



September 2022

# Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Work and Care

The Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA, the Agency) is pleased to present a submission to the Senate Select Committee on Work and Care. WGEA is an Australian Government statutory agency charged with promoting and improving gender equality in Australian workplaces. Under the *Workplace Gender Equality Act 2012* (the Act), relevant non-public sector employers with 100 or more employees are required to report annually to the Agency against six gender equality indicators (GEIs). This includes reporting data on women's and men's position in the workforce as well as how employers support their employees with caring responsibilities.

The Senate Select Committee on Work and Care is considering several aspects of work and care arrangements. These include gender differences in experiences of work and care and policies and practices that have been effective in supporting the combination of work and care.

Given the Agency's focus on workplace gender equality, the Agency's submission highlights relevant research related to gender differences in work and care and how these differences impact on women's engagement and progression in the workforce. Recent research highlights that factors associated with care, family and reductions in workforce participation account for 33% of the gender pay gap.<sup>1</sup> The submission goes on to present insights from WGEA's dataset about employers' policies and practices that support employees who are also carers as well as leading practice initiatives in the private sector.

The data which WGEA collects from employers about how they support employees with caring responsibilities mostly relates to carers of young children (i.e. parents). WGEA acknowledges that caring responsibilities are not limited to those with children.

## Key points

- Gender inequality in care impacts gender inequality in the workplace. A gendered division of labour still persists in Australia, and this sees women take on more unpaid care and men spend more time in paid employment. Gender differences in work and care have continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Women are more likely to take time away or reduce participation in the workforce due to caring responsibilities, and this has consequences for their progression into leadership, pay, and overall economic security and wellbeing.
- Women are more likely to utilise flexible working arrangements and parental leave to balance work and care, and this can further entrench norms about the gendered division of labour.

- WGEA's dataset shows that the majority of employers have policies, strategies, and practices in place to support employees with caring responsibilities. These have not yet translated into improved outcomes for women in the workplace or into more equal division of work and care between women and men.
- Leading practice from the private sector demonstrates the importance of gender-neutral language in policies and practices that support carers and encouraging the use of parental leave and flexible working arrangements by women and men in order to disrupt gender norms about work and care and progress workplace gender equality outcomes.

## Gender differences in work and care

Australia has made significant progress against gender equality outcomes in recent decades. However, gender norms, discrimination, and stereotypes perpetuate gender inequality in the division of work and caring responsibilities between women and men. This sees women taking on more unpaid care responsibilities and can inhibit women's engagement in the workforce.

This section reviews research related to women's position in the workforce and how responsibilities for care impact workforce participation. It also highlights how the gendered division of labour continued throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Women's position in the workforce

Women's participation in the workforce has generally increased over the last decade in Australia. This contributes to national economic performance and growth, positive impacts on organisational culture and operations, and women's economic security.<sup>2</sup> As of July 2022, women's workforce participation was at 62.2%.<sup>3</sup>

However, women's workforce participation remains 8.6 percentage points below that of men.<sup>4</sup> When compared to men, women remain overrepresented in part-time and casual employment, underrepresented in leadership positions, and are less likely to be in the highest earning positions.<sup>5</sup> The national gender pay gap currently stands at 14.1%.<sup>6</sup> Taken together, women's position in the workforce sees them have lower lifetime earnings and lower retirement savings.<sup>7</sup>

Several factors contribute to gender disparities in the workforce, including the unequal division of labour in which women undertake the majority of unpaid care and domestic work.<sup>8</sup> Women are more likely to take time away or reduce their participation in the workforce in order to care for children and other family members. Research finds that the "incidence of these career interruptions [to care for children and other family] is gendered and highly persistent," accounting for 20% of the gender pay gap in 2020, while part-time employment accounts for another 11% of the gender pay gap.<sup>9</sup> This is because perceptions exist that time away from the workforce depreciates professional skills, and therefore, women often return to the workforce in lower paid roles and may be passed over for promotions and higher paid opportunities.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, women's already lower earnings may inform decisions about a female partner taking time away from the workforce to provide care because it comes at less of a cost to household income.<sup>11</sup> The costs associated with early childhood education and care may further inform household decisions which prioritise a man's career over a woman's career.<sup>12</sup>

In sum, these factors – including women's lower workforce participation rate, overrepresentation in less stable forms of employment, underrepresentation in leadership, majority responsibility for care, and the gender pay gap – and other factors – such as industrial and occupational gender segregation and sex-based discrimination and harassment – are interconnected and work together to perpetuate gender inequality in work and care.

## Women and unpaid care

Women are more likely to be carers in Australia. This is confirmed by several data sources. For instance, ABS data on carers<sup>i</sup> from 2018 shows that 12.3% of women and 9.3% of men were carers.<sup>13</sup> The latest census data shows that more women are providing care for children, either their own or other children, as well as unpaid assistance to a person with disability, long-term health condition or due to old age.<sup>14</sup> Informal providers of elder care are most often a partner or a daughter of the individual requiring care.<sup>15</sup> In addition, women are the majority (71.8%) of primary carers,<sup>16</sup> and generally spend more time on unpaid domestic work, such as tasks associated with housework and upkeep.<sup>17</sup> The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey shows that women, including single women and those in couple relationships with or without dependent children, spend more time on unpaid work when compared to their male counterparts.<sup>18</sup>

Research finds that some of the largest gender gaps in time spent on unpaid<sup>ii</sup> work are between women and men in opposite-sex couples with dependent children.<sup>19</sup> Although women and men may start from more similar positions in the amount of time spent on unpaid work prior to the birth of a child, women's caring responsibilities increase significantly with the arrival of a child, and this remains high over the course of raising children.<sup>20</sup>

