

Women, Work and the Global Economic Downturn

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Introduction

Women now constitute 45.4 per cent of the Australian workforce and their experience of work and employment is substantially different to men's. This became even more evident during the Global Economic Downturn (GED). Unemployment rates in Australia reached a peak in June 2009, when male unemployment was 6.0 per cent and female unemployment was 5.5 per cent.² Underemployment, that is, the proportion of employed people who want and are available for more hours of work, was and continues to be greater for women than for men. By August 2009, 9.7 per cent of employed women were underemployed while this was the case for just 6.4 per cent of employed men.³ These figures, however, paint only a partial picture of what happened in the labour market and in workplaces during the GED.

While for many Australians the GED may now have become a memory or thought of as an event that occurred on the other side of the world, it is important to reflect on the ramifications of this economic shock and consider the lessons that can be learnt. In this essay we explore how the GED impacted on women. We also examine how employers responded during the GED and whether the opportunity to shift to more equitable work arrangements for men and women was seized.

With the Australian unemployment rate now at 5.1 per cent⁴ while countries such as Spain, Ireland and France remain in double digits,⁵ it is tempting to think that Australia emerged from the GED unscathed and in far better shape than the rest of the world. Certainly Australia did not experience the 'Great Recession' (as the Americans refer to it) in the same manner as many other countries. In Australia, analysts attributed the prevention of a technical recession, that is, two successive quarters of negative Gross Domestic Product (GDP), to the federal government's stimulus packages,⁶ the regulation of the banking sector⁷ and the flexibility already embedded in the Australian labour market. Luck and geology played their part too. Australia's mineral wealth and connections with the powerhouse Asian economies contributed to Australia's relative economic buoyancy. Some press headlines also suggested that business responded in a socially responsible manner, resisting retrenching employees,

and instead cutting hours and simultaneously improving work–life outcomes — for example, ‘Downturn effects a better work–life balance’, ‘Can a downturn give you better work–life balance?’ and ‘The Good Times in Part Time’.⁸ Under these headings, the articles reported positively on cuts in hours and/or pay as an alternative to redundancies, with employers motivated by the need to retain skilled staff and concern for their welfare. It was also reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics that ‘Part-time work cushioned Australia's economic downturn’.⁹ In one case, a small advertising agency business that cut hours appears to have continued the practice, to staff satisfaction.¹⁰ *HR Monthly* referred to a company that reduced employee hours to a nine-day fortnight in the first half of 2009, which was ‘a revelation to staff who love the extra time for life outside work’.¹¹ While these stories were favourable, a more complex reality existed in many more cases, as we shall report.

An exception to the generally rosy picture of responses to the recession was the *Australia at Work* study. The study authors noted that their ‘data does not provide evidence to support the contention that job losses have been mitigated by de facto work-sharing’. Rather, they found that ‘[t]he most significant shifts in earnings, hours and non-standard work have been experienced by workers who change jobs’. The authors concluded that the impact of the decline in hours worked was felt at the point of job change rather than within jobs, and that ‘any strategy of modifying existing full-time jobs to part-time is not a common one, and definitely not specific to the downturn’.¹²

Women’s participation in the Australian labour market has been on a constant upward trend over the last 30 years and in 2009 it reached 59.3 per cent.¹³ One of the most profound changes within this trend is the increase in the proportion of married women with dependent children in the workplace, which increased from 41 per cent in 1978 to 63 per cent in 2009. The labour market operates not as one homogeneous system but as a series of distinct, albeit inter-interconnected, parts and there are distinctly different patterns for men and women. One result is that some employees have core and secure jobs and others have peripheral jobs and insecure employment. The enormous growth of the casual labour force has been another defining feature of the Australian labour market in recent years, and now 2.1 million workers, almost a quarter of all employees, work on a casual basis.¹⁴ A majority (56 per cent) of casual employees are women. These workers have what the *Australia at Work* authors describe as ‘an unstable and uncertain experience of employment and entitlements over time’. Such workers have also been described as the ‘preariat’ by economist Guy Standing. They are

workers who ‘have little income security, with no assured entitlement to state or enterprise benefits, and little employment security, or other forms of security’.¹⁵

Another feature of the Australian labour market is the clear and long-standing segregation of jobs between men and women.¹⁶ Women continue to be concentrated in a narrower range of occupations and industries than men and there is some evidence that segregation between male and female jobs is intensifying, with industry segregation in particular associated with the persistence of the gender wages gap.¹⁷ Women are over-represented among clerical and administrative workers (75.5 per cent), community and personal service workers (69.5 per cent) and sales workers (61.4 per cent) and under-represented among machinery operators and drivers (8.7 per cent), technicians and trades workers (13.9 per cent) and managers (33.6 per cent).¹⁸ Women are also concentrated in a narrower range of industries than men. Just three industries (health care and social assistance, education and training, and retail) account for 44.4 per cent of female employment. For men, the three main industries (construction, manufacturing, and retail) accounting for a somewhat smaller percentage of male employment (35.9 per cent). Women are over-represented in health care and social assistance (79.0 per cent) and education and training (69.2 per cent), and under-represented in construction (11.5 per cent) and manufacturing (27.9 per cent).¹⁹

Before the GED, scholars in Australia and overseas were examining how to redesign jobs so work can be shared more equitably between men and women, as well as undertaken more effectively and productively for businesses. As most advanced economies face the twin challenges of an ageing and shrinking workforce, and businesses face a skill shortage in Australia, more thought must be given to how best to allow men and women to participate in the workforce for longer but with less tension between work and care demands. We return to these ideas later in our essay when considering the way forward. During the GED, with a few exceptions, the fuel went out of the fire of arguments to construct good quality jobs, whether part-time or full-time. Rather, the focus during the GED was on keeping jobs. This is understandable but at the same time unfortunate, as the potential for widespread innovation in work organisation and job redesign that the GED offered was not realised.

The media reports of employer innovation during the GED were not matched by our research. Instead our research led to a number of less positive findings:

1. There was gender blindness in reporting and data collection regarding the downturn;
2. Very few creative or innovative responses were discernable in Australian workplaces;
3. The full-time, long hours 'ideal' worker norm, paradoxically, resurfaced;
4. Women experienced increasing insecurity in their jobs;
5. Those who were fortunate in retaining employment often experienced increased work intensity and stress;
6. There was generally little in the way of communication or consultation with employees over employers' responses to the downturn;
7. There was an increase in negative workplace practices that undermined the quality of working lives;
8. For a minority of employees the GED offered a chance to try other life activities, but this positive picture was far from the norm.

Collecting the data

The essay draws on research conducted over a three-month period in early 2010. We were particularly eager to find evidence that the positive changes made to hours of work and work organisation during the GED, such as those reported above and which were said to have improved the quality and experience of women's and men's working lives. We explored the impact of the GED from the perspectives of the women themselves, as well as from the perspectives of different employers, unions and employer associations. We were keen to discover any opportunities to shift traditional forms of work organisation to more sustainable and equitable forms. This shift becomes especially important as the Australian economy recovers from the GED and moves into a new period of skills shortage.

A unique focus of this research, compared with other analyses of the events of the GED, is that we dug beneath the headline data and media stories to uncover the often different lived experiences of women at work during the GED. Such an approach was generally absent from mainstream analysis and reporting during the GED, which focused almost exclusively on male unemployment and male-dominated sectors such as construction and manufacturing.

