



CHANGE CHAMPIONS: (From left) QEnergy managing director Kate Farrar, APHS managing partner Cathie Reid, and Ernst & Young Queensland managing partner Jenny Parker. Pictures: Liam Kidston, Jono Searle

Three of Queensland's top female executives share their views on important workplace issues in a **Q & A** with **SOPHIE FOSTER**

ADVOCATES LEAD WAY FOR GENDER BALANCE

**KATE FARRAR,
MANAGING DIRECTOR QENERGY:**

Q: The higher you rise, the less balance there seems to be gender-wise in the composition of peers.

What is your view on a sponsorship system where male executives are tasked with actively mentoring females that show leadership potential?

A: In past corporate roles, I have definitely found that as you progress up the ranks, most peers are male. So it is a wonderful thing for an aspiring corporate female to have a male sponsor show her how to get things done. I have been very fortunate that past bosses – all male – have actively mentored me so I could move up into “C level” roles within their companies.

Interestingly, it is a bit different as the managing director of QEnergy, a new electricity retailer specialising in selling to SMEs. In Queensland, female CEOs are more common than elsewhere in Australia because we have such a high proportion of SMEs within our business mix. So I am now finding that I have quite a few peers who are women, but for SMEs, there are just fewer mentors.

In that context, I was recently very inspired by Peter Birtles (Super Retail Group CEO), who promoted himself as a “Male Champion of Change” at a Queensland Leaders session, designed to mentor SME leaders.

**CATHIE REID,
MANAGING PARTNER APHS:**

Q: There has been much discussion around the need to revamp maternity provisions in the workforce. What is your view on the Paid Parental Leave scheme, as advocated by Prime Minister Tony Abbott, and what other measures do you believe would be effective in keeping more women in the workforce?

A: With Australia's ageing population creating a widening gap in the job market, there has never been a more

important time for industry and government to facilitate an easy and effective work/family life combination for women. While the Paid Parental Leave scheme has its critics, I believe it has achieved an elevated awareness of the need to support women who choose to have a family, without resulting in a crippling financial burden.

Further to this, I am a big advocate of expanding childcare funding to allow better utilisation of nannies. Stuart and I have always used nannies for our child care, largely because our work schedules would never have been able to fit the operating hours of childcare centres, a problem I know many other women struggle with. Having a nanny also alleviates the bugbear of the working parent's life, the sick child who can't go to child care where they'll infect all the other children but is perfectly fine to be at home in the care of their nanny.

We would not have been able to build the successful national healthcare company we have today without the assistance of the three wonderful nannies who have been part of our children's lives across the last 10 years. I would love to see women financially supported in accessing this degree of flexibility and, as a consequence, make their work and childcare options far easier.

**JENNY PARKER, QUEENSLAND
MANAGING PARTNER, ERNST & YOUNG:**

Q: Women have been highly successful in education but this does not appear to be translating into achievement in paid work, according to the Australian Human Rights Commission. In your experience, what are some of the best policies to retain women in the workforce through to leadership levels?

A: Greater female representation in senior roles is inextricably linked with the productivity of an organisation, as well as the country as a whole. But, while many organisations are proactively

working towards this goal, change has been slow. Women in the corporate world still face common blockages, including unconscious bias, rigid work hours, unaffordable childcare and inflexible work practices.

While flexibility and setting regularly monitored gender targets are important, organisations also need to have a top down approach that addresses the cultural issues which may be stopping these measures from having their intended effect.

Business leaders should articulate the case for gender equity and constantly reinforce these values. This is an issue that needs to be led by the CEO and supported by the leadership team, not just with words but through meaningful day-to-day action.

Women in positions of influence have important roles to play in terms of stewardship, acting as visible role models and creating a better workplace for future generations. Equally though, men need to be a part of the discussion so that it isn't viewed as solely a women's issue. Gender equity is as good for men as it is for women.

There are also simple things organisations can do to help ease the transition back to work for women (or men) who have been off on parental leave. At EY in Brisbane, for example, we hold regular morning teas and send out monthly emails containing key updates. This helps maintain contact, keeping people in the loop and making it easier for them to readjust when they return to work.

We also provide a benefit worth \$2500 for people returning from parental leave that can be used for a range of things including executive coaching or development programs.

But it's not all about parental leave. Organisations that foster an inclusive work environment and leverage different work styles will be best able to attract and retain great talent, both male and female.