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Submission - Victorian Gender Equality Strategy

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About us

Victorian Women Lawyers (**VWL**) is a voluntary association that promotes and protects the interests of women in the legal profession. Formed in 1996, VWL now has over 600 members. VWL provides a network for information exchange, social interaction and continuing education and reform within the legal profession and broader community. VWL has undertaken research into work practices affecting women in the legal profession, and provided protocols and training to effect change.

Details of our publications and submissions are available at www.vwl.asn.au under the 'Publications' tab.

Victorian Gender Equality Strategy - Overview

Since 1996 VWL has advocated for the equal representation of women and promoted the understanding and support of women's legal and human rights by identifying, highlighting and eradicating discrimination against women in the law and in the legal system, and achieving justice and equality for all women.

VWL welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Department of Premier and Cabinet in relation to the Victorian Gender Equality Strategy inquiry and supports government efforts to address gender inequality.

1. What is the role of business in addressing gender equality?

(a) Promote flexible work practices to women and men

Workplaces can help address gender equality by providing flexible work arrangements to women and men. The business community must also instil a culture in their organisations that encourages staff to take up flexible work opportunities and provide clear career pathways for those who do work flexibly. Currently, it seems to be mostly women who take the opportunity to work flexibly and as a result of these arrangements, tend to be penalised in terms of their professional development and career progression.

The availability of flexible work arrangements is only of substantial value if they are attractive to both men and women. If men feel that they can also take up opportunities to work flexibly, then this will normalise the practice of flexible work. The business community must take a leading role in encouraging men to take advantage of flexible work arrangements. Normalising flexible work in organisations and increased take up of such arrangements, will ensure that parents of both sexes can share child rearing and domestic responsibilities.

(b) Provide career progression to those who work flexibly

Businesses can show leadership by promoting employees who take non-traditional career routes into senior roles. Whilst it may be difficult for businesses to do so, the message from the business community needs to be that staff who work flexibly can expect career progression if they continue to develop professionally. From a business perspective, it



makes sense to retain staff you have trained and invested in by providing them with flexible work practices.

As mentioned, business can help address gender equality by giving men an opportunity to work flexibly so that they have an opportunity to balance their work and home life. Considerable take up of flexible work arrangements by men will only occur if there is a perception that career progression is still possible. It will require business to drive a cultural change that sends a strong message that less or different work hours do not equal the end of career progression. Only when flexible work arrangements are not viewed as the end of a person's potential for professional development and career advancement, will we find that there will be a greater take up of flexible work practices by both men and women.

2. How do we address the pay and superannuation gap for women in Victoria?

(a) Provide pay transparency to employees

VWL supports legislative reform that encourages pay transparency for employees and organisations. It is our association's view that pay secrecy, particularly in industries like the legal sector (and other professional sectors) that incorporate a number of discretionary payments and bonuses as part of an employee's salary package, contributes to the gender pay gap.

Furthermore, all employees need to be able to access data regarding pay held by their employer. Without such information, it is difficult for women to negotiate their career progression and salaries.

(b) Require rigorous workplace gender equality reporting

VWL advocates for a broad policy response to the gender pay gap as we appreciate that the issue is influenced by a variety of factors. In particular, VWL is in favour of rigorous workplace gender equality reporting requirements that ensure employers are accountable for pay decisions that disadvantage women. This could take the form of yearly reviews of pay equity and remuneration.

Employers should be required to address the pay gap by conducting gender pay audits. Where a pay gap is found to exist, measures should be taken to redress the gap and reported back to government.

(c) Provide super contributions during maternity leave and provide tax concessions

As outlined in a recent, Australian Human Rights Commission report, the gender superannuation gap is about 47%. The reasons are numerous and include the fact that women may be more likely to engage in casual, insecure and part time work, and are more likely to engage in domestic unpaid work such as raising children.

One way of addressing the superannuation gender gap would be to require employers to make super payments during maternity leave. This will ensure women aren't unduly penalised for taking time out of the workforce to have children.



Greater tax concessions for low-income earners will assist a large proportion of the women in the Australian workforce to save more for their retirement. The current Low Income Super Contribution should be retained and increased from \$500 which would encourage low income earners, including women, to save more for retirement.

