



## Equality Talks Podcast - Transcript

### Episode 2: Gender Equality and Reaching 50-50 with Fiona Vines

Equality Talks. Brought to you by Work 180. Where we discuss how to finally put an end to workplace discrimination. Let's talk about what it really takes to succeed, what people are doing to drive equality and what can still be done.

Samantha (WORK180):

Fiona Vines has 26 years of HR and management experience in the financial services and resources sectors. She's currently the Global Head of Diversity and Inclusion at BHP, a world-leading resources company with more than 60,000 employees and contractors, primarily in Australia and the Americas. In addition, Fiona is a member of the Victorian government Ministerial Council on Women's Equality and is a board member of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons.

New Speaker:

Thank you so much for joining me today Fiona. I'm really excited to be talking to you.

Fiona Vines:

Thanks Sam. It's great to be with you.

Samantha (WORK180):

So one of the reasons I'm so excited to talk to you is because with the work that 180 and BHP are doing together, I really see BHP as market leaders in inclusion and diversity. And the reason I say that is because you have such a big market share and you are so large, that the moves you make influence the rest of the industry, that you're part of. So I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that, BHP's positioning in inclusion and diversity and your role within that.

Fiona Vines:

Absolutely. Certainly we understand the importance of a company of our size in what has traditionally been a very male dominated industry, taking a strong stand on creating a truly inclusive workplace for women and for a lot of people who have been excluded in the past. Not only for our own workforce, but also for our industry. And that's why one of our key priorities, and we'll probably talk about this more throughout the podcast Sam. But one of our key priorities in our strategy is to really work with our supply chain partners to achieve what I call the supplier multiplier effect. So we know that if we work with our key partners such as our vendors who provide labour hire to us, our vendors who design our equipment and the huge bits of gear that you see on mining sites. Right through to the vendors who we work with in relation to the goods and services that we use in our mines, such as the uniforms and the protective equipment that people wear.

Fiona Vines:

It's so important that we engage with all of those partners to talk about why it's important to redesign our workplaces, our jobs, and our equipment and materials to make the mining workplace truly inclusive for women.

Fiona Vines:

We know Sam, that it wasn't really until we started to really achieve our goal of achieving gender balance by 2025, which you're probably aware as CEO, Andrew Mackenzie at the time announced back in 2016. It wasn't until we actually really started to do the work, to hire many, many more women into our company, and to actually truly understand why do they stay, but also why do they leave and why do they not progress to management to the rate that we would like. And that was when we uncovered the real barriers in our business to, to inclusion. And it is things like does the equipment that I have to use every day, can I actually physically use it? Does the uniform that I get given to wear, is it actually made for a woman? And is the culture that I'm working in, is it respectful and is it safe? And we've learned a lot in three and a half years about all the things that you need to do. And certainly working more broadly with our supply partners is a really big part of that.

Samantha (WORK180):

So I have a few questions on this because I just find this topic so interesting as well. And I have a book that's called the Invisible Women, and it's really about how stuff like equipment in mining isn't built for women. So they actually can't be included because they can't operate the equipment. Or for example a pregnant woman on a site where she needs to wear a uniform and the uniform just isn't made to fit a pregnant belly in it. So I'm really interested to hear, you said there's reasons why people stay, but then there's reasons why people leave and why they don't progress as far. So what were some of the learnings, some more of the learnings that you've had in that time, if we can go even a bit deeper into them, since announcing that 50/50 goal?

Fiona Vines:

Yeah, for sure. Firstly, can I just say I'm also a huge fan of Invisible Women. I think Caroline's book, and her podcasts, and her TED Talks, and her research is game changing. Anyone who follows me on LinkedIn would probably think I'm on some kind of commission because I have been spruiking the book. And I really strongly encourage people to read that book. I mean, I'm a feminist. And I've been working in inclusion and diversity for a long time. I've read a lot of books, and I have to say that is a game changer. We've used it very widely here at BHP to really help particularly our leaders and our male leaders to really understand where bias is and how much of a part of our everyday lives it actually is. And I have to say it has been an enormously important part of us deepening our understanding, and therefore the effectiveness of the work that we're able to do. So do yourself a favour, go out and read the book.

Fiona Vines:

So Sam, to your question about what specifically have we learned? There's probably two really important things, categories of learnings that we've had. And I can talk about them at a high level, and then you can ask me sort of more detailed questions about both of them. But firstly, let me explain to you how we figured out what those true barriers were. And that is about a year after we announced the goal to be 50/50 by 2025. And back then, BHP was only 17% women. So back in 2016, only 17% of our workforce was women. So we knew we had a big, big job ahead of us to get to 50% by 2025.

