

# Gender equality and rights

Pia Rowe

Are historical inequalities and discrimination based on gender being rectified in Australia, and is the pace of recent change fast enough? The World Economic Forum's (2021) annual global comparisons showed Australia's progress towards gender equality coming to a halt, with the country dropping six places in the Global Gender Gap Report's overall rankings, moving down to 50th (out of 156 countries), and placed 70th for women's 'economic participation and opportunity', and 54th in terms of 'political empowerment'. However, these slumps were soon ameliorated and by 2023 Australia ranked 26th in the WEF Global Gender Gap overall ranking, 38th for economic participation and opportunity, and 29th for political empowerment. These previously lacklustre and recently improved indicators tell a vivid story of a country where past positive narratives of progress towards gender equality often contrasted with the stark realities of a culture where traditionally masculine leadership norms permeated every facet of the society (especially for lesbian and transgender women in the past (AHRC, 2014)) hampering efforts to effect lasting change, especially via the political process. Yet recent positive movements, and changes in the tenor of policy debates under the Labor government, also demonstrated that raising the political salience of gender issues can have considerable effects.

## What does democracy require in terms of gender equality?

- ◆ People of all genders must enjoy genuine equality in terms of civil rights (covering equal pay, employment rights, property rights, access to legal services and protections, access to care services spanning all facets of the whole human lifecycle, and marriage and partnership laws).
- ◆ Political and public life should be organised to maximise the equal chances of all people regardless of their gender identity or biological sex to be involved in democratic politics – to vote and stand for election, to take part in party and political processes, to contribute to public debate and discussion, and to stand for public office and rise to the top in political life.
- ◆ Employment in the public service sector (and in firms working on public sector contracts) should serve as exemplars of good practice in improving gender equality more broadly.

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- ◆ No one should be subject to differential discrimination in political, public or private life, nor to demeaning discourses in terms of public and media discourses based on their individual social attributes such as gender, race, ability, religion, sexual orientation and age. There should also be equal visibility in the media.
- ◆ Where barriers to gender equality are proven to exist, it is desirable for public regulations or interventions to at least temporarily be undertaken to secure appropriate and feasible ameliorative actions (consistent with maintaining the civil rights of all citizens).
- ◆ The fundamental human right to feel safe and secure is realised for all through the elimination of gender-based violence.

## Recent developments

Gender equality in Australia has been at a crossroads in recent years. On the one hand, there has been a significant increase in the public's interest in gender equality and growing political salience for gender issues. From online activism (#MeToo, #EnoughIsEnough, #LetHerSpeak), to national protest movements (**Nally, 2021**) and mainstream TV shows (*Ms Represented* on ABC Television), gender equality has shifted from a niche scholarly topic into a mainstream issue of interest. The success of the Teal Independents in the May 2022 federal election 'cashed in' many of these previously diffuse gains in salience, with (mainly) women candidates mobilising strongly around women's issues and successfully displacing Liberal MPs in one of the election's most important developments (see **Chapter 5**). The new Labor administration (with Greens support) also took a much more activist position on remedying gender inequality than had its Coalition predecessor and gave increased priority to the care economy.

In the public sphere there have been several positive developments. For the first time there is an equal representation between men and women parliamentarians in the Senate. In another Australian first, after Victoria's Gender Equality Act was passed in February 2020 (**Victoria Parliament, 2020**), Dr Niki Vincent was appointed the state's first Public Sector Gender Equality Commissioner in September 2020, signalling the state government's commitment to gender equality in practice (**Victoria Public Sector Gender Equality Commissioner, 2021**). Under that Act, public sector entities must report on their progress on workplace gender equality. At federal level, following the Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins' *Respect@Work* report submission to the government (**AHRC, 2020**), the Senate passed the Sex Discrimination and Fair Work (Respect at Work) Amendment Bill 2021 in September 2021. The legislation will bring into law some of the recommendations from the landmark report.

However, despite increasing awareness and support for gender equality – at least in principle – numerous policies already in place, and women faring well in some areas, such as education, where they are more likely than men to have attained a bachelor's degree (35 per cent female to 29 per cent male) or above, in other areas progress has been either extremely slow, completely stalled, or worse yet, gone backwards (**ABS, 2023a**).

The treatment of women in politics featured prominently in much of the media headlines in recent years. Sadly, for a long time it appeared that not much had changed since Julia Gillard's 'misogyny speech' went viral around the world in 2012 (**Gillard, 2012**), with increasing reports of discrimination, sexism and abuse surfacing in the media. As late as 2021, some female

MPs argued that the abuse ‘is so normalised as to be expected in public office’, and they experience it both online and in real life, and from both the public and their colleagues alike ([Majumdar, 2021](#)). Perhaps predictably, many women at all levels of government reported that the widespread bullying and harassment impacted their aspirations for political leadership, or a career in politics entirely. These complaints proved fertile grounds for women Teal Independents in competing against Coalition MPs at the 2022 election.

Politics and leadership aside, the harrowing statistics of gender-based violence remain a dark spot in Australian society, spanning from home and school to work and the media. As Natasha Stott Despoja argued: ‘The figures in Australia belie the fact that we consider ourselves an equal, fair, safe nation because clearly, while women and children are living in fear and losing their lives, we’re not a safe nation in that respect, and we’ve got a lot of work to do’ ([Despoja, 2019](#)). The uncomfortable truth that women in Australia are not safe at work was also publicly acknowledged by the Prime Minister (PM) Scott Morrison at the Women’s Safety Summit in September 2021 ([ABC News, 2021c](#); [Morrison, 2021](#)). Unfortunately, the situation is not any better in the private sphere. As noted by the PM, every nine days a woman is murdered by a current or former intimate partner, and one in four women experience physical or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in Australia. This is, he aptly noted, ‘our national shame’.

