

Achieving a better balance between work and life

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Whenever I attempt any assessment of the disadvantages faced by Australian working women I feel compelled to look at the circumstances of women around the world. The United Nations Development Plan (UNDP) report today places Australian women at the top of the list on a composite index of life expectancy, education and share of gross domestic product. I'm not exactly sure what to make of this, given that the same index also shows that overall Australia plunged three places down the list and scored amongst the worst in the developed world for poverty, particularly amongst Indigenous people.

Despite greater attention to the position of women and the dramatic economic and political changes over the past 20 years, we must confront the tragic reality that globally the average condition of women remains virtually unchanged. In many places and in many ways, it has, in fact, worsened. Women still comprise two thirds of the world's illiterates (30 percent of all women cannot read or write); we are 80 to 90 percent (an increase) of the world's 1.3 billion poor. Poverty wears a female face. We are the majority of the elderly and comprise the majority of the world labour force's unemployed and underemployed, averaging 40 percent less pay than men at the same jobs.

Our unpaid labour-in the home, in childbirth, childrearing, subsistence gardening, farming, water hauling, wood gathering, etc.if expressed in terms of monetary worth, would yield a "staggering \$16 trillion, or about 70 percent more than the officially estimated \$23 trillion of current global output" (UNDP, 2002).

Worldwide, women still lack full reproductive freedom and sexual choice: as we meet, more than 300,000 women-many children themselves, most malnourished, anaemic, and lacking medical care-are in labour. According to the 1996 UNICEF/WHO/Johns Hopkins University report, 585,000 women - and the number has been rising - now die each year in pregnancy or childbirth. A further 18 million suffer disabling illnesses or injuries from complications.

Women still suffer disproportionately from domestic violence (rape, battery, incest, sexual abuse), now recognised as one of the most significant causes of female disability and death worldwide. Sexual violence, trafficking in women and girls, "honour" killings, female genital mutilation, acid burning and dowry deaths are appallingly commonplace. More often than not, unless such violence occurs on our soil, to our people, we behave as if it is no concern of ours.

In the context of the current debate about terrorism and the war on terror, Amnesty International has noted that women's fatality in war - 5% of all victims in WWI, rising to 50% in WWII - soared to nearly 80% in the 1990s. Women, with their children, now make up almost 90% of all refugee and displaced populations. In our own community, violence within Indigenous communities and that inflicted on Indigenous women is disproportionately high. Indigenous women have a much higher risk of being murdered than women in the community as a whole.

Noted U.S. writer and feminist Robin Morgan describes women as "society's canaries" - living alerts to danger. She argues "a civilisation can be gauged by the status of its female citizens". If this is true, then our civilisation is in serious trouble, especially because, unlike the miners who pay attention to the canaries' reactions, governments continue to ignore the parlous state of so many women around the world.

I mention these things, not to suggest that the struggle to improve the status of women in Australia should be abandoned - because we are better off than many - but to remind us that we need to work in our own communities and with the global community to spread the nation's and the globe's wealth more equitably. There are many women who are struggling with much more severe problems than those of us who have regular employment and reasonable incomes.

Within Australia we need to attend to the substantial inequality which exists and pay particular attention to the needs of those women who are on low incomes with poor employment prospects; to those who suffer institutional disadvantage not only because of their gender, but because of their race or socio-economic status. A spate of recent reports continue to show what we all know - that Australian working women's lives are becoming more difficult and that government policies are not helping. Indeed, in some areas they are exacerbating the problem.

It is a feature of modern Australia that more and more women are combining work with parenting and the majority of Australian families are attempting to combine work and family responsibilities in an increasingly hostile public policy environment. We are constantly being told that Australia has led the world in economic growth over the past decade. While this is generally true, The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report card on employment over the same period - which came out this week - tells a different story. Australia remains at the bottom half of the developed country register on jobs. If full employment is the best single indicator of a socially inclusive society, we have made little progress toward it.

Although women's participation has increased, 32% of women between 25 and 54 have no job, compared with 18 % in the Scandinavian countries. Two out of every three jobs created in the past decade have been part-time. It is also clear that, despite the claims about declining unemployment, we still suffer from substantial unemployment, particularly if account is taken of "hidden unemployment", those who have given up looking for work or have marginal attachment to the workforce. When this adjustment is made, the real unemployment rate for women is 17.2% rather than the official 9.8%.

