



# Supporting families to work and parent for a more gender equitable Australia

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## About the author



**Dr Sarah Duffy** is a qualitative researcher specialising in gender equity in institutional contexts. Her work focuses on the intersection between policy, practice and lived experience. Dr Duffy's key ongoing research projects relate to how fathers juggle work and parenting, how mothers negotiate their ongoing parenting and work commitments and the experiences of student parents managing study and parenting. Dr Duffy hopes her work contributes to a more equitable future for all Australians.



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## Executive summary

Although Australia has a government-funded paid parental leave scheme, the payment rate and leave duration mean that many families<sup>1</sup> still rely on employer-provided leave for financial security. This creates unequal access to adequate leave, as employer support varies significantly by gender, sector, occupation and income level.

Australia's current system also reinforces unequal care roles. It encourages mothers to spend more time caring for children and engaging in unpaid domestic work, while limiting fathers' participation in care. This contributes to the gender pay gap and deepens gender inequity.

The design of Australia's current scheme influences patterns of caregiving and workforce participation. Payment settings, leave length, sociocultural norms and allocation rules mean mothers often spend longer out of paid work, while fathers' uptake of parental leave remains comparatively low. Recent figures for government-funded paid parental leave show that fathers comprised just 0.6 per cent of the total recipients of primary paid parental leave.<sup>2</sup>

This paper examines the strengths and limitations of the current government-funded paid parental leave system in Australia. Drawing on qualitative evidence from Australian families, it identifies ways that government can better support Australian parents.

These opportunities include increasing the rate and duration of paid parental leave and reserving a portion for fathers; expanding childcare subsidies to support care at home during the early years; encouraging employer-led return-to-work frameworks; promoting cultural change to increase and normalise paternal leave uptake by delivering public education initiatives; and prioritising the equitable division of parenting and caregiving in the National Gender Equality Strategy.

This research aims to support an Australia where families have genuine agency in deciding how care and paid work are shared. Achieving this requires targeted support for mother and father figures that address structural inequality and advance gender equality.





# Policy opportunities – at a glance

**1 Structural settings and entitlements** | Increase the support offered to families through the Australian Government Paid Parental Leave scheme and consider how the scheme could offer additional ongoing support to working families.

Parents in our study overwhelmingly supported bringing Australia's Paid Parental Leave system in line with global best practice by:

- raising the Paid Parental Leave payment to wage replacement rates;
- extending the total leave duration to 12 months; and
- earmarking a minimum of 11 weeks exclusively for fathers.

Further, there are opportunities for the Australian Government to provide additional support to working families outside of Paid Parental Leave. For example, setting up a scheme to assist with domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning could alleviate burdens and encourage greater engagement in the workforce or in caring for their children.

**2 Flexibility for families** | Explore opportunities for introducing greater flexibility into family policy.

Respondents in this study pointed to the 'one-size-fits-all' approach of the existing Paid Parental Leave policy. There is no additional support, for example, for a multiple birth, if the mother or the child requires additional time in hospital, or if anything unexpected arises.

**3 Transitional arrangements** | Support employers to provide material assistance to parents returning from parental leave.

The Australian Government could develop best practice guidelines or a national framework that considers all stages of parenting, up to the age of 18 for the youngest child in the family, to inform workplaces on initiatives and support they might provide to parents. This framework should outline practical, evidence-based strategies for reintegrating parents into the workforce and promoting adaptive family-friendly workplace cultures.

**4 Culture change** | Establish a more inclusive gender equality strategy at the Australian Government level.

There is an opportunity to revise Australia's gender equality strategy, "Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality", to place greater emphasis on the equitable division of parenting and caregiving responsibilities.

Promote cultural change by designing interventions that encourage Australians to view parenting, paid parental leave, childcare, early childhood education and health as family issues – not women's issues.

The Australian Government could consider commissioning public education initiatives that normalise fathers' involvement in caring and challenge social norms that workplace supports are only for mothers. For example a campaign could encourage fathers' uptake of parental leave and carers leave to look after children when they are unwell.



# Background

Achieving gender equity in Australia requires changes to the structural settings that shape how families combine paid work and caring responsibilities. The design of paid parental leave is a potential pathway to achieving this.

The transition to parenthood brings significant new responsibilities and demands on time. However, depending on their gender, new parents face different sets of expectations, opportunities and constraints when combining parenting and work. Current policy settings continue to frame parental leave, childcare, early education and workplace flexibility as “women’s issues” rather than family concerns and responsibilities.

This framing is reflected in the uptake patterns of paid parental leave schemes. Mothers are more likely than fathers to take up extended government- or employer-funded parental leave and to access ongoing workplace supports that enable caregiving.<sup>3</sup> Recent figures for government-funded paid parental leave show that fathers comprised just 0.6 per cent of the total recipients of primary paid parental leave.<sup>4</sup> Australian research found that 35.1 per cent of mothers or primary carers had partners who did not have access to parental leave.<sup>5</sup>

These disparities affect not only parents’ workforce participation and long-term earning trajectories, but also family wellbeing. One-third of Australian children aged 10 to 13 believe their fathers work too much, highlighting how limited paternal engagement in caregiving can impact family dynamics.<sup>6</sup>

Although Australia offers a government-funded Paid Parental Leave scheme, its payment rate and leave duration requires many families to rely on employer-provided leave for financial security. This market-based approach can deepen inequality. Employer-funded parental leave and flexible work arrangements are uneven across sectors, genders, occupations and income levels, so access to generous entitlements is often correlated with labour market advantage. While 68 per cent of Australian employers reporting to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency offer some form of paid parental leave, the coverage and eligibility of these schemes vary considerably, and not all parents benefit equally.<sup>7</sup>

Limited employer-funded parental leave is only one barrier to fathers’ participation in caregiving: workplace culture and entrenched gender norms also impact uptake. In 2024, only 17 per cent of primary carer, employer-funded paid parental leave was taken by fathers.<sup>8</sup> As this form of leave is paid at wage replacement rates, financial disincentives alone cannot explain the disparity. Organisational expectations, concerns about career penalties and broader societal norms around breadwinning and caregiving continue to constrain fathers’ access to and use of available entitlements.

“

Isla, two children



My husband was also entitled to paid parental leave the first time around and didn’t take it. **People thought you were taking the piss if you took the entitlement.**



These barriers are responsive to policy intervention and there is scope for Australia to act, with clear opportunities to strengthen the design of paid parental leave to better support gender equality.

## Government-funded paid parental leave in Australia

In the 1970s, Sweden and Australia were both pioneers in reforms for gender equity. The Swedish Government recognised gender equality as a separate policy area and in a world first established paid parental leave for men in 1974. This encouraged more equal distribution of the domestic load and offered a system-level solution.

In Australia in 1973, in another world first, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam appointed Elizabeth Reid as Women's Adviser to the Prime Minister and in 1974 the Women's Affairs Section was established (now known as the Office for Women). The policy focus in Australia was, and still is, on women.

Sweden consistently ranks higher than Australia for gender equality.<sup>9</sup> The unintended legacy of Australia's focus on women in its efforts to achieve gender equality in health and education systems places much of the emotional load of parenting on women.

“

Tina, two children



I feel **like it's all so mother focused**: mother health, mothers' mental health. Looking back on it, there wasn't a lot for him. And also, I felt the mental load was all mine. So, working out the schedule, the appointments, the family planning, the follow-up obstetrician appointments. I just remember so many appointments in that first six months. It felt like it was all on me.

In 2010, Australia became the second-last Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) country to implement a paid parental leave scheme (the United States still does not have a national scheme).