The gender gap in unpaid work for opposite-sex couples with dependent children is over 42 hours per week in their first child's year of arrival and narrows to over 26 hours per week when the first child is ten years old. Gender differences in the amount of time spent on unpaid work continue while caring for subsequent children, with a gender gap in unpaid work at 17 hours per week ten years after the arrival of the couple's last child.<sup>21</sup>

In 2019, women in opposite-sex couples with dependent children spent an average of 60.8 hours each week on unpaid work where their youngest child was under age 6, before decreasing to 43.3 hours per week where the youngest child was between ages 6 and 12 and 33.6 hours per week where the youngest child was between ages 13 and 17. The respective average hours that men in opposite-sex couples spent on unpaid work were 31.6 hours, 27.1 hours, and 22.4 hours.<sup>22</sup>

Gender gaps in time spent on work are less when accounting for both unpaid and paid work,<sup>23</sup> signalling a division of labour where women spend more time on unpaid work and men spend more time on paid work. At the same time, the gender gap in time spent on unpaid work between couples, both those with and without children, has begun to narrow in recent years. This is because men have increased the amount of time on unpaid work and women decreased time spent on unpaid work.<sup>24</sup> Relatedly, a recent analysis finds that time spent on unpaid work as a driver of the gender pay gap decreased to 2% in 2020 down from 7% in 2017.<sup>25</sup>

Responsibilities for care can continue across an individual's life. The rate of caring generally increases with carer age, with 54 years being the average age of a primary carer.<sup>26</sup> Primary carers essentially provide care on a full-time basis, at an average of 35.2 hours per week.<sup>27</sup> Over a quarter of primary carers spend more than 60 hours per week on caring responsibilities.<sup>28</sup> The high

<sup>i</sup> The ABS survey on Disability, Ageing and Carers defines carer as "a person who provides any informal assistance (help or supervision) to people with disability or older people (aged 65 years and over)."

<sup>ii</sup> The HILDA dataset includes the following seven activities as "unpaid work": (1) Household errands, such as shopping, banking, paying bills and keeping financial records (but not driving children to school and other activities); (2) Housework, such as preparing meals, washing dishes, cleaning house, washing clothes, ironing and sewing; (3) Outdoor tasks, including home maintenance (repairs, improvements, painting, etc.), car maintenance or repairs, and gardening; (4) Playing with your children, helping them with personal care, teaching, coaching or actively supervising them, or getting them to child care, school or other activities; (5) Looking after other people's children (aged under 12 years) on a regular, unpaid basis; (6) Volunteer or charity work (for example, canteen work at the local school, unpaid work for a community club or organisation); and (7) Caring for a disabled spouse or disabled adult relative, or caring for elderly parents or parents-in-law.

rate of care impacts labour force participation as primary carers either reduce hours or leave the workforce.<sup>29</sup>

However, unpaid care contributes to the Australian economy. The value of unpaid care work in Australia has been estimated to be \$1.5 billion per week (2020 pre-pandemic figures).<sup>30</sup> Carers, both primary and non-primary, spend about 2.2 billion hours on unpaid care annually.<sup>31</sup> Replacing this care with formal paid care would amount to \$77.9 billion (2020 figures).<sup>32,iii</sup> A separate analysis offers that unpaid childcare would account for Australia's largest industry.<sup>33</sup>

While many carers report satisfaction in their caring responsibilities, they also have lower levels of wellbeing than the average Australian adult<sup>34</sup> as well as poorer overall health and higher levels of psychological distress.<sup>35</sup> When compared to the average adult population, women carers have a larger gap in wellbeing levels than men carers, and women carers are among the groups most likely to report fair or poor health.<sup>36</sup>

### **The impact of care on work**

Responsibilities for care contribute to women's and men's different experiences in the workforce. When compared to men, women are more likely to take time away from the workforce or to utilise parental leave and flexible working arrangements in order to balance work and care responsibilities. These differences are reflective of gender roles, norms, and stereotypes about the division of labour, where men are viewed as breadwinners and women as carers.<sup>37</sup> While contemporary family structures and employment patterns have altered strict gendered divisions of the breadwinner-homemaker model,<sup>38</sup> they have given way to the "modified male breadwinner model."<sup>39</sup> This describes a gendered division of labour where women are more likely to balance part-time work and care while men are employed on a full-time basis.

The majority of carers are balancing their caring responsibilities with work, as 63.2% of women and 71.8% of men who are carers are also employed.<sup>40</sup> The majority of parents with dependent children are also working. ABS data shows that 69.9% of couple families with dependent children have both parents engaged in the workforce.<sup>41</sup> In single parent families with dependent children, 61.3% of single mothers and 75.8% of single fathers are employed.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, care impacts levels of participation in the workforce. For people aged 15-64, 58.8% of primary carers were in the labour force, compared to 81.5% for non-carers and 76.6% for other carers.<sup>43</sup> When compared to the general population, primary carers are also less likely to be employed on a full-time basis and more likely to be employed part-time.<sup>44</sup> In addition, full-time employment among carers over age 55 is particularly low, which may signal difficulties in re-entering the workforce after time spent caring in addition to personal health problems beginning at this age.<sup>45</sup>

Some carers are not able to participate in the workforce at all due to the demands of care. Estimates suggest that about 160,900 primary carers and 53,000 non-primary carers are likely not in paid employment because of caring responsibilities.<sup>46</sup>

