



COMMITTEE FOR GEELONG

VICTORIAN GENDER EQUALITY STRATEGY CONSULTATION

SUBMISSION

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1. Introduction

The Committee for Geelong (CfG) is pleased to lodge a submission with the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet, as part of the current Victorian Gender Equality Strategy Consultation.

The CfG is an independent advocate for Geelong that actively looks at ways to solve problems and confront challenges. Our members represent the political spectrum and a breadth of industry both by sector and size. We work with members, leaders, stakeholders and governments to provide strategic leadership and influence to leverage the economic potential of the region to make Geelong a world-class place. The CfG has a history of achieving genuine results for Geelong by influencing policy and challenging the status quo. As a direct result of the tangible outcomes the CfG has achieved, our highly valued opinion is consistently sought by key decision makers.

The CfG welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on gender equality in Victoria.

2. Background

In order to contribute to the consultation process, the CfG facilitated a focus group session with representatives from CfG's highly regarded community leadership program, the Leaders for Geelong program (LfG). LfG is a two year program for emerging leaders from across the breadth of large and small businesses, not for profits and statutory organisations. The program builds individual leadership capacity, educates participants about the challenges and opportunities impacting on the Geelong region, and develops highly networked and community focussed alumni.

The focus group comprised representatives from a diverse mix of professions, sectors and industries including: owners of small and medium sized enterprises, the principal of a professional services firm, lawyers, an engineer, an IT specialist, and other executive managers in their respective fields. In addition, the majority (with the exception of one) are also balancing family priorities whilst working in demanding professional roles.

As a prompt for the discussion, CfG used questions from the Consultation Paper and recorded a summary of the key points raised within each of these important issues.

3. Submission

3.1. The most urgent areas of gender inequality that Victoria should tackle first

3.1.1. Child care

- Affordable and accessible childcare is the most pressing issue that needs to be addressed at government level. Difficulties around access and affordability of childcare are seen as the greatest barrier to career progression for women.

This view is consistent with national (and international) data where childcare continues to be identified as a significant impediment to women's participation in the workforce. The Productivity Commission Report into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning¹ (released in February 2015), noted the need for improvements in the child care and early learning system "*because families are struggling to find*

quality child care and early learning that is flexible and affordable enough to meet their needs and to participate in the workforce”

International models also provide a basis for comparison, with a recent European Union (EU) report¹¹ noting that Swedish parents are among the EU’s most successful in balancing work and family responsibilities. Female and maternal employment rates are among the highest in the EU, and child poverty is among the lowest. The country’s family policy is aimed at supporting the dual-earner family model and ensuring the same rights and obligations regarding family and work for both women and men. Generous spending on family benefits, flexible leave and working hours for parents with young children and affordable, high-quality childcare are seen to be the main factors for success.

- Similarly, by comparison to other countries, Australian women may risk being ‘phased out’ of the workforce when they become mothers. Based on personal experience, several participants recounted difficulties in finding appropriate childcare, lack of flexibility in working hours, and in some circumstances, a perceived ‘boys club’ culture which interrupted their individual career progression. As this was largely a tertiary educated group, it was thought that these factors are even more pressing for women seeking to re-enter the workforce at lower levels.
- Workplace based childcare is regarded as highly desirable for women in professional roles because of both the convenience and well-being benefits it offers for both child and parent. Women highly value the opportunity to breastfeed, or to make contact with their child throughout the day.

There are a growing number of companies who subsidise employees’ offsite care or offer family-friendly working arrangements. According to the Childcare and Early Childhood Learning Report, only three per cent of organisations in Australia currently have their own crèche.

- Beyond long day care or family day care options, women are also looking for guidance and support in hiring their own child care help. There appears to be little guidance on the legal and other implications of employing carers in the home (including nannies), and many women resort to informal arrangements, without due regard for the potential liabilities involved.

For that reason, whilst this degree of flexibility is an advantage, it can also bring a level of personal responsibility that can also prove confusing for both employer and employee.

3.1.2. Education

- Participants expressed an urgent need for widespread education on the economic benefits which result when gender equality is achieved. There seems to be a lack

of awareness about the inequalities that currently exist, and the sometimes simple steps that can be taken to address them are largely unknown.

Data from a recent Essential Media Communications Reportⁱⁱⁱ⁾ suggests that men and women are broadly “in agreement in rejecting the idea that gender equality focuses on the well-off and embracing the proposition that the law has a role in enforcing gender pay equity”.

- Anecdotally it was noted that often, unfortunately, women do not proactively assist or support one another, in gaining equality. Positive role models are extremely important and participants noted the impact this had on the development of their own careers.
- Education is also a major conduit for achieving a ‘cultural shift’ in terms of valuing and respecting the personal choices that women make - whether that be choosing to be a stay at home parent, taking time out to care for elderly relatives, or caring for a person with a disability. Through education, a greater understanding could be achieved of the key transition points in people’s lives, which need to be accommodated as people leave and re-enter the workforce.

Supporting and enabling women to increase their employment participation has been identified as a significant public policy issue, given the ageing of the population and the need to maintain productivity and economic growth. Findings from The Persistent Challenge: Living, Working and Caring in Australia 2014^{iv)} indicate that unless the resources and supports available to women and carers in general are significantly improved, it is unlikely that their employment participation will significantly increase.

