

Childcare and Early Childhood Learning Enquiry

- the contribution of childcare to workforce participation and child development

Every single survey, report, enquiry, commission I have seen on women's workforce participation has completely missed the elephant in the lounge room – and why things are logistically harder now for me than they were for my mother – it has actually gone backwards.

Women's workplace participation is utterly choked by the **school structure in Australia**. Until we start asking the right questions we will never get even close to useful answers.

Childcare is a band-aid on a broken leg – no wonder every attempt to stick it on at a different angle doesn't work. Fixing childcare is a good idea, but only covers the first few years of a child's life. Then they hit 12 long years of school and it really goes pear-shaped.

Maths time. Stay with me. Most public schools have at most 40 weeks contact a year and that is before every all day excursion, sport day swimming day arts day, assembly, learning journey – ALL of which school expects a parent to appear at, etc etc etc let alone the 5 professional development days which are of course pupil free – and - it gets better – they don't have to coordinate in WA. So next year we will have 4 children in 3 different public schools and could potentially have 15 pupil free work day a year to navigate for the next 5 years). Before holidays even start.

Most workplaces have 48 weeks contact. It simply does not add up. Let alone the shorter hours of each of those school days. And after exams, even if there is a week or more when your child doesn't have exams, schools appear to simply stop.

Every workplace I know of and have worked in has flexed and been accommodating and understanding and yet 100% of the time it is workplaces, not schools that are targeted to do more try harder to help women somehow keep working.

Workplace reform, targets, and the entire parental leave and childcare discussion - the whole box and dice, has been a red herring and why nothing has changed. And won't until we all turn around and face the right way of where reform needs to start. **School**. Someone at some time, eventually, is going to have to bell the cat if we really do want change.

I have worked almost the whole time I have had children, and they are now entering their teen years. The idea of leaving them unsupervised for long periods seems like a bad one to me – I know, because I was a teenager once too! Post daycare years (most have had enough of it well before the age of 12 and most given a choice would not ever go – another inconvenient truth however we gild the lily) – it appears the community has – mm no plan whatsoever. And then we are puzzled that so many teenagers are not coping?

I have watched countless smart, talented and hard working women gear down and out of the workplace and if they step back in, into roles well below their ability and capacity to contribute and earn, to make their daily lives and families function.

Here is the core inconvenient truth. School hours and structure are what needs reform if anyone is serious about women working (ie paying tax, earning super so they are less dependent on the

pension, paying back their HECs and helping their families' finances and mortgages from hell – presumably all things we would like to see as a community).

Let's start with less summer holidays. Those holidays were invented in the 19th Century so children could **bring in the harvest**. True. Think about it.

Our kids are not exhausted, and it is only ones from affluent families who do interesting expensive activities, the rest are parked wherever parents can manage it. And where are they parked, in all the gaps between school and work hours is another very good question our community seems unwilling to ask, since even formal daycare ends at age 12. TV? Gaming? Risky experimenting of any variation you can think of? Few people in Australia have the luxury of extended family, so grandparents holding the fort is not a policy plan. Even if we try and work out a way of paying them.

I am fully supportive of in-home nannies being eligible for government support. As children get older, it is actually the only option if you don't want to leave them to their own creative devices. If we're going to home audit because we thinking mothers are rorting the scheme, why not audit investment properties that are negatively geared for all the so-called improvements? I'm all for audit when other people's money is being spent (including mine), but do not think retirees are magically more honest than mothers.

Next, I do not the cert 3 has anything to do with providing a loving safe environment for small children. Nana or a trusted family friend should not need to pay \$3K to get a ticket to show they can care for small children. I gave several uni students great jobs that paid well, flexed around their hours and exams, gave my children wonderful loving care and received not 1 cent of subsidy. The hard fact was the nearby daycares were glorified children's carparks. Holidays were camping and I am grateful I was able to make that choice of where the money went – but when mums not working were getting government money using daycare so they could have a day off having coffee

I am happy for the hours of care claimed to be cross-checked with a parent's payslips. Otherwise they simply lose the right to claim.

For women to be able to make the contribution so many want to make, after working so hard get into the workplace, often paying so much for their qualifications, that is good not only for them but an economy that should not need to fund their retirement, what has to happen is changes to school.

The concept of principals being responsible for childcare is a nonsense. School could have another hour a day and include daily PE which in terms of taxpayers health return would be easy to calculate and of substantial value, with 8-10 weeks holidays. Maximum.

I work in the energy industry so am well familiar with rent seeking behaviour. I can hear the teachers' union from my lounge room. Again, to be clear. There are no exhausted children. If we need to pay teachers or extra staff more, so be it – the sums of additional tax, super earned so reducing future pension payments, less government benefits etc would again be easily quantifiable.

Why not have selected schools trial it, maybe in disadvantaged areas to start where many single mums are under such government pressure to find work, and see if parents vote with their feet by heading off to work knowing their children are safe and learning more?

My mother-in-law reminisced how when the men went to war in Britain in WW2 they changed school hours so women could fill their places. Interesting. No confusion there. No policies, longwinded enquiries or workplace targets, just action. When women could work, they did. Then when they wanted those spots vacated so returned servicemen could find a job, school hours changed back. When it really mattered, government knew perfectly well what to do.

We subsidise babies to go into long hour daycare 48 weeks a year, up to 12 hours a day. We are actively encouraging this with the ill-conceived parenting leave plan – presumably this is what they expect to happen when the mums do go back to work. But new mums – you have 18 years to go!

These babies and toddlers who as a society we have determined can be away from their home and parents for all this time, supposedly morph into fragile children who can only bear at the MOST 6 hours school a day and need 14 odd weeks holiday a year? Where is the thought process in this?

And. It gets better –there's 2 more weeks holiday the teachers somehow negotiated in when we went from 3-4 terms compared with my school years. Who signed that one off?

My view is that overall, babies and toddlers are best supported by the community to be at home with their mothers and families as far as possible. This is a short window in a working woman's life, and a pivotal time for the pre-schoolers development. Government supported day-care nannies etc does have a real role to play in helping women retain a level of workplace connection.

And then, when children are older, more independent and ready to learn, for the next 12 years of school life let's look at more closely aligning school and work.

Until this happens, any change that does occur will be at the margin, and

at the direct expense of the children, left unsupervised or in poor quality care

highly costly to the taxpayer, and

stressful for parents, especially mothers, who continue to make 1+1 add up to 3 every single day.

Thank you