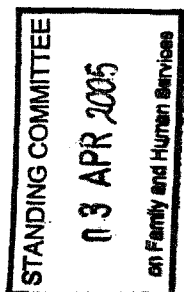




## INQUIRY INTO BALANCING HOME AND WORK

Thankyou for the opportunity to make a submission into the Inquiry into Balancing Home and Work. I am a 48 year old mother of three. I have remained in the workforce to a greater or lesser extent almost continually since the birth of my first child nearly 20 years ago. I hope my account of my own personal experience may be useful to your committee. It is not meant to address the issues facing the majority of women in Australia. I have however read recently that the more highly educated a woman is today, the less likely it is that she will have a child. I think my submission may be relevant to this aspect of your inquiry.

In my case I faced no financial or social disincentive to starting a family. I have had enormous opportunity and choice. I was 27, had been married nearly 3 years and had a husband who could provide adequate income for me to have a child and so I did not feel the need to return immediately to the workforce. I say this because over the years I have met women who say the need to remain almost continuously in the workforce has delayed or led them to choose not to have children and certainly not more than one or two. When my first child was born I had the benefit of having already completed a BA (Hons) in political science, two years in the workforce and a graduate law degree. So when I stepped back into the workforce at 28 to do articles, although a bit of a late starter at law, I had already had a few other skills to bring. I found leaving my child an emotional wrench initially but as my mother stepped in to look after her virtually fulltime I faced much less guilt and expense and also came home to a calm and ordered household. Again I had friends who gave up on trying to stay in the workforce because they did not have family support. Childcare is one thing but children get sick and can't go to school or childcare and with out good back up the system soon collapses. Even with my mother's support it was still exhausting rushing in at 6.00pm (I never stayed for drinks on Fridays after work!). There was dinner to get, quality time to enjoy! housework etc and often work bought home from the office. I had nothing but support from my law firm, getting to work by 8.30am and leaving at 5.30pm was acceptable but it was never going to be, and from recent reports is still not compatible with progress in a large law firm. And really why should someone who has no other responsibilities (or a partner doing the lion share of home duties and child rearing) and can work 60 to 70 hours a week not get ahead of someone who cannot. I was married to someone who had that type of demanding job and of course his job like mine was predicated on the basis that someone else had the children and looked after them. I started to notice



friends and women around my age particularly if they had a partner with a demanding job and who earned a reasonably good income giving up the fight. This happened particularly with the arrival of a second child and as in my case a third. I actually planned the arrival of my first 2 children specifically to fit into work and study plans. What I didn't plan on was how difficult I would find to leave my children and parent them as fathers in a law firm did even if reluctantly, that is seeing them on the odd evening and some of the weekends but with little overall knowledge or control of what was going on at home or school and limited time if any to be involved in cooking, cleaning, homework driving and most importantly just being there as a reasonably constant presence.

Interestingly our children don't hold it against their father that he works long hours and they love him just as much as me, but we all know I am the one whose schedule bends, whose working life has been modified and is available in a way he is not. In some ways it is perfectly logical. You cannot hold down a demanding job and make your children your focus despite this fatuous claim being made by the odd actress or politician. No one in the real world can run in and out of committee meetings and breast feed a child, unfortunately the real world is not that accommodating. The real world of greater productivity and workplace agreements is not a sheltered workshop (My first job was for a Senator so I know Parliament can be extremely demanding so I don't mean to be too critical of the recent coverage of some politicians with their new babies but if this was intended to be a positive image it failed. Most women I spoke to just felt it reinforced a destructive and impossible stereotype.)

Through my mother's support in particular, opportunity and hanging in there even in the lowly paid part time jobs that I could manage while my children were young I have been lucky and have managed to stay in the workforce and make some progress in terms of pay and conditions. Even with children ages 19, 16 and 10 however I consider fulltime work would put enormous pressure on our household. My husband still works long hour. I am certainly not complaining, we are very secure financially and I have no illusions about the stress and responsibility of holding down and being the primary wage earner. I have actually had choice including the choice to have a third child. Many women no longer have that choice because working pays and having babies and being out of the workforce does not.

I do wonder how this will affect in particular our daughter. She is high achieving and very hard working. She is in 3<sup>rd</sup> year medicine. She and her friends know that even if they marry chances are they will have to always remain in the workforce because the real buying power of incomes has

dropped. That is of course if they do marry and the marriage doesn't break up which they know is all too likely. They are not stupid, they have watched their mothers. They know no one can do it all. They have noticed that their father's careers have generally have been much more successful than their mothers. They know that to get ahead and reach the professional heights they are capable of requires time and dedication. They notice that despite the opportunities women have had in the last 20 to 30 years it is middleaged men not middleaged women who hold most of the positions of power. They know people in the workforce are paid for their efforts. Their stay at home mothers are not. They accept that someone who makes their career their primary focus deserves to do better than someone who does not. They know that everyone says that nothing is more important than children, "they are the future" but they know that often the people who say that don't seem to want to look after them; they are too busy with their career. People who work and have a career are paid and command some respect, people who care for their children are still often patronised. Perhaps they have heard Peter Costello's recent comments about single parents returning to part time work when their children get to school age. Many young women now have lived in a single parent household and know this is not a lifestyle to aspire to. Perhaps some have noticed that many high achieving women do not have children or have 1. This would account for the recognition of the extraordinary achievements of someone like Fiona Woods and the constant reference to the fact that she has 6 children. It would not be nearly as noteworthy if it was a man with 6 children because the assumption is that as a mother she has a far greater hands on role in their care which makes her achievements all the more extraordinary.

A number of suggestions then;

Bring more reality into the debate. You cannot say your children are your **primary** focus and then work in a full time and demanding job or make 5 movies in a year! It is not possible.

Until we move past this Women's Weekly celebrity type depiction of women and babies and careers the issue will be distorted and it will remain difficult to address.

It must be financially viable and attractive for women to return to the workforce part time if they have the choice of staying at home with children. For couples, taxation reform may assist, and for all women recognition of childcare costs as a legitimate work related expense that can be claimed or deducted when doing your tax return should be explored.

Perhaps the hardest of all will be to convince younger women that more than lip service is being paid to the importance of having, and what invariably goes with it for many women, caring for children. Perhaps then the choice between career (rather than just a job) and children will not seem like an either or decision.

Good luck with your Inquiry and I will look forward to reading your recommendations.

Linda Savage Davis