
Essential Part of Life or Essentially Ignored? Combining Care Labour with Parliamentary Duties*

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Abstract Despite significant efforts to increase women's participation in the paid workforce, Australian politics remains resistant to calls for greater workplace flexibility, including family-friendly measures. One of the issues contributing to this problem is women's disproportionate share of care labour, and the persistence of cultural norms that reinforce a gender binary in the division of public and private duties. A significant oversight to date is the common conceptualisation of care duties solely in relation to children, and more specifically, babies and young children. While some structural support is already in place for childcare, the diversity of caring roles has received very little attention. In this paper, I examine Parliament as a family-friendly workplace, with an emphasis on the multi-faceted nature of caring. In doing so, I argue that while 'babies are ok', there is a need to shift the discourse to one more inclusive of care labour—in all its manifestations—if workplace practices are to be changed to accept diversity as the standard.

INTRODUCTION

The division of paid and unpaid labour has received a significant amount of attention in recent years in Australia. The often-cited figures of women continuing to shoulder

most of the burden have been further amplified during the global COVID-19 pandemic,¹ painting a dark picture of the state of gender equality at home and at work. Naturally, these impacts have not been evenly distributed, but rather vary significantly depending on both the individuals' social attributes such as gender, class, age, and ethnicity, as well as structural variations in workplace policies and practices.

In the global context, early projections from the ILO show that five per cent of all employed women, and 3.9 per cent of men, lost their employment during the pandemic. Simultaneously, women's recruitment or promotion into leadership roles declined markedly, and the longer 'double-shift' of paid and unpaid labour brought on by school closures and limited care services negatively impacted work-life balance among women with children.² The annual global comparison also signals Australia's progress towards gender equality coming to a halt, with the country dropping six places in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report's overall rankings from 44th in 2020 to 50th out of 156 countries in 2021.³ Much of this regression is attributable to the country's poor rankings in terms of 'Economic participation and opportunity' (70th), and 'Political empowerment' (54th).⁴

While there is little doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated an already fraught situation, the issues regarding work and care are not new. As Elizabeth Hill and Sara Charlesworth argue, the pandemic and the 2020 bushfire crises in Australia 'exposed longstanding weaknesses in our labour market and the child-care, aged care and disability care systems', even if 'they are the two sides of the same coin'.⁵ Given the focus in recent years on the need to improve both women's labour force participation

¹ Lyn Craig and Brendan Churchill, 'Working and Caring at Home: Gender Differences in the Effects of Covid-19 on Paid and Unpaid Labour in Australia'. *Feminist Economics* 27(1–2) 2021, pp. 310–326.

² World Economic Forum, 'Gender Gaps, COVID-19 and the Future of Work'. *Global Gender Gap Report 2021*. Accessed at: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021/in-full/gggr2-key-findings#gender-gaps-covid-19-and-the-future-of-work>

³ World Economic Forum, 'Benchmarking Gender Gaps: Findings from the Global Gender Gap Index 2021'. *Global Gender Gap Report 2021*. Accessed at: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2021/in-full/gggr2-benchmarking-gender-gaps-findings-from-the-global-gender-gap-index-2021#gggr2-benchmarking-gender-gaps-findings-from-the-global-gender-gap-index-2021>

⁴ World Economic Forum, 'Benchmarking Gender Gaps'.

⁵ Elizabeth Hill and Sara Charlesworth, 'In 2020 Our Workforce and Our Caring System Broke. They Are the Aame Thing'. *The Conversation*, 16 March 2021. Accessed at: <https://theconversation.com/in-2020-our-workforce-and-our-caring-system-broke-they-are-the-same-thing-152191>

and their access to leadership, it is curious how little has been done to make care provisions more widely accessible—regardless of gender, family circumstances, or socio-economic status.

Current evidence suggests that caring is not gender-neutral; women are disproportionately impacted because they shoulder most of the caring responsibilities. Further, certain industries have been much slower to respond to changing labour demographics: rather than improving care provisions, they have reinforced and reproduced traditional gender norms and binaries that position women as primary caregivers, and men as primary breadwinners. The Australian Parliament can be characterised as such a workplace. Overwhelmingly dominated by white, heterosexual men, it is known for an adversarial and often hostile culture that continues to present a barrier for women's greater participation, and that of more diverse cohorts of the population.

While some progress is evident in institutional efforts to be more inclusive of those with childcaring duties—a point to which I will return later—this progress is perhaps marred by an extremely slow pace of change, often described as 'glacial': 'The new Australian Parliament building opened in 1988 with squash courts, a swimming pool, a meditation room but no childcare centre. It took years of campaigning to win one—from 1983 to 2009'.⁶ Moreover, given that MPs continue to resign from politics citing 'family reasons', there may be a limit to the effect of structural changes such as a childcare centre. The Australian parliamentary workplace has a long way to go before it can truly be called 'family friendly'.

