

# Hard Core Activism fights Soft Core Tokenism

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"Women of Ideas: Feminist Thinking for a New Era"

This feminist event is for all women who denounce the escalating violence and oppression that mark the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, who rage against the continued exclusion and silencing of women throughout the world, and who are convinced that a strong feminist response is essential for the creation of a fairer future.

# **‘Hard Core Activism fights Soft Core Tokenism’**

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We are living in times of post-feminist backlash that has created a terrible void for women, filled only with silence, or tokenistic policies that ring hollow and empty. For the past decade under a conservative federal government, Australia has taken up a right wing ‘Post Feminist’ discourse which revolves around the idea of the excesses of feminism. This rhetoric argues that women can achieve whatever they aspire to and explains women’s failure to thrive in the current political climate as due to their limitations rather than patriarchal or discriminatory practices and structures.<sup>i</sup> It is our aim today to argue that a return to hard-core activism is needed to address the issues of inequity for women in the workplace and on the home front as they deal with the impact of workplace reform and try to juggle their multiple roles as superwomen. Both the hostility to feminism and the conservative views of the family have become a major stumbling block to a work-family balance.

## **How has women’s power become so diminished?**

The power of women has been greatly reduced as many platforms of support and debate for women have been dismantled or disempowered. Despite Equal Opportunity Legislation and the Sexual Discrimination Act, these policies are dependent on the political, social and context in which they are received, which in the current context renders them to be mute or tokenistic. As The Australian Workplace Act of 2005 brought in industrial changes including Work Choices<sup>ii</sup> and Australian Work Place Agreements (AWA’s) there was no scrutiny prior to its introduction into its impact on women specifically.<sup>iii</sup> As a result Work Choices and AWA’s have created an ‘at risk’ environment for marginalised workers including women, especially those from NESB or rural backgrounds, on minimum wages or casual contracts.<sup>iv</sup>

## **Who else is at risk?**

Working mothers are particularly at risk of inequitable treatment because they are more likely to have casual or part-time work because of the juggling act they do with work and family. As a journalist and mother of two remarks, ‘While feminism gave women the right to be educated and have careers, they still got stuck with the cooking and cleaning as well.’<sup>v</sup> Added to this conflict is the issue of child care, as another working mum said, ‘Even if the baby is in childcare, the whole co-ordination of the baby is still seen as women’s work.’<sup>vi</sup> From issue of childcare, and having to wait up to 2 years to obtain a childcare places for their children, a group of women recently started the ‘What Women Want’ party to address the concerns of working mothers.<sup>vii</sup>

Sometimes when the juggle gets too much, the balls fail to stay in the air. A case in point is a 37 year old Sydney mother of three young children who resigned from her

part-time job, admitting she could not do it all. In trying to balance the expectations and constant phone calls that went with her job of styling properties for sale, she felt the intense pressure to put her work before her family. She said, 'I was a work angel and home devil, telling the clients nothing was the problem and then yelling at my kids to get in the house'.<sup>viii</sup>

Sceptics of the work-life balance crises, proffer examples such as a Channel 7 'poster superwoman' who was quoted as saying since having children, 'I can take on more than I ever did before...I can do more things at once.'<sup>ix</sup>The propaganda around the 'superwoman' myth undermines the reality for many women. As one nurse and mother said, 'I don't have any time to myself. If I am at home at all, I should be helping with the business. There is always something else, the washing on the line or having general house duties.' (Morehead:2001, p.366). The reality is that real superwomen are time poor, stressed out, overtired, underpaid, underappreciated, under-compensated, and close to melt-down.

### **What's happening under the current workplace reform?**

In the past in Australia workplace conditions in many work organisations were set by awards, which provide similar conditions for all workers in an industry. Additionally set in place were the Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBAs) or collective agreements that served to complement awards and benefit employees with better conditions such as enhanced leave entitlements or higher pay. Under Work Choices these options have been scrapped and replaced by 'collective workplace agreements' which are weaker, less likely to occur, and not checked for breaches to the workplace Acts.<sup>x</sup> The changes made possible through workplace reform create an environment where women and marginalised groups are placed even more at risk of losing basic rights to a fair and equitable deal in the workplace.

