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Chapter 1: EEO for Women: A Political and Organisational Challenge

Since the last edition of *Making the Link*, there has been a considerable amount of discussion in the political and organisational arena about the implications of work/life balance on companies and individuals alike. The falling fertility rate and a looming demography crisis in our country have renewed discussions around women's necessary involvement in and economic contribution to the workforce. This first chapter will overview important developments and trends with relevance to equal employment opportunity which occurred during the last twelve months. Three major topics will be discussed. First, according to Anne Summers' latest publication, we are witnessing 'The end of equality' (2003) in Australia instead of a celebration of 21st century equity among women and men. Summers explains how, in her view, the government under John Howard's leadership has dismantled the hard work of previous governments and lobby groups that went into changing the legislation and putting into place appropriate political bodies to work towards equal rights for women in the workforce.

Second, the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace (EOWA) has published its second annual census on women in leadership positions in Australia. (The first annual census was discussed in last year's chapter 1 of *Making the Link 14*.) The results of this census make it clear why the former head of EOWA, Fiona Krautil, talks of feelings of frustration when presenting the statistics that demonstrate women's all too slow progress in the echelons of corporate power.

Third, work/life balance – 'a pernicious little phrase', notes Amanda Sinclair (2004) – continues to be a theme of importance attested by the current Industrial Relations Commission test case. The major difficulties in terms of dealing with work/life balance become evident when considering the particular challenges we face in Australia today. For example, some argue that the government does not seem supportive enough of women's choices about workplace participation. We might also contend that the corporate world has to work even harder at improving women's participation rates in top positions. And whilst we are dealing with an impending demographic crisis, it appears that we have not yet created an organisational and political context that will alleviate the potential danger. According to data cited in this chapter, the pay gap between women and men remains significant, our tax system could be seen as not going far enough in supporting part-time working mothers and the Federal Budget 2004 has attempted to deal with paid maternity leave in a different way than the previous, unsuccessful baby bonus. Lastly, it is interesting to hear young people's views about our work/life choices. According to recent research, their message is, 'get a life' rather than live a life where work is completely out of balance (Pocock and Clarke 2004).

EEO for Women: The Political Debate

In August last year, the *Australian Financial Review's* BOSS Magazine ran a cover story of Australia's 'true' leaders, selected by a panel of nine men and women, employed in academia as well as the private and the public sector. Of twenty-five selected people who have 'focus, consistency and good sense' (BOSS Magazine, p. 46), the magazine's front cover depicts a colour photograph of seven. Among these are three women, Gail Kelly, CEO St George Bank, Denise Bradley, Vice-Chancellor University of South Australia and Elizabeth Proust, Managing Director Esanda (ANZ is its parent company). This depiction might lead us to believe that equity in Australia has been achieved. However, when reading the article, we find out that the panel struggled with finding women leaders for the list. The panel – on which there were three women – also acknowledged the persisting dearth of women leaders despite the fact that 'the number of females graduating from university now outstrips males, particularly in areas such as law, finance and medicine' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 February 2004, p. 12).

At last year's *Women, Management and Employment Relations* conference, Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward told the audience that 'equality between men and women has hit a brick wall'. She called on Australia's leaders, such as Prime Minister John Howard and Treasurer Peter Costello as well as corporate leaders to support the necessary culture change in both words and actions. Anne Summers (2003) argues in her latest publication that our current Government works against gender equity by undermining the political, economic and social rights of women in general and working women in particular. It is of interest that for a significant period of time, Prime Minister John Howard's focus was on single-income families and not so much on families with both partners in the workforce, suggested in a statement he made just over three years ago: 'I have probably done more as Prime Minister in changing the tax laws to help single-income [families] than any prime minister in the [past] thirty years.' (*The Australian*, 1 December 2003, p. 10).