Affordable childcare is a crucial part of creating family-friendly work environment, but on its own it is not enough to change the status quo. This article focuses on the question of how far the Australian Parliament has come in terms of providing a family-friendly workplace. I argue that in striving towards a gender equal and diverse Parliament, the concept of care labour must be incorporated into policy reform proposals in its broadest possible form. I consider three opportunities for policy change. The first consideration relates to the availability of childcare in the Parliament. As a consequence of the limited space allocated, the centre caters to children aged three and under, requiring parents and carers to find another facility before the formal

⁶ Marian Sawyer, 'Australian Parliaments—Still Not Family Friendly'. *ANU Reporter*. Accessed at: <https://reporter.anu.edu.au/australian-parliaments—still-not-family-friendly>

school years, which in Australia occurs around the time the child turns five. Given that caring duties do not end when a child starts school, the current inflexibility of the Parliament as a family-friendly workplace requires further consideration and solution design.

Second, while not specific to the Parliament, the changing demographics of the general population necessitate a broader policy approach when it comes to caring duties. The rise in the so called ‘sandwich generation’; that is, people who are looking after their aging parents and their own children simultaneously, combined with declining birth rates and those whose caring duties are not linked to dependants at all, as well as those caring for people with special needs and disabilities, all need to be taken into account when designing family-friendly policies. Currently, there are no leave provisions or policies specific to these broader considerations, affecting the support available for parliamentarians, and consequently narrowing the parliamentary talent pool and challenging the notion of representative democracy.

Third, for any structural change to be successful, we also need factor in the cultural norms, and the perceptions and attitudes which may not be compatible with the proposed changes. This too is something that applies both to the whole of population, since the attitudes and perceptions of people in general interact with the political sphere. Furthermore, the current cultural norms within the Parliament, as evidenced by the frequent media attention on sexism and hostility in politics, have not shifted to reflect the increasing number of women in politics. This will need to be taken into account when designing new policies, since there is an increased likelihood of resistance from those in power who do not consider the current environment problematic.

In what follows, I first discuss the concept of care labour and its parameters, focusing in particular on its interplay with the paid labour force and the gendered division of labour in Australia. In doing so, I will also briefly note the impact of COVID-19 on both paid and unpaid labour, before I examine the Australian context in which there have been increased calls for family-friendly parliaments. Drawing on pilot interviews conducted with female parliamentarians prior to the pandemic,⁷ as well as illustrative

⁷ Pia Rowe and Jane Alver, ‘Unpaid Labour: Gender and the Unseen Work of Politicians’, in Zareh Ghazarian and Katrina Lee-Koo (eds), *Gender Politics: Navigating Political Leadership in Australia*. Sydney: UNSW Press, 2021, pp. 135-145.

examples from recent media coverage, I will highlight the conceptual blind spots in the public discourse. Finally, I will offer some suggestions for the way forward. Overall, I argue that meaningful change will depend on a comprehensive shift in both the cultural norms which see continue to legitimise women's disproportionate share of caring duties, as well as the structural changes which will improve the work-life balance of all parliamentarians.

CONCEPTUALISING CARE LABOUR AND 'FAMILY-FRIENDLY' WORK

The term 'care labour' refers to all forms of paid and unpaid work involved in caring for others. According to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), in the paid work domain it includes 'occupations providing a service to people that help develop their capabilities, such as childcare educators, all levels of teaching (preschool to university professors), and all types of health care workers (such as nurses, doctors and therapists)'. Unpaid care work refers to 'all forms of domestic work, such as cooking, cleaning, washing, gardening and home maintenance' and also includes 'taking care of children, the elderly or a family member with a long-term health condition or disability as well as voluntary community work'.⁸ Here, I will briefly focus on the scholarly literature on care as it pertains to family-friendly paid work in particular.

Care labour has received a lot of attention from scholars over the years, as the integration of work and care remains a challenge for many families.⁹ There is a growing recognition of the complexity of care relationships at all levels of analysis.¹⁰ The fragmentation of the employment relationships, influenced by factors such as the marketisation of formal care; the growing need to utilise informalised care workers (au pairs, migrant workers and other lived-in carers) who may not be protected by minimum labour standards, and who rely on various immigration policies in order to enter the country in the first place; changes in the workforce such as the increasing casualisation of work and the changing labour market demographics; and the

⁸ WGEA, *Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market*. Insight Paper. No date. Accessed at: <https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/australian-unpaid-care-work-and-the-labour-market.pdf>

⁹ Sylvia Fuller and C. Elizabeth Hirsh. "Family-Friendly" Jobs and Motherhood Pay Penalties: The Impact of Flexible Work Arrangements Across the Educational Spectrum'. *Work and Occupations*, 2018, pp.3-44.

