

# FROM EQUAL OPPORTUNITY TO GENDER EQUALITY

Gender equity is a business issue, not a women's issue.

Changes to the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWWA) and Act (EOWW Act) reflect new thinking about gender diversity in the workplace, that suggests we should:

- Stop treating gender equity as a women's problem and instead treat it as a business imperative, and
- Set up workplaces to be more worker friendly, not just women friendly. This will result in benefits flowing to men, women and the organisation as a whole.

## New focus on caring role

The changes will include the renaming and broadening of the EOWW Act, "to encompass women and men, particularly in relation to caring responsibilities".<sup>1</sup>

The new focus on men and women's caring responsibilities was recently supported by Sue Morphet, the CEO of Pacific Brands. Ms Morphet was quoted advocating the "go home for dinner culture". She said that "the most important thing to keep women on their way to senior executive roles... is to ensure that men and women take accountability for the domestic environment".<sup>2</sup>

## What are the changes?

- From EOWW Act and EOWWA to *Workplace Gender Equity Act* ("the Act") and *Gender Equality Agency* ("the Agency").
- Act to be broadened to encompass women and men, particularly in relation to caring responsibilities.
- Businesses able to report online.
- Reports to contain data rather than policy, to shift the focus from gender equity intentions to outcomes in the workplace.
- CEOs and employee representatives to sign off on reports to the Agency.
- Reports to the Agency to be accessible for employees and shareholders.
- The Agency to conduct reviews to ensure accuracy.
- Businesses to demonstrate progress against industry-level benchmarks.
- Government to only contract and deal with those who comply with the Act.

- Businesses that do not comply to be named in Parliament.
- The Agency to provide support to organisations with fewer than 100 employees (not required to report), in the form of advice, education and incentive activities.

The changes, due to take effect in 2013, are described by the Minister for Employment Participation and Childcare and Minister for the Status of Women, Kate Ellis, as a way of making the Agency more effective and cutting red tape and compliance costs for business.<sup>3</sup>

## Will these changes help?

The reforms are to be applauded, and build momentum in Australia for action on gender diversity and pay equity. The business case for gender equity is now well established. Studies repeatedly demonstrate positive correlations between women in leadership roles and profitability, creativity and positive corporate governance.<sup>4</sup> Australian organisations should start moving from questioning the "why" of gender diversity to asking "how".

One troubling aspect of the focus on caring responsibilities of the Act and Agency reforms is the implicit assumption that the major obstacle to women's lack of representation in leadership roles and pay equity is women's disproportionate caring roles. Research in the US and Australia suggests that this is only part of the problem.

Research by the Professor of Business Administration at Harvard Business School, Kathleen McGinn, says the two best supported hypotheses for why women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles are:

- They bear a disproportionate share of child-rearing and household responsibilities, and
- Gender biases in the workplace make women less acceptable in senior roles.<sup>5</sup>

McGinn concludes that the notion of senior leadership in many organisations is gendered and masculine, but the practice and outcomes of leadership are not. In Australia, Dr Hannah Piterman, in *Unlocking Gender Potential: A leader's handbook* says:

"The alignment of leadership and masculinity is the major recurring theme that emerges from the evidence. This phenomenon impacts on every aspect of workplace structure and culture. Entrenched beliefs regarding gender roles in organisations and society see leadership as an enterprise that privileges males and masculinity."<sup>6</sup>

This issue of unconscious bias can be dealt with through quotas, review, reform of promotion processes and training on unconscious bias and negotiation.

The changes to the Act and the Agency represent a good step forward. The changes aim to allow men the freedom to participate equally in caring roles and will hopefully normalise a family and life friendly workplace.

I hope that the help to be provided by the Act and the Agency will go some way to dealing with unconscious bias against women in senior leadership roles. ●

AMANDA STEVENS is a member of the Victorian Women Lawyers (VWL) Work Practices Committee. The views expressed are her own and may not be shared by the VWL.

1. [www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women/progserv/economic/Pages/EOWA\\_fact\\_sheet.aspx](http://www.fahcsia.gov.au/sa/women/progserv/economic/Pages/EOWA_fact_sheet.aspx).

2. [www.heraldsun.com.au/news/more-news/go-home-for-dinner-says-female-ceo/story-fn7x8me2-1226063636828](http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/more-news/go-home-for-dinner-says-female-ceo/story-fn7x8me2-1226063636828).

3. [www.kateellis.com.au/newsroom/466](http://www.kateellis.com.au/newsroom/466).

4. McKinsey & Company (2007) *Women Matter: Gender diversity, a corporate performance driver*, Catalyst (2007) *The Bottom Line: Corporate Performance and Women's Representation on Boards*; Smith, M. (2008), *Diversity and Business Performance*, Presentation, AICD 2008 EOWA Census launch; CAMAC, *Corporations and Markets Advisory Committee, Diversity on Boards of Directors Report, 2009*; ASX Corporate Governance Council Recommendations on Diversity, 2009; McKinsey & Company (2010) *Women Matter: Women leaders, a competitive edge in and after the crisis*. Insync Surveys and Gender Worx, *Gender Agenda: Unlocking the power of diversity in the boardroom*, 2010 based on the views of 849 directors on 105 Australian and New Zealand boards.

5. McGinn, K. (2011) Harvard Business School, *Presentation to the Women's Leadership Forum*, May 2011.

6. Piterman, H. (2010) *Unlocking Gender Potential: A leader's handbook*, p.xix.