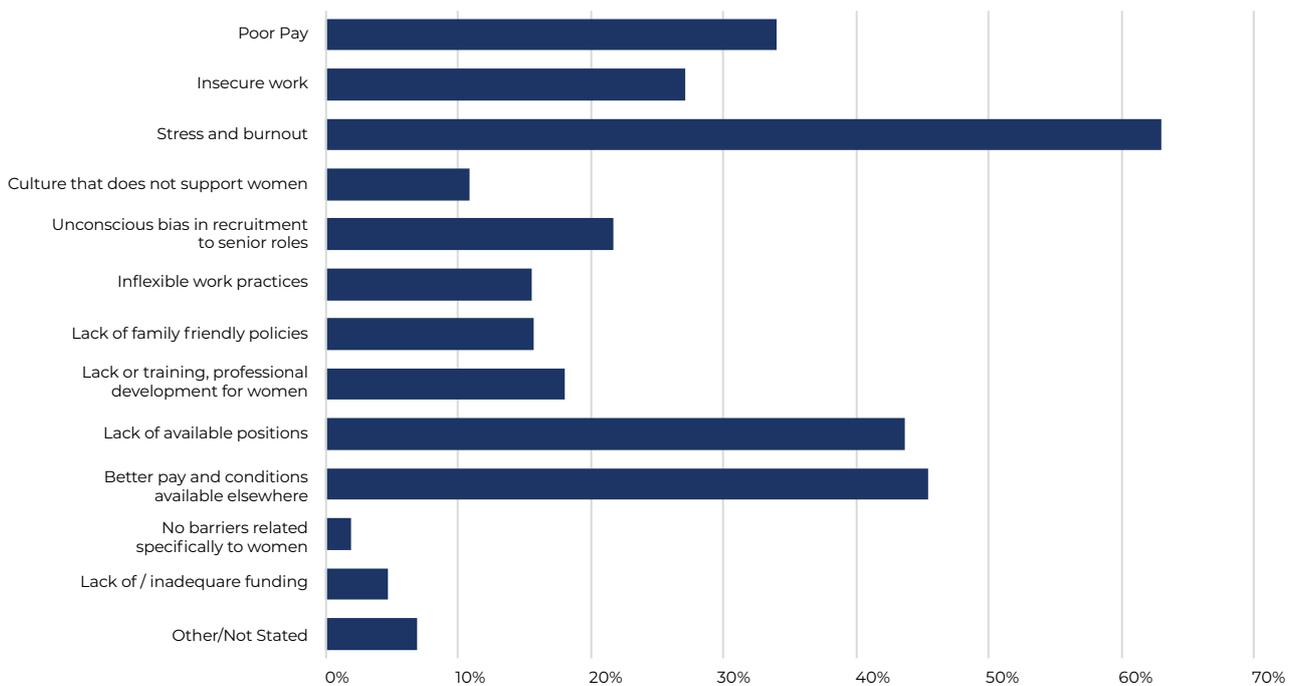


*'I think there would be less stress and burn out if programs like Emergency Relief were adequately funded. ER is almost an after-thought as far as funding bodies go. We are very limited in the support we can offer and in areas like Western Sydney our clients often rely on and need this support in order to get by because their income can't stretch to meet cost of living. COVID has made this even worse and I am fortunate to have been working in a COVID support role offering financial assistance to people affected by COVID but our funding is coming to an end in the next couple of months but people will be impacted by COVID for many months to come.'*



*'I love the sector and have dedicated my career to it but it is hard, unforgiving, low reward and very limited advancement unless you work for the big Church affiliated NGOs.'*

FIGURE 9: WHAT DO YOU PERCEIVE AS THE BARRIERS FACING WOMEN IN YOUR ORGANISATION?



Workers often earn rates well below similar or lower skill levels in other professions, despite having higher levels of education.

