

# Pushing back on pushback:

## *Leading for Gender Equality When Progress Feels Under Attack*

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**THE GLOBAL  
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The **Global Institute for Women's Leadership** was founded by the Hon. Julia Gillard AC – the only woman to have served as Prime Minister of Australia – in 2018.

# Mark Zuckerberg Thinks Companies Need More 'Masculine Energy'

SBS Australia

## Report finds Voice referendum normalised racism and increased hostility toward First Nations People

A report has found that the Voice referendum caused increased in hostile levels of racism towards First Nations People.

7 Mar 2025

WORLD

# Hard-won gains for women at risk as backlash against gender equality grows UN report

## Dutton softens pledge to ban WFH after anti-woman criticism

## Government announces federal review into gender-affirming healthcare for young people

Health Minister Mark Butler has announced a review into gender-affirming care for trans and gender-diverse children, including the use of puberty blockers.

# More than half of UK businesses changing DEI approach due to Trump's criticism

Leading UK organisations reacting to pushback against diversity initiatives in the US by reviewing or even scrapping policies



# One in four countries report backlash on women's rights in 2024



PRESIDENTIAL ACTIONS

# Ending Radical And Wasteful Government DEI Programs And Preferencing

# Gender equality progress and backsliding



World Economic Forum 2025 Global Gender Gap Report [https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2025.pdf](https://reports.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2025.pdf)

*In just under two decades, 99 out of 100 economies in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap report have improved their overall gender parity scores*

**But it will take...**

162 years to close the gender gap in economic participation and opportunity, and political empowerment

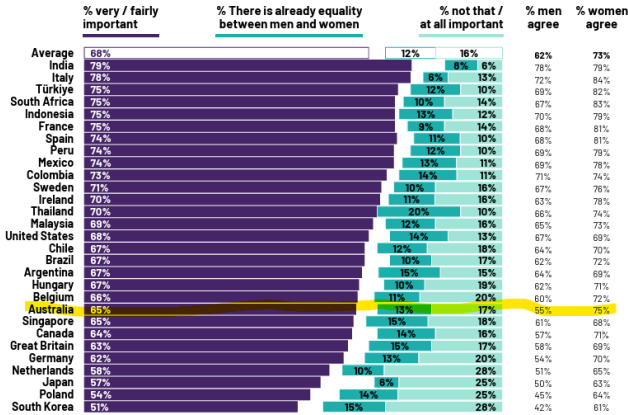
# Changing attitudes to gender equality

Q

How important or not important is achieving equality between men and women to you personally?

Two in three people (68%) say that achieving equality between men and women is important to them personally, with fewer than one in five (16%) saying it's not important.

Women (74%) are more likely than men (62%) to say gender equality is important to them personally.



## 29-country average

Things would work better if more women held positions with responsibilities in government and companies

**60%** agree somewhat / strongly

**27%** disagree somewhat / strongly

Women won't achieve equality with men in ... unless there are more female leaders in business and government

**54%**

**36%**

When it comes to giving women equal rights with men, things have gone far enough in my country

**52%**

**40%**

Men are being expected to do too much to support equality

**46%**

**43%**

We have gone so far in promoting women's equality that we are discriminating against men

