The Committee for Perth’s landmark gender equality report ‘Filling the Pool’ recently celebrated its first anniversary. Since June last year what has followed could only be described as a phenomenal response. In the months after the report came out you couldn’t go to a meeting on the Terrace without it being discussed. In the year since, I have been kept busy presenting the report’s findings and recommendations roadmap. To date, I have done 67 presentations and, pleasingly, not only here in Perth but also in Geelong and Sydney. It is gratifying that a report that was specifically ‘by Perth, for Perth’ has resonated so strongly at home and also across the Nullabor.

The two year-long research effort was to understand why women in Perth don’t get ahead and therefore don’t occupy enough influencing and decision-making roles. Its qualitative approach placed women at the core of the subject and their stories, provided through 150 interviews, were then checked against the facts. What has resulted is a body of evidence that is irrefutable, with a clear pathway forward, proposed through 31 practical and actionable recommendations in which Government, businesses, leaders and women all have a role to play.

One of the very first organisations that asked for a briefing on ‘Filling the Pool’ was the WA Chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects. If you haven’t read the report here is what you need to know: getting more women into the workforce and, importantly, progressing their careers has a number of structural barriers and social norms that need to be overcome.

Unfortunately, the trajectory that leads to gender inequality starts in early childhood and continues during the formative years. As parents, it comes from the decisions we make in raising our children and the subjects we guide them to take. It arises from the professions that are deemed acceptable and suitable for one gender over another. It is exacerbated by the emphasis placed on mothering rather than parenting by society as a whole. In essence ‘pink vs blue’ biases exist everywhere.

Women make up 51% of the nation’s population and below is a list of lead indicators that demonstrate the magnitude of gender inequality in Australia:

- women take on 97% of the primary care-giving role whether they are working or not
- women make up 46% of the Australian workforce yet hold only 4% of CEO positions, 16% of directorships and 5% of board chair roles
- the gender pay gap continues to increase, going from 14.9% in 2004 to 18.9% in 2014
- 55% of university graduates are female. In most degree areas 55% of women make up the graduate pool except in the areas of science and engineering. This has been the case for more than two decades.

Looking at those figures is illuminating. Another gem from our researchers is that at the current glacial rate of change it will take 300 years to have an equal number of men and women in CEO roles. Based on the above, it is fair to say that a woman who graduated some time over the past 30 years who has been able to capitalise on her abilities and forge a career that takes her all the way to the C-Suite and boardroom and who has been also able to balance that with the needs of her family would be rare. I am not sure the same could be said of her male counterparts.

‘Filling the Pool’ deliberately concentrated on the corporate sector, the place where the most change could be effected that would lead to large scale transformation. However, that barriers need to be overcome so that women can take an equal seat at the table is an issue for all parts of our economy and society.

The study found that the four pillars that need to be working in concert so that a woman can successfully return to work are:

- spouse support
- family support
- external childcare providers
- flexible employment.

Two of the four pillars relate to individuals and their circumstances, the third to government and the
marketplace and the fourth is where organisations have a role to play. Access to flexible work arrangements, not necessarily less hours or responsibility, is crucial for balancing career and caring.

At the Australian Institute of Architects presentation last year, two primary concerns were raised about moving from a traditional practice environment. I have listed these and offered an update about what is happening more broadly in the Perth business community:

**Issue:** Offering flexible working arrangements to a woman returning to work will be inequitable for others.

**Update:** Organisations that are focused on keeping a talented workforce are deploying flexible conditions for all and are gaining a reputation for being employers of choice.

**Issue:** Client work with deadlines cannot be done flexibly.

**Update:** All professional service firms face this challenge; however there have been a number which have deployed an ‘all roles flex’ policy even in litigation areas of law firms.

A central recommendation of ‘Filling the Pool’ was to create ‘targets with teeth’ in order to achieve gender equality in each workplace. Here are some good first steps for all organisations, regardless of size:

− undertake a gender count to understand your workforce composition
− analyse the gender count to ascertain the number of women and men in all roles within the organisation
− create strategies to move women through the pipeline where any imbalance occurs
− undertake a like-for-like pay gap analysis
− where there is a pay gap for women undertaking the same roles with the same accountabilities as their male counterparts, close the gender pay gap
− be accountable and transparent with the results and communicate regularly with your staff.

Critical to the roadmap is the interlocking nature of the recommendations for government-business-women. Without all parts pulling together with a sense of shared responsibility the desire for a Perth in which men and women have equal opportunity will not be realised.

A lack of action will result in current and future generations of women continuing to squander their education and not fully realise their goals and ambitions. What a shameful underutilisation of female talent, particularly when Perth faces some significant challenges growing to a region of 3.5 million people. This is a time in which we need diversity of thought around the table in order to devise workable, actionable, intergenerational solutions.