

Individual Expert Submission

Melanie O'Toole

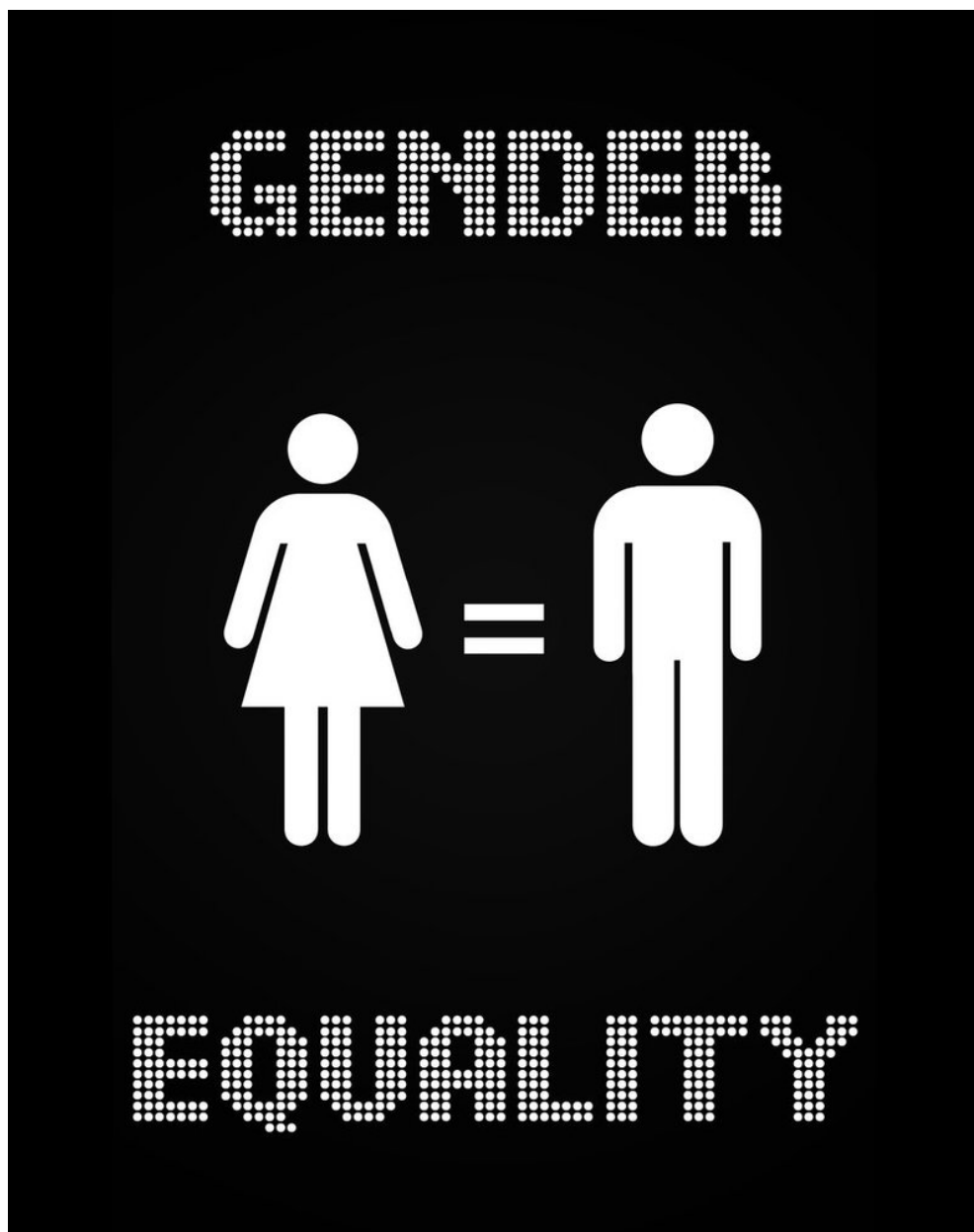
To the

Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee

on the

Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Amendment Bill 2012.

March 2012



Introduction

Since my childhood days, I have been working and volunteering in Australia and abroad to improve the opportunities of girls and women in employment and business. For more than 10 years, I have represented Australia at numerous international meetings, focused on post secondary education and training, equal opportunity and entrepreneurship, and was a former board member of the United Nations Development Fund for Women.

