Women trailing at work: COAG

Substantial differences in pay rates show little sign of narrowing

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GIRLS perform better than boys in reading and writing across all levels of schooling and more finish Year 12, but this early advantage does not transfer to the workplace, where men are culturally primed for success, a COAG report has found.

The Council of Australian Governments Reform Council report 'Tracking equity: comparing outcomes for women and girls across Australia' — the first snapshot of its kind from the council — found the pay gap between men and women was still 17.5 per cent.

Last year, the proportion of young women aged 18-24 fully engaged in work, study or a combination of the two was 73.5 per cent, compared with 79.3 per cent for young men.

The figures were even more disparate for young people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds: 53.6 per cent of women to 63.1 per cent of men.

In 2013, almost 71 per cent of women aged 15-64 were participating in the labour force nationally, 12.1 per cent lower than the rate for men.

Yet attitudes are changing, gaps are closing and young women such as Year 12 students Heba Niem and Angela Omari, both 16, have reason to be optimistic.

Ms Niem is studying economics, ancient history, legal studies, mathematics and English at Merrylands High School in Sydney's west and wants to work in politics or law.

"I know there is a lot of talk about the glass ceiling but I'm not planning on any of that stopping me from going on to a high-profile job or career," she said.

"As women and particularly young women we need to recognise progress made since the 1970s and work even harder... it all starts from the grassroots. That's the beginning because women are capable, and at a very fundamental level, we need change."

Last year, women in non-managerial roles were paid an average $4.20 less an hour than men in non-managerial roles and in all metrics, disadvantaged women performed worse than disadvantaged men.

The Smith Family chief executive Lisa O'Brien said: "If we believe in gender equality — in salaries, in the equal representation of women in senior leadership roles — then we must start by making sure the most vulnerable girls and young women in our community are getting the education they need."

The report has recommended that the COAG Reform Council agree on a set of indicators against which it could report on gender equality.