

Working mothers deserve more: MP

Minister urges businesses to be more flexible

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WOMEN returning to work after having children are treated like second-class citizens and face discrimination from employers and workmates, a Federal Government minister says.

Workforce Participation Minister Sharman Stone called for a dramatic rethink on flexibility for mothers working part-time.

In an interview with *The Age*, Dr Stone urged companies to ensure they were giving part-time working mothers the same opportunities as other workers.

"I believe there is strong discrimination in the workplace against these part-time women workers — where they are seen as being less serious about their careers, as being child-focused not enterprise-focused," she said.

Dr Stone said child-rearing was viewed as detrimental to work, "when in fact women are perfectly capable of being superb employees and at the same time looking after their family responsibilities".

Fewer than one in six Australian women whose partners work full-time opt to return to their jobs for a 38-hour week while their children are under the age of four. One in three work part-time.

Half the nation's married women with working husbands do not have a paying job in the early parenting years, Australian Bureau of Statistics show.

Urging the nation to "get serious" about a workforce

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SHARMAN STONE, federal minister

shortage and declining birth-rate, Dr Stone said working mothers still had to contend with an attitude that condemned them as being less serious about their careers.

But employers who did not offer flexibility and support for part-time working mothers were robbing themselves of productive, competent staff.

"In Australia we do have this incredible workplace culture of very, very long hours at work

and a sense that if you are not still there at 7pm, that you can't be serious about your career," Dr Stone said.

She said that meant "an incredible number of women, in particular," were being treated as second-class citizens because they wished to work three days a week as they made the transition back into the workplace over five, perhaps 10 years.

Companies should think laterally about offering employees the right to work from home or to work shorter hours instead of viewing such deals as "a cop-out", she urged.

"I think we've got to encourage employers to do audits of their part-time women returning to work, and see are they offering women the same professional development opportunities, the same options for training, even travel."

Dr Stone said men should not be forgotten, either. Companies needed to consider whether they were "discriminating against men who might ask for time off for family-focused activities. "Is there a black mark against their name if they start to behave like fathers in the workplace?"