

Boosting Retention of Women in Construction: Improving Transitions in and out of Parental Leave

Rapid Literature Review



Work and Organisational Studies The University of Sydney Business School

28 January 2025

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Suggested citation

Hanna-Osborne, Sally., Galea, Natalie., and Hamilton, Myra. (2025) Boosting retention of women in construction: Improving transitions in and out of parental leave: Rapid literature review, University of Sydney, Sydney.

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Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the NSW Government Women in Construction Industry Innovation Program (IIP) and undertaken on behalf of the National Association of Women in Construction (NSW).



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Executive summary

Introduction

Australia's construction sector continues to struggle to attract and retain women workers. A key area of strategic importance is how women are supported in the workplace before, during and after taking parental leave. Research has found that these periods are pivotal in a woman's career, and the decision to remain in or return to work. There has so far been little research into the experiences of women in construction before, during and after pregnancy and parental leave, and how to help employers and workers navigate this critical time.

About this literature review

This review provides an overview of the literature on how women "transition" between the workplace and parental leave, as pregnant workers taking leave as new parents returning to work. It identifies examples of leading policies and practices within construction and other industries and it highlights areas where more research is needed. The review is part of a broader project investigating how to assist women to remain in frontline construction roles in NSW during pregnancy and after taking parental leave.

A difficult environment for parents

Construction is Australia's most male-dominated industry. Despite numerous efforts to improve gender equality in the sector, women make up only 13.6% of the workforce (ABS 2024). Among trades workers, women comprise only 3% of workers (ABS 2021).

The barriers to women staying and progressing in the sector are well known. The working culture can be harmful and hostile to women. Women in construction have experienced sexual harassment, discrimination and bullying. They are excluded from workplaces by a lack of female facilities and belittled by male colleagues who question their competence.

Work practices in the industry are another obstacle to women's participation. Construction workers are expected to be available for long and inflexible work days, driven by pressures to complete projects on tight timelines and budgets. These work practices are incompatible with other responsibilities that many women have, such as caring for children.

Parental leave entitlements in the sector are patchy. According to the National Employment Standards, all employees who have worked with their employer for at least 12 months, including casual employees, can take unpaid parental leave and have their job protected for at least 12 months. The Australian Government Parental Leave Pay scheme currently provides 22 weeks of leave paid at the national minimum wage to parents who meet the criteria. However, employer provided parental leave schemes in the sector are limited, and many employees do not experience the full benefits of the statutory provisions, such as having their job protected for 12 months.



Reference ABS 2024

Parental leave transitions, discrimination and disadvantage

The small amount of research into the construction sectors of Australia, the UK and US identifies the issues for women in the important transition periods into and out of leave.

Before parental leave:

- Women face discrimination even before becoming parents. Women report that it is often assumed by employers that they will become pregnant, require leave and not be able to work the long hours demanded by the workplace, irrespective of their childbearing intentions.
- Pregnant workers experience a lack of support and accommodations. A national review found that 36% of women in construction experienced discrimination during pregnancy – among the highest rates of all industries (AHRC 2014).

Taking parental leave:

- WGEA data indicate that 36% of employers with 100 or more employees offered no additional paid parental leave in 2022-23. However, given the construction sector is dominated by small to medium businesses, this data does not provide the full picture. Even among employers who do offer paid parental leave, high rates of casual labour in the industry mean that not all women are eligible to use it.
- Poor communication with women while they are on parental leave can make women feel isolated and hamper their return to work. A national survey found 51% of workers on parental leave were not informed about changes in the workplace that could affect them, and 44% missed out on training or promotion opportunities (Potter et al. 2024).

Returning to work:

- The quality of a woman's transition back to work is largely determined by the planning and support provided by their employer. Without engaged and active managers, and supportive policy frameworks, women can return to work in lower-skilled, unsuitable roles or their positions can be made redundant.

- Women returning to work are often expected to resume the long and inflexible hours they worked before taking leave. While 77% of employers in the industry have a flexible work policy (WGEA 2024), only 14.3% of employees work part-time (ABS 2024).



Leading practices

The literature identifies leading practices in providing parental leave and supports, including:

- Parental leave policies as part of a broader gender equality strategy
- Parental leave factored into resource planning so it is properly costed and resourced
- Parental leave policies that are inclusive of all genders and family structures
- Parental leave policies that go beyond the statutory minimum and can be taken flexibly
- Proactive workplace accommodations for pregnant employees
- Protecting jobs and conditions of employees on parental leave
- Planning to stay connected with employees on parental leave, (where employees would like it) and considering employees on leave for career advancement opportunities
- Comprehensive return-to-work programs and support, including flexibility on working hours, help to find appropriate childcare, and facilities for breastfeeding.

