

Submission
to
House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Family and Human Services

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Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family

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SUMMARY

The Australian Federation of University Women Inc (AFUW) is a federated non-government organisation of graduate women formed in 1922. The International Federation of University Women is based in Geneva with representations from 78 countries. IFUW has consultative status at the United Nations and AFUW plays a leading role in its advocacy programs.

AFUW is a member of two of the four women's secretariats (Security 4 Women and WomenSpeak) established and funded by the Office for Women in 2001.

AFUW includes in its mission the following objectives:

- to promote national and international understanding, friendship and co-operation among university women graduates of the world irrespective of their race, nationality, religion or political opinions.
- to advocate for the advancement of the status of women and girls; and
- to encourage and enable women and girls to apply their knowledge and skills in leadership and decision-making in all forms of public and private life.

While it believes that all the questions raised in the Terms of Reference are of importance, it wishes in this instance to make a submission only to **Part 2 – making it easier for parents who so wish, to return to the paid workforce**. We are extending the concept of “parents” to “family carers” in the practical context that many parents and employed persons also have responsibility for the care of other family members particularly aged parents. AFUW has already made submissions to the Australian Government in relation to tax deductibility of Child Care and supports the National Women's Secretariats stance on Paid Maternity Leave.

This submission is based on reporting of our membership and women who we support who have had vastly different experiences depending on the conditions of employment available as follows:

- the employment sector (government/private)
- the industry of their employer
- their occupation or profession
- qualifications,
- level of pay
- the status if their employment (full-time/part-time, permanent/temporary)
- demographic characteristics (age, ethnic background, etc)
- geographic location (urban, rural, remoteness)

By far, the most family friendly employment sector is Government and in particular the Australian Public Service. The most restricting working conditions are to be found in small businesses in the private sector and particularly for those employees who are in temporary part-time positions. We consider that there is considerable scope for the Australian Government to better assist families, where at least one parent is in paid employment, to balance their work and family responsibilities. We are recommending:

- (a) introducing minimum standard working conditions (national and state awards) suited to the needs of families in the 21st century;
- (b) anti-discrimination legislation amendments to ensure all family carers who are in the paid workforce are not discriminated against due to their caring obligations.

AFUW recognises that the Australian and State Governments have set the example and for some time attempted to encourage better working conditions in the private sector. There have been many advances made and excellent individual company examples which are cited as best practice. However, there are still glaring examples of harsh and unfair treatment of employees once they become parents and/or carers or indirectly (despite existing anti-discrimination provisions) in the case of pregnant women, even before their parenting responsibilities commence.

Recommendations:

1. That working conditions currently available to Public Sector employees be made available to all private sector employees whether permanent or temporary eg

- Flexible working hours
- Carers leave
- Graduated return to work with option for part-time
- Retraining for new positions or updating skills for existing positions
- Working from home
- Provision of in-house Workplace Child Care positions and/or services.

2. Under federal and state legislation unlawful discrimination occurs when someone, or a group of people, is treated less favourably than another person or group because of their race, colour, nationality or ethnic origin; sex, pregnancy or marital status; age; disability; religion; sexual preference; membership of a trade union activity; or some other characteristic specified under anti-discrimination or human rights legislation.

That “family caring responsibilities” be specifically listed as an anti-discriminatory characteristic.

1 Background to this Submission

AFUW has recently undertaken considerable research and prepared papers and submissions in relation to the 12 critical issues specified in the UN Beijing Platform for Action. The United Nations Commission for the Status of Women (which is responsible for the Beijing Platform for Action which was formulated 10 years ago) has just held its annual meetings in New York to review the progress made on these topics. A copy of the AFUW submission to the Australian Government Office for Women is attached. You will see that three of the 12 critical areas listed relate closely to your enquiry – Women and Poverty, Women and the Economy and Women in Power and Decision Making.

