

International Women's Day 2025 – March Forward

Governor of South Australia breakfast, 7 March 2025

Danielle Wood, Chair, Productivity Commission

Thank you – it is an absolute honour to share my International Women's Day with such an incredible group of people in this very special place.

Thank you Aunty Rosalind for that powerful welcome to Country. I would like to acknowledge the continuing connection of the Kurna people to this land and their elders past and present.

A warm thank you to the Governor of South Australia, Her Excellency the Honourable Frances Adamson AC, for the invite to be here today. I've seen firsthand the thoughtfulness and effort Her Excellency puts into this event. And I know that reflects her genuine passion for women's empowerment. She has been a trailblazer for women in international relations, including as the first woman to be Australia's ambassador to China and the first woman to head the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

It is also an honour to be in all of your company. Her Excellency certainly knows how to compile a guest list! I'm blown away by the sheer amount of talent and energy in this room. I want to say a special welcome to the young women, among them SACE award winners and Rhodes scholars – you will be the ones that carry forward so many of the issues that we will touch on today.

This year's International Women's Day theme is March Forward.

And I think we already have marched a long way.

If it was the 1960s, I would not be here. Many in the audience would be similarly absent. Under the Marriage Bar, which existed – unbelievably – until 1966, married women were not allowed to be employed in the Australian Public Service.¹

And the idea of a woman Governor or a woman heading up a major economic institution would have been very foreign indeed.

Popular cartoon the Jetsons gives us a glimpse into how limited our vision for change was.

The cartoon was made in the early 1960s but set 100 years in the future in 2062.

It revolved around the life of the Jetson family – George Jetson, a loveable but slightly dopey patriarch who left their elevated ‘skypad’ apartment in Orbit city each day to go off to work in his flying car. While Jane, ‘his wife’, as she was described, went shopping, curled her hair and cooked meatloaf. She was largely freed of domestic drudgery and care of their children by their domestic robot – the ever-efficient Rosie.

So, that was the future we imagined – cities in the sky, flying cars, robot maids and digital communications tools that look remarkably similar to today’s Zoom calls – all very futuristic. But relaxation of entrenched gender norms? Not so much.

As it turns out, Jane Jetson today, let alone by 2062, is likely to be in the workforce.

Workforce participation amongst women has been rising steadily in Australia since The Jetsons first went to air.

More than three-quarters of Australian women of working age are in the workforce, compared to around 50% in the early 1980s.²

There are also more women in leadership roles.

In 2015, when the Australian Institute of Company Directors released its first quarterly gender diversity report, only 20% of ASX 200 board seats were occupied by women.³ Indeed, one researcher found that there were more men called John (and Peter and David), than women running ASX 200 companies.⁴ Now women hold 36% of board seats.⁵

The public service has also seen a significant transformation. The Australian Public Service has nearly reached equal or greater representation among senior executive levels up to the level of Deputy Secretary.⁶ Here in South Australia, as Her Excellency has discussed, the representation of women in executive roles in the public service has increased by more than 16 percentage points, to reach nearly 60% today.

And as for women heading economic institutions, in 2018 I wrote an article that said:⁷

Economic leadership positions in Australia remain an almost exclusively male affair. Indeed, we’ve had a female Prime Minister but not Treasurer, a female CEO of a Big 4 bank but not a Chief Economist, and a female Chief Scientist but never a female at the helm of the RBA, Treasury, Productivity Commission, ASIC, APRA or the ACCC.

Last year I participated on a panel with the first woman Governor of the RBA and the first woman Chair of the ACCC as the first woman Chair of the Productivity Commission. A lot can change in 6 years!

And while I’m talking about economic leadership roles I’d like to nod to wonderful Tammie Pribanic, recently appointed as the first woman to head the South Australian Department of Treasury and Finance.

Surely a woman Treasurer can't be that far off?

But for all the fantastic progress, in some areas it feels as though we have been marching on the spot.

The poverty rate in households where the main earner is a woman is 18% compared with 10% where the main earner is a man.⁸ Women also experience more persistent poverty than men across all age groups.⁹

In addressing poverty, the adequacy of government supports matters a lot. But it is also true that economic outcomes for Australian women are constrained by their more limited participation in the paid workforce.

While the share of women working has risen over past decades, women still work on average seven hours less a week than Australian men,¹⁰ one of the highest gaps in the OECD.