More research needed

This review identifies various groups that should be included in future research on parental leave transitions in Australian construction. Moreover, a comprehensive national study involving a representative sample of construction employers and employees is needed. This would map policies and practices across the sector and establish a baseline of evidence on women's experiences navigating pregnancy and parental leave transitions.



Introduction

Retaining women in construction and trade careers in Australia is a long-standing and well-recognised problem.

Women face numerous structural and cultural barriers to their participation and progression, leaving them much more likely to discontinue their construction careers and trade apprenticeship programs than men (Galea et al. 2018; ABS 2022). Research indicates that women's experience of pregnancy and the transitions into parental leave and back to work have critical implications for their retention and career development (Nowak et al. 2012; Fisher et al. 2012; Millward 2006; Barron and West 2005). Yet little research has explored these transitions in the context of construction and trades careers. The purpose of this review is to provide a critical review of the literature that examines how women navigate pregnancy, parental leave and post-parental leave transitions in construction and cognate industries, identifying key gaps in existing knowledge and examples of leading policies and practices. The review will directly inform the development of policies and practices supporting women's parental leave transitions in the construction sector in Australia.

Industry context

Despite years of attempts by state and federal governments to address gender inequality in the construction industry, the industry remains the most male-dominated in Australia.

Women comprise just 13.6% of the workforce (ABS 2024) and only 3% of trades workers (ABS 2022). Occupational segregation by gender within the construction workforce is acute. Men vastly outnumber women in supervisory, leadership, trade and technical positions, while women cluster in junior, administrative and non-fee-earning roles (Duncan et al. 2024; Galea et al. 2018; Samaraweera et al. 2023; Yan et al. 2024). In construction company boards, 90% are male-dominated and 54% have no women at all (WGEA 2023a¹). Workforce segregation in turn contributes to an average gender pay gap which is the highest of any

industry in Australia – 28.3% compared with 21.7% for all industries (WGEA 2023b). The pay gap is even higher among certain occupations, for example, 35% for labourers and 30% for technicians and trades workers (WGEA 2023b).

Women comprise just 13.6% of the workforce (ABS 2024) and only 3% of trades workers (ABS 2022).

Studies have identified many barriers to the retention and career progression of women in the industry. The everyday work culture of construction and the trades has been described as 'hypermasculine' and hostile to women's presence (Galea 2018; Galea et al. 2018; Carroll 2023; Zhang et al. 2021; Holdsworth et al. 2020; Shewring 2009; Wright 2016; Ghanbaripour et al. 2023). Women report experiencing sexual harassment, discrimination and bullying (Building Commission NSW 2024; Galarneau et al. 2024; Hasan & Kamardeen 2022; Wright 2016), and having their competence and professional legitimacy questioned and criticised by male colleagues (Galea et al. 2018; Bridges et al. 2022; Watts 2009). Women also report a lack of female-specific provisions on sites, including separate toilets, sanitary facilities, breastfeeding/expressing spaces, and personal protective clothing and equipment (Building Commission NSW 2024; Perrenoud et al. 2020; Hegewisch and Mefferd 2021; Carroll 2023; Wright 2016; Samaraweera et al. 2023; Oo and Lim 2020).

Entrenched working time norms based on rigid and long hours have been shown to constrain the participation, retention and career development of women in construction (Galea et al. 2018; Lingard and Turner 2022; Holdsworth et al. 2020; Hegewisch and Mefferd 2021; Sang and Powell 2012; Watts 2009; Samaraweera et al. 2023). The project-based model which is dominant in the industry creates pressures on project leaders to complete contracts within tight timeframes and budgetary constraints, leading to high workloads and an expectation of 'total availability' from workers (Lingard and Turner 2022; Sang and Powell 2012; Galea et al. 2018). Data from the Construction Industry Culture Taskforce indicate 64% of workers in the Australian construction industry exceed 50 hours

¹ Unless otherwise specified, the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) data cited in this review pertain to organisations with 100 employees or more which report to the agency.

per week, and Saturday work is routine (CICT 2021). Working schedules that deviate from the full-time norm are uncommon, with flexible work arrangements considered at odds with the demands of project-based work and the culture of 'competitive presenteeism' (Simpson 1998 in Watts 2009) among workers (Zhang et al. 2021; Galea et al. 2018). The impact of these work practices is that women, who still shoulder the greatest caring responsibilities, are often left to choose between a career in construction or having children. This in turn forces many women out of the industry and exacerbating already critical skills shortages (Bryce et al. 2019; Galea et al. 2018; Holdsworth et al. 2020).

Regulatory context

Within the Australian construction sector, a set of paid and unpaid parental leave arrangements operates, including statutory entitlements, enterprise bargaining agreements and organisational policies.

Under the Fair Work Act 2009 (Fair Work Act), employees who have worked with their employer for at least 12 months can take job protected unpaid parental leave for a period of up to 12 months in the 24-month period after the birth or adoption of a child. This includes casual employees who have been employed on a 'regular and systematic basis' for at least 12 months and have a reasonable expectation of this continuing if not for the birth or adoption of a child (Baird et al. 2021). Employees can apply for a 12-month extension on this leave but employers are not obligated to grant this request.