**44%**

**48%**

I define myself as a feminist

**39%**

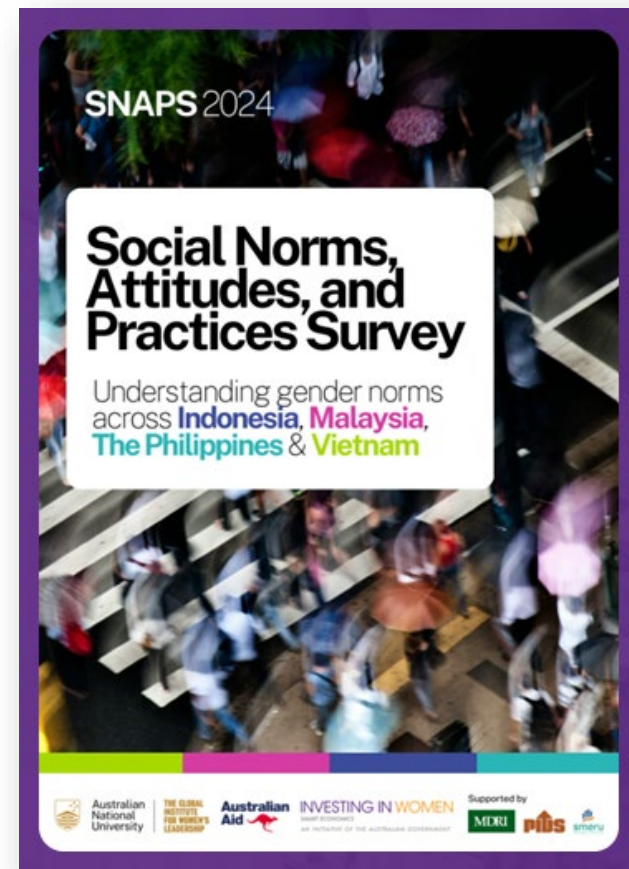
**50%**

Ipsos International Women's Day 2026. /https://resources.ipsos.com/rs/297-CXJ-795/images/IWD-2026-Global-Report.pdf?version=0&alid=eyJlpljoia0pySkZYMKzYkg0VGdtVylslnQlOjJUb3dFOTFjWWV4Z3Y0M0NlUw4MnpRPT0ifQ%253D%253D

# Changing attitudes to gender equality

- While actual behaviours show progress toward more gender-equal households, aspirations for equality among unmarried, unpartnered individuals and those without children regressed in some instances between 2022 and 2024.
- Both women and men report higher expectations for the other to take on more responsibilities in childcare duties and family income contribution

Nguyen, Hang Anh, Rich, Lucaya, Merdikawati, Nurina, Stephenson, Elise, Mikolajczak, Gosia, Ryan, Michelle K., Qonita, Lulu, Liao, Yuan-Hsi, Vu, Minh Phuong, Vacaflares, Isabella, Lau, Samantha and Cleary, Annabelle. 2026. "Social Norms, Attitudes, and Practices Survey: Understanding Gender Norms across Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam". The Global Institute for Women's Leadership. Available at <https://giwl.anu.edu.au/our-research/understanding-gender-norms-across-indonesiamalaysia-philippines-vietnam>



# Changing attitudes to gender equality



- 17% agree feminism should be resisted with violence
  - Among 13-17 year old boys, 36% agreed with misogynistic attitudes
  - 40% of boys aged 13-17 years agreed women lie about domestic and sexual violence

*>>> threat to masculine status and lack of belonging*

Sara Meger and Kate Reynolds 2026, 40% of teenage boys believe women lie about domestic and sexual violence: new research. <https://findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/news/145763-40-of-teenage-boys-believe-women-lie-about-domestic-and-sexual-violence--new-research>

# In perspective

Since 2024, those who oppose DEI in the workplace has decreased from 7% to 5%, and those who support it have increased from 75% to 76% of workers.

***Contrary to media reports, more workers now perceive their organisations are taking action on D&I.***

D'Alminda-Remedios, R. (2024). *Inclusion@Work Index 2023-2024: Mapping the state of inclusion in the Australian workforce*. Diversity Council Australia. <https://www.dca.org.au/research/inclusion-at-work-index-2023-2024>  
CSIRO, Global Institute for Women's Leadership and Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute 2025 *Inclusive Innovation Playbook*. Diversity Council of Australia (2026). *Inclusion@Work Index 2025-2026*. <https://www.dca.org.au/research/inclusion-at-work-index-2025-2026>

# Backlash

Resistance often stems from fear...

**STATUS THREAT** zero-sum thinking where gains by marginalised groups feel like losses for the majority.

**MERIT THREAT** belief that DEI challenges the idea that success comes purely from individual effort

**MORAL THREAT** discomfort acknowledging personal or group privilege.

D'Almada-Remedios, R. (2024). *Inclusion@Work Index 2023-2024: Mapping the state of inclusion in the Australian workforce*. Diversity Council Australia. <https://www.dca.org.au/research/inclusion-at-work-index-2023-2024>  
CSIRO, Global Institute for Women's Leadership and Wiyi Yani U Thangani Institute 2025 *Inclusive Innovation Playbook* .

# What does backlash look like?

1. **Denial:** Denial of the problem or the legitimacy of the case for change.
2. **Disavowal:** Refusal to recognise responsibility to address the problem or the change process for this problem.
3. **Inaction:** Refusal to implement a change initiative.
4. **Appeasement:** Efforts to placate or pacify those advocating for change in order to limit its impact.
5. **Appropriation:** Simulating change while covertly undermining it.
6. **Co-option:** Using the language of progressive frameworks and goals (“equality,” “rights,” “justice” and so on) to maintain unequal structures and practices.
7. **Repression:** The reversal or dismantling of a change initiative once implementation has begun.
8. **Violence:** The use of violence, harassment and abuse against subordinate groups.
9. **Politicisation:** The process of giving facts and ideas a political tone or character, elevating their contestation.
10. **Internalisation:** Unconscious or subconscious assimilation regressive attitudes and behaviours.

**What's one phrase or argument you're hearing that signals pushback in your context?**


# Inclusive innovation

Australia's innovation ecosystem

## Inclusive Innovation Roadmap

Everyone in the innovation ecosystem has unique power to drive change. Your voice, decisions, and daily actions shape who gets to participate in innovation. This Roadmap, and accompanying Playbook, show how your influence can help transform Australia's innovation ecosystem.