And it is children that explain the big differences in working patterns. Women with children under the age of 15 are less likely to work,¹¹ and they're more likely to work part-time than men with children or women without them.¹²

Their rates of part-time work remain high compared to men and women without children through the rest of their lives.

A recent Australian study showed mothers' earnings fall by an average of 55% in the first five years after the birth of a child, mainly due to reduced working hours. Fathers' earnings remain unchanged.¹³ The exact same pattern is true even where the woman is the higher earner before the child's birth.

To be clear, many women *want* to work part-time when they have a child.¹⁴

But we should be concerned if gendered expectations of work and care get in the way of women's choices and economic security.

So let's talk about gender norms, the complex soup of expectations we marinate in from the moment we are born.

The behaviour we see and that is broadcast to us sets out the 'normal' behaviours we expect of boys and girls, men and women. These norms are real, pervasive and shape the life decisions of Australian men and women.

One norm is that of the male breadwinner.

Evidence from Australia, the US and Europe documents a surprising (and consistent) phenomena: a much higher than expected share of heterosexual coupled women are

earning just below 50% of the couple's total earnings. This is matched by a surprisingly large drop-off above 50%.

Researchers have concluded that this statistically unlikely pattern appears to arise from an 'aversion to a situation where the wife earns more than her husband'.¹⁵

Dig further into the research and this aversion may be understandable.

When a woman's share of earnings rises above 50% she takes on *more* unpaid household tasks. This 'second shift' of ever more hours floor mopping and clothes washing is perhaps designed to soften the blow from breaking the male breadwinner norm.¹⁶

Couples in which the woman outearns the man are also unhappier in their marriages and over time more likely to divorce.¹⁷

And most chillingly, we see material increases in domestic abuse in those couples where women outearn their partners.¹⁸

A recent Australian study found that women who bring in more than half of a couple's income face a 33 percent increase in partner violence, and a 20 percent increase in the chance of emotional abuse.¹⁹

These same broad findings are replicated across Western nations.

A second norm is the norm of the female carer.

It is women who still deliver the bulk of unpaid work and care. And this pattern has persisted even as women's paid workforce participation has changed significantly.

The birth of a child represents a seismic shift in how the average woman spends her time. Her hours of unpaid housework and care rocket up after the first child is born and remain elevated even as her first child reaches their 12th birthday. As we have already discussed, her paid work declines significantly to compensate.²⁰

For the average Australian man, other than some increase in care hours in the early years, the difference in paid and unpaid work after children is barely noticeable.

So while Jane Jetson's life might look different to the future imagined in the 1960s, George Jetson's is almost entirely as expected.

There are some glimmers of change.

The latest HILDA data shows that Australian dads are spending a bit more time on looking after their children and relatives than in previous years.²¹

But with mothers still spending 75% more time on these tasks than their male partners, and even women who work full time doing four additional hours a week of unpaid labour compared to men,²² George's evolution remains slow.²³

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Norms constrain everyone.

University of South Australia research shows that workplace discrimination remains an issue for women trying to combine work and family. One in four women feel they have to hide their pregnant belly at work.²⁴ A third return from maternity leave to a job with lower status or less responsibility, and one in five have their role permanently replaced by a colleague.²⁵

For men, the 'woman as carer' norm is equally containing.

Many men want to play a more hands-on role as dad and partner.

But almost half of men using flexible work to manage caring responsibilities report some discrimination – much higher than any other group accessing flexible work, including men without caring responsibilities.²⁶

Norms are also slow to change.

Australian economists have found that Australia's convict past still reverberates through gendered attitudes in different parts of the country today. In particular, regions in Australia with much higher ratios of men to women in the mid-1800s today have lower women's workforce participation, higher rates of violence and male suicide and fewer men working in traditionally female industries.²⁷

History casts a long shadow.

So that brings me now to what seems to be an important juncture in our march forward.

It is hard not to be concerned about recent backtracking on the progress many Western nations have made on promoting diversity.

Diversity, equity and inclusion has become a convenient scapegoat for an economy and society that has not delivered for everyone.

There may be some valid criticism of the diversity movement.

Some corporate diversity programs have been akin to 'pink washing' – more about the warm glow than genuine progress. This is amusingly called out each year by the 'gender pay gap bot', which scrapes companies often uplifting International Women's Day messages and posts them alongside their gender pay gap data.

Other programs have been criticised for moving too quickly without doing the work on the pipeline to ensure the right candidates are there.

