

Motherhood, Stigma and Survival: Women's Lived Experiences of Pregnancy and Parental Leave in the NSW Construction Sector

Research Report



Work and Organisational Studies The University of Sydney Business School

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Executive Summary

Australia's construction sector continues to face challenges in attracting and retaining women workers. A crucial area of focus is how women are supported in the workplace before, during, and after parental leave. Research has shown that these periods are pivotal in a woman's decision to stay in or return to work. However, there has been limited research into the experiences of women in construction during these transitions, or how to support employers and workers through this critical time.

The Boosting Retention of Women in Construction: Improving Transitions In and Out of Parental Leave project aims to investigate how to help women remain in frontline construction roles in NSW during pregnancy, parental leave, and after returning from leave.

This Lived Experience Report, which forms the first part of Stage 3 of the project, details the experiences of women construction workers as they navigate pregnancy, parental leave, and their return to work. It also identifies the key factors that support or hinder these transitions, as described by both women workers and industry stakeholders. The report presents the following key findings:

- Because women are underrepresented in construction, many are the first in their workplace to take parental leave and face limited support from managers who often lack knowledge and experience with these transitions. This uncertainty makes an already stressful time more difficult, and many women feel pressured to stay silent to avoid jeopardising future support or reinforcing negative stereotypes.
- There is a lack of clear and consistent parental leave policies across and within organisations. Outcomes for women depend heavily on their manager, their influence within the company, and local team culture.
- In many cases, women have to initiate or push for policy development themselves.
- Work practices remain a significant constraint with long and inflexible work hours ubiquitous and entrenched. This poses the biggest challenge for women as they transition in and out of parental leave.
- The nature of construction work, especially fully site-based or trade roles, makes flexible work arrangements more difficult. Office-based or mixed-location roles tend to offer more options.



- Parental leave and flexibility policies in the industry are generally minimal and this shapes women's expectations. As a result, even limited support is often seen as a favour rather than a right, leading to feelings of gratitude and a sense of obligation toward the organisation.
- More women entering the industry are expecting better support, but they often face outdated norms and resistance to change. In some workplaces, this leads to positive reform; in others, it results in pushback or entrenchment of the status quo.
- Industry stakeholders have mixed views of the challenges and enablers to supporting women's parental leave transitions in the sector.

This report provides comprehensive recommendations to government, employers, trade unions and industry associations including:

- Employers should extend the duration of their paid parental leave offering.
- Employers should make paid parental leave more accessible to men and remove gendered terms like 'primary' and 'secondary' carer to promote shared caregiving responsibilities.
- Off site, not out of mind. Employers should maintain engagement with women on parental leave by communicating workplace changes, enabling paid keeping-in-touch days, and ensuring continued access to career development opportunities and pay reviews.
- Employers should support women's return to work through personalised plans, phased transitions, flexible arrangements, and access to lactation facilities and paid breaks.
- The NSW Government should convene expert committees to develop industry-specific guidelines on pregnancy and parental leave, with a focus on apprenticeships and small and medium size enterprises (SMEs).
- NSW and Federal Governments must mandate access to amenities and appropriately-sized PPE on all construction projects for women including toilets, lactation rooms and sanitary products.
- The Federal Government should introduce an industry levy to fund paid parental leave for workers in SMEs and sole traderships.

- Trade unions, industry associations, and employers should collaborate through joint working groups to embed robust pregnancy and parental leave provisions, flexible work options, and support for pregnant workers into enterprise agreements.

A practical toolkit, *Building Better Workplaces A Toolkit for Retaining Women Through Pregnancy, Leave, and Return to Work in the NSW Construction Industry*, designed to help the construction sector more effectively support women throughout their parental leave journey accompanies this report.





1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of new research into the experiences of women as they transition in and out of parental leave in the construction sector and the impact of these transitions on their retention and careers. The construction sector remains the most male-dominated industry in Australia, with women comprising just 12.7% of the workforce (ABS 2025). Research indicates that women's experiences before, during and after parental leave are critical in a woman's decision to remain in or return to work. Yet there has been little research into the experiences of women in construction during these transitions, or how to support employers and workers to navigate this critical time¹.

The current project, *Boosting retention of women in construction: Improving transitions in and out of parental leave*, aims to generate critical new knowledge on policies and practices that impede women's retention before, during and post-parental leave in frontline construction trade and professional roles. It will use these insights to develop a comprehensive practice guide or 'toolkit' for the sector to support women during these life course stages and improve their retention in frontline construction careers.

The project is being undertaken by the University of Sydney Business School on behalf of the National Association of Women in Construction (NSW) and funded by the NSW Government Women in Construction Sector Innovation Program (IIP). The research² involves four stages of work:

- 1. Review of existing literature** examining how women in construction navigate pregnancy, parental leave and post-parental leave transitions, identifying gaps in existing knowledge and examples of leading policies and practices.
- 2. Industry scan** to map the current construction sector landscape in pregnancy, parental leave and return to work and identify leading practice in paid and unpaid parental leave schemes in construction and other sectors.
- 3. Interviews** with 37 women in frontline construction roles to understand the lived experiences of women as they transition in and out of parental leave, and interviews with 15 sector policy stakeholders on enablers and constraints associated with parental leave transitions.
- 4. Parental leave toolkit** for the construction sector to support women as they transition in and out of parental leave.

¹ Hanna-Osborne, S; Galea, N; Hamilton, M (2025) *Boosting retention of women in construction: Improving transitions in and out of parental Leave*, Rapid literature review, University of Sydney, Sydney.

² University of Sydney Ethics Committee approval number 2024/HE001624.



This report presents the findings of Stage 3, including:

- **Women’s lived experiences of pregnancy and parental leave transitions:** This section details the lived experiences of pregnancy and parental leave for women construction workers in NSW.
- **Enablers and constraints:** It then explores the perceived enablers and constraints associated with parental leave transitions, as described by stakeholders with relevant policy knowledge and experience in the NSW construction sector.
- **Good practices and recommendations:** The report concludes with an overview of good practices in the sector and provides recommendations for change.

1.1 Research approach

Lived experience interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 37 women currently or previously employed in frontline professional, semi-skilled, or trade roles in NSW. The women had experienced pregnancy at work, taken parental leave, and/or returned to work after parental leave within the last five years. The sample of participants was drawn from individuals who registered their interest in the study. Participants were purposively selected to ensure diversity across occupational groupings (e.g., trades, professional, semi-skilled), parental leave transition points, geographic locations, employer/business sizes, and industry sub-sectors. Interviews were conducted online or by phone and lasted between 45-75 minutes. They were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed thematically using NVivo software.

Table 1 provides an overview of key characteristics of the sample of 37 women construction and trades workers interviewed for the project.

Table 1 – Employment characteristics of women participants

Position	Participants
Tradesperson	6
On-site professional (e.g. engineer, project manager, surveyor)	27
Other site-based role (e.g. traffic management, machinery operator, truck driver)	4
Employer size	
Sole trader	2
Small	4
Medium	3
Large	28
Location	
Metro	29
Metro & Regional	2
Regional	4
Regional & Rural/Remote	1
Rural/Remote	1
Sub-sector	
Civil	12
Commercial building	11
Transport	3
Utilities	2
Residential building	2
Services	2
Other	5

Policy stakeholder interviews

Stakeholders with policy knowledge and experience relevant to parental leave transitions were also interviewed for the project. Participants were identified through publicly available information, the research team's pre-existing contacts, and referrals from stakeholders who had participated in an interview (i.e., 'snowball' recruitment). The final sample of 15 included two representatives from sector-level non-government organisations, three trade union representatives, three employer association representatives, and seven HR and Industrial Relations/workforce managers. Interviews were conducted online and lasted between 30-100 minutes. They were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed manually to extract key themes and insights. Participants were also asked to provide, where available, copies of existing policies on managing pregnancy and parental leave transitions. Policies were received from two organisations and are referred to in this report and the Industry Scan.

Table 2 provides an overview of the key characteristics of the sample of 15 policy stakeholder interviewees.

Table 2 – Overview of industry stakeholder participants

Sub-sector	Participants
Civil	2
Electrical	1
Residential	1
Commercial	8
Energy	1
Engineering	2
Organisation type	
Employer Association	3
Union	3
NGO	2
Employer - medium	2
Employer - large	5



2. Women's lived experiences of pregnancy and parental leave transitions

The findings of women's lived experience interviews are grouped into three stages, or transition points: before parental leave, requesting and taking parental leave, and returning to work after parental leave.