The issues we identified that need to be addressed are:

- Immediate improvement in wage disparity between the sexes
- Creation of an environment to better match job vacancies and workers’ vocational abilities
- Amendment of legislation (particularly for the private sector) to match family friendly working conditions and benefit packages based on modern work arrangements.
- Legislated changes to make it possible to interchange jobs of different work arrangements (mainly part-time and full-time work as well as temporary and permanent appointment)
- Introduction of affirmative action to promote equality between the sexes.
- The ban on indirect discrimination of women in the workplace and add family care responsibilities to the list of anti discrimination characteristics in the Human Rights Legislation.
- Acceleration of education programs to ensure an environment of workplace and society where employees can balance work and family
- Acceleration of measures to address re-employment barriers for women.
- Continuous improvement of health and safety measures at work

The Labour Force and Working Conditions

Our workforce has changed considerably in recent years. Almost the same numbers of men and women are now in paid work, and almost two thirds of couples with children both work. However, working conditions are still designed predominantly around the idea that one parent goes out to work while the other manages the home. Nearly half of all working people now have caring responsibilities.

On top of this, more and more people are under intense pressure at work, because workloads are greater and the pace of work has quickened. Families want more say over their work so they can look after sick children, get to child care, cover school holidays, and have stress free time with their children and partners. We are also reaching the situation where many baby boomers need to look after aged parents at the same time as still caring for dependent children. This situation is new in our society and is placing added strain on families.

The factors leading to this are wide and varied. In part it relates to women waiting to have children as they cannot afford the costs of rearing children, child care is hard to find in many cases and is very expensive. With people living longer, these parents are finding themselves ‘sandwiched’ in between looking after their dependent children and their aged parents. This is not conducive to a healthy society and research is required on the long term effects this will have on a future labour force.

AFUW supports the ACTU’s first work and family test case in the Industrial Relations Commission where they are seeking a choice for parents to take unpaid leave from work for up to two years after the birth of a child, as well as the option to return to work part-time until children are at school.

The case is also claiming flexible working hours so parents and carers can pick up or deliver children to school or child care and take time off during school holidays. It is considered that employers could introduce these changes at either no cost or low cost. This change will be for men as well as women.

The Australian Government is reforming the public service systems in terms of working condition (flexible working arrangements and selection procedures based on merit). Considerable more change is needed in the private sector, particularly ‘big’ business.

For some employees, family caring responsibilities still attract discriminatory management practices in the workplace. Those needing to take leave in episodes of larger duration than considered “acceptable”,

due to protracted illnesses or other unplanned events, can suffer bullying and unfair dismissal.

The progress of Australian Equal Employment Policy

While women's incomes have increased, there is still a significant gap between total male and total female earnings. Australia has a workforce that is highly segregated with women clustered in industries and occupations with lower pay, poorer working conditions and fewer opportunities for promotion and career achievement. Women are under-represented in senior management in both the public and private sectors and they face barriers in leadership positions and are generally unprepared or face barriers while occupying positions of leadership. Industrial change has meant that women's industries such as the service industries and health and community services are heavily impacted by casualisation, contract work and increased flexibility. While there have been benefits achieved, a significant impact of this is that many groups of women work harder for shorter periods, with fewer benefits, with little training, at unsociable hours for less pay.

In 2004, the "What Women Want Survey" conducted by the Security for Women Secretariat identified the three top issues important to women generally as:

- balancing work and family;
- affordable education and training for all ages;
- equal pay for women and men doing the same job.

Also high on the agenda for the more than 300 women surveyed was:

- equal access to secure well paid jobs;
- quality childcare that is flexible and that families can afford;
- information about financial planning and security early in life;
- more women in management and leadership; and
- housing that is affordable.

Women in the Labour Force

It is recognised that over 4.2 million women are now engaged in paid employment in Australia with over 56 per cent of all working age females participating in the paid work force compared to 53% in 1996.

Since 2001, 53% of all new jobs have been filled by women and one third of small business operators are women.

Until 2003 the unemployment rate of women was consistently lower than that of men and down to almost 5.0% from 7.6% in 1996. Since 2003, the unemployment rate for women has risen slightly above that for men.

The gender gap is closing between men's and women's earnings:

- Women now earn 85% of men's full-time average weekly ordinary time earnings (75% in mid 1970's);
- In comparing average hourly pay rates which takes account of the large proportion of women who work on a part-time basis, the ratio is almost 90% and compares with 87% in 1996.

Retirement incomes are improving for women: coverage has increased over recent years; married couples can divide their superannuation entitlements upon separation; personal and employer contributions to accumulated funds can be split with spouses; broader access to co-contribution scheme.

