

UnitingCare Burnside Submission:

to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

'Striking the Balance: Women, Men, Work and Family' Discussion Paper 2005

October 2005

because
children
matter

 **UnitingCare**
Burnside

October 6, 2005

Paid Work and Family Responsibilities Submission
Sex Discrimination Unit
Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
GPO Box 5218
Sydney NSW 2001

Re: Striking the Balance: Women, Men, Work and Family – Discussion Paper

Dear Sir/Madam

UnitingCare Burnside would like to thank the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) for the opportunity to respond to the Discussion Paper entitled: *Striking the Balance: Women, Men, Work and Family*.

UnitingCare Burnside is the child and family agency of the Uniting Church in Australia (NSW Synod). Our purpose is to provide innovative and quality programs to break the cycle of disadvantage that affects children, young people and families. Each year we provide services to over 5000 children and their families. A high proportion of these families are from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Burnside supports the goals proposed in the Discussion Paper. However based on our experience working with men and women from disadvantaged backgrounds, it is apparent that these individuals have extremely limited choices in balancing their work and family life.

We recommend that in their final report HREOC recognises and reflects the significant challenges faced by men and women from disadvantaged backgrounds in balancing their work and family life. We also recommend that the final report include clear recommendations for future action and the processes for progressing these.

Once again thank you for the opportunity to contribute our views to the Discussion Paper. We would be pleased to provide more information should you require it.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads "Jane Woodruff".

Jane Woodruff
Chief Executive Officer

**Striking the Balance: Women, Men, Work and Family
Discussion Paper**

Submission from UnitingCare Burnside

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This submission was prepared by Rani Kumar, Policy Officer, Social Policy and Advocacy Program, with input from Jo Alley, Policy Officer, Social Policy and Advocacy Program – UnitingCare Burnside

Introduction

UnitingCare Burnside (Burnside) is an agency of the Uniting Church in Australia and a leading child and family welfare agency in New South Wales. Our purpose is to provide innovative quality programs and advocacy to break the cycle of disadvantage that affects children, young people and families. We provide a range of direct services to families in Western Sydney, South West Sydney, the Central and Mid North and South Coasts and Orana Far West.

Burnside provides services to the most disadvantaged children and families in our community. In 2004 Burnside provided services to over 5000 individuals and families in New South Wales. Of these 63.7% were dependent on some form of income support payment¹.

Burnside is responding to the *Striking the Balance* Discussion Paper in light of our experience in providing services and support to disadvantaged children, young people and families as well as international and Australian research.

Burnside supports the four goals proposed in the *Striking the Balance* Discussion Paper. We agree there is a need for

1. A more equal distribution of unpaid work between men and women
2. A re-valuing of unpaid work as central to the economic and social aims of the nation
3. Governments to provide adequate support for families to make real choices
4. Workplaces that are culturally and structurally flexible

As outlined in the *Striking the Balance* Discussion Paper it is important to promote discussion about gender roles in managing the balance between the work and family life of Australian families. This is especially relevant in the current economic and social climate with an ageing population, increased female participation in the workforce, growing recognition of the critical role of fathers in child rearing and the evolving workplace environment.

However Burnside's experience in working with men and women from low socio-economic backgrounds highlights that particular groups of people have extremely limited choices in balancing their work and family responsibilities. These individuals face significant structural barriers to gaining paid employment. Often they are unemployed or underemployed as casual or part time workers. Research shows that 21 per cent of Australians live on less than \$400 a week, and around one in five children live in households where there are no adults in paid employment².

The types of structural barriers faced by unemployed and underemployed individuals include the lack of secure work available in lesser skilled industries, the lack of access to quality childcare and reliable transport as well as limited education and training. There is very limited opportunity for these men and women to choose how they balance their work and family life. The lack of choice and support for these individuals can lead to a range of negative outcomes for the children in their care.

A constructive analysis of gender roles in balancing work and family responsibilities needs to consider the circumstances of men and women from all socio-economic backgrounds.

¹ Pannell, J. 2005, UnitingCare Burnside Submission to the Standing Committee on Family and Human Services "Balancing Work and Family", UnitingCare Burnside, North Parramatta.

² Leppert, Sue. 2005, "State of the Family 2005", Anglicare Australia, Canberra.

This submission will seek to discuss a number of the proposed goals for achieving greater gender equality in balancing work and family responsibilities from the perspective of men and women from low income disadvantaged backgrounds.

