

REPORT

ACT Gender Equality Forum: Sharing Stories of Success

12 February 2018

Executive Summary

About 60 people from more than 40 distinct organisations/agencies attended the *ACT Gender Equality Forum: Sharing Stories of Success* (10am to 2 pm, 12th February 2018) which was jointly organised by the ACT Ministerial Advisory Council on Women (MACW) and the ACT Office for Women (OfW).

After an enthusiastic welcome from the ACT Minister for Women the Hon. Yvette Berry MLA, participants were inspired to hear and share women's stories in an image-filled Keynote from Dr Gail Crimmins, who is a respected University of the Sunshine Coast researcher into storytelling as a way of sharing women's experiences of inequity.

Small groups then met for six themed discussions on *Leadership; Respectful Relationships; Housing and Homelessness; Breaking down Gendered Occupations; Women supporting Women in Business; and Changing the System, not the Woman*. Each group, facilitated by MACW members, shared inspirational stories of success from the ACT community. These stories are valuable ways of reminding the community that change is happening, and that success must be highlighted even more than failure: as Dr Crimmins explained 'You have to see it to be it!'

Feedback from participants suggests high levels of satisfaction with the Forum's organisation, Keynote Speaker, and themed discussions. Many participants felt empowered to take strategies of success back into the community. Many participants indicated a strong desire to have more involvement with MACW/OfW and suggested a need for both to have much higher profiles through engagement with the ACT community. The Forum can be deemed a success that now requires follow-through, with this report providing many avenues for discussion and action for change.

1. The Forum

The *ACT Gender Equality Forum: Sharing Stories of Success* was co-designed and co-facilitated by the ACT Ministerial Advisory Council on Women (MACW) and the ACT Office for Women (OfW) to provide an opportunity for ACT residents and workers of all genders to share successful strategies that could help the ACT community towards more gender equality. This approach sought to support the implementation of the ACT Women's Plan 2016-2026 and the First Action Plan 2017-2019.

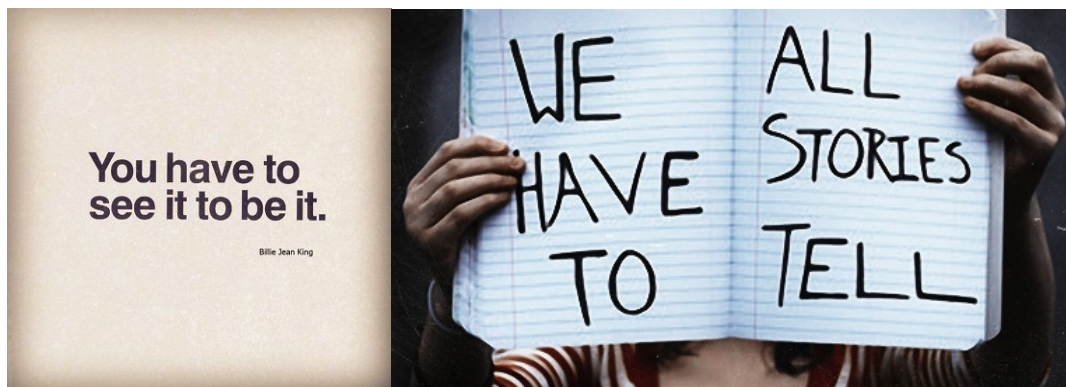
Some 180 individual invitations were sent to a broad range of organisations, business, representative bodies, community service providers, awardees, and individuals, in addition to invitations directly from the Office for Women to representatives of ACT Government Directorates. The Forum was held at Theo Notaras house on Monday 12th February 2018 (10 am-2 pm). The Forum had 66 advance registrations, representing more than 40 identified organisations (Appendix 1) as well as many individuals, with more than 70 people attending on the day (including MACW Facilitators and OfW staff).

Participants were welcomed by Dr Beth Beckmann, Chair of MACW, who outlined the focus on sharing stories of success in addressing gender inequalities. The Forum was opened by ACT Minister for Women the Hon Yvette Berry MLA, who first acknowledged and thanked the traditional owners of the land on which we were meeting, and then advanced her desire for gender equality to be pursued actively in the ACT. Minister Berry drew attention to the ACT Government's Women's Plan 2016-2026 as an active policy-driven and strategic mechanism for working towards consistent change across all aspects of governance and engagement that were the responsibility of the ACT government.

*The Women's Plan is an ambitious ten-year plan providing us
with a pathway for positive change for women and girls in our community;
for working to secure true equality.*
(Minister for Women Yvette Berry MLA)

Minister Berry also explained that this event was the second Gender Equality Forum held under the Women's Plan 2016-26. The first forum (October 2017) held in conjunction with the YWCA set the scene for change. It highlighted the necessity to continue advocating for and furthering the rights of women and girls to be treated with respect and fairness. Participants at that forum made a pledge to make a personal commitment to promoting gender equity in their own way, in their own spheres of influence. This 'Stories of Success' forum sought to build the ripple effect by using storytelling, one of the world's oldest means of remembering and sharing.

