

7. Barriers to Work/Family Balance

Significant barriers to women's working lives exist, such as breaks in service, limitations on time available for work, and complications with capacity to earn (salaries and superannuation). These barriers disadvantage women because women are still **the predominant care givers** in Australian society.

The contemporary challenge for Australian workers to **balance work and family commitments** ultimately rests with employers and governments acknowledging that Australia's working environment has vastly changed since the 1950s model of a male full time earner and a female full time (unpaid) mother and domestic worker. The family "norm", now involves 2 partners engaged in full time (paid) work, although this does not discount the increasing number of single parent families with the parent working full time, nor the number of childless couples both working full time *desiring* to start a family (but being constrained by income).

A shift is also certainly occurring of workers' desire to return to having more **time** as opposed to more **\$** so that families can concentrate on healthy relationships. In addition an intent exists to breakdown the **traditionally gendered role** of care giving and domestic work, (despite the low take up rate of parental leave, it is often workplace culture, as opposed to the parent's desire, that is preventing fathers opting for workplace flexibilities.)

Where employers can facilitate a successful balance between work and family/caring responsibilities, broader benefits include workplaces being more able to retain a skilled (and happier/ less stressed) workforce. This can facilitate healthier family/cultural/personal relationships which have to date been placed under strain by the 'ratcheting up' of working conditions and hours over the last 30 years.

The AEU prioritises campaigning for greater work/family balance in recognition of the important impact teacher recruitment, retention and workload has for our members (in all sectors), and thus demands the workplace become more flexible and understanding of its workforce – particularly that of a female dominated workforce.

When "Flexibility" can be Negotiated:

Many family flexible work options already exist in education, but they can improve, and **not all educators know these rights exist**.

State and territory agreements do have differences, so ask you workplace union rep or union women's officer for details. However, common models of **flexible work options**, as the AEU consistently campaigns for, range from:

- the ability to switch between full-time and part-time permanent work (as the worker's needs and responsibilities may change – child, sick family, retirement etc);
- the right to negotiate job-share arrangements particularly in leadership/management positions;
- temporary adjustments of hours due to short-term changes in caring needs;
- breast feeding or lactation facilities and time.

It is important that not only you as a union member and employee know the flexibilities available to you, but often it is the **lack of awareness** of policies and conditions **by managers/principals** that causes a lapse in the take up of useful options. Maintaining awareness campaigning and pressure in the worksite on issues of family friendly practices is a step towards keeping managers accountable and cognisant of these important issues.

Structural inequities/anomalies:

The section in this kit devoted specifically to **women in precarious employment** discusses in more detail the ways women employed as permanent and fixed term contract casuals have a vastly different set of conditions from other permanent full time and part-time employees in the workplace.

Casuals are only just being recognised as requiring SOME form of flexibility and predictability of hours if they are to better manage their family/carers responsibilities. One mechanism being put forward by the ACTU in the Work and Family Test Case (2004) included the 'right' NOT to be on call for a shift if they have immediate caring responsibilities, without fear of loss of hours/employment.

Other than mechanisms like these, casual employees have little ability to request flexible work, and indeed no actual "rights" at all to leave.



For a long time, women who took leave to have a family have been indirectly disadvantaged via the loss of income and superannuation, because of the concept in awards of “**breaks in service**”. In effect, the time taken to have a family has not counted towards things like long-service leave, super entitlements, back pay etc leaving women significantly lesser paid in comparison to their male colleagues who on the whole continued to work throughout the raising of their families.

The other difficulty in many workplaces is that though flexible work options may have been negotiated, the limitation on them can be clauses that dictate “**discretionary powers**” of the employer in granting such flexibility. This means that an employer, at the moment, has the right to refuse a request without having to reasonably justify why it cannot be workable. So women are at the behest of an un/sympathetic employer (often male).

When “Choice” isn’t an Option

Both the **cost** and the **lack of places in child care centres** is a nation-wide issue that this Federal Government has failed to adequately address. The result of these rising costs and scarcity of places means many women don’t have a “choice” whether they stay home to care for their children or attempt to go back to work for the necessity of income. For many women, the cost of childcare comes directly from any income they are able to earn, and in many cases **the cost of the care barely outweighs the benefits** of being able to go back to work – a convenient and deliberate result of public policy by a Federal Government ideologically opposed to women in the workforce.

It is clear that the Coalition Government’s band aid bribes, like the **Baby Bonus**, the **Baby Payment**, and \$600 bonuses were only ever a ploy to encourage women to procreate and minimise the need for immigration for population growth, rather than the desire to make balancing work and family any easier on Australian parents. The “choice” is being taken away from families and hence their decision is to delay or refuse having a family altogether – neither is acceptable.

What Can I Do?

Activism around Work/Family Balance

Action component:

- Women are encouraged to get involved with their union’s women’s support networks, women’s committees and their campaigning.
- For example, in 2004 many union members were contacted across Australia and some ended up being used as witnesses to the ACTU Work and Family Test Case in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. Their stories of being un/able to negotiate flexible work options that benefited their management of family were used by the ACTU to support their arguments for particular provisions for a selection of the rest of the Australian workforce. Our members’ efforts and solidarity with the ACTU case has been integral to promoting fair practices in other workplaces as well as highlighting the need for improvements in our own industry in order to attract new educators to education systems that are responsive to the needs of their workforce – still predominantly women.
- As an extension of this campaign activity, your union might organise lobbying or letters writing exercises at targeted MPs during Federal or State/Territory elections.
- The campaign to demand a Federally Funded Paid Maternity Leave Scheme, the abolition of the Baby Bonus and funding increases to childcare subsidies will remain a union priority.

And you can participate in organising local workshops or information sessions supported by your workplace union meetings to ensure that your union bargaining team holds work/family issues as key priorities alongside salaries and conditions in each and every round of enterprise bargaining.