Initially, 18 weeks of paid leave was offered to the primary carer, paid at the minimum wage. In 2013, Dad and Partner Pay was added to the scheme, offering non-birth parents two weeks paid at the minimum wage.

Dad and Partner Pay has now been abolished. Instead, both parents can access the Paid Parental Leave scheme. The Australian Government has committed to expanding the entitlement, from 20 weeks' leave to 26 weeks by July 2026. In addition, from 2025, 12 per cent superannuation is paid on Paid Parental Leave, shared according to how much Paid Parental Leave each parent took.

Despite these increases, Australia's paid parental leave scheme remains the least generous of OECD countries.



**Table 1 | Parental leave compared to average weekly adult earnings**

	Mother	Father/ non-birth parent
Parental Leave Payment (PLP)	\$915.80/week	\$915.80/week
Duration in 2025	20	4
Average weekly adult earnings (AWAE)	\$1,510.90	\$1,510.90
Ratio of PLP to AWAE	0.61	0.61
Parental leave equivalent to AWAE	12.2 weeks	2.4 weeks

While both parents can now access the scheme, there is a 10-day ‘use it or lose it period’. In two-parent households, a parent can only access a maximum of 90 out of the 100 days of payments. This is a commendable effort to encourage greater paid parental leave uptake from fathers. However, without raising the rate of payment this initiative is unlikely to have the desired effect. Further, only a maximum of 10 days of payments can be accessed concurrently by two parents.

The inadequacy of the payment rate, short leave period and limited access arrangements of Australia’s scheme mean that many families look to alternative sources of income or long-term savings strategies in the lead-up to having a child to offset lost income.

“

Gary, one child



It’s minimum wage. **How far does that actually go in today’s economy?**

“

Isla, two children



**We saved up a whole year’s salary to allow me to take time off work.** I started doing that when I was in my early twenties in anticipation I was going to have children and need to financially support us. My husband actually didn’t take the two weeks paid parental leave through the government, because it’s so much lower than his salary.



## How does Australia compare globally?

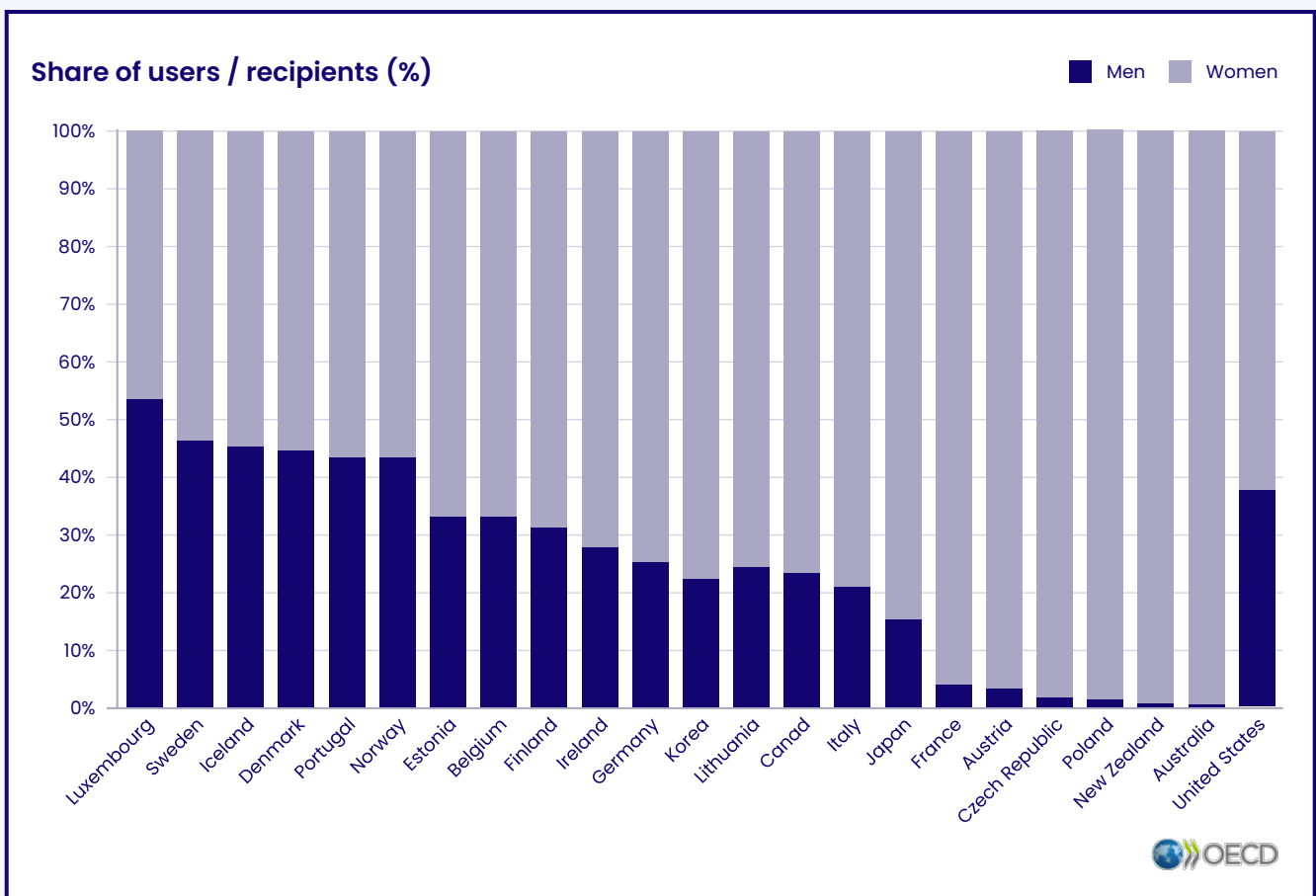
International case studies show Australia can learn from other paid parental models.

Figure 1 shows the gender distribution of parents accessing paid parental leave across OECD countries. It indicates Sweden's early commitment to encouraging both parents to take leave has supported a more even gender distribution.

Luxembourg also stands out: it is the only country where slightly more men than women access paid parental leave, and it is also the only OECD country with a gender pay gap favouring women (-0.9 per cent).

Luxembourg, Sweden, Iceland, Denmark, Portugal and Norway also reserve part of paid parental leave for fathers through a 'Daddy quota'. These countries pay leave at or near wage replacement rates and show a more balanced gender distribution of paid parental leave.

**Figure 1 | Gender distribution of recipients/ users of statutory parental leave/benefits**





# Parental leave as a driver for greater gender equality

This report captures the lived experience of Australian parents who have accessed some form of paid parental leave (employer- and/or government-funded) in the last five years. It examines their experience of paid parental leave, its impact on their family, what worked well, what could be improved and their return-to-work after leave. The research also considers the impact of Paid Parental Leave on their career progression, work-family conflict and their partner's experience.

These findings are supported by key data captured through desktop research.

## Who participated in this research?

Thirty-two working parents participated in this qualitative research project.

In total, 18 mothers and 12 fathers participated. The cultural background of participants included: Australian (excl. Indigenous), New Zealander, South-East Asian, Anglo-European, North-Western European and North African and Middle Eastern (participants could choose multiple cultural backgrounds).

17 participants were currently working full-time, 13 participants were working part-time, one participant was working casually and one participant was unemployed (but had been employed within the past two years).

For further information see, Annexe B.

