

# Submission to the Select Committee Inquiry into Work and Care

SEPTEMBER 2022

## About Per Capita

Per Capita is an independent progressive think tank, dedicated to fighting inequality in Australia. We work to build a new vision for Australia based on fairness, shared prosperity, community and social justice. Our research is rigorous, evidence-based and long-term in its outlook. We consider the national challenges of the next decade rather than the next election cycle. We ask original questions and offer fresh solutions, drawing on new thinking in social science, economics and public policy. Our audience is the interested public, not just experts and policy makers. We engage all Australians who want to see rigorous thinking and evidence-based analysis applied to the issues facing our country's future.

## Terms of Reference

On 3 August 2022, the Senate resolved to establish a Select Committee on Work and Care to inquire into and report on:

- a. the extent and nature of the combination of work and care across Australia and the impact of changes in demographic and labour force patterns on work-care arrangements in recent decades;
- 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;
- c. the adequacy of workplace laws in relation to work and care and proposals for reform;
- d. the adequacy of current work and care supports, systems, legislation and other relevant policies across Australian workplaces and society;
- e. consideration of the impact on work and care of different hours and conditions of work, job security, work flexibility and related workplace arrangements;
- f. the impact and lessons arising from the COVID-19 crisis for Australia's system of work and care;
- g. consideration of gendered, regional and socio-economic differences in experience and in potential responses including for First Nations working carers, and potential workers;
- h. consideration of differences in experience of disabled people, workers who support them, and those who undertake informal caring roles;
- 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; and
- j. any related matters.

## Introduction

*".... housework is everything. It's a ubiquitous physical demand that has hamstrung and silenced women for most of human history."*

Megan K Stack, *Women's Work*, 2019<sup>1</sup>

Per Capita welcomes the Senate's initiative to inquire into the interaction of paid and unpaid work, especially the work of care, and its effects on workers, carers and recipients of care. This is an issue that affects all Australians, and consideration of how we might better balance the demands of paid labour with the needs of our families and loved ones is fundamental to creating a more equitable and just society.

This submission, which is largely drawn from Per Capita's 2020 report *Measure for Measure: Gender Equality in Australia*, looks at the impact of unpaid labour and care through a gender lens. It is overwhelmingly women in heterosexual relationships with dependent children who undertake care and other unpaid domestic work in Australia, more so than in most comparable OECD nations.

Globally, women still undertake more than three-quarters of the world's unpaid care work.<sup>2</sup> The largest discrepancies between women's and men's rates of unpaid work are found in developing countries, but still in relatively egalitarian nations like Australia, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate amount of unpaid domestic labour and care, even when they are in the paid labour force.

Women's share of the paid labour force in Australia has increased from just over a third forty years ago, to almost half today. So, it would be natural to expect that the share of unpaid labour has seen a similar shift towards a more equitable distribution between men and women over the same time.

Unfortunately, this is not so.

### The value of unpaid work and care in Australia

Domestic labour is still regarded as 'women's work', and our economic systems refuse to recognise its value, or even to properly acknowledge it as work at all. When, almost 80 years ago, British economists James Meade and Richard Stone developed the system of national accounting that would become known as the Gross Domestic Product, they explicitly refused to include the value of women's domestic and unpaid labour.<sup>3</sup>

Meade and Stone calculated their accounting standard according to the measurement of goods and services that could be bought and sold. A young woman, Phyllis Deane, whom they had hired to apply their method in some remote British colonies, quickly realised that the omission of women's unpaid domestic labour was a significant flaw in the model, excluding a massive amount of economic activity simply because it was not formally exchanged for money in the economy – in fact, as she recognised, because such activity was historically regarded as 'women's work'.

<sup>1</sup> Stack, Megan K, *Women's work: a reckoning with work and home*, Doubleday, New York, 2019. P.

<sup>2</sup> Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work, ILO: 2018. P. 53

<sup>3</sup> Messac, Luke, *Outside the Economy: Women's Work and Feminist Economics in the Construction and Critique of National Income Accounting*, in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Volume 46, 2018, Issue 3, Pp 552 – 578.