Comparing for example, technicians and trade workers and community and personal service workers we find:

*FIGURE 10: COMPARISON BETWEEN TECHNICIANS AND TRADE WORKERS AND COMMUNITY AND PERSONAL SERVICE WORKERS*



For some of the more common roles in the sector, the hourly rate for an entry level position is only marginally above the minimum hourly wage set by the Fair Work Commission of \$20.33 per hour and below the hourly wage of a retail assistant at Bunnings Warehouse:

<b>\$25 per hour</b>	<b>\$22.11 per hour</b>	<b>\$20.33 per hour</b>	<b>\$24.83 per hour</b>
<b>RETAIL ASSISTANT, BUNNINGS WAREHOUSE</b>	<b>AGED CARE WORKER</b>	<b>CHILD CARE WORKER</b>	<b>WELFARE SUPPORT WORKER</b>

The wages paid to workers in the sector make it difficult to meet the rising cost of living in Sydney and regional NSW. Housing costs are the biggest impost on the weekly budget, and tight rental markets are no longer confined to metropolitan areas, with affordability in regional areas crashing over the past year. Housing stress is considered to occur where more than 30 per cent of a person's income is spent on living costs<sup>10</sup> and has increased across the period of the pandemic.

The table opposite sets out how much income typical workers in the social services sector would need to spend to rent a two-bedroom house in Sydney and other key locations in NSW, and the extent to which the problem has worsened in some areas over 12 months:

TABLE 1: RENTAL STRESS AND WORKERS IN THE NSW SOCIAL SECTOR

Location	Role	Proportion of Weekly Income on Rent (2 Bedroom House)	
		December 2019 (%)	December 2021 (%)
Gosford and Central Coast	Support Worker – Home Care	38	46
Sydney	Aged Care Worker	88	83
Newcastle	Childcare Worker	52	62

Source: Fair Work Ombudsman's, The PACT Pay and Conditions Tool: <https://calculate.fairwork.gov.au/findyouraward> and NSW Government Quarterly Rent Report Dashboard December 2021: [https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/facs.statistics/viz/Rentandsales\\_15565127794310/Rent](https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/facs.statistics/viz/Rentandsales_15565127794310/Rent)

Living on a full-time salary in the social services sector for many means living in chronic housing and financial stress, struggling to meet day-to-day living costs.

### Would you recommend working in the social services sector to a friend?



*'Depends on their career priorities. If they were focused on working in a sector which rewarded hard work and efforts with attractive remuneration and other benefits I would not recommend working in the social services sector.*

*If they wanted work that provided opportunities to address injustice, inequality and other social issues - I would recommend working in the social services sector.*

*Unfortunately, it's currently a case of weighing up the capacity to earn a decent wage with the desire to work for social change. It's an "either/or" proposition.'*



*'Yes, because it is a sector that is rewarding and filled with passionate, driven, inspiring, and successful women, who are often battling against the odds but who do so because they genuinely believe in the impact of their work.'*



*'Flat structure, low pay, limited specific diversity policies means if career growth is the focus, I'd probably recommend a friend go elsewhere. If their focus is on the purpose and mission of the NGO, definitely.'*

Quotes from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey

# STAFFING AND SKILLS SHORTAGES ARE WORSE AS A RESULT OF COVID AND RISING LIVING COSTS

The impact of low wages, inability to meet basic cost of living requirements, and lack of career paths often makes working in the social services sector an unattractive and financially unviable option. Despite rising demand and predicted growth in the sector, staffing shortages are increasingly threatening the ability of providers to deliver services.

In NCOSS' 2021 report: *The Social Sector in NSW: Capitalising on the Potential for Growth* these issues were most acute in regional areas with vacancies growing more than 500 per cent in five years in some areas. Over the past 12 months vacancies have continued to grow, including in Sydney where vacancies have increased by more than 50 per cent.

Region	Growth in Vacancies January 2020-January 2021 (%)
Blue Mountains, Bathurst & Central West NSW	31
Dubbo & Western NSW	0
Gosford & Central Coast	52
Illawarra & South Coast	27
NSW North Coast	27
Newcastle & Hunter	18
Riverina & Murray	14
Southern Highlands & Snowy	66
Tamworth and North West NSW	40
Sydney	53

Across Australia, 1 in 10 childcare centres are now operating with special leave because they cannot meet minimum staffing requirements.<sup>11</sup> Shortages of staff are also leading to the closure of Aged Care facilities, with residents being moved as a result.<sup>12</sup> The Aged Care Royal Commission found shocking examples of neglect and poor quality care endemic across the sector, and concluded that low wages and understaffing were partly responsible.<sup>13</sup> The Commission called for an increase in award wages, reflecting the role that they play in the inability to attract and retain staff in the sector.



