



**Victorian Equal Opportunity  
& Human Rights Commission**

# **Supporting gender equality**

## **Lessons for the post-COVID workplace**



**The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and exacerbated existing gender inequality at work, including in employee entitlements and pay and how our community values feminised and unpaid labour.**

**At the peak of the pandemic, the Commission surveyed and interviewed Victorian workers aged 18+ years, who are parents, carers and/or have a disability, to better understand how COVID-19 transformed approaches to flexible work and how any lessons can be applied to support greater workplace equality.**

**This is what we learned.**

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## **OUR METHODOLOGY**

The Commission surveyed 1504 Victorian workers aged 18+ years, who are parents, carers and/or have a disability.

We supplemented our online survey with 12 qualitative interviews. The survey and interviews were conducted between 27 June 2020 and 3 July 2020. We ensured robust sample sizes by setting quotas by location, gender, age and parental/carer/disability status.

The Commission acknowledges and thanks the Victorian Public Sector Commission for its support in analysing our survey results.



# Women were hit harder financially by COVID-19

More men than women reported a pay reduction during the pandemic (29% of men, compared to 22% of women), but the women who did lose pay lost much more.

On average:

Working women who suffered a pay reduction had their pay cut by **46%**, compared to **30%** for men

Women working part-time lost **39%** of their wages

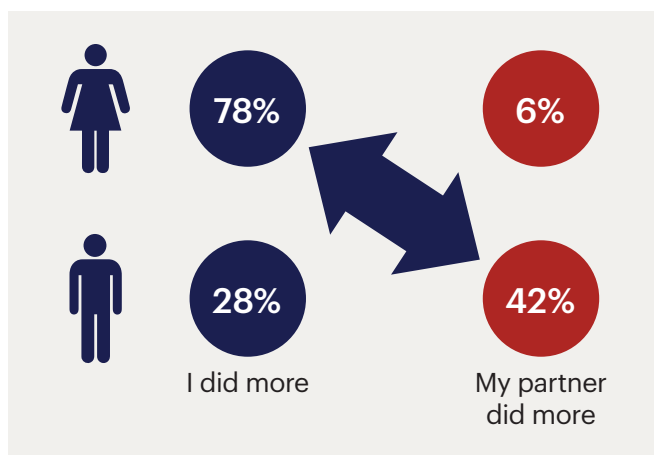
Women working casually lost **65%** of their wages



# Women completed more unpaid care work than men

Our survey showed that women and men both spent more time caring for children than they had before the pandemic. However, the bulk of this caring work fell to women.

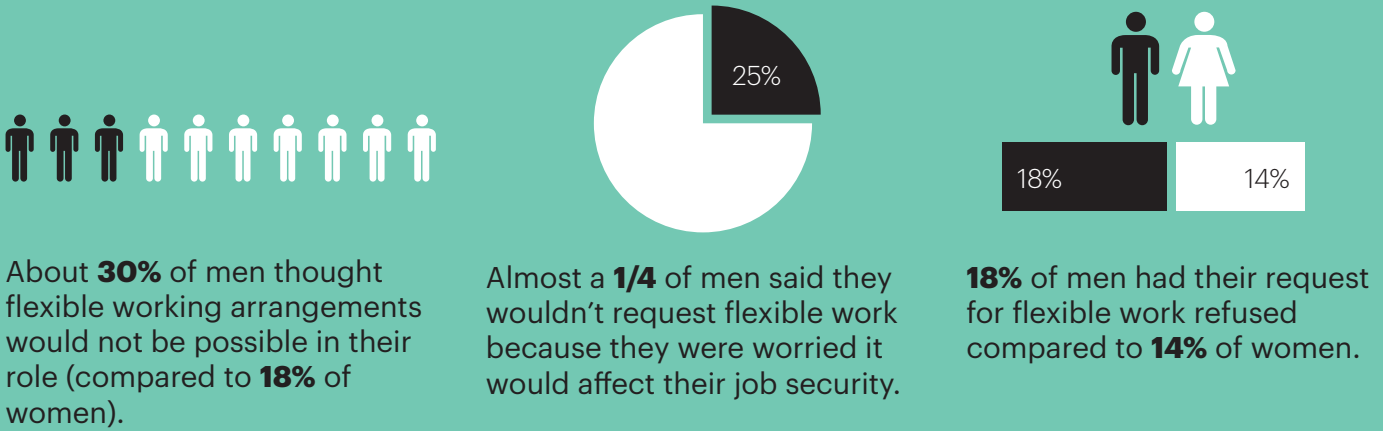
- Women were more likely than men to spend more time looking after their children (54% compared to 47%).
- Women spent more time than men helping children with home schooling – regardless of whether they worked full- or part-time, or whether they had a partner who was working from home.
- Men appeared to underestimate the amount of work women believed they were doing, suggesting that they undervalued women’s efforts.



