

WOMEN'S CONSULTATIVE FORUMS

Statement by Minister for Women's Interests

MRS L.M. HARVEY (Scarborough — Minister for Women's Interests) [12.15 pm]: In 2013 the Liberal–National government made an election commitment to improve strategies that address issues affecting women. Last week I was pleased to host the second of my consultative forums to inform government on the status of women and to assist in policy implementation in Western Australia. The first forum was held on 3 March, which I co-hosted with the Premier. The theme was “attracting talent—promoting non-traditional education and careers to girls.” Attended by leaders across government, academia and industry, it focused on strategies to attract more young women into non-traditional trades and careers involving science, technology, engineering and maths—or STEM—to address the significant under-representation of girls and young women in this sector. Importantly, the forum identified that many issues were cultural and systemic in nature and stemmed from negative perceptions about non-traditional roles, as well as an unconscious bias steering young women away from these careers. The proposed strategies include a rebranding of the way STEM and non-traditional careers are promoted to girls and young women, with particular focus on the benefits these careers offer in remuneration and flexibility.

The second forum, held on 15 June, was themed “retaining talent—investing in women”, focusing on improving workplace practices to better support and encourage women to remain in the workforce and attain leadership positions. Nationwide, women are graduating from study at higher rates than men, yet, as of February this year, the general labour force participation rate for women is 58.6 per cent, compared with 71 per cent for men. Workplace participation rates decline further for women when they reach their mid-twenties, and stay lower for the following two decades of their lives. Industries with greater female participation are typically relatively lower paid industries such as health and social assistance, and education. Relatively higher paying industries such as mining and technical services remain male dominated, with women under-represented in engineering and IT qualifications. Women constitute almost 70 per cent of part-time employees. Evidence demonstrates that by working part-time, women are disadvantaged in various ways. Working part-time can mean putting their career on hold and fewer opportunities for career progression resulting in lower salaries and significantly reduced superannuation, causing a considerable impact on retirement.

Offering flexible working arrangements, providing assistance with transition around periods of extended leave and providing mentoring and sponsorship programs are just some of the ways in which organisations can encourage women to stay in the workforce and progress to leadership roles. Improvements in workplace culture, when implemented effectively, support and retain women in the workplace and deliver whole-of-organisation benefits. This forum presented an opportunity to identify strategies that engage government and industry sectors to improve workplace practices across sectors, and encourage and promote women to return to, and remain in, the workforce.