This preoccupation ignored the implications of enormous demographic shifts in Australian society. Statistics released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that the proportion of single income families has fallen from 39 per cent in 1984 to 23 per cent in 2003. Along with this declining trend, currently 52 per cent of families have both spouses in the workforce whilst women's participation in paid part-time work has been increasing steadily from 26 per cent in 1970 to 47 per cent in 2003 (Speech by Hon Kevin Andrews MP, November 2003). From recent surveys we can see that women were holding 70.5 per cent of all part-time jobs in August 2002, and 22 per cent of this group wanted to work longer hours (Summers 2003, p. 161). The trend to go back to paid work after childbirth is accelerating. In 1996, many mothers took up jobs when their youngest child turned three. In 2001, however, these women went back to work when the

youngest offspring was one to two years old (*The Australian*, 1 December 2003, p. 10).

Our country's innovative approach towards women's policies, has certainly supported such a trend. For example, Australia was the first country to measure women's progress in all government activities. The National Agenda for Women, which set measurable equity targets, was a worldwide first as was the invention of a position for a 'femocrat', a feminist adviser to government (Summers 2003, p. 15). Over the two decades between early 1970 and early 1990, numerous laws and programs had been introduced on both federal and state levels to ensure women's equality:

[W]omen benefited from the childcare program, that, for the first time, put government funds into providing childcare places; the Sex Discrimination Act (SDA) provided legal protection against discrimination in employment and education and against sexual harassment; affirmative action legislation required employers to report on the steps they were taking to improve women's job opportunities; the federal government intervened in the industrial court in favour of equal pay for women; special units were set up in all government departments to monitor women's services and programs; special programs were introduced in education, employment, health and legal services to ensure women's opportunities were expanded.

(Summers 2003, p. 122)

In her book, Anne Summers (2003) strongly criticises the current federal government for not being supportive enough of the above mentioned programs, policies and laws introduced before it came into power. She is of the opinion that Australia, over the last few years, has moved to a situation where 'women and women's issues were being steadily removed from the political agenda' (Summers 2003, p. 130), thereby weakening rather than safeguarding or even strengthening equal opportunity for women.

Over four years ago, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 'urged the federal government to strengthen laws protecting women in the workplace, following a national inquiry into pregnancy and work issues' (*Australian Financial Review*, 16 September 2003, p. 4). In 2003, the government finally proposed three relatively minor legislative changes based on HREOC's report. This response came under heavy attack from the Democrats' spokeswoman on the status of women, Senator Natasha Stott Despoja. She argued that the weak response represented a watering down of the obligations listed in the Sex Discrimination Act. It reflected the government's 'lack of genuine support for working women' (*Australian Financial Review*, 16 September 2003, p. 4).

The Federal Budget for 2004 was announced in May 2004; it was described by the *Sydney Morning Herald* (12 May 2004, p. 1) as 'the mother of all spending sprees'. This latest budget reveals a change in Prime Minister John Howard's and Treasurer Peter Costello's approach to

families and paid work. Two budget measures, in particular, warrant mention here: First, both working and stay-at-home mothers will be entitled to a new maternity payment of \$3,000 in recognition of the extra cost associated with the birth of a child. Not surprisingly, critical voices continue to be heard. The Australian Democrats leader, Senator Andrew Bartlett, for example, points out that the new payment amounts to less than half the suggested fourteen weeks paid maternity leave at the minimum wage, \$6,543.60 before tax (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 May 2004, p. 10). Second, an extra 40,000 childcare places outside school hours in addition to 4,000 family day care places are supposed to help parents ease the juggle between work and family. Whether this will translate into more flexibility granted by employers, an increase in trained and experienced childcare workers, an increase in affordable childcare and available childcare in less prosperous urban and rural areas remains to be seen.

2003 Australian Women in Leadership Census

Anne Summers (2003, p. 1) starts out, in her latest publication, to describe the extraordinary change that has taken place in Australia's world of work:

We see women cabinet ministers, women sitting on Supreme Courts, a woman running a major bank, others running large government agencies or sitting on the boards of our top companies. There are Australian women who run successful international fashion businesses, women who direct and produce globally renowned films, women who win Academy Awards. We see women reporting in the field from home and abroad, we see women reading the television news, we even see pregnant women reading the nightly bulletin.

