Australia continues to undergo significant reform to industrial relations arrangements; these processes of change have been underway since the late 1980s, first through reforms introduced by the Hawke and Keating Labor Governments (1983-1996) with a shift away from centralised to more enterprise-based flexibility from the late1980s, and then more dramatically under the Howard conservative Government (1996-2007) with more scope for individualised employment arrangements, a weaker safety net, and less scope for unionisation. The election of the Rudd Labor Government in 2007 has seen some important positive direct action on work and family with policy innovation that has redressed, to some extent, the backward steps of the Howard years. However, the seismic shifts underway in the Australian labour market make a compelling argument for more action on a wider front if labour regulation and policy - and especially scope for the all important expression of worker voice – is to benefit the growing proportion of Australian workers with caring responsibilities.

This contribution briefly outlines some important changes in the Australian labour market over recent decades, which shape the context of work and family policy and labour practices in relation to it. I then summarize some key changes on two fronts that are critical to work and family outcomes (rights around flexibility at work and paid parental leave), exploring how they might assist workers to better reconcile work and care². The paper then turns to some gaps in policy – especially in relation to workplace cultures, management and supervision - and the wide gap in effective voice that affects many workers, especially young, casual, long hours and professional workers, and the longer term challenge this creates for work and family policy in Australia - and in many other countries also.

1. The changing Australian labour market context for work and family policy and labour practices

Over the past twenty years, Australia has seen very significant increases in labour market participation and in GDP, including through the recent international downturn. Australians are giving more to work, and generating more productivity and profit as a consequence, yet many workers are negatively affected by their work and, as a whole, take home a declining share of its

---

¹ Please note that this is a draft, not for citation. A final paper after the conference will be available, with complete reference list.

² There have also been some important changes to childcare policy, including significant moves towards a national approach to staffing ratios and qualifications, as well as announcements – some of them recently overturned – of more childcare places. The Rudd Government has recently cancelled a large number of new multi-purpose childcare centres co-located with schools which it had previously announced in response to the growing demand for quality care for pre-school children and the need to end the ‘double drop off’ that afflicts many parents who drop pre-schoolers and school-aged children to different locations.
rewards. Many feel that they are working harder, and find that new technologies – for all their benefits – are making work more unbounded in time and space as it spills over into home, sleep-time, travel and social life.

Higher levels of employment participation have been identified as a central pivot on which the goals of economic productivity, social inclusion and increasing living standards rest. In Australia, labour force participation across the life-cycle is an increasingly significant public and private policy issue, given the ageing of the population (Australian Government, 2010a). Governments, employers and those with an interest in social inclusion (Australian Government 2010b) are committed to increasing rates of workforce participation, especially amongst older citizens and women whose current rates of participation in paid work – while increasing – lag behind men’s. Participation in paid work is a major determinant of health and social inclusion, as well as central to Australia’s productivity (Skills Australia, 2010).

* Australians are working more*

Paid work is a major part of Australians’ lives. Two-thirds of Australians are now in paid work (ABS cat. No. 6202.0) and women’s rate of participation has been rising strongly compensating for men’s decline and underpinning the overall increase in labour market participation. Figure 1 illustrates the steady rise for women and the steady decline for men since 1986.

```
\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{chart.png}
\caption{Chart illustrating participation rates for male, female, and total population from 1986 to 2010.}
\end{figure}
```

*Little change on the domestic work front*

This change on the paid work front – as in most other developed countries - has not been accompanied by a shift in unpaid work, with women still doing around twice as much as men (Craig and Mullan 2008), leaving many women rushed and pressed for time (ABS cat. No. 4102.0). Australian women are increasing their qualifications at a faster rate than men, especially through higher education. However, in view of their overwhelming responsibility for housework and care, many women ‘step back’ from both paid work and the use of their qualifications when they have children to try to reconcile work and care.
Many Australians report intensified work and just under one in five now work more than 48 hours a week. In the week of the 2006 Census, amongst those who worked any hours in the week before, 26 per cent of men worked more than 48 hours a week, 9.4 per cent of women and overall 18.4 per cent worked these long hours (ABS Census 2006). As the Australian Treasury point out in their 2010 Intergenerational report, over the past four decades labour productivity growth has accounted for most of the increase in real GDP per capita (Australian Government 2010, chapter 2). Alongside more hours at work, each hour of work is generating more productivity. Figure 2 shows how GDP per hour worked has risen significantly in the past two decades.