◀ Transition Stage 1: Before parental leave

The invisibility of mothers in the construction sector

Interview data provides insight into the social messages and signals women receive about pregnancy and motherhood from the time they enter the industry, which then shape their beliefs and expectations about the process. Participants noted the dearth of women in site-roles in the industry, and many said they were the only woman in a particular role or management level within their company. In this context, it was no surprise that there was very limited visibility of pregnant women and mothers that participants could look to.

I was a bit of a pioneer, there weren't any other women in the industry that were pregnant or having babies... like on-site, at the coal face...it's been hard, there's never been any other women to look to the whole way through. (P1, Engineer)

I haven't heard of any plumber becoming pregnant in the construction sector. Have you found one? (P14, Tradeswoman)

The lack of visibility of mothers, and the resulting lack of discussion of pregnancy and parenthood, meant women could feel unsure or anxious about how they would manage the process and the potential consequences for their lives and careers.

There was one lady in the first 10 years of my working life [who] was pregnant, but I never saw her come back. (P24, Project Manager)

For some women, hearing derogatory and disparaging stories about women becoming pregnant or taking parental leave in their company, fostered feelings of worry and apprehension about how they might be treated during pregnancy. The small number of women in the organisation heightened their sense of vulnerability.

They had someone else in the year above me who wouldn't do work for medical reasons [so] I didn't know if they'll say, 'Well, now you're doing the same thing, trying to avoid work"...I was like, people are going to think badly when other female apprentices come in, because I'm the one that got pregnant. (P21, Tradesperson)

Finally, one participant observed that the mere prospect of a woman becoming pregnant led male managers to view women with suspicion and unworthy of recruitment or investment in their careers.

It's still quite a male dominated industry, so [women's] value might be seen as less because there is this thing looming: "That person might be pregnant and therefore we won't have an employee essentially, so why would we invest?"...There are companies, like the one I come from, that still have that outlook. (P6, Tradesperson)

Women delaying pregnancy

Many participants reported that they had chosen to delay having children because of what they anticipated would be the impacts of becoming pregnant and taking parental leave. Several women said they had waited until they had been promoted to a particular level, or been with the company for several years, before trying to become pregnant. This could be to allow sufficient time to 'prove themselves' in their job and ensure that they would have enough authority to make adjustments for flexibility in the role that they returned to.

I feel like I've done my time out on-site, got my career to a level where people at least respect that I know what I'm talking about. That's why we didn't have children early. (P31, Project manager)

Other women reported timing their pregnancy to coincide with the end of a project to reduce the chances that they would be made redundant or transferred while on parental leave and minimise the 'disruption' their departure would create for the team and organisation.

I probably delayed it more than what I would in other circumstances, [because] I have a lot of pressure on my hands... I've heard that other people got made redundant while on maternity leave and I am one of the only women leaders in my company, so it makes me a little nervous. (P16, Project manager)

For one participant, the timing of her second pregnancy was dictated to her by her employer, via a legal agreement she was made to sign after returning from her first parental leave. This stipulated that she would have to remain employed in the company for another 12 months before gaining access to a second period of paid parental leave. What is more, if she did not, she would also be asked to return the money from her first parental leave, pro-rata. This disrupted her own plans for timing her second pregnancy. She described the impact of this.

I got very frustrated when I had to sign this...because for my career, I would rather stop for a long period, have two, then come back for good. My plan is second semester of this year, I start trying. (30, Tradeswoman)

Disclosure experiences

Concealing pregnancy

Research indicates that when women anticipate negative perceptions and discrimination arising from pregnancy, they are forced to engage in complex decisions about when, how, and to whom they reveal their pregnancy (Perrewé et al. 2019; Jones et al. 2016). Many women in this study reported hiding their pregnancy for as long as possible out of fear of consequences for their employment and treatment from managers, colleagues and clients.

Initially I kept it very quiet because I was fearful of retribution... I was only a few months in and wanted to succeed... I was worried about the leadership being unimpressed and then having a target on my back for the rest of the apprenticeship [like] "you've taken a spot away from someone else and now you're not even going to be here because you've got yourself knocked up." (P7, Apprentice tradeswoman)

One woman hid the fact she was experiencing miscarriages because she did not want to lose opportunities for promotion and pay increases.

I was having miscarriages, needing to go to appointments. I didn't feel comfortable telling the workplace because I didn't want it to impact my promotion or pay rises that I thought might be coming up...I tried to hide it as best I could. (P17, Project manager)

Positive disclosure experiences

Despite many participants anticipating stigma and negative consequences upon disclosing their pregnancy, more than half reported that the reaction from managers and colleagues was – at least initially – positive.

I had a conversation with my boss, the director of my team, and the manager I mainly work with. They were really excited. They were like, "Obviously, take as much leave as you want. We will support you throughout that period, while you're pregnant, and once you come back to work." (P32, Quantity surveyor)

I told her fostering [has] been a long term dream that my husband and I have had... She was very supportive, she said any time you need to go take a day off for training, we've got you covered...even if it's short notice. (19, Project manager)

It was acknowledged by participants that the experience of an individual woman upon disclosing her pregnancy was very much dependent on the attitudes and values of their line managers and team. Several women believed younger men with children of their own were more likely to provide a supportive reaction than men who were older or had an 'old school' mentality.



A lot of the guys I'm working with had kids who were toddlers or early primary school so they were like, "It hasn't been that long since my family has been through that." (P21, Tradeswoman)

There's lots of older men that have been there 40 years, don't do anything else, don't believe that women belong in trades, and are generally unimpressed to have girls working alongside them... So, I knew that they wouldn't be so receptive to being pregnant on the job site. (P7, Apprentice tradeswoman)

Negative disclosure experiences

Two women reported having their disclosures forced upon them by their manager when they had not disclosed their pregnancy to family or friends.

One of the directors sat me down [and] he said I have a feeling you're either going through IVF or you're pregnant. I was 8 weeks at that point and I was forced to tell him before I told my parents. (P20, Project manager)

In another case, after an initial positive reaction to her pregnancy news, a senior manager notified her that he would be cancelling a multimillion dollar contract under her management because "I wasn't going to be there to manage the job" (P9, Engineer). He then drafted a letter to the client, notifying them that the woman was pregnant and therefore the contract would be cancelled. The letter was written without the woman's consent.

Everybody was very happy for me but it immediately changed after that...[The director] asked me to review and sign off on this letter. I came back and said "The client doesn't know that I'm pregnant. The 60 owners in this building don't know. The builder doesn't know. That's my personal information and I'd prefer not to share it at this point." (P9, Engineer)

The woman believed that she was being 'punished' for becoming pregnant, and she decided to leave the company at the commencement of her unpaid parental leave. This perception that being pregnant was an inconvenience and a disruption to the business was heard as a recurring theme in the interviews. It could be expressed through 'jokes', or more openly hostile behaviour.

I was a bit afraid...I knew he wouldn't be happy... always those jokes about "How many kids do you think you're going to have? Just stopping with this?" (P30, Project Manager)

Many other accounts of discrimination and negative treatment by managers following disclosure of pregnancy emerged from interviews. For example, women reported being made redundant and expected to leave their job, having promotions and pay-rises withheld, and being transferred to another role with lower duties and no progression opportunities.

I got made redundant when I was six months pregnant...Our finances were shot and I was in a situation where I did not feel comfortable getting another role – I was starting to show...It was very hard on the pregnancy and family unit. (P34, Interior designer)

When I requested [parental] leave I got a phone call from HR saying "I've heard you've quit your job..." (P14, Tradesperson)

Suddenly they wanted to put the promotion on hold until I returned from maternity leave...they just didn't want to pay the extra money... (P16, Project Manager)

They placed me into an administration role [and] took away all client-facing meetings...I was kind of devastated that there was no way for me to progress my career in those six months. (P20, Project Manager)

Health and safety of pregnant workers

Issues around managing pregnancy-related illness, health and safety at work were salient in the accounts of participants. Several women who experienced severe morning sickness described the challenges of early start times, expectations of constant availability, and the lack of appropriate toilet and rest spaces on sites.

You've got to be on-site at 6:30 at the pre-starts and... just some mornings I couldn't drag myself there. There were comments made, "oh she's turning up to work late", and I'm like "man, I'm in the toilet spewing; I'd be here if I could. (P1, Engineer)

One woman reported being reprimanded for taking time off due to illness and described the emotional impact of this.