This suggests that caring responsibilities impact on an individual's employment and income. Carers make less per week than non-carers, are more likely to be on government pensions or allowances,<sup>47</sup> and generally live in households with lower overall incomes.<sup>48</sup> Modelling shows that carers lose, on average, \$392,500 in lifetime earnings and \$175,000 in superannuation savings up until age 67.<sup>49</sup> This can increase to a loss of \$940,000 in lifetime income and \$444,500 in retirement savings for those who are carers for extended periods of time.<sup>50</sup> Other analysis shows

<sup>iii</sup> This figure is disaggregated between primary and non-primary carers, with an annual replacement value of primary carers at \$60.2 billion and of non-primary carers at \$17.7 billion (2020 figures). The analysis focused on unpaid care provided to people with a disability, mental illness, chronic conditions, terminal illness and the elderly. (see Deloitte Access Economics (2020), The value of informal care in 2020, Prepared for Carers Australia, available: [https://www.carersaustralia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FINAL-Value-of-Informal-Care-22-May-2020\\_No-CIC.pdf](https://www.carersaustralia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FINAL-Value-of-Informal-Care-22-May-2020_No-CIC.pdf))

that primary and non-primary carers collectively lost an estimated annual earnings of \$15.2 billion (2020 figures).<sup>51</sup> This contributes to carers reporting poorer financial wellbeing when compared to the general Australian population.<sup>52</sup>

### **Unequitable uptake of flexible work arrangements and leave entrenches gender inequality**

Part-time work and other flexible working arrangements are important, and in many cases necessary, for individuals who need to manage work with care responsibilities. Given that women take on more unpaid care work, they are also more likely than men to access flexible working arrangements to manage paid and unpaid responsibilities.<sup>53</sup> Due to stereotypes and “traditional working norms” such as those about the ideal worker, long hours, prioritising work over other responsibilities, and presenteeism, individuals who utilise flexible working arrangements can be penalised.<sup>54</sup> This might be in the form of employers offering less opportunities for challenging work or opportunities for advancement to those who work flexibly.<sup>55</sup>

For many of these same reasons, men have traditionally been more reluctant to utilise flexible working arrangements, and they have been more likely to have requests for flexible working arrangements refused.<sup>56</sup> This further entrenches gender norms related to the division of labour and hinders women’s participation in the workforce and men’s engagement in care.<sup>57</sup> Similar patterns are seen in the uptake of parental leave, with women more likely to take parental leave.<sup>58</sup> This is despite the established benefits of higher levels of gender balance in parental leave taking, which contributes to more equal division of work and care between partners and improved work-life balance.<sup>59</sup>

### **Gender differences in work and care during COVID-19**

Patterns in the gendered division of work and care, similar to those described above, were also found throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Research suggests that the gender inequities that pre-date the COVID-19 pandemic have amplified the pandemic’s impact on women.<sup>60</sup> Women’s employment was more impacted by periods of lockdown, especially given their greater representation in part-time and casual work, and women took on more care responsibilities.<sup>61</sup>

The pandemic and its associated health and safety measures increased the amount of unpaid work. Periods of lockdown, school closures, managing online or at-home education, caring for family members, and caring for children home from school and early childhood education and care all contributed to this increase. Research found that both women and men reported spending more time on unpaid care and domestic work.<sup>62</sup> However, women were still likely to spend more time on these unpaid responsibilities,<sup>63</sup> and mothers continued to “always or usually” be the partner that cared for children.<sup>64</sup>

Research also examined how parents simultaneously managed paid and unpaid responsibilities as the early months of the pandemic and lockdown periods brought on a significant increase in parent-only care for children. Of parents working from home in the early months of the pandemic, 40% reported that they “actively” cared for children while working, and the majority balanced some form of childcare with paid work.<sup>65</sup> For single parents, difficulties in accessing formal and informal childcare arrangements during lockdown may have contributed to significant declines in their workforce participation, particularly for single mothers when compared to other parent groups.<sup>66</sup>

A May 2020 survey investigated whether less rigid boundaries about the time and place for paid and unpaid work affected the gendered division of labour between couples,<sup>iv</sup> where each partner was employed.<sup>67</sup> For both mothers and fathers, paid work hours declined while unpaid work hours increased during lockdown. Since men spent less time on unpaid responsibilities before lockdown, the relative increase in time spent on active care and supervising of children during lockdown was

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<sup>iv</sup> Couples were heterosexual couples.



greater for men than for women. This helped to reduce, but did not remove, the gender gap in care work.<sup>68</sup> However, the number of hours spent in unpaid work increased more for women than men. This includes time spent actively caring for children, supervising children, and tasks related to housework and household management.<sup>69</sup> These findings generally align with other research about the division of work and care between women and men during the national lockdown.<sup>70</sup>

In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic did not deliver changes in gender roles and norms about the division of paid work and care. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic instead reflects those gender roles and norms that see women take on the majority of unpaid care and domestic work.

## **WGEA data indicates that caring responsibilities contribute to gender differences in workplace outcomes**

The impacts of trying to balance work and care are primarily borne by women in Australia. WGEA data supports research on the gendered nature of work and care in Australia. WGEA data shows distinct gendered differences in the workplace, which link to women taking on the majority of unpaid caring responsibilities. These unpaid caring responsibilities can impact on earnings, workforce participation, progression into leadership, and utilisation of leave and flexible working arrangements.

This section highlights findings from WGEA's dataset on the following topics which are relevant to gender differences in work and care:

- Analysis of the gender pay gap by age and factors contributing to the gender pay gap across age groups;
- Flexible working arrangements and the impact of COVID-19 on access and utilisation; and
- Employer-funded paid parental leave.

