

Promoting and Improving Gender Equality in the Workplace: Australia's Public Sector Gender Equality Policy Framework

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Abstract

- Australia's political system is a hybrid model that combines the federal system of the United States and the parliamentary sovereignty-based cabinet system of the United Kingdom. Consequently, the federal government holds only the powers enumerated in the Constitution, while residual powers are vested in the state governments.
- Laws, systems, and terminology are often not unified across states, requiring cooperation between federal and state governments in areas under state jurisdiction, such as law enforcement. Moreover, the terminology and policies related to gender equality may differ across states and territories.
- This study aims to describe the evolution and current state of Australia's gender equality policy framework and, based on this analysis, propose policy recommendations that can be utilized in establishing future gender equality policies in Korea.

1) This study was developed by Monash University, Australia, based on the results of a research project commissioned by the Korean Women's Development Institute in 2024, under the theme "Advancing Gender Equality in the Australian Public Sector: Policies and Practices".

The Development of Australia's Gender Equality Policy Framework

- Australia has a comprehensive public sector gender equality policy framework, with many different policies or legislative instruments operating at all levels of the Australian government. Australia has three levels of government, each with varying or shared roles and responsibilities, that work together to provide governmental services in Australia (PEO 2022). The three levels of the Australian government are:
 - Federal government: makes laws for the whole of Australia
 - State government: there are six state and two territory governments that make laws for their state or territory¹⁾
 - Local government: there are over 500 local councils who make laws for their local region.
- Historically, the Federal government has led Australia's gender equality progress and reform. The Affirmative Action (Equal Employment Opportunity for Women) Act 1986 formed part of the Federal government's suite of workplace anti-discrimination legislation (renamed the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Act 1999 (the EOWW)). The Australian Federal government's commitment to modernise the EOWW and equal opportunity policies in the workplace was delivered through the Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 (the Act).
- The Act is the Federal Government's key legislative tool to increase gender equality in the Australian workforce by supporting and improving women's participation in the workplace. The Act includes an obligation that all employers who have 100 or more employees are required to annually report against six different indicators of gender equality. In 2022, the Act was extended to include Federal government public sector organisations (APS organisations)²⁾
- The amendment to the Act to include APS organisations was initiated by the Realising the benefits for all - APS Gender Equality Strategy 2021-2026 (the Strategy). The Strategy, introduced in 2021, is the Federal Government's overarching policy framework aimed to drive change and realise gender equality in APS organisations.³⁾

1) The six states include New South Wales, Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia. The two territories include the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory.

2) Previously, this legislation only applied to private sector organisations.

3) The Strategy builds upon the 2016 strategy, Balancing the Future: The Australian Public Service Gender Equality Strategy 2016-2019, that was introduced to support Australia's G20 commitment to reduce the workforce gender gap by 25 per cent by 2025 (G20 Research Group 2014).

- At the state government level, each state and territory works with their own government departments and agencies to improve gender equality in their workplaces. This is enacted through initiatives such as increasing representation of women in leadership roles, increasing paid parental leave entitlements, and enhancing sexual harassment response and prevention.⁴⁾ The Victorian State government has one of the most progressive public sector gender equality frameworks in Australia, and as such, will be discussed in detail in Workplace Gender Equality Policies in Practice: Implementation of Victoria's Gender Equality Legislation and Strategies, and Implications for South Korea.
- The next section will briefly discuss the significant aspects of the Federal government's public sector gender equality framework.

Current Status

- The Federal government's public sector gender equality framework consists of the following main components: the Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 (the Act), the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (the WGEA), and the APS Gender Equality Strategy 2021-2026 (the Strategy).

■ Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012 (the Act)

- The main object of the Act is to promote gender equality by targeting areas of significant gender inequities, removing barriers to full and equal participation for women in the workplace, and achieving pay parity for women in comparison to men. This includes ensuring consultation occurs between employers and employees on issues relating to gender inequality in their workplace.
- Since 2022, the act requires APS organisations that employ 100 or more employees in Australia to report annually to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) on the following six gender equality indicators:
 - Gender numbers and makeup of the workforce
 - Gender numbers and makeup of governing bodies of relevant employers
 - Equal remuneration between women and men
 - Access to employment terms and practices relating to flexible working arrangements for all employees
 - Consultation with employees on gender inequality issues in the workplace
 - Incidents of harassment on the ground of sex or discrimination

4) For examples, see NSW government's Public Service Commission and Queensland government's Inclusion and diversity strategy 2021-2025

- To promote compliance and accountability, the annual reports are publicly available to any person and the information provided by employers and published in the annual reports may also be used in public documentation to demonstrate an employer's progress in achieving gender equality with respect to the remuneration of their workforce.