The reasons for this focus on ‘male’ jobs and sectors during the downturn are complex. While there was a loss of full-time jobs in male-dominated areas, other reasons for the focus on men’s jobs include the strong and loud ‘voices’ of unions and business groups in these sectors that sought industry assistance to ameliorate the effects of the downturn and to avoid the catastrophic effects seen in the manufacturing sector in the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s. However as we noted in the introduction, there was only a half percentage point difference in male and female unemployment at the height of the downturn and no obvious campaigning on behalf of female job sectors.

In addition to scanning reports and papers on the GED in Australia and overseas, our fieldwork research included key informant interviews with 38 industry professionals, including employers, unions and consultants in key sectors of manufacturing, finance, travel, hospitality, retail, and the not-for-profit community services sector. These sectors are also highly gender segregated and allow us to compare differences between them. In addition, we interviewed 23 individual women working in workplaces affected by the GED. We use their words directly to give voice to their experience of the GED. We also collected data from a focus group of union officials representing thousands of women across various industry sectors and states and from a group of women in one industry significantly affected by the recession. In both instances, these were people who directly handled or personally felt the impact of the recession on women’s jobs. The research had the ethics approval of two major universities and, in order to comply with these protocols, pseudonyms are used so that anonymity is preserved for all interviewees and their organisations.

We were fortunate to have access to a study of work–life issues undertaken in the midst of the recession. In mid-2009, over 3000 Victorian employees were surveyed about a range of workplace and employment matters.²⁰ A specific question was asked in the Victorian Work and Life (VicWAL) survey about employee perceptions of the impact of the GED on their workplaces. In order to further identify any positive work reorganisation or job redesign that came out of workplace changes due to the GED, we followed up with personal interviews with fifteen of the women from the VicWAL survey who had reported workplace change due to company restructure or overhaul.

Our analysis from the survey and follow-up interviews shows that the effect of the GED on industry, workplaces and jobs was not uniform. There was great variety in employee perceptions of employer reaction to the GED — often influenced by government support in

terms of stimulus packages, industry assistance and the degree of the global exposure of their business. But from this variety emerge certain patterns that we argue illustrate the different effect of the GED on men's and women's working lives and a general lack of innovative response to the recession. In highlighting the eight major themes that emerged from our research, we suggest a way forward to take Australia into the next decade with policies and practices that could better meet the needs of our diverse and changing workforce.

Our Findings

1. The GED and 'gender-blindness'

Economic data can obscure important differences in populations, particularly those to do with gender and employment, and although it is easy to be mesmerised by graphs and stats, it is important to closely examine the way in which the GED impacted on women and men differently. Of course, we recognise many men's jobs and lives were severely affected. Indeed, the Australian Industry Group referred to it as the 'mancecession', or a 'recession concentrated on male employment declines'.²¹ In August 2009, *The Financial Review* reported that in Australia, 100,000 full-time male jobs had been lost while 26,500 female jobs had been created.²² But that was not the whole story, women were significantly affected by the GED, but a gendered awareness of the effect of the GED was largely and notably absent. In the VicWAL survey, 45 per cent of the women (and 50 per cent of the men) reported there had been recession-related changes in their workplace. The most frequent types of change nominated by female respondents were shifts being cancelled or hours being reduced and staff numbers being reduced or staff being made redundant.

Furthermore, the Australian economy and Australian families increasingly rely on the income generated from female breadwinners, adding to the significance of female workers' experiences. Men are often assumed by employers to be the sole family breadwinner. This is now a patently wrong assumption. The fact is that dual-earner families are the norm in Australia and there are a growing number of women sole parents in paid work.²³ Often the result of men losing their jobs is that women have to find additional work. Accounts from the frontlines in nursing and policing during the GED revealed that women were forced to seek extra hours of work to meet their family's needs when their partners lost their jobs.²⁴

Concern about the lack of gender awareness in analysing the recession is already apparent in a number of policy papers and reports released by international agencies such as the United Nations and the International Labour Organization (ILO) as well as in the UK, North America and in many European countries. These reports uniformly acknowledge the growing importance of women's economic contributions and argue for greater gender awareness in policy responses to the recession. For instance one expert says:

Policy responses to the [global economic] crisis risk jeopardising advances made in women's employment or the enhanced status of equality in recent years. Gender equality is at risk if the downturn is used as a reason to slowdown progress on equality policies ... that help women on the labour market.²⁵

This need to understand the role women play in the Australian labour market is enhanced when one considers that as women's labour force participation continues to rise, men's declines. In 1978 the participation rate for men was 80.1 per cent and for women it was 43.7 per cent. In 2009 by contrast, the participation rate for men had dropped to 72.6 per cent and for women it had risen to 59.3 per cent.²⁶ This is a major social shift yet despite this inverse trend, the type of work men and women do and the conditions in which they do it remain very different. Women are likely to earn less than men for work of equal value,²⁷ are more likely to be employed casually with less access to paid annual, sick and long service leave and the current average superannuation payout for women is less than half that received by men — \$63,000 compared with \$136,000.²⁸

Australia also has a particularly polarised working time regime. Men are far more likely to work very long full-time hours of 50 hours or more and women are far more likely work very short part-time hours of 15 hours or less a week.²⁹ Women overall are far more likely to work part-time than men, and this is not always by choice. In 2009, 46 per cent of women and 16 per cent of men worked less than 35 hours a week.³⁰

Not surprisingly then, while underemployment rates for both men and women rose during the GED, they rose in female-dominated industries in particular and they have remained consistently higher for women. In thinking about the differential impact of the GED on men and women more broadly it is also essential to consider the *underutilisation* rate. This is the unemployment rate plus the underemployment rate. Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicates that for men the underutilisation rate rose from 8.0 per cent in May 2008 before peaking at 12.3 per cent in August 2009 and then falling to 10.5 per cent in August 2010. For

women, the underutilisation rate was higher than that for men at all times. It was 12.3 per cent in May 2008, peaking at 15.3 per cent in August 2009 and dropping to 14.5 per cent in August 2010.³¹

One of the very few Australian studies to examine the gendered effects of the recession argued that:

women fare differently in recessions from men. Their experience is not necessarily more adverse but the concern is that policies designed to address the hardship of people in the recession need also to take account of women's unique circumstances. That is, policies should be sensitive to gender differences and appropriately targeted.³²

In gathering evidence for this research, it was frequently difficult to obtain a gendered breakdown of data on job losses or loss of hours at either an enterprise or industry level as a result of the GED. If we are to address future crises, and do so in creative and positive ways, we need more gender-sensitive metrics and a greater transparency and use of data. In many of the European Union countries for example we found that gender disaggregated data would be required where any government funding or support was involved to mitigate the impact of the recession.

In the finance sector, where the GED had its roots, the division between men's and women's jobs is evident. Women are over-represented in the finance and insurance workforce at 59 per cent, yet under-represented in management (at approximately 31 per cent). The 2006 report on the finance and insurance sector by the Equal Opportunities for Women in the Workplace Agency from which these figures come also noted 'women are recruited ... in much lower numbers to the still highly-male dominated front office areas of funds management and technical roles'.³³ A 2010 survey reports that women in banks hold only approximately 13 per cent of the most senior (executive) management posts and nine per cent in insurance.³⁴

A senior official of the Finance Sector Union estimated that of approximately 5,000 job losses in the sector between October 2008 and February 2009, 60–70 per cent were women's jobs. In manufacturing, another sector badly hit, a gender breakdown was unavailable. On every measure - production, new orders, employment, deliveries — manufacturing was severely affected and, according to senior national officials in the key union in manufacturing, an estimated 50,000 jobs were lost across the sector, but exactly how many

were men's and women's is not easily found.³⁵ Gender breakdowns of redundancies from a major employer in another badly affected sector, travel, were provided after specific requests and the breakdowns demonstrated that across full-time and part-time staff proportionately more women than men were made redundant (women constituted 34 per cent of the full-time workforce and 55 per cent of the full-time redundancies; they accounted for 70 per cent of the part-time workforce and 85 per cent of the part-timers made redundant).