![Figure 2](image2.png)

Figure 2 Index of GDP per hour worked, 1986-2009 (2007=100). Source: ABS cat no 5204.0 Australian System of National Accounts, Table 1, Key National Accounts Aggregates, Time Series.

At the same time, unit labour costs have fallen steadily as the index of unit labour costs shows in figure 3. Figure 4 shows how, while hours in paid work are resulting in higher levels of GDP per hour contributed and labour costs have steadily fallen, aggregate hours have steadily risen at about the same rate as the population of workers (Figure 4).

![Figure 3](image3.png)

![Figure 4](image4.png)
The combination of more productive hours in work – especially from women – increasing hours given to paid work and declining labour costs has contributed to a very significant shift in the wages/profit share in Australia.

The wages/profit share

The wages share of total income in Australia has fallen from a peak of 62.4 per cent in 1974-75 to 53.4 per cent in 2007-8 (ABS cat no 5204.0, p 7). Despite an increase in labour productivity arising from a more skilled and educated labour market and more aggregate working hours, the total wages share has declined since the mid-1990s and especially in the last seven years. On the other hand, the profit share has reached record levels: The profit share of GDP in Australia has trended steadily upward since the mid-1970s with a steep rise in the past seven years (ABS cat no 5204.0 Australian System of National Accounts, page 8).

Occupational and industry change

At the same time, the occupational and industry composition of the workforce has changed, with very rapid relative growth in professional and managerial occupations and service sector workers: each of these is characterised by a much more amorphous ‘wage effort’ bargain than is traditional in industrial relations. Poorly defined psychological and material contracts, and a strong impulse to provide quality service in many fields like health, education and other professions, combine to fuel many hours of unpaid work and jobs with poor time and space boundaries. A quarter of overtime workers in Australia do not receive any form of compensation. The low levels of unionisation across the workforce and especially amongst the expanding occupations of professional, service and managerial workers as well as young workers, do not help. New technologies that enable workers to work ‘untethered’ in time and space – at home, while travelling, in usual sleep or recreation times – also make the ‘wage effort’ bargain harder to manage directly. This has important effects upon families and households, as well as on the health and well-being of workers.

Worker voice and union density

Worker voice has also been in decline, especially that provided through union membership, partly reflecting the occupational and industry shifts in employment along with growth in part-time jobs and casual and contract work. In May 2010, 29.8 per cent of all Australian workers were part-time (ie worked less than 35 hours a week in their main job), and 45.9 per cent of all women worked part-time, compared to 16.4 per cent of men; these are very high rates of part-time work compared to the OECD average. In August 2009, 24 per cent of all Australian workers were casual (as indicated by the proportion who lacked any paid holiday or sick leave), and three-quarters of these were part-timers. Unionisation amongst this group – disproportionately female, young and in the retail sector – is very low.

In August 2009, one in five Australian workers were union members in their main jobs. While this was up by 82,200 on a year before, a long term trend in union decline has been underway from the 1970 peak of over half (Australian Bureau of Statistics cat no 6310.0). This represents 1.8 million trade union members in their main job, a rise of 82,200 from the previous year. Only 15 per cent of part-timers (22 percent full-timers) and 17 per cent of private sector workers were members of unions (47 per cent public sector).

A changing world of work, with implications for work-life interaction

All of these developments make up the background against which work and family issues have emerged as important issues affecting a growing proportion of Australians. At present around
four in ten Australian workers at work on any day of the week have responsibility for the care of a dependent. This is a long way from the realities of the 1960s, with very rapid growth in two-earner, and sole parent-worker, families in Australia. More intensive and expansive paid work – with a declining share of its rewards - and changing household structure, amidst very slow change in many key policies affecting work and family life, has negatively affected many individuals. This picture will be very familiar to Canadians given recent reports about work, time and well-being amongst Canadian workers (Galloway and Wingrove, Globe and Mail, 15th June 2010, p 1,6).

