

28 May 2025

Senator the Hon Dr Jess Walsh
Minister for Early Childhood Education
PO Box 6100
Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Dr Walsh

Re: Abuse and Neglect in For-Profit Child Care Centres

Congratulations on your appointment as Minister for Early Childhood Education in the newly elected Albanese Government.

I am writing to you on behalf of Zonta Australia which provides a framework for a collective voice for the three Zonta International Districts in Australia. Zonta International is an international human rights organisation committed to advancing the status of women and girls worldwide, particularly in the areas of leadership, advocacy, education and empowerment. Zonta Australia engages in advocacy at a national level on behalf of 102 clubs and approximately 2,275 members across Australia.

It is with deep concern that we note the recent allegations of child abuse and neglect in some commercial for-profit child care centres, aired in the Four Corners program Betrayal of Trust in March this year, and subsequently aired in a condensed form on the 7.30 Report on 7 April 2025. Other reports echo these reports.

Recent reports also reveal that 95% of the 300 - 400 new child care centres opened each year are for-profit. Apart from one of the top 10 largest operators, the remainder are controlled by private equity firms and international investment groups, all driven by profit rather than child welfare.

Professor Gabrielle Meagher, Professor Emerita School of Social Science Macquarie University, is a leading expert on privatised social services. She points to the "overwhelming evidence showing that for-profit providers deliver lower-quality services on average compared with their non-profit equivalents. For investors, the childcare sector is an attractive opportunity, thanks to billions of dollars in government subsidies and grants underwriting the business. The whole industry is massively underpinned by a secure and growing stream of government income".

An Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) report from December 2023 found that for-profit providers paid lower wages and hired less-experienced staff than their non-profit equivalents, leading to a decline in the quality of standards.

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Zonta Australia believes that the national regulator and state investigating authorities should be resourced to investigate these claims and that any findings should be made available to the general public.

Furthermore, we believe it is the expectation of Australian women and men that governments must play a central role in setting up and maintaining standards of care for its most vulnerable members; in particular the very young and the very old. We urge both the Federal Government and state governments to address these allegations in a transparent manner as soon as possible.

We recognise that child care in Australia is regulated by national laws and regulations legislated by the Commonwealth Government in the National Quality Framework. The National Quality Standards set a benchmark for early childhood education with seven quality areas to ensure child care is safe, healthy and effective. We also recognise that the States and Territories are responsible for monitoring, assessing and supervising approved providers and services.

While we note that the Federal Government has committed to building new child care centres in areas of need, we recommend that they be community-based child care centres, staffed by qualified child care educators, to serve as models of good practice and to give parents some choice in choosing a good centre. At this point in time parents have very few options in finding a place for their child and end up taking any offer they can find so they can take up paid employment.

We agree with three proposals being suggested to improve the quality and safety of Australia's child care centres:

1. Design safer centres
2. Conduct a thorough review. We wonder if the National Child Safety Review announced by the Australian Department of Education on 29 April 2025 during the caretaker period is going to proceed
3. Increase the status of early childhood education in Australia.

Zonta Australia has three specific requests of the Australian Government:

1. A commitment that the National Child Safety Review proceeds.
2. Details be released on how the new proposed centres will be built and staffed.
3. Clarity on the matters we have raised so we can reassure our members across Australia that action will be taken to rectify the current situation and that appropriate guidelines will be established for the new centres to be built by your Government.

I look forward to your considered response to the concerns and issues raised.

Regards

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ZONTA INTERNATIONAL

Founded in 1919, Zonta International is a global human rights organisation whose members work towards building a better world for women and girls. Together we collaborate on causes and projects through service and advocacy initiatives, at a local, national and international level. The ultimate goal in all we do is to empower women to take their place on an equal footing with men.

Today, Zonta International has some 30,000 members in over 1200 clubs in 67 countries, and has General Consultative Status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and Consultative Status with UNESCO, UNICEF, UN Women, ILO, Council of Europe and the International Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs.

Zonta volunteers actively work to advocate for women's gender equity, improved outcomes for women affected by climate change, and an end to violence against women and girls.

Financial support through educational award programs improve education opportunities and various service projects improve everyday lives.

Through our time, service, advocacy, and fundraising efforts, we make a meaningful difference in the lives of women and girls at the local, national, and international levels. Join us in building a brighter future for all.

Key elements of Zonta actions include:

Advocacy: Speaking out on issues that affect the lives of women, advocacy is core to changing the lives of women around the world – the purpose for which Zonta was created. We focus our work around 3 main pillars: the achievement of gender equity, the prevention of violence against women and girls, and a gender equal response to climate change.

Service: Through international service projects, Zonta provides life changing opportunities for women and girls. By partnering with agencies of the United Nations and other recognized non-governmental organizations, Zonta has improved women's health, provided better economic opportunities and prevented gender-based violence in 71 countries. Since our first service project, Zonta has contributed more than US\$35.9 million to our international service projects.

Expanding access to education: Zonta International supports women in advancing their education and careers through scholarships and awards. Recipients highly value the recognition and mentorship, in addition to the financial support.

Creating global connections: Zonta International organises conferences and events that inspire and educate members worldwide, helping them advance and expand their efforts toward achieving the organisation's mission.