Mannix College

Mannix College Newman Lecture
Delivered by Professor Kate Fitz-Gibbon
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GENDER EQUALITY IN AUSTRALIA:
WHY IT MATTERS AND WHY WE STILL HAVE SO MUCH WORK TO DO

Thank you very much to the Mannix College community, and particularly to Andrew Swan for this invitation to deliver tonight's lecture, I am honoured to do so. I'd also like to thank the Mannix student leaders for selecting the topic of gender equality for this year's lecture.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the unceded lands upon which we are meeting – the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. I pay my respects to their elders, past and present, and also want to extend that respect to all First Nations students and staff here today. In my area of work, I have been fortunate to listen to and learn from numerous First Nations leaders working to address domestic, family and sexual violence. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to do so and want to acknowledge how much we have to learn from First Nations communities.

I would also like to acknowledge any victim-survivors of domestic, family and sexual violence in this room tonight. By virtue of the number of people in the room – and the prevalence of violence in this country – I know there will be survivors here, there will likely be people here still experiencing violence, and there will be people who know family or friends that have experienced violence. I have had the incredible privilege in my research to speak with victim-survivors and to learn from their experience and expertise, and I am extremely grateful for those insights.

This event tonight is scheduled to run for three and a half hours – 210 minutes – the brutal reality is that in that time 21 women around the world are estimated to be killed by men's violence. It is an uncomfortable reality but one that we must acknowledge. As it is only through acknowledgement and shining a light on the problem that we can drive transformational change.

The focus of my lecture today begins with gender equality.
And we simply won't achieve substantive prevention of men's violence against women without significant progress towards the achievement of gender equality.

Acknowledging that this is an incredibly educated and informed room – I will admit that at times I worry that gender inequality is a term thrown around and mistaken for a vague concept or an abstract one.

It is real, and we can point to it in the everyday experiences of women and girls across Australia.

The gender pay gap, for example, nationally stands at 13.3 per cent. Gender inequality is the extra hours, days or indeed weeks that a woman is required to work to earn the same salary as her male counterpart. It is, on average, the 87 cents that a woman earns for every dollar that a man earns, or the fact that in Australia women make up over 50% of the workforce, but less than 20% of CEOs and less than 20% of board chairs.

Gender inequality is the fact that women in Australia retire with significantly less superannuation than men and are consequently at higher risk of living in poverty or facing homelessness in their later years. Indeed, in Australia women aged 55 and over are the fastest growing population of homeless persons.

Women's financial insecurity has significant impacts on their safety. We often hear the problematic question asked – why doesn't she leave? But often leaving is not an option for women, and particularly so where their economic independence has been eroded by the perpetrator. In Australia research shows that given the many barriers to leaving a violent or abusive relationship, it takes on average 7-8 attempts to leave a relationship and around $18,000 and 141 hours to extricate oneself from an abusive relationship. Consequently, financial insecurity must be understood both as an impact of an abusive relationship as well as a key barrier to achieving safety and freedom from that violence.

So how do we compare on gender equality against other countries?

Every year the World Economic Forum provides global analyses of the gender gap. That analysis shows that at the current rate of progress globally it is likely to take 131 years to reach gender parity worldwide.

In 2006 Australia was ranked 15th in the world for gender parity. Not exactly a leader in the space but perhaps borderline respectable. 15 years later Australia's performance in addressing the gender gap declined and our position globally became neither leading nor respectable.

As of early 2021 Australia ranked 50th in the world on gender gap. This measure takes into account economic participation and opportunity, political empowerment, educational attainment, health and survival.

The Nordic nations are well represented as leaders in this space, with Iceland, Finland and Norway taking the top three rankings, followed by our closest neighbour, New Zealand. The UK sat in 23rd place and in the immediate aftermath of Donald Trump's presidency, a four-year term where concerns surrounding the erosion of women's rights were front and centre, the United States appeared in 30th place. 20 countries above Australia's ranking as of 2021.

When you break down Australia's ranking in 2021 against each of the four measures the results are even more sobering. Australia's performance on economic participation and opportunity is lower than its overall average – here Australia sat in the 70th position globally and on political empowerment we held the rank of 54th. And our ranking on health and survival is most telling. On this measure Australia ranks 99th in the world. The measure takes into account the early death of women due to violence as well as disease, malnutrition and other factors. Our ranking is perhaps unsurprising given that Intimate partner violence contributes more to the disease burden in Australia than any other risk factor in women aged 18-44 years, more than well known risk factors like tobacco use, high cholesterol or use of illicit drugs. I will say more on this in a moment.

