

It's About Time

Women, men, work and family

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At the heart of efforts to "strike the balance" between paid work and family and carer responsibilities is the issue of time.

Striking the balance between paid work and family life has become more than a "barbeque stopper" – it is one of the major challenges facing families, employers and governments.

Despite a decade or more of economic growth and prosperity, many Australians say they are not living the lives they want. They feel pressured, stressed and constrained in the choices they can make, particularly at key points in their lives.

Family relationships top their list of priorities, but the demands of paid work increasingly undermine the time that people have to care for their children, parents and other family members.

While a large number of workplaces have family-friendly policies, many others do not.

The cost of not finding solutions to this challenge can be immense, particularly for individuals who are forced to take poorer quality paid work in order to meet their dual responsibilities or who have to drop out of the labour market altogether.

There are also costs for employers, particularly in industries with skills shortages, and costs for the economy as a whole in terms of workforce participation and productivity.

In 2005-2006, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) undertook a project looking at how families and individuals can best be supported to "strike the balance".

Our aim has been to broaden the work and family debate to better include men's role in family life, include forms of care other than child care (such as elder care and care for people with disability) and to highlight the relationship between paid work and unpaid work.

The discussion paper for HREOC's consultations – *Striking the Balance: Women, men, work and family* – was released in June 2005. We received 181 submissions in response.

We also heard many personal stories during the 44 consultations and focus groups held around Australia. We spoke to employers, employer groups, employees, unions, community groups, parents, carers and children.

The Final Paper, *It's About Time: Women, men, work and family*, makes the case for a new framework to support a balance between paid work and family responsibilities. This new framework recognises changes in caring needs and responsibilities across the life cycle, addresses equality between men and women and reflects a "shared work – valued care" approach.

It proposes a series of changes to legislation, workplace policy and practice and government programs to support this new approach.

Making this new framework a reality requires commitment from governments, employers, communities, families and individuals because, in the end, striking the balance between paid work and family is a shared responsibility.



It's about time

"Fundamentally there is less time. Now you're not only time poor, you're also buggered. We always talk about 'quality time' but I wonder about the quality of quality time."

Consultation participant

A few decades ago the "sole breadwinner" family was the norm in Australia. Today's workforce, however, is changing rapidly.

Women are in paid work in unprecedented numbers, and there is increasing participation by people with disability, sole parents and older workers.

More and more Australians now have dual roles as both "workers" and "carers".

In consultations around the country, men and women repeatedly spoke about time pressure and a desire for more time to spend with children, family and friends.

Successfully managing conflicting demands on our time is not only a result of individual choice; it also results from the support that exists within families and communities, and the constraints of government policies, workplace practices and social attitudes.



The community feedback HREOC has received is clear: the external support available to families is patchy at best and counter productive at worst.

Another important issue is the unequal division of unpaid work between men and women.

Despite their growing participation in paid employment, women continue to do the lion's share of unpaid work, particularly child care, elder care and housework. Pressures of paid work often mean that men have less time to take part in family life.

This imbalance has a direct and measurable effect on men and women, compromising their finances, relationships, physical health and emotional well-being.

"I don't have the chance to talk to dad much at home because he is always on the telephone for work."

Focus group participant

A truly prosperous society values time as well as money, whether this is time spent with family, working voluntarily in the community or meeting the daily care needs of others.

Australia needs to develop a holistic framework to help individuals and families properly balance their paid work with their caring commitments.

The "shared work – valued care" approach that HREOC proposes aims to achieve this.

It also means helping people to meet the changes in caring responsibilities that occur across the life cycle.

Governments have a crucial role in establishing and supporting this approach, as well as sharing the costs of care by providing accessible and affordable support services for the children and adults who need them.

Striking the balance at home

Men who are heavily involved in caring and other unpaid responsibilities are well placed to lead social change.

Decisions about how to balance paid work and family responsibilities start in the home. The daily choices about who does the dishes, who collects the children from school and who works overtime can have cumulative and long term consequences.