To have you here and participating today tells me that you are committed to making real change – and I believe to make real change we need to keep working together on solutions and ideas – keep talking about what we're trying to do – and to not give up or become overcome with frustration or negative commentary. ... standing by is no longer an option in the gender equality fight ... the whole world is on a gender equality wave – and we need to all make sure we catch that wave and ride it in all the way.
(Minister for Women Yvette Berry MLA)



Forum participants were then engaged by Forum Guest Speaker Dr Gail Crimmins' inspirational Keynote. Dr Crimmins worked as an actor, director and casting director in theatre, television and film in the UK before beginning her academic career in 2000, teaching drama within higher education institutions and drama schools/conservatories. She is now a Lecturer in Communication at Queensland's University of the Sunshine Coast, where she is the First Year Experience Lead for the School of Communication and Creative Industries, and teaches courses related to Creative Industries, Creativity and Communication: her teaching expertise has been internationally recognised through a Senior Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy. Dr Crimmins is also an active and highly published researcher, predominantly focusing on issues of gender inequity and the impact of such inequity on women's lived experiences, and working on collaborative feminist projects. Dr Crimmins employs narrative and arts-informed inquiry to unearth and re-present stories of lived experience, share stories otherwise often unheard, and to provoke awareness and change. This concept—that women's stories and storytelling can be agents of change by uncovering inequities and by sharing stories of success, however small—was the subject of her very well-received Keynote.

- *I loved what she had to say - very interesting and thought provoking. Her presentation style was excellent, and her use of visuals was powerful and appropriate.*
- *'Seeing is believing' is a great strategy.*
- *Informative, articulate and engaging.*
- *She was magnificent. I will be reading her work and I have already told about 100 women they need to follow her and read her work! ... [Gail] totally inspired me to believe that I can make a difference. GREAT CHOICE!*
- *Great context and really helped set the tone for stories as valid research.*
- *Really well pitched. Considering the diverse audience, this was quite a feat.*
- *It was very on point and resonated with the purpose of the Forum*
- *... as a fairly passionate (yes I get called angry) feminist I can sometimes get overwhelmed by the apparently impenetrable glass wall, ceilings, cliffs and want to smash it all NOW! I am a big picture thinker and sometimes the big picture makes me want to give up! Gail gave me such a valuable perspective on how a change in my own perspective can reveal small pivotal actions that can effect huge change. She totally inspired me to believe that I can make a difference.*

After the Keynote, Forum participants clustered into six themed discussions (based where possible on participants' choices made at registration). Each theme was facilitated by a member of MACW and supported by a member of OFW staff. Discussions continued for an hour. After a break for lunch and networking, participants moved to a second themed discussion for another hour.

Theme	MACW Facilitator	Inspirational Lead
Leadership	Dana Esperanza	Fiona May (ADACAS)
Respectful Relationships	Trisha Jones	Mark Wadie (I Respect Initiative) Katherine Jeffries (Defence) Tim Bavinton (SHFPACT)
Housing and Homelessness	Lauren Gale	Susan Helyar (ACTCOSS)
Breaking Down Gendered Occupations	Jayanti Gupta	Penny King (ANU)
Women Supporting Women in Business	Beth Beckmann	Llewella Jago (Rowdy Digital)
Changing the System not the Woman	Megan Taylor Julie Blackburn	Kieran Vaughn (independent)

*MACW members Alisa Draskovic, Louise Bannister and Catherine Carter contributed to the Forum planning but were unable to attend the Forum.

MACW is very grateful to the Inspirational Leads from the ACT community who provided starting points of a story of success towards gender equality for each them. As the discussion progressed, all group members were encouraged to share their own, or witnessed, stories of success, whether large or small. Notes were created by each group, and Dr Crimmins then facilitated a short reporting back session before the close of the Forum.

In the post-Forum feedback survey, it was clear that the extended time for themed discussions had been positively received, with 70% of respondents rating the discussions as 'excellent' or 'very good'. The key concerns raised were related to structure, time, and reporting back. Many respondents reported that the focus on success stories and strategies had given them ideas to take back to their workplace, communities or personal lives, although converting stories to strategies may not always be easy.

- *The discussions at both tables were rich, varied and interesting.*
- *The first [session] I found very stimulating - I think the vulnerability of the introductory story created a magical space where people felt comfortable to share their stories. The second was much more formal and less flowing, I think because the intro story was reporting on research, rather than a story from lived experience.*
- *The discussion was fantastic and [the facilitator] did a great job running the session.*
- *... more useful over a longer period of time as it provided food for thought.*
- *It was empowering to hear other stories, to know common challenges (so you do not feel lonely on continuing the battle you are in).*
- *... great to build connections with other strong, change-making women.*
- *It was good to hear people speaking about positive experiences in an unencumbered way (little or no spin).*
- *... mostly story sharing, so experience-based rather than skill-based.*

There were some concerns at the effort required to turn stories into strategies:

- *It was useful to hear and be inspired by other women, but we didn't really get into ideas on how we could take them back to our workplace, community or personal life.*
- *... achieving a focus on strategies was difficult.*

This Report summarises these six discussions from the perspectives of change-makers' shared stories and strategies for future success, both from the grassroots up in individual actions and from the top down in policies and strategies. Feedback received from participants in the post-forum evaluation are also included where these enhance the discussion notes.

It is hoped that these ideas and stories will inspire women across the ACT to continue to challenge the status quo in the quest for gender equality, and will provide opportunities for increased engagement between all parts of the community, the ACT Office for Women and the Ministerial Advisory Council on Women.

*... focusing on successful stories promotes success in others and,
as Dr Crimmins said, success stories create the realisation of possibilities for others.*

I would like to continue to be involved and understand what are the next steps on this powerful journey.

Looking forward to the next one!

(feedback from participants in post-Forum evaluation)

Theme 1: Leadership

We can certainly look to role models—at one time Australia’s Head of State Governor-General, Prime Minister and ACT Chief Minister were all women. But this kind of situation should not be seen as a quirk, but as a pattern we wish to see just as often as there are men in all those positions.

