



Australasian Council of Women and Policing submission to the Supporting Working Parents: Pregnancy and Return to Work National Review





Background to this submission

The Australasian Council of Women and Policing Inc (ACWAP) is an independent body working to improve policing for women, formed in 1997, with membership comprising women from the community as well as sworn and unsworn women and men from within policing and law enforcement. Its goals are to: improve policing services provided to women; improve opportunities and outcomes for women within policing; and participate in the global network of women in policing. ACWAP works to achieve these goals in a number of ways, including a biennial international conference that is open to all women in policing, academic researchers and the broader community; the Annual Excellence in Policing Awards that recognise the achievements of the women and men in who are making a difference in policing for women; the biannual national *Journal for Women and Policing*, and an online presence including its website www.acwap.com.au.

In 2013, ACWAP commissioned a survey on the issues experienced by women who currently work in police organisations. Nearly 1,600 women responded – further details of the survey and preliminary results relevant to the National Review's terms of reference are given in the attachment. Although not explicitly asking about pregnancy and return to work after parental leave, the survey did produce findings about these issues. The body of the submission summarises the key outcomes and discusses some implications of these findings, based on consultation with a working party of ACWAP Steering Committee representatives established for the purpose of contributing to this submission.

The views presented in this submission are those of the working party and do not necessarily reflect those held by all ACWAP members. However, the conclusions drawn are built on a strong and robust information source in the form of a large and representative survey about the experiences and views of women working in Australian police organisations. Relevant findings from the survey are provided to the National Review for the purpose of contributing to the evidence base about this important issue of workplace discrimination on the grounds of pregnancy and return to work as a working parent.

Key findings

The survey outcomes show that the prevalence and impact of workplace discrimination reported in the National Review's factsheet and issues paper also apply within police organisations. However, ACWAP considers that women working in policing face further barriers and higher levels of discrimination, given both the operating context of police work¹ and the police culture, where women have traditionally been in the minority and continue to be under-represented at senior management level. The key findings from the survey about the challenges faced in the workplace while pregnant, on parental leave, or upon returning to work are described below.

¹ For example, ACWAP acknowledge that there are challenges for police management in accommodating pregnant police officers in front-line operational roles. There is both a duty of care to employees who are at risk of assault-related or other injury because they operate in potentially dangerous work roles and there is a dual responsibility to the community were a female officer limited by her pregnancy from engaging in physical activities that may be required to protect or rescue a member of the public. While a first response police role doesn't always involve the application of physical force to resolve a situation, the dynamic and unpredictable nature of operational policing creates difficulties for organisations in determining the appropriate duties for pregnant officers that balance the rights of a woman to work when pregnant and the duty of care obligations to employees.



Prevalence:

Based on the survey findings, it is estimated that between three and four out of 10 women experienced at least some level of workplace difficulty when pregnant or as a working mother at some point during their time working in policing. This was an ongoing or recent (during the past 12 months) experience for almost three-quarters of those women. While it is acknowledged that not all of these instances would fall within the scope of discrimination as defined in legislation, this survey finding does show that a significant proportion of sworn and unsworn women in policing continue to face circumstances with a high risk of discrimination being experienced.

There were numerous examples of individual women reporting direct and indirect discrimination related to being pregnant or upon return to work as working mothers reported. The most commonly described issues were: lack of meaningful work roles and sufficiently flexible work arrangements to meet the needs of pregnant officers and working mothers; restricted access to development and promotion opportunities; and stigmatisation and bullying about being pregnant or working under those flexible arrangements intended to address the needs of working mothers.

There are also examples, unfortunately less commonly cited, of supportive organisational responses to accommodate women's needs while pregnant or upon return to work among sworn and unsworn officers in similar work roles and rank/management levels to those reporting negative workplace experiences.

