

## AHRI/UN Women Australia Gender Equity in the Workplace Summit

### **Speech by the Hon. Kate Ellis MP, Minister for the Status of Women**

Thanks sponsors, other speakers and all of the people who have come along today and committed to addressing gender equity in our workplaces.

It is my absolute great pleasure to be here today to officially open this summit and I would like to take this opportunity to thank our hosts UN Women Australia, AHRI and Westpac for working to advance women's rightful place in our economic life.

Of course, it's really fitting that we meet today as we're about to embark on celebrations right around Australia to mark 100 years of International Women's Day.

Next week, right around the country, far and wide, women will be reflecting on the achievements over the last century. Reflecting on the heroes, reflecting on the advances, reflecting on the rights that have been won and reflecting on the impact that those rights now have on each and every one of our lives.

And celebrate we should – we have so very much to be grateful for. But I'm also firmly of the view that this is also an occasion where we need to keep focused on the road ahead. We need to keep focused on the fact that we're not there yet and that there is a whole lot more work to do.

As you know, the purpose of today's summit is to focus on the Women's Empowerment Principles, a framework to help companies to support women's empowerment.

These principles reflect what we who are here today already know: that gender equity in the workplace is pivotal to a society that is both prosperous and fair. And it's fantastic to see so many businesses who do recognise their role; that business can, and that business must, be an agent of change when it comes to gender equity.

Looking at the program you will cover much ground today. How best to implement the Women's Empowerment Principles; promoting education, training and professional development for women; establishing high level corporate leadership; promoting equality and introducing business practices that empower men.

And I note that you have working groups this afternoon to look at issues like how to redesign workplaces to best meet these goals; on what a truly diverse workplace actually looks like; on the potentials of targets and quotas; on the responsibilities of CEOs, board directors and HR managers; and, perhaps ominous for me, a session on what government policies need to change to better progress these goals.

I really look forward to hearing the outcome of those discussions, but in my brief remarks this morning in opening this summit I'm not going to go through the facts and figures with you, the terrible statistics, the evidence of the need for further advancement.

I figure that you wouldn't be here if you didn't already know of the gender wage gap which still confronts Australian women, of the scarcity of women on Australian boards, in corporate leadership

and filling positions in middle management. Of the prevailing boys' clubs, exclusionary recruitment practices, stereotyping and unhealthy cultures which still exist in some quarters.

But in your deliberations today you will discuss many different ways forward to advance this cause. You might talk about mentoring, about quotas, about development programs and support systems. You might discuss the impact on the culture of organisations when you do have sufficient representation of women in leadership roles. You might discuss the value of role models and those pioneers which proved the possibilities to those women who come after them, and of public sector leadership in showing the way.

All of these discussions are absolutely necessary and legitimate, and many form important parts of the solutions going forward. But in my remarks today, I hope to briefly add two further issues to this pile.

Broader than workplace issues alone, I believe there are a couple of issues which are often neglected, yet play a really important role when we look at solutions to produce better gender equity and to tackle the issues which hold back women in both our society and our businesses.

In a recent panel discussion that I was involved in to discuss women in corporate leadership, one member of the panel put forward that they'd seen time and time again that women, whilst qualified, weren't putting themselves forward for promotion; that they were holding themselves back for some reason, whereas men were going in there all guns blazing.

Without for a minute going anywhere near suggesting that the low number of women at the top is our fault, that we lack the ambition or will to lead, and making absolutely clear that I believe that there are structural barriers which are holding back many women in corporate life, I do think it's worth exploring this notion further.

If women are indeed not putting ourselves forward, then why would that be? And I reckon that just maybe it might have something to do with the fact that, whilst we've been exceptionally good at boosting women's participation in the workforce in recent decades, we haven't matched it with a decrease in unpaid work responsibilities.

We meet here today because we want to boost women's roles and responsibilities in the corporate world. But, equally, we need to make sure we make progress in easing the burden of domestic and caring duties at home. Obviously this is an issue which is broader than business alone, but the workplace can actually play a huge role in addressing it.

Today I'm releasing new research which our government commissioned from the Australian Institute of Family Studies, which is on fathering in Australia. It demonstrated what we have suspected for some time – that there are hundreds and thousands of men across Australia who'd like to play a bigger role in caring responsibilities and unpaid work, but may feel they're unable to access the work arrangements to support them to do so.

It confirms that fathers in couple families still do less than 30 per cent of the domestic work and only marginally more of the child caring. And I think there are probably some women who would say these are the figures that the men themselves are putting forward and many of these men probably aren't quite at that 30 per cent target yet either.

But importantly, the research which we're releasing today shows that this is not ideal for men either, and that 63.7 per cent of fathers believe that work responsibilities have caused them to miss out on home or family activities that they would like to have taken part in.

Previously we have all heard anecdotally of men wanting to access more flexible arrangements, wanting to adjust their work-family balance but feeling unable to make this a possibility, and feeling that they won't be taken seriously in the workplace. That, culturally, it looks like they're not ambitious if they also value their home life, value spending time with their children. That it's discouraged due to financial or cultural pressures.

