

# THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ELIMINATING DISCRIMINATION AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE

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## INTRODUCTION

Dismantling gender oppression against women and girls will target the various issues they face in today's society. As defined by Webster, gender oppression is

*unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power.” Gender discrimination, a form of gender oppression is “Attitudes, conditions or behaviors that promote stereotyping of social roles based on gender.*

Despite the historical gains that women's rights activists fought for, equality has yet to be achieved. Women are still being raped, abused, objectified, oppressed and discriminated against. Often being disguised as a women's issue, there is a need for a major shift in perception as a societal issue that includes women and human rights. This societal issue involves various forms of victimization amongst women and girls. According to Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nearly 1 in 5 women have been raped at some time in her life (2011). In the military, 1 in 3 women are victims of sexual assault. Studies show that they are more likely to have become victims of sexual assault than to die in combat in Iraq or Afghanistan (Huffington Post, 2012). In addition, 1 in 4 women has been a victim of severe physical violence by an intimate partner in her lifetime (CDC, 2011). Furthermore, a startling number of 1.5 million high school students reported having been intentionally harmed by a dating partner (DoSomething.Org).

Gender oppression of women and girls does not stop with violence. For instance, women hold 17% of the seats in U.S. Congress and only make up 4% of Fortune 500 companies top leadership positions. Yet, they make about 76 cents to a man's dollar, this being less amongst women of color<sup>1</sup>. Portrayals of women and girls in the media also have an impact on gender oppression. Women are often objectified and sexualized in the media (magazines, ads, internet, etc.), often being described as “rape culture.” Rape culture is an environment in which sexual violence against women is normalized and excused in the media and popular culture. An example is music videos that often contain misogynistic language. Where women's bodies are objectified and sexual violence is glamorized. These messages create a society that disregards women's rights and safety<sup>2</sup>. Addressing these root causes can be an asset in transforming our society. A society that creates equality amongst women and girls would not allow for gender oppression to happen. Women would have opportunity for high leadership positions as men without a wage gap. Violence against women and girls would be dramatically reduced. The media would not portray “rape culture” messaging. Instead women would be valued and respected. In which, young girls would not internalize the misogynistic language and images they hear and see today. Dismantling such a large-scale social issue such as gender oppression of women and girls is not just a structural issue, but also a cultural one. Creating policies and systems is needed, but it will not eliminate gender oppression. There is then a need for a collective impact, where social change would be achieved by transforming our society through broad cross-sector collaboration.

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<sup>1</sup> (Valentini, 2010)

<sup>2</sup> (Marshall University, n.d.)

## **TYPES OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION**

So what exactly constitutes gender inequality? What are the signs that gender discrimination may be happening in your work place? Before answering these questions, it's important to know that while gender discrimination is usually directed toward women, men can also be subjected to gender-discrimination. The most overt form of gender inequality is unequal pay or unfair promotions. Unequal pay is typically a form of gender discrimination against women. Men are not supposed to earn more for performing a particular job just because they are men – but all too frequently they do. Under federal law, if a woman performs the same function, achieves the same goals, and works the same hours, she is entitled to be compensated as much as a man performing the same job. Women often have to work longer at their job than men do to be promoted. For most of history, women were discriminated against for giving birth. When a woman got pregnant she often lost her job, her position, and was replaced with a new "more productive" worker. Since a pregnant mother was often unproductive, employers felt justified in not continuing their employment or allowing them to return to work once their pregnancy and birth was over. Today, under federal law, an employer cannot discriminate against a woman based on pregnancy or child birth. Pregnancy must be treated as any other temporary condition. Think you weren't hired because of your gender? If so, pay attention, you may have grounds for a lawsuit. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 specifically states that it is against federal law to refuse to hire someone based on their gender. The same law also specifies that it is illegal to fire an employee, or deprive them any job related opportunities, including internships, apprenticeships or promotions based on gender. For example, a hospital can't decide not to hire a nurse because he's male any more than they can fire a doctor because she is female. Another form gender discrimination and inequality is harassment. In this day and age you'd think we were beyond gender driven harassment in the work place – but unfortunately it still exists. Harassment takes

many forms and can be difficult to prove. Sexual harassment is arguably the most egregious form of harassment and may include overt sexual advances, unwanted sexual overtures, suggestive photos, inappropriate physical contact and the request for sexual favors in return for promotions, job security or any other job related benefit. Other common forms of harassment may include bullying, off-color jokes, and any patterns of behavior that fosters a hostile environment for an employee.