However, these encouraging changes do not represent the full picture. The second Australian Women in Leadership Census was conducted by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA) in partnership with Catalyst, the New York based, non-profit research and advisory organisation. Dr Graeme Russell from Macquarie University collaborated with EOWA on this project whilst ANZ, Esanda, Macquarie University and Edith Cowan University acted as sponsors. The census data is Australia's only definitive measure of women on Boards and in executive management positions across the country's top ASX200 companies, constituting 90% of Australia's market capital. The methodology used in the census is rigorous and has been approved by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

When the results of the census were released on 1 October 2003, it became clear that very little had changed since the inaugural 2002 census highlighted the under-representation of women in Australian leadership. It is evident that women managers' lack of experience in line management and/or profit-and-loss roles has translated into a barely significant improvement in this year's census results. Hence, the number of women board directors has increased by 0.2% from 8.2% in 2002 to 8.4% in 2003. The number of women executive managers has increased by 0.4% from

8.4% in 2002 to 8.8% in 2003. The 2003 Australian Women in Business pyramid has changed little from the previous year:

Figure 1: Australian Women in Business: 2003

ASX200 CEOs	5
ASX200 Highest Titles	3.2%
ASX200 Board Directors	8.4%
ASX200 Executive Managers	8.8%
Managerial & Professional	
Specialty Positions	43.0%
Australian Labour Force	44.6%

Source: EOWA (2003), Census of Women Board Directors and Executive Managers.

According to the 2003 census, 49.1% of Australian companies employ no women executive managers at all. And even though 8.8% of all executive positions are occupied by women, they hold only 4.7% of line roles. Men, on the other hand, make up 95.3% of all line roles. Lastly, the number of companies with at least one woman board director has decreased by 0.6%, from 53.3% in 2002 to 52.7% in 2003. These figures reveal that it is a tough call for women to obtain the experience they are told they have to get in order to make it to senior roles in the corporate world.

Interestingly, the 2003 survey found significant changes in the performance of particular industries with regard to the promotion of women. The best performing industries were:

- Software and Services
- Telecommunications
- Retailing
- Health Care Equipment and Services

Banks and insurance industries, which were among the best performing industries in 2002, are not included in this census list anymore.

The worst performing industries were:

- Consumer Durables and Apparel
- Pharmaceutical and Biotechnology
- Hotels, Restaurants and Leisure
- Real Estate

In last year's census, transportation as well as food, beverage and tobacco also figured in the worst performing industries list.

At the launch of the census, Fiona Krautil, the then head of EOWA, pointed out that more strategic focus is needed in the Australian business environment to tackle the issue of women's under-utilisation in the workforce because 'this is a problem that time is clearly not going to fix' (EOWA 2003). Australia is not alone in this. According to the UK Equal Opportunities Commission, the most detailed and recent survey of women's representation in senior positions in Britain shows that the percentage of women in top positions is equally low. 7% of the senior judiciary and the senior ranks of the British police force are women; in the senior ranks of the armed forces 1% are women, and only 9% of the top business leaders and national newspaper editors are female (*Australian Financial Review*, 6 January 2004, p. 43).

All these figures, can be contrasted with organizational experience at lower levels. For example, when we look at the gender distribution in law, female lawyers in their 20s and 30s outnumber their male colleagues 53 per cent to 47 per cent (*The Australian*, 1 December 2003, p. 10). These figures successfully demonstrate changed cultural perceptions about so-called 'appropriate' degrees for women. Sandra Yates, chairwoman of Saatchi & Saatchi Australia, cautions that times have not completely changed for the better for women and society has wrongly given 'young women the impression that they can do anything – and that is demonstrably not true' (*Australian Financial Review*, 2 October 2003, p. 6).

