

The fight for gender equality in the workplace is far from over

[LEADERSHIP \(/TOPICS/LEADERSHIP\)](#)

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Sheryl Sandberg joined Facebook as COO in 2008 and four years later became the first woman on its board of directors.

By SUSAN MULDOWNNEY

(<http://intheblack.com/contributors/Susan-Muldowney>)

As long as men continue to make key business decisions at football games, on the golf course or even in the men's room, Avril Henry has her work cut out trying to redress workplace gender discrimination.

When Avril Henry FCPA selected subjects for her final two years of high school in the early 1970s, she was called to the principal's office for a dressing-down. Maths and economics? What was she thinking? Henry told him of her plans to study accounting and economics at the University of Cape Town.

His response was a mix of incredulity and contempt: “That’s the problem with girls like you,” he said. “You don’t know your place.”

Henry certainly knows her place today, and it is in helping organisations achieve the very thing that her former principal could not accept: gender equality. The managing director of Sydney-based consultants Avril Henry and Associates, Henry is a passionate advocate of gender, generational and cultural diversity in the workplace.

Even before forming her own business in 2003, she helped change the game for Australian women in the workplace. While in a senior finance role at Westpac, Henry developed a successful business plan for six weeks’ paid maternity leave. In 1995, the bank became the first private sector organisation in Australia to introduce the entitlement.

Henry acknowledges that attitudes towards women in the workplace have changed for the better and diversity is now a notable topic of boardroom conversations, but she believes we have not come far enough.

“I can tell you one thing, there are plenty of people, including those who profess to be champions of women in the workplace, who do a lot of talking and not a lot of doing,” she says.

Women at work

Henry’s new book, *Leadership Revelations III – How We Achieve the Gender Tipping Point*, brings together the workplace experiences of 91 women in leadership roles from 10 countries to examine how we convert the rhetoric into results. Experiences of gender discrimination are a key feature of the book.

Wendy McCarthy, businesswoman, company director and co-founder of the Women’s Electoral Lobby in New South Wales, tells of being overlooked for a job because she didn’t go to the pub on Friday nights. Kayla Le Cornu, head of operations at GrainCorp, recalls attending an industry awards night and being asked why she wasn’t at home looking after her children.

"In the future, there will be no female leaders. There will just be leaders." Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook

Former Queensland premier, Anna Bligh, now the chief executive of YWCA NSW, recounts the media frenzy about the red shoes she wore while delivering a A\$40 billion state budget.

“People will always be curious about their leaders and how they look, and I don’t mind it; however, it is not said about men,” she notes.

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Henry's book also explores myths about women in the workplace. Joan Wei, managing director of Yuanlong Investment in China, cites the curious belief there that women "have longer hair but less knowledge". Henry outlines a way we can achieve the gender tipping point where equality represents business as usual.

Pace of change

Almost 10 per cent of the women in Henry's book started work at a time when they were excluded from several industries and occupations. Their pay was legally less than men's and, depending on their profession, they were forced to resign when they married.

While legal barriers to equality have all but gone and life is indisputably better for women, workplace discrimination persists. Females remain under-represented in senior roles and board positions despite women outnumbering men in global university attendance and graduation rates by a ratio of 100 to 93. In OECD nations, they are still paid 17.3 per cent less than their male counterparts.

"When people say things for women are getting better, I say yes they are; however the pace of change is not fast enough," says Henry.

"I actually think some of the discrimination that women experience has become more covert. In some ways we have become cleverer about things we do to keep women out of senior leadership roles."

Henry suggests covert discrimination includes not sharing information with women or conducting business in places where they are less likely to be.

"I don't care if it offends people when I say I think a lot of business decisions happen at the rugby, at the urinal and on the golf course," she declares. "It's one of the best ways that we exclude women."

Barriers from both sides

Inequality is not merely a result of men behaving badly. Henry believes women also hold themselves back in the workplace.

“I absolutely believe that the way we achieve the gender tipping point is not only for men to change the way they view and treat women, and how they support women through sponsorship rather than mentoring, but women need to change the way they see themselves. They need to have greater self-belief.”

