

# Concerns that gender is still an issue

Reflecting on this year's UNIFEM theme for International Women's Day 'Women in Decision-Making', Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward said she is concerned that gender equality in the workplace is still an issue despite sex discrimination legislation being in place in Australia for over 21 years.

"Each year we pause on International Women's Day (8 March) to reflect on the achievements of women, consider their needs and contemplate ways to tackle the continued discrimination and bias that women and children continue to suffer," Commissioner Goward said.

"While some women and organisations can hold their head up high, it dumbfounds me that in this day and age we are still calling for greater numbers of women to be appointed to senior leadership roles, whether in business or politics - despite the clear social and economic benefits and despite women being eminently qualified."

A January 2006 Income and Wealth report by the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) showed that educated young women are getting more job opportunities than ever before, while other women are heading back to work in larger numbers. But this hasn't translated into women being appointed to powerful, decision-making roles.

Ex-federal Cabinet Minister Kay Patterson's recent call for more women to be appointed to the ministry highlights the lack of women in senior political roles (only 35.5 percent of senators are women<sup>1</sup> and a mere 24.7 percent of MPs in the House of Representatives are women<sup>2</sup>).

The story is the same in the corporate sector. Despite their significant presence in the workforce, women hold only 10.2 percent of executive management positions - compared with 15.7 percent in the USA and 14 percent in Canada. Women hold only 8.6 percent of board directorships - compared with 13.6 percent in the USA and 11.2 percent in Canada.<sup>3</sup>

"I would have thought it was a no-brainer - if you're the best qualified person for the job you should be promoted to the position, regardless of your sex," Ms Goward said.

"But these statistics indicate that gender is still an issue in senior level appointments."



It is no different in the judiciary. In the Federal Court, state or territory supreme courts and court of appeals there are only 33 women out of a total of 202 judges<sup>4</sup>. Only 5 of the 42 current Federal Court judges are women.<sup>5</sup>

"Young women start out their working lives with high expectations. They are well educated for anticipated careers and initially gain valuable skills in the workplace. But this is not translating into leadership and management roles based on merit or performance."

"Australia is simply wasting its investment in women's education and skill development by not rewarding women for their contribution.

"Gender equality is crucial for two reasons - it is a fundamental human right; and an essential requirement for successful economic and social development. We cannot continue to ignore these basic truisms if our nation is to achieve its full potential."

## ENDNOTES

1. Parliamentary Handbook - [http://www.aph.gov.au/library/handbook/historical/women\\_number.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/library/handbook/historical/women_number.htm) (as at 1 July 2005).
2. Composition of Australian Parliaments by Party and Gender <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/intguide/pol/polwomen.htm> (as at 9 October 2004).
3. EOWA Women in Leadership Census 2004 for top 200 companies listed on the ASX [http://www.eowa.gov.au/Information\\_Centres/Media\\_Centre/Media\\_Releases/2004\\_Australian\\_Women\\_In\\_Leadership\\_Census.asp](http://www.eowa.gov.au/Information_Centres/Media_Centre/Media_Releases/2004_Australian_Women_In_Leadership_Census.asp)
4. Speech by Nicola Roxon 7 Sept 2005 to Women's Lawyers Association <http://www.womenlawyers.org.au/speeches.htm>
5. Federal Court of Australia website accessed 24/01/2006