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New laws will help overcome gender inequality in Australian workplaces

The ACTU has welcomed new laws that will require organisations with more than 100 employees to report on how they are improving the position of women in the workforce.

The Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace (EOWW) Amendment Bill was passed by the Senate last night, renaming the EOWW Agency the Workplace Gender Equality Act Agency and strengthening its powers.

ACTU President Ged Kearney said gender inequality in Australian workplaces had persisted for too long and the bill was a welcome step towards addressing this.

“Failing to give women equal access to the workplace is a denial of their rights, and damages the long-term productivity of Australia,” Ms Kearney said.

“We cannot be complacent and expect that gender equality will just happen, we need to keep working to remove the barriers that stop women being full participants in the workplace.”

“Australia ranks amongst the highest of OECD countries for women’s education but the participation rate for mothers with children below school age is amongst the lowest and the gender pay gap remains at 18.3%.

“Women are four times as likely as men to experience sexual harassment or discrimination.

“This bill will ensure that employers accurately record the position of women in their organisations and allow the WGEA Agency to develop benchmarks.”

Ms Kearney said the previous legislation did not do enough to accurately monitor the position of women in workplaces in terms of their job classifications, total remuneration, and the policies and practices used by employers to overcome inequality.

The Bill will require employers with over 100 employees (including unions) to provide quantitative information to the Agency on five key Gender Equality Indicators:

- Gender composition of their workforce;
- Gender composition of their governing bodies (i.e. boards);
- Total remuneration payments of women and men for the reporting period;
- Availability and usage of flexible working arrangements for employees and arrangements supporting employees with family or caring responsibilities; and
- Consultation with employees on issues concerning gender equality in the workplace.

Employers will be required to inform relevant unions when the information is provided, and unions will have the chance to comment on the information. Those who fail to comply will be excluded from accessing government funding or contracts.

Ms Kearney said employers had fought against these two provisions, but without them employers would not be accountable for improving gender equality.

“This bill is a good start but there are a lot of details to be worked out, and the union movement will continue to work to ensure that the reporting system and benchmarks are as rigorous as possible,” Ms Kearney said.

“I would like to acknowledge the work of the SDA and United Voice in the Advisory Group that developed this legislation.”

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