### **Balancing work and care: gender differences in pay, employment status, and leadership at every age<sup>71</sup>**

A recent point-in-time analysis of the WGEA 2020-21 dataset by employee gender and age<sup>v</sup> shows gender differences in pay, employment status<sup>vi</sup> and leadership between women and men. While women and men in the youngest age cohorts were generally in more similar positions within the workforce, gender differences in pay, employment status and leadership generally grew as employee age increased. Women's employment outcomes fared less well than that of men at every age. The analysis indicates that women's disproportionate responsibility for care impacts on earnings, labour force participation, and opportunities for advancement.

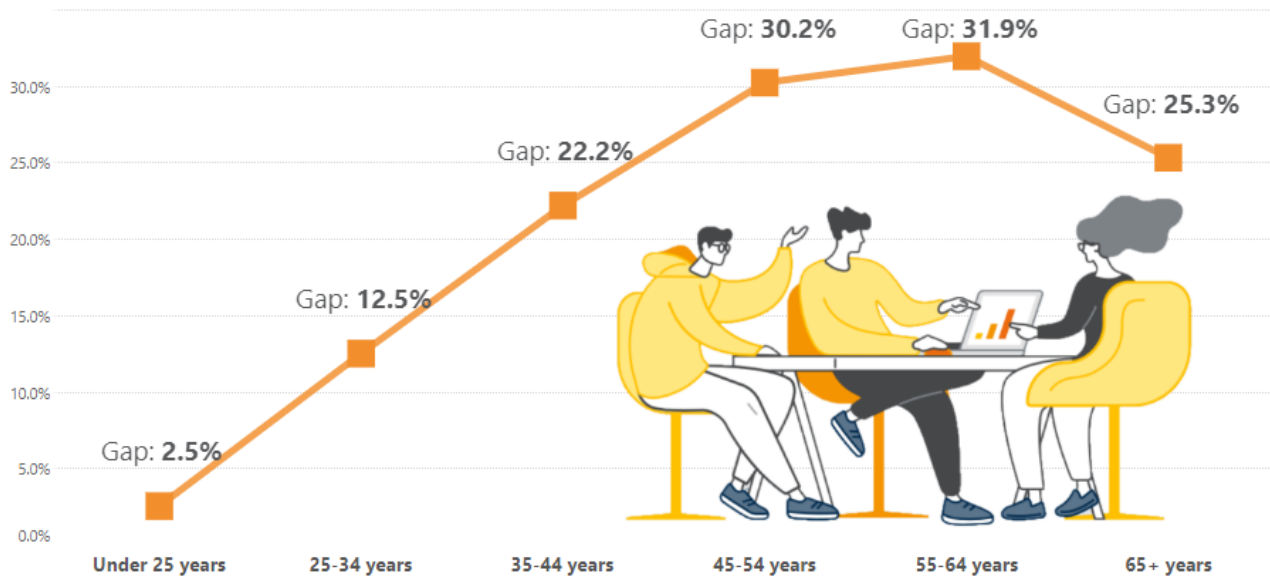
More specifically, WGEA data shows that the gender pay gap – a key indicator of women's position in the workforce – increased during those years that women would be more likely to begin reducing their participation in the workforce due to care, between ages 25-44. While the average remuneration gender pay gap is 2.5% for those under 24 years of age, it grows at a consistent rate and peaks at 31.9% for employees ages 55-64. It remains high for the oldest cohort in the dataset (over age 65).

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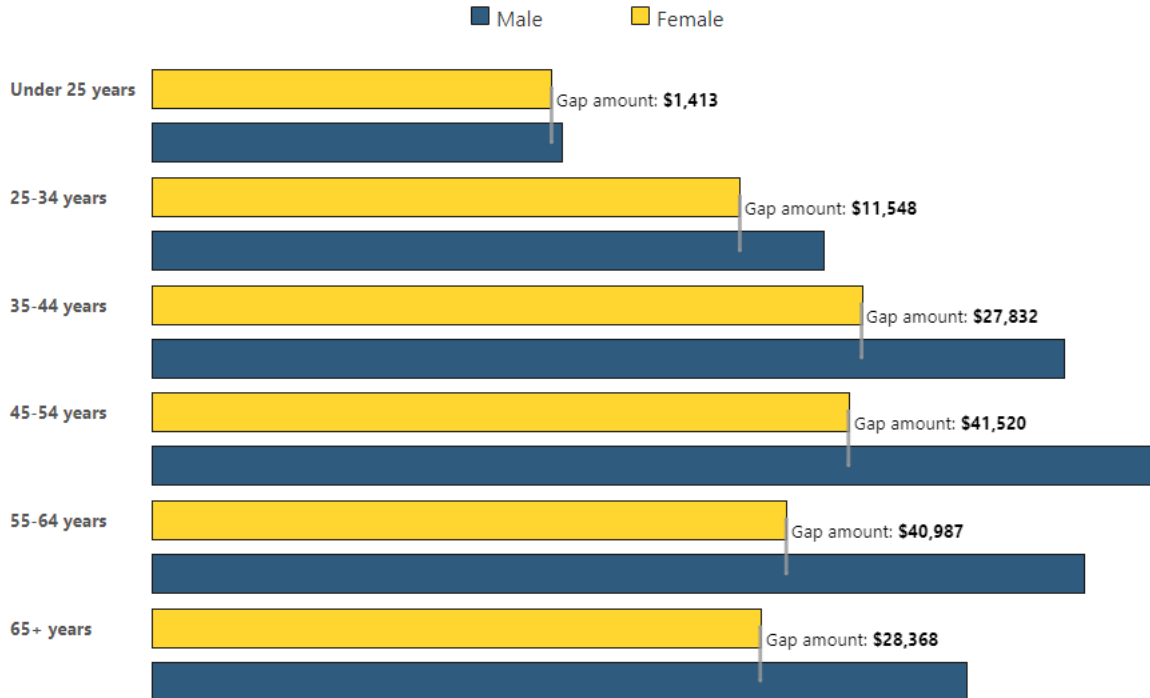
<sup>v</sup> During the 2020-21 reporting period, WGEA collected data on employee age from relevant employers for the first time on a voluntary basis. Over 70% of relevant employers reported data on the year of birth for nearly 3 million employees.