Of the women covered by federal certified agreements:

- 43% are entitled to paid maternity leave;
- 75% have access to paid maternity leave;
- 82% have access to part-time work provisions;
- 29% have access to provisions dealing with family responsibilities;
- 28% have access to provisions on taking 48/52 career breaks;

Working Women's Centres are funded to assist women who might have difficulties (language, remoteness, precarious employment status) to understand their workplace rights and obligations and to access the benefits of the workplace relations system. We feel more needs to be done to advertise this service.

The government is committed to the provision of affordable, flexible and accessible child care services and has contributed a record allocation to child care over four years to 2005-6.

The 2002 decision of the NSW Industrial Relations Commission found that librarians (as a pre-dominantly female workforce) compared to for example geologists (as a pre-dominantly male workforce) had been undervalued and should receive pay increases of up to 25%.

After significantly lobbying by women's organisations and a large and significant inquiry lead by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission both the Liberal/National Coalition and the Labour Party recognise the need for paid maternity leave. It is now up to the Australian Government to implement policies that actually bring this into practice.

The discussion of the importance of family friendly and flexible workplaces has become an increasingly mainstream issue. Again, we need to see this policy brought into reality.

Women's Re-entry into Paid Work (Reemployment)

Discrimination by age, sex and family responsibilities often prevents 'housewives' from finding full-time jobs after a break and compels them to accept low-paid part-time (often temporary) jobs. The social structure and the need for updating qualifications keeps many women, especially graduates, inside the home, even though they hope to get back into the workforce. There is still not enough job-training programs to refine their old skills. The percentage of women's latent work force when graphed by age is trapezoid patterned, not the well known M-patterned as can be seen in the women's labour force participation rate by age.

Overall, women have a higher rate of labour force underutilisation than men, due to their higher rate of underemployment, which, in turn, is related to the higher proportion of women who are in part-time employment. Between 1994 and 2003, the rate of underemployment for women was between 1.6 and 1.9 times that of men. In 2000, the unemployment rate for women fell below the underemployment rate and has stayed lower since then. In 2003, unemployed women accounted for 45% of all women whose labour was underutilised.

The extended labour force underutilisation rate for women was also higher than that for men, not only because women had a higher rate of underemployment than men, but also because there was a higher proportion of women in the marginally attached populations that contribute to the extended labour force underutilisation rate.

Labour underutilisation rates - Females



Source: Labour Force Survey, Persons Not in the Labour Force, Underemployed Workers.

Systematic Measures Against Paid Work for Women with Family Responsibilities

As indicated above, women are more likely to work part-time. In addition, women are more likely to work as temporary employees. This situation is worsened by the proportion of employees without paid leave entitlements (32% compared to 24% for men). Of all employees without leave entitlements, 65% were part-time employees and 53% were women. Thus, while fairly similar proportions of men and women worked as employees with paid leave entitlements the situation for women employed part time is markedly different.

Overtime and shift work are often unavailable for women with families. The proportion of employees who work overtime on a regular basis in their main job increased from 33% in November 2000 to 37% (2,958,300 employees) in November 2003. A higher proportion of full-time employees (46%) worked

overtime on a regular basis compared to part-time employees (13%), with male employees more likely to work overtime than female employees (44% compared to 29%). Occupation groups that had the highest proportions of employees working overtime were Managers and administrators (63%) and Professionals (51%), while those with the lowest were Labourers and related workers (22%) and Elementary clerical, sales and service workers (17%).

Future Action

More must be done to ensure all women receive equal pay for equal work. The Government must lead the way in its work force and by setting examples to the private sector, parity may occur. The government is able to coerce private employers by providing incentives to ensure there is parity.

More incentives must be given to women to allow them to make choices in the hours of work in which they wish to engage. This can also be helped by providing more child care places for their children as many are prevented from working with young children due to the cost of child care. This also leads to grand parents being caught in the situation of having to look after grand children while their daughter or daughter-in-law seeks employment (quite often to balance the family budget). This of course leads to many other social issues.

This proportion of females employed without leave entitlements is far too high (32% compared with men at 24%). In Australia today, all people should receive adequate leave entitlements. There should not be this gap. The Government should be ensuring that employers are not taking advantage of female employees to this extent.

Signed on behalf of the Australian Federation of University Women:

Rosemary Everett.
President
8 April 2005