**SWiM Inspiring Stories**

**Workplace gender equality - Where to from here?**

The Honourable Mary Wooldridge, Director, Workplace Gender Equality Agency

Tuesday 16 August 2022

**TRANSCRIPT**

**NATALIE HANNAN:** I'd like to start first, by acknowledging that I am hosting the

Inspiring Stories Webinar on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations.

Custodians and leaders of this incredible land and waters for thousands and thousands of years. I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge and pay all of our respects to their

elders past and present. I welcome all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders here with us today. I want to also acknowledge all of our First Nations colleagues for their important

contribution to our academy.

For those who don't know me, I am Professor Natalie Hannan, the Associate Dean in

Diversity and Inclusion for the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences.

I resolutely believe we all have the right to a safe, fair and equitable workplace, where an individual's gender, sexuality, sexual orientation, background, race, disability or mental health issues, should not be a barrier to reaching their full potential. And our faculty is

certainly, rich in impressive and accomplished women breaking barriers and challenging the status quo. Yet there is still under representation at the senior and leadership levels within our faculty. And while we've certainly moved forward to enhancing representation, there still remains a lot of important work to do around this issue and broader diversity and inclusion.

It is my hope that by having these conversations, that challenge our systems and inspire leadership from within and enhance our support of talented people in MDHS. This will allow all people to reach their full potential and will highlight the various barriers our staff face.

And so today, I'm really, really pleased to be introducing the Honorable Mary Wooldridge.

Mary has a Commerce Honours degree from the University of Melbourne and a Master of Business Administration from the Harvard Business School. Prior to entering parliament,

Mary had several senior roles, including CEO of the Foundation for Young Australians, Manager at Mackenzie and Senior Advisor to the Federal Industry Minister. Mary is an experienced leader in the non-for-profit, public and corporate sectors and is currently director

of the Federal Government's Workplace Gender Equality Agency. For 13 years, Mary was a senior leader within the Victorian Liberal Party, serving as leader in the legislative council,

as Shadow Minister for health, jobs, innovation and trade, training skills and higher education, and as a Minister for mental health community services and women's affairs.

These portfolios saw Mary at the forefront of the coalition government's major overhaul of the State Child Protection and Out-of-Home Care system, securing a full rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme in Victoria.

Just incredible.

It is clear throughout her career, Mary has led policy reform, and she's certainly one of Australia's most significant leaders in driving gender equality in Australian workplaces.

So Mary, thank you so much for taking the time to join me today in what I think is a really

important conversation.

MARY WOOLDRIDGE: Thanks very much Natalie. And thanks very much for the invitation

and the opportunity to speak with you and everyone today. And I too would like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional owners who've loved the many

lands we meet from today and I'm sure right across different locations across the state and I'm on Wurundjeri land as well.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** I'd like to start the conversation asking about your journey so far?

Perhaps from even your childhood or your time at the university through to now as Director of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency.

**MARY WOOLDRIDGE:** While I grew up in a household that was very committed to public service and engaged in, you know, discussions and debates and thinking about policy,

a really critical time for me was actually when I was 16. I was an exchange student to Canada for a year after year 11 through the Rotary Club of Melbourne. And I stayed with a

family who the father was the mayor of the local community. And I really grew to understand how community activism occurs, how elected representatives, you know, act and behave and make a very significant difference for the community that they represent. And I came back very motivated about public life, about public policy and about community activism and the power of a movement. And I suppose that in many ways shaped a lot of the things

that I did subsequently. Loved my time at Melbourne Uni. I was very, very pleased

to get a Commerce Degree with Honours and, you know, the opportunity to be active and involved. And I was elected on the SRC and in all sorts of different ways. In fact, it was quite