**Inclusive Innovation Playbook** Dive deeper to find detailed actions, case studies and implementation tools.



- 1 Opportunity to provide additional info. As in:**
  - Ad-hoc, short-term initiatives that overlook systemic change
  - Approaches aimed at fixing individual instead of systems
  - Performance Inclusionity
- 2 Understand your sphere of influence**
  - Identify leverage points
  - Focused influence
  - Map impact
- 3 Examine your own biases and assumptions**
  - Self-reflection
  - Notice creating perspectives
  - Challenge assumptions
- 4 Build daily inclusive practices**
  - Inclusive language
  - Show opportunities
  - Value diverse contributions
  - Create welcoming spaces
- 5 Champion equity in every interaction**
  - Challenge bias
  - Amplify voices
  - Support others' advice
  - Foster collaboration
- 6 Expand your definition of success**
  - Broaden metrics
  - Recognize diverse motivations
  - Community partnerships
  - Embed values
- 7 Transformed innovation ecosystem**
  - Diverse voices leading
  - Inclusive practices as standard
  - Core embedded
  - Continuous MEL


**Your leadership actions** Evidence-based practices creating conditions for inclusive innovation. Start anywhere - other actions will emerge.

**Underlying principles**

- Systems-focused approach over individual solutions
- Integrate multiple actions
- Sustained commitment - change requires ongoing effort

**Measurement, evaluation and learning (MEL)**  
What signals might you feel, sense, hear or see if these actions occurred in your setting?

Funded by CSIRO's ON Innovation Program and delivered in collaboration with the Global Institute for Women's Leadership and the Wuyi Yaru U-Thurgate Institute for First Nations Gender Justice.



## Inclusive innovation playbook



Scan the QR code to download the Playbook and other resources



# Navigating backlash

- 1. Anticipate and name resistance.** Understand that backlash is likely and learn to identify how it manifests.
- 2. Integrate pre-emptive myth-busting.** Address common misconceptions before they take hold using the **fact-myth-fallacy-response** framework: present the fact, then the myth and debunking, followed by explanation of how the fallacy distorts the fact, concluding with clear response.
- 3. Present multiple cases for DEI.** Combine approaches:
  - *Business case.* Inclusive organisations are more innovative, more likely to meet targets.
  - *People case.* Inclusive teams show higher job satisfaction, better mental health.
  - *Values case.* Frame as fairness, dignity and social responsibility – an ethical and moral responsibility

# Navigating backlash

**4. Use storytelling and lived experience.** Personal narratives are powerful tools for reducing defensiveness and humanising DEI work. Storytelling tends to connect better than facts alone.

**5. Adopt an invitational, voluntary tone.** Use language that invites participation and collaboration. An emphasis on shared goals and universal values is less likely to be contentious or polarising. The values of benevolence, universalism and self-direction are most associated with non-discrimination and equality.

**6. Create feedback mechanisms.** Design channels for open dialogue and feedback to foster trust and responsiveness. Provide safe spaces where people can express their beliefs, concerns and questions without fear of judgement. The process of listening can itself be transformative, especially when resistance stems from fear or uncertainty.

**7. Encourage values-based reflection.**

Reflection helps organisations and individuals examine their values, identities and the systemic dynamics at play. This form of values-aligned inquiry creates space for honest and open reflection and deeper commitment to change.

**8. Draw on tools.** Draw on tools (such as in the Playbook) to help stakeholders recognise and interrupt bias in their roles.

**You don't have to do everything,  
but you can do something.**

Think about your audience,  
your options, and your  
capacity.

# Reframing equity

By changing the context, you can change the perception of something as *negative* into something that is *positive* (or vice versa).

# Reframing equity

## Set the context

- What is a relevant **universal statement** or **truism**?

*We know that it's hard to raise funds right now.*

*Women persistently receive less funding for enterprise.*

*Australia is not alone in facing these problems.*

*These are issues our whole sector is grappling with.*

## Build interest

- What is its **importance** to the audience?

*Imagine creating a new way for funding entrepreneurs, regardless of their background.*

*Today's about seizing an opportunity to make a tangible difference, not just for women entrepreneurs but for the health of our whole innovation ecosystem.*

## Acknowledge concerns

- What are their **concerns**?

*You may be concerned that by focusing on funding for women entrepreneurs, other entrepreneurs will miss out.*

*You might be concerned about how this aligns with existing budget constraints.*

*There could be fears that this signals tokenism rather than genuine systemic change.*

*You might be wondering whether this approach will deliver measurable returns for all stakeholders.*

## Directional thinking

- How do you **want them thinking, acting, behaving, feeling**?