A more equal distribution of unpaid work between men and women

Traditionally men have not been seen as the primary caregiver for children. In order for men to become more actively involved in unpaid work and child rearing in particular they require support and training. In the past decade Burnside has responded to the increasing recognition of the important contribution fathers can make to their children's lives by establishing support programs for fathers from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Currently Burnside operates four fathers' support services in Western Sydney, South Western Sydney and the Mid-North Coast. All these services are funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. These programs are for fathers in intact families as well as those who have separated or are at risk of separation. They provide counselling, education and skills training to encourage positive fathering and to reduce the negative effects of relationship breakdown on children. All the programs aim to assist fathers to develop strong family relationships by encouraging them to focus on their child's needs.

The expansion and promotion of such programs is necessary in order to achieve any sustainable progress in the pursuit of a more equal distribution of unpaid work and parenting between men and women especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Re-valuing of unpaid work as central to the economic and social aims of the nation

Revaluing unpaid work as central to the economic and social aims of the nation is a necessary step in achieving greater gender equality in balancing work and family responsibilities. The care of children is a crucial role to be performed in society. It is widely recognised how essential positive parenting is in raising healthy and happy children³.

Government policies need to take into account and value all unpaid work especially child rearing. Changes such as those in the proposed Welfare to Work legislation can be seen to place less value on the importance of parenting than on participation in the workforce.

Governments that provide adequate support for families to make real choices

In order for men and women from disadvantaged backgrounds to be able to make real choices in regards to balancing their work and family life they will need Governments to provide adequate income support, better education and training initiatives, accessible and affordable childcare and improved infrastructure such as transport.

Income support

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2002-03, 16.2 per cent of all children aged under 15 years were living in families where no resident parent was employed⁴. These families are at risk of poverty and require adequate income support from the Government to be able to provide the basics like rent, food, clothing and schooling.

³ UnitingCare Burnside, 2005, *Information Sheet 8: Parent Support & Education Programs*, (retrieved on 22 September 2005 from www.burnside.org.au)

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics. Last updated 12 July 2005. *Living Arrangements, Family and Community: National Summary*, Australian Social Trends, Australia Now, (retrieved on 20 September 2005 from www.abs.gov.au).

Living with high financial stress can have detrimental impacts on parenting with poverty being associated with less parental warmth, less supervision and monitoring of children and an increase in the use of harsh and erratic discipline⁵.

Research shows that sole parent families experience higher financial stress than other families. They are over five times as likely as households overall to have sought assistance from welfare agencies, four times as likely to have been unable to heat their home at some point in the previous year, and three times as likely to buy second hand goods, be unable to afford to have friends over for a meal, to have pawned or sold an item, gone without meals or sought financial assistance from a friend or family⁶. These stresses naturally limit the parents' choices in balancing their work and family responsibilities. The restriction in this context falls more heavily on women as they head 83.3 per cent of sole parent families⁷.

*When working full-time I was much better off.... I could afford to pay my bills. Now we're struggling... my kids don't go on school excursions because I can't afford it. It's not fair on them... they're missing out..... there's no additional financial help for people on a pension and who need extra services... everything has to come out of "food money"..... even doctors because there's no bulk billing..... and his medication costs me \$60 a box because it's not on the PDF... I would love to go back to work but I can't. The kids must come first.... I'm about \$400 a fortnight worse off now that I'm not working. That's an astounding amount of money!
(Mother of 11 year-old son with special needs)*

Education and Training

From our experience many of the men and women who use Burnside's services and who are not in employment would like to become financially independent. However many of these individuals have limited educational qualifications and skills which severely limits the range of work available to them as well as their competitiveness in the workforce. Many of them are responsible for the care of a child. Over 60 per cent of jobless payment recipients have no more than Year 10 education⁸.

Often the men and women in these situations have also been out of the workforce for extended periods resulting in a lack of up to date skills. Usually this means they receive limited offers of employment which can force them to work in locations or jobs that are not suited to their personal circumstances and family responsibilities. Essentially this would further restrict their ability to make choices in managing the balance between their work and family life.

Childcare

The lack of quality childcare that is accessible, affordable and flexible is a serious barrier to economic participation for men and women from disadvantaged backgrounds. The experience of many of Burnside's service users is that there are far too few conveniently situated child care places to make further education or work a reality for them. In order for sole parents or any other working parents to take up opportunities for training or even have

⁵ UnitingCare Burnside, 2005, *Information Sheet 2: Impacts of Child Poverty*, (retrieved on 22 September 2005 from www.burnside.org.au)

⁶ Bray, Rob J. 2003, *Hardship and Australian Families*, Paper presented at 8th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, 12-14 February 2003.

