



# National Council of Women of Australia Inc Ltd

Secretary ,  
Standing Committee on Regional Australia  
House of Representatives  
Parliament of Australia

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## **National Council of Women of Australia Submission to the Inquiry on FIFO and DIDO workforce practices House of Representative Standing Committee on Regional Australia**

### 1. Introduction

National Council of Women of Australia noted with interest the announcement on 23 August 2011 that the Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government, The Hon Simon Crean MP, asked the House Committee on Regional Australia to inquire into and report on the use 'fly-in, fly-out' (FIFO) and 'drive-in, drive-out' (DIDO) workforce practices in Regional Australia.

NCWA is pleased to have the opportunity to submit to the inquiry and looks forward to notification about the progress of this investigation, and of the schedule for hearings.

As an Australia wide umbrella organization with State and Territory constituent councils, with hundreds of NGO affiliates and associate (individual) members, NCWA is well placed to contribute to raising awareness of the Committee's inquiry and to encourage community input. NCWA is an affiliate of the International Council of Women ICW/CIF which operates as a recognised NGO within the UN system with ECOSOC recognition and representatives in New York, Geneva and Rome.

This submission reflects National Council of Women of Australia's long standing interest in health and well-being in the wider Australian community and its commitment to the elimination of violence, especially directed towards women and children. It draws from material supplied by members of the NCWA team of pro bono Advisers based in the resource rich regions of Australia including Western Australia, Queensland, and Tasmania.

### 2. Extent and projected growth in FIFO/DIDO work practices, including in which regions and key industries this practice is utilised;

While FIFO/DIDO has been associated in the public mind with the operations of the mining industry in remote areas, it also has its presence more established communities outside the capital cities; for example Kalgoorlie has a significant FIFO/DIDO workforce as do Tasmania's West Coast mining towns. It should also be noted that the shifting of workers to a given location on

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regular but part-time basis is also a practice of long standing in other industries including off shore gas platforms and in military and civil contracting in other industries including people management in migration control and overseas development.

Growth in this type of work seems likely to increase given the fact that Fly in Fly out (FIFO) is seen by many to provides outstanding opportunities for younger people to be well remunerated for work with “cutting edge technology” in remote mining areas such as the Pilbara and Kimberley regions of WA with huge companies such as Rio Tinto. Employees are given training and paid a commute allowance on top of a large base salary, with six weeks of annual leave. Typically, employees work long, stressful 12 hour-shifts of two weeks at work and one week off, or 14 days on shift followed by 7 days on leave.

3. Costs and benefits for companies, and individuals, choosing a FIFO/DIDO workforce as an alternative to a resident workforce;

From the viewpoint of the companies, FIFO is cost-effective way of organising its workforce. By contrast with the prior practice in Australia especially in power generation for example, FIFO reduces the costs associated with constructing homes for a worker and his or her family, and saves in infrastructure costs as well as the lead in time involved in construction when workers and families are to be permanently located. Similarly there is less maintenance and fewer costs associated with closure of the facility.

There are implications also for the employers rights of association, because the different shifts do not know each other; longer shifts are associated with FIFO which means that there is less time for workers to socialise. With the 12 hour shifts that are usually associated with FIFO the different shifts are either sleeping or working; there is no overlap in free time; and when they have finished their shifts they fly out to their respective homes. Even workers on the same shift tend not to socialise much with each other because they are fatigued and need to sleep.

The disadvantage to the employer is that the burn out rate of workers tends to be higher so that there is a higher turnover of workers. Again this probably makes for a workforce that is likely not to question management; however it also means a dull workforce that may not have much initiative and a less experienced workforce.

The benefits for individuals include high wages usually associated with FIFO as well as longer periods of time off due to the longer shifts; this can give greater flexibility as to what a worker may choose to do in that time off. This type of work when the employees are housed in villages can be satisfactory when at best they are provided with transport, healthy nutritious meals, air-conditioned accommodation and a range of recreational activities. For young unattached women or women with partners in the mining industry, it is an outstanding opportunity to receive training and high salaries, enabling them to save to buy a home, as well as the opportunity to develop relationships in a close knit environment, while contributing to the development and prosperity of Australia.

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The costs can be great: For some married women, FIFO has been found to place considerable stress on family relationships. A Canadian study by Costa, Silva and Hui (2006) of women in mining, oil and gas industries, found that times of parting and of reunion were major sources of stress, along with the challenges of defining roles within the family, parenting and conflict between spouses over the use of leave time and money. FIFO is particularly challenging for employees with young children or those wishing to start a family, and for single mothers. FIFO can place stress on relationships and on workers' psychological well-being, particularly on women in lower paid positions.