Deane recognised that if the purpose of the national accounts was to inform policies not only to increase national wealth, but to more equitably distribute it, then it was essential to count the contributions of all producers in an economy, which women working in the home most certainly were. Unfortunately, her pleading fell on deaf ears, and to this day, despite further ground-breaking work in the 1980s by Marilyn Waring, the GDP standard does not account for women's unpaid labour.<sup>4</sup>

Recently, a renewed push by feminist economists and public policy thinkers for women's unpaid labour to be measured as a contribution to our economy has seen some research try to quantify the financial benefits afforded by the care and other domestic work predominantly done by women in our societies. A report by Deloitte Access Economics, commissioned by the Victorian Government, put the value of unpaid work and care in Victoria at around \$206 billion in 2016-2017.<sup>5</sup>

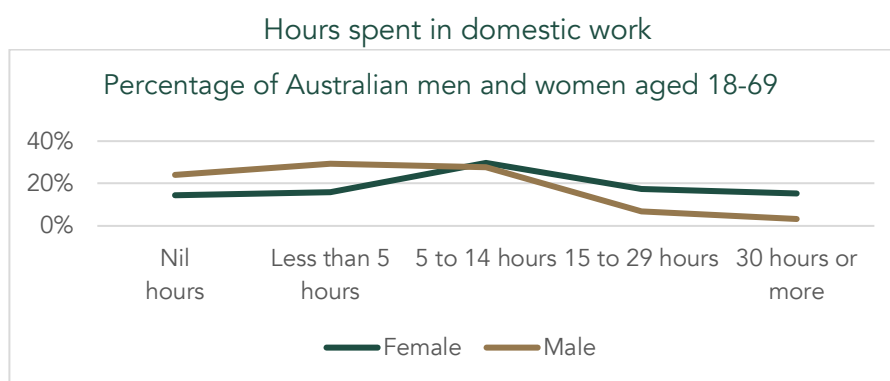
Extrapolating that to the Australian population at the time, of which Victoria comprised almost exactly 25%, we can reasonably assume that the value of unpaid work and care nationally is around \$824 billion. The GDP of Australia was, in that same year, \$1.69 trillion – so the value of unpaid work and care in our economy is equal to just under half of our total GDP.

That same report found that the value of women's unpaid work and care is 60% higher than that of men. In Victoria, on average, women do 32.9 hours per week while men do 19.8 hours of unpaid work and care.

### Women shoulder a disproportionate load of unpaid domestic labour

The 2016 report, *Women at Work: Australia and the United States* by Rae Cooper, Meraiah Foley and Marian Baird for the United States Study Centre at the University of Sydney, revealed interesting findings about the nature of women's work in Australia, and how it differs from other comparable countries.

The report found that “[w]omen in Australia spend 48.4 per cent less time in paid work, and 80.8 per cent more time on unpaid household work each day than men. This is significantly higher than the average for other industrialised countries in the OECD, where women spend 38.8 per cent less time in paid work and 49.3 per cent more time in unpaid work than men”.<sup>6</sup> ABS data bears out this discrepancy between the hours of domestic work done by men and women in Australia, as shown here.



Source: ABS 2018 Census Table Builder

<sup>4</sup> Waring, Marilyn, *Counting for Nothing: what men value and what women are worth*, Heritage, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Deloitte Access Economics, *Modelling the value of unpaid work and care*, Office for Women, Department of Health and Human Services, Victoria, October 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Cooper, Rae, Foley, Meraiah and Baird, Marian: *Women at Work: Australia and the United States*, United States Study Centre, University of Sydney, 2014. P. 15

This unequal share of domestic labour reflects the fact that Australian women are more likely to work part-time than are women in other countries, especially in the US, where even women with young children are more likely to be in full-time, rather than part-time, employment.