## Unequal division of care and domestic chores reinforces gender inequality at work

There is a direct link between the unequal division of unpaid care work at home and gender inequality in the workforce.<sup>10</sup> When mothers take on a greater share of responsibilities, the long-term impacts can be significant: reduced financial stability and independence, lower income and poorer workforce participation compared to fathers.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, growing evidence shows that fathers face both explicit and subtle barriers when trying to access parental supports in the workplace<sup>12</sup>

Figure 1, first published in 2019, correlates with 2024 research that indicates how Australian men's participation in domestic labour has flatlined in the past 20 years, remaining below 50 per cent since 2002.<sup>13</sup> This is despite women increasing their time in paid employment from 22.2 hours in 2002 to 28.5 hours in 2022 (men's engagement in paid work was 37.7 hours in 2002 and 37.9 in 2022). Women continue to undertake the majority of household labour (18.4 hours) and care duties (10.7 hours), while men spend 12.8 and 5.5 hours respectively on these tasks.<sup>14</sup>

“

Amy, mother of one



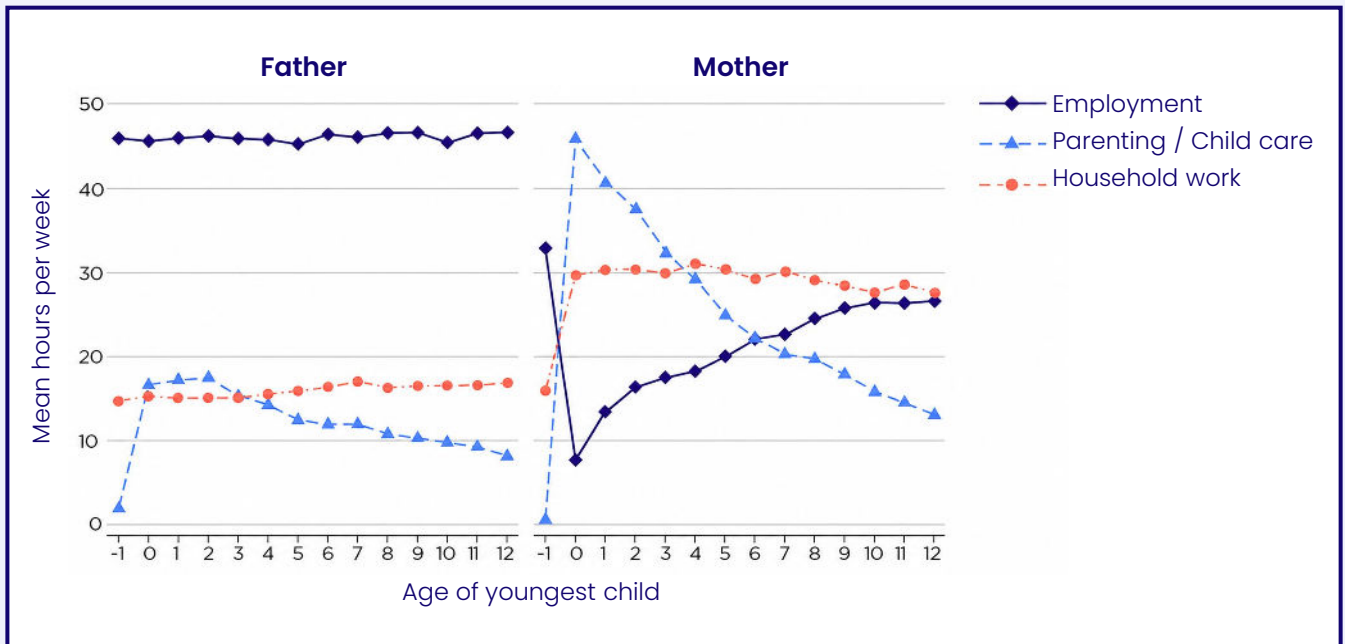
...before having a baby, **we were dividing the load**. And then, when you're not supported by society, it's super hard to actually follow through on any of that stuff.



Figure 1 illustrates how, for the first 12 years after their first child is born, fathers' employment tends to remain steady. Their contribution to domestic and child-rearing responsibilities is consistent and is always less than the mother's.

Meanwhile, mothers' employment levels tend not to recover. Time spent on housework, once equal to their partner's, rises and the time spent caring for children increases sharply, then slowly recedes, particularly after the child is school-aged.

**Figure 2 | Fathers and work: a statistical overview**



Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies

Overall, men work more hours than women in Australia. However, it does not start out this way. Table 2 shows that women and men begin their working lives with equal workforce participation, with a substantial drop-off for women during childbearing years. These are broad figures that only show workforce participation, obscuring the fact that 31 per cent of women work part-time compared to just 11 per cent of men.





**Table 2 | Workforce participation by age and gender<sup>15</sup>**

	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Women	70.3%	82.7%	83.1%	82.0%	64.5%	12.7%
Men	70.6%	90.6%	91.4%	88.5%	74.8%	20.3%

Greater participation in part-time work may blunt career progression. The Workplace Gender Equality Agency has identified a ‘part-time promotion cliff’. In 2022-23, although 21 per cent of employees worked part-time, only seven per cent of managers were employed part-time.<sup>16</sup>

The gender pay gap contributes to men’s higher levels of workforce participation. The Workplace Gender Equality Agency calculates the gender pay gap at 21.8 per cent in Australia for organisations with 100 or more employees.<sup>17</sup> This is a significant difference in current and future earnings between men and women and is reinforced by government and employer-funded parental leave schemes that primarily support mothers to take extended time out of the workforce, sometimes for substantially less pay.

When combined with women’s greater access to parenting supports, this system encourages a gendered division of labour – where women are expected to care and men to earn. Additionally, discrimination related to pregnancy, paid parental leave and returning to work as a parent remains widespread and systemic in Australia.<sup>18</sup>

These influences combine to force families to make decisions about parenting and work based on financial pressures rather than wellbeing.

“

Tina, two children



**When I announced I was pregnant at six months pregnant ... I was demoted in my role, from a marketing strategist, which is a very senior role to, get this, a social media coordinator. So, on the same pay, but like in terms of tasks and responsibilities, I was completely demoted.**

The Australian Government’s Paid Parental Leave scheme directs most leave to one parent, usually the mother.<sup>19</sup> This reflects the fact that most mothers give birth and need to physically recover and to care for a newborn infant.

Other countries, such as Luxembourg, separate recovery leave from broader parental leave. The birthing parent is entitled to eight weeks leave prior to the birth and 12 weeks after birth. A separate parental leave entitlement is then available to parents.

Many Australian workplaces follow a similar pattern. They offer longer leave to mothers and limited support for fathers. This reinforces sociocultural norms that position mothers as primary carers and fathers as secondary carers.



“

Tina, two children

I was looking into the future of kindy and school hours and school drop offs. And given my husband's workplace is not as flexible in terms of hours, I thought, well, **because I don't have a job, I need to look for a job that is going to be flexible. So then one of us has the flexibility.**

There's no point me going into a full-time role and then us turning it into arguments. And who's going to take the time off? And, you know, I could see [how] my future would be if I went for another big, heavy role, like **it would be arguments in our marriage.** So, I thought, well, **I'm going to make the choice to pick a less responsible role** – you know, a little bit less demanding, but more flexibility, easy going... it was very purposefully selected.

Of course, in recent decades, social and personal expectations about the role mothers and fathers play in families have shifted. For most families, it is no longer accepted or financially viable that the father will be the sole 'breadwinner' while the mother cares for the home and the children.

There has been a push for women to increase their contribution to the economy through greater workforce participation. At the same time, working hours and school hours remain incompatible, often requiring both parents to play an active role in parenting.<sup>20</sup> (We acknowledge that single parents likely face an even more difficult 'juggle'.)