“... Work went on the back burner; I did it after hours or in between and when they’re having snacks or lunch ... Helping with schoolwork took 4–5 hours each day. I didn’t do any of my work from 9–3; I’d cook dinner and work at night-time. I would answer a couple of calls during the day but maybe do 3–4 hours after dinner.”

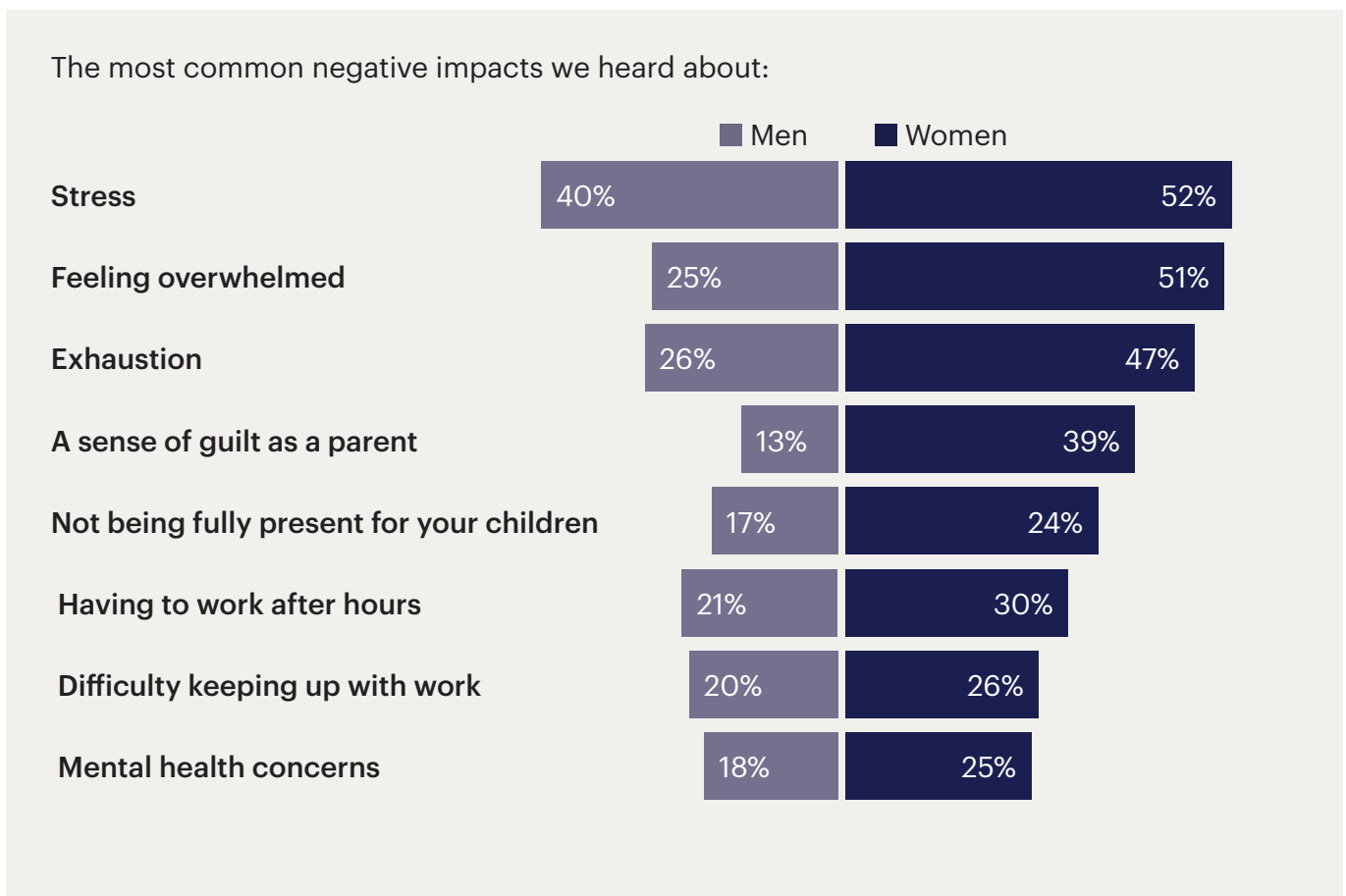
# Many employers continue to view family and caring responsibilities as women's work

Men are less likely to think flexible work is relevant to them due to the nature of their role or the expectations of their employer.