¹⁰ Donna Baines, Sara Charlesworth, Tamara Daly and Sue Williamson. 'The Work of Care: Tensions, Contradictions and Promising Practices'. *Labour and Industry* 2018, pp.257-260.

insufficient focus on unpaid labour in the private sphere, all present challenges to the care workers, recipients care, and the families who rely on care.¹¹

Much focus in recent years has been on ‘family-friendly’ workplaces as more women enter the paid workforce, thus necessitating a different approach to care. The umbrella term encompasses a variety of policies and programs designed to facilitate the employees’ ability to fulfil their family responsibilities.¹² However, the uptake of these varies greatly, and is often influenced by the workplace culture more broadly.¹³ It is also important to recognise that these measures do not always have the intended outcome. For example, workplace flexibility is often perceived as beneficial to parents. However, evidence suggests that the outcomes of different arrangements are mixed, with flexible work arrangements (for example, flexitime) being associated with lower fatigue and less burnout for parents, whereas higher use of flexible leave arrangements (such as purchased leave) and informal arrangements (self-directed flexibility with time use) were associated with poorer health outcomes.¹⁴

In the parliamentary context, there have been some interesting developments internationally. For example, in the UK, *The Good Parliament* report prepared by Professor Sarah Childs in 2016 included several practical recommendations for overcoming the ‘diversity insensitivities’ in the House of Commons.¹⁵ In response to one of the recommendations, a gender sensitive audit was undertaken and the results published in 2018. Subsequently, the House of Commons and the House of Lords Commissions published a combined response in 2019.¹⁶ However, too much of the discussion around family-friendly work practices in this process centred on parenting

¹¹ Baines, Charlesworth, Daly and Williamson. ‘The Work of Care’.

¹² Toni S. Moore. ‘Why Don’t Employees Use Family-Friendly Work Practices?’. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Human Resources* 2020, pp. 3-23.

¹³ Moore. ‘Why Don’t Employees Use Family-Friendly Work Practices?’.

¹⁴ Stacey Hokke, Shannon K. Bennetts, Sharinne Crawford, Liana Leach, Naomi J. Hackworth, Lyndall Strazdins, Catram Nguyen, Jan M. Nicholson and Amanda R. Cooklin. ‘Does Flexible Work ‘Work’ in Australia? A Survey of Employed Mothers’ and Fathers’ Work, Family and Health’. *Community, Work and Family*, 2020, pp. 488-506.

¹⁵ Sarah Childs. ‘The good parliament’, 2016. Url: <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/news/2016/july/20%20Jul%20Prof%20Sarah%20Childs%20The%20Good%20Parliament%20report.pdf>

¹⁶ UK Parliament. Response to the UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018, 2019. Accessed at: https://www.Parliament.uk/globalassets/documents/lords-committees/house-of-lords-commission/2017-19/UK_Parliament_Gender_Sensitive_Report_Response_Combined.pdf

duties and child care specifically, although topics such as the need for facilities to support the needs of parliamentarians stemming from unsociable hours—which naturally are not specific to parenting—also surfaced (see Recommendations 24, 25 and 26).¹⁷

Over the years both the literature and the legislation in Australia have started recognising families as increasingly diverse in both structure and function.¹⁸ However, there is no one overarching or unified policy or guideline covering all industries and workplaces in Australia. The concept of intersectionality, originally conceived to highlight the way in which race and gender interact, has gained some prominence in the mainstream debates as a response to addressing the lack of diversity in the workplace, though there is no consensus on how it can be applied in practice. Regardless, even though the field of work and employment relations benefits from greater engagement with the concept, rather than focusing on its methodological aspects, by merely being more intersectionally sensitive the concept can be brought into sharper relief.¹⁹ Such an approach has obvious resonance with the concept of family-friendly workplaces, which within the industries are often discussed vis-à-vis parenting duties and childcare, but rarely as something that pertains to the whole human lifecycle. In the next section, I will examine care labour statistics in the Australian context, focusing in particular on care as a multifaceted role.

CARE LABOUR IN AUSTRALIA

In Australia, care labour is still predominantly done by women, who spend 64.4 per cent of their average working hours each week on unpaid work, compared to 36.1 per cent for men.²⁰ At the same time, while women comprise 47.2 per cent of all employed persons in Australia, they only account for 37.9 per cent of all fulltime employees, and

¹⁷ UK Parliament. 'Response to the UK Gender-Sensitive Parliament Audit 2018'.