One day a week I had to take a sick day and I was pushing myself to make it the other four days. The [clients] were fine with it, but then when my actual boss heard, he was very upset saying, "I'm making his company look bad, I need to sort it out." I just felt like...I've failed as an employee. (P11, Tradeswoman)

The ability to work from home was not common among participants. Those who could cherish the flexibility it provided them to attend appointments or when unwell.

I was allowed to work from home because I couldn't even drive to the office some days, or I'd get halfway to the office, vomit in the car and have to go back home. My work was quite happy to be flexible with me through that pregnancy. (31, Project manager)

Little policy support or guidance

A consistent theme across interviews was that there was very little guidance or formal support provided by line managers or HR on how to work safely through pregnancy. Many women, particularly tradeswomen, reported feeling unsure about whether adjustments should be made to their work, for example, around heat and chemical exposure, heavy lifting, and working at heights, and that it was largely left to her to decide what was appropriate and safe.

My job is dangerous regardless of pregnancy but when you're pregnant it is more dangerous because you're off balance, you're heavier. I had the guys doing it for me but that was just an agreement [we] made. [The company] could have assessed the situation better and said "Hey, now that we've got a pregnant staff member, in order for her to do her job there are things that could be dangerous" (P6, Tradeswoman)

According to some participants, the information vacuum around pregnancy safety was compounded by the lack of other women who had been through the experience.

I didn't know anyone that was pregnant and working in a tunnel until I did it. And there's not a lot of women that are in an engineering position with children. If I had the opportunity when I was a junior to talk to someone, I would have loved that (P12, Engineer)

There weren't too many adjustments made. I guess because nobody had [been] in that situation before (P1, Engineer)

Only two examples of company-led initiatives to enable pregnant workers to work safely in their normal roles were raised in interviews. One woman had access to an occupational physician already contracted by the company to assist with return-to-work injuries, with appointments arranged by HR.

I had two FaceTime meetings which was very reassuring...I would just come to him with questions like "it's really loud underground, is the baby safe?"... He also drew the line of when I shouldn't go on-site anymore. (P12, Engineer)

Another participant described a culture of safety in which collaborative conversations and planning between management and workers took place.

They have a lot of safety conversations across the business [and] get engaged in planning...The supervisor raised it with me and said, "I've looked at some alternatives. Here are my suggestions. What are your thoughts?"...It was good they actually raised that with me, rather than me having to raise it with them. (P21, Tradeswoman)

Finally, two women raised the issue of inadequate provision of personal protective equipment and uniforms for pregnant workers.

They just kept giving me bigger pairs of men's pants and shirts and I was like, "This isn't safe. I'm wearing a tent." (P21, Tradeswoman)

Finding alternative duties

Under the Fair Work Act (2009), pregnant workers have the right to be transferred to a safe job if their position isn't appropriate for them due to pregnancy-related illness or risk or hazards related to their position. The alternative role must be at the same hours and pay as the original job, and if this is not available, the employee is entitled to 'no safe job leave' (which is paid for those eligible for unpaid parental leave under the Act). Participants described instances where these requirements were not adhered to.

I transitioned to doing test and tag work, light duties essentially, but it's really only worth about two days' work a week. So I had to take a big pay cut and that was a compromise I made myself, purely for my mental and physical health. (P11, Tradeswoman)

Participants acknowledge the challenges of finding safe alternative duties for physically demanding on-site roles, particularly for tradeswomen and in small businesses and sole traderships. A tradeswoman in a same-sex relationship said this was a factor in their decision about who would bear their child.

I remember saying at the time, I can't do it, because imagine me going to the worksite pregnant? It's not the environment for it. How would they accommodate that? There's not a lot of office work you could do because you're a plumber. (P14, Tradeswoman)

Other women reported being placed on light duties despite feeling well and being cleared to work by their doctor. This could be experienced as a form of punishment and discrimination.

I was cleared to come back full-time, full duties, and I was eager to learn because I had missed so much through being sick...and it was like "Sit at the depot"... I got told they were doing me a favour...but it really did me a disservice because there's nothing worse than being pregnant and having to sit at a depot for 10 hours bored out of your brain. (P7, Apprentice tradeswoman)

By contrast, a small number of participants recounted positive experiences of being found alternative duties by their managers, and this was highly valued by the women.

Working until full term

The majority of participants continued working until their pregnancy was at full-term and of these, a few worked until the day before or the day of the birth of their child. For some, the decision to work until full-term was financial, in response to having no or limited access to paid parental leave or to help cover high living costs more generally. Others felt it was necessary to meet project deadlines and to 'prove' they could continue to perform at previous levels and conform to dominant working patterns.

I just kept going, and what kept me going was that I knew they were only giving me one week [paid parental leave]. I was like 'I need to work as long as I can'. (P6, Tradeswoman)

I was under an immense amount of pressure and stress because there were lots of things that needed to be completed for the end of the contract. (P36, Tradeswoman)

I felt a lot of pressure to just be working right up until. I didn't want to be seen as less by my male counterparts. I didn't want them to think I was slacking off (P16, Project manager)



Transition Stage 2:

Requesting and taking parental leave

Access to employer-funded paid parental leave

Of the 37 women interviewed for the study, almost 80% (n=29) had access to employer-funded paid parental leave³. The number of weeks offered ranged from between one week and 26 weeks, with the majority of women (n=22) receiving between 12 and 18 weeks. Eight women in the sample had no access to employer-provided paid parental leave (PPL), either because the company didn't offer it, or they did not meet the company's eligibility requirements. For all but one of the 29 women who received PPL, the leave was paid at the employee's full pay, and every woman who could recall if they were paid superannuation said that they were.

Of the eight women who did not have access to PPL, most were employed by small enterprises at the time of pregnancy. Several participants remarked upon the disparity in pregnancy-related entitlements between small and larger businesses.

There's a lot more entitlement in some of the large companies than there is small business and that's always going to be the case because it comes out of their pocket (P24, Project manager)

There's a very strong startup culture in the architecture industry because all you need is insurance, a computer and your software and away you go... in some firms [PPL] is on a discretionary basis...Cashflow is really hard to predict because it's on a project by project basis. (P2, Architect)

Those participants without access to employer-funded PPL reported relying on other financial sources during their leave, including the government's scheme paid at the minimum wage, annual leave and other unused entitlements, their partner's employer-funded PPL, and/or personal savings.

I did plan for the pregnancy, I stockpiled all my holidays and all my RDOs [Rostered days off], I banked them all up. I was clever. (P22, Traffic controller)

Gendered restrictions on accessing policy

Most participants noted that access to employer-funded PPL in their company was reserved for the primary carer of the child, with secondary carers commonly able to access two or three weeks of paid leave. Some companies restricted access to primary care leave to the parent who gave birth, whilst other companies allowed either parent to take primary care leave but required the leave to be taken immediately after the birth of the child. These examples illustrate how ostensibly 'gender-neutral' PPL policies became gendered through eligibility restrictions linked to the act of giving birth.

One participant recalled that her company's primary care leave could be accessed by men when it was first introduced but was later restricted to the birthing parent after "a lot of the site guys started to have babies" (P4, Project manager). She noted that in addition to reinforcing traditional male breadwinner norms, the change was problematic because "not everybody can give birth. People might decide to have children in different ways such as adoption."

Participants were generally very supportive of paid parental leave policies which reduced the barriers to men taking leave and enabled women to return to full-time work sooner. Several women had themselves been lobbying for change: "It's something we are discussing a lot in the background with HR" (P37, Project manager). One way in which companies were facilitating this was by allowing primary care leave to be taken by either parent, up to 12 or 24 months after the birth of the child.

There's quite a few men who are on leave or taking that leave soon, and they are generally waiting until their wife goes back to work [as] they've got two years to take it. (P27, Contracts manager)

In this extended quotation, a senior engineer argued that the normalisation of men taking extended parental leave offered the greatest potential for improving women's careers in the industry, by ameliorating the inequitable distribution of work and care.

³ Of these, two women did not have access to employer-funded PPL for their first child but did, or would, have access for their second child.