#### 4. Effect of a non-resident FIFO/DIDO workforce on established communities, including community wellbeing, services and infrastructure;

The potential for a non-resident FIFO workforce brings few, if any economic and social benefits to the local communities in mining regions. When the workers fly out they usually fly out with their money. They tend to bring their personal requirements with them so have little reason or time to spend money in the town where they may be based, apart from the semi-structured drinking patterns identified in some research for example the account given of the mining community on the AHRC website. Moreover because of the nature of their shifts they have little time to contribute socially and often have no interest to do so anyway.

This can lead to resentment within the established community. They may have had expectations of a cash inflow from the non-resident workforce. Instead they feel used as their infrastructure/services are drawn upon with no apparent return e.g. water and sewerage which cannot be taken for granted in isolated communities. This resentment is exacerbated if the non resident workforce is seen to receive (actual or perceived) incentive perks that are over and above what the resident workforce receive. Moreover FIFO workforces are associated with a greater push for longer shifts which are then likely to be imposed on the resident workforce. Longer shifts are more stressful and they also strain the social capital that the resident workforce might previously have been able to contribute to the community; in turn the workers' families are also stressed and therefore also unable to contribute as positively to the social fabric of their community. Inevitably some resident families leave and those workers also fly in and fly out. Their families then no longer have the stress of having to tip toe around during the long shifts but they face other dysfunctions associated with FIFO. They may see this as compensated by access to better services and infrastructure associated with metropolitan living. Meanwhile in the established community a decline in population due to families leaving results in a decline in services placing greater pressure on more families to leave.

#### 5. Impact on communities sending large numbers of FIFO/DIDO workers to mine sites;

Communities that send large numbers of FIFO/DIDO workers to mine sites face the stresses associated with the constant disruption of fly in fly out. The social capital, that the workers might otherwise have provided, is just not there to support community building, and their families are stressed and consequently unable to contribute in an ongoing way that they may have done

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previously. Clearly this has repercussions on the whole community. There may be some economic input but the mental and physical well being of the whole community is likely to suffer.

NCW WA ran a seminar in 2008 on depression and mental health at Mandurah about 70 km from Perth. One of the keynote speakers addressed the issue of women dealing with the stress of partners working in a fly in fly out work situation. Some of the points raised at the seminar were

- Impact on women of the stresses on families caused by the fly in fly out work placement.
- Impact on family structures- eg when the male partner returns on leave the children respect his decisions regarding family rules, when he returns to work the structure changes again. Teenagers are often confused and difficult to manage.
- Family finances fluctuate as fly in fly out appointments are often short term and there may be some weeks even months before another job.
- The woman often becomes isolated, difficult to join groups as no partner to assist with child care particularly in the evenings.
- Women working in fly in fly out situations are sometimes exposed to inappropriate behaviour by work mates e.g. maybe only one or two women on a site, but women accept situations they may not tolerate otherwise because of the tradeoff in higher pay. Such women workers become isolated from their friends at home as they are away so often and it is hard to maintain relationships with friends, sporting groups.
- Rural women are often affected as farmers take fly in fly out jobs to assist in times of drought or difficulties on the farm. The woman is left with an extra work load.

## 6. Long term strategies for economic diversification in towns with large FIFO/DIDO workforces;

The aim should be to make FIFO/DIDO less attractive and to make it more attractive for resident workforces. In so far as this refers to the established towns with the non-resident FIFO workforce then efforts need to be made to make the town a much more attractive place for families, and the conditions associated with FIFO should be less attractive. E.g. more family (and worker) friendly shift rosters, improved and more reliable health and education facilities, upgrading of recreational facilities, workplace training facilities; less perks associated with FIFO e.g. accommodations costs, meals etc.

## 7. Key skill sets targeted for mobile workforce employment, and opportunities for ongoing training and development;

While targeting the mobile workforce with key skill sets and opportunities for ongoing training and development is seen as advantageous to the companies, there is an argument which suggests more could be done to train locally sourced personnel to create a stable resident workforce that does not face FIFO stresses.

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### 8. Provision of services, infrastructure and housing availability for FIFO/DIDO workforce employees;

From one view point, to actively encourage the development of a FIFO workforce by facilitating FIFO work practices through the provision of services, infrastructure and housing etc could be seen as a dis-service in that encourages workers to enter a stressful work environment that has repercussions on society as a whole. There is some evidence that there are detrimental effects on established communities hosting significant non-resident FIFO workforces, and on the sending communities.

Some thought needs to be given to longer term planning of community development and best use of facilities following the end of a companies operations in a given locale.

