

# Target Setting for Gender Equality: A Review of the Literature

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Report prepared for the Workplace Gender Equality Agency

March 2024

## Executive Summary

This report presents a synthesis of insights drawn from research literature on gender equality in the workplace that can inform the development of a menu of targets by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), for organisations to adopt and implement as part of Australia's progressive journey towards gender equality.

The breadth of research presented in this report expands to insights that can help inform WGEA on the most effective ways to communicate the target menu to organisations and elevate organisations' positive receptiveness to the new target-setting initiatives.

Research insights have been synthesised around four broad themes: Harnessing data-driven approaches; Expanding beyond headcounts; Curating an enabling environment; and Optimising for success. For each theme, the report offers a summary of the practical implications gleaned from the research that can be applied to WGEA's formulation of the target menu. The collation of insights range from specific prescriptions on the design of targets that have been clearly identified in the literature, to broader inferences about engagement with organisations that apply more generally across the target-setting exercise.

This review also identifies examples of accompanying actions that organisations can be encouraged to take that will support their pursuit of targets, including actions that can elevate the likelihood of achieving genuine and sustained progress.

The content presented in this report may also prove helpful as input into the creation of informational guidance and resources to support organisations in their target-setting initiatives and to enlighten broader audiences through public dissemination.

## About this publication

This independent report has been written for the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA). It takes an evidence-based approach to the collation and synthesis of the literature to support WGEA to undertake its roles under the *Workplace Gender Equality Act*.

This research was commissioned by WGEA to inform the development of a menu of targets by WGEA in response to recommendation 3.1a of the review of the *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012*. The review recommended a requirement that "employers with 500 or more employees commit to, achieve and report to WGEA on measurable, genuine targets to improve gender equality in their workplace". The proposed menu would be intended to guide organisations in their conception and adherence to targets, in accordance with the proposed legislative amendment.



**Suggested citation:**

Risse, L. (2024) *Target Setting for Gender Equality: A review of the literature*. Report prepared for the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA).



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# 1. Aims and purpose

## 1.1 How this review delivers on WGEA's expected outcomes

This report provides a synthesis of research and evidence relating to the effective use of targets, including why targets matter, processes to choose which targets to set and at what level, and processes for ongoing embedding, reporting and monitoring.

This report approaches this task by asking: What is the evidence that can inform the use of gender equality targets by organisations to achieve their gender equality objectives? And what evidence can inform WGEA in its creation and communication of a menu of targets for organisations?

To optimise the relevance of these findings for WGEA's operations and functions, the insights and implications drawn from this review of the research are mapped out in a way that aligns with WGEA's existing Gender Equality Indicators (GEIs) and recognises the data that WGEA currently collects from organisations. Insights are contextualised within a broader understanding of the practical challenges and impediments faced by organisations when investing in gender equality initiatives and embarking on organisational change.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Criteria used to conduct literature review

This report applies the criteria that WGEA is seeking in this review:

- draws on contemporary evidence (10 years or less), with the exception of seminal papers
- identifies instances where any nuances arise for types of employers (such as differences by industry and organisation size)
- structured by WGEA's 6 Gender Equality Indicators (GEIs)
- include targets relating to data collected in WGEA's annual employer Gender Equality Census

This review also considers practical applicability, which entails the feasibility of which metrics can be practically observed, measured and analysed. Both numeric and policy-related targets are considered.

The diversity that exists across different organisations is a factor for consideration. This includes accounting for different stages of maturity that organisations can be at in their knowledge, experience and progress on gender equality. This review presents its synthesis of findings in a way that is sensitive to variations in organisations' stage of maturity in gender equality, as well as differences in technical and resourcing capability.

The methodology applied in this literature review has been informed by resources of the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE, 2023). The consolidated criteria adopted in this review is presented in Appendix 1.



### 3. Synthesis of findings

This section draws out the thematic insights that were identified in this literature review which have relevance for the design and implementation of gender equality targets. It offers a critical appraisal by considering the practical implications of these insights.

While these thematic insights aim to reflect the prevailing literature, this synthesis does not claim to be exhaustive. There is scope for further review and research to generate additional insights.

**Figure 1: Summary of thematic findings of literature review**

1. Harnessing data-driven approaches	2. Expanding beyond headcounts	3. Curating an enabling environment	4. Optimising for success
Statistical practicalities	Capturing experiences	Need for accountability	Holistic systems-based approach
Achieving critical mass	Positive duty of care	Commitment to resourcing	Alignment with organisation's identity, purpose
Timeframes for success	Non-binary genders and intersectionality	Addressing resistance	
Need for evaluation	Specific inclusion of men	Openness to learn and innovate	

#### 3.1 Harnessing data-driven approaches

Best practice research on diversity and inclusion clearly advocates for a data-driven approach as a mechanism for activating change.

Applying insights from behavioural design, leading scholar in the gender equality field Professor Iris Bohnet summarises how data analytics can do more than merely enlighten, but also mobilise action:

*“What does not get measured does not count,” a saying goes. Even more important, though, is the truism “What does not get measured cannot be fixed.” (Bohnet 2016, p. 103)*

Bringing a feminist perspective to data analysis, D'Ignazio and Klein (2020) highlight how data can be a tool of empowerment in the journey towards gender equality. The collation and



robust analysis of data can serve to dispel misconceptions and myths that impede progress, to scientifically test for evidence of bias, and to thoroughly evaluate which strategies work and which do not.

A strength of a data-driven approach, which is behind the use of targets, is that it brings objectivity and transparency to an organisation's gender equality efforts and enables an organisation to monitor its progress towards gender equality in a way that is readily measurable and trackable over time. The “ease” with which progress can be measured and tracked could elevate an organisation's (or individual's) perception that it is capable of achieving its objectives – a characteristic identified in the psychology and change management literature as self-efficacy (Gist 2014). This potential for data-driven approaches to enhance self-efficacy, whether at the level of an individual or organisation, could enhance the likelihood of workplaces' positive engagement with target-setting.

This data-based approach to gender equality progress is backed by WGEA-BCEC analysis showing that companies that undertake regular analyses of their gender pay gap and other gender indicators see a faster narrowing of their gender gaps compared to companies that do not (Cassells and Duncan 2018).

Providing an example of best practice, the UK Behavioural Insights Team (2021) provides an instructive guide on target-setting for gender equality goals, which was written with input from gender equality scholars from Harvard University.<sup>1</sup> It distils evidence-based insights from academic research and practitioner experience to arrive at a practical checklist for organisations to set their gender equality targets. Best practice actions recommended in the report emphasise data-driven processes, including investing in the collection and analysis of data to generate objective metrics of gender equality outcomes and progress.

The practicalities of designing and operationalising data-driven targets, however, bring complexities. A major consideration are the ethics and legal responsibilities concerning the appropriate way for organisations to collate and use personal data, and how to ensure trust and integrity in the data collation processes. Another complexity arises in managing the mathematical and statistical properties of data metrics when formulating appropriate targets.

