



Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences

Opt Out or Lock Out?

Department of Social Work

Examining fathers' participation in Paid Parental Leave, family friendly work provisions and the implications of policy on the gendered division of care in Australia.

Study aims

Over the last ten years both employers and work and family researchers have noted an increased interest from fathers to assume a more active role in the care of their children. Their aspirations for greater participation in care however are rarely realised.

At present, our understanding of the needs and impacts of primary care on working parents is largely centred on women. We know significantly less about fathers – how they define 'more care' and what policies might support their desired levels of care taking for children in contemporary families.

This national research study seeks to investigate the needs and aspirations of Australia's working fathers. It will examine the barriers and gateways to paternal care of pre-school children and its intersection with policies such as Paid Parental Leave and 'family friendly' work provisions. This study is intended to contribute to the evidence base of work and family policy. It will develop a contemporary understanding of gender and care – examining the barriers and enablers of paternal care for primary earner fathers and the penalties of working parenthood.



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Why this Research is Important?

Despite the significant social changes in the last half century, gender remains an integral rather than peripheral determinant of quality of life in Australia. Gender differences become particularly stark following the transition to parenthood. It is here we see most couples default to gender specialisation even if this was not what they intended – with men adopting the role of primary breadwinner and women adopting the role of primary carer with the addition of part-time labour force participation. These conditions are inextricably linked to wider gender inequities in the workplace and at home.



Is Paid Parental Leave the Answer?

At a policy level, there has been considerable faith placed in Paid Parental Leave to support a more equal distribution of paid work and care amongst couples in addition to increasing employee engagement. Parental Leave and other family friendly work provisions have been available to both mothers and fathers for some time. Women however continue to be the primary takers of all care based leave including Paid Parental Leave. This pattern has continued within the statutory scheme introduced in 2011. Utilising parental leave and corollary family friendly work provisions is far from mainstream practice for working fathers. Whether this is a matter of choice for men and women or part of a larger issue of exclusion and limitation at the policy level remains contested.

Changing the Game

The specific impacts of paid parental leave and care based policy on working fathers is under examined in Australia. However, emerging evidence suggests a growing level of unmet need for working fathers in terms of balancing their careers with childcare responsibilities. Organisations can no longer rely on traditional assumptions about family, gender and care. Nor can it be assumed that equitable outcomes for working men and women are independent from one another.

To reach their full potential, workplace diversity strategies and work and family policy architecture must be based on a contemporary understanding of employee needs and behaviour. Examining the needs and aspirations of both men and women as earner/carers is critical to this achievement.

These factors make the present study directly relevant to employers seeking the most effective workplace diversity, employee engagement and gender equity strategies.



Don't miss this unique opportunity to participate in this national research undertaking.

Further information

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About the researchers

The principle researcher is doctoral student Samone McCurdy. Samone has considerable experience in organisation development, employee engagement and workplace diversity. She has provided advice and support to large, multinational corporations, NGO's and Public Sector organisations.



This project is supervised and supported by Professor Margaret Alston (OAM), Director of the Gender, Leadership and Social Sustainability (GLASS) Research Unit and Associate Professor Philip Mendes, Director of the Social Inclusion and Social Policy Research Unit (SISPRU) at Monash University.