11th International Conference of the International Coordinating Committee of National Institutions


4-7 November 2012

Amman, Jordan

Session 5: Women’s Empowerment: Economic and social Rights and Political Participation

Professor Gillian Triggs, President, Australian Human Rights Commission: ‘Engaging high-level corporate leadership for gender equality’

[Speech delivered: 7 November, 9.40am – 9.50am]
Honourable guests, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for the opportunity to speak today and I hope that I can add to this morning's remarkable presentations on the challenges and progress around women's empowerment, in the economic social and political spheres.

From the Australian Human Rights Commission's perspective I would like to share with you today a little about the work we have been doing, and in particular, the work of my colleague Ms Elizabeth Broderick, Australia's Sex Discrimination Commissioner to advance gender equality through the engagement of Australia's business community.

The starting point for this work was the recognition, that despite Australia having a strong economy, there is still a significant gap in gender equality and the position of women in paid work. Last week there was released the 7th annual *Global Gender Gap Report 2012*, in which Australia ranked 25th overall in World Economic Forum, dropping from 23rd place in the 2011 report.

Since the first report, Australia's ranking has slipped ten places from 15th in 2006 to 25th in 2012. So while overall Australia may be showing some improvement across the board on gender equality we are failing to see improvements occur at the same rate as other countries. Most notably while we rank highly in the areas of
educational attainment and health and survival, in terms of ‘economic participation and opportunity’ and ‘political empowerment’ we rank much lower.

The barriers women face to improving their economic and political participation in leadership are common to many countries across the world. In Australia

- In 2012, women make up 24.7% of elected positions in federal parliament
- As of June 2011, women held 35% of Government board appointments
- As of October 2012, 15% of ASX200 board positions are held by women.
- Women face a gender pay gap of 17.5%;
- Superannuation balances and payouts for women are approximately half of those of men
- In January 2012, 66% of all women aged 15-64 years in Australia were in employment compared with 78% of men in this age group.
- 46% of women employees work on a part-time basis, compared with 16% of male employees, which reflects the gender inequalities in time spent in unpaid caring roles.
- In the last five-years one in four women have experienced sexual harassment in the workplace.
Given the lack of progress on these issues, the Commission felt that we needed to look at new and different strategies.

One thing that became increasingly clear was that if we were to create change for women in paid work we would need to work not just with women but with those who have power and control the resources in workplaces – both financial and human – that is men.

The research is clear – it is men taking the message of gender equality and women’s leadership to other men that will help break what is called the “cycle of absence” – namely women’s significant under-representation at decision making level across Australia.

So about two years ago, the Sex Discrimination Commissioner established the Male Champions of Change leadership group.

The Male Champions of Change is a group of influential men comprising CEOs and Chairpersons from some of Australia’s most influential organisations. It includes the Chief Executive Officers of Qantas, Telstra, Woolworths, Commonwealth Bank, ANZ, Rio Tinto, as well as influential leaders in other sectors, namely the Head of Army, head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and Head of Treasury – to name just a few.

These men see gender diversity as both a human rights issue and a business imperative. They use their collective influence to progress equality at both an organisational and national level.
Since its inception in 2010 the group has met quarterly and has worked to create change in their own organisations but also they have been national advocates - presented at conferences and events to advocate for greater gender equality. They have spoken at over 60 events in Australia and internationally, in Washington, Rio de Janeiro, and New Zealand. There has been a great deal of interest in the Male Champions of Change strategy and its impact. We have started to see other Male Champion of Change groups being developed, for example the Chiefs of Gender Equity in South Australia and a Male Champions of Change group being developed for the built environment sector in Australia. We have also had significant interest in the strategy from a number of emerging economies.

Last year the group wrote to every business leader in Australia in their collective voice reflecting on their own experience in increasing the representation of women in leadership in their own organisations. The fact that the letter was based on the actual experiences of Australian organisations, and on the insights of CEOs and Board members operating in Australia, makes this a unique piece of research. Over 150,000 copies of the letter have been distributed since it was launched.

The picture I have behind me was taken at the launch, and in many ways it was a significant moment for Australia. It was one of the rare occasions when we saw such a collection of male leaders in one place, advocating for gender equality and women’s leadership. Even more importantly, the room they spoke to was filled with their peers, other
male leaders from the corporate and government sectors, so we had over 400 people mainly men focused on addressing gender equality in Australia.

