



WHY FATHERS' CARE MATTERS: ENABLING GENDER EQUITY IN CARE AND WORK

Summary and Consensus Statement

This was the first forum in Australia to unite on this key contemporary issue. The forum was held at The Australian National University (The ANU) on August 9, 2018 and was sponsored by The Gender Institute (The ANU) and the Judith Lumley Centre (La Trobe University). The forum was organised by Dr Liana Leach (The ANU) and Dr Amanda Cooklin (La Trobe University). Participants were researchers and scholars; industry representatives; policy-makers; those working in both government and non-government sectors; fathers, mothers and the general community.

The goals of the forum were to:

- Share our knowledge of why fathers' care matters;
- Identify barriers that limit fathers' participation in combining work and care;
- Derive a consensus statement about key issues, actions and priorities to promote organisations', fathers' and the broader community's support of gender equity and fathers' involvement in work and care

Leading national work-family and fatherhood scholars were the opening guest speakers

Professor Jan Nicholson (La Trobe University) chaired the first session and was invited to discuss implications and importance of the focus on fathers for family and child wellbeing.

Associate Professor Richard Fletcher (The University of Newcastle) highlighted the experiences of fathers, including the ongoing 'invisibility' of fathers in the workplace. Fathers often default to two weeks leave provision following the birth of a baby, and are not yet taking ownership of longer leave, or are not widely supported to do so. This challenges the formation of warm and supportive attachment in the early weeks and months, which is a critical time for bonding and family relationships.



Dr Jenny Baxter (Australian Institute of Family Studies) used national data, including from the Census, to track fathers' work and care patterns over recent decades. She noted that time in work and care in Australia remains markedly split by gender. Fathers work long hours; and this is similar before and after the birth of a child. Mothers' work hours 'dip' dramatically, without a full recovery over time. Although interest in 'stay at home' dads has burgeoned, the proportion of dads being in full time care of infants and children remains low (4%). Paid parental/paternity leave is unevenly distributed across industries (e.g. 10% in retail/hospitality, up to 85% in public administration). Many fathers remain unaware if paid parental leave is even available to them.



Professor Lyndall Strazdins (The ANU) highlighted the myriad of ways in which time is a problem for fathers, with long work hours taking them away from time with children. One in four fathers work weekends in Australia; over half report 'missing out' on family activities due to work; and 20% say family time is less fun and more pressured due to work. Not only does this have adverse implications for fathers' health and wellbeing; children and adolescents long for more time with their dads; with many saying that their dads work 'too much'.





Dr Amanda Cooklin (La Trobe University) and **Dr Liana Leach** (The ANU) presented a snapshot of their collaborative research focussing on fathers' work and its links with mental health. Fathers who work long hours, have inflexible, demanding or insecure work are more likely to report work-family conflict and its adverse effects on mental health, including stress and anxiety. These effects flow on to undermine parenting, couple relationships and children's mental health too.

Fathers' perspectives on combining work and care

Three fathers shared their experiences combining work and care, and the rewards and challenges they faced in accessing extended parental leave, part-time employment and flexible work. Fathers valued caring for their young children and noted the importance of getting in 'on the ground floor' to establish early relationships and competent parenting. They acknowledged that combining work and family did come with some sacrifices to their career, but that they had gained so much more by being there for their children and supporting their partners in the workforce.



What helps?

- *Changing norms and expectations.* Fathers are seen as 'secondary' helpers while having mothers as primary carers is normalised, diminishing the work of both mums and dads.
- *Challenging social expectations.* One father noted, "I can do everything my partner can, except breastfeed".
- *Questioning the definition of success.* Men's success is largely tied to their work, rather than their role as a father and parent.
- *Keeping the conversations about gender in workplaces open for all genders* (i.e. not only mothers). Include men in all discussions and strategies about gender equity.
- *Awareness.* More fathers now know about the 'juggle' that typically women have faced – this awareness can be used to make work and care 'everyone's problem'.
- *Flexible work.* Flexible policies that can be tailored to an employee's needs, with good manager support, skills and willingness.

What's hard?

