

**Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
Sex Discrimination Commissioner's Listening Tour 2007-2008**



**Issues for Australian Men and Boys:
A discussion at the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
Sydney, 3pm, Monday 11th February 2008**

FULL REPORT

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DETAILED MINUTES OF THE DISCUSSION

The Commissioner started the discussion by telling us that, as part of her Listening Tour, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) has already held a number of men's focus groups around Australia, and that the issues of men are important to them. HREOC expressed an interest in our concerns on how equality can work for both men and women and what role HREOC can play in this regard. To date on the Listening Tour, they have run men's and women's focus groups, spoken to men and women at workplaces, unions, business round-tables, academic round-tables, community groups and public consultations, in both city and regional areas. The Commissioner reflected upon one focus group they held at a South Australian abattoir. The men there talked about the immense pressure they felt as primary breadwinners in the lead up to Christmas, especially with the casualised nature of the workforce and the resultant lack of job security.

One of the main men's issues that HREOC has looked at during the Listening Tour is work-family balance. Stories collected during HREOC focus groups suggest that while women often find it hard to access flexible work practices in order to undertake family responsibilities, men can find it even harder because of workplace cultures that assume that men aren't supposed to care for children in the way that women are. Employees (especially men) aren't seen as "team players" if they take time off for family responsibilities. Maggie noted that while we often assume men love their work, her interviews revealed that many men stay in jobs they hate for decades just to support their families. Greg mentioned research showing that many of today's school-aged girls still choose their partners based on their earning potential, creating yet another generation of men who feel that they have to achieve career success as a primary breadwinner in order to earn women's love.

The Commissioner informed us that HREOC is looking to make connections and establish relationships with a wide range of men's and women's organisations around Australia during her Listening Tour. For example, in December 2007 they held a focus group in Melbourne hosted by Mensline Australia. Participants raised a number of men's issues including men's health (and the need for a National Men's Health Policy), access to anti-natal care for men, family law issues and the new Family Relationship Centres. They have also met with National Seniors Australia, who raised issues around age discrimination (for example, the ageism present in many workplaces and recruitment practices), elder abuse, and issues around transport for elderly people.

HREOC have noted many men's reluctance to talk about personal issues in public forums (where they are quite happy to talk about less personal issues such as workplace cultures). Maggie observed that some men, especially older men, who have been raised to "hold it in and be strong" for their entire lives, may feel that if they open up and raise personal issues they will be overwhelmed by emotion. She also described how many older men often feel a total lack of usefulness to society, and commented on the issues faced by male carers. HREOC have heard from some older men who have felt burdened by the caring work of looking after grandchildren. Micheal reminded us that many other men relish the opportunity to be grandparents once they have given up their responsibilities in the workplace.

Micheal went on to talk about how our society doesn't want men to go around saying "I can't cope" - we want men to go out and fight bushfires without complaining or asking for help. The trade-off of this expectation is that when men are saddled with the burden of looking after a partner in old age, they are unlikely to reach out and ask for help. It is therefore the responsibility of services to engage with these men more effectively. HREOC were very interested in hearing what a service tailored to men's needs might look like. Micheal talked about "The Shed" in Mount Druitt (a MHIRC project), which has been very effective

at working with men and attracting them into the service. Advertising often doesn't work very well at attracting men into such a service - word-of-mouth is a much more effective way of attracting men because of men's need to trust the service provider.

Greg brought up another example of an effective men's service-delivery model: Community Men's Sheds. Some of the reasons for its success are its explicit masculine naming (*men's shed*), the activity-based focus of the shed (making toys, for example) that makes men feel comfortable, and the peer-support opportunities offered. We discussed the problem men's sheds often have with cobbling together enough funds from community grants in order to survive. Maggie talked about the success of the Ashfield Community Men's Shed. Greg observed that men's sheds are tremendous informal education settings for older men who might feel uncomfortable with traditional modes of education such as universities. Maggie described how most men have inadequate emotional and psychological preparation prior to retirement - that they often make the sudden transition from work to retirement without any preparation by society or their employers for such a dramatic life change. Micheal suggested that superannuation companies and trade unions could potentially be harnessed effectively to provide support to men (and women) who are about to retire. HREOC noted that males are much more likely to be socially isolated in their later years than are females, especially after the death of a partner.

Maggie made the observation that we currently have a generation of under-fathered children existing simultaneously with a generation of wise, experienced older men looking to be socially useful. We should be connecting these two groups. Micheal reminded us that the hysteria around child sexual abuse by men stops many men from taking up mentoring roles due to the fear of being labelled a pedophile. The Commissioner asked what could be done to address this issue. It was suggested that father's and grandfather's days at preschools and child-care centres might be a good idea. HREOC mentioned the work by Richard Fletcher and the Family Action Centre at the University of Newcastle in training early childhood services to better engage with men and fathers.