Understandably, there is talk of a 'feminisation' of the legal profession (*Australian Financial Review*, 16 January 2004, p. 21), but that is only accurate at the more junior levels. The gender distribution in law has changed over the years, according to the 2002 practicing certificate survey conducted by the Law Institute of Victoria. Whilst women dominate the profession in the younger age bracket, the gender pyramid starts to show in the 30-39 age bracket where there is an even distribution. In the 40-49 age bracket, there are 40 per cent women lawyers and in the over-50 bracket, a mere 13 per cent females remain (*Australian Financial Review*, 19 December 2003, p. 46). The big corporate law firms, however, have realised that they need to become proactive if they wish to retain female talent. To this effect, organisations such as Mallesons Stephen Jaques are examining the way partners are appointed in order to remove hidden barriers to women (*Australian Financial Review*, 19 December 2003, p. 1). On a federal level, there are also attempts at ending discrimination against female barristers. Federal Assistant Treasurer, Helen Coonan, has indicated plans to guarantee women lawyers a minimum share of government work (*Australian Financial Review*, 5 September 2003, p. 1).

The Australian world of work does not yet have a 'critical mass' of women, according to Heather Ridout, Chief Executive of the Australian Industry Group (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 December 2003, p. 3). Only when a critical mass of women in key decision-making roles is achieved, will gender inequality begin to turn around. A ground-breaking Australian study titled *Senior Women Executives and Cultures of Management* undertaken by Dr Anne Ross-Smith, Dr Colleen Chesterman, and Dr Margaret Peters points in this direction (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 3-4 April 2004, p. 33). Their study is based on interviews with more than 250 senior managers, about a third of them males, across universities, financial institutions and public service departments. The researchers examined the extent to which 'management culture changed when a more-than-token number of women held powerful positions' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 3-4 April 2004, p. 33).

Critical mass has not been reached as also indicated by another survey of 338 top 500 companies. This was funded by the federal Office of the Status of Women. It found that female representation on corporate boards and rural boards and associations had risen only 2% since 2001 (*The Australian*, 20-21 March 2004, p. 27). Fiona Krautil stated: 'It is important for women to get experience in line jobs, in profit-and-loss roles as well as staff roles' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 February 2004, p. 12). This statement is supported by a Catalyst survey of Fortune 1000 CEOs and women executives at the vice president level and above (Wellington, Brumit Kropf and Gerkovich 2003). The results of this survey, published in the *Harvard Business Review*, found that 79% of women and 90% of CEOs agreed that lack of general management or line experience was the primary obstacle to women's promotions. There is little advancement to the highest levels of corporate leadership without this experience.

The case for affirmative action remains very strong. In January this year, Catalyst released the findings of a new United States study which demonstrated that 'companies with a higher representation of women in senior management positions financially outperform companies with proportionally fewer women at the top' (Catalyst 2004). For the purpose of this study, Catalyst used two measures to examine financial performance: Return on Equity (ROE) and Total Return to Shareholders (TRS). 353 companies on the Fortune 500 list participated in the project. The hard data requested by businesses to support the link between gender diversity and corporate performance is reflected in the following statistics:

- The group of companies with the highest representation of women on their senior management teams had a 35 per cent higher ROE and a 34 per cent higher TRS than companies with the lowest women's representation.
- Consumer Discretionary, Consumer Staples, and Financial Services companies with the highest representation of women in senior management experienced a considerably higher ROE and TRS than companies with the lowest representation of women.

(Catalyst 2004)

Commenting on these figures, Susan Black, Catalyst Vice President of Canada, commented that these 'findings demonstrate a link between women's leadership and financial performance, but not causation'. Some companies, she continues, 'understand the competitive advantage of gender diversity [and] are smart enough to leverage that diversity' (Catalyst 2004).

