



OPINION PIECE

Published in The Canberra Times

January 13, 2023

2022 was quite a year for gender equality, but deeper changes will take steely resolve.

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Australia has had a history of fits and starts when it comes to gender equality. Things jump ahead, and then remain little-changed for years. 2022 was one of the years things jumped ahead, beginning with the election in May.

In its first six months, the Albanese government

- implemented in full the Respect@Work recommendations
- legislated 10 days domestic violence leave
- set out plans to extend paid parental leave
- pushed for and won better pay for aged care workers
- made pay equity an objective of the Fair Work Act

The changes to the Fair Work Act also imposed a positive duty on employers to prevent sex discrimination, victimisation and sexual harassment.

It is sorely needed. The Human Rights Commission's latest survey shows sexual harassment remains systemic, with half of all incidents repeated; and of those, half ongoing for more than a year.

Steps backward, then steps forward In 2015 Prime Minister Tony Abbott abolished the Fair Work Commission's pay equity unit. Albanese's amendments to the Fair Work Act bring it back.

The re-established unit will undertake the complex research needed to adjudicate equal pay cases and conduct pay-equity audits in order to close the gender pay gap, which stubbornly sits at 22.8%, not too far below the 28.6% it was when the Workplace Gender Equality Agency began measuring it in 2013.

Also returning is financial support for Working Women's Centres, not-for-profit community organisations that support women employees or women who wish to work set up in the 1970s and progressively defunded by governments of both persuasions from the 1990s.

And the government has reinstated a requirement for 80% of foreign aid programs to effectively address gender issues, and required programs worth more than A\$3 million include a gender equality objective. Gender responsive budgeting on the way back
Gender responsive budgeting is an accounting of the gender impact of budget decisions that happens early enough to help shape those decisions.

Throughout the 1990s the process was less and less used. It moved in and out of favour in subsequent years, becoming more of a showcase of what the budget was doing for women, before it was axed in the first Abbott-Hockey budget in 2014.

The statement returned in 2021 under Treasurer Josh Frydenberg, but without the process of policy scrutiny that originally underpinned it. Treasurer Jim Chalmers and Finance Minister and Women's Minister Katy Gallagher expanded it in the October mini-budget promising to put gender equality "at the heart of policy and decision making", but it has yet to be embedded throughout the budget process.

There's much the government could still do, including taking inspiration from state gender responsive budgeting systems, including those in Victoria.

National strategy imminent Labor has promised a National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality, with a launch expected as soon as the first half of 2023.

It's a big undertaking. It will need to fit in with the second ten-year National Plan to End Violence against Women and Children developed under the Coalition and launched this year by Labor, and the National Women's Health Strategy, now bolstered by a women's health advisory council in an attempt to tackle unconscious bias in the health sector.

It would be wise not to rush the national strategy and to conduct a public campaign to ensure Australians see themselves in the strategy and see what it could do.

Almost all issues are women's issues. If the government is serious about gender equality, it would consider rearranging the Stage 3 tax cuts so the beneficiaries are not – as expected by the Parliamentary Budget Office – two-thirds male.

It should also boost and change the nature of Commonwealth Rent Assistance, given that single women who rent are at the greatest risk of poverty in retirement and the fastest-growing group of homeless Australians. And it is beyond time to address the gender gap in superannuation, given that women retire with 28% less super than men.

Creating momentum on gender equality without generating a backlash will require taking the public along and staying the course – something the Albanese government seems prepared to do, talking about a multiple-term agenda.

The active crossbench will help, as will a disciplined Labor team.