



**Victorian Equal Opportunity
& Human Rights Commission**

Juggling caring, parenting and work

Lessons for the post-COVID workplace

A significant proportion of the workforce is balancing parenting and/or caring responsibilities. However, traditional workplace structures have failed to keep up with workers' attempts to balance work and family life and leave behind outdated, gendered divisions of 'breadwinner' and 'home-maker'. The rapid – and enduring – transformation of work brought about by the pandemic shone a light on the pressures experienced by working parents and carers and revealed opportunities to rebuild more inclusive workplaces that support all workers to flourish.

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.

This is what we learned.

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.

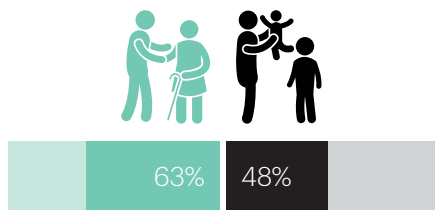
The Commission acknowledges and thanks the Victorian Public Sector Commission for its support in analysing our survey results. Newgate Research undertook the survey on our behalf.

A note on terminology: In this snapshot, 'carer' means a person on whom another is wholly or substantially dependent for (unpaid) ongoing care or attention. This includes people who provide unpaid care and support to family members and friends who have a disability, mental illness, chronic condition, terminal illness or an alcohol or other drug issue, or who are frail.¹

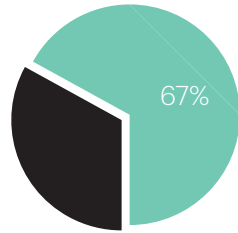
¹ Carers Australia, 2021, *Who is a Carer?*, Carers Australia, viewed 10 June 2021, <<https://www.carersaustralia.com.au/about-carers/who-is-a-carer/>>.

COVID-19 has put further pressure on working parents and carers

Many workers took on additional parenting and caring responsibilities throughout the pandemic, meaning that for many, they needed greater support and flexibility from their employers.



Almost two-thirds of carers (**63%**) and half of parents surveyed (**48%**) found it difficult to balance their work and caring responsibilities during the pandemic.



Two-thirds of all parents and carers surveyed (**67%**) had to make trade-offs between caring and keeping up with work.

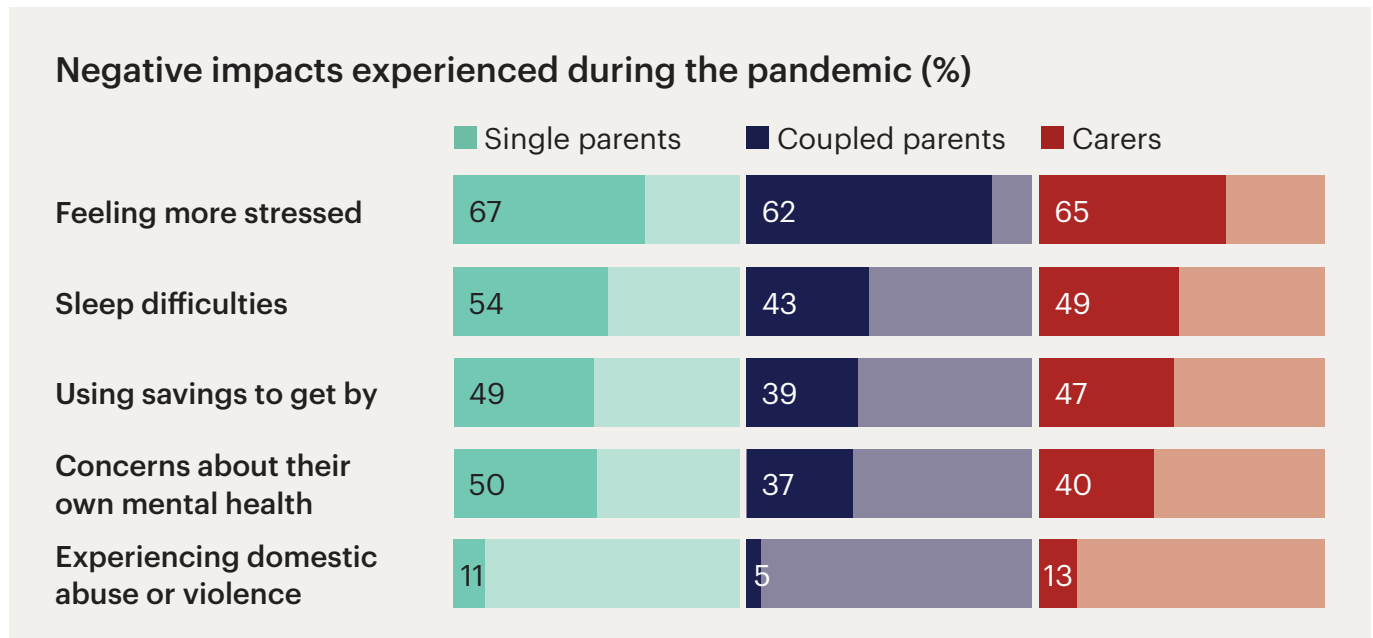
Key trade-offs included:

- relying more on partners, family members or friends to provide care
- not spending as much time home-schooling as they wanted or needed to
- spending less time with their children.