<sup>vi</sup> Employment status refers to whether an employee is employed on a full-time, part-time or casual basis.

### Gender pay gap by age group, WGEA 2020-21 reporting data



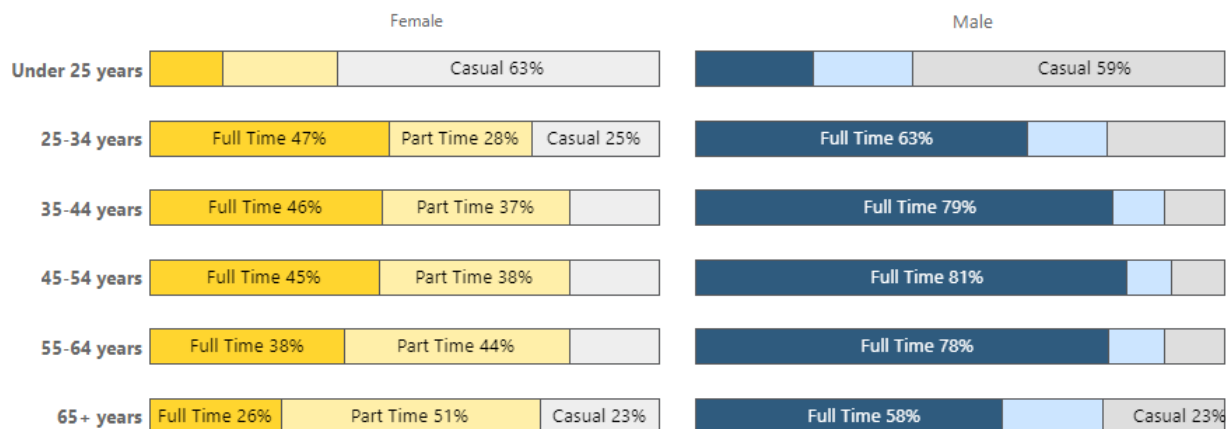
### Average remuneration by gender and age, WGEA 2020-21 reporting data



The data also shows that women are overrepresented in part-time and casual employment and underrepresented in management positions across age groups. These factors both contribute to the gender pay gap and are likely the result of women taking on more unpaid care responsibilities.

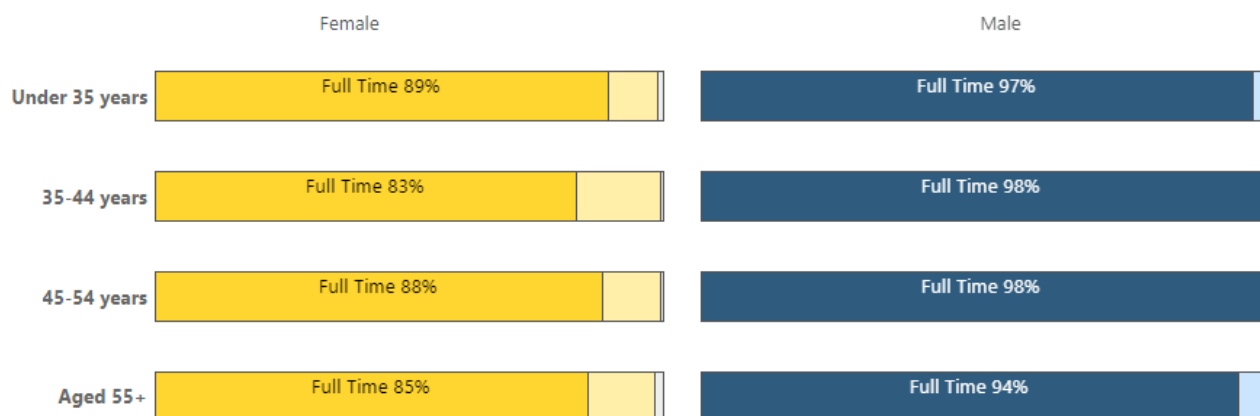
Indeed, less than half of women are employed on a full-time basis at every age. Women and men under age 24 were represented in generally similar proportions in full-time, part-time and casual work. However, from age 25, women are overrepresented in part-time and casual work. From age 35, women are twice as likely as men to be working part-time and casually. Overall, the proportion of women employed full-time decreased with employee age. In contrast, from age 25, over half of men were employed full-time, and men’s representation in full-time employment remains close to 80% from ages 35 to 64.

