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PRESS RELEASE

Flexible Working Arrangements not for the Unambitious, Slack or Soft

With the stage set for two national inquiries targeting the “barbecue stopper” issues at the heart of work and family balance, women and men across New South Wales can be sure that the Women Lawyers’ Association of New South Wales (WLA NSW) is poised to actively engage in what WLA NSW expects to be a complex and embroiling public debate.

21 years after the introduction of provisions under the Sex Discrimination Act which sought to level the playing field between the sexes in the world of work, and 11 years after we celebrated the UN’s International Year of the Family, Australia lags behind the rest of the international stage with its conservative and ad hoc adoption of family friendly practices in the home, community and workplace.

WLA NSW’s participation in the debate is not about women blaming men or men blaming women. But stakes are high: the national fertility rate is below replacement level on one front, and the pressures of supporting an ageing population propel another front. Frustrations and emotions for both sexes are at an all time high.

Whose real choice is it to put off having children? “What I find interesting whenever this issue is raised is that it focuses on the ‘choice’ women of child-bearing age have made not to have children. It seems to me, speaking to my numerous childless friends, that it is not women who are choosing to go childless. Rather, it is the men they live with who don’t want children until much later, by which time the women are beyond fertile age. It’s this ‘extended adolescence’ many men seem to be having, going well into their thirties that is affecting the birthrate,” says Pauline Wright, solicitor and WLA NSW Policy Officer.

WLA NSW does not deny that there has been clear progress in the legal workplace. But inequity between women and men who make their living in a field defined by its historically male-centered culture persists. The number of bright young women graduating from law schools is greater than ever, yet the gender gap in pay remains.

A more nationally consistent approach to entitlements such as parental leave and the provision of elder, disabled and child care is required. Employment laws, employment practices, and provisions under the Sex Discrimination Act must be reviewed and amended.

The message WLA NSW has for its brothers in the law and outside of it, is that being seen to take up flexible work arrangements is not to be seen as less ambitious, slack or soft. How could anyone be accused of being less ambitious when they are juggling household and caring responsibilities with paid work?

What will the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission and the federal government do to ensure that such a message is captured in reforms to laws and policies?

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