

# ***BUILDING STRONGER AUSTRALIAN FAMILIES***

**POLICY FORUM REPORT**

**WORK, TIME AND FAMILY**

**24 MARCH 2017**

**Building Stronger Australian Families**  
*What do they need to thrive?*

AN INITIATIVE OF  
**Families Australia**

## **About Families Australia**

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Families Australia is a national, peak, not-for-profit organisation that strives to improve the wellbeing of Australian families, especially those who experience the greatest vulnerability and marginalisation. Families Australia does this by providing policy advice to, and working with, the Australian Government and Parliament on behalf of more than 800 member organisations around Australia.

Since 2007, Families Australia has coordinated the National Coalition on Child Safety and Wellbeing, a consortium of around 200 major non-government community service organisations and prominent researchers from across Australia who work closely with the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments to implement the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009-2020.

## **Acknowledgements**

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Families Australia wishes to record its appreciation to the Commonwealth Government Department of Social Services, Professor Lyndall Strazdins, Dr Ros Baxter, and Dr Tim Reddel for their assistance in planning, hosting and delivering the forum. Families Australia also wishes to thank all forum participants.

## **Contact**

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# FAMILIES AUSTRALIA POLICY FORUM

## WORK, TIME AND FAMILY

24 MARCH 2017

DSS

### Summary

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Families Australia, in association with the Commonwealth Department of Social Services (DSS), convened its second Work, Time and Family forum in Canberra on 24 March 2017 to explore the question *'Long work hours erode health, but whose health is being more adversely affected: men's or women's?'* as part of Families Australia's *Building Stronger Australian Families* initiative [\[1\]](#). Approximately 200 participants from government, service provision, community, academia and ACT Legislative Assembly attended the forum.

The forum was chaired by Dr Brian Babington, CEO of Families Australia, and led by Professor Lyndall Strazdins from the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University College of Medicine, Biology and the Environment. Dr Ros Baxter and Dr Tim Reddel from DSS participated as panellists.

### Background

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In 2015, Families Australia began convening a series of policy forums as an important part of its role in representing families and children, and the services and academics committed to advancing the wellbeing of families. These policy forums assist Families Australia to jointly examine contemporary challenges facing families in Australia, and exploring new ways of responding to them.

The aim of the 2016/17 series is to convene three policy forums, generally held at the Department of Social Services, Canberra, to examine trends for Australian families, work and time, and work-hour gendered health inequities. The first in the series was held 7 November 2016, with a presentation delivered by Allyson Essex, Principal Advisor, Behavioural Economic Team of Australia within the Australian Government Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

## The Forum

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Dr Brian Babington, CEO of Families Australia, welcomed participants and provided a description of Families Australia and its role in providing policy advice to, and working with, the Australian Government and Parliament on behalf of more than 800 member organisations around Australia.

Dr Babington recalled the focus of the first policy forum, held in April 2016, with presentations from Professor Alan Hayes AM, Distinguished Professor in Family Studies, Director, Family Action Centre, Faculty of Health and Medicine, University of Newcastle and Dr Lyndall Strazdins. Professor Hayes had presented an analysis of the broader trends of Australian families now and in coming decades by scoping where Australian families are and which families are vulnerable, how many are vulnerable and what these families need. Dr Strazdins had followed Professor Hayes with a presentation that scoped the complicated connection between work and family through the concept of a family “puzzle” that has jobs, family life, care of children and family health and wellbeing at the heart. This family puzzle included the linkages with wider social, economic, demographic and cultural factors through the megatrends of globalisation, population ageing and social equity/gender. This first forum has provided the base for exploring work, time and family issues in more depth.

Dr Babington introduced Professor Strazdins and the recent research in which she and her colleagues explored how work hours were protective of health especially when seen through the lens of gender. Their paper—*Hour-glass ceilings: Work-hour thresholds, gendered health inequities* [2]—has attracted considerable media attention: the ABC AM radio program reported, for example, that ‘people who work more than 39 hours a week are putting their health at risk’ [3]. Professor Strazdins’ presentation can be viewed [here](#).

Professor Strazdins proceeded to show that the study is highly significant for both intergenerational policy and family policy development, particularly for its findings about the likely adverse health consequences of long working hours for many women and care-givers. To quote:

How many hours men and women work determines their income and labour market success. It also determines their health, in gender distinctive ways with identifiable tipping points beyond which working longer compromises mental health. For the average Australian adult aged 24-64, these hour-health tipping points are 10 hours lower than current regulatory standards, and lower again for women and employees with care and domestic responsibilities. Within an affluent, developed economy such as Australia, there is a workhour-health trade-off that is socially patterned. *It is likely to be systematically disadvantaging women and caregivers, generating labour market-based health inequalities.* [4] [italics added]

The hour glass ceiling refers to the ceiling on pay, career choice and advancement which arises when good jobs become predicated on long work hours. The ceiling is time-based and not merit-based and pushes qualified and capable women out of well-paid and influential jobs into short hour and less privileged jobs. This compromises income, savings and superannuation creating a two-tiered, gender-polarised labour market that undermines equality. It creates an ongoing unaddressed complex problem for Australian society.