Micheal feels that many of the current generation of young men are still being raised with the same expectations as their grandfathers - to be the full-time breadwinner who works primarily outside the home to support his family. The Commissioner was very interested in finding out how we could bring about changes to workplace cultures so that workplace flexibility for employees (irrespective of gender) was seen by employers as a business opportunity, rather than leaving it up to individuals to bargain it out on their own. One measure of her own success as Sex Discrimination Commissioner would be to see men taking advantage of family-friendly workplace provisions at the same rate as women. Micheal suggested that we need to take a step upstream and look at the lack of anti- and post-natal services available for new fathers. He noted that Families First funding goes almost exclusively to the mother-child dyad with hardly any funding being earmarked for fathers. In some areas community nurses aren't allowed to visit fathers unaccompanied after midday, so new dads (especially separated dads) often miss out on essential neo-natal visits. Early childhood services need to focus on both parents, and not just mothers. Greg reminded us that we shouldn't just re-label services from "mothers" to "parents" without also changing them to make them father-friendly. For example, if a new dad goes along to a "parents' group" set up entirely for mums, he is likely to feel out of place and not return. Services for parents must be tailored appropriately for mothers *and* fathers.

HREOC asked what could be done to make services more responsive to the needs of fathers - for example, should there be a male community nurse in every service? Micheal suggested that the training for *all* community nurses needs revising to make them aware of the needs of new fathers. HREOC also asked how widespread early childhood services for

dads were. Greg explained that they are far and few between, and are usually run by one or two passionate men or women who somehow scrabble things together to make it happen. There is certainly nothing systemic in place across the board anywhere in Australia. HREOC asked whether men would actually attend services for new fathers if they were regularly provided. Micheal explained that the belief that men don't attend services is often a myth. For example, men attend health services in droves when they are provided appropriately. He noted that one of the worst things to happen in terms of the physical health of Australian men was the death of the occupational health nurse as a profession. These nurses used to be the primary health providers for men in Australia. Greg noted that it sometimes takes time for word-of-mouth to spread about a new service. This word-of-mouth is crucially important for men, as they often need to know that other men in their community are attending a service (i.e. that they're not going to be the only bloke there!) before they will give it a go.

The Commissioner asked for our opinions about the ALP's proposed National Men's Health Policy. Micheal noted that the 1995 ALP National Men's Health Initiative under Carmen Lawrence was a very good policy - indeed it was largely adopted by the NSW government in their "Moving Forward in Men's Health" framework. He then mentioned that the entire annual NSW budget for men's health is only \$300,000, much of which goes to MHIRC.

HREOC raised the issue of paternity leave. Greg suggested that maternity leave and paternity leave provisions should be equal so that mums and dads have the flexibility to choose which of them works and which of them stays home to care for their young child(ren). A national paid paternity scheme would also "level the playing field" for companies with fathers in their workforce: if every company had to provide fathers with paternity leave at no extra wage cost, there would be no economic disadvantage for individual employers providing paternity leave. The Scandinavian parental leave model was discussed as a possible framework that could be adopted in Australia however Greg voiced his concerns that if parental leave was available to be shared between the parents then mothers might often end up taking it by default and we would be back where we started. HREOC mentioned that during their community consultations and submissions process for the "Women, men, work and family" project, paternity leave was largely absent from the list of issues provided by individual men and men's groups. Maggie described how many men she interviewed for her book talked about physically aching when they had to separate from their new babies and go back to work to support their family. Nevertheless they weren't going to "rock the boat" and ask their bosses for paternity leave. Greg suggested that one reason why paternity leave might not be high on the agenda for many men is that most fathers' main priority is the health and wellbeing of their partner and children. If their partner doesn't even get decent paid maternity leave, they're not going to make a fuss about not getting paternity leave themselves. The Commissioner mentioned that one strategy might be to aim to get some form of parental leave on the board as an initial step, even if maternity and paternity provisions weren't equal to start with.

HREOC talked about the mixed messages they had heard on their Listening Tour around bringing children into the workplace as a viable childcare solution. Some people thought it was an excellent idea while others thought it was a terrible proposition. The Commissioner believes that we should never aim for a one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to workplace flexibility. It's really about thinking laterally about how we can allow both men and women to achieve some measure of work-family balance. HREOC wanted to know how we thought a cultural shift in the workplace could be brought about so that business begins to think of flexible family-friendly work practices as being good for business. Micheal suggested that more research could be done that might show how such practices benefited businesses. The Commissioner suggested that we need more male role models who take

time off work for family responsibilities, in order to “normalise” this kind of behaviour in the workplace. Greg suggested that this cultural shift is already underway - that the current generation of new fathers is less hesitant about asking their employer for time off to be with their new baby. Maggie suggested that we need to creatively utilise the mass media to convey the message that fathers taking time off work to care for their children is both normal and desirable. Micheal suggested that some sort of “father’s award” could be established, perhaps awarded during Men’s Health Week, to draw attention to male role models in the workplace. He also observed that much of the so-called “wage gap” is probably explained by women making the smart choice between working long hard hours and having little family life, and working (and earning) less but spending more time with their families. The Commissioner agreed that the male breadwinner model isn’t working well for either men or women.

