

**SPEAKING NOTES – MINISTER FOR WOMEN
THE HON VERITY FIRTH MP**

Women's Business – Current issues and future agendas
Women and Work Research Group Colloquium

**Closing Address
Friday 7 March 2008, 3.30pm
Sancta Sophia College
Sydney University**

- CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY -

Good afternoon everyone and it's lovely to see you all here at Sydney Uni on the eve of International Women's Day.

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land on which we stand, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

Thanks to our friends at the Women and Work Research Group for asking me to come along today. It is a great pleasure to be here with you this afternoon, if only for a short time, to bring the day to a close, and to bring a NSW Government perspective to the issues of women, work and life.

I would have loved to have been able to spend some more time with you and hear what I'm sure have been fascinating presentations, but as I'm sure you can imagine, the eve of IWD is a particularly frantic time for a Women's Minister. I am sure my Federal colleague Tanya Plibersek might have already mentioned this problem, and I know I speak for us both when I say we are looking forward to having a chance to read copies of today's presentations soon.

I'd like to reinforce... although I am sure you are all well aware of this...just how important it is that organisations such as the Women and Work Research Group exist. Your work provides those of us working in politics and policy with the evidence base that we need to ensure we can accurately respond to the diverse range of issues impacting on women's working lives today. Without rigorous research fleshing out the complexity of these policy issues, Governments, businesses and policy-makers would have a greatly diminished capacity for development of new policy responses that actually work.

One of the great challenges that exists for politicians is balancing the need for sound, evidence based policy development, with the qualitative feedback that comes from our electorate. It is often the case that small interest groups can assert a great deal of electoral pressure about issues, through savvy use of networking and the media.

I'm sure we can all think of situations where this might have occurred but one of the more obvious in recent times was the influence of fathers rights activists on

the policy agenda of the former federal Government in relation to its overhaul of the family law system. The influence of these groups was enormous in shaping a new policy agenda, completely contrary to the directions that research suggested it should be heading. And despite really legitimate fears about the safety and wellbeing of mothers and kids. This was something that I know State Governments and many women's organisations expressed their concerns about at the time and I hope now that we have a new federal Government, they'll be having a good hard look at what the outcomes have been for women and children.

Another example ...which is of course of interest to all us this afternoon ... is the former federal government's pursuit of its *Workchoices* agenda at the behest of a number of business lobby groups, in the face of overwhelming evidence that it was likely to be damaging to vulnerable groups in the workforce and was also electorally very unpopular.

While clearly these kind of policy outcomes can have consequences on polling day...as the former Howard government well learned... in situations where the general population is less broadly concerned about an issue or less people are affected, it continues to be a challenge to balance the individual narrative presented by lobby groups and an impartial evidence based response.

This is not to say that the individual narrative and experience is not important. I know that many of you have been involved in both qualitative and quantitative research and there is no doubt that the qualitative can give a real human perspective to policy outcomes.

As part of International Women's Day celebrations I have had the tremendous pleasure of being involved in many events that speak to women's individual experiences and life journeys. Just this morning I was at the annual UNIFEM breakfast and heard from 2 inspiring women – one Palestinian and one Israeli – from the International Women's Commission about the importance of women's stories in the peace building process in the Middle East.

I also last night had the pleasure of presenting with Premier Lemura, the award for NSW Woman of the Year at a function at Parliament. The women nominated for this award were making amazing contributions to their workplaces and communities. Awards like this that give women's stories a place in the public sphere and recognise women's unique achievements, also provide opportunities for women, especially younger women, to see just how far women have come in a generation or two.

But recognising how far women have come is not enough on its own. We also have to recognise the challenges still to be met if we are to ensure all women have equal opportunities to reach their potential for full participation as human beings.

From looking at your program I know that the speakers here today have addressed some of the key issues facing contemporary women in their working lives. And in these areas there is clearly still more work to be done.

Addressing women's status in the labour market;...the ongoing persistence of pay inequity;... lack of access to paid maternity leave and family friendly working conditions;... the situation facing older women workers;... and the impact of

policies that aim to increase women's workforce participation... are still key issues for policy makers to grapple with.

