**Women’s Equity Think Tank**

**Submission to the Inquiry into Reporting Matters Under the Workplace Gender Equality Act**

**by**

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# Background

The Women’s Equity Think Tank is a network of activist feminists, with expertise who offer advice and proposals on a range of policy issues. Our main role is offering expertise on policy issues affecting gender equity. Therefore we submit the following submission to the inquiry into Reporting Matters Under the Workplace Gender Equality Act which is based on my long involvement with feminist change issues and my professional competencies as a long time researcher. These were developed over a long career as a consultant on research methodologies, undertaking some major research projects and teaching research methods over more than 40 years. Together with a similar length of experience as advocate for feminist progress, I am particularly aware of the importance of good data for both good policy making and effective social change.

On the basis of this long experience, I wish to raise some broad concerns at the limits of the current proposed measures, as these focus almost entirely on particular items that are both uni-dimensional indicators of change and easy to measure. I recognise the importance of encouraging a widening of the data base and the need to produce measures that reflect data that is already collected or can easily be added to existing collections. There is already anxieties being expressed by business and prescribed data must be logical and accessible to ensure both compliance and political acceptability. I am very aware that setting complex measures or extensive ones may lead to political and practical objections and low levels of compliance.

The new framework of the WGE Act introduces five Gender Equality Indicators (GEIs):

* The gender composition of the workforce,  Gender composition of governing bodies*

* Equal remuneration between women and men,  Availability and utility of employment terms, conditions and practices relating to flexible, working arrangements for employees, and to working arrangements supporting employees, with family or caring responsibilities*

* Consultation with employees on issues concerning gender equality in the workplace.*

These are all simple measures, with even consultation being presumably a tick box rather than a specific process. Then later the paper mentions the presumed key outcomes to be measured. To quote again:

The GEIs will measure and help drive progress towards five key outcomes:

 To improve women’s workforce participation across Australia,  To improve women’s representation in leaderships positions in workplaces and on governing bodies,  To improve equal remuneration for work of equal value, between women and men,  To increase flexible working for both women and men, particularly those with family or caring responsibilities and  To promote employee and employer engagement on gender equality.

There is an implicit assumption that the measured items are adequately causal to the achievement of the above outcomes. This assumption is questionable as current data does not provide such predictable results. Questions of how well policies are implemented and the cultures and attitudes of individuals and organisations are not even mentioned.

Therefore WETTANK would seriously suggest that these outcomes do not sufficiently reflect the intent of the Act, if the net results are not serious culture changes but just increasing numbers of women in organisations that still expect them to comply with current organisational cultures and priorities. Therefore they do need amending and expanding?

# Redefining the problem of measurement

As a long term researcher who has also innovated measures, I am concerned that the range of measures proposed are inadequate for answering the question of why inequity continues rather than what is occurring. What types of data are most effective in both measuring what needs changing and how to achieve desired outcomes are embedded in a long term set of arguments in research communities, and is particularly evident in debates on the relative value of quantitative and qualitative data.

As a teacher of research methods at the University of Technology, Sydney for over a decade, I used to introduce the methods courses by describing the difference between these types of measures as of what is happening and measures of why. Basically, there is a bid difference between asking questions that can easily be quantified like how many people are in particular positions, and asking people why they do or do not apply for promotion. While how many succeed is a valuable indicators, as are questions on what policies are in place or how many training courses are on offer, they do not necessarily explain who and why some organisations su**cceed or fail on gender equity.**

However, questions like on why fewer women apply for promotions, or why most women decide not to ask for increased pay can’t be answered by simple tallies of what is happening. These require feelings and attitude measures that can answer, or at least indicate the possibilities, of why differences persist, even when the framework of equality is in place.

One of the reasons for changing legislation and processes of equal opportunity policies implementation is the continued and often seemingly inexplicable inequality of outcomes. There have been prescriptions and counts in place for some time but these are not producing the changes to gender proportions at senior levels that were expected. It means that the type of data often used so far has not been adequate and therefore the type of data needs to be looked at, as well as the quantum.