## **EFFECT OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION**

To say gender discrimination isn't a problem is like saying bullying in elementary school is perfectly acceptable. The victims of gender discrimination feel its effects, as do the companies that allow gender discrimination to go unchecked. One of the biggest effects of gender discrimination – particularly for women – is increased stress. In fact, women who report experiencing workplace discrimination also report experiencing increased levels of stress – especially when discrimination involves any form of sexual harassment. Women dealing with workplace discrimination, in conjunction with increased stress levels, may also experience poorer health. Decreased productivity is another effect of gender inequality and discrimination in the workplace. Not surprisingly, when faced with ongoing gender discrimination and inequality, workers tend to lose motivation and morale and they're unable to perform their jobs as effectively. Discriminatory behaviors that can lead to loss of morale and motivation – and consequently productivity – include off-color jokes, jokes that imply inferiority, jokes of a sexual or suggestive nature, or directly suggesting an employee's performance is sub-par because of his or her gender. In corporate America these days, performance is often team based. While individuals contribute their skills, knowledge and services, overall production and final outcomes are often based on the continuity and performance of the team as a whole. There isn't much that creates more tension, hostility or lack of continuity for a team than gender inequality or discrimination. A woman doing

the same job as her male coworker – and team member – will likely feel resentment towards her male coworker if she's being paid substantially less – even if the unequal treatment isn't his fault. An atmosphere or environment filled with tension often leads to lower productivity. Conflict is a natural consequence when employees experience gender discrimination or inequality – regardless of whether it originates from other employees or management. If, for example, a junior employee is promoted ahead of his female supervisor to a managerial position, without sound rationale, it will likely be difficult for the female supervisor to accept this man as her new manager, and she may take issue with management's decision and claim that gender discrimination has occurred. Gender discrimination can lead to high employee turnover, which in turn equates to higher than necessary hiring, training and operating costs for a business. If an employee feels that his or her value is based on gender, rather than job performance, they'll feel demoralized, develop a bad attitude, perform poorly and ultimately look for a different job where gender discrimination does not exist. Even worse, employees who experience gender discrimination and then quit usually don't have nice things to say about their previous employer. Businesses who don't nip gender discrimination, inequality and bias in the butt can develop a poor reputation and find it more difficult to attract good employees. Not only does gender discrimination affect workplace performance, productivity and attitudes, it can negatively impact every aspect of a worker's life, including their overall emotional and mental health. Just like bullying in school, discrimination can take a toll on the emotional and mental health of the individual being discriminated against.

## **THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ELIMINATING DISCRIMINATION AND GENDER BASED VOILENCE**

UN Women has played a key role in developing evidence-based policy and programming guidance on prevention of violence against women and girls. As part of its prevention strategy, UN Women focuses on early education, respectful relationships, and working with men and boys, especially through, and in, the media, sports industries, and the world of work. UN Women helps conduct research on attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of men and boys, as well as young people, related to various forms of violence, and supports advocacy, awareness-raising, community mobilization, and educational programmes, as well as legal and policy reforms. In **Asia and the Pacific**, for example, UN Women works with other UN agencies on the Partners for Prevention programme that aims to reduce the prevalence of gender-based violence in the region through behaviour and attitudinal change among boys and men, as well as increased institutional capacity and policy enhancements. In partnership with the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, and with inputs from young people, UN Women has also designed a curriculum—Voices Against Violence—for those aged 5–25 years. The curriculum includes tools to help young people understand the root causes of violence in their communities, and to help educate and involve their peers and communities in preventing violence against women and girls.

Yet the voices of women like Grace Tames an Australian activist and advocate for survivors of sexual assault appearing on our national stage remind us of how far we've come: they are a shining silver lining gleaned from this cultural moment. In an incredibly moving speech at the National Press Club last week, the Young Australian Of The Year – who has long advocated for reform around child sexual abuse after surviving it herself – called for national reform around consent and advocated for every single one of us to use our voices.

