

## Ged Kearney 2012 International Women's Day Address

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On IWD we acknowledge our achievements- and I think we have much to celebrate- just over the past few years we have won Paid Parental Leave, the landmark SACs equal pay case, reform of Equal Opportunity legislation and FWA such as protection from discrimination on grounds of family and caring responsibilities and the right to request flexible work arrangements for carers.

But better pay, paid parental leave and equal opportunity laws cannot alone reverse the deep-rooted inequity that women continue to face at work.

It is true that without these essential rights and protections, Australian women would be well and truly left behind, but unfortunately these things are not alone the answer to eliminating inequality.

The gap continues to exist for many reasons – a lack of value of what is seen as feminine work, the fact men are more likely to ask for a pay rise and the reality that women often work less hours than men once they have children, to name just a few.

The moment a woman leaves school or university and enters the workforce, she is running from behind her male counterparts.

The gender pay gap, which will undoubtedly be in the news today because it is International Women's Day, for most of the year is a silent statistic – but the 17.6% difference between a man and woman's income is a very real beast preying on women's lives.

But a hidden driver of the gender pay gap is the lack of options for women to balance their work and family commitments- forcing them into low paid, low skilled and often insecure work. And the thousands of employers who perpetuate the problem by hiring under insecure terms know it – and they don't want anything done about it.

Ask an employer and they will tell you women love this type of work because it means they can work casual hours and balance the job with family responsibilities.

Ask a woman and she will tell you sure she needs to be able to balance these things, but she would also love to have sick pay, annual leave and some kind of job security, even if that just means knowing more than a week ahead how many hours she will work and when.

ABS statistics tell us that almost one third of all women workers are engaged as casuals and a significant proportion of these work irregular and unpredictable hours.

The ACTU's own 2011 Working Australia Census of 42,000 people found that the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest issue for both women and men (after wages) was balancing work and family.

The Census found that almost a quarter of women in insecure work had variable hours from week to week, while another 12% worked on call, 10% worked rotating shifts and 40% regularly worked weekends.

The irregular hours lead to irregular incomes and more than half of the women who responded to our Census worked more than one job just to make ends meet.

Working weekends, juggling multiple rosters not to mention the family schedule, and struggling to make ends meet - the life of the casually employed mother is starting to look a fair bit different from the picture of a simplified, comfortable and stress-free life employers paint.

We know all of this because at the ACTU we go out and talk to workers. We ask them what makes them happy, what makes them stressed and we go back to the office and we analyse what they tell us against what the statistics tell us.

The sum of the parts is that lack of family friendly work arrangements, forcing many women into insecure work and the lack of rights that goes along with it, is a real driver of inequality is.

Take what the participants at a recent ACTU women's forum about insecure work told us.

There were the hairdressers hired by an employer as self-employed business owners on low pay, bearing the costs of insurance an Workcover and without basic entitlements like superannuation, paid leave and redundancy.

We heard from parcel delivery workers employed under sham contracting arrangements, earning \$1 per delivery, before costs and also without superannuation, paid leave and redundancy.

Teachers, lecturers and school support staff told us they were hired on sessional, rolling and casual contracts without job security or basic entitlements such as paid leave.

Some women were employed by labour hire companies to perform outsourced call centre, clerical and administrative work for banks, telecommunications companies and airlines on lesser terms and conditions than full-time workers are afforded.

There were social and community services workers on perpetual rolling and short term contracts because of the prevalence of short term funding cycles in the sector.

And we heard from women working two, sometimes three, casual jobs in retail and hospitality just to make sure they earned enough to pay the bills each week.

If employers actually asked any of these women what they thought about insecure work it is a fair bet they might get a different view to the one they sprout in the media.

Working women need to balance their family's needs with their need to work. But the reality is too many women feel the only way they can do this is through casual and contract work devoid of their basic entitlements.

