

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND
WORKPLACE RELATIONS.**

**INQUIRY INTO ISSUES SPECIFIC TO OLDER WORKERS
SEEKING EMPLOYMENT, OR ESTABLISHING A
BUSINESS, FOLLOWING UNEMPLOYMENT.**

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INTRODUCTION

This paper looks specifically at the issues for women 45 years and older who are unemployed and specifically relates to the present economic climate in Tasmania. It will also address the particular issues for women over 45 that have relevant, useable qualifications, but who cannot become gainfully employed.

Listed below are the issues under each specified category.

Social Issues

1. Poverty:

The poverty cycle is especially relevant to women. It occurs and is reinforced in a number of ways.

- Women are by far the largest group of single parents. This fact contributes heavily to the poverty cycle and it is further aggravated by the difficulty that women over 45 years have in entering/re-entering the workforce. Many of the women who have re-trained and seek to re-enter the workforce after fulfilling their parental responsibilities find it a very long and frustrating process. The existence and competition for suitable employment for this age group can be very problematic. Listed below are some of the issues;

- The downsizing of many organisations in both the public and the private sector have seen many of the graduate positions and middle management positions made redundant.
- The lack of positions, especially at graduate level.

The necessity of having to compete with much younger people for the available positions, **which brings to the forefront many societal and cultural values and attitudes around ageism and the place of older women in society.** (which includes our societies emphasis, that women have to look youthful, as well as being skilled in their work, see media images of working women.)

- The clustering of many women in the traditional lower paid areas of employment, ie. service industries, community work etc.
- The past and continuing differential between male and female pay.

As stated in a 1994 publication by Langmore and Quiggan, 'Work for all' "The measures of unemployment published every month are based on a survey conducted by the ABS between 1978 - 1993. In periods of unemployment many people simply give up looking for work. They are often referred to as the 'hidden unemployed' One source of evidence on the size of this group is provided by recent ABS surveys in which people are asked whether they would like a full-time or part-time job. On the basis of the Sept. 1992 survey it was estimated that 1.1 million people, classified as 'not in the labour force' on the

usual definition, nonetheless wanted to work (Langmore & Quiggan, 1994, 22). Further, about '170,000 people currently attending an educational institution were classed as wanting to work. Some of these are presumably attending primarily because they cannot find work. Others may be committed to study but willing to under-take part-time work, or they may be upgrading their skills in the hope of becoming better qualified for employment". (Langmore & Quiggan, 1994, 22).

The issues here are twofold. Firstly it points to how women perceive themselves, and most importantly, how society views and has expectations of the older women. For example societal expectations are that women with partners, or otherwise financially supported are not considered part of the unemployed. Similarly, older single women, divorced or widowed come under the category that they have had their opportunity to participate in the paid workforce and if their work has been intermittent for various reasons ie. child rearing or other responsibilities, they find themselves part of a system that can only be described as punitive. Whatever the reason for their present non-participation they are now perceived to be less employable and less efficient and effective than other applicants, especially when applying for positions that are not in the lower status, lower paid area.

Such articles in the media as 'Under 40's now face too-old tag" stating that the Commissioner for Human Rights, Chris. Sidoti, had voiced his concern "that the workplace perception of "old" now included the under 40s." (The Mercury April 25th ,1999) which really reflects the attitudes and the reality for the over 40 year old women when applying for work.

It seems that from further studies 'the disability support pension is being used as a long term substitute for the unemployment benefit (and) is evident from

the fact that among women aged over 50, who are much less commonly eligible for unemployment benefits, the rise in disability support pensioner numbers was broadly in line with population growth' (Langmore & Quiggan, 1994, 22)

The point we would like to make here, is that many women in this age group, who need employment, become stressed and ill (physically and mentally), to the point that they qualify for the disability pension. This is a very undesirable result, as it further erodes the women's self esteem so her ability to support herself and contribute to her retirement, consequently she continues to be wholly supported by government benefits.

Further support for this statement can be seen from a joint study by The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Heart Foundation, The Mercury dated May 3, 1999. It states that, "poorly paid Australians were twice as likely to have more than one risk factor leading to heart disease. It (heart disease) places a heavy burden on all Australians in terms of illness and disability and its health care costs are more than those of any other disease.

More Issues.