¹⁸ Moore. 'Why Don't Employees Use Family-Friendly Work Practices?'

¹⁹ Anne McBride, Gail Hebson and Jane Holgate. 'Intersectionality: Are We Taking Enough Notice in the Field of Work and Employment Relations?'. *Work, Employment and Society* 2014, pp.331-341.

²⁰ Accessed at:

<https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/Gendered%20impacts%20of%20COVID19.pdf>

67.2 per cent of all part time employees.²¹ When it comes to looking after children, women also take up most of the paid primary parental leave (92.7 per cent women vs 7.7 per cent men), while paid secondary leave is mostly utilised by men (women 3.5 per cent vs men 96.3 per cent).²²

Predictably, these figures have become even more pronounced since the beginning of the global COVID-19 pandemic. ABS data show that in December 2020 women were twice as likely as men to have spent 20 or more hours per week caring for and supervising children (27 per cent of women compared with 13 per cent of men). They were also twice as likely to have spent five hours or more on unpaid indoor housework (54 per cent of women compared with 28 per cent of men). The inequalities extended to household chores, with 54 per cent of women having spent five unpaid hours or more on cooking and baking, compared with 31 per cent of men.²³ The preliminary results from my own visual research, where adults over the age of 18 took photos of their unpaid labour in Australia during COVID-19 lockdowns over any seven days of their choosing,²⁴ also demonstrate the gender disparities of the mental load (that is, the non-material aspects of labour, such as doing the meal planning, and organising the weekly schedules), with women carrying most of the burden.

While a full analysis of the context that has led to these inequalities is outside the scope of this paper, several factors ought to be highlighted, since the gendered norms in the Parliament—while unique in many respects—do not exist in isolation from the broader society and culture. First, even though improvements have been made in the number of women entering politics over the decades, overall Australia's workforce has remained persistently gender segregated for the past 20 years. Combined with gender

²¹ WGEA, *Progress Report 2019-20*. Accessed at: https://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/wgea-progress-report-2019-20_0.pdf

²² WGEA, *Progress Report 2019-20*.

²³ ABS, Household impacts of COVID-19 Survey. Insights into the prevalence and nature of impacts from COVID-19 on households in Australia, May 2021. Accessed at:

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/household-impacts-covid-19-survey/latest-release>

²⁴ Zoe Daniel, 'Coronavirus Has Prompted Both Men and Women to Do More Housework—and Nobody's Happy about It, Data Shows'. *ABC News*, 20 June 2020. Accessed at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-20/coronavirus-covid19-domestic-work-housework-gender-gap-women-men/12369708>.

pay gaps,²⁵ the high cost of child care and the associated workforce disincentive all contribute to a culture that upholds traditional gender norms. This is significant because it has a direct impact on the division of labour in families with child care duties. Childbirth and the transition to parenthood has been shown to have a differential gendered impact in terms of paid workforce participation, as well as attitudes to caring responsibilities, although differences are also directly related to the institutional arrangements that support a traditionally gendered division of labour.²⁶

However, it is important not to limit the analysis of care just to dependent children. In Australia, the prevalence of disability is similar among both men (17.6 per cent) and women (17.7 per cent). Around 10.8 per cent Australians provide unpaid care to people with disability and older Australians, while 3.5 per cent of the population aged 15 and over (861,600 people) are primary carers. Unsurprisingly, women provide the bulk of this care, representing seven in every ten primary carers.²⁷ Interestingly, the reasons for taking on the role of primary carer also depended on the carer's relationship to the recipient, with one third of those caring for a child saying they had no other choice, compared with 21.8 per cent of those caring for a spouse or partner, and 14.4 per cent of those caring for their parent.²⁸

At the same time, the ageing population has also generated a phenomenon colloquially referred to as the 'sandwich generation'; that is, people who are in the workforce, while simultaneously caring for their children and their ageing parents. In some scenarios, the carers may simultaneously even be helping out with their grandchildren, and go through this phase of life while also going through menopause.²⁹

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that care labour has remained highly gendered in Australia. Less researched, however, is the link between highly gendered

²⁵ WGEA, *Gender segregation in Australia's workforce*. April 2019. Accessed at: <https://www.wgea.gov.au/publications/gender-segregation-in-australias-workforce>

²⁶ Janeen Baxter, Sandra Buchler, Francisco Perales and Mark Western, 'A Life-Changing Event: First Births and Men's and Women's Attitudes to Mothering and Gender Division of Labour'. *Social Forces* 2015 93(3), pp. 989–1014.

