To highlight the issues raised, Sheree shared the stories of two of her research participants, Anna and Miriam, who were both employed in higher education after the birth of the youngest child and made significant changes to their careers so as to combine paid work and caring. Anna was employed at a high-level position prior to the birth, but rather than returning to work in the same capacity she resigned and took up another position at a different institution, four levels lower than her previous appointment prior to maternity leave. Anna saw this as a viable solution to the issue of managing work and caring for her children. Miriam talked about her intention to find a new job and taking unpaid leave for a year. She stated ‘I’m at Level B now and I’d actually consider going down [a level] in order to take a part-time job if there was one that I thought was truly a part-time job or job-share’.

Both examples highlight the challenges of juggling paid work and caring in an employment culture which demands long hours and highlights an ‘ideal-worker’ norm, a key issue which Sheree believes needs to be discussed in conjunction with attracting and retaining women in the higher education sector.

This report by Paula Johnson based on the presentation by Sheree Cartwright at the 2009 NTEU Women’s Conference.

Sheree Cartwright’s experiences of employment within the higher education sector mirror that of many women, being a combination of casual work and fixed-term contracts. This combined with the acknowledgement that the majority of female academics across Australian universities work in levels A, B and C, and an interest in how gender inequality, work and family are connected, led her research on how women resolve working in this environment with family commitments and the factors which influence the decisions they make.

Sheree Cartwright
Stories from inside the ivory tower
Women’s experiences of combining paid work and family life when employed in the Victorian higher education sector

A great opportunity, gratifying, exciting, educational.
Conference delegate

Excellent – very worthwhile.
Conference delegate