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Is gender equality a non-gendered agenda? Or is it really about women?

BY KATE GALLOWAY / NOV 23, 2012 11:33AM / (0)

The passage overnight of the *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012* (Cth) has been lauded as a significant improvement on its predecessor, the *Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999*. The focus of the new legislation is, as its title suggests, on gender equality. According to Helen Conway, director of the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, it represents a more [contemporary approach](#) to the issue of discrimination, particularly in relation to family and caring responsibilities.

I am undecided in my views on this change.

On the one hand, I have long been suspicious of the default position linking childcare with women's child rearing responsibilities. Affordable and accessible quality childcare is widely recognised as essential to facilitate women's full civic participation, including in the paid work force. However, part of the reason for this is the societal expectation that women be the carers of children. This is reflected in [media reports](#) that focus on 'women forking out for childcare' and [surveys of mothers](#) (generally not fathers) about their childcare arrangements. Additionally, discussions about accessible and affordable childcare for executive or professional women devolve into a debate about middle class welfare that ignores the importance of gender diversity. (See the business case from the [Diversity Council of Australia](#))

What if we re-framed the issue of childcare to focus on children, instead of women? Should we not be challenging the implicit assumption that women alone will take time off to care for infants and young children? And the assumption that women alone should arrange and pay for childcare? I think the new legislation heralds the potential to break this deep seated assumption. By keeping an eye on caring responsibilities of both fathers and mothers, the re-badged agency may well require us to dispense with presuppositions about women and motherhood and shift the national debate to center around families, parents and children; not just women.

On the other hand, the lack of gender diversity in the workplace, on boards and more widely in society is a reflection of deeply held sexist views about women, often unrecognised by those who hold them. These views are enacted and reproduced by institutions such as the law, government, media, family and religion. It is this [unconscious bias](#) that results in much discrimination against women. My concern is that in adopting the term 'gender equality', through our language we implicitly deny that there is systemic, institutional discrimination against women.

The other aspect of this concern is the very notion of equality. Equal to what? Are we suggesting that women are to be measured by the existing (male) standard that exists as a function of men's historical domination of the workplace (and elsewhere)? How will equality be measured to the extent that men and women are different?

Happily, Helen Conway [has indicated](#) that "the agency will still recognise that women have a particular disadvantaged position in the workplace". There is of course no reason to doubt this, and to remain hopeful of a nuanced approach to gender equality that recognizes the ongoing challenges faced by women as women.

In talking about gender diversity, we know there is a business case, and we all benefit. But in the end, this is about women. I just hope that a non-gender specific agenda will not mask that.

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HELEN CONWAY, WORKPLACE GENDER EQUALITY ACT

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