#### Fathers want to contribute more to parenting, but face structural and cultural barriers

Recent research heralds that 'the most pressing issue for contemporary fathers is negotiating both work and care'.<sup>21</sup> Yet, governments and workplaces have been slow to adapt to evolving expectations around fatherhood and the growing desire among fathers to take on more caregiving responsibilities. Australian fathers work some of the longest hours globally, and uptake of policies aimed at increasing their engagement remains low.<sup>22</sup>



“

Michael, two children

I work with clients who are in either government agencies or they work in the corporate world, and they get these extra leave packages, which is great. It's really awesome that employers are getting behind that. But the fact that it's not recognised universally, **the fact that if you don't have the luck, if you don't then have the privilege, if you're not educated enough, or you're not of the social class where you have access – for some reason you're then disadvantaged.** But that's the most vulnerable groups that we should be supporting.

There is a critical need to shift attitudes towards fathers' roles at home and in the workplace across Australia. Our findings show how stigma and outdated attitudes still shape how paternal leave is perceived in many Australian workplaces.



“

Seamus, two children

I think maybe even more so for dads, it [parental leave] is **seen as like a luxury**.

I remember when I was taking the longer time for leave, **some people in the office were making comments about it being an ‘extended holiday’, and how pampered we were in this age that we got to take that amount of time**, and [saying] I wish I could just have a baby.

Expanding public policy parental leave provisions to encourage fathers to access parental leave has been found to improve mothers’ workplace re-entry,<sup>23</sup> increase life satisfaction for fathers,<sup>24</sup> enhance children’s long-term academic performance,<sup>25</sup> promote marital stability<sup>26</sup> and increase fathers’ engagement in domestic and child-rearing tasks.<sup>27</sup>



“

Delilah, two children

My partner hasn’t been able to take time off work, really, since the birth of either of the kids. I mean, he took two weeks off, but [he] was still hassled the whole time by his employer about what needed to be done. And prior to having both children, when I was sort of in my last few weeks, there was lots of talk about, well, this needs to be done, **so make sure that she doesn’t have the baby by Friday, because you need to have all of this work finished**.

So it’s just a lot of pressure around it – what’s supposed to be a really exciting time. **Just so much pressure** and having to think about going back to work and what needs to be done at work; it should be the last thing that people need to think about when they’re welcoming a new family member.

### Strengthening violence prevention: Why fathers’ access to parental leave matters can prevent family violence

Improving access to equitable parental leave could have far-reaching effects in supporting more equal family relationships. Evidence from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Our Watch identifies gender inequality as a primary underlying driver of family and domestic violence.<sup>28</sup> Structured inequalities, including economic dependence, rigid gender norms around caregiving and breadwinning and unequal decision-making power within relationships, create conditions in which violence may occur. Addressing these gendered drivers and recognising how they interact with other forms of disadvantage and discrimination is central to long-term prevention.

A growing body of international and Australian research shows parental leave reform as a promising strategy for the prevention of family violence.<sup>29</sup> Parental leave policy is not only a workforce participation reform; it is also a structural gender equality intervention. When caregiving is assumed to be primarily women’s responsibility, policy settings can reinforce traditional gender roles and economic dependence. In contrast, well-designed parental leave, that is adequately paid, individually allocated and accessible to fathers and partners on a non-transferable basis, supports more equal sharing of care and earning from a child’s earliest months. Setting families on a more equitable and fairer trajectory for the future.



Respondent Gemima shares her experiences of the inequitable division of domestic and child-rearing responsibilities, and the severe consequences of relationship breakdown:

“

Gemima, two children



... yeah, [his work demands] contributed or interfered with family life. Because his job is physical and then he's exhausted, and even when he is home, he wasn't much help. It definitely increased conflict, because I'm getting annoyed because he's not pulling his weight at home ... **there was always this tension around him prioritising work over his family** ... It wasn't the reason that we separated, but it would have contributed to the separation.

... **honestly, if it wasn't for my parents this last year, who are semi-retired, I don't know how we would have survived.** If it wasn't for them I wouldn't have been able to do the little bit of work that I have done which has kept me afloat ... **We probably would have ended up homeless.**

All Australian governments have committed to long-term action through the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010–2022. Expanding and strengthening equitable parental leave should be understood as a complementary measure that addresses wider inequalities in society.





# Frameworks to support parents returning to work

A key finding from this research highlights the critical need for greater support for parents transitioning back to work after parental leave. The Australian parents who participated in this project described becoming a parent as an enormous life change with material and practical implications that often go unacknowledged when one returns to work as a new parent.

A national return-to-work framework could support workplaces in considering the different ways parents may wish to combine work and parenting, as well as the different phases of parenting and options that meet the needs of both employers and parents.

In countries such as Norway, this transition is guided by a combination of formal policy and employer-led initiatives. Formal policy includes the right to breastfeeding breaks at work, the right to flexible working conditions or part-time work, carers leave, parental leave paid at replacement wage rates and well-funded childcare. Employer-led initiatives include adjusted responsibilities and staged re-entry to work after a prolonged period of parental leave. Initiatives combine to promote smoother reintegration for employees and their families, as well as better outcomes for employers.

By contrast, Gary talks about what it was like not having a return-to-work plan:

“

Gary, one child



**I don't think my employers supported [us] with a very strong return-to-work plan. It was like, you're back in the office now. Off you go.** And there were a couple of days here and there where I wouldn't be leaving the office till six o'clock at night, because some urgent task popped up. And it's like, I've got caring requirements. But I've got to stay back late at work ...

Tina describes the discrimination she experienced when she returned to work:

“

Tina, two children



**It was really hard because of the discrimination.** I mean, you know, at 18 weeks [postpartum], I'm still pumping every four hours, trying to keep my supply up because we're doing formula and bottle breastfeeding.

I went in for a meeting to see how it was going to work and if I could do half days, so that I wouldn't have to worry about pumping. And I was met with, **'We don't really have anywhere other than the bathroom toilet cubicles for you to pump.'** They didn't make any allowances of perhaps putting shades down in a meeting room or anything ... Then they weren't open to me working half days, so **when I went back to work, I lasted a couple of weeks, and then I quit.**



Recent research has suggested that Australia's lack of clear guidelines on the treatment of employees who are pregnant, on paid parental leave or returning to work (predominantly women) may be part of the reason for the 'extreme national discrimination' they experience.<sup>30</sup> It was found that 91.8 per cent of respondents reported experiencing discriminatory behaviours when returning to work, 89.0 per cent reported experiencing discriminatory behaviours during their pregnancy and 84.7 per cent reported experiencing discriminatory behaviours during parental leave.<sup>31</sup>

Respondent Vivienne describes the discrimination she experienced at work, and compared her experience to that of a male colleague who started with the same qualifications in an equivalent role and who has had the same number of children:

“

Vivienne, three children



I have had comments in the office about maternity leave or, 'You're pregnant again' or 'Are you gonna get pregnant again?' I do get comments like that, and I take a lot of offence to it. Yep, he [the male colleague] never gets comments about how many kids he's had, and he's had the same number of kids as me, but it hasn't affected him.

So I'm just explaining the difference between two people who started at the same time. **One's a man, one's a woman. We've both got the same number of children, [had them] around the same time; our kids are the same age. He's gone ahead and he's now team leader. He's jumped up. I missed out on a couple of jumps because I was on maternity leave when they did the performance reviews, so I missed out.** So I've been put on hold financially and he's gone up.

Support for employees is often at the discretion of individual managers, many of whom rely on their own lived experience rather than structured guidance and clear policy directives. This gap leaves parents vulnerable to poor health outcomes, discrimination, workplace disengagement and increased levels of stress and work-family conflict.

Respondent Sam points out the lack of recognition of diverse parents:

“

Sam, father of one



**The current scheme assumes that every baby, in every relationship, has the exact same need for the parents.** I don't think it even factors in other things like if the parents have disability, or if they're, you know, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. If they're from a CALD [culturally and linguistically diverse] community ... it's very much a black-and-white scheme, isn't it? It's a one-size-fits-all.



