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*Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on
Employment and Workplace Relations*

*"Inquiry into pay equity and associated issues related to increasing female
participation in the workforce"*

Women at Sea and at Home

Employment Equity and Female Participation

in the Australian Maritime Industry

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Abstract

The purpose of this submission is to disclose the experiences and opinions of Carmen Blanco with regard to the House of Representatives “*Inquiry into pay equity and associated issues related to increasing female participation in the workforce.*”

This submission looks at the personal experiences of Carmen Blanco, in the traditionally male dominated seafaring industry and goes onto discuss the possibilities with regards to paid maternity, paternity, parental and carers leave, superannuation, retraining and childcare. Also included are some brief statements from other seafaring women: Liz Datson, Helen Cole, Wendy Doran and Jeanine Drummond (nee Stanley).

Finally, this submission concludes that whilst women without children do not experience inequity from employers in the Australian maritime industry, once women have children they have few options in continuing with their careers in the industry. Seafaring women who have children will not be on a financial or promotional level equal to their male counterpart by the time they reach retirement.

Australian government legislation is needed to create flexibility in the workplace, so women and men can care for family when they need to and stay in or return to paid employment and progress in their careers. Legislation needs to be written so that Australian women and men are able to raise children equally, care for family and arrive at retirement without women ending up having an equivalent of 20 years less superannuation.

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Introduction

Whilst Australian women seafarers enjoy pay parity with their male counterparts there are very few who reach the top positions within their chosen fields as there are currently few options available for them to balance family commitments with work.

My own experiences with regards to women working in a male dominated workplace - choices I have made in order to continue my career and how I have kept my options open - will hopefully explain to the House of Representative Standing Committee the reasons women, whilst starting off with equity, arrive at retirement unequal to their male counterparts.

Options with regard to superannuation, retraining, paid maternity, paternity, parental and carer leave and childcare all have an influence over this inequity for female seafarers who have children.

About Carmen Blanco

At the age of eighteen, directly out of high school, I started with BHP Transport as a Deck Cadet. For the past few years until January this year, I was Captain of an Offshore Oil and Gas Support Vessel. I am now a Tug Master in the port of Gladstone. I have made my recent career move and relocation in order to be able to juggle the possibility of family and the desire to continue being a part of my profession.

Women in a male dominated workplace

During my 16 years at sea I did not experience any discrimination from employers and my last employer used my strengths effectively. The General Manager of Human Resources at that company once said to me that he liked employing female seafarers, because we were at sea because we really wanted to be there.

As far as difficult situations with other workers, I would have to say that the very few people were the same workplace bullies with whom almost everyone has encountered difficulties. The big difference as a seafarer is that your workplace is also your home, there is no escape.

In the last few years in the Offshore I found, perhaps because of my more senior position or the different attitude of Offshore seafarers compared to Bluewater seafarers, that we had comfortable workplaces (also the Offshore is an alcohol free workplace). When I first went to sea as a cadet I did find myself on ships with uncomfortable workplaces and have had strange and challenging situations. I quickly learnt not to be around when there was

drinking, to keep my distance and to close (and sometimes lock) my cabin door. During the initial months when I was in the common-entry part of the training, and technically not an officer, I was assigned a cabin on the officer's deck as a precaution (by the Captain). A lot of the first year at sea is learning the social norms of the institution. However, like most of the other women at sea, I was pretty tired of having to constantly prove myself worthy (taking a man's job), being considered a hard worker, a reliable officer and a good team player at all times. It has been good in the last five years to spend a couple of years with the same group, because once this is proven, things then run fairly smoothly. At the end of the day most people just want to do their work and feel that they are also respected and then go home in one piece. Whilst I prefer a diplomatic solution to any situation I found early on that there were times necessary to use the "command" voice to facilitate determinations.

There was a particularly memorable incident with excessive pornography. As a young female cadet I found the repetition of the same pornographic calendar (given to all ships by ship's suppliers & agents as a free advertisement) hung on each bulkhead of the ship's office. I found it impossible to avert my eyes, so I asked the Chief Mate if I could remove them. He said I would have to ask each individual who owned the calendars for their permission to remove them. It was a demeaning and degrading experience for a young female and I was extremely disappointed in my work colleagues. This was prior to 1995 and the introductions of the Australian Maritime Industries Sexual Harassment Code.