Overcoming such 'gender blindness' in the availability and collection of data at the workplace level is important if we are to fully understand the impact of economic change. It is also important to assist policy makers to appropriately target training and support mechanisms that enable workforce participation by women and men.

2. *Few creative responses to the GED*

While there is evidence that for some employers, cutting back staffing numbers and working hours was seen as job redesign,³⁶ our research uncovered few creative or innovative responses to job or working arrangements during the GED. Our overwhelming conclusion is that the introduction of innovative arrangements and work design was not at all widespread. Where innovations were applied, they were isolated islands of change and it is too early yet to see how many of these small changes have been sustained in the upswing. Instead we argue that business responses to the GED fell within a fairly narrow spectrum of organisational activity: restructuring, encouragement to take leave (annual leave, long service leave, leave without pay), wage cuts, and freezes and reductions in discretionary spending on areas such as training, travel and treats (massages, fruit, biscuits). Although it was often said in the media that job cuts and reductions in hours were reluctantly introduced by employers, there were reports from our interviewees that employers used the GED as an excuse to retrench people who they viewed as being outside the core business or regarded as underperforming. For example, an experienced employer adviser to small and medium-sized businesses commented, '[redundancy] seemed a more palatable alternative [to job redesign] for some clients ... because they were able to use that as an opportunity to weed out underperformers and people that they wanted to get rid of. That was seen as being much more understandable in the economic climate'.

Another of the responses common to many workplaces that were part of our research was organisational restructuring, but it was often difficult for interviewees to isolate the GED as the sole cause of the restructuring and they often cited the combination of the impact of the GED and other industry or sectoral issues. Employee and union observations suggest the GED may have increased restructuring activity in some workplaces and provided the impetus to restructure in others.

Restructuring was widespread in the accounts of our interviewees and evident in many of our industry cases, often reported to negatively impact on the quality of work performed and to confuse workers. Ashleigh, one of our VicWAL interviewees, worked as a scientist in a large laboratory where there were redundancies and organisational change due to the GED. She felt quite strongly that the restructure during the GED diminished the quality of work being produced by the laboratory. This was cost-driven and had very little to do with improving productivity or making the workplace more effective or flexible. Ashleigh said, 'I could never understand it when they started doing the things they started doing. We just looked at one another and said, "they have taken a business and destroyed it".'

In the finance sector, a round of company mergers coincided with the GED, leading to a concentration of business and to job losses. Most of the finance industry interviewees noted the centralisation of business to the 'big four' banks during the GED and said that this had further employment effects in the smaller institutions (job losses and hours reductions) as well as in the larger organisations (increased pressure to meet targets). Other changes noted by banking industry interviewees included the devolution of management functions to business units or, in other organisations, the centralisation of these functions within single sites in the banks. This resulted in job losses not just at the customer service level but in those roles 'beyond telling and selling'. Interviewees note that there was a significant impact on employment in key areas including head office employment, for example, in the large centralised processing sites.

In the (female-dominated) food processing sector, there was major restructuring or discontinuation of particular product lines during the period of the GED.³⁷ Cadbury in Hobart and McCains vegetable processing operation in regional Tasmania are just two examples. For a senior official of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) who was familiar with these cases, much of the GED restructuring was simply a continuation of what had gone on in previous years:

During the period there was serious restructuring and off-shoring happening in the Tasmanian food industry, though this was not directly related to the downturn. There is a general phenomenon of restructuring happening in the (female-dominated) Tasmanian food industry.

According to our interviewees, some employers also capitalised on the downturn to justify practices that would not have been accepted by unions and the community in more buoyant times. Examples cited in interviews included wage cuts and employers refusing to bargain for new enterprise agreements in order to defer wage increases. For example a senior official in NSW noted:

In NSW we saw firms in the manufacturing sector seek informal deals with their workforce which were presented as a means to 'save businesses'. Packages included withholding wage increases, shortening hours, getting rid of casuals and using up accrued entitlements. Many businesses clearly deferred spending on training and capital items.

At one of the major automotive companies, different strategies were used for hourly paid employees and salaried employees. Domestic and export sales had slumped dramatically, so in negotiation with the relevant unions CarCo halved their production shifts but kept their production workforce. CarCo feared losing their production workers because they recognised the skill shortage that would follow the recession. According to management, under the arrangement:

... people worked one week on and one week off. And on the week they had off, they were paid 50 per cent of their ordinary time rates ... those on afternoon shifts also lost their penalties.

CarCo also restructured and cutback in the salaried sections of HR, engineering, sales and marketing through voluntary separation packages. Initially, salaried staff were encouraged to take paid leave and leave without pay, but very few people did. All salaried employees, including executives and staff not covered by an enterprise agreement, had a wage salary freeze in 2009. Executives took a temporary pay reduction for the part of 2009 when the downturn was most severe and award-covered engineers voluntarily agreed to defer a scheduled enterprise bargaining agreement pay rise.

The option of halving the number of production shifts was preferred because, according to CarCo, voluntary redundancies were too costly and ‘simply not sustainable’ on a large scale. Furthermore, the company was still planning for a new product and they would need ‘capacity in place’. CarCo also had the advantage of being able to access federal and state government funding to provide up-skilling training for production line employees, regarded by the HR manager as ‘an investment in the future’. However despite this and the fact that it was seen as a ‘paradigm shifting’ time by the company, management did not consider other ways of changing the job architecture or more fundamentally restructuring the allocation of work. There was a suggestion from one manager that jobs for some part-time employees who had returned from maternity leave were simply lost. However, while the impact of these changes on female employees at CarCo was not formally monitored by the company, recent HR analysis suggests that the proportion of women in both the manufacturing and corporate administrative divisions remains similar to what it was before the GED.

At TravelCo too, different strategies were used for different segments of their workforce, but it was also made very clear by a senior HR manager that ‘the business levers and the legislation tend to drive strategy’. In total, 1500 employees were made redundant. These redundancies were all in management and back-office roles, not in operational areas. In operations, a different strategy was used. The main ‘levers’ used in the operational areas were a greater use of flexible hours and the use of leave of all kinds — annual leave, long service leave, paid and unpaid leave, voluntary and forced leave, were instated. There was also a freeze on recruitment and a freeze on turning part-time positions into full-time positions. Again, despite these changes, alternative or innovative job re-design was not considered.

3. *The return of the ‘ideal worker’ cultural norm*

Despite overall full-time hours falling during the GED, employer preference for the ‘ideal worker’ — the employee who can be full-time, present and flexible according to employer wishes — re-emerged during the GED. While this preference was not always realised or consistent with employer practices in respect to the use of part-time and casual work, it more consistently works to exclude women with caring responsibilities, who are often unable to meet the criteria of the ‘ideal worker’. At a time when experimenting with different working arrangements would seem more possible, we found examples of workplaces where more

rigidity was imposed on employees. As Rachel, one of our female interviewees said, ‘I was taken off the roster because I wasn’t as flexible as others’.

