Women in Perth: Only 328 more years to wait for equality!

Conrad Liveris

Western Australia has the largest gender pay gap in Australia at over 25%. It is home to more ASX companies without women on their boards than any other state. And a landmark report released yesterday by the Committee for Perth's called Filling the Pool (http://www.committeeforperth.com.au/pdf/FillingThePool/CFP%20Filling%20the%20Pool%20Report.pdf) indicates that without leadership the chance of meaningful change is grim.

"Here in WA, we have half the national average of CEO's, fewer than half the number of female directors and under one third the national average of female chairs," Committee for Perth CEO, Marion Fulker said. "The current glacial pace of change will not see women in equal numbers of CEO roles until 2343. By any standards, there's no equality in those figures."

This is despite the fact that failing to include women, fails to stack up economically or socially. The business case for diversity is compelling and has been mounted consistently and publicly for the past 10 years. McKinsey, Goldman Sachs and EY are a few of the corporates who have produced the evidence.

"There is a financial and strategic advantage for companies that have gender equity initiatives in place," Fulker said. "In the United States, companies with a higher representation of women on their boards had a return on equity that was 53% higher, a return on sales that was 42% higher and a return on invested capital was higher by 66%.

For Australia, the forgone GDP from failing to adequately engage women in the workforce represents an annual loss of around $300 billion to the economy. And yet change eludes us.

The Filling the Pool findings are based on interviews conducted by lead researcher Dr Terrance Fitzsimmons and Professor Victor Callan. As part of their two-year research project they interviewed 173 Perth-based people, including 151 women. This included chairpersons, executive recruiters, human resources professionals, female executives and senior managers, women who have opted out of the corporate sector and 22 recent female graduates.

A key finding was that this is not just an issue of gender equality but one of leadership. "If the most influential men in Perth were to adopt and implement the recommendations in this report, the effects would be profound and felt immediately," Fulker said.

At the event to launch the report Shell's General Manager Michael Schoch asked a group of Perth-based business-leaders to consider this familiar line: If not me, then who? If now not now, then when?

Every single one of us is capable of creating a more equitable and inclusive workforce, but only if we acknowledge the task and respond in action.

West of the Nullarbor the four pillars that support women in the workforce - family support, spousal support, affordable and flexible childcare and out of school care and flexible employers and workplaces - are almost nonexistent.

Perth is not the only city in Australia with a childcare challenge but with only one childcare centre in the CBD, and the next closest one being a kilometer away its problem is significant. In a growing capital city this is substantial.

Societal attitudes also impede the case for equality.

"The people who were interviewed also talked about a prevailing attitude in Perth that if your partner was earning a good wage, then you should be at home looking after the children," Fulker noted.

In highlighting the distinctly masculine culture of operating in Perth, Fulker talked about her own experience attempting to join the board of RugbyWA. It took seven years from her first request to actually sitting on the board because she had not crossed that white line to score a try. During her first meeting after her first suggestion one director put his hand on hers and said that it was a "really good idea but it won't be my last".

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This anecdote drew laughter and a sense of agreement from other women in the room.

Filling the Pool clearly indicates that women in Perth confront deep and complex dynamics in the workplace but they are not unique. Discrimination – both direct or indirect - sexism and exclusion are sadly universal issues in Australian workplaces.

The Filling the Pool report makes for sober reading. In some respects it's tiresome to read that yet another research report proves the point. Societal attitudes also impede the case for equality.

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I am hopeful that the most influential men in Perth will heed the message they heard yesterday. Should they seek to implement this report's recommendations they will instigate change. I hope they act with gusto, starting now.
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