

## Responding to curly questions about changes being implemented to advance gender equality

As a practitioner working to implement changes required under the Gender Equality Act you may experience some challenging questions and statements from your colleagues and community. People may demonstrate defensiveness, concern, disbelief, and sometimes anger; they may also show curiosity and support. This resource collates information to help you respond effectively and promote the social change required to advance gender equality.

Four steps to responding:

1. **Acknowledging the person's** question or statement. This demonstrates that you have heard them, reflects your understanding of their comment and can be a useful way to begin a respectful conversation.
  - a. *Example: "Listening to what you have said, you are asking why past advances in gender equality are not enough?"*
2. **Clarify their concern** by asking open ended questions. Gaining better understanding about their comments assists you to respond appropriately. This can reduce your presumptions about the person's reason for commenting.
  - a. *Example: "When you say 'diverse range of people', can you tell me a little bit more about what do you mean by this?"*
3. **Communicate** your response statement. This may involve respectfully correcting misconceptions and using key, evidence informed messages.
4. **Support your response statement with evidence** provided in the following pages. The evidence you use depends on who you are speaking to, the tone of the conversation and the format of the interaction e.g., email or in-person.

For further guidance on responding to resistance please read [Talking about change](#) by Safe and Equal and see the [WHWBSW website](#).

It is critical to understand that gender inequality is a primary driver of violence against women. Please visit [Our Watch](#) to consolidate your knowledge of violence against women.

On the following pages are response statements and supporting evidence. Topics include:

- Questioning the need for workplace changes to advance gender equality
- Using resourcing and logistics as reasons against implementing change
- Questioning the need to change rigid gender norms and stereotypes.

**THEME: Questioning the need for change**

Comment: Aren't we equal already?

Response statement	Evidence
<p>Although organisations may strive to be equal, there are many societal and systemic factors that contribute to inequalities experienced by women, men, and gender diverse people.</p> <p>Gender equality work looks at changing workplace policies and processes to promote equal sharing of responsibilities and opportunities among the genders. For example, policies that offer flexible work for all staff broadens opportunities for those with caring responsibilities and encourages more men to take-up caring responsibilities.</p> <p><i>(Societal and systemic factors include decision-making power, access to resources, and social discrimination)</i></p>	<p>The gender pay gap persists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Australian women must work an additional 56 days each year to earn the same pay as men doing the same work</li> <li>• Incomes from roles historically dominated by women are less than income from male dominated roles and industries (<a href="#">WGEA</a>)</li> <li>• Higher paying industries continue to be dominated by men because of rigid gender stereotypes (<a href="#">UN Women</a>)</li> </ul> <p>Women live longer on less; this results in preventable health problems in older women (<a href="#">Monash</a>).</p> <p>Older women are the fastest growing cohort of people facing homelessness (<a href="#">ABS</a>).</p> <p>Pain experienced by women is under diagnosed and ineffectively treated because of medical gender bias. Past medical research was based on male physiology (<a href="#">DoH</a>).</p>

Comment: 'We do not have a problem with gender inequality in our workplace'

Response statement	Evidence
<p>Gender inequality can sometimes be hard to see, particularly if you are not subjected to it. Examples of gender inequality at work:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender inequality in leadership and decision-making roles</li> <li>• Bias influencing professional development or advancement opportunities for mothers but not fathers</li> <li>• Persistent workplace sexual harassment impacts women more than men. Discrimination based on gender can be experienced by all, however, it primarily affects women.</li> <li>• Expectations that women will use flexible work more than men</li> </ul>	<p>The Australian Human Rights Commission's national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces found that one-in-three workers had experienced workplace sexual harassment in the last five years. The survey found that only 18 % of incidents are reported (<a href="#">AHRC</a>).</p> <p>Power to make decisions at work is predominantly held by men:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 22% of CEOs in Australia are women</li> <li>- 1 in 4 boards do not have any women</li> <li>- Only 7% of management roles are part time, 30% of women work part time (<a href="#">WGEA</a>)</li> </ul>

**THEME: Questioning the need for change**

Comment: Haven't we already done gender equality at work?

