# National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality: Consultation – Family and Unpaid Work Meeting Summary

5 December 2022

*The government is developing a new* [National Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality](https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/national-strategy-achieve-gender-equality)*. The National Strategy will guide whole of community action to help make Australia one of the best countries in the world for equality between women and men.*

*Consultation with diverse stakeholders is key to developing a strategy that speaks to the experiences and ambitions of women and girls around Australia. The first phase of consultation took place in late 2022 and summaries of these discussions are shared to support further consultation and input into the development of the National Strategy.*

*This note summarises a consultation meeting held on 5 December 2022 focused on family and unpaid work, which included representatives from peak bodies, not-for-profit organisations, non-government organisations, advocacy groups, and community service organisations. The consultation drew on a* [*discussion paper*](https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-02/Roundtable-Discussion-Paper_Family-and-Unpaid-Work.docx) *prepared by the Office for Women. This summary note reflects the discussion amongst the participants. These are not the views of Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.*

## **Summary of key points raised by participants:**

1. Paid parental leave (PPL) policy perpetuates gendered patterns of care and results in significant gaps between men and women in hours spent caring and hours available for paid work. Improving men’s uptake of parental leave requires moving to 52 weeks of PPL at full-wage replacement rates with superannuation, and a shift in cultural expectations for men to be engaged at home.
2. Universal access to quality early childhood education and care, delivered by a securely employed, adequately paid and gender-balanced workforce is key. Feminised care industries set expectations at young ages that women are responsible for care and that this is lower value than other work.
3. Employers need to be incentivised to contribute to paid parental leave, childcare (including holiday care during school years) and elder care.
4. There needs to be greater recognition of the diversity of women’s care roles, including care for older people in enterprise agreements and employment conditions.
5. There needs to be a national strategy for work and care that brings together governments, unions, employers and community and recognises balancing work and care as the norm for households.

## **Discussion at this roundtable focused on four questions.**

## **What are the drivers of gender inequality in care responsibilities and unpaid work?**

PPL policy perpetuates gendered patterns of care and results in significant gaps between men and women in hours spent caring and hours available for paid work. PPL policies do not differentiate between the first and subsequent children or recognise that care responsibilities increase with multiple children.

Prescribed gender roles start in formative years, with girls staring domestic unpaid work earlier and earning less pocket money than boys. Media can reinforce these stereotypes and has a role to play in shifting cultural norms around care. Low pay and poor conditions in feminised care industries such as early childhood education and care (ECEC) set expectations that women are responsible for care and that this is lower value than other work.

Young women are often blamed and stigmatised for unplanned pregnancy. Having to accept caring responsibility can be punitive or viewed as a justified consequence of their choices. Young men can opt out of participating in care (such as through neonatal appointments and conversations with schools), whereas young women cannot.

The tax and transfer system, in combination with women’s lower wages and the cost of child care, informs how families make decisions about sharing work and care. This encourages women to leave the labour force to provide unpaid care. This establishes gendered patterns of care that continue for the rest of their working lives, contributing to a gender gap in retirement incomes.

Policy settings around education, work and care do not recognise the care responsibilities for older children. For example, paid leave accumulated by part-time workers is insufficient to cover 13-weeks of school holiday care and costs for formal holiday care are too high for parents to bear, particularly with multiple children.

**What are the barriers to achieve greater gender equality of unpaid work in Australia?**

Low wages and poor conditions in the care sector means attracting workers is difficult, resulting in working parents unable to access support. Issues around access to quality and affordable ECEC are exacerbated in rural, regional and remote Australia. Participants noted wait lists of up to six to nine months in some locations.

Australia is a conservative society compared to other countries, with deeply entrenched norms about men as breadwinners and women as caregivers. It is more difficult for women to go through life and maintain an attachment to paid work and their financial independence. Other countries place greater value on PPL and ECEC, and have a more mature expectation and understanding of systems to support families to combine work and care.

Women from culturally and linguistically diverse communities may need to navigate multiple, competing cultural expectations and gender norms, with few role models.

There is a growing inequality in relation to women’s access to PPL and leave. Women (particularly young women) are overrepresented in insecure, low-paid and low-quality work. Many women also do not have access to employer-funded PPL schemes, paid leave or flexible working arrangements.

The barrier for employer-funded PPL schemes is not necessarily about paying people while on parental leave, but being able to find someone to fill the role in the interim.

Cultural expectations and employers’ expectations can be barriers to women accessing part-time or flexible work in male-dominated industries. Requests can be denied, or women are moved off shift work and into administrative roles, stalling their career progression and reducing their pay as they no longer receive shift allowances.

While child care is the most visible form of care, there needs to be greater recognition of the diversity of women’s care roles, including elder care, in enterprise agreements and employment conditions.

Perceptions of flexible working being for women harms men as well. Participants noted that men who request flexibility are twice as likely to have their flexible working request denied and experience discrimination. Harnessing the full benefit of flexible working options requires flexible working to be equally taken up by all genders.

**What are some concrete policy options that should be considered as part of this Strategy to enable better sharing of care and unpaid work?**

A coherent national strategy for work and care is needed that brings governments, unions, employers and community together. This should recognise balancing work and care as the norm for households and include a shared vision, clear goals and accountability mechanisms.

The earlier men take up a caring role and spend long periods of time with a child, the more likely this shared responsibility will continue later in life. Improving men’s uptake of parental leave requires moving to 52 weeks of paid parental leave at full-wage replacement rates with superannuation, and a shift in cultural expectations for men to be engaged at home.

Participants noted that universal access to quality ECEC, delivered by a securely employed, adequately paid and gender-balanced workforce is key. Further consideration could be given to employer incentives to have child care facilities on site.

Employers need to be incentivised (for example, through tax treatments) to contribute to paid parental leave, childcare (including holiday care during school years) and elder care.

Condensed work weeks, such as four-day working weeks without reduced pay, have been trialled and evaluated from a productivity lens. These models support all employees to balance work and care responsibilities.

Paying superannuation on PPL could be implemented relatively easily. This sends a strong signal about the value of care and contributes to closing the gender retirement income gap.

Employers can facilitate access to continuing professional education, microcredentials, and networking for women to support their participation in different roles and industries and their return to work. Many women lose out on education and networking opportunities that take place outside of working hours. Employers in male-dominated industries can support workers to build skills when they start, rather than as a condition for applying.

Men need role models in leadership who take PPL and carers leave, and utilise flexible working arrangements. Support networks for men taking on caring roles can facilitate cultural change.

**What will success look like and how can it be measured and evaluated?**

Increase in women’s workforce participation rates including in secure and full-time employment, and a reduction in women’s underemployment.

Increase in women’s satisfaction in balancing work and care.

Increase in men and secondary partners accessing longer periods of leave.

Increase in men taking up part-time and flexible work.

Improvements in satisfaction with family relationships and children’s wellbeing and reduction in relationship breakdown.

Reduction in the gender gap in hours spent on unpaid labour.

Changes in attitudes and perceptions of gender norms over time (such as those measured in Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia data or by the Global Institute for Women’s Leadership), and understanding of issues such as the gender pay gap.

Reduction in the gender pay and retirement income gap, and reduction in older women’s homelessness rate.

Improvement in pay and conditions in the female-dominated care economy.

Greater uptake by employers of family friendly workplace policies and standards, such as Family Friendly Workplaces and career break schemes.