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Media Statement

Sex equality in the workplace still has a long way to go

Equal Opportunity Commissioner Yvonne Henderson has supported Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner Elizabeth Broderick's warning this week that sex discrimination and gender equality laws are failing Australian women.

The Commissioner also welcomed a recent Senate report urging Federal Parliament to authorise the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to launch its own investigations and court action.

"The system requiring individuals to lodge and pursue complaints is not producing change quickly enough," Ms Henderson said.

"There is no question that the ability to proactively investigate where there has not been a formal complaint would be useful."

Ms Henderson said that despite some progress, sex discrimination and sexual harassment continued to plague women in the workplace.

"While we are able to deal with complaints individually and provide individuals with redress, it does not address ongoing systemic problems like access to promotion, sex discrimination and lack of pay equity.

"For example, in 1985 in its first year, the Commission dealt with a number of complaints where women were discriminated against on the grounds of being pregnant. All the complaints involved women being dismissed after informing their employer that they were pregnant.

"Since July last year, the Commission has dealt with another seven formal complaints where women have been discriminated against because they were pregnant. This included one case where a woman was told she would not receive a pay and salary increment increase because she was pregnant.

"So here we are more than 20 years later, still dealing with the same types of systemic discrimination in the workplace.

Sex and sexual harassment form the third highest area of complaint that the Commission receives after impairment and race. From 1985 to December 2008 the Commission has received nearly 2000 sex discrimination complaints and 1485 sexual harassment complaints.

"Many employers in Western Australia are still not taking sex discrimination in the workplace seriously and the majority of complaints are also being made to us after the employee has had no success in tackling the issue within their workplace."

**FOR ADDITIONAL COMMENT: Commissioner Yvonne Henderson
(08) 9216 3954 or mobile number 0409 880 544**

Level 2, 141 St Georges Terrace, Western Australia 6000 - Tel: (08) 9216 3900 - Fax: (08) 9216 3960
Email: eoc@eoc.wa.gov.au Website www.eoc.wa.gov.au