Since 2011, Australia has also had a statutory Parental Leave Pay scheme. The scheme is intended to complement existing entitlements, including unpaid parental leave and employer-provided parental leave (Ramoso and Hill 2023). Under the scheme, parents have access to 22 weeks of paid parental leave, paid at the rate of the national minimum wage. To be eligible, workers must meet a work test, income test, and residency test. The number of weeks will increase to 24 in July 2025 and 26 weeks from July 2026. Currently, 10 paid parental leave days are reserved for the non-claiming partner on a 'use it or lose it' basis to encourage

greater sharing of care responsibilities (Department of Social Services 2024). From July 2026, this will increase to 20 days. The period of leave which can be taken concurrently by both parents is currently two weeks, increasing to four weeks from July 2026. Single parents are able to claim the whole period of leave. In addition, under the National Employment Standards, employees are entitled to return to work for 'keeping in touch' days during a period of unpaid parental leave to help them prepare for their eventual return to work (Fair Work Ombudsman 2024a). By agreement with the employer, employees can take up to 10 'keeping in touch' days per one year of unpaid parental leave, paid at the employee's normal wage (Fair Work Ombudsman 2024a).

In March 2024, the Federal Government announced that from July 2025, new parents will receive 12% superannuation on government-funded Parental Leave Pay, to be paid as a lump sum as a proportion of the National Minimum Wage. This is the same rate as the Superannuation Guarantee, or the compulsory amount of superannuation that employers are required to pay eligible workers (Australian Government 2024a).

Pregnant and breastfeeding employees in Australia may also access a range of entitlements and protections under the Fair Work Act, workplace health and safety regulations and anti-discrimination laws (Fair Work Ombudsman 2024b). These laws are designed to minimise risks to the health and safety of pregnant people and the unborn child, and prevent employment discrimination because of pregnancy and maternity.

Finally, the National Employment Standards in the Fair Work Act provides employees who have at least 12 months' continuous employment, and long-term casuals who expect to be employed on a regular and systematic basis, the right to request flexible working arrangements from their employer. Examples include changes to the hours, pattern or location of work. A request can be made for a range of circumstances, including if the employee is pregnant or caring for a child who is of school age or younger.

Beyond these statutory entitlements, employers may provide additional paid parental leave and entitlements related to pregnancy, maternity and caregiving, pursuant to enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs), company policies or individual employment contracts (Baird et al.



2021, Ramoso and Hill 2023). There is a paucity of data on the prevalence and nature of employer-provided and EBA-provided policies and entitlements in the construction sector, particularly in small to medium-sized organisations.

Parental leave transitions in frontline construction and trades roles

This section summarises the key insights from the small volume of research examining aspects of women's transitions in and out of parental leave in the construction sector, drawing on studies from Australia, the UK and the US.

Details of the methodology employed in the review can be found at the end of the review. The discussion is grouped into three stages, or transition points, where discrimination and disadvantage can arise for women: before parental leave, while taking parental leave, and returning to work after parental leave.

1. Before parental leave

Stigma and the 'spectre of motherhood'

Research has established that motherhood stigma and discrimination arise before a woman's childbearing future is known (Thebaud and Taylor 2021; Carroll 2023; Correll et al. 2007). In a large UK survey of pregnancy and maternity-related discrimination and disadvantage, 87% of employers in the construction industry felt women should declare during recruitment if they were pregnant (Adams et al. 2016a). Young women in construction, STEM and manual trades report that they face the assumption that they will become pregnant, require significant leaves of absence and be unable to conform to dominant working time patterns, regardless of their intentions or plans about parenthood (Thebaud and Taylor 2021; Holdsworth et al. 2020; Galea et al. 2018; Carroll 2023; Matthewson et al. 2015; Shewring 2009). The 'spectre of motherhood' (Thebaud and Taylor 2021) becomes grounds to question and discredit the professional legitimacy of women of childbearing age

and deny them opportunities for work on high-value projects and additional training and apprenticeships (Shewring 2009; Matthewson et al. 2015; Holdsworth et al. 2020; Galea et al. 2018; Carroll 2023).

Lack of support and accommodations

Once pregnant, women working on construction projects can experience discrimination and resentment from managers and co-workers who view parental leave as an 'actual and resource cost' to projects (Galea et al. 2018; Carroll 2023). The positions of those on parental leave are often not backfilled, fuelling negativity from colleagues who are expected to carry the additional workload (Galea 2018; Carroll 2023). Women also report being marginalised and sidelined from decision-making after informing their employers of their pregnancies (Watts 2009). A national review of pregnancy and return to work in Australia found that 36% of women in the construction industry experienced discrimination during pregnancy – among the highest rate of all industries (AHRC 2014). Similarly, Adams et al. (2016) UK survey found employers in construction and other male-dominated industries were the least likely to believe supporting pregnant women was in the interests of their organisation. Employers in construction were also the least likely to report that line managers in their organisations consulted the HR department about how to manage pregnant women, or those on or returning from parental leave (Adams et al. 2016a).

