

Why Women Should....

Keynote Address

YWCA She Leads Conference

By

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Good morning everyone and thank you for the opportunity to address this important conference.

I see my task this morning as being to introduce some ideas to help set the scene for the work you will be doing for the rest of the conference.

A couple of these ideas might seem rather provocative – at least to some of you perhaps. I hope so, anyway, because I believe that we all need to be challenged constantly if we are to keep our brains supple and in good shape. Our brains of course being our essential tool for what we do in life.

Before I begin, it is worth re-stating what I regard as the three fundamental principles of women's equality:

- Economic self reliance
- Control of our bodies
- Freedom from violence

Sadly, it is necessary for us to continually restate these fundamentals because they are still not present or where they do exist they are not secure because they are not embedded.

For women to be self-reliant economically, we need to have access to the best education we are capable of absorbing. On this score, as the current World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report points out, Australia does quite well. We are equal no 1 on women's education achievement.

We need to have access to employment, to equal wages, and to progress throughout our careers to the higher ranks should we wish to go there. None of these opportunities are available to Australian women as a matter of entitlement. Our workforce participation rate is just under 60 per cent, and most of that is part-time work, and we are still paid only around 83 per cent of men's earnings.

This means that over a lifetime women earn a lot less than men. It has been calculated that a 25 year old postgraduate student starting employment today will, over the course of her working life, earn ONE MILLION dollars less than a 25 year old man who starts work the same day she does.

Our lesser earnings, together with our interrupted work patterns as a result of child-bearing and raising, means we retire with a lot less than men. And we live longer.

You do the math.

The second fundamental principle for women's equality is that we retain control of our bodies; that we decided when – and whether – we are going to have children.

Today, while most Australian women can access contraception, our ability to resort to abortion, should that be necessary, is under constant threat.

The latest assault on our freedom of choice is in Victoria where an Independent MP is threatening to, in effect, bring down the government if the state's abortion laws are not drastically tightened.

And in New South Wales, there is legislation that if passed would confer "personhood" on the foetus; this has the potential to reduce women's rights to abortion.

Access to abortion is also reduced by the constant stigmatizing of the issue.

Look what happened last year when Julia Gillard warned us – with great prescience as it turned out – that "men in blue ties" would try to restrict access to abortion.

"We don't want to live in an Australia where abortion again becomes the political plaything of men who think they know better," she said.

She was roundly attacked for this – including by many women, including self-styled feminists, who argued that she was being divisive. Why is it "divisive" to talk about a threat to women's reproductive choice?

The answer is that the subject of abortion has become so stigmatised that few people want to talk about it, let alone fight for it.

This has serious repercussions for every aspect of service provision in this country, including the fact that most abortion providers are in their 60s and are not being followed by younger doctors willing to provide this essential service.

What does it matter if abortion is legal if there is no one willing to provide the service?

And thirdly, and very sadly, we are not free while so many of us are subject to violence.

We know that the recent increases in murders as a result of domestic violence have been so numerous that there are now calls for an emergency national summit to address the subject.

I agree that this should happen, but am saddened by the fact that it has taken the death of a large number of children for this call to be made.

Women's deaths are not serious enough, despite there being at least one a week in this country, to warrant a similar call.

These, then, are the three fundamental principles that need to be accepted for women to have true equality.

To attain or protect these principles in the current political environment I suggest that there are five things we need to do, five areas where we need to take action:

The Five Things:

Let me summarise and then address each one in some detail:

1. Stop calling Tony Abbott the Minister for Women
2. Oppose Tony Abbott's Paid Parental leave Scheme
3. Support numerical enforceable targets for women's representation in leadership positions in private and public spheres – parliament, the government (including the cabinet), boards and – most importantly – senior management positions
4. Retain gender reporting and the Women's Gender Equality Agency
5. Work together as women to protect our interests.

Let me elaborate.

1. Stop calling Tony Abbott the Minister for Women

I am sick to death of people – particularly people on Twitter – mocking Tony Abbott by referring to him as the Minister for Women.

I do not agree with many of Mr Abbott's policies but I DO support his decision to move responsibility for women's policy back to the Prime Minister's department, thereby potentially returning the power and prestige it used to enjoy during the Hawke and Keating governments.

I was always very disappointed that both Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard left women's policy languishing in FACHSIA, thereby designating it effectively an area of welfare, rather than a central, whole-of-government policy.

Both Bob Hawke and Paul Keating had Ministers assisting the Prime Minister on (the status of) Women. This did not make either of these men the Minister for Women and, to my knowledge, no one ever tried to call them that.

