

No more nappy valley but childcare still an issue for working women ^[1]

Childcare worries hold more women than men back from workforce participation. The only remedy is a change in culture

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AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

New data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics reveal that childcare remains then biggest barrier to women either entering the workforce or taking on more hours. The data show that women, whether they are employed or not, will always rate the issue of caring for children more highly than do men, when it comes to thinking about their working life.

There is now a greater level of women in the workforce than ever before. 40 years ago only 45% of women aged 25-64 were either working or looking for work – half the 91% of men of the same age. Now 74% of women in that age group are in the workforce, compared with 87% of men.

[Graph: "Labour force participation rate of men and women aged 25-64" available to view online].

And yet women remain much more likely to work part-time than men. While the percentage of women in their prime working ages working full-time has risen over the past 40 years, only 41% of such women work full-time, compared with 73% of men:

[Graph: "Percentage of those 25-64 working full-time" available to view online].

For this reason, unsurprisingly women have consistently higher levels of underemployment than do men – although both genders are experiencing record highs:

[Graph: "Underemployment rate" available to view online].

But the reasons for not being able to work more hours – or for even working any hours – greatly differs across the genders.

And the biggest difference is the need – or desire – to care for children.

The “children penalty” has long been a factor for women’s workforce participation. It leads to the so-called “nappy valley” of employment for women – where there is a sharp drop in the percentage of women in work once they enter the prime child bearing and then raising years of the mid-20s to mid-30s.

The problem is not just that such women see reduced incomes and lower superannuation balances as a result, they also struggle to return to work, and also miss out on opportunities for proportion and leadership roles.

As I noted in August, the situation has greatly changed. Only 58% of women born in 1962 were employed while aged 25-29 – down on the 65% who were employed when aged 20-24. By contrast 72% of women born in 1982 were employed:

[Graph: "Average employment rates of women by year of birth and age", available to view online].

Now the valley has become a plateau.

But the issue of childcare – who does it, its accessibility and cost – remains a massive barrier to work for women.

The latest release of the data on barriers to work shows that of the 691,000 women not in the workforce who wanted a paid job, 50% were caring for their child, compared with just 12.5% of the 407,000 men in the same situation:

[Graph indicating, "Persons not in the labour force who wanted to work", available to view online].

And the clear impact of caring for children as a barrier is evident when men and women were asked to rate the incentives for them to either join the workforce or to seek more hours. Half of the women surveyed suggested that access to childcare was “very important”, compared with just 37% of men.

Similarly, 51% of women highlighted the need for financial assistance with childcare costs, while just 36% of men rated the issue as very

important.

The responses also highlighted the issue is not merely related to preschool aged children but is an ongoing issue throughout the child's school life.

While 29% of women suggested that it was very important that they be able to work "school hours" – which would enable dropping off and picking up children – only 8% of men suggested that was a very important incentive for them to return to work:

[Graph titled, "Incentives to join/increase workforce participation rated as 'very important'", available to view online].

The barriers to work are only for those who actually are seeking either more hours or a return to the workforce. Most people who are not in the workforce or who are employed are quite happy with that situation.

While the underemployment rate is currently at a record high of 8.7%, that does mean 91.3% of workers are content with their hours. Similarly, around 82% of those not in the labour force do not want a paid job, but the reasons vary.

Most do not want a job because they see no need or are satisfied with their current situation, are retired or are suffering a long-term illness or disability and thus work is not possible.

Those three categories account for around three-quarters of those not in the labour force who do not wish to look for work.

There is little difference between men and women when it comes to the first two categories, and while men are more likely to be out of the workforce due to long-term illness or disability, where the big disparity occurs is the issue of caring for children.

Just 0.6% of men who are not in the workforce and who do not wish to be so cite caring for children as the main reason, compared with 14% of women.

[Graph indicating, "Main reason for those not in the labour force not seeking work", available to view online].

A similar result occurs when looking at the reasons for those in work not seeking more hours.

While a slightly higher percentage of men than women will suggest they are satisfied with their current arrangements, or are studying, barely any men cite caring for children as an issue.

Only 5% of men currently in work cite caring for children as the reason they are not seeking more hours, compared with 30% of women.

[Graph, "Main reason for those in work not seeking more hours", available to view online].

The findings around barriers to work provide yet more evidence that childcare remains the big issue that holds women back from entering the workforce or working more hours. But the results also explain why it is an issue for women rather than men. It is not that women are less able to secure childcare than men, or are somehow more likely to have children, it is that they either expect or wish to be the one who takes care of them.

The issue of women's workforce participation will never be fully solved by childcare subsidies or greater availability – but will require a change in culture. The data shows that men – whether working or not – barely even consider the issue of caring for their children when worrying about their working lives.

-reprinted from The Guardian

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