*Women at Work* draws on a 2004 study for the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, *Family Structure, Usual and Preferred Working Hours, and Egalitarianism in Australia*, by Robert Drago from Pennsylvania State University, with Yi-Ping Tseng and Mark Wooden from the University of Melbourne. This study highlights the prevalence in Australia of the “neotraditional family”, in which “...both heterosexual parents participate in the labor market and in household and child care tasks, but the division of labor is highly unequal, with the man performing a disproportionate amount of paid work and the woman undertaking most unpaid work for the family”.<sup>7</sup>

Certainly, this family model, in which the man works full time and the woman only part time in paid employment, while the woman undertakes most of the unpaid care and domestic labour in the home, is the dominant one among Australian heterosexual couple households.

Drago et al posit that this is partly due to the relative security of part-time work in Australia compared to the US. Given that, “...part-time employees in Australia have been guaranteed pay equality since the 1970s, and typically lose neither superannuation nor health insurance benefits when switching from full- to part-time employment”, none of which benefits are accorded to part-time workers in the US, the authors theorise that “[b]y making part-time employment relatively attractive, Australia may shore up inequality in the division of household labor”.<sup>8</sup>

That inequality is striking. Cooper et al report that:

*Women in Australia spend an average of 311 minutes per day (including weekends) performing unpaid domestic work, including 168 minutes of routine housework, 64 minutes caring for household members, 36 minutes of shopping, and 43 minutes on other unpaid household activities, such as volunteering, driving to and from household-related activities, and caring for non-household members. Men in Australia spend an average of 172 minutes per day on unpaid household chores, including 93 minutes on routine housework, 27 minutes looking after household members, 22 minutes on shopping, and 30 minutes on other unpaid household activities.*<sup>9</sup>

It is important to note, here, the inclusion of “caring for non-household members”: it is not just their own children that women care for. Almost twice as many women (540,000) as men (230,000) are the primary carers for friends or family members with disabilities or physical and mental illness, including end-of-life care, in Australia.<sup>10</sup>

However, it is undeniable that of the most significant life transitions for any woman, in which the experience of gender inequality becomes acute, is becoming a parent.

<sup>7</sup> Drago, Robert, Tseng, Yi-Ping and Wooden, Mark: *Family Structure, Usual and Preferred Working Hours, and Egalitarianism in Australia* Melbourne Institute Working Paper No. 1/04, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, Melbourne: 2 February 2004. P. 3.

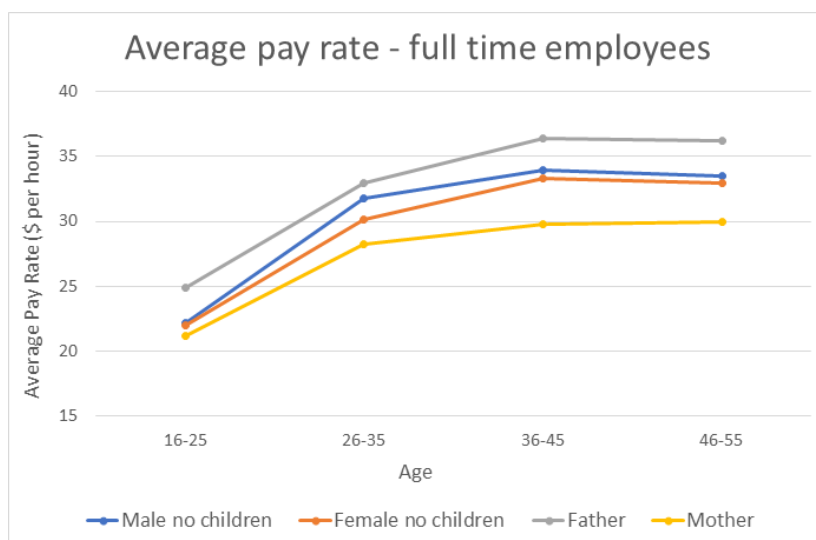
<sup>8</sup> Ibid, P. 5

<sup>9</sup> Cooper et al, Op Cit. P. 16

<sup>10</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2015. *Australia's welfare 2015*. Australia's welfare series no. 12. Cat. no. AUS 189. Canberra: AIHW.

## Women spend much more time actively parenting than their male partners

Thanks to advances in reproductive health care, Australian women today have far greater choices over when to become a mother than their forebears, but parenthood continues to effect far more significant changes for women than it does for men – for example, the ‘motherhood penalty’ sees women’s income drop after the birth of a child, while men’s rises.