Work and family issues were declared a ‘barbecue stopper’ by Prime Minister Howard in the Australian 2001 election campaign (equivalent to saying that they matter a lot to Australians – enough to take over barbecue conversations), and again figured in the 2004 and 2007 elections. However, it is fair to say that progress under both conservative and Labor Governments (while different) has been sluggish and slow to take effect – and this is reflected in high levels of work-family conflict amongst Australian workers.

**Measures of work and family conflict**

The Centre for Work + Life (CWL) has been measuring how work negatively affects life beyond work for the past four years\(^3\) through large national representative surveys of workers. The Australian Work and Life Index (AWALI)\(^4\) allows us to examine trends in Australian’s work-life outcomes over a time span that has included the global financial crisis, a change of national government, and significant changes to industrial relations law and employee entitlements including the *Fair Work Act* 2009.

Our analysis suggests that Australians are paying a high price for the growing aggregate hours they give to paid work. Expansive and intensive work is associated with a high level of negative spillover from work to household and community life. High levels of work-life interference are associated with significantly worse health outcomes: those with poorer work-life outcomes have worse health self-assessments, more visits to a health professional and greater use of prescription medication. This accords with Canadian findings (Higgins, Duxbury and Johnson 2004).

*Work-life interference is widespread*

Work – for all its benefits – has negative effects on the majority of Australian workers, creating strain for them and restricting the time they would like for themselves, their families and friends, and their communities. More than half of Australian workers find that work interferes with their activities beyond work and with enough time for family and friends. More than half feel often or almost always rushed and pressed for time.

---

\(^3\) We focus on how work affects families with dependent children – the usual focus of work-family conflict – but, beyond this, how it affects all workers, given that many employees without dependents show signs of negative effects arising from work for how they would prefer to live their lives. We focus on work-to-life conflict rather than the reverse because the effects of the former outweigh the latter several times over as our research, and that of many other scholars, confirms (Pocock, Skinner and Williams 2007). We focus on negative effects because these are the focus of policy interventions; of course, work and its wages also have many positive effects on workers (Pocock 2009).

\(^4\) AWALI measures five perceptions of work-life interference including ‘general interference’ (ie the frequency that work interferes with responsibilities or activities outside work); ‘time strain’ (ie the frequency that work restricts time with family or friends); work-to-community interference, measuring the frequency that work affects workers’ ability to develop or maintain connections and friendships in their local community; satisfaction with overall work-life ‘balance’; and frequency of feeling rushed or pressed for time. We bring together these five measures of work-life interference to arrive at an overall work-life index that is scaled from 0 (best work-life interference) to 100 (worst work-life interference). The index provides an easily understood general measure of work-life interference and allows us to analyse how request outcomes relate to work-life interference.
Some groups of workers are particularly affected by negative strain arising from work: most prominently people in poor quality jobs (especially workers who feel they have too much to do), individuals with unsympathetic supervisors or workplace cultures, those with little flexibility, those who work long hours, those who work more than they would prefer, managers and professionals, those at either end of the income scale, those in middle-age, and people who have longer commuting time. Whilst we observe small changes across the years, consistent patterns are clearly evident. Those with a supportive boss in a supportive workplace, some flexibility, hours that suit them, a reasonable workload and not too much responsibility for care beyond work, manage much better than others. Women do worse than men when we allow for differences in hours, and mothers much worse. A substantial proportion of Australian workers, around one-quarter, often or almost always feel that work interferes with their quality of life by reducing their capacity to engage in activities outside of work and spend time with family and friends. The majority (60 per cent) of women feel persistently time pressured, and nearly half of men also report being often or almost always rushed or pressed for time. For many Australian workers daily life is very busy and time strains and pressures are common.

Working hours matter: length, timing, predictability and fit with preferences

Not surprisingly, parenting responsibilities have a significant impact on increasing work-life strains. This most likely explains the higher levels of work-life interference observed for those in their middle years (34-55 years). AWALI data shows that time pressures are widespread in the Australian working population. They are a common experience for full-time employees: in each of the past four years more than half of full-time employees report frequently feeling rushed or pressed for time. These pressures also affect many women who work part-time. Women are more likely to feel frequently time pressured than men and we find that part-time work offers men more protection from work-life pressures than it does men, and that protection appears to have declined over the past four years for both sexes.

