

Unpaid childcare is Australia's largest industry – it needs to be acknowledged ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

We're all resigned to traffic gridlock on the way to work during the week, but when we are stopped, bumper to bumper, on Saturday mornings, we fume.

The reason we get so angry about clogged roads on the weekends is because we believe everyone else's travel is optional – it's mostly parents taking their children to sport and other activities.

It's the same with school drop-off and pickups. Those parents are getting in the way of people who are working.

Well, taking care of children is working. It might be unpaid, but it is still work and, if parents didn't do it, they would have to pay someone to take on the task, says PwC partner, Jeremy Thorpe.

Thorpe is a co-author of *Understanding the Unpaid Economy*, a study that attempts to quantify the value of unpaid work. The report values Australia's unpaid economy at \$2.2tn. Childcare makes up the biggest proportion of unpaid work – 24.6% – and it has a replacement value of more than \$345bn (what it would cost to pay someone to do it).

The value of unpaid childcare makes it Australia's largest industry, larger than any in the formal economy.

Unsurprisingly, because of traditional role allocation, women do 76% of childcare and 72% of unpaid work overall. They also do 67% of domestic work, 69% of care of adults and 57% of volunteering.

Thorpe says it's important to put a dollar figure to this unpaid work in order to acknowledge it, and to encourage governments and employers to factor it into their planning.

If, for instance, travelling with children was regarded in the same way as paid work – as contributing to the economy – then planners may account for it in their expectations of traffic flow on the roads, infrastructure and public transport timetables.

"We build a whole lot of infrastructure on the basis of moving people around in peak hour times and often moving them to CBDs and hubs in the city, but there is actually a large 'workforce' that doesn't travel in that type of way," Thorpe says.

"If we think of them as a workforce, are we providing the right transport, support, infrastructure for that group – especially when they are three times the size of the financial services industry?"

Thorpe says if unpaid care of children was paid, it would have a lobby group looking after its interests.

This is a point also made by a recent OECD report, which says any cost-benefit simulation used as a basis for employment and welfare spending decisions must include areas such as health and childcare.

While childcare takes up the lion's share of unpaid work, domestic duties account for 8%, followed by care of adults at 0.9% and then volunteering at 0.5%.

The \$15.4bn value of care of adults, often elderly parents, could also be factored into the provision of services, such as training for family members taking on end-of-life care.

With women doing three-quarters of the unpaid work, attaching a dollar value helps in understanding how it affects their participation in the paid workforce, says Thorpe.

The PwC data shows that women on lower incomes are less likely to give up paid work to take care of their children. It is women on higher incomes whose families can afford to exist for a period on one income. People in more advantaged situations have more options around unpaid work, he says.

This information suggests men should be encouraged to take paternity leave, allowing women to get back into work earlier, if that is what they want to do.

“Are we flexible enough so we are getting the most out of people ... and acknowledging that these things [family commitments] are important?” Thorpe asks.

“It is about getting the balance right.”

Another interesting finding of the research (based on the Australian census) was that men are more likely to do traditional volunteering than unpaid family work.

The report states: “There is no situation that makes men, on average, substitute their unpaid work for female unpaid work.”

Thorpe says: “The gender stereotypes actually have a ring of truth to them.

“[Volunteering for men] is social networking, a potential career enhancement. It is not doing the things around the house. It is visible.”

According to the report, people in New South Wales and Victoria do less unpaid work than in other states. This could relate to the higher cost of living and the fact it generally requires two good incomes to service a mortgage in Sydney and Melbourne.

“Canberra clearly dominates per capita amounts of unpaid work,” the report says. “It is the highest state average, and also has six of the top 10 individual locations for per capita childcare (Acton, Bonner, Civic, Crace, Namadgi and Phillip).”

-reprinted from The Guardian

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