Response statement	Evidence
<p>We have made significant progress, but evidence shows we have a long way to go. For example, gender roles are less rigid than they were in the past, however gender stereotypes continue to present barriers to women's advancement at work. For example: a forceful, confident woman may be labelled 'bossy' when a man would not be.</p> <p>Stereotypes persist for both genders. A policy to enable flexible leave is great, male leaders need to use this leave to demonstrate that caregiving, for example, needs to be shared across genders.</p>	<p>54.4% of employers took action to address identified gender pay gaps (<a href="#">WGEA</a>); over <b>half</b> of us have contributed to progress. However, the gender pay gap is currently 21%, and more needs to be done.</p> <p>A University of Sydney survey of women and men aged 16-40 found only a third of women felt that the sexes were treated equally at work, compared with half of the men (<a href="#">USYD</a>).</p> <p>Carrying a disproportionate burden of care is a significant barrier to workforce participation for women (<a href="#">WEF</a>).</p>

Comment: 'We have an award; therefore, we can't have a gender pay gap'

Response statement	Evidence
<p>Organisations do not intentionally set out to cause a gender pay gap, but the pay gaps still exist.</p> <p>Gender pay gaps are often caused by discrimination and bias in hiring, promotions and bonuses. Other factors include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gender differences in time spent out of the workforce caring for children and families.</li> <li>- Gender norms about what is women's work. Women are overrepresented in Australia's low paid essential sectors and underrepresented in high paid sectors such as mining and science, technology, engineering.</li> </ul>	<p>Currently, Australia's national gender pay gap is 21.7% (<a href="#">WGEA</a>). Women's average <b>total remuneration is \$26,393 less</b> than men's; this is \$507 less money each week.</p> <p>Statistics show:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• on average, men earn more than women in every role, across all industries and occupations</li> <li>• more women than men complete tertiary education, but their graduate salaries are lower. (<a href="#">WGEA</a>).</li> </ul> <p>Although 63% of organisations offer paid parental leave, only one third offer it to both men and women (<a href="#">WGEA</a>).</p> <p>For more information about overcoming systematic barriers to workplace equality see (<a href="#">PMC</a>)</p>

**THEME: Questioning the need for change**

Comment: 'We already have a diverse range of people in our organisation'

Response statement	Evidence
<p>Acknowledge that the organisation may have a diverse range of people employed. However, it is important to critically think about how overlapping forms of discrimination and bias play out in the workplace, and it's impacts on a person's workplace experience and opportunities.</p> <p>*Refer to the workplace gender audit process and results.</p> <p><b>Ask:</b> Do your leaders publicly acknowledge that not all relationships are heterosexual? Does your organisation have policies to ensure internal communications are accessible to all? Do you support events which celebrate diverse cultures?</p> <p>Key workplace issues for culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) women</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of recognition of overseas qualifications, skills, and work experience</li> <li>• Lack of knowledge about Australian workplace processes and culture</li> <li>• Pre-migration life experiences, particularly trauma and torture</li> <li>• Caring responsibilities and unaffordable paid care (<a href="#">FECCA</a>).</li> </ul>	<p>Evidence reveals populations of women who experience additional barriers to participation in the workforce. These include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culturally and racially marginalised (CARM) women have unequal access to institutional power and leadership positions - discrimination based on race, cultural background, language or religion persists (Ch.4 <a href="#">GEC</a>).</li> <li>• Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women have a considerably lower rate of workforce participation compared to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men (18.4% and 37.9% respectively, Ch.1 <a href="#">GEC</a>).</li> <li>• Older women are more likely than men to be discriminated against based on their appearance as they grow older, which can negatively impact their sense of self-worth (Ch.2 <a href="#">GEC</a>).</li> <li>• Low applicant diversity in rural areas, reduced workplace flexibility and variable structural changes to support gender equity limits rural women's workforce participation (<a href="#">GEC</a>).</li> <li>• Women with disability disproportionately experience lower pay for work (Ch.3 <a href="#">GEC</a>)</li> </ul>

**THEME: Resourcing and logistics**

Comment: 'I don't see how this relates to my work?'

Response statement	Evidence
<p>Gender equality is everyone's business and impacts everyone.</p> <p>These changes to our organisation benefit individuals, families and the community. They create a fair and equitable place for us all to live.</p>	<p>The Gender Equality Act embeds new ways of working that are applicable for all staff. If you are not directly involved with a <a href="#">GIA</a> or <a href="#">GEAP</a>, you will experience changes in flexibility in your work, promotion and recruitment processes and various workplace opportunities.</p>
<p>The workplace changes we are asking you to undertake promote safety at work; this is important. These changes support your other workplace requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Positive duty to reduce sexual harassment at work</li> <li>- WorkSafe</li> <li>- Outcomes contribute to favourable statistics reported to WGEA</li> </ul> <p>The workplace gender equality audit is an opportunity to highlight areas for improvement and to celebrate progress.</p>	<p>All employers have a duty to take 'reasonable and proportionate measures' to eliminate workplace discrimination <a href="#">(AHRC)</a>.</p> <p>Andrew Vesey, CEO of AGL Energy said "Gender equality is part of the organisation's core business. We report on gender in the same way as we report on safety." <a href="#">(CCC)</a></p>