We now have up-to-date research which confirms this, but through a fairer balance of caring responsibilities between women and men, women's capacities for corporate advancement and leadership open up dramatically as a more level playing field is created.

And I recognise that government most certainly has a role in addressing this. We're really proud to have established Fair Work standards which give a right to request flexible work options. And with much lobbying from our Sex Discrimination Commissioner, we're proud to have introduced amendments to the Sex Discrimination Act which provide a specific protection against discrimination for these men wanting to access flexible working arrangements.

Of course, as we work to provide paid parental leave and improved access to quality childcare to give families greater options to make decisions about their caring responsibilities, we have a crucial role to play.

But there's no question about your role here. Gender equity in the workplace relies upon businesses making a decision to challenge these outdated cultural expectations and create a culture where flexible leave is not just theoretically an option, but is something which is actually accepted and embraced.

And in the Australian business community we have some fantastic examples of gender-focused practices that are making a very real difference to gender equality in the Australian workforce. We have examples such as those from our co-hosts here today, which I hope Gail [Kelly] will speak about shortly so I won't go into too much detail.

But we've seen that Westpac recently reported that 43 per cent of their staff has some form of flexible working arrangement. In addition, 80 per cent of people taking parental leave return to the company, which is up from 50 per cent just 10 years ago. So there is something that's going right there.

My point is that we should never underestimate the capacity of the workplace to instigate the changes at home that many men are privately longing for and which will open the door to women's advancement.

But of course there is a much bigger, much more damaging and much more urgent obstacle which stands between women and our increased equity and advancement in life and in the workplace. That is violence.

Now, we've heard the statistics – they're real and they're horrifying. One-in-three Australian women today are the victims of physical violence; one-in-five Australian women are victims of sexual assault. These are disgusting figures which are representing real women. Women in our neighbourhoods, women in our communities, women in our workplaces.

You might think this has nothing to do with the workplace. Well, it actually has quite a lot. Research from the Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse shows that two-thirds of women reporting domestic violence are in paid employment. It shows that returning or staying in work was actually a pathway for women leaving a violent relationship. Yet we also know that the negative impact of violence on a woman's work performance can put their employment at risk.

The clearinghouse also found that by acting to reduce the impact of domestic violence on the workplace employers may reduce costs associated with loss of productivity, misuse of resources, absenteeism and staff turnover. There is a business incentive for making sure we address this.

I'm really pleased to say that the Australian government is currently funding the clearinghouse to educate workplaces about domestic and family violence issues for their employees; to promote the introduction of provisions in workplace agreements to support employees experiencing domestic and family violence, and; to monitor and evaluate their impact.

There is a very big role for workplaces here. And of course we recognise the ongoing role for government, too. A role that we're stepping up to with the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children that we released just weeks ago. It's the first time we'll have sustained action across all jurisdictions for 12 years.

But surely it is all of our responsibilities to take this on and do all that we can to bring these figures down. To show the women who are suffering in silence behind closed doors that we're pulling their suffering out of the shadows and demanding supportive, safe and understanding workplaces and communities who demand an end to violence.

So there is no question that we have made much progress and this International Women's Day we have a lot to celebrate. My point is that we still have a very long way to go.

Gender equality remains a major barrier for women trying to succeed in the workplace and establish a sound financial base for themselves and their families with men still two steps ahead in landing bigger paycheques and greater leadership opportunities.

Australian women still earn just 83 cents for every dollar earned by men, and it's amazing to me that this equates for the average 25 year old woman to earning \$1 million less today than an average 25 year old male.

The disadvantage that's faced by women in the workplace has serious implications on their economic security, particularly in retirement. Data shows that the current average superannuation payment for women is less than half that received by men. Almost 60 per cent of women today are retiring with no superannuation, meaning that they are also more likely to be reliant on the aged pension, a fact that is proved by the fact that over 70 per cent of single aged pensioners are women.

Obviously the affects of these facts on the lives of Australian women are dramatic and they are damaging. And the impact of this inequality on our businesses and our economy is also huge.

A report commissioned by the Australian Government shows that the gender wage gap is such a work disincentive for women that it costs the Australian economy \$93 billion a year, which amounts to a staggering 8.5 per cent of GDP. This NATSEM [National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling] research found that decreasing the gender wage gap by just 1 per cent would increase GDP by more than \$5 billion.

So we're not just asking businesses to do this out of the goodness of their hearts, we're asking them to do it for our productivity and for our economy as well.

Our goal, of course, is an Australia where women can access equal opportunity in the workplace based on merit, without prejudice and without being forced to choose between family life and rewarding paid work.

As a government we're committed to providing business with the help that they need to ensure quality in the workplaces, which we know improves business performance and employee satisfaction.

We know how powerful the role that you can play is, so I want to add my voice to the call for Australian businesses to sign up to Women's Empowerment Principles. And I want to thank each and every one of you for coming here today and showing that you, too, want to work on these important issues.

Your commitment to advance and implement strategies to promote gender equality will also lead to better workplaces and better business, and I welcome the opportunity to work with you on a better deal for Australian women.

Thank you.