Equally concerning is the fact that, despite years of research and evidence, far too often structural change still hinges on individuals’ willingness and ability to share their trauma with the media and public. Grace Tame, Australian of the Year 2021, is one such example ([Burnside, 2021](#)). Ms Tame, a sexual assault survivor, fought to overturn the gag laws preventing victims speaking out in public. When aged 15, she was groomed and raped by her teacher at a private girls’ school in Tasmania. Her abuser and the media were able to speak about the event publicly, while Ms Tame herself was silenced by the law. Similarly, while the *Respect@Work* report was released to the public in March 2020, it was Brittany Higgins going public with the allegation she had been raped by a colleague in Parliament House ([Wikipedia, 2023](#); and see [Chapter 13](#)) that prompted the national reckoning into the issues it detailed, more than a year later ([ABC News, 2021a](#)). Given the extent of data and statistics already available, ministers relying on individuals reliving their trauma in public forums before acting seemed inexcusable.

Finally, the full impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality in Australia have continued to work through, and from very early on it was clear that it had differential impacts on men and women. A 2021 [Grattan Institute report](#) laid bare the myriad ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic recession created a ‘triple-whammy’ for women, who were more likely to lose their jobs, more likely to do additional unpaid labour, and less likely to get government support. Mothers in couples and single parents (80 per cent of whom are women) were more likely to leave the paid workforce, further magnifying the long-term economic impacts on women. Curiously however, the federal government’s direct financial support and recovery focused on male-dominated construction and energy sectors, while the childcare sector (which is 95 per cent women) was the first one to be taken off the JobKeeper scheme. In addition, Australian federal government decided to discontinue the free childcare arrangement in place during the first set of lockdowns in 2020, despite all the evidence of its crucial role in the economic recovery post-COVID-19 ([ABC News, 2020](#)).

# Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis

Current strengths	Current weaknesses
<p>Under the Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 all private sector organisations with more than 100 employees are required to report annually to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) on progress against defined gender equality indicators. Labor ministers have fully implemented the Respect@Work report's recommendations, in particular, the so-called 'positive duty' on companies and organisations to take steps to prevent harassment and discrimination (<a href="#">ABC News, 2021b</a>), and subsequently to shift their culture from punishment to prevention</p>	<p>The gender pay gap has hovered between 14 per cent and 19 per cent for 20 years.</p>
<p>The Australian Public Service (APS) has been an exemplar of good practice, and it managed to close several gender gaps in the workforce, excluding the most senior SES levels. The APS Commission in partnership with the Office for Women conducted a refresh of the APS Gender Equality Strategy, launched in 2021 (<a href="#">APSC, 2021a and 2021b</a>) and expanded in 2023. The federal government agreed in 2021 to Respect@Work's recommendation to amend the 2012 WGEA to cover public sector agencies (they were previously exempt) (<a href="#">Williamson and Colley, 2021</a>).</p>	<p>The WGEA's Public Administration and Safety Industry Snapshot (<a href="#">WGEA, 2023</a>) shows that gender pay gaps remained high in the public services administration and that women's representation ranged from 66 per cent in clerical ranks, to below 30 per cent in manager positions.</p>
<p>The overall figures for women in politics have improved, reaching parity in the federal Senate. Parties that have adopted quotas have witnessed faster improvements in female representations than those that rely on the concept of 'merit'.</p>	<p>The number of women in the House of Representatives improved in 2022 but has long lagged behind changes in the Senate. Significant discrepancies exist between political parties, with those on the centre-right reluctant to adopt quotas.</p>
<p>In recent years, the women's movement has been strongly reinvigorated, as the Teal Independents' progress in 2022 illustrated (see <a href="#">Chapter 5</a>). There has been increased mainstream interest and activism in securing meaningful (50/50) gender equality in professional and senior roles.</p>	<p>Yet the culture of politics remains male-oriented, and benchmarks of success do not reflect the diversity of the Australian population. Due to the negative reputation of politics, young women in Australia are reluctant to pursue a career there, and thus future progress in gender equal representation is not guaranteed.</p>
<p>The women's movement is well represented and very active on social media, and women's prominence on ABC, in other broadcast media and the press has increased (see below).</p>	<p>Polarisation of social media audiences and the increased radicalisation of men's right activists have contributed to a society that is less tolerant of diversity.</p>

<p>Action to reduce violence against women is a prominent area of Labor’s Gender Equality Action Plan in 2023, and its salience was dramatised by controversies over abuse of women in Parliament itself, where new codes of practice were needed. Some states (such as Victoria) have longstanding programmes (see <a href="#">Chapter 18</a>) and more are launching initiatives.</p>	<p>Among liberal democracies Australia still has high levels of violence against women. Instances of domestic and gendered violence against women and girls increased in Australia during COVID-19 lockdowns, in line with the Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuke labelling of its global impacts as a ‘shadow pandemic’ (<a href="#">Mlambo-Ngcuke, 2020</a>).</p>
<p>The United Nations recommended that Australia develop a specific national action plan on violence against Indigenous women (<a href="#">Carlson, 2021</a>), which began to happen in the 2023 National Strategy for Gender Equality (<a href="#">PM&amp;C, 2023a</a>)</p>	<p>While the government’s fourth action plan to reduce violence against women and their children (<a href="#">Department of Social Services, 2019</a>) named support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children as a priority, no real change was evident (<a href="#">Carlson, 2021</a>). Hopes for improvement rest on the strengthened 2023 National Strategy (<a href="#">Prime Minister’s and Cabinet Office, 2023a</a>).</p>
<p>Australia has consistently ranked #1 on the women’s education indicator in the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report (<a href="#">2021</a>).</p>	<p>Despite women’s workforce participation increasing, they are still more likely to work reduced or part-time hours and take time off from work. The workforce also remains heavily gender segregated, and leadership in the private sector remains male-dominated.</p>
<p>The APS employment database acknowledges gender diversity beyond binaries and classifies data into three categories of gender: Male, Female, and X (with X representing individuals who are indeterminate, unspecified, or intersex). Numerous global and national indices already exist to map out the state of gender equality in Australia in detail. In addition, a wealth of tools and procedures – partly due to learnings from other countries – are now available online through governmental bodies such as the Workplace Gender Equality Agency.</p>	<p>Failure to collect data on sex, sexual orientation and gender identity is likely to result in a service gap to already vulnerable populations (<a href="#">Stephenson and Hayes, 2021</a>). In addition, there is a lack of comprehensive population-wide statistics on violence experienced by LGBTIQ+ people in Australia.</p>
<p><b>Future opportunities</b></p>	<p><b>Future threats</b></p>
<p>Historically, quotas and affirmative measures are divisive in Australia, but where quotas have been implemented, they have been shown to improve gender equality. To help increase both the diversity and the social acceptance of such measures, instead of ‘quotas for women’ the rhetoric and tools should focus on implementing 40:40:20 gender quotas.</p>	<p>Many Australians still believe in traditional gender norms, and due to structural constraints, unpaid labour in the private sphere is still predominantly done by women. The unequal division of care labour combined with inadequate care infrastructure and high cost of childcare further hamper their paid work prospects.</p> <p>Experience of gender-based violence are high in Australia (see below) and increasing for women.</p>

