



TIME FOR WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT SECURITY TO BECOME A GENDER EQUALITY INDICATOR

Presentation to

ACTU National Community Summit - Creating Secure Jobs & a Better Society

Weds 13 - Thurs 14 March 2013

Old Parliament House, Canberra.

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While the gender pay gap at around 17 per cent frequently makes the headlines, to date there has been little public, media or government interest in employment insecurity as an equally important facet of women's inferior labour market –and economic - position. Tackling employment insecurity however is crucial not only in achieving workforce gender equality but in reducing levels of poverty and social exclusion.

Employment insecurity prevails in feminized occupations and industries including retail trade, health care and social assistance, and education and training. Twenty-three per cent of the female workforce (1.1 million women) compared to 16 per cent of the male workforce, work in casual jobs which are also mostly part-time. This means that many women in part-time, casual jobs are also underemployed. Currently 9.5 per cent (525,000) of the female workforce compared to 5.4 per cent of the male workforce, has insufficient hours of work which translates to insufficient income. Employment insecurity not only means living on a low and unpredictable income, it consolidates social disadvantage by reducing the capacity to acquire key protective assets including housing and superannuation.

Women's superannuation holdings according to the Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia (ASFA) are significantly lower than those of men with average balances in 2009-2010 at \$71,645 for men and \$40,475 for women and payouts at retirement, \$198,000 for men and \$112,600 for women (ASFA, 2011). These significant gaps will be perpetuated in years to come without concerted efforts to improve women's access to jobs which enable them to acquire sufficient and secure employment. The full-time unemployment rate is currently 6.2 per cent (206,000) for females compared to 5.1 per cent for males. Altogether 15 per cent (843,000) of the female labour force has no employment or not enough

employment. A further 600,000 women are marginally attached to the labour force, and want to work although they are currently not looking for work.

Employment insecurity is contrary to the demands of unpaid caring work. Women as carers need flexibility which is why many want part time work. However, an insecure job, and over 50 per cent of part time jobs are also casual, is likely to impose a rigid and unsupportive work regimen where there is continuous fear of job loss, unpredictable hours of work, and no leave provisions. Women in insecure work are less likely to benefit from provisions in the Fair Work Act for the 'right to request' flexible work arrangements.

At the present time, women's employment insecurity facilitates the achievement of public policy goals in unemployment and public spending. A recent OECD report, *Activating Jobseekers: How Australia Does It* (2012), shows that much of the success of Australia's employment service system, in increased labour force participation and reduced welfare dependency, is produced by rigorous welfare- to -work requirements in tandem with low benefit levels. Such policies support the proliferation of low end, casualised jobs which are the only options for many women including those who have been out of the workforce due to caring, those who have little workforce experience or have lost jobs, or who are older. At the same time, there is little assistance for these women to obtain the skills and credentials for better quality, secure employment. Assumptions that a job, any job, is the best path out of poverty, a stepping stone to a better job, and the basis for social inclusion need to be revised.

Women's participation in the workforce has greatly increased since the 1970s. However women's participation has also coincided with the growth of insecure employment in 'feminised' and casualised service sector employment where there is relatively poor union representation and opportunities for collective bargaining. Many industry sectors, both private and public, for-profit and non-profit, benefit from the exclusion of casual workers from most of the National Employment Standards under the Fair Work Act.

It is one thing to create the conditions for a dynamic and flexible economy but it is self-defeating for the long term, if this is achieved at the expense of some groups, where social and gender inequalities, as well as significant social disadvantages, are entrenched by differentials in access to decent, secure employment. More creative and fairer means of achieving global competitiveness and flexibility are needed. Some of these were explored by the ACTU Independent Inquiry into Insecure work in its report.

Employment security needs to become a core Gender Equality Indicator and subject to the sort of recurrent inspection and accountability as the gender pay gap. Indicators make explicit where there are deficits in outcomes for socially agreed objectives and serve as a basis for advocacy and improved policy. Employment security as a Gender Equality Indicator could also lend its weight in achieving the recommendations of the Independent Inquiry, and more broadly a range of public policies across employment and social welfare, which would benefit everyone.