²⁷ ABS, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings*, October 2019. Accessed at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/disability/disability-ageing-and-carers-australia-summary-findings/latest-release#carers>

²⁸ ABS, *Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia*.

²⁹ Australian Seniors, *The Sandwich Generation Phenomenon is Taking Its Toll*. November 2020. Accessed at: <https://www.seniors.com.au/home-contents-insurance/discover/the-sandwich-generation-phenomenon>

care labour in Australia and the continued lack of diversity in the Australian Parliament, both in terms of its composition (membership), and its institutional culture. In the next section, I will explore this relationship further.

THE GENDERED NORMS OF CARE IN PARLIAMENT

Normalising babies in Parliament?

In 2017, Kelly O'Dwyer, then federal Minister for Women and for Jobs and Industrial Relations became the first Cabinet Minister to have a baby while in office, and the first woman to breastfeed in a Cabinet meeting, while the Greens Senator Larissa Waters became the first woman to breastfeed in Parliament.³⁰ O'Dwyer and Waters were preceded by Ros Kelly and Anna Burke (respectively, the first and second female Members of Parliament to have a baby) and Nicola Roxon (the first female Cabinet Minister to have a preschool-aged child).³¹

Together, these women have begun to normalise motherhood in politics, but the path to this point has been far from smooth. As recently as 2003, Victorian State Labor MP, Kirsty Marshall, was asked to leave the chamber for breastfeeding an infant.³² In response, the Australian Senate changed its standing orders to exclude a 'Senator breastfeeding an infant' from the prohibition of 'visitors' on the floor of the chamber. However, in 2009 Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young entered the chamber to vote while carrying her two-year old toddler, resulting in the President of the Senate ruling that the child be removed. To cover such incidents, Standing Orders were amended in

³⁰ Pia Rowe, 'The O'Dwyer Case: Don't Throw the Mother Out with the Bathwater', in Mark Evans, Michelle Grattan and Brendan McCaffrey (eds), *From Turnbull to Morrison: The Trust Divide*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2019, pp. 199-210.

³¹ Mark Rodrigues, *Children in the Parliamentary Chambers*. Research Paper no. 9 2009-10. Accessed at: https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp0910/10rp09

³² Ben Knight, 'Victorian MP and Baby Ejected from House'. *ABC News*, 26 February 2003. Accessed at: <https://www.abc.net.au/pm/stories/s793397.htm>

2016 to add an exemption to the prohibition on ‘visitors’ for a ‘Senator caring for an infant briefly’.³³

The House of Representatives adopted a different approach to breastfeeding. The Rudd Government introduced an amendment to the Standing Orders to allow nursing mothers to vote in divisions by proxy. Subsequent amendments to allow infants to accompany Members into the House of Representatives Chamber and the Federation Chamber were made in 2016.³⁴

Despite such changes, in January 2019 O’Dwyer announced she would quit politics at the next election, citing family reasons—she no longer wanted to miss seeing her children when she went to bed at night and when she woke up in the morning. Perhaps mindful of the effect her decision would have on prospective women candidates, she was quick to argue that it was not a sign of the two being incompatible, and that even though the role necessitated some sacrifices, with the right support it was possible to do both, and do both well.³⁵ Her choice of words—‘with the right support’—even if unintentional, speaks to a broader pattern of support, or more accurately, lack thereof for those with caring responsibilities in the Parliament, especially when one takes into account the number of people who have since quit for similar reasons.

Care as a challenge to democracy?

In many ways, the status of women in Parliament in Australia, and the status of care provisions in Australia resemble the age-old adage about the chicken and the egg. The system, as it currently stands, is set up almost exclusively to reflect old-fashioned, masculine norms of leadership. The benchmarks for behaviour and success, it follows, are also modelled after these norms, making it difficult for women in the current context where they also do most of the care work to increase their representation in the Parliament. This in turn impacts the quality of decision-making in Parliament, as the interests of the governing body do not reflect the interests of the whole society.

³³ Marnie Cruickshank and Barbara Pini, ‘Fleshy Citizenship: Representations of Breastfeeding Politicians in the Australian Media’. *Feminist Media Studies* 2020, p. 1.

³⁴ Anna Hough, Australia’s Parliament House in 2016: A Chronology of Events. *Research Paper Series, 2017-18*. Accessed at: <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2017-12/apo-nid124016.pdf>

³⁵ Pia Rowe, ‘The O’Dwyer Case’.

