

Gender inequality in the workplace: using the evidence to advance change

Workshop Factsheet | GIWL Youth Summit

Workshop overview

Gender inequality in the workplace is widespread and damaging and can take many forms, from the overt issues (like pay inequity, disparity in promotions and sexual harassment), to subtler and less easily identified microaggressions. These issues are often compounded when intersectionalities, like ethnicity or sexuality, come into play. But, so often the focus is on “fixing the women”, as though it is a lack of confidence or experience that is to blame rather than entrenched systemic inequalities.

In this workshop we'll share the latest research on workplace gender equality and explore how this plays out across different sectors, for people at different stages of their career, and for different communities to understand how we can address systemic obstacles to create fairer and safer workplaces for everyone.

The workplace is often a precarious place for women and gender diverse people

- **Implicit discrimination** can be hard to recognise and address. These are subtle biases, stereotypes and behaviours that can affect decision-making around things like promotions, pay rises, work allocation and even just day-to-day interactions at work.
- This includes **microaggressions** – subtle, often unintentional everyday discriminations which includes everything from not being invited to meetings or included in emails, to undermining comments or backhanded compliments, like “you're really smart for a woman”.
- Sexual harassment is one example of **explicit discrimination**, and is an issue that plagues workplaces around the world and affects people across sectors and career stages, although research suggests young people are particularly at risk.

There is scarce data for gender diverse people, but research from the Australian Human Rights Commission shows that...

- In the last five years, **39% of women have experienced sexual harassment at work**, compared to 26% of men.
- **45% of people aged 18-29 have experienced sexual harassment at work** – making them more likely than any other age group to have done so.
- **1/5 (20%) of 15-17-year-olds have been sexually harassed at work.**

- Fewer than 1/5 people (17%) made a formal report or complaint about workplace sexual harassment.

Gendered barriers to career progression

- It is widely established that **career progression plateaus in your late 20s and early 30s for women and gender diverse people**. In addition, those who enter the job market in low-paid roles rarely progress compared with men.
- A culture of overwork disadvantages employees who have caring commitments, and historically women have disproportionately undertaken unpaid child and elder care – currently in Australia **12% of women identify as a carer and women represent 7/10 primary carers**. This means they are...
 - » More likely to work part-time, casually on in flexible roles (and often face stigma and have limited job opportunities for doing so).
 - » More likely to experience interruptions to their career.
 - » More likely to have a substantially lower superannuation balance at retirement.
 - » More likely to experience depression or anxiety than non-carers.
- **Gender bias flourishes without clear and transparent systems on pay and promotion**, with decisions reached via processes that disadvantage women and gender diverse people, including networking and “**social cloning**”, where bosses champion employees who are “like them” or part of their network.

“Leaning in” won't solve the problem

In recent years there's been a huge growth in the diversity and inclusion landscape, with a significant amount of effort and considerable resources being invested into making change. There's just one problem – it's not paying off.

- There's a widespread assumption that women and gender diverse people are somehow less confident, ambitious or likely to take risks at work than men (which is often blamed for their lack of career progression).
- BUT our research shows that this is simply untrue – women and gender diverse people's confidence and ambition are not inherently lower than men's, but are eroded by experiences in unequal workplace cultures (not having role models, and being treated differently from male counterparts).

- Similarly, women and gender diverse people are not inherently risk-averse, they just operate within systems that reward men for risk-taking, but punish women for the same behaviour.
- So, organisations need to shift away from encouraging women and gender diverse people “lean in”, be more confident and take more risks and focus instead on the ways in which their reward systems may perpetuate gender inequality.
- Individually targeted coaching or training programs aren’t going to magically solve entrenched inequalities – at best, they’re short-term fix for a few already privileged women, and, at worst, they reinforce damaging assumptions of success that reinforce systemic issues.