### 3.1.1 Statistical practicalities

Drawing on a number of publications and practical guides on target-setting for gender equality, a conventional approach for setting gender equality metrics is to compute statistical proportions or percentages that compare the figure for women to the figure for men. This approach generally lends itself to an implicit assumption that progress constitutes a narrowing of any gaps where women are lower than men, while a plateauing or widening of any gaps would be interpreted as stagnation or regression. However, it is also important to consider and set targets pertaining to outcomes where men are under-represented, such as rates of men's participation in parental leave and flexible working practices.

One example of a data-driven approach is adopted in the comprehensive set of gender equality indicators proposed in the Baltic Gender Project's Handbook on Gender-Sensitive Indicators (Baltic Gender 2019). This handbook, which was designed with specific reference to the field of marine research and focuses mainly on gender equality within the academic profession, informatively presents a detailed set of objective statistical metrics, with reference to academic analysis in support.

Suggested metrics include, and can be expanded, to:

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<sup>1</sup> The report published by the Behavioural Insights Team (2021) was written with academic input from gender equality scholars Iris Bohnet, Siri Chilazi and Anisha Asundi from the Women and Public Policy Program at Harvard Kennedy School, and is therefore treated as fulfilling the standards of an academic publication in this literature review.



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### **Scissor Diagrams**

Scissor Diagrams visualise the composition of men and women at different stages of organisational seniority and the employee life cycle. It illustrates the over-representation of women at lower ranks and under-representation at senior ranks, reflective of the “leaky pipeline” phenomenon and the widening disparity between men’s and women’s representation at increasingly senior levels within an organisation.

Set a target to narrow the “Scissors” illustration.

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### **Glass Ceiling Index**

Measure the ratio of women’s share of positions at the top levels of an organisation, to women’s overall share of all positions in the organisation.

Set a target to lift this Glass Ceiling metric.

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### **Female representation in leadership**

Measure women’s share of chief roles and decision-making committees.

Set a target to steer this proportion to represent gender balance.

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### **Gender pay gap**

Measure the difference between men’s average (or median) earnings and women’s average (or median) earnings, divided by men’s earnings and, multiplied by 100% to express as a percentage.

Set a target to steer the gender pay gap closer towards zero (or an acceptable small threshold).

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### **Gender gap in part-time employment**

Measure the difference between the share of women in part-time employment and the share of men in part-time employment.

Set a target to narrow this gap.

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### **Work-care policies**

Measure the availability of work-care policies, such as employer-provided paid parental leave, carer’s leave, quality childcare and flexible working arrangements (noting that flexibility can mean flexibility in time and flexibility of location).

Set a target to increase the number of these policies available and the rates of usage by employees.

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### **Pipeline measures**

Measure women’s proportional share of applicants, candidates selected for interviews, and hiring of new appointments in the recruitment process

Set a target to steer women’s shares closer to gender balance.

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### **Gender lensing**

Measure whether the organisation undertakes a gender analysis of the services, policies and programs it is responsible for delivering.

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Set a target to increase the number of services, policies and programs to which a gender lens is applied.

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The Handbook offers recommendations on the numerical value to apply to these metrics in assessing progress.

For example, in relation to women's representation in leadership, chief roles and decision-making committees, the Handbook advises: "An equal share is reached if both women and men are represented evenly (50%) but at least not below 40% because in some countries, the legal definition of equal representation is 40%" (p. 14). In relation to the gender pay gap, it advises: "If a gender pay gap of more than 5 per cent on any of the income levels in an institution is identified as a steady trend over time, the reasons should be investigated" (p. 7). WGEA has consistently considered a gender pay gap within this range of +/-5% as a tolerance threshold which accounts for normal business fluctuations and employee movements.

In this review of this literature, an observation to offer here is that these types of data-driven metrics tend to be generated from sectors where data analysis and technical computations are a part of the sector's operations, such as academia and the Professional, Scientific and Technical Services sector. A potential drawback to gender equality metrics that are based on technical formulas is that they may have less resonance to industries and sectors that are not as technically oriented. There is a potential risk that mathematically complex approaches could be perceived as too technical and less meaningful to some industries and sectors, unless additional guidance and resources are provided. The distinction between technical and non-technical (or "less" technical) sectors has emerged as one of the key dimensions of "sectoral difference" for WGEA to be alert to in its engagement with organisations.

However, the advantages of these technical sectors' contribution to these matters is that they provide helpful insights on how to navigate these statistical complexities. For instance, the *Baltic Gender Handbook* (2019) highlights the following statistical considerations when analysing the gender pay gap as a metric of gender equality:

- Calculating the gender pay gap using averages does not account for distortion effects potentially caused by outliers within the distribution. Therefore, while it is advisable to monitor such outliers (such as CEO salaries) which are often deeply gendered, it is recommended that gender pay gap calculations apply an analysis of median values or other distributional measures such as quintiles to this set of metrics.
- Disaggregation by subgroup (such as occupational level) is recommended within an organisation's analysis. However, if the count of individuals within a subgroup is very small, problems can arise in relation to individual anonymity and statistical validity. The implication of this insight for WGEA is that thresholds will need to be provided on what constitutes a small count, and guidance offered on how to manage small counts. The *Baltic Gender Handbook* (2019) recommends setting a threshold count of 5 cases as the minimum number of individuals needed in a subgroup for analysis to be undertaken.

When designing data-driven targets, this review notes that the statistical interconnectedness of different gender equality metrics is a factor for consideration. As an example, an increase in women's share of senior occupational roles (GEI 1) would, all else constant, lead to an improvement in the organisation's overall gender pay gap (GEI 3). This impresses the need for measurements of equal pay between men and women (GEI 3) to be analysed at each occupational level of the organisation. It also points to the importance of the menu promoting targets and actions that will contribute to closing the gender pay gap through ways other than improving women's representation in senior occupations (for example, by addressing discrimination and biases).





An observation drawn throughout this review is the imperative for any statistics-based targets to be defined in a way that is clear, unambiguous and accessible for end-users. This applies when defining targets for metrics that are computed as percentage values to begin with: conventional mathematical practice is to express any change in terms of “percentage points”. This is the approach adopted by the G20 in the articulation of targets for closing the gap in women’s labour force participation rates (OECD and ILO 2019). Examples are offered below:

- Targets for the gender pay gap need to clarify that any changes in the gap would be statistically expressed as a change in “percentage points”. For example, a decrease in the gender pay gap from 14% to 12% would be expressed as a decrease of 2 percentage points (computed as the difference between 14% and 12%). A decrease in the gender pay gap from 6% to 4% would still be measured as an improvement of 2 percentage points, even though the starting point is lower.<sup>2</sup> This approach makes the assumption that both improvements are equally valuable.
- Similarly, targets on gender composition would be technically expressed as a percentage change. For example, an increase in women’s share of employees from 35% to 40% would be expressed as an increase of 5 percentage points. An increase in women’s share of employees from 10% to 15% would also be expressed as a 5 percentage point increase, even though it is based on a lower starting point.
- This approach follows mathematical convention in the field and has the advantage of computational ease by preserving the denominator value, as all percentage points are relative to 100.

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<sup>2</sup> An alternative to the “percentage points” approach is to compute the change relative to the starting value. For example, a fall from 14% to 12% could be computed as a  $2/14 = 14.3\%$  improvement, while a fall from 6% to 4% could be computed as a  $2/6 = 33.3\%$  improvement. This approach skews the magnitude of the measured change depending on an organisation’s starting point. It also creates complexities because organisations need to “reset” their starting point (the denominator number in the equation) each time the value changes. These practical and conceptual complexities lend support to the use of the percentage point approach instead.



