

Opinion: It's time for men in early childhood to advocate for women ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

This has been tough to write, and has taken me many months of thinking to put down. I know that the words I write here will be misinterpreted, misunderstood, or even seen as some sort of grandstanding or attention-seeking.

I can't help any of that, but I need to quickly say these things.

Over the last couple of years I have turned down opportunities to speak or write about challenges for men working in early childhood.

I want to explain why, and why I will continue to do so.

Let's get a clear statement out of the way first. Any discrimination in workplaces is unacceptable, including the experiences of men in early childhood centres. I abhor it in every possible incarnation, from exclusion, to gossip to outright bullying and harassment. For men in early childhood who have experienced it, I offer my genuine support and hope that you have raised it with the leadership of your service and had it respectfully resolved.

But recent years have forced me to reconsider my views on this issue, and particularly reconsider my views on action in this space. This week's Fair Work Australia decision to throw out a Pay Equity Case that the work is devalued because of gender was the final push for me to publicly state my thoughts.

The simple statement I've been dancing around is this: I won't be talking, speaking or advocating in this space. I want to explain why.

I can't, while women experience overwhelmingly more prejudice, harassment and outright violence in their lives in every other part of the community. Yes, men are outnumbered in the early childhood sector – which gives us a taste of what it is like to be viewed as “not belonging”, or viewed with suspicion – but in every single other aspect of our lives, being a male immediately places us in a privileged position. For a straight, white male like myself and others, the privilege increases exponentially.

This issue cannot be viewed out of that context – the experience of men in a female-dominated sector is not equivalent to women in male-dominated sectors.

I can't, while the gender-imbalance in the actual educator workforce who do the job every day for low wages and low recognition, is not reflected in the highest leadership of the sector. Look at CEOs of early childhood organisations, look at Board Members, look at CFOs and COOs – are there only 3% of men in those roles? Not even close.

Who is making the big decisions about early childhood? Look at this fantastic tweet from February 2017:

While men are indeed poorly represented in the actual low-paid, un-valued work of the sector – we're doing pretty bloody OK in all the high-paying jobs.

I can't, while the fundamental reason that there are so few men in the sector is precisely because it's viewed as women's work – and is therefore paid poorly and given no value. This is a really hard one for men in the sector to “get”, particularly if they experience discrimination (overt or otherwise) – I know because it's taken me years to get to this point. But we have to lift ourselves up out of individual experiences to see the big picture.

The community perception of “childcare” as women's work, which drives low wages and low recognition, means that men don't see it as a high-status job and aren't joining the sector. The reverse is not true in male-dominated sectors. Women aren't choosing to stay out of the senior executive, political and business worlds because they're so low-status – entrenched hierarchies of powerful men exclude them because they want to hang on to their high-status positions.

The discrimination against men in early childhood is a part of wider discrimination against women, all through our society. This is a key point, and if you accept it – as I have done – it becomes very difficult to continue to have a narrow focus on advocacy for men in early childhood.

This is part of a broader problem that needs to be solved with advocacy and action for women – advocacy and action for equal pay, not just in early childhood.

Advocacy and action to end violence against women, which in Australia has already seen the deaths of 8 women in 2018.

Advocacy and action for representation in every part of our society, including the highest leadership circles.

For men experiencing discrimination in the early childhood sector, after immediately raising it with your manager or leadership, the next thing they can do to resolve those issues at a systemic level is become an advocate for women in the sector – not just for men. While we face challenges in choosing to work in early childhood, we also need to acknowledge the privileges.

I can only acknowledge my own. I have had a blessed career, one I would not have in the same way if I had been a woman. I would not have been so quickly promoted into senior roles. I would not be given the opportunities I have now to write and speak. It's often as simple as just being remembered – I'm often the only bloke in sector meetings, workshops, seminars.

Men in our societies are also conditioned from birth to stand up, speak out, put their hands up – and not be at risk of being seen as too forthright, bossy, annoying. Women do not get the same privilege. This also helped me stand out and be recognised.

In a crowd of women educators, who is more likely to be remembered? One of the great participants in the crowd who had more experience and knowledge than myself, or the one bloke in the crowd who asked a question? Who's more likely to go to the forefront of someone's mind when looking for someone from that crowd to maybe do a follow-up panel?

For men working in the sector, we have to acknowledge these privileges. And if we use those privileges to succeed in our career, as I have undoubtedly done, we have an ethical and moral responsibility to advocate for those who do not have that privilege.

The experience of men in early childhood will not change until how women's participation and contributions are valued, not just in the sector but in our entire society, changes.

By only advocating for ourselves, we may make a tiny bit of difference to a few. By standing up and advocating for our colleagues who are under-valued and under-appreciated not just in early childhood, but in the wider society as well, we can solve the wider issues.

Yes, the sector is better for diversity and there are general benefits to having more men in the workforce. But it's important to remember that men aren't beneficial to the sector just because they're men. That's incredibly demeaning to all the women in the sector who have earned their positions through study and hard work, and we need to be careful that men are not highlighted above those educators for purely genetic reasons.

We also need to be really careful about stereotyping men's contributions, and by comparison stereotyping woman's contributions. Yes there are plenty of men who are good with construction and fixing things, but there are plenty who aren't – anyone who's worked with me for example knows not to let me within 10 feet of a toolbox. Similarly, there are plenty of women for whom that is a great skillset.

Diversity – full stop – is good for the sector, and that means diversity of backgrounds, skills, accomplishments, regardless of gender.

When we consider the extensive and long-running experience of women having to continually fight for recognition, respect and wages, and when we consider this week's big loss in Fair Work, we have to look beyond our own issues to the wider system. For the exceptional women who have fought these battles for generations, and overwhelmingly do the incredible work in early childhood centres around Australia, I would not be encouraging them to be redirecting their focus to the experience of men in the sector.

I could not ask that of them.

When the critical and complex work of early childhood education isn't viewed as just "women's work", and when the work women do in our community is finally valued appropriately, we'll find that percentage of men working in the sector is growing, and the issues around it lessening.

But until that happens, my advocacy efforts will be focused on addressing the overwhelming, systemic and entrenched disadvantage of the incredible women in the early childhood sector and beyond.

I would encourage men who want to become advocates to do the same.

-reprinted from The Framework

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