Mocking Abbott in the way that is so fashionable these days is politically short-sighted as well as being factually incorrect.

Let's stop it and instead, ask whether the Office for Women is being listened to.

How much influence do they have? Are they able, as OSW certainly did in my day, to comment on EVERY Cabinet submission?

If so, we would have expected that OSW would certainly have, for instance, opposed the removal of the Low Income Superannuation Contribution whose impact we know will be mainly on women.

As will the Medicare co-payment.

And many other measures of this government, and likely in tonight's Budget, will have a disproportionate and detrimental effect on women.

This should be the scandal - that women are being made to suffer more by this government.

That policy is not being designed to help women. In some instances, it could be argued, it is designed to do exactly the opposite.

I am referring of course to the Prime Minister's Paid Parental Leave Scheme.

2. Oppose Tony Abbott's Paid Parental leave Scheme

Mr Abbott's very expensive scheme has been rightfully criticised for the fact that it will not deliver what he claims is the principal reason for the scheme: to increase women's workforce participation.

We all know that the two key barriers to women returning to work is the availability and cost of childcare, and the loss of income due to the high effective marginal tax rates on family benefits. If Mr Abbott has \$5 billion to spare, he would be better off spending it to address these two issues – and he would have more success in achieving his stated aim.

This is what Canada did in the late 1990s – with great success as reported by the Grattan Institute in its 2012 report *Game Changers: Economic Reform priorities for Australia*.

Given the evidence, and given that the existing PPL scheme is working quite well, you have to question Mr Abbott's motives in persisting with his scheme in the face of almost universal opposition.

I am not the only person to have suggested that what he really wants is to get women – especially those he has dubbed “women of calibre” - *out* of the workforce. The fact that his scheme will be administered by CentreLink rather than paid by the employer as the current scheme is, gives some credence to this idea.

3. Support numerical enforceable targets for women's representation in leadership positions in private and public spheres – parliament, the government (including the cabinet), boards and – most importantly – senior management positions

Mr Abbott has set a shocking precedent with his Cabinet. With just one woman, this is the lowest representation of women in Australia's top decision-making body since the Keating years (when at least there was the excuse that the pool of women to draw on was pitifully tiny – not something that can be argued today).

Just to remind ourselves:

The last Howard Ministry, 2006:

Overall 16.7% comprising

Cabinet 2 of 18 = 11%

Ministry 2 out of 12 = 16.7%

Parliamentary Secretaries 3 out of 12 = 25%

The last Gillard Ministry 2013:

Remember this is still less than a year ago!

Overall 33% The highest in our history.

Cabinet 4 out of 20 = 20%

Ministry 6 out of 10 = 60%

Parliamentary Secretaries 4 out of 12 = 33%

The last Rudd Ministry 2013:

Overall 31%

Cabinet 6 out of 20 = 30%

Ministry 5 out of 10 = 50%

Parliamentary Secretaries 2 out of 12 = 17%

And what do we have today?

The First Abbott Ministry 2013:

Overall 14%

Cabinet 1 out of 19 = 5%

Ministry 4 out of 11 = 36%

Parliamentary Secretaries: 1 out of 12 = 8%

The rest of the world can do it. The French cabinet comprises 50 per cent women.

Just yesterday I saw in the *New York Times* that the recently –elected Mayor of New York, Bill de Blasio, is setting new records with his appointments. And not just on gender, although with 32 women appointed to senior positions in his administration, as against 28 men (that's 53 per cent women!), he's doing a lot better than anyone in this country.

But the other example we should be looking to is the age of his appointees.

We are, according to media reports, going to learn in tonight's federal Budget that the pension age is going to be raised to 70. Employers need to take heed of this and start hiring, and retaining, workers way beyond the current preference for people under 50.

Mayor de Blasio's new administration includes a number of women who are in their late 60s and his Schools Chancellor, Carmen Farina, was brought back from retirement, at the age of 71, to take on the job.