However, these seemingly “private” decisions are in fact shaped by the broader social environment in which families live; such as the employment options that are available, the cost of child or aged care, and the tax implications of re-entering the workforce.

Australian women currently carry a much greater load of unpaid work in households than men. Women do 90 per cent of child care tasks and 70 per cent of all family work.

While the majority of Australian men and women believe in the principle of sharing care, particularly parental care, many feel unable to make this a reality.

HREOC heard that many families feel constrained in the choices they make by workplace expectations, government policies, the availability of formal care and community attitudes.

Men experience significant social pressure to be the primary breadwinner, and this can hamper their ability to be involved as parents and care givers.

Women, on the other hand, experience significant pressures from a double – and sometimes triple – load of paid work, child care and elder care.

If men and women are to be supported to make choices that benefit them and their families, then more needs to be done to challenge the perception that caring is a “woman’s job”.

Men who take on unpaid work and caring responsibilities can be strong role models to lead social change in the communities where they live and work.

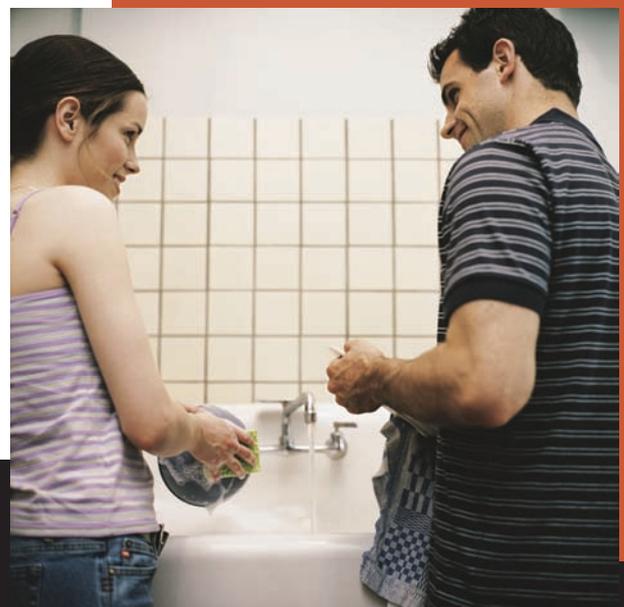
HREOC is recommending that the Australian Government fund education and awareness initiatives to help change community attitudes around caring roles and unpaid work.

It is important to incorporate men’s role as carers into existing government policies and frameworks. Part of this “mainstreaming” is to help existing family services and programs to properly address the needs of men as carers.

Families that have found ways to share paid work and care have been very positive about their experience. Along with better legal protection, supportive workplaces, and father-friendly spaces and parenting services are required to make this an option for more families.

Specific initiatives for parents, particularly at critical or transitional times in the life of their families, can help them negotiate the pressures of paid work and family commitments.

Care is a community responsibility, not just an issue for individuals, and needs to be reflected in government policies and services that support families and carers.



Striking the balance at work

Women who are sandwiched between various caring responsibilities find it difficult to access or continue with paid work.

The “ideal worker” is often seen as someone who can meet the demands of paid work without any interruptions from family life.

The reality is that there are very few employees who will have no family or carer responsibilities across the course of their lives.

Australia’s ageing population means that a growing number of workers will be part of the so-called “sandwich generation” – people who have caring responsibilities for their children, as well as their ageing parents or other family members.

In consultations with HREOC, employees were very aware of the business and regulatory pressures that employers have to grapple with. They were also very appreciative of employers who provided flexible work arrangements.

But the overwhelming feeling was that employees were under so much pressure from the combined demands of paid work and the responsibilities of family life that better ways had to be found to “strike the balance”.

A key issue that employees raised was the desire for certainty and flexibility in the conditions of work, which could be adjusted as family and caring needs change.

There are a range of practical responses that employers can make to address these concerns, such as offering greater flexibility around hours of paid work and, for many employees, shorter but more secure hours.

Providing quality part time work and ensuring pay equity between men and women are also necessary steps to address employment barriers faced by women and to allow families to make the choices that best suit them.