While it is often assumed that there has been greater use of flexible work arrangements by employees over the last few years, recent ABS survey findings suggest that employee-orientated (as opposed to employer-oriented) flexibility has not increased.³⁸ In 2009, 30 per cent of employees have either a written or unwritten agreement with their employer to work flexible hours and a third (37 per cent) of all employees (and 42 per cent of part-time employees) had hours that varied weekly or were usually required by their employers to be on call or standby. These figures showed little change from 2006.

We interviewed Patricia, a partner in a law firm with considerable experience advising small- and medium-sized employers. Her views were that during the GED:

... it did seem that the women who often had flexible work arrangements were sort of picked off first whereas I would have thought they were the ones you might have kept. But again, it was sort of an opportunity to perhaps get rid of anyone that wasn’t quite standard. It was almost like, “well, we’ve sort of indulged this part-time arrangement while we were busy and doing well but now that times are tight, we need a full-time committed person here”. It seemed to be almost the reverse of what could have happened, where instead of increasing the variety of ways in which people worked, [employers] kind of made it much more uniform in that they wanted to keep the core full-time employees and lose the peripherals, as they saw them.

Another of our interviewees in the banking industry, Leslie, commented on the likely return of the ‘bowler hat’ in banking as a result of the scaling back or closing down of equal opportunity or diversity programs. This was reinforced by Anne, a human resources professional in the finance industry, who said in her workplace ‘they weren’t hiring any part-timers’.

An exception to this reported return of tradition was at BankCo. This company saw the GED as a strategic opportunity to reshape and diversify their workforce. They described themselves as having ‘bucked the trend’, strategically recruiting ‘talent’ and employing more women during the GED. According to one of BankCo’s senior HR managers:

in the business part [of banking] the proportion of women drops significantly ...
However, in the last 12 months [the GED period] we’ve moved that up ... We set up a

deliberate strategy to employ women from non-financial backgrounds ... and to fish in different ponds ...

BankCo also took the opportunity to consider different work arrangements for women:

the other thing that we did was make sure that we had really good flexible work options, so we created part-time roles and specifically set aside some roles that would be absolutely part-time or reduced hours. If one job equals 100 per cent then we will create roles that are either 0.6 or 0.8. If that means you want to work Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday this week and you want to work Tuesday, Wednesday next week then that's okay.

For BankCo, offering flexible work to women during the GED was regarded as a positive investment in the future. The HR Manager argued that:

it actually offers business a really good opportunity to manage and plan their workforce because in a downturn, if you are prepared, particularly with women, to look at flexible options and say, "well we'll employ you on reduced hours now", in two years' time or three years' time when the market does move, they actually may be the ones who are ready now to go full-time for you.

Women don't stop their career, they just have a different career path and if they're given the right opportunities, I also think that they can be a far more loyal workforce and more engaged. We know that more engaged people leads to better business results, lead to better results with customers and better reputation and brand.

This case stands in contrast to most of our industry and enterprise case studies where the GED had not been used so positively. A number of interviewees in our research pointed to a reduction in training expenditure and activity during the downturn. Senior managers also noted that it was more common to 'poach' or 'recruit in skills' than it was to develop skills within the organisation. One described their approach as:

cherry pick[ing] the best talent that was coming into the market as a result of financial turmoil in other organisations.

Some senior HR managers sounded a note of caution over this approach and suggested that they feared that this would have negative ramifications for the businesses in which they

worked, for example in relation to staff morale and turnover. One argued that by underspending on development of staff during the downturn:

...we created a bit of a captive workforce rather than an engaged workforce and then that captivity lasts as long as you can have the external factors that force them to stay. Those external factors are changing rapidly and now staff turnover is increasing at the same rate.

This experience was reflected in a recent press report of disenchanted and disengaged workers moving jobs as ‘payback’ for businesses’ failure ‘to implement effective engagement programs during the tough times’.³⁹

In many instances, employers had already enacted strategies to lower costs to meet global competitive pressures prior to the GED, so that when the downturn hit these employers had flexibilities available to them in relation to labour utilisation. According to one of the manufacturing industry union officials we interviewed, ‘there was not much fat on the bone of manufacturing’ even before the effects of the GED began to be felt. He noted that those workers on the edges of organisations — employed as casuals, in labour hire or in supply chains to major manufacturers — were dramatically affected by the downturn. A small-scale qualitative research project conducted for Fair Work Australia into the changes faced by minimum wage employees and their (largely small- and medium-sized) employers during the downturn bears this out. It found a common employer response was a reduction in casuals’ hours.⁴⁰

This point leads directly to our fourth finding, a tendency to entrench job insecurity during the GED, particularly for women in female-dominated industries.

4. Entrenching insecurity in women’s work

In retail, an industry which employs over a million people, casual and part-time work is pronounced. Women make up 57 per cent of employees in the industry and they represent three-quarters of all part-time and part-time/casual workers.⁴¹ Two-thirds of workers on the shop floor are women - while men are in the majority in management.⁴² Yet even in this industry, where the stimulus package had a direct and largely positive impact, underemployment increased, especially for women. Underemployment for women reached its

highest point in February 2010 where it rose to 18.1 per cent for female retail industry workers.⁴³

The stimulus package may have ‘created a buffer’ in the retail sector, but there were direct consequences for many women workers in more precarious jobs. According to industry sources, it was more common for hours to be reduced than for jobs to be lost. Casual employees were the most affected and there were flow-on effects to roster changes. There was a shift away from daytime Monday to Friday hours to rostering on weekends and evenings and there was an increased intensity of work overall. These changes, not typically picked up in the statistical reporting, were reflected in the qualitative research for Fair Work Australia referred to earlier.⁴⁴ It categorised employer strategies for ‘wage bill management’ as starting with (amongst other strategies) reducing casual hours and then moving on to cutting a high proportion or all casuals before hours or numbers of permanent employees were affected.

The *Australia at Work* survey referred to earlier has followed several thousand workers since 2007 and collected annual data regarding their employment. The most recent data covers the first half of 2009, reporting evidence of cuts in casual numbers: ‘eleven per cent of those employed on a casual basis in 2008 lost at least one job between 2008 and 2009’ in contrast to 4.5 per cent of permanent employees.⁴⁵

These developments had negative implications for women. As an official of the Shop, Distributive & Allied Employees Association (SDA) said:

Rostering has become much less flexible with more staff being required to work at times that are inconvenient or conflicting with family responsibilities.

Other negative impacts for casual employees in our case studies and interviews emerged in unexpected ways. We received reports of increased demand for hours by permanent nursing staff as a result of male partners losing work hours during the downturn. Where agreed to, this then led to fewer hours for casual nurses in those workplaces. In the community sector, one large employer reported laying off some casuals — in this instance mostly men because of the nature of the services they were working in. A Victorian government survey of 18 community organisations during 2009 indicated a move to full-time employment and an increase in casual employees away from permanent part-time positions.⁴⁶ In effect, this is a

move to more rigid work patterns on the one hand and employer- rather than employee-friendly flexibility on the other.