⁷ Australian Bureau of Statistics, Last updated 12 July 2005, Family and Community, Being unemployed, a lone parent or a recently arrived migrant, Australian Social Trends 2004, Australia Now, (retrieved on 4 October 2005 from www.abs.gov.au).

⁸ Australian Council of Social Services. 2005. *Investment not cuts needed for single parents*. ACOSS News, 14 September 2005, (retrieved 20 September 2005 from <http://www.acoss.org.au>)

the time to prepare job applications, childcare is a necessity. However optimum childcare placements are not always available, and even with assistance from government programs, are not affordable for families living in or on the edge of poverty.

Although the provision of the Child Care Benefit has somewhat reduced the fees for those parents who are fortunate enough to enrol their child into a registered Long Day or Family Day Care Centre, this is of no consequence if they are not able to secure a place in the first instance.

Access to childcare is related not only to financial resources but also to the availability of reasonable childcare in a location convenient for the family.

I'd love to work but the childcare is too much – and it's hard to get child care anyway. I don't have my family nearby and anyway they don't do much to help... it's too hard.... friends are good but they're busy with their own problems so it can be very hard at times. Thank goodness for Burnside. At least I can meet other mums this way They even fetch us ... I don't have a car and it's hard to get places with public transport and two little children.

(Member of Burnside's supported playgroup)

Transport

In order to have a choice in how they balance their work and family life individuals need access to affordable and convenient transport. This is especially relevant for men and women from disadvantaged backgrounds with child caring responsibilities who are trying to secure and maintain employment. These individuals need reliable transport to access both child care services and their place of employment within specific times each day. Public transport is often poorer in areas with high concentration of low income families. Access to public transport can be especially difficult for individuals residing in rural areas. For those individuals who can afford a vehicle, the rising price of petrol will be another factor restricting their ability to make lifestyle choices.

Workplaces that are culturally and structurally flexible

Culturally and structurally flexible workplaces for all men and women are necessary if increased gender equality is sought in balancing work and family life.

In Burnside's experience one of the key difficulties faced by working parents from disadvantaged backgrounds is how to balance parenting responsibilities with the expectations and needs of their employers. For parents with school age children the school hours do not fit in easily with working hours. For parents of pre-school children the lack of child care places and the high costs of child care precludes them from considering the option of a paid job until their children are older.

It is also important for employers to provide a working environment that takes into account the needs of working mothers and fathers to accommodate for the care of sick children, school holidays and other family responsibilities. There is a need for more widespread availability of maternity, paternity and carers leave in lesser skilled industries.

Currently where these entitlements are available they are more likely to be offered to full time permanent employees, not casual or part time staff. Many individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who are fortunate enough to secure employment may only do so in a casual or part time capacity without family friendly provisions. This can mean that if a child in their care falls suddenly ill they can be forced to choose between their family responsibilities and losing their job.

Provisions in industrial relations legislation must ensure that all workers, including casual and part time staff, cannot be dismissed unfairly due to family responsibilities. Men and women in low paid work should have the ability to bargain collectively for workplace entitlements. At a minimum maternity, paternity and carers leave provisions need to be maintained.

Conclusion

Promoting discussion around gender roles in balancing work and family responsibilities is extremely important in the current economic and social climate in Australia. All Australian families deserve to be provided with real choices for balancing their competing responsibilities. However it is evident from the experience of the men and women that Burnside assists that many individuals have very limited choices in balancing their work and family life. These individuals face significant structural barriers to gaining and maintaining paid work which reduces their ability to make meaningful lifestyle choices.

If we are to support men and women from all socio-economic backgrounds to take on more equitable distribution of paid and unpaid work responsibilities then there needs to be a re-valuing of unpaid work. Governments must provide more support to families to enable them to make choices and workplaces need to become more structurally and culturally flexible.

Burnside appreciates this opportunity to provide comment to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commissions' (HREOC) *Striking the Balance* Discussion Paper. We recommend that the final report to be compiled by HREOC recognise and reflect the significant and distinctive challenges and structural barriers faced by men and women from disadvantaged backgrounds in attempting to balance their work and life responsibilities. We also recommend that the final report include clear recommendations for future action and the processes for progressing these proposals.