More recently, on my first swing on my last vessel at sea, I was a bit put off by a semi nude poster in the Engine Room Control room. So I just took it down and put it on the desk, a subtle hint I thought. One of the engineers put it back up again! I also found that one of the crew members was spending the ship's Magazine and Newspaper allowance on rather expensive Men's Magazines. So towards the end of that first swing there was a heated debate, where I requested that they display only what they would have displayed in their own homes - I was shouted down. Fortunately during that period the company restated its position on equity in the workplace, so I did feel supported from higher up the chain. However it is difficult to be the one to enforce the company policy whilst at the same time as being the one who has an issue with current behaviour.

Whilst I am tolerant of marginally offensive material in small amounts, I would be happier not to see it at all. It is a bit of a trap to make a fuss about something small, as to complain only cements your position as the victim.

Continuing my career

I am almost 35 years old and I know my time is running out to have children. It is tricky to find a new position to continue in my career and plan having a family. My partner left the Offshore and became a Tug Master last year, and encouraged me to make the change as well. We want to start a family, but it did make me feel very uncomfortable to just leave the sea behind and lose my identity and income. My current employer payed me, at a rate of 75% of the full wage, during the three months of Tug Master training. I am now classed as a permanent casual (fifty-percenter), which means I don't have a fixed

roster; I fill in for people when they are absent and the company guarantees me a minimum of Fifty Percent of the full time employees wage in a year, however it is very possible to work more than the fifty percent of the year. I am second in line for a full time position. At the moment this company also allows for job sharing, which means you can work one three week swing and you take nine weeks off. At this stage the AMOU EBA with the company does not allow for paid maternity leave. Another of the Tug Masters here in Gladstone has recently taken 52 weeks unpaid leave from work to have her first child. I did advise my current employer about my intention to start a family in the near future and fortunately this does not appear to have disadvantaged me.

The options available to Deck Officers to move into shore-based jobs within the maritime industry changes depending on the level of certification you have reached, and then the duration for which you have held command of a vessel. For example, if I wanted to leave the sea before I attained my Master Class One Certificate I would have limited my options to Stevedoring Supervisor, Ship's Agent, Human Resource Assistant or other clerical level roles in the company. On attaining my Master Class One (I was 28), I had the option of Tug Master or in a limited amount of small/remote ports, Marine Pilot (such as Gove, NT).

Once I had Command of a vessel, which I did at the age of 32, then positions as Marine Pilot opened up. However some ports (e.g. Sydney) require that you must have five years command of a vessel with at least two subordinates. A career as a Marine Pilot is a higher paying and more prestigious career

path, but doesn't really suit me at this stage in my life. Plus I really enjoy being hands on. It is a good time to be looking for jobs as Marine Pilot or Tug Master as there are lots of positions available, but this certainly wasn't the case when I first went away to sea. A variety of factors create this availability; generational change and expansion in shipping. Lack of sufficient training of Australian seafarers, especially in the last decade, to feed shore based positions is going to make it harder for employers to find qualified Australians to fill positions (AMOU 2008). This makes it even more important that employers can attract and retain those people who already have the training.

Keeping my options open

I always wanted to keep my options open, so I completed a Master of Business Administration in Maritime Management through the Australian Maritime College by correspondence whilst I was at sea. I also planned to stay at sea for long enough to have command for two years, making the position of Marine Pilot a possibility. I don't think that many mothers, no matter how driven, will want to return to sea, spending weeks at a time away from their young family, as would be the case in the majority of shipping in Australia.

Australian seafarers, whilst they can choose which company to work for, cannot choose onto which vessel in the fleet they are placed, this is done based on vacancies in the permanent crew. So whilst a company might have a ship on a regularly running short coastal voyage, which would be ideal for a person with a young family, this vessel may already have a permanent crew and no vacancies.

