

**WOMEN AND WORK CHOICES ROUNDTABLE
SYDNEY 23 MARCH 2007**

Closing Plenary Session

Summary

Four issues were identified as ways of bringing the roundtable together and thinking about further developments:

1. What are the practical concerns that seemed to be emerging?
2. What are the systemic problems?
3. What needs to change?
4. What do we need to monitor?

Small groups discussed all or part of these issues and reported back:

Group 1

- Lack of understanding of rights until issue actually arises – and then not known what can be done about grievances.
- Information about rights was therefore necessary; one central, high profile website might be a good idea.
- Stronger negotiation skills were needed for women – and perhaps for employers too – give the new regime.
- There was also some discussion of the need for new forms of collective representation and bargaining – including the idea of European style works councils.
- New professional and industry bodies, or enhanced roles for existing ones, might also be necessary in this context.
- *Overall*, this group wanted to think about ways in which the individualism under *Work Choices* might be addressed.

Group 2

- Most of the discussion in this group centred on the importance of further research.
- More research is needed into the impact of *Work Choices*, including more attention to the question of how women's work experiences and expectations affect what women do and how they fare.
- Analysis of regional differences: it was suggested that there might be significant differences between regional and metro labour markets.
- How did real estate markets especially rental costs shape decisions about working life?
- Should there be more thought about job satisfaction? It was felt that some research showed that this was more important than wage rates.
- Were skilled and professional women faring better and therefore less affected or concerned by the legislation?

Group 3

- Union access was identified as a vital issue: prior to *Work Choices*, unions had been more or less effective in policing awards and agreements but this was now much more difficult. A specific example was provided of women's overtime and penalty rates being arbitrarily removed, even without a new agreement being entered into.
- Therefore restoration of rights of access is important.
- State inspectorates and state laws do remain as possible avenues of redress.
- Inspectorates might also play an educative role as well as receiving and publicising complaints; outreach services therefore highly important.
- The context in which *Work Choices* has been introduced is very important – not least how the laws and processes interact with Welfare-to-Work changes.
- Turning to remedies: a new body to lobby for change, which might be called the *Making Time Coalition*; it would gather - but not be limited to - the organisations at the roundtable along with groups involved in the campaign against *Work Choices* thus far. It would in particular take up the recommendations in HREOC's *It's About Time*.
- There was considerable discussion about the Office of the Employment Advocate, it being suggested that there was much in its charter that it could and should be encouraged to fulfil: specifically, it should be pressured to collect and publish data. It should be making material available in languages other than English. There was a strong feeling that the OEA could deliver justice to women workers.
- It was noted that pay equity must be reinstated as a clear policy aim.

Group 4

- Identified the powerlessness of young women in particular as a problem.
- Further, as their work experience begins under *Work Choices*, they were the ones most likely to see current arrangements as the norm.
- More broadly, women it seemed were now likely to internalise work-life balance problems, rather than discussing them with the employer.
- Women's limited interaction with the workplace itself is of concern: many women workers such as cleaners do not have a common workplace area, with notice boards available with information about safety and health issues and the like.
- Complainants would tend to disappear after raising issues – even if they succeeded in winning some kind of redress.
- The cost of union membership for women working as casuals along with lack of access to unions was identified as a problem.
- Changes are plainly needed: to reduce the scope of managerial prerogative.
- Relationships between employees must also be addressed: some women's wins or benefits are being perceived as coming at a cost not to employers but to other employees.

Drawing together the report-backs:

The practical concerns that seemed to be emerging

There seems, among other things, to be much *confusion*. There is a lack of *knowledge* about the changes among many women themselves and lack of *information* more broadly about the implications of the *Work Choices* and the context in which women are working and making decisions.

The systemic problems

These largely turn on the nature of ‘*individualisation*’ under *Work Choices*, namely, the nature of and scope for gaining information, the nature of *representation and bargaining*, and *enforcement* of such agreements as are made. Women may well be *internalising* work/life issues, and their options increasingly constrained by a range of *contextual factors* in particular workplaces, locations and living arrangements.

What needs to change?

Much of this necessarily flows from what was said about the practical and systemic problems being faced. High priorities were accorded to: *further research and accessible provision of information* for women workers themselves and for the wider community. Agencies such as State inspectorates and, in particular, the Office of the Employment Advocate could play a much more active role.

Lobbying should continue through new, old and allied organisations.

Pay equity itself needs to be monitored and addressed, as it had begun to be the case pre-*Work Choices* in several State jurisdictions.

What do we need to monitor?

- More research needed in to the impact of *Work Choices*, including more attention to the question of how women’s work experience and expectations affect what women do and how they fare.
- Analysis of regional differences and impacts of other policies, rental and real estate markets and the like.
- Were skilled and professional women faring better and therefore less affected or concerned by the legislation?
- The nature of agreement-making and contracts; information flows about this and about outcomes for women including pay equity.