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**Submission to
House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Family and Human Services
Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family**

**by the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists
and Managers, Australia (APESMA)**

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

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Efficiency / Skills Shortage

- For professionals working in long hours cultures, with little access to part-time work and without effective family friendly terms and conditions of employment, their working lives have a direct impact on their family formation, their workforce participation and the skills shortage that is already evident in many technology professions.
- The current long hours work culture is unsustainable in the professions and does not support working families or the ageing workforce. Government should assist industry to reduce working hours whilst protecting or enhancing productivity.
- An enhanced safety net of family friendly terms and conditions of employment is necessary to support working families and to enable parents to effectively participate in the workforce.
- Government and industry should work together to identify areas of skills shortages in the technology based professions where there are opportunities for programs to rapidly reintroduce professionals into the workforce, with government funding available to support such initiatives.
- As women's workforce participation and careers are specifically impacted by family responsibilities, government should initiate a program to enhance female retention in the technology professions in partnership with industry and other relevant organisations.

Part-time Work

- The right to return to work part-time after parental leave should be enshrined in legislation or industrial awards.

- A whole of community educational process about the many benefits of part-time work is required.
- Professions with low levels of part-time work need government intervention through targeted programs to encourage, assist and support the introduction of part-time work and to communicate “success stories”.

Workplace Regulation

- A realistic and effective role for industrial awards and enterprise agreements is necessary to maintain the current safety net to support working families and to pursue the additional initiatives that are necessary to make workplaces family friendly.
- Should the role and scope of industrial awards be diminished the, government has the responsibility to legislate to enshrine a basic raft of terms and conditions of employment that positively and directly contribute to the well-being of working families.
- A review of overseas legislation is required to ensure that Australia has an international benchmark for providing effective and innovative legislative support for Australian families to gain flexibility in the workplace.

Accessible, Flexible and Affordable Childcare

- Additional government funding is necessary to increase the number of childcare places.
- A national review of childcare provision is necessary to ensure that childcare meets the needs of working families.
- The requirements for employer provision of childcare, and that such childcare should be onsite, should both be removed to make the childcare exemption from FBT more accessible.
- Employees should have access to salary packaging arrangements to enable the packaging of all childcare costs.

- Government should recognise that for working parents, childcare is an expense incurred in gaining income. Deductibility would have a significant impact on working families and those considering whether to have children. House-keeper rebates would also need to be adjusted accordingly.

2. INTRODUCTION

The Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers, Australia (APESMA) is an organisation registered under the Workplace Relations Act representing over 25,000 professional engineers, scientists, veterinarians, surveyors, architects, pharmacists, information technology professionals, managers and transport professionals throughout Australia. We are the only industrial association representing exclusively the industrial and professional interests of these groups.

This membership includes approximately 3,200 professional women drawn from across these professions and participating in an active Professional Women's Network. The members of this network have contributed their comment on the terms of reference of this inquiry and these have been included throughout this submission. It is recognised that balancing work and family is not a gender issue, but that its impact disproportionately effects professional women.

We also represent approximately 20,000 university students, the future of the professional workforce in Australia who look to us to create workplaces to meet their career and personal aspirations.

We thank you for the opportunity to present specific observations, concerns and recommendations on balancing work and family for professionals and outline our submission below.

3. FINANCIAL, CAREER AND SOCIAL DISINCENTIVES TO STARTING FAMILIES

3.1 Background

In 2004 APESMA conducted a survey of its women members. 69% of respondents did not have children.¹ This result is similar to past APESMA survey findings and is

significantly higher than the ABS estimate that 1 in 4 women are likely to remain childless.ⁱⁱ

Professional women are greatly affected by disincentives to starting families. Aspirations to have children do not vary with educational status as shown by recent research by the Australia Institute of Family Studies. This research demonstrated that just over 80% of childless women aged 20-29 want to have children but that patterns of expectation and achievement show that professional women are less likely than professional men or lesser educated women to fulfil this desire.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is supported by Australian Bureau of Statistics findings that women with a bachelor degree or higher are most likely to be childless, due in part to deferment of pregnancy to concentrate on education and career.^{iv}

The very high proportion of childless female professionals found in the APESMA Surveys also reflects the reality that professional women with children are leaving the workforce or reducing their level of workforce participation due to family responsibilities and are therefore less likely to be Association members.