5. *Increased work intensity for those who remained*

Employees reported in interviews that a consequence of employers cutting back on casuals was that work was intensified for those remaining. In a variety of industry sectors employees reported that in order to avoid impacts from the GED such as a loss of orders and business, the strategy of some employers was to wait out the GED and extract maximum output from their remaining, core employees in the meantime. Interviewees reported this was achieved in their workplaces by employers cutting paid overtime, cutting shifts on production lines, moving employees to shorter working weeks and increasing the pace of work. While data is unavailable to show any change during the GED, ABS data shows that of 3.2 million people who usually worked extra hours or overtime in November 2009, over a quarter (27 per cent) were not compensated for the extra hours or overtime worked.⁴⁷

The Fair Work Australia report also noted work intensification during the GED period, with the cutting back of casuals resulting in more work for remaining staff. One small manufacturing employer was quoted as saying, '[We] made core full-time work as hard as possible and explained to them we need to be a viable business so that we can remain in business in order to offer them a job'. Another small retail employer commented, 'I did notice staff were working harder ... [they] knew they had to work for their money'.⁴⁸ Work intensification was also reported by employees in the study (of whom 34 were women and 22 were men) who were expected to be more productive 'through increased work effort, rather than through using different or better techniques to perform tasks more efficiently'.⁴⁹ In the retail sector, SDA women's officers reported to the national office examples of 'employees working harder and longer' and an increase in workloads.. One of the women's officers also noted that at worksites, they were aware of cuts in casual employee hours. As a result:

experienced full-time and part-time employees are taking on more duties, for example training other employees, [and looking after] the security of the store (because in some companies the security staff have been sacked or had their hours cut dramatically)⁵⁰

Other changes reported by both the SDA women's officers and other retail employees we interviewed negatively affected employee's work and family balance. For example the SDA reported that shelf filling rosters were changed to early in the day in two major grocery chains to reduce payment of penalty rates. This, several SDA women's officers noted, had repercussions for working parents who shared their work and child care arrangements around their night and day shifts.

Yee Man, an older migrant cleaner, who reported that she lost her full-time job with no prior warning or consultation, told us that in her view job sharing could have been introduced at the workplace but it wasn't:

... the work should have been shared equally between the staff. You don't have to exhaust one person and throw the other one on the street ... There is no need for that because some people are doing a lot of hours — 60, 70 hours a week.

Women interviewed in manufacturing identified similar patterns of cuts to casual employment and hours. For example, Nancy, an interviewee who has been employed for most of her working life in a food processing plant, and as a permanent employee for the past decade, said that when the number of casual staff was dramatically cut in her workplace during the GED this presented a significant increase in workload for those permanent employees who remained. She said, 'it does put a strain on people because sometimes you're probably doing the work of two'.

In both interviews and focus groups it was reported by employees that they felt there had been an increase in work intensity for those who kept their jobs where other employees had been made redundant. It appeared, at least from the workplaces in our studies, that contrary to a commonly held assumption that there was less work to be done during the GED, redundancies left those in jobs with increased workloads. Sally, who works part-time at a food processing company, was denied the extra hours she had been hoping for. She outlined how antagonism had increased employees at her workplace, who felt driven to work harder, and managers, who appeared intent on extracting the maximum from employees whose hours had been cut.

Finance Sector Union officials suggested that during the GED, employees of the major banks were under considerable pressure to work harder and faster and with fewer resources. This was seen as a particular problem in the branch networks. The union officials reported that

workers had increased workloads with little relief in the form of extra staff, and at the same time employers had increased expectations of staff, such as increased targets for sales staff. Susan, a banking employee who had worked on a two-day a week basis for 20 years was told by her manager that there was no future for an employee on such short hours in the branch as she was only making two-fifths of the standard full-time productivity target.

6. *Communication and consultation with employees*

A sixth theme to emerge strongly in our research was that communication with employees during the period of the GED was minimal or highly variable. At one end was the example of Bendigo Bank which sent an email to employees asking them to take 10 days unpaid leave without any prior discussion or consultation.⁵¹ At the other end was the example set in the automotive manufacturing sector where changes were undertaken with union involvement and were recognised as leading to ‘better outcomes for employees and business’. In this case, senior officials of the key union representing employees in automotive manufacturing, the AMWU, suggested that some, although not all, employers made real attempts to consult with the union and, at times, to seek their counsel and agreement on initiatives which would allow for the retention of jobs though the economic crisis. Changing shift arrangements, the instigation of workplace training days and staggered leave were initiatives cited by the union that ‘good’ and ‘innovative’ employers implemented with the involvement of the union. As useful as these were, however, they did not address gender concerns or differences.

In the retail sector, the National Secretary of the SDA pointed out that some employers went out of their way to communicate with the Union. For instance, a leading women’s clothing chain made a commitment to the union and employees not to cut part-time hours. However this level of communication and consultation was seen by those we spoke to as atypical across other retail workplaces. For example, one of the VicWAL interviewees, Mary, reported that since the GED sales staff have been subject to increasingly unrealistic performance expectations from higher management with little understanding of what goes on day to day in the store she works in.

Patricia, the lawyer whose firm works with corporate clients, told us how undesirable discussing workplace change with their employees as a whole seemed to be for her clients. Rather than consulting to achieve agreed changes to hours to save money, she reported that

some clients thought it preferable to make one or two employees redundant, with some employers apparently envisaging everyone else would then work harder for fear they would be next.

One large community sector employer, ComsecCo, did report that the GED led to job redesign in consultation workers. As a result, specialist workers' jobs were redesigned to provide a range of support services to clients rather than just one type of service. This led to the employees involved increasing their skill levels, enabling them to keep their jobs and try out new work. The increase in skills for these workers was recognised in a reclassification of their positions and an increase in salaries. This approach has continued after the GED as management has viewed it as a means to provide better service to clients. This more innovative approach that drew strongly on employee consultation and involvement appeared, however, to be the exception rather than the rule for the employers and employees we interviewed.

7. An increase in hostile workplace environments

The seventh theme that was consistently raised in our research was the emergence of more toxic workplace environments. Many of those we interviewed commented on increased bullying, employee-unfriendly hours and scheduling, and a growing 'climate of fear' to force change on workers as effects of the GED in their workplaces.

Another of our VicWAL interviewees, Kristen, who worked for a private provider of employee assistance programs, told us about receiving more reports of bullying, conflict and 'bad behaviour' within workplaces. Kristen said in her view this was due to a sense of fear about workers losing their jobs and also the fact that such job insecurity meant that people were less likely to leave a workplace where they were being bullied as they were worried about not finding another job during the downturn. Representatives of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) Women's Committee also told us that they were seeing more bullying cases due to work intensification.

Other types of employee impact reported by unions included a steep rise in unfair dismissal claims, the scope of employees' jobs being increased and fewer breaks for shop floor workers, the latter two of which were seen to have implications for occupational health and safety (OH&S). Of the former, according to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission's

2008–09 annual report, there was a 30 per cent increase in unfair dismissal claims in the 2008–09 year compared with the previous year. The Annual Report confirmed that while partly due to the Work Choices legislation, this may also have been in part due to the GED.⁵² The SDA women’s officers reported that leaner work organisation was a false economy because it impacted both managers’ and customer’s behaviours. The main reason for this according to one SDA official was because

store managers’ hours have increased ... they are exhausted and angry. They don’t have the same level of tolerance and are more likely to make bad decisions.’⁵³

At the same time we were told that employees in stores that were short-staffed were the recipients of customer abuse because they were not getting the service they want. As a result, ‘the staff [were] stressed and there [had] been an increase in workers compensation stress claims’. The link between economic recessions and increasing levels of occupational stress has been documented in a recent study, which shows that during recessions, workers’ compensation claims tend to increase.⁵⁴

Sarah, an employee in a manufacturing workplace, reported that she and other women colleagues felt silenced by what they saw as a newly developed toxic and hostile workplace culture:

if you were unhappy or you didn’t think the workplace health and safety was up to standard, you were very reluctant to bring that forward because — you put up or you shut up basically and we’ve been told that by management.