So the only option is to get the sea-time and the certificates before having a family. I think it must be very hard for men as well, so I fully support a system where there is also paid parental leave available to fathers, with an option that part of time that can be shared, depending on needs, similar to the situation in Canada (HRSDC 2008).

Balancing family and career

One point that I can't really back up with statistics, is that all the female deck officers who have successfully balanced career and children that I know, have a seafaring partner. This includes the Harbour Master of Bunbury in Western Australia (ABC TV 2004), the Harbour Master of Eden in New South Wales (SMH 2005), a Ship Master in Sydney and a Tug Master in Gladstone. Not that everyone needs to have children to be happy or be a family; I just don't think women need to choose not to have children because they cannot then fulfil their life's goals.

I know in myself that professionally I have succeeded and enjoyed an exciting career; however it is only really in the last year that I have felt this clearly. I know when or if I have children I will be entirely there for them. My success so far is because my partner has been supportive, understanding and has shared the same lifestyle. I have also been very lucky to have strong family support, with a father, a seagoing marine engineer and brother who started in the industry two years before me, to act as mentor.

There are other women who have left the sea to start a family, never to return to the industry, which is probably similar in other industries. However I know

that both I and the other woman who started in my intake year have both stayed at sea until we attained command of a vessel, zero attrition, compared to a number of my male counterpart's departure from the industry.

Paid Maternity, Paternity, Parental or Carer Leave

Enterprise Bargaining Agreements for Australian seafarers vary widely with regards to paid maternity leave: the towage company that I work for provides only one week parental leave on the birth or adoption of a child and 52 weeks unpaid leave, additionally 5 days carers leave is also available. Offshore Oil and Gas EBAs include 6 weeks paid maternity leave and 46 weeks unpaid maternity leave. A longer period of paid maternity leave gives families the option to contemplate the mother staying at home with the baby for close to the World Health Organisation's (WHO 2008) recommended length of time for exclusive breast feeding; six months.

A system with a portable leave account for any worker, male or female, as proposed by the Catalyst (2008) Organisation in their submission to the Productivity Commission's "Inquiry into paid maternity, paternity and parental leave" would be ideal. The Catalyst Organisation also recognised the need to provide for carers leave to care for a family member, women are usually the first to leave the workforce to dedicate themselves as carers. Current Employers alone shouldering the financial burden of paid maternity leave could lead Employers thinking twice about employing women. If the leave is considered parental leave "designed to provide either or both parents with time to spend with their newborns" (HRSDC 2008), then the best system would be that all employees from the time they start in the work force start

accumulating a transferable leave account into which all their employers contribute. This leave could then be used for maternity, paternity, parental or carers leave at any stage of their working life.

Superannuation

Superannuation is built up over an entire career, and currently when a parent is out of the workforce during unpaid maternity or paternity leave a very paltry amount of superannuation is allowed to be paid on their behalf by the working spouse, certainly not equivalent to the amount they would have been able to contribute if they were still in the workforce. If the person is a sole parent then there will be no payments during the time taken for parental leave.

Considering the rate of divorce and the longer life expectancy of women, this is certainly going to lead to inequity between the sexes in retirement (Clare 2001), women are currently arriving at retirement with an equivalent of 20 years less savings than men. Australia is different from other countries with the Superannuation system, so it is difficult to find an existing model to suggest, but perhaps the government could allow for a tax break of some sort to even the balance.

Retraining

Positions such as Pilots, Harbour Masters and Tug Masters all require a certain level of certification and experience, which can only be attained through sea-time (years at sea). These career changes, which might allow a woman to balance family, are only available to older women who may have already missed their opportunity to start a family.

Women who chose to have children at an earlier age would need to be retrained to rejoin the industry later and if this retraining was guaranteed could leave the industry with peace of mind, for a few years whilst they cared for a young family. A Deck Officer who does less than twelve months sea-time in a five year period currently requires a revalidation course to keep their certificate valid if they cannot complete the sea-time. Other employment options within the industry ashore might also need retraining but would really benefit from an experienced seafarer in the role. At this stage these courses are full fee paying, which could limit a woman's ability to pursue this avenue whilst also being without paid work.