Fiona Vines:

And as you can probably imagine, and is common in most organizations, there was a lot of focus on recruitment. Let's recruit as many women as we can, and our partnership with WORK180 is a really important part of that. And we were really successful. We recruited a lot more women than we had in the past. We went from 10% of our external hires being women, to 45% of our external hires being women. So that was a really great acceleration of our work.

Fiona Vines:

But then what we found Sam about a year later was when we looked at our other metrics, particularly around turnover, we noticed that women were leaving the company at a higher rate than men. And we didn't really have a good understanding of why that was happening. We also noticed that they weren't progressing towards management at the same rate that men were and that they were staying stagnant in their job levels for longer than men were. So data's really important to understanding the lived experience of women and other minorities in an organization.

Fiona Vines:

So once we started looking at the data and really going and talking to leaders and saying, "What is going on in your business and why are women leaving at a higher rate?" They really didn't know. They could speculate, but they didn't know for sure. So we undertook a piece of work to go and find out. Which involved all the obvious things that you would expect to do. Exit interviews, but also interviews with women who recently joined or interviews with women who were at what we called an at risk stage where we could see that we had spikes in turnover.

Fiona Vines:

And from that intervention, we discovered two things that were really important that were drivers of higher female turnover. The first was the level of unpaid and caring work that women do that really was a barrier to them fully participating in our workforce. So the lack of true flexible working enabling them to live their lives and all their responsibilities outside of work, as well as do their job. There was still lots and lots of barriers there, either real or perceived, that was causing women to choose other careers and to leave that company.

Fiona Vines:

And the second area was these experience they were having of what we called everyday micro behaviours, or this kind of borderline behaviour is how a lot of them described it. So it wasn't full on sexual harassment and really serious stuff, but it was just this constant current of what it's like to be a woman working in a male dominated industry. Banter, looks and comments, being excluded. Your gender being referenced as a reason why you got the job. There was a really strong theme around that.

Fiona Vines:

So what we learned from that was that our work on embedding flexible working deeply into our organization needed to continue and needed to accelerate. But secondly, we really needed to take a good look at this experience that women were having of just not feeling respected and certainly not feeling included, if we were going to really take our performance to the next level.

Samantha (WORK180):

So on that, one of the things that I wrote down when you were talking about the 50/50 goal is so you started at 17% in 2016. And I imagine the industry as a whole is around 20 or 25% women?

Fiona Vines:

It's about 17% still.

Samantha (WORK180):

It's about 17, right. Okay. So you were on the industry average. So when you then try to go to 50/50, I was wondering how you combat the assumption that many people are going to make that to get to 50/50, you're hiring women who are less meritorious than they're not. Leaving aside the fact that a meritocracy isn't a real thing. But how have you had to respond to that? Because that actually goes right in line with what you said about some of these micro behaviours around people saying women just have the job because they're women.

Fiona Vines:

Yeah, absolutely Sam. And there is no doubt that that is the backlash and the kind of pushback that you have to deal with. It's like well, obviously we're going to have to hire people who aren't really up for the job. And what does that mean about safety, performance, production. Is all that going to be at risk? So we've done a huge amount of work to help people to understand that firstly, the notion of meritocracies is as you say, not really a thing. The notion of merit is do you do things the way they've always been done? And do you look the same as me? And that's clearly not a valid reason for hiring or not hiring anybody.

Fiona Vines:

But the second thing and probably the more powerful thing has been our businesses changing. Like all workplaces out there, we are constantly changing, technology is changing the way that we work. We need people who have actually different ways of thinking about things, and we need diverse teams.

Fiona Vines:

So maybe Sam, if I can use an example that really brings to life the way that we have tried to address this issue of merit. We were doing some hiring for a big team that we were setting up in Brisbane, which was going to remote control operate the mines in our Queensland coal business. So the controllers of mines used to actually physically sit at the mine. And they would be in a control room at the mine. And they'd be controlling a lot of the activity. Think of it like an air traffic controller. And that role due to the advances in technology and process improvements, we were able to centralize those roles into Brisbane into a much more sophisticated control hub where we could be far more efficient and obviously much safer for our operations.

Fiona Vines:

So when the leader of that business establishing it, he said to the project team it has to be a 50/50 gender team. And they said, "Well, we're not going to be able to achieve that, because 80% of the operators that we currently have are males." And he said, "Well, that's not a limitation. I need you to go and solve for this."

