

CHAPTER 10

Ways forward

It is increasingly recognised that the responsibility for change does not sit solely with women — men must also actively pursue gender equity in the workplace and the home.

The road towards gender equity is uneven. It seems smooth, but cracks appear, there are potholes and sometimes the path is overgrown and blocked. Below we identify seven key steps that can help us to move towards greater gender equity in Australia. We know that there's more to do but these are a good start.

1. Put on gender glasses

Because gender discrimination is often unconscious, it is important that new and existing policies are assessed in terms of their gender impacts. This is often referred to as adopting a 'gender lens'. The Finnish government invites policy makers to 'put on your gender glasses' to examine how every policy affects girls and women and boys and men.¹⁴³ Existing

knowledge about the needs and experiences of women and men and girls and boys, including statistical analyses and research evidence, provide valuable insights for gender analyses. For example, the National Foundation for Australian Women recently conducted an analysis of the 2014–15 federal budget, making visible the differential impacts of a range of policy proposals on Australian women.

2. Name it

Part of the problem is that over the past 20 years there has been a swing towards gender-neutral language in social policy. Instead of referring to ‘sole mothers’, policies and politicians refer to ‘sole parents’ or ‘single parents’. In a similar way, the non-gendered term ‘carer’ is used to describe people who have caring responsibilities for children or adults with a disability, illness or age-related frailty.

There are arguments for and against gender-neutral language. Some feminists argue in favour of gender-neutral language because it challenges stereotypical assumptions about women’s and men’s roles. For example, referring to parental leave rather than maternity leave might discourage assumptions about the gender division of labour.

While there is some merit in the arguments for gender-neutral language, there is a catch-22. If the language changes but the reality does not, then gender-neutral language obscures the inequity and

makes it more difficult to challenge it. This is especially apparent in relation to care, which we have shown plays a key role in shaping women's workforce participation and economic security. Marty Grace has pointed out that the use of other neutral terms, such as work–life 'balance' or 'juggling', has also depoliticised the tensions between paid and unpaid work, as well as obscuring the ways in which the risks and responsibilities associated with resolving these tensions are frequently borne by individual women.¹⁴⁴

Gender-neutral language also makes it difficult to research and support men in caring roles, because the gender-specific issues they face are also obscured. Of course, the problem isn't the gender-neutral language; it is the fact that gender-neutrality obscures the persistently gendered division of paid and unpaid labour. The real problem is the mismatch between reality and rhetoric.

3. Count and measure

As we have already highlighted, data collection and analysis plays a vital role in monitoring progress. While not everything that matters can be quantified, the collection and analysis of data in relation to gender equity enables an assessment of policies and practices and can reveal patterns of change or lack of change. This is important at both the broad social and economic level and the level of individual workplaces.

Reliable data is important to make visible the patterns and the nature of change or lack of change. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) provides data for a wide range of social and economic activity. This data is disaggregated by gender, enabling gender analyses. In addition, the ABS publishes ‘gender indicators’ in relation to economic security, education, health, safety and justice, democracy, governance and citizenship. Agencies like the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) also play an important role in tracking and measuring progress — or lack of progress — in the workplace. Australian employers with 100 or more employees are legally required to report their performance on a range of ‘gender equality indicators’ to WGEA, including the gender composition of the workforce, men’s and women’s rates of pay, the distribution of men and women in full-time, part-time and casual work, the availability of flexible working conditions, and the numbers of women in management and governance positions.

The WGEA recently published its analysis of the first tranche of this data, from 2013–14, some of which we have cited in this volume. It stated that the data is ‘game-changing’ and ‘world-leading’ because it provides detailed information against which future progress (or lack of progress) can be measured.¹⁴⁵ These reporting requirements are under review; and media reports suggest that the current government is

considering reducing or abolishing the requirements for companies with fewer than 1,000 staff, as part of a push to reduce ‘red tape’ for business.

