

Time to back women as leaders

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A survey of political, media and social media commentary this week proves one thing: Australia's attitudes to working women are stuck and need a good shove to get them moving again.

Yes, society says, it's fine for women to work. But there has been a systemic failure to remove the barriers to women in work.

Working women are expected to bend their work and career aspirations around society's expectations, rather than society and government – providing the means for women to engage meaningfully in work on an equal footing.

Look at the government rhetoric around changes to paid parental leave this week that played into those negative attitudes to women combining parenthood with work, using words like "roosting" and "double-dipping".

It has taken many years to move businesses to recognise and value the contribution of women. An employer that that paid parental leave should have government policy that supports and encourages that, not detracts from it.

A negative dialogue around women accessing child care was also loud and clear in the news and social media this week.

Women being in work is desirable and legitimate. It increases the tax base, boosts productivity and provides economic security.

Increasing female workplace participation by just four percentage points would increase Australia's GDP by \$23 billion every year.

Having children is also desirable and legitimate in Australia.

These sound objectives should be backed by government policies that recognise the contribution women make to our economy.

So why are we so quick to scapegoat working women in



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Australia? And what can we do to change it?

At YWCA Canberra, we believe parenting responsibilities are not defined by gender. We are working towards a future where responsibilities for parenting are shared equally as the norm, not the exception.

We also need to introduce quotas for leadership positions.

The Equilibrium Challenge, launched recently and endorsed by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, will follow men in different industries as they ask their employers for flexible work arrangements to support their parenting responsibilities. The resulting micro-

documentary will be fascinating, and highlight the discrepancies in how men and women are treated by employers.

There is a tolerance for women accessing part-time or flexible work arrangements to support parenting responsibilities. But there is a price paid for this "tolerance". The price is lower pay, fewer opportunities for training and advancement, lower numbers of women in positions of power and influence, and a general perception that women are less desirable as employees due to caring responsibilities.

Women statistically earn less than men, with the current gender pay gap sitting at 18.8 per cent, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The female workforce participation rate is 68 per cent and has barely moved in the past decade.

Reconciling paid parental leave, child care and flexible work arrangements as issues for society

as a whole, not just women, would begin to shift those attitudes and inequalities.

We also need to introduce quotas for leadership positions. The need is clear and unequivocal: if we wait for organic change, progress will be excruciatingly slow. A recent ASX200 survey found there are more men named Peter running top 200 companies in Australia than there are women.

ACT Chief Minister Andrew Barr ought to follow the lead of his Victorian counterpart, Daniel Andrews, in legislating that 50 per cent of all government board appointments must be women. The Victorian quota applies to all paid government board positions and all Victorian courts.

In making this change, Mr Andrews said, "It's sick of walking into meetings and seeing a room full of blokes sitting around the table.

"Many of the boardrooms of our

public bodies are lacking a balance of skills, a balance of views, a balance of experiences and a balance of knowledge.

"Because they're lacking perhaps the most important balance of all – they're lacking women."

Next Tuesday, YWCA Canberra will be hosting the She Leads 2015 Conference, where women will have the opportunity to network, be inspired by an incredible array of speakers and panellists, and develop their leadership potential.

But we need society to back these aspiring women leaders.

Equal participation of women is the work force, and particularly in decision-making leadership roles across all sectors, is vital for Australia, as a progressive, innovative society, to move forward.

Frances Crimmins is the executive director of YWCA Canberra.