

8 September 2022

Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Work and Care

Select Committee on Work and Care
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on matters relating to work and care, and the wellbeing of workers, carers, and those they care for.

We are researchers at the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales. We would like to draw the Committee's attention to our recent research, listed below and attached, which is of most relevance to Terms of reference *b, c, d, e, and i*.

Our research highlights the care challenges faced by workers in some of Australia's feminised industries, and underlines the need to improve industrial relations and early education and care systems to better support workers with their care responsibilities, and to meet children's needs.

We hope this information will lead to better recognition of the way our economy depends on care. Care is essential infrastructure that should be valued, supported and enabled. Formal early education and care systems should be funded and organised to ensure that all children can participate. Businesses need to be better attuned to the ways their arrangements impact on employees' capacity to care. Workers need to have genuine choice over their work and care. Children need to be more visible in policy conversations about work and care. Children have rights to access quality early learning, to have their care needs met, and to participate in social and community life. The life chances of children and vulnerable adults should not suffer because of their parents' or carers' employment arrangements.

Yours sincerely

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1. Challenges of work, family and care for Australia's retail, online retail, warehousing and fast food workers

Full citation: Cortis, N., Blaxland, M., and Charlesworth, S. (2021). *Challenges of work, family and care for Australia's retail, online retail, warehousing and fast food workers*. Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney.

<http://unsworks.unsw.edu.au/fapi/datastream/unsworks:77843/bin5df0551d-5d63-41be-993e-f098287c1b1c?view=true&xy=01>

Full report is attached.

Additional resources: Fact sheets available at: <https://national.sda.com.au/care/>

This report examines the care responsibilities faced by retail, online retail, warehousing and fast food workers, and the challenges they face as they manage work, family, childcare, school, ageing parents, and more. The research was commissioned by SDA. Responses come from survey data provided by 6469 employees in 2021. Survey participants were members of SDA, Australia's largest private sector union. As the data comes from union members, it likely reflects circumstances among workers in larger organisations who benefit from stronger employment regulation, such as union negotiated agreements. Participants nonetheless reported that their care responsibilities are not well accommodated by their workplaces. Many are let down by industrial relations protections and by the early education and care system.

Workers are embedded in complex care relationships

Retail workers are deeply embedded in care relationships in their families and communities. They contribute to society and the economy through their unpaid labour, upon which others depend, as well as through their paid work:

- 55% of participants said they currently provided regular care to another person, such as care to a child, grandchild, or to an older person, or a person with a disability or long-term health condition.

Women in particular provide large amounts of care. This care can be complex, including across multiple generations, as sole parents, as grandparents, and for children or others with disabilities or high support needs. Too often, the unpaid care is provided with little if any support from employers.

Working time arrangements are out of step with the needs of children and families

Retail employers offer their employees working time arrangements which are out of step with the needs and routines of children and families, and which deplete employees' resources for care.

- The shifts on offer make it difficult to access and afford formal childcare.
- Retail work involves low pay exacerbated by short hours and unpredictable schedules.
- Many must work on weekends or nights to access higher pay rates so they can pay bills, even though this takes away time with their family.

- Working outside standard weekday daytime hours is common: half of participants reported working on Saturdays (49%) and many worked on Sundays (43%), evenings (6pm to midnight, 37%) and early mornings (5am to 8am, 35%). Such arrangements are not limited to casual or young workers, or students.
- Workers lack the regularity and stability needed to feel secure in their working and caring lives, and to plan for the future.

Many working parents reported avoiding formal childcare as they found it unaffordable and poorly matched to the working times on offer in retail. Even when accessing the Australian Government subsidy, childcare remained unaffordable. Many said they could not afford care because their shifts were short and they could not pay for whole days of childcare. Working parents experience high levels of stress piecing together patchworks of care for young children. Many said they worked short hours because they could not access flexible, affordable, high quality childcare.

Existing policies don't adequately support the caring lives of low income workers

Many SDA members have contributed years and decades of service to their employers. Yet their working time arrangements continue to be characterised by short, fluctuating hours, and precarity. This impacts on mental health:

- 35% said that the way they are rostered impacts on their mental health
- 37% of parents and carers said that their shifts and work schedule cause stress for them and their family

Most parents of young children (63%) said they experienced difficulties affording early childhood education and care. The next most common challenge related to scheduling. Almost half (46%) had difficulty coordinating work times with childcare and 35% had difficulty finding childcare that fit with their work schedule (35%).

Rather than engaging with formal services, most parents in retail used informal arrangements to care for their children whilst working. Among parents of children aged 12 or under, 9% used formal care services only, half (49%) used informal care only, and 42% used a combination of formal and informal care.

- Care by a grandparent is particularly important, enabling mothers in particular to extend their working hours and earnings, and to reduce or avoid the costs of formal care. Among mothers with a child aged 12 or under, 30% used grandparent care each week and a further 10% used it most weeks. However, access to grandparent care cannot be assumed: over a third of mothers with a child under 12 (36%) did not ever draw on grandparent care.