### **An example of a statistical solution: Gender Proportionality Principle**

An instructive data-driven target-setting method advocated by Harvard scholars is the ‘gender proportionality principle’ (GPP). This relates to gender composition indicators and can be operationalised in hiring, promotion and leadership appointment decisions. The GPP approach prescribes that the gender composition at a given rank within an organisation should aim to reflect the gender composition of the rank immediately below it which feeds into the higher ranks (Chilazi, Bohnet and Hauser 2021). This logic aims to plug the “leaky pipeline” where women’s representation diminishes at higher occupational levels. The academic authors report that they have worked directly with several organisations who have adopted the GPP approach and successfully achieved improvements in gender equity across their ranks.

Chilazi et al. (2021) identify that a strength to the GPP approach for target-setting is that it offers a practically more realistic outcome for organisations to pursue and achieve. This can make it more appealing for organisations to adopt as a target, serving to boost buy-in and receptiveness. The academic authors also stress the importance of setting up systems for accountability for the achievement of GPP outcomes within a specified timeframe (See **Need for accountability**). Based on their practical experience working with companies, they recommend three to five years. (See **Timeframes for success**)

Backed by these research insights, the GPP approach can be incorporated into target metrics for its practical logic, simplicity and likelihood of appeal to organisations. This research also affirms that actions to establish accountability for achieving these proportions-based outcomes need to be part of the policy architecture that organisations are encouraged to adopt.

This review identifies some potential caveats to this approach. There is a hypothetical risk that this approach incentivises organisations to change their behaviour in regressive ways. For an organisation that has a lower representation of women at senior ranks than at junior ranks, one way to achieve proportional representation among senior ranks is to reduce women’s representation at junior ranks as well. Therefore, designing a proportionality target that requires women’s representation at senior ranks to *rise to match* that of the rank immediately below – rather than merely match it – is a way to avert these potential distortionary incentive effects.

The GPP approach has applicability not only in male-concentrated workplaces, but also in female-concentrated or gender-balanced workplaces where women are still under-represented at senior ranks.

### **3.1.2 Achieving a critical mass**

A large number of studies, conducted over a diversity of settings, point towards the significance of reaching “critical mass” in women’s representation in order to bring about observable change in an organisation’s performance outcomes and practices. Thirty per cent (or one-third) has emerged as the proportion that constitutes this critical mass threshold (Joecks et al. 2013; Strydom et al. 2017; Tarkovska et al. 2023; Wicker et al. 2023). Although this section refers to board leadership to explore the concept of a critical mass threshold, it can be applied beyond boards, such as to overall gender composition within organisations and/or gender composition at certain staff levels.

Other studies have highlighted not only the ineffectiveness, but also the problematic risks, of having only one woman on a board (Yarram and Adapa 2021). Scholars have cautioned that such tokenism tends to subject that sole woman to higher visibility and, consequently, greater scrutiny and performance pressure. This scenario is also less likely to achieve



transformative change, but instead result in an assimilation process where the solo woman tends to imitate the behaviour of the majority cohort. It also carries the risk of causing isolation or patronising treatment, the perception of tokenism, or a concentration of backlash against a company's gender equality being targeted towards the woman herself (Yarram and Adapa 2021). For example, if a sole woman expresses a different perspective to the majority cohort, she could be singled out as a disruptor or “troublemaker”, rather than her different opinion being valued for constructively broadening the group's perspective.

When coming off a low starting base, target metrics on women's representation on boards and other executive roles need to be designed in a way that sets the 30 per cent critical mass threshold as the minimum acceptable proportion to be reached. The literature on “token theory” further implies that the target menu needs to communicate that the appointment of a sole woman to a board (even if it is relative to having zero women) cannot, in itself, be treated a marker of genuine progress.

The potential outcomes of achieving a critical mass in women's representation can flow on to indirectly support the achievement of other gender equality indicators in addition to the gender composition metrics. For example, achieving a critical mass in women's representation within the organisations could help to normalise a greater uptake of flexible working arrangements, including the positive impact of role modelling the use of flexible working at senior and executive levels. Achieving a critical mass may also help to shift standards of behaviour with respect to discrimination and harassment in the workplace (See: Capturing employee experiences)

### 3.1.3 Timeframes for success

As part of a data-driven approach to gender equality targets, setting timeframes is well recognised as a component of effective goal-setting. For example, the SMART approach to goal-setting, commonly cited within this literature, advises that targets should be: specific, measurable, achievable (that is, practical), relevant and time-bound. This is consistent with research on goal-setting that cautions that distal (long-term) goals can be less effective in motivating change compared to proximal (short-term) (Barends, Janssen and Velghe 2016). In its submission to the Review of the Workplace Gender Equality Act, the Global Institute for Women's Leadership drew on comparative research on gender pay gap reporting in their recommendation that targets to redress pay gaps should be timebound (cited in Commonwealth of Australia 2022, p. 27).

Mapping out a progressive roadmap of targets to be achieved at intervals over time can also convey the narrative that progress towards gender equality is a “journey” for organisations. This also reflects the progressive journey that organisations will need to embark on to implement their gender equality strategies, with respect to awareness-raising, knowledge-building, capacity-building, and supporting ongoing improvement through iterative learning-by-doing (Washington 2022). (See **Openness to learn and innovate**)

USAID (2022), in its gender equality target-setting guide, provides a set of examples that apply the SMART approach. Targets are made measurable by the use of readily quantifiable metrics and time-bound by articulating a series of sequential milestones. An intuitive strength of the examples in USAID's Guide is that they map across the employee lifecycle. This equips organisations to consider the multiple leverage points at which they have the capacity to make intentional changes.

Available guidance on the formulation of gender equality targets tends to contain various recommendations on the timeframes to achieve such targets (for example, milestones of one, three or five years). More informatively, studies of the success factors of organisational change more broadly have discovered that it is frequency with which a project is reviewed and monitored for progress, rather than the length of time that a project is anticipated to take to complete, that predicts the successful attainment of the outcome (Sirkin, Keenan and Jackson 2005). This implies that it could be even more fruitful for organisations to prioritise



the frequency with which progress towards a measurable outcome is reviewed, rather than the timing of the achievement of the outcome itself.

Concerns have been raised about the practical attainability of targets for women's representation on boards that are "too" ambitious to match the pool of potential candidates in particular fields of industry. An example illustrating these concerns is drawn from the study of the impact of the 2003 introduction of a mandated 40 per cent female quota for company boards in Norway, which prompted a concern that the pipeline of qualified female candidates was small in number and therefore that boards would end up with appointees with lower-than-average experience (Ahern and Dittmar 2012). The study concluded that the quota caused a significant drop in companies' financial performance, which the authors attributed to the younger and less experienced board composition resulting from the gender quotas. However, a subsequent study of the Norwegian experience, which covered a broader time period for analysis, challenged this conclusion and instead contended there was a sufficient supply of qualified female candidates, and that there was no statistical evidence that the gender quota had negatively affected companies' performance (Eckbo, Nygaard and Thorburn 2021).