We have been interested to follow the work of Professor Kerry Carrington one of the principal researchers for Safeguarding Rural Australia: Addressing Masculinity and Violence in Rural Settings is a QUT ARC project (number DP0878476). This work focussed on change in rural communities and its impact on men and men's health resulting in higher mortality and morbidity rates for violence including, interpersonal violence, alcohol related violence, domestic violence, suicide, motor vehicle accidents and workplace injuries experienced by men in rural Australia compared to men in cities, and the policy implications of the issues raised.

Subsequent research by Professor Carrington beyond the ARC funded project was released recently. The majority of the 559 persons surveyed were from residents affected by Queensland's coal mining and resources sector development in the Bowen Basin Region (Collinsville, Dysart, Blackwater, Emerald, Moranbah and Moura and surrounding communities). Professor Carrington commented "While the state and national economy is clearly benefiting from the resources boom, the impact on local communities needs to be much more carefully considered. Mining activity has sprung up around many country towns, without regard to sufficient planning for this sudden increase in transient population and the flow-on effects on services, infrastructure, housing and community wellbeing. While there is a common assumption that mining activity brings money into these local economies, this survey has shown that many local businesses report they are actually suffering, and even closing down, because of the 'fly-over-effects' on the local economy, and an inability to compete with mining industry wages. Moreover, the non-resident workforce is not spending a lot of money in the local community, with alcohol and fuel being the two key exceptions." [QUT News, 21 June 2011]

### 9. Strategies to optimise FIFO/DIDO experience for employees and their families, communities and industry;

It is timely that this review has been established to so that there will be an opportunity for the Australian community to evaluate the emergence of FIFO as a regular work practice for a regular workforce.

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Where a FIFO workforce is seen to be the only option such as in very remote areas where there is no existing infrastructure let alone community. In these situations the companies which are usually very large could attract members of their regular workforce for short periods of FIFO e.g. 3 months out of 12 or 18 or even 24. This would have the advantage of enabling them to attract experienced skilled workers, who do not get burnt out. They should ensure that the workers have easy access back to their regular employment. The families would not experience quite the same dislocation as felt by regular FIFO; but the families should also be supported by the employers in the same sort of way that families of workers in Antarctica are supported. Support needs to be ongoing as the workers return to regular work practices and regular family life.

10. Potential opportunities for non-mining communities with narrow economic bases to diversify their economic base by providing a FIFO/DIDO workforce;

There is evidence that areas where de-industrialisation has occurred or where changed work practices or the vagaries of climate have resulted in significant employment deficits for example in farming areas affected by drought or regions like the Latrobe Valley in Victoria, what are non-mining or former mining communities with narrow economic bases have been able bolster their economic base by providing skilled or trainable FIFO/DIDO workforce.

11. Current initiatives and responses of the Commonwealth, States/Territories:

Some other industries could benefit by application of FIFO/DIDO practices for example the provision of high level health services in remote locations.

The current consultations being undertaken by the COAG agency the Health Workforce Australia on the Rural and Remote Health Workforce Innovation and Reform (RRHWIR) Strategy is an example of a governmental initiative that has the potential to provide national guidance on future needs, reforms and initiatives to improve the health care services of those in rural and remote communities.

The RRHWIR Strategy is intended to be a complementary document to Health Workforce Australia's *National Health Workforce Innovation and Reform Strategic Framework for Action* and the *National Training Plan*. It aims to promote better utilisation of existing workforce; support optimal use of skills and workforce adaptability; and to build workforce capacity for responding and adapting to changing demands in rural and remote communities.

The development of the RRHWIR Strategy is being supported by a consultation process with stakeholders from the health and education sectors. Consultations are being conducted throughout September and October 2011 in 19 metropolitan, regional, rural and remote locations.

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## 13. Any other related matter.

Work practices that involve the ongoing dis-association of a workforce from families and communities place great strain on the social fabric. Work life balance and shared parenting are difficult to accomplish for households locked into the patterns of absent parents implicit in FIFO work. The early 20<sup>th</sup> century saw many important advances in workers' rights, in particular the importance of a balance between work, rest and play. Every state in Australia still recognises the importance of these gains through the 8 hours or Labour Day public holidays.

Whilst it is acknowledged that FIFO can create opportunities for professional growth and financial independence including for women, greater flexibility in rosters, reliable policies and standards regarding family and maternity issues, as well as the establishment of a welcoming work environment which is also supportive of young families, would assist in making the FIFO more friendly and conducive to women and men of all ages.

It is possible that the debate flowing from the current inquiry and from greater attention to best practice in the industries involved will help contribute to more positive outcomes in industries using FIFO/DIDO.

Submission lodged By Margaret Findlater-Smith, National President on behalf on NCWA  
12 October 2011

### Some sources

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