Becoming a parent is a highly personal decision, influenced by a range of factors including age and sexual reproductive fertility, access to a suitable partner as well as income, work and social stability. But it is also a decision that carries great political and economic weight.

There is considerable data available about the nature of parenting, its implications and costs, in Australia. The Australian National Census is formulated around the home, with most questions relating to the household and familial circumstances within the domestic sphere. Consequently, the Australian Bureau of Statistics produces regular statistics on a range of gender indicators related to parenting.<sup>11</sup>

The HILDA Survey provides further insight into the economic and social wellbeing of parents, and the gendered division of parenting in Australia, while the National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling produces regular data and reports on the impact of taxation and government benefits and how these policies affect families via “STINMOD”, a major modelling project relied on heavily by Treasury, Social Services and Employment.

As at March 2019, Australia has 3,087,386 couple families with children and a further 1,122,016 one parent families. Of those one-parent families, 202,638 are led by a male parent while the vast majority - 919,378 – are led by a single female parent. 82% of all single parents are women.<sup>12</sup>

In both coupled and single parent families, gender inequality in parenting creates poorer social and economic outcomes for women, and while this is in large part due to the deep-rooted cultural norms that expect women to take primary responsibility for raising children, these norms are reflected in the public policy approach to supporting families and children.

<sup>11</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics Gender Indicators, 25 September 2018

<sup>12</sup> Household and Family Projections, Australia, 2016-2041, 14 March 2019

## Policy settings that encourage unequal division of unpaid work

Apart from our unusually high level of part-time work, there are other uniquely Australian conditions that entrench the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work in heterosexual couple households.

### Tax and transfer policies

When women with children or other caring responsibilities try to re-enter the paid work force, or to move from part-time to full-time work, our high effective marginal tax rates make it extremely difficult for them to do so.<sup>13</sup> Faced with the phasing out of Family Tax Benefits, higher tax rates as their earnings increase, and the cost of childcare, women, particularly at the lower end of the income scale, often find that they will receive little or no extra income when increasing their paid working hours.

The 'choice' many women in couple relationships then make is to remain underemployed outside the home, and take on more of the unpaid domestic labour, but the decisions of working couple families to do this are dictated by our economic settings and work structures, rather than undertaken genuinely through free choice.

Many of these disincentives for women to work more hours are unintended consequences of the interaction between tax settings and the provision of benefits and services; that is, the design of one part of our tax system that applies equally to all income earners in a particular bracket does not adequately allow for the impact on women in particular circumstances when they also rely on transfers through child care subsidy or other forms of income support. This is essentially a problem of poor design, rather than intention; nevertheless, successive governments have failed to address it, despite it being repeatedly identified as a significant barrier to women's workforce participation.

But there are also features of the Australian tax and transfer system that quite deliberately encourage an unequal division of unpaid domestic labour and push women out of full-time paid employment. The structure of our Family Tax Benefits (FTB) system is explicitly designed to encourage the male breadwinner model in Australian couple households.

Barbara Broadway from the Melbourne Institute has found that "[w]hile not always the case, there are a lot of circumstances in which families with both parents working are very seriously penalised compared to one-earner families on the same income" due to the structure of Family Tax Benefits. Broadway's modelling shows that, for example, a family of three, with a three-year-old child, in which both parents earn an equal share of a \$68,000 annual salary receive over \$150 per fortnight less in FTB than a similar family in which the man works full time for an equivalent income while the woman remains at home and does not undertake any paid employment.<sup>14</sup>

This, she says, "...is fundamentally unfair and sets all the wrong incentives. Family Tax Benefit Part A and Part B should be harmonised into one payment that financially encourages two-earner families". This would not only allow the woman to return to the workforce without financial penalty, thereby utilising her skills, and accruing an equal share of superannuation; it would incentivise an equal division of unpaid domestic labour and child-care.

<sup>13</sup> Murphy, Katharine, [Budget analysis shows some women hit with effective marginal tax rates of 100%](#), Guardian Australia, 21 May 2017.