Six in ten women felt almost always rushed and pressed for time. This high level of very time pressured women is consistent across recent years. This reflects women’s double load at home and at work – and the generally unchanging distribution of domestic and care work amongst men and women.

Working mothers are particularly affected with seven in ten almost always rushed and pressed for time in 2010 (compared to just under six in ten fathers). Once again, high time pressure for mothers is consistent across recent years. Clearly, many mothers feel persistently pushed when they hold down a job as well as care for children, and this is likely to affect their inclination to participate in paid work, and the hours they work.

Long hours: bad for work-life interference

A consistent picture connecting long working hours to very significantly higher negative work-life interference is clear from AWALI over its four years. In 2010, employees working 48+ hours a week had significantly worse work-life interaction than part-timers or those working between 35-47 hours. In each category women are worse affected than men, and especially when they work more than 48+ hours a week.

Preferred working hours

Many Australians are working more than they would like, even taking account of the lesser income they would receive if they worked the hours they would prefer. Full-time employees would prefer to reduce their working week by an average of about three quarters of a day. Work-life interference is significantly higher for men and women who would prefer to reduce their working week compared with those who have a good fit.
Our analysis suggests that if workers can better match their actual hours to their preferred hours, their reconciliation of work-life fit will be easier. Further, given the poor work-life outcomes for those working long hours and the close correlation between long hours of work and a poor fit between actual and preferred hours, long hours workers are especially likely to reap positive benefits from working the fewer hours that are close to their working preferences.

Work-life pressures have stayed fairly steady over the last four years with no sign of a fall in 2009 associated with the global slowdown despite a significant fall in aggregate hours worked. Unfortunately, negative work-life interference appears to be recession-proof. Overall, a slight upward trend in negative work-life interference is evident amongst Australian women over the past four years. Not surprisingly this picture has drawn increasing attention to work and family policy; however, practical action has been slower to flow that political rhetoric. Two areas of significant change however are the introduction of a right to request flexible working conditions, and the prospect of a national paid parental leave scheme, which I now consider in turn.

‘Fair for work and family? Labor reforms to Australia’s workplace regulation for work and family’

Since 2008 two important reforms to work and family have been proposed by the national Labor Government: increased access to flexibility for some Australian workers through the Fair Work Act 2009 and a proposal for national paid parental leave scheme. While other aspects of the new arrangements also have important implications for work and family (including new arrangements for fixing the minimum wage and provisions for flexibility in relation to workplace agreements) I concentrate on these two direct measures in this analysis in view of their significance especially for those most afflicted by poor work-family interference: working mothers.

A right to request flexibility for parents of young or disabled children

The objects of the new Act include ‘assisting employees to balance their work and family responsibilities by providing for flexible working arrangements’ including changes in the hours of work, changes in the patterns of work and changes in the location of work.

The Act provides new National Employment Standards (NES) which create a right for employees to request changes in working arrangements effective from 1 January 2010. This new right to request (RTR) represents a ‘light touch’ regulatory measure to support employees seeking flexibility, and it creates a duty for employers to consider such requests ‘reasonably’. An employee who is a parent or carer for a child who is less than school aged or a child under 18 with a disability may ask their employer for a change in working arrangements to assist them to care for their child. Examples of such arrangements include changes in patterns of work and its location. Permanent employees (ie not casuals) are only entitled to make a request if they have completed at least 12 months continuous service with their employer immediately before making their request. Casual workers can only make such requests if they are long term casual employees in their workplace immediately before making their request, and have a reasonable expectation of continuing employment on a regular and systematic basis. The legislation requires that requests be in writing and give details of the change sought and the reasons for it. In response, employers must give employees a written response to their requests within 21 days, saying whether they grant or refuse the request. Employers can refuse requests only on reasonable business grounds. If the request is refused, the written response must include details of the reasons for the refusal.

In some countries RTR law also creates a grievance mechanism and/or a right of appeal to a tribunal or a court where agreement cannot be reached; however, no such mechanism has been introduced in Australia.

