Stream 4: Gender, Diversity and Indigeneity

Competitive Session

Gender Equality in the Workplace: Moving from Practices to Strategy

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ABSTRACT:

Gender inequality continues to be a workplace issue in Australia. Despite decades of gender equality research and activism, there has been little examination of overarching workplace approaches to promote gender equality. We address this gap by defining workplace gender equality in the workplace, considering the gap in gender equality research and discussing a practitioner framework for action in gender equality at the organisational level. Our discussion illustrates the complexity of applying a standardised framework. We conclude by presenting the next steps for creating sustainable gender equitable workplaces.

Keywords (from ANZAM lists): affirmative action, diversity management, equal employment opportunity, women and work, work and family.

Gender inequality continues to be a workplace issue in Australia. Many women and men do not experience gender equality in the workplace, which is achieved when all employees have ‘access to and enjoy the same rewards, resources and opportunities whether they are a woman or a man’ (Australian Government Workplace Gender Equality Agency; WGEA, 2012, p. 1). There is a long history of regulation and activism around the lack of women’s equality in the Australian workforce (Burgess, French & Strachan, 2010; Gaze, 2014). However, progress towards equality has been slow, shown particularly by the underrepresentation of women in management (Australian Bureau of Statistics; ABS, 2012), the continued gender pay gap (ABS, 2015) and gender segregation by industry—women dominating in health and education and men dominating in mining, construction, transport and manufacturing (ABS, 2014). However, much of the research has focused on gender equality activities such as the regulation of gender equality (Charlesworth & Macdonald, 2015; Dickens, 2006), the implementation of practices that affect gender equality in the workplace (Cooper & Baird, 2015) and the impact of these practices on organisations (De Ciceri, Holmes, Abbott &
This research has provided rich data about different aspects of gender equality, but more focus needs to be placed at the level of organisational strategy. We recognise that achieving gender equality in the workplace is a unique journey of development and sustainability for each organisation, but there has been limited research on the best practice strategies that organisations can develop to undertake this journey. This particular oversight is a key question for HR and diversity practitioners and concerns which workplace programs are best to promote diversity and gender equality specifically (Burgess et al., 2010; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2015; Kulik, 2014). In this exploratory, conceptual paper, we begin to address this gap by considering an existing practitioner framework for action in gender equality—the WGEA’s *Gender Strategy Toolkit* (WGEA, 2012)—and by showing the complexity of applying a standardised framework, as well as suggesting the next steps for creating sustainable equitable workplaces for women and men.

This research is important for three reasons. First, it is twenty years this year since the United Nation’s Beijing World Conference on Women. The Beijing Conference’s Platform for Action was based on a world in which gender equality and women’s empowerment are at the centre of sustainable development (UNW, 2012.). Because it has been two decades since this world event relating to women’s equality, and because of the glacial pace of change towards equality in the workplace, it is timely to take stock of gender equality workplace developments and their outcomes. Second, we try to bridge the research-practice gap in diversity management (Kulik, 2014) by focusing on practical changes that can be made at the organisational level. In doing so, we try to overcome previous criticisms of diversity management scholars as not being ‘market-oriented enough’ (Jonsen, Maznevski & Schneider, 2011, p. 36). Finally, this approach integrates different aspects of gender equality, rather than focusing on single particular aspects—for example, flexible working. This approach recognises the underlying interdependence and complementarities between practices, following from the research in diversity management and HRM that suggests an overarching strategy and bundles of practices are more effective than standalone practices (e.g. Becker & Gerhart, 1996, Wentling, 2004).
Background

It is important to first understand the regulatory aspects of gender equality in Australia, as well as research findings on the implementation of equality practices and their impact on organisational and employee outcomes in various workplaces.

From the 1970s, Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) legislation was enacted and Australian federal and state government departments established equal opportunity units. They employed women’s advisors, focusing on affirmative action based on a social justice and human rights mission (Gaze, 2014). In the 1980s and 90s, with the influence of neoliberalism, the focus shifted to a business case for gender equality (Dickens, 2006; Hart, 2010). The goal to increase women’s equal participation in the workforce has gained the imprimatur of being a good business strategy supported by such innovations as Male Champions of Change (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2010). Though scholars have highlighted concerns with leaving gender equality to the ‘benevolence or enlightened self-interest of employers’ (Charlesworth & Macdonald. 2015, p. 437), there have been many studies that have been influential in showing the business benefits of greater gender equality, encouraging employers to take action in the workplace (Ali, forthcoming; Dezsö & Ross, 2012; Martin, 2013).

