

Pregnant and Working? Breaking Barriers and Rethinking Workplace Policies for Inclusive Support

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Introduction

While there have been significant, positive changes to entitlements and protection for pregnant employees in Australia over the last decade, significant hurdles remain – particularly concerning policies related to family leave entitlements around [antenatal care](#), the medical attention and support provided to pregnant women to ensure their health and well-being during pregnancy.

We have indeed come a long way since the days when women had to choose between starting a family and having a successful career, largely due to organisations recognising the importance of diversity and inclusion through fostering environments where [employees from various backgrounds and life stages feel valued, respected, and supported](#). However, while many organisations have implemented policies aimed at promoting [diversity and inclusion](#), traditional leave entitlements often fall short in supporting employees across various life stages. In this article, we delve into the critical need for organisations to revamp their approach to leave entitlements, particularly in recognising the significance of antenatal care as a vital aspect of diversity and inclusion.

The Gaps Within Current Legislation

Since the introduction of the [Paid Parental Leave](#) scheme in 2011, Australian organisations have been obliged to provide allowances to accommodate various life events, including maternity and adoption. While the [proposed changes](#) to the Paid Parental Leave scheme recognise the continuing gap under present legislation, there is still a glaring omission when it comes to antenatal care.

Antenatal care, also often known as prenatal care, refers to planned consultation between pregnant women and a midwife or doctor occurring throughout the pregnancy. Its [objectives](#) include monitoring the progress of pregnancy, identifying and managing any potential complications, and educating women about healthy behaviours to promote a safe delivery and the birth of a healthy baby. [Regular antenatal care in the first trimester](#) has been linked with better pregnancy outcomes for both mother and child. However, despite its importance, the [only entitlement women](#) have to antenatal care outside of the six weeks before the expected date of birth is to take flexible unpaid parental leave, unpaid

special parental leave, sick leave (assuming they are unwell) or compassionate leave. Some expecting parents may even choose to use up their annual leave balances for antenatal care. We argue that in order to promote inclusivity and to support women in the workplace, it is essential to recognise the [significance](#) of antenatal care and provide [dedicated paid leave](#) for this purpose, recognising it as a crucial aspect of supporting employees in their journey toward building families.

The Flaw in Treating Antenatal Care as Annual Leave

Treating prenatal care as sick, compassionate or otherwise [unpaid parental leave](#) instead of personal leave sends a damaging message to employees, suggesting that starting or expanding a family is not valued equally with other aspects of [employee well-being](#). This perpetuates the harmful misconception that pregnancy and childbirth are trivial or discretionary life events, undermining the importance of family-building endeavours. Despite amendments made by the [Australian Government and Department of Social Services](#) to the paid parental leave scheme to enhance the inclusion of men, we still lack comprehensive recognition of the entirety of the pregnancy journey.

Not only does the flawed approach to [leave entitlements](#) undermine inclusivity in organisations, it can also be potentially damaging to [employee morale](#), engagement and productivity. Employees who feel unsupported during significant life events, such as pregnancy, may experience [heightened stress, anxiety and dissatisfaction](#) with their workplace, which has been shown to have long-term [consequences](#) on a mother's well-being. Additionally, it can contribute to feelings of resentment and alienation among employees who perceive a lack of recognition for their [family-related responsibilities](#).

The Need for Policy Reform

We argue that recognising the importance of [antenatal care](#) and other family-related responsibilities will better promote inclusivity in the workplace. However, this recognition requires a fundamental shift in organisational policies and societal attitudes. The first step towards fostering a more inclusive environment is for governments to take ownership of the issue and advocate for policy reforms that prioritise the [well-being](#) of employees at all stages of their lives.

The Australian Federal Government plays a pivotal role in shaping workplace policies and promoting [social change](#). By acknowledging and legislating the significance of antenatal care and advocating for policies that support employees in starting and growing their families, the Australian government [can drive the social change](#) required to create a more diverse and inclusive society.

