



**Submission regarding the
Australian Government Boards
(Gender Balanced Representation) Bill 2015**

31 July 2015

About YWCA Canberra

YWCA Canberra is a feminist, not-for-profit organisation that has been providing community services and representing women's issues in Canberra since its establishment in 1929.

Established in the 1880s, we are one of 11 affiliated Member Associations of the Australian YWCA movement. Through our national Member Association, YWCA Australia, we are part of the World YWCA network, which connects 125 countries across the globe.

We have a rich history of supporting women and girls in Canberra through the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the rapid social and cultural changes Canberra has experienced in recent years.

Today, we provide leading and innovative services to women and the broader Canberra community in the areas of children's services, community development, housing, youth services, personal and professional training, and women's leadership.

We are a membership-based organisation that is non-religious and encourages the participation of women of all cultures, beliefs and ages through our programs, member activities and services. Strengthened by diversity, YWCA Canberra draws together members who are committed to recognising and celebrating the value of every human being.

Our vision

Women shaping our communities.

Our purpose

Empower women, young women and girls to achieve equality for all.

Our motivation

As a feminist organisation, YWCA Canberra believes that everyone has the right to contribute to, and share equally in, the benefits of the community's social, cultural and economic development.

We will work towards a world where reconciliation, justice, peace, health, human dignity, freedom and care for the environment are promoted and sustained through women's leadership.

In all of our work, we apply a human rights-based approach by realising women's rights and the rights of vulnerable people in the Canberra community.

The present situation

Women remain underrepresented in leadership positions in Australia. This is reflected both in government and business. In the course of 18 months, over 2013 – 2014, the rate of female First Ministers in Australia dropped from 44 per cent to 11 per cent¹. Even more alarmingly, currently five per cent of Cabinet positions, and 17 per cent of federal ministry positions are held by women².

Australia ranks 42nd on the Inter-Parliamentary Union's Women in National Parliaments Index, sitting well below developing nations such as Timor-Leste (15), Uganda (23) and Ethiopia (38)³.

In the private sector, women do not fare much better. As at 2014, women accounted for 17.6 per cent of directors for ASX200 boards, and 21 per cent of ASX200 companies do not have a woman on their board⁴.

This discrepancy in leadership positions has a direct impact on the gender wage gap, which currently sits at 18.8 per cent⁵. Women entering the workforce as graduates earn on average \$5000 less per annum than their male counterparts⁶. By the time they retire, the gender pay gap amounts to 36 per cent less superannuation than men.

There are continuing systemic and cultural barriers to women gaining leadership positions in Australia, including access to childcare, maternity leave, flexible working arrangements, and gendered biases that influence hiring decisions.

Gender equity senior leadership level across all sectors, if left to happen organically, will take 300 years⁷.

Yet change can happen quickly, with the right incentive and motivation.

¹ <https://www.coag.gov.au/>

²

http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/WomanAustParl#_Toc392833819

³ Inter-Parliamentary Union, 'Women in National Parliaments', 1 May 2015 <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

⁴ Workplace Gender Equality Agency, *Gender workplace statistics at a glance*, February 2014, https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/2014-02-10-Stats_at_a_Glance.pdf

⁵ https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/Gender_Pay_Gap_Factsheet.pdf

⁶ <https://www.wgea.gov.au/media-releases/graduate-pay-gap-blowout-females-earn-5k-less>

⁷ <http://www.smartcompany.com.au/leadership/42016-gender-equality-might-be-possible-in-the-year-2314.html#>

What the future could look like

The Australian Government has a responsibility, and a wonderful opportunity to lead the way in terms of gender-balanced representation on boards.

YWCA Canberra is fundamentally committed to supporting women's leadership. We believe that women's unique perspectives and experiences must be heard, and that the community will benefit as a whole from women's contribution to decision-making in the government, business and community sectors.

YWCA Canberra welcomes this Bill, as legislation to mandate gender balance on government boards would ensure that current gender targets not only remain in place but become enforceable.

We believe that a minimum of 40 per cent women and 40 per cent men on all Federal Government Boards is not only desirable but also necessary.

There is strong evidence to suggest that quota systems work to redress the gender imbalance when it comes to leadership positions. For example, in 2012 in countries with legislated quotas, women held 24 per cent of parliamentary positions; in countries with voluntary quotas, women held 22 per cent of parliamentary positions; and in contrast, in countries with no quota system, women held 12 per cent of positions⁸.

YWCA Canberra supports and advocates for the adoption of quotas across government and the private sector.

A decision to introduce quotas for women on boards will demonstrate the Australian Government is not just giving gender equity lip service, but is taking steps to make it happen.

A future where government boards better reflect the communities they represent will ensure better outcomes for all.

⁸ Inter-Parliamentary Union, 'Women in Parliament in 2012 – The Year in Review', 2013.
<http://www.ipu.org/PDF/publications/WIP2012E.pdf>

A case in point

YWCA Canberra aims to build a better community for all through the leadership of women and girls. We support and develop women's leadership in all aspects of their lives including in the home, the community and the workplace.

Developing pathways for women into leadership positions is a priority policy position of YWCA Canberra. We run several innovative leadership programs, including the *She Leads* leadership pathway incorporating the *She Leads* Diploma of Management, *She Leads* Conferences, and *She Leads* Workshops. In addition, our school programs, Every Girl and Y-Aspire, help to develop leadership aspirations in young women.

We also lead by example when it comes to our own Board. We maintain a commitment to ensuring that 30 per cent of all our Board positions, and positions on any of our other decision-making bodies, are held by young women under 30.

This ensures our Board continues to reflect a variety of view points and has been an enormous strength of our organisation.

In addition, we have a Board Traineeship Program. This program is integral to our commitment to building leadership pathways for young women. The program provides our members under the age of 30 with the opportunity to actively participate on our Board, without the financial or legal responsibilities of being a Director.

This provides a unique opportunity for young women to gain experience in governance and directorship.

A word about cultural change

It is often said that quotas are of little or no use without simultaneous efforts to change the dominant 'culture'. We take a different viewpoint.

Government must demonstrate its firm belief in the advantages of gender balance on boards by legislating quotas at the earliest opportunity.

The legislation, and its subsequent reporting requirement, will lead to cultural change. More women on boards will become accepted through lived experience, rather than something that people have to be convinced of.

Too often the approach has been 'softly, softly' in an attempt to create change gradually without causing ripples.

We say the time for the 'softly, softly' approach has passed. It is now time for the Australian Government to take a firm lead in terms of gender-balanced representation on boards. This, in turn, will drive cultural change, having long lasting benefits for our community as a whole.

The time has come to take this decisive step and put gender balance on government boards into legislation.

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