a time at Melbourne Uni because Richard Marles, the current Defense Minister, was President of the Student Union. The year that I was elected onto the SRC and many elected representatives were involved in student politics and the student union at that time, including Tony Smith, Sophie Mirabella, Nicola Roxon, Greg Hunt. There was a whole cohort. Obviously a very strong time for what was happening at Melbourne Uni and what happened subsequently. So, my career since university days has always been one where I've developed a range of general, strategic skills. I worked in consulting, I ran a nonprofit, I've worked in government. I've had a wide variety of expertise. Always seeking to use those broad, strategic skills to apply in different contexts. And I suppose part of that was combination of the opportunity to be elected to the State Parliament and to use that passion and expertise as a Minister. My passion has always been social policy in its broadest sense. I think these things are worth doing if you can help plan and articulate a vision for change and opportunity to improve people's lives. And then try to implement that as a Minister across, really the social portfolios ranging from, you know, child protection, disability, youth justice, mental health, drug and alcohol. I suppose the perspective is these things are in many ways, all connected for families. And try and not have isolated policies, but things that reflect a joined up approach to help families, to really support them to often get back on their feet, to drive change, to create a safe environment and to give children opportunities for the future.

Obviously, the role of women in that context has always been very prominent and important. And actually when I left parliament, I took some time off just to really think about what's next.

But what I decided was really important is I still love the policy thinking and the opportunities for reform to drive change through, you know, help make a contribution to improving people's lives.

And this role, has been just perfect because it works with employers to both understand the

issues and to drive change. But has that broader perspective in terms of policy and advocacy in terms of, you know, working together to reach an outcome that we need to see

for the benefit of both men, women, families, all people in our community. Equality is fundamental to opportunities in work, but in family life and in community life as well.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** With your background in advocacy, we're lucky that you'll

be in this role as Director at a particularly important time, when there's a lot of change going on at the moment. I'm really excited that you're there and that you're having this

conversation with me today.

In thinking of your journey, through all the many roles and also in politics, I can't imagine there were many women around you as you've navigated through this. How did you navigate that time in male dominated environments?

**MARY WOOLDRIDGE:** I have worked in a lot of male dominated environments. I think early on, I tried to be like a man, you know, to be honest. And I think, you know, I think it's good now we're having a debate that we don't need to fix the individuals. We need to sit and fix the system and the culture and the environment. But I think, you know, earlier on in my career, it was very much, you know, how do I fit in? How do I try and be like them? It took a while to come to the realisation that I needed to be me, and where that was different, that was good and hopefully useful and contributing. You know, some areas were common, and some areas weren't. You suffered a lot or experienced what's now called the Imposter Syndrome. That idea that if I stand out I'm gonna be found out first in terms of the opportunities, then if I stand out, that will be to my detriment.

I think times have changed. It's an opportunity and we're actually celebrating the differences rather than trying to hide them. And so, you know, it's great that the world's changed.

And you know, what I realised is, some of my strengths are because I'm a woman, some of are just because they're strengths. That's the way I think or behave. In politics you have to be yourself because people see through you. And back to that community side of things, it really taught me that, you know, you be yourself, you be very honest and genuine and act with the integrity that you hold and people will respect you for that rather than trying to be

something that you're not.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** I think authentic leadership is pivotal and we have to remember it.

I think particularly in the roles that you've been in. I don't think you could be in there if they weren't part of your values and very close to your heart.

We're talking about the times and we've had a really challenging two plus years now with the pandemic. I was really interested in the piece that you put out, the fourth edition of *She's*

*Price(d)less: the economic impact of the gender pay gap* [report](https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/fourth-edition-of-the-shes-pricedless-report-released) recently where you've demonstrated that although there has been no real change in the pay gap between 2017 and 2020, that that's not necessarily the real story, is it? Do you think we've truly seen

the impact of the pandemic on gender equality?

If we look at the data, has it stalled our progress?

**MARY WOOLDRIDGE:** I think it's had some positives and negatives. I try and be someone

who's a bit glass-half-full in terms of the opportunities. Because, where I think there's a massive opportunity is flexibility. Flexibility isn't just working from home although that can be part of it. It's flexibility in the way we work and that's been driven by the pandemic 'cause we had to, it was forced upon us. We're now in a moment where if we can capture the benefits of being able to work flexibly, it actually opens up the opportunities for women, parents, people with caring responsibilities and different, you know, things that challenge

their ability to work in what has been traditional, full time in the office- type environments.

We have to be very intentional about how we manage that. We can't just, you know, slip into or continue what we've done because I think, you know, some people will return to the office, some of the past behaviors that have, you know, valued that presenteeism will return.