# Women experience more challenges balancing work and caring responsibilities

Women and men told us about the negative impacts of being unsupported to balance their work and care responsibilities, but women reported these impacts at significantly higher rates.





**Marielle moved to Australia 10 years ago and lives in regional Victoria with her husband and three young children. She works four days a week in healthcare administration and is studying as well.**

During the pandemic, she was able to work from home, but her husband was not. She did all of the home-schooling work, as well as all of the other domestic work around the home. Not having family here was especially hard.

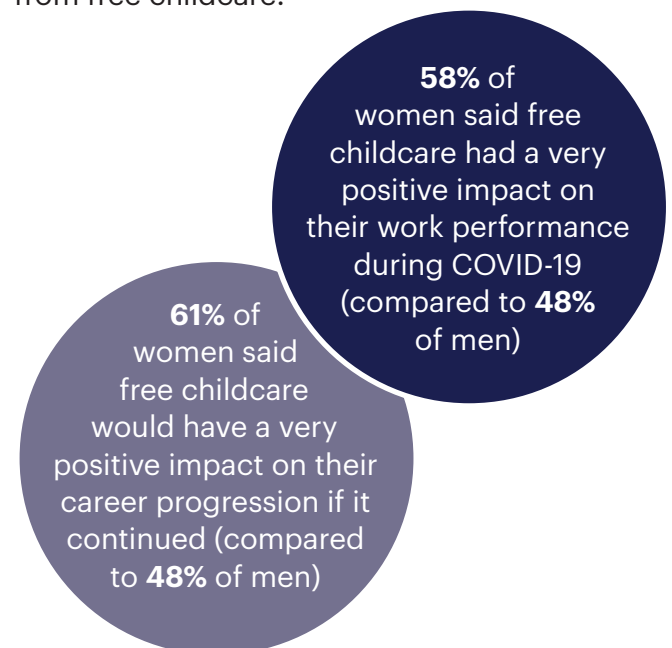
**“The first few weeks I really struggled, we still had to do work from home, as well as look after the kids and keep them busy. ... My kids are so little that they don’t understand when I need to do work, and they do need to be supervised. So, I was doing the work late in the evening, sometimes at 10–11pm at night.”**

## **Access to free childcare supports women’s workforce participation and has many other benefits**

Access to free childcare during COVID-19 worked well for many workers surveyed, who hoped it would continue post-pandemic.

- **57%** of parents with school-aged children were able to access free professional childcare. The majority of those who did had a positive experience.
- Overall, **82%** of working parents would access childcare if offered for free in the future.
- Even though almost half of the male respondents reported positive experiences with free childcare, the proportion was higher for women. More women said that the policy’s continuation would benefit their career progression.

Women were more likely to report benefits from free childcare:



# Women and workers with family responsibilities report high rates of workplace discrimination

Despite being unlawful, many working parents felt discriminated against because of their caring responsibilities, with women reporting this more than men.



**30%** of women and **27%** of men felt discriminated against, treated unfairly or disadvantaged at work as a parent, carer and/or person with disability during COVID-19.

Working parents and carers who were not aware of laws to protect them from discrimination were more likely to report feeling disadvantaged.



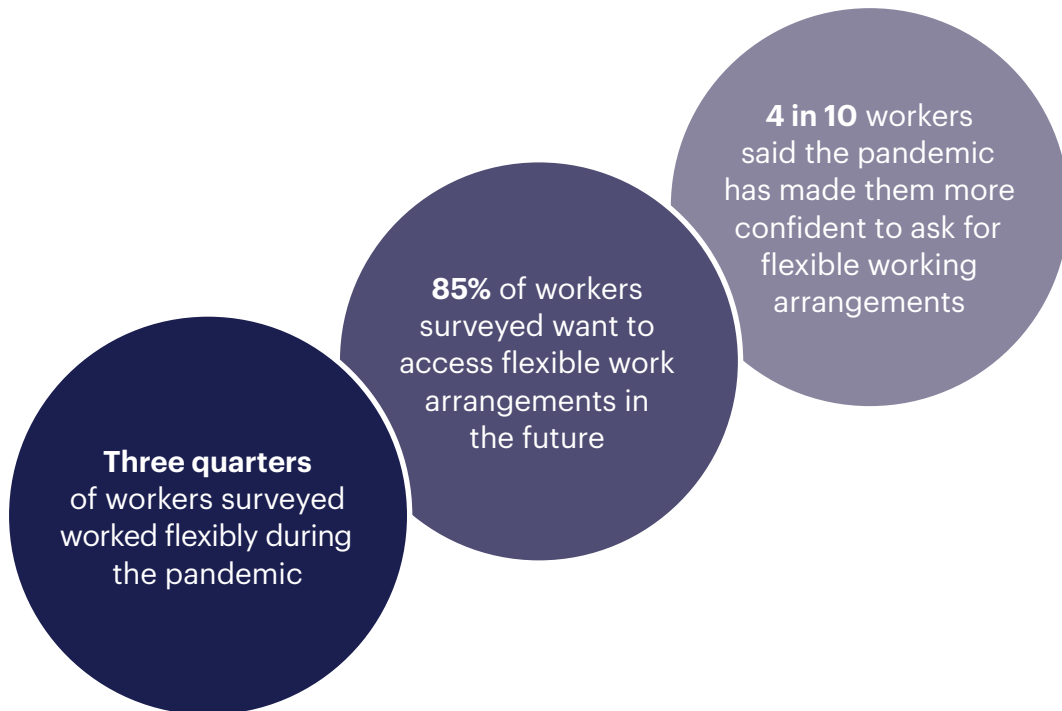
**“Coming to Australia as a woman without children I was treated fairly, but I’ve noticed after I had my first child, you get treated differently and people don’t put you as a priority for training or give you opportunities to upskill yourself. I noticed male staff tend to climb the ladder quicker.”**