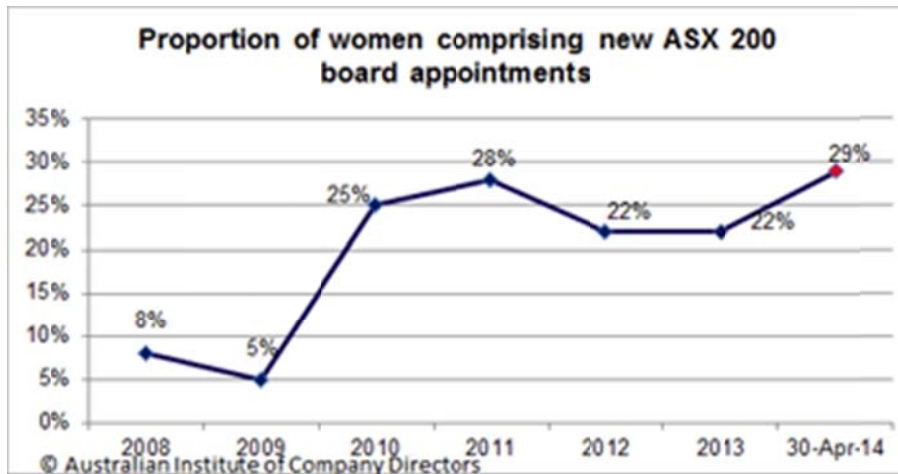
With government setting such a bad example in Australia is it any wonder that women's representation in the corporate world is pretty woeful?

It is good to see that the proportion of women comprising new ASX 200 board appointments continues to rise, from the pitiful 5% in 2009 to a record of 29% so far this year. But we are still nowhere near the 40 per cent that Norway and some other European countries have adopted in order to rapidly increase the representation of women.

And, as the Australian Institute of Company Directors, which provided these figures, points out: there are still 40 out of the ASX companies that still have **NO WOMEN DIRECTORS**.

That is nearly 25 per cent.

Unacceptable.



We need to be quite clear about one thing: without enforceable numerical targets – what I would call “quotas” – we are not going to see noticeable and permanent change.

At present, as we have seen in politics, the appointment of women is a matter of whimsy. If the bloke in charge feels like doing it, he will. Or, in the current case, he didn't.

We have to move beyond whimsy to regulation. Just as we do with every other goal we are serious about attaining.

Having quotas of at least 40 per cent will, as Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick has pointed out, force employers to canvass the available talent.

It will require them to take merit into account.

This does not happen at present.

Merit is the last thing many employers look for. Instead, they use networks, mates, old school, footy clubs or any number of random means of recruiting people who – quelle surprise! – end up being very much like themselves.

It is ludicrous to argue that thirty years after women began graduating from Australian universities in equal or greater numbers than men, that there is not an equal distribution of talent and merit in this country.

So why is this not reflected in the ranks of our leadership in politics? In business? In public administration?

We have had forty years of saying we are going to do this. We haven't done it voluntarily. We now need some compulsion.

4. Retain gender reporting and the Women's Gender Equality Agency

Just as we need quotas to achieve results, we need gender reporting to check our progress.

The private sector began such a bench-marking scheme in 2010 when the ASX introduced, under its corporate governance guidelines, the requirement that listed companies report on the numbers of women in their organisations, on their boards and in their senior management teams. In doing so, the ASX led the way.

The Labor government had been inexcusably slow to redress the damage done by the Howard government to the Hawke Government's reporting requirement under the 1986 Affirmative Action legislation.

Now the rather-little and almost-too-late measures legislated at the last minute by the Labor government in the Women's Gender Equality Act are under threat from the Abbott government.

This government's initial effort to end the gender reporting requirements just as they were about to be implemented was, fortunately, stymied by some pretty effective lobbying by women's and other groups. But the law, and the Agency that administers it is still on the government's hit-list.

We need to fight to save the law and protect the Agency.

As they say in business, what gets measured gets noticed.

It was no mistake that the Howard government systematically abolished every single form of measurement of women's activity and progress, from the Women's Bureau (that has been set up by the Menzies government back in 1963 to monitor women's employment, especially equal pay) to the Women's Statistics Unit in the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

If we are not measured, we don't know how we are doing.

It is imperative that we have markers of progress – or lack of it, or of backsliding.

The government that abolish these ways of measurement know this.

And finally -

5. Work together as women to protect our interests.

We as women must work together to fight for our rights, to protect what we have won and to resist any further attempts to send us back to the Dark Ages.

As I have often argued, we need a strong independent and effective women's lobby – why should it just be the miners, the farmers, the trades unions etc which are able to have powerful lobbies in Canberra? Women need this too.

In the meantime, we must support the groups that are taking a stand: Fair Agenda, the National Foundation for Australia Women, the Women's Electoral Lobby and we must be ready to support them with our money as well as with our voices.

The only way we can ensure our independence and hence our effectiveness is to end our reliance on government for funding. We have seen too often how governments of both persuasions have been quite ruthless about using funding as a weapon and a tool. We must leave those days behind us.

What I have tried to do this morning is to be prescriptive. Women should, I say. You may not agree with each of the things that I prescribe but I trust you take seriously the need for us to be vigilant, active and effective when it comes to fighting for and protecting our rights to be equal members of this society.

Thank You.