Types of impacts:

Women described adverse consequences from the manner in which they were treated by individuals in the workplace and at organisational level, as well as arising from concerns about future discrimination if becoming pregnant or a working mother in police workplaces. These impacted on the women themselves, their families, and others. For example, one woman stated she chose to terminate a pregnancy as she was led to believe that at that stage in her career it would have been 'career suicide' given the difficulties her female colleagues experienced in employment opportunities and part time agreements. Some examples of types of impacts experienced, using the women's own words², include:

- involuntary change of position/role – for example: "transferred whilst on maternity leave, nil consultation, advised can't be part time in chosen field of 17 yrs" and "I was placed into x role for which I had no expertise or training after returning from maternity leave rather than in my field of expertise which was severely short staffed at the time. I think it was done out of spite as I was negotiating a part time agreement at the time."
- limited work roles and/or lack of meaningful work when pregnant – for example: "You are treated differently and viewed as being 'broken' and 'of no good' to the station and the only role you can work is the counter." and "Being told I could sit in the corner when became pregnant and management did not know where to place me."
- restricted access to opportunities as a working mother that are readily available to others in the immediate workplace and/or were previously undertaken – for example: "Treated like second rate police officer. Not given same opportunities as others in my

² 'x' used to replace wording removed because it could potentially identify an individual or organisation



current position. Even though can't always do things still not asked just assumed I can't or won't do." and "Deliberately excluded from travel/overtime opportunities and told because it was assumed I couldn't due to child commitments outside work hours"

- effect on access to or take-up of promotion opportunities – for example: "I was also asked on one occasion if I planned to have any more children as that would affect my chance at promotion" and "last 12 months, discrimination based on carers responsibilities meaning merit-won promotion was denied."
- reduction in rank/level – for example: "I have taken a demotion from Sergeant to Senior Constable to obtain a better work life balance and have the ability to work flexible working hours." and "Requested part time and was refused in my current position – told I could relinquish my position, drop down to a lower level & then they would allow me part time"
- effects on work record – for example: "Last minute court notifications (1 day notice) from OIC and supervisors, forced to take annual leave when I was unable to arrange last minute child care, and told "The organisation expects you to be in court, you should have bought your children in and sat them in the back of the court." She also noted that an adverse report was submitted about her on this incident.
- being stigmatised and bullied while pregnant – for example: "Being pregnant is awful in the police force as you are treated as a second class employee. Disgusting." and remarks like "fat, you're not operational so you're excluded from the conversation".
- being stigmatised and undervalued when on flexible arrangements after return to work – for example: "Females are not given the opportunity to expand their work role after maternity leave as they are seen as being away having a holiday." and "...limited or no recognition of the growing mass of women and their need for part time work. Additionally the culture in particular in the regions is such that women or officers applying for part time are seen as an inconvenience to the roster and are targeted accordingly. Little has changed in recent years."
- stress on the women and their families – for example: "everything about returning to work after maternity leave has been nothing but stressful and extremely detrimental to my son and my relationships with my family. This job has a lot to answer for. Bullying exists when you ask for flexibility you get threatened. It's a joke." and "Extremely difficult and has caused myself and my child great stress. It has caused the deterioration of my relationship with my parents."
- other effects on quality of life and family relationships – for example: "... I cannot access childcare to cover the 14 hours I am away from home for a 12 hour shift and so must work on my husband's rostered days off, or at night. Issue has at time proved difficult."
- financial impacts – for example, high cost of childcare that meets the needs of women working long shifts and loss of overtime and acting-up pay because relieving opportunities are no longer offered.

There were also some examples that described consequences for the workplace as well as the individual concerned, such as the loss and underuse of skilled employees. For example, one woman stated: "...the constant changes of shifts impacts on my personal life commitments such as looking after my step-son and scheduling with my partner who is also a shift worker to meet parenting requirements. For this reason alone I look at returning to University so that I have other qualifications should it become too difficult and I am required to leave the service." Another woman who was heavily pregnant at the date of her promotional appeal hearing was



told by the member of the judiciary "you have more important things going on, go and have your bub" in his summing up. She states: "I was actually going to return to work early after the birth and my husband was going to work part-time had my promotion been upheld. I am very disillusioned now about promotion process."

Severity of impacts:

As these examples show, the impacts can be quite severe in some cases. Although difficult to quantify precisely from the survey, results from two of the 11 specific issue areas asked about provide an indication of the extent of impact experienced across the wider group. Based on these findings, it is estimated that between about 4-5 out of 10 women that this applied to experience no difficulties with barriers to work placement but of those that did, it was equally likely to have been a major rather than minor difficulty. It is also estimated that about half of the women that flexible work arrangements applied to had no difficulty with this issue and of those that did, it was more likely to be seen as a minor difficulty than a major one.

