

4/05/2017

OPEN LETTER TO WESTPAC CEO, MR BRIAN HARTZER

Dear Mr Hartzer

In a recent interview with *The Deal Magazine* (21 April 2017) you asserted that single-sex schools in Australia were preventing women from reaching senior roles within business.

I agree wholeheartedly with you that the figures on gender inequality in the workplace in Australia tell a depressing story. Despite years of positive initiatives by the private sector and government, including those of Westpac, and with plenty of women 'leaning-in', progress toward workplace equality has been glacial.

But to suggest that somehow single-sex schooling is responsible for the lack of women in senior leadership positions in Australia is simply unfounded, if not absurd.

Yes, we have a different education system to the USA.

Single-sex schooling was prohibited in the US public sector and remains restricted, but with changes to the law and growing demand for single-sex education the US is now actively opening more single-sex schools. Nevertheless, in the US, Australia and the UK, single-sex schools hold a much smaller share of the market than co-ed schools. In fact, in Australia all-girls schools still represent only a fraction — less than 2 per cent — of all schools.

Yet figures on gender equality and women in senior leadership positions show little real difference between the US and Australia.

A 2016 report *Women in Financial Services* from Marsh & McLennan Companies revealed women held just 21 per cent of senior leadership roles in Australia compared to 20 per cent in the USA. And on the World Economic Forum's 2016 *Global Gender Gap Index* Australia ranked 46th and the USA 45th, with both countries slipping down from their 2015 ranking.

There is no evidence to suggest that single-sex schooling inhibits a young woman's ambition or likelihood of achieving a senior leadership role.

We would argue that just the opposite is true of girls educated in all-girls schools. They emerge as amazingly well-balanced individuals, with the confidence and assertiveness to step up and pursue career and life success.

Every leadership position in an all-girls school is held by a girl — from captain of the cricket and debating teams to president of the science and coding clubs. Research shows that girls are also more likely to reject gender stereotypes and are bucking the trend when it comes to studying STEM subjects.

The benefits of all-girls schooling aside, the important issue at hand is addressing the real barriers behind the low representation of women in senior leadership positions and challenging Australian businesses and governments to do more.

It's vital that corporate culture changes, that unconscious bias is disrupted and more support for women is provided, especially mid-career when childcare responsibilities and caring for aged parents impact women more than men.

One of the major hurdles to boosting the number of women in leadership positions in the corporate sector is encouraging girls to become interested in pursuing a finance career in the first place. And this is happening in girls' schools which are sending their students on to study business, law and STEM degrees in record numbers. What is not happening, however, is the progression of these very capable female graduates into the ranks of senior management.

I invite you step inside and experience a 21st century Australian all-girls school and — having viewed the extensive leadership, academic and extra-curricular opportunities on offer — still think that single-sex education is even remotely responsible for the lack of women in senior leadership positions.

Sincerely

Loren Bridge
Executive Officer
The Alliance of Girls' Schools Australasia