<p>While COVID-19 was economically disruptive, the experiences of lockdowns also demonstrated that flexible working from home (WFH) practices are possible and may also boost productivity in some settings and roles. Post-COVID-19, flexible WFH practices across different sectors saw some rollback, but left some positive effects on equality, diversity and women’s morale more broadly – often creating one or two extra days a week at home for women and many men. In 2023, 37 per cent of employees still regularly worked from home, compared to 40 per cent in 2021 (ABS, 2023b).</p>	<p>The Federal Government’s recovery package inadequately addressed the differential impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women (Grattan Institute, 2021). For instance, 23 per cent of women reported experiencing high or very high levels of psychological distress, compared with 17 per cent of men (ABS, 2021c). Recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic set back some gender equality developments.</p>
<p>Affordable and/or universal childcare is the single most important factor in determining women’s workforce participation. Shared parental leave has been shown to improve engagement, morale and productivity at work. Yet women continue to be the primary carers, and even when offered, men have not used paid parental leave provisions. Critics argue that abolishing the ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ carer labels, along with gender-neutral parental leave provisions, would help change the situation.</p>	<p>When care norms are being discussed, the focus is often solely on children. However, caring duties include people of all ages and abilities. Without adequate care infrastructure in place, an ageing population will put more pressure on women to do unpaid care labour. There has been some progress on incentivising parental leave for men and reducing the stigma associated with taking time off work for care duties.</p>
	<p>Mature aged women are the fastest growing demographic facing homelessness (see later in this chapter).</p>

The rest of the chapter discusses four key aspects of gender equality in detail – political leadership, employment and money, gender and violence, and the media and culture.

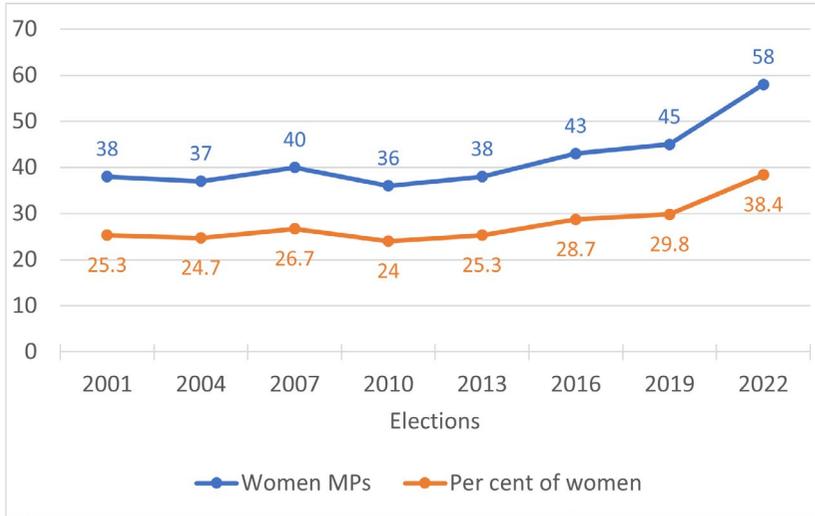
## Political leadership

Media headlines about the treatment of women in Australian politics highlighted a past culture that was in many ways toxic and hostile to those who do not adhere to traditional male leadership norms. The numbers of prominent women at high levels in political life have been abysmal. Since federation in 1901, there has been only one female Governor-General (Dame Quentin Bryce, from 2008 to 2014), and one female PM (Julia Gillard, from 2010 to 2013). However, there has been some progress in terms of MPs and senators, as Figures 10.1a and 10.1b show. The number of MPs oscillated around 40 (out of 173, below three-tenths) with little definite signs of improvement until 2019 and 2022 due to the Teal Independents’ success, and Liberal losses helping parties with more women in winnable (single member) seats. This still meant that there were only 20 more women in the House of Representatives than in 2001 (Figure 10.1a). By contrast, the number of women senators (elected by Single Transferable Vote (STV) in multi-seat competitions) grew more consistently in recent decades, moving from three-tenths in 2001 to over half by 2022 (Figure 10.1b). At the party level, significant differences