The issues you have addressed today **are** of concern for the NSW Government ... as they should be for **all** Governments in Australia. Not least because, in a time where NSW and Australian businesses are experiencing a shortage of skilled labour, the lack of access of women to work arrangements that support their labour force participation threatens to drain skills from our workplaces, and is detrimental to our economic growth and productivity.

At the Women of the Year awards last night our guest speaker Ann Sherry spoke eloquently about the impact that women are having on the world economy. She reminded us that we can't forget about China, India and the internet... women are the global face of economic growth.

I would also like to reflect that it is very appropriate we think about the issues of women and work in celebrating this International Women's Day. As I'm sure you know, this year marks 100 years since the first major demonstration of women activists fighting for fair employment conditions. In 1908 women garment makers took to the streets of New York to demonstrate against their appalling working conditions. They earned half of men's wages, died prematurely from poor health and didn't even have the right to vote. 15,000 women marched, demanding shorter hours, better pay and voting rights.

Since that time, this day has been seen as a time for asserting women's political and social rights, for reviewing the progress that women have made, and as a day for celebration.

So – while women have made considerable progress – it is important to consider the significant challenges that remain.

The impact of the recent industrial relations policy context has of course made life **harder** for women, especially women in low paid and precarious employment. *Workchoices* and *Welfare to Work* – implemented by the previous Federal government – combined to create a policy agenda that has measurably unfairly affected vulnerable women and their families – and are yet to be fully repealed.

In NSW we have been very concerned about these policies, especially the effect on single mothers who are already struggling. The NSW Office for Women has recently supported two pieces of work investigating the **impact of *Welfare to Work* on women in NSW** which we hope can influence the National debate in this area. One of these was a project undertaken by the Premier's Council for Women, and the other a report produced by Eva Cox on the effects of the changes for female sole parent recipients of income support under the *Welfare to Work* scheme. These reports will be released and made available on the OFW website shortly. These reports again, offer a great combination of rigorous research and women's first hand stories about real life policy outcomes.

Both reports show that, while women are happy to work, study or volunteer, *Welfare to Work* has undermined the social wellbeing of many families **without** achieving expected improvements in economic wellbeing. Precarious employment in low skilled occupations, with limited flexibility, has resulted in

many women feeling stressed that their workforce participation is impacting on their ability to meet their family responsibilities.

It was particularly disturbing that many women felt their role as a mother was devalued, and that *Welfare to Work* was not flexible enough to support their caring responsibilities. Indeed the report by Eva Cox [*Welfare to Work: At What Cost to Parenting?*] suggests there is evidence that the requirements of *Welfare to Work* may actually be **counterproductive** to good parenting.

As Governments, we have to be careful not to undermine the value and importance of women's caring roles in their families and our communities, in thinking about how we encourage women to gain the benefits of the income and skills derived through work. We have to really make sure that the policy frameworks we establish to encourage women into the workforce don't, at the same time, drain our social fabric.

These reports tell us that we need to be doing more to support vulnerable women and families in our society. While the major responsibility for reform lies with the Federal Government, there is opportunity for State activity to improve the outcomes for women as well. I am pleased to be able to say I have submitted these reports to the Premier – to bring the NSW experience with welfare reform to his attention – and also to assist in COAG negotiations about the dimensions of the new work and welfare systems.

A further key policy challenge includes thinking about how we can better support women – and families – to **balance work and family responsibilities**. Evidence that 75% of AWAs signed since *Workchoices* commenced have not included family friendly provisions such as flexible work hours or job sharing arrangements...let alone paid maternity leave... reinforce just how far women still have to go in ensuring their needs are accommodated in our societies' system of work.¹

Of course, like I'm sure do many of you here today, I am delighted that the Rudd Labor Government has announced a **Productivity Commission inquiry into the pressing issue of paid maternity, paternity and parental leave**. This is an issue of value for all Australians, and an area where Federal leadership has long been lacking.

