



Factsheet: Equality of women

Background Information

Australia has legislation that protects women from unfair treatment on the basis of their sex, marital or relationship status, pregnancy, family responsibilities and breastfeeding. It also makes sexual harassment against the law. Despite the legal framework, significant issues still exist around workplace equality, family and caring responsibilities, and violence.

Key Issue – Women and work

Positive actions regarding women in the workplace include the increase in the number of women on boards,¹ and the enactment of the *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012* (Cth). The Act requires the provision of benchmark data using a reporting framework. The most recent benchmark data identified the under-representation of women in management positions with women comprising only 26.1% of management positions and 17.3% of Chief Executive Officer positions.² As of November 2014, the national gender pay gap had widened to 18.8% with men on average earning \$298 more than women per week.³

Women in Australia continue to do the majority of unpaid caring and domestic work,⁴ and are more likely to experience discrimination in the workplace, including on the basis of pregnancy, parental leave and return to work. The Commission has previously noted the need for outstanding recommendations from the 2008 Senate Inquiry into the effectiveness of the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* (Cth).⁵ Implementation of the outstanding recommendations would assist in addressing pregnancy and return to work discrimination.

Each of these factors contribute to a significant gap in women's retirement savings.

Recommendation

Government implement measures to close the gender pay gap, strengthen the representation of women in leadership and managerial roles, value and recognise unpaid caring work, and address the gap in retirement savings to assure women economic security in later life.

Recommendation

Government amend the Sex Discrimination Act 1984 (Cth) to improve its effectiveness.

Key Issue – Violence against women

Violence against women remains a critical and endemic issue in Australia. Statistics suggest that 41% of women aged 18 and over having experience violence in their lifetime. Positive steps have been taken by the Australian Government to reduce violence against women in the last five years. In particular, through the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–22 delivered through four three-year Action Plans.⁶ The National Foundation to Prevent Violence against Women and their Children (Ourwatch) and Australia’s National Research Organisation for Women’s Safety have also been established.

Legislation has been passed which seeks to respond more effectively to domestic violence and child abuses in the family law system.⁷ Legislation was also passed around flexible working arrangements for those experiencing or supporting someone who is enduring violence in the family or household.⁸

Despite these positive events, the prevalence of domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment and community attitudes about violence against women have not substantially improved. Under-resourcing of crisis and support services continues with inadequate levels of support available for women in rural and remote areas, women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disabilities, and lesbian, trans and intersex women.

In response to violence against women occurring within the Australian Defence Force (ADF), a review and subsequent audit was conducted into the treatment of women in the ADF. The Australian Defence Force has now committed to cultural reform, including efforts towards ensuring organisational diversity and inclusivity, particularly for women.⁹

On 24 September 2015 the Australian Government announced a \$100 million package to respond to family and domestic violence by enhancing women’s safety. This includes funding for legal assistance, improved frontline support and services and providing education resources to help change community attitudes. Funding has also been targeted towards Indigenous women and communities.¹⁰

Recommendation

That implementation of the National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and their Children reflect the diversity of women, and include adequate, sustained funding for programs and services and independent monitoring and evaluation.

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- ¹ Women on Boards, *ASX200 in 2013*. At <http://www.womenonboards.org.au/pubs/bdi/2013/asx.htm> (viewed 30 June 2015).
- ² Workplace Gender Equality Agency, *Australia's gender equality scorecard* (November 2014), p 3. At https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/2013-14_summary_report_website.pdf (viewed 30 June 2015).
- ³ Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 'National gender pay gap at record high of 18.8%', (Media Release, 26 February 2015). At <https://www.wgea.gov.au/news-and-media/national-gender-pay-gap-record-high-188> (viewed 30 June 2015).
- ⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Caring in the Community, Australia*, Catalogue no. 4436.0 (2012). At <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/4436.0Main%20Features22012?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4436.0&issue=2012&num=&view=#Chapter2> (viewed 30 June 2015); Australian Human Rights Commission, *Investing in care: Recognising and valuing those who care. Volume 1: Research Report* (2013). At <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/publications/investing-care-recognising-and-valuing-those-who-care> (viewed 30 June 2015).
- ⁵ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Supporting Working Parents: Pregnancy and Return to Work National Review – Report* (2014), p 118. At <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/publications/supporting-working-parents-pregnancy-and-return-work> (viewed 30 June 2015).
- ⁶ For example, the *Action Plan to Address Violence against Women and Children 2012-2015* by the Victorian Government. Victorian Government, *Victoria's Action Plan to Address Violence against Women and Children 2012-2015* (2012). At <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/about-the-department/plans,-programs-and-projects/plans-and-strategies/women/action-plan-to-address-violence-against-women-and-children> (viewed 10 October 2014).
- ⁷ *Family Law Legislation Amendment (Family Violence and Other Measures) Act 2011* (Cth).
- ⁸ *Fair Work Amendment Act 2013* (Cth).
- ⁹ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force Audit Report 2014*. At <https://defencereview.humanrights.gov.au/reports> (viewed 22 June 2015).
- ¹⁰ Prime Minister of Australia, *Media Release – Women's Safety Package to Stop the Violence* (24 September 2015). At <http://www.pm.gov.au/media/2015-09-24/womens-safety-package-stop-violence> (viewed 24 September 2015).