



2017 L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science Ceremony
7pm, 31 October 2017
Sydney Opera House

Anna-Maria Arabia, Chief Executive, Australian Academy of Science
Opening Address

Good evening and thank you for the opportunity to address you this evening.

I would like to acknowledge and pay respect to the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

I am thrilled to be at the 2017 L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science ceremony to honour the five early career scientists from Australia and New Zealand.

My warmest congratulations to the 2017 Fellows for their outstanding achievements.

I'm sure you would all agree this is a stellar event by any measure.

The location is superb, the cocktails and canapés exquisite.

The company is exceptional.

And the mission is critical.

A mission to recognise and promote participation and excellence amongst women in science.

Tribute must be paid to L'Oreal for their longstanding commitment to this mission.
L'Oreal's support has been sustained and targeted, making a tangible difference to recipients.

It is the kind of support that helps women at the critical make or break junction in their scientific careers.

Importantly, it's the type of support – flexible financial support – which recognises the real challenges faced by women at the early career stage when research funding uncertainty is ever present, women are faced with escalating childcare costs and barriers to attending conferences where critical networks are formed and research collaborations begin.

The Australian Academy of Science is proud to stand with L'OREAL, to shift the dial toward gender equity in STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine).

Indeed, I'd like to acknowledge the Fellows of the Australian Academy of Science who have been recipients of the award, members of the judging panel, mentors, and advocates for gender equity – you are a great source of pride for the Academy and for the nation.

I love this event – let's be honest – what's not to love.

But I'm sure you will understand when I say that I look forward to the day when L'Oreal and the STEMM sector can hail "mission accomplished".

When it is not extraordinary for women to rise to dizzying heights.

When there is nothing remarkable about women's accomplishments in science and we simply celebrate success in whatever shape, form or gender it arrives in.

Let's be clear I'm not advocating for less cocktails – far be it for me to make such an outrageous statement.

The truth is we will be sipping cocktails and celebrating the achievements of women in science - rather than just achievements in science - for many years to come.

Because this challenge is proving to be nothing, if not persistent.

And this challenge is global.

Gender inequity is indeed a challenge as widespread, and as stubborn as they come.

I'm reminded of this daily.

When I see that across most scientific disciplines women are still significantly under-represented in senior leadership positions, despite advances in female participation at secondary school and at the undergraduate level.

I distinctly recall the day in 2009 when Professor Sharon Bell published a report on Women in Science in Australia.

Professor Bell's report took as its benchmark a 1995 Women in Science, Engineering and Technology review and noted that in the 15 years prior to her 2009 study the gender equity issues were yet to be addressed.

Sobering reading to say the least.

Professor Bell's research also reported high levels of attrition in the postdoctoral phase of women's scientific careers and the small number of women in senior and leadership roles in the science and technology sector.

Sound familiar?

The very women L'Oreal so rightly targets and who we are celebrating this evening.

The truth is, in the last 15- 30 years we have hardly shifted the dial.

Still today, when we compare men and women in STEMM, 32% of men, compared with only 12% of women are high income earners, earning over \$104K.

And to be clear the magnitude of this disparity is not accounted for by the percentage of women with children, or by the higher proportion of females who work part-time.

Although we haven't quite cracked this old chestnut, I am pleased to say that Australia and decision makers, largely of the male variety, have heard the call to action and unlike 2009, the problem is now being addressed.

I am proud to say that in Australia the Australian Academy of Science in partnership with the Academy of Technology and Engineering is well into the implementation of the Athena Swan Charter – a UK based evaluation and accreditation framework that has moved the dial in the UK.

In the UK, Athena SWAN has been operating for over 10 years and it has shown sustained and continuous improvement in gender diversity, and in bolstering women's leadership roles within STEMM institutions.

As many of you would know the Athena Swan pilot in Australia is named Science in Australia Gender Equity or SAGE. The pilot includes 44 members.

Early next year, 20 of those 44 Australian institutions will be submitting their application for bronze accreditation.

For the last 2 years these institutions have been evaluating their practices and capacity to eliminate gender inequity, committing to the hiring, promotion and retention of women, challenging the minds and attitudes of staff at every level and engaging their leadership to identify and tackle barriers faced by women in STEMM.

And unsurprisingly it is improving the workplace environment for people of all genders.

Their efforts are to be applauded. Loudly.

Change does not come easily. For if it did, we would be sipping cocktails tonight for a very different reason.

I would like to acknowledge L'Oréal for partnering with the Australian Academy of Science to deliver the SAGE Symposium – we are deeply grateful for your support.

The 44 SAGE members represent a phenomenal level of participation, covering the majority of universities in the nation, several medical research institutes and publicly funded research agencies.

Their participation in this initiative and initiatives like the Male Champions of Change for STEM are a cause for celebration as they signal not just an acknowledgment of this persistent problem, but indeed a willingness to change.

An admission that we can and must collectively do better.

A step closer to that long awaited day, when we will speak about gender inequity in science in the past tense.

A step closer to workplaces designed for both men and women, rather than asking women to fit into a business structure not conceived with them in mind.

A step closer to a new normal, where men and women alike can take parental leave without compromising their careers and without stigma.

A world where joining a maths or physics or earth sciences or chemistry department as a senior female scientist is commonplace and does not trigger appointment to EVERY committee.

A world where we forget to count how many women are on stage or how many childcare places are on offer because it is entirely unremarkable.

A world where young women can aspire to be what they can see – a successful woman in science, paid in equal measure to her male counterpart.

Of course gender inequity in STEMM is not a challenge that starts and ends in the laboratory.

Many have argued that self-doubt or the confidence gap is a potent force amongst women.

Indeed, women are still less likely to seek promotion, nomination for fellowship of learned academies and as a general rule they will hold themselves to a higher standard when it comes to publishing research results.

This sort of behaviour once led author Julia Baird to quip that women would do well to “carry themselves with the confidence of a mediocre white male” and to not feel they had to meet every single selection criteria before applying for a job or promotion.

I am cautiously confident that by 2024, fifteen years post Professor Bell’s 2009 report - we will have shifted the dial.

Initiatives by SAGE members are a source of hope and a demonstration of action.

Initiatives such as:

- ANU’s early career research support grants spread 50:50 amongst women and men.
- Griffith University’s Leneen Forde Future Leaders Program- aimed to improve women’s promotion rates.
- The University of Melbourne’s women only positions in the School of Mathematics and Statistics.
- UTS’ – Research Equity Fellowship – providing financial support for mid-career staff whose research careers have been significantly interrupted by carer responsibilities.

And construction has commenced at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute - the first medical research institute in Australia to establish its own on-site Early Childhood Education and Care centre as part of a suite of measures to achieve gender equity.

Bricks and mortar and real actions that fix the system, rather than putting the onus on women to adapt to it.

Friends, equity is never assured - at least not yet.

And persistent challenges require persistent and sustained action, otherwise, hard-fought gains will be lost.

L’Oréal is a significant part of this sustained push forward.

We thank you for your leadership and support of the extraordinary 2017 L’Oreal-UNESCO For Women in Science Fellows and for the support you have already provided to literally thousands of equally brilliant women across the world through this initiative.

Thank you.