**Supporting Working Parents: Pregnancy and Return to Work National Review**

Submissions from women and men who have experienced discrimination at work while pregnant, or while on or on return to work after taking parental leave

**Submission Number 247**

**Part C Submission Response**

In my position as a senior female member of the executive management team with 6 years full-time service, whilst on parental leave, I encountered extreme resistance by the new incoming managing director to return to work on short term flexible working conditions, as agreed formally with the current managing director at the time. I found myself in this situation despite leading the company's progressive policy and program in relation to paid parental leave and flexible working conditions just a few years prior and with an unblemished performance history. The new incoming MD held archaic views on the role of career women upon commencing a family and was not prepared to trial the opportunity of allowing me to become a strong role model to upcoming female and male organisational leaders in balancing career commitments whilst nurturing a family. In fact, his view was that if he allowed it for me, it would open up a can of worms for the organisation as a whole.

My current MD who had originally agreed to my flexible working arrangements was a supportive and visionary leader, who provided unconditional support during my negotiations with the incoming MD and prior during my pregnancy. So here in lies a good example also. The incoming MD was not prepared to consider other options despite my fair attempt to propose a series of mutually beneficial compromises. My flexible work arrangements were unitarily revoked and I was forced to move to negotiating a financial settlement. Fortunately, my strong knowledge and practitioner experience in employment relations and IR held me in good stead to navigate the negotiations and desired financial outcome.

However, behind the scenes I was left emotionally bankrupt and lacking self-confidence for a considerable period despite my high performance and achievement history with the organisation in mention. Not to mention, unemployed and left to start all over again in search of a comparable opportunity with a new baby in tow without the benefit of full time child care secured. Whilst I was prepared to compromise fairly with my next future employer, but after approximately 100 job applications, most employers were unwilling to take me on with some desired (what I mean is very little) workplace flexibility, including those that promoted such practices on their company website. Here I was, a high achieving leader in my profession, prepared to take a step back in responsibilities, pay and career progression for the return of some flexibility. Instead, I was condemned as overqualified and a risk. Recruitment agency consultants were the biggest culprits in undermining my ability to secure a balanced job opportunity.

Since then, I have bounced back to successfully run a small boutique consulting firm in my profession with a strong interest in pregnancy and return to work, along with professional development for the next generation of female leaders.

Professionals/executives such as myself who find themselves in this or similar situations are quite powerless despite popular belief. This is due to the potential of reputational risk if you choose to fight for your rights, assuming you have the wits, knowledge and support to pursue your rights and entitlements. After years of coaching female leaders across all levels, it is clear to me that women are simply not as confident and assertive in asking for what they want. They try to use their natural consultative and relationship management approach and when they confront a leader (male or female) who lacks compassion and a genuine interest in promoting a positive organisational culture, they are overthrown and dog tagged! In light of this, I have become somewhat of a silent crusader for other career women who find themselves in this situation, assisting them to navigate negotiations with their employers in a fair, confident and professionally assertive manner.

On reflection, whilst the Commission has pursued positive developments over the years on this topic, it must continue to play a stronger role in coaching organisational leaders and providing examples of success stories in relation to pregnancy management and return to work. In addition, the Government is quick to punish for non-compliance but instead could develop a program to reward organisations that have implemented success stories and good examples in practice. Furthermore, there is scope to introduce within the commission a government funded free advisory and coaching service/program to women who are navigating a personal pregnancy/return to work employment minefield. This may include personal development initiatives with negotiating and courageous conversations.

Lastly, I believe the recruitment agency should also be investigated for acts of direct and indirect discrimination when recruiting on behalf of their organisational clients. Their candidate assessment can be ruthless and highly discriminatory in their fight for a placement fee, leaving many talent females poorly or unjustly represented to potential employers.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute on this important community topic.