**“Requests to help manage my family situation with young children were not addressed by my employer. Rather, I’ve had managerial meetings about my performance going down, which is easily explained by my family responsibilities. This added to the stress in my relationship and parenting. My partner and I have had multiple arguments about it.”**

**“I feel that if I ask for leave or days off, I’ll lose my job.”**

## Women and men want flexible work arrangements

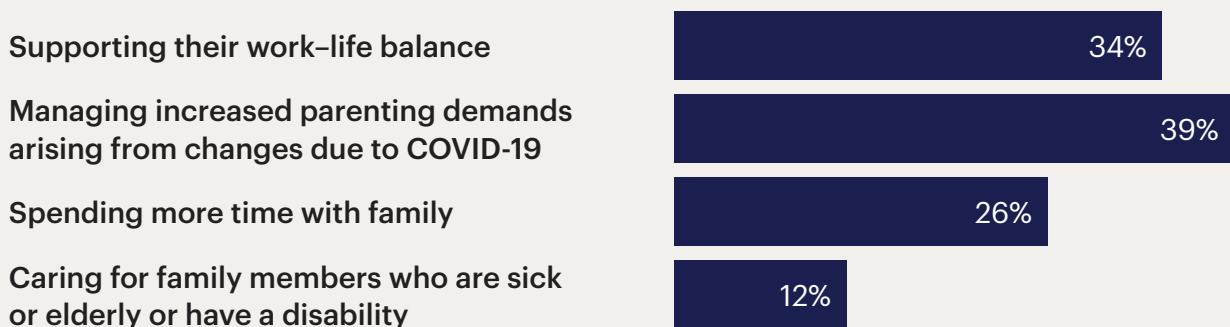
Women and men expressed a strong desire to work flexibly. All employers need to consider how they can embed flexible work practices post-pandemic.



## Workers see flexibility as key to maintaining balance

Workers see flexibility as an important part of balancing personal and working responsibilities throughout their working life. Access to flexible work is about more than just accommodating childcare responsibilities.

Workers reported a range of reasons for accessing flexible work arrangements during the pandemic:





## What next?

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed entrenched gender inequality in the workforce and the ongoing struggles of working parents, particularly women, to balance their work and parenting/caring responsibilities.

We now have an historic opportunity for positive change, to reset how we work and create 'gender equal' workplaces. The Commission survey and interviews, as well as our broader work, point to a need to:

- 1 **gather data on the gendered impacts of COVID-19 to ensure policies, budgeting and recovery planning consider the impact on women**
- 2 **include the voices of women from diverse backgrounds in decision-making and engage with organisations with gender expertise**
- 3 **ensure that stimulus measures and economic initiatives target industries that benefit women as well as men, and that new jobs and reskilling opportunities are not limited to male-dominated sectors**
- 4 **explore opportunities for free, accessible and properly funded childcare to support women's workforce participation**
- 5 **prioritise measures to close the gender pay gap, including gender inequality in superannuation**
- 6 **embed flexible work as part of a business-as-usual approach, enabling men and women to better balance and share caring responsibilities.**



# Further information

For more on how the Commission is working to advance gender equality at work, visit our website.

For general enquiries or further information, call our Enquiry Line on 1300 292 153.

For media enquiries, contact Peter Davies on 0447 526 642 or at [peter.davies@veohrc.vic.gov.au](mailto:peter.davies@veohrc.vic.gov.au).

[humanrights.vic.gov.au](http://humanrights.vic.gov.au)