The thing that is going to create the most amount of change is actually what men do. Because the industry is so male-dominated, if it becomes the norm for men to do it, it's not an outlier if women do it. And I've seen how the men taking actual paternity leave – not a week when the baby is born – changes how people view maternity leave. It's like "it's not something special and female and this weird thing that will never apply to me"...And men taking paternity leave while their partner isn't at home is an even bigger step because that role suddenly is flipped and they have to take on that mental load that never gets accounted for in the family situation. (P28, Engineer)

Paid parental leave as a 'privilege' for valued workers

A strong theme to emerge from interviews was that within parts of the industry, particularly smaller businesses, employer-funded paid parental leave was viewed as a discretionary bonus or privilege which was offered to deserving women who could make the case for its introduction.

One woman reported that the paid parental leave she received was merely her annual bonus paid out incrementally over the period she was absent. When she complained to her manager about the arrangement, she was told it was 'her fault' for failing to negotiate it as a condition of her employment when she 'knew she would be having kids' at some point. Other participants said that their company had denied their request to introduce paid parental leave out of fear it would set a 'precedent' and be accessed by other employees which would be an unsustainable cost.

The idea that PPL was offered as a reward to a valuable worker came through in several women's accounts.

They [introduced] maternity leave paid by the company because of me. My manager said, "Look, we appreciate you, and we are pushing to give you something." And they worked it out, 12 weeks full pay. (P30, Project manager)

An implication of this framing was that the recipient of PPL was expected to feel grateful for the entitlement, which could lead to feelings of guilt and indebtedness to the company.

I felt like I owed them something because it's so unique what I was able to receive...I wanted to show my value all the way [and] to be like I've done everything in the best interests of [the company] and I feel I'm entitled to this (P33, Project manager)

It was common for participants to say it was they themselves who had spearheaded a PPL policy or other support for parents within their company. In some cases, the request was received positively by managers and subsequently introduced, while in others was met with incredulity or scepticism.

I had a meeting with one of the directors and raised [that] I would like to try and negotiate parental leave... When I said six months he laughed at me and told me "we're not the Commonwealth Bank" and then "Do you want us to pay you to sit at home and do nothing for six months?" (P9, Engineer)

Inconsistent planning for parental leave absences

Participants reported varying levels of planning and discussion around key matters such as role backfilling, handover arrangements and keeping in contact during the period of leave. Most often, discussions were ad hoc and informal between the woman and her line manager, with very few examples of organisational policies or initiatives to support these conversations.

There is not much discussion or resources, or transparency around practices [for] parental support and leave and continuity. (P2, Architect)

Parental leave positions were commonly not formally backfilled by the employer (either through an internal 'acting' arrangement or external recruitment). In some cases, the woman's work was distributed among colleagues and in others, the work was left for the woman to deal with when she returned.

Everything just got put to the side. They did a couple less projects and everything that I normally handle was piled up for me to come back to. (P33, Project manager)

When employers did not backfill roles, women could feel obliged to continue working shortly after giving birth to meet project demands. This was the case for two participants.

I went into premature labour...And me just being me, I can't leave things unfinished. I was in hospital still sending off emails because I thought, "How is anyone going to know what to do?"...I just felt so responsible. (P36, Tradesperson)

I remember going to an OC inspection when he might've been four weeks old because I couldn't leave him... I had so much ownership over that project and because I was being paid maternity leave I felt a responsibility to be there" (P33, Project manager)

Other participants commented on the resentment among work peers who were expected to pick up additional work.

I've had a girl take maternity leave [and] her workload just got divvied up between the rest of the balance of the team. ...in some ways that is unfair, because it means everyone else gets more work. (P25, Design manager)

Participants offered insights into some of the difficulties of backfilling in construction projects, including finding employees with specialised technical skills or qualifications, and managing the transfer of tacit and complex project and client knowledge. These accounts spoke to the potential for 'substitutability' among employees, that is, the ability for other suitably skilled workers to step in to cover absences internally. This theme is returned to in the context of flexible work in Transition Stage 3.

Our roles you can't just jump in and out, you need to have knowledge of the project and how to do a lot of the civil construction stuff...We're in a niche market; which means people that haven't had exposure to it can't actually do the role. (P16, Project manager)

One participant observed that projects did not typically backfill parental leave roles later in the project program due to project budgets and timing.

The government will set the dates of when the project needs to be done and companies will go and hire people to deliver the deliverables...it'll be X amount of money and X amount of resources. So for them to go hire someone again for say nine months is difficult. And the industry isn't built for that...if the stage of the project is earlier, they're more likely to hire someone. But if it's later, they'll just say we can absorb it into existing resources. (P10, Project manager)

Where participants had been able to properly handover their role to another employee, experiences were generally positive. One woman who was starting the process to become a foster parent stressed the importance of an early handover because of the very short notice period foster parents were typically provided by the government.

Because I'm moving into the fostering space I made sure that I wasn't the only one who knows about a particular project...At least two of us would be involved in each of the projects...and my director is also aware of the progress and that's how I kept it throughout. (P19, Project manager)

Several participants highlighted the opportunities parental leave absences opened up to other staff, for example, experience acting in a more senior position, and the development of new skills and competencies.

Connections with the workplace while on parental leave

The value of maintaining a connection with the workplace emerged as a salient theme in interviews with women working in frontline roles. Participants emphasised its role in supporting women's career continuity and sense of inclusion and belonging. It was considered especially important given the project-based nature of the construction sector and the potential for significant workplace change to occur while the woman was on leave.

When you're pregnant you're so vulnerable, you want to have that reassurance that nothing is going to change. (P16, Project manager)

Keeping in touch days and your manager reaching out to you and having conversations prior to you coming back about how you want to work and what you think you can achieve. That's where women can feel really isolated, because you come back...and everything's changed for you. You [might] be coming back to a completely new team, you might not even know your new manager...Most companies really fall down [there] (P24, Project manager)

Consistent with the findings so far, discussions about the women's expectations and preferences for contact were generally informal and ad hoc. Often no discussion took place, which for some women was indicative of a lack of support on the part of the manager or employer.

No [conversation] at all...My boss was not a very close sort of person...she wasn't super caring...she wasn't interested in my promotion or in how I was going. (P16, Project manager)

There was no one-size-fits-all approach to staying in touch. Rather, women valued having choice as to the level and type of contact, and appreciated when managers were open to those preferences changing over the course of the parental leave.

Keeping that conversation open with mothers before they go on parental leave and asking them what they actually want, instead of just making assumptions in terms of how often they do or don't want to be contacted...I didn't know what I would need. (P8, Engineer)

While several participants spoke positively about their experiences of keeping in touch with the workplace, others reported having too little contact, which could leave them feeling isolated and under-valued.

Nobody even messaged me. I think the only interaction I had with them was when I sent in photos of my daughter...it was all 'congratulations' and then just silence. (P20, Project manager)

A few participants reported being asked by managers to return to work earlier than they had agreed.

There was a bit of pressure for me to relinquish [my parental leave] ...We had negotiated 13 weeks maternity leave so they thought that meant I was returning to work after 13 weeks. I said "no", I was very clear that I'll return back at the end of [month]. (P33, Project manager)

Impacts of workplace change while on parental leave

Participants accounts provided many examples where women were negatively impacted by workplace change and experienced discrimination while on parental leave. These included redundancies, changes to conditions of employment and missed opportunities for promotion and progression.

We all got offered a redundancy when I was on maternity leave [and] I was like, "Can they do that?"... It was "You can stay on if you like, but we really don't know what you're going to do." (P36, Tradesperson)

One woman reported losing the flexibility arrangement she had negotiated to enable childcare drop-offs on her return to work, forcing her to relinquish her leadership role. Other women had promotion opportunities withheld until their return to work or missed out on annual performance and bonus review cycles if they fell during their absence.

I was supposed to get a promotion and they deliberately withheld it until I returned from parental leave...they just didn't want to pay the extra money. (P16, Project manager)

They've got very rigid review cycles...If you miss it because you're on leave you miss out. You're not campaigning. You're not front of mind. (P15, Project manager)

By contrast, a handful of participants described positive experiences of workplace change, including two who were promoted while on leave. Having an engaged and supportive line manager was critical in both of cases. The role played by line managers in buffering women from the whims of project changes and smoothing the transition back to work is a theme explore further in the following section.





Transition Stage 3:

▶ Returning to work after parental leave

Planning the return-to-work process

Consistent with the experiences documented in the first two transitions, participants were largely responsible for managing the transition back to work after parental leave themselves. This finding aligns with earlier research in the Australian construction sector that found women taking parental leave had to negotiate their departure, return and career survival largely unaided (Galea et al. 2018).