The letter describes three distinct stages. The first is 'Getting in the Game', where an organisation's CEO becomes interested, numbers are analysed and barriers identified. At this stage the focus is on programs, with the majority of initiatives being driven at an HR level, but tangible returns yet to emerge.

The second is that of 'Getting serious', in which a CEO shifts from merely interested to truly committed. Here, women's representation is given the same emphasis as other transformational goals and responsibility shifts from human resource to line managers. The same measurement approaches are applied as to other business priorities and crucial, highly visible appointments are made. Good progress often occurs, before the impetus begins to lose pace.

Finally, the third stage was that of 'Capturing the Diversity Advantage'. Here diversity becomes a part of the organisational DNA, with the impact seen not just on gender representation but on business performance as well. The shift from Phase 2 to Phase 3 is about identifying - and then addressing - the underlying cultural barriers and assumptions that work against greater representation of women in leadership.

Changing organisational culture is certainly a challenge that many industries face, from the 'institutional stoicism' that demands employees
put work before family, community and sometimes before personal wellbeing; through to unspoken beliefs about the qualities or narrow experience necessary to fulfil a particular job’s requirements.

Most critically, the impact of the work of the Male Champions of Change has been the engagement of male leaders, and most notably leaders in the corporate sector, on prioritising gender equality, gender diversity and women’s leadership, as a mainstream economic and business issue. For example, the Grattan Institute has reported that increasing the workforce participation rates of women by 6% could generate an increase of $25 billion in Australia’s GDP. So it is now becoming widely accepted, that achieving gender equality is a useful goal for Australia’s economy, as well as for our society. This has motivated substantial efforts across Australia to initiate change. In the last 2 years we have seen a doubling of the number of women on company boards – in 2010 women occupied 8.3% of ASX 200 board positions, in 2012 they occupy over 15%.

Since the launch last year, the Male Champions of Change group continues to develop bold and innovative ideas that will make progress. This year they are increasing their efforts even further.

They have divided into 3 self-directed action groups with the intention of supporting each other to drive change within each organisation and nationally. They are meeting more regularly and have decided to explore three themes:
• The role of the leaders (looking at leadership shadows, mining of diaries, create a job description of CEO, looking at who's doing it well);

• Game Changers – “buddying up” with 1 other CEO to identify bold and innovative ideas; and

• Building flexibility into the DNA of organisations – working with all members of their Senior Leadership team to present the case for flexibility.

Over the coming year, they will engage in a series of ‘monitoring experiments’ and I await the results in 2013 with great interest.

This being said, it is important to note that we do not view the male Champions of Change as the only, or most important strategy for change in this area. After all, women have been pursuing gender equality for quite some time now and have done pretty damn well without looking to men to be saved!

Current effective strategies initiated by women, as well as by mixed gender groups are equally important and there are many.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the establishment of the Male Champions of Change was met with a degree of scepticism - some concerned that it might be construed as corporate knights in shining armour, galloping paternalistically into territory that women have occupied for years.

However, we see this group as just one of many strings to our collective bow - a recognition that, as one of their members explains, ‘[t]he rules
of work have been invented by men for men'. So men – particularly those most influential in their respective industries - must be part of the endeavour to reshape those rules.

Conclusion

To cement the future of women in any workplace whether in the government, military or corporate sector, leaders need to identify and discard those organisational elements which may be holding the organisation back – the simplest of changes, in both principle and practice, having the potential to make a difference.

As male Champion of Change member, Cameron Clyne of the National Australian Bank, has observed:

_When you think about it, having more women in leadership is far more under our control than most other business objectives we set for ourselves. This is not beyond our intellectual capability to solve. Excuses are just that._

Certainly, Rosabeth Moss Kantor, a prominent US academic who first described the critical mass of women necessary to achieve change in an organisation, has widely observed that leaders are more powerful role models - when they learn than when they teach\(^1\). That is exactly what the Male Champions of Change are doing. They are not satisfied with a modest increase or even Kantor’s critical mass. They want to model real change for gender equality. And the
Australian Human Rights Commission is keen to support them in this endeavour.

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