Continuing on from the original Australian EEO legislation and the Sex Discrimination Acts, the Workplace Gender Equality Act was passed in 2012 (Gaze, 2014). Companies with 100 or more employees were now required to report on key measures involved with ascertaining their progress towards an equitable workplace. A new recommendation is for businesses to develop an overarching gender equality strategy that is linked to their business strategy, but only 7 per cent have done so (WGEA, 2014). However, there is optimism among some scholars such as Benschop and Verloo (2011), who suggest that ‘[e]qual pay and fair employment procedures for recruitment and promotion
may not be realised yet but thanks to equal employment strategies... they are recognised as being worth striving for’ (p. 280).

Australian literature has confirmed the persistent neglect of gender equality and flexibility practices as a strategic imperative for most organisations, especially in the private sector (De Cieri et al. 2005; Baxter & Chesters, 2011). Moreover, much of this work has identified a gap between the formal provision of flexible work arrangements and their use (Cooper & Baird, 2015; McDonald, Pini & Bradley, 2008; Nowak, Naude & Thomas, 2013), and a lack of coherence and integration between such policies and the needs of employees across the life course (Pocock, Charlesworth, & Chapman, 2013).

There is growing evidence that the provision of different types of flexible work practices may have unintended consequences for gender equality (McLean, 2014). Baxter and Chesters (2011), for example, report on a study examining the relationship between access to and use of flexible/family-friendly work practices and perceived work-family balance. They show that not all flexibility practices are associated with stronger perceptions of work-family balance. For example, employer-provided or subsidised health care was consistently associated with lower levels of perceived work-family balance, whereas part-time work was associated with higher reported work and family balance.

Scholars have generally explained these findings as reflective of the fact that most organisations take an *ad hoc* approach to gender equality and diversity more generally. This line of work demonstrates that for many employees, especially women, the uses of flexible work practices have been associated with negative career outcomes, such as promotion and access to meaningful work. There is also considerable evidence that there is a significant gap between the formal rhetoric of policy and how such policies are implemented in practice. These findings have been particularly evident in such professions as accounting (Kornberger, Carter & Ross-Smith, 2010), legal practice (Thornton & Bagust, 2007), and engineering (Powell, Bagilhole & Dainty, 2009), as well as among senior management (Drew & Murtagh, 2005).
A gender equality strategy framework and gender ‘mainstreaming’

Achieving gender equality in the workplace can be understood as a journey, requiring deliberate action for organisations to become more equitable over time (French, Strachan & Burgess, 2012). To mainstream gender equality as a business issue, progress can be made through goal setting and measurement, crucial levers for organisational change more broadly (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2015). Many frameworks for gender equality encompass this approach, including the United Nations’ Women’s Empowerment Principles (UNA, 2012) and the Calvert Women’s Principles (2014). In the Australian context, the WGEA’s Toolkit is a particularly comprehensive framework.

The WGEA developed the Toolkit with input from industry and academic partners as a framework for assessing the development of whole-of-organisation approach to gender equality. Based on a gender equality road map, it conceptualises an organisation’s journey to workplace gender equality as progressing away from avoidance and compliance with legislation through a series of stages towards a sustainable, strategic approach to gender equality. The Toolkit defines 12 key focus areas that make up essential components of a comprehensive equality strategy. They are stakeholder engagement, leadership accountability, strategy and business case, measurement and reporting, policies and processes, supply chain, gender composition, gender pay equity, flexibility, talent pipeline, leader and manager capability, and gender inclusive culture. The Toolkit conceptualises each aspect separately, detailing that goals and progress need to be set within each, but it also maps their interconnection. For example, a gender inclusive culture is conceptualised as underpinning all other aspects, while leaders are seen as being ultimately responsible for gender equality, with stakeholders being consulted and engaged in every aspect (WGEA, 2014, p. 18).