<sup>14</sup> Broadway, Barbara, [Sharing the Load](#), Inside Business, 29 March 2019.

## Parental leave policies

It took considerable time for Australia to grant paid parental leave to working parents. Initially paid leave was made possible in limited industry settings, either at the discretion of employers or through negotiated employment agreements won by trade unions.

In 2010, following a Productivity Commission review, Australia adopted a policy of 18 weeks paid parental leave to be paid to the primary carer at the minimum wage for all workers by the government.

90% of primary carers supported by the scheme are women. There is some take up by men, but they are mostly at a management level. Only 4.6% of men who take up the scheme are in non-management positions.<sup>15</sup>

This policy was soon followed by the provision of two weeks of Dad and Partner Pay (DAPP).<sup>16</sup> The allowance for DAPP in Australia is low compared to the OECD average, which is 8.4 weeks.

Australia has a very low rate of take up of parental leave by male parents in heterosexual couple relationships compared to other OECD nations. The take up of DAPP sits at a rate of 30% compared to the OECD average of 50%. In Slovenia, 90% of fathers take up the opportunity to spend time with their newborn, while in the Nordic countries that figure is at 70%.<sup>17</sup>

International comparison of utilisation data and parental leave policies show that the use of parental leave by fathers increases when entitlements are generous and when policies offer flexibility about when leave can be used.<sup>18</sup> Further, international experience shows that when parental leave is provided equally to men and women, and is not transferable between partners, men's take-up of parental leave is significantly higher, women are more likely to return to the workforce at the same level, and working the same hours, as before becoming a parent, and the economic penalty on mothers is vastly reduced.

The impact of paid parental leave on gender equality is significant, and redesigning Australia's system to encourage men to take a greater role in the care of babies and young children is critical to improving the balance of unpaid care and domestic labour between men and women in couple relationships.

## Investment in early childhood education and care (ECEC)

Also important in reducing the social and economic imposts of parenting on women is investment in high quality, universal early childhood care and education. The accessibility, affordability and quality of childcare are significant factors in whether parents, particularly of children under the age of 12, can balance work and caring responsibilities.

Nationally in 2018, 31.4% of children aged 0–12 years attended Australian Government approved childcare, up from 31.3% in 2017 and 23.2% in 2009.<sup>19</sup> The majority of attendees, 64.3% are aged 0–5 years.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/03\\_2015/finalphase4\\_report\\_6\\_march\\_2015\\_0.pdf](https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/03_2015/finalphase4_report_6_march_2015_0.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> OECD Family Database – Parents' and of childbirth related leave, Updated 21.1.19

<sup>18</sup> WGEA Towards a Gender Balanced Paid Parental Leave: Australian and International Trends

<sup>19</sup> Productivity Commission Report on Government Services, 2019. <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2019/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care/rogs-2019-partb-chapter3.pdf>