### Employment status by age and gender, WGEA 2020-21 reporting data



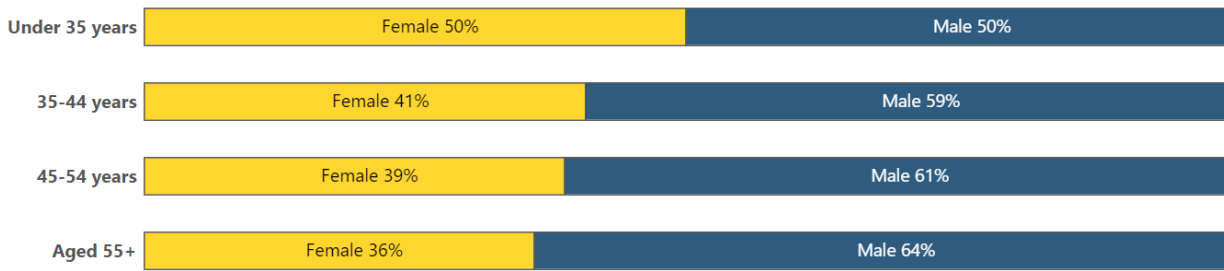
Women’s reduced hours in the workforce, furthermore, likely contributes to women being passed over for promotions into leadership. WGEA’s analysis shows that the majority of managers are employed full-time. However, full-time employment does not pair with most women’s employment status, and women are underrepresented in management positions.

### Manager employment status by age and gender, WGEA 2020-21 reporting data





### Gender composition of managers by age, WGEA 2020-21 reporting data



In sum, the analysis highlights women’s and men’s different experiences of paid and unpaid work throughout the course of their lives. Women are more likely to have interrupted careers and reduce their participation in the workforce to care for children and other family members, while men are less likely to have access to or utilise flexible working arrangements.

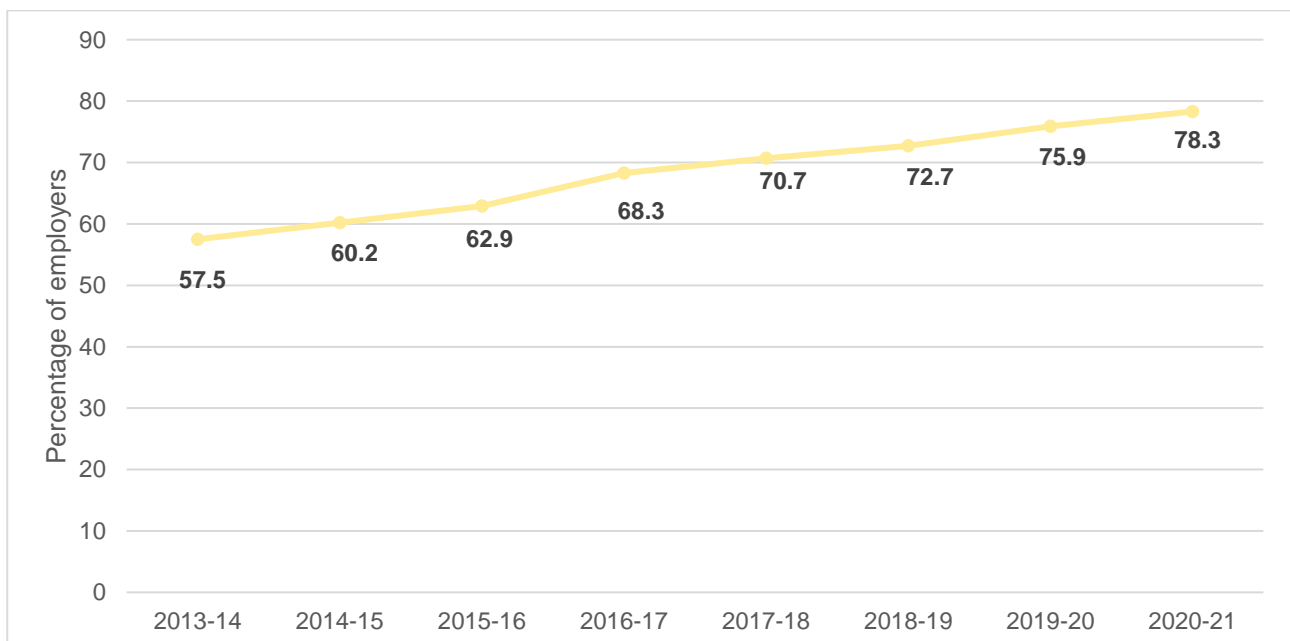
Differences in how women and men can manage work and care can impact opportunities for advancement into more senior and highly paid roles. These, and other social and economic factors that shape different employment trajectories, can compound overtime, impacting women’s and men’s workforce outcomes, lifetime earnings, and the gender pay gap.

#### The gendered nature of care and flexible work

WGEA collects data on an annual basis from relevant employers on the availability and utility of employment terms, conditions and practices relating to flexible working arrangements for employees.

WGEA’s 2020-21 dataset shows that the majority of organisations (78.3%) have a policy or strategy on flexible working arrangements.<sup>72</sup> This is an increase of just over 20 percentage points since employer reporting to WGEA began, indicating the growing importance of having flexible options for workers. In addition, the majority of employers articulate several formal options for flexible work in their policies and strategies. This includes carer’s leave, flexible work hours, part-time work, telecommuting, time-in-lieu, and unpaid leave.

### Percentage of employers with a flexible work policy or strategy, WGEA reporting data



## **Flexible work during the COVID-19 pandemic**

WGEA data<sup>73</sup> shows an uptick in certain offerings of flexible work arrangements since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, after remaining generally static for seven reporting years, there was an over 20 percentage point increase in the proportion of employers offering both formal and informal telecommuting between 2019-20 and 2020-21. The proportion of employers offering formal telecommuting increased from 44.3% in 2019-20 to 66.2% in 2020-21, and the proportion of employers including informal telecommuting increased from 56.6% in 2019-20 to 74.3% in 2020-21.