It is particularly important to examine the interconnection between different practices, due to the unintended consequences of implementing particular practices in isolation, which may hamper progress on workplace gender equality. One pertinent example is the issue of workplace flexibility. Workplace flexibility, which entails a variety of measures that may include part-time work, working from home, reduced hours and other forms, has been identified as a key way for employees to balance
their work and outside life. It is more frequently taken up by women to accommodate traditional
caring responsibilities in the home (Skinner & Pocock, 2011). However, it may have gendered ‘trade-
found from analysing the careers of women employees in the banking sector, universities, government
services and schools, that ‘although flexibility enshrined in government policies supports women’s
employment, it does not necessarily support their career progression’ (p. 86). Developments in
workplace flexibility can reinforce discrimination towards women, as it ‘entrenches gender inequality
further, ensuring that women remain responsible for reconciling work and family through part-time
work and flexible working arrangements’ (Pocock, Charlesworth & Chapman, 2013, p. 597). Indeed,
it is important to consider flexible work in connection with other aspects of human resource
management, such as the talent pipeline, to ensure that those working flexibly are not excluded from
training and development and are considered for promotion and career progression (Brooke et al.,
2013, p. 86).

Developing an overarching strategy guided by the Toolkit can help inform both practice and
research. For practice, it provides a helpful starting point for examining interconnection and
identifying key areas, where there is limited research on overarching measures. For research, this
framework focuses attention on the need to conduct research with senior leaders and HR managers to
understand the approach the organisation takes towards diversity and the program they offer (Kulik,
2014). However, there are limitations of using a standardised framework as a measure to gauge
action, which we will discuss below.

**Key issues in developing a gender equality strategy**

Research has examined the complexity for organisations working to progress gender equality,
and the management of diversity more broadly. Scholars argue that ‘the one size fits all model’ can be
limited as it does not account for key contextual differences amongst organisations, including
industry, size and the nature of the work performed (Burgess et al. 2010, p. 89; Gotsis & Kortezi, 2015). Furthermore, some aspects of strategy, such as cultural change initiatives, may be more imperative for some organisations than others in progressing towards gender equality (Morley, 2011).

The industry context and differences amongst industries are particularly important. Recently, French and Strachan (2015) analysed 280 reports made to the Australian Government’s Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (precursor to WGEA) by organisations in the female-dominated finance and insurance organisations, and the male-dominated transport and construction organisations. They found that in the construction industry, a majority of operatives are subcontractors and not employees. This may be where heavy gender bias occurs, because the contractors are not included in reporting. This highlights marked industry differences and similarities which need to be taken into account in the practice of equal employment policies and outcomes, particularly when formulating a strategy, where it is important to ensure that all relevant employees are considered. Treatment must be in ‘the name of equality--not just equal treatment’ (French & Strachan, 2015, loc.1461), moving beyond ‘identity-blind’ practices that treat everyone the same to ‘identity-conscious’ practices that recognise the needs of certain groups (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2015; Konrad & Linnehan, 1995). However, the use of different approaches may vary depending on the industry context. For instance, identity-conscious practices may be particularly important in male-dominated industries, which may not adequately account for the historic disadvantage and stereotyping of women in these industries (French & Strachan, 2015). In female-dominated workplaces, gender equality may not be considered an important issue, as it is assumed that by having more female workers, the organisation also has an approach that benefits female workers, though this may not actually be the case. For instance, the residential care sector is dominated by women employees and is popular with employees who have caring responsibilities out of the workplace. Flexible work is almost the norm, because it needs staffing 24 hours a day, seven days a week (WLACC, 2008). However, it is low-paid work, historically undervalued as care work because of the assumed link between female workers and the labour of care (Charlesworth, 2012; Cortis and
Meagher, 2012), and even the flexible working often better serves the organisation than the employees.

Particular aspects of a gender equality strategy are especially important, such as the establishment of a gender-inclusive culture, which must underpin all other action. In an Australian survey of 619 Committee of Economic Development Australia (CEDA) members, corporate cultural change was nominated as the most important from a list of strategies designed to bring about gender equity in the workplace (CEDA, 2013: 128). Some organisations may need more work than others in this area, requiring different strategies according to the degree to which the organisation has established this key aspect of gender equality. To build a culture of gender equality, leaders’ behaviours and decisions need to be inclusive and equitable. However, changing workplace culture is most probably one of the most difficult of the WGEA’s key focus areas.