It is also the case that female dominated industries such as retail, hospitality and the social and community services sectors are among the highest employers of casual, part-time and contract workers.

And women are also more likely to work in caring services work which is subject to short-term funding cycles.

Our own research shows it is a fact that women have less bargaining power and are less likely to have negotiated a workplace agreement than their male counterparts.

Women returning from parental leave in particular are often unable to return to their job on a part-time basis- and are forced to choose between leaving their baby in full-time care or to accept a lower status, lower paid, and often casual or contract job instead. Cases of discrimination against mothers, often hidden by making their jobs 'redundant' whilst they are on parental leave are an almost daily occurrence. So the right to equal opportunity in education and to a career falters once a woman takes on family or caring responsibilities.

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I hate to sound like a doomsayer. After all International Women's Day is a celebration of how far we have come over the past century. There have been great strides made outside of work as well. I doubt that a century ago, anyone would have predicted that not only would Australia's union movement be headed by a woman, but the government as well.

And it is important to note we have come far in recent years. This year's massive win by unions for equal pay in the community and social services sector for a start will help address the problem, just like paid parental leave last year was a major step forward.

And the recent moves by the Government to introduce the new Workplace Gender Equality Act will mean minimum standards and performance benchmarks will be developed in consultation with industry, unions and experts.

The reality is employers have had three decades to get their act together but have failed to do it and these reforms will help pull them into line.

All these things are essential building blocks towards equality and, what's more, they are all recent advancements. So they give me hope that we are on the road to change.

A recent comparison of ABS data collected 50 years ago highlights the strides women have made into the Australian labour force. The number of women returning to work after having children has increased dramatically from 34% in 1961 to 59% in 2011.

Women now make up more than half of all tertiary graduates, half the paid labour force and total union membership in Australia and 55% of families have both parents in paid employment.

But I keep seeing that number. 17.6%. It should not exist.

It is not just a co-incidence the gender pay gap is not closing despite our recent advancements for women's rights at work, while at the same time Australia is almost unique in that the solution to meeting the needs of working parents is almost exclusively limited to part-time and casual work. Insecure work, with inferior conditions and wages. Those dirty little words keep reappearing.

Australia also offers a very narrow range of alternative options for mothers who want to stay in the same job they had prior to needing to balance work and family commitments.

Studies show there is no evidence workers with caring responsibilities actually choose casual work. Rather discrimination, lack of access to flexible working arrangements combined with inadequate social supports often forces them out of permanent, full-time work and into insecure work, often on lower status, wages and conditions.

The introduction of paid parental leave means a woman can now afford to take time out of the workforce and return to their existing job. So sure, this is to be welcomed. But there is still no genuine obligation on a boss to allow the woman to return under flexible or part-time hours. The Fair Work Act provides a limited right for employees with caring responsibilities to request flexible work arrangements, but there is no obligation on employers to demonstrate that they have seriously considered a request nor is there a right to appeal an employer's unreasonable request. Needless to say, many women complain that this is not a genuine right. Many report simply being told by a manager that 'it won't happen', and without any obligation on the employer to even investigate options for the employee to balance work and family, it doesn't happen.

It's important to acknowledge that many fathers and partners also report an attitude that balancing work and family is their problem and they shouldn't expect their employer to at least be open to options which would enable them to help share the caring roles in their families.

This effectively forces many women to have to choose between returning full-time or leaving their jobs and seek flexibility coupled with insecurity.

Even for those mums who are able to access flexible work and leave arrangements, many still face discrimination at work and are pushed out of quality jobs into less secure, lower status work. The statistics, but more importantly the women, speak for themselves.

Employers will shout me down – I am used to that – but the truth is insecure work is a key driver of the gender pay gap.

It pays low wages, forgoes benefits such as paid leave, doesn't provide for long-term accrual of entitlements, stunts career progression, places employees in vulnerable negotiating positions and is often subject to discriminatory practises.

Any wonder employers don't want anything to change.