It is important to emphasise that this is not a biological argument positing that women are better leaders than men—much the same way as neither sex nor gender make women or female-identifying people natural carers. Rather, the argument serves to highlight the differences in leadership styles, where the stereotypically ‘male’ styles of leadership have traditionally been regarded as the gold standard, while the stereotypically ‘feminine’ qualities of empathy, compassion, listening and collaboration have been viewed as ‘soft’ values.³⁶ In other words, Australia ‘needs leaders who will lead with women in mind’.³⁷

As Rubenstein *et al* have noted, when Parliament comes to legislate around issues,

... the differential impact on people through gender and other aspects of life experience such as age, ethnicity, class, and sexuality are all considerations that must be taken into account. Doing so is not only imperative for addressing the existing gender inequalities and improving the lives of women, but also for the validity of the representative democracy as a whole’.³⁸

Drude Dahlerup posits the question more succinctly: ‘Can one honestly speak of democracy if women and minorities are excluded, even if the procedures followed among privileged men in the polity fulfil all the noble criteria of fair elections, deliberation and rotation of positions?’.³⁹

Care as more than motherhood of young children

Given the lack of diverse representation overall, it is not surprising that discussions around caring roles in the context of parliamentary duties have so far focused predominantly on babies and young children. This, as previously noted, does not take into account the full scope of care labour, and its impact on the gendered parliamentary workplace.

³⁶ Kim Rubenstein, Trish Bergin and Pia Rowe, ‘Gender, Leadership and Representative Democracy: The Differential Impacts of the Global Pandemic’. *Democratic Traditions* 2020, pp.94-103.

³⁷ Ramona Vijeyasara, ‘Gender Equality in Australia: Looking for the Silver Bullets in the Short and the Long Term’. *Australian Journal of Human Rights* 2021, DOI: 10.1080/1323238X.2021.1932407

³⁸ Rubenstein et al, ‘Gender, Leadership and Representative Democracy’.

³⁹ Drude Dahlerup, *Has Democracy Failed Women?* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018.

In our pilot interviews with Australian female parliamentarians on their own experiences of unpaid labour, the interviewees identified a number of cultural and structural issues that both reflected the gendered division of labour, and the interlinked struggles to maintain any semblance of a 'work and family' balance. Spousal support was raised by many, with some noting that their male colleagues were essentially treating their female partners as their own 'life support systems'. Yet when probed further, many did not expect their own male partners to step into a similar role to support them, but rather were more likely to utilise paid services such as cleaners, or accept help from their own mothers. Tellingly, one interviewee also highlighted the invisibility of her own caring duties: 'I have no kids so there's this assumption that I don't have a family ... there is no acknowledgment for those caring for their parents'.⁴⁰

The definitions of what constitutes a 'family' aside, Australia's vast geography also presents significant issues with regards to changing the nature of Parliament to be more inclusive of diverse representation. Often referred to as 'the tyranny of distance', the term aptly captures the pressure faced by those who do not live in the vicinity of the national capital. For example, when Warren Snowdon (Labour, Northern Territory) announced that he would retire from politics, he estimated that during his 31-year career, he had spent two full years on domestic flights alone.⁴¹ And naturally, the issue of extensive travel is not limited to getting to and from Canberra. The seat of Durack in Western Australia, for example, spans over 1.6 million square kilometres. By comparison, the Australian Capital Territory, represented by two Senators and three Members of the House of Representatives, covers a mere 2,358 square kilometres. These distances suggest that the idea of being home 'in time to tuck the kids into bed' presents a significantly different challenge for MPs across the country.

Social attitudes of care in politics

If increased diversity in political representation and decision-making depends on diverse social groups being willing to enter into the often hyper-competitive and adversarial world of politics, then it is also important to consider how the Australian

⁴⁰ Pia Rowe and Jane Alver. 'Gender and the Unseen Work of Female Politicians'.

⁴¹ David Speers, 'For Some MPs, COVID-19 Has Meant Less Travel—and Perhaps a Shift to a More Family-Friendly Parliament'. *ABC News*, 11 January 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-11/politicians-covid19-less-travel-family-friendly-parliament/12996456>

public views the political landscape. A national survey of attitudes towards gender equality in Australia is illustrative. When asked to identify areas in which sexism is most widespread in Australia, both men (53 per cent) and women (63 per cent)—58 per cent in total—nominated ‘politics’, followed by the ‘workplace’, and the ‘media’. Comparatively, in a similar study conducted across Europe, only 28 per cent of respondents considered sexism most prevalent in politics.⁴²