Studies indicate that managers often lack understanding of the safety issues for pregnant women on construction and trades worksites, and show unwillingness to provide accommodations so pregnant women can continue to work safely, such as temporary alternative duties, or paid leave if alternative duties are not available (Hegewisch and Meffered 2021; Galea 2018; Galea et al. 2018; Holdsworth et al. 2020; Adams et al. 2016a). This can pose significant risks to the health and safety of the pregnant worker and her unborn children; for example, women construction workers in Galea's (2018) study observed managers 'consciously overworking female employees' before their parental leave, even those about to give birth, with one woman hospitalised for exhaustion. Whether or not a woman will be able to continue working while pregnant can hinge on the nature of their employment arrangements and organisational size. For example, self-employed tradeswomen and tradeswomen employed by small to medium enterprises in Holdsworth et al.'s (2020) study

were found to stop working in early stages of pregnancy, while those on permanent employment contracts were more able to be transferred to administrative work than sole traders.

The ability of women to access support and pregnancy accommodations can be a critical factor in whether they see a future for themselves in construction or the trades (Galea 2018; Hegewisch and Meffered 2021). In a survey of tradeswomen and non-binary tradespeople in the US, a lack of supports during pregnancy and maternity, as well as difficulties finding childcare, were the most important reasons for considering leaving the trades (Hegewisch and Meffered 2021).

2. Taking parental leave

Patchy access to parental leave

As noted above, construction industry workers in Australia may have access to parental leave provisions under the government's paid and unpaid parental leave schemes, enterprise bargaining agreements and workplace policies. While comprehensive data on access to and utilisation of parental leave entitlements across the construction industry are not available, WGEA data indicate that 36% of employers with 100 or more employees offered no paid parental leave to workers (in addition to the government scheme) in 2022-23 (WGEA 2025). Among large construction employers who do offer paid parental leave, the average number of weeks provided is 12.4 for primary carers and 2.3 for secondary carers (WGEA 2025). This is around the average number of weeks offered by large private sector employers in Australia (12.3 weeks and 2.9 weeks respectively) (WGEA 2025), but considerably lower than recognised leading practice of at least 26 weeks, irrespective of primary or secondary carer status (as discussed below). Further, the average number of weeks offered within the construction industry as a whole is likely to be considerably lower than 12.4 weeks, as small to medium-sized enterprises, which make up the vast majority of employers in the construction industry (ABS 2018), are less likely to provide paid parental leave and other benefits that support work-family balance (Barrett and Mayson 2008; Lingard et al. 2015).

Qualitative research finds that women in construction and trade roles face extensive barriers to accessing and utilising parental leave (Holdsworth et al. 2020;

Zhang et al. 2021; Lingard and Lin 2003). In Holdsworth et al.'s (2020) study of women working in trades and semi-skilled roles in the construction industry, 32% of participants reported difficulty in accessing paid parental leave, with some drawing on savings from wages to fund their own leave. Access to paid parental leave was dependent on their employer and employment contract type, and high rates of casual labour in the industry meant many women were not eligible for paid parental leave schemes at all (Holdsworth et al. 2020). Further, women may choose not to utilise parental leave entitlements because they fear they will lose their job during the break, or not be able to return to work on a part-time basis (Aboagye-Nimo et al 2019).

Parental leave as a 'women's issue'

Despite paid parental leave schemes being gender neutral in name, data show that the vast majority of both government-provided and employer-funded parental leave in Australia is utilised by women (WGEA 2017a). Baird et al. (2021) note that parental leave policies which are mainly used by women have the potential to exacerbate gender inequality in the labour market and at home, by 'consolidating [women's] primary responsibility for caring roles and extending their vulnerability to career penalties associated with workplace absence' (Farrelly and Whitehouse 2013 in Baird et al. 2021, see also Widdis 2021; Earle et al. 2023).

Data on the gendered uptake of parental leave across the construction industry do not exist. However, of the 64% of construction employers (with 100+ employees) with paid parental leave policies, only 14% did not distinguish between primary and secondary carers (WGEA 2025). In the construction companies studied by Galea et al. (2018), parental leave policies were still framed in terms of a 'primary carer' and 'partner', meaning that parental leave was perceived as 'maternity leave' and a 'women's issue', perpetuating the notion of women as carers and men as breadwinners.

A 2024 national survey on discrimination experienced by pregnant and parent workers found that 51% of respondents were not informed about changes in the workplace that could affect them, and 47% were not included in communication about their workplaces while on parental leave (Potter et al. 2024).