Fiona Vines:

So the way that they solved for it was they deconstructed the job of a mine controller, and then put it back together again in terms of what are the capabilities and attributes that we need for this role as it stands today. Not what it used to be in the past, and what we need for the future. And with that in mind, they were able to I guess rewrite the job description for mine controller. And then do a piece of analysis to understand which other industries do people pick up those experiences and capabilities. And we then went in targeted women, particularly in industries like air traffic control, triple zero dispatch, science type roles, etc. And we specifically used LinkedIn and other avenues to target people. And we ended up with a 50/50 gender mix, but also with about 35% of that new team being from outside of mining. Which is really important because they brought new skills and new ways of thinking.

Fiona Vines:

It's not to say that the mining experience is not important, but it's only part of what we need. So what we needed was a diverse team that had both mining experience, but also had this experience from other sectors. And also of course still makes our gender aspiration. So we've used that Sam as an example of how to I guess redefine merit and how to then use that process to tap into talent pools that you've never tapped into before.

Samantha (WORK180):

That is such a great story. And I love that going from 80% to 50% or 20 to 50 actually happened by thinking outside the industry. Because this is actually, well, as you would already obviously know, is one of the big ways that you solve for that kind of issue is that you brought in the pool and ways you brought in the pool are changing what it is you think you're looking for.

Samantha (WORK180):

Because I think historically in Australia, people traditionally wanted someone who'd done that exact job before, before they'd hired them. And now people are starting to see that actually people can have skills that are very relevant and transferable without having been a mine controller previously.

Fiona Vines:

Absolutely. And I mean, that is I guess the crux of the whole issue. We knew at BHP the only way we were going to achieve our objective is if we looked outside of our industry for talent. Because as we said before, the mining sector sits at sub 20% women internationally and nationally. So there is no way knowing that we were going to be able. By definition, it would have been madness to think that we could continue to hire the same sort of people and yet get a different gender mix in our workforce.

Fiona Vines:

The other thing I will say though Sam, that I think is the other really important part of this puzzle is not only is it about thinking about the skills that you can get in other industries. But the other really important lever that we have to pull is this notion of flexible working and how you actually work. Because I still think there are significant barriers for women and the way that women's roles are perceived in the workforce and in society that is still an enormous barrier.

Fiona Vines:

Because whilst in mining, BHP, we are definitely starting to think bigger about who could we go and talk to about coming to work for us. The reality is there are still made barriers that women face about how they can participate in the workforce. Not just in our industry, but across so many sectors. And that is

one of the reasons why we still see such low levels of female participation in politics, in sectors like the finance sector, which are female dominated at the entry level, but male dominated at the top.

Fiona Vines:

So it's so important to understand all the different components, I guess at a structural level that you need to be driving at the same time. Because the interplays between them are really critical. We know that by hiring women from these other industries, we're getting great skills. And it's exactly what we want for our business. But if at the same time, we don't create an environment where they can reimagine the way that they work and live, both the women and the men. We're actually not going to achieve our objectives of 50/50 by 2025.

Samantha (WORK180):

I 100% agree with you. And I'm interested to hear a bit more about what you think about some of these structural barriers. So when you talked about the two broad categories, and one of which was the amount of unpaid and caring work that women do. And the amount of unpaid domestic labour that women do. And I actually thought if you've read Invisible Women, obviously you would have read The Wife Drought as well. And I'm interested to hear from you what you think about that. And also actually the other thing is the marrying between the fact that you identify as a feminist, and a lot of the issues around social justice for me, with my feminism anyway. But then commercially in order to convince a CEO and a board that they need to have 50/50 women, that argument is quite different from social justice. So how do you bring those two things together?

Fiona Vines:

Firstly, completely I've read The Wife Drought. And that was actually the first book that I read many years ago I think that really made me understand this issue of the barriers faced by women. And probably when I discovered my inner feminist was all the way back then. So yeah, Annabel Crabb is definitely one of my heroes.

Fiona Vines:

Look, it's an interesting question Sam around how do you get leaders to buy into this and what does it take for them to be prepared to drive what is a very, very difficult challenge and change to make. And if I think about my experience here at BHP and maybe compare it to what I see in other organizations, there are really two very important factors. One is that you do need leaders and particularly a CEO, I think, who deeply understands the business benefit of having a more diverse workforce.

Fiona Vines:

And I don't just mean at the sort of superficial level of oh yes, we need to reflect our customer base or some other such comment. It's do they deeply understand the workforce that they need to be successful? The culture and the capability mix that's required for them to deliver their business objectives or to minimize risk.