Women can be great leaders in many spheres, but structural issues often minimise the potential for this to be realised, and therefore sap women’s confidence. Women need to support one another as leaders and mentors and ensure they are not inadvertently ‘pulling up the ladder’. The sisterhood can nurture, champion and support women in leadership, and can also advocate for a different kind of leadership.

Leadership is no longer considered to be related to specific personality characteristics or based on specific traits, especially traits that are considered masculine or more often expressed by men. Nor is leadership seen any longer as simply about positional and named roles. Careful use of language can start to help break down unconscious notions of leadership as gender- or position-based.

While most organisations still have figure-head leaders, sometimes with inordinate power, there is a growing recognition that distributed, or shared, leadership is much more functional and likely to create extensive achievements that benefit the whole group. Leadership is certainly not a ‘one-person’ game, but rather is about people coming together and being guided by the person with the most relevant experience or expertise at that moment. For women especially, leadership often is, or can be, about collaboration.

Lawrence Levy, who ran the highly successful animated film company, Pixar, attributed his success to learning that positional leaders had to stay out of the experts’ way during decision-making. Levy argues that there are hidden costs to the performance culture that drives many organisations, and that we can all work towards building better, stronger, more humanistic organisations with more mindful leaders at many levels. Women can take these ideas to heart and see leadership as a role in decision-making, a sharing of expertise, and an authentic expression of individuality that is not limited or circumscribed by gender.

Shared thoughts

The “sisterhood” should be considered as a strong leadership and networking support mechanism, as it champions women and raises girls and young women to understand the issues of feminism and equality. By having support networks and mechanisms that set out value all voices (such as this Forum), it becomes easier to hear many voices in all their diversity and different levels of loudness.

Think about being authentic as a leader, shining as an authentic woman in her many roles. Being comfortable in your identity as a woman—whatever that means to you—is an important way of underpinning change. Own your identity: being assertive in your visibility as an individual who is a

woman—rather than trying to be ‘the’ stereotypical woman in how you dress, eat, work—sends a powerful message and raises awareness of diversity.

Keep an eye on the end game is very important: what are the goals of any activity, and where is leadership supposed to take us? What do we want to pass on to the women who come after us? Glass (and bamboo) ceilings are genuine structural problems in organisations that reduce gender equality and societal success. Having a ‘merit-based’ path to promotion and leadership is only beneficial when the merits that are sought are truly equal and available to women regardless of opportunity.

Be the change you want to see: women have to take the initiative to drive cultural change towards gender equality by taking every opportunity to ask and be asked, to see and be seen, to meet and to be met. Always ask for opportunities even if there are risks: you will miss all the opportunities if you never take risks. Leadership in sharing parental responsibility could be a powerful force.

Leadership can take us beyond a binary gender equality by ensuring that society takes a more inclusive view of all its members, whether they are female, male, trans, bi, intersex, gay, lesbian and others. Intersectionality is a crucial area of understanding for all leaders, because an inclusive society is, by definition, not divided and divisive. Women leaders could seek to embody openness. Leaders have a responsibility to continue shining a light on ‘taboo’ subjects until they become the norm. Even when situations have been terrible, leaders can make a great impression by ensuring that there is an apology, and that ‘sorry’ is heard by the people who suffered.

Stories of success

Being a woman leader: One woman leader at the forum attributed her success to her capacity to i) create a strong blend of the personal and the professional ii) be authentic iii) always look to find common ground with her colleagues, collaborators and communities iv) keeping her eye on end game, which means being able to rise above the ‘people politics’ v) using experience, privilege or leverage whenever possible or necessary to advance situation (e.g. by taking time when making a ‘yes/no’ decision, sounding calm).

The **ACT Women’s Awards** and the recently launched **Women’s Honour Roll** acknowledge and celebrates the outstanding achievements of women in Canberra, and provide many role models of leadership. In 2018 the International Women’s Day theme was *Press for Progress*, and the annual ACT Women’s Awards recognised ‘innovative and progressive approaches to achieve gender equity’, expressed in many different kinds of leadership. The following awards were announced shortly after the Forum, and are well worth highlighting.

2018 ACT Woman of the Year Ms Ashleigh Streeter-Jones has been the Director of Future 21 Young Australians in International Affairs, which seeks to have more young people involved in international affairs, was part of the task force behind the official recognition of trans inclusion. She also co-organised the Girls Takeover Parliament program to inspire and equip the next generation of female leaders.

2018 Senior Woman of the Year Ms Cathi Moore has contributed to leadership positions in key community service organisations and government boards for more than 30 years, including serving as the President of YWCA Canberra and Board Member/Treasurer of YWCA Australia. She successfully campaigned for the introduction of the 30% quota for young women under 30 in governance positions in the YWCA both nationally and locally. She is the founding member of My

Coaching, My Future, which provides pro-bono coaching services for women who have left violent relationships.

2018 Young Woman of the Year Ms Caitlin Figueiredo is an international champion for gender equality. As the Alannah and Madeline Foundation Ambassador, she has helped transform the lives of girls in the ACT by supporting the foundation to end violence and bullying. As Director of Lake Nite Learning, Miss Figueiredo helps women develop skills, find employment, build a community and follow their passion. Miss Figueiredo co-founded the world's largest political takeover, which reached 10 million people and trained Canberra women in leadership, public speaking and Indigenous rights.

2018 Woman of the Year Finalist Ms Jayanti Gupta works across the multicultural, interfaith and women sectors. She has worked with Government, individuals, committees and organisations, and is a member of the ACT Ministerial Advisory Council on Women, Executive Member of the Canberra Multicultural Community Forum, and Executive Member and Media/Publicity Secretary of the Canberra Interfaith Forum. Ms Gupta is also an active and dedicated volunteer in the community and in 2017 was named the 2017 ACT Volunteer of the Year.

