

## **IWD 2016 sees legal profession in unprecedented push to improve inclusiveness and diversity**

The Law Council of Australia has taken International Women's Day to shine a light on the unprecedented push by the legal profession to take practical action to improve inclusiveness and diversity.

In 2014, the Law Council's landmark [National Attrition and Re-engagement study](#) (NARS) showed that while 63 per cent of lawyers admitted to the profession today are women, they made up only 10 per cent of senior appointments. The study also revealed more insidious issues, with half of women lawyers who work part-time reporting discrimination due to family responsibilities. There was also evidence of conscious or unconscious bias against women, especially those who adopt flexible working arrangements. Since the publication of the NARS study, the Law Council has been leading a broad and cooperative range of initiatives under its Inclusiveness & Diversity (I&D) Program, announced last year. Notable developments in 2016 include:

- The [Diversity and Equality Charter](#), drafted in May 2015, has been swiftly adopted by the full complement of Law Societies and Bar Associations from across the country as well as by a swathe of law firms, barristers' chambers, and individuals.
- A National Equitable Briefing Policy has been developed to achieve a nationally consistent approach towards bringing about cultural and attitudinal change with respect to gender briefing practices.
- The preferred supplier has been selected for the development of an unconscious bias training program for Australian lawyers.
- A central information hub is being rolled out as a platform for resources, policies, guidelines, and practical examples regarding parental leave, return to work and flexible work practices.
- Law Societies and Bar Associations from across the country have been developing their own individual action plans.

The Managing Partners Diversity Initiative established by 13 major firms in order to collaborate on initiatives to address issues that are hindering the progress of female lawyers has also continued its ground breaking work.

Law Council of Australia President Stuart Clark AM said the energy and focus being brought to the challenge is both "unprecedented and exciting."

"In just two years we have gone from a study on the depth of the problem, through an extensive round of consultation, and now to the exciting process of implementing the changes that will address what is a very serious problem issue for the profession," Mr Clark said.

"We've seen a palpable shift in the mood of the profession when it comes to addressing this issue. Ever since the Law Council of Australia started bringing together key representatives last year there has been a real commitment for practical action. No more is this seen as a niche 'women's issue' – this is now correctly perceived as a problem undermining the integrity and potential of Australia's legal profession.

"Watching the legal profession enthusiastically throw its support behind the new Diversity and Equality Charter and other initiatives has been extremely encouraging, but it's obviously just the start. We have moved beyond acknowledging the problem and beyond articulating an intent to do something about it. Today's mission is about pursuing pragmatic, results-oriented initiatives that can turn the tide."

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