Overall conclusions:

The overall implications of these survey findings is that while legislation, policies and practices may be in place to prevent workplace discrimination on these grounds, there continue to be many women working in policing who report experiences showing that the measures designed to prevent this source of discrimination may not be applied in practice to the extent that they could be to provide a supportive work environment during and after pregnancy.

Flexible working arrangements that allowed childcare commitments to be met was the most frequently mentioned issue. Based on the comments made in the survey, the problem seems to be more with the attitudes and practices of supervisors and senior managers at local level than the lack of organisational policies providing for such options. There were frequent remarks about new supervisors or local area commanders being more/less willing to offer and grant part-time arrangements than their predecessors and about inconsistent practices experienced at different worksites to accommodate childcare commitments through more flexible rostering practices. In the words of one woman: "The organisation is NOT family friendly at ALL. In fact, we have a million policies that NO ONE follows unless they absolutely have to. When you stand up for your rights, they make your life hell but looking for other ways to bully you or make you look bad. It is a disgusting situation."

ACWAP's position

The survey provided many examples where women reported limited work roles were available to them either while pregnant or returning to work. Not only were their skills and experience overlooked simply because they were pregnant women or were working mothers, but some were belittled by the behaviour and attitudes of supervisors and colleagues about their circumstances. ACWAP considers that limiting women from engaging in work roles on the basis of unwarranted concerns about the capability of pregnant women or of working mothers to fully undertake these roles has adverse consequences for both the individual and the organisation and should be addressed at all levels.



ACWAP welcomes the National Review's call for evidence on effective strategies to deal with workplace discrimination on these grounds and awaits the Review's conclusions with great interest.

Women reported being overlooked for promotion and development opportunities just because they were pregnant or had childcare commitments that necessitated them taking up flexible work arrangements. ACWAP considers that this has short and long-term adverse consequences for both the women and the police agency and must be addressed. In ACWAP's view, organisational practices and attitudes that undervalue the contribution of, and fail to invest in, employees just because they are pregnant or currently require flexible work arrangements for family reasons is both inappropriate and unproductive. Such thinking is outdated and does not recognise the changing nature of employment generally. Police organisations that fail to align thinking and practices with current and emerging employment trends, particularly the need for and expectations of employees about flexible work practices, will risk both losing skilled staff and an inability to recruit quality people as a result.

ACWAP considers that police organisations would benefit greatly by reviewing the manner in which their policies are implemented in practice at local level, and take steps where necessary to ensure that there is equitable access to training and promotion opportunities.

Women also reported being stigmatised and bullied because they were pregnant or working part-time on return to work. ACWAP considers that this is totally unacceptable behaviour and that police management has a responsibility to prevent this happening in all police workplaces. Police culture and the attitude of supervisors and managers needs to be addressed to ensure that legislation and policies intended to protect employees from such negative behaviours operate effectively.

In ACWAP's view, instances of direct and indirect discrimination reported in the survey are unacceptable in modern professional police organisations, particularly when other sworn and unsworn women of similar rank/management level and in similar work roles made very positive comments about the extent to which their police organisation understood and accommodated their needs.

ACWAP acknowledges that there are some real challenges for police management in accommodating pregnant police officers in front-line operational roles and that rostering demands for some work areas can make it difficult to be fully flexible to meet the needs of working parents in every instance. It is highly encouraging to hear many positive comments made in the survey about family-friendly work areas and very supportive supervisors. It is also encouraging to see the numbers of women reporting they had no difficulty with barriers to work placement such as limited work roles after return from maternity leave or in accessing flexible work practices to support childcare commitments afterwards. These demonstrate that police organisations can balance organisational and individuals' needs satisfactorily.

However, the statistics and comments about negative experiences for other women show there is much still to be done. In particular, there is a need for: strategies to ensure that policies on flexible work arrangements are consistently and effectively applied at local level; eliminating inequitable practices that restrict access to promotion or developmental opportunities simply because an employee is pregnant or currently working part-time; and cultural change to prevent stigmatisation and bullying for being pregnant or working part-time on return to work.

ACWAP does not hold a formal position on the most effective way forward to address discrimination on the grounds of pregnancy or return to work in police workplaces, as this has



not been a policy development focus for ACWAP to date. However, ACWAP does hold firm views on the importance of addressing the sources of such discrimination, especially given the 2013 survey findings that provide an evidence base about prevalence and impacts in police workplaces. We therefore welcome the work of the Australian Human Rights Commission on this important issue and await the findings of National Review on best practice approaches with great interest.