2018 Woman of the Year Finalist Ms Caroline Hughes is a proud Ngunnawal woman who has made a significant contribution to women and girls in the field of education for over 30 years. As Director of CIT's Yurauna Centre she has made an outstanding contribution to both Indigenous and Non-indigenous communities as a practitioner, manager and leader of educational programs in community development and client support services. As Director at Yurauna she has increased the enrolments at the centre and works with Indigenous women to help them gain qualifications to enter the workforce.

2018 Woman of the Year Finalist Ms Lana Read is an innovative and passionate secondary school principal who has worked in public education for nearly 20 years. She is an inspirational role model for girls and women, and coaches and mentors, at the school and system level, and presents professional development across the country. Ms Read has a passion for working with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those with complex and challenging needs and behaviours.

2018 Woman of the Year Finalist Ms Julie Tongs OAM has been the Chief Executive Officer of Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Service for over 20 years. She has been instrumental in growing the organisation from 10 to 70 staff servicing a client base of over 7000 clients serving 75% of the Canberra Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. She has prioritised the specific and special health needs of women and children in service delivery. She is a strong advocate and has provided leadership for Aboriginal women in the community.



The 2018 Women's Honour Roll inductees and Women of the Year award winners with Minister for Women Yvette Berry (6 March 2018).

Theme 2: Respectful relationships

Much gender inequality and inequities are fundamentally based in a lack of respect in cross-gender and cross-sectional relationships. If we could heighten respect in all relationships within our community, we could expect a natural shift towards more gender equality (because inequalities would be seen as disrespectful), less family and workplace violence and harassment, and more relationships that engage in meaningful discussion of consent. Being respectful includes understanding the vulnerabilities of different people (for example based on their age, gender, sexuality, and disability), deferring to a highly-informed concept of sexual consent, expecting accountability from all parties, and engaging with issues of intersectionality.

We need to be educating children, young adults, families and leaders about what constitutes respectful relationships in their context. Supporting young people into a full understanding of what constitutes respectful adult relationships is crucial. One focus may be on coaching boys to become the best and most respectful men they can be. Yet to some extent we are still taking baby steps in this sphere, not quite knowing whether what we are doing will be beneficial in the long run. Ensuring we have and use evidence-based approaches is thus fundamental, especially in schools. Given limited resources, and a recognition that we want faster change than might happen without new inputs, we need to be sure of the best investment in time and effort at all levels. This requires that relevant relationships programs are not only designed and delivered, but also rigorously evaluated and the results shared. At the same time, we need to remember that while we all notice times when major shifts in awareness take place (e.g. #metoo) or big changes happen, this kind of work in a community requires significant persistence. We should acknowledge, and be inspired by, historic examples where this persistence, often by just a few, has led to breakthroughs in the past.

Shared thoughts

Raising awareness of gender inequities throughout the broader community is fundamental to increasing the range and impact of respect in all relationships, whether in couples, families, workplaces or the community as a whole. Change needs to be enshrined in policy and legislation as well as in practice and custom: although this affects society as a whole, it must be remembered that major changes in policies and conventions can make a significant difference to potentially vulnerable or otherwise unprotected individuals.

We need to be sure that programs dealing with respect and respectful relationships are actually achieving outcomes and moving society towards more understanding of gender equality. A point for open discussion is whether we are trying to erase notions of gender or nourish the diversity while ensuring equality of opportunity and treatment. Helping people identify, and then demolish stereotypes, is an important aspect of going forward. Working with prospective parents even in ante-natal classes could be very productive in starting to challenge gender stereotypes.

Universities have had a shock encounter with the results of ignoring sexual harassment, but are now catching up on supporting respectful relationships and the notion that 'consent always matters'. It is, however, concerning that so much harassment, discrimination and disrespect of individuals is still considered part of 'initiation' into groups of highly educated students.

It is crucial that cultural considerations and values, and the age spectrum, are taken into account in this discussion. Themes that arise include safety, consent, confronting privilege (e.g. not only majority and gender privilege, but also the privilege to hold cultural values that might diverge somewhat from Australian human rights) and the difficulty of initiating change. Respect for the elderly is a cultural value that is being lost, for example, with elder abuse becoming more common.

How do we deal with success in ourselves and others? By teaching respect for, and by, 'tall poppies' we could learn from others' experiences and wisdom. Sporting and other heroes should not be free to behave intolerably or even badly.

Stories of success

Consent Matters: online self-paced courses on what constitutes consent in sexual relationships have been made available (and mandatory in some cases) to students at both the [Australian National University](#) and [University of Canberra](#).

I Respect Initiative: This program has set out to "engage boys and men with healthy and respectful manhood, so they are enabled to support each other emotionally and to hold each other to account while creating a world where women and girls are valued, safe and considered equal".

Choose Respect: This 9-week course on respectful relationships is delivered by the Canberra Police Community Youth Club (PCYC). The course targets young people aged 12-25 years who are exhibiting poor attitudes towards women and/or may have been exposed to, or responsible for, domestic or family violence. The course content uses evidence-based programming, and includes a Canberra PCYC fitness component. Beyond the 9-week course, Canberra PCYC staff also provide ongoing mentoring support for participants.

Respect, Communicate, Choose: This is an innovative, evidence-based program that aims to give young people aged 8-12 years old the tools and support to develop, promote and perpetuate equal, safe and respectful relationships, with the ultimate goal of preventing violence against women. The program is designed to prevent violence before it occurs by supporting young people to challenge attitudes that are based on inequality; build knowledge and skills to develop relationships that are non-violent and respectful; encourage young people to think about the consequences of their behaviour on themselves and other people; and empower participants to become advocates for violence prevention in their community and within their peer groups.