When account is also taken of the 430,000 who would prefer to work additional hours - as well as those who want fewer hours- it is estimated that this is equivalent to a demand for an extra 150,000 jobs. As you know the majority of women are working in a range of low paid, part-time and precarious jobs. Forty four percent of females are part-time workers compared with 13% of males, while women hold 72% of part-time jobs. Australia has the highest proportion of women employed in part-time work of any OECD country bar the Netherlands (OECD 2001). And it is getting worse.

Over the last decade, women, like men, have experienced a decline in standard hours and a rise in part-time hours, particularly in the 21-34 hours a week band. Over the same period there has been a rapid increase in the numbers in "casual employment" which is the most common form of employment amongst part-timers, accounting for 59% of the part-time jobs that women hold, a proportion which has been steadily rising. It is on these features of women's work that I want to concentrate tonight.

Many women in part-time and often casual jobs will testify that they are less than ideal. Despite the fact that part-time work has often been touted as the ideal way of reconciling work and family responsibilities for women, there is also a substantial downside to such employment. As the 1997 International Labour Organisation (ILO) report on part-time work put it: "Part-time work: Solution or Trap?" The ILO makes an important distinction between voluntary and involuntary part-time employment, emphasising that some people accept reduced hours because they cannot find full time employment, in which case it is a form of underemployment. In addition, some women accept part-time work which does not use their skills because it is the only work available which allows them sufficient flexibility. In other cases women may opt for part-time work because adequate and affordable child-care is simply not available.

Since so much part-time and casual work is clustered in the lower-paid sectors of the economy, this sometimes means that women accept lower rates of pay than they might otherwise obtain with the skills they have. Because of their part-time status many also miss out on overtime and other penalty rates, because they are not available until the employee has worked the equivalent of full-time hours. In many organisations, part-time workers are overlooked for promotion and denied training opportunities. As one commentator put it, "greedy" institutions demand total commitment from their workers, and that often means long hours.

Even if people are productive and effective, the quality of their work may be called into question if they work reduced hours. They may be marginalised within the workplace or the organisation. In many cases, particularly where they are casual workers, they are denied benefits such as superannuation, on-site child care, allowances for skills, work-related travel and discretionary payments such as bonuses, loadings and over-award payments. Much part-time and casual work is not structured to meet the families' needs, but rather to suit the employer. Many report an increase in unsociable hours, split shifts and the like, adding to the problems rather than diminishing them.

There are alternatives to this scenario which turn the trap into a solution. As the ILO points out,

"Where part-time work is accompanied by adequate legal protection in accordance with the principles of proportionality and non-discrimination and provided it is freely chosen by workers who are in a relatively strong position in the labour market, it can be an excellent means of dividing one's time between economic activity, family responsibilities and other pursuits. However, where it is imposed on or endured by workers in secondary jobs, it merely increases their difficulties and compromises their employment prospects."

The European Union has addressed this choice directly through a series of directives which have been translated into domestic legislation of the member countries. These directives cover participation and consultation structures in the workplace, family leave, working time, part-time works and fixed term contracts (casual work).

The last two apply non-discrimination principles and require that part-time employees are not treated less favourably than their full-time colleagues in relation to:

- Hourly rates of pay
- Contractual sick pay and maternity leave
- Access to occupation pension schemes, bonuses, shift allowances (pro rata)
- Holidays and maternity leave (pro rata)
- Redundancy, and
- Access to training

When reorganising work load, the employers must also ensure that part-time workers are not treated less favourably and their access to promotion is available on an equal basis. Similar provisions have been developed in relation to casual workers. Provisions to prevent abuses of fixed term contracts by limiting the duration of successive fixed term contract and setting a maximum number of renewals are also in operation.

It's time that we examined some of these measures to improve the quality of part-time work and prevent the exploitation of workers whose work becomes permanently casual. Changes to the IR legislation in 1996 have restricted the capacity of the IRC to regulate parttime and casual employment through the award system and enterprise bargaining and they do not appear to be monitoring the effects of these changes. This is simply not good enough. Working women deserve secure, rewarding employment, no matter how many hours they work. Part-time work should help them manage their work and family responsibilities not lead them into a trap, which limits their income and their future work prospects.