Further, Equal Employment Legislation, is meant to address equal employment opportunities in the workplace for all employees. It fails to address this because of the entrenched workplace cultures in many organisations. The following reflects this statement.

"Men founded and developed the vast majority of the organisations we know.

Men made them places where they could work and live and their settings were intended to be both comfortable and familiar.....concurrently we think of how differently women grew up; their different orientations, their expectations, aspirations and experiences - then we can begin to understand why in spite of the law, very little may really have changed for women".(Still, 1993, 9.)

The merit principle, Public Employment Policy, which is meant to provide a level playing field for all applicants states that the five key aspects of the merit principle are: skills, qualifications, experience and potential for future development. The issues here for women over 45 is that the 'potential for future development' can be seen to favour younger workers as they will be in the system some 20 years longer.

Many women are caught in the cycle of poverty through past employment policies, before certain legislation was enacted (female public servants as well as women working in other areas of employment, upon marriage could lose their jobs, or at least lose the right to permanent employment, pregnancy was another area in which women lost their employment.) Legislation such as the 1975 Racial Discrimination Act which made it unlawful to engage in 'unjustified discrimination' to the Sex Discrimination Act of 1984 have only comparatively recently, given women the legal right to demand equality within the workplace. The lack of availability to women of adequate amounts of superannuation, is another factor that has contributed greatly to the continued impoverishment of women, particularly older single women (this includes, divorced, separated, widowed and never married women).

Self employed.

The Australian self-employed woman's profile also reveals that about two thirds of the women use private sources of finance to commence their business, with personal savings being the prime source, followed by assistance from family earnings and borrowing's from relatives. Bank loans and overdrafts are the two main business sources of finance at start-up time. "Even in these days of anti-discrimination laws, women generally find it difficult to obtain commencement loans from a bank with most needing to reapply or to obtain a co-signatory before the loan gains acceptance" (Still, 1993, 55). or financial backing is not available to people without assets.

Establishment of businesses requires self-confidence and certain skills in marketing and self promotion and a mentor or 'coach' to guide them through the commencement phase, without the interference or patronising attitudes that some have experienced from the Office of Small Business. This department which is the information provider in this field, has too many unsuccessful, short-lived schemes, a condescending attitude of knowing better, and a tendency to pass the woman from department to department while she is seeking advice.

There should be recognition for the time and skills that are needed to bring up children and survive on a very low income all of which is applicable to self-employment. Many of the skills contributing to the employability of women and necessary to even consider self-employment are negotiation, communication, budgeting, organisational skills, consultative skills, resourcefulness, etc. which are not recognised in a woman re-entering the workforce, because they are self-skilled and have not 'proved' their worth in paid employment. Other issues for

Self-employed women who work full-time, are areas of possible tax relief to help overcome the high costs involved. Another possibility is the continuation of benefits that accrue to a health care card, till the self-employment is established and self-supporting.

Mental Health/Physical Health

Social attitudes to ageing alienates and reinforces the individuals perception of themselves and their ability to gain suitable employment. Coupled with this is the above mentioned criteria of poverty and the impact on mental /physical health which contributes greatly to the ability of the job seeker to enter or re-enter the workforce. Problems such as mentioned under the headings of ‘ **social and poverty**’ implications the cumulative effects of unemployment contributes to ill health. The results being;

- Lack of self esteem. self confidence
- The physical impact of stress.....panic attacks, high blood pressure,
- The emotional impact of stress such as chronic fatigue, post traumatic stress, depression, and other stress related illnesses.

Economic

There are well qualified, highly skilled women over the age of 45 who are responsible and well motivated but fail to find employment. Many unemployed women 45 and over are still educating children, ie College/University. Without work these women cannot contribute, therefore reliance on the welfare system is total unless suitable and reasonably paid employment is found.

Other economic implications of this are:

- Huge outstanding HEC's fees.
- Not enough positions at graduate level or middle management for those over 45 years. (organisations are offering redundancies and early retirement to their over 50 year old employees.)
- Continued reliance on welfare payments
- No opportunity to accrue superannuation or retirement benefits.
- Dependency on public or rental housing. (Both of which are costing governments)
- Dependency on the public health system.
- Waste of talent and skills that could benefit the community.

