



MINERALS COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

WORKPLACE GENDER EQUALITY ACT 2012

Submission to the Australian Government's Consultation on Reporting Matters

JANUARY 2013

Australian Government Office for Women
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Consultation on Reporting Matters for Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012

Dear Sir/Madam

The minerals industry is fully committed to diversity and the business value it represents. It has long recognised that women are an untapped source of skills and labour and that increased workforce diversity can improve productivity and workplace culture.

Background

One of the major recommendations of the National Resource Sector Employment Taskforce Report, chaired by the Hon Gary Gray AO MP, is to increase participation of women in the sector as the need for skilled labour rises in line with major resources projects coming on stream. The minerals sector fully endorses this recommendation.

The female labour force in the minerals industry grew between November 2009 and November 2012 by 15,890 (from 19,460 to 35,350) or 82 per cent, whereas the number of males grew by 73,830 (from 132,820 to 206,650) or 56 per cent. The most recent ABS data (November 2012) indicates that the percentage of women in the minerals sector workforce has increased slightly, from 13 per cent in August 2012 to over 14 per cent in November 2012. During the GFC, the percentage of women rapidly declined to 12 per cent (August 2009) and then grew to almost 18 per cent by November 2010. However, over the past two years, the percentage has been hovering between 13 and 16 per cent.

It must be noted that, given the rapid growth, changing nature and volatility of the sector, it is more difficult to achieve linear improvements in participation rates *vis a vis* raw numbers, however the general trend represents an increase in the participation of women in the sector.

At the same time, the MCA supports a number of practical initiatives aimed at boosting female participation, including:

- the Australian Women in Resources Alliance (AWRA), an Australian Government-backed initiative implementing strategies to increase the proportion of women in the resources sector to 25 per cent by 2020;
- the landmark joint MCA-Office of Women report 'Unearthing new resources – attracting and retaining women in the Australian minerals industry', as well as the Curtin University review of this report;
- support for Women in Mining and Women in Resources groups in each State and the Northern Territory;
- participation in the University of Queensland ARC Women in Mining Longitudinal Study;
- the Thiess/MCA Women in Engineering Scholarship; and
- support for government efforts to increase the proportion of women with mathematics and science qualifications relevant for mining work.

In 2013, the MCA pioneered an initiative offering Scholarships for Women in Mining to complete the AICD Company Directors Course. 43 women applied and three scholarships were awarded for 2012.

This initiative is designed to develop pathways for women to join mining company boards in increasing numbers. The Scholarships not only facilitated relevant studies for three women but unearthed a powerful community of interest among women interested in taking positions on mining company boards in the future. This initiative was formally recognised by Minister Collins.

The MCA is also engaged in a range of broader strategies to increase the participation of women in the minerals industry supply chain through supporting business development. This is particularly relevant given that many women living in mining communities have expressed the desire to work in other industry sectors outside of mining. While this activity does not contribute to the industry's direct employment of women, the MCA sees such initiatives as an opportunity to leverage the economic capacity of the industry to provide diverse employment choices for women in remote and regional Australia. This is particularly important for a number of Indigenous communities where the participation of women on mine sites is actively discouraged.

Further, the MCA is also engaged in a partnership with AusAID to analyse the gendered impacts of mining related agreements. These agreements, which may or may not be required by law, provide a broad range of compensation and benefit sharing measures which provide economic opportunity for communities impacted by mining. The research will in turn inform the development of leading industry practice to ensure women share fully in the economic opportunities provided by resource development be they employment, enterprise development, or other measures such as education.

The MCA notes that in focussing solely on the direct employment of women in the minerals industry workforce that the much greater story of women's economic empowerment from mining is largely understated.

Regulatory and red tape issues

Business is watchful about the practical implementation of some of the provisions of the new Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012, particularly around increased red tape and regulatory burden, scope for increased union and government interference in business operations and uncertainty about the nature of the minimum standards.

While we support the aims of the new Act, we are keen to ensure that efforts of companies supporting and enhancing equity and diversity in their workplaces are not re-directed to compliance. The focus should primarily be on continuous improvement.

In this respect, the MCA and the Workplace Gender Quality Agency have already commenced a promising working relationship based on information sharing.

The Government has claimed that the Act will not increase the regulatory burden and will, in fact, make compliance easier in terms of new initiatives such as online reporting. Businesses are also informed that a key informational benefit will be the ability to compare and contrast gender equality indicators.

While this is an undoubted positive, requiring a level of consultation with employee organisations (unions) and encouraging them to comment officially on employer data, for example, brings into view the possibility the data will be misused, raising the spectre of union and government interference in normal business hiring and board appointment decisions.

Conclusion

While the Act grants the Minister a substantial head of power to create minimum standards, as outlined above, the minerals sector is undertaking its own successful initiatives to drive female participation. Our proposal is that, rather than simply imposing new standards on the industry, the Government and the Agency work with the sector to enhance and improve take-up of the sector's own initiatives to create even more powerful outcomes for female participation.

MCA Secretariat
24 January 2013