## LACK OF SUFFICIENT, ONGOING FUNDING IMPACTS JOB SECURITY AND OTHER CONDITIONS

Half of the state's social services workers are employed in fixed term or casual positions, and lack the security of permanent roles.<sup>14</sup> Underpinning this are common and well-documented features of the sector – such as short-term contracts, discontinuation of programs, inadequate indexation to meet the real cost of service provision, and lack of growth funding'.<sup>15</sup>

Qualitative data from the survey highlights how these features flow through to employees in the form of job insecurity, wages that don't keep pace with the cost of living, and increased workloads.



*'The short term funding arrangements of many positions makes working in the sector very unstable. People want to join the sector and contribute, however once in, they leave quickly for more secure and better paid roles outside of the sector. People cannot cover the basic costs of rent and everyday living on the SCHADS award, many positions are level 3-4.'*

*Quote from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey*



*'We are a smaller org, and despite massive population growth not one additional cent from funders. We keep doing more with less. Staff working unpaid. With the pandemic we all face burn out. Already lost a number of staff last year, retired or left the sector. Earn more in public service or private enterprise. Increasing accountabilities, governance and admin by funders in the name of "outcome based" work, yet decreasing funding that is not short term, that expects us to change the world in 12 short months, and somehow does not want to fund admin costs or staff costs and expects us to find that money elsewhere.'*

*Quote from Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW Survey*

# MORE WOMEN LIKELY TO LEAVE THE SECTOR IN YEARS AHEAD DUE TO POOR WAGES AND INSECURE CONDITIONS

Our survey for this report found that 50 per cent of respondents were either not sure or did not see themselves working in the sector in five years' time. For 53 per cent of respondents, low pay and/or insecure work was an issue. If this proportion of workers were to leave the sector over the next five years, this would equate to a loss of 120,000 workers, on top of the additional 63,000 needed by 2030, due to population ageing and demographic shifts.<sup>16</sup>

These shortages are likely to undermine the ability of the sector to deliver core services, including in aged care and childcare, resulting in lost participation and reduced productivity across the economy in NSW.

Reforms and additional investments are needed to ensure that the NSW social services sector can continue to thrive and support women achieve gender equity.



# REFORMS TO UNDERPIN GENDER EQUITY AND GROWTH OF THE SECTOR

A number of reforms are needed to improve gender equity, support the growth of the sector and provide rewarding careers – including addressing low wages, poor conditions and the underfunding of services; investing in leadership development; and improving pathways for career progression.



## Wages

The wages in female-dominated sectors such as the social services sector are below male-dominated sectors, and reforms are needed to the industrial relations framework to address this disparity. NCOSS supports the current wage case by the Health Services Union that would lift wages by 25 per cent for aged care workers.

More broadly, we support reforms to the industrial relations laws to ensure gender equality is considered in wage claims.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The NSW Government should:

- Actively support the current wage case to lift wages for aged care workers by 25 per cent; and
- Advocate for and support changes to the Fair Work Act to include gender equality as an express object, removing the need for a 'male comparator' and establishing a new Fair Work Commission gender equality panel.



## Paid Parental Leave

Currently, the maximum period of parental leave pay under the Australian national scheme (18 weeks for primary carers, 2 weeks for secondary carers) is inadequate, contributes to unequal distribution of caring responsibilities, and is not in line with OECD or best practice standards.<sup>17</sup> Analyses by the Grattan Institute and KPMG recommend increasing the maximum period of paid parental leave under the national scheme to 26 weeks, to be shared across both the primary and secondary carer.<sup>18,19</sup>

**RECOMMENDATION:** The NSW Government should advocate for the Commonwealth Government to extend the period of paid parental leave under the national scheme to at least 26 weeks, shared across the primary and secondary carer.



## Security of Entitlements

The lack of job security is a feature of the sector's frequent reliance on short-term funding, and casual or fixed-term employment contracts. The Victorian and ACT Governments have moved to improve conditions through establishing a scheme that allows entitlements to move from one employer to another. This would provide workers in the social services sector greater security of employment; a factor in staff retention and recruitment.

In particular, allowing workers to retain their accumulated long service leave entitlements within the social services sector would mean that women are supported along their career pathway, recognised for their experience and contribution to the sector, incentivised to continue doing the essential work of the sector, and able to access hard-earned breaks from the demanding nature of their work.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The NSW Government should introduce a scheme that provides portability of entitlements, including long service leave, within the NSW social services sector, similar to schemes operating in other Australian jurisdictions.