But let's be clear: the opposite of 'diversity, equity and inclusion' is not 'merit, excellence and intelligence' as some powerful people have claimed.

Pushing for greater participation of women, or people of colour, in our businesses and government agencies and public life is about trying to better identify talent that otherwise might have been overlooked.

There is a huge literature on entrenched gender bias in employment and promotion.²⁸ ‘CV studies’ find that women²⁹ and people with ‘foreign sounding’ names³⁰ are less likely to be called for an interview than applicants with identical CVs who have male or ‘English sounding’ names.

Another famous economics study shows that the movement to ‘blind auditions’ for orchestras – one profession where the simple use of a curtain can hide the identity of the person applying for the role – substantially boosted the share of female musicians in leading US orchestras.³¹

Stopping efforts to help those otherwise held back by unconscious and conscious biases in the workplace risks *less* meritocratic outcomes.

Backsliding on women’s progress also risks poorer economic outcomes.

The rise in women’s paid work has contributed to a rise in economic output and household incomes around the world.

But it has almost certainly also played a role in improving productivity.

A 2019 study by economists at the University of Chicago and Stanford shows how significant this shift has been. They estimate that 20 to 40 per cent of the growth in US living standards between 1960 and 2010 was due to ‘better allocation of talent’ as more women and minorities participated in the workforce, including in roles previously closed to them.³²

The logic is simple: if a country used only half its factories or fertile land it would waste a lot of its productive potential. The same is true if we tap into only half of society’s brains.

Removing barriers to participation deepens the talent pool and makes better use of a country’s human capital. Resurrecting those barriers would have the opposite effect.

Even beyond allocation of talent, there is also some inherent benefit to greater diversity in teams. Studies have shown that increasing diversity can lead to higher-quality work, better decision-making and greater team satisfaction.³³

And the benefits of diversity apply not just to gender but to other differences including cultural and socioeconomic background.

I would argue that this diversity is even more important in the policy world where I work, because differences in life experiences lead to crucial differences in perspectives and priorities. These different perspectives are needed to make sure that policy works for everyone.

Against this backdrop, my hope this International Women's Day is that we maintain the momentum.

Marching forward has not always been easy. The progress we've made was hard fought and not guaranteed.

The loosening of the tight-fitting straitjacket of gender norms has seen women participate in the workforce and leadership like never before and men taking tentative steps towards more active roles in parenting and home life.

These changes have created broader choices for individuals, and I would argue improved society and the economy.

So let's not accept people trying to take us backward.

By 2062, I'm all in for the flying cars and the robot doing the washing. But I hope for the version where Jane and George can flexibly combine their work and parenting efforts in the way that works for them.

¹ Sawyer 2016, *The long slow demise of the 'marriage bar'*, Inside Story, 8 December. <https://insidestory.org.au/the-long-slow-demise-of-the-marriage-bar/>.

² For those aged 15 to 64. OECD (current), *Data Explorer*, accessed March 2025.

³ Australian Institute of Company Directors 2018, *Gender diversity momentum on ASX 200 boards*, 07 September. <https://www.aicd.com.au/news-media/media-releases/2018/gender-diversity-momentum-continues-on-asx-200-boards.html>.

⁴ Liddy and Hanrahan 2017, *Fewer women run top Australian companies than men named John – or Peter or David*, ABC News, 8 March. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-08/fewer-women-ceos-than-men-named-john/8327938>.

⁵ Australian Institute of Company Directors 2023, *Gender diversity progress report March 2023 to June 2023*. <https://www.aicd.com.au/content/dam/aicd/pdf/news-media/research/2023/gender-diversity-progress-report-q2-march-to-june-2023-web.pdf>.

⁶ Australian Public Service Commission 2024, *State of the service report 2023-24*, Commonwealth of Australia, p.57.

⁷ Danielle Wood 2018, *Economics has a woman problem. Here's why you should care*, The Power to Persuade, 7 May. <https://www.powertopersuade.org.au/blog/economics-has-a-women-problem-heres-why-you-should-care/5/5/2018>.

⁸ Davidson, P. et al. 2023, *Poverty in Australia 2023: Who is affected by poverty and inequality*, Partnership report no. 20, Australian Council of Social Service and UNSW Sydney, pp.32-22.

⁹ This likely reflects the earlier ages at which women leave home, gender-related wage gaps and the higher proportion of women who are single parents. Productivity Commission 2024, *Fairly Equal? Economic mobility in Australia*, Research Paper, Canberra.