Given the alarming rates of discrimination experienced in Australia, a new inclusive approach is needed. Many of our respondents reported that the current system lacks flexibility and is largely designed around a 'best-case scenario'. As such, it often fails to accommodate families who face complications – for example, if a newborn requires a stay in the neonatal intensive care unit, or when a mother undergoes a caesarean section and requires additional support to recover from the birth.

Challenges presented by a birth that does not follow the expected trajectory are described by Seamus:

“

Seamus, two children



Yeah, look, **it was really difficult**. Both of the boys' births were difficult. They were both premature, both emergency C-sections. So my wife was in hospital for two weeks, both times, and I didn't know this at the time, **but I found out [later] I was actually entitled to take six weeks leave because of the nature of the birth**. But either my managers didn't know or didn't choose to tell me.

This lack of reckoning with the different shapes of modern family life is evident across stages of parenting. For example, children attending long day care do not have 12 weeks of school holidays per year or restricted hours in the way that community preschool, primary school and high schools do, and yet there is currently no provision in workplaces for these systemic differences.

Parents instead are expected to scramble and create a patchwork of solutions. Most often, these solutions include the mother working for lower pay in jobs with less responsibility, or for fewer hours, to accommodate the needs of their family.

“

Violette, one child



I think that **dads need to be able to get a fair go** as well because they can have a huge impact in kids' lives and it makes a huge difference to the person that's given birth, or to the mother to feel like they've got someone on board with them and they're both on the same ride together, rather than it being one-sided.

The lack of workplace recognition of ongoing care is particularly concerning for fathers, who often return to full-time roles while continuing to carry caregiving responsibilities.



Shane explains the strain he felt in the early stages of balancing parenting with returning to work. He felt there was an assumption in his workplace that caregiving responsibilities rested primarily with his wife, and that he was expected to resume full-time work without adjustment after a short period of parental leave. Returning to a high-pressure workload while continuing to share caregiving responsibilities at home left him feeling fatigued and anxious.

“

Gary, one child



... employers need to be more cognisant of that ... It was exhausting, coming home from work to a screaming baby that still needs to be fed, bathed, put to bed. Who's still waking up four times a night. So, you're waking up four times a night, getting up and still going back to work, and still being expected to perform at that higher level ... it was very demoralising.

The absence of structured return-to-work plans poses serious risks to employee wellbeing and workplace productivity. As expectations shift for fathers to take on more caregiving responsibilities, many, like Gary, return-to-work while experiencing sleep deprivation, stress and emotional strain. This increases the risk of mental health challenges, social isolation and reduced performance. Without adequate support, both employees and organisations suffer.

Jimmy describes the lack of real choices for parents:

“

Jimmy, two children



I feel like **it's not very parent- or child-centred**; it's very economy-centred. It's either you go back to work and you put your kids in childcare, or you're kind of a bit on your own, unless you are very privileged. It just seems like a bit of a ruse where politicians kind of wring their hands and go, 'Oh, yes, it's terrible.' [But] it's the system working the way it's designed to.



# A policy agenda for Australia

## 1 Increase the support available to families through the Australian Government Paid Parental Leave scheme and consider how the scheme could offer ongoing support to working families.

This research shows that while many parents are grateful for the government-funded Paid Parental Leave scheme, it is widely seen as inadequate. Parents often rely on employer entitlements, long-service or annual leave, or personal savings to extend their time at home. Those without such options (particularly those who are in insecure or casual employment) are disproportionately disadvantaged.

The low rate of payment (minimum wage, rather than wage replacement or close to) and short duration (24 weeks) of the government scheme turns what should be a national social protection policy into a privilege dependent on a person's employer. As a result, the system reinforces structural inequalities, particularly for low-income and precariously employed parents.

For small business owners and self-employed workers, the financial pressure can be even more acute.

The limited leave and low payment rate also restricts fathers' involvement in early caregiving, leading to long-term effects on family dynamics and child development.

The lack of meaningful support impacted Pierre's transition to fatherhood:

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Pierre, one child



I feel like I haven't really enjoyed the moments of having a child ... I had to go back to work straight after 2 weeks ... those moments were taken away from me.

Due to the relatively new nature of paid parental leave for fathers in Australia, many fathers who do have access to extended, well-paid leave feel pressured not to take it.

“

Valentina, two children



My partner works in an engineering field, and he accessed his leave, and he is a huge advocate for doing that, but he's spoken to a lot of colleagues that are opting not to, I think because they feel that other people will feel like they're letting down the team, or feel that they're taking the piss.



Parents in our study overwhelmingly supported bringing Australia's Paid Parental Leave system in line with global best practice by:

- raising the Paid Parental Leave payment to wage replacement rates;
- extending the total leave duration to 12 months; and
- earmarking a minimum of 11 weeks exclusively for fathers.

These changes are linked to improved family bonding, increased visibility of fathers as equal caregivers and better psychosocial wellbeing for both parents. By encouraging and normalising fathers' participation in early caregiving, the policy would help mitigate the concentration of part-time employment among mothers in Australia, which remains a key structural driver of the gender pay and superannuation gaps.

Further, there are opportunities for the Australian Government to provide additional support to working families outside of Paid Parental Leave. For example, setting up a scheme to assist with domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning could alleviate burdens and encourage greater engagement in the workforce or in caring for their children.

“

Michael, one child



I think the ideal would be that there'd be more in-home support for families. And that that [would] be available to everyone. Not just, you know, a certain class.

Such an approach is not without precedent. In 2004, the Belgian Government introduced a Service Voucher Scheme to create low-skilled jobs, reduce the domestic load on working families and decrease the amount of undeclared work in domestic services.<sup>32</sup> Belgians, whether part of a working family or not, can purchase service vouchers that they can then redeem for domestic services such as cleaning, washing and ironing, preparing meals or small errands. Vouchers may not be used for elder care or childcare. Each voucher purchased has a value of €22.04, of which €6.30 is paid by the user and €15.74 – or over 70 per cent – is paid by the government.<sup>33</sup>

Twenty years on, the Belgian scheme has been found to increase the rate of female workforce participation, improve overall employment and reduce unemployment.<sup>34</sup>

Implementing a scheme of this nature would help reduce the work-family conflict experienced by working families and support a more equal distribution of paid and unpaid labour.

In addition, such reform would make visible and explicitly value domestic labour that is currently unpaid and disproportionately undertaken by women. Recognising care and domestic work as essential economic and social infrastructure, rather than a private responsibility, strengthens both labour market equity and long-term economic security for families.



## 2 Explore opportunities to introduce greater flexibility into family policy

The current subsidy models often fail to account for the physical and emotional recovery needs of the parent who has given birth, especially when financial pressures force a premature return-to-work (before they have fully healed or have adapted to parenthood). For many families, this is not a choice but a necessity, driven by the low-rate Paid Parental Leave. Respondents in this study pointed to the 'one-size-fits-all' approach of the existing Paid Parental Leave policy. There is no additional support, for example, for a multiple birth, if the mother or the child requires additional time in hospital, or if anything unexpected arises.

“

Seamus, two children



**It was difficult, because it was unexpected.** My wife was in hospital for a week before, so I was still having to work, you know, right up until then to finish work before I went on leave.

