



University of
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Centre for Work + Life

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Strengthening communities and supporting working families

Australians are working at rates that are higher than ever before, with effects on the well-being of men, women and children as well as upon GDP, fertility, social fabric, inequality and social inclusion and the configuration of regions, suburbs and cities.

This is occurring against the background of changing family shape, with only 40 per cent of families being 'traditional' nuclear families of two parents sharing biological children. With a third of 2001 marriages predicted to end in divorce, and big increases in sole parent households, work arrangements have to accommodate transitions over the life course.

While much attention focuses on the effects of work on the ability to care for children, combining care and work is increasingly going to be about aged as well as young dependents, with a quarter of the population predicted to be over 65 by 2036.

These days a job is not the sure road out of poverty and into secure housing that it has been in the past, with the same proportions of working and non-working households living in poverty (12.5 per cent). Australia now has a real 'working poor' problem, with low paid workers suffering both income *and* time poverty.

We haven't made enough progress in the past 30 years in confronting the inequality between men and women with the gender wage gap showing no signs of positive movement, and women

continuing to do most unpaid work (almost double men's in 2006). While women increasingly join men in paid work, and enjoy many aspects of their work, women's inequality marks almost every category of social and labour market analysis.

Work is associated with positive well-being and social inclusion outcomes for men and women. Having a job is, on average, a good thing – but only in the right circumstances. Giving more household hours to work, affects the capacity to do other things – to care for each other, exercise, spend time with neighbours, friends and families and undertake formal or informal voluntary work. Alongside this, poor quality work is associated with particularly negative effects for workers, their workplaces and their communities: these include jobs that overload workers, absorb long hours, are insecure, or give little control over where and when work is done.

How can we make work 'work' better for Australian communities, for social inclusion and for equality? I have four suggestions:

1. **Share the work around:** deal with the twin evils of overwork and underwork (and growing inequality between the two) by sharing the work around by capping long hours at the European standard of 48 a week (including overtime). Give tax breaks to companies that introduce initiatives that reduce working hours. **Pay for overtime:** stop unpaid overtime.
2. **Improve leave arrangements,** and support workers who combine work with care, by:
 - a. granting a paid holiday and paid sick leave to all, including casuals, now 26 per cent of workers
 - b. introduce a government funded minimum period of 14 weeks paid maternity leave at minimum wage with top up to usual earnings through bargaining (only a century late!) plus 3 weeks paid paternity leave (on a 'use it or lose it' basis);
 - c. allowing workers to set up time banks, which they control, where they can bank all forms of leave and time to give them more control over working time (facilitating their care, education and life interests), as well as the opportunity to negotiate changes in the hours and place of work.
3. **Improve quality, accessible, affordable care options** by:
 - a. Providing two years free early childhood education and care (of around 18 hours a week) to all children 3-5 years, especially Indigenous children.
 - b. Increasing social networks through services for children under 3 (and their parents) through integrated 'one stop shops' of childcare, health and community service, co-located with schools.
4. **Build better communities** by better integrating housing, jobs, education, community services, transport and care services, in new developments which include quotas for affordable housing.

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