

The Work + Family Policy Roundtable Federal Election 2022 Scorecard

How the major parties' policies rate against the research evidence

In April 2022 the W+FPR released its **Work, Care & Family Policy Federal Election Benchmarks 2022**. Based on expert knowledge of the Australian and international research evidence, the network of 31 academics from 18 Australian institutions called upon the next federal government to advance policies that enhance the capacity of all households to combine work and care responsibilities and take care work seriously. We identify 5 priority policy themes that put respect, work, care and equality at the centre of public life: decent work; high-quality care infrastructure & a sustainable care workforce; gender pay equality; safe & respectful workplaces; and institutional support for decent work & decent care. The W+FPR finds current policy settings do not provide adequate support for families to work and care in ways that suit their circumstances.

DECENT WORK & JOB SECURITY: Decent work that provides job security, predictable working time arrangements, paid leave and a living wage make it possible for workers to manage their work and care responsibilities. But secure, predictable and properly paid work remains a significant challenge for many - particularly those employed part-time, many of whom work casually. Labor has committed to widening the scope of the Fair Work Act beyond employees to include 'employee-like' forms of work, which will

extend employment minima, including wages, to some gig and 'self-employed' workers. Labor announced it will ensure that labour-hire workers used by employers do not receive less pay than the workers they employ directly. Women's economic security is much more dependent than men's on the National Minimum Wage (NMW) and minimum award wages. While unlike the Coalition, Labor advocates a NMW increase, the purchasing power of award wages in feminised sectors remains a crucial issue.

Labor has committed to 10 days paid domestic violence (DV) leave in the National Employment Standards (NES) but not to the extension of paid DV or other forms of paid leave to those who are not permanent employees as recommended by the W+FPR. Neither major party has committed to addressing Australia's poor social protection safety net, including raising the low rate of Job Seeker. The Coalition has made no election announcements related to decent work and job security.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION & CARE (ECEC): Affordable, accessible, and high quality ECEC is a work, care and family priority. Both major parties share the objective of increasing women's employment participation. But lack of access to affordable ECEC services remains a sticking point for

many households. Expensive childcare is a major cost of living pressure and the main barrier to increasing women's participation in paid work. The W+FPR recommends investment in a national system of publicly funded, *free* ECEC for all children regardless of their parents' workforce participation, where they live, or socio-economic status.

The Coalition has improved the Child Care Subsidy (CSS) system, dropping the annual cap on the maximum \$10,560 subsidy for families with household incomes above \$189,390, and lifting the subsidy rate for families with multiple children in care to a maximum of 95%. These changes will reduce the cost of ECEC for eligible families by an average of \$2,200 a year and reduce work disincentives for women. However, even with these changes the ECEC system, designed and implemented by the Coalition in 2018, is deficient according to a comprehensive review by the Australian Institute of Family Studies. Work activity tests and complex administrative rules mean the system does not deliver adequate opportunities for children in vulnerable households, who stand to benefit the most from high quality ECEC. The Coalition has provided \$19.4 million to build 20 new ECEC centres over the next 5 years in regional Australia where there is limited or no access to childcare.

Labor has promised a \$5.4 billion investment in ECEC to lift the maximum CCS subsidy to 90% and expand eligibility for households with taxable incomes of up to \$530,000. This change will reduce out-of-pocket ECEC costs for most households and alleviate employment disincentives for women. Labor has also signaled an intention to expand the system, to offer universal childcare as an economic reform to drive productivity & growth. Labor has committed to develop and implement a 'whole of government' Early Years Strategy, accountable for the wellbeing, education and development of young children. Labor will charge the Productivity Commission and ACCC with supporting the changes, including managing costs and promoting transparency.

PAID PARENTAL LEAVE: There is strong research evidence for an improved PPL scheme. The W+FPR recommends 26 weeks of PPL able to be shared between both parents, plus an additional 6 weeks on a 'use it or lose it' basis for fathers and partners, plus superannuation. The Coalition has redesigned the national PPL scheme to combine 18 weeks (for the primary carer) with 2 weeks of dad & partner pay (DaPP). The new 20-week scheme, paid at the National Minimum Wage, can be shared by parents in any combination, and used flexibly over the first 2 years of a child's life, doing away with old definitions of 'primary' & 'secondary' carer. Eligibility has been enhanced with the income test broadened to include a household income threshold of \$350,000 a year. The 20-week scheme increases single parent's access to paid leave; however, it unpicks good policy architecture designed to 'nudge' men to take leave, removing the DaPP provisions. Labor

has ruled out paying superannuation on PPL. Failure by both major parties to support payment of superannuation on PPL is a major oversight that weakens women's economic security and retirement income.

A SUSTAINABLE & HIGH-QUALITY CARE WORKFORCE: The W+FPR recommends payment of professional wages for care workers that reflect skill and support workforce sustainability. Labor supports the current work value case before the Fair Work Commission (FWC) for a \$5 per hour increase in frontline aged care workers' wages and will fund the outcome. Labor will establish Care & Community Sector and Pay Equity Expert Panels within the FWC that will provide expertise on gender pay equity and care sector work. Labor has not, however, committed to ensuring publicly funded care services directly employ care workers as recommended by the W+FPR. The Coalition will 'honour' the decision of the FWC in the aged care work value case, but has not made any announcements that might address systemic defects in the IR system for care workers.

GENDER PAY EQUALITY: Gender pay equality is critical for worker-carers. Yet equal pay laws and institutions have failed to address Australia's persistent gender pay gap. Labor's policy aligns with W+FPR recommendations that equal remuneration be an explicit objective of the Fair Work Act and that an equal remuneration principle be established. Together with a new Expert Pay Equity Panel, the expertise and decision-making of the Commission on gendered undervaluation will be strengthened. Labor has also committed to prohibiting pay secrecy

clauses and requiring companies of more than 250 employees to publicly report their gender pay gap. The Coalition has committed additional resources to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency but not made any specific commitments on gender pay equality.

SAFE WORKPLACES: The W+FPR supports the implementation of all the 2020 Jenkins Respect@Work report recommendations, as does Labor. The Coalition has implemented 43 of the 55 recommendations. It is currently consulting on key recommended legislative reforms including a 'positive duty' on employers to take reasonable steps to eliminate sex discrimination, sexual harassment and victimization, and own motion inquiries by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner. Both reforms are vital to address and prevent systemic sexual harassment and gender-based violence, making workplaces safer for women.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

For the full text of the W+FPR Federal Election Benchmarks 2022, see <https://www.workandfamilypolicyroundtable.org/>

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** This scorecard reflects policies announced as of May 16, 2022.*

