



House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services Inquiry into Balancing Work & Family

I appreciate the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry. I am a married 34 year old professional working full time in Sydney, with no plans to have children.

I believe there are a number of issues that have so far prevented or discouraged my desire to have children.

Housekeeping

Currently I work full time and do almost all of the housekeeping, and financial management. If I include the time I spend on household duties and travel to and from work, my working hours increase to a minimum of 60 hours per week. Although my husband contributes in some ways, it is not significant. As it is, I feel I have very little time for myself. I even struggle to set aside time for regular exercise. I think about doing all I do and then also having to consider the care of a child and quite frankly, I am quite discouraged. I am not superwoman and really don't want to be. The women who say that you can "have it all" are welcome to it. I am not interested.

Work

General Working Conditions

Although my working conditions are comparatively good compared to others, the amount of time I spend either working or travelling to work is still too much. If you consider part time work as an alternative this also poses its own problems; in my experience you either need to accept a substantial decrease in your hourly rate and take on low skilled work or do a full time job in part time hours for part time pay.

Furthermore, I believe that although work-life balance issues are discussed, actual policies addressing these problems are not readily available. Employers seem to be very good at claiming that they have these policies in place, however they are not so good at allowing them to be utilised by their staff (with the exception of government employers). For example, I am currently trying to negotiate a slight change in my working hours with my employer (who claims to be a model employer in terms of its work-life balance policies) and have been told that I cannot shift my working hours by ½ an hour.

I do not understand why people that have families are the only ones that should utilise flexible working arrangements / work-life balance policies. People without children also need work life balance and the opportunity to work flexible hours. I feel that the current working environment in the private sector is not sensitive to those that do not wish to have stressful, high pressure, highly paid jobs and spend long hours at work. Those that want more balance are only able to exercise this desire by changing careers usually to less challenging work. As an educated person with much to offer, I feel as though society misses out on much that I would be able to contribute. This is a direct result of the fact that I am not willing to do the long hours that normally come with challenging work.

I believe that working arrangements are very much in favour of employers. With the current plan for changes to Industrial Relations laws I am very concerned that these changes will give even more power to employers, and even less power and rights to employees. I cannot see how such policies will encourage an increase in the birth rate. The current government keeps talking about raising the birth rate and then keeps implementing policies that will only discourage people from having children. The IR changes will probably result in less job security, the possible loss of maternity leave, super, penalty rates and the list goes on.

Maternity Leave

Although I believe that 12 months maternity leave is better than nothing, I do not believe that maternity leave provisions are nearly as flexible or far reaching as they need to be to encourage more women to have children.

- Many of the women I know that have had children have had to leave their jobs. The main reason they give is that they were not given the option of working part time. Others say that they were simply not ready to put their child into childcare at 12 months old and return to work. Despite the problems that many women have faced, I am surprised at the number of female managers and colleagues I have come across (most with children) who have little or no sympathy for mothers in these situations. I believe that there is a real need for females in the workplace to actively support each other in this regard and I believe that this is currently largely lacking.
- Many women are unable to afford to take unpaid maternity leave for 12 months. At the same time they may find it very difficult to access child care.
- The modern working person, on average, changes jobs much more often. This has been the case for myself in the 9 or so years I have been working full time. I have held many contract and temporary positions. Often these do not have any maternity leave arrangements or I am not there long enough to access them. This does not exactly encourage me to have children.

Some of the suggestions I would make:

1. The option of longer unpaid maternity leave.
2. The option of taking the paid portion of your maternity leave at half pay for a longer time period.
3. The option of cashing in some of your salary towards longer paid maternity leave options
4. The option of returning to work part time after taking maternity leave.

Money

My husband and I are cannot complain about our lifestyle. Our earnings are above the average. However, affordable housing is beyond our reach. We have no family on either side - which means no one to turn to should we ever need assistance or get into trouble.

Saving a 20% deposit for a property these days is neither easy or a small amount of money. Even if we do get this money together at some point, the repayments for the property we buy will guarantee the need for us to both work full time.

At this point I ask myself, do I want to be the kind of parent that puts their infant into childcare (if I can find it) and is away at work? No is the only answer I come up with. I believe that I should be able to stay at home with my child until he/she goes to school. I then think about whether my husband and I could work out a way of both working part time so that one of us was with our child. However, I doubt we would be able to make the repayments. I forgot to mention the \$20000 HECS debt I have - factor this in and it really is impossible. Unless I am willing to accept the prospect of renting forever, quitting my job and struggling financially - I cannot see a way.

On the topic of childcare, I believe that for mothers who choose childcare, this should be more readily available. However I do not believe that "affordable" childcare should be made available at the expense of the already very poorly paid childcare workers. If childcare is to be made more readily available and at more affordable rates, this should not disadvantage childcare workers any more than they already are.

In summary I feel that there is too much standing in the way of me having children. I feel that the current climate we live in places priority on economics, productivity, and business. I do not think that we are considering the social consequences of the policies being implemented.

If the policy makers are worried about this trend - they should be. In light of current policies this trend will only get stronger. We need to give equal weight to our social health and not just keep focusing on our economic health. In many ways, a happy, content, secure society is much richer than one that only focuses on its economic health. Happy, content, secure people have children. Not people worried about their working or financial future. We may be richer, but I don't think we are happier or as happy as we once were. It is all pretty obvious if you ask me.

I think the Western world has much to learn from a concept put forward by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck of Bhutan. According to him, Gross National Happiness (GNH) is more important than Gross National Product (GNP) - and I wholeheartedly agree.