Women described receiving little guidance or engagement from managers on navigating the pathway back into their careers and balancing the intense demands of their jobs with caring for a child. Again, this information vacuum was compounded by a lack of role models and other mothers who the woman could turn to for advice.

They left it up to me a lot to decide what I wanted to do. The hard thing was I'd never seen anyone do it before. (P5, Engineer)

I'd say the majority of construction companies don't have [guidance] in how you actually transition back to reality...If you don't have someone who's gone through it you don't really know what's expected of you (P4, Project manager)

One participant noted that her organisation had a return-to-work coordinator, but that “still to this day” nobody could tell her who it was (P24, Project manager).

In the absence of formalised return to work programs and support, women's experiences were heavily influenced by the attitudes and discretionary practices of their line managers, as well as the strength of the woman's personal networks. If women were employed in a company with a human resource function, the management and responsibility of women's return to work could slip between HR and line managers, creating confusion and gaps in the support provided.

'Luck' was a strong theme in the women's narratives, both in terms of being able to return to a desirable position or project, and in having access to working conditions which supported their new responsibilities as parents.

I feel very lucky that I had a good manager and that my plan kind of worked out how I wanted it to...(P12, Engineer)

I didn't have that champion when I was going through my issues. The HR girls were like, "That's not our department, but here's some advice for you." I was just lucky I was friends with them. (P31, Project manager)

Access to flexible work

Of the 37 women interviewed, 20 reported that they were currently working part-time or had done so previously after returning from parental leave. A further four participants reported having access to an informal flexible work arrangement which enabled them to start later or finish early, or to work from home for part of the week. Of the women who returned to work part-time, four did so only briefly before transitioning to full-time employment.

A recurring theme across interviews was that employment practices in the construction sector continue to be inflexible for most workers, disproportionately impacting the wellbeing and career potential of women workers. Participants described a deeply entrenched industry culture which expects and rewards long hours, weekends and continuous availability.

We do work really hard. I think that's culturally baked in. (P25, Design manager)

It's definitely the hours, construction is notorious for having long hours, site hours can be seven to five. (P8, Engineer)

It really does come down to the culture of the industry...it's like, if you are not there at prestart you are obviously not working as hard...there is still that mentality. (P28, Engineer)

It was universally acknowledged that combining a career in the industry with significant caregiving responsibilities was very difficult, leading to many women exiting the construction sector prematurely.



Women will come into the engineering and construction workforce, they'll get to a particular level or age, then most of them will leave, not just our business, they leave the industry. And it 100 per cent has to do with parental leave and wanting to start a family, and not being able to see that there's flexibility or a pathway forward once you do have children to get further up in those roles. (P24, Project manager)

One participant had left the industry and started her own business as an interior designer, in part, to achieve greater control over her working hours and have more time to spend with her children.

Another common experience discussed by participants was for women to move from a site-based role to an office-based role, or to an area of the business or sector where the hours were shorter and part-time work could more easily be accommodated. Participants recognised that this often came at a cost to the woman's career development and the satisfaction derived from their work.

It's definitely the hours...women go from being on the construction delivery side and have to get out of that space when they're having babies and their kids are quite young – whether it's [into] design work or tendering work which is less client-based. (P8, Engineer)

I feel as though since having a child and having lost the ability to do overtime, I have stalled...A lot of the team leaders do work long hours, they do work every Saturday and if you're not able to do that I think you're crossed off and you do not move forward. (P14, Tradeswoman)

However, family-friendly hours were not always guaranteed in the alternative role, given the demands of project work.

I thought I knew the answer, which was to sort of side-step a bit, like specialise into traffic and that would be a better situation for family. But I'm still at pre-starts in the morning and I'm still here until five or six o'clock, and now I'm driving an hour and 45 each way. (P28, Engineer)

Barriers to part-time work

In interviews, participants were asked their views on why the uptake of part-time and other forms of flexible work remained so limited in the construction

sector, particularly for site-based roles. A number of explanations emerged.

Continuing the theme emerging in Transition Stages 1 and 2, participants reported receiving little or no information and guidance on whether flexible work was even an option to return to, as well as not seeing other women returning to work part-time.

Just those discussions around coming back four days a week, or three days, we never really had that. I didn't even realise it was an option at the time, I guess because I hadn't seen anyone go through the process or do anything like that. (P1, Engineer)

Participants noted that part-time work was not always an attractive option because of the way in which it was implemented by employers. Often the work-load of the part-time worker remained the same because additional staff were not hired to cover the hours not being worked, or because roles were not redesigned accordingly. Women reflected on the stress and pressure this created.

You were still doing the same amount of workload but squeezed into four days... I only did that for six months and then went to full time. Then, based on that experience, for my second [child], I just went straight back to full time. (P25, Design manager)

Another barrier to enhanced uptake of flexible was the continuing male-dominance in the industry and senior male leaders who held traditional gender attitudes and were resistant to different way of working.

The male leaders whose wives do everything for them, just said, "Nah, you can come to the office, because I am." ...He's got no comprehension of what these families in my team do. (P31, Project manager)

It's fulltime in the office – there's no hybrid model ... everyone's sort of institutionalised and my boss, he's only young but he has that old-school mentality. (P16, Project manager)

They've never experienced [it] because obviously it's females who carry the babies...So it's a bit of 'well men do this and women do this' kind of bias there. (P9, Engineer)



Finally, participants reported that certain features of project-based construction work perpetuated a long hours culture and hindered wider implementation of flexible work. Project timelines set by clients were typically very tight, with little margin for unexpected delays, which created intense time-pressures.

You can't wait three days for an answer on a construction project, it moves too fast. (P28, Engineer)

Given project time-pressures, having continuity of knowledge and experience was considered very important, which meant key workers were not easily substituted on the days they were not there. This was cited as a key barrier to job-share arrangements in the industry.

It's very difficult to cover for someone...hiring another engineer part-time, [they] need to be across the project and be on all the conversation and discussion. You need to have a regular handover with that person almost every day to tell them what's happened the day before or before you take your time off. (P37, Project manager)

Lastly, the industry-wide practice of compulsory early-morning 'pre-start' or 'toolbox' talks was viewed by participants as a significant barrier to flexibility for caregivers who did not have access to childcare at that time of day.

90 per cent of the jobs, you have to be on-site at 6:00 am, that's when they do the toolbox talks, and childcare oftentimes don't open until 7. So I didn't really have that option of going back full-time just because I didn't have the childcare available. (P11, Tradeswoman)

Enablers of flexible work

Despite the recognised barriers, participants were generally very supportive of widening access to flexible work in construction workplaces and spoke about how this could be achieved. Many believed the practical obstacles to arrangements like part-time and job share were overstated. For example, some participants argued that with adequate workforce planning and scheduling, big construction projects should be able to accommodate working time flexibility.

We manage to run projects 24/7 without one person working 24/7, [so] it can be done...I was actually having a conversation with someone this morning about it... he's been off sick and he's coming back part-time...but needs to ease himself back into it. So that's a similar transition back, just without a baby. (P24, Project manager)

Job-sharing was seen to hold the most potential as an arrangement to enable more workers to access part-time work, on the proviso that there was a shared day or crossover period for the handover of work. Participants discussed how the barriers to job-sharing could be overcome.

There's always a handover at the end or the beginning or the end of the day. We sort of say 'this is what I've done, this is what needs to be done tomorrow'. So I don't think that's the issue; the issue is it's not common, it's not something that happens. There's such a big thing about overtime and working long hours. (P14, Tradeswoman)

We've got so many procedures and processes that we should be able to do that job sharing role, but we don't, and it just doesn't get entertained either. (P1, Engineer)

Greater flexibility in start times to support childcare drop-offs was another suggestion from women interviewed. Participants said there were ways of implementing this without compromising safety or productivity, for example through staggered start-times, facilitated by multiple pre-starts, and by allowing team members to miss pre-starts on a rotating basis.

I think they need HR or something to just say, "Look, here are opportunities to get women into the workforce. Think about job sharing. Think about changing your hours." If it's a huge company and they do pre-starts, have two pre-starts. Have a 6:45 start cohort. Have a 8:45 [or] 7:45 start. Because it not only helps women, it helps men that want to be more involved with their children. (P26, Machinery operator)

One participant felt pre-start was a form of presenteeism as many workers would be across the content already. Recognising this, her company had allowed her to be absent so she could do daycare drop-offs.



Another key enabler of improving access to flexible work discussed by participants was strong and clearly-communicated support from managers and leaders. It was acknowledged that managers set the standards for everyday practice within their teams and provided the authorising environment for employees to utilise work-life policies. As such, they were powerful role models.

