

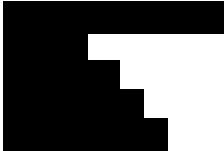
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Soroptimist International  
of Brisbane Inc

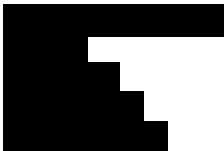
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## SUBMISSION ON THE REVIEW OF THE WORKPLACE GENDER EQUALITY ACT 2012 FROM SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL OF BRISBANE INC

### A. OVERVIEW AND INTRODUCTION

- **Soroptimist International of Brisbane Inc** takes this significant opportunity to provide this submission to the Review Committee within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet on the targeted Review of the Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012.
- Our membership base consists of business, community, and professional women who advocate for women and girls. As part of the global advocacy organisation, Soroptimist International, our network of around 72,000 club members in 121 countries works at a local, national, and international level to Educate, Empower and Enable opportunities for women and girls.
- As we witness growing numbers of women engaged in paid employment across the world, the workplace is not a gender-equal domain. Violence and sexual harassment continue to be pervasive and gender discrimination is often the norm. These forms of inequality in the workplace are not acceptable. There should be zero tolerance for violence and harassment since they are antithetical to rights to equal opportunity for all.
- Women engaged in paid employment is a significant measure of their empowerment. For the workplace to be a true gender-equal space, we must eradicate every inequality, discrimination, and disadvantage that women face based on their gender identity.
- We believe that the Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 has been providing strategic value in developing, promoting, and improving workplace gender equality in Australia. However, there is wonderful opportunity to make it more effective in facilitating better gender equality outcomes.
- Building on progress to date and drawing from our knowledge and lived experiences in diverse workplaces, **we hereby outline relevant issues and propose ways (based on the discussion paper) to enhance the Act that will drive genuine change to achieve workplace gender equality outcomes in Australia.**

## B. ISSUES AND PROPOSED ACTIONS

### 1. Function, powers, and effectiveness of the Workplace Gender Equality Act (WGEA)

- To be effective, we consider the functions and powers of WGEA **require clearer and stronger focus and alignment** with the UN Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs), primarily in the context of **Goal 5: Gender Equality**. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development <sup>1</sup>provides a global blueprint for dignity, peace, and prosperity for people and the planet, now and in the future. **Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world.**<sup>2</sup>
- **We recommend a significant increase in budget and resourcing** (both physical and human) **for the WGE agency to enable better implementation of tasks** such as:
  - enhancing employer development and engagement
  - providing targeted education and training, better tools, and employer resources to enable reporting
  - leading practice programs
  - contributing to public discussions on gender equality.

### 2. Improvement strategies to achieve gender equality in workplaces

- As gathered from our knowledge and practical experiences, workplace gender inequities and inequalities have been significantly inherent in **recruitment and selection processes**, particularly in male-dominated industries. Studies show that gender bias can lead to productivity losses.<sup>3 4 5</sup>
- We believe that standardised interviews and skills-based assessments can help address the issue along with salary transparency and offering flexible working arrangements to allow for childcare and family responsibilities.
- Despite considerable efforts to improve gender equality in the workplace, women still earn less than their male colleagues and remain under-represented at senior levels (including in Wholesale Trade, Manufacturing, Electricity, Gas and Water and Waste Services, and Mining). **Employers have been understating or ignoring the benefits of workplace gender equality.**
- **We recommend** that the WGEA integrate and promote **the following strategies to improve gender equality in Australian workplaces:**
  - a) Develop a longer shortlist when recruiting  
Workplace recruiters should make informal shortlist longer to increase the women-to-men ratio of vacancy candidates.
  - b) Reduce and remove the gender pay gap.  
Employers can promote gender equality in the workplace by being transparent about wages, to ensure women are not receiving less than men in equivalent roles. Pay scales can encourage female applicants and employees to negotiate their wages by giving an indication of reasonable expectations for a particular role.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2015), *Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*

