



62

PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER
REALISING THE POTENTIAL: A WORKSHOP ON WOMEN
AND AWARD RESTRUCTURING
CANBERRA - 6 JULY 1989**

It gives me great pleasure to be opening this important workshop on women and award restructuring.

I say it is important - and I think I am as qualified as anyone to define just how important is this workshop and the subject with which it deals.

As advocate and later as President of the ACTU, I was proudly and actively involved in the struggle of the labour movement and the women's movement for equal pay.

As Prime Minister I have had the satisfaction of seeing the implementation of legislation such as the Affirmative Action and Sex Discrimination Acts.

On the basis of those experiences, I assert that with the process of award restructuring, women workers stand on the verge of a new era of industrial progress that will be at least the equal of those earlier landmarks in their struggle for industrial and economic rights.

Award restructuring offers gains of enormous significance to all members of the workforce, to their employers, and to the economy generally.

Specifically, award restructuring offers the potential to transform the role of women in the workforce.

So it is very proper that this workshop should be called 'Realising the Potential'.

The workshop will provide a forum for exchanging information that will help all of us to realise the full potential award restructuring provides for improving the position of working women.

And it will allow us to develop further strategies to achieve a better deal for women.

Of course this potential could not be realised today were it not for the solid foundations, built in previous decades, on which women's participation in the workforce is based.

In 1968, when as ACTU advocate I was presenting an Equal Pay Case before the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission on behalf of the Meat Industry Employees Union, I made a point that is still valid today.

I observed that differences in the wages paid to men and women were simply outmoded - relics of assumptions and conceptions dating from the beginning of the twentieth century.

The historic 1972 Equal Pay Case granting 'equal pay for work of equal value' was the successful culmination of that long equal pay struggle.

Its impact is measured by the fact that by the end of the 1980s women are earning almost 80 per cent of the average full-time male earner, compared to less than 60 per cent in the 1960s.

The significance of that achievement is of course increased by the fact that since we came to office in 1983 there has been an enormous increase in the number of jobs available to women.

Of the one and a half million jobs created under my government since April 1983, almost 55 per cent have been taken up by women.

Women's labour force participation rate is now consistently above 50 per cent, an historic high.

We have enacted three major pieces of legislation for affirmative action and equal opportunity programs in the private and public sectors, giving women greater freedom from discrimination in employment.

The Affirmative Action Act, in particular, helps lay the groundwork for award restructuring, in requiring consultation with women, and review of areas such as opportunities for promotion, training development and conditions of service.

Nor have we been content with creating jobs and combating discrimination within the workplace. We have also placed a very heavy emphasis on opening the doors that might otherwise prevent women from taking up the job opportunities that are available.

Two examples are particularly striking: child care and education.

Obviously, access to quality and affordable child care is essential to women's workforce participation.

During my Presidency of the ACTU, maternity and adoption leave for women workers was achieved. This has assisted women to combine family responsibilities with workforce participation.

Now, in Government, we are massively expanding the provision of child care. In the last Budget, we announced the provision of 30,000 new child care places over four years, which will by 1992 bring to 98,000 the number of new Government-funded places - a trebling of places since we took office.

We also support the ACTU's test case on Parental Leave which is due to come before the Industrial Relations Commission shortly. We believe it makes good sense for family responsibilities to be shared between parents.

In the field of education, our achievement is nothing less than ensuring that Australian school kids - girls as well as boys - increasingly are getting the start they need to a satisfactory career.

It seems appalling that only a few years ago, in 1982, only one in three Australian school children was staying on to complete Year 12.

Now, more than half are finishing Year 12 and by the early 1990s, about two thirds will be doing so. In so doing, they will be getting the best possible start to a working life.

Further, we are encouraging girls and women to enrol in maths, science and technical subjects and courses.

The National Policy for the Education of Girls is a key element in that strategy. It emphasises the co-operation of all those involved in the provision of education - the Commonwealth, States, and private systems - in improving the quality of girls' education.

So through greater access to better education and training, and through appropriate support services such as child care, my Government is enabling women to compete more strongly in the labour market.

The Government is making it clear: we want women to have every opportunity to enter the workforce, and we value their aspirations for economic independence and security.

I have briefly sketched these landmarks in the achievements of working women not to create any sense of self congratulation or complacency in this audience but to highlight the potential of the logical next step: award restructuring.

Award restructuring holds the promise of a fairer labour market in which women can attain further wage justice and can further strengthen their labour market position.

It sets the scene for recognising women's skills and rewarding them appropriately, and for offering women not just jobs, but careers. It holds the promise of a labour market in which the terms and conditions of employment do not obstruct women's labour market choices.

Women deserve equal access to the skills, training and remuneration available to men.

Award restructuring can not only remove award provisions that are directly discriminatory, but develop positive measures which encourage and expand women's employment opportunities.

Progress hinges on the goodwill and good sense of both employers and unions, and I feel confident that they are already demonstrating the willingness to tackle issues of discrimination in women's employment.

Without widespread commitment to genuine workplace reform, the gains will not be forthcoming.

We, as a nation, will have lost a valuable opportunity to enhance the nation's economic efficiency, and the working lives, careers, employment opportunities and earnings of Australian women will be constrained.

For the next two days you have the opportunity to deliberate on how award restructuring can be used to best effect to improve the position of women in the labour market. I congratulate those who have organised this workshop, I wish you well in your discussions and I look forward to hearing your timely and practical advice.