What is revealed then, is a complex picture of deferment of pregnancy, childlessness and women exiting from the professions.

Yet the APESMA Women in the Professions Survey Report 2004 also takes our understanding further, as the number of women with children varies by profession. In Community Pharmacy, where there is ready access to part-time work, flexible hours and the industry is highly regulated, female dominated and without extensive and competitive career paths, 59.3% of the survey respondents have children. In comparison only 31.3% of information technology respondents have children (and the respondents share the median age of 41 years with Pharmacists).

So, whilst the APESMA survey reinforces the message that in general professional women are not having children in line with their aspirations, it also identifies that in some professions women are better able to manage work and family responsibilities.

3.2 Career Disincentives

Professionals seek meaningful work roles in a supportive work environment that offers the flexibility and hours of work to enable them to enjoy their personal and family lives.

In whole of APESMA membership surveys all professionals rate work life balance as one of the most important issues facing professionals, with 51.4% of all respondents identifying work life balance as very important in 2004.^v

60% of female respondents to the 2004 APESMA Women in the Professions Survey thought the most important issue facing professional women was access to flexible work arrangements, followed closely by career development and training (57.6%). 45.8% expressed a preference to be working fewer hours. 36.8% perceived workplace culture as the major obstacle to their career.^{vi}

In focus groups and through member feedback, young professional women have expressed the concern that a meaningful work and family balance may not be available to them, that they are being made to choose between work and family and many are instead choosing to defer childbirth. Similarly those with children often express the difficulties that they are facing when struggling to balance their family responsibilities and career.

Voices from the Workplace-

"I feel that I too will have to make the choice between family and career... I've discussed my feelings with other female engineers who also share the same concerns. Basically most of my friends who are professionals are putting off having kids because the choice between kids and a career is just too hard to make."

3.2.1 Efficiency / Skills Shortage

Lack of access to part-time work and flexible working arrangements, and long hours of work are relics of past work arrangements based upon the model of sole breadwinner with a full-time home carer and are not suitable for today's society of working parents.

Genuine choices around work arrangements, regardless of gender, are needed to afford professionals flexibility to effectively achieve work and family balance and to meet the complex and shifting needs of modern workplaces.

In the 1970s and 1980s government gave resources and support to initiatives to encourage women to study technology and the sciences. In male dominated professions such as engineering this led to a gradual increase in the number of female students so that for the last decade their numbers approximated 15% of all engineering students. However, the percentage of women working in engineering has lagged and today is still only around 8%.^{vii}

In the technology professions, the exit of parents from the workforce exacerbates the current skills shortage with a high economic and social cost. The loss of career opportunities to these individuals also takes a high personal toll.

It is now time to introduce initiatives that make workplaces family friendly, so that we can effectively embrace the skills and capabilities of working parents. The government should support such initiatives through inclusion in the award system or legislation.

Government should initiate a program to enhance female retention in the technology professions in partnership with industry.

Voices from the Workplace -

"Even though there are over 100 female engineers in my company... there are only a couple of part-time female engineers with children. The female engineers that have children have either come back full-time and put their children in full-time care (except one who has a house husband) and the rest have not come back at all. So basically there are lots of young female engineers, but few senior female engineers."

"I have been working... [in local government] for over nine years. I have been working part-time for over eight of those years. I have had great flexibility in my working hours... My concern is that I will not be able to find this type of flexibility in another job and I have remained here for that reason. This has probably limited my career... but I am afraid to change."

3.2.2 Part-time work

Access to part-time work varies considerably with profession. 32.5% of women and 16.6% of men in Community Pharmacy worked part-time in comparison with Professional Engineering where part-time work is scarce, with 2.1% of women and 0.8% of men working part-time.^{viii}

Focus groups and member feedback in the professions where part-time work is uncommon have indicated fears that part-time work would not be accepted in the workplace, would not be available in a meaningful role and would have an adverse effect upon their career. Yet in those same professions there are cases where part-time work has been successfully implemented.

