

Workplace policies must change to reflect 21st century realities

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It's 2016 and we are moving backwards on work, care and family policies. Governments focused on balanced budgets rather than balanced lives have stymied support for workers with caring responsibilities – mostly women. This is at a time of increased global attention on gender, inequality and care.

At the G20 meeting in Brisbane in 2014, Australia signed on to a global compact to reduce the gender gap in workplace participation by 25 per cent by 2025. But who will care for the kids, the frail aged, the ill and people with a disability? In order to increase women's workforce participation and build a fair Australia, governments will need to invest in a basic universal system of social care that supports all workers with caring responsibilities.

Those performing paid care must also be recognised and remunerated appropriately. But recent changes to work, care and family policies do not reflect the research evidence about how to build a national system of social care infrastructure that is attuned to the needs of Australian households and the economy.

This month's budget retained radical cuts to Australia's first national paid parental leave scheme which will leave many new mothers with less paid time at home with their baby, contradicting research evidence and World Health Organisation recommendations. Plans to restructure and enhance Early Childhood Education and Care funding by \$3.5 billion have also been deferred until 2018. Complex implementation rules, reduced access for children from disadvantaged households and changes to funding rules for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services raise serious doubts about the reform package.

The demographic and research evidence tells us we need to be heading in a different direction.

Managing work and care is being cast, increasingly, as a private matter that individual households need to sort out for themselves. But research evidence on the total (paid and unpaid) working time of Australian women and men, and the associated time pressure, shows the current approach is unsustainable. Building a more effective system of social care services has become urgent.

Our workforce is increasingly feminised and ageing, with the formal retirement age set to increase to 70 by 2035. Workplaces will need to change to manage the needs of an older workforce. An ageing population also means more workers will have responsibility for aged relatives and friends – especially as the aged-care system increasingly relies on unpaid "informal" care.

At the same time, the paid care workforce is expected to grow to meet Australians' demand for affordable and high-quality childcare, aged care and disability care services. These must be decent jobs that provide workers with the adequate wages and conditions essential for the delivery of high-quality care infrastructure.

A new report released by the Australian Work and Family Policy Roundtable, of which I am co-convenor, makes a series of policy recommendations for a care infrastructure to meet the needs of 21st-century Australia. Drawing on the research and expertise of more than 30 academics from 16 Australian universities, the report urges the next government to provide a minimum two days per week of subsidised early childhood education and care for all children, regardless of their parents' workforce participation.

We call for the extension of the parental leave pay and dad and partner pay schemes to 26 weeks in the near term, and eventually to 52 weeks, alongside raising the payment level from the minimum wage and including superannuation. The report also urges a liveable aged pension as a cornerstone of Australia's retirement system. This must be delivered at a level that allows those eligible to live with dignity in their old age, by continuing to index pensions to increases in average earnings.

We are not alone in calling for improved work, care and family policies. The OECD's 2016 Going for Growth report urged Australia to increase government spending on high-quality early childhood education and care in order to meet the Prime Minister's national productivity and innovation agenda. Earlier this year, the IMF advocated for the use of public debt to finance investment in key productive inputs such as education.

Right now, an erratic policy environment and absence of a predictable, affordable system of social care compromises the wellbeing of Australian households and our economy. We need to do much better if we are to ensure a good society where work and care can be combined with benefits for all. It is high time we got this right.

-reprinted from The Age

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