

AHRI/UN Women Australia Gender Equity in the Workplace Summit

Speech by Julie McKay, executive director, UN Women Australia

Introduction by Catherine Fox

Julie McKay has been Executive Director of UN Women Australia (formerly Unifem Australia) since 2007. During this time she's been national campaign manager for the White Ribbon campaign, I know a lot of CEOs are running that; we've run it in Boss magazine, which is about taking a stand against violence against women.

Julie has experience in both corporate and NGO sectors and she's very passionate about this. She's on the board of the UN Association Australia, the YWCA Canberra and Australians Helping Abroad.

She has a masters in public policy, majoring in economic policy from ANU and was selected to study at Sydney University's global MBA program this year; she has a scholarship for NGO leadership, so there's a whole lot of new work going on there.

She also, in her spare time, won the 2010 Australian Institute of Management, Manager of the Year.

Please welcome Julie McKay.

Now that I know that I'm all that stands between you and another session and then lunch, what I'm going to try and do is two things. The first is to introduce to you the concept of the Women's Empowerment principles, which you heard Gail Kelly start to speak about this morning, and which some of you will be involved in a splinter group about later this afternoon. The second, to speed up our time a bit so we can get you out to lunch on time.

Before I kick off, I wanted to introduce to you two women: Geraldine Chin Moody is the COO of Baker & McKenzie and a board member of UN Women Australia, thank you for being here today; and also Kate O'Reilly, the director of Optimiss Consulting and the immediate past treasurer of UN Women Australia. Both of these women, alongside several of my other board directors, really have built the organisation over the last couple of years to where we are today.

And at 12.30pm on Friday, another 1700 people have just entered the Canberra Convention Centre to celebrate the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day in the nation's capital. We're just thrilled at how much things have grown this year, and at how much the corporate sector have come on board to take leadership around the celebration of International Women's Day, but also the concept of the need for a genuine re-commitment to achieving gender equality.

I'd also like to thank Sandra Cormack, Peter Wilson and the team at AHRI for all their hard work. Our partnership is very recent and what has been pulled together today to have all of you in the room is a huge credit to your organisation, so thank you. And I hope it might be a model for future partnerships between UN Women Australia and the corporate sector.

Last year the UN launched the Women's Empowerment Principles – the first ever global tool developed for the purpose of promoting gender equality worldwide. Launched in Australia late last

year, these principles provide a framework for organisations to use when they're considering how to engage women in leadership and how to overcome persistent gender inequality in the workplace.

This afternoon, as I mentioned, there will be a syndicate group dedicated to how we might implement the Women's Empowerment Principles and I'm very much looking forward to that discussion. So my hope in the next couple minutes is to give you an overview of what the principles actually mean, but also first to talk to you a bit about why the United Nations has become involved in encouraging and facilitating corporate leadership on gender equality.

First, a brief insight into the UN's position on the normative concept versus the voluntary concept around women's leadership in the corporate world. And, finally, I hope to draw some conclusions about how we might use the principles as a tool to show that in the next 100 years. Until we celebrate the 200th anniversary of International Women's Day, we're not still debating how gender equality might be achieved.

So how did the UN get involved? The UN has long been at the centre of various initiatives aimed at formulating universally acceptable goals and norms for businesses, especially multi-nationals. Historically, the UN has favoured volunteerism, strongly advocating for the need for companies to set their own commitments and own those commitments.

As early as 1977, the UN sought to develop a code of conduct to regulate the work of trans-national companies, asking them to consider the impact of the work that they were doing in host countries, not just their own bottom line. However, between 1977 and 1992 no agreement could be reached among member states and the code was never finalised.

One of the major reasons why agreement could not be reached was tensions between North-South countries around the expectations involved in national companies, compared to local companies, and what that would mean in terms of how they operated in those different environments.

The International Labor Organisation also attempted to draft a code of conduct, however it really lacked an implementation framework. So while it is still referred to within the UN system, it seems to have petered off in recent years.

So then in 1999, we saw the launch of the UN Global Compact, which hopefully some of you are familiar with. What the Compact did was require companies to respect and promote human rights within their sphere of influence. Instead of proposing ways to overcome the challenges which had been faced by the two attempted previous codes, the Global Compact proudly promoted companies to sign up voluntarily and set their own agenda for achieving human rights in their business.

In 1999, this Compact covered a wide range of areas, but gender equality was not one of the areas that the UN set forth for being a priority to the corporate world. So, just over 10 years ago this issue was still not at the forefront of what the UN saw to be important when companies engaged with gender bias globally.