So we have to be intentional about how we plan to return to work in terms of that being flexible. It is a massive opportunity for more people to be able to participate in a way that works for them in their personal context to fit that work/life blend much more effectively together is a massive opportunity.

I think we can do that because people who would've never worked flexibly before have been forced to 'cause of COVID. And you know, that includes

some very senior people within all employers. So that's where the massive opportunity is. There was no doubt there was a massive pressure, particularly on women, you know, and with families managing homeschooling in addition to jobs and you know, the sort of double burden as it's been described. And we saw that immediate impact on particularly feminised workforces. But it's also been, I think, you know, wonderful how things have bounced back and women's participation is now at such a high rate.

With the tight labor market as well, is actually the ability to push on things like, gender equality and broader diversity and really challenge employers in terms of their policies and practices and what they do. Because employees being recruited now have a lot more power and influence given the nature of the labor market at the moment.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** I think you're spot on, in that we really should look at what we could learn from this time; that we've had to be forced to be flexible. I work from home. And now I guess we can prove and demonstrate that you can work flexibly and still have really great

outputs and achievements. As maybe, having a bit of a better balance at home. The opposite could also be true, in that woman predominantly, might bear the increased burden of now being able to be able to work and care for people, children, or elderly or others in their homes. think we must be really intentional as you say. I think it's really important that we know what we're trying to push for and move towards.

I wanted to touch on another area, which is the pay gap for women. While a good place to start, do you think it's as simple as paying women and men the same? When we know in many sectors, especially the academic and STEMM sector, there's barriers and in-built biases. So, do workplaces need to do more to support women to thrive beyond just making sure that the same job is paid the same?

**MARY WOOLDRIDGE:** - So, wow. There's a lot in that question. We see the gender pay gap as a proxy for gender equality. Because the sum of the parts of all of that is, you know, what ends up with the number where you know, the gender pay gap number is. I need to say, first of all, is that equal pay for equal work is not the gender pay gap. You know, that equal pay for equal work has been the law for 50 years. I've gotta say, it's not always still there. I mean, companies still work, you know, many very diligently to make sure that they do comply with the law and find gaps on life-for-life comparison. Gender pay gap is the sum of all the income that women earn and all the men's income that men earn and look at the comparison of that. So, the gender pay gap combination is pay, but it's also workforce composition. And if you look at it within an organisation, or an industry it's about, you know, jobs and roles within those industries. If you look at it nationally, it's obviously about our

whole economic structure.

We have highly gender segregated economy in terms of our industries. More so than many countries in the world. With, many highly feminized and masculinized industries and that's driving an element. And in fact, the She's Price(d)less report that you referred to previously,

is you know, and I love the work because it actually looks at the causes of the gender pay gap. What it says is that about 25% of the gender pay gap is that industrial and occupational segregation. The fact that women tend to work in lower paid industries. And even in higher paid industries, the roles women take are often lower paid roles within those jobs. And so, you know, the industrial and occupational segregation I s about 25%.

About a third though, is the time women take out of the workforce. For, parental and

other caring responsibilities. That puts them back in terms of their careers, and they never really make it up once again. Some of that is going part-time or working flexibly. The analysis we've done shows that the gender pay gap really starts diverging in those early 30 years when women are staying at home with children and never catches up. And a third of it is

about discrimination.

It's just straight bias and discrimination that happens in recruitment. It happens in promotions.

It happens in pay raises and all the way through.

So there's various components that make up the gender pay gap. And so, when we say to an employer, you need to do a gender pay gap audit. It is to try and get under that detail of pay is important, but there's a lot of other things going on in terms of how women aren't being recruited, how they're progressing, the opportunities they're given and where they've ended up by the nature of who they are and the balance and the juggle that they've been trying to manage with other competing responsibilities as well.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** Here in the faculty, we've been talking about this as a key issues particularly caring responsibilities, as you mentioned, it's that impact and the women can never get back on track to where they would've been prior to that career interruption or intervention that occurred. So we've been trying to work really hard on trying to think outside, as you say, it's not just about the pay, but how are we actually assess promotions and grants and awards applications, relative to the opportunities and the career interruptions,

women and others, not just women, but predominantly women face.

