

Australian report finds disturbing evidence of gender inequality

Sex discrimination commissioner Kate Jenkins reveals widespread opposition to advancing equality, despite stark evidence progress is needed

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A report into the experiences of more than 1,000 women said there was ‘tremendous resilience from women overcoming the entrenched obstacles to their progress’. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

Incorrect assumptions are being made that gender equality has been achieved despite disturbing and comprehensive evidence to the contrary, an investigation by Australia’s sex discrimination commissioner, Kate Jenkins, has found.

Her findings include the experiences of more than 1,000 women who she interviewed while travelling to every state and territory over a six-month period last year to learn about Australia’s progress towards gender equality.

Women start out as ambitious as men but it erodes over time, says researcher

“I did this report because you need to know you need to know the lay of the land before you make progress,” Jenkins told Guardian Australia. “I think that probably one of the most surprising and concerning findings was just how prevalent the opposition to advancing gender equality is.”

After speaking to women and reviewing existing research, Jenkins found there were three key areas where equality was particularly lacking and where more progress was needed. They were gender economic security, leadership positions and violence against women.

“Some people are adamantly opposed to proactive initiatives to improve gender equality,” Jenkins said. “Other people truly don’t understand this is still problem for Australia.

“They’re not actively working against equality but there is a sense in the broader community that gender equality has been achieved, which means there is no real motivation for people to do things differently or to promote women or highlight their stories.”

A lot of the rural women were really facing greater barriers to women in metro areas
Kate Jenkins

One of the stories highlighted in the report was the experience of a woman named Lyn, who works as a cleaner in a hospital. She told Jenkins she regularly experienced sexual harassment from doctors and patients.

On one occasion a patient called Lyn into his room, where he sat naked with an erection. “Her colleagues, including her manager, assumed that she was sexually involved with the patient,” the report said.

“Lyn tried to report an unrelated instance of sexual harassment by a colleague’s husband but her manager did not take her seriously. After eight years of employment, Lyn thinks that she will have to resign from her job.”

Jenkins said for many women she spoke with, the repercussions for speaking up and reporting harassment or inequality to their managers were worse than the discrimination and harassment itself.

Workplaces that consider themselves meritocracies 'often hide gender biases'

A female employee told Jenkins she had been labelled “hysterical” for calling out sexism. Another woman told Jenkins she lost shifts in her casual employment because she was unable to find care for her children at short notice.

A plumber started her own business after failing to receive a single callback for job applications despite being overqualified. And a young woman in a suburban area was encouraged to pursue childcare or be a barista rather than apply for a trades apprenticeship.

Women working in rural and remote areas were particularly vulnerable to inequality, Jenkins found. One young woman told her how she was asked to wear a bikini while fruit picking to get paid a bonus. Jenkins heard stories of women not being taken seriously or experiencing sexual harassment in these areas in particular. “A lot of the rural women were really facing greater barriers to women in metro areas,” she said.

“It’s too easy to lump all women together as a homogenous group of white, Anglo-Saxon, heterosexual, able-bodied people, many who feel they are breaking down some of those barriers to equality.

International Women's Day 2017: protests, activism and a strike – as it happened

“But there are many different voices in this, and my voice is tied to having spoken to rural women, LGBTI women, older women, women with disabilities, migrant women and Aboriginal women.”

Research shows that women with disabilities are 40% more likely than women without disabilities to be the victims of domestic violence; and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are 32 times more likely to be admitted to hospital as a result of family violence-related assault than non-Indigenous women in Australia.

The report noted that Australia’s long history of removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their parents had left young women scared to take their babies to hospitals when they are unwell because they fear having their children removed from their custody.

“It took a woman like Rosie Batty to make people understand and be aware of family violence, and key to that was her experience was supported by overwhelming evidence and facts,” Jenkins said.

“People do need to hear individual experiences and that’s what this report tries to do. It tried to document those lived experiences and help those not touched by inequality in their everyday lives to realise deeply embedded barriers to change still remain. And that behind these stories, there is clear data.”

One woman, named Sonia, told Jenkins how after she became pregnant, her partner regularly raped her and emotionally manipulated her to convince her his behaviour was acceptable.

The findings were launched on Wednesday to coincide with International Women’s Day. Jenkins said it was distressing to see the same arguments emerge each year that having a day for women was biased against men and unnecessary.

Rosie Batty: By teaching children, we can change the culture of violence against women

Rosie Batty

“You see the conversations with people asking; ‘Where is men’s day?’ Well first of all, there is one. [It’s in November](#). And the fact is we still see women underrepresented on honour rolls around the country.

“Until recently, women had to stop playing AFL at 13 or 14 if they were wanting to play at the highest levels, because there was nowhere for them to advance to. We have research from workforces like the Australian federal police and from surgeons highlighting inequality and discrimination.

“The World Economic Forum ranks countries for female economic participation and Australia ranks number 46.”

Jenkins’ report also found there were still fewer opportunities for women when it came to career development, progression and leadership in casual employment.

One female academic interviewed noted that although promotions are supposed to be considered in light of achievement relative to opportunity, in reality promotions were based on how many papers an individual had produced, which disadvantaged women on parental leave or with caring responsibilities.

But the report was not entirely depressing, Jenkins said. In her foreword she wrote that in her consultations around the country she had also heard about “ingenious ways individuals are working to overcome structural biases and unhelpful stereotypes in order to improve opportunities for women and girls”.

“Again and again I witnessed tremendous resilience from women overcoming the entrenched obstacles to their progress, and men stepping up beside women to advance gender equality,” she said