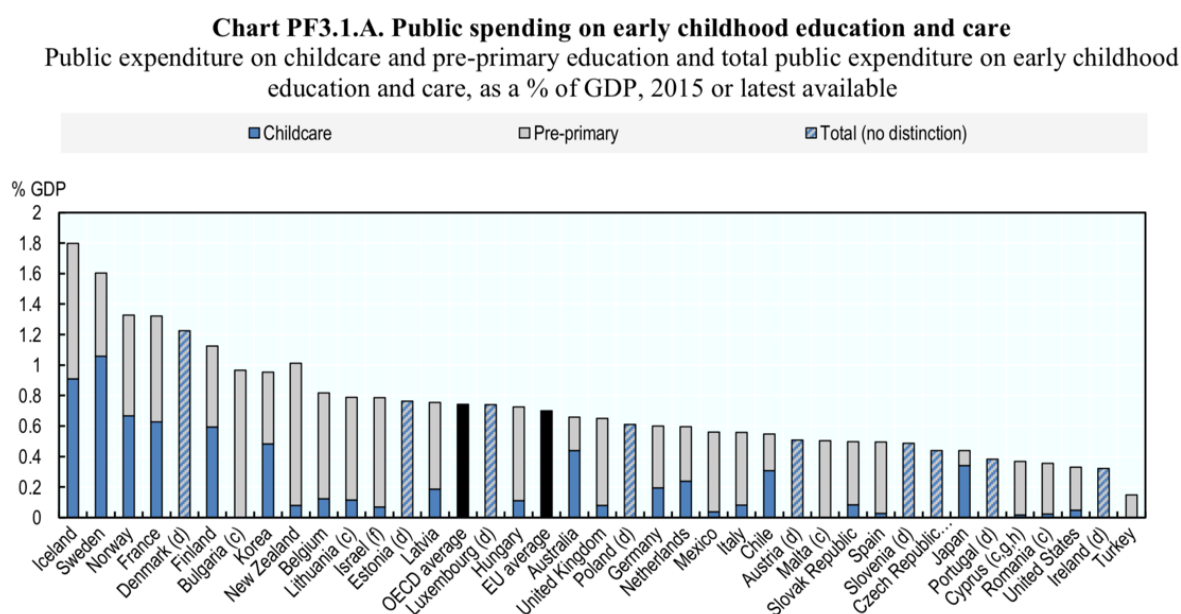


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Nationally, 90.1% of children were enrolled in a preschool program in the year before school, down from 92.4% in 2016. Compared to all children, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children had a higher preschool program enrolment rate in the years before school, at 94.8%.

Since 2011, formal day care use has risen from 33% to 44% in 2017,<sup>20</sup> but those levels remain relatively low. Significantly, 56% of women returning to work still rely on informal day care of grandparents or some other family member.<sup>21</sup>

Australian Government Expenditure on ECEC Services in the last financial year was \$9.2 billion.<sup>22</sup> This is less than 0.7% of GDP. Australia's funding of ECEC is below the OECD average,<sup>23</sup> and is very far behind the best performers in ECEC service provision, with four of five of the highest government investors being from Nordic nations.



Perhaps unsurprisingly, those same nations perform very highly on the WEF Global Gender Gap Index. There is a clear correlation between government expenditure on early childhood education and care and gender equality performance.

In the absence of higher levels of government investment, the burden of childcare costs is born directly by families – which, as we have seen, means primarily by women.

In 2019, the median weekly cost for 50 hours of care for long day care was \$460, higher than for family day care (\$400). This was an increase of 2.8 per cent and 2.2 per cent respectively.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> ABS Pregnancy and Employment Transitions Report, Nov 2017, Australian Bureau of Statistics.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Productivity Commission [Report](#) on Government Services, 2019.

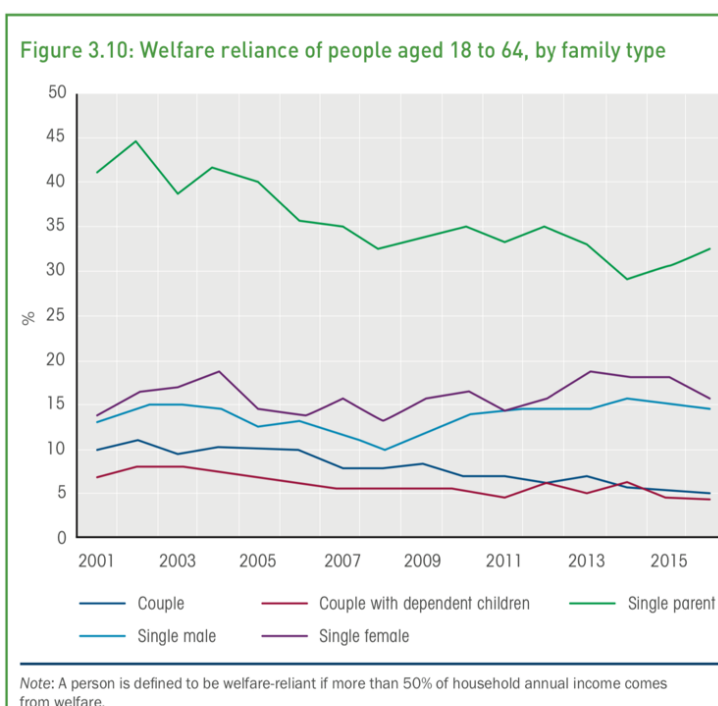
<sup>23</sup> OECD, [Public Spending on childcare and early education](#), OECD Family database, 2 April 2019

<sup>24</sup> Productivity Commission [Report](#) on Government Services, 2019.