Continuing Themes: Demographics, Fertility, Pay Gap and Lack of Work/Life Balance

These challenges at senior levels might become even more pronounced with contemporary societal problems emerging in a significant way. Australia faces an impending demographic as well as fertility crisis. At the launch of the second Australian Census of Women in Leadership Fiona Krautil pointed to a partial solution: '[W]e have an ageing workforce and a fertility crisis. Yet we have this highly educated female workforce that is not valued and unable to fully contribute' (*Australian Financial Review*, 2 October 2003, p. 6).

A new policy paper launched by the Business Council of Australia (BCA) in April 2004 suggests that we need to target the problems at a more grass-roots level. According to the BCA, policies to lift fertility rates, will need to:

- enhance and support work and family strategies and policies;
- review childcare and leave policies to ensure they support families and participation in the labour force;
- encourage public and private sector employers to pursue 'customised' solutions that enhance work and family balance and improve retention, morale, productivity and employee loyalty.

In order to improve labour force participation, the BCA proposes a dual approach by focusing on:

- older workers – by reviewing retirement age regulation, super provisions and age pension condition;
- female workers – by improving workplace flexibility via provisions such as parental leave, maternity leave and part-time work.

(*Workplace Express*, 27 April 2004)

According to new comparative research by Professor Frank Castles, University of Edinburgh, on 21 OECD countries, it is possible for governments to influence fertility rates through their social policies (*WORK+LIFE Strategies Newsletter*, April 2004). Castles found that it is not family-oriented cultural traditions that influence fertility rates today, but rather a 'valued care model' in which governments provide comprehensive support systems for working parents. Australia has not gone far enough in providing such a substantial support system. This is reflected in the significant gap between male and female earnings. Indeed, this gap appears to be widening.

In Victoria, the government will examine the causes of continuing pay inequity to find out how it can narrow the 17.3% pay gap between the State's women and men (*Workplace Express*, 26 March 2004). Employment Protection Minister, John Kobelke, of Western Australia has also ordered an independent review, which will be conducted by Dr Trish Todd and Dr Joan Eveline, University of Western Australia, into the critical issues causing a gap of 2.2% in earnings increases between male and female workers (*Workplace Express*, 17 March 2004). In the private sector, it is known that female solicitors are paid less than their male counterparts, 'even among solicitors with less than one year's experience' (*Australian Financial Review*, 16 January 2004, p. 21). The pay gap in this industry continues despite increasing workplace experience. For instance, take the 'pay of those in Generation W aged 25-34 years, there is a 12 per cent gap in the men's favour' (*The Australian*, 1 December 2003, p. 10). This mainly childless group of women is not discriminated against because of their caring responsibilities.

Whilst pay inequity for childless women remains, mothers in the paid workforce also suffer despite the government's recognition that more people need to take up paid work in order to financially support our ageing population. Before the Federal Budget 2004 was announced, research suggested that 'the Howard government's tax and welfare system discriminates against mothers who work part-time' (*Australian Financial Review*, 27 February 2004, p. 22). For women working between 10 and 19 hours a week, there was only a negligible rise in weekly disposable income because of the associated tax burden and a loss of benefits. In the 2004 budget, Treasurer Peter Costello announced 'the largest package of measures ever to assist families who are juggling work and child-rearing' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 May 2004, p. 1). Public policy has been brought into line with the reality of 52 per cent of families with both parents in the workforce.

Critics point out that the new policy supports only specific dual-income structures. Analysing the financial benefits of the 2004 budget, some argue that the policy is biased: 'The biggest winners are dual-income families with children in which the "primary earner" (read male) contributes 80 per cent of the household income and his "secondary earner" (read female), the other 20 per cent' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 May 2004, p. 13). Under these restructured benefits, the critical voices continue, '[t]he Government rewards those families who split the paid work 80:20 and pays less to those who share the responsibility' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 May 2004, p. 13). It remains difficult to see how this new family assistance and tax budget will promote gender equality and shared responsibility for children.