While there is no “one size fits all” solution for the diversity of industries, occupations and workplaces in Australia, all employers share a responsibility to assist their employees meet their family and carer obligations.

Governments also have a crucial role to play. Policies and programs that better help employees to care for their families provide significant benefits to the wider community.

HREOC’s recommendations to the Australian Government include:

- establishing a national working hours framework, which promotes flexibility and encourages workplaces to limit long hours;
- establishing a national, government funded scheme of 14 weeks paid maternity leave, and over time considering a more extensive system of paid parental leave for women and men;
- developing industry resources and assistance to business to increase the number of quality part time jobs; and
- creating greater job security for carers.



Legal protection for working carers



"In my experience and discussions with other men I have found there to be pressure exerted upon men who have wished to change their employment arrangements to make them more family friendly. There seems to be some suspicion if you are a man and wish to work part time to balance your other responsibilities." Submission 68

Federal laws, such as the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984* and the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, provide protection at a national level for workers with family and carer responsibilities.

State and territory laws also generally prohibit discrimination on the grounds of parental status and family and carer responsibilities.

Despite this, employees with family and carer responsibilities can find themselves disadvantaged compared to other workers.

Many of the submissions HREOC received argued that existing anti-discrimination provisions about family and carer responsibilities should be broadened.

Although the *Sex Discrimination Act* applies to both men and women, discrimination on the basis of family responsibilities is a distinct issue from sex discrimination, and there are only limited protections in the Act for fathers and male carers.

HREOC is recommending that a new federal law – a *Family Responsibilities and Carers' Rights Act* – be introduced.

The proposed law would prohibit discrimination on the grounds of family and carer responsibilities in all areas of employment and expressly cover both men and women.

It would also give employees the right to request flexible work arrangements in order to meet their family or carer responsibilities. Employers would have to give reasonable consideration to whether

the request could be accommodated before making a decision.

While this right to request would impose some additional obligations on employers, it does not create any absolute employment rights. An employer who is unable to meet a request because of genuine operational reasons is under no obligation other than to reasonably consider the request.

The *Family Responsibilities and Carers' Rights Act* would help "strike the balance" between the needs of employers and the need to support employees with family and carer obligations.



Support from government

Families need more than just flexible, family-friendly workplaces to manage their paid and unpaid responsibilities – all levels of government have a leadership role to play.

Australia has agreed to support workers with family and carer responsibilities as part of its international human rights commitments. It's important that there are laws, policies and programs in place to back up these obligations.

Governments can lead the way with a vision of social wellbeing which encompasses both the principle of "shared work – valued care" and the more traditional goal of economic wellbeing. This principle guides HREOC's recommendations to government on issues concerning tax, welfare, early childhood education and care services and support services for carers and adults.

Australia's welfare and taxation system

Welfare and tax arrangements play a key role in helping people to combine paid work with their family and carer responsibilities.

The two systems should work together so that individuals and families can receive the support they need to meet their paid work and caring responsibilities across the life cycle.

Currently not all families have the support they need to make these choices. In many cases, the interaction between the tax and welfare systems creates its own problems, which mean there is often only limited financial benefit in returning to work after having a break to raise children.

Sole parents and people with disability also face barriers re-entering the workforce – they lose financial support and other benefits when they start paid work, but their caring responsibilities may

mean they can't work enough hours to meet all their new expenses.

HREOC makes a number of recommendations that aim to better align the tax and welfare systems so that people have more choices about managing paid work and family commitments.

The welfare safety net needs to be extended to support families with specific caring needs who are currently falling through the cracks.

The unpaid work of carers should be recognised through a Carer Card (which some states and territories have introduced), similar to the existing Seniors Card.

The welfare and tax systems need to be made easier for people to understand so that they can make informed decisions about balancing paid work and care.

Australia's superannuation system needs reform. Women commonly spend more time out of paid work because of caring responsibilities. As a result, they are likely to retire with much lower levels of superannuation benefits, leaving them financially vulnerable. This has to change.