Fiona Vines:

Because if you can help them to see the connection between having a more diverse workplace where everybody has a sense of feeling safe, and included, and respected such that they speak up and bring not only their ideas, but talk out when something's happening that is not right. That is where you start to reach into high performance.

Fiona Vines:

So having a leader who understands the connection of all of those things and how ultimately having a more diverse and inclusive workforce will help achieve the business objectives is critical. And my observation is I don't think enough leaders deeply understand how all of these things are connected. So that's the first critical ingredient for success. And the second is, this is a little harder to influence is that they need to believe personally that it is the right thing to do. That it is a social valued driver. And that fundamentally, women participating in the world is better for everybody. And if you have a leader who does not actually believe that, I do still think you can make progress. But it's harder.

Fiona Vines:

So I think you need both of those elements. The element that you critically must have though is the first one that I spoke about. There has to be a clear understanding from the CEO, and then ultimately from the broader parts of the business about how this enables the business strategy. If the CEO also happens to get it and is a feminist, that helps. It's not a critical ingredient though, but the first one definitely is.

Samantha (WORK180):

Well one of the things that I read in research once is that the outcomes, the teams where the leader believes in the kind of commercial value of having diverse teams is actually better than the outcomes in teams where the leader believes in diversity because they have a daughter and they want her to be given opportunities or something like that. So that supports exactly what you're saying, which is that that first one, deeply understanding what their workforce needs to be made up to be able to achieve their goals is critical to the success of the organization and to the success of any kind of diversity agenda.

Fiona Vines:

I completely agree. I don't know the particular piece of research that you're referring to Sam, but I would agree with it. I've worked with leaders and observed leaders in the past who I could not question their personal belief in the value of inclusion. But because they had not made the connection to the business strategy, they weren't driving the structural change that was needed to get something different to happen. Their views were, "Well, doesn't everyone just get that this is the right thing to do, and can't we just all get on with it?" But once you've read a book like Invisible Women or The Wife Drought, you realize you can't just wish this thing. You have to actually change things. You have to do difficult things in order to address the biases that exist, and to create a culture that's truly inclusive. It doesn't just happen because you as a leader get the vibe of the thing. You have to do things, and they're hard things as well.

Fiona Vines:

So I think that that's the disconnect. And that's why I think particularly for people in roles like ours, advocates or inclusion and diversity leaders or HR practitioners, it is so important to make that strong connection to the business strategy.

Samantha (WORK180):

I also think that that statement about I get it, why doesn't everyone get it? Can't we just move on. It actually is a bit of an indicator of a level of privilege that they have. And the reason I came to that conclusion and realization is because during the plebiscite, we're voting on whether or not we should have same-sex marriage. In my head, I was like, "Why are we even having to talk about this? Surely everybody just believes that we should allow same-sex marriage. And I can't believe that there's even any discussion." And then a friend of mine, who's in a lesbian relationship, who's got married since it

became legal. She put up a post on Facebook saying that there are places in Sydney where she wouldn't walk down the street, holding her girlfriend's hand. And I was like, "I think can't we all just get on with this because I'm totally unaffected by the fact that we're not just getting on with this." And I think it's actually probably similar for the leaders who are saying that.

Fiona Vines:

I completely agree with you. And there are about 1,000 stories I can share that are similar to the one that you just shared about your friend. I think one of the things that I say on my profile on the BHP website is I have a piece of advice for leaders who come to me and say, "I'm a male champion of change. And I'd like to help out." And the first thing I say to them is, "Go and find yourself a reverse mentor." So for six months, meet regularly with whichever minority group it is your championing. Because until you begin to even slightly understand the lived experience of the day to day world, you can't do anything. You must as a leader who wants to drive change, be curious and be open to hearing about what it's like not to be a privileged white male.

Samantha (WORK180):

Yeah, I hadn't actually heard of the phrase reverse mentor until I saw some of the stuff that you sent through before this conversation. So have you done that reverse mentoring for people? And what are the kinds of things that you've pointed out to them through that process?

Fiona Vines:

I've definitely done that reverse mentoring for people in terms of as a woman and as a working mother. As a single working mother with two children, I have definitely shared my day to day experiences and some of the things that are difficult. And also I've shared experiences with leaders about how it feels as a woman to work in a male dominated industry.

Fiona Vines:

One particular example that springs to mind is about a year and a half ago, myself and the then CEO of the BHP Andrew Mackenzie. He's retired now. We did an internal video based on the You Can't Ask That film production on the ABC. And we asked our employees to send us questions on diversity of things that they really want us to know, and we would answer them. And one of the questions that was sent in was why do men just take up all the space? They're just totally everywhere. And it's really hard. And why does that happen?

