

14 November 2022

Senator Barbara Pocock
Chair
Select Committee on Work and Care
PO Box 6100
Parliament House Canberra
ACT 2600

Via email: workandcare.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator Pocock,

Select Committee on Work and Care Inquiry - Response to questions taken on notice

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide submission and evidence at the Select Committee on Work and Care Inquiry.

Please find below the ACTU responses to those matters taken on notice in our appearance at hearing on 31 October 2022.

1. *"In terms of managing their care responsibilities, do you have any further information about the impact on the family life of these workers, or the mental health impacts of the prevailing industrial relations framework on those women?"*

Women face significant stress from the disproportionate responsibilities and burdens of care they shoulder.¹ They are also more likely to retain primary caring responsibilities after the birth of their children and to have to combine unpaid care with part time or insecure engagement.

They also carry significant financial stress as well as they continue to earn \$470 less per week on average than men.² This inherent disadvantage often sits alongside further financial burdens associated with being a carer. They are faced with some of the highest cost early childhood education and care in the developed world.³ And they are financially disadvantaged when employers are unwilling to provide rostering and flexibility arrangements to facilitate care.

Even outside of the lens of gender, the rates of workers experiencing mental health issues as a result of their work lives are significant. The ACTU's 2021 *Work Shouldn't Hurt Report* show that

¹ See for example, AFR (7 March 2020), "Workplace stress keeping more women up at night than men"; Seedat, S & Rondon M, BMJ, 2021, "Women's wellbeing and the burden of unpaid work". <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n1972>

² ACTU calculations from ABS Labour Force, July 2022 and ABS Average Weekly Earnings, May 2022.

³ <https://cpd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/CPD-Starting-Better-Report.pdf>

more than one in five (22%) workers said they had suffered a mental health issue due to work in the past 12 months.⁴

But for women the levels of mental health impacts are even more significant. While one third of all workers were either regularly or always exposed to stress at work in the past 12 months, the rates of stress at work were highest in female dominated industries such as Health (28%) and Retail (27%).⁵ Women were more likely than men to at least sometimes experience stress at work (74% cf. 66%), traumatic events or aggressive clients (40% cf. 30%), bullying at work (26% cf. 22%), or discrimination or harassment (22% cf. 17%).⁶

The mental health risks linked specifically to being carer, coupled with the generally higher risks for women, mean that there is a considerable mental health risk associated with maintaining the industrial relations systems as it stands.

2. *“...do you have any insight into sites of excellent practice, in terms of a female-dominated workplace where the care responsibilities have primacy?”*

The current limitations of the ability to request flexible work arrangements provided by the legislation, coupled with the inherent exclusion of female dominated industries from the existing bargaining framework, mean that there has been little space for women to develop and deliver successful models for balancing work and care.

Direct equity interventions such as those delivered in the Secure Jobs, Better Pay bill (e.g. stronger rights to reasonable flexibility arrangements) are key to improving this capacity. However it is not until we have a bargaining system that allows women to collectively engage in and negotiate the rights that they need at work that we will see significant reform and innovation in the models of balancing work and care.

3. *“..on the right-to-request provisions that are under consideration at present, the British have moved to a right to request which is available to everybody in an attempt to deal with the stigma that often hits people who request. What's your view?”*

It will be interesting to see if this approach works. It certainly has in other contexts e.g. the serious drive towards shared parenting in some European countries has shifted attitudes and reduced the stigma women have faced when returning to work from parental leave.

The pandemic also showed that moving to flexible working arrangements more broadly can have benefits for employers and employees if done right.

The ACTU's priority at the moment, however, is to ensure that those juggling work and care actually have effective rights to request and secure flexible working arrangements. The current system has failed in that regard. And the Secure Jobs Better Pay Bill is a good start to fixing it.

⁴ ACTU (2021) “Work Shouldn’t Hurt Report”, p 11

⁵ Ibid, p 11

⁶ Ibid, p 35

4. *"I wonder if you'd take this on notice. I'm interested in what the ACTU thinks about the four-day week movement. We heard this afternoon from a not-for-profit mental health organisation that's participating in the trial and reorganising their work to allow their workforce to work 80 per cent of the time but get 100 per cent of the pay. I wonder if you could come back to us and say what the ACTU thinks about that as a proposition. It wouldn't work in every sector, potentially, but it might work in a lot of sectors and ease the burden for people who have care responsibilities. So if you could make some comment on that, I'd appreciate it."*

The goals of the four-day working week – to provide a better work life balance – are admirable. It is an idea that deserves consideration. However the priority for the ACTU at the moment is to address the wages and cost of living crises.

Sincerely,

Erin Keogh
Assistant Director of Campaigns
Australian Council of Trade Unions