Where survey participants felt childcare arrangements were working well, success was attributed to the way their family was able to draw on informal care arrangements, co-ordinate parents' work times to tag-team, and, although they were often not available, to have regular, predictable shifts. Many however felt they were only managing due to luck, such as having a good manager, a partner with a higher or more stable income, or a friend or relative who was able to help with children.

Retail workers' references to 'luck' in achieving work-life balance reflect the very thin, precarious supports for care available to workers in low paid industries. Rather than good workplace

protections and policy design, workers have to develop individualised, private solutions that temporarily reconcile their work and caring lives.

Retail workers felt let down. They described how employers did not reciprocate the flexibility that they, as employees, offered. They found the childcare system didn't meet their needs as low paid, flexible workers. Some noted that their large employers offered supports for care to more privileged employees such as office-based and professional staff, but did not extend these to frontline workers, such as supermarket sales assistants.

Inadequate support for care is having profound social and economic impacts

Work and care challenges faced in retail and other industries deplete the labour force. They lower women's working hours and hold down women's economic status. Among parents with a child aged 12 or under, 43% of mothers and 35% of fathers wanted to work more hours. However, access to suitable childcare is a barrier: 35% of mothers and 27% of fathers agreed with the statement "If I had suitable childcare, I would work more hours".

Children also experience the impacts.

- The low paid, flexible working arrangements in retail hold children back from fully participating in education and social life. Young children cannot access early education, and older children have constrained opportunities, for example, weekend sports and music lessons.
- Many parents find it difficult to supervise and support older children at the times they need, as employers arrange shifts in ways that make them unavailable for care.
- Workers in retail also find that employers lack the flexibility that would enable them to care for elderly parents or vulnerable adults, making it difficult to take leave to accompany them to medical appointments, for example.

Change is needed

Changes to working time arrangements in low paid industries are needed, to give employees better control over their working hours, and to ensure regularity and predictability so that employees can organise their caring lives. Better job security and pay are needed, to enable families to engage with formal care services. Child care should be available to retail workers in ways that are affordable and suitable for their working hours. Childcare reform should be oriented around principles of children's universal rights to early education and care, to enable access for every child regardless of parents' incomes or employment arrangements.

2. Work and care among Australia's feminised social services employees

References (reports not included in attachments)

Cortis, N. and Blaxland, M. (2022) *Carrying the costs of the crisis: Australia's community sector through the Delta outbreak*. Sydney: ACOSS. <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/ACSS-Full-2021-Report-v6.pdf>

Cortis, N., Blaxland, M. and Adamson, E. (2021). *Counting the Costs: Sustainable funding for the ACT community services sector*. Sydney: UNSW Social Policy Research Centre. https://www.actcoss.org.au/sites/default/files/public/publications/2021-report-Counting-the-Costs_1.pdf

Cortis, N., and van Toorn, G. (2020). *Working in new disability markets: A survey of Australia's disability workforce*, Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney <http://doi.org/10.26190/5eb8b85e97714>.

Cortis, N., and Eastman, C. (2015) Is job control under threat in the human services? Evidence from frontline practitioners in Australia, 2003–2012. *Competition & Change*. 2015;19(3):210-227. doi:[10.1177/1024529415580260](https://doi.org/10.1177/1024529415580260)

Powell, A., and Cortis, N. (2017) Working Time in Public, Private, and Nonprofit Organizations: What Influences Prospects for Employee Control?, *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, 41:2, 162-177, DOI: 10.1080/23303131.2016.1236764

Australia's sex-segregated labour market means that high proportions of women are employed in the feminized health, education, and social welfare industries, including in not-for-profit organisations delivering disability, aged care, early childhood, community health, community legal, domestic violence, and other services. These organisations and industries rely heavily on government funding. However, wages have been held down as a result of the chronic under-resourcing arising from gender-based undervaluation, competitive funding models and other factors (see Cortis, Blaxland and Adamson, 2021, pp 9-10). In the context of low wages, the ability to exercise autonomy and control over working time have often been considered 'compensating differentials', whereby opportunities for flexibility in social services help mediate conflict between work and family, and make up for lower levels of pay (Powell and Cortis, 2017).

Evidence from our research indicates that such flexibility cannot be assumed; workers in feminised social services are under pressures that place prospects for work-family balance at risk. Chronic underfunding by governments for decades has made working time a highly contested resource, squeezing out opportunities for employees to control how their work is scheduled and organised, and to manage work and care. Evidence indicates that levels of job control in the feminised human services have historically been constrained, or in decline (Cortis and Eastman, 2015).

Our recent research shows that due to chronic underfunding, workers are carrying the costs of inadequately resourced social welfare systems, performing high levels of unpaid work to meet demand, offset funding shortfalls, and ensure system viability (Cortis, Blaxland and Adamson, 2021; Cortis and Blaxland, 2021).