Micheal raised two topics that weren’t on the official agenda for the Commissioner’s Listening Tour. The first of these was boys’ education. He outlined the history of the issue - how measures to improve girls’ education were rapidly and effectively introduced as soon as the issue was known about, while the crisis in boys’ education has been acknowledged for twenty years but no one has yet had the political will to tackle it. The Commissioner asked what could be done to address the issue. Micheal suggested that all we would have to do is take a similar approach with boys’ education as we did with girls’ education: tailor the curriculum and classroom environment to the way boys like to learn (while of course keeping the advances in place that have benefited girls). Single-sex classes for boys and girls could also be introduced in certain subjects (particularly in the senior years of high school). A further suggestion was to reintroduce boy-friendly books to the high school curriculum in an effort to re-engage boys.

The Commissioner asked about the reasons for the lack of male teachers in the education system. A few possibilities were raised. HREOC suggested the lack of decent salaries for teachers, while Michael suggested the hysteria around child sex abuse by males. Greg asked the Commissioner to clarify whether boys’ education was actually an issue that fell under her brief. She replied that it probably wasn’t one of the main focuses of her work but that was not to say that HREOC couldn’t comment on the importance of it. She went on to mention that as a mother of a young boy she is very aware of the issue. Maggie observed that contemporary society doesn’t provide much for non-sporty boys to do outside of school life - some boys she interviewed spent their entire school holidays “hanging out” on the railway platform.

The second additional topic raised by Micheal was the gender inequity within Australia’s health funding. For example, the National Health and Medical Research Council consistently funds prostate cancer research at half the level of breast cancer research. The Commissioner asked why this discrepancy exists. It was hypothesised that perhaps women are more willing to speak up for themselves and their own issues more than men are. We observed that often the best advocates for men’s health are women! As another example of funding inequity, Micheal told us that almost every man will suffer from an enlarged prostate later in life, leading to symptoms including bladder and erectile dysfunction, yet very little research money is spent on this condition. Maggie added that more research was also needed into testicular cancer and osteoporosis in men - especially as men die much more frequently than women after suffering a bone fracture.

Questions were raised around what a good men’s health policy might look like. Greg was concerned that it might be dominated by the health industry instead of looking at the more important social determinants of men’s health such as occupational health and safety. Greg informed HREOC about the process currently underway to establish a peak body for the

men and boys sector. The Commissioner said this could be a very useful point of contact for HREOC in its future work. HREOC has a good network of contacts when it comes to women's issues but when it comes to engaging with men, it is sometimes uncertain who best to approach. A national men's peak body would thus be a very useful resource. Micheal also reminded us that a number of useful national bodies already exist, such as the Australasian Men's Health Forum and its Aboriginal counterpart.

To wind up the discussion, the Commissioner asked each of us a question that she is asking everyone on the Listening Tour: "Given HREOC's particular role (i.e. without a great many resources but with some power as a national independent voice), if there was one thing that the Commissioner could achieve over the next five years around the issues that matter to us, what would it be?"

Greg said he would like to see the myth dispelled that many issues are "women's issues" - that violence and discrimination and work-life balance, for example, only affect women - and that women are still a "downtrodden class". Men and women alike need help. Some of their issues are shared, while others are different. When we talk about gender equality, we're not talking about a battle of the sexes or a zero-sum game. For each issue we must ask, "how can we best help men and how can we best help women?"

Micheal said he would like the Commissioner to look at the intersection of gender with class, age, ethnicity, etc, so that a more subtle analysis could be made of where resources would be most effective. As an example, he described how a rich Double Bay housewife has infinitely more power than a young unemployed Aboriginal man in Mount Druitt.

Maggie suggested that because public policy moves so slowly, there is a great opportunity for the Commissioner to capture the public's imagination by harnessing the mass media, as has been done by the very successful Movember fundraising campaign. This increased public awareness and engagement with the issues then has the potential to drive changes in public policy, workplace cultures and individual values. Greg added that we often live our lives through stereotypes brought to us by the mass media. If the media presented us with the *realities* of men's and women's lives rather than clichés, this would help to dispel unhelpful stereotypes about both men and women.

HREOC encouraged us to send them any research or articles of interest with regard to the issues we had just discussed, especially on boys' education and disparities in health funding. The Commissioner reminded us that she is keen for men to absolutely be on HREOC's agenda over the next five years.

A summary of this report is available from http://www.menshealthaustralia.net/files/HREOC_Summary_Report.pdf. A briefing paper is available from http://www.menshealthaustralia.net/files/HREOC_Briefing_Paper.pdf.