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Minister for Women
and
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Opening Address for the

New South Wales Quality Part Time Work Roundtable

19 February 2009

- CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY -

Thanks, and good morning everyone.

To begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

It's fantastic to be able to join you here this morning to open what promises to be an exciting forum.

As I look around the room, it's terrific to see how many of you have come along, to examine ways to improve the *quality* of the part time work opportunities available to women, and men, in our community.

I'm anticipating, and looking forward, to some fascinating, constructive... and perhaps lively...conversation about how we can collectively bring about real change for the benefit of working women, men and NSW businesses.

One reason I've convened this forum is that I believe it's incredibly important that we keep abreast of changes in the way our workforce is working... in what kinds of jobs and industries...and the quality of this work.

Part time work now accounts for almost one third of jobs in the Australian economy. In 1966 the proportion was only 10%.

Interestingly – in the current economic climate this may even be increasing. I've observed with interest some of the media and business discussions over recent months, tossing around the idea that part time work can be a way to avoid redundancies and manage their workforces in a time of clear economic challenges.

As the Minister for Women, I'm keenly focused on what all these changes mean for women in our community and our economy.

We are so familiar with the changing face of the workplace that it's easy to forget that women's increasing participation in paid work has been one of the most significant social transformations of the last 50 years.

Nearly 65% of all working age women are now in paid work – 76% of women in the 45-54 age group.

For many of these women, part-time work is an important strategy to manage the many competing demands of contemporary life.

ABS data shows that 45% of women work part time. While 71% of all part time workers are women, 85% of men work full time.

Quality, secure part-time work has a strong role in promoting workforce attachment and providing the flexibility needed for many women with family responsibilities to maintain a work-life balance, particularly following childbirth and in periods of primary care-giving.

However, as most of you here know, real problems come when this work is poor in quality.

We know that poor-quality part-time work can be associated with more restricted career paths, poorer quality work opportunities, less secure employment, and more limited access to leave and other work-related conditions.

We also know that significant periods of time spent in part-time and casual work can have a wage and superannuation penalty for women.

At the end of the day, this impacts on our quality of life. It has impacts for the practical issues of how we pay our bills and meet our mortgage repayments. It also has impacts for the capacity for women to fund their retirement, and for the utilisation of women's skills within our economy.

So, what is *quality* part time work? Quality part time work is secure, regular work that reflects the training and expertise of workers and provides them with opportunities for career development. Whilst access to quality part time work is a key issue for women, it is not only a women's issue.

An ageing workforce, increased consumer demand for services to be provided during 'out of work hours', discussions about work and family balance, and the dynamic changes in economic conditions, have increased the level of interest in part time work across the community. This makes our discussion today ever more relevant and critical to the issues facing today's workforce and today's policy makers.

The impact of the global economic crisis on working arrangements was highlighted just last night, as some of you may have seen on the 7.30 report. The trend of companies offering employees part time work as an alternative to job losses is being seen increasingly in industries and occupations employing large numbers of men. It will be interesting to see whether the greater engagement of men in part time work will have an impact on the quality of these jobs.

It is also interesting to watch the debate shift over recent years: from part time work being seen as something women undertake to manage caring responsibilities ... to the recognition that part time work is an important strategy for older workers who want, or need, to reduce their work hours, and transition to retirement...to the idea that maybe men want... or need...to work part-time too!

I think it's fair to say, that in the ideal world, workers could move in and out of part time positions through their life cycle and as their work life priorities change.

One of the challenges for today is to understand why this can be so difficult. What are the real sticking points in making quality part time work a reality in practice? What are the challenges for making real changes for individuals, workplaces, and the community? And how do we overcome these?

One of our aims is to take on and challenge some of the myths out there about part time work, such as that it is too expensive and that part workers cannot fill senior and

managerial positions. By offering part time work to valued employees, businesses avoid the high costs of recruitment and retraining. And part time work can be an attractive incentive for skilled and older workers, especially in businesses unable to provide financial incentives.

As I've said already, these issues make our discussions today ever more critical.

Many of the issues I've highlighted are big picture problems – but there are things each of us can do.

And that is why I've invited you all here today.

Here today we have a wonderfully diverse group.... with representatives from businesses, unions, universities and policy makers. I anticipate thought provoking, and perhaps contentious discussion.

That's where some of the best ideas can come from. Throughout today, we want to combine your collective experience and knowledge to look together at what can be done in NSW.

We want to know what the keys to success are in putting quality part time work into practice in NSW workplaces.

One of my roles as Minister for Women is to provide a voice for Women in Government and policy making in this state. I encourage you to be vocal. This forum provides an exciting opportunity to explore the issues, share good practice, and identify opportunities to feed into a forward agenda.

Some of you may be aware that the Premier will be chairing a high level Jobs Summit over the next couple of weeks, to protect jobs in NSW, in the face of the global economic crisis.

I'd like to take the opportunity to announce that a report of the discussions today will be provided to the Premier to make sure our ideas today are heard across NSW Government.

I would also like to thank you all for coming today to talk about what we can all do, individually and in partnership, to bring about change, in practical ways to improve the access of women, and others, to better quality part-time work and to encourage workplaces to genuinely build this option into their working arrangements.

I'd like to particularly thank the speakers who've made time to come and participate in our program today and contribute to our dialogue.

I am really committed to developing this conversation because I really believe that improving women's access to quality part time work is a vital part of the equation in helping women participate in work. It also provides better options for women to balance and combine work, family and caring commitments, and for businesses to access and retain the skills of valued staff.

Thank you again for coming along today and for sharing your ideas and experiences. Let me assure you that the Rees Government will continue to focus our attention on the challenges still facing women in the workforce. This will ultimately benefit the whole community.

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