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Are we doing today's young women a disservice?

I remember leaving school in Sydney's eastern suburbs in 1980 with the ring of being told 'girls, you can be anything you want to be' tolling loudly in my ears.

We were told to embrace a new found equity for women, where boundaries had been redrawn at home and in the workplace.

In reality what 'be anything' meant to most was to be a hairdresser, teacher, shop assistant, nurse or secretary. So many of us took on these jobs, they may have been fulfilling but had rates of pay that were notoriously low and limited career paths.

I am fortunate to be one of those who carved out a career, yet the pitfalls along the way have been many, so as a 50 year old I look at today's young female hopefuls with a degree of trepidation.

Despite going to university and qualifying in increasing numbers in male dominated professions and industries, there are still underlying issues that will impact on a young woman's success and independence.

In Perth, first year female graduates can expect on average to earn 9-10% less than their male counterparts. By the time they have worked in their chosen profession for 10 years, that gap will have grown to 26%.

So for girls, the current 'be anything' means that you can qualify in any field if you are smart and resilient but don't expect to earn the same as your male colleagues.

As the parent of two young women I am appalled that they will not have equal access to pay and opportunity despite being as qualified and as experienced as their male peers.

Why the pay difference? The literature says it is because men ask and negotiate well and women don't ask and accept whatever is offered. In my early career I was guilty of this, happy to receive a promotion or new role and take whatever money was on offer.

However, with a gap this big, we must worry about the cultural bias that remains when men are simply more likely to be offered higher salaries than women.

Why the gender gap?

This is a complex issue. In his thesis *Navigating CEO Success* Dr Terry Fitzsimmons says that men are promoted on future potential and women are promoted on past success – making it clear that the playing field for women and men is not even.

Common myths also abound. Like, there aren't enough women qualified to take on senior executive and board roles. But research that shows that having women on boards makes a positive impact to a company's bottom-line, yet women remain woefully under-represented in the boardroom.

Further inequity exists with women remaining the primary caregivers of children and a growing number are now also caring for elderly parents. These additional responsibilities lead to many women seeking part-time or flexible working hours or finding themselves struggling to take on further work related responsibilities, which hinders their career opportunities.

It is also true that women often lack confidence or the ability to promote themselves. 'No one likes a boaster' is on playback in my mind, from early tutorials on how a young lady should behave.

But, while all of the above scenarios are not unique to Perth, women here fare worse than they do in any other Australian capital – and we need to understand why.

We should not kid the young women of Perth today. Yes, the goal posts have moved over the past three decades. But I worry that we are burdening young women with HECS debts to qualify in areas of work that they will either choose or be forced to opt out of in 10 years' time, or in which they will not achieve parity in pay or opportunity.

The Committee for Perth, through its *Filling the Pool* gender equity project, will examine these issues and more. Our aim is to understand the very complex landscape of gender workplace equity in Perth and provide solutions for businesses and women.

We owe it to the current and future generations of women to make sure we close the gender inequality gap. As part of *Filling the Pool* we've just started interviewing people at senior levels across a range of business-related industries, 75 of these will be carried out this month. It is only through candid one-on-one interviews that we can get to the heart of the issue.

Our aim is that Perth's future decision makers equitably incorporate the talent and perspectives of women to address just one facet of the many areas of inequity facing society today.

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