Victorian

WOMEN'S TRUST

making a difference

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES' FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY

The Victorian Women's Trust welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry. We believe that when conditions are improved for women, everyone benefits – men, children, communities and environment.

Work/life balance, and the balance between paid and unpaid work are important issues for both men and women. But because of women's reproductive role, the issues take on a particular sharpness for women contemplating family work and/or returning to positions of paid work.

We are particularly interested in addressing the first two component parts of the Committee's Terms of Reference – the financial, career and social disincentives to starting families; and how to make it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid workforce.

Our interest in this area sharpened with an initiative we took to celebrate the centenary of federation in 2001. The Trust created and toured throughout Victoria an exhibition called *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives.* The aim was to celebrate the extraordinary contribution to society made by women over the course of the century.

The exhibition was greeted warmly and effusively wherever it toured, in large measure because it spoke the truth about women's lives. We have included with this submission individual copies of the book we produced for the exhibition so that this important social evidence remains on the public record. It is a unique collection and we commend it to Committee members as a background resource for its work.

The majority of unpaid work is done by women. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics *Unpaid Work and the Australian Economy* (1997: Cat.No.5240.0), the value of unpaid work is approximately $261 billion. Of this total, $237 billion was unpaid household work. Women contributed 65% of the value of unpaid household work.

This contribution is usually performed as complex juggling act, caring for families and children, trying to earn an income if possible, and playing significant roles as volunteers within their communities. Women doing unpaid work are productive citizens. Yet they do not enjoy the same social rights as paid workers. Their contribution, with its attendant problems of low status and limited economic security, has not been properly addressed in Australian public policy.

In our view, there are three key issues that go to the heart of work/family balance – poorly defined work; lack of support for unpaid workers; and the need to make it easier to move in and out of unpaid and paid work.

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1. The unpaid work women do is poorly defined

Almost across the board, the enormous amount of unpaid effort made by women is not characterized as *work.* More commonly, in areas of public discourse, through the media, in academic texts and government publications, it is usually described as 'care-giving.' In the majority of writings about women's work, the language used to describe 'work' is largely related to paid work, whereas work in the home is described as 'family responsibilities.'

This is a limited and poorly conceptualized approach. However, it still pervades. This was well illustrated in a recent discussion paper by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission on Valuing Parenthood which states "women are less likely to work as the number of young children they have increases.' We suspect that the authors were not trying to insult mothers, who would laugh derisorily at this observation. Instead, the authors are operating within an uncritical mindset, shared by many, which only sees work that is paid, and ignores the fact that rearing children and running households is what is really is – work, and hard work at that.

This is not simply a question of semantics. Ann Crittenden is aware of the real issue in her use of a subtitle her book, The Price of Motherhood (2001) – *Why the Most Important Job in the World Is Still the Least Valued.*

Mothers have been left behind in the transition to an economy based on individual contributions to market production. This was observed decades earlier by Eleanor Rathbone:

'If motherhood is a craft (as doubtless in a sense it is), it differs from every other craft known to many in that there is no money remuneration for the mother's task, no guarantee of her maintenance while she performs it and (most important yet most ignored of all) no consequential relationship recognized by society between the quantity and quality of her product and the quantity and quality of the tools and materials which she has at her disposal (quoted in Folbre, N, The Invisible Heart New York Press, 2001).

If we were to call this effort what it is – *work* – and the place where it is performed a *'workplace,'* then we could ask in what ways could we improve the conditions of these myriad workplaces? After all, we enjoy community standards that suggest workplaces should aim to be humane and non-exploitative outfits, where people are valued employees, where their safety is paramount.

2. A lonely, low status role with limited practical support

In May and June 2004 staff of the Victorian Women's Trust convened three focus groups to explore women's perceptions of their role and living situations. The groups were from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds in suburban Melbourne and the provincial city of Geelong.