This new right is similar in general terms to the UK law, and to provisions in the Netherlands, Germany and most recently New Zealand although there are some important variations between countries (Charlesworth and Campbell 2008). In New Zealand, since mid-2008, the Employment
The Relations Act 2000 (NZ) has provided a right to request a variation to hours, days or place of work to employees with children less than five years, with disabled children and/or with dependent relatives. The UK right to request was introduced on 6 April 2003 in relation to young children (Holt and Grainger 2005) and was extended in 2007 to give the right to request to carers more generally.

Requesting flexibility: baseline data

AWALI 2009 collected data on the incidence of requests for flexibility and their outcomes, providing a basis for considering the effect of RTR provisions and to compare them – with some caution – to UK results.5

Just over one in five Australian employees (22.4 per cent) had made a request for some work flexibility in the year before the survey. However, the rate of requests was highly gendered: almost twice as many women as men made a request: 29.1 compared to 16.3 per cent. The incidence of requests was much higher amongst younger workers, with 29.8 per cent of 18-24 year olds making such a request, compared to only 14.4 per cent of 55-64 year olds. The higher rate of requests by younger people may reflect, to some extent, their participation in education and training, and the need to make requests to accommodate work and study.

Parenting responsibilities are strongly aligned with requests – but only for women. There was no significant difference in men’s requests whether they have preschool children, any children under 16 or no children: about 16 per cent of men in all categories had made a request. However, almost half of women with preschoolers had made requests (47.8 per cent), just over a third of all women with children (34.7 per cent), and a quarter of women without children.

This finding suggests that flexibility is much more important to women than men, and that many more women than men – even where they are not parents – seek flexibility from their employers. The fact that one in two women with a preschooler, one in three women with any children under 16 years and one in four women without children sought flexibility, suggests that flexibility matters most for women with children under five years, a lot for any women with children, but also affects many women who do not have children. It seems that Australian law makers have been right to start by supporting the right to request for parents of young children. However,

5 The UK Government has undertaken several surveys to review the use of the right to request (Holt and Grainger 2005; Palmer 2004). However, the two sets of data have some differences. The UK data was collected in 2004 slightly less than a year after the UK RTR was introduced, while our data relates to March 2009, prior to the operation of the new Australian law. The UK research shows that after the enactment of the right, approval rates increased. The 2004 UK survey had 3525 respondents (Palmer 2004, p 23), similar to AWALI 2009’s 2691. A second 2005 UK survey with 3222 respondents resulted in very similar rates of request and approval, although slightly different questions were used (Holt and Grainger 2005). The UK survey was conducted using face-to-face interviews, whereas AWALI was conducted through computer assisted telephone interviews (CATI). In the UK survey, while being shown a list of flexible work arrangements (eg job share, flexi-time), interviewees were asked whether in the nominated period they had ‘requested to work any of the following work arrangements for a sustained period of time? Sustained means for longer than 1 month at a time’. In the AWALI survey, respondents were asked ‘In the past 12 months have you asked your employer for a change in work arrangements for a sustained period of time, that is for longer than 1 month?’ If they said yes, they were then asked to identify which arrangements they had requested from the same list of options used in the UK survey, which were read out. As in the UK, if necessary, AWALI interviewers explained to respondents that ‘work arrangements’ meant the ‘amount of hours you worked, when you work these hours and where you work those hours such as at home’. This question attempts to capture requests for substantive changes, rather than one-off requests for particular circumstances. The AWALI survey method probably captures a larger set of requests than that captured by holding up a card of specific types of changes, even where it includes ‘other’. This most likely explains the higher rate of request in the AWALI survey. Therefore, the data comparing UK and Australian rates of requests for flexibility should be used with caution.
they will assist many other workers if they extend the right to others, beginning with those with any children under 16 and then extending it to all.

In both Australia and the UK it is more often women who are making requests, and the patterns by age and parenting are also similar. In both countries the presence of children makes no difference to men’s rate of request.

The majority of requests for flexibility made in Australia (68.8 per cent) were fully granted. A further 14.4 per cent were partly granted so that, overall, 83.2 per cent were granted in part or full. Only 9.8 per cent were refused, whilst 6.9 per cent were awaiting a decision at the time of the survey. The rate of outright approval is lower in Australia than the UK; in 2004 over three-quarters of UK requests were granted in full compared to just over two-thirds in Australia.