22% of respondents in Potter et al.'s (2024) national survey of 1,048 workers from a range of industries were made redundant, restructured out of a job, did not have their contract renewed, or had their employment terminated.

Broken connections with the workplace

Research indicates that the support provided to a woman while on parental leave can significantly affect her experience and influence decision-making about returning to work (Nowak et al. 2012; Houston and Marks 2003; Millward 2006). A 2024 national survey on discrimination experienced by pregnant and parent workers found that 51% of respondents were not informed about changes in the workplace that could affect them and 47% were not included in communication about their workplaces (Potter et al. 2024). Further, 44% said they missed out on training opportunities and/or opportunities for promotion (Potter et al. 2024). The limited qualitative research available on women's experiences in construction organisations suggests poor communication by managers can make women feel isolated and undervalued, and hamper their re-integration into the workplace (Galea 2018; Samaraweera et al. 2023). Additionally, participants in Galea's (2018) study reported receiving no annual pay rises or bonuses while they were on parental leave, exacerbating gender pay gaps in the company.

Employees on parental leave are also at risk of being made redundant. Under the National Employment Standards, employees taking unpaid parental leave are entitled to return to their pre-parental leave position or if that is not available, an equivalent position which is nearest in status and pay to their pre-parental leave position (Fair Work Ombudsman 2024b). Notwithstanding this guarantee, 22% of respondents in Potter et al.'s (2024) national survey of 1,048 workers from a range of industries were made redundant, restructured out of a job, did not have their contract renewed, or had their employment terminated.

3. Returning to work after parental leave

Lack of planning and management of return to work

The transition back into the workplace by mothers after parental leave has been found to be of critical importance to women's long-term career trajectory (Nowak et al. 2012; Baird and Charlesworth 2007; Millward 2006; Barron and West 2005). In particular, employers and managers need to plan for and actively manage the return-to-work process to ensure women can return to their original or equivalent roles (Nowak et al. 2012; Aboagye-Nimo et al. 2019; Galea 2018). Despite this, research has identified a lack of strategic planning and return-to-work programs within the construction industry to assist women to resume their careers following childbirth (Samaraweera et al. 2023; Galea 2018; Aboagye-Nimo et al. 2019). Galea et al.'s (2018) study involving several large Australian construction firms found that women were left to plan for their departure, return and career survival largely unaided, with 50% not returning to work after parental leave.

Galea et al.'s (2018) study involving several large Australian construction firms found that women were left to plan for their departure, return and career survival largely unaided, with 50% not returning to work after parental leave.

Overall, women's return-to-work experience appears to be localised and highly variable, depending on the strength of the individual's informal networks, the support (or lack thereof) from line managers, and whether or not the project she last worked on was still active (Matthewson 2015; Galea 2018). While some women reported positive experiences of engaged and supportive managers, others said they had been assigned lower-skilled roles, transferred to areas not relevant to their qualifications or experience or were made redundant (Galea 2018; Matthewson 2015; Aboagye-Nimo et al. 2019).

Constrained access to flexible work

Perhaps the biggest barrier to women's successful return to construction careers after parental leave is the entrenched culture of long and inflexible work hours, particularly in site-based roles (Galea 2018; CICT 2021; Sang and Powell 2012; Matthewson 2015; Aboagye-Nimo et al. 2019; Zhang et al. 2021; Yan et al. 2024; Watts 2009; Holdsworth et al. 2020; Hegewisch and Meffered 2021; Lingard and Turner 2022; Lingard and Lin 2003). As noted earlier, 64% of workers in the Australian construction industry work more than 50 hours per week (CICT 2024). While 85% of employers in the construction industry have a policy for flexible work (WGEA 2025), only 14.3% of construction employees work part-time hours.

Research indicates that formal entitlements to flexible work are undermined by tight project timelines and resourcing pressures, full-time worker ideals and narratives of part-time work as incompatible with career success in the construction industry (Watts 2009; Samaraweera et al 2023; Sang and Powell 2012; Lingard and Turner 2022; Lingard and Lin 2003; Galea 2018; Matthewson 2015). When women return from

parental leave, they are commonly expected to fit back in with existing work practices and denied flexible work arrangements to support their caregiving roles (Holdsworth et al. 2020; Galea et al. 2018). Those who are 'able' to access reduced or flexible work hours in construction workplaces are often met with resistance and backlash from colleagues who resent the 'special treatment' they perceive the flexible worker is receiving (Galea 2018; Matthewson 2015). Their prospects for promotion and progression can become severely limited, as they are seen as lacking commitment to their roles, and because management and specialist roles are almost never offered on a part-time basis (Watts 2009; Matthewson 2015). Further, if a woman is transferred to an office-based or support role to access more family-friendly hours, they can be denied the experience on high-profile site-based projects needed for promotion (Dainty et al. 2000).