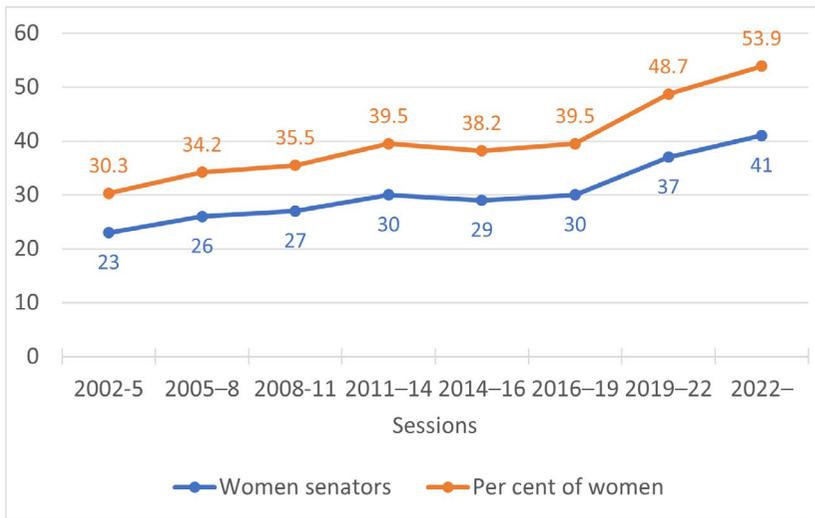
persisted in 2022, with Labor reaching parity in the lower house, while in the upper house Labor (plus the Greens and the Nationals) had majority female representation (Figure 10.2). By contrast, fewer than one in five Liberal plus National MPs was a woman in 2022, following their losses, although these parties had more women senators.

**Figure 10.1: Women politicians at national level**

**(a) Women in the House of Representatives**



**(b) Women in the Senate**



Source: **Parliament of Australia (2024); Hough, 2022: Table 2.**

Note: In *Figures 10.1a* and *10.1b* the blue lines show the actual number of women legislators, and the orange lines show what percentage of all legislators in the chamber were women.

**Figure 10.2: Percentage (%) members who were women, in the Commonwealth House of Representatives and Senate, by party, May 2022**

Party	Per cent (%) of House MPs who are women	Per cent (%) of senators who are women	Per cent (%) of each party's Parliamentarians who are women
Labor	47	62	51
Liberal	21	39	28
National	13		27
All other parties		46	55
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>44</b>

Source: Computed from **Parliament of Australia (2023)**. **Hough, 2022**.

Note: General election outcomes. Liberal Party data include Country Liberal Party. Shaded cells indicate N base was too small to calculate percentages.

**Figure 10.3: Percentage female representatives by party across all Australian parliaments: State, Territory and Commonwealth upper and lower houses, in 2023 and 2000**

Legislature	Per cent (%) women in		Per cent point increase
	December 2023	February 2000	
ACT Legislative Assembly	60	12	48
<b>Commonwealth: Senate</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>28</b>
Tasmania Legislative Council	53	27	26
South Australia Legislative Council	50	23	27
Western Australia Legislative Assembly	49	23	26
Northern Territory Legislative Assembly	48	12	36
Tasmania House of Assembly	48	28	20
Victoria Legislative Assembly	46	24	22
NSW Legislative Council	45	21	24
Victoria Legislative Council	45	27	18
NSW Legislative Assembly	41	18	23
<b>Commonwealth: House of Representatives</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>17</b>
Western Australia Legislative Council	39	21	18
South Australia House of Assembly	34	30	4
Queensland Legislative Assembly	31	19	12

Source: *Parliament of Australia (2020)*; **Hough (2023)**: Table 1.

Note: As [Figure 10.1](#), per cent numbers here include changes from by-election outcomes up to December 2020. NSW = New South Wales. Numbers in the last column are rounded up or down as appropriate.

In state legislatures much the same patterns occurred as well from 2000 up to 2023 (see [Figure 10.3](#)). At this time, Australian Capital Territory (ACT) (at 56 per cent) and Tasmania's upper house (53 per cent) had the highest total level of female representation. In nine other state legislatures, the percentage of women also showed some notable increases (of 20 percentage points or more, from low bases). Queensland's single house and South Australia's lower house showed the lowest levels, with only around a third of their legislators being women (see [Figure 10.3](#)).

The key improvements achieved after previous stagnation can be attributed to parties using three main types of quotas: reserved seats; legal candidate quotas; and political party quotas (for a full description on how these function, see [Hough, 2021](#)). The Labor Party adopted a mandatory 35 per cent pre-selection quota for women in winnable seats in 1994, which was replaced by the 40:40:20 system (40 per cent men, 40 per cent women, 20 per cent any gender) in 2012, and in 2015 the party adopted targets of securing 45 per cent female representation by 2022 and 50 per cent by 2025. By contrast, the Liberal party in the recent period resisted implementing any form of gender quotas to improve the party's female and gender diverse representation. Internationally, over 100 countries have implemented political gender quotas with clear effects in improving women's representation.

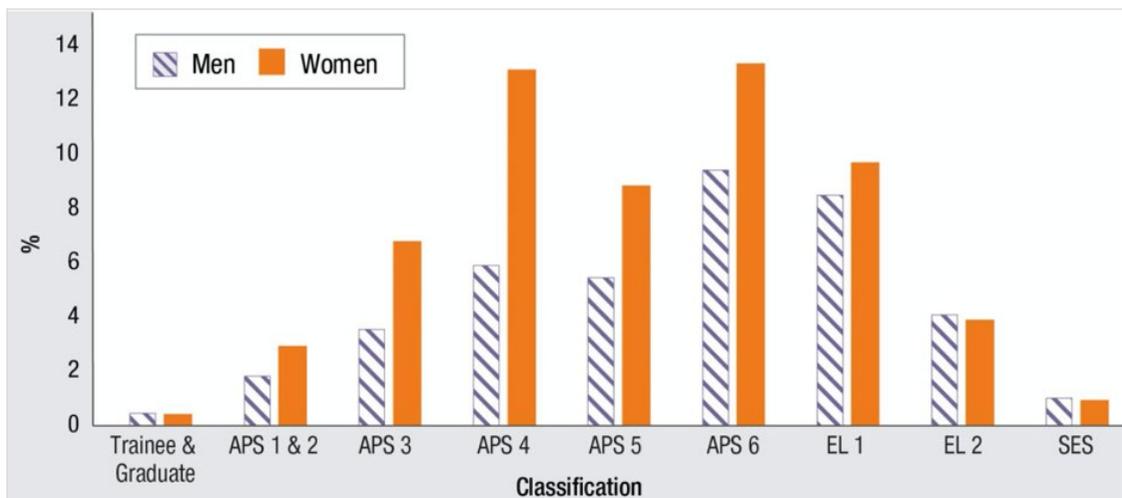
In some parliaments, seats are also reserved for other diversity categories, such as the seven Māori electorates in New Zealand's Parliament ([2022](#)). Similar measures could also be considered in Australia, where the lack of diversity in politics has been apparent for years. For example, a report from the Australian Human Rights Commission ([2018](#)) showed that only 4 per cent of federal MPs had non-European ancestry, compared to 19 per cent of the Australian population. The underrepresentation of cultural and linguistic diversity is particularly stark for Asian Australians, even though an estimated 15 per cent of the adult population are of Asian heritage ([Chiu, 2021](#)).

