

## OPINION PIECE

# Women in the Workforce

The recent opinion piece 'We can't afford to keep ignoring female talent' by Jessica Irvine asserted that, by increasing suitable child care places for children, more women would be able to participate in the workforce. This is true, but is just one of the issues that needs to be addressed in order to have a workforce where women have the same opportunities to participate as men.

I am the third generation of professional woman in my family. My grandmother was a bookkeeper by trade and went on to manage credit unions during the most rapid change in their history, fuelled by breakthroughs in technology and de-regulation. My mother has had a long career in the IT industry and, although almost at retirement age, still works as hard as ever. I have been fortunate to hold a number of middle and senior management positions in sales, marketing and more recently advocacy roles in the non-profit sector. Against this backdrop, we have raised families and juggled work/life balance and, until recently, I thought nothing of it.

In the past six months I have met women who are struggling to make decisions about their careers and family lives which leads me to think that choices for women are still limited for those who want to be mothers as well as workers.

Firstly I met a young lawyer. She is bright and hardworking and there is no doubt in my mind she is going places. Although married, she feels that motherhood will get in the way of career advancement and is considering how important both those things are to her. She recently asked me to reflect on my own past and think what the one piece of advice I would have for her would be. Without a moment's hesitation I said "I wouldn't have gone without having children".

Just days after, I gave a speech at professional women's event with some attendees approaching me at the end of my very self-deprecating speech, embracing such concepts as 'guilt free outsourcing', who said that they are constantly juggling work and family commitments which leaves no time for enjoying life. I get that. Ask any of my friends how dreadful I am at keeping in contact. A few others felt that they couldn't have both a career and family. These women who feel there is a distinct choice to be made - ie either or but not both - echo the comments of professional women I met in the US in the late 90s who felt that they were married to their jobs and children couldn't be on their agendas without their careers suffering an irretrievable setback.

Last year I participated in a mentoring program aimed at stemming the rural/urban divide. I got so much out of working with a member of the farming community and learnt a lot about the issues facing the rural sector. What struck me most though was the limited career choices there are for his university graduate wife.

More recently I have had a conversation with a mid-level professional woman who is anxious about raising a more flexible working arrangement with her employer because there really isn't a precedent for it.

My eldest daughter who is in her early twenties married two years ago and has produced the most wonderful grandson any grandparent could ask for. People constantly ask me "so what is she

doing?” to which I reply “bringing up the baby”. The conversation usually then goes along the lines that she must be bored senseless and can’t wait to get back to work. To which I reply that she loves being at home and that we are totally supportive of her choice to concentrate on motherhood.

I am grateful that my time of balancing school timetables and work commitments is over. It was hard and I did the best I could with help from my husband, afterschool carers, and other school mothers and I thank them all. Back then workplaces were more rigid and it was an unspoken rule that you shouldn’t bring your ‘kid problems’ to work. Flexibility in working hours and place of work was rare.

At the Committee for Perth we are very fortunate to have two contractors working for us under very flexible arrangements that suit them well and meet all of our expectations. Both are professional women who are mothers who have chosen to work from home. They provide us with skills and expertise that we call upon on when needed. One of our researchers was born and bred in Perth but is now based just outside of Queenstown, New Zealand. Our copywriter and graphic artist is based in Cairns. We have a unique way of working together that relies a lot on phone calls and emails but the work gets done to a very high standard and, because of the time differences, is often completed overnight!

Women of previous generations fought for women to be an equal part of society. We have the vote, are better educated with every generation, we are closing the gap on rates of pay and are slowly making our way through the corridors of power. If we are seeking to attract and retain skilled workers, many of whom are women, workplaces need to ensure a flexible working environment so that women can make decisions that will serve them well throughout their lives rather than fill them with bitter regret.

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