ATTACHMENT: 2013 ACWAP SURVEY – PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Background

In 2013, the Australasian Council of Women and Policing (ACWAP) commissioned a survey on the issues experienced by women who currently work in police organisations. Almost 1,600 responses were received ($n=1,586$), comprising nearly 7% of all women (sworn and unsworn) working in police organisations across Australia at that time³. There was good coverage across different age groups, ranks/management levels, work roles, and length of time working in policing.

The survey was conducted between late August and mid-October 2013 using an online survey tool and applying an approach designed to protect the anonymity of all participants.

Respondents were asked about the extent to which each of 11 pre-identified⁴ issues had been difficult for them over the last 12 months and the extent to which each had been a problem for them when working in policing before then. There was also opportunity to provide free-text comment on each question, which produced a rich source of in-depth information to support the quantitative data. In addition, there was a separate question asking respondents to identify and describe any other issues not already covered.

The analysis and reporting of the survey outcomes will not be finalised until February 2014, but preliminary results relevant to the terms of inquiry are described below. While the survey did not explicitly ask about pregnancy and return to work after parental leave, the responses do provide findings relevant to these issues. The following findings are based on analyses specifically targeting the purpose of this submission and may therefore differ from those that will be presented in the final survey report, where a different approach to data analysis and presentation has been applied.

Prevalence

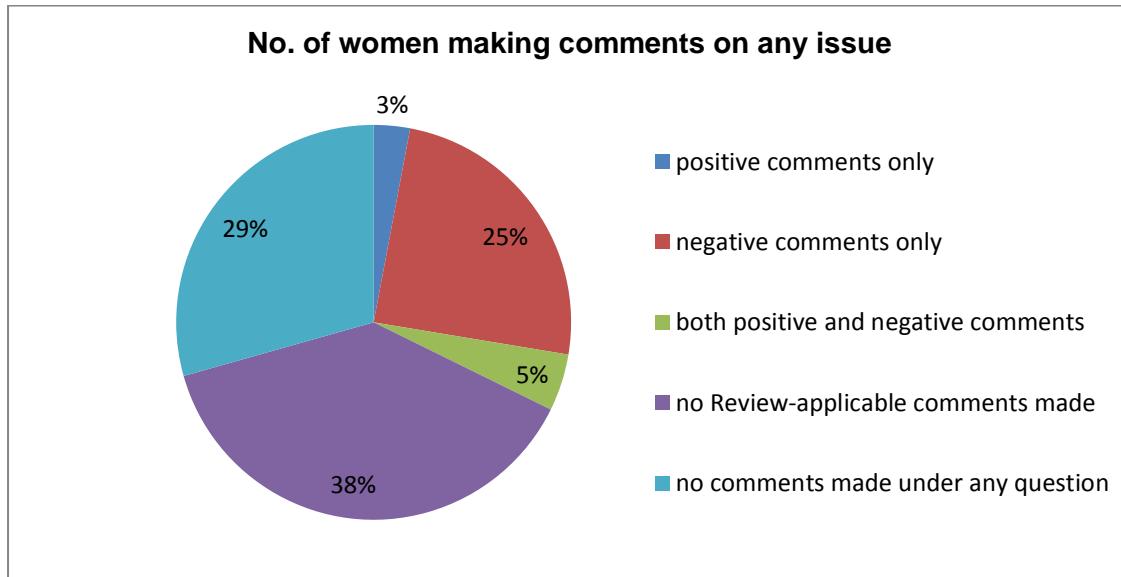
As there were no specific questions about pregnancy and return to work after parental leave, findings about prevalence are based on content analysis of the comments made by the women under all questions to identify whether these related to pregnancy or child-relevant commitments. Of the 1,586 completed surveys, 1,120 women made comments that provided additional information about an issue of any kind under one or more questions (70.6%) and that therefore provided opportunity to establish whether the quantitative rating of extent of difficulty was associated with being pregnant or a working mother or to flexible working arrangement issues by women who currently had dependent children.