Comment: 'We don't have the time or resources for this'

Response statement	Evidence
<p>This work may seem overwhelming; please use the resources available and seek available support.</p> <p>Workplace leaders are required, by law, to prioritise this work.</p> <p>The changes required to advance gender equality have many benefits; this work meets the needs of many other legislative policies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender Equality Act obligations</li> <li>• Reconciliation action plan</li> <li>• Disability Inclusion Action Plan</li> <li>• Positive duty under Sexual Discrimination Act <a href="#">(AHRC)</a></li> <li>• Equal Opportunity Act obligations</li> </ul> <p>Streamlining is key!</p>	<p>Benefits of investing time and resources include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contributing to the prevention of violence against women and girls</li> <li>• Improving the economy</li> <li>• Advancing human rights</li> <li>• Contributing to safer communities <a href="#">(Vic Gov)</a>.</li> </ul>

**THEME: Resourcing and logistics**

Comment: 'How much is this going to cost the organisation? We have limited funding.'

Response statement	Evidence
<p>Investing in gender equality is a smart business decision, by doing so, you will see:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased <b>productivity</b> and <b>performance</b></li> <li>• Women and men better able to share the load i.e., decreased burn out, increased mental and physical health</li> <li>• Improved organisational culture and staff moral</li> <li>• A reduction in the gender pay gap</li> </ul> <p>Changes to advance gender equality can be considered an investment, rather than a cost.</p>	<p>Gender equality at work promotes productivity and performance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning saves \$31 million each year due to flexible work; similarly, Mercy Health saves \$23 million and Wannon Water saves \$150K each year (<a href="#">OPWE</a>).</li> <li>• Diversity at work increases workforce retention and team performance (<a href="#">DCA</a>).</li> <li>• Businesses with at least 30% women in leadership positions are 15% more profitable (<a href="#">Vic Gov</a>)</li> <li>• Workplace sexual harassment cost Australia an estimated \$3.8 billion in 2018 (<a href="#">Respect@work</a>)</li> </ul>

Comment: 'You can't do this kind of work flexibly'

Response statement	Evidence
<p>There are different types of flexibility:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>When</b> work happens. This includes flexible hours/scheduling, part-time work, job sharing, split shifts, compressed hours/compressed week, variable year employment.</li> <li>• <b>Where</b> work happens. This includes working remotely at home and from different locations.</li> <li>• <b>How</b> work happens. This includes workplace design, use of technology and other enabling factors.</li> </ul> <p>Not all types of flexibility are ideal in every role, but some type of flexibility is possible in every role.</p> <p>Flexible working arrangements and leave entitlements, including parental leave, help Victorians of all genders balance paid work with other responsibilities.</p>	<p>COVID-19 lockdowns demonstrated our ability to adapt our workplace practices.</p> <p>Flexible work is associated with greater employee wellbeing: it reduces exhaustion, burnout, and fatigue (<a href="#">Hokke</a>).</p> <p>Flexible work is associated with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved productivity</li> <li>• An enhanced ability to attract and retain employees</li> <li>• Improved employee well-being</li> <li>• An increased proportion of women in leadership</li> <li>• Future-proofing the workplace (<a href="#">WGEA-b</a>).</li> </ul>

**THEME: Rigid gender norms and stereotypes**

Comment: 'Women are just more suited to caring roles'

Response statement	Evidence
<p>Traditional gender stereotypes suggest women are more suited to caring roles, but this is not the case.</p> <p>Women undertake more caring roles because it is expected of them; this is a result of gender stereotyping.</p> <p>Over-representation of women in caring roles is caused by historical gender inequality.</p> <p>Gender stereotypes create barriers for women's participation in male dominated industries and for men wanting to enter caring professions; stereotyping limits everyone's freedom.</p>	<p>Gendered toys, expected behaviours for girls/boys, and advertising perpetuate the stereotype that women are more suited to caring roles; these roles are socially constructed.</p> <p>Evidence shows that labour division in the first year after a baby's birth impacts roles completed in households for the next 10 years (<a href="#">HILDA</a>). Consciously interrupting stereotypes during this time leads to more equal division of caring responsibilities in households (<a href="#">AIFS</a> &amp; <a href="#">BM3</a>).</p> <p>Women can thrive in male dominated industries when there are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• workplace settings that meets the needs of all employees</li> <li>• inclusive workplace culture (<a href="#">PM&amp;C</a>)</li> </ul>

Comment: 'How does this benefit men?'