More worryingly, surveys conducted by Plan International Australia show that young women are increasingly concerned by the political arena. In 2017, 56 per cent of young women believed that women were treated unfairly by their male colleagues. In 2021, that figure had risen to 73 per cent for respondents in the 18–21 age group, and 78 per cent among women aged 22–25. The figures were consistent across the political spectrum. Furthermore, only one in ten women aged between 18 and 25 believed that the work culture in Parliament was safe for young women to work in; only 12 per cent would pursue a career in national politics; and 81 per cent had never considered or aspired to be the Prime Minister.⁴³ Given the increasing number of media reports on politicians behaving badly, this is of course not surprising. It does, however, raise significant questions regarding the future of care norms, and the possibility for a holistic approach to family-friendly parliaments in Australia. The sexist attitudes and behaviour in politics then work in two ways in relation to care labour: firstly by acting as a deterrent for an increased female representation, and secondly, through their impact on the decision-making itself. As the research on gender equality attitudes in Australia showed, there is a correlation between sexist attitudes and traditional views on gender roles.⁴⁴

As such, a holistic change will depend on those currently holding the power being aware of the problems in the first place, something that cannot be automatically assumed. Without the pressing demand for change, the attitudes of politicians (and

⁴² Mark Evans, Virginia Haussegger, Max Halupka and Pia Rowe, ‘From Girls to Men: Social Attitudes to Gender Equality in Australia’. University of Canberra, 2018. Accessed at: <https://www.5050foundation.edu.au/assets/reports/documents/From-Girls-to-Men.pdf>

⁴³ Plan International Australia, ‘Just One In Ten Australian Young Women Believe the Culture In Our Nation’s Parliament Is Safe for Women, and Most Want Men To Do Better in Calling Out Sexism’. 31 March 2021. Accessed at: <https://www.plan.org.au/media-centre/just-one-in-ten-australian-young-women-believe-the-culture-in-our-nations-parliament-is-safe-for-women-and-most-want-men-to-do-better-in-calling-out-sexism/>

⁴⁴ Evans *et al*, ‘From Girls to Men’.

party gatekeepers) themselves have been slow to shift. The following quote from former Liberal Senator Sue Boyce is telling:

I was asked repeatedly about the abilities of my daughter with Down syndrome during my own pre-selection as though this was something I had not considered. One woman candidate in another State was told that a male candidate should get her position because 'he had a young family to support'..⁴⁵

Boyce called out the 'hypocrisy' of the Parliament as a workplace, and argued that it would discuss, but not practise, work-family life balance and rule against, but not act against, workplace bullying, harassment and sexism. The double standards adopted by the party gatekeepers are based in deeply entrenched traditional gender norms, rendering it more acceptable for a man than a woman to support a young family. In the current climate, it is hard to imagine anyone making a similar claim for women with caring responsibilities.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY PARLIAMENTS: THE WAY FORWARD

Change is of course possible. The provision of childcare facilities, allowing babies on the floor, and establishing breastfeeding rooms are all welcome parliamentary reforms. On their own, however, they are not enough. The caring duties of Australian citizens are multi-faceted, and span from children to ageing parents and to those with special needs and disabilities. Many people, including children, require varying levels of care around the clock. A creche in the parliamentary building for young children aged three years and under has clearly not been sufficient in supporting men and women parliamentarians with child care responsibilities. It is also completely unsuitable for supporting parliamentarians with other, sometimes more complex, care needs. What other measures could be considered to support a broader range of caring responsibilities?

⁴⁵ Sue Boyce, Women and Mothers in Parliament: Again!. Accessed at: https://www.aspg.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Women-and-mothers-in-Parliament_-Again-1.pdf

The first and most obvious answer lies in creating the proper infrastructure for care. Discussing the Australian labour market as a whole, Elizabeth Hill and Sara Charlesworth note that this should include the following:

universal free high-quality early childhood education and care with robust and transparent quality standards that are publicly audited and enforced

high quality, adequately and securely resourced aged care and disability services

business models and governance arrangements for all care service providers that are transparent and fit for purpose

providers that are fully accountable for the expenditure of public money and the provision of high-quality accessible services

accessible and responsive respite, end of life and palliative care and other services to support unpaid carers

the extension of paid ‘care leave’ to all workers, including at least nine months paid parental leave incorporating three months dedicated leave for each parent

workplace flexibility that works for women and other worker-carers that gives workers voice, control, predictability and security.⁴⁶

These are, of course, not specific to the parliamentary context, but they do aptly highlight the lack of a broad policy and regulatory framework in Australia. Meaningful change in the political arena requires some attention to broader societal and cultural norms, since these also have a significant impact on the parliamentary workplace. This is particularly pertinent when it comes to the care norms and the future of care and work in Australia. In the broader social context where women continue to carry the majority of the caring responsibilities, the assumptions of women as natural carers keep being reproduced, even if inadvertently, and therefore further cemented in the culture, with obvious and predictable consequences in the paid work arena.