Just 10 years later, the UN Global Compact and Unifem (now UN Women) joined forces to develop the Women's Empowerment Principles. Discussions about these principles started as a need for gender equality to be included in the Global Compact, so could we edit the current Global Compact to include gender equality.

The decision was actually that was just going to stick it on as a last thought, and instead what the UN decided to do was take a real leadership position and say, actually, there's a whole different set of standards and expectations that need to come from the corporate sector around this issue of gender equality.

It led to incredible debate amongst member states about the centrality of achieving gender equality to achieving business outcomes. And I think one of the things that was made very real to me were some of the comments that were coming out from member states during these debates, where we were still fighting a battle of whether women's human rights were actually human rights. In many parts of the world, that's the conversation that's happening.

So, as we go into this afternoon and into the commitments that we can all make, we need to really remember that we have a strong platform and base to start from. And these Women's Empowerment Principles were adapted from the Calvert Women's Principles, which I'm sure many of you are familiar with.

One of the most significant challenges within the UN in all aspects of its work is the difficulty it has around enforcement; often referred to as a 'toothless tiger' and for failing to respond quickly to conflicts and global emergencies. In this space, I think the UN has been able to set an incredible standard.

Former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, believed that the UN should set global standards. It should, itself, be an inspiration and role model to global companies the world over, and at the same time provide a legal framework for member states to implement, if they wish to do so, to ensure human rights in business were afforded. He believed very strongly in voluntary codes of conduct.

So this leads me to the Women's Empowerment Principles which, as Gail Kelly mentioned this morning, there are seven. And what The Westpac Group have actually done in their report is shifted some of the principles to actually work for their business. So there is a formal set of principles and then what we're starting to see is a company saying we're going to make these our own, and we're going to really own them by labelling them in a way that's meaningful to our business.

I hope that while the concept and the content of the Women's Empowerment Principles might not be new to you, that the framework might be a useful way for you to consider moving forward from today.

The first principle: Establishing high-level corporate leadership gender equality

Supporting Calvert's Corporate Governance Principles, this first Women's Empowerment Principle encourages companies to set company-wide goals and targets for gender equality.

There remains, as we've heard from all our speakers this morning, an disconnect on the rhetoric we're hearing in corporate Australia on gender equality and on the actions and outcomes being achieved.

To address this, the Women's Empowerment Principles recommend that companies include progress as a factor in manager's performance reviews across the board.

It is also recommended that companies engage internal and external stakeholders in the development of company policies and plans that advance gender equality.

In the context of your own company, the key things to think about are: do you or does your CEO and senior leadership team consider gender equality as part of your overall strategic planning; do you have public or private targets which you're working towards; and what are the consequences for you and for the other managers in your organisation should these targets should not be reached.

The second principle: To treat women and men fairly at work, respect human rights and principles of non-discrimination.

This principle focuses on things like ensuring equal remuneration, pay-equity – which we've heard a lot about this morning – and calls on companies to implement gender-sensitive recruitment strategies to pro-actively recruit women into managerial positions and onto boards.

It includes providing flexible work arrangements and notes the importance of the critical mass concept that the panel went into earlier.

The third principle: Ensuring health, safety and wellbeing of all workers, particularly women.

This principle is fairly self-explanatory, but I would draw your attention to the call for companies to establish a zero-tolerance policy towards violence against women.

This is where the Women's Empowerment Principles start to go to something that Elizabeth Broderick spoke about; about making sure we don't have a disconnect about what's a private issue in the home around violence and what affects us as communities and in workplaces.

And when we talk about violence against women, we're not only talking about physical and sexual assault and violence, we're also talking about verbal abuse and sexual harassment, and making sure that those things are all considered.

The fourth principle: Promoting education, training and professional development for women.

I won't go into this too much, but the concept of sponsorship as opposed to mentoring, which we've all started to hear more about in Australia, and Peter Wilson's example of the 'Jane and Patrick' case and how we can use innovative ways to ensure we're actively promoting women, and giving them the networks and opportunities they need to take the next step.

The fifth principle: Implementing enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices which empower women.

This principle encourages innovation in our approach to gender equality. It recommends that companies expand their relationship with women-owned enterprises, including small businesses and entrepreneurs.

It requires that companies not only implement the Women's Empowerment Principles themselves, but they encourage their business partners and supply chain to do the same.

