

## *Gender Equity - Inspiring Change*

On Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> of October at St Paul Apostle Parish, 28 people gathered to “continue the conversation” started earlier in the year in March on International Women’s Day when 8 speakers, four young women and old and four older women, spoke of their experiences regarding women’s issues, gender equity and their thoughts on what inspires change in this area. This led to the October forum on the subject of *Gender Equity: Inspiring Change*, organized by the parish Justice Peace Integrity in Creation (JPIC) group. This gathering was opened to the wider community and men and women were also invited.

The purpose of the Forum was to continue to explore the issue of Gender Equity in the context of Inspiring Change and identifying possible action to bring about further change. After the welcome and acknowledgement of the Traditional Owners of the Land, the guest speakers were invited to share their personal stories and experiences, insights, perspectives and challenges.

### **Karen Delvin (Managing Director, Bridges**

**Key message:** *“Logic doesn’t always drive change”*

Karen’s presentation focussed on

- the journey of women’s involvement and influence to today and their achievements. She referred to the Women’s Empowerment Principles and agreed that there would be many opportunities for further future discussion on these principles.
- the importance of inclusive decision making in and the need for democratic processes in organisations. Men and women are essential participants in these discussions. She also outlined the importance of social justice values in building capacity and capability in local communities.
- Organisations such as Business Professional Women have been established and evolved to address matters related to gender equity.

The world has moved on considerably from when gender equity was considered a “women only” domain. There is much greater recognition of the need a collaborative approach and partnering between men and women to address current and future gender equality challenges.

### **Mark Rolfe (Husband, Father, Assistant Deputy Principal at Regional Male College)**

**Key message:** *“There are male champions addressing gender equity who are inspiring change in the workplace – seek them out.”*

Mark opened his address by demonstrating the power of the media in influencing the agenda, attitudes and behaviours towards gender equity and equality. He spoke of the need for leadership to model appropriate behaviours in inspiring the need for and action to change societal values.

Mark summarized five areas of challenge where changes should impact current and future attitudes on gender equity:

#### *Family Structure:*

- Growing and learning experiences in his family situation where his parents held “non-traditional” roles for the time mid last century.
- Emphasised “partnership” that his parents enjoyed in raising him and

- Modelling equity principles through family values and behaviours is in most instances, the foundation for future attitudes towards the roles of women.

### *Social Change*

- Importance of social change
- Need for the debates on gender equity to be balanced and open and the role of the media in keeping this balance when reporting in the public domain.
- Value of reinforcing the acceptable social norms and not supporting those that are unacceptable.
- Government and societal attitudes to women and other disadvantaged people, including refugees and asylum seekers need to be monitored.
- Action is required if there is not an equitable balance.

### *Addressing serious issues*

- Difficulty in understanding why our communities still appear to ignore serious issues such as domestic violence.
- These have the greatest capacity to undermine the status of women resulting in total disempowerment.
- It is encouraging that these serious issues are being played out in the public domain and it is essential that this continues.
- Maintaining pressure on governments and communities to provide appropriate interventions and support needs to continue and where appropriate, escalated.

### *Workplace Challenges*

- Changing workplaces to make them more “female friendly” is achievable. It just takes a different leadership “mindset” to achieve this.
- Changes that had been made in his school environment and the challenges involved in achieving greater flexibility in his workplace.
- Engagement, discussion, partnering, flexibility, acceptance are all needed to achieve this; the greatest factor is trust.
- The encouraging message is that there are models that can and are working and these need to be espoused as “models for the future workplace”.
- It also means future leaders need to be elected and selected for their ability to accommodate flexibility in their workplaces.

### *Leadership*

- Mark reinforced Karen Delvin’s messages of the need for leadership to inspire and action change.
- He developed this further by advocating “pioneers” and “male ambassadors” aspiring and inspiring change.

### **Kumari Middleton (Co-founder, Mayibuye)**

**Key message:** “A leader has no boundaries or barriers – they have vision, passion, drive and empathy for people”

Kumari gave a truly inspirational presentation

- From her international and local experiences and showed how resilience, determination and empathy with women have been a driver for her to change social norms.
- She shared her story about her disadvantaged background in Sri Lanka and how she and her siblings arrived in Australia.
- The very different paths she and her siblings experienced (some very painful for her in dealing with her sisters as they experienced and struggled with serious issues affecting them)
- As they grew up in Australia that resulted in her doing what she does today.
- She provided a much broader and diverse perspective on social barriers and norms and the need to respect these, particularly as they related to the roles of women.
- There are Anglo-Saxon views, but Australia has a cultural diversity that can create conflict.
- Acknowledgement of Hindi, Muslim and other cultural norms creates even greater gender equity challenges now and in future.
- Emphasis of the need to recognise diversity in our communities and to ensure a balance of representation and views when addressing gender equity challenges.

Kumari spoke passionately about the value of not only partnerships, but relationships in making advances on gender equity.

The participants then met in smaller groups to discuss and consider the following matters:

- The messages and learnings
- The challenges that these presentations had created for them
- The opportunities that they saw both personally and for the wider community
- Reflections on what inspires change for them
- Proposed actions for further and future development.

### ***Plenary Session***

During the discussion time, the Group had focussed on a number of important matters:

#### *The Workplace*

- Pay inequality and its impact on the role of women in the workplace, the ability for women to provide equity of financial support to their families and a woman's self-esteem.
- Lesser opportunities for women to advance in the workplace.
- The need for workplace reform and for employers and managers to not only recognise, but address and provide more flexible participation options and opportunities.
- Taking life experiences to the workplace. The diverse skills of women should be recognised in the "traditional" workplace.
- Women will not advance their careers unless they are 150% certain they can meet position criteria or unless they are encouraged to apply.
- Inequity in both recognition and reward is a high priority for further consideration
- Need to support all employees in their workplace was recognised

#### *Family Role Models.*

- The importance of parental, sibling and extended family behaviours and attitudes towards women and the influence this can have.
- The influence and inspiration for change starts with church and then extends to local and broader community.

- St Paul Apostle is leading through its Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Group and there are significant opportunities ahead for outreach to the SPA community first and then Endeavour Hills broader community. A model for the future can be built.
- Empowerment – the power of hearing the speakers and what they had said to encourage further inspiration. The learnings for this group were – it takes courage to inspire change; it takes time to change systems and behaviours, sharing stories and storytelling is very important.
- More action is needed to address domestic violence (perhaps future and more discussion needed)
- Future action proposed – keep the conversations going and build and extend networks.

### *Education*

- Importance of education and conscience raising for all was stressed
- This was recognised as a broad ranging matter for further future discussion.
- Needs serious consideration and a strategic, structured and a well-resourced plan to be developed
- Need to work in partnership with others, Set up networks.
- The need for improved investment and resourcing for children and childcare to enable women to be more effective contributors to Australia’s economy.

### **1. *Gathering the Threads***

A challenging process, but suggestions were;

Modelling behaviours in our families	Keep conversations happening	Invitation to Elizabeth Broderick to address Community Forum
	Feeding back to Parish through newsletter and PPC	More support for Employee Assistance Programs
	Building and extending Networks with “like-minded” organisations in the local community	Advocacy for workplace restructure (G20, Local MP)

The conversation continued over a delicious supper. Thanks to all who contributed.

***“All true things must change and only that which changes remains true”***

*(CS Lewis)*