As an Asian linguist and export specialist, I have also seized the opportunities to work in five different countries in the developed and developing world. I have been privileged to be part of government and community level dialogue to improve legislative and employment practices for women in China, New Zealand, Japan, and Singapore – some of Australia's closest trading partners. Much valuable work was also accomplished during my term as Singapore-Australia Young Business Ambassador in the area of improving women's representation on boards.

Despite the many gains of earlier community advocates and parliamentarians to whom I am very grateful for the current protections and benefits that my peers and I enjoy, inequity still persists in many parts of the Australian working environment for young and older working women. This concerns me greatly, and is not consistent with the Australian value of "a fair go".

The outcomes and observations provided below capture some of these local and international experiences, networks and research.

Australian Context

In the past two decades, the proportion of women earning their own incomes has risen. In 1982, women had a 31 percent share of all income received by men and women. By 2006 this share had increased to 38 percent. Legislative leverages during this period I believe were strong catalysts for the improved financial status of women. Legislation included the implementation of the Sex Discrimination Act of 1984 and the Affirmative Action (Equality in Employment) Act 1986.¹ In more recent times, compulsory superannuation was effected in the early 1990s, giving many women across all occupations not just the public service, the first chance of compulsory savings for retirement.

Robust legislation and moreover dedicated oversight and sanctions are still required to ensure that the existing and emerging human rights to decent employment for women are protected.

The current working environment faced by the women of Australia is still experiencing many systematic inequities. These include but are not limited to:

- Despite making up half the workforce, women in full-time paid work still earn 17.8% less than men in full-time paid workⁱⁱ; amounting to over one million dollars less over a lifetimeⁱⁱⁱ;
- While women are now more likely to have a tertiary qualification than men, women graduates will earn \$2,000 less than male graduates and \$7,400 less by the fifth year after graduation^{iv};
- Less than 9 percent of women are represented as tradespersons and technicians^v;
- Fewer than 8 percent of board directors are women^{vi};
- Women are four times as likely to experience sexual harassment, bullying and discrimination in the workplace compared to men^{vii}.
- Women pay more for income protection insurance compared to men of the same age and occupation^{viii}.
- Access to meaningful workplace flexibility policies and practices still remains at low levels across the business community and yet the economic, social and environmental benefits of having such practices in place are considerable. In other locations such as San Francisco and New York it is common place within the public service and corporate world for staggered starting and finishing times to help reduce traffic congestion, and provide greater support for workers to balance work and caring responsibilities. Analysis by the Australian Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics indicates traffic interruptions account for about 40 percent of all vehicle fuel consumption in major cities, contributing 17 percent of total domestic transport greenhouse gas emissions. Yet as little as a 4 percent change in traffic volume can mean the difference between free flowing traffic and gridlock^{ix}.
- The application rate of technologies to enable flexible work is still modest in Australia compared to the USA and Canada. Technologies including web-conferencing, podcasts, webinars and teleconferencing are common place in many of the local small businesses, public services and corporations of the USA and Canada. Again the economic, environmental and social gains in adopting these technologies as part of standard business practices are very positive.

- Study after study has proven that access to quality and affordable childcare and elder care has consistently improved the participation rate of women at all milestones in the work-life cycle. Yet many still miss out on places to support the caring of their young and elderly family members, particularly in regional and rural parts of Australia.

In this climate of a high Australian dollar, increasing global competition, increasing foreign investment in Australian assets, fluctuating weather conditions and a need to boost Australia's productivity levels to remain internationally competitive, more needs to be done at the enterprise level to attract and retain female talent.

Specifically, I provide the following comments in respect to the principal objects of the Act.

- a. To promote and improve gender equality (including equal remuneration between women and men) in employment and in the workplace.**

Australia is a signatory to the United Nations Millennium Goals and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. As a community advocate and entrepreneur, the general undertaking in the business world that I come across of these obligations to women is very poor. This is further demonstrated by the small number of Australian firms that are signatories to the United Nations Global Compact and the Women's Empowerment Principles. See the complete list at: http://www.unglobalcompact.org/issues/human_rights/equality_means_business.html

Suggested recommendation:

That Federal, State and Territory Governments invest in public e-marketing campaigns (e.g. webinars, fact sheets downloadable from government and regulatory worksites) to draw attention to the economic and social benefits of equality in employment.