But there has been progress – the most recent findings from the World Economic Forum which were released in June this year show that as of 2023 Australia has climbed nearly 25 places, to be ranked 26th in the world on gender gap. Our results on economic participation have shifted from 70th position to 38th, and on health and survival we see a small increase from 99th in the world to 89th – hardly a point of celebration but progress none the less. However, progress is not linear. On educational attainment we have fallen significantly – in 2021 Australia shared first place globally for educational attainment with 26 other countries – now only 2 years later we are ranked 78th for educational attainment.

Australia has a legacy of having some of the most educated women in the world. Yet those same highly educated women experience inequality in so many facets of their lives. Those same highly education women are being killed at a rate of one every week and victimised by men's violence in all facets of their lives – be it the home, the workplace or in public.

If we are ultimately to make progress on improving women's equality and safety in Australia, we will need to acknowledge where inequalities exist. They must be named, identified and remedied. We cannot solve a problem that we feel too uncomfortable (or paralysed by the status quo) to call out.

So I'd like to return briefly to my opening focus on the national crisis of violence against women in Australia, which is my day to day work through my role as Director of the Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre and also as Chair of Respect Victoria.

We know that consistently over the past decade on average one woman is killed each week by men's violence in Australia. In 2022 this equated to the death of 57 women nationally. Yet women killed by violence represents only the tip of the iceberg. When we focus only on deaths – we do not capture the full extent of the problems that lurks beneath.

The prevalence of domestic, family and sexual violence is difficult to quantify given that acts of violence against women so often go unreported to the police. Despite this under reporting - police across Australia respond to a family and domestic violence incident every two minutes.

How in Australia do we progress calls for a world that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive, when we know that First Nations Women in Australia are twice as likely to be killed by an intimate partner and up to 32 times more likely to be hospitalised as a result of domestic and family violence.

Or when recent research shows that in Australia women with disability are almost at double the risk of intimate partner violence victimisation. Those highest at risk of violence are women with disability aged 18 to 24 years old.

National prevalence rates of violence against women have remained stable over the past 10 years. You could take some solace in the fact that they have not been rising. We can't be satisfied with this plateau; women in Australia deserve improved safety and a concerted drive towards the elimination of violence. These acts of male violence are, but should not, be the everyday experiences of women and girls in Australia.

We know that the impacts of domestic and family violence are significant. Impacts are immediate – in terms of the physical impacts of violence and the emotional and psychological impacts of abuse. They can infiltrate a victim-survivors everyday life – throughout my research with victim-survivors over the past decade I have had numerous individuals describe life as a victim of domestic and family violence like 'walking on eggshells' or 'living in a warzone'.

The impacts are also long lasting and can extend well beyond the period of time that a victim-survivor is within the abusive relationship. Part of the national commitment so desperately needed is a commitment to supporting women's recovery from violence. It must not be considered enough for women to merely survive their abusive partners but rather we may ask what it would take for Australian women to thrive.

So what can you do as an individual, what can workplaces do, and what can government do to support efforts to prevent and ultimately eliminate violence against women, and to drive a greater focus on the need for gender equality.

As an individual it can feel overwhelming or intimidating to know how to make a difference in this space. But small acts can go far.

Research tells us that sexism and disrespect towards women contribute to a culture that allows, justifies, or even promotes violence towards women.

Challenging disrespect towards women is everyone's responsibility. So, you can call it out – when your friend, family member, or work colleague makes a disrespect remark, joke or comment – call it out. This doesn't have to be confrontational, and it doesn't mean you can never be friends with that person again. Everyone

is on an evolving journey and we have seen in recent weeks the power of change – I truly hope we will no longer hear 'you kick like a girl' or 'you throw like a girl' levied as a criticism. The Matilda's have changed the national conversation on women in sport and equality across sporting codes.

As an individual it's hard to imagine driving change at the same scale – but you can absolutely drive change at the individual level, and we know that over time every single efforts contributes to driving improved attitudes and actions.

When we consider workplaces - In recent years workplaces have been identified as one of the key sites for change both in terms of ensuring gender equality within the workplace but also in terms of supporting victims of domestic and family violence.

So why do workplaces matter?

