

What Women Want

Press release, November 18, 2005

Over 60 national women's organisations, representing more than three million Australian women, congratulate Pru Goward and the staff at Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission for their courageous submission to the Work Choices Senate inquiry yesterday. We share the HREOC concerns that WorkChoices will likely lead to loss of hard won family friendly working conditions.

After meeting in Canberra last week to examine the Legislation to Enact the Federal Government's Proposal for Reform of Industrial Relations and its Welfare-to-Work Strategy and their impact on women the national women's organisations confirmed they too are unhappy with the legislation.

Reflecting interests ranging from education, through small business, professional groups, church and religious affiliation groups, and service organisations, the representatives welcomed the policy of encouraging workforce participation and the lessening of long-term welfare dependence but rejected the methods chosen.

They saw both Work Choices and Welfare to Work as worsening the current situation for a significant number of women, and through them, on Australian families. The impact will be even more difficult for women in regional and rural areas where jobs are not available and in urban areas where access to available jobs is restricted by time and transport facilities.

Women (with dependent children), partnered or un-partnered, are clustered in part-time, low-pay areas of the workforce. This is often a consequence of their skills base and of them seeking jobs with family-friendly work conditions. The proposed system may well suit skilled and educated workers in well-paid positions who are relatively mobile within the labour market and who can bargain effectively under a system of individual Australian Workplace Agreements.

In our view, however, a large number of the proposed changes will impact adversely on the 'working poor', those in part-time and/or low paid positions whose individual bargaining power is very weak. Some groups such as indigenous women, and women from non-English speaking backgrounds will face double jeopardy.

Spokesperson for the National Foundation of Australian Women Marie Coleman reinforced the groups concerns "that giving employers the right to refuse to negotiate a collective agreement even where that is the determined preference of workers is unfair. Individual AWAs will disadvantage workers, particularly those at the lower levels of the labour market who may have limited education and skills training and possibly a poor command of English. These are some of the most disadvantaged groups in our society whose ability to bargain effectively in one-on-one situations with employers will be very limited".

The representatives at the forum also expressed concern that workplace agreements will no longer have to pass the no-disadvantage test against a relevant or designated award. In relation to content, workplace agreements must only meet the Australian Fair Pay and Conditions Standard – the absolute legal minimum. The changes to the no disadvantage test could also lead to the disappearance of penalty rates and overtime for many workers. This will particularly affect women who are already the lowest paid employees in the country, who already make up the greatest number of casual and part-time workers in Australia, and often work evening and weekend shifts and rely on these penalty rates.

After attending the forum Alex Haynes from Security4Women said "We fear that Work Choices will destroy hard-won gains allowing family-friendly work conditions. The August 2005 test case of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, the *Family Provisions Decision*, has gone some way towards making Australian workplaces more responsive to work/life issues. This decision will allow an employee to request a further period of unpaid parental leave and/or return to work on a part-time basis until the child reaches school age. The capacity to make such requests would be of considerable benefit to women, who would be able to balance their family responsibilities and working life. It is a matter of profound disappointment that

this landmark condition of employment may have little application due to its failure to be included into the Australian Fair Pay Commission Standard".

The plain evidence of the lower rates of income support payments, allied with the inability of workers without skills in demand to negotiate reasonable pay and conditions will lead to sharply increased levels of child and individual poverty.

The failure of government policy to deal with EMTRs means that workforce participation for sole parents and people with disabilities face significant financial disincentives.

Spokesperson Marie Coleman said "it is all very well to talk glibly about working poor being better off with a job than without. It is a disgrace that it is the Government itself taking steps which will mean a loss of 60-70cetrns in each dollar earned when individuals move from welfare to work'.

The organisers of the forum in Canberra have produced a Workshop Paper that outlines the key concerns and provides expert summary papers highlighting the disproportionate negative impact on women of the legislation, both Workchoices and Welfare to Work.

Sue Conde from the Australian Women's Coalition said that "while the participants at the forum endorsed the principle of government assistance for people to enter the workforce and improve their economic wellbeing they feel the government does not fully understand all the issues involved and the compounding effect of both sets of legislation that will particularly impact negatively on women. Fear was expressed that the new regime, without adequate monitoring and safeguards, will almost certainly increase the level of poverty in the community amongst its most vulnerable members".

Emphasizing the intentions of the group Marie Coleman states, "Our intention all along has been to contribute to policy formation, monitoring and review to ensure that women and families are protected. We are also committed to ensuring that women are well informed of the impact of any changes upon them".

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