From participant feedback

I really think we should have input into ante-natal programs. This is the time when prospective parents are enthusiastic and idealistic enough to want to be perfect parents. If we had some gender equity programs at this point - to stem the differential parenting before it begins - then we might be building a fairer society for the future. I thought the recent ABC program on gender equity was excellent - even something like this shown to parents would be helpful.

Theme 3: Housing and homelessness

Housing is a societal and social challenge with many private and community sector players beyond government, particularly developers, the real estate industry in general and landlords. Housing options need to be diverse, available and affordable. The key issue for housing in the ACT is ‘simply’ cost i.e. the continual rise of the cost of housing in every segment of the market (rental, purchase, and lease) and in all areas. Essentially the housing market has ‘failed’, and government over-reliance on the market to adjust appropriately to supply and demand has led to a situation where regulations are insufficient to address this failing. Many women at different stages of life experience homelessness—not just teenagers or those with young children— so services must cater for this breadth of demand and need. While powerful stories of individuals have become beacons of light shining into this dark area, the aim now is to direct this light onto the contributing and reinforcing factors that contribute to this not-so-hidden issue.

Shared thoughts

The concerns of housing security and homelessness are real for many women in the ACT today, and impact on many other aspects of women’s lives, such as leaving disrespectful relationships, making appropriate health decisions, and personal safety. Homelessness is a particular social challenge that perhaps could be considered through a lens of privilege rather than one of exclusion and discrimination. Success stories are still to become the norm rather than the exception.

Although many women are keen to tell their story of housing challenges, and this definitely has raised awareness significantly, this is not always a comfortable or even safe approach for the individuals to take. Many (most) stories are personal and potentially traumatic to re-tell. In promoting individual stories, there is also a risk of distracting understanding of the bigger picture and the same kind of impact on many people who may not be sharing their stories. Why is it that society needs these stories of ‘dauntless’ women to be told repeatedly, and sometimes shamefully, before governments, landlords and the industry do ‘the right thing’?

Stories of success

The ACT Government brought together some 200 people at the [Housing and Homelessness Summit](#) in October 2017 to inform its [planned Affordable Housing Strategy](#).

The [ACT Council of Social Services](#) has prepared many [submissions and documents on housing and homelessness](#), including a [Literature Review on Older Women and Housing](#). [Soon after the Forum, ACTCOSS released a [Housing Choices Discussion Paper](#), March 2018.]

Economical housing: Domain writer Nicola Powell has reported locations in Canberra where more economical housing could be found, which is a positive example of how the real estate industry can engaging in this issue.

There are individual good news stories. For example, after effective consultation in the design phase, a group home is being developed for young people in South Canberra.

[YWCA Canberra](#) are providing group housing for older women. 'Ageing in place' is crucially important for the physical and mental wellbeing of many women. However, this may not necessarily mean living in the same house as previously, but within the same location or region.

The [Women's Centre for Health Matters](#) has been engaging with various professional sectors to share the stories of women in vulnerable situations, particularly women who have experienced domestic or family violence. In many cases, good advocates telling their stories is an effective way to build links and relationships, but effort must be made to help women do this effectively and safely. This work has had many benefits: success in engaging with these sectors, the way sharing of stories from women clearly served to raise awareness, and the ongoing support (financial, pro bono and other) forthcoming from a range of professional firms.

[Onelink](#) is a service where homelessness support and child, youth and family services can be sought.

Theme 4: Women supporting women in business

Women are constantly being told to 'lean in' and become the change-makers for their own futures, but this fails to acknowledge the systemic contexts that often make it virtually impossible for women to thrive in workplaces that structurally limit gender equality. Even when workplaces and business sectors predominantly employ women (e.g. real estate agencies, nursing, education), management and leadership positions often go predominantly to men.

Many women are no longer accepting this status quo and have seen business development as a way of stepping aside into a new way of working. But change doesn't have to come from adversity: it can be a rational choice that is introduced from the grass roots or top down to benefit all employees.

Businesses can help one another through networking, collaboration, sharing spaces, and building respectful relationships within and across industry boundaries. For example, Canberra Women in Business is an active networking group that can support individuals and teams, and is one of many groups that could contribute to creating broader opportunities around safe spaces where women could meet and share experiences, knowledge and support. The key to making change happen is for women to accept all kinds of support and 'pay it forward' in a form of peer coaching.

Shared thoughts

Having more women in the Australian workforce will [boost productivity](#). Having women involved in business, and in leading businesses, is not just a good idea ethically and morally, but also is known to impact on the \$-based bottom line (as well as the triple bottom line of financial, social and environmental accounting). Jack Ma, founder of China's e-commerce giant Alibaba, considers women executives and managers (35% high-level managers are female) as [one of the reasons for the company's success](#).

Women often want to do what they are good at, create change and build networks. Without the scope for their ideas to be listened to, however, women, like men, can become focused on 'presenteeism' rather than productivity. In addition, some (especially private sector) workplaces are not very supportive of mid-career women ("they just go off and have babies") or require women to accept certain constraints as the norm (e.g. having to listen while men speak for women, not getting pregnant, accepting they are 'over-qualified'). Staff need to be hired not only for the skills they have but those they can develop: hiring with a view to who they will become. Many women have not had the chance to demonstrate skills in the workplace but have fine-tuned many skills at home, volunteering with schools and in community groups. Give them a chance to shine as employees!