I have had considerable experience in looking at measures of what may be seen as hard or even unmeasurable. My consultancy Distaff Associates, pioneered measures of Costs of Domestic violence in a pilot project in the early 1990s which is still the benchmark study. As part of the follow up on my 1995 Boyer Lectures, I was deeply involved in developing social capital measures and consulted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). I was also involved in the last decade plus in developing measures of Corporate Social Responsibility for The Bodyshop and other businesses. We recently explored ways of surveying difficult to contact Indigenous youth, so I am still trying out new ways of measuring what really counts. These various research projects built on earlier experience I had as researcher and consultant in looking at social measures, including those that cover feelings and attitudes.

These types of measures are often defined as soft measures because they are reflections of what people say they are thinking and cannot be validated objectively and externally by another observer. However, these types of measures are often crucial for understanding why problems exist and continue. The reason is simple, causality in the social sciences is rarely the more physical causality of ‘if A happens then B does’, so humans make decisions on mixed messages and motives. So what we feel and think become entangled and only soft data can tap these complexities. Discrimination and its defences are too complex for easy explan**ations.**

There are long term debates on the effectiveness of national measures, comparable data and official statistics. This emerges often in critiques of the types of measures used by ABS which may be very useful indicators but often fail to explain why the situations occur. This explanatory data may be particularly important in solving the problems of apparent lack of progress in gender equity in many organisations.

# Proposed inclusions

When working on corporate social responsibility, I started developing indicators for good corporate cultures that combined some material from social capital measures and cultures of organisation measures. We tested the ideas we were developing in various brief surveys in the early part of this century. I was very aware of the overlap between questions of good corporate cultures, ethical behaviour and non discriminatory practices.

What became clear then was that the perceptions workers had and shared about the cultures of their organisations or even their smaller units within larger organisations, were often the major influences on their work attitudes. It was their perceptions and feelings that determined how the reacted to possible breaches of fairness factors. If enough workers felt that the organisation was not ethical, or that the leaders or power brokers were not acting fairly, the cultures of the workplace were problematic. Fairness was seen as an essential determinant of good practices in hiring, promotion, good working conditions. The possible gaps between official policy and what was actually practiced became key indicators of what was happening and why..

Therefore I suggest that some very basic attitude questions should be included as measures. Questions such as gender based attitudes of supervisors, or reasons why women don’t go for promotions etc can be very useful. The plethora of organisational climate measures show that employers and consultants are aware of the need for these types of questions

# More on the case for soft data

The following text is extracted from a document I wrote in 2011, when commissioned by the ABS to explain why I was concerned at the limits of their data on measuring progress. This article was published on their website and quoted in their report. It is included here as the arguments made are clearly connected as please for including more qualitative indicators.

‘Measuring anything requires us to define it. What then does “progress” mean: development, growth, evolution, civilisation ……?

In defining progress, we need to recognise that human beings are social: we gain our sense of who we are and how we feel through the quality of our connections with other people. Our connections cover both emotional and physical relationships. These links create the complex patterns that are our societies and communities. So how do social beings decide what a good – or even just a *better* – society is, and define what we mean by progress? Society is by definition about these connections.

Current progress indicators often have over-emphasised the material basis of our social system and our individual skills and possessions. There is more to count as we connect through care for each other, and arguments about territory, ideas and access to material goods. So, have those in charge overvalued our economic growth, wealth, ownership of possessions and physical symbols of affluence rather than the quality of our social interdependence? There is little questioning of where we are going socially rather than environmentally or discussions about these benefits and threats to futures. In deliberations on progress, our leaders devote a lot of attention to material and financial changes, but little to the essential aspects of being human. Traditionally defined indicators of progress are too often imbued with macho Western European values that emphasise material change and exchange, but ignore what really matters such as the benefits of relationships, the power of feelings and connections? Is it because these are not defined in the language of commerce, politics or institutional power?

One reason for omitting aspects of social life from measures of progress is that these are harder to measure precisely. Defining human thinking, feeling and doing lacks the simplicity of raising or lowering interest or exchange rates. The OECD Better Life Index illustrates this official prioritisation in the items it picks out for our information and input. It ranks member countries on a range of indicators, with only one, out of nearly twenty, reflecting social/relational factors. The document introduces this section with the following almost-apology:

*Measuring feelings can be very subjective, but is nonetheless a useful complement to more objective data when comparing quality of life across countries. The data can provide a personal evaluation of an individual’s health, education, income, personal fulfilment and social conditions. Surveys, in particular, are used to measure life satisfaction and happiness*.