- In late 2021, a survey of 1828 community sector workers (Cortis and Blaxland, 2021) showed that in the previous week, 55% had performed at least one hour of unpaid work,

in addition to their paid working time. Community sector workers worked an average of 32.9 paid hours in the previous week, and contributed an additional 6.0 unpaid hours (average of 38.9 hours of total work).¹ Of the total hours worked by community sector workers, around 15% were unpaid.

- In a survey of 2341 disability support workers just prior to the pandemic (Cortis and van Toorn, 2020) two in five disability workers (41%) worked at least one unpaid hour in the last week. On average, workers contributed 2.6 hours of unpaid work per week, most commonly to complete case notes, forms and reports, and to communicate with supervisors or other practitioners. Many also reported poor working time security: 45% of disability support workers said their shifts change unexpectedly, and 29% said they were often called in to work at inconvenient times.

Insecure working time arrangements, and the high levels of unpaid work performed, deplete the resources for care available to women workers in the feminised social services. Performing additional, unpaid hours takes time from employees that could otherwise be used for leisure or care. It is an unsustainable way to prop up the formal social service systems upon which vulnerable community members depend.

We draw the Committee's attention to these issues, and highlight that addressing chronic underfunding of Australia's social services industry will contribute to a positive cycle, both bolstering capacity in formal care systems and improving employees' resources to manage work and care. This will also help to reduce labour turnover and further strengthen the quality and sustainability of formal care systems.

¹ Unpaid work was higher among senior staff: CEOs contributed 11.6 hours of unpaid work in the previous week, in addition to 35 hours of paid time (25% of total hours worked were unpaid). Frontline workers averaged an extra half day of unpaid work per week (3.5 hours) in addition to an average of 31.8 paid hours (10% of total hours worked).

3. The Five Aspects of Effective Engagement in Early Childhood Education: Approachability, Acceptability, Availability, Affordability, Appropriateness

Full citation: Skattebol, J., Blaxland, M., & Adamson, E. (2021). *The Five Aspects of Effective Engagement in Early Childhood Education: Approachability, Acceptability, Availability, Affordability, Appropriateness*. Sydney: UNSW Social Policy Research Centre.
<http://doi.org/10.26190/5fa0c6861b8af>

Full report attached

This research is particularly relevant to Terms of Reference (d) (adequacy of work and care supports) and (i) (services that are effective for supporting work and care). It highlights the need for early education and care services to more effectively engage with all children and families.

The research examined ways to ensure that children and families facing adversity can access and stay engaged with early education and care services. While the proportion of children participating in early education in Australia has increased, there is a persistent minority who miss out on the benefits that high quality ECEC can offer. This research gathered evidence from ECEC professionals with a reputation for excellence working with marginalised families. We found that engagement in ECEC is multifaceted and that policy and services systems must address all five aspects if children and families are to successfully connect, and stay connected, to early education and care services.

The five aspects of engagement are:

Approachability means that families know that ECEC services exist, that they might be useful, and know how to connect with them. Approachability is underpinned by the development of trust. Often understood as ‘outreach’ this aspect of practice was strongly embedded in the knowledge of key stakeholders and the literature. Outreach involves soft entry points where families can observe, and approach to receive information without the need for disclosures or commitments.

Acceptability. Services are compatible with family values, culture and communication styles. Services must be culturally safe for all families. Acceptability, and the cultural safety that flows from it, requires a high level of skill in interacting with families, in order to adapt approaches that may be standard but could be intrusive and not acceptable to everyone.

Availability. ECEC places must be available in the kinds of services families would like to access and in the locations where families wish to use them. Availability is not simply about places but also describes the ways in which services take into account families’ particular needs for flexible places over time.

Affordability. Services must be affordable places to families experiencing multiple adversities with sufficient duration to build trusting relationships with families and children. Affordability doesn’t just mean fees - the extensive documentation required to access the subsidy system from families in hardship is onerous and off-putting. Complexity works against the grain of building cultural safety for families.

Appropriateness. Families must have access to services they find useful for what they see as their long and short term goals. Some families in high poverty contexts have experienced failure in education systems or are unfamiliar with the Australian system and may have little confidence in the ability of ECEC to contribute to their children’s formal learning. Participants described strategies for partnering with families through building trusting relationships, good communication and trauma and attachment-based strategies. The research indicates that pedagogical approaches that are based in educational partnerships with families is an area of underdeveloped expertise in the sector.

Supporting effective engagement

Importantly, working across the Five Aspects of Engagement is skilled work that requires resources. Collaborations with interagency and brokerage organisations can provide families with the wrap around support they need. Practitioners and educators who excel in this work are highly skilled and building and maintaining the capacity of the ECEC workforce will require ongoing professional development. The cost to services of supporting families’ and children’s engagement can be substantial when families face complex adversities.

Finally, there was strong consensus among the research participants that universal and free ECEC would address many of the unintended consequences of the current system. But, even if ECEC were free, there would remain a need for additional support and specialisation in high poverty contexts to ensure services could work with families across all five aspects of engagement.