- b. To support employers to remove barriers to the full and equal participation of women in the workforce, in recognition of the disadvantaged position of women in relation to employment matters.**

Suggested recommendations:

Small Business

According to Australian Bureau of Statistics, small business is the largest employer of Australians. Therefore, I ask the Committee to investigate the feasibility of remodeling

and reintroducing the former DEEWR's Workplace Flexibility Grants for small business. The program could be a co-contribution funding arrangement between government and small business to invest in physical infrastructure to enable participation and retention of women in the workplace. Physical infrastructure including but not limited to: parenting rooms for breastfeeding; technologies to enable offsite communication with colleagues, peers, clients and suppliers; female only toilets and change-rooms; onsite childcare facilities and more.

Investigate more innovative taxation incentives to allow smaller to mid sized firms to establish onsite childcare facilities and provide salary sacrificing arrangements for childcare for their workers, which have long been awarded to large businesses, universities, hospitals and TAFE colleges.

Government & Statutory Authorities

That TAFE colleges, universities, government and statutory buildings be equipped with parenting rooms to enable working women and students to breastfeed or express safely.

Older Working Women

The ABS *Work Related Injuries* report found that people aged 65 years and over had the lowest rate of work-related injuries and illnesses^x. As people are working and living longer due to advancements in medicine (particularly women), that the Federal Government work with State and Territory Governments to remove the age limits on worker compensation schemes and income protection insurance. So far Queensland and Western Australia have removed age limits on their workers compensation schemes^{xi}.

That the Federal Government works with the Insurance Council of Australia to lift the age limit on income protection insurance and to bring equity to insurance premiums paid by women.

Board and Committee Composition

That all businesses in receipt of government grants and contracts be obligated to have a board composition that is diverse (gender, age, nationality). Further, that the recruitment of board vacancies is advertised and open to the public.

Companies that make a priority of gender diversity tend to have operating margins twice as high as those that do not. Further, there is a positive correlation between the share of female managers and return on assets and equity^{xii}.

Submitted by:

Melanie O'Toole

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- Independent Board Director
- Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, Women Leaders Network Policy Contributor
- Economic Adviser, National Council for Women
- Founding State member of *Women in Global Business* – Federal/State Government Initiative to improve the participation rate of women involved in global business. www.wigb.gov.au
- Columnist, *Women of China*, and numerous other gender and business focused publications.

Photo 1: Australian Delegation Team, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Women in the Economy Summit, USA, September 2011



Photo 2: (left to right) Tina Tchen, Chief of Staff, Office of the First Lady, USA and Melanie O'Toole, Australian delegate, APEC Women and the Economy Summit, USA, September 2011.

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- ⁱ ABS 4102.0 Australian Social Trends 2008: Women's incomes At"
<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/4102.02008?OpenDocument> (Viewed 20 March 2012)
- ⁱⁱ ABS cat. No. 6320.0 AWOTE February 2011 (Released November 2011)
- ⁱⁱⁱ Cassells, R., Miranti, R., Nepal, B and Tanton, R., (2009), *She Works Hard for the Money: Australian Women and the Gender Divide*, AMP/NatSEM Income and Wealth Report, Issue 22.
- ^{iv} Ibid.
- ^v ABS 6105.0, Labour Market Statistics, January 2011 (Released 16 July 2010) Employment type 1992-2009, Table 6.
- ^{vi} Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, *2011 EOWA Australian Census on Women in Leadership Report*, January 2012.
- ^{vii} Australian Human Rights Commission, *Gender Equality Statistics*, 2011.
- ^{viii} <http://www.ratedetective.com.au/insurance/why-do-females-have-pay-more-income-protection-insurance.htm>
- ^{ix} Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Australian Transport: Base Case Projections to 2020 – Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics. See www.bitre.gov.au
- ^x Australian Bureau of Statistics, 6324.0 – *Work Related Injuries*, Australia 2009-10.
- ^{xi} Australian Human Rights Commission, "Financial Rights are Human Rights for Older Women", The Hon. Susan Ryan AO speech to Women in Super NSW lunch, 6 February 2012.
- ^{xii} Women Matter: Gender Diversity, a Corporate Performance Driver, McKinsey, 2007. Women Matter 2: Female Leadership, A Competitive Edge for the Future, McKinsey, 2008.