It's important that we've become more mature about how we assess for this. And we don't default to number of publications or grants, and really look at the potential of the individual and what they're bringing into the faculty or the organisation. In this case, we're talking about the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences. But also how we actually adjust for that. Otherwise, we will always see that women who have had this career interruption will always be, you know, delayed or behind with where their colleagues would not have been, that hadn't had these interruptions.

**MARY WOOLDRIDGE:** Absolutely. And one of the big inhibitors is just years. You know, some environments, you have to have done five years before you get a chance to step up to a role. And when you have career interruptions or you're working part-time or whatever it might be, it doesn't take into account capability and skills and contribution and all of those sorts of things as you say. You need to look at it differently to make sure that it's fair and that those opportunities are there based on contribution and capability, not on tenure or, you know, numbers.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** I wanted to run something by you. The CEO of the NHMRC,

Professor Anne Kelso, has recently released a detailed analysis of funding outcomes by gender in the first three rounds of the NHMRC Investigator Grant Scheme.

There's a demonstration of a clear bias of funding to men. Anne has been traveling across Australia to consult on this issue and has now provided options for the research sector, but for all to weigh in on with how they're improving the way they're awarding major grants and funding. I think this demonstrates a serious commitment to change.

I wondered if you had any thoughts on the importance of major Australian funding agencies to take on this important challenge, and what are the universities and institutes roles here

to also support this work and progress to change?

**MARY WOOLDRIDGE:** I recently read an article in the FIN I think – I just loved seeing it because it highlights the in-built inequity and it builds on itself year after year because you know that, you know, if you don't get the funding, you don't get the research and you don't get the students and you don't get to publish the papers and then you don't progress at the same level. And it becomes so unfulfilling in many, many different ways.

I understand it's looking at one stream of grants. I think there's probably an opportunity to look at, look at the rest of them as well, you know? Because you know, this is all the way through careers. From a university perspective then, and you know, I'm not an expert on the research processes and those sorts of things, but being able to think outside of the box

and sort of say, how can we support women in this case, or people who are going to have greater access, who haven't before, to be able to be successful in that environment.

That's the challenge. Hopefully a new funding model will come out of it. But the challenge for the university is to make it a success. You know, none of us want to be told we're anywhere because of a quota or because we're a woman, we're doing it because we're capable and we can have an impact and the work we do is important. But the university has a role in helping ensure success in that environment and thinking about that creatively. So what are the inhibitors or the barriers? Is it flexible work? Is it putting in support mechanisms to enable that flexibility with additional students?

I'm not sure what the answer is.

I think that focus would be on the effective implementation for success is really important to think through. Thinking and actually looking at what's not worked and now trying different things to actually see what we might be able to do to enhance this and support women.

And we know other minority groups are affected as well. So, I think more creative thinking on how we can support women at work. Really thinking about where the structures and the systems have played a role in this bias towards supporting or enhancing others careers.

And there maybe things that Melbourne uni and other universities just aren't aware of.

Charles Sturt uni, for example, makes a payment and provides I think about $5,000 for people who are returning from parental responsibilities to use in whatever way they like. To help recognize, it might be childcare, it might be, you know, some other sort of assistance or flexibility, whatever it is so it encourages return to work. I don't know if Melbourne Uni does that too.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** The University of Melbourne has one of the better return to work policies.

But we have this, it's like, you can get it as a lump sum payment or it can pop you up while you might be working part-time. But to not realise that pay, the loss of pay so it's actually a great way to encourage women to come back but it may at a slower rate. Or, you know, maybe support in different ways, as you say, in childcare costs with what returning to work would be. And we're looking at the moment in the faculty to putting together a parental scheme that would also prevent, so mitigate some of those barriers. So, having the

conversation early on when women are first planning, you know, they're pregnant and they might wanna have proper mentoring support prior to going on maternity leave, during maternity leave and then upon return. We're putting that together at the moment.

Very timely that you mentioned this, 'cause I do think that's a huge improvement for people who do have barriers because of caring responsibilities.

Thank you so much, Mary, for joining me, and for taking the time today to talk about your journey and your clear commitment to enhancing gender equality

in the workplace.

**MARY WOOLDRIDGE:** Thank you.