However, the issue of gender diversity and representation of other diversity attributes cannot be considered in isolation from the direct impact on the decision-making process, including issues that are deemed important and necessary for inclusion in the first place. How Australian politics lags behind becomes apparent when we investigate the structural reforms – or lack thereof – to make the parliament a family-friendly workplace. In recent years there has been a concerted effort for politics to be more inclusive of those with childcaring duties, and in the Australian context where women continue to do most of the care labour, such support is crucial. However, such improvements have sometimes been decades in the making: 'The new Australian Parliament building opened in 1988 with squash courts, a swimming pool, a meditation room but no childcare centre. It took years of campaigning to win one [for children under three] – from 1983 to 2009' (Sawer, no date). The number of politicians who have resigned citing 'family reasons' indicated that past measures are clearly inadequate in meeting the needs of modern parents, although some more family-friendly timings and rules were brought in in July 2022 ([McLeod, 2022](#)).

## Public sector

The Australian Public Service (APS) put a concerted effort into improving gender equality and diversity in its workforce, with tangible results. As of December 2020, women made up 60 per cent of the whole APS. According to APSC data (see Figure 10.4), women have reached, and in many cases exceeded, parity with men at every level up to and including executive level 1 (EL1). Women also achieved parity at the senior executive service Band 1 classification (SES1), with SES

**Figure 10.4: Proportion (%) of Australian Public Service (APS) employees by job classification and gender in December 2020**



Source: APSC (2020) 'Diversity' in 'APS Employment Data 31 December 2020 release', <https://www.apsc.gov.au/employment-data/aps-employment-data-31-december-2020-release/diversity> and see also APSC (2021a) and APSC (2021b); Coade (2023).

Note: The grades here run from APS1 and APS2 (the lowest) on the left, in progression up to the SES (Senior Executive Service, the top grade) on the right.

**Figure 10.5: Female and male justices and judges, 30 June 2020**

	Female justices/ judges	Male justices/judges	Per cent (%) female
High Court Justices	3	4	
Federal Court	14	38	27
Family Court	18	20	47
Federal Circuit Court	26	42	38
State Supreme Courts/ Courts of Appeal	49	128	28

Source: Compiled from **Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2020a)** 'Gender Indicators, Australia, December 2020'.

Note: Percentages shown for all types of judges where  $N > 20$ .

Band 2 and in the SES Band 3 were not far behind, at 44 and 46 per cent respectively. By 2020 the proportion of women joining the SES was also the highest ever recorded ([APSC, 2020](#)). In 2020 the government had also reached gender parity on government boards, and women held 52 per cent of positions by July 2023 ([PM&C, 2023b](#)).

The judiciary also showed improvements in gender balance, albeit more slowly. As [Figure 10.5](#) shows, women have long been outnumbered by men in all categories, with the widest gap in senior courts. By mid-2020, 37 per cent of Commonwealth justices and judges were women (61 women versus 201 men) – the highest proportion in the past decade. Across all courts the share of women increased to reach 45 per cent of all judges by mid-2023 ([AIJA, 2023](#)).

## Employment sectors and money

Despite concerted efforts to increase women's workforce participation, significant gender inequalities persist. Women in 2022 comprised 47 per cent of all employed people, but only 38 per cent of all full-time employees; they made up 68 per cent of all part-time employees ([WGEA, 2022](#)). In 2023, 71 per cent of men and 62 per cent of women were in work ([ABS, 2023a](#)). The labour force participation rate for women is lower than that of men in all age groups, except 15–19 years. Furthermore, while unemployment rates are similar for women and men aged 20–74 (just under 5 per cent), parental status has differential gendered impacts. The unemployment rate for mothers with a dependent child under six years is almost double that of fathers (5.3 per cent and 2.8 per cent). Similarly, the underemployment rate – that is, people in the workforce who want to work more hours and are available – was 10 per cent for women, and 7 per cent for men ([ABS, 2023a](#)).

In 2019–20, nearly a third of women (32 per cent) and over one in five men (22 per cent) aged 20–74 years were not in the labour force. The largest gender difference was in the 30–39 age group, where women were around three times more likely than men to be out of the labour force. As the ABS suggests, this may be because women in this age group were more likely to take the major role in childcare. For parents whose youngest child is six years or younger, only around two-thirds (65.5 per cent) of women compared to nine-tenths of men (94.4 per cent) participated in the workforce. While these numbers improved significantly when the youngest child is aged 6–14 years, the rates remained lower for women than men (80.2 per cent and 92.4 per cent respectively), and women worked fewer hours per week than men ([ABS, 2023a](#)).

Gender diversity and caring roles cannot be considered in isolation from cultural diversity. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women continue to be under-represented in the workforce. Research indicates that Indigenous women who are also carers face 'triple jeopardy' at work ([WGEA, 2021a](#)). In essence, they are more likely to feel unsafe at work, more likely to carry extra expectations to make their workplace culturally sensitive and engaged, and less supported when they encounter racism and unfair treatment.

Australia's workforce has also remained gender-segregated for the past 20 years ([WGEA, 2019](#)). In some cases, the proportion of women in traditionally female-dominated industries – such as healthcare has increased, while some male-dominated industries (construction and transport) have reported a decline in female representation (see [Figure 10.6](#)).

