

May 3, 2017

No equality in Perth's boardrooms

Despite it being 33 years since the Equal Opportunities Act was passed by the Western Australian Parliament, the number of women in senior management and leadership positions in Western Australia's public and private sectors remains low. The latest FACTBase bulletin released by the Committee for Perth investigated gender equality in Perth and found that women account for a mere 8.7% of the directors on WA ASX 100 boards.

"The cold hard figures are that out of a total of 539 directors in the WA ASX 100, 492 were men and just 47 were women. Even when the calculations took into account the number of men and women who sat on multiple WA ASX 100 boards, female representation marginally rose to 8.9%," said Committee for Perth CEO, Marion Fulker.

"Considering mining is the most male-dominated industry in Australia, the small number of females comes as no surprise with materials and energy firms comprising the majority of the WA ASX 100. Yet what is surprising is that many companies aren't taking any positive action."

When the sectors within the WA ASX 100 are broken down, the top 10 companies record 25% female representation, dropping to 6.7% for WA ASX 11-20, 9.1% for WA ASX 21-49, and 3.7% among WA ASX 50-100.

"The Equal Opportunities legislation aims to eliminate discrimination against people, amongst other things, based on their gender, race, religion, marital status and political conviction. Women aren't being legally discriminated against when it comes to rising up the ranks in Perth but we know that there are many structural and cultural reasons why.

"The Committee's landmark Filling the Pool report identified a range of factors that can lead to workplace gender disparity, including a lack of family and spousal support, a shortage of childcare options, inflexible working arrangements, male-centric corporate cultures and direct or indirect discriminatory practices.

"What the latest FACTBase report also revealed is that women directors on the WA ASX 100 almost exclusively hold the position of non-executive or independent director rather than executive director. What this might suggest is that even when women do make it into boardrooms their skills aren't fully utilised."

The report also found that only a fifth of the 19 Perth headquartered companies on the ASX 200 currently meets or exceeds the Australian Institute of Company Directors' (AICD) 30% gender diversity target, a target that is supposed to be reached by 2018.

"If we take a closer look at the materials sector, out of 12 companies, five have no women on their boards, and five only have between 10% and less than 30% women directors. While these figures are only based on a small sample, it suggests much more progress is needed to reach the AICD's recommended gender target by next year," added Mrs Fulker.

"As well as being under-represented in boardrooms, women in Western Australia remain under-paid. WA continues to have the worst gender pay gap in the nation, with women earning 23.9% less than men. The national average is 16%."

“Even outside of Perth’s boardrooms, monthly data from the ABS suggests that gender plays a part in the State’s unemployment patterns. Whether its across Perth or elsewhere in WA, women looking for full-time, part-time, or casual work, are facing more difficulties than men. Between November 2016 and January 2017, the women’s unemployment rate increase slightly from 6.8% to 7.0%. On the other hand, the men’s unemployment rate was not only lower it also showed a marginal decrease from 6.4% to 6.3%.

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