Having a child, or turning 30 or 40, can be a tipping point for women in realising these constraints. Women start asking the big question "Why not?" More and more women are not only finding greater personal scope and satisfaction working within the business sector, but are also setting up their own businesses to find more scope for their values-driven focus. There is now often an impetus for women ("enough is enough") to move to establish their own business from the 'hustle on the side' or to work with others who do value their skills.

Our challenges are our opportunities: many women have identified creative solutions to personal, social and community problems. We need to ensure there are enough platforms for these women to be heard. Investing in people—creating a 'social capital bank account'—is a powerful way for women to exemplify inclusion in every way.

Networking is a key activity for success in business, and one for which many women have a natural affinity (finding a 'tribe'). Networks are enablers, in which investments should be made well before you might need support. Networks need to include women and men, and men need to be brought along on the journey to gender equality. Networks are also very supportive for women ("meet friends, be supported, have a cry, do something amazing") and can substitute for the 'men play golf' or 'I'll shout you a round of drinks at the pub' networking from which women may feel excluded. Soft networking—listening to peers as coaches—empowers confidence in women's capabilities and provides opportunities to see things from another worldview.

Stories of success

Canberra Women in Business: This not for profit incorporated association supports women in business in the Canberra region. Formed in 1992 as the Chamber of Women in Business, Canberra Women in Business is an organisation created by women and run solely for women, to provide support and networking opportunities for businesswomen in the Canberra region. Canberra Women in Business fosters the confidence to establish and grow successful businesses.

Rowdy Digital: As Inspirational Lead Llewella Jacobs spoke about how she and colleagues specifically set up [Rowdy Digital](#) as a values-focused digital communication and marketing business. One of their commitments is to provide a free weekly appointment time to allow women from any sphere to come in to discuss ideas, concerns, strategies, approaches. This 'Open House' has been very successful in attracting interest by providing mentoring.

Lead, Mama, Lead: This rapidly-growing local initiative has grown out of the frustration of working mothers that they may be at risk of being overlooked in career development, promotion rounds and leadership opportunities. Employers may feel that reduced work time during/for child-rearing is limiting an employee's experience and potential, when often the exact opposite is true.

From participant feedback

We discussed a 'Longhouse' which offered a shared work-space/wellness centre/counselling space populated by mentors, made available through the donation of a public space or building, and funded through a network of small business users. Have women's forums every quarter with themes, speakers and an open mic. ... I am not sure if there any small business women on MACW but I would highly recommend having a generalist representative who is part of the growing community of "women who network" because I see very little connection between this group and government policy makers. I think they are an untapped or underutilised source of support for gender equity programmes or reform agendas.

We often aren't very loud (as so many don't want to rock the boat and we're too tired) - but we are the forgotten/neglected potential untapped in the workplace and falling out of structured work to find our own flexible paths in small businesses or volunteering or elsewhere.

Theme 5: Changing gendered occupations

Many male-dominated occupations are related to sciences or engineering, and require a 'scientific' approach to have the potential for impact. Remember many women have already worked very hard to create spaces in these men's worlds, so looking for role models can be inspirational. Never apologise for success. Every woman in a male-dominated industry is a change-maker.

The important thing in effecting change in these occupations is to be factual not emotional (as some storytelling can be). It is crucial to do the research about the workplace's specific issues, collect data, explain the data within legislative and ethical frameworks, and build solid arguments for change while providing effective mechanisms (e.g. recruitment and promotion practices). This approach provides evidence and opportunities to prioritise (either the simple-to-change or the most urgent).

Have the courage to initiate small steps of change, especially practical ones, because these can make a great difference to individual women's lives. Look for the enablers as well as the barriers. But don't be afraid to challenge the systemic issues that require major change. Often this requires changing workplace and gender-focused cultures at the same time, both bottom up and top down. Invite everyone to the table: for example, many men want to change things (for their partners, daughters, and friends) but don't know what or how. Avoid tokenism, but recognise that quotas may be necessary to effect faster change: under the present rate of change in 'meritocratic' systems, it will take more than a century (4 generations of women) before there is gender equality.

Shared thoughts

Women should not be defined as a different kind of men. Women should be confident to lead and do in ways that suit their nature, biology, physiology and strengths: they do not need to emulate a masculine approach to be successful. Maybe they do things differently in a specific occupation: this should be celebrated, not defended. Women also need to (really) support women and understand that they are part of a community (a 'tribe') with similar needs.

It is important to continue working to change ideas that jobs are related to 'masculine' or 'feminine' traits. Stereotyping of jobs is highly persistent, but we need to continue to challenge the status quo, starting in childcare centres and preschools, and fighting the stereotypes that persist during puberty in high schools. Role models must be strong and prevalent, and mentoring from people already in the male-dominated professions must be encouraged and supported.

While women dominate higher education as students, including at the highest levels of doctorates (a worldwide finding) and therefore should be expected to be flooding the employment market, these proportions are not reflected in workplaces overall. Real flexibility in working schedules is a requirement to address gendered issues (and will improve working contexts for society as a whole). By not engaging with even part-time roles effectively, many gendered occupations remain unattractive and impossible for many women.

Even though the majority of our leaders are expected to come through and be nurtured in universities, academia itself appears profoundly gendered, with significant under-representation of women in senior positions e.g. [Savigny study](#). Thus women academics, and women graduates in general, often experience a diminution of their aspirations after a few years in the workplace.

Every day there are little gender-biased actions (often invisible to others) that every woman has to endure in her workplace. These are cumulative in their impact on diminishing women's status, motivations achievements, outcomes and aspirations. Every woman has to uncover these actions, share their impact and envision change.

