Facilitating men’s involvement in care work

Research clearly demonstrates the benefits of men's involvement in unpaid care for prosperous economies, businesses, communities and households. Young men increasingly expect to be able to combine care for family with a successful career, but policy settings make this hard. Facilitating men's participation in care will support healthy families, workplace gender equality and economic productivity.

What is the problem, and for whom?

Men do not participate in unpaid care work equally with women. Instead, women do the lion’s share of all unpaid care and domestic work in Australia, even when they work full time (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016). This pattern is most acute in couple households with young children as entrenched social norms, outdated workplace cultures and a gendered tax and transfer system lock men out of care. Inadequate access to paid carers’ leave affects men’s health, and child and elder parent wellbeing. It also limits women's access to satisfying paid employment.

Pre-pandemic, men's uptake of existing care policies was low with only a small minority accessing flexible work, part-time work, and paid parental leave. Workplace cultures that stigmatise flexible and part-time workers as ‘lacking commitment’ or paid parental leave policies that are short or paid below wage replacement level discourage men from sharing the care load (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2019, Baxter 2019). Employers are also more likely to refuse men’s request for carers’ leave and the lack of role models can discourage men wishing to access existing policies.

At the same time, young working fathers’ expectations and aspirations are evolving. Young men identify access to adequate care supports as critical to a successful future at work (Hill et al. 2019). But workplace and national policy settings are slow to evolve, leaving young men dissatisfied and creating problems for retention.

Why does this matter for the economy, community, society, business, families, and individuals?

Men's access to paid family care delivers benefits for child, parent, and collective wellbeing. Policies like paid parental leave have a positive impact on father and child health, and men's relationships with their children (Norman et al. 2018, Porter 2015). When men have access to paid care leave and flexible working, gender norms shift and care is valued more broadly. Men's participation in care provides an essential support to women's labour force participation and household economic security (Norman et al. 2017).

Organisations also benefit. Businesses with good paid care leave policies report better recruitment, retention and promotion rates, leading to stronger performance and productivity outputs (Porter 2015). Research in Australia shows that dedicated paternity leave is attractive for fathers and a key driver of employment decisions and job performance for both men and women (Hill et al. 2019, Diversity Council of Australia 2012).

Men’s access to paid care leave delivers economy wide benefits through enhanced women’s workforce participation and higher workforce productivity. Men cannot afford to be sidelined in care policies.

What did the pandemic period reveal about these issues?

The pandemic sparked a crisis in care and deepened the already unequal division of unpaid care work, raising concerns that gender equality will be set back decades. Loss of regular childcare, remote learning for school aged children and the additional cleaning, cooking and housework linked to lockdown saw a large increase in the total unpaid workload faced by households. In couple households with children, men picked up some of the pandemic-induced unpaid care load. However, established gender norms meant it was women who shouldered most of the additional burden, on top of their existing load and alongside the demands of paid work (Cooper and Mosseri 2020, Craig and Churchill 2021).

The pandemic has shown that social norms around care work are sticky, despite evolving attitudes. Equal access to paid care leave can help to shift gender norms and create a more gender equal world of work and care.

Workplace supports for men's equal access to care are essential for men's wellbeing and gender equality. This includes access to paid time to care and flexible work. To support this agenda:

**Governments can:**
- Extend Australia’s national Paid Parental Leave Scheme to 3 (parent 1) + 3 (parent 2) + 3 (shared) months of paid leave;
- Increase the rate of the parental leave payment and include superannuation payments;
- Design gender neutral policies by removing the primary/secondary carer model that entrenches traditional gender norms;
- Increase the length of paid carer’s leave for all employees.

**Employers can:**
- Adopt gender neutral paid parental leave policies and paid carer leave policies for other family members e.g., elder care;
- Limit long hours contracts;
- Provide high quality flexible work arrangements for all employees and measure their uptake.

**Investors can:**
- Set and implement care policy benchmarks to guide gender equal investment practices.

**Unions can:**
- Advocate for improved paid parental and care leave policies and for new forms of paid care leave e.g., palliative care leave and reproductive health leave.

What can be done?

Our research (Women, Work and Leadership Research Group 2019) shows that facilitating men’s involvement in care work helps with:

- Retaining talented workers – men and women – across the life course
- Locking diversity into the organisation and workforce
- Building more responsive and productive organisations
- Designing gender equality into the Covid-19 economic recovery

What are the benefits?

To find out more, visit: sydney.edu.au/gewl

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016, 4125.0 - Gender Indicators, Australia, Feb 2016.

Australian Institute of Family Studies 2019, ‘Bringing up baby: Fathers not always able to share the load.’ Available at: https://aisf.gov.au/ media-releases/bringing-baby-fathers-not-always-able-share-load


