

28 August 2008

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Attention Committee Secretary,

Submission to the Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations of the House of Representatives - Inquiry into pay equity and associated issues related to increasing female participation in the workforce.

Are we there yet?

I am writing to you on behalf of the South Australian Premier's Council for Women.

The Premier's Council for Women welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the Inquiry into pay equity and associated issues related to increasing female participation in the workforce.

The Premier's Council for Women (PCW) is a high level advisory body which advises the Premier of South Australia and the Minister for the Status of Women. The PCW provides quality, independent advice to the South Australian Government on issues relating to women to facilitate a whole of government approach to meeting the needs of South Australian Women.

The views expressed in this submission are those of PCW and do not necessarily reflect those of the South Australian Government.

The PCW has prioritised two focus areas over the next 18 months. These are:

- women's economic status and employment; and
- women's health, safety and wellbeing.

The first is particularly in response to PCW's concerns about the inequity and discrimination that occurs in the workforce - particularly for women.

In 2007 the PCW held *Women's Voices Forums* in Adelaide and Mount Gambier, as well as an Adelaide-based *Young Women's Forum*. Over 220 women from more than 100 organisations attended. While the forums' focus related to the targets relating to women in South Australia's Strategic Plan, there was discussion on many topics. An overwhelming proportion of responses at the *Women's Voices Forums* highlighted issues of employment, work-life balance and equity in the workplace – an indication of the importance of these issues to women in South Australia.

South Australian women are very aware that their position in the labour market is often reliant on their ability to find employment that provides them with the flexibility they need to fulfil their other commitments. They recognise their need to juggle work and life commitments makes them more vulnerable in the labour market and diminishes their opportunities.

It is of concern to the Premiers' Council that women in South Australia register a significantly higher level of self-reported psychological distress than their male counterparts. It is the council's belief that this can be related to the difficulties experienced in juggling the issues of family, work and life.

The Australian work and social landscape has changed considerably in the last three decades as women's participation in the labour market has risen steadily - and continues to rise¹. However, a corresponding change in social and industrial policy that would ensure women could participate equally in the workforce has not occurred.

This is a crucial time for Australian women in the workforce; they have been bearing the burden of outdated social and industrial laws and policy for too long.

Social changes have seen women enter the traditional workforce in large numbers, however:

- women spend extended periods in and out of the workforce to meet their caring responsibilities;
- women who have children are disadvantaged in comparison with men;
 - in their income over time; and
 - in the superannuation entitlements they can accumulate; and
 - in the level of seniority achieved in the work place
- the effects of individual bargaining post WorkChoices have left women particularly disadvantaged.
- inflexible working conditions and workplace cultures are disincentives for women who seek to balance employment advancement and their caring responsibilities.
- unpaid work in the home and caring responsibilities continue to be disproportionately undertaken by women.

The ongoing effects of earning less than their male counterparts, and the difficulties in securing ongoing well-paid employment when returning to the workforce, all contribute to the relative poverty of women.²

The PCW commends the Australian Government for conducting this long overdue Inquiry and hope that the complex but essential elements necessary to women's participation in the workforce will be addressed.

Yours Sincerely,



Pat Mikan
Chair
Premier's Council for Women

¹ *Australian Industrial Relations Commission Decision No PR082005 08/08/05, Paragraph 78.*

² Adapted from: Parr, Nick, Shauna Ferris & Stephane Mahuteau. (July 2007) "The Impact of Children on Australian Women's and Men's Superannuation". *HILDA Research Conference Paper*.
www.melbourneinstitute.com/conf/hildaconf2007