

# Building women's leadership at all career stages

## Equality of opportunity

Behaviour in the workplace is not always fair, rational or evidence-based. Lack of access to opportunities can be the result of discriminatory practices that are overt or the result of social stereotypes that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness. Inequality of opportunity can inhibit women's ability to achieve leadership positions as it can actively prevent women from obtaining leadership positions, affect women's confidence and deprive them of role models. It can also perpetuate the notion that women are not capable of assuming senior jobs. In order to promote equality of opportunity, there should be a focus on ensuring that all women and men are treated fairly at work and that human rights and non-discrimination are respected and supported (**Women's Empowerment Principle 2**). Educational, training and professional development opportunities should also be provided for women (**Women's Empowerment Principle 4**) at all stages of their career.

### Why is this an area of focus?

The effects of overt discrimination on women's leadership opportunities are well known. What is not so well understood is that unconscious bias contributes to the view that women need simply to conform to an objective set of workforce parameters in order to succeed, but they are not in actual fact objective. Bias can emerge in both formal and informal processes, including in judgements about capability, performance, organisational fit etc. Women can also be excluded from informal networks in companies that can affect their opportunities for promotion.

### What are the barriers?

Unconscious bias can thwart recruitment processes through the association of leadership and

managerial capabilities? with men rather than women. As a result, men are unconsciously perceived as a better fit for leadership roles. Selection processes, promotional opportunities and remuneration reviews can be inadvertently skewed against women. They may also be deprived of natural mentoring and contacts. Without the relevant leadership skills and experience, women will not have the opportunities to be considered for positions at all stages of the leadership pipeline.

### What are the opportunities?

- Raising awareness of the importance of compliance with relevant anti-discrimination legislation

- Raising awareness of the importance of providing workplace programs to raise awareness of unconscious bias. This could include providing links to reputable programs.
- Raising awareness of the need for specific measures to ensure that recruitment and promotional processes are free from bias. This could include providing resources and toolkits.
- Raising awareness of the importance of access to mentoring or other programs that develop women's careers and leadership skills at all stages. This also includes providing women with access to a wide range of information about career and leadership opportunities available to them. BPW could consider relevant running programs to assist with this.

## What can we do?

- 'Women in the Pipeline' leadership programs

- Information and resource sharing

- Advocacy

## Legislation

- Equal Opportunity Act 2010

- Gender Equality Act 2020

## Resources

Institute of Public Administration Australia  
([vic.ipaa.org.au/resources/free-resources/women-in-the-public-sector-framework](http://vic.ipaa.org.au/resources/free-resources/women-in-the-public-sector-framework))



Leadership Victoria ([leadershipvictoria.org](http://leadershipvictoria.org))

Women Victoria: ([engage.vic.gov.au/gender-equality](http://engage.vic.gov.au/gender-equality))

Chief Executive Women: ([cew.org.au](http://cew.org.au))

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## Culture change

Culture change both in the workplace but also in society is important to support women's leadership. There are three suggested areas for focus in this area; breaking down stereotypes in the workplace; flexible work practices including exploring alternatives to the 9-5 working system; and building the business case for gender equity.

### Why is this an area of focus?

Leadership stereotypes in the workplace, such as valuing competitiveness and assertiveness over more collaborative styles, need to be challenged.

The way we work has not changed to reflect the fact that many workers still have caring and household responsibilities. Changes need to be made to reflect this reality.

The business case for women in leadership has not been well articulated and has not had widespread acceptance by the business community.

### What does the research say?

There is significant research that indicates that there is an excellent business case for increasing women's workforce participation.

Reports from leading organisations indicate that removal of barriers to women's entry to the workforce would result in a sizeable increase to the economy<sup>1</sup>.

### What are the barriers?

Women continue to bear the brunt of domestic and caring responsibilities which affects their ability to achieve leadership positions.

Flexibility continues to be associated with women and with low ambition or commitment.