Response statement	Evidence
<p>The goal of gender equality work is to reduce discrimination against women and gender diverse people, to level the playing field.</p> <p>Gender equality actually benefits everyone. It creates a world where everyone has the same rights, responsibilities, and opportunities to thrive.</p>	<p>Gender equal societies have less violence and higher social cohesion (<a href="#">Vic Gov</a>).</p> <p>Traditional male stereotypes are associated with poorer mental and physical health (<a href="#">JSS</a>).</p> <p>Normalising flexible work and extending parental leave to include all staff enables men to be involved in their children's lives.</p> <p>Direct resisters to this video from North Melbourne football club talking about the benefits from workplace change to advance gender equality <a href="#">available here</a>.</p>

**THEME: Rigid gender norms and stereotypes**

Comment: 'Most of us guys are pretty progressive already'

Response statement	Evidence
<p>Although attitudes and behaviour are changing, there is room for improvement. What does 'pretty progressive' mean? On average women do 5 more hours of unpaid housework than men each week, even when the woman is the primary breadwinner (<a href="#">PMC</a>).</p> <p>Encourage men to be reflective of the power they hold and how a situation may be experienced for a woman, especially a woman who experiences multiple forms of discrimination (sexism alongside ageism, ableism, racism).</p> <p>Men hold an influential position to shift power dynamics and advance gender equality.</p>	<p>Compared to the global average (21 per cent), more Australian men (30 per cent) believe that gender inequality 'doesn't really exist' (<a href="#">PMC</a>)</p> <p>In 2023, men accounted for only 14 % of all paid primary carer's parental leave despite nine in 10 Australian men agreeing they had equal responsibility for childcare (<a href="#">WGEA</a>; and <a href="#">Wilson</a>)</p> <p>The Man Box study (2024) found that 40% of Australian men felt pressure to abide to identified masculine 'rules – these include 'real men should act tough when feeling nervous' and 'men should use violence to get respect' (<a href="#">Man Box summary</a>). They found, men who hold these views are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 times more likely to have perpetrated physical violence against an intimate partner</li> <li>• 12 times more likely to have hit a partner with a fist or something similar (<a href="#">JSS</a>)</li> </ul> <p>Most men are implicated in maintaining dominant masculinity and gender inequality; they benefit from these stereotypes (<a href="#">Our Watch</a>).</p>

Comment: 'Women aren't suitable leaders in our workplace.' 'Women aren't as good at leadership (*as men*)'

Response statement	Evidence
<p>Women in leadership are more likely to have successful productivity, performance and profitability outcomes.</p> <p>Change is often difficult; but adjusting the way we do things is integral for innovation and progress.</p>	<p>Analysis of the Australian workforce found that an increase in the share of female 'top-tier' managers by 10 percentage points or more led to a 6.6 per cent increase in the market value of Australian ASX-listed companies, worth the equivalent of AUD\$104.7 million (<a href="#">Cassels &amp; Duncan</a>).</p>

## Further references:

Rainbow Health Victoria (2021) Pride in Prevention messaging guide, pp.21-24, available at [rainbowhealthaustralia.org.au](https://rainbowhealthaustralia.org.au)

Safe and Equal (2021) **Talking about change**: how to navigate resistance about gender equality. Available at [safeandequal.org.au](https://safeandequal.org.au) Please utilise Safe and Equal's practical resources and videos to build your capacity to manage resistance in your work [available here](#).

Vic Health (2018) **(En)countering resistance**: Strategies to respond to resistance to gender equality initiatives. Available at [vichealth.vic.gov.au](https://vichealth.vic.gov.au)

Vic Health (2020) Framing masculinity message guide. Available at [vichealth.vic.gov.au](https://vichealth.vic.gov.au)

Women's Health West (2015) Speaking publicly about preventing men's violence against women. Curly questions and language considerations. Available at [womenshealthbsw.org.au](https://womenshealthbsw.org.au)