Under closer scrutiny, Australian Workplace Agreements, which the Workplace Relations Minister argues 'gives individual workers more power to negotiate their salary and working conditions'<sup>xi</sup>, in fact allow the employer to reap the benefits, to increase their profit margin, to hire and fire with little ethical regulation. AWA's, under closer examination, make women, especially those on casual appointments, even more vulnerable to gender incarceration, being duped into doing more for less, and at risk in being denied basic work rights. Interestingly enough since the introduction of Work Choices there has been a 60% growth in claims of sexual discrimination.<sup>xii</sup> The constant stripping away of women's 'basic' rights to safe and healthy working conditions with a worthy wage puts at jeopardy her energy, health, and a sense of wholeness (Rose&Schaare: 2003).

### **How is this played out in the workplace?**

Current workplace reform puts the individual, who has to negotiate a fair deal, vulnerable to being exploited and undervalued. The following scenario gives us a snapshot of what happens in workplaces that do not have awards or EBAs.

Ms D, and loyal long-serving employee to a private Economics Company, discovered her male co-employee made three times the salary she did despite the fact she bid and won most of the contracts and did all of the written work and research required for the

job. When Ms D had her two children while working for the company she was given no maternity leave, and on return was not valued in the same way because she had to go part time with the implication that sold-out to company by becoming a mother. Despite individual negotiations with the boss, she still puts in long hours, for no increased financial re-numeration, a despite returning to full time work, was never again given bonuses. She is currently looking for work elsewhere.

Mr Marg (marginalised) another hardworking employee of the same company, once his partner had children, decided to go part-time so that he could share the care of his babies. When informing the company of his decision, he was ridiculed, heckled, and made feel less of a man, for this life choice. He left the company.

Mr BC (boys club) the employee who is paid 3 times as much as Ms D despite opting out of all written work, leaving the office early, or attending days at the Cricket. His inflated salary gives him the luxury of being able to afford his wife staying home full time to care for his children. Not surprisingly, he has stayed on at the company.

The industrial reform work laws allow for greater secrecy around wages, conditions, and the awarding of bonuses. For example pay secrecy in companies that do not have award wages are rationalised with reasons such as (1) employees really want pay kept secret (*wouldn't you if you were male and your female co-worker was making less than half of your salary*) (2) it will upset them to know what others other making (*if I found out my male co-worker was making three times as much as me I'd be more than upset*) and (3) they (*I guess that means the underpaid female employees*) may make 'irrational decisions' (*such as leaving*) if they knew what others were being paid (*I'd call that a rational decision*).

### **How do employers get away it?**

One explanation seems to be based on the dominant ethic of the inherent power of men and the accompanying acquiescence of women (Connell: 1987). Current trends show that power in the workplace is still largely male-dominated and work-place conditions, male-determined.

The ability of women to multi-task, synchronize their time, and co-operate may be one explanation as to why women have acquiesced to working more for less. It is as if women have been used to compensate for lack of care in the system. Add to this equation, the feeling of guilt many working women in Australia feel and they are easily blamed, made to feel failure for their efforts and put upon to do more for less.

### **What sanctions this social and workplace ethic?**

The ethic of male as provider and masculine identity defined by status at work reinforces the privileging of the male in the workplace. On the flip side, women's issues are silenced and minimalised as pressure is applied for her to acquiesce or face the chop. Through the threat of losing their job, being demoted or made redundant workers are forced to comply with the new workplace laws. Isolation, rejection, being alienated with bullying tactics also works to keep the patriarchal workplace ethic in order.

### **How does the new workplace ethic affect work-life balance?**

With a long hours work culture, where 22% of Australians working more than 50 hours a week, a 24/7 driven economy, more 'poor quality' jobs on offer, there is definitely a risk to work-life balance. Already in Australia 2 out of 3 workers, report working outside the Monday to Friday daytime schedule, with precious evening, night, and weekend time being eaten into by this intense pressure to work. The toxic erosion of a work-life balance is creating a lack of well being in our society and disharmonious relationships. One study showed that people experiencing work-life conflict were more than 30 times more likely to suffer a mood disorder such as depression and 11 times more likely to have a substance dependency (Frone:2000). This is a serious issue for people's mental and physical health.