While 85% of employers in the construction industry have a policy for flexible work (WGEA 2025), only 14.3% of construction employees work part-time hours.

For many women, this inflexibility leads them to feel they must choose between a career in construction or having a family (Aboagye-Nimo et al. 2013; Matthewson 2015; Galea et al. 2018; Watts 2009, Lingard and Lin 2003; Holdsworth et al. 2020). As noted earlier, half of women in the construction organisations studied by Galea et al. (2018) did not return to work after parental leave. Almost half of women trade and semi-skilled workers interviewed by Holdsworth et al. (2020) reported that inflexible work hours would prevent them from returning to their careers after having a baby. Faced with this dichotomy, some women choose to become self-employed (Shewring 2009; Holdsworth 2020), delay or eschew having children (Zhang et al. 2021; Matthewson 2015), lean heavily on family and friends for caregiving (Holdsworth et al. 2020), or leave the sector entirely (Aboagye-Nimo et al. 2019; Di Bartolo and Torres 2024; Hegewisch and Meffered 2021; Galea et al. 2018).

Having summarised the existing literature on the challenges women face as they navigate parental



leave transitions in frontline construction roles, the next section identifies examples of leading practice in supporting pregnancy and parental leave within a range of industries and organisations. The review concludes with an overview of the key gaps in our knowledge and areas for further research.

Leading policies and practices

It is recognised that there is no ‘one’ best practice approach to parental leave policies, and what constitutes best practice will vary between organisations and industries.

In particular, small to medium-sized organisations are likely to have less capacity to adopt leading practices than larger organisations (WGEA 2022; Samaraweera et al. 2023). Notwithstanding this, the literature identifies some consistent elements of leading practice in the provision of parental leave and associated policies and supports, and provides examples of employers implementing such practices.

Parental leave policies are part of a broader gender equality strategy

The literature suggests that parental leave policies should form part of a suite of integrated measures which support gender equality and reduce the penalties associated with caring responsibilities (Forbes et al. 2020; AHRC 2014; WGEA 2022, 2019a; Charlesworth 2007). According to the WGEA (2023a), best practice organisations have an overarching gender equality strategy which sets specific targets for progress towards gender equality goals, which are to be achieved through policies relating to workforce gender segregation, the gender pay gap, flexible working and support for employees with family or caring responsibilities. Importantly, the strategy should include key performance indicators so that progress can be monitored, and leaders and decision-makers held accountable for the achievement of gender equality goals (Hamilton et al, 2022).

Policies and practices are factored into resource planning

Galea et al.’s (2018) research underscored the importance of incorporating gender equality into the construction planning process, and ensuring parental leave is managed, costed and resourced (see also Lingard and Turner 2022). This includes accommodating employee leave allowances and variations in working-time patterns, and establishing lines of accountability for managing employees on parental leave and plans to minimise backlash from colleagues. Samaraweera et al. (2023) highlighted the need for clients to have reasonable expectations for project timeframes and for companies to collectively resist client pressures to accept program deadlines that are incompatible with reduced working hours.

Parental leave policies are gender-neutral and inclusive

It is now widely accepted that leading practice parental leave policies (whether government or employer provided) are gender-neutral, that is, they universally available and offered equally irrespective of the employee’s gender (WGEA 2023a, 2022; Galea et al. 2018; Samaraweera et al. 2023). Labels that define a caregiver’s role as ‘primary’ or ‘secondary’ have been shown to discourage men’s uptake of parental leave and reinforce the gendered norm that women are the ‘natural’ primary caregivers of children (Baird and O’Brien 2015; Atkinson 2017; Earle et al. 2023; Widiss 2021; WGEA 2022). Despite this, WGEA data indicate that men only account for 14% of all employer-funded primary carer’s parental leave taken nationally, and the majority of employer-funded PPL policies still designate primary and secondary carer roles (WGEA 2023a).

Rose and Oxland (2023) note that despite increasing family formation among the LGBTQ+ population in Australia, policies and practices around conception, pregnancy, and birthing remain largely focused on heterosexual couples. Leading practice policies are inclusive of all genders and diverse family structures (for example, same-sex partnerships and single and co-parenting arrangements), as well as different pathways to parenthood, including surrogacy and IVF (Rose and Oxland 2023; Raub et al. 2018; Diversity Council of Australia 2024).

Parental leave policies should also be inclusive of employees on different types of employment contracts and irrespective of an employee's length of service (Holdsworth et al. 2020; Galea et al. 2018; Palast et al. 2023). The literature recommends that casual and part-time workers be eligible for employer-funded paid parental leave, with no minimum tenure requirements for eligibility (Dobrotić and Blum 2020; Raub et al. 2018; WGEA 2022). For example, male-dominated technology firm Motorola created a 'zero eligibility period' paid parental leave policy by removing any qualifying period to access the policy (WGEA 2021).

