

Budget 2021 – Employment

Work and family overview

Many women experienced job loss and reduced working hours during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, there are positive signs that women’s jobs are recovering. This places new pressures on women as they renegotiate paid and unpaid work responsibilities when taking up new employment or increasing their hours of paid work. There is a limited window of opportunity to learn from innovative working arrangements employed during the pandemic, however, in the rush to ‘normal’, these lessons may be lost. This Budget did not take advantage of the opportunity to embed innovative work practices and supports, with no changes to paid parental leave, no incentives to normalise working from home arrangements and very targeted increases to child care support for some groups. The small career advice initiatives for women returning to work will not impact significantly.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Time Use Survey is a valuable tool and its commencement in late 2020 is a welcome development.

Work and family

The Budget

Despite the increased focus on women’s economic security in the Budget compared with 2020, there is still no underlying, evidence-based strategy designed to help women (and men) better balance the conflicts between their paid work and unpaid domestic roles.

New initiatives to support work and family balance in the Budget include:

- Increased spending on child care and preschool supports for particular groups of parents (see [Early Childhood Education and Care](#) paper). As pointed out in this paper, the vast majority of funding allocated to women’s economic security in this Budget is for these measures.

There is also a very small amount of funding directed towards several initiatives that may benefit women if they are returning from a break from paid work:

- An additional \$12.2 million over 2 years for a fourth grants round of the National Careers Institute Partnership Grants Program to develop and deliver career advice.
- \$2.6 million over 3 years to expand the Career Revive program for an additional 60 businesses – this pays for a business consultant to work with medium to large employers to help them attract and retain women, with a focus on women returning to work after a career break. This will include businesses in male dominated industries.

- The Mid-Career Checkpoint initiative will allow men and women aged 30-45 who have been out of work for 6 months (down from 2 years) to have career counselling - as it mostly women who use this service due to them more commonly having career breaks to manage caring responsibilities, the government has badged this as a women's initiative.

The Women's Budget Statement also included the welcome news that the Time Use Survey, funded in the 2018 Budget, commenced in late 2020 with findings expected to be published in 2022. NFAW welcomes this development and looks forward to the publication of this critical data. The Time Use survey will provide important information on women and men's paid and unpaid work patterns and will provide a strong evidence base for policy making in this area.

Gender implications

Why is this an issue for women?

Women continue to shoulder the burden of most unpaid domestic and caring work, and they often tailor their paid work choices to best fit in with their other responsibilities. This can create conflicts that must be resolved – often this is achieved by women engaging in part-time work, or work with flexible hours or during school hours, working from home and taking time out of the workforce in the form of paid and unpaid parental leave, or career breaks.

This has downstream implications for women's economic security, particularly for their retirement incomes, due time spent in lower paid work or outside the paid workforce.

Working from home practices introduced during the pandemic have the potential to be game-changing for many women seeking to balance their work and family obligations, but there is already pressure to go 'back to the office' for many workers (see [Working from Home](#) paper).

What are the 2021 Budget impacts on women?

While the additional funding for some groups using child care is welcome, this Budget represents a missed opportunity for the Government to consider a holistic approach to work and family issues for women, across the spectrum of child care and school structures and funding, flexible working arrangements, paid parental and other forms of supportive leave types.

Recommendations

NFAW recommends that the 2020 Time Use Survey data should be used to inform a cohesive and comprehensive review of current arrangements and the development of a new root and branch Work and Family Strategy, initiated by Government and including input from academics, the community and families.

References

Commonwealth of Australia (2021). *Budget 2021-22. Budget Paper No 2: Budget Measures.*
<https://budget.gov.au/2021-22/content/bp2/index.htm>

Commonwealth of Australia (2021). *Budget Paper 2021-22. Women's Budget Statement.*

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