

WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

Business with purpose sparking social change

“I consistently find that women often are really good at making the circle bigger – they don’t care so much about who gets the credit, they just want to get good stuff done.”

REBECCA SCOTT



SOCIAL PURPOSE
EMILY MCAULIFFE

Often women find that the types of workplaces they want to work in are few and far between, or simply don't exist. They're after workplaces that not only offer flexibility to fit around family commitments and domestic tasks (according to a 2017 PwC report, Australian women conduct 72 per cent of unpaid labour), but also fill a social need and give them the satisfaction of making a difference in the world.

The solution? Women create the organisations they want to work for.

While there haven't been any large-scale research projects that have specifically studied women-led social enterprises in Australia, Distinguished Professor Jo Barraket, director of the Centre for Social Impact Swinburne, says that, in practice, women's social entrepreneurship is a strong trend.

According to Barraket, this is likely because women tend to have a good understanding of people-centred economics, and because social enterprises often, but not always, emerge from the female-dominated not-for-profit sector. However, she also states that a lot of women, along with people from refugee communities, engage in 'necessity entrepreneurship' – servicing people who are effectively excluded from the labour market.

“A notable proportion of those groups look to business development as a pathway to financial sustainability, and among some groups of people – and women we would include in that – the tendency is towards impact-focused forms of entrepreneurship,” she says.

This is the case for Georgina McEncroe, radio presenter, TV personality and comedian turned businesswoman, who founded the social impact business Shebah, an all-female ride-share service, in 2017. “I saw a really big problem to be solved,” says McEncroe.

Like many women, she worked in

between the 'gaps' of her husband's work and her children's needs, then found herself in a precarious financial situation post-divorce, but was unable to take on a full-time career while she cared for her children. She'd also lost the family home in the split and couldn't afford a new one.

“I thought, ‘I need to get some more money’,” she remembers. “And so I looked at becoming an Uber driver, but just felt like it was too scary ... You see when things go wrong for women when they are victims of an assault, there is a very quick knee-jerk response to say, why was she there, why was she in that dangerous position?”

While pondering and rejecting Uber driving as a money-making venture, McEncroe was also shuttling her children around to sport and other activities, and thought, ‘Wouldn't it be good if someone else could do this?’. “So I thought, well, I should try and invent what I need and see how it goes.” What she needed was a service like Shebah – a form of safe on-demand transport,

Below, Professor Jo Barraket, director of the Centre for Social Impact Swinburne.



designed with women and children in mind.

It turned out other women were feeling McEncroe's frustrations, and now Shebah has 2000 female drivers on the books, with 4000 more in line to start. Half of her drivers carry car seats, and all have Working With Children Checks. McEncroe reports growth of 1000 new passengers per week across Australia.

She puts the success of the business down to the creation of a new sector that was desperately needed (because, as McEncroe quips, much of the transport sector was created by men for men with men's experience in mind), but also to the support she's received from other women in business. “Women share information pretty freely and happily with one another and can be vulnerable and say, you know, I just don't know what to do in this scenario. Can you help me?” she says.

This sentiment is echoed by Rebecca Scott, CEO of STREAT, a work integration social enterprise that assists 16–24-year-olds who are in crisis (for example, facing homelessness or the youth justice system) by providing them with training and employment pathways into the hospitality industry. Flexibility and support systems are built into all areas of the organisation, with psychologists, social workers, and even a therapy dog available to support trainees while they complete their Certificate II in Hospitality.

Scott launched STREAT in late 2008 in Melbourne with her now-wife Dr Kate Barrelle, a clinical and forensic psychologist. STREAT's management team of six includes five women, and most of its board chairs have been female. “I think women are particularly good at being collaborative rather than competitive,” says Scott. “I consistently find that women often are really good at making the circle bigger – they don't care so much about who gets the credit, they just want to get good stuff done.”

As well as having strong female representation at the top of the organisation, Scott says STREAT attracts a lot of women to other roles, and many have come from high positions in other not-for-profits or businesses.

“We've found women are often quite keen [to get into social enterprise], especially, for example, corporate women who feel like they're not getting the job satisfaction and personal impacts that they might've wanted in their jobs in the corporate world, but want more entrepreneurship than you might get in the non-profit world,” she says. “I think we're in a really nice sector that gets a lot of diversity. You end up with really diverse teams and that's one of the reasons I love it.”

LGBTIQ+ members of the community are also emphatically welcomed, both as staff and trainees, and Scott says it's common for young people to come out as queer at STREAT, because it's the first place they've felt safe in expressing their identity. This culture of inclusion is something Scott feels has played an important role in STREAT's success, yet is something that should be reflected across all organisations, regardless of what industry they service or who's in charge.

“In every workplace you should feel free to express yourself the way you want to,” says Scott. “Every workplace should have workmates who are supportive and caring. Every workplace should be diverse and reflect the community that it's in. All of those things should be the norm.”

Barraket agrees. “We need to ensure the business sector as a whole, and indeed all sectors, are practising inclusion and also supporting social innovation,” she says. “When we have a more diverse and inclusive economy, we're actually accessing the expertise, experience and knowledge of a wider group of the population, which makes our society more innovative and more resilient.”