Professor Strazdins' presentation showed there is a complexity of the interplay between work hours, wages and mental health. The presentation also highlighted the different thresholds of work hours that benefits mental health while confirming that time is a resource for health but it is finite.

Professor Strazdins supported the policy approach for wanting families to flourish and be economically secure. She agreed with the aim for economic security and optimisation of wellbeing for mothers, fathers and children but challenged participants on how Australia could achieve this. Professor Strazdins proposed that the study undertaken with her colleagues, estimating the health and work hour trade-offs shows what the sweet spot might look like and what might happen if it isn't addressed.

The challenge to participants continued seeking agreement to three policy principles that matter and need to align. Professor Strazdins congratulated participants on already achieving these goals in part through the introduction of Paid Parental Leave six years ago. This was seen as the introduction of a landmark social policy that brought together those three policy goals of economy, equality and wellbeing.

Dr Baxter followed Professor Strazdins and recognised the attraction of a time when productivity is high but the work day is short – giving a freedom to spend more time with families, friends or passions then challenged participants to consider what kinds of workplace and community supports and resources would be needed to enable this to happen.

Dr Baxter agreed with Professor Strazdins' analysis of the ways in which our current work hour standards disadvantage those with caring responsibilities, and challenged participants to consider what kinds of supports and resources would make positive change a reality.

This includes support to encourage men to take time away from work and take on more caring roles to help achieve better balance. Dr Baxter recognised the changing face of traditional families, with increasing numbers of men staying at home or working part-time to care for children, and rising numbers of single fathers with sole custody or joint-equal custody of their children. Working conditions, expectations and supports are not keeping up with the desire of fathers to spend more time caring for children.

This is problematic, as Dr Baxter recognised the importance of the positive involvement of fathers in raising their children both in relation to child development as well as strengthening their relationship with their partner. The way parents engage with and look after their children, and interact with each other, also shapes the attitudes of their children to roles and status of men and women and their own future relationships.

The Third Action Plan of the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children* commitment to increase men's involvement in gender equality and reducing violence, with a specific interest in supporting men in their role as fathers was highlighted as an example of change of attitudes.

Dr Baxter described that one of the ways that DSS will deliver on this commitment is through the Building Capacity in Australian Parents trial which will take place in three sites in Queensland from June this year. This trial will offer voluntary text messages to parents of zero to two year olds and will reach out to new fathers with messages about equal parenting responsibilities and the importance of fathers in children's early wellbeing and learning.

Participants were reminded that Government payments and services were still more likely to be accessed by women and mothers than men and fathers. The Department's Data Exchange, or DEX, is showing that in some communities there is a surprisingly large amount of working age men accessing Communities for Children services, Children and Parenting Support services and Family and Relationships Services. This includes some remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, particularly in Northern Queensland. Dr Baxter highlighted that overall women remain the majority of the Department's clients.

Dr Baxter went on to describe a Communities for Children community partner in Cairns called *Rock Impact* that is doing great work engaging fathers, operating under the motto, "strong fathers means stronger communities". *Rock Impact* has supported over 250 fathers, with 30 per cent being single dads. Almost every dad has requested to repeat the program or something similar, and many have referred the program to their fellow dad-friends. The biggest challenge *Rock Impact* has found is related to men's loneliness. Men typically do not have "father networks" to turn to when they encounter parental issues, as it is not something that is generally spoken about among their male peers.

Dr Baxter asked the question "How do we better engage men to help them discuss issues early before they escalate?" She went on to relate that DEX reveals that men prefer to access family support services and talk through issues over the telephone and through online channels. Research is showing that this is the best way to encourage men "through the door" and leave them the option to keep coming back to support services. Dr Baxter spoke of the success of other countries in providing paid paternity leave leading to more equitable caring responsibilities and subsequent positive male models.

Dr Baxter finished by reminding participants that the Commonwealth Government acknowledges the important role of parents in the primary care of their children and maintains a range of programs and payments to support them. While improvements can always be made, these improvements will need to be considered within the current economic environment.

Dr Tim Reddel followed Dr Baxter and highlighted the Commonwealth Government payments to families (including FTB, Paid parental leave and Dad and partner pay, and childcare benefit) which give families some choices around work and time and posed the question: What other approaches to support families to manage their work and time are suggested by Dr Strazdins and her colleagues research? What parameters need to be changed, and how can we do this given costs?

