**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 307**

**Part C Submission Response**

I am a mother of young children who works full time in a senior executive position and I am a staunch feminist. However, the discrimination I am being exposed to arises from two omnipotent sources. First, the grotesque and unchallenged political / economic push to return women to work as quickly as possible and the related undervaluing of child raising. Second, corporate and employment structures in which corporate performance is measured largely on financial performance which necessitates insecure employment that is only 'flexible' to the advantage of the employer, and not the employee. This is also a political and economic construct.

As to the first source of discrimination, it has become the expected norm for women to return to work as soon as possible following the birth of a child. Sadly, this has been pushed ostensibly as a 'women's rights' / feminist issue. The reality is that the political agenda is one of pure economic growth with no regard to the effect on mother (or father) or child. The push to create and support Childcare centres and research supporting same is evidence of this agenda. Childcare operates to ensure women can return to work (creating wealth) and employs lower paid women (also creating wealth). It has no regard however for the natural instinct of a woman to nurture and protect her own child. Unfortunately, many women are, as a result of societal expectations and structures effectively forced back to work for financial reasons.

They are also unsupported by health care professionals who have been educated to assert that group Childcare is not harmful, and can be beneficial. This is a distortion of the research which remains undecided, with the exception that children under the age of 2-3 do not gain any value from the alleged 'socialisation' of group Childcare and of evidence that it is harmful to have more than 30 hours of group care per week (I.e. That which would permit return to full time employment). The alleged benefits of Childcare have been grossly overstated. It is only children from 'challenging' households who benefit from Childcare. This does not represent the larger majority of households who have loving and attentive parents. I understand it is important not to make mothers feel guilty for using Childcare, particularly those who do find it beneficial to go to work, however in trying to support those women, harm is also being caused to other women and their children. The Scandinavian countries recognise the needs of both the mother (or father) and child to bond and grow and supports between twelve months up to three years of paid maternity leave. This is what is needed in Australia, not more Childcare centres and pushing people back to work.

The second source of discrimination is corporate and employment structures. The Corporations Law requires that the highest duty is to the shareholders (to return a profit). The only reason corporations do not overtly discriminate is that their compliance obligations (compliance with anti discrimination laws) temporarily (and begrudgingly) overrides their primary obligation to the corporation / shareholders. Those holding senior positions, such as myself, are employed on a fixed term contract with key performance indicators (KPI) attached. Failure to perform equates to failure to renew. There is no room for extended maternity leave or 'flexible' work that genuinely advantages the child-rearer in these arrangements. Any 'flexibility' that is offered comes with the unstated fact that the child-reader must continue to be available 24/7 to the organisation and to place the needs of the organisation above the needs of the child.

Further, in meeting KPIs, senior executives use 'flexible' or insecure work contracts for their employees including fixed-term and casual contracts. Again, there is no room for extended maternity leave or 'flexible' work that genuinely advantages the child-rearer. In order for there to be a guarantee of support for childrearing, every person, irrespective of the employment construct, must have a right to three years paid maternity leave. Men should be encouraged to share this time, which should benefit the family, but also reduce the risk of kick-back against women of childrearing age. There must also be adequate measures for appropriate return to work. Given fixed term and casual contract workers have no right to expect ongoing work, an alternate employment structure must be identified and implemented. Unfortunately, many workers in precarious work have been led to believe that they have 'chosen' or are better off in terms of flexibility under these arrangements. It is only when the position is not renewed or continued that they realise the arrangement never was to their advantage. At that point, it is too late - there is no legal recourse.

I accept that the scope of the review is constrained. However, adhering to this confined scope means that the review itself would be flawed and limited by yet another political construct. Consequentially, I seek from the review:

1. That this review acknowledge that discrimination against childrearing is a complex social and political issue that goes beyond any single employer. It is structurally ingrained in Australian modern culture and therefore this discrimination needs to be addressed structurally.

2. That this review promote that childrearing is of great economic and social value, and argue that it should not be undermined by competing economic and political forces.

3. That this review acknowledge the legitimate emotional attachment that women (and men) have to their children and support strategies that promote women (and men) to maximise their time at home via fully paid maternity leave for the first three years.

4. That this review acknowledge that our corporate and employment structures do not value or support childrearing, which is why every person, irrespective of the employment construct, must have a right to three years paid maternity leave.

5. That the review acknowledge the limitations of current 'flexible' work practices and employment models and work to identify alternatives that give employees security and genuine flexibility in their return to work.

6. That this review recommend that broader systems and structures are installed and implemented, including community education / the school curriculum, that ensure the value of childrearing is recognised and supported by our modern society.

I would also be grateful if the review could also take into consideration the excellent article written by Anne-Marie Slaughter titled 'Why Women Still Can't Have It All' found at:

http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/

I implore you not to ignore the reality of these issues. Discrimination can only occur where it is tacitly accepted in our society that childrearing is of lessor economic or social value than employment and corporate enterprise.