<sup>2</sup>UN Global Compact (2020), *Women's Empowerment and Business: 2020 Trends and Opportunities*

<sup>3</sup>Nabila Ahmed, *An Unapologetic Old Boys' Network Is Costing Australia Billions*, (1 October 2021- Bloomberg Equality),

<https://www.bloomberq.com/news/features/2021-09-30/why-australia-s-gender-inequality-problem-is-costing-the-country-billions>

<sup>4</sup> KPMG, Diversity Council of Australia, and Workplace Gender Equality Agency, *She's Price(d)less: The economics of the gender pay gap* (2019)

<sup>5</sup> Joe Caccavale, *Data-backed strategies for improving gender equality in the workplace* (22 January 2021 – Applied),

<https://www.beapplied.com/post/gender-bias-in-hiring-report>

c) Use skills-based assessments and structured interviews in recruitment processes

Employers can use skills-based assessments and structured interviews to reduce the risk of unfair bias. Other than interviews, a strategy is to ask candidates to **perform tasks** based on the role they are applying for. This enables the assessment of **skills suitability**. Employers can standardise the tasks and use a scoring system to ensure fairness across candidates.

Relatedly, unstructured interviews are more likely to allow unfair bias. Employers should use **structured interviews** that:

- i. ask the same questions of all candidates in a predetermined order and format, and
- ii. grade the responses using pre-specified, standardised criteria. This makes the responses comparable and reduces the impact of unconscious bias. The development of resources, tools, and training can assist employers to use skills-based assessments and structured interviews.

d) Develop workplace initiatives that consciously encourage women to mentor men

- A strategic approach to improve gender equality in the workplace is by letting women mentor men. Mentoring in the workplace have proved invaluable in helping an employee progress their career and the benefits have been well documented. Studies also show that workplace equality improves when women mentor men.<sup>6</sup>
- Specific strategies that encourage women mentoring men could benefit both parties (and the society as a whole) by allowing people to learn more about different working and leadership styles. We need to encourage more women mentoring men to generate more empathy, better co-operation, and effective collaboration.

e) Make work-life balance policy a priority

- Improving work-life balance can benefit both men and women. Employers with work-life balance policies (part-time, job-share, flexible working arrangements, etc.) experience a significant increase in women applying for jobs. It also saw a rise in applications from men.
- Gender equality in the workplace also widens considerably after women have children – an issue which can be tackled by **shared parental leave policies** and enabling working parents to share childcare more equally.

### 3. Coverage of the WGEA and definition of 'relevant employer'

- **We recommend that the WGEA cover Commonwealth, State, or Territory public sectors.** We endorse recommendation 43(a) of the *Respect@Work* report,<sup>7</sup> *Roadmap to Respect*, to mandate public sector organisations reporting on gender equality programs and initiatives.
- As noted in the *Women's Budget Statement 2021-22*, we recommend that WGEA adapt its reporting and data management system for the public sector and work with relevant agencies to ensure a more comprehensive, representative, and accurate data set of the Australian workforce.
- We believe that these changes will assist public and private sector organisations to develop benchmark performance (with each other) and provide a better assessment and understanding of progress against gender equality indicators, including those that address sexual harassment in the workplace.

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<sup>6</sup> Adi Gaskell, *Workplace equality improves when women mentor men* (18 February 2021 – Forbes)

<sup>7</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission (2020), *Respect@Work: Sexual Harassment National Inquiry Report*

- Similarly, we recommend to expand public sector reporting to include state and territory public sector agencies to further increase the data bank coverage of the Australian workforce.