Policies go beyond the statutory minimum and can be taken flexibly

WGEA data indicate that in 2022-23, the average length of employer-funded paid parental leave was 12 weeks for both gender-neutral parental leave and primary carer's leave, and three weeks for secondary carer's leave² (WGEA 2023a). Further, 84% of employers that offered employer-funded paid parental leave placed time limits on employees accessing that leave (usually 12 months or less after the birth or adoption of the child) (WGEA 2023a).

By contrast, leading practice employers offer 26 weeks paid parental leave at full salary, in addition to the government scheme (not just 'topping up'), and pay superannuation contributions on the employer-funded scheme (WGEA 2022, 2024; Fair Work Ombudsman 2024c). Examples of leaders in this area include KPMG, Ashurst, Grant Thornton, and Diageo which offer 26 weeks paid leave which can be taken by either parent (Trinca 2021; WGEA 2019b). Policies should also offer flexibility in how and when parental leave is taken (e.g. continuously or intermittently, part-time or full-time, and over a period longer than 12 months), to support parents to meet their varied work and caregiving needs and encourage more males/secondary carers to subsequently take primary carers' leave (Palast et al. 2023; APSC 2013; WGEA 2023a).

Workplace accommodations for pregnant employees

Under the Fair Work Act, a pregnant employee is entitled to be transferred to an 'appropriate safe job' if their current position becomes unsuitable because of an illness or risk arising out of their pregnancy, or hazards connected with their position. If there is no appropriate safe job available and the employee is entitled to unpaid

parental leave, they are entitled to paid 'no safe job leave'. Alternatively, if they are not entitled to unpaid parental leave they can take unpaid no safe job leave (Fair Work Ombudsman 2024b).

Holdsworth et al. (2020) note that leading practice in the construction industry involves proactively organising alternative working arrangements for pregnant employees within their workplaces. This requires policies that support pregnant workers to stay safe and remain employed in a role aligned with their trade and skillset throughout their pregnancy (Holdsworth et al. 2020). This could include ergonomic role adjustments (e.g. lighter duties, limited heavy lifting) as well as shorter working hours, more breaks, and different start and finish times (Potter et al. 2024; AHRC 2015). Construction managers and supervisors should be trained in understanding the legal protections for pregnant employees and in identifying and managing workplace risks to both the pregnant worker and unborn child (Holdsworth et al. 2020).

Leading practice policy for pregnant employees also includes additional types of leave to support their health and wellbeing. For example, nurses in Victoria employed under the Nurses and Midwives (Victorian Public Health Sector) (Single Interest Employers) Enterprise Agreement 2020–2024 are offered pre-natal leave to attend appointments or birth and parenting classes during their ordinary rostered shifts (ANMF 2023).

Protecting jobs and conditions of employees taking parental leave

Under the Fair Work Act, employees on parental leave are entitled to return to their original position at the end of that leave or, if that job does not exist anymore, to a suitable available job that aligns with the employee's qualifications and is nearest to their old job in pay and status. The research reviewed above showed that women in frontline construction roles can face dismissal or redundancy while on parental leave, particularly if the project they were working on is completed in the meantime (Galea 2018; Aboagye-Nimo et al. 2019).

Leading practice employers engage in return-to-work planning (see below), consider workers on paid or unpaid parental leave for promotion, and ensure salary reviews and bonus schemes are accessible to those on parental/carer leave to avoid worsening the gender pay gap (WGEA 2022; Galea et al. 2018, Potter et al. 2024).

² Interestingly, the average amount of leave offered in different industries does not correlate with gender-dominance; for example, the male-dominated Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services has the longest average at 15.9 weeks for gender-neutral and 14.1 weeks for primary carer, compared to 8.6 weeks for gender-neutral leave, and 9.0 weeks for primary carer's leave in the female-dominated Health Care and Social Assistance (WGEA 2023a).



Employees on parental leave should be consulted about workplace change processes, such as team restructures, and any changes to the employee's role structure or duties (Potter et al. 2024; AHRC 2024; WGEA 2022). CommBank, for example, monitors changes to the roles of employees on parental leave and proposed changes must be reviewed by a senior manager for its impacts on promotion and development opportunities (in AHRC 2014).

Staying connected with employees on leave

The literature notes the importance of managers developing a mutually-agreed plan for communicating with employees to support their continued attachment to the workplace and colleagues on parental leave (Fair Work Ombudsman 2024c; Potter et al. 2024; WGEA 2022). The Fair Work Ombudsman's Parental Leave Best Practice Guide recommends meeting with the employee before they start leave to establish their expectations and preferences for contact during leave, including key contacts and to make plans for handovers of work (Fair Work Ombudsman 2024c). Paid 'keeping in touch' days can enable a worker on parental leave to attend planning days, training sessions or informal catchups if they desire (AHRC 2015). Stockland provides an example of leading practice in this area: keeping-in-touch events are held throughout the year and are attended by managers and a direct report to the CEO. Parents are provided two hours of free childcare so they can participate fully in the events (WGEA 2017b).