There are many layers to this answer. Firstly, and perhaps most importantly, workplaces matter because they are a site where men and women spend a significant amount of their daily time. Immunity from consequences, and a lack of accountability for the use of violence in one setting will follow individuals into another setting. This has significant consequences for victims and for perpetrators.

Research shows that:

- Domestic and family violence can take victim-survivors out of the workforce,
- Domestic and family violence can impact the degree of their contribution when in the workforce, and
- Domestic and family violence can prevent victim-survivors from entering the workforce.

Recent research in Australia has quantified the extent to which domestic and family violence impacts employees and productivity. A report, by the Champions of Change Coalition, found that:

- 62% of women who have experienced or are currently experiencing domestic and family violence are in the paid workforce
- And that nearly 50% of women who disclosed that they had experienced domestic and family violence reported that it affected their capacity to get to work.

Of these women:

- nearly one in five (19%) reported that the domestic violence followed them into the workplace with, for example, abusive calls or emails or their partner physically coming to work.
- 16% of people reported being distracted, tired and unwell

Looking to perpetrators, globally studies have found that up to 78% of people who use domestic and family violence have done so during work hours using workplace resources.

We can put a cost on these impacts. In Australia, it is estimated that violence against women costs Australia $22 billion annually. Of this:

  - 1.9 billion is attributed directly to businesses and productivity
  - With 443 million due to perpetrator absenteeism
  - 860 million due to victim-survivor absenteeism
  - 96 million in additional management costs

Workplaces can absolutely make a difference.

- **For a victim-survivor** – the availability of workplace supports – including policies like paid family violence leave – can mean the difference between choosing to stay in an abusive relationship due to financial insecurity and the independence to be able to safely leave an abusive relationship and to be supported to maintain employment while navigating that decision.
- **For perpetrators** - Workplaces can play an important role in encouraging employees who use domestic and family violence to seek help and supporting people to feel able to change their behaviour and ensure there are appropriate consequences when their behaviour impacts on colleagues or the workplace.
- **And at the early intervention level** - Workplaces also have an opportunity to raise awareness of what constitutes a healthy and respectful relationship. Just like those people who don't recognise their behaviour as unacceptable, many people may not recognise themselves as being in a relationship that is violent or abusive. Workplaces can play a significant part in promoting a culture where all violence, including coercive and controlling behaviours, are understood as unacceptable.

We have seen some world leading reforms introduced in recent years which will propel workplaces forward significantly. The Federal Government has introduced access to 10 days paid domestic violence leave for all Australian employees and through the Australian Human Rights Commission's Respect@Work agenda legislation has now been introduced which inserts a positive obligation on Australian workplaces to prevent workplace sexual harassment.

These legislative changes are a critical piece of the puzzle, but we also must do the trickier work of changing culture. it is important to **normalise help-seeking within the workplace.** It is essential that workplaces create a culture where individuals feel comfortable to seek help at work and are supported when they do so. Colleagues and I recently conducted research listening to the experiences of over 3000 victims of domestic and family violence in Australia. Those victim-survivors explained that where they did not feel supported to disclose their experience of family violence at work, this contributed to inaccurate assumptions by colleagues and managers whereby they were seen as lazy or flaky, and in some cases moved onto performance management plans.

Workplaces must demonstrate a true commitment to women's safety at work in the same that we see with commitments to others area of occupational health and safety. Part of this requires the provision of specialist training on domestic and family violence, and trauma informed practice. We cannot expect employees to just know how to address insecurity in the workplace, workplaces must invest in cultural change and upskilling.

I'm conscious of time but before I finish, I would like to say something about what governments can do - and specifically the need for funding as we move forward.

I acknowledge funding in and of itself will not be enough, but it is an important piece of the puzzle. For too long women – and women's issues – have been allocated small buckets of funding, that have been halved, chopped, shared and spilt over.

The funding committed needs to commensurate with the gravity of the problem. We have never seen that before.

- This would require funding of a range of housing and accommodation options so that women and children do not balance the threat of homelessness against the threat of staying with a violent partner.
- It would necessitate funding for specialist services, funding to ensure calls for help and referral pathways do not go unanswered due to a lack of resources.
- And of course, we must fund prevention, including education and community led programs, or we will still be here having this conversation in 10, 20 years' time.

We need leadership that commits with heart, mind and wallets to secure the safety of all persons, and to meaningful progress the attainment of gender equality.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to speak with you today.

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* Excerpts from this speech are taken from Kate Fitz-Gibbon (2021) *Our National Shame: Violence against Women*, Monash University Press.