Committee for Perth launches landmark study

The Committee for Perth today released the findings of its landmark report Filling the Pool, which focuses on the Perth-based issues around gender inequality by exploring why women are paid less than their male colleagues and their struggle to climb the corporate ladder.

“Gender inequality is one that we all need to address. It's affecting us economically and socially. It really is case of “if not now, then when?” and “if not me then who?” when it comes to tackling this very serious issue,” said Committee for Perth CEO, Marion Fulker.

“When you look at the figures, the gender pay gap in Western Australia is higher than other states. It’s 25.3%, while the other states range from 8-22%.

“Here in WA, we also 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. 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.

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.

“From the Chairs and HR managers interviewed, those that had carried out gender pay audits reported that they had uncovered pay a disparity. Over 75% of female senior managers and executives reported that women did not negotiate their salaries whereas men almost always did. Often the pay gap starts when entering the workforce with male graduates often paid 9-10% more than the females and then that gap exacerbates over time.

“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.”

As well as finding that Perth had a blokey and masculine culture, the researchers found that the Perth business community is missing or has an erosion of the four pillars of support that help women to
succeed in other states.

The four pillars include:

- **Family support** - The mining and energy boom has seen tens of thousands of people move to Perth from overseas and interstate. They usually only have their immediate family and therefore lack the support of an extended family to call on for help.
- **External childcare providers** – Perth has the lowest per capita number of places for childcare in Australia. There are also extended waiting lists, the hours are often inflexible and there are only two childcare centres in the CBD. It’s also costly. A woman on the average wage of $45,000, with two children in childcare is working just to cover the cost of childcare. After school care and vacation care during the school holidays is described as ‘patchy’ and ‘piecemeal’.
- **Flexible employers and flexible work hours** - While a number of companies offer flexible work arrangements, these are perceived as career killers for both women and men.
- **Spousal support** – Many of the women interviewed hadn’t talked to their partner about progressing their careers after having children. WA also has a higher number of FIFO workers compared with other states, which reduces the level of support for families.

Mrs Fulker said that there was a strong economic argument for women staying in the workforce.

“National and international studies have proven that the GDP foregone every year is estimated at 20%. For Australia, this represents an annual loss of around $300 billion to the economy, what a waste of money that could be used to build desperately needed infrastructure,” she said.

“There is a financial and strategic advantage for companies that have gender equity initiatives in place. 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%.”

Filling the Pool makes 31 interlocking recommendations for government, businesses and their leaders as well as women.

For government, the key recommendations are:

- Develop a long-term campaign to raise awareness of the cultural norms that are hindering the progress of women. This should address intergenerational inequality, through a series of case studies. These would be similar to the anti-smoking and healthy lifestyle campaigns.
- As part of the Red Tape Reduction Campaign, investigate and remedy the lack of childcare places in the Perth and Peel regions as well as investigating how to reduce costs and extend opening hours.
- Create a greater range of childcare before and after school and during school holidays.
- Increase the number of girls undertaking STEM subjects at high school to grow the pool of women for the mining, energy, technology and construction sectors.

For organisations the key recommendations are:

- Carry out a gender pay gap audit by June 2016. These results should be released to all staff and thereafter carried out annually.
- Boards need to understand and embrace the economic rationale for gender equality as a strategic competitive advantage.
- CEO’s needs to be accountable for driving the issue of gender equality in the workplace.
- Rather than quotas, companies need to adopt targets with teeth. These targets must be challenging, accompanied by accountability and reward, aligned with a diversity strategy and assigned at the same levels as targets for budgets and performance.

Each of the women interviewed was asked, “What advice would you offer a woman at the start of her career if she were aiming for an executive position?” These are the key recommendations for women:

- Start with the end goal in mind and be strategically opportunistic.
- Work on self-confidence and understand effective self-promotion and networking.
Be true to yourself. It is better for a woman to negotiate the 'too soft' stereotype, rather than trying to mimic Perth’s blokey culture.

- Acquire mentors, sponsors and role models.
- Plan around your family and bring your partner into the conversation.

“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,” Mrs Fulker said.

Quotes from interviewees from the Filling the Pool research

“I think that Western Australia is exactly like the mining industry, it’s a boys’ club. It’s the familiarity, it’s all about local connections; it’s a lot about school tie connections. People come from the right school it doesn’t matter whether that was 30 years ago.”

“My director had a conversation with me and she said, ‘The male discrimination here is bad, I’ve never been in an office that’s been as bad as this anywhere I’ve worked in the world.’ And she said, ‘I could be in a meeting with a male partner and they’re nervous. I never felt that in London but I certainly feel it here.’ So, maybe it is a Perth thing. I think it is an issue here. I think it is a problem.”

“Most women, in my experience, are very uncomfortable with promoting themselves. Whereas, most men that I’ve come across, are happy to self-promote and I most definitely find that they are the ones that will boast the most or ask for a pay increase. Whereas, women, rarely, if ever do.”

“Women don’t go for roles that are outside their comfort zones to the same extent that men do. Women have to tick all the boxes before they’ll apply for the job, whereas men, so long as they can spell ‘engineer’ they will say ‘Why can’t I do that?”

“Women tend not to show off, it’s a big contradiction to the way we’re supposed to behave, the way we were taught to behave, and I remember my mum telling me not to show off and I think that we’d get told not to show off or not to be over-confident.”

“Some stats were put on the table and then there was lots of scepticism. But not only was it right, because we found those females were lesser paid than those blokes who are in the same role, but we also found that nearly everyone was too generous to the male performance reviews and men were actually being promoted to a title higher than they should be and then all of the excuses came out and I think in hindsight, with the stats in front of us, the talk was, ‘look some of that bias is probably true’.”

“My daughter goes to a highly competitive school. It’s very academic. The top girls tend to come out of this school. When they’re choosing their subjects, the number of them that I know who are deliberately choosing subjects to study things that would enable them to easily go part-time shocks me. If you talk about “don’t leave, before you leave”, these girls have left the workforce by the time they’re 15. What are the conversations at school, in the home, with each other? What are they talking about? They are certainly not talking about being at the head of corporations, or not enough of them.”

“I’s a big stickler for authenticity and honesty and integrity and all the values that we were trying to instil in the rest of the organisation. But you see inconsistencies around those values every single day and it pulled me down. It pulled me down after 15 years of loving what I do. It got to the point where I just didn’t want to deal with the negativity and the constant bias. So I was burnt out from a professional perspective and so I sat down with my husband and said, ‘Well, someone’s going to raise the children here. They need to come first and so I resigned.”

“I’ve had women in my organisation compare childcare to a house of cards. The minute that you pull one out, the rest of the cards start falling. It’s not easy because A: it’s not cheap and B: it’s not accessible.”

“As part of diversity, we have an allowance for men to take paternity leave as well as women and I know that in my office they call it the ‘girls blouse leave’ and the men do not take it and if they do they have to come back and prove themselves for a very long time before they’re being considered for any advances in their career or promotions.”

“So I think for a female to self-promote you’re seen as a bossy bitch. So, you’re bossy or you’re pushy. That same behaviour in a guy and he’s a hero.”

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The Committee for Perth is a member funded, think-tank organisation that is focused on the vibrancy, sustainability and liveability of the Perth and Peel region. The landmark Filling the Pool report is one of the many fact-based reports regularly released by the Committee.

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