Research shows that parents in the poorest quality jobs report the worst well-being, and their children have more emotional and behavioural difficulties.<sup>xiii</sup> The Relationships Forum of Australia has found evidence for the connection between working hours and family breakdown.<sup>xiv</sup> Poor quality jobs are those that offer no sense of security, and allow little job control as to how, when, and how long you have to work.

### **How can we replace the demands of global capitalism with a contract of care?**

Imbalances in work, family and community life, has lead to a time-poor, stressed-out, debt-ridden culture which is slowly sinking into the depths of detachment and alienation. The void is often filled with superficial stuffing, consumerist condiments, like the latest product, gadget, or narcissistic 'nonsense'. As our society embraces this cult of consumerism, and an obsession with the individual, much of the responsibility to the broader community and ethical decision-making has diminished. Escapism, alienation, offers the narcissist everything but nothing. The emptiness in many workers lives has risen from a non-caring individualistic philosophy of the, me, me, me, ethic.

Other countries including the UK are feeling the void and voicing sentiments such as 'it's time we admitted there's more to life than money and it's time we focussed not on GDP but on GWB: general wellbeing'.<sup>xv</sup> The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission of Australia takes this theme further by saying, 'A truly prosperous society is one that values time as well as money, whether this is time spent with children or other relatives in leisure activities, time working voluntarily within the community, or time spent meeting day to day care needs'.<sup>xvi</sup>

A contract of care that recognises that all workers depend on others, involves a work ethic of reciprocity. This ethic would honour the caring roles and other significant community commitments people have in their lives. In addition the masculine top-down military model of leadership has to go and needs to be replaced models that inspire trust, confidence, flexibility and team work.

### **How to fight the fetish for work and strike a deal to achieve work-life balance?**

Do we downsize to a tree change or sea change, or do we simply refuse to co-operate? It's time to re-activate, whether the action is subtle, covert, or overt. Let's start with

supporting a government who will repeal Work Choices legislation. Women need to lobby to have more platforms for women's issues to be heard and acted upon. Also there needs to be recognition of women's work as economic capital and greater appreciation of the vital role women bring to work-life balance equation. Fundamentally, if you improve the lot of women, and place them [realistically] at the centre of the economy, you improve the lot for the whole of society.<sup>xvii</sup>

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### *Notes*

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- <sup>ii</sup> Workplace Relations Amendment (Work Choices) Act 2005, [www.workplace.gov.au](http://www.workplace.gov.au) and [www.aph.gov.au/Senate](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate)
- <sup>iii</sup> Pod cast, Radio National, Dr Sarah Maddison
- <sup>iv</sup> Australian Senate Hansard, (30 November 2005).  
<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/index.htm>.
- <sup>v</sup> Bulletin, Jan 30, 2007, 'Mother of all Truths'
- <sup>vi</sup> Bulletin, Jan 30, 2007, 'A Juggle and a Struggle'
- <sup>vii</sup> City South News, July 5, 2007.
- <sup>viii</sup> The Australian, June 27, 2007 'Part-time work worst for mums', Stephen Lunn
- <sup>ix</sup> The Courier Mail, Mar 26, 2007 'Mums working it out'.
- <sup>x</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enterprise-bargaining-agreement>
- <sup>xi</sup> Weekend Australian (March 10-11, 2007) 'Why Working on Family Matters', Mike Steketee.
- <sup>xii</sup> Marie Coleman, Life Matters Pod cast
- <sup>xiii</sup> Pod cast, Radio National, Life Matters, Dr Lindel Strasden
- <sup>xiv</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>xv</sup> Weekend Australian (March 10-11, 2007) 'Why Working on Family Matters', Mike Steketee.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid*
- <sup>xvii</sup> Courier Mail, April, 2007, 'Gillard says PM's path back to the 70's'