We have drawn on a range of data sources to highlight the uneven progress towards equity for girls and women in Australia. However, there are considerable gaps in data, especially in relation to violence against women, for which the most recent national data is almost 10 years old. The ABS has released a useful directory of domestic violence data which details data availability, with the goal of identifying gaps and making data collections accessible for policy making and program evaluation, and improving the recording and reporting of domestic violence across Australia.¹⁴⁶

Quotas and targets

The limited number of women in senior roles has prompted some people to call for mandatory quotas — requiring a certain proportion of positions to be filled by women — or other ‘affirmative action’ approaches. While this has been successful in many parts of the world, it has few supporters in corporate Australia. Quotas and affirmative action are criticised because they can undermine perceptions of women’s success, as Liz Temple pointed out in a recent article in the *Griffith Review*:

Denial of credit for successes often affects women hired or promoted through affirmative action or quota arrangements, as well as

those who have completed women-only training (such as women's leadership courses). This is because it is easy to point to the 'special help' the women have received and, thereby, maintain a belief that the women would not be succeeding without it. Women in this situation are plagued by the questioning of their legitimacy and competency in the positions they hold. This is in stark contrast to the treatment of men who are vouched for or assisted in other ways by mentors or 'old-boy' networks.¹⁴⁷

As Temple explains, the argument against quotas is based on the idea that they somehow undermine merit, and women want to be seen to have succeeded on their own merit. Yet the current system for selecting senior staff cannot simply be based on merit, unless one accepts that very few women have the capacity to fulfil senior roles and men are 'naturally' better equipped to be leaders. The current gender imbalance suggests that unconscious bias plays at least some part in workplace inequalities; and direct action is one way to address this bias. As quotas enable more women to hold senior positions, proponents argue, the bias against women will decrease, eventually making affirmative action unnecessary.

4. Commit to gender pay equity

As Christine Christian, president of Chief Executive Women, recently pointed out in the *Australian Financial Review*,

Westpac has done it, Telstra, Woolworths, ANZ, National Australia Bank, CSR and BP are on to it, and even number-crunchers such as KPMG are doing it. So let's do it — let's have pay equity for women and men doing similar jobs.¹⁴⁸

She argues the gender pay gap closes when there is a determination from business leaders to put pay equity on the agenda (literally), adopt transparent pay scales and criteria for promotion (as is the case in the Australian Public Service) and monitor and report on pay and promotion data from a gender equity perspective.

Beth Gaze, an associate professor in law at the University of Melbourne, argues that 'pay transparency is one of the main reasons why the pay gap is lower in the public sector, where pay rates tend to be more public and standardised'.¹⁴⁹ She cites a number of countries, including the United Kingdom and New Zealand, that are adopting pay transparency. Where pay levels are secret, women may be less likely to challenge their pay due to a combination of socialisation and lack of information.

Employers can be more active in addressing workplace inequalities by conducting gender equity 'audits' — regularly analysing the number and positions of women employees, identifying gender pay gaps and assessing the availability and use of flexible work arrangements. This signals that gender

equity is important to the organisation. Australia has made some progress, but WGEA recently found that only 24% of employers reported that they had undertaken a gender pay gap analysis, and only 18% had included pay equity objectives in their remuneration strategy or policy.¹⁵⁰

5. Commit to cultural change

At the launch of the 2013 COAG Reform Council's publication *Tracking Equity: Comparing Outcomes for Women and Girls Across Australia*, John Brumby, the Chairman of the Council and former Premier of Victoria, observed that a key challenge in addressing persistent gender inequity was to change cultural attitudes towards women, both within organisations and in society. Michaelia Cash, the current Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Women, has also recognised the importance of cultural change, stating: 'It is clear that unconscious bias is a significant factor within Australian workplaces and industries'.¹⁵¹

Increasingly, leaders are recognising that the responsibility for change does not sit solely with women, and men in positions of leadership must take on the task of cultural change. Many men are taking up the challenge, as individuals and through programs such as Male Champions of Change. This group, established by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Elizabeth Broderick, comprises male CEOs, board members and senior government figures

who have committed to prioritising and promoting women's greater representation in leadership roles within their own organisations and across Australian society.