### **3.1.4 Need for evaluation**

A characteristic of this field of literature is that the abundance of ideas for the gender equality initiative is not matched by the same intensity of focus on evaluations and assessments of effectiveness (Chang et al. 2023). This has led some scholars to identify that one factor explaining the lack of progress on gender equality is a presumption among organisations that their awareness-raising efforts and gender equality initiatives are working effectively, when this may not necessarily be the case (Cahn et al. 2022; Dobbin and Kalev 2016, 2019; Forscher et al 2019; Guthridge et al. 2023). This observation implies that investing in evaluations of initiatives is a highly recommended, if not essential, component of organisations' efforts. An example of gender equality initiatives that are often assumed to be effective – but where this is not backed up by the evidence – is unconscious bias and diversity training (Atewologun, Cornish and Tresh 2018; Burnett and Aguinis 2024; Steele and Vandello 2019). While well-intentioned, this training approach to correcting gender inequalities has generated mixed outcomes – including negative effects – among the evaluations that have been conducted.

Extending this observation to the context of target-setting, this review also identifies that many of the suggested ideas for targets that are shared in publications and guides are well-intended and often indirectly extracted from broader research on gender equality, but are not necessarily designed on the basis of evaluations and evidence.

The availability of many resources on target-setting that have been produced by various agencies and institutes globally also tend to lack references to analysis and evaluation, or at least are opaque about whether their prescribed guidance is research-based. Many "how to" guides on target setting for gender equality offer logical ideas that tend to be drawn from general approaches to formulating and executing corporate strategies. An example is the *Engendering Industries: Setting Strategic Gender Equality Targets* published by the US Agency For International Development (USAID 2022) which presents a set of example target metrics that can contribute to the pursuit of gender equality goals. While the guidance and ideas contained in these publications are generally logical and innovative, the extent to which these ideas are based on evidence and evaluation is unclear and there is little information on what the ideas are based on. For this reason, this review prioritises "how to" guides that have been produced by, or with input from, academics with expertise in this field, and otherwise notes the necessary caveats.

The implication of this finding is that organisations' target-setting actions should involve steps to conduct evaluations of the effectiveness of their gender equality initiatives and target-setting approaches. This will not only encourage the implementation of the most



effective actions, but contribute towards building the evidence base that is currently lacking. To facilitate this, the target menu could include an action for organisations to allocate resources to carry out evaluations. The allocation of resources for specifically carrying out evaluations could facilitate this, which will be dependent on the organisation's readiness to constructively scrutinise and critique its initiatives and redesign them where needed (See Openness to innovate and learn). An organisation taking action to evaluate the effectiveness of their gender equality initiatives and interventions can be seen as complementary to target-setting and WGEA reporting processes, as these processes entail the collection and analysis of relevant data anyway.

### **Data-driven approaches: Summary of implications for target-setting**

- Organisations need to be equipped to be able to **accurately collect and compute** the relevant data and metrics. This need is accentuated for industries and workplaces that do not ordinarily operate in highly technical or data-driven ways.
- Metrics that are designed to reflect progress towards a genuine improvement in a gender equality indicator need to consider a workplace's initial starting point. **Rates of change or the number of percentage points by which an indicator moves closer to a target value**, alongside at actual attainment of the target value, could be a more meaningful and appropriate approach for some organisations when defining their metrics.
- Targets in relation to gender composition need to be articulated in a way that prioritises the **attainment of a critical mass** in gender representation. An increase from zero to one sole woman may not, in itself, be defined as progress because it introduces the potential for risks.
- Targets for the gender pay gap should consider the **distribution** of outcomes. Computation of the median value, and other distributional statistics such as quartiles, should be considered alongside the mean values.
- Organisations needs to be advised on **how to manage small-sized categories** in their data analysis and computation of target metrics. For disaggregation for subgroups (for example, analysis at occupational levels), guidance should be provided on the minimum number of cases that is needed to produce statistically robust calculations.
- Targets on gender composition can be designed in a way that supports organisations to adopt the **gender proportionality principle**. A target can be defined as the gender composition at senior level increasing to at least match, if not exceed, the proportional gender composition of the level immediately preceding it.
- Targets in relation to data-based metrics should include incentives for **monitoring of target metrics at regular intervals over time**. In practice this could take the form of including an action with the target menu that organisations allocate dedicated resources to collect data, conduct regular analysis, and regularly report on their target metrics over time.
- Terms and formulas used in data-driven approaches need to be **communicated in an accessible and meaningful way** for end-users. Catchy terms may help end-users to better understand the concept and positively engage in the target-setting process. Investment in educational resources can empower people with non-technical backgrounds to effectively participate in their organisation's target-setting.



## 3.2 Expanding beyond headcounts

### 3.2.1 Capturing employees' experiences

Much of the literature on gender equality targets focuses on standardised calculations such as compositional measures of representation and percentage gaps in pay. These metrics offer the benefits of objectivity and relative practical convenience in the collection, computation and monitoring of data over time. However, the need to extend metrics for gender equality beyond these statistical metrics is acknowledged in more progressive and emerging approaches to diversity and inclusion.

As an example the Victorian Commission on Gender Equality in the Public Sector (CGEPS), in its adoption of a research-informed approach to gender equality policy, has defined a set of gender equality progress metrics which include measures of employees' experiences that can take the shape of subjective and qualitative responses.<sup>3</sup> This can include measuring employees' perceptions of equitable treatment and fairness in decision-making, feelings of safety, inclusion and belonging, and feeling of being respected and heard. Employees' experiences can also take the form of reporting experiences that relate to discrimination, harassment and abuse in the workplace (See **Positive duty of care**). This implies that setting up processes for inviting, collating and analysing metrics on employees' experiences needs to be designed and carried out in a way that is sensitive to the potentially highly personal and delicate nature of this information.

Building on these insights, an action step to conduct regular employee surveys and consultations, and creating dedicated channels for employees to communicate with their employer on matters regarding equality and inclusion, can be considered as "actions" on the target menu. Investing in these interchanges can be a constructive way for employers to invite feedback and gauge the effectiveness of their gender equality initiatives, and therefore serve as part of an evaluation mechanism too. (See **Need for evaluations**)

### 3.2.2 Positive duty of care

Related to the need for metrics to capture employees' experiences, there remains an enduring case that an employer's actions to promote and uphold gender equity is part of an employer's duty of care to their employees. This line of reasoning was presented in the Respect@Work report, led by former Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkins, which articulated a new positive duty on employers to eliminate workplace sex discrimination and harassment (Australian Human Rights Commission 2020). This duty of care can also be likened to the responsibilities placed on employers to meet occupational health and safety requirements. A similar approach has been promoted by Our Watch (2022) in curating a set of suggested standards for organisations to adopt on Workplace Equality and Respect.

Highlighting workforce expectations that are part of a positive duty of care also impresses the point that gender equality is a matter of moral principle and fairness, aligned to a human rights context. This approach can be a more compelling and meaningful case for change among some organisations and individuals, in contrast to the "business case" for diversity which justifies investment in gender equity on the basis of generating a financial payoff for the organisation. Despite widespread use of the business case rationale, including by advocates, there is actually no clear evidence that appealing to the business case is a sufficient, or even successful, catalyst for change among resistant or laggard organisations.