Most women interviewed for her book agree. Ann Sherry, chief executive of Carnival Australia, believes women tend to tolerate poor management or peer behaviour rather than raising concerns. Sydney Opera House CEO Louise Herron says women don’t adequately “put ourselves out there” for promotion.

Kelley Platt, general manager of Western Star Trucks, believes that women don’t back themselves.

“Women only seek jobs where they know 90 per cent of what’s needed to do the job, whereas men will apply and take jobs if they can spell the job titles,” she says.



Avril Henry

Self-imposed obstacles may exist, but Henry believes the greatest barrier to equality in the workplace is that leaders value conformity over diversity.

“It’s not just diversity of gender and age – it’s the diversity of thought and the way people do things. If you keep doing what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you’ve always had,” she says.

“To talk about progressing women while we continue to keep in place the same systems, policies, methodologies and ways of thinking, we are not actually going to change anything.”

Change can be good for business. Henry cites the private sector’s introduction of paid maternity leave, a move in which she was instrumental.

“Don’t ever think that the board or the executive team of Westpac did it because it was good for women or because they liked women, although that’s what we said on radio and on TV,” she maintains. “It was because I could prove that it was economically far more productive and financially advantageous for women to return to work than to lose them.”

Changing the status quo is never easy. Bold diversity strategies can appear impressive from the outside but unless they become part of business culture, Henry says they won’t come to much.

She believes incremental change is the answer and recommends starting with three initiatives: genuine equal pay, parity in the number of men and women in leadership development programs, and merit-based selection.

“If you wanted to be really bold, you would do blind recruitment,” she says.

“I’ve introduced this in a number of organisations and in one it was so successful that they decided not to do it anymore because too many women were coming through. You either want to build a strong pipeline, or be honest and say you want to improve but not by too much.”

Avril Henry's Three steps to gender equality

1. Genuine equal pay
2. Parity in the number of men and women in leadership development programs
3. Merit-based selection

"I don't care if it offends people when I say I think a lot of business decisions happen at the rugby, at the urinal and on the golf course. It's one of the best ways that we exclude women." Avril Henry

Battle for equality

When former army chief Lieutenant General David Morrison set out to change attitudes about women in the Australian Defence Force, Avril Henry helped him all the way.

In 2013 Henry was appointed as an adviser to the army chief on gender diversity, values and cultural reform. “It’s been one of the most satisfying experiences of my career,” she says.

“It’s not just the ability to have an influence on someone like David Morrison and how he views the world, and transforming a culture that goes back so far, but it’s also working with people at the general brigadier and the colonel level, whom I continue to work with one-on-one.

"The pace of change is not fast enough." Avril Henry

“My approach has been to ask how I can help to change things to improve them. Changes have got to improve culture, work environment and the quality of collaborative leadership.”

A key change has been the level of tolerance of gender discrimination in the army. In a video uploaded to YouTube in 2013, Morrison issued a warning to his troops. There’s “no place” in the army for members who “exploit and demean” their colleagues, he said, and those who don’t agree should “get out”.

Henry believes other leaders can learn from Morrison’s powerful speech. “He was talking about the one thing that we avoid, which is behaviour,” she says.

“It’s very easy to talk about systems and to talk about policies because there is no behavioural component to that.

But what Morrison was challenging was people’s behaviour and the impact of that. I’ve never heard any leader of an organisation actually say: If you don’t like the culture I’m trying to create, you can get out.”

How men can create gender equality

“Publish targets in the organisation’s annual report and have a percentage of the senior leaders’ remuneration tied to the recruitment, development, promotion and retention of women and this way we’ll see change.” Helen Lynch, Chief Executive Women

“View employee diversity through an organisation capability lens (rather than a compliance risk lens) and be curious about women’s experience of the workplace.” Fiona Krautil, University of Sydney

“Sponsor an up-and-coming female. Introduce her to people that could assist her career and share your ideas.” Kayla Le Cornu, GrainCorp