**Figure 10.6: Proportions (%) of females and males, 20–74 years old, employed by different industries from 2019 to 2020**

Industrial sector	Males (%)	Females (%)	Difference	Comment
Healthcare and social assistance, <i>mostly government</i>	22	78	-56	Mostly women
Education and training, <i>mostly government</i>	28	72	-43	
Retail trade	45	55	-10	Relatively balanced
Accommodation and food services	46	55	-9	
Administrative and support services [ <i>many in government</i> ]	47	53	-6	
Financial and insurance services	50	50	0	
Arts and recreation services	50	50	0	
Public administration and safety [ <i>mostly government</i> ]	51	49	2	
Rental, hiring and real estate services	52	49	3	
Other services	54	46	9	
Professional, scientific and technical services [ <i>many in government</i> ]	57	43	13	Mostly men
Information media and telecommunications	61	39	22	
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	67	33	33	
Wholesale trade	67	33	34	
Manufacturing	73	28	45	
Electricity, gas, water and waste services	76	24	52	
Transport, postal and warehousing	80	20	60	
Mining	83	17	66	
Construction	87	13	75	

Source: ABS (2023a) 'Gender Indicators: Key economic and social indicators comparing males and females including gender pay gap and life expectancy'.

Note: Sectors with strong government sector employment are noted in italics comment in column 1. Numbers are rounded in all columns.

In the private sector, female representation at leadership levels continued to lag. In 2020, women filled under 33 per cent of key management positions, and were 28 per cent of directors, 18 per cent of CEOs, and under 15 per cent of board chairs (WGEA, 2021b). What's more, 30 per cent of company boards and governing bodies had no female directors (compared with under

1 per cent for boards with no men). However, in public companies, the rates were somewhat better – for example, just over a third of directors in the ASX 200 were women by 2021. Women also progressed into management roles at a faster rate than men, but if the early 2020s rate of progress continue, it would take two decades to reach gender parity in full-time management positions, while for CEOs the WGEA in 2021 estimated that gender equality was still 80 years away.

The COVID-19 pandemic adversely impacted women’s paid labour – women were more likely than men to lose jobs and hours during the recession because they were more likely to work in the hardest hit industries and occupations, work part-time (part-timers were more likely to lose jobs) and work in short-term casual jobs which were ineligible for government support such as the JobKeeper scheme (see [Grattan Institute, 2021](#), Figure 2.1). Of course, women’s employment improved as the first large-scale lockdowns in 2020 ended, but the Australian Reserve Bank expected unemployment to remain above 5 per cent into 2023.

## Gender pay gap

Australia’s full-time gender pay gap – calculated by the WGEA using data from the ABS – has barely shifted in the past two decades, and as of May 2021 was 14 per cent, so women’s full-time average weekly ordinary time earnings were 86 per cent of men’s ([WGEA, 2021c](#)) (see [Figure 10.7](#)). There were also significant differences between states and territories, which can be partly explained by their different industry profiles. For example, the high gap in Western Australia reflects its concentrated mining and construction sectors, while the majority of the ACT workforce is employed in the public administration and safety sector (see [Figure 10.7](#)).

On average, women’s weekly earnings across all industries stood at \$1,580 compared to men’s \$1,840, or \$261 less than men. If you include overtime payments, the full-time total earnings gender pay gap rose to nearly 17 per cent. Adding in the part-time workforce widened the gap to 31 per cent. In real terms, this means that on average women earned \$486 less than men

per week. In mid-2023, the ABS found gender pay gaps of 9 to 28 per cent on six different measures ([ABS, 2023a](#)).

**Figure 10.7: The gender pay gap in full-time adult weekly, ordinary time earnings, by state and territory, May 2021**

State/territory	Gender gap
Western Australia	21.9
Queensland	15.8
New South Wales	14.5
Northern Territory	12.7
Victoria	12.2
Tasmania	8.4
Australian Capital Territory	7.9
South Australia	7.0

Source: WGEA (2021c) See *Australia’s Gender Pay Gap Statistics*, 27 August. See also ([WGEA 2021d](#)).

In female-dominated organisations the average remuneration has remained lower than in male-dominated ones, and performance pay has played a greater role in male-dominated occupations. Across Australia, the gender pay gap in 2021 was highest in professional, scientific and technical services at 25 per cent, followed by financial and insurance services at 24 per cent and healthcare and social assistance at 21 per cent, and lowest in other services, under 1 per cent, and in public administration and safety at 7.3 per cent ([WGEA, 2021c](#)).

The gender pay gap has obvious implications on superannuation as well, with Australian women retiring with 25 per cent less superannuation than men ([Australian Super, 2023](#)), although this has improved a lot since 2017. However, the pay gap is

not the only reason for this inequality. Women are more likely to take time off paid work for caring duties, more likely to work part-time, more likely to do unpaid labour, and on average still lived four years longer than men by 2023. Women are also more likely to be affected by the ‘double penalty effect’, where time out from work (or reduced hours) not only reduce their superannuation balance, but also slow down their career progression and future earning potential.

In addition, 2020, some 240,000 women aged 55 or older and another 165,000 women aged 45–54 were at risk of homelessness. Those most at risk were people who:

- ◆ had been at risk before
- ◆ were not employed full-time
- ◆ were an immigrant from a non-English-speaking country
- ◆ were in private rental housing
- ◆ would have difficulty raising emergency funds
- ◆ were Indigenous
- ◆ were a one-person household
- ◆ were now a lone parent after being married ([Faulkner and Lester, 2020](#)).

These risk factors compound each other, and a person’s propensity to be at risk of homelessness is cumulative over time.