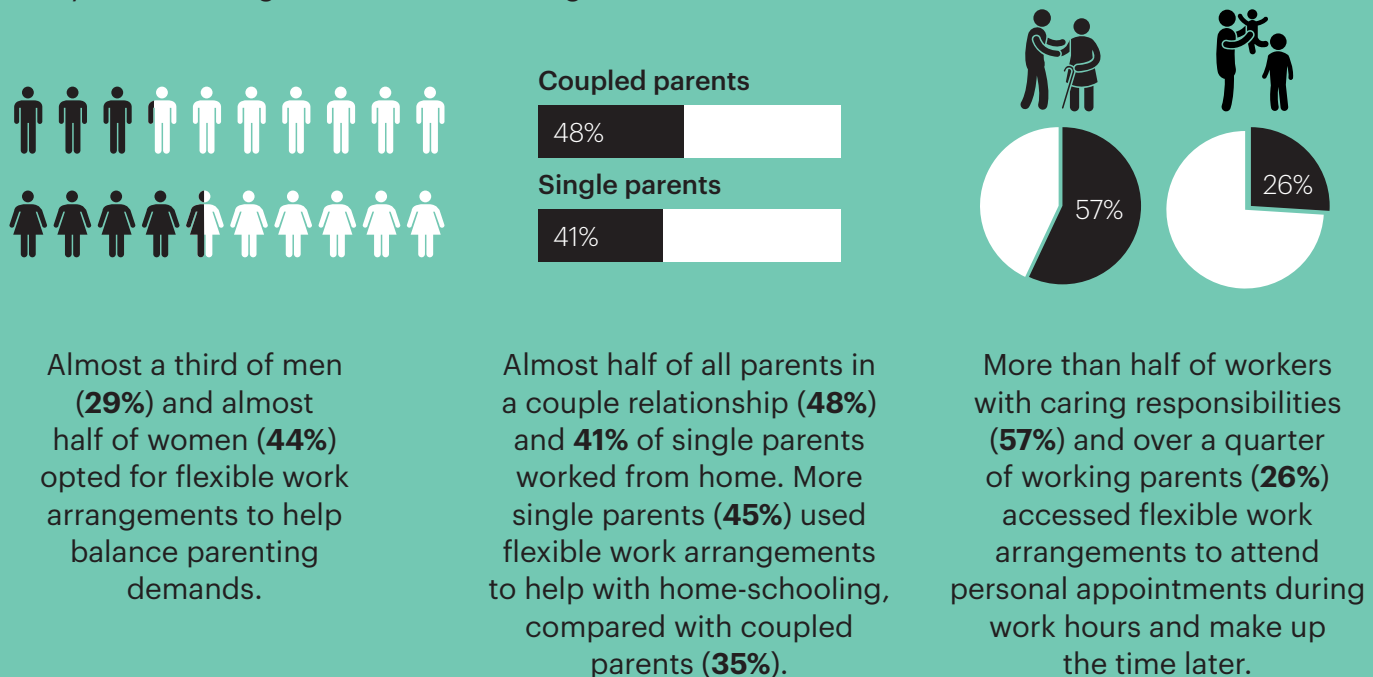
The health of many working parents and carers suffered

With the increased challenge of parenting and caring while schools, childcare and other facilities were closed or locked down during the pandemic, the health, wellbeing and financial security of many working parents and carers suffered. Carers were most likely to report negative impacts.



Flexible work arrangements help parents and carers to balance their work and personal responsibilities