The signal is there in the first sentence. Subjectivity is seen as a problem. We humans are deemed to be inadequate reporters of our quality of life. Like many authoritative voices, the OECD assumes we don’t know how to constitute our sense of wellbeing; at best, they consider our views to be a complement to the *real* data. Yet, in reality, our subjective views, mixed with reason and data, drive both our feelings and actions……..

If we want serious social indicators that can help us understand, and perhaps change, our future trajectories, we need to add in many more types of measures. These need to include attitudes, feelings and perceptions of social wellbeing that determine what social progress means in the complex patterns of our connected lives.

Progress is an odd concept. The Western industrial revolution changed views of time from seasonally cyclical to linear. Production lines made things, civilisation moves inexorably forward and, in general, the future will be assumed to be better than the past. ……..

Somewhere along the way we lost sight of the benefits of community and now risk failing to recognise how much of our social wellbeing comes from relationships, feelings and interdependence. Without wanting to turn back the digital clock, I suggest that the quality of our social bonds need to be included in any measures of progress, because they are the basis for trust relationships that make the social (and economic) possible. These are the centre of what makes human society.

As a sociologist, feminist and change-pusher, I read opinion polls and wonder what people are now feeling. The polls show there is now considerable doubt about the assumption that human social progress is inevitable. …….

The crudity of gross domestic product as an indicator is a good example, as it only measures traded and tradable goods and services. GDP was roundly attacked nearly 25 years ago by feminist economist Marilyn Waring for failing to count unpaid work. This obviously is a gender issue because the basic economic structure of western societies devalues unpaid work and household production. In less industrialised countries, excluding unpaid work from the calculation means overlooking subsistence farming and goods for home consumption. Omitting these activities distorts measurements of quality of life and access to resources. A system is absurd if it counts people who mind each other’s children for payment but not if they mind their own!

Progress needs to be re-defined by counting much of what has been omitted and maybe lost but can now be recognised as important. Deciding these factors would widen the range of categories we need to measure. As a social scientist and researcher, I used to teach my students that understanding human behaviour needed what are called soft, or subjective measures because behaviour is too complex to assume simple causes. People act on what they believe is happening, so subjective beliefs and attitudes often offer more powerful measures of wellbeing than what is actually objectively occurring. And interestingly these two kinds of measures don’t always correlate. However, politicians require objective data because they see these numbers as voters. ………

Progress needs to include much more than the usual ‘objective’ socioeconomic measures. We need measures of people’s agency, the control they feel they have over life decisions that underpins good health, the feeling of being part of communities, of acceptance and belonging and the ability to live a meaningful life. People should also feel they can dissent, be respected and make a valued contribution. These are all subjective data as they measure feelings and connections, which are difficult to lock into a nice clear table – but represent what often really matters. For instance, how we allocate time is a big factor in the ways we connect, engage in multiple activities and value the benefits of relationships – perhaps that should be a core progress measure?

Increasingly research shows that the way we feel determines much of what we do. This includes our feelings of fairness, trust of others and institutional trustworthiness. Yet these feelings are rarely or minimally measured and have none of the power of indicators like GDP, inflation levels or the number of people who claim this week they are looking for paid work. The feelings listed above are a few possible components of a serious progress indicator based on asking what makes a good life and where we fall short.

Progress indicators should reflect the society we want. The MAP exercise does include a category of family, community and social cohesion, but states that this category lacks headline indicators or time series data. This is where the priority needs to be, as these areas of life are core to our well-being. The rest of the indicators in MAP are often just the means that feed into who we are, how we feel, what we do and why not ends.

Eva Cox AO 2011

# Conclusion

Closing dates that overlap with holiday times and other summer distractions make it harder for the unpaid sectors to respond to inquiries. This is an acknowledged last minute effort. I thought it important that, as a feminist researcher with considerable experience, such views were represented. I am happy to extend and expand on these issues and have many examples of good design and practice in the construction of measures.

There is danger in increasing the demands for indicators that continue to delineate the problems of gender inequality but do not offer clues to its intransigence. Questions on organisational cultures and the lack of changes to assumptions on merit and gender are well overdue.

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