

Media release

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Lawyers Condemn Outdated Statements of Malcolm's Men As Reflecting a 1950's View of Women and Low-Paid Workers.

Australian Lawyers for Human Rights (ALHR) has concerns about the federal government's submission to the Fair Work Commission Annual Wage Review 2017. The government has argued that an increase in the minimum wage is an inefficient way to address relative living standards or the needs of the low-paid.

The government's view is misguided and risks entrenching further inequalities for lower-paid workers generally, and in particular women and young people, who are overrepresented in lower paid jobs. The government has suggested that minimum wage increases will only have a modest impact on the overall gender pay gap, and is a 'blunt instrument' for remedy. ALHR Co-Chair of the Women and Girls' Rights Subcommittee, Anna Kerr, points out that "this clearly ignores the fact that women are more likely to rely on the minimum wage and that decisions regarding the minimum wage will disproportionately impact on women." Contrary to the government's assertions, research findings have demonstrated that minimum wage adjustments favourable to workers can help reduce the gender pay gap.

Dr Rita Shackel, ALHR Co-Chair of the Women and Girls' Rights Subcommittee, points out that "the government has also asserted that many low-wage jobs are 'temporary' however, international studies suggest this trajectory does not necessarily hold true for all demographics – with middle-aged women and single mothers among the groups that may experience less wage progression. Migrant women may also face particular challenges in gaining higher-paid work." Women generally have less upward mobility in employment compared to men. The government's misplaced assumptions about the transitory nature of low-paid work totally ignore the gendered nature of employment mobility and systemic discrimination that women may face.

The government's framing of low-wage earners in high-income households is also deeply concerning. The government has suggested that "low-paid workers are more likely to be young, female, single or without children", and that they have "varied levels of living standards and household income, with nearly half in the top 50 per cent of household income." According to the government this means minimum wage increases will also be "directed to well-off households". Anna Kerr warns, "these statements are dangerous and are unacceptable and adopt a retrogressive and reductive view of women, according them status only as an extension of their partner. This view fails to respect women's autonomy and agency."

ALHR calls on the government to further consider the potential harm caused to low-paid workers generally by their submissions to the Fair Work Commission, and recognise the gendered nature of employment and women's needs consistent with obligations under the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

To arrange an interview with Dr Rita Shackel or Anna Kerr please contact Matt Mitchell on 0431 980 365 or media@alhr.org.au