Parents in Australia pay more for childcare than parents in most OECD nations. For both single and coupled families in Australia, approximately 15% of net income is spent on childcare costs.<sup>25</sup> Combined with the high effective marginal tax rates imposed on women returning to work through the operation of our family tax benefit system, as demonstrated earlier, this means that, for many mothers in couple relationships who earn below-average incomes, returning to work after parental leave is financially unviable.<sup>26</sup>

## Single mothers are doubly penalised

For single parent families, the vast majority of which (82%) are headed by women, the conflict between working for money and caring for children is even more fraught, with much greater implications economically. Single parents have the highest welfare reliance of any other cohort between the ages of 18-64 (see Figure x). 39% of children in single parent families are growing up in poverty.<sup>27</sup>



In part, the impoverishment of single parent families led by women is due to failures of the Family Law Child Support system. This system was designed to guarantee that following family separation, the parent with the responsibility for primary care, and commensurate reduced earning power, received income support from the working parent. According to the Council for Single Mothers and their Children's *Election Platform 2019*, Australia-wide there is a \$1.5 billion debt in unpaid child support.<sup>28</sup>

The system suffers from inherent gender inequality in its framework: in the failure to prioritise improving enforcement mechanisms, trialling government guaranteed child support, and recording child support debts on individual credit ratings.

<sup>25</sup> Gothe-Snape, J. How other countries address affordable childcare, SBS News, 11 June 2018

<sup>26</sup> Dunning, P. If Childcare costs more than my salary, don't expect me to return to work, Sydney Morning Herald, 21 August 2017; Jericho, G Stay-at-home mothers a drain on the economy? Actually, the problem might lie with men, The Guardian, 14 March 2017

<sup>27</sup> Council for Single Mother Election Pitch 2019

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Single parents are also treated punitively within Australia's welfare system. While, as we have seen, our tax and transfer system is geared towards encouraging mothers in couple relationships to stay at home and care for children, perversely our system of income support for single mothers forces them into paid work when their children are still quite small.

In 2006 the Howard government made substantial changes to all parenting payments as part of its "welfare to work" program.<sup>29</sup> Under these changes, single parents applying for parenting payment after 1 July 2006 would receive it only until their youngest child turned eight, at which point they would be moved onto the much lower Newstart payment (now known as JobSeeker), and subject to "mutual obligation" requirements to look for work.

While single parents already parenting payment were "grandfathered" (meaning they could continue to receive it until their youngest child turned 16), this was reversed in 2013 by the Gillard government, so that now all single parents are moved onto JobSeeker and required to find employment when their youngest child turns eight.

In 2016, single mothers were further targeted with punitive welfare measures with the introduction of ParentsNext. A compulsory so-called "pre-employment program" primarily targeting women with children under the age of six who have been receiving a parenting payment for at least six continuous months and have not reported employment earnings in the previous six months, ParentsNext requires single parents to account for the hours they spend providing care to their children and to participate in "job readiness" programs. Through the imposition of a Targeted Compliance Framework (TCF), failure to account for activities results in loss of income support, putting parents and children at risk of poverty.

ParentsNext was initially piloted in 10 locations before being rolled out in a further 30 communities nationally. Today it is fully operational in all non-remote areas of Australia.

The Council for Single Mothers and their Children has heavily criticised the program, observing that 94.9% of participants are female and that over a quarter of those women have had payments suspended.<sup>30</sup> The Council identifies a number of failings, including the lack of school hour employment to enable parents to combine work and family responsibilities and the compulsory referral process six months after birth – before children are weaned from breastmilk, not sitting independently or responding to language cues. Further, they criticise the lack of expertise in agencies charged with supporting women into work and determining punishment.