Such examples suggest that in some workplaces the GED may have provided an excuse for poor management practices to prevail, rather than provide the impetus for a positive change in behaviours.

8. *Alternative working lives for some, but not for many*

According to our research, some employees found that the GED gave them an opportunity to explore new ways of living and working, but it was not always positive. At CarCo for example, where shifts were halved, the hardship of managing on between 25 per cent and 43 per cent less pay was too great for some employees. For these employees an arrangement was made, with the union’s agreement, to allow them to, in the words of a senior manager, ‘exit

the business in a dignified way with appropriate compensation'. According to this CarCo manager, there were other people who adapted quite well to the reduced shifts. He told us that anecdotal evidence at the company suggests some people have sought additional part-time and casual jobs elsewhere. He believed that others were quite happy because they were at the end of their career and the reduction in hours was a way of phasing in retirement, while others were studying and were glad of a temporary reduction in hours to allow them to attend to their studies more fully.

At TravelCo there was also some discussion of employees finding alternative working lives as a result of the changes forced on them by the GED. For those employees who used their leave, the senior HR manager suggested:

... many were doing studies and things like that. The demographic of that group usually means we get a reasonable pick-up of leave without pay. It's quite interesting then how many come back. The majority come back. We always get a sort of significant minority who choose not to return. So they do a couple of things; those who are tired of their job will go off and try something else and if it doesn't work then they'd come back.

On the whole, however, there was little evidence of employees finding a better alternative as a result of job loss or hours cut back. For some women, the effect of their partners losing their jobs meant the burden fell to them to find more paid work. Both the Australian Nursing Federation and Policing Association ACTU Women's Committee representatives reported that they had been contacted by some of their part-time female members seeking to increase their hours after their partners had lost their jobs. Our research did not take us into their homes to see if the division of labour changed there – although that would be a fascinating topic!

There Are Alternative Approaches

From the reports of employees and unions in our study, progress towards improving employee work–life balance appeared to be in retreat in some workplaces, leaving those who access flexible work arrangements particularly vulnerable. Most importantly, our analysis

reveals not only a disturbing lack of awareness of the gendered impact of the downturn, but also a lost opportunity to rethink the way that we work in Australia.⁵⁵

Acknowledging this is important because there have been profound social and labour market changes over the last 20 years. More women than ever are in the paid workforce and increasingly men and women both want to work more flexibly to care, to study and to take time out.⁵⁶ Dual earner families and employed single parents are now the norm.⁵⁷ Yet the way work is currently organised fails to recognise this and presents barriers to the realisation of equality for men and women both at work and at home. It also prevents both men and women workers making a full contribution to the organisations and businesses they work for and to improving productivity in Australia more generally. As argued in a recent UK report, we need to ‘work outside the box and change work to meet the future’.⁵⁸

So where can we start?

The workplace

The workplace is a critical site for broader cultural change. This is recognised by the *2010 Intergenerational Report*⁵⁹ that argues the lack of workplace flexibility along with cultural (including employer) attitudes are major barriers to increasing workforce participation, particularly that of mature-age workers. In Australia, there is considerable research evidence that before the GED some workplaces have employed an ‘individual accommodation approach’ to their employees who want more flexibility, where certain employees are allowed to work part-time but where such modes of work remain an aberration that is tolerated only because the employee is valued.⁶⁰ Research studies also suggest that other workplaces have denied employee requests for flexibility or forced employees to trade off increased flexibility for career advancement, or have only allowed those at the bottom end of the hierarchy to access flexibilities, such as time-in-lieu arrangements.⁶¹ In many organisations, those who work on casual part-time contracts or arrangements are more vulnerable to redundancy or having their hours reduced when a crisis, such as the GED, occurs. These responses conflict with any progress towards gender equality.

We argue that to ensure that women as well as men can have fulfilling and meaningful lives *at work* as well as *outside* work we need to change the way in which work is organised. To

do this we need to move gender equality and work–life issues from being a stigma on employees who access such policies and being situated at the margin of our discussions and policy debates to become mainstream interests and policy concerns. An illustration of stigmatisation was highlighted in a Federal Magistrates Court decision, *Evans v National Crime Authority [2003]*.⁶² In this case a woman was given a poor performance assessment and refused a renewal of her contract because she had used the carer’s leave that was her entitlement under the relevant industrial regulation. While her complaint was upheld, her case shows vividly how the use of family-friendly benefits enshrined in labour regulation can lead to assumptions of poor performance.

Work organised around the ‘ideal’ full-time worker, unencumbered with family or domestic responsibilities is out of sync with the modern reality of work, family and community. It also carries significant penalties not only for employees but also for employers who miss out on having *all* their employees working to their full potential and the business more effectively responding to customer demand. Changing the organisation of work means ‘ensuring that changes in working time are effectively managed alongside other changes in work organisation and job content’.⁶³

One approach that has been used successfully in the US, UK and a range of Australian organisations is what is known as the ‘Dual Agenda’ approach to gender equitable organisational change. The dual agenda is focused on changing workplace policies and practices in order to enhance the work–life balance of all employees in ways that will also improve workplace performance. Importantly the dual agenda process works to move the focus from specific accommodations such as part-time work for women to examining how work is organised more generally and how it could be improved to better meet both business needs and employee needs. This approach was used in a busy 24-hour police station in Australia to diagnose workflow issues and to improve the quality of predominantly part-time police jobs. The process led to the trialling and ultimately the implementation of an alternative and more effective way of dealing with the inevitable paperwork that follows most policing work, through the designation of a follow-up officer. The new and improved processes were then used by both full and part-time police officers and led to better completion times of briefs and better working relationships with the local court.⁶⁴

Another similar, practical example of changing work organisation is that of Bristol City Council in the UK where working patterns were put in place through a joint union–employer partnership to both improve the quality of council services and employees’ ability to balance their paid work with family and personal lives. In the Council library service the extension of service hours to meet local demand was implemented through employee self-rostering and the payment of penalties for any unsocial hours worked.⁶⁵

In all dual agenda approaches and similar projects the involvement of the workers affected and their unions, where they exist, as well as the buy-in from senior management is crucial to achieving outcomes that are sustainable over time.⁶⁶

Policy Level

As Australian academics John Buchanan and Louise Thornthwaite have aptly noted, ‘no organisation is an island’.⁶⁷ To be effective, workplace initiatives around work reorganisation and job redesign need to be supported by a coherent public policy framework. Two key policy approaches in thinking about how to achieve gender equitable work organisation are those of ‘transitional labour markets’ (TLM) and the European Union ‘flexicurity’ policy approach, which are both currently being canvassed in social policy circles in Australia. Together with the ILO’s decent work agenda, such policy approaches draw on the concept of job quality. While these frameworks can inform employment regulation and social policy, they also have important implications for the design of jobs at the workplace level.