The reality is that some industries/careers/workplaces are not ready for change and the idea of gender equality is potentially still a battlefield rather than a natural evolution. For example, 65% of real estate agents are women but only 3% of these have ownership or decision-making roles in their industry.

Casualisation in many industries (e.g. university teaching) is actually targeting women or making it more likely that women will just be 'earning some money' instead of having a career. Sharing positive stories can support women and role-model effective change as we seek to find new ways. Structural and institutional change is required: policies must enshrine gender equality across all initiatives, especially (but not only) those related to parenting. But even something as simple as gender-equal school uniforms that do not restrict girls from making sporting or behavioural choices is still something that [we are fighting for in many jurisdictions/schools](#) in Australia.

It is also important to challenge notions (held by women employers as well as men) that women are somehow 'unreliable' because of child-bearing, parenting, family caring or part-time working choices, while men with the same kinds of responsibilities (e.g. young children, ageing parents) are not seen as having any limitations to career progression or capabilities.

Good decision-making can sometimes involve meshing individual needs with currently gendered occupations e.g. working in occupations that include natural flexibility, or are child-centred. But this should be by choice, not by a lack of choice. Being more inclusive of, and responsive to, gender diversity (including LGBTIQ) is important and starts at home, in schools and in workplaces. Stereotypes start in the home, in childcare, in schools: let's do all we can to break these down from day one of a child's life. Recognising that misogyny impacts the LGBTIQ world, and that trans-women face discrimination (e.g. diminished employment opportunities) is also important in gender equality.

Women often apologise for taking a feminist stance, even in gendered occupations, and feel guilty about not being a perfect feminist ('[Guilty Feminist](#)'). It is important that women stand up and continue to suggest ideas for changing inequitable workplaces without feeling apologetic or weak. This requires others (women and men) to be supportive of change, not of the status quo. Awareness-raising and communication is crucial, and underpins everything: as well as sharing stories in active groups, we need to take the stories to people who aren't already listening. Mass media, social media, education, training, peer support, and workplace culture need to happen simultaneously.

Stories of success

Science and engineering: Women often need to fight to insist on their rights e.g. Sudha Marthy: [becoming a woman engineer in India](#) - "[women not allowed](#)"; Students set up a [50/50 initiative](#) to change ratios of students and staff in science and engineering at ANU. Recognising the instigators who go out on a limb with these ideas (e.g. [Francesca Maclean](#)) with awards can draw organisational attention to the issue as well as the action for change.

Earth Sciences: Students are encouraged across genders but in the relevant professions/careers 90% are men. Women experience gender bias, but presenting objective data (not 'feelings') is crucial. It is challenging to bring about change but every success must be celebrated. At ANU a 'culture survey' provided basic data which could not be ignored. Strong leadership is required by men in such settings—it cannot all be left to women (because it will not happen). Parents' room (e.g. for breastfeeding), review of recruitment process, committees with teeth and/or access to leaders.

Policy shift: In Norway parental leave is extended to fathers ('paternity leave'). Recognition of both parents (including same-sex contexts) having a role in welcoming a baby and/or early childhood care is crucial. [ANU recently adopted such a policy](#) (after individuals had gained media coverage).

Understanding options: A multiple-birth mother recently realised that choosing jobs related to children provide good opportunities for maintaining her own parenting relationship.

Representation in politics: All women must support increased representation of women (and diversity in general) in politics. The ACT has shown that gender-equal representation, [even a female majority](#), in Government is possible. (But Bangladesh is an example of the importance of maintaining female representation at all levels of government [even if there are women government leaders](#), as good levels of [representation can decrease again](#).)

Vocational education: The active focus on 'tradeswomen' is very powerful in enabling and empowering young women to take up vocational education. Building networks (e.g. [Tradeswomen Australia](#)) and good reporting of [stories](#) is crucial in role-modelling.

Schools: Schools are key places for sending messages by having strong gender-neutral uniform policies. The [ACT Education Directorate's uniform policy](#) reminds schools of legislative requirements against discrimination, including gender/cultural considerations. Parents have a responsibility to remind schools about this, and can (eventually) effect change (e.g. [Canberra Girls Grammar](#)).

From participant feedback

Talk, discussions and planning will get us nowhere if we don't start acting on the ideas.

'Action makes change happen.'

Theme 6: Changing the system not the woman

There was a strong view among Forum participants that a successful community would change the focus from 'needing to know the system' to 'getting to know the woman'. Changes can/should occur in terms of people's attitudes, cultural norms, policy patterns and legislation. Changes that are good for addressing gender bias generally improve opportunities across the diversity spectrum. Remember that women are constantly being asked to make choices and take roles in systems not designed by them or for them. Also remember that everything we do—in workplaces, families, schools—is role modelling for our children of all gender: 'being different' must be accepted, norms can be challenged.

'It's policy' is not an excuse: policies were written and policies can be changed. For example, annual grant applications for funding may be good practice in terms of accountability, but may be placing an undue burden on the limited resources of frontline service providers for those women who are most vulnerable or in most immediate need. It is also often women who, as the part-time and short-term staff of community service providers, bear the brunt of funding shortfalls year to year. Could accountability still be served by a reviewed system that issued multi-year funding with annual reporting, and provided some stability of employment to those who give their lives to caring for others?

Challenges, difficulties and disabilities, no matter how hard, often make women brave and strong, not weak. We must be bold in asking what help is needed and be prepared to make that help available through legislation and policy changes, innovative strategies and a caring society that seeks gender equality and safe lives as a 'sooner rather than later' goal.