So I remember working from the hospital while we were there waiting. Our experience at the time was, it [the system] didn't kind of recognise any complexity or any sort of difficult circumstances. Right? Because many people, they go in, and they sometimes leave hospital the same day, and **it all goes to plan. But it doesn't for everyone.**

A central tension emerging from this study is the misalignment between the objectives of Australia's childcare subsidy framework and the needs of families. While current settings are primarily designed to drive workforce participation, many parents emphasised that child development, family wellbeing and flexibility were insufficiently prioritised. Parents described the system as operating on a 'one-size-fits-all' model, with limited support for families with complex or additional needs or those without access to childcare centres. Families described being faced with a binary: either return-to-work and enrol their child in formal childcare or forgo income so that one parent can stay home – a trade-off that is particularly acute for lower-income households.

“

Vanessa, one child



Daycare should be much more heavily subsidised. It's \$158 a day at our centre... [that's] \$400 a week for 5 days, [so] **you're essentially paying for an extra week's rent ... Do you still want to go to work if you know that you're having to pay most of your salary to basically cover daycare?**

The Australian Government could investigate ways to allow families to access childcare subsidies directly, enabling them to care for their children at home during the early years before preschool. Currently, families may only access subsidies by enrolling their children in formal, externally provided childcare services. Some families have expressed a desire to reduce working hours or delay returning to work to directly provide care for their children at home and would have preferred to directly receive those subsidies to help them manage financially.



Historically, Australia recognised the value of household labour and care and made direct payments to mothers in the form of the Maternity Allowance and Child Endowment schemes dating back to 1912.<sup>36</sup>

Providing families with this flexibility again would support a wider range of caregiving choices, improve equity for households that cannot or choose not to access formal childcare, and promote greater wellbeing for children, parents and caregivers.

The existing policy framework should be re-examined from an intersectional approach to consider if there are groups who do not have equitable access to support and how equitable access could be ensured.

### 3 Support employers to provide material assistance to parents returning from parental leave.

This research highlights an opportunity for Australian governments to assist workplaces in better supporting parents returning to work after parental leave. Currently, there are no consistent frameworks or best practice guidelines to assist workplaces in this area.

“

Valentina, two children



**I just went back and I never really felt like I fit back in, or that my role fit where it used to, or it made sense ... I just felt like everything had shifted along ... I just didn't fit back in the puzzle anymore.**

I don't think my partner experienced the same thing, returning to his company ... When he came back, they valued him as a resource, and were very excited to kind of fit him back into the puzzle. I don't feel like it impacted his career trajectory in the same fashion.

In most cases, support offered through workplaces is informal and reliant on the lived experience of colleagues (often other parents) who understand the challenges involved.

“

Michael, one child



**I think [my partner] noticed that she became more career oriented after our child was born. But it's really hard to get into it ... And she did have experiences where employers or organisations were funny about part-time work.**

**Like, she'd inquire about part-time, and they'd be like well, no, not unless you could find someone to job-share with you ... [It was] almost like there was a hostility around it. She was saying, 'I'm just curious if you're offering a part-time position?' and immediately get shut down. She felt like as a mum she was sometimes being discriminated against, because there wasn't that openness to part-time positions, or, you know, flexible work, or things like that.**



Parents identified flexible work arrangements, remote work options, the ability to take extra time off during school holidays, regular check-ins and structured support meetings as the most effective return-to-work strategies.

Additionally, many parents reported the need for additional sick leave for families with more than two children, single parents or for those whose children or parents have additional needs.

The Australian Government could develop best practice guidelines or a national framework that considers all stages of parenting, up to the age of 18 for the youngest child in the family, to inform workplaces on initiatives and support they might provide to parents. This framework should outline practical, evidence-based strategies for reintegrating parents into the workforce and promoting adaptive family-friendly workplace cultures that extend from birth through the various stages of a child's life until adulthood.

Making such resources accessible will help reduce the burden on individual workplaces work towards establishing a minimum standard Australia-wide and improve long-term workforce participation for parents.

#### **4 Establish a more inclusive gender equality strategy at the Australian Government level.**

To achieve meaningful progress towards gender equality, Australian Government policy must move beyond framing parenting as primarily a maternal responsibility. Despite increasing public discourse on shared care, our system continues to focus on mothers.

This research indicates the need for a national strategy that actively promotes shared caregiving between parents and recognises families in all their forms.

There is an opportunity to revise Australia's gender equality strategy, "Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality", to place greater emphasis on the equitable division of parenting and caregiving responsibilities. This includes explicitly recognising care work as a shared responsibility between fathers and mothers and ensuring that structural supports are designed to enable this.

Embedding shared caregiving as a central pillar of gender equality strategies will help dismantle entrenched gender roles, reduce financial, domestic and workforce disparities and improve outcomes for children, families and the economy.

Formalising a more inclusive approach in public policy would support the shift in institutional, cultural and policy settings to recognise both parents as equal contributors to caregiving and paid work. Meaningful inclusion of fathers is needed across early childhood, healthcare, parental leave and workplace policy domains.

Only by doing so at the highest level of government action can Australia dismantle the structures that reinforce gendered patterns of labour and care and achieve long-term gender equality outcomes.



## 5 Promote cultural change by designing interventions that encourage Australians to view parenting, paid parental leave, childcare, early childhood education and health as family issues, not women's issues.

Research highlights a persistent cultural expectation in Australia: fathers should prioritise work over caregiving; taking parental leave is often perceived as a luxury rather than a legitimate responsibility.

“

Tom, two children



I've got other friends that are in building trades, in mechanical trades, and amongst the colleagues there, **there's not a lot of importance [placed] on fathers spending time at home. It's sort of very much of a 'You go to work.' The wife does that sort of thing.**

Look, I see that stigma that has flowed on from generations and it's something that unless you consciously want to distance yourself from it, you'll end up following that same pathway. **It's just not fair.**

These attitudes discourage fathers from taking parental leave, undermine their legitimacy as parents and their ability to build early bonds with their children and equally share caregiving responsibilities with their partner.

Many respondents spoke of the way fathers are shut out of accessing health and educational information about their children, and how this excludes them from receiving mental health screening and support during a high-stress, vulnerable time in their lives.

“

Michael, one child



We already know the challenges about engaging men in regular routine healthcare. **We know that they're particularly invisible in the perinatal period, usually because of work, commitments, services not being adaptive, but also health professionals not being particularly geared to screening dad as well as mum ... but also, if I'm not there, then I can't be.**

We know that [the] research tells us that the rates of domestic and family violence increase in the perinatal period. We know that ... one in 10 men also experience perinatal depression or anxiety. So again, this research is there that tells us we probably should be doing more to allow more families to get support at that time.

But if you've got the pressure to go back to work really quickly, you're not going to be having contact with those health professionals that can screen that.

**There's so much isolation.**



There are examples within Australia that show the benefit of systems that are more inclusive of fathers. For example:

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Tina, two children



Our son, just last year, was diagnosed with autism. The autism association, once you have a diagnosis, they have parent groups for dads, they have webinars just for dads – and they have parenting ones – but they also have specific dad ones.

And we were saying, like, how much support we're getting now, this is amazing. But when you have a new bub, especially one that has a few health challenges, **it's all focused on the mum, the mothers' group, the child health nurse, getting you breastfeeding, getting you recovered from a C-section. And that's all needed.**

**But there was no marketing or pamphlets or anything for the dads** like there is since the ASD [autism spectrum disorder] diagnosis.

Now we're so supported in this new chapter of our lives that you can kind of see the differences between that and this.

For policy efforts to be effective, they must be supported by public education that recognises and promotes the value of paternal involvement in early caregiving.

The Australian Government could commission public education initiatives that normalise and encourage fathers' use of parental leave, and that encourage access to carers leave in the longer term to take time off to look after children when they are unwell.

These campaigns could be integrated into antenatal education and delivered through existing government touchpoints such as Centrelink, hospitals, GP clinics and Child and Family Health Nursing (or their equivalents in each state).