The TLM framework takes a dynamic life course perspective and aims to establish institutional arrangements that can support both enhanced flexibility and better employment outcomes. In many European countries statutory paid leave, including parental leave and study leave, and infrastructure such as childcare, are provided to help people transition smoothly between labour market participation and ‘outside’ activities such raising children, caring for older dependents and education. Such institutional arrangements, which have historically been less available in Australia, help support both quality employment and social inclusion.⁶⁸ Since much of the inequality between men and women in the labour market is brought about by women’s dual role as worker and carer, transitional arrangements that assist movement in and out of the paid workforce can contribute to mitigating the risks associated with caring, such as interrupted careers and less superannuation, and to distributing risks more equally between men and women.⁶⁹

There has also been recent interest from the Brotherhood of St Laurence, the ACTU and social policy scholars in promoting a discussion about ‘flexicurity’ in Australia. Put simply, the term ‘flexicurity’ means flexibility for employers and security for employees. In a policy sense, flexicurity suggests that more labour market flexibility does not necessarily lead to less job security and that more security does not necessarily limit flexibility.⁷⁰ In the Australian context for example, this might mean finding ways, such as employee choice rostering, to provide the flexibility necessary for business effectiveness and productivity without resorting to casual employment.

While such discussion is to be welcomed, it is unclear if in Australia the necessary institutional arrangements are in place to support the full implementation of a ‘flexicurity’ agenda. Not only does Australia lack the social partnership models present in the three European ‘flexicurity’ exemplars (the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden), but arguably Australian industrial relations has become dominated by demand-side (employer-orientated), rather than supply-side (employee orientated) flexibility. Further, the European experience to date suggests that current readings of ‘flexicurity’ fail to recognise that men and women enter the labour market on unequal terms due to the uneven distribution of unpaid care. The aim of much current gender equality policy in Australia and other developed countries is often limited to ensuring women have access to employment and to allowing them to combine work and care. This narrow reading can thus work to entrench gender inequality because it fails to address direct and indirect discrimination against women and maintains them in their currently marginalised location in the labour market in poor quality jobs. Thus one ‘test’ of more gender equitable transitional and flexible arrangements is the extent to which women are enabled to have more continuous careers and men are enabled to participate more equally in unpaid work in the family and in the community.⁷¹ As Jepsen argues, a more gender-sensitive understanding of ‘flexicurity’ *could* be used to address the current gender divide:

... there is a case for establishing the conditions for a new work culture that not only engages women in paid work but legitimatises and normalises men in unpaid work as well as emphasises the need for quality employment for all.⁷²

Policy leadership around these concepts is needed if Australia is to embrace a more flexible, secure and productive employment regime. This regime needs to be responsive to the changing demands on men and women and the businesses for which they work.

Some Good Ideas for a More Equitable Future

To reiterate, our essay has presented the key findings of our research on ‘Jobs, Women and the Global Economic Downturn’. We began by asking if the GED had affected women and men differently and if there had been a shift to more progressive and equitable work arrangements during the downturn. We found evidence of the former and very little of the latter in labour market statistics and the reports of interviewed employees, employers, employer associations and unions.

As we outlined in our introduction, eight key findings emerge from our work: 1. gender blindness in reporting and data collection; 2. very few creative or innovative responses; 3. resurfacing of the preference for the full time, potentially long hours ‘ideal’ worker; 4. increasing job insecurity for women; 5. increased work intensity and stress for those who kept their jobs; 6. little communication or consultation with employees; 7. an increase in negative workplace practices which undermined the quality of working lives; and 8. for a minority of employees the GED offered a chance to try a different work/life balance including other life activities.

What follows is a brief outline, informed by our research, of some recommendations about changes to be made in critical areas. Some of these ideas relate to workplace practice, others to the policy agenda that might support a more innovative approach to women’s jobs in future downturns and, indeed, in the upswing.

1. Data collection

We recommend that employers and governments collect and monitor data on the implications of recession for different groups of employees. Without sex disaggregated data, it is very difficult to measure the impact of recession on women relative to men and, one might argue, makes the task for policy makers constructing worthwhile and inclusive interventions almost impossible. Some progress is occurring and the Australian Bureau of Statistics has now launched a gender statistics web page, titled ‘Gender @ a Glance’, providing a central access point to gender-related statistical sources and sex-disaggregated data.⁷³

2. Innovations at work

Governments should showcase innovative workplace practices that build good jobs in productive workplaces. This can start by modelling good behaviours ‘at home’, so to speak, in public sector workplaces through encouraging enhanced job quality and work organisation. This might, among other things, include promoting a broad ‘quality flexible jobs agenda’ in a range of industries and enterprises of varying size that builds jobs with non–full-time hours, secure employment and predictable scheduling and career paths. It might also include directly funding innovative employment practice in the private sector, such as we have seen within state jurisdictions (for example Victoria).

3. Commitment to equality in the workplace

Building on the quality jobs agenda, governments should articulate and mainstream a policy commitment to equality between men and women within the workplace and all employment-related fields. This should be broadly expressed and not be limited to piecemeal policies that accommodate women at work where they fit a male template or push those who access flexible work policies to the margins. As future demographic challenges hit Australian workplaces, the need to promote quality work and inclusive workplaces rather than ideal, full-time workers will become more pressing. Such workplaces will offer security and flexibility for their employees and the benefits will accrue to business and society.

4. Regulation and enforcement

Our research identified a number of employment experiences for women that have nothing ‘rosy’ about them (including increased insecurity, workload and negative workplace practices). The costs and penalties to employers of engaging in such practices must be increased. The government already has industrial relations laws that make breaching freedom of association, and engaging in unfair dismissal and a range of other behaviours, unlawful, as well as anti-discrimination legislation. There is a clear need to ensure compliance with these legal requirements, especially in the sectors where those most vulnerable (women with young children, mature age women, migrant women) are employed. Governments should also consider widespread education campaigns in languages other than English to increase the knowledge base of both employers and employees.

5. Giving employees a say

Governments can also play a role in encouraging genuine employee consultation in both lean and more prosperous times. Our research shows those workplaces where we identified innovative practice were also the workplaces that valued employee involvement and consultation, often through union involvement and representation. It is time to convene a national conversation with social partners, including unions and employer associations, to think creatively about mechanisms for more meaningful and inclusive consultation and involvement. Governments may then be in a position to establish mechanisms with which employees would be consulted and informed about workplace events and changes that will affect their jobs. On a less grand scale, there is certainly room now for government to ensure that employers are aware of their legal responsibilities and to educate them about positive, progressive and innovative ways that they might engage with and consult with employees and their representatives. There is scope for government to promote innovative collective bargaining agendas that would encourage and establish consultation and information in workplaces where it does not currently exist. Some effort should be directed at establishing minimum standards about consultation and make it easier for women to access independent advice about workplace matters, for example through making it less ‘threatening’ for employees to access union advice or by providing more accessible community advice facilities.

Conclusion

The GED may have passed for Australia but the reverberations for many women workers continue. The suggestions in the media that work became more flexible and that employers were more open to job sharing and alternative patterns of work were exaggerated. Rigidity, insecurity and intensification of work seemed to predominate. The opportunity afforded by the economic crisis to make genuine workplace change was lost and a chance to focus on improving both equity and performance at work was also wasted.

In light of these lessons, government and business could usefully review, rethink and reprioritise the way in which work is organised and jobs are designed. This is necessary because, in good times and in bad, women as well as men are breadwinners and men as well as women have lives outside the workplace. Employers and government need to recognise this reality more consciously and more actively than they have in the past and work toward ensuring the benefits of job redesign and workplace improvements can accrue to all.

¹ We acknowledge and appreciate the research assistance of Susie Elliott (RMIT University) and Megan Clement-Couzner (University of Sydney).