In the UK the majority of employee requests were either fully or partly granted: 86 per cent in 2004 and 81 per cent in 2005 (Holt and Grainger 2005, p 2). This is an increase on the 77 per cent of requests that were granted before the UK right was introduced. This suggests that the introduction of a formal right to request may give rise to a higher rate of approval in Australia. A refusal rate of about one in ten is common to both countries.

How does making a request for flexibility relate to work-life interference? Work-life interference, adjusted for differences in working hours, is significantly worse amongst those who have made a request than for those who have not, suggesting that it is those most in need who are asking. Further, those who have a request granted have much lower work-life interference, with compared those whose request is refused. Those who had their requests partially granted have work-life interference levels lying between these two. In other words, making a request and having it granted is significantly associated with lower work-life interference. Having a request fully granted rather than partially granted also matters: there is no significant difference between the scores for those whose requests were declined and those whose requests were partially granted. Both have significantly worse work-life interference than those whose requests are fully granted.

These findings highlight the importance of industrial legislation and protections to support workers’ voice and right to request a change to their work arrangements and the potential value that a meaningful RTR might confer – one that gives genuinely increased voice to workers to seek and achieve flexibilities that will help them put together their jobs with the rest of their lives. They also highlight the importance of flexibility to good work-life outcomes, and the contribution that they make to constructing a good job that can meet workers’ needs over their life-cycle. This capacity to make changes such as adjusting the hours of work, how these hours are arranged or the location of work has a substantial effect on reducing the negative effects that work may have on life outside of work. Therefore, the right to request can be viewed not only as an aspect of ‘a good job’ and an entitlement that supports fairer and more equitable work arrangements, but also as an important support to quality of life including family, social and personal life. Having a request partially supported brings little benefit. In this case, ‘something’ is not that much better than ‘nothing’ (ie a complete refusal). These findings emphasise the importance of a strong legislative system which contains processes to enable request making and ensure that requests are fairly and reasonably treated.

An Australian system of paid parental leave

Australia has lacked a national approach to paid parental leave until the 2010 introduction of a Bill to create such leave by the Rudd Government. The proposed scheme follows a long and comprehensive national inquiry by the Productivity Commission, which itself followed a number of proposals by various political parties and public figures, along with academics and trade unions. The Rudd Government’s proposal for 18 weeks of government-funded parental leave pay paid at the National Minimum Wage (around $555 per week at present) for eligible parents...
of children born or adopted on or after 1 January 2011. At present only around a quarter of women on very low wages (<$400 per week) currently have access to employer-provided paid parental leave, compared to 70 per cent of women on higher wages. Women in larger companies and in the public sector generally have better access to paid parental leave, much of it embedded in collective agreements or provided by the employer directly. However, many women with some paid leave have access to only a few weeks.

Under the proposed Government’s scheme, casual and part-time workers, contractors and the self-employed will be eligible for paid parental leave, many for the first time. The Government’s Bill reached the Senate on 15th June and is likely to be passed with Opposition approval, despite the Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott’s announcement of his intention, should he win office, to introduce a scheme offering a longer period of leave (26 weeks) at replacement earnings funded, not out of government revenue but by means of a new tax on companies making large tax payments. This scheme has been treated with derision by past conservative Treasurer, Peter Costello who labelled it ‘a "silly" idea that would reduce the global competitiveness of Australian business and which contravened the Liberal philosophy of low taxes’ (Coorey, 2010). Others, including those in the union movement, have expressed cynicism about Abbott’s proposal in view of his past pronouncements that paid maternity leave would be introduced over his party’s ‘dead body’.

This week a petition of 25,000 signatures in support of the Bill was presented to Labor MPs. Despite some rather curious proposed amendments6, the Bill is likely to pass and provide all Australian parents with 18 weeks leave. For most women, the proposed payment level will be in excess of their usual earnings (given the high number of part-timers). However, work and family experts have called for a longer period of leave (of at least 26 weeks, and for a period of ‘use it or lose it’ paternity leave).