Shared thoughts

How could we design a flexible gender-equal system?

- Take a 'curiosity' stance towards each system: if it is currently not working to enhance gender equality, why not? To have a flexible system we need to understand workplaces in terms of their inflexibilities. What seems like it *cannot* change? Why not? Staff who deal with people fronting up for the first time should be trained in the skills to listen, care and help.
- Women are often in many 'systems' that do not appear to communicate well, requiring individuals to be constantly telling stories again and again. Traumatized women especially should expect trauma-informed care that does not require repetition of difficult and painful stories. A patient in hospital should have automatic support in relation to Centrelink documentation, for example.
- What needs and processes are specific to an industry/workplace? Are there any inherent gender inequalities in the way things are done now? Is this because of necessity or simply tradition?
- Remember, evolution of people is required alongside the evolution of systems. Bring people on board with change. Have the courage to have imperfect systems and relatively slow change because no one can get everything right all the time—share the common humanity of

vulnerability—but make sure change is happening! And don't let an imperfect system stay unchanged. Be prepared to have the courage to ask a difficult question, and apologise if it offends, rather than let the question remain unasked.

- Develop a 'safe person / safe space' target: every little change should lead more towards this goal, step by step.

The recruitment process is a good starting target for systemic change, with opportunities at each part of the process to increase the overall diversity of workplaces as new people are recruited.

- Is the method of recruitment appropriate for women as well as men, and does it have the capacity to attract a greater diversity of applicants overall? Watch out for processes that just attract the 'same kind' of person as already in the job.
- Think about the job description. Does the work need to be location-specific or is there an opportunity for genuine home-based work. If not, why not?
- Certain wording/jargon is known to imply/connect with a specific gender. Use the 'Gender Decoder' online tool <http://gender-decoder.katmatfield.com/> to identify gender-coded wording in job descriptions/advertisements.
- Are the skills and capabilities that the job actually requires today (not historically) described neutrally in the job ad? Consider whether the actual tasks and job requirements may be creating implicit or explicit gender barriers (e.g. nature of duties, work hours). If so, review whether these are actually integral to the position and how to address the needs of employees.
- How much travel is really involved, and is it all necessary? Is this amount of travel possible for primary carers?
- Are there flexible work options e.g. part-time, longer but fewer days in a working week?
- What are the job share opportunities? Does job share have to mean just two people at the same desk on different days?
- Being flexible means being innovative: be flexible in recruitment practices and seek people who understand flexibility.
- If the shortlist isn't 50/50 on gender, why not?
- Think about the timing and flexibility of the interview process. Is the timing family-friendly (between 10 am and 2 pm)?
- Is the selection panel (active questioners) gender-balanced? If not, could questions be alternated from different gender panel members?
- Are the interview questions really suited to all genders and diversities?

Although specifically aimed at universities and redressing the significant gender imbalance in senior positions in higher education, the Universities Australia [Best Practice Recruitment Guidelines](#) has many good and detailed ideas to consider.

Stories of success

[AECOM](#) (engineering company) – a woman leader brought a spotlight onto women's participation in the company and made significant changes: *"We embrace the diversity of every employee through an inclusive and accountable culture."*

[Lead, Mama, Lead](#) – an active and growing group of women who believe that *"the workplace needs to evolve to meet the needs of working families to earn a decent meaningful living, whilst also meeting the unpaid needs of taking care of family. The workplace needs to make space for the career aspirations of working mothers AND the caring aspirations of fathers."*

[Emergency services](#) – have taken direct action to [increase number of women employed](#).

From participant feedback

I also wanted to add that the discussions about changing the system not the woman made me think about the fact that a part of what makes women lose confidence in the workplace is when they feel that they have to apologise for not being able to work fulltime due to family commitments. If women/managers could re-focus on improving the system instead, and not apologising for things too much, things could improve and women might feel more resilient, accepted and strong enough to feel like an equally contributing member of the workforce and society.

There are a lot of focus groups, women's organisations and individuals hustling in the community. If MACW / OfW could provide a space for these groups to collaborate, meet and deliver outcomes to the broader community would be a positive action that delivers on these forums. Talk, discussions and planning will get us nowhere if we don't start acting on the ideas. 'Action makes change happen.'

○

Appendix 1: Organisational affiliations of registered participants

1. 1800RESPECT
2. A Gender Agenda Inc (AGA)
3. ACT Council of Social Service
4. ACT Government
5. ACT Health
6. ADACAS
7. ANU
8. APS
9. Australian National University (multiple)
10. Beryl Women's Refuge
11. Canberra Women in Business
12. CMTEDD
13. COTA ACT
14. Daryl Jackson Alastair Swayn Architects
15. Department of Defence (multiple)
16. Doris Women's Refuge Inc.
17. DVCS
18. Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate
19. Eternal Springs
20. Harmony Alliance
21. Health Care Consumers' Association
22. I Respect Initiative
23. IGPA
24. Integrated Women's Network
25. Justice and Community Safety Directorate
26. Karinya House for Mothers and Babies
27. MACW
28. MoAD at Old Parliament House
29. Office of the Coordinator-General for Family Safety (multiple)
30. Project Coordination P/L
31. PWC
32. REIACT
33. Relationships Australia Incorporated
34. Skills Canberra, ACT Government (multiple)
35. Student Wellbeing, Education
36. Toora Women Inc
37. Transport Canberra and City Services, ACT Government
38. University of the Sunshine Coast (Keynote Speaker)
39. WCHM
40. Women with Disabilities ACT
41. WWDACT
42. Youth Advisory Council
43. YWCA Canberra

Plus 14 registrants with no affiliations recorded.