Arising from the Respect@Work Report, the *Anti-Discrimination and Human Rights Legislation Amendment (Respect at Work) Act 2022 (Cth)* amended the *Sex Discrimination*

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<sup>3</sup> Commission for Gender Equality in the Public Sector (2023) Prepare for the employee experience survey 2023, Victorian Government <https://www.genderequalitycommission.vic.gov.au/prepare-employee-experience-survey-2023>



*Act 1984 (Cth)*, that brought about changes for employers. It extends employers' scope of responsibility to proactively prevent workplace sexual harassment, discrimination and victimisation from occurring, rather than responding only after it occurs (Respect@Work 2023).

It is critical to distinguish between employers' legislated responsibilities in this area, and aspirational targets related to sex-based harassment. The former is not to be perceived as an optional goal to be pursued by target-setting, but as a non-negotiable starting point from which target-setting can be implemented as a means of improving, accelerating and consolidating progress beyond merely meeting legal responsibilities.

### **3.2.3 Incorporating non-binary gender identities and intersectionality**

When analysing the reasons why some approaches to diversity training fail, a common explanation is that the approaches fail to account for cultural, race, linguistic and ethnic diversity and other such dimensions of intersectionality that shape individuals' and communities' experiences. While much of the research on intersectionality focuses on cultural and racial diversity, the premise and practice of intersectionality can be extended more broadly to dimensions including socioeconomic background and circumstances, spectrum of ability, family responsibilities, household structures and geographic remoteness. In Australia, understanding dimensions of intersectionality that matter for First Nations people is not only about culture but also about the enduring vestiges of colonisation.

The failure of organisations to consider intersectional experiences and circumstances is among the reasons why many gender diversity initiatives have proven to be ineffective (Dobbin and Kalev 2016). This has led researchers to advocate for policies that intentionally dismantle structural bias, rather than attempt to align marginalised or under-represented individuals into existing systems. For example, scholars in this field prescribe that instead of hiring for "culture fit," it would be more equitable and inclusive to hire for "culture add" instead (Tulshyan 2022; Williams, Multhaup and Mihaylo 2018).

For Australia, recognition is growing of the need to strengthen community awareness about the experiences of First Nations people. WGEA's study on the experiences of First Nations women, *Gari Yala (Speak the Truth)*, undertaken in collaboration with UTS Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research and the Diversity Council Australia (2020), illustrates the importance of recognising the amplified effects of discrimination and exclusion experienced by Australia's First Nations women. This work provides an illuminating example of how intersectionality is not merely about data collection and disaggregation: true to its conceptual origins, intersectionality is about recognising imbalances in power, voice, autonomy, access to and control over resources, and input towards decision-making and governance (Hankivsky and Jordan-Zachery 2019; Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013). Remaining actively aware of this definition of intersectionality can enable organisations to adopt appropriate targets that meaningfully reflect the diversity of their workforce cohorts, and to implement initiatives to meaningfully address imbalances in decision-making in the design of systems, structures and policies.

The movement towards articulating gender composition targets that go beyond gender binary classifications, and fully embrace a diversity of gender identities, has led to the emergence of goals that expand beyond a conventional 50:50 target defined solely in terms of shares of men and women. As an alternative to the 50:50 target, the 40:40:20 principle has emerged as a more inclusive, as well as a more flexible, numerical goal adopted by organisations. The 20 per cent portion is unspecified and therefore open to individuals of any gender. The 40:40:20 principle has been widely adopted in a range of settings, including in targets for boards and by advocacy organisations that prioritise evidence-based strategies such as the Champions of Change Coalition (2019). However, despite its widespread uptake and the appeal of the logic behind this approach, this review has been unable to locate any evidence that has specifically tested the effectiveness and impact of the 40:40:20 principle.



A strength of the 40:40:20 principle is that it creates a space for individuals who identify beyond binary genders and therefore constitutes a more inclusive and equitable approach than a target defined solely in binary terms. Companies have also contended that the unspecified portion of 20 per cent permits for variations in gender composition over time that can be due to factors that are outside of company's control (for example, not having a sufficiently large applicant pool of women candidates). A potential shortcoming of the approach, however, is that it legitimises a gender composition gap as wide as 20 percentage points. A company that achieves no higher than 40 per cent women, and as high as 60 per cent men as a majority share, would still be considered best practice under this standard. There is also no requirement to ensure that the 20 percent open fraction includes non-binary individuals. The 20 percent buffer could therefore be used by companies to maintain a majority share among one binary gender. The hypothetical example below illustrates how a company could fulfil a 40:40:20 target, and even deliver equal pay at each occupational rank, but still generate an overall gender pay gap due to men's over-representation at senior ranks.

**Table 1: Illustration of potential outcome of 40:40:20 target**

Occupation level	Count of employees				Composition share (%)			Average weekly pay		
	Men	Women	Non-binary	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Gender pay gap
<b>A (Junior)</b>	50	100	0	150	33%	67%	100%	\$1,000	\$1,000	0%
<b>B (Mid)</b>	100	100	0	200	50%	50%	100%	\$1,500	\$1,500	0%
<b>C (Senior)</b>	150	100	0	250	60%	40%	100%	\$2,000	\$2,000	0%
<b>Total</b>	300	300	0	600	50%	50%	100%	\$1,667	\$1,500	10%

The question arises as to whether the 20 percent fraction is the appropriate figure. For the percentage to acknowledge the representation of non-binary individuals, estimates of the share of the Australian population who identify as non-binary are needed. While data is difficult to reliably ascertain, available estimates indicate that the share of the population who identify as gender- and sexually-diverse or non-binary range from 3.5 to 11 per cent (Lyons et al. 2021). While further data collection is needed to build certainty around these numbers for Australia, these numbers are also generally consistent with international estimates (Wilson and Meyers, 2021).

Based on the upper band of these available estimates, it could be reasoned that, as a way to recognise non-binary gender identities, the open fraction of the composition ratio could be set around 11 percentage points. Mathematically this could lead to a reconfigured ratio of 45:45:10 or 44:44:12. Any scope above the non-binary percentage could be interpreted to be an allowance to accommodate limitations in a company's capacity to achieve a demographically representative workforce.

In many cases, organisations may need to take a more flexible approach to their compositional target-setting based on a realistic understanding of their ability to achieve a demographically representative workforce composition. This may be that buffer that is reduced progressively over time in line with the expectation that companies will invest in initiatives to overcome the factors that currently justify the buffer, such as pipeline initiatives to expand the applicant pool.





In relation to the adoption of the 40:40:20 principles to support the inclusion and recognition of non-binary individuals, some additional insights are offered. Firstly, it is also helpful to recognise that people who identify as non-binary are likely to be over- or under-represented across different industries, sectors, geographic locations and types of jobs across society, reflective of how some workplace cultures and sectors provide more safe and inclusive cultures for non-binary communities compared to others. This implies it could be unfeasible to expect all workplaces will be demographically representative of the non-binary population. Secondly, this approach assumes that employees will be willing to reveal this potentially sensitive information to their employer. This data collection process is complex and, for many organisations, yet to be fully developed. Thirdly, while there is comprehensive evidence on the heightened rates of discrimination and bias against of gender diverse people in society, –which is paramount a wellbeing and safety issue – the evidence on whether non-binary or LGBTQI individuals systematically experience lower pay rates or under-representation in leadership roles has produced mixed findings. For example, several studies examining workforce outcomes according to sexual orientation have found that lesbian women experience higher average pay than their heterosexual counterparts (Drydakis 2022; Klawitter 2015; Sabia and Wooden 2015). In this instance, higher pay does not necessarily diminish the likelihood of these demographic cohorts encountering discriminatory and biased treatment in other aspects of their workforce experience.

