THERE HAS BEEN a significant shift in perceptions of gender equality since 2007, when I first began the role of Sex Discrimination Commissioner. There was no paid parental leave, women were not equal participants in the military and people were still making the case as to why we needed more women at the decision-making level across the nation. Since then, there has been a great deal of progress – but we’re still a long way from a gender-equal society in Australia.

MEN AS ADVOCATES
In the past five years, there has been far greater understanding across the Australian business community that the promotion of gender diversity and equality should not be shouldered by women alone – that unless powerful, decent men step up beside women to advocate for change in the nation, we won’t see progress. There is, at last, the recognition that men need to take responsibility and accountability, and be equal partners with women in promoting gender equality. This is vital, as there is a far larger proportion of men in leadership positions.

This objective has been exemplified by the ‘Male Champions of Change’, a collective of many of the nation’s most powerful male leaders who are stepping up to create change. These men come from every walk of life: sports, industry, the military, the government and so on. And when you bring men like that together, who have A-type personalities, they become incredibly competitive, and each one of them wants to do the most to change the nation in terms of gender equality. It’s been a very successful strategy for us.

More specifically, many of the leaders in business are embracing a number of bold strategies, such as making all roles flexible – from the CEO to junior positions. This will eliminate the ‘ideal worker model’, which is based on a fixed-time, full-time mentality. The goal is to fit the job around the individual rather than the other way around.

PAID PARENTAL LEAVE
A landmark step forward took place in 2011, when the national paid parental leave was implemented. Much greater recognition was given to the fact that work and care should not sit at opposite ends of one difficult decision. The ability for both men and women to participate in raising a family and have paid work is absolutely vital to building a strong economy here in Australia.

WOMEN AT WORK
In terms of salary, the gender pay gap is still unacceptable in Australia – on average, for a full time weekly earning, men receive 18.8 per cent more than women for work that is of equal or comparable value. This is something we are still working on. Another important imbalance to address is in the tax system; women retire with just over half of the retirement savings as men. And that’s because the nation doesn’t put an economic value on unpaid caring work, and women are doing most of it.

With regard to workplace policy, the Sex Discrimination Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, marital status and pregnancy. Australia is one of only three countries in the world that have investigated the level of pregnancy discrimination at work. This has been undertaken at three specific stages: when an employee tells her manager she is pregnant, when she tells her employer and when she stops work to raise her family.
pregnant; when she discusses parental leave; and when she tries to come back to work (with flexible working hours). Based on our data, one in two women will experience some form of pregnancy discrimination. Not only that, very few of them – less than 9 per cent – will ever say anything about it. These are issues that are deeply hidden.

We may have laws, but if they’re not implemented within organisations, we won’t have gender equal workplaces. In fact, the focus needs to be on changing attitudes and social norms. One of the prevalent social norms we have here is the ‘good mother belief’. If you are born and educated in Australia, you are likely to grow up thinking that good mothers are always with their children – regardless of whether they are smoking, gambling or being abusive. This leads to the damaging perspective that it doesn’t matter what you’re doing as long as you’re with your child. This is the type of social norm that needs to be challenged in our nation.

AUSTRALIAN ARMED FORCES
Speaking of altering attitudes, changing the culture of the military has been one of my biggest objectives. We, like the UK and US militaries, have started to understand that how we treat women in the Australian military corresponds directly to our capabilities and operational effectiveness. Specifically, we have worked towards ending sexual assault and harassment. Because when a soldier – usually a male – makes the decision to be a protector or perpetrator, one of the key determinants is the culture in which he finds himself in his own military. We are now being profiled as a best practice leader by NATO.

DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE
In the past two years, the issue of domestic and family violence has truly come to the fore. There are around 1.4 million women in Australia today who are either currently in an intimate relationship characterised by physical violence or have experienced it in the past. It will take every sector of the Australian community to remove this blight from our society, which is why domestic and family violence are front and centre of our political, economic and business agendas.

Ending violence involves changing perspectives as well. When I began the Sex Discrimination Commissioner role, I undertook a nationwide listening exercise to hear stories of gender equality from both women and men. When I used to go into businesses, I could always talk about issues surrounding sexual harassment, but the minute I touched on domestic and family violence, I was told politely that it was a private issue ‘between him and her’.

Now, most Australian businesses recognise that domestic violence is also a workplace issue, and that as a business, they need to ensure that women working there are safe and supported. A strong advocate against violence has been the ‘Australian of the Year’, Rosie Batty, a woman whose 11-year-old son was beaten to death at cricket practice by her husband, it galvanised the nation and put the issue front and centre. In fact, the new Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s first funding announcement was allocating AUS $100 million to combat domestic and family violence.

TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE CHANGE
We have to work on a number of different fronts; I increasingly believe we need new and disruptive strategies, because those that got women better education and maternal health are not necessarily the strategies that will get women closer to economic power or greater access to leadership. I was recently at the UN for a review of Beijing +20, and although the entire world has made progress on education and health, very little has been achieved regarding women in leadership positions in the past 20 years.

The aforementioned ‘Male Champions of Change’ is one example of quite a controversial strategy, because it focuses on men rather than women. Some women might say: ‘Oh, are we trying to get men to save us?’ and comment on the problem of a patriarchal society. It’s not about men saving us, it’s about recognising where power sits in nations – and organisations – and working with those who have power to create change. Gender equality is not a battle of the sexes, it’s a battle where women and men need to stand side by side. I talk about the empowerment of women as the empowerment of humanity, so it is very much a collaborative approach.