³ calculated from statistics on the number of police staff (sworn and unsworn per state/territory and percentage breakdown by gender given in Tables 6A.8 and 6A.18 of the *Report on Government Services 2013*

⁴ access to flexible work arrangements; getting work in a specialist area; barriers to work placement eg after maternal leave; access to promotion opportunities; access to appropriate development opportunities; participating in decision-making forums in the workplace; equipment or uniform issues; sexual harassment; workplace bullying; getting complaints heard and dealt with; being the only one or one of only a few women working in their work area



Of these, 512 made comments applicable to the Review's terms of reference⁵. In 47 cases, only positive remarks were made about their experiences, citing supportive and accommodating work environments, while 391 described negative experiences when being pregnant at work or a working mother and 74 provided both positive and negative comments about their experience.



Combining the figures for women reporting only negative experiences and those making both positive and negative comments provides an indication of the prevalence of women experiencing at least some level of workplace difficulty while being pregnant or a working mother. This applied to 465 women, representing 41.3% of women providing comments about any issue under any question and 29.3% of the total sample.

When only considering comments about recent experiences⁶, a total of 338 women experienced at least some level of workplace difficulty over the last 12 months linked to being pregnant or a working mother. This represents 30.2% of women providing comments about any issue under any question and 21.3% of the total sample.

Based on this analysis, it is estimated that between one in three and one in four women experienced some level of difficulty at some time while working in policing when pregnant or a working mother. For between one in two and one in three women, this is an ongoing or recent (ie during the past 12 months) experience.

⁵ ie nearly half (45.7%) of those providing comments under any question and almost one in three (32.3%) of all women completing the survey either made explicit reference to pregnancy or commitments related to children in their comment on an issue under any question or, the woman identified herself as having dependent children and the comment, while not explicitly mentioning childcare-related issues in the wording used, was considered to relate directly to childcare commitments, either, in the case of the two questions that most directly relate to the Review terms of reference (ie flexible work arrangements and barriers to work placement eg returning from maternity leave – see below) or, in a limited number of cases, under other questions where issues about flexible work arrangements were explicitly mentioned

⁶ ie excluding responses where the only review-applicable comments made were under those questions asking about 'more than a year ago' or, under the final question about 'other issues' (where women were asked to specify 'whether each has been a problem over the last 12 months or more than a year ago' but not everyone did so), comments where it was not possible to confirm from the wording used that this was a recent (within past 12 months) or ongoing issue



Impact

Women whose comments related to negative experiences while being pregnant at work or a working mother described a range of impacts as well as different degrees of difficulty experienced. The most common were:

- lack of meaningful work roles and sufficiently flexible work arrangements to meet the needs of pregnant officers and working mothers
- restricted access to development and promotion opportunities
- stigmatisation and bullying about being pregnant or working under those flexible arrangements intended to address the needs of working mothers.

Women described a range of direct impacts on their work and careers. For example, there were instances of involuntary change of position/role, such as being transferred without consultation while on maternity leave or moved to positions in which they had no expertise or training after returning from maternity leave rather than in their field of expertise even though that area was severely short staffed at the time. Consequences for access to or take-up of promotion opportunities were reported and there were examples of women taking a reduction in rank/level simply in order to be able to have access to flexible working hours.

Impacts described also included restricted access to opportunities as a working mother that are readily available to others in the immediate workplace and/or were previously undertaken, particularly overtime and relieving duties, which had both financial and career-related implications. One woman reported an adverse report was submitted about her in relation to an incident where she was unable to arrange last minute child care to deal with a court notification at only one day's notice and was told she should have taken her children with her to court.

Some women reported high levels of stress experienced, not only personally but also in some cases by their children and other family members, attributed to the difficulties of accessing sufficiently flexible work arrangements and compounded by bullying. Other effects on quality of life and family relationships were also described, for example, instances where both parents are on shift and therefore one must always work on the other's rostered days off.

Findings relating specifically to pregnancy

This was not a specific question asked about in the survey, but difficulties with being pregnant while working were identified by some women in the question about 'other issues' experienced or were referred to in comments under other questions such as flexible work practices or access to development opportunities. Because of the relatively small numbers making specific comments about their experiences while pregnant, this information is not analysed in the same way as for other issues below. The discussion of the findings is limited to applicable comments made in response to any of the survey questions.

The overall number of women who mentioned workplace difficulties arising from being pregnant is relatively small – 37 women made specific mention of negative workplace experiences while pregnant in comments made under any question. Another six made only positive comments about their experience, citing organisational understanding of, and willingness to accommodate, their needs.