Dr Reddel also proposed one of the key questions raised by the discussion is how do we build the capability of families to nurture their children? He responded that the Policy Office is currently leading some work around what should be the DSS approach to family functioning. This work is revealing that families need time and skills for quality interactions with their children. DSS is also looking at how to support families to build capabilities and to maximise the resources they need to do this such as *income, time, parenting skills, education and health* and *social connections* to ensure they can do the best for their children.

Improvement to lifetime wellbeing is being explored through the Priority Investment Approach by increasing the capacity to live independently of welfare through employment, and address the risk of intergenerational welfare dependence. Success will involve supporting families through critical transitions especially the less resourced families like young carers. Through the Try Test and Learn fund the Department is seeking to

identify the points in people's lives where extra support may make a big difference. One of the themes raised in this early stage of family transitions is the need to support or intervene with fathers.

Dr Reddel also highlighted the importance of addressing the question of how do we as a community deal seriously with trade-offs between work and caring responsibilities, and ensure families have time to nurture children. ABS data shows that after female partners, daughters are the most common source of informal care. This also affects women's career progression and lifetime earnings.

Dr Reddel then went on to talk about the disruptive potential of new technologies. The accelerated rise of globalisation and new technologies offers opportunities for the creation of new businesses, and higher productivity growth, but also has the risk of automation leading to greater wage inequality while jobs that used to play a key role in generating quality jobs are already becoming increasingly automated.

Workers with an ability to acquire new skills will be better placed to adapt to changes in the labour market. The demand for care services for children, people with disabilities and older adults, which allow parents to remain in the workforce, is expected to grow.

Key issues for government and consumers are to maintain a balance between the cost and quality of care, while the availability of volunteer carers (e.g. grandparent carers) is likely to decrease as more women remain in the workforce. The key issue for industry is the recruitment, training and retention of a workforce sector that is feminised and underpaid.

Dr Reddel returned to the question of what will this mean for us in trying to meet these policy challenges around the sharing of work and time for families now and into the future. He reminded us that the time horizons may be shorter than we think.

Questions from participants followed the panel discussion. A question was posed querying the focus on the minority of those higher paid people working long hours when lower paid workers, such as cleaners, work very long hours for poor pay. Dr Strazdins responded agreeing these workers faced inequity and were included in the study. The difference between reasonable hours and unrecorded hours was also raised and impacts on gendered employment. The disproportional employment of women in lower paid employment was agreed to be an important issue and that HILDA had some limitations identifying industries.

Engagement of the business sector was raised as an issue with the work, family time struggle of self-employed people being recognised.

Closing observations highlighted the importance and value of the DSS data sets and the need to democratise what we have learnt. Dr Baxter questioned how to best use the data we have now and activate the private sector. Dr Reddel agreed we continue constructive conversations and foster a more engaged process. Professor Strazdins thanked Families Australia, fellow presenters and participants for a valuable forum.

## Next Steps

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Dr Liana Leach will lead the next Forum (5 June 2017), the final in the current series, on family formation with a focus on young and new parents, transition points and work family balance. This will be a timely discussion given the interest from both the community and Government in young parents facing vulnerability, especially young fathers. Professor Strazdins, representatives of the Department of Social Services will participate in the forum panel discussion with Dr Brian Babington facilitating the forum.

Dr Liana Leach is a research fellow in the Society, Culture and Health research stream at The National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health (NCEPH). Her research interests include examining the impact of family and work circumstances on mental health. Her work involves the translation of mental health research for public policy and practice. Dr Leach's areas of expertise include mental health, epidemiology and family and household studies.

Families Australia thanks Professor Strazdins, as well as forum panellists Dr Ros Baxter and Dr Tim Reddel from the Department of Social Services, for their participation in this *Building Stronger Australian Families* policy forum.

Presentations and associated resources, including a video recording (if available) of each of the policy forums is shared nationally after each event via e-bulletins and the Families Australia web site.

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## References

[1] Families Australia's *Building Stronger Australian Families* forums bring together key people from government, NGO and research sectors to consider how best to advance the wellbeing of Australian families now and in the future. More information is available at <<http://familiesaustralia.org.au/policies-submissions/current-policy-areas/building-stronger-australian-families/>>.

[2] Dinh H, Strazdins L, Welsh J. *Hour-glass ceilings: Work-hour thresholds, gendered health inequities*. *Social Science & Medicine* 176 (2017) 42-51.

[3] ABC AM Program, 2 February 2017, 'Working more than 39 hours a week can affect your mental health, new research shows', retrieved from <<http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2016/s4612862.htm>>.

[4] Dinh H, Strazdins L, Welsh J. *Hour-glass ceilings: Work-hour thresholds, gendered health inequities*. *Social Science & Medicine* 176 (2017) 49.