



Australian  
National  
University

THE GLOBAL  
INSTITUTE  
FOR WOMEN'S  
LEADERSHIP

8 September 2022

Dear Senate Select Committee members,

We welcome the establishment of a Senate Select Committee to address the important issues at the intersection of work and care. Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission.

### **Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Work and Care**

**September 2022**

This submission has been prepared by the Global Institute for Women's Leadership (GIWL) at the Australian National University (ANU). Our submission responds to three of the Committee's Terms of Reference.

#### **About us**

Chaired and founded by the Hon. Julia Gillard AC, the vision of the Global Institute for Women's Leadership (GIWL) brings together rigorous research, practice and advocacy to better understand and address the causes of gender inequality and women's underrepresentation in leadership positions. We work across sectors and countries to connect current activity in gender equality with what research evidence shows to be truly effective.

As internationally recognised experts within a world-leading knowledge institution, the Australian National University, GIWL is experienced in shaping policy development on issues of gender equality. We comprise a team of established scholars with deep knowledge of women's leadership, public policy interventions around gender, sexuality, and cultural diversity, and practical experience working with government and industry at all levels around gender equality and systems change.

Your sincerely,

Dr Miriam Glennie, Dr Gosia Mikolajczak and Dr Alex Fisher, on behalf of GIWL ANU.

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## **Response to terms of reference**

Our submission addresses three of the Committee's Terms of reference: b, d and i. Although there are many forms of care that impact the work and non-work wellbeing of carers, in our submission we focus on providing a gender lens to issues relevant to caring for dependent children. Specifically, we highlight current limitations and possible improvements to the three areas known to improve the work-life balance of working parents: parental leave provisions, affordable quality childcare and flexible work arrangements.

### **b. The impact of combining various types of work and care (including of children, the aged, those with disability) upon the well-being of workers, carers and those they care for.**

When balanced, care and work responsibilities can be rewarding and beneficial for well-being (Ahrens and Ryff 2006). Fulfilling work can provide a buffer against problems at home, and a fulfilling home life can provide a buffer against problems at work. However, in relationships between women and men, women tend to shoulder the majority of household labour and care work. Indeed, Australian women spend nearly twice as many hours on care work than Australian men (Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), 2018). Australian women also make up the majority of primary carers (68%), including the majority of primary unpaid carers for children, older adults, and people with disability (AHRC 2018).

This disproportionate care burden placed on women can result in women's heightened experiences of role strain, conflict, and guilt when balancing care and work responsibilities (Aarntzen et al. 2020; Crompton and Lyonette 2006; Morgenroth et al. 2021), and can be especially pronounced for women who occupy low-paying, unrewarding jobs or those who have unsupportive or no partners (Lundberg-Love and Faulkner, 2008). In addition to impacting women's health and well-being, this disproportionate care burden can undermine women's economic stability and mobility (Baker 2010; Horne et al. 2018; Kleven et al. 2019).

Reducing the care burden placed on women, for example, by increasing men's engagement in care work and providing access to affordable, high-quality childcare has numerous benefits for well-being. Partners who share care work equally report better relationship satisfaction, health, and well-being (Croft et al. 2015). Children also benefit when men engage equally in childcare. Specifically, high quality care from fathers is associated with better social and cognitive development among children (Coltrane and Adams 2001; Marsiglio et al. 2000). Men's greater involvement in care work also has broader societal impact including reductions in household violence and the greater economic empowerment of women (Barker et al. 2021). For single parents, access to affordable,

high-quality childcare is similarly important for maintaining a healthy balance between work and care responsibilities as well as for children's development (NICHD 2006).

- d. the adequacy of current work and care supports, systems, legislation and other relevant policies across Australian workplaces and society;**
- i. consideration of the policies, practices and support services that have been most effective in supporting the combination of work and care in Australia, and overseas;**

### **Parental leave**

Paid parental leave provides financial support to parents to enable time for creating psychological bonds with a child in the crucial early stages of development, while balancing the demands of paid work. Australia compares poorly internationally on paid parental leave and access to quality childcare. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2021) ranked Australia 37<sup>th</sup> out of 41 rich countries on indicators of parental leave, along with access to and the quality and affordability of childcare. Government-funded parental leave in Australia is lower than international leaders (EU Parliament), and less than half of non-public sector employers provide paid parental leave (WGEA 2022).

Importantly, current parental leave entitlements in Australia are not only relatively low but also unevenly distributed across the genders, reinforcing traditional gender roles and associated gender stereotypes, and perpetuating men's low uptake of parental leave. For example, the identification of primary and secondary carers assumes that one parent (typically a woman) will take the main responsibility for childcare, while the other parent (typically a man) will play the supporting role. Similarly, the use of binary gender language in the description of leave entitlements (such as 'maternity' and 'paternity' leave) reinforces the idea that all children are raised in two-parent households comprised of heterosexual couples. Exclusionary gender-binary language (such as 'maternity' and 'paternity' leave entitlements) should be replaced with gender neutral language, such as 'parental' or 'carer's leave'.