*Today we have an opportunity to genuinely co-create a way forwards that is fair and targeted, recognising the ongoing challenges women entrepreneurs face.*

*I encourage you to approach this challenge with an open mind, prepared to think boldly with your best strategy hat on.*

*We invite you to help us create the most flourishing innovation ecosystem for all – funders, entrepreneurs and Australia more generally.*

# Over to you...

1. Think of a real scenario where you faced equity pushback
2. Name the pushback using the 10 categories
3. How could you shift the narrative so the concern becomes an opportunity?

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## Directional thinking

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# Shifting systems, not just conversations



# What works?

More generally, we know that successful gender equality projects have a few commonalities (Acker 2007):

1. **target a limited set of goals** at once.
2. **coincide with wider external support/movements** (e.g. movements in country or internationally, at a UN level)
3. **involve coercion or threat of loss** – i.e. organisations have to comply with policy directives (coercion) or lose out by not taking gender equality seriously, e.g. don't get full amount of funding or lose international credibility, etc. (threat of loss)

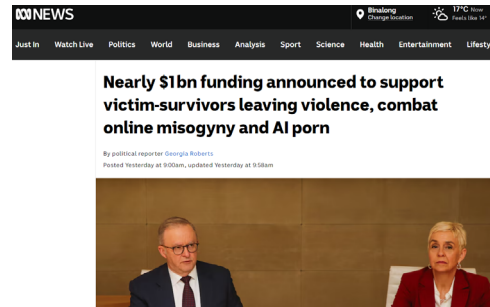
National Victoria Domestic violence

## Thousands march in Melbourne rally against gendered violence 'national disgrace'

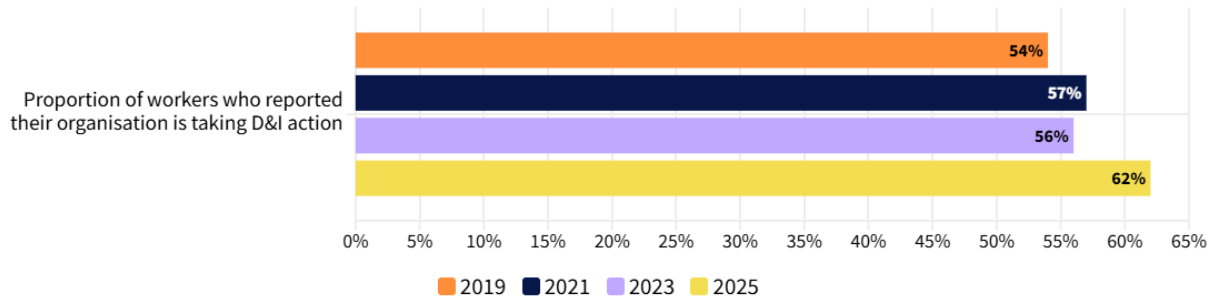
Ashleigh McMillan

Updated April 28, 2024 – 2:24pm, first published at 11:28am

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# More organisations are doing more.



D'Almada-Remedios, R. (2024). *Inclusion@Work Index 2023-2024: Mapping the state of inclusion in the Australian workforce*. Diversity Council Australia. <https://www.dca.org.au/research/inclusion-at-work-index-2023-2024>  
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New legislation requires 'designated relevant employers' (DREs) to select and meet gender equality targets.

A DRE is defined as an employer who directly employs 500 or more employees.

These employers will need to select and commit to achieve 3 targets from a menu of 19 options. At the end of 3 years, they need to meet or demonstrate improvement against each target selected.

The list of targets employers can select from is defined in the legislation and detailed in the [WGEA Targets Menu Guide](#).

This FAQ provides answers to common questions about the new requirements. It also includes details of support available from WGEA to assist employers to select and implement effective targets.

For more information on how to select targets, the evidence-base for targets, or to register for WGEA's Targets Masterclass, head to [wgea.gov.au/targets](https://wgea.gov.au/targets).

# What's one lever you can influence?

## Understanding

### Your unique leverage points

**Now that you've identified your sphere/s of influence, consider:**

- **Where is your influence strongest?**  
Focus your initial efforts where you have the most direct control and decision-making power.
- **What changes would have the biggest ripple effect?** Think about actions that would influence others to also change their practices.
- **Where do you face the most resistance?** Understanding barriers helps you plan more effective change strategies.
- **Who else shares your sphere of influence?** Identify potential allies and collaborators in your ecosystem role.
- **What unique assets do you bring?** Your lived experience, professional credibility, networks and resources create distinctive opportunities that others might not have.

- Recruitment?
- Procurement?
- Program design?
- Budgets?
- ....?

**Backlash often signals  
meaningful progress when  
entrenched power structures  
are challenged.**

Expect it but never accept it.