

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON LEGAL AND CONSTITUTIONAL AFFAIRS
AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

Question No. 122

Senator Cash asked the following question at the hearing on 18 October 2011:

1. How does the Sex Discrimination Commissioner justify running the Male Champions of Change program, which is designed to encourage cultural change through assisting large organisation to increase the number of women in leadership roles?
2. Are there not enough corporate programs already working to achieve this aim without government assistance?
3. Shouldn't the Commissioner be using resources to assist women whose human rights are genuinely being violated and/or threatened?

The answer to the honourable senator's question is as follows:

1. Women are still considerably under-represented at senior levels of management, as CEOs and board members in government, corporate and community sectors across Australia. The Global Gender Gap Report for 2010 shows Australia dropped eight rankings between 2006 and 2010, from 15th to 23rd. In terms of labour force participation, Australia is ranked 44th. This indicates that improvements in the gender gap in Australia are not progressing at the same rate as other nations. It shows we have a decreasing rate of women's workforce participation – that is - we are going backwards overall including at the senior leadership level.

This is a major economic challenge for Australia, as well as for the achievement of gender equality.

2. Progress in achieving women in leadership positions has been virtually stagnant for years. This requires strategic intervention such as the Male Champions of Change process. The assistance provided by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner for this process is limited to the direct participation of the Commission. All costs for the MCC (such as report production, launch etc) are covered by the CEOs who participate in the project. The Sex Discrimination Commissioner chairs 3 x 1.5 hour meetings each year and one public event. Limited assistance is also provided by Commission staff in helping to promote the activities of the group.
3. The MCC project is low cost and high impact in addressing a significant barrier to gender equality in Australia. The Commissioner focuses the majority of her work on other issues, such as addressing family violence and sexual harassment. She is also currently leading the Review into the Treatment of Women in Australia's Defence Force. The overall program of the Commissioner is set out in her *Gender Equality Blueprint*, released in 2010.