Early childhood education and care

"The day care centre there was bursting at the seams. Once you got in you were fine, but waiting for a place is definitely an issue."

Submission 33

Parents told HREOC that having access to good quality child care services close to home or work helped them balance their paid work and family lives. It was a point made time and again.

The services most frequently needed were child care for infants, preschool services and care for school aged children before and after school and during school holidays. While some parents can arrange informal care with family or friends, this is not an option for everyone.



Availability of services is a particular issue in some regional and rural communities.

It is important that families have options about the kind of care they choose for their children. The more types of care that are available the more likely it is that families can find the care that will suit them.

Not only do formal child care services allow parents to stay in or return to paid work, they also provide a positive environment for children to learn and grow.

HREOC was told of patchy availability and wide variations in the affordability of early childhood education and care services between the states and territories.

A priority for governments and stakeholders is to agree on a national policy framework for early childhood education and care, identify key areas for reform and improve availability and affordability for Australian families.

Increasing the availability of care for school aged children is also needed. HREOC is recommending that governments provide financial incentives for schools to introduce out of school hours care.

Care for adults and support for carers

At some point in their lives all Australians will be receivers of care. The overwhelming majority will also be providers of care.

More than one in eight Australians – 2.6 million people – provide informal care to a person who needs assistance because of disability, chronic illness or old age. Almost half a million people are primary carers.

These carers provided approximately 1.2 billion hours of care in 2005, at an estimated value of \$30.5 billion.

Australia's rapidly ageing population will place growing pressure on family and community care,

especially as older people increasingly choose to stay in their own homes.

While people usually provide care because of feelings of love and family duty, it comes at a cost. Some carers are able to combine paid work with their caring responsibilities, however many are unable to work full time. These people miss out on income and superannuation benefits.

Governments need to recognise the enormous financial and social contribution that carers provide and support them accordingly. In recent years governments have increased the range and availability of support services for family carers – but more still needs to be done.

This includes providing carers with flexibility in their workplaces and making sure they receive financial support so their caring work doesn't leave them impoverished.

There are a wide range of carers and many groups need specific supports, including men, carers with disability, grandparents, young carers, Indigenous people and people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

Governments fund a wide range of care and support services. Many work well, but some require urgent attention in the form of funding, research and policy development.

A priority must be to provide support services that allow people with disability and older people to participate as fully as possible in their communities.

Governments must also value the work of paid carers by providing them with decent wages and employment conditions.



Building communities

A recent Australian study found that over ten per cent of parents in paid employment spent more time each week commuting than they did supervising or caring for their children.

Decisions about balancing paid work and family are shaped to a large extent by the physical environments in which people live.

The planning and design of our cities and transport systems has a direct effect on how much time people can spend with their families.

Access to transport was a major issue for people living in regional and remote areas, and people with disability told HREOC that a lack of accessible public transport and the high cost of other transport options, such as taxis, often outweigh the benefits of paid work.

High housing costs, isolation and long commuting times all affect how people juggle paid work, child care and other commitments.

Caring for ageing parents can be difficult for adult children who have had to move away to establish a career, buy a home or raise a family.

On the other hand, well designed neighbourhoods can help community networks to grow and flourish. The social and economic benefits of strong community links are often overlooked.

These networks provide the necessary support that can allow individuals and families to balance their paid work and caring commitments.

Get in contact

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission is an independent organisation that investigates complaints about discrimination on the basis of family responsibilities, sex, race, disability, age and other grounds.

For free advice on discrimination and your rights, or to make a complaint, call our Complaints Information Line on 1300 656 419 or TTY 1800 620 241. Information about making or responding to a complaint is available at humanrights.gov.au. You can also email us on complaintsinfo@humanrights.gov.au.

To order copies of the *It's About Time: Women, men, work and family* Final Paper, or for additional copies of this Community Guide, call our Publications Officer on (02) 9284 9600 or email publications@humanrights.gov.au.

If you'd like to share your thoughts, ideas or feedback on balancing paid work and family life, a feedback form is available on our website at humanrights.gov.au/sex_discrimination/its_about_time/



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