The visibility of fathering should be considered at all touchpoints in the parenting journey within the healthcare and education systems and workplace systems. Greater effort must be made in all domains to encourage, support and acknowledge fathers' contribution to family life.

Promoting fathers' engagement in unpaid care from the outset and in an ongoing way will help to shift social norms and support gender equality in parenting.



## Conclusion

Australia stands at a critical juncture for reimagining how care, work and gender equity intersect. This research highlights that, while many parents value existing entitlements, current policies fall short in supporting families equitably.

Australia's Paid Parental Leave scheme remains insufficient in both the rate of payment and the length of leave. It leaves many families, particularly those in casual or low-income roles, choosing between financial stability and caregiving. Further, limited employer return-to-work frameworks, inflexible childcare subsidy models and limited cultural recognition of fathers as caregivers reinforce the ongoing gendered distribution of care and overburdening of mothers, with long-term financial penalties.

These barriers are structural and cultural. Fathers who seek to take on caregiving roles face stigma, particularly in male-dominated industries. Parenting continues to be positioned as an individual or maternal responsibility rather than a collective and societal one. This undermines gender equality, family wellbeing, child development and gender equity.

The findings point to opportunities for Australia to make progress. These include raising the rate and duration of paid parental leave and reserving a portion for fathers; investigating ways to reduce the burden of the domestic load on working parents; incentivising employer-led return-to-work frameworks; enabling families to receive childcare subsidies when caring for children at home; investigating how to improve the equity of all family support policies; and launching targeted education campaigns to normalise paternal leave and the ongoing involvement of fathers in parenting.

Critically, revising the national gender equality strategy, "Working for Women: A Strategy for Gender Equality", to ensure that it encourages and advocates for shifting responsibility for parenting and care from mothers to families – a strategy supported by government, workplaces and community institutions alike.

Reform in these areas would support healthier, more equitable families. It could also contribute to reducing family violence, strengthening family bonds, increasing women's workforce participation, reducing the gender pay gap and improving long-term social and economic outcomes.





## Annex A | Parental leave across OECD

Annex A summarises total paid leave offered to parents across OECD and EU countries with the highest level of uptake among fathers. It gives an overview of parental leave frameworks in each country, summarising leave entitlements for each parent, eligibility and payment scheme. The table also reports and compares the average payment rate of paid parental leave available to both mothers and fathers in each country, as of April 2024.<sup>37</sup>

It can be difficult to compare like-for-like with parental leave systems as there is so much variation in duration, rates of payment and conditions. To attempt to enable a clear comparison, we have made some additional calculations and included a column averaging payment rates, to understand how much income a parent on leave receives compared to their usual earnings.

These figures are taken from the OECD Family Database 2024, which:

looks at a person earning 100 per cent of the national average full-time salary in their country;

calculates what percentage of their gross (before-tax) income would be replaced by the government benefit over the full leave period; and

uses a weighted average if the paid leave includes different stages (for example, the first few weeks at one rate, and later weeks at a lower rate). This means the different rates are averaged based on how long each one lasts.

In some countries, the benefit is calculated based on net income (after tax and social security deductions). In these cases, the payment rate reflects the portion of take-home pay that is replaced.

So, the average payment rate gives a general national-level comparison point, not an exact figure for every individual.



Country	Summary of framework		Total paid leave available to mothers/ birthing parent and pay rate			Total paid leave available to fathers / non-birthing parent and pay rate		
	Length and process	Eligibility and pay	Length (weeks)	Avg. pay rate	Full-rate equiv. (weeks)	Length (weeks)	Avg. pay rate	Full-rate equiv. (weeks)
<b>Australia</b>	Parents are entitled to 25 weeks paid parental leave (rising to 26 weeks from 1 July 2026). This can be split between parents and taken as a single block, multiple smaller blocks, single days or a combination.	Eligible parents must be employed in full-time, part-time, casual, seasonal, contract or self-employed work.  Pay is based on national minimum wage and includes 12 per cent superannuation contribution paid directly to their superfund.	20	46.1%	12.2	4	46.1%	2.4
<b>Luxembourg</b>	Each parent can take between 4 and 20 months of leave.  Parents working full-time have 4 options: 1. Full-time leave for 4 or 6 months 2. Part-time leave for 8 or 12 months 3. Split leave of 4 months for a maximum of 20 months 4. Split leave of one day per week for 20 months.  The birth parent may access leave 8 weeks before their due date and 12 weeks of post-natal leave. The non-birth parent is entitled to 2 weeks after the birth (OECD, 2022).	Luxembourg has a comprehensive leave policy with several options, depending on employment contract and preference. For simplicity, this table presents the option for full-time employee parents (up to the birth of their child).  A full-time worker taking full-time leave will receive between the minimum social wage and the minimum social wage plus two-thirds (as paid by government).	46	83.7%	38.5	28.0	73.2%	20.5
<b>Sweden</b>	Parents receive a total of 96 weeks (480 days), with 18 of those reserved for each parent. Nine weeks can be transferred to a family friend or grandparent acting as the child's guardian for that time.	Seventy-eight weeks (390 days) is paid at 80 per cent wage replacement up to a cap that translates to about \$AUD7697 a month.  The remaining 90 days is paid at a flat rate. Sixty days are reserved exclusively for mothers and 60 days for fathers, and the remaining days/pay are divided between them as they choose (OECD, 2006).	55.7	61.8%	34.4	14.3	76.3%	10.9
<b>Iceland</b>	Each parent is entitled to 6 months' leave, 6 weeks of which are transferable between parents (Eydal & Gislason, 2021).	Working parents receive benefits equivalent to 80 per cent of their average earnings.  Non-working parents receive a guaranteed minimum payment ranging from 18 per cent to 40 per cent of average earnings (OECD, 2007).	32	65.1%	20.8	20	68.9%	13.8
<b>Denmark</b>	Each parent is granted 24 weeks (total 48 weeks' family entitlement). Four weeks of the mother/birth parent leave must be taken 4 weeks before the birth.  Both parents receive 2 weeks' non-transferable leave following the birth and an additional 9 weeks' non-transferable leave (each) to be taken any time until the child's first birthday.  A maximum 13 weeks may be transferred to the other parent. <sup>38</sup>	Those eligible are the employed, the self-employed, unemployed and students, if entitled to unemployment benefits. Both parents are eligible for 3 types of birth-related leave, with 100 per cent income compensation up to a ceiling.	41	49.7%	20.4	11.0	49.7%	5.5



Country	Summary of framework		Total paid leave available to mothers/ birthing parent and pay rate			Total paid leave available to fathers / non-birthing parent and pay rate		
	Length and process	Eligibility and pay	Length (weeks)	Avg. pay rate	Full-rate equiv. (weeks)	Length (weeks)	Avg. pay rate	Full-rate equiv. (weeks)
<b>Portugal</b>	<p>Leave is available to both parents and can be taken by either the mother or father or shared between them.</p> <p>The entitlement is 24 weeks at 100 per cent previous earnings or 30 weeks at 80 per cent previous earnings. An additional 6 weeks of leave is granted for twins, or if the baby is hospitalised after birth or born prematurely.</p> <p>If both parents share the leave and the father takes at least 60 days after the mother returns to work, the leave can be extended to 180 days at 90 per cent pay.</p> <p>Mothers must take at least 6 weeks (42 days) of leave immediately after birth and can choose to take up to 30 days before the birth.</p> <p>Fathers receive 28 mandatory days (full pay), with 7 taken immediately after birth and the rest within 6 weeks. Parents who return-to-work part-time can access an extra 90 days of leave paid at 20 per cent.</p>	<p>Parents must be employed (full-time, part-time and formal contract employees) and have made at least 6 months of contributions to the Portuguese social security system.</p> <p>Leave is paid by social security, with options for different salary percentages and duration.</p>	30.1	74.1%	22.3	22.3	65.0%	14.5
<b>Norway</b>	<p>Families are entitled to 49 weeks at 100 per cent of pay or 59 weeks at 80 per cent.</p> <p>Mothers are entitled to 17 weeks - 3 weeks before the birth and 14 weeks after (paid at 100per cent of earnings for the 17 weeks).</p> <p>Fathers' quota is 15 weeks; 2 weeks are non-transferable leave after the birth. The remaining leave entitlement is shareable (length dependent on 80-100per cent compensation).</p>	<p>Employed and self-employed parents, and those studying or participating in full-time introduction/qualification programs, are eligible.</p>	86	46.3%	39.8	15	98.2%	14.7



## Annex B | Research methodology

### Participants

Thirty-two working parents participated in this qualitative research project. The average age was 37. Participants typically had had their youngest child within the past 5 years. Family size ranged from 1 to 3 children.