### What works:

#### *Government-funded, inclusive parental leave for all parents:*

International leaders in paid parental leave provide long periods of government-funded, gender-inclusive parental leave (UNICEF 2021; EU Parliament 2020). In addition to supporting men's early bonding with a new child, men's participation in parental leave also increases father's future uptake of flexible working to better share care responsibilities throughout child raising years (Duvander et al 2017). Some examples of leading practice on parental leave internationally include:

- Policy provisions encouraging men to take parental leave:
  - In Finland, both parents are entitled to the same amount of parental leave, only part of which (approx. 40%) can be transferred to the other parent.
  - In Germany, 2 more months of leave available to the couple only if both parents take the parental leave
  - In Iceland, 13 non-transferable weeks are reserved for each parent + 13 weeks can be divided flexibly
  - In Norway, 15 non-transferable weeks are reserved for each parent + 19 weeks can be divided flexibly
- Government leadership is parental leave funding:
  - In Germany, the state pays 67% of the employee's average monthly income
  - In Norway, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service covers the parental leave during the child's first year
- Inclusive policy provisions for non-standard families:
  - In Iceland, single parents have the right to use parental allowance of two parents

### **Childcare**

The availability of quality and affordable childcare increases children's development and supports parents' workforce participation. Australia has some of the least affordable childcare amongst rich countries. In 2021, Australia was amongst only 8 of 47 rich countries in which childcare for two children costs over a quarter of a couple's average wages (UNICEF 2021). Although additional subsidies for parents with two children have since been announced, Australia remains a low performer internationally.

Lack of access to quality, affordable childcare compounds both economic and gender disadvantage, as it discourages or even prohibits workforce participation amongst low-income earners. In addition to gender expectations associated with caring placed on women, women tend to be lower income earners in heterosexual relationships. These factors combined result in more women disengaging

from paid employment, or working fewer hours, to accommodate unpaid care for dependent children (WGEA 2016).

Women's workforce participation in Australia is low in comparison to OECD countries, in part due to the above average costs of childcare. As a result, the overall gender pay gap in Australia (including full-time, part-time and casual employees) is well above the average pay gap in other rich countries (ILO 2019). This contributes to the gender superannuation gap, with older women more likely to experience financial stress than older men (WGEA 2016).

#### What works:

*Government funded or subsidised childcare for children under 3:* The rate of subsidy could be increased to improve the affordability of childcare for children under 3 and bring Australia more in line with international counterparts. Funding system design should consider ways to ensure a fair and living wage for childcare workers.

*Fully-funded early childhood education from age 3:* The majority of rich countries profiled by UNICEF (2021) provide free (fully government-funded) early childhood education from age 3. In Australia nationally, free early childhood education begins at age 4. This age could be reduced, as is in the state of Victoria.

#### **Flexible work**

Flexibility is an enabler of women's ongoing participation in employment (Chung and van der Horst 2018) and supports men's participation in unpaid care work (Norman et al 2017). Under the *Fair Work Act 2009* many employees have the right to request flexible working arrangements, but employers do not have a responsibility to approve employee requests. There is substantial evidence that barriers to access are widespread, with many employers denying flexible working requests for unsubstantiated reasons (GIWL 2021).

When accessible, reduced and flexible hours are often available only on a precarious basis via fixed term positions or casual employment which creates economic precarity for individuals in those positions. Reflecting these circumstances, women are less likely to hold secure, permanent employment and more likely to be under-employed than men (ABS 2021). Additionally, when flexibility is available, it is often employer-led – meaning that employers are the primary determinants of work schedules for employees' working on flexible arrangements. Reflecting these

circumstances, the children of women working in highly casualised industries such as retail are less likely than others to attend pre-school as casual workers are unable to secure work schedules that align with school schedules (Cortis et al 2021).

What works:

*Secure employment:* Many countries have similarly high levels of part-time employment without levels of insecure employment as high as Australia's (e.g. the Netherlands, Germany). Both employment legislation and organisational policies can be improved to reduce the quantity of insecure employment in Australia, particularly for workers seeking access to flexible work arrangements.

*Condensed work weeks:* A number of countries (e.g. Iceland, Belgium, New Zealand, Germany) have experimented with condensed work weeks, including four day weeks and nine day fortnights, without reduced pay. Although not free from challenges, these trials have found positive benefits stemming from the reduction in working hours and have not led to a reduction in productivity (Laker and Roulet 2019). Condensing the working hours of all workers can support improved gender balance in paid and unpaid work, in addition to supporting broader benefits for employee wellbeing and work-life balance.

*Balanced working hours:* Long working hours are a barrier to work-life balance, which provide a barrier to women's workforce participation and a barrier to men's participation in unpaid care. Long working hours are also a barrier to flexible working, as the benefit of flexibility is limited when the quantity of work hours is too high to accommodate non-work activity. Many European countries have standardised working hours that are generally well implemented (e.g. France 35 hour week). National employment standards exist in Australia (38 hour week) but are less well implemented - evidenced in much longer working hours in Australia than comparable OECD countries (OECD 2021).

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