Comprehensive return-to-work programs and supports

Developing and implementing comprehensive return-to-work programs for workers on parental leave are critical for ensuring employees return to their positions and are successfully re-integrated into their workplaces and careers (Samaraweera et al 2023; Diamond et al. 2007). WGEA suggests managers consult with employees about their expectations and create a return-to-work plan that outlines how the arrangements will be implemented, and by whom (WGEA 2022). The plan should also provide for mentoring and re-training, and invest in skills, qualifications, career development and progression after an extended period of leave.

Facilitating flexibility in an employee's work hours, schedule and location are a key component of leading practice in supporting the return-to-work process (Samaraweera et al 2023; WGEA 2023a,

2022; Holdsworth et al. 2020). Policies should allow for a staged return to full-time work for parents (for example over three, six and 12-month periods), to help employees adjust to their work demands after a period away (Galea et al. 2018), and provide opportunities for part-time work. As noted above, factoring reasonable working hours into the construction project tendering process is required to ensure flexible working can be accommodated for both site-based and office-based roles (Samaraweera et al 2023; CICT 2021). Also essential is a move away from a culture of rigid, long hours and presenteeism to one more conducive to work-family balance for all employees irrespective of gender (Holdsworth et al. 2020).

Finally, leading practice responses in the construction industry should address the difficulties parents face in accessing childcare, particularly early in the morning, by providing on-site childcare, childcare referral services, or financial support to cover the costs of at-home childcare (Hegewisch and Meffered 2021; Samaraweera et al. 2023). The provision of appropriate spaces for breastfeeding or expressing milk on worksites, as well as flexible break times to accommodate these needs, is also important (Hegewisch and Meffered 2021; Potter et al. 2024; Aboagye-Nimo et al. 2019).

Key research gaps

This review of the literature highlighted a number of critical gaps in our knowledge on parental leave transitions in construction and the trades, particularly in the Australian context.

A comprehensive national study involving a representative sample of construction employers and employees is needed to map policies and practices in the industry as a whole and establish a baseline of evidence on women's experiences navigating pregnancy and parental leave transitions in the sector (an example of this type of study in the UK is Adams et al. 2016b).

Much of the research to date has examined practices and experiences within large construction companies. Given the construction industry is dominated by businesses with fewer than 20 employees (ABS

2018), there is a need for studies on parental leave experiences and policy challenges within small and medium sized businesses, including micro-enterprises with 0-4 employees (including sole traders). These issues are also not well understood in the context of labour hire workers and independent contractors – many of whom may be employees who have been misclassified as independent contractors by their employer (Gilfillan 2024). There is also a paucity of research on the pregnancy and parenting needs and experiences of women in regionally or remotely-located construction and trade businesses in Australia, and any additional barriers to implementing leading practice in these geographic areas.

The terms and conditions of approximately 80,500 employees in the construction industry are covered by an enterprise bargaining agreement (Australian Government 2024b), yet there is an absence of studies on the role of the enterprise bargaining environment in improving (or otherwise) parental leave and related entitlements in the industry and in advancing gender equality in construction and trades more generally.

While the literature on parental leave transitions in the construction industry is small, the perspectives and experiences of some groups of employees are largely ignored. These include:

- LGBTQIA+ employees and those with diverse family structures and households (e.g. single parents, re-married or re-partnered parents, adoptive families, extended-family and multi-family households)
- First Nations people, people from a variety of cultural, linguistic and religious communities
- People with disability or chronic health conditions
- 'Industry leavers' i.e. people who were pushed out of their construction careers because of pregnancy and parenting-related discrimination or lack of support and accommodations from employers.
- Men taking parental leave.

Finally, more research is required on the attitudes, knowledge and behaviours of those responsible for implementing organisational policies and the day-to-day management of employees who are pregnant, on parental leave and returning to work following parental leave.

Review methodology

A 'rapid review' technique was utilised to identify relevant academic and grey literature on parental leave transitions from the last 20 years. While the focus was on Australian literature, relevant studies and reports from the US and the UK were also included in the review.

Academic publications (peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters) were identified through keyword searches of Google Scholar. Grey literature (e.g. documents and reports from government, industry and research institutions) was identified through Google keyword searches. Keywords included "parental leave", "maternity leave", "pregnancy", "transitions", "leading practice", "best practice", "construction industry", "construction sector", "trades", "tradespeople" and "tradeswomen". Additional sources were identified through 'citation chaining', that is, by identifying relevant sources from the reference lists of other publications.

Publications were excluded if they were published before 2004, with the exception of Lingard and Lin 2003, which was included because of its relevance to the research concerns.

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