Achieving workplace gender equality a top priority

Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) recently released several papers as part of its Gender Economic Equality Study. This study showed the impact of gendered jobs, work and pay in Australia – balancing all of these is crucial to improving overall productivity, as well as improving and accelerating progress towards gender economic equality.

What was unsurprising to note in the study was though teaching is highly a feminised industry; there was still a gender pay gap.

A common misconception is that gender pay is based on equal pay. Rather it is the difference between the average pay of women and men across an industry as a whole. You can view an interactive table showing the gender pay gap in occupations in Australia here.

There are many contributing factors that result in gender pay gaps such as:

- Conscious and unconscious discrimination and bias in hiring and pay decisions.
- Women and men working in different industries and different jobs, with female-dominated industries and jobs attracting lower wages.
- Lack of workplace flexibility to accommodate caring and other responsibilities, especially in senior roles.
- High rates of part-time work for women.
- Women's greater time out of the workforce for caring responsibilities, impacting on career progression and opportunities.
- Women's disproportionate share of unpaid caring and domestic work.
  (Source: wgea.gov.au/the-gender-pay-gap)

An area that is often an issue for predominantly women, including our members is unpaid care work.

According to Australia's Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA) unpaid care work includes: "All forms of domestic work, such as cooking, cleaning, washing, gardening and home maintenance. It also includes taking care of children, the elderly or a family member with a long-term health condition or disability as well as voluntary community work.

"Economists classify unpaid care work as a type of productive work called 'household production'. The products and services of unpaid care work are typically not sold on the market but consumed by a family member or by the community.

"Unpaid care work should not be confused with leisure because someone else, such as a cleaner or a nanny could be paid to perform the caring activity. In comparison, no other person can be paid for performing someone's leisure time, such as reading a book or going to a movie.

"Unpaid care work is essential to the social and economic wellbeing of individuals, families and societies.

"The provision of unpaid care work, such as washing clothes or preparing food increases the productivity of the individual and as a consequence care work substantively contributes to economic activity of the individual and the country as a whole.

"The monetary value of unpaid care
work in Australia has been estimated to be $650.1 billion, the equivalent to 50.6 per cent of GDP. However, unpaid care work is not included in the calculation of
the GDP."
(Source: bit.ly/4fGmpxE)

The WGEA has data showing how the role of unpaid care work differs greatly between men and women.

For women aged 15-61, their total (weekly average) work hours amount to 56.4 hours, with 35.6 per cent of that in productive or paid work and the rest, 64.4 per cent being unpaid care work.

For men aged 15-61, these figures where 55.5 total (weekly average) work hours, with 63.9 per cent in productive or paid

work and 36.1 per cent in unpaid care work.

This leads to the majority of part-time work being done by women. Many women have little choice but to take part time or casual roles because of standing gender stereotypes and norms around care roles, lack of accessible childcare and flexible work.

The WGEA says flexible working arrangements increase employment quality for all carers and that: “Workplace flexibility is ‘the ability of workers to make choices influencing when (hours), where (location) and for how long they engage in work-related tasks (patterns)’. It also includes telecommuting, reduced hours, job sharing and varying start and finish times.

“Women are twice as likely as men to request flexible work arrangements and flexibility is most often thought of as a woman’s way of juggling family and career. Research identifies a general reluctance by men to use family-friendly work arrangements because of the – perceived or actual – impact on their jobs, personal identities and career progression.

“Men in high-paid employment are less likely to request flexible working arrangements than men in lower-paid employment, while the patterns for women were found to be consistent across all income levels. A culture that supports both women and men to adopt flexible working practices or part-time work can help to support employees with caring responsibilities.

“Performance evaluation and development criteria that are designed to be gender-neutral and which do not disadvantage employees who adopt part-time or flexible working arrangements are also important ways to support carers.

“When assessing flexible work in the context of gender equality in senior roles, there is evidence to show that senior roles are often quite inflexible in nature. This indicates that, like part-time senior roles, flexible senior roles are rarely proactively created and recruited for, and this is a barrier for women who want to advance into senior positions.”

The SSTUWA’s work on improving working conditions for our members includes rectifying these gendered working arrangements.

Our work recently included improving the flexible working arrangements for breastfeeding members. The union worked with the Department of Education (DoE) on some of the necessary requirements for staff who require breastfeeding or lactation breaks.

This includes a suitable location to breastfeed or express milk, which includes a lockable room which is clean, hygienic and private. The location needs to have a power point for a breast pump, with a table and suitable seat if required. There should be easy access to a sink, fridge and/or microwave in the room and a place to store equipment. Flexibility in expressing is essential, and staff diversity needs should be taken into consideration.

Each person’s lactation break would differ and requires a discussion with the relevant line manager.

While we are happy with the progress we have made with the DoE, we know there are still improvements that need be made to timetabling breaks.

Another area of improvement includes the SSTUWA’s recent Schools and TAFE General Agreements win with superannuation contributions being made in respect of the period of unpaid parental leave, taken to a maximum of 24 weeks.

This will help our members who take unpaid leave (mainly women) to narrow the gender gap with regards to superannuation and our members being financially better off in retirement.

Changes made to our recent parental leave clause allows members to also return to work while on unpaid parental leave.

Keeping in touch days provides for our members on parental leave to stay up to date with their workplace, refreshing their skills to assist their return to work.

The purpose of the work must be for the employee to keep in touch with their employment to help their eventual return.

Work on a keeping in touch day may include refreshing skills, participating in a planning day, undertaking training, or attending a conference.

An employee can take up to 10 keeping in touch days for each 12-month period of unpaid parental leave. This day can be used as a whole, part day, a few days at a time or all at once. Keeping in touch days are negotiated between the school leader and the employee, with the employee being paid for the time attended at school.

These days do not break the continuity of unpaid parental leave period entitlements but also allows an employee to accrue other leave entitlements during a keeping in touch day.

Other leave entitlements that can be accrued during a keeping in touch day include annual leave, personal leave, long service leave and Remote Teaching Service leave (if applicable).

We hope these wins can go some way into redressing the gaps in pay and conditions between the genders in our country.



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