Treasurer Peter Costello's comment: 'if you can have children it's a good idea to do – you should

have one for the father, one for the mother and one for the country, if you want to fix the ageing demographic' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 May 2004, p. 1) was noteworthy given Professor Frank Castles' research cited above. The government would have been better advised to introduce a national paid maternity leave scheme to support its family-friendly social engineering program. At present, not enough has been done to assist those women workers afflicted by low pay and poor working conditions.

All women full-time, part-time and casual employees with twelve months service, are entitled to twelve months unpaid maternity leave with their jobs open for them when they return. In 2002, Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Pru Goward, lobbied for a policy overhaul, proposing a national paid maternity leave scheme which would pay for fourteen weeks' leave at the federal minimum wage. Even though this proposal was not supported by the government, some public and private organisations have changed their maternity and paternity leave policies and brought them in line with the International Labor Organisation (ILO) standard, the basis of Goward's proposal. For instance, Brisbane City Council has increased its paid maternity leave from nine to fourteen weeks and doubled paid paternity leave to two weeks (*Workplace Express*, 24 October 2003). Employees of Alice Springs Town Council can now also access fourteen weeks paid maternity leave (*Workplace Express*, 27 January 2004). In the private sector and under a new enterprise agreement, Insurance Australia Group (IAG) grants its employees six weeks paid maternity and two weeks paid paternity leave (*Workplace Express*, 15 October 2003).

These are encouraging changes but they seem to be undermined by other judicial and political decisions or proposals. For example, a female employee wanted to return to work on a part-time basis after her maternity leave last year, but was refused permission to do so. In the ensuing case, the Federal Magistrates Court ruled that '[e]mployers who don't generally offer part-time or flexible employment are not obliged under federal anti-discrimination laws to allow full-time employees to return to work part-time after maternity leave' (*Workplace Express*, 15 December 2003). This judgment, in the case *Kelly v TPG Internet Pty Ltd* appears to work against extended rights for workers with caring responsibilities. Similarly, the Labor government released its proposal for a Baby Care Payment of \$3,000 in March this year. This proposal has been criticised by various parties, not least by Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Pru Goward (HREOC, 31 March 2004).

Unpaid parental leave of twelve months was introduced in Australia in 1993, but the uptake of this entitlement by both female and male employees has been slow (*Australian Financial Review*, 12 December 2003, p. 11). A survey conducted in November 2002 showed that only 16 per cent of women and 10 per cent of men used their unpaid leave entitlement after the birth of their first

child (*Workplace Express*, 23 February 2004). At the same time as more effort needs to be put into educating employees about their rights and entitlements, there is a large group of low-paid women in the Australian workforce who cannot afford to access these entitlements and instead uses paid annual or long service leave (*Workplace Express*, 23 February 2004).

Further reasons for the slow uptake of work-family entitlements have been identified by Associate Louise Thornthwaite. These are the fear of endangering career advancement and the association of work-family policies with women (*Workplace Express*, 8 April 2004). A report prepared by Bittman, Hoffman and Thompson (2004) found that three out of four fathers with access to family-friendly provisions in the workplace were not taking advantage of the available entitlements. Alleged risks to one's career and a perceived association with 'women's issues' are significant disincentives. Often, however, the reality of substantial salary differences between partners' incomes presents couples with strong economic imperatives and, hence, does not allow for much choice. According to Marian Baird, 'the lack of pay equity in Australia perpetuates the inability of men to become more involved in caring for their children and further compounds pay inequality' (*Australian Financial Review*, 12 December 2003, p. 11).

In light of the above, it is interesting to note that the ACTU launched a Work and Family Test Case late last year, based on evidence that Australia is second last among fourteen Western OECD nations on work and family balance (ACTU, 30 April 2004). The following workplace reforms are being sought by the ACTU:

- the option to work part-time after the birth of a child;
- flexible working hours, school-friendly holiday times and more workplace choice;
- an option to take up to two years unpaid parental leave;
- a new entitlement of five days paid leave to care for a child or relative;
- access to unpaid family emergency leave for all employees, including casuals.