However, we also argue that the burden cannot solely be a legislative instrument and propose that organisations must be responsible for proactively addressing the shortcomings of traditional leave policies. This can be done through the provision of [family-friendly policies](#) for employees with family responsibilities, whether legislated or voluntarily. This includes offering [flexible work arrangements](#), extended parental leave and additional support for childcare and eldercare responsibilities. By accommodating the diverse needs of their workforce, organisations can foster a more inclusive and [supportive environment](#). Additionally, organisations should also be promoting work-life integration to signal their commitment to developing a more [inclusive workplace](#) culture; and this may include

encouraging employees to prioritise their personal well-being and family commitments, which in turn demonstrates an organisation's commitment to [supporting](#) employees beyond their professional roles.

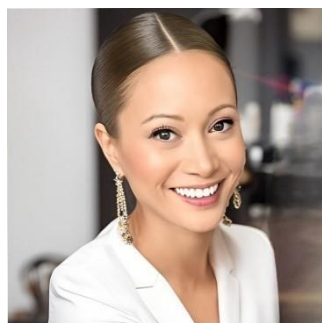
Does One Size Fit All?

While larger organisations may have the resources to support family-friendly policies and benefits, we recognise that many small and medium enterprises face [a resource constraint](#). Through a pragmatic lens, it is observed that despite the widespread advertisement of intentions for a diverse workplace by small businesses, its policies, fundamental basic inclusive support programs and leave entitlements fail to meet these promises, which it purports to champion.

Many small and start-up businesses are unable to offer wide-ranging leave requirements for women and disadvantaged people due to affordability and productivity risks. The only way for these businesses to compete with big organisations is through government subsidies to create greater business equality. Until legislation can keep pace with the growing significance of work-life integration, managers should enable an open dialogue with expectant mothers to accommodate flexible work arrangements, such as working from home, flexible work hours or leaving early to meet a prenatal appointment, and an inclusive work environment as a form of social support, which signals a psychologically safe work environment for all employees.

Towards a More Inclusive Future

Fostering diversity and inclusion in the workplace requires a concerted effort to reform outdated policies and attitudes towards [family-related responsibilities](#). By recognising the importance of prenatal care and advocating for inclusive leave entitlements, governments and organisations can create environments where employees feel valued, supported and empowered to [thrive](#) at all stages of their lives. Together, we can build a more inclusive future where every individual is allowed to succeed and flourish, both personally and professionally.



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Bianca Lemon is a seasoned leader with a proven track record of guiding entire businesses and expansive divisions to thrive in fiercely competitive local and global arenas. Armed with strategic executive leadership acumen, she excels in rallying stakeholders, crafting robust strategies, and reframing challenges to propel organisational objectives forward.

Bianca holds both an MBA from the Australian Institute of Business and a Bachelor of Industrial Design from the School of Engineering, Western Sydney University. She boasts a distinguished business pedigree, underpinned by cutting-edge insights into contemporary working environments stemming from her doctoral research.



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Soraiya Fuda is an accomplished journalist, editor and executive senior manager who works for a major media outlet. She boasts over 17 years of experience in the field. With a keen focus on digital journalism, Soraiya has established herself as a trailblazer, adept at leveraging emerging technologies and platforms to engage audiences and drive growth.

Currently serving as Head of Content and Programming, News Corp Australia, Soraiya leads national mastheads with a strategic vision aimed at pushing teams beyond conventional boundaries, constantly seeking innovative ways to connect with readers and deliver compelling stories.



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Underpinned by an innate interest in human flourishing, Alicia is a Senior Academic in Leadership and Organisational Learning and Development, which aims to build capability through the alignment of strategy, structure and human capital, as well as overseeing the HRM MBA specialisation as a Discipline Leader. Alicia also holds the dual role of AIB's Industry Engagement Manager, overseeing the Industry Advisory Board and Alumni Industry Panels to ensure that AIB continues to deliver on its promise of being the Practical Business School.



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Mulyadi is the Associate Dean (Teaching and Learning) at the Australian Institute of Business (AIB). An experienced academic who has previously held appointments at Monash University, The University of Melbourne, and Alphacrucis College; his area of research predominantly focuses on servant leadership and the unintended outcomes of good leadership practices. Mulyadi's works have been published in *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Personnel Review*, and *The Conversation* among others.

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