Industrial

Women continue to be over represented in areas that are low paid with poor working conditions. They continue to be over represented in part-time, casual and temporary positions. There are many part time and casual jobs where there are no regulations as to the maximum or minimum hours of work when called in. Working in these low status positions, often with very little or no job security women are disempowered when it comes to enterprise bargaining, workplace agreements, contracts etc. They feel obliged to accept the pay and conditions that are offered by the employer or find themselves without a job.

With the difficulties in obtaining permanent work, many older women have to take temporary and casual positions. The continued pressures of always having to

look for work and the uncertainty of income, which impinges so greatly on the ability to plan and save for the future, further disadvantages this group and alienates them.

Such issues as flexibility of work hours etc. are not only necessary for workers with young children, but are also needed by women over 45 years, who also have family responsibilities ie. older parents, grandchildren etc.

Other examples of the erosion of wages and conditions are;

1. A women applied for a part-time (10 hours per week) position with a community organisation, she was offered the position but only if she agreed to work a further 5 hours a week on a voluntary basis.
2. A teachers aide, employed for two days a week, but required to come in on two of the days she does not work to attend meetings, she does not get paid for this.

A 72 year old women, who was still gainfully employed, was told that she could not continue in her employment, because the organisation said it was no longer possible to get workers compensation cover for her. (Examples supplied by The Working Women's Centre.)

- Women who enter the workforce at 45 years or over, do not have enough time to accrue sufficient superannuation for a financially secure retirement, especially as most will not be in a well paid position.
- Too much emphasis is placed on relevant paid work skills, and not nearly enough emphasis placed on the skills and life experience older workers can offer

- Older women in employment, who are being bullied / harassed feel they have to remain in that employment (even to the detriment of their health) because they know the difficulties of obtaining other permanent employment.

Existing H.R.M. policies in certain corporations, organisations etc. can impinge on the likelihood of an older worker being employed. For example:

1. The recent employers' responses to the present industrial climate and the equalisation issues on pensions, which has been focused on redundancy and early retirement, has been a costly option for those over 45 years trying to re-enter the workforce.,
2. Policies that effect who is trained and who is not. (for instance, those who are nearing retirement age) do not have the same options for training as other workers.
3. Effects of downsizing of middle management positions, new and proposed industrial legislation, leave women disempowered.
4. Continued discrepancy between male and female pay

Questions around Health and safety issues for older workers.

- Workers compensation for older workers.?
- Is there an upper age limit or a price differential?.
- Boards, Commissions, public servants, various companies and organisations etc. where compulsory retirement ages are set. Is the issue, the competence of the incumbent, or their age?

Conclusion.

In conclusion we agree that the plight of the older female jobseekers who face longer periods of unemployment than younger people and their unemployment presents a particular set of problems. We believe that women, especially those over 45 years of age, whose paid work history tends to be irregular are left in the most unenviable position, of looking forward to an impoverished old age, in spite of their best efforts to gain and keep employment

We have looked at this problem in the Tasmanian context, where unemployment has been consistently amongst the highest in Australia. Tasmania is losing jobs in both the public and the private sector, which makes the gaining of employment for those re-entering the workforce extremely difficult. Overall Tasmanian rates of pay compare unfavourably with the mainland, which only adds to the continued impoverishment of those older women who gain employment.

The unemployment rate in Tasmania continues to be unacceptably high, and we are losing many of our best and brightest younger people to the mainland, but this option is often not feasible for the older woman, who may have family or other commitments to consider. It is the state that continues to have the highest proportion of welfare beneficiaries, and the continued difficulties of older workers to obtain suitable and financially rewarding work will only ensure that Tasmania continues to be highly welfare dependant.

Recommendations.

EDUCATION FOR; employers, employees and the general public,

- Emphasising that paid working life must not end at 45 years.
- Most people have at 45 years a great many productive and useful years left.
- Older people are not a homogenous group and have as many diversities in values and attitudes as younger people.
- That it is greatly beneficial to Australian society to encourage and sustain older people in the workforce, in order to
 - (a) make full use of their skills and abilities.
 - (b) enable them, (especially women) to be given an opportunity to plan and save for their retirement.
 - (c) As many studies have shown, those people who are contented with their lives (meaning, appropriately employed, reasonable income, which enables them to plan and budget for the future) need much less financial and societal support than those who do not have a reasonable income
- A youthful appearance is not a skill or prerequisite for most positions.

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