The most commonly mentioned difficulty experienced related to limited work roles available while pregnant, including access to opportunities to act at a higher level and lack of meaningful work roles. Bullying or stigmatisation because of their pregnancy was the next most commonly mentioned.

Restricted access to development opportunities or to promotion opportunities were mentioned by some women. For example, one woman whilst pregnant and on a part time work agreement was told that those officers that were operational and full-time were more entitled than she was to attend detective training. Another stated she was overlooked for courses, higher duties and all development opportunities while pregnant.

Difficulties with uniforms and equipment were also mentioned. For example, one woman identified lack of maternity uniforms not being available in her jurisdiction (although they are in at least one other state) and another that chairs were not suitable for pregnant women.

Although the absolute number of women reporting adverse workplace experiences is relatively small, there were significant impacts described by some. For example, one woman stated she terminated a pregnancy as she was led to believe that keeping it at that stage in her career would have been career suicide. She acknowledged that it was fully her choice but definitely felt a lot of pressure when seeing the difficulties her female colleagues experienced in employment opportunities and part time agreements.

Findings relating specifically to parental leave and subsequent return to work

The analyses above are based on content analysis of all comments under any question made by those women who chose to provide further information than the numeric rating. While this was considered the most appropriate way of targeting prevalence and of **identifying** impacts, that approach is limited in establishing the **extent** of difficulty experienced for a number of methodological reasons⁷. Therefore, findings from questions on two issue areas that apply most directly to the Review terms of reference are given below. These statistics should be interpreted with caution as in some cases the level of severity rated may be due to workplace issues other than being pregnant or a working mother.

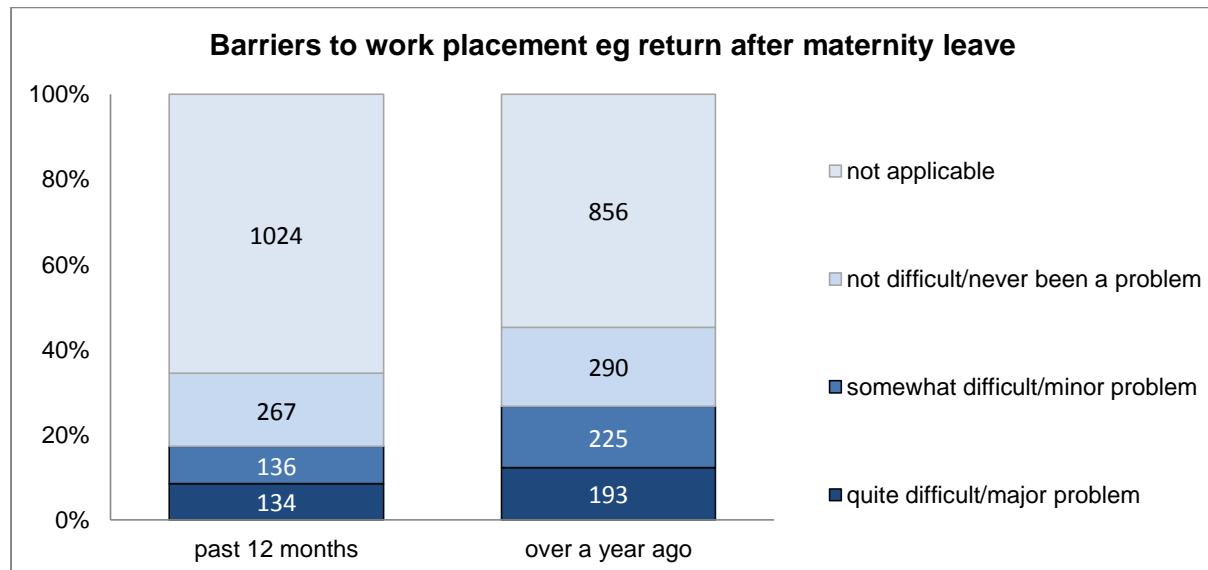
The most directly relevant findings came from the two survey questions⁸ asking about “barriers to work placement, for example, limited work roles available after returning from maternity leave”.⁹