3.2. The role of business in addressing gender equality

- Achieving flexibility in the workplace is seen as the potential game changer. Examples in other countries point to much greater flexibility for both men and women in the workforce. Swedish legislation ensures job security when people return to work and workers’ rights, which are generous by Australian standards, are enshrined in legislation.
- Accommodating flexible work arrangements could be seen as challenging for SMEs. However, regional employers are motivated by recruiting and maintaining the “right” person for the job so it is often in their interests to negotiate mutually agreeable conditions. Business owners also identified issues with bureaucratic processes and onerous “red tape”.
- Flexible work solutions are beneficial for men too and may go some way to enabling greater contributions from men to domestic and child caring duties.

- Businesses should be encouraged and incentivised to become 'champions of change' as instigated by Elizabeth Broderick, Former Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner, and Founder of the Male Champions of Change. The Male Champions of Change strategy is about male leaders advocating for and acting to advance gender equality.

3.3. How Government could partner with the community, corporate sector, non-profit sector and other stakeholders to advance gender equality

- It is recommended that the key role of Government is primarily in setting policy, rather in service delivery. Government could partner more closely with other sectors to pilot, investigate and develop frameworks that support workplace flexibility and diverse child care options. When the framework is right, business will respond with the services that the market demands.
- The guiding philosophy of choice and control already drives government policy around disability and health. This philosophy could be equally applied to workplace flexibility and to child care.
- There is a need for deeper discussion around the pros and cons of setting quotas and targets around performance in gender equality outcomes. Whatever the answer, it is crucial that we are tracking our progress towards equality. Government could partner with other sectors and businesses to establish the indicators and set the benchmarks for the various industries.
- It is more difficult for employers to justify different rates of pay when workers know what each other is being paid. Government could legislate for greater transparency around salary and conditions for comparable jobs.
- As part of a broad community agenda, Government should consult carefully with regional and rural employers. There are different pressures in regional areas, and quite often great inequality is evident in career outcomes for women in regional areas compared with those in the city. Likewise, issues of equality for women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds require specific investigation.

3.4. Other considerations

In addition to the major issues noted above, the participants in the CfG focus group provided insights on a wide range of gender equality issues, illustrated with anecdotes from their own lives. Some of these personal experiences were relevant and are noted as follows;

- There are subtle messages given to boys and girls from the earliest ages. One participant gave the example that her daughter is far more willing to contribute

to chores at home than her son. Her son seems to see helping at home as a choice, and he needs to be incentivised in order to contribute.

- Gender stereotyping can be particularly pervasive in some cultures, with a participant commenting on the work dynamics between herself and her husband in their very successful co-owned business. She noted that her husband regards himself as the head of the household and the leader at home, and although she is highly capable and a skilled professional in her own right, he extends that influence (and potentially dominance) over her to their workplace.
- On the issue of women in the workforce, another participant observed that the women who do “succeed” often have a secret ingredient – a supportive husband or partner.
- As a collective, the group expressed surprise, and dismay, at the statistics on the poor representation of women in directorships.
- On the issue of superannuation, the discussion centred on the prevalence of women taking a break from the workforce to raise children, and the long term impact this has on retirement savings. Some women choose to return to the work place in a self-employed capacity in order to achieve the flexibility they need, and they often further penalise themselves by tending not to contribute to superannuation when they do so. In addition, they are often under-insured, leaving their families vulnerable also. After an extended time away, some women lose confidence and return to the work force in more poorly paid roles. The long term costs of staying out of the work force can be enormous, but these costs are largely unknown to women and therefore not considered by them.
- Regarding the under representation in science, technology, education and maths (STEM) studies and careers, the lack of female role models and parental attitudes can undermine possible career or vocational choices for female students. This participant is regarded as a champion for women in IT in her workplace and suggests that more champions like this are needed.
- Given the state and national focus on issues associated with violence against women, participants continue to be shocked by current statistics and consider urgent action is required.

4. Conclusion

The CfG welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission. Gender issues are difficult to address and intractable inequalities still pervade our workplaces and community despite previous attempts to resolve them. However, progress has been made, and with further courageous government leadership, willing partners can be found to develop creative solutions and realise the social and economic benefits of achieving gender equality. Participants in the CfG focus group believe the answers lie in developing a culture of respect, with the emphasis on valuing diversity in all its forms.

5. Summary of Recommendations

In summary, the CfG recommends that:

- Public awareness and education about gender inequality is needed as a first step to create a wider community conversation.
- Issues around child care should be addressed as a matter of urgency.
- Flexible work options should be investigated, legislated and afforded to all.
- Government should proactively seek to partner with businesses and the community to invest in research, pilots and other incentives to develop solutions.
- Issues associated with rurality and CALD must receive specific consideration.

6. Contact details

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ⁱ Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Australia, (Australian Government Productivity Commission, February 2015, Inquiry Report#73, page iv)

ⁱⁱ Source Sweden: successful reconciliation of work and family life (European Union Platform for Investing in Children website April 2016)

ⁱⁱⁱ "Turns out the Gender Gap has a Gender Gap", Peter Lewis, The Drum, 8 March 2016)

^{iv} "The Persistent Challenge: Living, Working and Caring in Australia 2014" (The Australian Work and Life Index 2014, Skinner and Pocock, September 2014)