Lack of access to part-time work in such professions has not been caused by any industrial or legal limitation, but by culture, custom and practice. This is also reflected in the predominance of professional development opportunities being based upon full time workplace participation.

Additional access to meaningful part-time work would significantly enhance work and family balance for all professionals. To be successful, improved access to part-time work must go hand in hand with protection of and support for part-time workers in their access to satisfying work, with a family friendly spread of hours, with information, training and development and with ongoing career progression. For these reasons increased casual work would be counter productive.

Professions with low levels of part-time work need specifically targeted programs to encourage, assist and support the introduction of part-time work and to communicate "success stories".

A whole of community educational process about the many benefits of part-time work is also required.

Voices from the Workplace -

"My view is that this is virtually impossible [to gain part-time work] in engineering at the present time, unless you are lucky enough to be established and indispensable in a position with a flexible employer (few and far between!). The way I managed it was to start my own contracting business. I found that employers are quite accepting if you say "I have 2 days a week I can devote to your project", but if you wanted to work "part-time" for them for family reasons would generally not even consider it."

"The reason I am working part-time is ... to keep a foot in the door for.... when the kids are off to school and I would be looking to go back to work [full-time]. I do enjoy the work and industry in which I am currently employed."

"I work for the Commonwealth Govt, and although part-time and work-from-home arrangements are available, in my workplace there is a definite stigma about taking them up, male or female. Personally, I would like to look at working maybe 4 days a week, but... I hear a lot of complaints about the difficulty of working with people who aren't in the office 5 days a week."

3.2.3 Conditions of Work / Long hours

In whole of APESMA membership surveys 34.7% of all professionals rate long working hours as a very important issue.^{ix} 48% of respondents to the APESMA Women in the Professions Survey indicated a desire to work fewer hours and 17.8% of full-time respondents indicated that they were working more hours than last year.

For professionals, long working hours create personal and career conflict. Professionals express dedication to their roles and perceive that long hours of work are expected by their employers and are necessary to achieve career advancement. It is not surprising therefore that professionals seeking reduced hours, flexibility or part-time hours are concerned for their careers and may consider leaving their professions.

The current award based protection that enables professionals to refuse unreasonable overtime has been insufficient in relieving professionals of the pressure of long hours work cultures.

The government should investigate the impact of hours of work and culture on the sustainability of the professions, for all professionals, for professionals with families and the aging professional community. Models that enhance productivity whilst reducing long working hours and increasing flexibility must be developed to enhance the contribution that can be made by the professions to our national well being, including our economic competitiveness.

Voices from the Workplace -

"Even if you work full-time, any reduction in your attendance is seen as a diminished commitment, possibly impacting upon your career."

"As I found myself pregnant... my career came to a grinding halt. For fairly practical reasons (from the company's point of view) I was given work on short term projects and "fill-in" work... The reason given is

that this is the only way I can work a 40hr week. On the whole, I feel... that I'm suddenly seen as a liability to the company... I'd hoped that I'd be able to be a mother as well as an engineer without too much of a break in my career, but I think my illusions have been dented if not shattered."

4. Making it Easier for Parents to Return to the Paid Workforce

4.1 Efficiency / Skills Shortage

Limitations on the capacity of professionals to return to meaningful roles following a break due to family responsibilities are significant. Considerable anxiety is expressed by professionals about becoming out of date and unemployable, with a consequent loss of confidence. Structures that handle job seekers aim to fill vacancies with the best applicant and those who may need training and support on re-entry to the workforce are often overlooked. For professionals this regularly extends the length of time out of the workforce and leads to eventual re-entry into roles where the individuals skills knowledge and experience are underutilised.

There are a variety of programs now available that aim to support workforce re-entry and fewer that seek to upgrade skills of those that are under-employed. APESMA's experience is that the most successful programs are those that are based upon a government and industry partnership and where retraining, work experience, work ready skills and job placement are integrated to provide a holistic program to meet the needs to individuals and of industry. Such programs are attractive to those who have had family related career breaks and those whose careers have been disrupted for various reasons.