One barrier to change is the persistent, though inaccurate, logic that the pursuit of merit might justify a lack of women leaders (Hutchinson, 2014). This often entails the argument that if women achieve the required level of merit they will obtain the corresponding leadership opportunities (Hutchinson, 2014). According to this logic, women need to adjust to meet the merit demands and fit into a particular leadership mould. However, this conceptualisation of merit is problematic in at least two ways. First, it assumes a level playing field upon which to prove so-called merit. Second, this conceptualisation also neglects the socially-constructed nature of how people perceive merit—that the definition and evaluation of merit is largely ‘in the eye of the beholder’. Leaders tend to promote people similar to themselves (Colley, 2004, p. 58). Thornton (2015) typifies the benchmark for leadership as ‘benchmark man’ and defines him as ‘white, Anglo-Celtic, heterosexual, able bodied, neither too old or too young’ (loc. 1087). It is therefore important to change the culture of leadership for a gender inclusive workplace. However, there is evidence that explicitly drawing attention to the lack of gender inclusion in the workplace can actually bring out heightened negativity about changing a culture. Traditional masculine behaviour is threatened. As Morley (2011) found, ‘being forced to engage in training or awareness of unconscious bias can strengthen bias, as can attempting to suppress
Next step: Leading for gender equality

Leadership is highly important for developing a more gender equitable workplace, particularly in changing culture, creating goals and introducing new practices (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2015). Whelan and Wood (2013, p. 35) suggest the use of what they term ‘targets with teeth’, defined as goals that are specific, challenging, embedded in organisational processes for reward, feedback and accountability’ (p.47). Piterman (2013), who explored barriers to women gaining leadership in the workforce, says ‘Australian business is yet to reap the benefits of the gender and cultural diversity in its midst’ (p. 102). She considers that the business case is well established but the problem is ‘blindness, inertia and short-term attitudes’. Further she advised, ‘leaders must step up’, quoting Charles Hampden-Turner (1994), ‘We do not promote women only because they have achieved. The value has to precede the achievement’ (p. 108).

A successful example of cultural change comes from the global, 150-year-old Bayer pharmaceutical company, which has recently changed its leadership to be more culturally and gender balanced (Wittenberg-Cox, 2015). The CEO knew it would be hard to shift the culture but had underestimated the ‘base line attitudes’ from which to start. To bring about change ‘you don’t use brute force, you have to do it gradually’ Marijn Dekkers, Bayer’s CEO advised. Dekkers further said:

Don’t overstretch people too early, or you alienate your majority group, who in the beginning are very sceptical. You have to think whether it’s the right thing for the people who are given the jobs, and the reaction of their colleagues when they get them.

He promoted from within, as it is ‘less threatening than rushing to recruit a lot of women from outside’ (Dekkers, interviewed in Wittenberg-Cox, 2015). For Bayer, it was helpful to bundle the topics of gender and nationality together, and they needed both women and a more representative mix of nationalities in management in order to better serve their consumers. It is an organisation of over 118,000 people, so to communicate these new ideas through the organisation they began ‘strategic
debates’ with senior leaders discussing both ‘why balance is relevant to their business as well as how they can implement change’. Almost 2,000 Bayer leaders have been actively engaged in the sessions which equip managers to recognise a world full of cultural and gender differences and become skilled at understanding, celebrating, and using those differences to connect with customers and employees. Dekkers insists that ‘it can’t be delegated to diversity experts or HR.’

**Implications**

Given the complexity of organisational change and diversity management practices to progress gender equality, this exploratory paper has presented some of the issues important in developing a strategy for gender equality at the organisational level. Understanding how practices influence each other and which are particularly important is key to improving gender equality within the workplace and in society more broadly. This conceptual paper has outlined issues which organisations need to consider to develop the most effective programs, using a practitioner framework and outlining previous research identifying key issues for gender equality in the workplace.

**Conclusion**

One of the major challenges for leaders and HR practitioners understudied in the literature concerns what types of strategy or program organisations should adopt in order to progress towards workplace gender equality. This paper has examined one practitioner framework that identifies 12 key focus areas and suggests an overarching approach that sets goals for each focus area, highlighting the importance of considering the interaction between the areas. The paper detailed important considerations when designing a gender equality framework, positing that it is essential to take into account the industry context and particular needs of the organisation and its workforce. Recognising the importance of cultural change is important to make real progress in workplace gender equality, in a way that appreciates not only the current working needs of female employees but also provides them
with development and promotion opportunities. The paper has highlighted the importance of leadership in making organisational changes, detailing the necessity of targeted accountability and showcasing examples of successful change to a more inclusive culture through leadership action. Changing workplaces into sustainable equitable environments is an ongoing journey with adjustments needed as the business advances and its internal and external community stakeholders develop over time. This exploratory research gives rise to important new directions for both practice and research.
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