⁷ because: (i) in some cases, comments identifying childcare-related issues were made only under the final question ‘other issues’ which did not include a rating of severity of difficulty, (ii) many women made Review-relevant comments under multiple questions and the rated severity could vary between questions, (iii) attempting to objectively assess level of severity from the comment wording does not necessarily reflect the extent of difficulty that the woman perceived she experienced and (iv) the analysis only includes women who chose to provide further comment and women who may be experiencing significant difficulty (as reflected in the severity ratings) but did not add any textual information are not taken into consideration, even where the question is likely to involve Review-relevant matters

⁸ Q.5: “What about other circumstances where you’ve experienced barriers to work placement, for example, limited work roles available to you after returning from maternity leave. How difficult has that been for you in the past 12 months?” and Q.6: “What about more than a year ago – have barriers to work placement (for example, limited work roles available to you after returning from maternity leave) ever been a problem for you when you worked in policing?”



Almost two-thirds of women rated this question as ‘not applicable’ in the past 12 months and just over half did so for the time period ‘more than a year ago’. Overall, about 1 in 6 of all women reported some level of difficulty with this issue over the past 12 months and about 1 in 4 stated this had been a problem for them at some earlier time in their policing career.



The following statistics are based on only the 537 women for whom this question was applicable over the past 12 months and the 708 for whom it applied at some earlier period in their policing career. Half (49.7%) of the women this applied to over the past 12 months said they had no difficulty with this issue and 41.0% said it had ‘never been a problem’ when asked about their experiences ‘more than a year ago’. For the remainder, it was equally likely to have been a ‘quite difficult’ than a ‘somewhat difficult’ experience over the past 12 months (25.0% and 25.3% respectively) and slightly more likely to have been described as a minor problem (31.8%) than a major problem (27.3%) if experienced more than a year ago.

Based on these figures, it is estimated that more than half of women returning to work after maternity leave, whether recently (within the last 12 months) or at some earlier time while working in policing, experienced at least some difficulty with barriers to work placement when doing so. For about one in four women this was rated as a major problem.

One of the most common reasons given was being placed in roles other than the one filled before becoming pregnant. Discriminatory attitudes are also described by some women in comments made under these two questions.

On the positive side, some women commented favourably on their organisations’ response, for example, one woman described applying for and winning promotion while on maternity leave and being able to continue her leave even though there was a four month gap between winning the position and returning to work and another stated she was assisted to return to work by

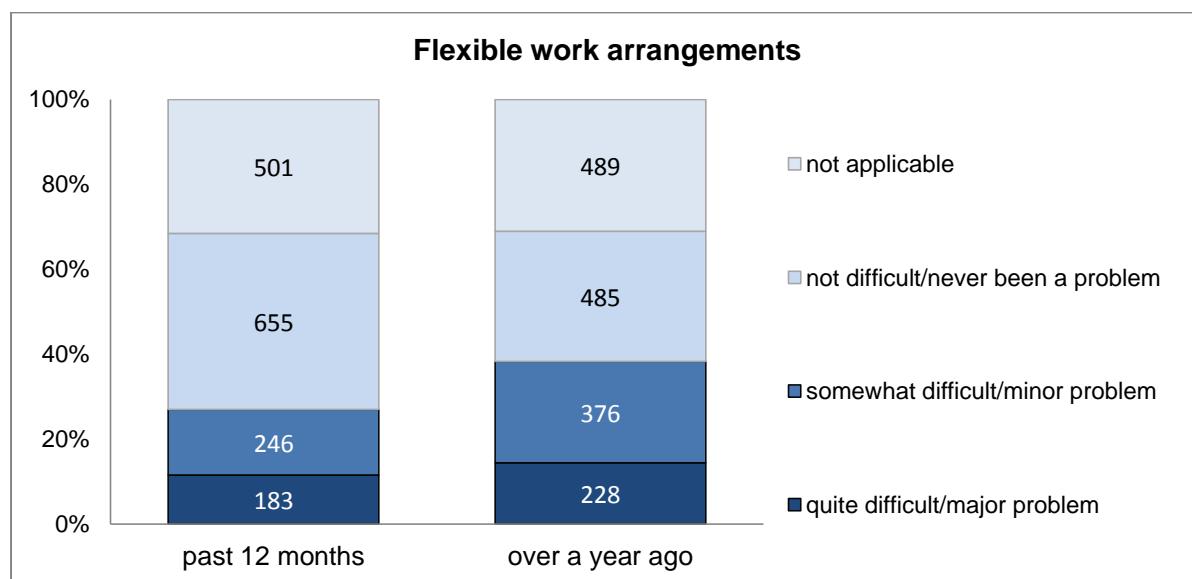
⁹ Although the scope of this question could include work placement barriers other than those linked to pregnancy and return to work after childbirth, the additional comments made under this question show that most women did respond on the basis of their experience with return to work after parental leave.



being providing flexible work hours and an opportunity to work from home during the transition back into the workplace, describing her police organisation as a leader in this field.