With skills shortages becoming apparent in the technology based professions there are opportunities for programs to rapidly reintroduce professionals into the areas of greatest shortage with significant returns for the individuals, industry and the economy. Government and industry must work together to identify areas of need where the opportunity for successful holistic program of workforce re-integration are greatest, with government funding available to support such initiatives.

Voices from the Workplace -

"I worked really hard before leaving... to go on maternity leave. Coming back into a different role and into a changed, but improved, organisation has been difficult. I had to adjust to their changes and feel a need to update myself."

“As a consequence of the rapid change of IT technologies there is a need to constantly keep updating knowledge and skills. A number of IT recruitment professionals have suggested to me that the greater the duration of my absence from the workforce, the greater the risk of skills redundancy and erosion of reemployment opportunities.”

4.2 Part-time Work

The right to return to work part-time following parental leave is slowly being defined by the courts but is complex and poorly understood. This right should be enshrined in legislation or industrial awards.

The importance of part-time work to workforce re-entry and to keep professionals with family responsibilities in the workforce cannot be overstated.

4.3 Conditions of Work / Workplace Regulation

APESMA supports the activities of the ACTU to provide family friendly conditions of work. Significant improvements are necessary to provide support to working families.

Members suggestions for improvements to terms and conditions of employment are many and varied, including items such as longer paid parental leave, longer annual leave, the ability to use annual leave as carer's leave, 2 years parental leave, job share and 48/52 (and other fractional arrangements) and many more...

At present APESMA has the capacity to bargain for improved conditions for our members (only a proportion of the professional community), and of our members only 40% have collective agreements in place. An enhanced safety net of family friendly terms and conditions of employment that has equal application across the community is necessary.

We recognise the excellent work done by the EOWA in promoting the initiatives of leading employers to promote equity, diversity and family friendly workplaces. This reflects substantial good will from employers. However many organisations are yet to make this journey. The EOWA annual returns required for employers with workforces over 100 do not require substantial workplace change.

We are gravely concerned about the impact of the deregulation of terms and conditions in the workplace upon families. At present many of the terms and conditions that support families in the workplace are found in awards and enterprise agreements. A reduction in the scope, role or content of awards and enterprise agreements could undermine the application of already accepted standards.

This approach underestimates the lack of bargaining power of the individual without ready access to regulatory information. For example only 48.8% of respondents to the APESMA Women in the Professions Survey were aware that their employer provided parental leave when this is a well known statutory entitlement. Our earlier comments also demonstrate the difficulties with workplace culture and in discouraging work and family balance and indeed even family formation. Professionals with family responsibilities are insufficiently supported and empowered and are vulnerable in a more deregulated work environment.

We seek ongoing support of the award and enterprise agreement safety net to support working families. Should this not occur we seek the passage of legislation to enshrine a basic raft of terms and conditions of employment that directly impact upon the wellbeing of working families.

We note with interest the provisions that have been introduced in the UK where employees have the right to request flexible work arrangements. A review of overseas legislation is required to ensure that Australia provides effective and innovative legislative support for Australian employees to gain flexibility in their workplaces.

Voices from the Workplace -

"I am ... about to have my second child and see the lack of flexibility in the engineering workforce as the single biggest barrier to women continuing on in engineering."

"I am 32 years old and would like to have children. I also like to work... My work offers 12 months unpaid maternity leave, including 6 weeks of paid maternity leave... I would rather have more time off work in the first couple of years of my child's life... Also, the likelihood of converting my job to a part-time or job share role is very remote... flexibility of work hours is a major issue. It is seriously making me consider giving up engineering and taking on some other profession that offers more flexibility in work hours."

4.4 Childcare

The capacity to access affordable childcare is an important determinant of whether professionals will have children and when they do so or whether they will return to the workforce. Member feedback demonstrates considerable anxiety about childcare shortages.

Some professionals are deferring returning to work due to a lack of childcare places. Others are accepting a place when it is available, whether or not they are ready to return to work, due to the fear of losing the place. Difficulties are also encountered due to limited times of opening of childcare facilities and the tight rules around the childcare absences allowable in order to retain government rebates.

Shortages and inflexibility in childcare undermine parents' capacity to plan, shape and manage the work and family balance and place ongoing limitations on work flexibility.