Looking ahead: what is needed

In a workforce increasingly made up of workers with caring responsibilities, with a large proportion of workers working long and more intensive hours and lacking very much real flexibility in their working arrangements, there is a strong argument for better regulation to support worker say over working arrangements. Union voice is weak outside the public sector – and even within many parts of government employment in real terms, given how work overload overrides formal rights to flexibility in many parts of the public sector.

Australian women make great use of part-time work as a central mechanism for reconciling work and care, with almost one in two Australian women working part-time, many of them for short hours and on casual terms. Other mothers withdraw from the workforce entirely. This helps explain Australia’s low level of workforce participation amongst mothers and results in significant under-utilisation of women’s skills, contributing to the persistent gender pay gap in Australia (Cassells et al 2009). Existing analysis of the working time preferences of Australian working women suggests that – rather than increase their participation in paid work as governments and employers would like to encourage – many would prefer to reduce their working hours given current workplace settings: just under a third of full-time women respondents to the 2009 and 2010 AWALI surveys said they would like to reduce their hours and become part-time, despite the fact that almost one in two working women in Australian have already made that choice.

---

6 For example, the lone Family First Senator Fielding has sought introduction of a ‘no abortion’ clause, preventing women who have had an abortion from claiming payments. It is unlikely that they could given the limitation of the payment to parents of a child that is stillborn or died (neither of which are usually defined in ways that include a foetus).
Perhaps stronger, enforced rights to request flexibility would help them find working
arrangements that both accommodate their needs and ensure their continued participation in
paid work. Such mechanisms, along with improved rights to paid parental and other forms of
leave, are critical to the better reconciliation of work and life, especially as traditional forms of
worker voice, such as that provided through trade unions, are in decline.

Like many countries, Australia has an ageing, longer-lived workforce. This has two implications
for the future. On the one hand, workers will need to work longer to support themselves in their
longer retirements, and on the other, the care ‘load’ associated with older citizens – much of
which will fall to working-carers and women - is likely to increase in the next thirty years. These
effects may be associated with an increasing need to listen carefully to what workers want in
terms of flexibility and to ensure its provision, in order to underpin participation rates.

What to do?

The evidence suggests that negative work-life interference affects a broad range and large cohort
of Australian workers. In terms of today’s policy priorities this affects efforts to increase
participation in paid work, through both drawing more citizens into paid work and drawing more
hours out of those who already work. Retaining existing workers, and their current levels of
hours, will require change in the terms of work. Greater worker voice is critical to this, given that
more voice might help workers find a better fit between their actual and preferred hours of
work, and to avoid long hours or unsocial work, and to move from casual work to permanent
work – all of which are likely to be associated with better work-life outcomes for workers. Each
if these relies on more say for workers over when, where and how they work. Many Australian
workers want to cut their hours – and the evidence is that this will improve their work-life
experience. This effect will be especially evident for those who work long hours and those who
work with low flexibility, poor job quality in terms of security and job control and too much to
do, as well as those with unsympathetic supervisors and unsupportive work cultures.

Further policy innovation is also needed, especially in four areas:

1. A broader right to request, one that extends to all workers who seek more flexible work
   arrangements;
2. Action to contain long hours of work;
3. Mechanisms that permit long term casual workers to find greater security of employment
   (e.g. convert from casual to permanent terms);
4. Measures to support and expand more positive and supportive workplace cultures that
   support workers’ working time and flexibility needs and preferences;
5. Maintenance of a minimum wage level that keeps pace with overall wages growth: a
decent rate of pay is vital to work-life reconciliation for the many workers who earn low
pay. It is an essential plank for a good work-life system in any country;
6. Improvements in the quality of part-time work, so that in electing to work less than full-
time, workers do not trade off the quality of their employment, its security and the access
they might have to training, development, promotion and other key conditions of
employment.

Each of these is amendable to change by means of policy interventions, especially those built on
evaluation of innovation. There is a large agenda awaiting the ongoing reform of Australia’s work
laws, to ensure fair work for all in the longer term.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2009). *Australian Social Trends, March 2009 (Cat. No. 4102.0)*. Canberra:
ABS.