² June 2009 data from ABS *Labour Force, Australia*, June 2010, cat. no. 6202.0. Note that throughout this essay we use the ABS trend data series, for unemployment, underemployment and labour underutilisation rates. Trend data is a smoothed, seasonally adjusted series of estimates. The smoothing of seasonally adjusted series to produce ‘trend’ series reduces the impact of the irregular component of the seasonally adjusted series. Trend estimates are used to analyse the underlying behaviour of a series over time.

³ August 2009 data from ABS *Labour Force, Australia*, August 2009, cat. no. 6202.0.

⁴ As at September 2010; ABS *Labour Force, Australia*, September 2010 cat. no 6202.0.

⁵ As at March 2010, *Employment Outlook 2010*, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Paris.

⁶ In October 2008 the Australian Government announced the first \$10.4 billion stimulus package that primarily benefited individuals and in February 2009 announced a second stimulus package in an attempt to steady the flagging Australian economy. The package provided a further \$42 billion targeted infrastructure, housing and schools as well as low to mid-income earners and small business. The first stimulus package saw cash payments to individuals with the intent of increasing spending and boosting the economy. Despite many recipients opting to pay off debt, consumer spending increased by 3.8 per cent in December, the biggest rise in eight years. The second stimulus package was more focused on job creation.

⁷ FINSIA 2009 ‘Navigating reform: Australia and the Global Financial Crisis’, Financial Services Institute of Australia, Sydney.

⁸ ‘Downturn effects a better work-life balance’ *The Age*, 22 February 2009, accessed on 26 October 2010 at: <<http://www.theage.com.au/national/downturn-effects-a-better-worklife-balance-20090221-8e9n.html>>; ‘Can a downturn give you a better work-life balance?’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 February 2009, accessed on 26 October 2010 at: <http://www.smh.com.au/small-business/can-a-downturn-give-you-better-worklife-balance-20090619-cqwy.html> ‘The Good Times in Part-time’, *HR Monthly*, June 2010, pp. 17–21.

⁹ ABS press release 16 March 2010, accessed on 25 October 2010 at: <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/4102.0Media%20Release3Mar%202010?op=endocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4102.0&issue=Mar%202010&num=&view>

¹⁰ ABC *Life Matters*, Radio National broadcast on 28 October 2010 on small business recovery which included a follow-up with the North Coast Ad Agency after interviewing them in January 2009 about their introduction of a four-day week to survive the downturn and provide better work–life balance. The reduced hours are ongoing, to staff satisfaction; accessed on 25 October 2010 at: <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/lifematters/stories/2010/2884007.htm>

¹¹ ‘The Good Times in Part-time’, *HR Monthly*, June 2010, pp. 17–21.

¹² Van Wanrooy B., Wright S., Buchanan J. and Wilson S. 2009. *Australia at Work: In a Changing World*, Workplace Research Centre, The University of Sydney, pp. ii and 35, at: www.australiaatwork.org.au

¹³ ABS, 2009. 6291.0.55.001 Labour Force, Australia, Detailed - Electronic Delivery.

¹⁴ ABS 2009 *Employee Earnings, Benefits and Trade Union Members, Australia*, August 2009, cat. no. 6310.0, As at August 2009, 24 per cent of all employees were casual, i.e. they had no paid leave entitlements, which means they were not entitled to paid sick leave or paid holiday leave in their main job.

¹⁵ Standing G. 2008 ‘The Australian Charter of Employment Rights: The Missing Dimensions’”, *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 50:2 355–366 (p. 360).

¹⁶ FaCHSIA *Women in Australia* 2009, Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Figures 3.7, 3.8.

¹⁷ NATSEM (2009) *The Impact of a Sustained Gender Wage Gap on the Australian Economy*, The National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, p. 18.

¹⁸ ABS *Labour Force, Australia*, Detailed, Quarterly, May 2010, cat. No. 6291.0.55.003,— Data cube E09, original data.

¹⁹ ABS *Labour Force, Australia*, Detailed, Quarterly, August 2010, cat. no. 6291.0.55.003, Occupational and Industry data for August 2009.

²⁰ Haynes K., Charlesworth S., Baird M., Campbell I., Bamberry L. and Elliott S. 2010 ‘A Regional Perspective on Work, Family and Community Balance in Victoria: Preliminary Results of the VicWAL Survey’, Centre for Applied Social Research, RMIT University.

²¹ Email correspondence with Marian Baird and a representative of the Australian Industry Group, 31 March 2010.

²² Macken D. ‘A World Upturned’, *The Australian Financial Review*, weekend edition, 12 August 2009.

²³ OECD, 2010. *Gender Brief*, OECD, Paris.

²⁴ ACTU Women’s Committee, oral communication at meeting on 18 June 2010.

²⁵ Smith M 2009 ‘Analysis Note: Gender Equality and Recession’, for the European Commission, Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, Brussels.

²⁶ ABS, 2009. 6291.0.55.001 Labour Force, Australia, Detailed - Electronic Delivery.

²⁷ See, for example, *Pay Equity Inquiry, Summary of Findings and Recommendations* NSW Department of Industrial Relations, accessed on 25 October 2010 at:
<http://www.industrialrelations.nsw.gov.au/pdfs/payequity.pdf>

²⁸ Clare R. 2009 ‘The Age Pension, Superannuation and Australian Retirement Incomes’, Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia (ASFA) Resource and Research Centre, p. 22.

²⁹ 18 per cent of women, almost a fifth, work 15 hours or less; 23 per cent of men, almost a quarter, work 50 hours or more. As at August 2009, see ABS *Australian Labour Market Statistics*, October 2009, cat. no. 6105.0. International comparison based on 2004 data and referred to in Lee S., McCann D. and Messenger J. 2007 *Working Time around the World: Trends in Working Hours, Laws and Policies in a Global Comparative Perspective*, Routledge: London.

³⁰ As at August 2009 see ABS *Australian Labour Market Statistics*, October 2009, cat. no. 6105.0.

³¹ Data from ABS *Labour Force, Australia*, May 2008, August 2009, August 2010, cat. no. 6202.0.

³² Richardson D. 2009 *The Impact of the Recession on Women*, Institute Paper No. 3, August 2009, the Australia Institute, Adelaide, p. 1.

³³ Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency (EOWA), 2006. *EOWA Industry Verticals: Finance and Insurance*, Commonwealth of Australia, Sydney. The organisations reporting to EOWA employed 58 per cent of the workforce in the industry and 60 per cent of the women. Accessed on 25 October 2010 at:
<http://www.eowa.gov.au/Information_Centres/Resource_Centre/EOWA_Publications/Industry_Verticals/EOWA_Fin_Ins_IV_2006.pdf>.

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- ³⁴ EOWA, 2010. *Australian Census of Women in Leadership*, Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, p. 16, accessed on 25 October 2010 at: http://www.eowa.gov.au/Australian_Women_In_Leadership_Census/2010_Australian_Women_In_Leadership_Census/Media_kit/EOWA_2010_Census_Full.pdf.
- ³⁵ AiG 2010 'Performance manufacturing index', AiG and Price Waterhouse Coopers, April 2010, pp. 1–2. Interviews with manufacturing union officials.
- ³⁶ See Southwell A., Elliott E., Stafford N. and French G. 2010 *Research Report 3/2010*, Fair Work Australia, pp. 27–28; employers who implemented hiring freezes or no-replacement policies in the event of attrition — changes that involved increased work effort as existing workloads were spread across fewer staff — described the adjustments as 'work redesign for greater efficiency'.
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