Other informal offerings of flexible work arrangements also increased between 2019-20 and 2020-21. In particular, the proportion of employers offering flexible work hours increased from 67.4% in 2019-20 to 81.0% in 2020-21. The proportion of employers offering time-in-lieu increased by just over 5 percentage points.

The data confirms what has been established over the past few years of the pandemic. Flexible working arrangements were a necessity for many employers to continue operations throughout the pandemic and lockdown periods. At the same time, the increase in employers offering flexible work, particularly informal options, indicates that how organisations manage flexible work may have become more dispersed due to the pandemic, which would likely have implications for access and utilisation.

To this point, WGEA's 2020-21 dataset shows that 63% of organisations allowed all managers to make informal arrangements with their team and a further 25% of organisations allowed some managers to make informal arrangements with their team due to the pandemic. Only a small minority of organisations (less than 2%) did not offer their employees any kind of formal or informal flexibility. In addition, 65% of organisations reported that they were more likely to approve formal flexible work arrangements for both women and men because of the pandemic.<sup>74</sup> Organisational culture and manager discretion to approve flexible working are key to the broader uptake of flexible working arrangements, and can also present the "greatest obstacles to maximising flexible working outcomes" where they are not supportive of such arrangements.<sup>75</sup>

Over the same period, more organisations have reported setting targets for men's engagement in flexible work. The proportion of organisations setting such targets has hovered between about 1% and 2% from 2015-16 to 2019-20. In the 2020-21 reporting period, the proportion of organisations setting targets for men's engagement in flexible work grew by 4.7 percentage points to 7.0%.

Taken together, WGEA's data on flexible work from the period of the COVID-19 pandemic suggests promising, although still preliminary, impact on the gendered division of work and care. It shows that employers have taken some steps to provide additional access to and utilisation of flexible working arrangements for both women and men. The data presented here suggests that organisational culture and management were supportive of flexible working arrangements. Subsequent data will help to identify whether such support was merely forced on organisations by the pandemic or has been genuinely sustained.

## **Employer-funded paid parental leave and childcare**

WGEA also collects data on an annual basis from relevant employers on the working arrangements they offer employees with family or caring responsibilities. The majority of WGEA's data on employers' measures for carers relates to parents, including parental leave and supports following the period after taking parental leave.<sup>76</sup>

In 2020-21, 66.3% of employers had a policy or strategy to support employees with family and caring responsibilities. Just over half of employers provide paid primary carer's leave (54.6%) and paid secondary carer's leave (50.2%) to both women and men in their organisations, with the majority of these providing employees full pay in addition to the government parental leave scheme and paying superannuation during parental leave.<sup>77</sup> Very few employers (5.5%) offer paid primary carers leave to women only or paid secondary carers leave to men only (1.7%). This is important as distinctions between primary and secondary carer can entrench gender norms about the division of care as women are more often seen as the primary carer.



While WGEA’s 2020-21 dataset finds an increase in the utilisation of employer-funded primary carer’s leave by men, it remains far below that of women. Women accounted for 88% of all primary carer’s leave taken and men accounted for 12%.

At the same time, WGEA’s data highlights that nearly half of employers in the dataset do not provide paid primary or secondary carers leave to both women and men. An analysis of the data by industry, furthermore, finds that female-dominated industries are the most likely to offer paid primary carer’s leave, with 66% providing to all employees regardless of gender and 10% offering to women only while 24% of female-dominated organisations do not offer paid primary carer’s leave. In contrast, 50% of male-dominated organisations and 41% of organisations in mixed industries do not provide paid primary carer’s leave.<sup>78</sup>

Many employers also provide non-leave based supports for parents. The supports offered by a higher proportion of employers in 2020-21 are breastfeeding facilities, referral services, targeted communication mechanisms, and coaching for employees returning to work from parental leave. Return-to-work bonuses, parenting workshops, and assistance with early childhood education and care were offered by the lowest proportion of employers.

Employer assistance with access to affordable early childhood education and care can be key to addressing the gender differences in work and care. However, WGEA data shows that a low proportion of employers have provided employees with assistance in accessing early childhood education and care, including by offering employer subsidies, on-site care, and referral services. The low proportion of employers providing such supports has generally remained unchanged since reporting to WGEA began.

**Employer-funded support for parents in accessing early childhood education and care, WGEA reporting data**

	2013-14	2020-21	Percentage point (pp) difference from 2013-14 to 2020-21
Employer subsidised early childhood education and care	6.0%	6.6%	+ 0.6 pp
On-site early childhood education and care	9.0%	8.8%	- 0.2 pp
Referral services for early childhood education and care	9.3%	9.6%	+ 0.3 pp

**Leading practice in the private sector**

Organisations that report to the Agency under the Act may apply for the Agency’s Employer of Choice for Gender Equality (EOCGE) citation.<sup>79</sup> In order to earn the EOCGE citation, organisations must meet rigorous criteria, including demonstrating how they provide support for carers in their organisation.

The current criteria for the 2022-24 EOCGE citation require employers to have a formal policy and strategy supporting those with family or caring responsibilities which covers return to work from parental leave; parents at all stages of children’s lives; employees with eldercare responsibilities; and employees with caring responsibilities for people with disability. In addition, the citation requires organisations to have **no eligibility** period for access to employer-funded parental leave. It also expects organisations to actively encourage men to take parental leave and, if applicable, set targets for men’s engagement in flexible working arrangements.