The more we come out and speak about this, the more the conversation will be normalised, and the more the power will be taken away from predators and returned to where it belongs,”

Tames said.

Remember you have the power and you have the control.

It’s your voice, it’s your story, and nobody else can tell it.

In a world of seven billion people, in a time when workplace systems and cultures regularly prioritise the voices of the powerful and silence others, we are so often discouraged from speaking our minds and telling our truths. But the women like Grace Tames, Brittany Higgins who went public of being raped by a colleague and Consent advocate Chanel Contos, who have spoken out and told their stories, remind us of the power of our voices – if we are just brave enough to use them.

The theme of International Women’s Day in 2021 is “Women in leadership: Achieving an equal future in a COVID-19 world”, but Chief Executive Women’s 2020 ASX200 Senior Executive Census has revealed that women’s progress in reaching senior leadership positions in ASX200 companies has flatlined. Australian women currently make up around 25 percent of CEOs and 16 percent of CFOs. And The World Economic Forum modelling predicts it will take 257 years for our world to achieve gender equality if we don’t accelerate progress. This progress is not just good for women, but business itself. They long for a world in which women and men are equally responsible for the most important decisions made – in the home and in the workplace. But it’s going to take *everyone* to find our voices to achieve this. An equal representation of voices is critical to cultures that are balanced and inclusive of all people. For as long as we are only listening to

the voices of *some* in leadership, we are never going to achieve balanced outcomes on the issues that matter. This requires more people to raise their voices *and* significant reform from workplaces around the country. We know the two biggest barriers to the acceleration of gender equality are **sexual harassment and abuse** – research shows that women subjected to sexual harassment and abuse will leave their employer at a rate of 80 percent within two years – and **gendered expectations for unpaid care**, especially childcare, which we know from parental leave data falls to women in 94 percent of instances. For businesses to create significant change in their cultures and promote an environment that encourages people to speak out, leaders need to start prioritizing care and accountability. To do that, workplaces have a significant role to play in terms of policy, culture and, perhaps most importantly, leadership accountability. We will never be able to eliminate sexual violence, family violence, gender discrimination, racial discrimination, the superannuation gap, or the gender pay gap that currently sits at around 15 percent until we have accountability in leadership.

Closing the gender gap, in pay, leadership and participation could contribute billions to Australia's economy. And an increase in the share of top-tier managers by 10 percentage points or more has been proven to contribute 6.6 per cent in the market value of Australian ASX-listed companies worth the equivalent of AUD\$104.7 million. New economic modelling from KPMG also shows that if we halved the workforce participation gap between men and women, in 2038 Australia's annual GDP would have increased by \$60 billion. The time we live in, where there is still so much progress to be made, reminds us of a founding principle of America's first Black women's club, The National Association of Colored Women (NACW). "*Lifting as we climb*," were the words they lived by. As we climb towards a more equitable society that values all human lives, we need to lift up *all* voices by creating a culture that listens to them. Now, we need to *listen* as we climb. People who are still finding your voice, it pays to start small.



When you find your voice by connecting with your values and purpose, it breeds confidence. We believe that every voice matters and every voice is worth cultivating. Together, let's lift as we climb, and commit to leaving no woman behind.

## **CONCLUSION**

A woman's right to live free from violence is upheld by international agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. Only 40 per cent of women seek help of any sort after experiencing violence, and so we advocate for, and support, women and girls' access to quality, multi-sectoral services essential for their safety, protection and recovery, especially for those who already suffer multiple forms of discrimination. We partner with governments, UN agencies, civil society organizations and other institutions to find ways to prevent violence against women and girls, focusing on early education, respectful relationships, and working with men and boys. Prevention is still the most cost-effective, long-term way to stop violence. As part of UN Women's comprehensive approach, we also work with partners to enhance data collection and analysis to provide a better understanding of the nature, magnitude, and consequences of violence against women and girls. Data collection and analysis also helps UN Women and our partners understand what works and doesn't work to address this violence. For more than 10 years, UN Women's global initiative, Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces, has worked to prevent and respond to sexual harassment against women and girls in public spaces, and since 2017 we have also been a key member of the EUR 500 million Spotlight Initiative that deploys targeted, large-scale investments in ending violence in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Pacific.

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