Fiona Vines:

And Andrew started to answer the question and he said, "I think that's a good point. And this is very male dominated industry. And we need to be very conscious as men not to take up all the space. But actually, women need to lean in as well. And maybe there's a bit of work that needs to be done by both parties." And I said to him, "I have a different view. And let me tell you what it feels like to be a woman in a male dominated industry. When you walk into a meeting room and you're faced with a sea of white male faces wearing the same uniform. When you go to a regional airport to fly to a mine site, and there's 500 people there and only seven of them are women." Before you've even opened your mouth, you feel off your game. You already feel like you're on the back foot.

Fiona Vines:



So in that context, you want me to be my best, but you also want me to lean in and actually speak up and tell you how I feel about feeling intimidated or feeling like I don't belong? No, I'm not ever going to do that. That's really, really difficult. So I think it's about sharing those experiences with even someone like Andrew, who's by his own description, an ardent feminist doesn't know what it's like to be a woman in that male dominated industry.

Fiona Vines:

But the other thing I would say Sam is I've also sought out reverse mentoring myself. So I want to know what it feels like for Indigenous women working in a white world. And I've done that. I also want to know what it feels like to be a male leader in a time when we're asking men to change and to be something different. And how's it feel for them. So I think it goes both ways.

Samantha (WORK180):

So that is an interesting point too. So I have questions about both of them. So when you're talking to a male leader in a time where they're expected to change. Because my attitude sometimes is you've had the chance, now you just have to listen and step back and stuff. But obviously if you want to get people on board with it, it doesn't work. You have to hear what they have to say. So what are some of the challenges that men are talking about now that because of this, because of the changing culture and changing expectation?

Fiona Vines:

Well, it's that very challenge right at the macro level, no one would disagree with what you just said. Yeah. Men have had their time, and now it's time for, in mining for 30% of them to step back. So at the macro level, no one would disagree with you. But at the micro individual level, when it comes to a specific person that you're talking to. Let's say a specific male who says, "Hang on. You mean me? I have to sit back?" And I think there's been some really good examples of that. I can't think of who it was, but there was a gender activist who was talking about boards. And she was talking on a panel to a male board member. And he said, he was sort of basically said, "Well, surely you're not meaning I need to step off boards." And she was like, "Yeah, you do. Someone has to. There has to be less men and more women." So I do think that it's very, very challenging for men to take it from the macro to the micro, and work at how to adjust to that.

Fiona Vines:

So if I give you an example, one of the things that we really struggle with I think in our organizations and in the media is the Panel Pledge. This idea that when you're speaking at an event on a panel, we want them to be balanced as much as possible. And one of the things I've talked to the male leaders in my organization about is if you get invited to speak at an event, or you get invited to join a working group or a special projects team, or something like that. It's not just the responsibility of the convener of that group or that conference to check for gender balance, it's yours as well. So don't just blindly accept an invitation to speak on a panel or to be part of a working group without first checking the composition of that group. And then thinking to yourself, "Should I join that group? Or would it be better for me to suggest that my place goes to somebody else who brings a different perspective?" So it's kind of a relatively low on the threatening end of the scale around a way that men can start to think about how can they actively start to step back from things and create opportunities for others to be more visible.

Samantha (WORK180):

Yeah, I really love that. So one of my favourite kind of Hollywood speeches of all time is when Frances McDormand got up and she won the Oscar for Three Billboards Outside something Mississippi, that film that she did. And she talked about men having inclusion writers in their contracts to say that they wouldn't enter projects without women being paid the same that they were being paid. And it's true. One of the ways that men can make a real difference is to put part of the condition of their involvement is they also include women, and people of colour, and other minority groups in the same thing.

Fiona Vines:

Absolutely. I completely agree. And it's a good first step to taking it from the macro yes, I agree with the argument and I'm supportive down to the micro what do I actually need to do as a male leader who doesn't really ever think about my own privilege. And it's surprisingly effective. And often when I talk to men that I know about that idea that I just can't believe I didn't think to do that. But now that you told me, of course it makes a lot of sense. I learned that strategy from working with Adam Fennessy when he was in the Victorian public service. And he had that strategy years ago around the Panel Pledge, he would be invited to speak at an event and he would say, "Yeah, I'm happy to come. And I'm going to be bringing this female colleague with me. And I'd like her to either take my place or to co-present with me."