#### 4. Gender equality indicators (GEIs)

- Australia's commitment to gender equality must start with collecting, reviewing, and responding to data about workplace equality. Although data and numbers may not provide a complete story, they offer a pathway in identifying where to focus attention and **GEIs can trigger strategies to improve gender equality outcomes.**
- GEIs relate to key areas of workplace gender equality and outline the data for collection and tracking<sup>8</sup>. They support workplaces to:
  - reflect on the status of gender equality in the organisation
  - establish a baseline to track progress
  - engage in critical discussions of workplace barriers
  - make the case for resourcing that promote gender equality.
- Workplace progress indicators overlap with GEIs, and most Australian workplaces are already collecting them, so this does not put an additional burden on employers' reporting.
- **We recommend that the WGEA align workplace GEIs with leading practice indicators** as follows:
  - 1) *The ratio of men to women in the workforce, overall and by teams*
  - 2) *The ratio of men to women in leadership and management positions -- including board, executive, senior, and middle management levels*
  - 3) *The ratio of male and female new hires and internal promotions, by level and department*
  - 4) *The average salary gap between female and male staff members across the organisation and by department*
  - 5) *Comparison of male and female staff and managers who use flexible work arrangements*
  - 6) *Comparison of male and female staff who use and return from parental leave with continued employment for 12 months*
  - 7) *Changes in staff perception of workplace culture as measured by annual staff survey*
  - 8) *The reported incidence of sex-based discrimination and harassment.*
- Collecting data on these key indicators can help determine an organisation's long-term strategy and assist in the development of annual action plans. Workplace GEIs can highlight areas of inequality and it is essential to create opportunities for staff to provide feedback on their experience in the workplace and their views on why inequality persists. Employers can use a range of employee engagement strategies: direct consultation, staff surveys, focus groups, or facilitated dialogues about identified barriers to achieving gender equality outcomes.
- **We also endorse opportunities to use single-touch payroll (STP) data** both to enhance gender equality data and to reduce the reporting burden on employers.

#### 5. Data collection: diversity and inclusion criteria

- As the focus of WGEA is on gender equality, the **definition of gender must reflect contemporary and best practices.** This should integrate a significant understanding and consideration of intersectionality.<sup>9</sup> Intersectionality refers to how multiple forms of discrimination – based on gender, race, sexuality, disability, age, and class – overlap and interact with one another to shape how different individuals and groups experience discrimination.'

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<sup>8</sup> United Nations Development Programme (2019), *Gender Responsive Indicators*

- The concept of intersectionality can help organisations better understand the dimensions of gender inequality and its complexity. An *intersectionality* is a tool for analysis, advocacy, and policy development that addresses multiple discriminations and helps us understand how different sets of identities impact access to rights and opportunities.
- **We recommend amendments to the diversity and inclusion criteria** that would include definitions for man, woman, and non-binary people. Any references to sex-based harassment and discrimination within the Act and its allied instruments and standards must be inclusive of gender-based harassment and discrimination.
- **We also recommend the collection of data on gender and intersectional diversity attributes** including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background, cultural background, and disability. To further support true diversity and inclusion information and strategies, we recommend collection of data on:
  - 1) *Actual occupation based on the Australia-New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) categories/sub-categories*
  - 2) *Year of birth or Age Range (using ABS question on age)*
  - 3) *Primary place of work by Local Government Area*
  - 4) *Employment exit information including relevant disaggregated data on gender, employment status, employment level, etc.*
  - 5) *Career trajectory changes such as promotion, demotion, transfer-at-level, redundancy, resignation, and termination.*

### C. OTHER RELEVANT ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

- The Australian government needs to note that there are overarching systemic constraints that contribute to persistent gaps in women's economic opportunities. There is a wonderful opportunity to lead actions to reduce those gaps and champion a better approach to gender equality, both in workplaces and in the wider community.
- There is a significant moral and economic case for eradicating violence against women in the workplace and creating an equal playing field that benefits everyone and build better productivity outcomes for Australia. A healthy and safe environment has its benefits for worker engagement and worker relations as well. As paid work becomes central to women's everyday lives, we all need to ensure that women and men are equally valued and recognised.

On behalf of Soroptimist International of Brisbane Inc, thank you once again for the opportunity to provide this submission and we look forward to the outcomes of the Review. Should you have any questions, please contact us per the details provided.

Warmest regards



**LOU DE CASTRO MYLES**

Convenor, Programme/Advocacy



23/11/21