The broader implication of this research is that, for targets to be inclusive of intersectionality and non-binary genders, it is important to extend them beyond metrics of the pay gap and headcounts, and prioritise encompassing measures of employees' experiences, such as in relation to psychological safety, the incidence of harassment, perceptions of equitable treatment, feelings of inclusion and belonging, and individual wellbeing. (See **Capturing employees' experiences**)

### 3.2.4 Specific inclusion of men

It is understandable that much of the literature on gender equality initiatives has focused on improving outcomes and equity for women. However, a growing body of research is revealing that the effectiveness of these initiatives is being compromised when the implications of gender inequity for men are not fully acknowledged and when men do not see a role for themselves in gender equality policies and programs.

Neglecting to articulate a role for men has been linked to resistance and backlash to gender equality and diversity initiatives. For example, Guthridge et al. (2023) identify that a barrier to progress on gender equality is a negative response to change especially among men: the authors describe how initiatives to improve opportunities for women can run the risk of triggering fear, resentment, jealousy or anger from men who may feel threatened by actions that seek to shift the status quo. The imperative to address these factors is also underscored by research on gender norms that identifies how the dominance of traditional and unhealthy masculinity norms can constrain men's choices too and are linked to attitudes and behaviours among men that harmful for both wellbeing and the safety and wellbeing of others (Our Watch 2019).

This is consistent with broader literature on resistance to gender equality initiatives which identifies that changes that destabilise gender norms and power structures can constitute a threat to those who currently benefit from that power (Anglim et al. 2019).

This stream of research also detects that just because paid parental leave is offered to men, this does not guarantee that they will use it. Whether or not men request to make use of the leave that is available, whether or not they are granted their request, and how much leave they take, depends on the extent to which employees' caregiving roles are positively supported in the workplace. Societal expectations placed on men to fulfil traditional masculine norms – which do not legitimise a role for men in care-giving – can lessen men's



likelihood of taking paid parental leave even if this is a role that a new father might personally aspire for.

Research on behavioural design for policy is highly relevant here, as the articulation of the target metrics provides a channel for setting the “default” expectations on which organisations can base their policies. These default settings can help to normalise caregiving among men and contribute towards shifting gender norms across Australian society more generally. One way to promote and legitimise parental leave uptake among men is to draw upon tools of behavioural science to design the policy as an ‘opt-in’ policy by default. This approach would mean that any father who has a newborn child is automatically assigned their leave entitlement, and must take additional steps to ‘opt out’ of taking leave. The “opt-in by design” mechanism has proven to be an effective feature of policy uptake across a range of other settings and is increasingly recognised as an important element of Australian Government policymaking (Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian Government 2018). When developing targets related to paid parental leave, the baseline assumption should be that paid parental leave is offered, leading to development of target metrics that relate to usage and uptake. This may include: the share of eligible workers who requested paid parental leave; the share of eligible workers who were granted vs. denied their request; and inclusion of an action item on whether an organisation undertook a review of the reasons that managers denied granting paid parental leave.

Given that survey data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey shows there is considerable uncertainty among employees on their entitlements to paid parental leave (including potential ambiguity in distinguishing government-provided entitlements from employer-provided entitlements), there is a need for all target metrics to clearly specify that they relate to employer-provided entitlements.<sup>4</sup> Actions on whether an organisation provides clear information to employees about their entitlements can also be promoted to accompany the target metrics. This is particularly pertinent to employees in circumstances that may disadvantage their capacity to access complete information, such as employees from non-English linguistic backgrounds, new migrants and workers on visas, and employees in non-standardised employment arrangements.

While research in this area has concentrated heavily on the provision of maternity, paternity and parental leave, similar principles can be applied to developing targets for access and uptake of carer’s leave and complementary initiatives, such as the availability of employer-provided or subsidised childcare for employers.

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<sup>4</sup> Around 16 per cent of employees answered “Don’t Know” when asked whether employer-provided paid maternity leave was available in their workplace, based on the author’s calculations using the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey for 2022.



### **Beyond headcounts: Summary of implications for target-setting**

- Targets and actions can expand beyond quantifiable objective metrics as markers of progress on gender equality, to metrics that measure improvements in employees' experiences. This expands focus beyond imbalances in representation, to a broader understanding of employees' perceptions of treatment, equity, inclusion, belonging, safety and wellbeing.
- It will be critical to distinguish between the legislative obligations of employers to adopt a positive duty of care in the elimination of discrimination and harassment in the workforce, from any aspirational target metrics or actions that also support this objective.
- Incorporating intersectionality and non-binary genders into gender equality targets will require a sensitive approach to the collation and usage of relevant data.
- The 40:40:20 ratio has been widely adopted as a metric that recognises non-binary genders while also granting organisations a wider degree of flexibility compared to a 50:50 binary goal. More research and evaluation is needed to ascertain whether this approach is working effectively to close gender imbalances.
- Targets that relate to improving opportunities, experiences and outcomes for men in areas where they are currently under-represented need to be highlighted alongside targets aimed at supporting women. This particularly concerns fathers' and partners' uptake of paid parental leave, carer's leave and other flexible work arrangements.
- When designing targets, there is an opportunity to apply evidence-based insights to shift gender norms and adopt best practice policy. An example of this is to provide paid parental leave using an "opt-in by default" design approach, when creating targets for the uptake of work-family policies. This is similar to providing a 'use-it-or-lose-it' component for fathers and partners in the design of government-provided paid parental leave, which is recognised as a research-informed best practice approach.

## **3.3 Curating an enabling environment**

The successful implementation of gender equality targets needs can be understood more broadly within the context of change management. This stream of research identifies that the effective implementation of any new workplace initiatives, and the cultivation of positive and sustained cultural change within organisations, requires an environment that not only activates enablers but anticipates and addresses impediments.

Factors that are identified as enablers of progress towards gender equality performance, including necessary precursory actions and conditions for success, can be proposed as actions and targets that organisations are encouraged to pursue. Equally, factors that are identified as barriers that impede progress can inform the development of actions and targets that organisations are encouraged to alleviate and reduce.

This stream of research also provides guidance on the type of language to use to optimise receptiveness to gender equality initiatives and to mitigate against resistance. This matters for the design, articulation and communication of potential targets.

### **3.3.1 Need for accountability**

A recurring condition that accompanies the implementation of gender equality actions is the need to establish clear arrangements for responsibility and accountability. This entails clarifying the specific individuals who are responsible for the delivery of targets within the organisation; creating accountability by establishing an organisation's commitment to report



on outcomes; and instilling vigilance through a commitment to the ongoing monitoring of targets at set intervals over time. These practical recommendations are a longstanding finding in the literature, and continue to be reiterated and proven by contemporary research (Sirkin, Keenan and Jackson 2005; UK Behavioural Insights Team 2021).