The contribution of women to unpaid caring work needs to be identified and compensated by government superannuation contributions. The superannuation guarantee should also be increased in paid employment. As noted in a recent AFSA report, women are less likely to receive higher than minimum contributions from their employer and a mandated increase would encourage this.

3. How do we encourage women and girls to take up leadership roles?

(a) Government can lead by example

Initiatives by the Victorian Government that no less than 50 per cent of all future appointments to paid Government boards and Victorian courts will be women are a way we can encourage women and girls to take up leadership roles. These government appointments provide role models to women. VWL is of the view that 'you cannot be what you cannot see'.

Leadership networks should be created to connect leaders in government, the professions and the community through to school age girls to allow those girls to meet with female mentors and see that a life in leadership is something that they can do and should do.

(b) Local Government to set targets for women in leadership roles

VWL believes that local governments should set targets to ensure a greater number of women at an executive level. Currently, while 60% of the workforce in local government are women, only 16.5% of council CEOs are women, according to the Minister for Local Government Natalie Hutchins.

Furthermore, given that only 24.9% of all Victorian councillors are women, Councils should actively encourage women to take up leadership roles in local government. This would ensure Councils better reflect the community they represent.

4. What is the role of men in a gender equality strategy?

(a) Men need to take an active role

The issue of gender equality is important not only for women and for society, but also for men. In the past, gender equality has been a 'women's issue' fought for only by women. Men need to be encouraged to take an active role in advocating gender equality, and part of the conversation should be the significant ways that hegemonic masculinity disadvantages men. The outcomes of systemic gender inequality, from violence to the pay gap, are underpinned by a cultural problem. Changing men's attitudes, and the institutional structures that



disadvantage women, starts by changing the lessons that we teach our children. This should be a primary focus.

(b) Educate boys about gender equality

Lessons on gender equality and respectful relationships need to start in early education. It should be promoted at home, in culture and in sport.

Socialising children into gender roles starts very early on. Boys are gifted action figures, trucks and sports equipment that are wrapped in blue paper. Girls are given dolls, books and dress-ups wrapped in pink paper. Boys are taught to aspire to be athletes, doctors, firemen and policemen, while girls aspire to get married and be ballerinas, nurses and teachers. While seemingly superficial, even the colour of wrapping paper represents a pattern of cultural conditioning regarding gender roles.

This socialisation can be damaging for men and boys who are restricted by a narrow concept of traditional masculinity. Part of the gender equality conversation should be to promote non-traditional career paths for boys. There should be support to increase men's participation in female dominated occupations like teaching, nursing and administration, and support for men's involvement in childcare and domestic work.

The role of men in a gender equality strategy is to actively advocate gender equality by broadening and changing the definition of masculinity. To facilitate men's involvement, the conversation needs to be inclusive, balanced and robust.

5. What strategies do we need to ease the strain of balancing work and caring responsibilities?

(a) Men should take up flexible work arrangements

The strain on many women to balance work and caring responsibilities would be eased by men taking up a greater role in the domestic sphere. Furthermore, while men have higher earning power and do less unpaid and part-time work, the costs of these privileges are not often discussed. Men work longer hours than they want to, are often absent from their families' home life and die an average of four years earlier than women. Stress, health risks and reduced family relationships are often effects of men's work and career demands. Therefore, different definitions of 'being a man' are important and should be part of the gender equality conversation. Men should feel comfortable asking for flexible work arrangements as it will ease the burden on women who currently take up the majority of caring responsibilities, as is the case in most families.

(b) Improve access to child care

Providing families with greater access to affordable child care will ease the strain of balancing work and caring responsibilities. For many families, the cost of child care is prohibitively expensive and forces a pragmatic choice whereby the parent who earns the lower income takes on the primary caring responsibilities and works part-time or not at all.



Conclusion

An effective gender equality strategy must be broad and multi-faceted in order to be successful in addressing systemic, structural and social issues that negatively affect women.

VWL supports efforts by government, business and the community to address gender inequality. Fundamental to achieving gender equality in the not too distant future, is efforts by all aspects of society, particularly those who are empowered to make a real and significant difference to women's economic position, such as employers and government.

VWL appreciates the Victorian Government's efforts so far to work towards gender equality and welcomes further consultation in its measures to achieve justice and equality for all women.

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