¹⁰ ABS (current), *Gender indicators*, ABS Website, accessed March 2025. See also Wilkins, R. et al. 2024, *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected findings from waves 1 to 22*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, The University of Melbourne, which finds a higher gap for those aged 18 to 64.

¹¹ Although increasing participation rates among mothers is a large part of the reason for higher female workforce participation more generally. Productivity Commission 2024, *A path to universal early education and care*, Inquiry report no. 106, Vol. 1, Canberra.

¹² Wood, D. et al. 2020, *Cheaper childcare: A practical plan to boost female workforce participation*, Grattan Institute, Figure 1.5.

¹³ Bahar, E. et al. 2022, *Children and the gender earnings gap*, Treasury Round Up, October.

¹⁴ See Productivity Commission 2024, *A path to universal early education and care*, Inquiry report no. 106, Vol. 2, Supporting papers, Canberra, p.239, for a discussion.

¹⁵ Bertrand, K. et al. 2015, *Gender identity and relative income within households*, The Quarterly Journal of Economics, Vol. 130, No. 2, pp.571-614.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Bergvall, S. 2024, *Women's economic empowerment and intimate partner violence*, Journal of Public Economics, Vol. 239, November; Breunig, R. & Zhang, Y. 2021, *A shocking finding that will change the way you think about gender pay*, The Conversation, 31 March.

¹⁹ Breunig, R. & Zhang, Y. 2023, *Female breadwinning and domestic abuse: evidence from Australia*, Journal of Population Economics, Vol. 36, September, pp. 2925-2965.

²⁰ Baxter, J. 2019, *Fathers and work: A statistical overview*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Research Snapshot, May. See also Wilkins, R. et al. 2024, *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected findings from waves 1 to 22*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, The University of Melbourne.

²¹ Wilkins, R. et al. 2024, *The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey: Selected findings from waves 1 to 22*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, The University of Melbourne.

²² According to 2021 HILDA data. Wilkins, R. 2024, *HILDA data show women's job prospects improving relative to men's, and the COVID changes might have helped*, The Conversation, 12 February; see also Melbourne Institute 2023, *Taking the pulse of the nation*, <https://melbourneinstitute.unimelb.edu.au/data/taking-the-pulse-of-the-nation/2023/ttppn-april-2023>.

²³ Wilkins, R. 2024, *HILDA data show women's job prospects improving relative to men's, and the COVID changes might have helped*, The Conversation, February 12.

²⁴ Potter, R. et al. 2024, *National review: Work conditions and discrimination among pregnant and parent workers in Australia, evidence and insights report*, University of South Australia.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ruppanner, L. et al. 2023, *2023 State of the Future of Work*, Work Futures Hallmark Research Initiative, The University of Melbourne.

²⁷ Baranov, V. et al. 2022, *Male-biased Sex Ratios and Masculinity Norms: Evidence from Australia's Colonial Past*, UNSW Business School Research Paper, 10 May; Grosjean, P. & Khattar, R. 2019, *It's Raining Men! Hallelujah? The Long-Run Consequences of Male-Biased Sex Ratios*, The Review of Economics Studies, Vol. 86, No. 2 (307), pp. 723-754.

²⁸ Isaac, C. et al. 2009, *Interventions that affect gender bias in hiring: a systemic review*, Academic Medicine, Vol. 84, No. 10, pp.1440-1446.

²⁹ Gonzalez, J.M. et al. 2019, *The role of gender stereotypes in hiring: a field experiment*, European Sociological Review, Vol. 35, No. 2, April, pp. 187-204.

³⁰ Adamovic, M. & Leibbrandt, A. 2023, *Is there a glass ceiling for ethnic minorities to enter leadership positions? Evidence from a field experiment with over 12,000 job applications*, The Leadership Quarterly, Vol. 34, No. 2, April,

³¹ Goldin, C. & Rouse, C. 2000, *Blind orchestra auditions reduce sex-biased hiring and increase the number of female musicians*, The American Economic Review, Vol. 90, No. 4, pp. 715-741.

³² Hsieh, C.T. et al. 2019, *The allocation of talent and US economic growth*, Econometrica, Vol. 87, No. 5, September, pp. 1439-1474.

³³ Ely, R.J. & Thomas, D.A. 2020, *Getting serious about diversity: enough already with the business case*, Harvard Business Review, November-December.