Most women in NSW, and across Australia, will spend significant periods of their lives juggling both paid work and family responsibilities. We know that two thirds of women in Australia have no access to paid maternity leave; and that recent research.... by some of you here... shows that lack of access to paid maternity leave² is one of the main reasons women cite for leaving their job around the birth of their child; and that it is not unusual for a woman to resign from work at the time of childbirth so that she may access other paid entitlements.³

It is timely that the issue of paid maternity leave is back on the public agenda. I am also very pleased to see the wider issues of paternity and parental leave examined in the context of the needs of working families in our community.

¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 April 2007, 'AWAs not so family-friendly, data show', by Mark Davis.

² Whitehouse, G., M. Baird, C. Diamond and A. Hosking (2006) *The Parental Leave in Australia Survey: November 2006 Report* <http://www.uq.edu.au/polsis/parental-leave/level1-report.pdf>

³ President of HREOC John von Doussa quoted in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 May 2007, 'Punished for having children' by Farah Farouque,

While I strongly believe the question of a national paid maternity leave scheme needs to be addressed first and foremost, I also support the expansion of options for women, men, and families in our community, to be able to make decisions about how parental care is shared and provided for their children.

I delighted to be currently working with my colleague, the Minister for Industrial Relations, to provide input from NSW into the Productivity Commission's inquiry. The NSW Government has been a leader in the area of paid maternity leave and flexible working conditions in its public service. While this is an area we firmly believe requires federal leadership – and funding – you can be assured that NSW will take a prominent role in pushing for national reform for the benefit of all women and working families in NSW.

Of course, a policy agenda for women and work should not only be about balancing work and family – but **also about supporting women's workforce participation across their lifecycle.**

A key concern here is the link between work, and women's access to adequate retirement incomes and financial security in older age. Our workforce policies and systems need to be constructed in such a way as to assist women of all ages to retain their attachment to the workforce, not least because that will assist them to attain adequate retirement incomes as a buffer against poverty in later life.

As a result of gaps in workforce participation throughout their lives (principally to meet care obligations) older women have significantly lower (around 50% less) superannuation than men. Women are 2.5 times more likely than men to live in poverty in their old age. Given that women currently aged 40+ are likely to have had little benefit from employer contributions over their working life to date, the problem of women retiring into poverty will be particularly severe over the coming 10-15 years.

Women are unable to solve this inequity merely by taking more responsibility for their own future – the issue also requires systemic change facilitated by governments. For this generation we need to ensure an appropriate policy mix is in place to underpin women's quality of life. Flexible work arrangements that support women to remain in the workplace, such as part-time work and access to carer's leave, need to be encouraged.

And it is important that we do not allow this glaring inequity in the incomes of older people to be repeated for future generations of women. We need to be thinking now about how we can support women to actively plan for their future early in their adult life. This is an issue that needs attention from all levels of government, but is of key significance in our discussions with the Commonwealth regarding the framework of national systems for industrial relations, work and family, welfare, and aging.

To sum up, we need to be rethinking work practices and policies to increase the participation of under-represented groups in the workforce, and these include women. This does not only mean thinking about ways to tap into women's skills; it is also about identifying how women themselves can best be assisted to experience the benefits of workforce attachment across their life cycle. We need to be asking ourselves: what should we be doing now, to support women's movements in and out of the workforce?

Clearly there are significant issues to be addressed if we are to truly give all women the work and family opportunities that will allow them to reach their full potential and to have satisfying and rewarding lives.

I would like to congratulate the Work and Family Research Group on your tireless work in continuing to provide sound and evidence based research to stimulate and contribute to policy development in the incredibly important area of women and work.

I would also like to congratulate the Group for organising this colloquium today. As I said earlier, I really look forward to taking the time to read your presentations from today in detail – I am sure they will provide extremely valuable contributions to the discussions that will take place between the major stakeholder groups over the coming year, as a new industrial relations system is negotiated in Australia.

Thanks again for inviting me today, and I wish you a happy International Women's Day tomorrow!

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