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Pregnancy discrimination highlights need for changes to workplace laws

The Human Rights Commission's report into pregnancy and return to work highlights the need for the Government to strengthen workplace laws to stop discrimination against women at work.

"The ACTU and unions requested this review because growing numbers of our members tell us they are being discriminated against at work during pregnancy, when they return to work from parental leave, or when they need to care for a family member," said ACTU President Ged Kearney.

"The shocking figures in this review reveal the magnitude of the problem," Ms Kearney said.

"The fact that one third of mothers and one quarter of partners either resigned from their job or looked for other work highlights the unacceptable cost of this discrimination on women, their families and the economy."

The structure of the workforce is changing and employers and workplace laws needs to keep up, Ms Kearney said.

"The ACTU has been advocating for some time now that the structure of work, and the way we organise work, must change to accommodate the greater participation of women in the labour force and the sharing of caring responsibilities in modern working families.

"As the Human Rights Commission review shows, the pressures of balancing work and family is unfairly borne by employees - mostly women. Not only is this unfair, it is unsustainable."

Unions support all of the recommendations put forward by the report and strongly commend them to the Government and employers for immediate action, said Ms Kearney.

"In particular, unions are calling on the Government to improve the right to request flexible work arrangements in the Fair Work Act.

"There is currently no obligation on an employer to accommodate an employee's request for flexible work arrangements.

"Furthermore, there are only two provisions in the entire act that specifically say an employee is unable to appeal a decision - that is in regard to flexible work arrangements and extending parental leave from one year to two.

"This quite clearly discriminates against working parents - in particular mothers - and must be addressed if the Government is serious about ending the shocking discrimination the Human Rights Commission review has laid bare."

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