(ACTU, 30 April 2004)

Barbara Pocock and Jane Clarke have made important contributions to the debate. For their study titled *Can't buy me love?* (2004), they interviewed 93 young people in Year 6 and Year 11 about their perspectives regarding parental work, consumption, care, money and time. The researchers point out that this project is not intended to contribute to the blame game (p. viii), instead it seeks to further our understanding of the following issues:

- young people's preferences about time and the trade-off between work and money;
- work 'spillover' and how parental work affects children;
- the nexus between money and parental guilt;

- children's own consumption and its link to work, identity and self.

(Pocock and Clarke 2004, p. ix)

The focus for young people is 'how jobs affect their mothers and fathers'. 'Negative spillover' associated with certain job characteristics including the risk of physical harm, job insecurity or work overload 'often send a parent home from work unhappy or bad-tempered' (p. x). In such situations, children are directly affected and they plan to do things differently when they grow up:

Most of the young people in this study are planning to have jobs and a family and many want to do it in ways that are different from their own parents. In many cases, young men want an active role in parenting and to be there for their children more than their own fathers have been. Young women want to share the tasks of earning and caring with their partners. Very substantial institutional changes will be necessary if workplaces and labour markets are to accommodate these preferences and give these parents of the future the kind of flexibility they seek.

(Pocock and Clarke 2004, p. xii)

Sexual Harassment

2004 marks the twentieth anniversary of the Federal *Sex Discrimination Act* which prohibits discrimination on the grounds of sex, marital status, pregnancy and potential pregnancy, family responsibilities and sexual harassment in certain areas of public life (HREOC, 24 March 2004). On 24 March this year, Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward and Attorney General Philip Ruddock MP launched a package of materials on workplace sexual harassment, including the results on a national telephone survey of 1,006 Australians. The findings reveal the urgency of keeping sexual harassment on the public agenda, given that one in four people between the ages of 18 and 64 reported experiences of sexual harassment. In 2002-03, an estimated 230,000 women and men claimed to have been subjected to sexual harassment at work, with an overall gender distribution of 86 per cent of complaints involving a man sexually harassing a woman. The Sexual Harassment in the Workplace resources developed by HREOC include a review titled *20 Years On: The Challenges Continue ... Sexual Harassment in the Australian Workplace*, a revised edition of *Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: A Code of Practice for Employers* and posters for schools and workplaces about sexual harassment.

Summers (2003, p. 68) describes women's experiences of today as 'a kind of existential schizophrenia' where girls are told that they can do anything, but later in life 'are bombarded with contradictory and confusing messages about the value of their sex'. This can be observed in instances such as sexual harassment at work which is experienced by more women than men. It can also be observed in the case where working mothers, employed in organisations with flexible policies in place, still struggle to obtain a work/life balance. As mentioned before, these women

often do not take advantage of family-friendly policies because they are afraid of being sidelined if they do so. And female executives without children but in childbearing age are left in doubt: 'Many of the younger women in the progressive companies wondered if they could continue to hold down these big, wonderful all-consuming jobs and have children.' (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 3-4 April 2004, p. 33). As long as these young women are rightly concerned about their future possibilities in the workforce, Australia's fertility rates will be constrained. For many with professional ambitions, starting a family involves significant risks.

Final Thoughts

The pace of progress towards greater equity in Australian workplaces remains slow although there are islands of excellence. Too many Australian leaders seem to underestimate the complexity of the situation. One of the progressive CEOs, ANZ chief John McFarlane, who is included in EOWA's latest book titled *Chief Executives Unplugged: Business Leaders Get Real about Women in the Workplace*, launched on 23 March 2004, is quoted as saying: 'The work environment is not pitched in favour of women; one has to pro-actively speak out, take action and initiate programs to ensure women are operating on a level playing field.' (EOWA 2004, p. 13).

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