It reminds us that we must all consider the empowerment of women in the way we go about our business, in the marketing materials we put out into the community.

The sixth principle: Promoting gender equality through community initiatives and advocacy.

This principle adds a new dimension to the debate around achieving gender equality. It encapsulates the need for companies to work with community stakeholders to eliminate discrimination against women at all levels, and encourages companies to use their philanthropic grants and corporate gender equity programs to really make that public commitment of support and inclusion.

It also acknowledged that there is a role for non-profits to play in building momentum and awareness about the need for gender equality, as it starts to happen at a grassroots level.

As I look back on my four years at UN Women Australia, starting as the sole staff member in 2007, it's very clear to me that there was a day – a game change, if you like.

I remember meeting Mary Waldron from PwC [PricewaterhouseCoopers Australia], and rather than pitching the shopping list of activities I'd planned to pitch to her, about what we were doing and all the wonderful things she might want to be involved in, we started to have a conversation about a vision of gender equality.

I think it was the shared vision that actually meant that PwC came on board as one of our first financial partners. Since then, joining them – The Westpac Group, Wesfarmers, DHL and Avon – has only helped us to substantially increase the size of our activities, our reach and our staff team. But it's also given us the resources which have been able to allow us to engage with government, the corporate sector and the non-profit sector in an entirely different way.

In my first year at Unifem I remember driving our Powerful Women's exhibition – which I hope you've all seen, which was 32 portraits of amazing women – around Australia. Putting them all in my car and driving them from Sydney to Brisbane, because we had an amazing opportunity to display the portraits in Brisbane, but we couldn't afford the transport costs.

I also remember carrying, with my colleague Jo, the materials for a 150-person conference between Canberra and Sydney because, again, the transportation costs were just not an option. I remember saying to Jo at that point, the day we succeed, the day this organisation is on the map, is the day when we can afford a courier. I never imagined we'd have DHL as a national partner.

So my point is that partnerships between the corporate sector and the non-profit sector are incredibly valuable. Not just to us as non-profit organisations to be able to build our reach, but hopefully because things like the Women's Empowerment Principles come back as a useful tool for the corporate sector to use.

Your support, especially multi-year support, allows organisations like UN Women Australia to work on your behalf, to run leadership programs for young women and train them to challenge the way our societies work.

To run community awareness campaigns, so at the point you're talking to these issues with your staff there's not a challenge from your staff about whether these issues are important.

And it allows, most importantly, us to reach out to communities where you may not have access to, and provide women across Australia and the world with the support they need to make a change in their lives.

The seventh principle: Measuring and reporting publicly on progress.

This principle encourages companies to report publicly on the progress they have made. We also hope that some of you will consider making public the policies you've used and the success stories you've had so that others can learn from best practice.

One of the criticisms over the last couple of months of the Women's Empowerment Principles has been that there's no reporting framework behind them. But this wasn't an oversight by the UN.

What it was, was putting the burden on responsibility for reporting back on to companies. It was about empowering corporate leaders to say, you need to report the way that works for your company and you need to come up with a model, as Westpac has, that suits the needs of your stakeholders.

Where to from here? We have a set of seven principles that represent not just tangible steps that you can take to achieve gender equality, but also which represent the global movement for gender equality in the corporate sector.

They represent a global movement of organisations who will not accept the current rate of progress towards gender equality. So I encourage you all to think about asking your companies and leading your companies to sign on to the principles as a first step. There's a CEO statement of support you can sign on to.

And globally to date, I heard in New York last week that 160 companies have signed on. I actually don't think it's out of reach for us today to try and commit to finding 160 Australian companies to match the global number.

Currently to date, Australian companies including The Westpac Group, Carnival Australia, Parsons Brinckerhoff, The Australian Institute of Management and PwC have signed on. But we would really like to see these principles leading globally, and we'd like to put Australia on the map in terms of ensuring that our companies are leading front and centre.

As we celebrate the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day this week, and we look back at the women and men who dedicated their lives to promoting equality in Australia and globally, we must say thank you.

My hope is that you'll go into this afternoon's sessions and keep in the back of your mind that in 100 years from now, as the world celebrates the 200th anniversary of International Women's Day, they note this day, this summit, as an event that changed the game on gender equality in this country.

I hope we really can find genuine, tangible strategies that we can all agree to take forward today. And tomorrow, that we feel inspired to do something, even if it's just something small, differently to the way we do it today.

I'm very much looking forward to working with you all this afternoon, and hopefully over the coming months.

Thank you.