

*MEDIA RELEASE*

*Tuesday 12 October 2021*

## **Inaugural survey reveals that women miss out on board roles because of their cultural background**

One in three respondents to the **inaugural WOB Counting Culture Survey** believe they have missed out on a board or committee opportunity because of their cultural background. This increased to 53% for those born overseas compared with 17% for those born in Australia.

Respondents' comments revealed key themes across the survey:

*"My accent arrived before I could explain my background and experience."*

*"As my appearance is white European, when I personally meet people they seem to be fine, but when they haven't met with me yet and see my foreign name or hear my accent over the phone they can be dismissive."*

**Claire Braund, co-founder and Executive Director of Women on Boards**, said the Counting Culture survey is the first to look at the issue from the perspective of women actively seeking board roles, rather than canvas the views of Non-Executive Directors on cultural diversity.

"In capturing the voices and experiences of culturally diverse women, the survey demonstrates how the intersection of being female AND from a culturally diverse background impacts opportunities to secure board roles.

"As a pioneer in taking action to address gender balance on boards, WOB has always been mindful it should not become a club of privileged white Anglo women that simply replaces men of the same cultural heritage and background.

Raising awareness and educating Boards, Chairs and Recruiters to firstly see how white privilege impacts others is critical, along with explaining the benefits of recruiting board members who don't come from your old networks and don't look/sound/think like you."

**Mahajabeen Zaman**, Chair of WOB's Cultural Diversity Committee said:

*Cultural diversity on boards is not a simple thing to solve. Our aim is to bring in partners and collaborate, to be more impactful as a multicultural society. While talent and culture remain priorities in boardrooms, having a culturally diverse board will reflect its true strength.*

**Marcella Lazarus GAICD**, one of the survey architects and member of the WOB CDC put it this way:

*"We have to value the thoughts, skills, lived experiences, and networks of a whole range of people and ensure their perspectives are incorporated into our decision making. It makes good business sense...We can't possibly be*

*making decisions that are in the best interests of all stakeholders when we aren't close to representative. ...I'm particularly concerned about the under-representation of Indigenous people on Australian Boards. We can't possibly work towards reconciliation while we marginalise First People's voices."*

Women on Boards has committed to 10 actions on the back of the Counting Culture Survey, which include actively promoting and championing culturally diverse and First Nations women into board roles and critically reviewing its own training programs, practices and branding to ensure it becomes more inclusive.

"There is always room for improvement and WOB recognises that correcting the cultural diversity imbalance within our gender is also an important step toward achieving optimally functioning boards.

To this end we are committed to working with the Cultural Diversity Committee, our members and other key stakeholders to get meaningful change and action on the issues raised in this survey," Claire said.

## **ENDS**

### **Contact**

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**Survey Key Findings** – page 3-4 following

## Key Findings

The survey revealed a rich diversity of cultural backgrounds:

- 42% identified as bicultural
- 73 language groups were represented and 18% speak more than one language
- 40% were born overseas across 65 different countries of birth (compared to 32% for the Australian workforce overall<sup>1</sup>)
- 0.6% of respondents identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders.
- 92 different cultural backgrounds were identified, with the most frequent - other than Australian at 67% - being English (17%), Irish (5.6%), Italian (4.9%) and Chinese (4%).
- 34% of respondents identified as only Australian.

Respondents identified across 18 different types of Religion, with the most frequent being Christianity (48%), No religion (40%), Hinduism (2.5%), Judaism (2.1%) and Islam (1.5%).

52% percent have had global experience, having worked/lived overseas across 102 different countries.

77% percent of respondents hold Board or Committee roles, however further analysis reveals that 53% of overseas born respondents hold such roles compared with 70% of respondents born in Australia.

Respondents not born in Australia are more likely to sit on boards domiciled outside of Australia (10%), compared with 5% for respondents born in Australia.

Respondents born in Australia are also more likely to sit on an ASX (3%) and Government Board (28%) compared to 2% and 19% respectively for respondents born overseas. This should be qualified by the fact the survey did not ask whether respondents have Australian citizenship, which may be a factor contributing to the lower percentage of overseas respondents holding government board roles.

## About the survey

The inaugural Women on Boards survey on the cultural background of its members and broader stakeholder groups was conducted from 13 – 25 July 2021. It received 629 responses. The survey was sent via email to the WOB network and extensively promoted on its social media platforms.

The survey is based on the Diversity Council Australia's recommended "Counting Culture Survey" questions with some additional questions for WOB's context. Earlier reports by the Diversity Council of Australia (2017)<sup>2</sup> and the Australian Human Rights Commission (2018)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Census 2016

<sup>2</sup> Diversity Council Australia, Cracking the Glass-Cultural Ceiling (2017)

<sup>3</sup> Australian Human Rights Commission, Leading for Change: A Blueprint for Cultural Diversity and Inclusive Leadership Revisited (2018)

acknowledge that culturally diverse individuals are underrepresented in the leadership of the public and private sectors.

### **About Women on Boards**

Women on Boards has been working since 2006 to address gender inequity in the boardroom and across leadership roles. It is a recognised leader in the ecosystem of organisations and networks promoting and supporting women; dedicated to breaking down barriers to entry into leadership and onto boards. Its aim is to have 40 per cent of these roles occupied by women by 2025.

As strong advocates for women, WOB works across organisations and sectors on a meaningful and strategic policy and cultural change agenda for gender equity.

### **Cultural Diversity Committee**

Women on Boards Diversity Committee (CDC) was established in 2020 with the aim of addressing barriers to opportunity and access to leadership and board & committee roles for women of non-Anglo/Celtic background.

Key areas of focus for the Committee:

- Collating diversity data and facts, telling stories and collaborating with bodies in Australia who act and promote cultural diversity, to enlarge the influence of our collective action and accelerate progress.
- Influencing and raising awareness to increase understanding and promote a bias to action; including creating opportunities for culturally diverse women to connect, network and interact with decision makers.
- Creating a mentorship program promoting diverse women into leadership roles in Australia

### **Members of the Cultural Diversity Committee**

- Mahjabeen Zaman, Senior Investment Specialist, Citi (CHAIR)
- Ivett Guerra, Future Students Manager, Australian Catholic University
- Belinda Howell, Board Member Dunmore Lang College, Macquarie University
- Malini Raj, Head of Strategy (Multicultural Community Banking), Commonwealth Bank; Miriam George, Graduate and Inclusion Manager, Marsh and McLennan
- Sara Pantaleo, Founder, Affari SP, NED & Chair
- Bernadette Masbayi, Community Engagement Officer, Office of Multicultural Interests-Dept of Local Government Sport & Cultural Industries
- Jess Grills, Head Paralegal, Allens
- Ruth Medd, WOB Executive Chair
- Lil Bianchi, Non Executive Director. Chair Audit & Risk Committee. GAICD. Business transformation, technology & risk
- Marcella Lazarus, Director & Founder, Growing Organisations
- Nicole Donegan, COO WOB