Leading practice organisations in the private sector aim to address barriers to carers' engagement in the workforce through robust flexible work arrangements and policies, carers leave, parental leave and childcare supports.<sup>80</sup> In addition, leading practice organisations encourage women and men to utilise flexible work arrangements and parental leave and have moved toward gender neutral language in policies and strategies. When workplaces support both women and men in their roles as workers and carers, they disrupt gender norms and assumptions about the division of work and care.

This section outlines the ways that leading practice organisations support carers through their policies and practices, drawing on research on EOCGE organisations which was published in 2020.

### **Flexible work<sup>81</sup>**

While flexible working arrangements are for carers and non-carers alike, this submission is focused on how access to and utilisation of flexible working arrangements contributes to eroding gender imbalances in work and care.

Leading practice from the private sector highlights the importance of “de-gendering” flexible working arrangements in order to normalise its use for women and men. One way to do this is by setting out flexible working arrangements in detailed policies and taking an all roles flex approach to implementing them. This helps to disrupt norms that contribute to ideas of workplace flexibility being reserved for women, and therefore, can contribute to more sharing of care between partners. By ensuring that flexibility benefits all employees, leading practice organisations report increased productivity and engagement among staff.

Leading practice organisations make continuous efforts in building a culture supportive of flexible working arrangements for all employees. The organisations employ several strategies to communicate that use of flexible working arrangements is gender neutral and to counter incorrect, negative perceptions which suggest that employees who use flexible work arrangements are less committed and contribute less. For instance, EOCGE organisations review the data on employee development opportunities and progress to ensure an employee is not penalised in accessing such opportunities due to using flexible work. Managers and senior leaders also demonstrate support by role-modelling their use of flexible working arrangements, and EOCGE organisations have highlighted those male managers and employees who progress while using flexible working arrangements.

These steps aim to support more men taking advantage of flexible working arrangements while also boosting women's engagement in the workforce by challenging notions about the ideal worker and presenteeism that can see individuals – both women and men – who utilise flexible working arrangements sidelined and even penalised at work.

Flexible working arrangements that are equally available and utilised by both women and men are a key enabler of workplace gender equality. They provide women and men with more choice in managing paid and unpaid commitments. This can affect gender norms and can contribute to more balance in the sharing of work and care between partners.

### **Parental leave, childcare and support for parents<sup>82</sup>**

Gender differences in work and care often become more pronounced with the arrival of a child.<sup>83</sup> Women often take on the majority of childcare responsibilities, which can reduce their workforce participation and limit opportunities for progression in the workforce.

Similar to leading practice on flexible working arrangements, leading practice in parental leave promotes a model of shared care by using gender inclusive language. This includes removing assumptions and distinctions between primary and secondary carers, and referring to all parents as carers and providing them the same entitlements. Such initiatives are more reflective of current family structures where both parents are working and would like to be involved in caring responsibilities.

Leading practice organisations also have financial measures in place to support carers, such as continuing or increasing superannuation guarantee payments on parental leave. This recognises and aims to reduce any economic disadvantage that women are more likely to encounter due to taking on the primary carer role.

Through parental leave policies and other supports for carers with children, EOCGE organisations aim to support carers in their return to work. For instance, leading practice organisations have provided more employee flexibility over when parental leave can be taken. While a carer is on parental leave, they also offer opportunities such as keep-in-touch programs, and training and development. Once an employee returns to work, many offer return to work coaching and links to internal and external support networks for parents.

In addition, leading practice employers recognise how availability and cost of childcare arrangements can factor into employee plans for returning to work. Where possible, EOCGE organisations increased access and reduced fees associated with childcare and supported carers with before- and after-school care and vacation care.

### **Elder care and care for people with disability**

The EOCGE citation recognises the importance of employer support to employees with eldercare responsibilities and employees with caring responsibilities for a person with disability. This is why EOCGE organisations must have a formal policy and strategy that supports employees with such caring responsibilities. Some of the actions taken by EOCGE employers to support these employees include providing information about the various resources and services that are available to support carers, referrals to support services, contact details for emergency care services, and the provision of additional leave entitlements.

### **EOCGE organisations progress workplace gender equality outcomes**

These and other measures initiated by EOCGE organisations create workplace cultures that are supportive of gender equality. When compared to other organisations that report to WGEA, EOCGE organisations employ a greater proportion of women, have a greater proportion of women managers overall, and have a higher proportion of women working full-time.<sup>84</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Responsibilities for care impact engagement with paid work. Since women are more likely to take on the majority of caring responsibilities, they are also more likely to reduce time in or leave the workforce. Where women continue to balance work and care, they are also more likely to utilise flexible work arrangements and other leave measures. Given the persistence of gender discrimination and biases, this has consequences for women's workforce outcomes, including representation in leadership and pay.

WGEA data shows that the majority of employers have policies and strategies to support carers, including options for flexible work and parental leave. Leading practice from the private sector highlights the importance of offering and communicating such policies and strategies in a gender-neutral way. The gender equitable uptake of these employer supports can contribute to a model of shared work and care between women and men.



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<sup>81</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all information in this section draws on Fitzsimmons, TW, Yates, MS & Callan, VJ (2020), Employer of Choice for Gender Equality: Leading practices in strategy, policy and implementation, Brisbane: AIBE Centre for Gender Equality in the Workplace.

<sup>82</sup> For more detail about the information in this section, see Fitzsimmons, TW, Yates, MS & Callan, VJ (2020), Employer of Choice for Gender Equality: Leading practices in strategy, policy and implementation, Brisbane: AIBE Centre for Gender Equality in the Workplace.

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