Teetering on the edge of a “glass cliff”

- While there has been some progress towards gender equality in top leadership positions, our research has found people of all genders consistently overestimate women’s representation in boardrooms, films and across professions.
- Even more concerningly, we found that those who felt that sexism is no longer a problem in their profession were the most likely to pay female employee less than a male one and to give her fewer career opportunities, and the least likely to support gender-equality initiatives.
- And when we do see greater gender representation, there’s often a story behind the numbers. The “glass cliff” is a pattern whereby women achieve success and attain leadership positions in times of crisis or where their position is precarious – that is, women are allowed to step in when men aren’t interested.
- We see this play out again and again across all sectors of business and politics – getting to the top isn’t enough if there’s no support or chance of success once you get there.

There is no “universal experience” of discrimination

It is still the experiences of white, cis, heterosexual, middle/upper-class women that are platformed as the “universal experience” of gender inequality. But if we’re serious about promoting equity and inclusion in the workplace, it is vital to take an **intersectional**

approach that centres the varying experiences of under-represented groups. For example...

- Evidence shows that **black women often suffer higher levels of stress, lack of confidence, low self-esteem, marginalization, silencing and objectification, than their white counterparts**, resulting in impaired mental health, invisibility, feelings of inauthenticity and inadequacy and lower career progression.
- People from racial and cultural minorities can also experience “**racial battle fatigue**” – exhaustion from the dilemma of repeatedly having to confront or choose to ignore racism in predominantly white settings, which leaves less time and energy for things like networking and taking on additional work responsibilities that may lead to promotions.
- Similarly LGBTQIA+ people can also experience additional layers of discrimination at work, like homophobic and transphobic comments, jokes and exclusionary behaviour. And the research suggests this is heightened the further you move away from visually presenting within societally accepted “gender norms” – so gender non-conforming and gender diverse people can be particularly affected and are more likely to experience “**gender policing**”.
- Trans and gender-diverse people can also experience additional stressors, like issues accessing a bathroom that aligns with their gender identity and difficulties in rectifying their name and gender on official documents. Gender transitions also often take place during working years and there is usually a lack of adequate organizational support and accommodation for their specific needs during the transition process.

Workshop aims

- To learn how to recognise gender inequality at work, including the subtler forms of discrimination.
- To explore how experiences in the workplace look different for people in different sectors and people at different stages of their careers.
- To apply an intersectional lens and ask how we can develop levers for change that work for everyone.
- To explore what policy change needs to happen and what research questions we should ask moving forward?

Key terms

Intersectionality

The acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalise people – gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc.

Glass Cliff

The phenomenon where women (and members of other minority groups) are more likely to be placed in leadership positions that are risky or precarious.

Explicit discrimination

Obvious discrimination, which often

violates anti-discrimination laws, eg sexual harassment.

Implicit discrimination

Subtle biases that consciously or unconsciously affect decision-making, attitudes and behaviours

Microaggressions

Everyday, subtle and often unintentional interactions or behaviours that communicate some sort of bias toward historically marginalized group

Gender norms

Restrictive and stereotypical ideas about how people of different genders should present and behave.

Gender policing

Imposing or enforcing gender norms on

someone who is seen as not adequately performing these via their appearance or behaviour.

Tokenism/ tokenisation

When people or organisations try to present themselves as diverse, without actually striving for diversity, eg by including only a small number of people from marginalized groups as a way to “look good”, or singling out a marginalized individual as a representative of their entire group.

Racial battle fatigue

The cumulative effects of relentless racial hostility that black people experience in predominantly white settings, likened to soldiers experiencing combat stress from being in hostile

Sources & further reading

[Intersectionality is the key to tackling gender inequality in the workplace – and beyond](#)

[In traditionally male-dominated fields, women are less willing to make sacrifices for their career](#)

[To advance equality for](#)

[women, use the evidence](#)

[Gender equality and caring](#)

[Everyone’s business: Fourth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces](#)

[In some professions, women have become well represented, yet gender bias persists](#)