“Maintain principles of meritocracy. In my view, swinging to the opposite extreme of having quotas

or varying standards of performance does not help women in leadership positions because it creates a perception of being tokens and neither males nor females appreciate that.” Lay Lim Teo, Accenture, Singapore

What women can do to create gender equality

“Have confidence. Raise your hand and say, ‘I’m ready for this role.’” Umran Beba, PepsiCo Asia, Middle East and Africa

“Take the time to support/mentor some younger women. Create an environment where diverse individuals, including women, feel comfortable and supported in their choices.” Kate McKenzie, Telstra

“Bring the power of femininity into the workplace – compassion, fun, caring, collaboration and purpose. Show it can be done differently.” Deanne Stewart, MetLife

“Ask for what you want – you might be surprised.” Nereida Perez, Ingersoll Rand, US

Taken from Avril Henry’s Leadership Revelations III – How We Achieve the Gender Tipping Point (A\$55, Avril Henry & Associates)

[This article is from the October issue of INTHEBLACK \(/magazines/2015-10-october\)](#)

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Avril Henry was named one of Australia's AFR 100 Women of Influence 2015, and is one of the 10 most influential women in the diversity space.

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- ☐ An ability to quickly adapt to change
 - ☐ Long-term strategic thinking
 - ☐ Commitment to promises
 - ☐ Building a top-level team
-

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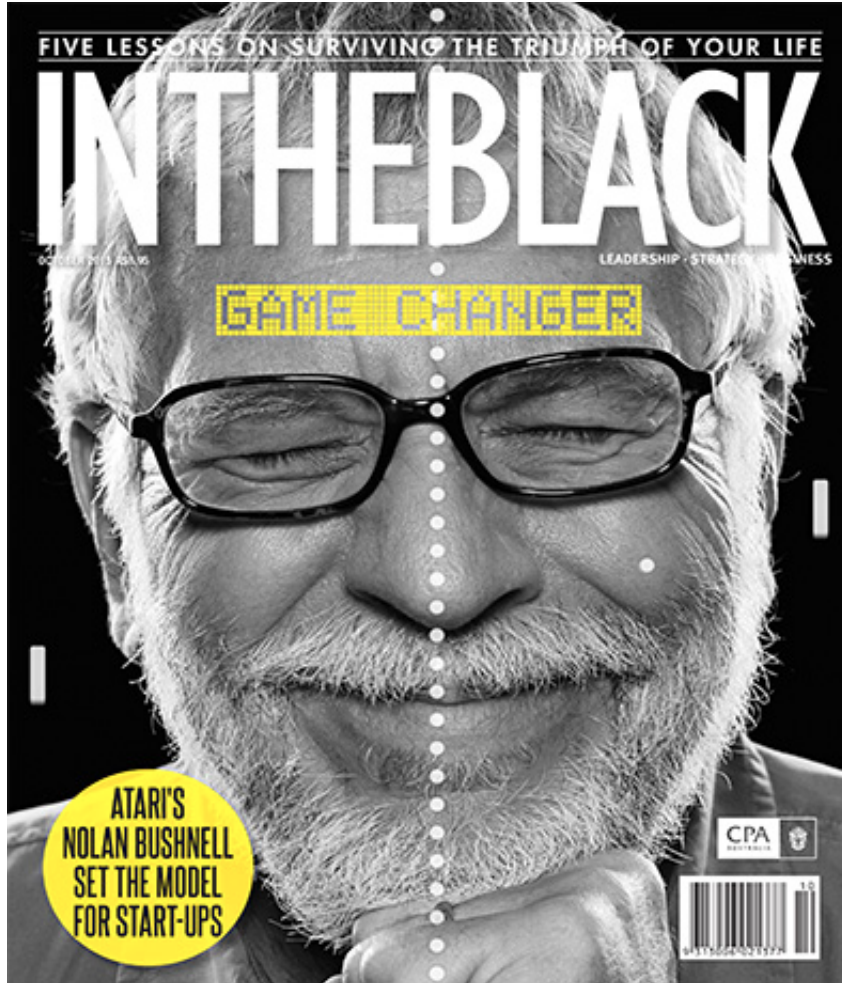
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