An example of an accountability mechanism is to specify gender equality targets as part of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of executives and other senior managers. This approach has been proven to activate progress on gender equality outcomes: a mechanism through which KPIs can have such an effect is when executives whose performance is linked to the gender equality outcomes proactively become the change-agents within the organisation (White 2017).

### 3.3.2 Commitment to resourcing

Studies that identify the factors that consistently aligned with successful organisational change highlight the importance of recognising the additional resources that organisational change and transformational policies require.

One way to operationalise the need for resource commitment is to include an action step on the allocation of specific resources to the implementation and ongoing monitoring of targets on the target menu, as a way to boost organisations' likelihood of achieving their targets.

However, the need for commitment of resources is likely to largely be in the form of time and effort by employees – and this might be a resource that organisations do not have capacity to stretch, leading to resistance. For example, Sirkin, Keenan and Jackson (2005) express the practical realities potentially facing organisations that are attempting to implement change:

*“When companies launch transformation efforts, they frequently don’t realize, or know how to deal with the fact, that employees are already busy with their day-to-day responsibilities ... If, on top of existing responsibilities, line managers and staff have to deal with changes to their work or to the systems they use, they will resist.*

*“Project teams must calculate how much work employees will have to do beyond their existing responsibilities to change over to new processes. ... To minimize the dangers, project managers should use a simple metric like the percentage increase in effort the employees who must cope with the new ways feel they must contribute. They should also check if the additional effort they have demanded comes on top of heavy workloads and if employees are likely to resist the project because it will demand more of their scarce time.”*

This points to the need for organisations to consider the benefits of investing in additional resourcing, rather than stretching existing resourcing, to optimise the likely effectiveness of their gender equality initiatives and chances of achieving their targets. Such resourcing decisions should be considered relative to the projected long-term benefits of achieving these target outcomes.

### 3.3.3 Addressing resistance

For organisations to achieve change, an enabling environment needs to consider both the factors that incentivise the desired changes in approaches and behaviour, as well as factors addressing the barriers that impede such change, often in implicit ways.

Many potential insights from the vast literature on change management are applicable to the formation of implementation of gender equality targets, and to WGEA's approach to engaging with organisations on this initiative. This review extracts some of the seminal and emerging academic insights that are instructive for formulating and communicating WGEA's target menu.

Existing literature in this field has identified an array of factors that can explain people's resistance to change, such as a loss of control, uncertainty, and the imposition of additional



work (Kanter 2012). This resistance can take various shapes, from indifference to outright hostility (VicHealth 2018). Emerging literature in this space conceptualises these factors as a form of “friction” that impede change, whether at a personal, organisational or cultural level. Neglecting the existence and impact of these frictions has been identified as a commonly overlooked factor in organisational change processes. The work of Nordgren and Schonthal (2021) on ‘friction theory’ formalises our understanding of these factors into four categories that can contribute to resistance to change:

- Inertia: The powerful desire to stick with what we know, despite the limitations
- Effort: The energy (real and perceived) needed to make change happen
- Emotions: The unintended negative emotions created by the very change we seek
- Reactance: The impulse to resist being changed

These factors are consistent with behavioural research into change resistance, such as the detection of ‘status quo’ bias and ‘loss aversion’ bias. These are examples of cognitive barriers that can skew people’s assessment of change towards underestimating the benefits and placing higher weight on the perceived costs (Behavioural Insights Team 2017).

While leading and best practice organisations may already operate in progressive enabling environments and be less subject to these frictions, these factors of resistance could be more salient in the laggard organisations. To incentivise change within these laggard organisations, specific focus may need to be placed on how to address these frictions throughout the target-setting process. Some potential options for organisations are listed below, although it is emphasised these are inferences only and further research would be needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches:

- To address inertia: Consider and present targets as an evolving process of expansion within the organisation that builds on the strengths of existing structures and process, rather than presenting targets as an entirely new way of doing things or as a disruption to known procedures.
- To address effort: In addition to information on target-setting, seek and utilise practical and realistic guidance on what resources are required, and how to operationalise targets in a way that makes effective and efficient use of an organisation’s existing resources where possible, rather than add to resource demands.
- To address emotions: When developing and internally presenting targets, anticipate and acknowledge the negative emotional responses that the change could provoke (e.g. anxiety, apprehension, resentment), and offer evidence-based strategies to support members of an organisation to placate these emotion-based response if they arise.
- To address reactance: Ensure that targets are devised and portrayed in a way that emphasises the maintenance of *choice*, *autonomy* and *self-direction* within an organisation, and activates an *intrinsic motivation* to initiate action.

Friction theory complements the insights offered by Anglim et al. (2019) on the personal characteristics and values that have been found to typify people who are least supportive of diversity and equality initiatives. This correlative study detected that the people who are the least supportive – that is, more likely to be resistant or opposed to gender equality initiatives – tend to also be people who place a high value on opportunities for their own self-enhancement and on conservatism, preserving tradition and upholding the status quo. A potential inference from these insights is that, to increase the likelihood of receptiveness by resistant mindsets, it could be effective to convey targets as a means of building on an organisation’s past achievements and contributing to the strength and continuity of its legacy, while minimising or de-emphasising such notions of change, reform or transformation.

Promisingly, the research of Anglim et al. (2019) found that the people who express the strongest support for diversity in the workplace are characterised by the high weight they



place on the value of universalism, which is defined as demonstrating a global concern for the wellbeing of all humanity with a view that transcends distinctions between in-group and out-groups. From this finding, it could be inferred that entrusting gender equality targets with individuals who are shown to hold this value, and activating this value across the organisation, could be an effective approach for organisations.

Wittenberg-Cox (2013) observes, drawing from practical experience, that a shortcoming in the implementation of gender equality target-setting is that organisational leaders can tend to assume that their employees understand the “why” behind the adoption of targets, and skip over this step in leaping straight into the “how”. A caveat to these observations is that they do not appear to be based on analytical evidence, but are simply drawn from Wittenberg-Cox’s professional experience as a widely respected gender equality practitioner.

### **3.3.4 Openness to innovate and learn**

Research on organisational change highlights that, in addition to ensuring they equip their staff with the processes, resources and technology they needed to successfully implement change, leaders also need to build the right emotional conditions (White et al. 2023).

A willingness to learn is important for creating an enabling environment for robust evaluations to be carried out. One understandable reason that organisations may be hesitant about carrying out evaluations – which is a common reason for a lack of policy evaluation more generally – is apprehension that the results may prove unfavourable (Taut and Brauns 2003). Drawing on this research, this makes it important for organisations to understand that, in relation to any targets or actions on evaluations, what matters is the undertaking of the evaluation and an organisation’s readiness to learn from the evaluation’s findings, rather than the findings of the evaluation itself.