So the project manager has daycare drop offs [and] the site manager has daycare pickup, [so] we're all in the same boat and we all benefit off all not making a big deal of it. (P3, Engineer)

One participant lauded her managers' practice of 'leaving loudly' as a way of challenging a culture of long hours and presenteeism and said that this had given her the confidence to change her working hours.

I think it comes from leadership. The managers would leave loudly at like five o'clock and would be out of the door saying goodbye to everyone, and it's, like, "I'm not here to check on you"... That was a huge factor for me in the way I changed what I was doing. (P28, Engineer)

Senior leaders also played a critical role in communicating the benefits or the 'business case' for greater flexibility and challenging common misconceptions about its impact.

Finally, several participants argued that achieving widescale change on working schedules required a 'de-gendering' of flexible work, i.e. that it is an issue only of interest to women.

It's about encouraging men to work part-time because if you've got the same principles – it's not a female/male thing, it's just an equitable thing for your company. (P33, Project manager)

The challenge of breastfeeding

There was consensus amongst participants that continuing to breastfeed after returning to an on-site role was very difficult, and often impossible, due to the lack of suitable lactation facilities. Several participants noted that investing in facilities to support women's inclusion in construction roles had not been a priority for the male-dominated industry.

I don't know anyone that has even tried [expressing] on a construction job... I've had to fight on so many jobs for just a female toilet. That's how much in the dark ages it is. (P22, Traffic controller)

Only one woman in the sample reported having access to a dedicated lactation room, and this was on-site at a large government infrastructure project. Some of the participants who worked for larger companies, and mostly in an office, reported finding unused offices or conference rooms to privately express in. The difficulties for women who worked for smaller-sized firms were highlighted by one participant.

There's nowhere on-site to feed, to pump, and I think on the smaller construction projects it's a massive impediment. (P33, Project manager)

The irony of building companies not being able to construct appropriate spaces for women to breastfeed was noted by one participant.

Being a builder, I don't think it should be that hard. We do plenty of offices which have parental rooms, so doing that for our clients; I feel like they should be open to it. (P4, Project manager)

Reflecting a recurring theme throughout the transition stages, broaching the issue of lactation with managers was often left to the individual woman.

In the lead up to me returning to work, I was the one coming to them every time with suggestions...I kept saying "Have you made any headway on this?" – because some of the locations we work at don't have a toilet...It was always "No, we haven't. No, we're not sure" (P7, Apprentice tradeswoman)

For some women, this was too awkward a conversation to have with management.

It wasn't on their radar as something ever being needed. So I just [had to] make do with what I had... again it's that awkward conversation that you don't really want to have basically. (P11, Tradeswoman)

It was unsurprising, then, that many participants reported that they had stopped breastfeeding earlier than desired. This was a source of disappointment and sadness for some of the women.

I stopped early. That's not something I wanted to do but I really didn't have a choice. I didn't want another thing that [would] possibly cause them to think that I was incapable of my job. (16, Project manager)

Women who persisted with breastfeeding did so with great difficulty due to a lack of adequate workspaces and understanding from managers.

The solution proposed [was to] get a popup shower tent for camping...but it's like 35 degrees some days and I'm just expected to find a spot on the grass on the side of the railway line, pop up a tent, sit a chair in it and then feel relaxed enough to express -- like what? (P7, Apprentice tradeswoman)

It's a lot harder than I thought it'd be, just managing the likes of mastitis and engorgement and things like that. [And] it's not something you can kind of say 'oh by the way this is what I'm going through', because they don't understand. (P33, Project manager)

In contrast, a handful of women who continued to breastfeed after returning to work reported having positive experiences. These included managers taking the initiative to identify a suitable location for the woman to express, and colleagues showing interest in helping the woman feel comfortable.

My manager pulled me aside and asked what I needed. They [didn't] know what they needed to provide because I'm the only one on-site that's ever gone on leave and come back...Then to pump, I just sat at my work desk...no one cared, and there was nothing said. So everyone was very good about it. (P3, Engineer)

[My] team were like, "What out of our ideas do you think are good?...we can leave the aircon in the van and cover all the windows for you when you need to express. We have refrigeration in the back of the van so you can use that if you need to."...They tried really, really hard, all of them, to make me feel comfortable and to not act like it was weird. They were like, "Well I guess it's just part of our day now." (P21, Tradeswoman)



3. Industry perspectives on supporting women through parental leave

Interviews with stakeholders in the construction sector highlighted both positive practices and ongoing challenges in supporting women through pregnancy and parental leave. These insights point to a range of enablers and constraints that influence women’s retention during this critical period. Across the interviews, stakeholders emphasised that meaningful support for parental leave must be part of a broader commitment to advancing gender equality throughout the industry.

Enablers

1. Supportive policies and management

- Employers who actively coach and support managers to support women through their parental leave and embed flexible working arrangements play a vital role in retaining women.
- Comprehensive parental leave policies that include paid leave, flexible working arrangements, and keeping-in-touch days help employees managing work and family responsibilities. These policies are designed to retain skilled staff, reduce turnover costs and in some cases, encourage men to take up caregiving roles.

But certainly, the offer is there for them to say, ‘I’ll go primary caregiver at the six-month mark’ [after partner takes leave at birth of the baby] and then they will get their nine weeks’ pay and their six months’ of return-to-work initiatives. (P2, Small-medium size employer)

- The introduction of men taking extended parental leave, especially in senior management roles, was being made possible with the introduction of gender-neutral parental leave policies.

2. Flexible working arrangements

- Policies include flexible working arrangements, such as part-time work, job sharing, and the ability to work from home. These arrangements are crucial for managing work and family responsibilities.

We’ve also lent on part-time leadership roles as well, which actually is totally effective. ... We have people who are parents, [and] they can only do a shorter day or they’re only working three or four days a week. That is totally doable, particularly in an SME. (P2, Small-medium size employer)

- Providing women who are pregnant and those returning from parental leave with the opportunity, where possible, to move into off-site or office-based roles can aid retention but also may unintentionally limit long-term participation in trade roles.

3. Innovative approaches

- Providing school holiday care supports working parents by helping them manage childcare responsibilities and reducing stress during these periods.
- Temporary care solutions for children or older family members ensure that employees can attend work without disruptions. This service has been highly successful and well-received by staff.



4. Support programs

- Coaching programs for both parents and line managers support the transition back to work and address concerns related to parental leave.
- Automated reminders help maintain communication between parents and managers before, during, and after parental leave. These nudges cover tasks like payroll forms, IT access, and scheduling “keep in touch” days.

5. Unions and industrial relations

- Employer and union collaboration on gender equity and parental leave is helping to improve the retention of women in the construction sector.
- Training programs on construction sites treat gender inequality and violence as workplace safety issues. This approach fosters a respectful and inclusive work environment.

6. Government and industry collaboration

- Governments have taken a stronger stance on parental leave support, improving the duration and flexibility of parental leaves.
- Government procurement is being used to drive gender equality by rewarding contractors who meet gender equity standards. This encourages companies to adopt inclusive practices and extend them throughout their supply chains.

Constraints

1. Gendered culture

- Traditional gender norms and outdated attitudes make construction sites unwelcoming for women and carers. The industry often expects workers to fit a full-time, inflexible model, which disadvantages those with care responsibilities. Cultural change is seen as more likely if more women enter the industry.

We had someone who was a single mother, and a lot of the feedback we would receive in relation to her was "she's lazy", "she's always taking leave", "she's unreliable". When you drill down into it she was accessing carers leave because she needed to care for children because she's a single mother. There is probably a rigorous application of the standard that's expected [of workers], that standard is around a man who is full-time and able to show up... every day and doesn't require any flexibility. (P10, Large employer).

2. Structural challenges

- The construction sector depends heavily on subcontracting, with head contractors typically responsible for providing on-site facilities such as women's toilets and lactation rooms, not the workers' employer. However, these essential amenities are often not made available.
- The project-based nature of the industry, contractual arrangements and incentivisation of long-work hours (early starts and late finishes) shape work practices on construction site. These practices often clash with childcare arrangements, and hamper efforts to introduce shorter work weeks and flexible and inclusive work practices that support workers with care responsibilities.

