

When former Chief of Army David Morrison was announced as the 2016 Australian of the Year, a number of media outlets pronounced him as “warrior for women”.

Morrison, who received international attention for his [stern video warning against unacceptable behaviour against women](#), is a member of the Male Champions of Change, an initiative which asks men “to use their immense power and influence, their collective voice and wisdom to create change for women”.

The Male Champions of Change head up companies such as Telstra, Qantas, the Commonwealth Bank, Woolworths, Citibank and IBM and hold the most senior roles in Government, Secretary of the Prime Minister & Cabinet and the Treasury. As heads of Australian and global corporates, they exert various levels of monopolistic and oligopolistic power to influence government, market price, tax structures and the remuneration packages they (and their staff) receive.

Yet despite the power corporate figures exercise in influencing the economic, political and social tapestry in Australia and beyond, their influence has not been able to progress women's equality.

Morrison's ascension to being a “warrior for women” reflects a rhetorical return to an implicit position that women need men to protect them and advocate for them.

In fact, the imprimatur of powerful men has always been intrinsic to women's success. To thrive and even to survive in the workplace has seen women and men collude with archetypal dynamics that place men in the role of protectors. Its legacy remains subtle and covert and has been a [powerful driver in workplace relations](#).

The inclusion of women in senior leadership positions remains a challenge for corporate Australia in particular. A key finding from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency's 2014-15 report indicates that women's progress into leadership positions has been glacial.

The top levels of management remain heavily male-dominated, with just 15.4% of CEO positions and 27.4% of key management personnel positions held by women. Even when women achieve executive status they earn less than their male counterparts. At [senior levels the gap is 29%](#)

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Most talented women are invisible to powerful men. Relatively few women have successfully navigated corporate cultures to reach positions of leadership. For most, career progression involves navigating labyrinthine barriers resulting in women exiting organisations or accepting the limitations of the glass ceiling.

In 2006, The Economist hailed the arrival of “womenomics”, claiming “the future of the world economy lies increasingly in female hands” with a new era of women in business, bringing equality.

Reframing the gender equality debate in economic terms brought women’s issues into a mainstream business agenda. Psychoanalyst Paul Verhaeghe writes that the tenets of the market had broken from the traditions of class, gender and race, offering the idea of a meritocracy in which “the ideal individual”, “the most productive man or women” is duly rewarded.

Yet the promotion of “natural” winners, women with talent, has not been realised. Women remain conspicuously missing from leadership. The market has failed to dismantle entrenched male hierarchies.

At a time when women are the most educated and in a position to serve the needs of a global knowledge economy, hungry for high quality talent, they remain excluded, underutilised and undervalued. Merit remains a subjective phenomenon reflecting the perspective of those who control economic resources.

Rationalisation for women’s absence at the leadership table is explained by women’s lack of “executive presence”, the mysterious X factor that determines entry into leadership ranks. According to research undertaken by Sylvia Hewlett leadership roles are given to those who look and act the part.

Top jobs often elude women and professionals of colour because they lack “executive presence”. Women have a [smaller window of EP acceptability](#) than men. Men continue to police the way women are expected to look and to behave.

No doubt the current crop of “male champions” can use their significant influence to ensure women’s contribution is valued rather than undermined. This requires commitment for the long haul. Sadly, history has shown that men’s support for women’s equality in the public and private sectors has been sporadic, selective and conditional, dismantled when priorities perceived to be more pressing took precedence.

Despite many leaders supporting equality, Australian companies chose a path of least resistance as gender diversity initiatives took a step backwards post the Global Financial Crisis. Women across all socio-economic strata bore the brunt. According to the 2008 [EOWA Australian Census of Women in Leadership](#), the number of women in board director roles in ASX200 companies had dropped to their lowest levels since the agency began collecting data in 2002. Australia was not alone.

In the US the number of discrimination complaints by women to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission climbed significantly during the recession in 2008 and 2009.

Resort to “warrior for women” rhetoric is a reflection of a number of realities that combined may offer some explanation. First, there is desperation and futility in response to the failed business case argument. No amount of evidence (such as these reports from Swiss Institute Of Banking and Finance 2015, [McKinsey](#), and [Catalyst](#)) is able to dispel a “deficit notion” of women as inherently lacking.

Second, it is a reflection of a current reality where control of economic resources, in particular, increasingly lies with strong men who head up corporations. To align with the power base is to align with the “winners”.

Research has found that women’s survival strategy has been to accept and collude with powerful men, albeit unconsciously, particularly in organisational settings which are highly competitive and hostile to the female presence. In a culture of “winners”, women seek to adapt to the norms of the winning group.

Third, in times of heightened military and economic threat, both real and perceived, the propensity for the warrior as protector fantasy is intensified as leaders act increasingly like “commanders”.

Women alone will not achieve change. The support of powerful men such as the Male Champions of Change is paramount. Change will only occur if men and women stand shoulder to shoulder to expunge cultures of sexism and discrimination. However, positioning men as “warriors for women” is a return to a primitive script of hero and damsel that sees both sexes diminished.

This script has distanced men from women and men from themselves as men relinquish their own feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness in facing the challenges of a complex and changing world, while women relinquish their adult voice to become victims of unsavoury power dynamics.

The time has come to consider systemic change such as quota-based solutions that transcend a reliance on powerful men. Quotas have been introduced in Norway, Spain, France, Iceland, Italy, and the Netherlands and now Germany has legislated boardroom quotas. Why not in Australia?

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