

Bridging the gap in women's participation in Sydney

What would it take to finally bridge the gap for women in our city? What would it take to ensure women have the same opportunities to succeed across our society as men do?

There's been palpable frustration and anger at widespread reports of sexual harassment, and a collective exasperation at the ongoing gap in workforce participation by women – currently 9 per cent lower than for men – which has been exacerbated by Covid-19.

As large numbers of women took to the streets around the country this week, we need to maintain our focus on the economic shifts, public policy reforms and cultural practices required to make Sydney a city that works for women and supports women who want to work.

This reader's group is devoted to understanding the scale of the problem we face in Sydney and around the world, and some of the steps we can take to solve it and move on.

Women, especially young women, lost their jobs at higher rates as a result of Covid-19 – with 97,000 losing work compared to 37,000 young men.

Professor Rae Cooper AO, who will join the Committee's Economic Briefing on March 31, has identified the need for increased efforts to support women into STEM sectors, where gains made in recent years risk being rolled back.

The Grattan Institute identified a 'triple-whammy' of Covid-19 for women – more likely to lose their jobs, taking on a greater share of unpaid work, and less likely to receive government support.

Globally, the results are consistent with what we're seeing here. Israel, seen as a leader in closing the gender gap, saw gains made in recent years fall back with the closure of childcare and schools during Covid-19. The USA is facing a recession unlike those before, with low-income women most exposed.

Outside the developed world, the effects are even more stark – with the United Nations warning that the 70 per cent of women in the developing world who work in informal jobs risk unemployment.

These effects have been especially felt by mothers. Women disproportionately shoulder the burden of raising children, and even before Covid-19, were more likely to work in ill-suited jobs closer to home to balance caring responsibilities.

The cost of childcare is another barrier to increasing women's participation – before the Covid-19 crisis, a typical Australian woman with pre-teenage children worked just 2.5 days a week.

Women make up a small fraction of the leadership in Australian society – Workplace Gender Equality Agency data shows women hold just 15 per cent of Board Chair positions, 28 per cent of directorships, 18 per cent of Chief Executives and 33 per cent of key management roles. There are no female directors on 30 per cent of boards and governing bodies. Australia is below the OECD average for women in parliament and fifth lowest for women in Ministerial positions.

The Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner's landmark Respect@Work report presented 55 recommendations to reduce sexual harassment in the workplace. Just three of these recommendations are being implemented – although this is being re-examined in light of recent events in Federal Parliament.

So how can we improve? Fortunately, there is no shortage of solutions that will boost economic performance and women's participation in the workforce.

McKinsey projects a \$13 trillion gain to global GDP by 2030 by taking action to arrest the gender parity regression as a result of Covid-19. KPMG research shows even halving the gap between male and female workforce participation would increase the nation's annual GDP by A\$60 billion over the course of two decades.

Parents advocate The Parenthood and Equity Economics found policy changes to parental leave and childcare to make Australia the best place in the world to be a parent would result in a 4.1 per cent increase in GDP by 2050 through wellbeing and productivity gains.

The Grattan Institute's Women's Work report proposes a set of reforms to 'build back better' by reducing the cost of childcare and investing in sectors with higher levels of female employment – hospitality, the arts, aged care and social services. Previously they had found that investing \$5 billion a year into childcare subsidies would deliver an \$11 billion a year increase to GDP for Australia.

Prof. Cooper and colleagues argue the way forward from this 'triple whammy' will require a much broader approach, employing a gender-lens for a far wider suite of public policy and economic responses. An open letter co-signed by high profile women including Lucy Turnbull, Rosie Batty, Nicola Forrest and Ronni Kahn backed this work, calling for the Prime Minister to "unlock the productivity gains that come from increasing women's workforce participation."

It is time for quotas and targets, argues incoming director of the ANU's Global Institute for Women's Leadership, Professor Michelle Ryan. Women need to be proactively rewarded for their achievements because waiting has not worked.

SGS Economics and Planning analysed workforce segregation by gender and found compact urban economies support more gender equality – suggesting denser communities, which put jobs closer to women, can also help increase participation.

In February, the Committee for Sydney made funding universal childcare a key Covid-19 recovery strategy priority – and we will continue to advocate on this. The Greater Sydney Commission's Women's Safety Charter and research by the Committee on the Female City also propose changes to make Sydney a city that works well for women.

Cities that get this right are reaping the benefits. Stockholm markets itself as a place for women, and have signed up their 100 largest employers to this cause. They successfully use this reputation to attract globally talented women to contribute to their city.

There is much to be done, but the benefits of putting women at the centre of our recovery – to build Sydney back as one of the best cities in the world for women – are enormous.