Samantha (WORK180):

Yeah. Amazing, amazing. So on that, to kind of go towards the other direction of where you've had reverse mentoring. Particularly I think in the corporate environment, there can be a bit of a, accusation is probably too strong a word. But that it can become a little bit white feminist. Because we're talking very often about women who are already highly educated and trying to get ahead in big corporate jobs and stuff. So what are some of the things that you've learned when you've done reverse mentoring with indigenous women and their experience to learn about how to bring that into your work at BHP and just your day to day feminism?

Fiona Vines:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I'm very conscious of my own privilege every day. And I think about that a lot. I had two aha moments quite early on in my journey as a feminist, which helped me understand that. One was I was working at a bank on Indigenous employment programs. And I had a woman working in my team who was an Indigenous woman about the same age as me. And she was a very strong Aboriginal leader in her community, and I learned so much from her. At the time, we both had 16 year old daughters.

Fiona Vines:

And I called her one day and she sounded a little frazzled. And I said, "Are you okay? Is everything okay?" And she said, "Actually no, not really. My daughter was just walking home from school." She lives in a regional town in New South Wales.

Fiona Vines:

"My daughter was walking home from school early because her classes had finished, and she was coming home to do some extra study in her school uniform. And she was pulled over by the police. They wanted to know why she wasn't at school." My blood just ran cold and I just said, "Oh my goodness, I can't even imagine." And she said, "Yeah, I bet that doesn't happen to your daughter when she's walking

home from school in her school uniform." Which of course she was right. Of course it would never happen.

Fiona Vines:

So that was just a real moment for me of understanding how this bias and this everyday racism is in every moment of people's lives. And how damaging, how it erodes a person. And the other experience I had, which was also really interesting for me. Maybe a little self-indulgent. So I hope it resonates as it's meant to. I went to the Garma Festival many years ago for the first time, which is an Indigenous festival that happens up in Northern Arnhem Land every year. And it's the first time I'd been, and they have this wonderful thing at the Garma Festival, the end of each day around the bungle, you sit around and you watch the ceremonial dancing. And it's a beautiful thing. And sunset, it's amazing. And all the children and the women are there from the community. And I was just sitting there watching all the children with their mums and their aunties, and they were just beautiful. And I was enjoying watching them. And I looked up and I caught the eye of one of the moms or the aunties and smiled in the way that women often do together when you're at the playground or you smile at each other's children.

Fiona Vines:

And this woman just wouldn't meet my gaze and looked away from me. And what I realized was her view was, "Don't try and be part of my world. You're not part of my world." In the same way that Aboriginal women probably feel when they're in the white woman's world, because I was in their world.

Fiona Vines:

And it was such a shock to me, because it had never happened to me before that I had felt so excluded and well and truly in the minority. And it's such a small thing, but it made such a deep impact on me in terms of how important those little, everyday micro moments are to how a person feels about themselves and their place in the world.

Samantha (WORK180):

Yeah. And the experience of actually feeling what it's like. It's very well to theorize about, I can imagine it would be quite hard being the only one in the room, who's different in a room. But actually to experience and feel it gives you a deeper kind of empathy towards it I think.

Fiona Vines:

Yeah, it did.

Samantha (WORK180):

I was at an event and I chatted a while ago to a guy who runs a startup. And they were introducing virtual reality experience to show what it's like in the corporate world being different people. So you could have one example would be, try on what it's like to be the CEO. And so you put on the VR and you go into a room full of people. And you're 6'1", so you're above most of the people in the room. And every circle you go into, it opens up to let you in. And people want to talk to you listen, and they don't interrupt.

Samantha (WORK180):

And then you have another example. You put on the virtual reality goggles, and you're a 5'2" Indigenous woman who works in administration. And you go in, and you're kind of below the conversation. And it's hard to make your way in because the circle doesn't even notice that you're there. And actually getting people to put on the different goggles and really feel what it's like to be that person in a room I think is such an interesting idea and quite impactful.

Fiona Vines:

Oh yeah, that's cool. I've not heard of that. I love it. Another way to achieve that, that's maybe a bit more accessible is that activity of the flexibility walk or the diversity walk where if you've got a team and you give everybody a different persona. They pretend to be a different persona. So yeah, they might be pretending to be a married white male or a young single female, or a person who's in a same sex relationship, or a person who's got a disability, or a person who is a carer for someone, or whatever. And then everyone is at the same starting line in the room. And then the facilitator reads out a scenario. The scenario might be you've been invited at the last minute to a work event with an important supplier. Do you go?