Alternative Employment Options within the Company

There are certain roles in Seafaring that are unsuitable for the primary carer to resume, even after parental leave, because of the extended periods of time away from home. Depending on the area of the industry this could range from weeks to months and even shore based jobs in a port can be at any time 24 hours a day and 365 days a year, depending on shipping.

Under Norwegian maritime legislation (NIS 2007):

“If practicable and if she so wishes, a pregnant employee may be relocated to alternative, suitable work in the service of the shipping company ashore”,

The legislation goes on to say:

“If such a transfer is practicable, it will lead to an increase in the woman's basis for birth allowance, among other things. The transfer

may also prevent a period during which the employee receives neither wages (or other compensation for her work) nor financial support. The question of economic compensation may also be settled through a collective agreement.”

Australia needs to catch up with progressive countries, Government legislation is needed with regards to rights of parents.

Relocating ashore could be an industry-wide scheme in the Australian maritime industry, so that the scarce qualifications, skills and experience of these seafarers can continue to benefit the industry.

Childcare

Besides a spouse with a flexible work schedule it would be difficult for many primary carers to return to seafaring without some very flexible childcare arrangements. It has been done, but it would be certainly more expensive than the average worker’s “nine to five” childcare costs. I found talking to other seafaring women we feel we have worked hard and earned the right to take time out to raise our children between ourselves and our partners.

Paternity leave would really help this situation. Due to the location of ports being mainly resource oriented, often no matter how close our relationship with our families, we are not close enough to enjoy any of the childcare benefits of an extended family.

Both skilled professional women and men are looking for more benefits in their workplaces and jobs will need to be redesigned to be more flexible,

Elizabeth Broderick (2008) stated in her speech as Equal Opportunities Commissioner that:

“Having effective flexible work practice also means confronting significant attitudinal barriers such as deeply held prejudices about men and women’s roles in both the family and paid work.

We need to challenge the stereotype of the ideal worker – most often thought to be a male, with no visible caring responsibilities, and 24/7 availability.

So, it seems to me that as employees and employers we need to advance flexible work practice on two fundamental fronts - attitudinal change and job redesign.”

The Industry

In making investigations for this submission I referred to my collection of information about women at sea. I noted that the Australian Shipowners Association (formerly the Australian Nation Maritime Association) had a document entitled “Women at Sea” published in 1993 (McKenzie). One of the recommendations (McKenzie 1993, p.28) was:

“5. Rotation of shoreside employment for male or female seafarers wishing to stay at home with children for a period.

Objective: To provide employment flexibility to allow for family commitments of male or female seafarers.”

I made enquiries with the ASA to see if they had any follow-up data relating to women in the industry in the last fifteen years, I was told that “they have no new data/info on this issue” (Appendix 2).

In 1995 I attended a conference entitled “Women at Sea” on the M.V. Spirit of Tasmania as a representative of the Australian Maritime College’s female students. Some of the recommendations of the background paper that was prepared for the conference were:

“4. that industry give consideration to develop a program into the future that will examine employment policies and their impact on achievements of Equal Opportunity in the industry;....

6. that strategies be developed to attract more women into the industry.”

(Effective Change 1995, p.11)

It is disappointing that no real effort has been taken to follow up on these recommendations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, amongst Australian women seafarers there are very few who reach the top positions within their chosen fields because currently there are few options available for them to balance family commitments with work, even though at work they enjoy pay and promotional parity with their male counterparts.

Currently if women want to pursue their careers in the industry they need to make very careful plans and not limit their options. More progressive legislation with regard to superannuation; retraining, paid maternity, paternity, parental and carer leave – allowing for more flexibility for women and men; and childcare -will have the benefit of attracting and retaining the skills of female seafarers.

This document has explained to the House of Representative Standing Committee the reasons why there is currently an inequity for female seafarers who have children when they end up at retirement, financially and promotionally unequal to their male counterparts.

Australian Government legislation is needed to create flexibility in the workplace, so women and men can care for family when they need to and stay in or return to paid employment and progress in their careers. Legislation needs to be written so that Australian women and men are able to raise children equally, care for family and arrive at retirement without women having an equivalent of 20 years less superannuation.

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