- *Career progression.* Flexibility and part-time work are options, and dads took these, but it was hard to be taken seriously at work while using these options. Dads worried about missing out on opportunities or losing their jobs altogether. There was agreement that overall, career progression was hampered and in conflict with fathers' desires to be a good dad.
- *Society's expectations.* Men's decision to care was viewed by many in the community and at work as 'optional' rather than necessary or desirable. One father recalled being asked "Won't you get bored? What about your career?" when he took parental leave; questions his wife was never asked.
- *Friends & peers did not always support* or endorse dads' choices to take time out of work or extended parental leave.
- *Few men in senior roles at work champion these options.* Leaders need to actively demonstrate these options to take the next step beyond having good policies 'on paper only'.
- *Can dads have it all?* Realisation that perhaps dads who want to spend a significant amount of time caring for their children 'can't have it all'; at least not at the same time or without re-defining what success means to them.

Australia's gender equality scorecard

Key findings from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency's (WGEA) 2016-17 reporting data.



- Two-thirds (68%) of employers had a policy or strategy for flexible working, yet <2% of employers had set targets for men's engagement in flexible work
- Fewer than half (39.3%) of employers offered paid parental leave for 'secondary carers'
- Average length of paid secondary carer's leave offered is 7.3 days. Men utilised 94.8% of all secondary carer's leave
- Dataset covers four million employees from non-public sector employers with 100+ employees - accounting for 40% of employees in Australia. Find out more [here](#).

Industry and Policy Panel Discussion

Led by Emma Walsh, founder and CEO of Parents at Work. Invited panellists were key industry and government experts discussing recent initiatives in their own organisations. Panellists were Rachel Ranton (Westpac), Helen Karatasas (WGEA), Jane Dickinson (Dept. Social Services), Gina DeGeorge (Deloitte), Cate Leyland (ANU), and Geoff Tattam (ANU).



Consensus Priorities: Setting the Action, Research and Policy Agenda

Ideas from all panels and discussions across the day are summarised below. Participants also joined in a final brief workshop to highlight novel ideas and strategies.

- **Getting the conversation right.** Ensure all genders are part of the conversation in workplaces about equity, work and care, as it is not just a mother's problem. Encourage fathers' voices and keep men in the messaging and information used in organisations to promote flexible work options and parental leave (e.g. include images of fathers in toolkits/communications).
- **Recognising and rewarding great initiatives and outcomes in organisations.** Introduce a Gender Equity Scorecard for organisations, to keep employers competitive to consumers and as an employer of choice, and to drive momentum for continual improvement in industry.
- **Reposition gender equality.** In addition to the gender pay gap, require employers to record and report the *gender leave gap* (differences in leave provisions and leave utilisation by gender).
- **Share stories amongst peers, colleagues and families** to normalise fathers' caring, and create a visible presence and community of support for dads.
- **Remove language that positions dads as 'helping' or as secondary carers,** to ensure both parents have responsibilities and rights to caring for their children; and that parenting is a shared job. This includes in health, community and parenting services which often are aimed at mothers only.
- **Showcase in organisations the benefits of all employees' involvement in care.** Managers and leaders can champion ongoing messaging, examples and support of fathers taking leave and flexible working options.
- **Highlight the benefits of flexible work options to all employees** and broaden their relevance beyond parents to reduce flexibility stigma.
- **Good balance between work and care is a workplace safety issue.** Ensuring healthy and productive workers should be a priority for organisations.
- **Continue research that shows the social and mental health benefits** for employees (and their families) of organisations offering flexible work options, parental leave and other initiatives aimed at managing both work and care responsibilities. Encourage research into imagining new, innovative ways of combining work and family.
- **Continue public discourse, debate and advocacy.** Policy-makers have the opportunity to reflect on the current parental leave scheme and consider other international initiatives (e.g. Share the Joy campaign for shared parental leave, UK); and have the capacity to respond to a robust public discourse that keeps gender inequities in work and care open to ongoing discussion and debate.
- **Make the future of work *The Future of Work and Family*** to keep the caring, child-rearing and wellbeing of all employees at the centre of the agenda.

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