## Parental leave

In Australia, women continue to be more likely to assume the primary care role for the children. In 2019, over 93 per cent of primary parental leave in the non-public sector (paid or unpaid) was taken by women. Just 1 in 20 Australian fathers took primary parental leave, which is low by global standards, and it is influenced by a number of social and economic challenges, including the gender pay gap, the lack of legislated ‘shared parental leave’ and the labels ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ carer, with limited support available for secondary carers, if at all, and the social norms which reinforce the traditional male/breadwinner, women/carer roles ([AIFS, 2019](#)). The high cost of childcare has played a significant role in maintaining these gender roles, since the full-time net childcare fees absorb a quarter of household income for an average earning couple with two children compared to the OECD average of 11 per cent ([Wood, Griffiths and Emslie, 2020](#)), and many Australian parents with children under five report that they struggle with the costs ([Phillips, 2023](#)).

The ‘workforce disincentive rate’ is a measure of the financial deterrent facing secondary earners wanting to work more hours. The present disincentive rate has been shown to have a deeply gendered labour market impact since a family’s secondary earner is typically female ([David, 2020](#)). If both parents earn \$60,000 a year and the secondary earner works more than three days a week, the secondary earner loses 90 per cent of the income on the fourth day, and all of it on the fifth day.

## Unpaid labour and care

Unpaid labour in the private sphere refers to the cooking, cleaning, household management, caring and family logistics. It is pivotal to the functioning of families and our society more broadly, but its full impacts are often unacknowledged. WGEA estimated that the monetary

value of unpaid care work in Australia in 2016 was around \$650.1 billion, the equivalent of 50.6 per cent of GDP (WGEA, no date). And Australian women did *311 minutes* of unpaid domestic work and care per day, compared to the OECD female average of 262 minutes (Craig, 2020). On average, women spent 64 per cent of their weekly working time on unpaid care labour, compared to 36 per cent for men (WGEA, no date). In real terms, for every hour Australian men committed to unpaid care work, women performed 1 hour and 48 minutes.

It is important to note that caring duties go far beyond dependent children, and rapidly changing demographics will necessitate different types of support infrastructure. In Australia, the prevalence of disability is similar in men (17.6 per cent) and women (17.7 per cent). Around 10.8 per cent of Australians provide unpaid care to people with disability and older Australians, while 3.5 per cent of the population aged 15 and over (861,600 people) are primary carers. Women provide the bulk of this care, representing 7 in every 10 primary carers (ABS, 2019). The ageing population has also generated a phenomenon colloquially referred to as the ‘sandwich generation’ – that is, people who are in the workforce, while simultaneously caring for their children and their ageing parents. In some scenarios, the women carers may even be helping out with their grandchildren simultaneously, and go through this phase of life while also going through the menopause (Australian Seniors, 2020).

The Albanese government from 2022 onwards signalled that public policies would place more emphasis on upgrading Australia’s care economy. Early measures included reforms to sole parent and parental leave policies, equal remuneration initiatives and the enactment of the positive duty of employers to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace.

## Gender-based violence

Gender-based violence refers to any act ‘that causes or could cause physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of harm or coercion, in public or in private life’ (OurWatch, no date). In 2015, then Minister for Employment and Minister for Women, Michaelia Cash, proclaimed that violence against women had become a ‘national crisis’ in Australia – a claim that is still backed up by the current statistics (Cash, 2015). According to OurWatch, 1 in 3 Australian women has experienced physical violence since the age of 15; 1 in 5 has experienced sexual violence; 1 in 3 has experienced physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by a man since the age of 15 (OurWatch, no date). From 2020–21, the ABS reported that while 6 per cent of males ‘experienced sexual violence since the age of 15’, that number was over 22 per cent for females (ABS, 2021a). According to the ABS, 2.2 million women and 718,000 men aged 28 and over have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime. Despite policy measures supposedly challenging sexual violence, the prevalence of sexual assault has increased at times for women (notably 2012 to 2016), but not for men (ABS, 2021a). Disconcertingly, in some surveys about sexual violence by a male perpetrator experienced by women, only 26 per cent perceived the incident as a crime at the time.

In general, Australian women have been three times more likely than men to experience violence from an intimate partner – echoing the UN’s statement that ‘home’ is the most dangerous place for women and children worldwide. Family violence can happen to anyone, but some communities have been more vulnerable than others. Women with disabilities have been two times more likely than women without disabilities to have experienced sexual violence

and intimate partner violence ([ABS, 2021b](#)). The statistics regarding Indigenous women experiencing violence at higher rates than other women in Australia are well documented ([Carlson, 2021](#); [AIHW, 2019](#)). For example, Indigenous women are 32 times more likely to be hospitalised as a result of family violence, and five times more likely to die from homicide than non-Indigenous women. In Western Australia, First Nations mothers were 17.5 times more likely to be killed than other mothers.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are also subject to disproportionate incarceration rates. While they make up around 2 per cent of the national population, they constitute 27 per cent of the prison population, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have long constituted over a third (37 per cent in 2021) of the female prison population ([ALRC, 2017](#); [Howard-Wagner and Brown, 2021](#)). To put this in context, the rate of Indigenous women's imprisonment is 465 per 100,000, compared to 22 per 100,000 for non-Indigenous women, and 29 per 100,000 for non-Indigenous men. Violence against Indigenous women also extends to government-mandated acts, such as the high rates of removal of children from their families ([Family Matters, 2020](#)).

Media coverage of police brutality is less in the Australian media than some countries (such as the USA). But numerous examples show that the authorities often fail to respond accurately ([Guardian, 2021](#)), or in the worst case scenario, sometimes further subject Indigenous peoples to violence ([SBS, 2020](#)). In addition, the media often frames Indigenous women as 'deserving' of violence rather than condemning the perpetrator ([Carlson, 2021](#)). The Queensland Government established a specific Women's Safety and Justice Taskforce, which aims to examine coercive control and review the need for a specific offence of domestic violence, as well as the experience of women across the criminal justice system ([Queensland Government, no date](#)). Solutions such as 'women's police stations' have also featured in some debates, but a group of Australian researchers have argued that there is not sufficient evidence of their efficacy ([Porter et al., 2021](#)).