As such, simply removing the structural and legal barriers will not be enough to change the status quo since social norms also influence behaviour and limit choices—the low

⁴⁶ Hill and Charlesworth, ‘In 2020 Our Workforce and Our Caring System Broke’.

uptake of paid parental leave by Australian men, even when offered, is just one example of this. In this vein, making both parental and carer's leave gender neutral and removing labels such as 'primary' and 'secondary' carer would play a part in removing some of the gendered norms currently linked to caring roles. At the same time, redefining the concept of 'family', so that we do not automatically default to 'babies' or 'children', is also vital to ensure that the associated policies reflect both the diversity and the complexities of people's caring needs.

Enabling and normalising flexible work, and implementing laws and policies that ensure equal access to these measures will go some way to removing the structural barriers to political participation. Since the 1990s, the omnipresence of the internet in our daily lives has instigated a revolution in workplace debates. The advent of a global pandemic in 2020, and nation-wide lockdowns, unleashed the full potential of digital technologies in the modern workplace. Regardless of a person's family status, the question we need to ask is: how much work-related travel is reasonable during a person's career? The aforementioned example of Mr Snowden spending two years of his working life on flights alone would be a significant deterrent to most people. In addition, our changing attitudes to seasonal germs, looking after dependents who are sick, and coming to work when unwell may also necessitate a shift to online work practices. If technology can help bridge the gaps generated by distance, and reduce absences due to personal matters such as mild colds in the family, it seems that the common-sense approach would then be to create a specific, permanent workplace policy around it. In the parliamentary context, flexible work can also include changes to the sitting hours so as to avoid early mornings or late evenings, or alternatively compressing the working week by a number of days to allow Members and Senators longer periods of time in their constituencies—as has already been done in Sweden.⁴⁷

The Parliament is a unique work environment, requiring separate targeted action. As part of this, the first step should be for all building occupants (MPs, political and parliamentary staff) to reflect on and consider the adequacy of parliamentary care arrangements in meeting their varied and specific care needs. There are many tools now available for parliaments to undertake gender sensitive self-assessments or audits. In Australia, the proportion of employers consulting with employees on issues

⁴⁷ Sonia Palmieri, 'Dear 46th Parliament... A Gender Equality Wish List'. *BroadAgenda*, 29 April 2019. Accessed at: <https://www.broadagenda.com.au/2019/dear-46th-parliament/>

concerning gender equality in the workplace has showed only moderate increases since 2017, hovering just over 50 per cent.⁴⁸ Without a thorough understanding of the struggles from the insiders' point of view, it is unlikely that we will be able address either the structural or the cultural barriers.

Lastly, and while not directly related to the caring duties of parliamentarians, we need to define what constitutes acceptable behaviour in the workplace. As various surveys have shown, in particular those on young women's perceptions on politics in Australia, a large part of the population does not currently consider politics as a viable career option, and views it both hostile and sexist as a workplace. To address this, the need for a code of conduct is clear. This, along with other measures to increase diverse representation, including but not limited to gender equal representation, would in part enable more diversity in the workforce, leading to a better, more inclusive decision-making.

CONCLUSION

There has never been a clearer case for improving the work and life balance of the parliamentarians in Australia by creating a proper infrastructure for care. As it stands, the political arena remains steadfastly stereotypically masculine, and the global political participation and gender equality rankings see Australia dropping further behind other developed countries. The provisions for family-friendly work practices are both inadequate, and conceptually lacking, failing to take into account the diversity of families and how they function. The vicious circle sees politics failing to change because of lack of diversity in representation, which in turn is partly due to, and partly reinforcing, stereotypical gender norms, eventually leading back to a workplace which has so far failed to legislate adequate support for itself or for the population as a whole. In the first instance, creating flexible work policies and adequate leave provisions for parliamentarians, in consultation with parliamentarians themselves would help start shifting the discourse. True change will hinge on a holistic shift, which includes

48 Workplace Gender Equality Agency, Progress Report 2019-20. Accessed at: https://www.broadagenda.com.au/2019/dear-46th-parliament/?fbclid=IwAR32jU3kNYclFsCj3cYdd0xlXHG_a4KGBqoS19vKzpWV-pj1T6sU5cgHvm0#.XM0m0invV2A.facebookhttps://www.wgea.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/wgea-progress-report-2019-20_0.pdf

workplace norms for acceptable behaviour being implemented and monitored, gender equality in the workplace and at home being realised, and consequently, culture being changed to accept diversity as the standard—and only acceptable—practice.