The experience of ParentsNext has been particularly problematic for Indigenous mothers. Interference in parenting from when child is six months of age means the program is insensitive to the intergenerational trauma of the Stolen Generation, where Indigenous family life was ripped apart by a welfare scheme that took children away from their mothers. Indigenous women are choosing not to receive any pension support and go 'underground' for fear of ParentsNext, putting themselves and their children at risk of greater poverty and poor health outcomes.

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<sup>29</sup> Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, [Welfare to Work Evaluation Report](#), Canberra, May 2008.

<sup>30</sup> Council for Single Mothers and their Children, Submission to ParentsNext Review Senate Community Affairs References Committee

## Conclusion

There is significant academic research and information on the time spent by men and women on unpaid work, parenting and other forms of care, but gathering a comprehensive picture is a complex and time-consuming task. Since the dismantling of the Women's Bureau within the former Department of Employment, Education and Training, and the defunding of the Time Use Survey, Australia has had little machinery to gather accurate data on women's unpaid work and related issues.

The reinstatement of the Time Use Survey by the ABS is welcome development. Comprehensive data on unpaid work and care is critical to measuring progress towards gender equality.

Understanding the complex interaction of paid and unpaid work for women, and the challenges faced by couple families when trying to negotiate the demands of the workplace and the home, is essential to recalibrating our social and economic settings in order to more equitably share unpaid work and care between men and women.

## Recommendations for the Parliament

1. Expand paid parental leave and ensure that both parents have access to substantial leave provisions upon the birth of a child. As international evidence has shown, a 'use it or lose it' provision for fathers or non-birth parents is essential to establish family norms in which the care of children is shared more equally. Per Capita proposes an immediate expansion of the federal paid parental leave scheme, to provide each parent with six weeks of paid leave at the replacement rate of their pre-parental salary, capped at \$85,000; and an additional 14 weeks to be shared as the family sees fit. Single parents should be eligible for the full 26 weeks' leave. The Government must also pay superannuation on paid parental leave.
2. The Government should bring forward its Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) reforms to 1 January 2023. Per Capita estimates this would cost A\$879million, or just 9.63% of the annual expenditure on ECEC.
3. Reform the Family Tax Benefit scheme to no longer penalise women who choose to work in the paid labour force upon becoming mothers.
4. Reverse the policy to push single parents onto JobSeeker when their youngest child turns eight, reverting to the original age threshold of 16.
5. Abolish ParentsNext.
6. Amend the Fair Work Act to allow workers' caring and other domestic responsibilities to be matters to be considered in industry and enterprise bargaining.

## Additional Recommendation

Longer term, we must rebalance the division of labour across society, including by more equally sharing the load of unpaid domestic work between men and women. The single best way to achieve this is to gradually reduce the standard full time working week from five days to four, or from 40 hours to 32. Critically, this must be done without a reduction in wages, in recognition that too few of the benefits of increased productivity over recent decades have been awarded to labour.

Per Capita is currently conducting a gender lens analysis of the Australian component of the international Four Day Week trial, to assess the impact of this shift on the distribution of unpaid work and care. The results of this analysis will be available in the second quarter of 2023.

There is already strong evidence to show that workers are just as productive across a four-day week as they are over five. That this concept is regarded as radical by mainstream economists, and even the contemporary labour movement, shows how deeply ingrained the productivity mantra that demands more and more work for less reward has become in our collective psyche. After all, the eight-hour day was considered radical once. So was the weekend.

Nevertheless, the shift to a four day / 32 hour week is not something that should be arbitrarily imposed by Government; rather, as with historical reductions in standard working hours, it must be pursued through our industrial relations and bargaining systems.

The Australian Union movement, particularly those unions representing low paid women, should be encouraged to pursue this change as a workplace right. Companies seeking to attract talent and to be regarded as employers of choice would rationally adopt a gradual reduction in standard full time hours without any loss of pay, given the maintenance of labour productivity. As the shorter working week becomes a feature of employment agreements across the country, it will be embedded in Australia's industrial relations and arbitration system over time.