

*“There is no benign power which will dispense equality– the realisation will come from active participation and struggle.”* - Edna Ryan (Australian feminist and labour movement activist)

All throughout history, women have found strength and safety in their networks with other women. They have survived in the world around them and built a better one by facing their struggles collectively. Today, when we make the call to #AccelerateAction in our fight to combat gender inequality, we must think of each other and channel such action to where it is most necessary. It would indeed be a futile analysis of the barriers women face if we did not appreciate its intersection with class. I believe if our elected representatives wish to implement genuine change, it is imperative to focus on empowering working class women. This is illustrated most clearly when looking at the experience of women in the Australian workforce, specifically when appreciating the development of their leave entitlements, pay rates, and their capacity to unionise.

Firstly, the way in which class inequality is exacerbated by gender is illustrated through the history of traditional leave entitlements and their historical formation. Annual leave was first introduced in the federal maritime award- one of the first awards in Australia– in the early 20th century, which entitled workers to 10 days paid leave (FairWork Ombudsman). A few decades later the Printers’ Union secured a week of paid leave, which, along with sick leave, became the standard entitlement across Australia until the end of WWII when workers won the right to two weeks paid leave. Annual leave, long service leave and sick leave are traditionally accepted leave entitlements enacted at a time when the workforce was either entirely, or predominately, male. Through their gradual introduction from industry awards into federal awards, these leave entitlements were paid from their inception because they were important to all workers. This is in stark contrast when compared to the implementation of leave entitlements that predominantly affect women. When maternity leave was first introduced in Australia in the 1970s, it was unpaid. It then took over 30 years until Australia became the second last developed country to introduce a universal paid maternity leave scheme in 2011. Further, domestic violence leave, which is predominately accessed by women, was only introduced in recent years after nationwide campaigning. Echoing the story of maternity leave, this only became a paid leave entitlement in Australia in 2022. If Parliamentarians are serious about removing barriers for women, they must implement entitlements that are genuinely accessible to all women, not just those who can afford them.

The barriers women face and the way they contribute to unjust economic disparities continues to be seen when comparing the working conditions across male and female dominated industries. Rates in female-dominated service industries such as aged care and retail are lower than those of similar low-skilled classifications in male-dominated industries. These lower rates can be attributed to historically undervaluing domestic work, which was then compounded by greater difficulty to unionise, and finally, the ‘double burden’ carried by women as they have entered the workforce. Female-dominated industries have often proved more challenging to organise due to their dispersed workforces across multiple sites, multiple shifts and a predominance of casual and part-time contracts. These industrial difficulties are compounded by the inequality that manifests itself from our cultural values and the greater ties women have to their responsibilities in the home. This ‘double burden’ means that even as women enter the workforce, they still perform a disproportionate level of unpaid labour in their households and a greater emphasis on family responsibilities. As such, women often are considering ‘other loved ones’ when bargaining for greater workplace rights, and can find themselves unable to take the same risks nor stay for the long haul in protracted disputes. One must understand the nature and very essence of unionising; workers banding together and engaging in the risks of bargaining with the confidence that their fellow workers will stand with them. This becomes increasingly difficult when there are fewer workers on one site, which degrades the strength of connections and comradery. The logistics of a dispersed workforce on insecure contracts does not lend itself to effective industrial action. If we are to truly #AccelerateAction we must recognise the structure of feminised industries and workforces and enable organising within this.

In women’s fight for equality, intersectionality must be at the core of all our efforts to remove the systemic and social barriers women face. Parliamentarians across the Commonwealth and indeed the world must appreciate the undeniable role gender plays in the perpetuation of class inequality if they wish to implement informed and effective policies that make a genuine difference to women. When reflecting on how to #AccelerateAction, we must think of the most vulnerable in our society—because if inequalities are analysed independently, they cannot be fully understood, and thus never overcome.