

Legal gender battle

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FEMALE lawyers are disadvantaged by inflexible work practices, lack of childcare, and court and tribunal operations, the state's top women lawyers say.

(AdelaideNow would like to hear your stories about inflexible work practices. Scroll down to the comment box below.)

The Women Lawyers Association of SA also wants changes in attitude in the legal profession which mean many female lawyers receive lower pay compared to their male colleagues.

"The gender gap in pay serves as a disincentive to having children early on in their careers and puts pressure on mothers to return quickly to the paid workforce after the birth of a child," the association says.

The lawyers' complaints are detailed in a previously unreleased submission to the state parliamentary committee investigating work-life balance.

The committee, chaired by Labor MP Grace Portolesi, is seeking to identify best practice employment standards and economic development opportunities for SA as a result of flexible employment practices.

The lawyers' submission says private law firms are, in the main, reluctant to introduce flexible work practices.

"Attitudes persist that such options are just for women, the less ambitious or the lazy," it says.

"In addition, practitioners worry about how they will be perceived in the profession if they engage in part-time work and job-sharing arrangements or decide to work from home.

"Firms need encouragement to recognise that practices such as part-time work can be of benefit to both the employee and the firm."

The submission says accessible and affordable childcare is a key concern for many of the association's members. It says waiting lists at centres are common, especially those in the city or near-city locations.

"Opening and closing hours of childcare centres are inflexible and do not accommodate many lawyers who have to work long hours," the submission says.

"Lawyers with family responsibilities are often disadvantaged by the way in which courts and tribunals operate.

"There may be little flexibility given to parents who need to leave court early to collect children from childcare, kindergarten or school. Courts need to be educated about the needs of parents and be willing to accommodate these needs in a sympathetic manner."

Lawyer Melissa Ballantyne said she was "very lucky".

"I work three days a week and management is very flexible, allowing me to work the days I want," she said.