The second most directly relevant findings came from the two survey questions¹⁰ asking about access to flexible work arrangements, which generated a great deal of comment about difficulties experienced by working mothers.

About one-third of women rated this question as ‘not applicable’ (that is, they didn’t want or need to access flexible work arrangements) both in the past 12 months and ‘more than a year ago’. Overall, about 1 in 5 women of all women reported some level of difficulty with doing so over the past 12 months and nearly 1 in 4 stated this had been a problem for them at some earlier time in their policing career.



The following analysis is based on only the 1,084 women for whom this question was applicable over the past 12 months and the 1,089 for whom it applied at some earlier period in their policing career. Over half (60.4%) of the women this applied to over the past 12 months said they had no difficulty with this issue and 44.5% said it had ‘never been a problem’ when asked about their experiences ‘more than a year ago’. For the remainder, it was more likely to have been a ‘somewhat difficult’ than a ‘quite difficult’ experience over the past 12 months (22.7% and 16.9% respectively) and much more likely to have been described as a minor problem (34.5%) than a major problem (20.9%) if experienced more than a year ago.

Based on these figures, it is estimated that up to one in four women have had some level of difficulty with the flexible work arrangements needed to support them with childcare arrangements after returning to work within the past 12 months, as have more than half of women at some earlier time while working in policing. For about 1 in 5, this was rated as a major problem.

¹⁰ Q.5: “What about other circumstances where you’ve experienced barriers to work placement, for example, limited work roles available to you after returning from maternity leave. How difficult has that been for you in the past 12 months?” and Q.6: “What about more than a year ago – have barriers to work placement (for example, limited work roles available to you after returning from maternity leave) ever been a problem for you when you worked in policing?”



A number of women commented specifically about their experiences upon returning to work from maternity leave under this question. On the positive side, this included comment about highly supportive organisations and practices – for example, providing flexible work hours and an opportunity to work from home during the transition back into the workplace or, in the words of one woman, “I have recently returned from maternity leave and x area has been outstanding in accommodating my work arrangements and facilitating shared work positions.”

In other cases, women reported negative experiences, such as being transferred while on maternity leave without consultation and advised part time work could not be accommodated in the field she had been in for 17 years or being told “child care issues not a police problem” and allowed no flexibility in working arrangements until union intervention was sought. In the words of one woman: “The organisation at a local level is often too hard to deal with so instead we put up with it and everything else in our lives suffer.”

Although not referring specifically to return to work after parental leave, many women commented about difficulties in achieving sufficient flexibility in their working arrangements to meet family commitments, which impacted adversely on them and their families. This included being pressured to work longer hours or more days than aligned with their family commitments. Difficulties in managing day-care availability when working rostered hours (eg 12 hour shifts) or being required to work days that are not compatible with childcare arrangements were also mentioned – as noted by one woman: “There is not one single start time within my office that will suit any day-care facility in my area.”

These difficulties are compounded for single parents or when both parents hold shift work positions. In the words of one woman: “Juggling my roster is by far the most stressful thing in my life. I have 3 children under 4 and no options for childcare as both my husband and myself work a 12 hour rotating roster. It is incredibly hard dealing with two roster officers in two separate regions.”

In some cases, flexible work arrangements to meet immediate needs proved to be a longer-term problem. Some women described limited opportunities for part-timers and job-sharers to take up other roles and positions once their immediate needs for such flexible arrangements had been met – for example, one commented that “Managers these days just will not employ you if they have even the slightest hint that you are going to go part time. Jobs very rarely get advertised as part time so members get stuck in their current positions as they try to juggle work/family life.”

Attitudes of immediate managers were described as problematic. For example, one woman was told: “I was informed there were no current part-time jobs available and that if I wanted a career in the police I should have considered it prior to having a child.” On the other hand, some women commented very favourably about their supervisors being very supportive and ‘family-friendly’.