

## The Work + Family Policy Roundtable Election 2019 Score Card

### How the major parties rate against the research evidence

In April 2019 the W+FPR, released its **Election Benchmarks 2019**. Based on available research evidence, the research network of 32 academics from 17 Australian universities called upon the next federal government to advance policies that take care work seriously and enhance the ability of all households to combine work and care responsibilities. We identified 8 priority policy areas: investment in care infrastructure; paid leave to care; decent working time and job security; sustainable high-quality care services; good quality jobs for the care workforce; gender pay equality; safe workplaces; and institutional support for work and care. The W+FPR found current policy settings do not provide adequate supports for families to work and care, in ways that suit their circumstances.

#### **EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION & CARE:**

Accessible, high quality and affordable ECEC is a work, care and family priority. Both major parties share the policy objective of increasing women's participation rate. But ongoing concern about lack of access to appropriate ECEC services remains a sticking point for many households as women continue to identify high childcare costs as the primary obstacle to deepening participation in paid work. The W+FPR recommends effective

access to at least two days of subsidised high quality ECEC for all children regardless of their parents' workforce participation and user-friendly access for disadvantaged groups and those in remote and regional Australia.

The Coalition's new childcare subsidy system, introduced in July 2018, includes a new single means-tested subsidy paid directly to ECEC providers calculated against a 'deemed' rate set by government. The new policy settings significantly reduce the cost of ECEC for households with regular and stable employment. However, recent data from the Department of Education shows that thousands of children in vulnerable households appear to have withdrawn from the sector. This is likely due to the complex activity test and a reduction in access to subsidised ECEC for children in vulnerable households. These are the children who stand to benefit the most from high quality ECEC. The Coalition has delivered one more year of funding (up to 2020) for the national pre-school and kindy program, providing 15 hours of subsidised pre-school education for all four-year olds. They have failed to restore funding for the National Quality Agenda and the Care Quality Agency ACECQA.

Labor's \$4 billion investment in ECEC will significantly reduce the out of pocket cost of childcare for low and middle-income households. Those with household incomes under \$69,000 and using services that charge no more than the benchmark price will receive fully subsidised ECEC. Families on higher incomes will still pay something, but less than they do under Coalition arrangements. Labor has committed to reviewing the impact of the activity test on vulnerable families. Labor has also promised an additional \$1.75 billion to extend the national pre-school and kindy program to two years, including all 3 and 4 year olds (commencing 2021) and will restore the \$20 million Commonwealth safety and quality funding to ECEC sector.

**PAID PARENTAL LEAVE:** The Coalition has improved eligibility for Commonwealth Parental Leave Pay (PLP) but will not pay the super guarantee on PLP payments. Labour will pay the super guarantee on PLP. This will contribute to women's economic security. Neither party support the W+FPR other recommendations to extend the current Parental leave scheme to 26 weeks, and Dad & Partner Pay to 4 weeks, nor raising the payment level from the minimum wage.

**PAID LEAVE TO CARE:** Labor will introduce 10 days paid domestic violence leave. However, neither party has indicated any support for other W+FPR recommendations on casual employees' access to paid personal and carers leave; introducing paid end-of-life/palliative care leave; or access to respite care for carers.

**DECENT WORKING TIME & JOB SECURITY:** Decent working time arrangements and job security make it possible for working carers to engage in both unpaid care and paid work. Labor has committed to providing long-term casuals with a protected right to request permanent employment after 12 months and has promised to reverse penalty rate cuts in the retail and hospitality, in which many worker-carers are employed. The Coalition will introduce a protected right to request casual conversion. However, the proposed Bill allows employers to determine which workers are casual rather than providing a statutory definition of casual status as proposed by Labor. Job security and predictable working time and income still remain a significant challenge for many families in Australia, particularly part-time workers.

**A SUSTAINABLE & HIGH-QUALITY CARE WORKFORCE:** The W+FPR recommended improved pay and conditions for all ECEC educators. Labor has promised to fund pay increases of 20% per cent to early childhood educators over 8 years. While the exact mechanism to ensure that these pay increases go directly to workers is not yet clear, research evidence suggests that better pay is likely to reduce the high level of turnover in the sector. However,

comprehensive and integrated workforce strategies must be also developed to better support decent pay and good quality work in the ECEC, disability and aged care sectors into the future.

**GENDER PAY EQUALITY:** Gender pay equality is a critical support for worker-carers. Yet Australian equal pay laws and institutions have failed to address the persistent gender pay gap. The W+FPR recommends that equal remuneration provisions in the *Fair Work Act* be amended to improve the mechanisms through which to run equal pay cases and to provide a broad and inclusive industrial relations framework capable of improving wages and conditions, particularly in undervalued feminised sectors. Labor has promised a comprehensive package designed to address the gender pay gap, including making pay equity a clear objective of the *Fair Work Act*, providing more resourcing to support equal pay cases before the Fair Work Commission and establishing an Expert Pay Equity Panel as part of the Commission supported by a Pay Equity Unit. Labor will also require Federal government agencies and companies with more than 1000 employees to publicly report on their gender pay gaps.

**SAFE WORKPLACES:** While both the Coalition and Labor have promised significant additional funding to address domestic violence, neither party has addressed the persistent problems of sexual harassment and gender-based violence in the workplace. To better support gender equality in work, care and family life, the W+FPR recommends that action be taken to ensure national occupational health and safety laws explicitly

recognise sexual harassment and gender-based violence, with mechanisms that support prevention and allow workers to pursue injury claims that arise from such hazards.

**INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR DECENT WORK AND DECENT CARE:** Policy settings for a prosperous, healthy and equal Australia must provide households with time to work and time to care for family and community in a way that suits their circumstances. Coordinated thinking across the whole of government in the area of work and care and the data to support quality policy design and evaluation is essential to provide sustainable quality care infrastructure for all. While neither party has announced policies to support carers, both the Coalition and Labor have committed to reinstating Australia's Time Use Survey.

#### FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

See the full text of the WFPR Election Benchmarks 2019, <https://www.workandfamilypolicyroundtable.org/>

For further comment, contact Professor Sara Charlesworth 0412 889 122; or Associate Professor Elizabeth Hill 0406 919 960

\* This scorecard reflects policies announced as of May 10, 2019.