Despite the existence of in-depth data and legislative action to address the problem (such as making child sexual abuse a specific criminal offense), resolving high levels of sexual violence does not seem any closer in Australia. In the case of sexual abuse, for example, an estimated 87 per cent of victim-survivors do not report the experience to police, and in the recent past less than 10 per cent of reported cases ended in conviction ([ABC News, 2021b](#)). One of the reasons suggested for this has been linked to persistent community attitudes. A historical culture of violence has persisted, which demands that Australian men should be physically and mentally tough ([Piper and Stevenson, 2019](#)). And in the case of Indigenous populations, some deeply ingrained assumptions in Australia's colonial history effectively condoned the abuse and murder of women by partners or relatives within Indigenous communities ([Carlson, 2021](#)).

## Gender, the media and culture

A snapshot of Australia's most influential news sites found that women accounted for only 34 per cent of direct sources quoted in the media, and 24 per cent of indirect sources (that is, sources named but not directly quoted) ([Price and Payne, 2019](#)). Men constituted 95 per cent of direct sources in sports-related stories, 82 per cent in business and finance stories, 79 per cent in law, crime and justice stories, and 41 per cent in stories relating to celebrities/

royals. The largest single category of news stories in the dataset related to government and politics (23 per cent), and that category was dominated by male writers, both direct and indirect sources, photographers, and subjects in the photos. The media also portrayed men and women politicians in the past in ways that were starkly different and gendered (Williams, 2017). Comparing the treatment of former PMs, Julia Gillard's and Malcom Turnbull's respective ascensions to leadership, one article found that Gillard was portrayed as the 'backstabbing murderer', while Turnbull was simply 'taking back the reins'.

However, there is hope that change is possible. The Australian national broadcaster ABC News established its 50/50 Project to commission and deliver more content that prioritises diverse women's experiences and perspectives, and to increase the contribution of women as expert talent or commentators and contributors across its programming (ABC News, 2019a). At its founding, men's voices dominated ABC News' coverage, with the male/female split around 70/30; by March 2021, the split was 49/51 in favour of women (Gorman, 2021).

## Cultural barriers to gender equality

As the evidence on the many gender gaps shows, despite being seen as a modern democracy, Australia is still in many ways conflicted when it comes to gender equality. On the surface, the vast majority of Australians express egalitarian values, but surveys have shown that people still hold multiple, and often contradictory, value systems when it comes to gender equality in practice (Ghazarian and Lee-Koo, 2021). For example, more than one in three men, and one in four of all Australians still believed that 'it is important to maintain traditional gender roles so that families function well and children are properly supported'. Surprisingly, young men often expressed traditional views, with 35 per cent of Generation Z males (aged 18–23) believing that caring for children is best done by women, and 32 per cent of millennial males believing that men are better suited to leadership roles. In addition, one in three Australians agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: 'Most women do not aspire to leadership positions because they have family responsibilities'. And while two-thirds of Australian women believe that gender equality should be a policy priority in Australia, 35 per cent of men thought that the government is already doing enough to promote equal opportunities for women (Ghazarian and Lee-Koo, 2021).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the nature of media coverage of politics and politicians, 63 per cent of women and 53 per cent of men believe that sexism in Australia is most widespread in politics (Ghazarian and Lee-Koo, 2021). Annabel Crabb's TV documentary *Ms Represented* also showed that female politicians across the spectrum report similar experiences when it comes to being heard at work among their colleagues (Crabb, 2021). Terming it 'gender deafness', the former Foreign Minister Julie Bishop (the only female in Tony Abbott's first cabinet) described the way in which ideas by women were often ignored until appropriated by a male colleague. Crabb found evidence this was an enduring phenomenon: South Australia's Dame Nancy Buttfield (Liberal, elected to the Senate in 1955) described this particular experience in exactly the same terms as Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young, elected more than half a century later and for a much more progressive party (ABC News, 2017).

In terms of workplace diversity and inclusion, progress has been patchy at best and cultural barriers continue to impact people differently based on their identity markers such as ethnicity, sexuality or gender identity. For example, recent research showed that Indigenous women 'in culturally unsafe workplaces were over 10 times more likely to be often or very often

treated unfairly at work than Indigenous women who work in culturally safe businesses, and around 20 times more likely to hear racial or ethnic slurs' (WGEA, 2021a). Same-sex marriage was legalised in 2017, but LGBTIQ+ people continue to experience harassment and hostility in their everyday lives (Powell, Scott and Henry, 2020). And although the Australian Public Service generally appears to perform well on many traditional gender equality markers, some media incidents suggested that discrimination and exclusion takes place within the centre of government. In 2019 PM Scott Morrison 'vowed to "sort out" a gender-inclusive toilet sign posted at his department' (ABC News, 2019b). In 2021 Peter Dutton banned events celebrating the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, Intersexism and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT) in the Department of Defence, noting that while discrimination was not tolerated, he also did not want to pursue the 'woke agenda' (Sydney Morning Herald, 2021). However, the incoming Labor government in 2022 outlined a far-reaching National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality setting out an ambitious and wide-ranging remit for action (PM&C, 2023a) on many fronts.

## Conclusion

Despite many positive developments in the Australian public sector in general, Australia still has a long way to go to reach gender equality in practice. From cultural norms to structural barriers, the myriad ways in which women continue to be marginalised have a profound impact on the validity of our democracy as a whole. As Drude Dahlerup argued: 'Can one honestly speak of democracy if women and minorities are excluded, even if the procedures followed among privileged men in the polity fulfil all the noble criteria of fair elections, deliberation and rotation of positions?' (Dahlerup, 2018). Nor is it simply a matter of legislative change alone, since cultural norms continue to impact people's behaviour long after the structural barriers have been removed, as we have seen with the slow uptake on parental leave among fathers. It is also important to note the difference between formal equality and substantive equality: '[Institutional] practices may not directly discriminate against women, but they can effectively inhibit women's participation by relying on norms reflecting male life patterns as benchmarks of eligibility or success' (Charlesworth, 1995). The positive news is that in the 2020s there seems to have been a greater willingness from our current leaders across the political spectrum to implement and drive this action in many facets of society.

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