The prevailing sentiment expressed by these women echoed much of what we had discovered through our literature research. Mothering more often than not, without

understanding and support from others, leads to a loss of self-esteem and confidence. Women experience acute loneliness, a lack of community support and a sense that their effort is undervalued. These are the themes emerging from the focus groups:

- Women who are (full-time) mothers have a poor self-image
- Women who are (full-time) mothers feel isolated
- There is inadequate support for women who are full-time mothers
- The work is relentless – there are so many tasks
- Mothers are responsible for lives – the life of a child
- Watching children grow is a real reward for mothering
- Arranging child-care is tricky – no casual child-care available
- Other women are the most critical of full-time mothers
- Women who are full-time mothers have to justify themselves and have no status, e.g. with professionals, such as doctors
- There is nowhere to learn how to be a mother – we are expected to know
- There is no occupational health and safety insurance
- Children don't like to say their mother is 'just a full-time mother'. They don't mind telling their friends that their mother does community work, but they like their mothers to be around when they need attention.
- Women who are full-time mothers have to have good organisational skills
- Women who are full-time mothers don't get paid
- Full-time mothers have special listening skills
- Patience and tolerance are skills mothers learn
- Women who are full-time mothers have special skills when their children are sick (women in two of the groups had a child with a mental illness)
- Time to deal with their own needs is not available to women who are full-time mothers
- There is not enough government support; child-care, tax rebates, superannuation
- Women's work is silent. Mothers are walking ghosts
- Why not have a Mother of the Year award!

Ironically, if the hours of work performed by women carers and mothers were properly remunerated, no economy could afford it! However, we should be considering ways in which the work of parenting, and mothering in particular, can be more valued publicly,

recognised, rewarded and supported, beyond family payments systems and baby cash bonuses. For instance, Federal and State governments allocate significant proportions of their budgets to health systems. But the real primary health care arena is the home itself, where children are raised, looked after when they are sick, and being socialized. Policy and public investment at this level would generate enormous cost savings to society further down the track.

Ideally, for example, we would see maternal and child health centres within walking distance of a woman's home. We would see more resources going into services where professional staff could visit women in their homes where there is a newborn child, offering a friendly listening ear and being able to provide some practical advice and support at a time of greatest need. We would entertain the idea of respite care for mothers, as we do for other people when society understands the relentless demands of care-giving can be injurious to the care-giver's health. We would develop stronger models of occasional care within a woman's local community. We would provide easy access to local meeting places where mothers could meet and form their own self-help and support networks. And we would see models of financial support that recognised their work, offset their lack of superannuation, and provided them with more economic security for the later stage of their lives.

Women would find it easier to start a family if they knew that this part of their life was greatly valued by their society; and that the same society was prepared to support their unpaid work in useful and practical ways.

3. Easier movement between unpaid and paid work

The final issue relates to the ways in which women and men can move between parenting work and paid work. All work benefits our economy and society and we should be maximising the experience and talent of all people throughout their working lives as parents or paid employees. We should also be looking at preventing poverty in older age by making sure that women are not penalised for undertaking important unpaid work and for moving between paid and unpaid work.

Women's increasing participation in paid work over the past four decades is well documented. Yet there has been little done to accommodate this trend. By government and across industry sectors. We lag behind many other OECD countries on the most basic ways that assist people to accommodate and balance their paid work and family work. When research, for example, shows the economic benefit of maternity leave provisions, it is hard to understand why industry and employer groups adopt an automatically defensive and negative position.

It is fortuitous that this Inquiry is occurring at the same time as the federal Treasurer and others are stressing the need for people to remain longer in the paid workforce. This call for prolonged labour force participation is more likely to bear fruit if there is some dramatic give in the first decade of the 21 century in the way women and men can be better supported in their unpaid work as parents and in their paid jobs.

Central to this imperative is the need for others (in industry, government and the broader community) to understand and accept that the care of children is part of the public good. Well-cared for children are tomorrow's productive and mature citizens.

As a base, this means paying sharper policy attention to:

- The superannuation disadvantage experienced by women who leave paid work to have children;
- The lack of any superannuation-type entitlement for women who are engaged in unpaid work.
- Incentives for employers to institute decent periods of maternity and paternity leave across all employment sectors, as well as provision of carer leave.
- Industry education and encouragement to show the benefits of flexible working hours
- Affordable child care – community and work based
- Extending models of child care that could qualify for taxation support, such as when a household employs a part-time carer who child minds at home.
- Access to training and/or re-training
- Recognition of the skills and experience built through unpaid work

A female German parliamentarian once told National Organisation for Women president Patricia Ireland that she had a dream in which she interviewed a young man. "Oh, you have such outstanding credentials" she told him, "but we are looking for well-rounded people. We see you have never spent any time with children. But there's still time. You're still young. Come back when you've had broader life experience."(Crittenden, 2001:274).

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