



Work + care in a gender
inclusive recovery:

**A bold policy agenda for
a new social contract**



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The environmental and pandemic crises of 2020 have upended our lives and sent the economy into turmoil. Millions of Australians are unemployed, unable to access the hours of paid work they need, or unsure whether their small business will survive.

The crisis in care is acute. Many formal care services for the aged, children, and for people with disability that were already strained, collapsed under the pressure of the pandemic. Shuttered schools and working from home arrangements only added to the care crisis as massive amounts of unpaid care labour were devolved to the home, [exacerbating gendered inequalities](#) in the distribution of work and care. The crisis in care and employment has had an immediate and negative impact on gender equality and wellbeing in Australia, raising widespread concern about the shadow pandemics of [domestic violence](#), [mental illness](#) and [substance abuse](#).

Current policy settings for work, care and family are broken. They have provided limited protection against the pressures of the pandemic and are not suitable to support an equitable and gender inclusive recovery.

As Australia charts its way out of the environmental and pandemic crises of 2020, households continue to face numerous and diverse challenges as they negotiate their work, care and family responsibilities. These challenges will intensify as emergency

measures, including income support implemented by state and federal governments, are rolled back. New policy architecture that moves Australia beyond crisis and resets the conditions under which we work and care is urgently needed.

In this document the Australian Work and Family Policy Roundtable provides a bold, research-informed policy agenda for an equitable and gender inclusive recovery and a new social contract that recognises and supports the right for all to give and receive high quality care. We focus on four key policy areas: inclusive employment and social protection; infrastructure for equitable work and care; a sustainable care workforce; and data for evidence-informed policy making.

[The Australian Work + Family Policy Roundtable](#) was established in 2005 and is a research network of 33 academics from 17 universities and research institutions with expertise on work, care and family policy. The goal of the Roundtable is to propose, comment upon, collect and disseminate research to inform evidence-based public policy in Australia.

Care: the foundation of a good society and dynamic economy

Care is essential to human wellbeing and economic prosperity. High quality care – both paid and unpaid – enables the development of human capabilities, wellbeing and economic productivity. Inadequate investment in care services and supports, uneven coverage of paid leave for workers in casual and precarious employment, and low wages for the essential workers who keep our communities functioning, weaken our economy. Inadequate care infrastructure leaves communities vulnerable and exacerbates inequalities. The environmental and health crises of 2020 highlight that without adequate paid and unpaid care the economy stops.

Care has important social and economic benefits in the short and long-term. It is not a private consumer good for the well-off, or a commodity to be produced for profit. However, many of Australia's essential care services are delivered through private for-profit 'markets' backed by large government subsidies. This model has not served Australians well. Accompanied by limited resources, ineffective regulation and meagre quality standards, as well as inadequate governance arrangements, many services deliver sub-standard care. The pandemic has exposed the false economy of reliance on an under-resourced, precarious and low-wage workforce.

Care is a collective social responsibility. However, the limited social provision of care and inadequate resourcing of formal and informal care, has meant the burden of care has been unfairly distributed with women shouldering the greatest load. Better social provisioning of care services will help alleviate gender and other social inequalities. Policy settings must be reconfigured to invest in the care – paid and unpaid – that sustains individuals over the life course and delivers wellbeing and long-term prosperity for all. We need [a caring economy](#).

[Governments have a vital role](#) to play in providing increased and sustained investment in equitable, high quality care systems that include decent wages and secure employment for the care workforce, and equitable access to paid leave for all workers. Only public investment in high quality care infrastructure, in combination with strong supports for individuals who take on unpaid care work, and appropriate regulatory and governance arrangements, can address the diverse needs of individuals and families on an equitable basis.

The tax and transfer system can play a vital role in delivering sustainable finance for public investment in care infrastructure and

expenditure on care work, and in ensuring equitable and efficient access by individuals to market work. A sustainable and equitable tax and transfer system will apply on the basis of an individual unit and reduce, as far as possible, the [inequitable and inefficient disincentives](#) for women to engage in paid work. Tax reforms should ensure that those with higher incomes continue to contribute a greater share of tax revenues through progressive tax rates, while tax reform to broaden the base of the income tax will enable more equitable taxation of capital income compared to work. This will ensure sustainable revenues while not over-taxing low and moderate wage earners, many of whom are women who work in the care sector.