Additional government funding is necessary to increase the number of childcare places. A national review of childcare provision is necessary to ensure that childcare meets the needs of working families.

Voices from the Workplace -

"I went back to work after six months because of the beginning of the childcare year. I knew that if I didn't take up the place I would lose it."

"I kept my older child in childcare whilst at home with my newborn to make sure that I could have childcare places for them both when I returned to work. It is particularly hard to get places for children under 2, but with a sibling in childcare I felt that I'd have a good chance of getting my baby into the same centre."

"Talking to other women about the difficulties in arranging and managing childcare has made me think that I'm not ready for all that. Maybe I'll have children later."

5. THE IMPACT OF TAXATION AND OTHER MATTERS ON FAMILIES IN THE CHOICES THEY MAKE ON BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY

5.1 Childcare

Targeted support to assist working families with the cost of childcare can have a significant impact. However, Government encouragement of employer provided childcare, through an FBT exemption, has had limited take up. Only 2% of respondents to the APESMA Women the Professions Survey were aware of onsite childcare provision.

The requirement for employer provision of childcare and that this provision be onsite should both be removed to make the childcare exemption from FBT more accessible. Childcare is not the core business of most employers and many Australians are employed in small and medium sized businesses for whom the requirements to comply with the current rules governing FBT exemption are onerous and unrealistic.

Employees should have access to salary packaging arrangements to enable the packaging of all childcare costs. At present this is only available to some employees as the result of company policy or inclusion in Enterprise Bargaining Agreements. In the latter instance our comments about the potential impact of workplace deregulation apply.

Government should also recognise that for working parents, childcare is an expense incurred in gaining income. Deductibility would have a significant impact on working families and those considering whether to have children. House-keeper rebates would also need to be adjusted accordingly.

Voices from the Workplace -

"If you are a working mother and have a partner you will probably receive no Govt benefits (and that's OK) but will have to pay for Child Care. We finished with child care a few years ago, but when we did I was paying \$10,000 - \$11,000 per year for quality on site care (not including the small Govt rebate). The cost of high quality child care is the main reason that professional women (who stay in the workforce permanently) limit their children to 1 or 2, in my opinion."

"It is a shame that the option of salary sacrificing child care is limited only to companies that provide on-site care - an option that very few companies... have the capacity and ability to provide."

"Perhaps if the Commonwealth considered ... salary sacrificing child care ...but without the current limitations...this may be an effective carrot for women wishing to return to work but [are concerned that it is] ... not that financially viable if a large proportion of salary is used up on child care fees."

6. CONCLUSION

The current systems have led to improvements, but these improvements have fallen well short of meeting the needs of working families. Professionals working in long hours cultures, with little access to part-time work and without high levels of collective representation are particularly vulnerable.

An increased commitment to working families is needed from the Australian Government. Innovative leadership in the areas of childcare, part-time work, hours of work, conditions of work and re-skilling and workforce re-entry would make a substantial contribution to the future and wellbeing of all Australians.

Should this leadership not occur, in an environment of workplace deregulation the needs of Australian families in the workplace and in particular professionals with families in the workplace will be at greater risk.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Women in the Professions Survey Report 2004, Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia.

ⁱⁱ Women in the Professions Survey Report 2002 and Women in the Professions Survey Report 2000, Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers, Australia and Social Trends 2002: Family – Family Formation: Trends in Childlessness, Australian Bureau of Statistics.

ⁱⁱⁱ “It’s Not for Lack of Wanting Kids”: A Report on the Fertility Decision Making Project, Ruth Weston, Lixia Qu, Robyn Parker and Michael Alexander, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2004 and Social Trends 2002, ibid.

^{iv} Social Trends 2002, ibid.

^v Member Satisfaction Survey Report 2004, Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia.

^{vi} Women in the Professions Survey Report 2004, ibid.

^{vii} Higher Education Statistics Collections, Department of Education, Science and Training and Professional Engineers Remuneration Survey Report, Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers, Australia, December 2004.

^{viii} ibid.

^{ix} Member Satisfaction Survey Report 2004, ibid