One way to support organisations to build this growth mindset is to create target metrics and actions that incentivise an organisation to share how it has invested in an analytical evaluation and made improvements to its policies as a result. This could be operationalised by, for example, creating a target or action that an organisation produces a given number of case studies within a timeframe which describe how it undertook an evaluation of its gender equality initiatives and target-setting, and how it improved on its program design as a result, with the case study published to its governing body or submitted to WGEA. Emphasis is placed on the process of learning, iteration and refinement, rather than an immediate expectation of effectiveness and success. An example of an approach used by the Victorian Commission on Gender Equality in the Public Sector (CGEPS) is provide real world case studies of organisations that have engaged in the process of developing the Gender Action Plan and are transparently sharing their experiences.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Commission on Gender Equality in the Public Sector (2023) Gender impact assessment case studies, Victorian Government <https://www.genderequalitycommission.vic.gov.au/gender-impact-assessment-case-studies>



### **Curating an enabling environment: Summary of implications for target-setting**

- Accompanying all targets is a need for organisations to **create clear processes for accountability** within the organisation and a commitment to **resourcing**.
- Targets and actions should be designed in a way which steer organisations towards the **regular monitoring and reporting** of its progress towards gender equality.
- To positively engage and activate progress among **resistance or laggard organisations**: describe how target-setting is an expansive rather than a disruptive process; identify opportunities to carry out target-setting in an efficient way that does not overstretch existing resources; acknowledge the range of responses that people and organisations may feel throughout the process; and communicate the target menu in a way that instils a sense of autonomy and activates intrinsic motivation within organisations.
- There is scope to incentivise organisations to **view evaluation, iterative learning and cycles of improvement** as among the metrics of progress. Promoting a culture of evaluation and analysis leverages the data collection processes that organisations are already investing in as part of their WGEA reporting requirements.



## 3.4 Optimising for success

### 3.4.1 Holistic systems-based approach

Awareness has strengthened over time that addressing gender equalities requires “fixing the system” not “fixing women”. A growing body of research points to the need to shift the focus away from individualised remedies for women, to instead placing the onus on organisations to change (Bohnet 2016; Ryan 2022). Rather than expect women to change to fit into a workplace culture based on traditional gender norms, research instead points to the effectiveness of de-biasing processes and systems, as a way to intentionally curate a more inclusive, respectful and equitable workplace culture.

The imperative for systems-based and systems-wide change aligns with a holistic approach to gender equality initiatives. For example, Guthridge et al. emphasise the need for a multi-faceted approach: “social context and systems thinking have shown us the importance of holism when tackling systemic discrimination.” (Guthridge et al. 2023, p. 338)

The development of a systems-based, holistic package of complementary initiatives for gender equality – which can be operationalised by the adoption of multiple targets – has the potential to counter resistance against gender equality initiatives (See **Addressing resistance**). In isolation, the pursuit of a single indicator that aims to improve outcomes for women could be seen, from the perspective of men, as a loss of opportunity for men, which triggers backlash and opposition. However, if a target is simultaneously accompanied by other targets that are designed to expand opportunities for men – such as expanded access to flexible work, paid parental leave and carer’s leave for fathers and partners – this could help to mitigate resistance by creating a picture of success that includes men. Such an approach would be enhanced by target actions by organisations that foster a workplace culture which supportively encourages men to make use of these workplace entitlements without risk of career repercussions.

### 3.4.2 Alignment with identity and values

Where pushback against gender equality initiative occurs, a recurring observation is that in resistant organisations it is often the case that such initiatives are perceived to run against their values and principles. For example, the implementation of targets or quotas can be perceived by some organisations as contrary to their principles of meritocracy and appointing “the best person for the job”.

Looking more closely into the research insights which can help to make sense of this source of resistance, literature on organisational change identifies the phenomenon of “competing commitments” (Kegan and Lahey 2001). This research detects that people’s immunity to change can stem from their impression that such change will undermine their capacity to fulfil other goals and values: it detects that the way to address these barriers is to invest in supporting individuals to reassess their assumptions and discover where these impressions may be unfounded. A related stream of research, which is highly relevant to the perpetuation of gender norms throughout society more broadly, is the role that “social identity” plays in consolidating people’s allegiance to existing systems (Akerlof and Kranton 2000). Existing gender norms, such as the male-breadwinner and female-caregiver model of the household, while being constrictive, can also provide a source of stability, predictability and a socially legitimised sense of identity and purpose for individuals. Resistance to change could stem from an individual’s apprehension about losing this stability and perceived sense of social identity and purpose that these traditional cultural structures offer.

The implication of these insights for the curation of WGEA’s target menu is that, to connect with resistant or laggard organisations, targets and actions need to be expressed in a way that is aligned with – or expands on – an organisation’s existing sense of identity, purpose and values. Target-setting initiatives could be more likely to be effective when they are





perceived by organisations to enhance and harmonise with their existing core values and identity, rather than destabilise or contradict them. Supporting organisations to invest in the reflective process of identifying this alignment could be an effective tool for building organisations' foundational commitment to change and progress.

### **Optimising for success: Summary of implications for target-setting**

- To optimise positive receptiveness and implementation by organisations, it would be beneficial for the target menu options to be communicated in a way that conveys how the **multiple targets synergistically complement each other**. Organisations need to be supported to pursue multiple targets simultaneously with equal commitment.
- A potential way to activate positive receptiveness to target setting initiatives is to support organisations to define and express their targets in a way **that meaningfully aligns with their existing purpose, identity, operations and aspirations**. This could include, for example, considering specific actions in the target menu that involve an organisation adapting and expanding its statement of values and operations strategy to encompass gender equality.



## Appendix 1: Methodological approach in this review

Methodological element	Approach adopted in this review
Criteria for inclusion	The criteria used to select relevant studies include: publication year (past 10 years); language (English); cultural applicability (relevant to Australian context); study design and methodology (satisfied high quality research); credibility and expertise of authors and publication outlet (professional credibility and reputation in the field; peer-reviewed status; professional ranking or standing academic journal, organisation or institution); evidence-based (findings are based on research of academic level).
Search strategy	To identify relevant studies, the following keyword search terms are applied, including combinations of terms to generate relevant results: gender equality; gender balance; gender representation; targets <sup>6</sup> ; target-setting; work; workforce; workplace; women; evaluations; interventions; effectiveness; what works; organisational change; change management; meta-analysis; systemic review; guide; guidelines; evidence base
Quality assessment	The criteria used to assess the quality of the studies in this review are factored into the inclusion criteria (as described above). This includes the study design and the generalisability of the results.
Extraction of insights	The design elements that are systematically collected include: study design; characteristics of organisations analysed in study; outcomes; limitations and caveats; practical feasibility of implications for Australian workplaces.
Process for synthesis	This review adopts a narrative approach to the synthesis of findings, where the findings are classified according to both pre-determined and results-based themes.
Format for presentation	Results of the literature review are presented according to thematic classifications, which were both pre-determined and emerged throughout the review. This included making a distinction between “actions” that can be taken and the “achievement” of a measurable outcomes as targets.
Limitations	<p>The content presented in this report is limited to materials that could collated and synthesised within the timeframe of the project. While the review has aimed to identify key insights, it does not claim to offer an exhaustive review. There is scope for further work to extend and elaborate on this report’s content.</p> <p>A content within available literature is also limited in scope with respect to research on non-binary genders and intersectionality although this has grown in recent years.</p>

<sup>6</sup> Within this literature, the distinction needs to be made with the alternative use of the term “target” to mean a person or group who is the subject of inequity and discrimination.



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