There's no childcare that early in the morning, and the childcare closes at six. (P14, Trade union)

We need to be working on this so that people understand that it's not always going to be possible for someone to be at pre-start at 7:00 am every day based on their personal circumstances. And that needs to be accepted, that needs to be normalised. And we're just not there yet. We're so far from that. (P10, Large employer)

- While many employers expressed concern about the expense of offering paid parental leave, some acknowledged that the cost of replacing staff can be even greater. Approaches to funding parental leave vary between treating it as a project cost or general overhead.

The key point that I brought up with HR is that the cost to replace you is somewhere between one and two and a half times your annual salary. And so, when you look at that and then you go, okay, well our longest serving parental leave policy is six months of a salary, it does stack up to keep these staff members. (P1, Large employer)

We have tr[ie]d to predict what's really the percentage uptake of parental leave, primary carer, secondary carer based on previous history. And then that gets charged back through the project. (P4, Large employer)

- Women are often in insecure roles like labour hire or traffic control, which limits access to leave and career development.
- Flexible work is much less accessible in frontline construction roles, especially among apprentices and junior staff.

We completed this survey and when I asked them in the survey in five years do you see yourself in construction, 78% of them said no. ... And the reason that the women who were saying no, they don't see themselves in construction in five years, the reason was always that they felt that if they had a family that they couldn't stay. (P8, Large employer)

- Small businesses report reduced capacity to meet government mandates around, and support employees through, pregnancy and parental leave. They report that the cost of providing paid leave and hiring temporary replacements can be prohibitive.

3. Industrial relations

- Part-time employment in the construction sector has traditionally been viewed as underemployment and casualisation. This perception, along with the challenge of balancing worker rights, has hindered the adoption of effective flexible work practices in parental leave policies.
- Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBAs) shape conditions on large, unionised construction projects and have traditionally assumed a full-time male workforce. As a result, they often lack provisions that support the needs of women and carers and flexible work arrangements like part-time or job-sharing.

Engagement for a part-time person is a minimum of eight hours in certain enterprise agreements. How is that able to be worked as a split shift when you then compound that with the restrictions on the hours of work of the project? (P6, Industry association)

- Parental leave policies within companies are sometimes left to manager discretion. Although this can provide flexibility for employers, it may also result in inconsistent application and unequal access to entitlements and support for employees.

4. Lack of amenities and personal protective clothing

- Lack of women's toilets, sanitary bins, and lactation facilities on-site is a major issue. Women may have to travel off-site to access appropriate facilities, which can be time-consuming and inconvenient.

Understanding of, I guess, women's health can be lacking on-site. Things like endometriosis and things, those reproductive illnesses that can really be crippling, really crippling, often seen as an excuse when really, it's not an excuse, it's something that people deal with, but they're the obvious ones is certainly around even just access to a bathroom. (P3, Industry association)

- Women often lack access to properly fitting personal protective equipment (PPE). Ill-fitting PPE can compromise safety and comfort, making it difficult for women to perform their duties effectively especially while pregnant.

5. Career impact

- Part-time work and taking parental leave can impact the type of projects and opportunities for promotion. Women may be assigned to less demanding tasks or smaller projects, limiting their career growth.
- Pregnant apprentices were seen as 'challenging' to manage because their apprenticeships typically need to be paused during parental leave and employers said they lacked guidance on adjustment of duties, meeting training requirements, and handling missed work experiences.

There was no guidance ... in the public domain around for employers or for TAFEs either about how to manage a pregnant apprentice. No guidance from the types of duties..., what that might mean for your training package or what that would mean for the kinds of work experience that you're required to get if you couldn't do certain work experience because it was too difficult, what that would mean. (P7, Trade Union)



4. Recommendations

The insights shared by women and industry stakeholders in interviews form the basis of recommendations for changes to policy and practice to better support and retain women during the three critical transition periods. This final section presents these recommendations. For each transition stage, specific recommendations for employers, government and unions and industry associations are included.

◀ Transition Stage 1: Before parental leave

! Issues identified by participants

- Lack of visibility of and connections with other pregnant women and working parents who can provide advice, peer support and social connection.
- Lack of clear, transparent and accessible policies regarding pregnancy and transitions into parental leave.
- Stigma, discrimination and adverse action against pregnant employees, for example, forced disclosures, and job redundancies, withheld promotions, and reassignment to lower-responsibility roles, post-disclosure.
- Inadequate health and safety policies and support for pregnant women, especially those working in physically demanding and unsafe environments.
- Inadequate financial support for pregnant tradeswomen who are sole traders and working for SMEs.

👤 Recommendations for employers

1. Building support and connections for pregnant employees

- Offer resources and information sessions for pregnant employees to assist them in navigating pregnancy and parental leave transitions and in understanding their rights, responsibilities and entitlements during these periods. Consider engaging external training providers with specialist knowledge, such as Parents at Work, to deliver workshops, individualised coaching.
- Provide training to managers to enhance their knowledge and skills in supporting women once they have disclosed a pregnancy, including having open and timely conversations to reduce uncertainty and establish expectations for the periods ahead.
- Develop peer networks and 'buddy' systems to enable pregnant women and new parents to connect with other employees who have been

through the experience. These networks can provide support and advice and help women understand their options and confidently plan both their careers and parenthood.

- Use purpose-built online platforms and portals where employees and managers can access policies, information and resources to support parental leave transitions, and register for seminars and information sessions and keeping in touch events.

2. Preventing discrimination and mistreatment of pregnant employees

- Review organisational policies related to anti-discrimination, health and safety, and family/care to ensure that they meet current legislative requirements and reflect leading practice around the treatment of pregnant employees. Introduce policies where none already exist.

- Provide targeted education and training to managers about their responsibilities under legislation and organisational policies.
- Undertake regular evaluation of policy and legislative compliance across business areas and take prompt action where non-compliance is identified.
- Consider the adequacy and appropriateness of existing reporting and complaint-handling mechanisms for women who have experienced discrimination and harassment related to their pregnancy.

3. Supporting the health and safety of pregnant employees

- Develop pregnancy-specific health and safety policies to support women to continue working safely in their roles throughout pregnancy.
- Establish a dedicated position in the organisation, with sufficient resourcing and seniority responsible for the management of women's health and safety in parental leave transitions.
- Develop resources to help managers and employees understand their rights and obligations under workplace health and safety and employment legislation. Provide training to managers and employees through company inductions, toolbox talks, communication, and training programs.
- Create safe work plans for the management of pregnant workers at various stages of their pregnancy, including hazard identification, risk assessments and job/role adjustments, to be completed by line managers in consultation with employees. Draw on the expertise of occupational physicians and therapists in the development of safe work plans.
- Review and ensure compliance with the Fair Work Act's 'safe jobs' provisions regarding the transfer of pregnant workers to appropriate safe jobs, and the provision of paid or unpaid 'no safe job leave' if a safe job is not available. Train managers on finding suitable alternative duties for pregnant workers.
- Monitor and evaluate implementation of health and safety plans and policies and take action to support compliance.

- Consult employees on flexibility arrangements to support their health and wellbeing during pregnancy, for example, the ability to work from home and working-time flexibility for medical appointments.
- Consider implementing paid reproductive health leave to assist employees dealing with fertility treatments, miscarriage, menstruation, menopause, and other related health needs.

Recommendations for government

- The NSW Government should consider the establishment of an expert committee inclusive of Safework NSW to review and provide guidelines on pregnancy and reproductive health in relation to construction work, with a specific focus on SMEs and trades.
- Safework NSW should consider enhanced monitoring of regulatory compliance in the construction sector with specific regard to the management of risks and hazards for pregnant workers.
- The NSW Government should consider an industry levy to support pregnancy leave in small and medium construction businesses and sole traderships.
- The NSW Government should consider the establishment of an expert committee inclusive of TAFE NSW to review and publish guidelines on pregnancy and parental leave for construction related apprenticeships.
- The Fair Work Ombudsman should consider an inquiry into the use of restrictive contractual conditions that limit employees' access to paid parental leave entitlements including barriers to accessing future paid parental leave and financial penalties for not meeting specific terms.

Recommendations for unions and industry associations

- Trade unions and industry associations could establish joint working groups across unions and member organisations to strengthen support for pregnancy and parental leave within enterprise bargaining agreements.