With leadership and commitment, workplace cultures can change. For example, in the United States, Mark Weinberger, CEO of the large corporation EY, committed to change the culture of overwork and long hours to address high staff turnover and to meet the demand for better work–life balance. Under his leadership, the company introduced processes to measure and report on work/family initiatives. These measures were not specifically targeted at women: the aim was to create a more family friendly, healthy workplace for all.

6. Champion sharing of care and redesign jobs

There is an urgent need to acknowledge and compensate for the unequal distribution of the benefits and burdens of paid work and unpaid care. A broad-ranging agenda is required to address the short- and longer-term impacts of ongoing care responsibilities, and develop strategies to enable the more equal distribution of care and work. In the meantime, it is important to develop and implement strategies to ensure that women's disproportionate responsibility for caring does not increase their risks of poverty at present and in later life.

The impact of caring responsibilities on women's workforce participation and earnings could be reduced — or at least shared more equally between men and women — if more men were willing to take on greater caring roles and reduce their paid work participation and use 'flexible' work options like part-time work or job-sharing. Bettina Cass has suggested that the quality of part-time and casual work might also improve if a flexible pattern of work became the norm for both men and women.¹⁵²

Changes in standard job design could encourage changes in men's (and women's) patterns of work and care. There is ample research on how jobs could be redesigned to be healthier and more equitable for all workers across the life course. For example, reducing or restricting maximum work hours and workloads for full-time and part-time workers can help women and men to manage their working lives, and can give men more time to participate in family care. Such changes can also improve men's and women's health and wellbeing, give them more time to pursue education and more time to rest, relax and socialise. This is particularly important for women, who are more likely than men to report feeling always or often rushed or pressed for time. Job redesign and a move away from a 'long-hours' work culture are important for gender equity. Indeed, Harvard scholar Claudia Goldin argues that:

the gender gap in pay would be considerably reduced and might vanish altogether if firms did not have an incentive to disproportionately reward individuals who labored long hours and who worked particular hours.¹⁵³

Changes to the design of work and flexible work options must be accompanied by a wider change in attitudes about paid work and care. Employers should foster a culture that is supportive of flexible work for both men and women, while minimising the career penalties that accrue to part-time and casual workers. Making flexible work options available to all workers — and making flexibility the ‘norm’ for men and women rather than an exception mainly reserved for women — would encourage and enable more women to stay in the workforce while enabling more men to combine paid work and family care.

Greater awareness of the social and economic value of caring could also improve employers’ willingness to offer flexibility, and employees’ willingness to share care more equally in the home. The community in general might be more likely to support caring if we acknowledged that caring is both universal and valuable. It is universal in the sense that everyone needs to give and receive care at some times in our lives. It is valuable in that it makes a meaningful and useful contribution to the community, and the provision of unpaid care enables other members of society to participate in paid work.

7. Invest in structural supports for combining care and paid work

In addition to encouraging more equal sharing of care within families, affordable high-quality and flexible child care for mothers (and fathers) is an essential element of the social infrastructure needed to address women's inequalities in both the workplace and the home. The provision of high-quality early childhood education and care has the added advantage of improving outcomes for children, particularly disadvantaged children, and increasing children's future economic productivity, which benefits the whole community.

Similarly, care services and policies must recognise that care is required across the life course and enable women and men with caring responsibilities to move in and out of paid employment without suffering serious economic or career disadvantage. Significant contradictions exist in social policies which assume that people are available to provide unpaid care, while at the same time promoting an 'adult worker model' as the norm, with all citizens expected to be economically independent through paid work participation.

There is also an urgent need to ensure that income support payments are sufficient to enable sole parents (most of whom are sole mothers) and their children to have a decent quality of life. In particular, an increased rate of Newstart Allowance or extended availability of

Parenting Payment could improve sole mothers' economic security while enabling them to combine care with paid work.

Taking the seven steps outlined in this section would move Australia further towards equity for women and girls.