Investment in high quality care infrastructure will enhance macro-economic stability and grow our economy.

Good quality care services support employment, labour supply and economic security – particularly for women. An expanded, secure and properly paid labour force will help build public finances through the collection of additional tax revenue. The capability of children, youth, worker-carers, older people and people with disabilities to fully participate in society and lead fulfilling lives will be enhanced and supported by investment in essential care infrastructure. This will improve social wellbeing while also delivering the increased productivity and economic growth to enable Australia to grow our way out of the pandemic-induced recession.

Work: valuing and supporting care

The environmental and pandemic crises of 2020 have exposed and amplified widespread labour market inequalities. In particular, COVID-19 has exposed the [structural inequalities](#) within the Australian labour market and the vulnerability of millions of workers, particularly those in service jobs in retail and hospitality.

Conditions of precarious employment, low-wages and insecurity, along with inadequate social protection measures, left millions in the hardest hit industries vulnerable to emergency lockdown measures and ensuing economic insecurity. Lack of adequate income protection, paid sick leave and carers' leave further entrenched worker vulnerability. Those in regular employment with higher wages and paid leave were less exposed to the economic impact of the sudden lockdown, although the rapid shift to working-from-home placed other significant stresses on workers.

The crises have had a disproportionate impact on women's paid and unpaid work, but have fallen most severely on [single mothers](#), women from [migrant](#) backgrounds (especially those on temporary visas), [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women](#), and women with [disability](#). The majority of Australian women work in part-time or insecure jobs, often in highly feminised and low-paid occupations. Precarious forms of employment do not provide adequate support for workers with care responsibilities and many women have struggled to manage the [triple pandemic demands](#) of supervising home-schooling, increased care responsibilities and paid work. This has led to widespread exhaustion and other health issues.

During the COVID-19 crisis, women have experienced [higher rates](#) of unemployment and underemployment than men. They are also disproportionately employed in essential frontline care jobs where they have been exposed to infection. How men and women fare over the long recession ahead is yet to be seen. But even at this stage of the economic downturn, the lack of minimum paid care and sick leave for workers in precarious employment along with inadequate access to affordable care services has seen [women disproportionately withdraw](#) from the labour market. This directly reflects and reinforces gendered inequalities in work and care and

increases the risk of poverty for women as they age.

Men with children [increased their unpaid care load](#), but not as much as women did and current workplace policy settings do not make it easy for households to share care between women and men. Policy architecture that relies on the exploitation of women's labour and time, in the workplace and in the home, and the feminisation of poverty and inequality this gives rise to is inefficient, discriminatory and can no longer be tolerated.

The pandemic has revealed the importance of decent work and adequate social protection, and their role in safeguarding the wellbeing and security of our families, communities and economy. This includes adequate pay, secure working time and paid leave provisions - such as paid parental leave, carers' leave, paid domestic violence leave and other forms of leave from work - that support women and men's equal right to combine family and community care responsibilities with stable and secure employment. Adequate social protection over the life the life course is also crucial. Temporary social protection provided during the peak of the pandemic through additional income support made a material difference to many worker-carers' lives. However, these measures also excluded many of the most vulnerable, including many casual workers and those on temporary visas.

A new social contract that recognises and supports the interconnections of work and care across society and the economy is urgently required. Our aging population, declining fertility and low inbound migration, make a new policy architecture for decent work and decent care essential for an inclusive and gender equal recovery. It is time to look beyond short-term budgets and toward long-term investment in a [caring economy](#) that delivers prosperity, equality, and a better life for all.

Below we outline a bold, research-informed policy agenda in four domains.

1: Inclusive employment & social protection

Women workers, many with care responsibilities, are concentrated in short-hours 'casualised' work, while in couple families [many fathers](#) with young children work longer hours. Without a decent floor of labour protections, the fragmentation of working time inherent in such work will continue to reproduce income and working time insecurity, and a lack of access to careers and decent work across the life course. Women face life-long penalties through gendered intersections of care, social protection and the taxation system. Women are forced to take on the risks of a retirement income system centred on occupational superannuation.

