

Inquiry: Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Amendment Bill

This statement from BPW Australia responds to the Inquiry in to the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Amendment Bill 2012.

BPW Australia develops the professional, leadership and business potential of women on all levels through advocacy, mentoring, networking, skill building and economic empowerment programs and projects around the world.

BPW Australia supports the expansion of the Act to men and all employers and employees in the workplace by amending the short title of the Act to Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012. With a primary focus of increasing women's full participation in the workforce, BPW Australia is cognizant of the structural changes required by business to deliver equal opportunity and flexible workplaces for all employees – men and women. The renaming of the Agency serves to reinforce this.

BPW Australia notes the emphasis on advice and educative functions to be provided by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency. Given that there remains no requirement for business with fewer than 100 employees to report to the Agency it is imperative that the Agency find new ways of encouraging small and medium businesses (SMEs) to openly embrace a commitment to gender equity. With more than two million businesses providing employment for more than five million workers it is critical that they attract and retain the best possible employees. Preliminary research undertaken via economicSecurity4Women in 2010, *"What Business Wants - A project assessing SMEs attitudes and approach to gender equity in the workplace and female participation in the workforce"* and additional research in 2011 *"Attitude to Gender Pay Equity in Small Firms"* confirms that there is a genuine need for increased education and simple tools to assist in the adoption of gender equity practices. We encourage the Agency to promote the principles of the United Nations Global Compact to Australian business, and in particular the Women's Empowerment Principles – Equality Means Business; such principles act as a guide to business of all sizes to ensure that women's talents, skills and experience is fully utilized.

BPW Australia commends the expansion of reporting requirements to include agreed gender equality indicators. Collection and analysis of the indicators will provide the sort of longitudinal data that will help industry address critical issues such as the gender pay gap, the inadequate representation of women in senior decision making roles and barriers to the participation of women and girls in non traditional roles – both in attraction and retention. With business facing critical skill shortages in the coming decades they cannot afford to lose two out of five workers over a matter as basic as pay inequity. This was just one of the findings from a 2011 *Equal Pay Day survey*, along with the fact that nearly a third of respondents were contemplating opening their own business as there was no career path at their current employ, or a workplace that offered flexibility.

It is only through identifying the practices that lead to barriers to the employment and career progression of women that systemic discrimination can be reversed. With a large proportion of working women employed with organizations not reporting to the Agency (either because they work for SMEs or in the public Services) BPW Australia remains concerned that proposed changes to the Act may not go far enough to bring about the required restructure of traditional work models to ensure that pay disparity is highlighted; that women's skills are not undervalued and therefore underpaid; that provisions for

flexible employment and part time work do not have an adverse effect on career advancement when utilised even by senior employees. Compliance of reporting must be improved to provide consistent data and trends. Given the paucity of data available from Fair Work Australia on such basic information as success or denial around Right to Refuse we implore the Agency to work to ensure maximum compliance in reporting.

BPW Australia has been an advocate for gender pay equity for more than sixty years and will continue to support change that can improve women's full participation in all aspects of the economy, returning benefits to individuals and business alike.

<http://www.security4women.org.au/wp-content/uploads/What-Business-Wants-Report-for-S4W-Final-Report.pdf>

Barrett, R. 2012. Attitudes to Gender Pay Equity in Smaller Firms. economic Security 4 Women. North Sydney NSW. Viewed at http://www.security4women.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Attitudes-to-Gender-Pay-Equity-in-Small-Firms_Final-Report_v2_Feb-20122.pdf

<http://www.security4women.org.au/wp-content/uploads/SurveyMonkeyEqualPayDay2011.pdf>

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