Twenty-nine participants identified as heterosexual; 3 participants identified as bisexual. Thirty participants indicated they were either married or in a de facto relationship; 2 participants identified as single. In total, 18 mothers and 12 fathers participated.

The cultural background of participants included: Australian (excl. Indigenous), New Zealander, South-East Asian, Anglo-European, North-Western European and North African and Middle Eastern (participants could choose multiple cultural backgrounds).

Five out of 32 participants identified as having a disability or a chronic illness, 2 participants preferred not to say, 1 did not answer the question and the remaining 24 answered 'no'. Two participants listed high school as their highest level of education, 9 had an undergraduate degree and 21 had a postgraduate degree. Seventeen participants were currently working full-time, 13 participants were working part-time, 1 participant was working casually and 1 participant was unemployed (but had been employed within the past 2 years).

Annual pre-tax income varied: 2 participants earned less than \$40,000 a year; 8 earned between \$40,000 and \$80,000; 11 earned \$80,000 to \$120,000; 7 earned \$120,000 to \$160,000 and 1 earned \$160,000 to \$200,000. Two respondents earned more than \$200,000 and 1 did not answer.

### Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was received from Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee (H16443) and the research design protocol for involving humans was in accordance with guidelines of the National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

Participants were purposively selected on the basis that they identified as a working parent who had accessed paid parental leave in the past 5 years and had a partner who was entitled to or had accessed paid parental leave.

We employed a combination of 'snowballing' and convenience sampling, recruiting participants via email invitations containing the survey link across our professional networks and via daycare centres and preschools across Australia to obtain a geographically diverse sample. We also recruited via social media, including LinkedIn, X (formerly Twitter) and parent groups on Facebook. Prior to participation, potential respondents were asked to read an information form detailing the nature of the research and provide informed consent. They were then asked to complete a short demographic survey hosted on Qualtrics to ensure they met the criteria for participation (that is, that they were a working parent who had accessed paid parental leave in the past 5 years and had a partner who had accessed or been entitled to paid parental leave).

Originally, participants took part in focus groups. However, due to the time-poor nature of this demographic, it was difficult to find a time that suited multiple participants. Keeping the questions the same, we switched the mode of data collection to interviews so we could better accommodate our participants' schedules.

We explored the following topics:

- What was the participant's experience of paid parental leave?
- What impact did it have on their family?
- What worked, what could be improved and what was their experience returning to work after taking the leave?



- What impact did Paid Parental Leave have on their career trajectory, and their partner's?
- How has Paid Parental Leave affected their experience or their partner's experience of work-family conflict?
- How could workplace practices be improved for Paid Parental Leave and return-to-work?
- The focus groups or in-depth interviews ranged in time from 40 to 80 minutes.

## Analysis

The data has been analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) informed by a post-structural feminist perspective. In our approach and consistent with updated RTA approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021), rather than following a prescriptive set of coding rules, we engaged in an iterative and reflexive approach that involved reading, questioning and immersion in the data.

Rather than treating themes as pre-existing categories to be 'discovered' (Braun and Clarke, 2021), themes were treated as constructed through the interaction between researcher and data (Braun et al., 2023) and the generation of codes and naming and categorising of data into themes is an iterative and collaborative process (Gilbert et al., 2024).

To start, we coded the literal content of the dataset, using an inductive approach, with examples of coded accounts including (1) Four-week Paid Parental Leave or less – negative impacts on families; (2) Four-week Paid Parental Leave or less – positive impacts on family experiences; (3) Beyond Paid Parental Leave experiences – positive impacts on families; (4) Fathers who have taken more than 4-week than Paid Parental Leave – positive impacts on family experiences; (5) Fathers who have taken more than 4-weeks Paid Parental Leave – negative impacts on family experiences (6) Feedback on Paid Parental Leave policy. The initial coding was data-driven, using codes to capture explicit meanings. When generating initial themes, we drew out what we considered was 'important', not simply in terms of prevalence, but rather what a specific account said about a mother's and father's experiences of Paid Parental Leave and negotiating work-life conflict and the ongoing juggle between work and parenting.

Some of our initial themes were still descriptive but experiences and meaning were emerging, these included (1) Father's experiences returning to work; (2) Impacts on post-birth support for mothers and families; (3) Effects of flexibility; and (4) The need for 'planning'.

Refining and developing themes was an interpretative process as we examined participants' underlying assumptions about the semantic or literal content. Here we began to sort the themes into a codebook that contained the dominant themes: 'We (Australians) view Paid Parental Leave as a luxury'; 'Grateful but it's not enough', and 'The status quo contributes to the invisibility of fathers'.

## Positioning the self: Subjectivities and insider-outsider status

Who we are and our life experiences to date naturally play a role in the way we conceive, design, analyse and interpret research (Gilbert et al., 2024).

The lead author is a working parent and has experienced parenting as a couple and as a single parent, as they are now a widow.

The second author is not currently a parent but is in the early stages of family planning and academic career development. This position shaped a sensitivity to the structural intersections between gender, career progression and the policy supports (or gaps) that affect future parenting decisions.

Through the process of data collection and analysis, the lead author could relate to parents' experiences of juggling work and parenting, validating her insider status and highlighting the shared experience of working and parenting in contemporary Australia.



# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Every family does not have a mother and father; there are widows and widowers, and single-parent families by choice or by circumstance. There are families with two fathers or two mothers, or families with parents who do not identify with either of those terms, or there might be grandparents in parent roles. We decided against using the language 'primary carer' and 'secondary carer' as they are too limiting in representing an inclusive model of parenting across genders. Despite this diversity of parents across genders, sexualities and relationship status, throughout this report we will mainly use 'mother' and 'father', because in Australia today we cannot escape the gendered and socio-structural fact that it is mothers who fulfil the bulk of parenting while fathers are typically expected to generate the bulk of a family's income.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Ward, "Fatherhood is changing. But will men let that affect their work?", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 September 2023, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/fatherhood-is-changing-but-will-men-let-that-affect-their-work-20231122-p5elya.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Alina Ewald, Emilee Gilbert and Kate Huppatz, "Fathering and flexible working arrangements: A systematic interdisciplinary review", *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 12:1 (2020), 27–40.

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<sup>5</sup> Rachel Potter, Kristen Foley, Sophie Richter, Sarah Cleggett, Maureen Dollard, Amy Parkin, Paul Brough and Kurt Lushington, *National Review: Work Conditions & Discrimination among Pregnant & Parent Workers in Australia Evidence & Insights Report* (Adelaide: The University of South Australia, 2024).

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