Transition Stage 2: Requesting and taking parental leave

! Issues identified by participants

- No universal access to employer-funded paid parental leave (PPL) across the construction sector, and availability of PPL within SMEs is particularly scarce.
- Policies commonly distinguish between primary and secondary carer roles and sometimes proscribe men from taking primary carer leave, leading to highly gendered uptake of PPL and reinforcing the gendered distribution of care and associated career penalties for women.
- Eligibility requirements around tenure and employment status (e.g. casual vs permanent) mean women can miss out even in companies with PPL policies.
- Parental leave is often framed as a privilege for deserving employees which can generate feelings of guilt and a reluctance to raise issues or seek to access other entitlements among pregnant women and those returning from leave.
- Formal backfilling of roles is rare and handover processes are often ad hoc and poorly planned.
- Limited prior discussion about the level and means of contact for women who wish to stay connected with their workplaces during parental leave, and cases where women's expressed preferences for contact were not honoured by their managers.
- Women can be negatively impacted by changes to their job, work location and other employment conditions while they are on parental leave, and may not find out about these changes until they return to work.

🔒 Recommendations for employers

1. Widening access to paid parental leave

- Make adjustments to employer-funded parental leave schemes to bring them closer to leading practice of 26 weeks at full pay with superannuation continuing to be paid.
- Small to medium enterprises should consider introducing employer-funded paid parental leave where not already offered, and/or adopting a combination of supportive measures such as paid reproductive leave, reduced working hours with full pay structured to equal a specific duration of paid leave, and flexible part-time work arrangements.
- Challenge beliefs and narratives which frame parental leave as a reward or privilege for particular workers, and re-frame parental leave as a right for all employees which benefits the organisation.
- Remove gender and primary/secondary carer distinctions to encourage men's uptake of parental leave and challenge the norm that women are the 'natural' primary caregivers.
- Amend policies to be inclusive of all family structures including same-sex partnerships and single and co-parenting arrangements, and different pathways to parenthood including fostering, surrogacy and IVF.
- Remove qualifying periods for paid parental leave and restrictions on casual workers' eligibility.
- Allow for flexibility in how and when parental leave is taken, for example continuously or in blocks, part-time or full-time, and over a period longer than 12 months to encourage men to take primary care leave after their partner has returned to work.

- Ensure parental leave is costed and resourced within project budgets and workforce planning and scheduling accounts for leaves of absence and variations in working hours for employees returning to work.
- Establishing lines of accountability for managing employees on parental leave and transitioning back into the workplace.

2. Preparing for the employee's absence

- Commence resource planning for the period an employee is on parental leave early, making arrangements for backfilling and formal handover processes to prevent undue stress and uncertainty for the woman and team members.
- Provide model plans and templates to managers to support discussions and planning for keeping in touch while the employee is on parental leave. Provide choice in the level and type of contact and be flexible if an employee's preferences change over time.
- Nominate a staff member with sufficient oversight of organisational matters to be responsible for communicating significant workplace changes to the employee while they are on leave.

3. Managing the impact of workplace change

- Ensure managers are aware of their legal responsibilities to prevent discrimination and unlawful treatment of employees while they are on parental leave.
- Notify employees on parental leave of workplace changes which will affect their job and/or employment conditions, including redundancies, structural changes, and changes to the location and hours of the employee's work. Where possible, consult with the employee on ways to minimise the impact of the changes on their employment and career.
- Allow interested employees to participate in professional development and training while they are on parental leave.
- Provide flexibility in promotion cycles and performance reviews to ensure that employees on parental leave do not miss out on progression, pay reviews or bonuses.

Recommendations for government

- To encourage and reward better parental leave policies and practices, the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) should consider updating its citation criteria so that they are more aligned with leading practice as currently the benchmarks for a citation in the construction industry are very low.
- The Federal and NSW Government should conduct an inquiry into the value and benefits of reproductive health leave for employees, employers and industry sectors.
- The Federal Government should review the adequacy of its current paid parental leave scheme and consider increasing the number of weeks covered to 52.



➤ Transition Stage 3: Returning to work after parental leave

! Issues identified by participants

- Limited planning, programs and support for women returning to work and successfully transitioning back is dependent on having a 'champion' in management or strong personal networks.
- Working hours remain long and Saturday and fulltime work are expected.
- Access to flexible work is very constrained, leading to women exiting the industry and enormous pressures for mothers returning full-time. Women often have to move away from site or management roles to access part-time work, or even full-time hours that are not excessive.
- The opening hours of childcare centres typically do not align with long and rigid working hours of construction workplaces. Access is particularly constrained in regional and remote areas.
- Safe and appropriate facilities for women to express milk at work are rarely provided on construction worksites, which can force women to cease breastfeeding earlier than desired, and pose inconvenience and safety issues for women who do attempt to continue.

👤 Recommendations for employers

1. Supporting a smooth and successful return-to-work

- Develop and implement comprehensive return-to-work policies and programs to support employees to return to their positions and re-integrate into their workplaces and careers, and allocate responsibility to an operational leader.
- Programs should include training for managers on planning for employees returning to work and implementing flexible work within their teams, opportunities for mentoring and sponsorship for the employee, and investment in skills development and re-training after an extended period of leave.
- Individualised return to work plans should be developed by line or operations managers in consultation with the employee before they commence parental leave. The plans can nominate a 'return to work champion', for example a line or operations manager, who provides support and advocates for the woman transitioning out of parental leave.

- Contact the employee towards the end of their parental leave to update them on any project and workplace changes and discuss their expectations for returning to work, including hours of work, role adjustments and options for flexible working arrangements.
- Consider ways to support employees' access to childcare when returning to work. For large construction businesses, this could involve building childcare centres or school holiday care on bigger worksites or at head office. Medium and large businesses could consider subsidising the cost of childcare for employees.

2. Normalising flexible and sustainable work practices

- Achieving change requires moving away from a culture of long hours and 'presenteeism' on work-sites. Implement a cap on work hours aligned with the National Employment Standard and adopt cultural change initiatives, such as the *Culture Standard*, to promote the benefits of a five day work week while actively reducing stigma and backlash against more sustainable work patterns.



- Ensure senior leaders and managers are committed to changing the working hours culture and are leading by example in their work practices and behaviours. Draw on existing resources such as the [Culture Standard](#) and [Project 5: A weekend for everywork](#).
- Trial alternative approaches to pre-start meetings, such as scheduling multiple sessions at varying times or using alternative communication methods, to better accommodate parents and others with care responsibilities.
- Widening access to flexible work requires a shift in the way projects are resourced, planned and scheduled, and a move away from overtime-driven project cycles.
- Proactively engage clients and contractors in discussions about reasonable completion timelines and workload expectations, and ensure project tenders, work plans, schedules and forecasting account for reasonable workloads, parental leave absences and part-time work.
- Review and restructure on-site human resourcing to incorporate flexibility, especially for site-based roles. Explore ways to implement flexible start and finish times, part-time work, and job-sharing through formal and consistent processes. Adopt a comprehensive all-in approach to make flexible work a standard practice.
- Consider introducing return to work incentives, for example, a monetary bonus, or five days payment for four days work, to encourage women to re-enter the workforce.
- Create goals and targets for flexible work uptake and monitor progress towards them. Utilise [Culture Standard](#) resources.

3. Supporting mothers who are breastfeeding

- Develop a breastfeeding policy which outlines employee entitlements around paid lactation breaks and the provision of facilities for breastfeeding/lactation.
- Wherever possible, ensure construction work-sites provide for appropriate lactation spaces and facilities to support breastfeeding mothers.

Recommendations for government

- The NSW and Federal Governments should lift industry standards on working hours by requiring flexible working, reduced work hours and a five-day working week to be implemented on all government-funded building projects, and funding those projects accordingly.
- The NSW Government should proactively plan projects with reasonable completion timelines and workload expectations, and ensure project tenders, work plans, schedules and forecasting account for reasonable workloads, parental leave absences and part-time work and meet the [Culture Standard](#).
- The NSW and Federal Government should ensure all projects provide necessary amenities for women including women's toilets, sanitary products and appropriate lactation spaces, adhering to the [Culture Standard](#).
- The Federal Government should address inequities in access to early childhood education and care arising from a lack of options that align with long or non-standard working hours and a lack of options in some geographical areas.
- The Federal Government should consider strengthening national employment laws to require employers to provide lactation facilities for breastfeeding women at work.

Recommendations for unions and industry associations

- Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBAs) should prioritise consideration of work hours, flexibility and support for pregnant workers and parental leave more broadly.
- Promote and share alternative work schedules and practices that support women returning from parental leave, while ensuring these approaches do not reinforce gendered assumptions or create stigma by being seen as exclusive to women.
- Support and guide members on the implementation of the [Culture Standard](#).

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