A Bold Agenda

1. A robust floor of universal worker rights across all sectors that provides:
 - A living wage and working time security;
 - A right to secure, predictable income;
 - A right to paid leave for all workers;
 - Paid time for training;
 - An effective right to equal remuneration;
 - A cap on long working hours that is enforced.
2. Over and above this floor, meaningful and genuine industry bargaining to address industry-specific problems through revitalised industry awards, for example provisions to provide *living hours* through decent shift notice periods, minimum engagements and sufficient guaranteed hours.

3. A right to a fair and equitable social protection system for all that respects dignity and autonomy and provides adequate income support, including a permanent increase to JobSeeker and other income support income payments.

2: Infrastructure for equitable work + care

Australia has failed to invest in good quality care infrastructure, spending below the OECD average on formal care services. The marketisation of care services with light touch government regulation and monitoring means many government-subsided care services have poor governance structures and do not produce good outcomes for service users, workers, or for taxpayers.

One-sided employer-oriented flexibility is the norm in many Australian workplaces. Uncertain and unpredictable hours of work make it hard to use existing formal care services. The COVID pandemic has made it even harder for unpaid carers to access respite and other service supports.

A Bold Agenda

1. Robust care infrastructure to build a more inclusive, accessible, resilient, and caring society. This includes:
 - Universal free high quality early childhood education and care with robust and transparent quality standards that are publicly audited and enforced;
 - High quality, adequately and securely resourced aged care and disability services;
 - Business models and governance arrangements for all care service providers that are transparent and fit for purpose. Providers must be fully accountable for the expenditure of public money and the provision of high quality accessible services;

- Accessible and responsive respite, end of life/palliative care and other services to support unpaid carers;
- The extension of paid 'care leave' to all workers, including at least 9 months paid parental leave incorporating 3 months [dedicated leave for each parent](#);
- High quality workplace flexibility that works for women and other worker-carers that is mutually beneficial and gives workers voice, control, predictability and working time security.

3: A sustainable care workforce

The care workforce including those who work in aged care, disability support and early childhood education and care is growing rapidly. In these sectors the federal government is effectively the lead employer in a supply chain of contracted out services. However, there are shortages of staff in all care sectors given very low wages, casualised conditions, underemployment and fragmented working time schedules. Care and support workers are increasingly employed through contracting arrangements and on gig platforms. Many care services [rely on temporary migrant](#) visas holders who are especially vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination. High attrition and working time fragmentation directly influence the quality of all care service provision and the dignity provided to service users and their families.

Targeted initiatives in the frontline care sectors under the *Fair Work Act 2009* have failed to address low wages, including the [failure of the Act's](#) low-paid bargaining stream to open up multi-employer bargaining in residential aged care, and the Fair Work Commission's rejection of the long-running equal remuneration case for early childhood education and care workers.

A Bold Agenda

1. Industry awards must be revitalised to 'unpack' skills classifications for frontline care workers to both recognise and remunerate the skills workers currently use and to provide a clear career path with meaningful wage increases as workers progress. This will create opportunities for career progression;
2. As the main service funder, the federal government must commit to policy and funding arrangements that end the structural pay inequity in care and support work.

4: Robust data for evidence-informed policy

In Australia there is very little rigorous publicly available policy evaluation undertaken by government particularly as it impacts on workers with caring responsibilities, including migrant and refugee women, women with disabilities, Indigenous women, older and younger women, and LBTQI women. There is also significant under-investment in national surveys that track the prevalence and forms of non-standard work, and its impacts on care, or the uptake of various forms of leave by different groups of worker-carers. This means there is a lack of accountability by government for employment and care policy outcomes as they impact on different groups of workers with care responsibilities.