Initiatives to introduce workplace flexibility and enhance women's entry to the paid workforce continue to be viewed as a cost.

### What are the opportunities?

- Raising awareness of the importance of providing flexible work opportunities for all employees which will assist in challenging

the association of flexible work with women.

- Encouraging employees to request flexible options through contract negotiation and enterprise bargaining processes.
- Advocating to governments to consider regulation regarding flexible work practices.
- Building the business case and raising awareness of that fact that to be competitive in the future leaders will need to be more diverse, cross-culturally attuned, agile, receptive to new ideas and good at engaging with a wide range of stakeholders.
- Raising awareness of the fact that women are a large consumer market segment and in order to be responsive to this market segment, women will need to be in decision making roles in the corporate sector.

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<sup>1</sup> Daley, John – Game Changers: Economic Priorities for Australia; the Grattan Institute, June 2012; Toohey, T, Colosimo, D and Boak, A: Australia's Hidden Resource; the Economic Case for Increased Female Participation, J B Were November 2009

## What can we do?

- Joint funding of new business cases
- Advocacy
- Information and resource sharing

## Resources

- Women Victoria: ([vic.gov.au/women.html](http://vic.gov.au/women.html))
- Australian Human Rights Commission: ([humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination](http://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination))

## Legislation

- Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012  
([legislation.gov.au/Details/C2012C00899](http://legislation.gov.au/Details/C2012C00899))
- Sex Discrimination Act 1984  
([legislation.gov.au/Details/C2018C00499](http://legislation.gov.au/Details/C2018C00499))

# Building women's leadership at all career stages

## Engagement and Accountability

The gender gap not only affects economic outcomes but also the performance of every aspect of our society. High level corporate leadership for gender equality (**Women's Empowerment Principle 1**); measurement and public reporting on progress to achieve gender equality (**Women's Empowerment Principle 7**); and diversity policies and programs are required to close the gap.

### Why is this an area of focus?

The slow progress across major women's leadership indicators suggests that our current approach to tackling these challenges is working at an incremental pace.

Cultural and other change needs leadership from the top. It is critical that gender diversity issues are addressed as mainstream issues by the organisations' leadership.

### What does the research say?

Women account for more than half of professionals but represent less than 10 per cent of line?? Executives, while young Australian women fall behind other advanced economies by the time they reach child-bearing age. Men in large Australian businesses have a nine times better chance of making it to senior executive ranks than women.

About 30 per cent of ASX200 directors (December 2018) are women. A total of four boards in the ASX 200 still do not have any women. As at September 2017 there were 11 female CEOs of ASX 200 companies, and 41 without women on their executive team. The national gender pay gap is at **14.6%**.

Countries where quotas are in place have a greater percentage of female directors. For example in France which has quotas, 43.4% of boards have women directors.

### What are the barriers?

While there are different views about whether quotas or targets assist women to attain leadership positions, the current voluntary approach is clearly not having the impact required.

Without commitment at the senior leadership level, real change in women's leadership is unlikely.

### What are the opportunities?

- Raising awareness of the need for targets for women in leadership positions at all levels in organisations. The targets should be specific, challenging and given the same importance as targets for budgets and other performance measures.
- Raising awareness of the need to include diversity targets in performance processes so as to better embed diversity in organisational processes.
- Advocacy to government for an increase in public reporting on gender and accountability requirements.
- Advocacy to government about considering legislation that mandates female quotas for the boards of listed companies.

## What can we do?

- Research into targets and quotas
- Advocacy
- Information and resource sharing

## Resources

Chief Executive Women ([cew.org.au](http://cew.org.au))

Australian Human Rights Commission ([humanrights.gov.au/education/face-facts/face-facts-gender-equality-2018](http://humanrights.gov.au/education/face-facts/face-facts-gender-equality-2018))

Workplace Gender Equality Agency ([wgea.gov.au/topics/gender-pay-gap](http://wgea.gov.au/topics/gender-pay-gap))

## Legislation

- Gender Equality Act 2020