Fiona Vines:

And depending on the persona you've been given, you take a step forward or you don't. And it's a really powerful way for people to understand how the different life experiences and obligations that people have actually then determines how they can be at work and the sorts of activities that they can partake in. And those that they just can't, but the barriers are often not seen by others. But also even people with the same persona would respond differently potentially to a scenario. It's a really powerful way to help people just to even imagine what it's like to be in the shoes of somebody else.

Samantha (WORK180):

Absolutely. I've run that activity in workshops that I've run before. And one of the things that I found most interesting about it is the bit that you just said, just at the end there. Which is that different people given the same persona will respond differently. So what I think is sort of the next level thing that's so interesting about it is the assumptions that we all make about types of people and what they can do as well.

Samantha (WORK180):

So very often, if somebody is the persona of a man who has a wife at home with kids, he'll just say yes to everything. And if it's a woman who has a husband with kids, people make that persona say yes to a lot less stuff. Because the assumption culturally here is that the woman is doing more of the caring stuff at home. So she's less available than the man would be.

Fiona Vines:

Yeah. Oh, absolutely. It's a fascinating exercise.

Samantha (WORK180):

So that actually brings me back to one of the things I want to dig into a little bit more, which we haven't talked about so much. Which is unpaid and caring work that the majority of which is done by women in Australia, and flexibility. And I wanted to talk about it from two angles. So one is BHP, and what you're doing there to support that, and what you've managed to change over the last four years since you brought in the 50/50 target.

Samantha (WORK180):

And I also wanted to hear about it from your personal perspective. So as a single working mother with two kids. And they're old enough that when they were little, I assume flex is even less available than it is now. So how you've managed flex and balancing a family through your career as well, and now in quite a senior position.

Fiona Vines:

Yeah. Well to the first question around what's BHP done, I mean we knew when we launched our aspirational goal three and a half years, that flexible working had to be part of the strategy. Otherwise, we were not going to achieve the goals. There's so much research out there that shows how important it is to give women in particular, but parents more broadly more choice. And frankly, it's just what people expect now. The old fashioned ways of working and presenteeism and so on are really for the dark ages.

Fiona Vines:

So flexibility was an idea whose time had come, and our organization responded accordingly. It was probably in hindsight, the biggest cultural change we ever saw. And it happened almost organically. So flexibility is one of those things that once you give people a little bit of license and put some loose kind of guidelines around it, it really can take off. And that's what happened at BHP. We gave our leaders some loose guidance around it, some principles. And then we asked them to weave it into the way that they organize their teams, and their rosters, and their work patterns. What we saw, which was totally expected, was a huge uplifting flexible working in office roles. And that's a no brainer. And we have fantastic technology that enables that.

Fiona Vines:

But what we saw that was also incredibly pleasing was a huge uptake in our sites, in our operations in the mines where we now have flexible and dynamic rostering. We have people doing job share in a way that they've never done before. We have people taking career breaks. We have people taking their long service leave and being excited about that. Whereas previously, that was seen as something that you didn't do if you were serious about your career.

Fiona Vines:

And the reason that that is so important is because of course the majority of people at our sites are men. So therefore, a majority of people who have taken up these flexible work arrangements are men. And that has been enormously important in terms of us bringing in on this journey and showing them that a more inclusive workplace is actually better for everyone, including men. And for anyone who follows me on social media or BHP, you'll see that we are constantly churning out stories about the experiences of our people and the ways that they are working flexibly and the change that's making to their lives.

Samantha (WORK180):

That is amazing. Because like as you said, the majority of people taking flex is men. And one of the things that we know is that without more men taking flex and having a bigger role in caring duties at home and that kind of thing, women can't possibly progress because they're just too held down by all the stuff, all the unpaid stuff they have to do.

Fiona Vines:

Absolutely. And we still have so much work to do on flex. And I'm not claiming victory by any sense, but we've made a really important start. And a lot of that is about the shifting attitudes of men and male leaders to flexible working. I think the next horizon is very much about actual senior job redesign so that you can start having, I know WORK180 are really focused on this as well. But you can start having job share in senior roles. You can have part time senior roles so that women can see that pathway ahead for them.

Fiona Vines:

And I think Sam, probably just coming then to my personal circumstance. That's one of the things that really drives my work in this area is being a single mother myself, my children were very young when my partner died, and I was doing it on my own, they were 1 and 4. And so it was hard. It was really tough. And fortunately the sector that I worked in, the banking sector at the time, mostly I had quite flexible work arrangements. So I was able to still have a good job and provide for my children, and continue to progress my career. But it was difficult. It was very, very difficult. And what I now realize because my children are older and I have so much more both time, but also mental capacity. Because I'm not carrying all that mental load of the school program, and running the household, and remembering when it's fancy hat day or whatever.

