BPW Victoria

Submission to the Victorian Government Gender Equality Bill

27 September 2018

Business and Professional Women (BPW) Australia is a federated member of BPW International which, as a member driven entity, develops the professional, business and leadership potential of women on all levels through advocacy, mentoring, networking, skill building and economic empowerment programs and projects around the world. In Victoria, BPW clubs represent women in Metropolitan and Regional areas with clubs in Melbourne, South-West (Warrnambool), Geelong, Swan Hill and North West.

BPW members in Victoria welcome the development of a Gender Equality Bill by the Government of Victoria. Gender equality is a basic human right, and its achievement brings socio-economic benefits to everyone. By empowering women, the broader community thrives, increasing productivity and growth.

The membership of the Victorian clubs has identified four key policy areas for development of BPW at state level:

- Building Leadership at all career stages
- Building Women’s Safety at work
- Building Financial Independence at all career stages –
- Ensuring Women’s Health and Well-being

BPW Victoria notes strong alignment of these themes with four of the six settings for statewide action identified within Safe and Strong and therefore, welcomes legislation to achieve these outcomes:

- Leadership, empowerment and cultural change
- Safety and freedom from gender-based violence
- Economic security, and
- Health and wellbeing

BPW Victoria has considered the Gender Equality Bill exposure draft Discussion Paper and provides the following input in relation to Question 1:

What do you think are the critical actions necessary for the success of gender equality legislation?
1. Target setting

Government has an important role in setting the long-term policy framework for gender equality, leading to gender parity and BPW Victoria strongly supports the inclusion of gender equality targets within the Bill. It is noted that the examples provided within the Discussion Paper relate to targets for women executives and paid public boards. It is agreed that these are important visible outcomes of successful gender inclusion however BPW Victoria has also identified the importance of the pipeline that attracts, develops and supports women to achieve these higher level positions. Therefore, it is important that there is gender equality at all levels of leadership, for example recruitment or middle management. It is suggested that consideration be given to the inclusion of targets for all levels of leaders.

For targets to be effective, they will need to be achievable but with sufficient aspiration to drive change, supported by transparency and accountability in monitoring performance. The draft bill proposes reporting via the entity’s annual report (or otherwise as prescribed) and BPW Victoria supports this proposal. The gap in the legislation however is lack of action if the entity has not met the prescribed gender equality targets. Currently, the only requirement is for the entity to explain in their report why targets have not been met. It is suggested that other accountability mechanisms be considered, for example, nomination of a body to examine non-compliance.

To further embed the importance of attaining gender parity, consideration should also be given to State Government providing gender equality guidelines, including targets, to community, corporate and not-for-profit partners.

2. Economic Security

Women across all career stages are at risk of reduced financial security due to the pay and superannuation gap. The reasons for this are complex and include issues relating to the interruption of women’s careers due to caring responsibilities as well as systemic gender discrimination. This disparity translates into potential vulnerability at end of career with reduced superannuation and alternative means of independent financial support. The benefits of the compounding value of superannuation mean it is imperative that parity is reached early in the career cycle of women to stem the effects of significantly reduced annuity at the end of a women’s career and the impacts this has on the financial security of older women. Although Safe and Strong has identified the goal of Financial Security, the legislation has limited direction on this aspect and BPW Victoria urges government to continue to pursue efforts to address this risk.

As a starting point, government could consider sustainable finance initiatives that provide flexible financial options for women, for example:

- The introduction of competency based, transparent pay grading and regular audits of pay grades across organisations
- Provision of grants to enable women to access training and professional development during longer term caring leave, to ensure they maintain skills currency and return to work at an equivalent level to their colleagues at time of leaving.
- Provide for parental benefits to fund super payments during leave

3. Ministerial Council

BPW Victoria welcomes the establishment of a Ministerial Council on Women’s Equality. It is reassuring that the draft bill specifies the need to ensure the membership reflects the diversity of Victorian women, including Aboriginal persons. BPW Victoria also proposes that the Council
membership is also reflective of the range of sectors in which women are represented, including representatives from the community, corporate, public and not-for-profit sectors.

4. Gender Budget

In order for the proposed legislation to be successful, it is important that the Government provide sufficient budget support to implement, support and monitor the changes proposed. It is therefore submitted that annual gender equality reports include the budgets allocated to gender equality initiatives. The development of accountability and governance mechanisms will also be important, as will the provision of communication and guidance for those seeking to achieve the legislative requirements and the overall intent of the strategy.

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