

Retreat Australia Fair: we've slid backwards on gender-equality league table



Australia has fallen way behind in the global gender equality rankings. CREDIT:MICHAEL MUCCI

Mind the gap, girls – it's getting bigger. I know a few blokes in Canberra who duck for cover when one of those legendary old "femocrats" – fierce champions of affirmative action and women's rights – happens to front up at the National Press Club looking cranky. It's amusing to see the old gents cower.

Well brace yourselves chaps, because there are several more generations of cranky women yet to come. And they'll be cranky for the next 108 years!

That's how long it's going to take to achieve full gender equality, according to the Global Gender Gap annual report released by the World Economic Forum this week.

The grim outlook is even worse in our region. It will take a whopping 171 years across East Asia and the Pacific to close the yawning gaps between men and women.

I've long tried to be an optimist when it comes to gender equality, so I nod encouragingly when people (men) tell me "things are so much better for women nowadays". But it's time for niceties to end. I haven't got another 100-plus years of patience in me. Nor have you.

Ranked a poor 39 in the world, Australia can take no pride in our placement on the 2018 Gender Gap ladder. Back in 2006, when the global index began, Australia ranked 15. Since then we have dropped backwards every year but one.

While our near neighbour New Zealand has shot up the rankings to 7th, thanks to the Kiwis' impressive strides in women's political participation, leadership, economic opportunity and advancement, Australia is doing precisely the opposite. On all those important measures we have plummeted down the chart.

Not only have we dropped from 35th overall last year, frustratingly our world ranking for gender equality in politics has dropped to 49th. And our level of shared economic opportunity between men and women has dropped to a miserable 46 in the world.

For a nation that has repeatedly been rated No. 1 for gender equality in education, our rude rankings in politics, economics and health (103) are quite simply – shameful.

From a global perspective Australia is increasingly looking like a flaccid failure when it comes to implementing gender-equality measures that have

real bite. We have done little to substantially shift entrenched bias and male norms. That's certainly what this international index is telling us. We ignore it at our peril.

Loading

A total of 149 countries were measured by the WEF this year. While NZ and the Philippines (8th) make the top 10, the UK and Canada rate 14 and 15 respectively. Scoring just above Australia on the gender equality ladder are Argentina, Portugal and Serbia. Immediately below us are Colombia, Ecuador and Poland. A strange place for Australia to sit?

Perhaps not surprisingly, it's the same Nordic countries each year that rate highest in closing the gender gap: Iceland, Norway, Sweden and Finland rank first to fourth respectively. Is it something to do with snow? No.

All top-ranking nations have one thing in common: gender equity values are not only politically embraced, but gender targets are embedded in legislative programs, public administration and private industry.

So why is Australia – one of the richest, safest, most economically stable democracies in the world, with more educated women than men – doing so badly when it comes to closing the gap?

For a nation that boasts being the first to give women the vote and the right to stand for Parliament in 1902, it's infuriating that in 2018 Australia rates so poorly when it comes to the political participation of women. Perhaps the fact it took 41 years to get a female elected to the Australian Parliament should have served as early warning that women here would never be warmly welcomed into politics. With only one female head of government in the past 50 years, just a handful of female premiers, very few cabinet Ministers, and a miserly 29.5 per cent of lower-house seats held by women – on the global political scale Australia looks very female-unfriendly.

Similarly, Australian women's lack of full participation in the workforce, high rates of part-time and casual work, our failure to crack promotion and leadership ranks like men, and that stubborn gender pay gap all combine to keep us well down the world ranks. In fact, our pay gap of 14.6 per cent hides myriad nasties. According to the Global Gender Gap 2018, Australia ranks 73 for "wage equality for similar work".

The WEF report presents a conundrum. Australians like to think we're a whole lot more advanced on gender equality than we actually are. But the evidence is in. And has been repeatedly each year.

The challenge now is how to stop those cranky women from rolling up their collective sleeve and busting out.

Virginia Haussegger AM is director of the 50/50 by 2030 Foundation, at the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, University of Canberra. She is 2019 ACT Australian of the Year.

virginia.haussegger@canberra.edu.au