A Bold Agenda

1. The Parliamentary Budget Office must increase the gender analysis of government policies through a gender distributional analysis and provide advice to the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit;

2. New policies and programs, including those put in place to ameliorate the impact of COVID-19, must be subjected to a rigorous gender-impact evaluation, particularly in terms of their impact on different groups of women and worker-carers;
3. All government and private sector data collection that tracks workforce characteristics and outcomes must be able to be disaggregated by gender together with other axes of disadvantage such as Indigenous status, birthplace and visa status, age, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as form of employment and care responsibilities;
4. The ABS must provide data on hourly wage rates for managerial as well as non-managerial employees and identify the gender pay gap for different groups of women.

This agenda will produce a decent society and a better country for all.

Australian Work + Family Policy Roundtable Members

- Dr Elizabeth Adamson, UNSW
- Prof Siobhan Austen, Curtin University
- Prof Marian Baird, University of Sydney
- Dr Dina Bowman, Brotherhood of St Laurence / University of Melbourne
- Adjunct Dr Michelle Brady, University of Melbourne
- A/Prof Wendy Boyd, Southern Cross University
- Emeritus Prof Deborah Brennan, UNSW
- Emeritus Prof Bettina Cass, UNSW
- Prof Sara Charlesworth, RMIT University (co-convenor)
- A/Prof Kay Cook, Swinburne University
- Dr Amanda Cooklin, La Trobe University
- Prof Rae Cooper, The University of Sydney
- A/Prof Natasha Cortis, UNSW
- Adjunct Prof Eva Cox, Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning (UTS)
- Prof Lyn Craig, University of Melbourne
- A/Prof Marianne Fenech, University of Sydney
- Emeritus Prof Suzanne Franzway, University of South Australia
- Prof Beth Goldblatt, University of Technology Sydney
- A/Prof Myra Hamilton, University of Sydney
- Alexandra Heron, University of Sydney
- A/Prof Elizabeth Hill, University of Sydney (co-convenor)
- Prof Therese Jefferson, Curtin University
- Dr Fiona Macdonald, RMIT University
- Prof Paula McDonald, Queensland University of Technology
- Dr Jill Murray, University of Melbourne
- Adjunct Prof Frances Press, Charles Sturt University
- Prof Alison Preston, University of Western Australia
- A/Prof Leah Ruppner, University of Melbourne
- A/Prof Belinda Smith, University of Sydney
- A/Prof Meg Smith, Western Sydney University
- Prof Miranda Stewart, University of Melbourne
- Prof Lyndall Strazdins, Australian National University
- Prof Gillian Whitehouse, University of Queensland

W+FPR Policy Principles

The aim of the Australian Work + Family Policy Roundtable is to propose, comment upon, collect and disseminate relevant policy research in order to inform good, evidence-based public policy in Australia.

The Roundtable believes work, care and family policy proposals should be guided by sound policy principles which:

- Recognise that good management of the work-life interface is a key characteristic of good labour law and social policy;
- Adopt a life-cycle approach to facilitating effective work-family interaction;
- Support both women and men to be paid workers and to share unpaid work and care;
- Protect the well-being of children, people with disabilities and frail older people who require care;
- Promote social justice and the fair distribution of social risk;
- Ensure gender equality, including pay equity;
- Treat individuals fairly, regardless of their household circumstances;
- Ensure sustainable workplaces and workers (e.g. through 'do-able', quality jobs and appropriate staffing levels);
- Ensure predictable hours, earnings and job security;
- Ensure flexible working rights are available in practice, not just in policy, to all workers through effective regulation, education and enforcement;
- Facilitate employee voice and influence over work arrangements;
- Recognise and support the ongoing need for income support where earnings capacities are limited by care responsibilities or other social contributions;
- Recognise the particular cultural and social needs of groups who have been excluded and discriminated against, such as Indigenous peoples and newly arrived migrants and refugees, who may require diverse responses to participate effectively; and

- Adopt policy and action based on rigorous, independent evidence.

Informed by these principles, the W+FPR will advance public debate and policy initiatives that promote a secure and living wage for workers; reasonable work hours and working time; appropriate and adequate leave provisions; quality care services; a fair tax and benefits regime and other measures that assist workers and carers to better combine these two spheres of essential human activity.