

Outcomes of a National Review: Work Conditions and Equity for Australian Parents

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The focus of this article is to present some of the leading evidence from a [National Review into work-related discrimination, disadvantage, and bias for 1048 pregnant and parent workers around Australia](#). Despite being a gender-inclusive study, almost 95% of the respondents identified as female. Shockingly, the analysis revealed that 91.8% of respondents experienced discrimination during their return-to-work phase, 84.7% during parental leave and 89% during pregnancy at work. Respondents reported comments such as “I was told I wouldn’t want to return to work as I would be ‘clucky’ and my career was severely impacted by my pregnancy, and I was forced to give up my team leader role.”

Pregnant and parent workers represent a substantial and growing proportion of the Australian workforce. The [Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#) reports that the number of children in Australia has increased over the last fifty years, with this number estimated to grow to 6.4 million by the year 2048. Despite the high prevalence of Australian workers who have children, there is limited nationwide research exploring their work conditions. In fact, the last Australian National Review on pregnant and parent workers was carried out a decade ago—by the Australian Human Rights Commission—which established that almost half of Australian mothers and over a quarter of Australian fathers experienced discrimination. [Discrimination](#) can be defined as either direct or indirect behaviour. Direct discrimination is “when a person, or group of people, is treated less favourably than another person or group because of their background or certain personal characteristic”, whereas indirect discrimination occurs if an “unreasonable rule or policy applies to everyone but has the effect of disadvantaging some people because of a personal characteristic they share”. Up-to-date evidence is needed to provide clarity on the current discriminatory issues experienced by pregnant and parent workers and to guide organisational practice and national policy efforts.

Pregnant Workers

For pregnant workers, almost a third of workers did not receive any information about their upcoming leave entitlements. Because of their pregnancy, workers stated that they missed out on training opportunities that they would have otherwise received (21.2%), many were ignored or excluded (39.0%) and over a quarter felt as though they needed to hide their pregnant belly (25.4%). Pregnant women stated that they started to experience monitoring of their work (35.9%) and were ordered to do work below their level of competence (45.7%). One respondent stated that “because of pregnancy, I had to take on casual work, as a full-time job would not accommodate pregnancy illness”.

Parental Leave

During parental leave, respondents stated feeling cut off from the workplace, and more than half (50.8%) were not informed about changes in the workplace that could affect them. Also, 21.3% were

pressured to begin or finish their leave earlier or later than they wanted. 22.4% of parent workers were made redundant, restructured out of a job, did not have their contract renewed, or had their employment terminated. 35.1% had partners who did not have access to parental leave and 74.5% of respondents would have liked to have taken additional leave to care for their child. One respondent said that “my employer (and many others) found it hard to figure out the 'keep in touch' days, which are available through the government paid parental leave scheme. It would have been nice to be able to easily access these and attend a day here and there during my unpaid portion of leave.”

Parents Returning to Work

When returning to work, parents received poor social treatment, such as receiving negative or offensive remarks about working part-time or needing flexible work hours (43.9%). 45.1% were provided with fewer opportunities for career advancement and/or promotions, shown also in “I feel like I miss opportunities because I’m ‘just a Mum’, only work four days a week or might get pregnant again”. There were 26.9% of respondents who were not provided with appropriate breastfeeding or expressing facilities, and again, there was a major gap in action surrounding providing information about return-to-work entitlements (44.6%).

“I was bullied upon my return to work and made to lift heavy kegs and alcohol cases. The stress affected my breastmilk, and I was made to express in the toilet”.

Steps Towards Progress

Based on the outcomes of this report, work-related discrimination, disadvantage and bias is a significant societal problem across Australia, which inequitably mostly affects people with reproductive bodies. We recommend that Human Resource (HR) personnel and employers ensure there are enacted policies *and* practices in place that serve to mitigate any relevant contributing hazards or issues in the workplace and strive to build a healthy workplace culture. For instance, in relation to the poor training opportunities presented for pregnant women and parents, HR personnel and managers need to establish clear communication processes that ensure all workers have knowledge and access to upcoming training. There should also be practical ergonomic adjustments made for these workers to prevent physical injury and to promote breastfeeding by providing a safe and comfortable space to feed or express milk.

Legislated documents and online guidance for employers already exist, suggesting that greater external auditing of these anti-discriminatory processes is required within organisations. It is apparent that many workplaces are not being regulated regarding these matters, and legislation must be enforced. As one respondent stated: “Senior management has a lot of good things written down in policy, but the reality is very different”. As such, future research and practice should improve the translation of both national policy (e.g., legislation) and organisational policy into effective workplace practices that promote greater social fairness for pregnant and parent workers.

From a national perspective, there needs to be greater public attention directed towards this issue, such as public campaigns outlining what constitutes discriminatory actions or inadequate work conditions for pregnant and parent workers. The Federal Government has started to respond to related issues of inequality via updates to the paid parental leave system. Whilst these changes are positive,

implementing parental leave improvements alone will not counter the vast discrimination, disadvantage and bias experienced by pregnant and parent workers. Based on this national evidence, it is imperative to use the evidence garnered from this National Review to make progress in this space and create more equal, fair and healthy workplaces for all working Australians.



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My research journey is driven by a genuine passion to improve the psychological health of Australian and international workers, particularly via policy level approaches that can influence broad stakeholder action. I am an adaptive and 'outward facing' academic and work across disciplines of psychology, public health and law/regulation. My expertise lies in qualitative research and public policy analysis, yet I work with quantitative researchers, and together, we provide clear and meaningful recommendations to policy and practice for improved work-related psychological health and reduced injury.

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