Chair - Professor Belinda Probert

Thank you very much Margaret it is very important to have that perspective. And the last speaker is Liberty Sanger, who is the President of the YWCA in Victoria.

Liberty Sanger - President of the YWCA Victoria

Thank you and thank you for the opportunity for speaking today. The YWCA would firstly like to thank Pru Goward and the Sex Discrimination Unit for the paper and for reinvigorating this debate. Thank you for that.

For those of you that don’t know the YWCA Victoria is a women’s organisation that encourages and promotes equality and opportunity for young women. We are the leading advocate for young women in Victoria. We are committed to helping young women achieve their full potential. We run a number of programs that support disadvantaged young women, providing them with opportunities to develop and enhance their creativity, self expression, social networks, skills and well being.

I am in a unique position today of standing before you as both an employer and an advocate on the issue of paid maternity leave. For those of you who are not familiar with YWCA Victoria’s structure, let me point out that although we are a community organisation, our community services are supported by commercial operations. The most famous of which you are probably aware of is Hotel Y which is a city landmark near the Vic Market on Elizabeth Street Melbourne. The unique feature of YWCA Victoria is the commercial orientation of our not for profit organisation. Income generated by the hotel is directed towards the provision of YWCA Victoria Community Services.

Given the nature of the organisation and the diversity of our work, we employ 70 staff across Victoria in a range of occupations such as public health professionals, housing workers, social workers, finance, hotel, conferencing and hospitality staff. Quite diverse. 89% of our employees are women. This diversity of work by the organisation is underpinned by YWCA Victoria’s commitment to the equality and opportunity of women in all areas of their lives. This commitment is reflected in our employment practices and human resources policies including our commitment to paid maternity leave.

I am pointing this out because we pride ourselves on not only being an advocate for young women’s equality but we also walk the walk. I stand before you as an advocate, but also as an employer who’s commercial operation makes commercial decisions. We already offer 12 weeks paid maternity leave to our staff including casuals who have completed 12 months continuous service. Our commercial operations are currently working at best practice. Paid maternity leave is good business. The decision to provide it is about productivity, training and retention of staff. Paid maternity leave is an investment in human capital.

Let me now talk to you about some of the issues surrounding paid maternity leave and young women. I would like to stand before you today and tell you that the Y has been convening a mass underground movement of young women aged 34 yrs and under. What we have resolved is that we will withhold our labour until such time that we
have paid maternity leave, affordable and quality child care, flexible working hours and no discrimination in the workplace for having children, and there will be no children until we have those things. I would also like to tell you that some of the things that have been considered are whether we should engage in some of the tactics of some of our less reputable employers and move our business off shore where the financial incentives and the tax breaks seem to be a little more appealing. But at this stage there has been no decision made on that. However if I were to tell you all of that, our strength would be lost, so I will have to keep some things to myself.

There are a few issues about young women’s lives, and young men’s lives for that matter, that are still standing in the way of a workable balance between work and life and hence population growth. Paid maternity leave alone is not going to overcome these concerns but we heed the calls that we have heard today from Pru Goward and Sharan Burrow about achieving objective one first and moving on to the later objective after that has been achieved.

Nevertheless I will point out some of the issues which are standing in the way of women achieving equality in the workplace. The first thing is job security. Job insecurity has become a fact of life for young women. There are young people around who have never known a workforce where there was job security. I hope job security is not a thing of the past. Not knowing whether you will have a job next week, next month, next year, makes it difficult if not impossible to get a loan, repay a loan, go on a holiday, plan for the future, get out of the rental market by owning your own home. If you lose your job, it’s pot luck if you get any entitlements. And if you can’t afford a deposit for your own home you are not likely to be able to afford a baby.

But even if you have job security there are other reasons why women may delay having children or choose not to have children at all. Fertility rates have fallen as women’s participation in the workplace has increased. Women want to be successful in their careers so they have put off having children and to want to be successful is not unreasonable, it is after all what our mother’s fought so hard for us to achieve.

Last year there was a study released that said women on average forfeit $160,000 in earnings in a lifetime due to entering and leaving the workforce to raise children. This means we don’t have the income of men, but it also means that when we get old we won’t have as much superannuation as men. And putting aside the notion of whether that is fair let’s just have a reality check. We have one third of marriages ending in divorce. We have got many women choosing not to enter into marriage or into a relationship where they may be financially dependent on another. So it is not very radical to suggest that young women are not planning on being financially dependent on another person in their older age.

There is the issue of money. Putting aside arguments about women’s right to work and money, personal and professional fulfillment we’re left with the fact that it takes two people to pay off a mortgage these days and there is also the argument about women versus men. The biggest mistake which could be made and has been alluded to by the previous speakers is that this is a women’s issue, not an issue for our community. It is about our community and it is not about individuals. It happens to be women who usually leave the paid workforce to care for our children and this
could be for any number of reasons which I am sure you are all familiar with. This doesn’t make it a women’s issue, it’s an issue for our community.

There has also been an issue which has been alluded to by previous speakers of whether young women are being greedy and selfish. I would just like to knock that one on the head. Young women like all people want a happy family life and a work life balance. We want a supportive partner, fulfilling job, career success and if we so choose, children. And if we do have children, as Pru said, we want to ensure that we are good mothers. But above all we want choice and you can have that choice with the right combination of public policy decisions.

There is one other element that I want to briefly touch on. I don’t want us to become distracted by this in this debate, but there can be at times a tendency for people to discuss who are the right sort of people when it comes to replacing ourselves. I can think of a sustainable and ready source of population growth and that is currently interned in detention centres dotted throughout the country. So I just want to alert you to the fact that we may have to look at immigration to solve some of our other problems.

YWCA Victoria supports a national paid maternity leave scheme built on a partnership of government and employers. There would have to be some sort of employer contribution in recognition of the value the employer obtains in workers returning to the workforce. Small business would have to be a big consideration in how this was structured. It would be of absolutely no benefit at all if young women were to find that we have obtained the right to paid maternity leave only to find that we either weren’t being employed, we weren’t being promoted or we were being overlooked in the workplace. Ultimately this debate has to move away from one which is about which body this is responsible for because it is up to us as a community. Government, employers and individuals. Young women will very happily engage in this debate but for us the solutions are not that hard. Partnership is the key. Thank you.