■ Workplace Gender Equality Agency (the WGEA)

- The WGEA is a key compliance mechanism established under the Act with the main purpose of working with employers to help them understand and follow the reporting requirements under the Act. This includes advising employers in promoting and improving gender equality in their workplace. Further, the WGEA is required to establish and coordinate research and programs that have the purpose of promoting and improving gender equality in Australian workplaces. The WGEA aims to ensure all relevant organisations are meeting their obligations under the Act.
- In late 2023, APS organisations reported to the WGEA for the first time. A total of 116 employers provided reports to the WGEA (incorporating information from 1 January to 31 December 2022) that included data relating to 338,951 employees. The WGEA publicly reported the data from APS organisations in the Commonwealth Public Sector Gender Scorecard: Key Employer Results From 2022 (the Gender Scorecard). The Gender Scorecard is an Australian-first report that provides APS Organisations with a baseline understanding of gender inequality issues still prevalent in the Federal government public sector.
- The Gender Scorecard is a public analysis of APS Organisations' performance against each of the six gender equality indicators, examining the gender composition, pay parity, and relevant actions these employers are taking to progress gender equality in their organisation. It demonstrates that gender equality initiatives in APS Organisations are making significant strides in promoting gender equality in the Federal government public sector, with APS Organisations demonstrating a substantially lower gender pay gap than private sector organisations, a gender balance in all management levels, and APS Organisations are leading the way on flexible work initiatives.
- The WGEA has also developed tools to assist reporting organisations under the Act to take proactive steps to progress gender equality in their workplace. The WGEA Gender Pay Gap Analysis Guide helps employers to undertake a pay parity and gender composition analysis. This analysis is a critical first step for employers seeking to reduce their gender pay gap as it helps to locate key areas of gender and remuneration imbalance. The WGEA Action Planning Tool identifies specific actions that employers can take to improve the status of gender equality in their workplace. The Action Planning Tool consists of a questionnaire completed by the employer that provides a report of evidence-informed actions relevant to their workforce that they can implement. This report enables employers to develop their gender equality action plans and make data-driven decisions about the actions and practices they can implement to effectively improve gender equality outcomes in their organisation.

■ Realising the benefits for all - the APS Gender Equality Strategy 2021-2026 (the Strategy)

- The Strategy is intended to outline a pathway to achieving gender equality in the Federal government public sector by embedding inclusive and respectful workplace practices that provide people of all gender equal opportunity and full participation in the workforce. To achieve its aim, the Strategy has three key objectives:

- Objective 1: Ensure leaders at all levels hold themselves and others to account for demonstrating gender equitable and inclusive behaviour.
- Objective 2: Shift gender norms, normalise respectful workplaces and access to flexibility for all.
- Objective 3: Embed gender equality and inclusion in all areas of public sector work.

- To achieve these objectives, the Strategy outlines six action areas:

1. Leadership and accountability: Gender equality is encouraged and progressed through both individual and collective action.
2. Respectful workplaces: Workplaces empower their people and prioritise their people's health and wellbeing.
3. Shifting gender stereotypes: All people are supported to best manage their career and lifestyle choices.
4. Flexible ways of working: All people are given more choice and ability to enhance their workplace contributions.
5. Gender data: Gender equality efforts are informed by the evidence base and progress and outcomes are clearly defined and observable.
6. Federal government's external influence: Utilising the government's significant influence in this space to champion gender equality in all workplaces and everyday work in Australia.

- The Strategy provides detailed information under each action area covering key actions that organisations should undertake, tips for organisations and indicators of success for the relevant action area. The Strategy sets out a flexible roadmap to enable agencies to consider their baseline levels of gender inequality in their organisation to inform how they should implement actions under the Strategy and best improve gender equality outcomes in the Australian public sector.

Implications/Recommendations for South Korea

- Gender inequality is a global issue that takes different forms across nations. Australia has made significant progress, but there is still much work that needs to be done. According to the Gender Scorecard, Australia has yet to meet its target of gender representation parity in the public sector, but the Gender Scorecard serves as a baseline understanding of gender inequality issues within the public sector, with the purpose of providing targeted areas for focus and reform. Mandated and public reporting will ensure Australian public sector entities are accountable and required to continue making progress towards gender equality targets.
- In comparison, Korea established the third Plan for Enhancement of Women's Representativeness in the Public Sector 2023 - 2027 in May 2023. However, the target itself is quite low, and gender representation in the public sector remains insufficient (Moon, 2023; Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, 2023). This is particularly the case for higher-level positions in comparison to positions in middle-management roles.
- Korea's public sector gender equality policies are merely recommendations, with no legislative basis and no specified rewards for achieving gender equality or penalties for failing to meet the targets (Cho & Park, 2018). In contrast, Australia's current public sector gender equality policies are created and enforced through the Act and the WGEA. Korea may similarly benefit from implementing relevant strategies and policies through legal and formal mechanisms.
- More accountability and demonstrated effort from the leadership team in the public sector are needed to show how they are actively addressing gender inequality within their organisations, including through the implementation of broader gender-inclusive policies, rather than merely focusing on meeting target numbers.

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● Short Bio

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