Samantha (WORK180):

So much mental load, oh my gosh.

Fiona Vines:

I actually feel like I've got a whole other brain! But it makes me realize how many things I missed out on, and how that did slow down my career, and all the things that I just couldn't participate in. Even though on the face of it, I have a very successful career. And as you see, I'm now in quite a senior role.

Fiona Vines:

So for me, I'm really driven to continue to focus on getting more balance in who does the paid work and who does the caring work. Because I think that not only will that achieve better balance for workplaces, but it also achieves better balance in the home. Before my partner passed away, he was a stay at home parent. So I knew what that was like to have a wife, if you like at home, who was running everything.

Fiona Vines:

But actually, that's even not the answer. The answer is for it to be balanced. Because then both the male, or the female, or the two parents in the partnership, whatever gender, are getting all their needs met. They've got a fulfilling career, and they're also feeling connected in their relationships in their lives. And we know that's really important from a mental health perspective and a wellbeing perspective.

Fiona Vines:

So I think my personal experience has taught me that it's tough, and I don't want it to be tough for women. I was just fortunate that I happened to be in a career where I had choices and options. There are so many women out there who don't, who would have got a curve ball in life like I got. And it would have been a huge setback for them.

Fiona Vines:

And finally Sam, one of the reasons why I'm so committed to this idea of flexible work is I actually also believe that if we had more equal work and paid responsibilities, not just in workplaces and in homes, but in society, that will start to reduce the power imbalance that exists between men and women. Whether that be financial power, or just perceived importance in the world. Which I think is the underlying driver of disrespect, and at its worst sexual harassment and domestic violence.

Samantha (WORK180):

Yeah. I 100% agree with you on that. I think that's a cultural shift that we need that needs to keep being pushed forward. Now I feel like I could keep talking to you about this all day. But since we don't have all day, I'd like to finish with one last question. Which is that if you could go back in time 15 years say when your kids were younger and the inclusion and diversity space hadn't got the hot wind behind it that it now has, and all the changes that you've seen in that time. What would you say to young Fiona both about your own life and what was to come, and changes you'd see culturally and in the industry, and in the world since then?

Fiona Vines:

Look, I think what I would say to a younger version of myself is don't be so hard on yourself. I think that women are really hard on themselves. And I would say your children are only young for a reasonably short period of time. I know it doesn't feel like it when it's happening. But having come out the other end now, I can definitely say that. So take it a little bit easy. Life is like a roller coaster in terms of what you can give to work, and different times what you can give to your family.

Fiona Vines:

I would say the same thing to a male version of myself though as well, right? I think it's really important that that's a message for men and women is pace yourself. And there are parts of your life where you need to be really focused on relationships and family. And then there are other times in your life when you can be turbocharging your career, and it's fluid, and be okay about it being fluid. The second thing I would say is ask for help a little bit more. I'm an annoyingly independent person I think. I probably try to do too much of it myself.

Fiona Vines:

And the third thing I want to say, and this is not advice I could give to myself, but it's advice I want to give to a lot of other women. Is be much clearer with your partner about what you need from them in terms of truly sharing the load. I think that there's a lot of great men out there who say, "I'm more than happy to do my share. Just tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it." And my response to that is, "No, I need you to do this thinking. I need you to carry half the mental load."

Fiona Vines:

So I would love to see women out there with their partners, having a really constructive conversation. Even if it's with a spreadsheet that says, "These are the things that I'm responsible for, and these are the things that you're responsible for." And when I say responsible, I mean the thinking and the planning as well as the doing. So it's not just enough that you have to drive junior to the birthday party. You have to have done the RSVP, bought the gift, and thought about all of the mechanics that go with that. I think that that would be enormously helpful in terms of lifting some of that mental load from women. And

actually giving it to their partners, which in a lot of cases is men. And I think it will really start to help to free up women to be able to participate more at work as well.

Samantha (WORK180):

I really hope you enjoyed today's chat. If you can help us spread the word by giving us a review on iTunes, that helps even more people find Equality Talks. To find out more about our mission, check out current opportunities with WORK180's endorsed employers, and to read and listen to more inspiring stories, please head over to [www.WORK180.co](http://www.WORK180.co). That's [www.WORK180.co](http://www.WORK180.co) See you next time!