## Representation and diversity

Boards in the social services sector have a critical role to play in setting the strategic direction, tone and culture of their organisation. By taking action to support and promote women, close the gender pay gap and champion diversity, they can lift the performance of the social services sector when it comes to gender equity.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Boards in the social services sector should:

- Actively encourage women to join their ranks and take on the role of chairperson;
- Take necessary steps to develop female leadership capabilities and pathways, assess their organisation's gender pay gap and take corrective action to close it;
- Co-design, implement and monitor organisational diversity strategies to attract, support, retain and promote women from diverse cultural backgrounds; and
- Review and update policies supporting flexible work arrangements and paid parental leave to reflect industry best practice.



## Investment in social services

The chronic underfunding of services across the NSW social services sector is leading to burnout of workers and, if left unaddressed, will add to projected skill shortages across the sector. Additional funding for housing, mental health, domestic violence, child protection and other welfare services is urgently needed in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, as ongoing demand continues to engulf the sector. NCOSS is calling for a 20 per cent increase in funding, along with greater continuity, longer-term contracts and adequate indexation to support job security, better conditions and a stable work environment.

Paid parental leave in particular is a critical entitlement for this sector, given the high proportion of female employees. Properly resourcing the sector would enable employers to provide paid parental leave entitlements on top of what is available in the national scheme.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The NSW Government should:

- Increase funding across the sector by 20 per cent to address chronic underfunding, and equip the sector to respond to the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters; and
- Commit to continuity of funding, longer-term contracts and adequate indexation as the norm, to support secure jobs, a stable work environment and better career opportunities for women.



## A strategic approach to leadership, career pathways and workforce development

Victoria's Workforce Innovation and Development Institute (WIDI) provides a blueprint for a strategic and planned approach to grow and transform the social services sector. Established as a partnership between RMIT, the Victorian Government and the social services sector, it is leveraging the sector's growth potential to build a high quality workforce, address skills shortages and provide employment opportunities where they are most needed – through scalable learning solutions, innovative programs and practical assistance.

**RECOMMENDATION:** The NSW Government should establish a NSW Workforce Innovation and Development Institute in partnership with the higher education, VET, and social services sectors. The Institute should progress:

- An Industry Development Plan (including a workforce growth strategy);
- Initiatives to address system blockages, facilitate career pathways and support leadership development;
- Building an integrated dataset encompassing all areas of the social services workforce to inform planning, growth and transformation;
- A comprehensive research program; and
- Tailored education and training opportunities, alongside practical support, to address the needs of the sector and priority groups and local communities.

# ENDNOTES

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# APPENDIX 1

## Leadership across NGOs in NSW Social Services Sector

To gain a more complete picture of the situation in NSW, this study has examined available data on larger NGOs to see how they are performing when it comes to gender equity in leadership roles.

Using ACNC data, we identified registered charities and Not-for-Profits operating in NSW with total annual revenue of \$25 million or more, whose main activities fell into categories aligned with those that comprise the NSW social services sector. We then cross-checked identified organisations with data available on their websites and/or in annual reports to determine gender composition of CEO, Board and Leadership team positions.

**NGOs operating in NSW with annual revenue of \$25 million and over – representation of women in leadership roles**

Position	Org type	Female	Male	Total
CEO	S	52 (50%)	52 (50%)	104
	FB	7 (27%)	19 (73%)	26
Total		59 (45%)	71 (55%)	130
Board Chair	S	20 (19%)	84 (81%)	104
	FB	6 (30%)	20 (70%)	26
Total		26 (20%)	104 (80%)	130
Leadership Team	S	429 (57%)	322 (43%)	751
	FB	88 (44%)	110 (56%)	198
Total		517 (54%)	432 (46%)	949
Board Directors	S	380 (44%)	478 (56%)	858
	FB	92 (39%)	143 (61%)	235
Total		472 (43%)	621 (57%)	1,093

S = Secular    FB = Faith-based

## Women in the NGO Social Services Sector in NSW – SURVEY

An online, 14-question survey was undertaken between Thursday 3 February and Monday 21 February 2022. It was promoted through NCOSS communication channels and via other peak bodies to employees in the social services sector, with 670 responses received. For the purposes of this report, only fully completed surveys have been included, resulting in a reduced sample size of 560. A separate data report is being prepared to provide a more comprehensive breakdown of the results, drawing on all survey responses.

# A LONG WAY TO THE TOP

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES AND  
OBSTACLES FOR WOMEN IN THE  
SOCIAL SERVICES SECTOR IN NSW