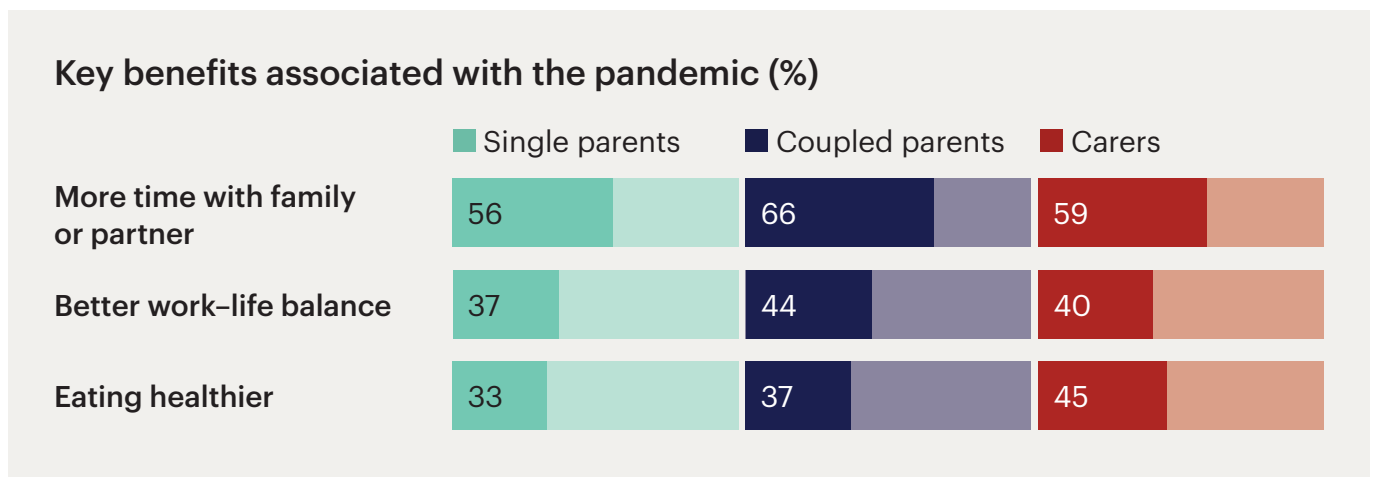
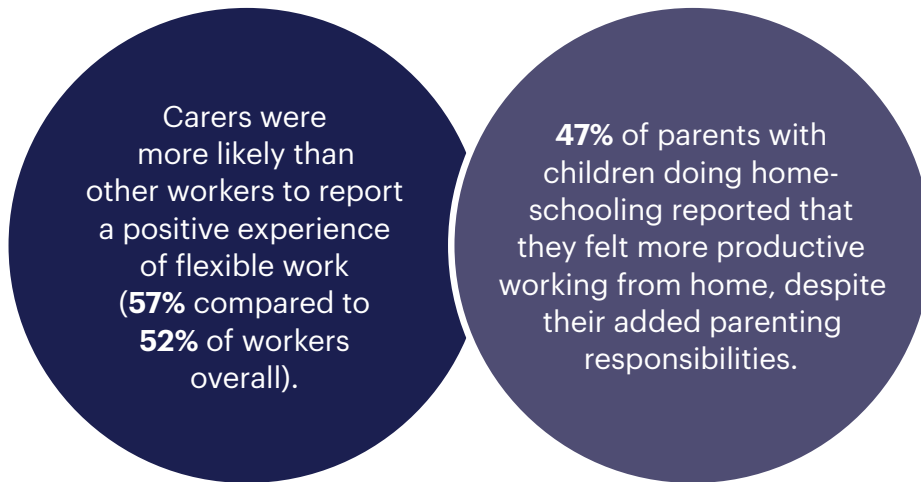
To accommodate the increase in caring and parenting obligations throughout the pandemic, many workers sought flexible work arrangements.





Many parents and carers had positive experiences of working flexibly

Working parents and carers reported positive experiences of working flexibly.



Working parents who also have caring responsibilities are more likely to be denied flexibility

Working parents who also have caring responsibilities were more likely than people who were only parents or only carers to have their request for flexible work arrangements denied, suggesting they face a disproportionate risk of their employers unreasonably refusing requests for flexible work.

Refused requests for flexible work arrangements (%)

Workers with both parenting and caring responsibilities

26

Workers with parenting or caring responsibilities

13

This suggests that more education is needed to support employers to understand their legal responsibilities related to flexible work.

Supporting workers and employers to discuss flexible work

The Commission has released a 'Flexible work request planner' to support workers and employers to prepare for and consider requests for flexible work.

The planner is an interactive chatbot, freely available on our website, which supports workers and managers to initiate a conversation about flexible work and create an effective plan. It includes a pathway for managers to check legal obligations, prompts to set up a successful conversation and downloadable planning tools.

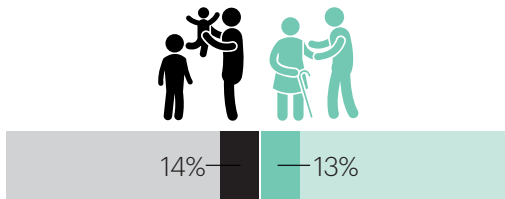
The Commission can also work with organisations to review policies and procedures and develop strategies to successfully embed flexible working arrangements across their workforce and create equality for all workers, including those with a disability.

To try the Flexible work request planner, visit www.humanrights.vic.gov.au/resources/chat-about-flexible-work/

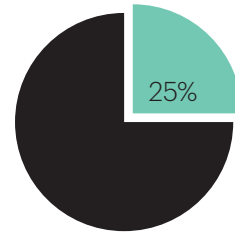


Parents and carers risk workplace discrimination

A number of working parents and carers reported experiencing discrimination on the basis of their caring or parenting responsibilities, and this risk was greatest for those who were both carers and parents.



14% of parents said they had been discriminated against at work due to their parenting obligations, while **13%** of carers said they had been discriminated against at work because they had caring responsibilities.



A quarter (**25%**) of workers who are both parents and carers reported discrimination due to their parenting and/or caring responsibilities.



Support for employees who have experienced discrimination

Discrimination occurs when someone is treated badly or unfairly because of a personal characteristic that is protected by the law. These characteristics protected in the *Equal Opportunity Act 2010* include parent or carer status, among others.

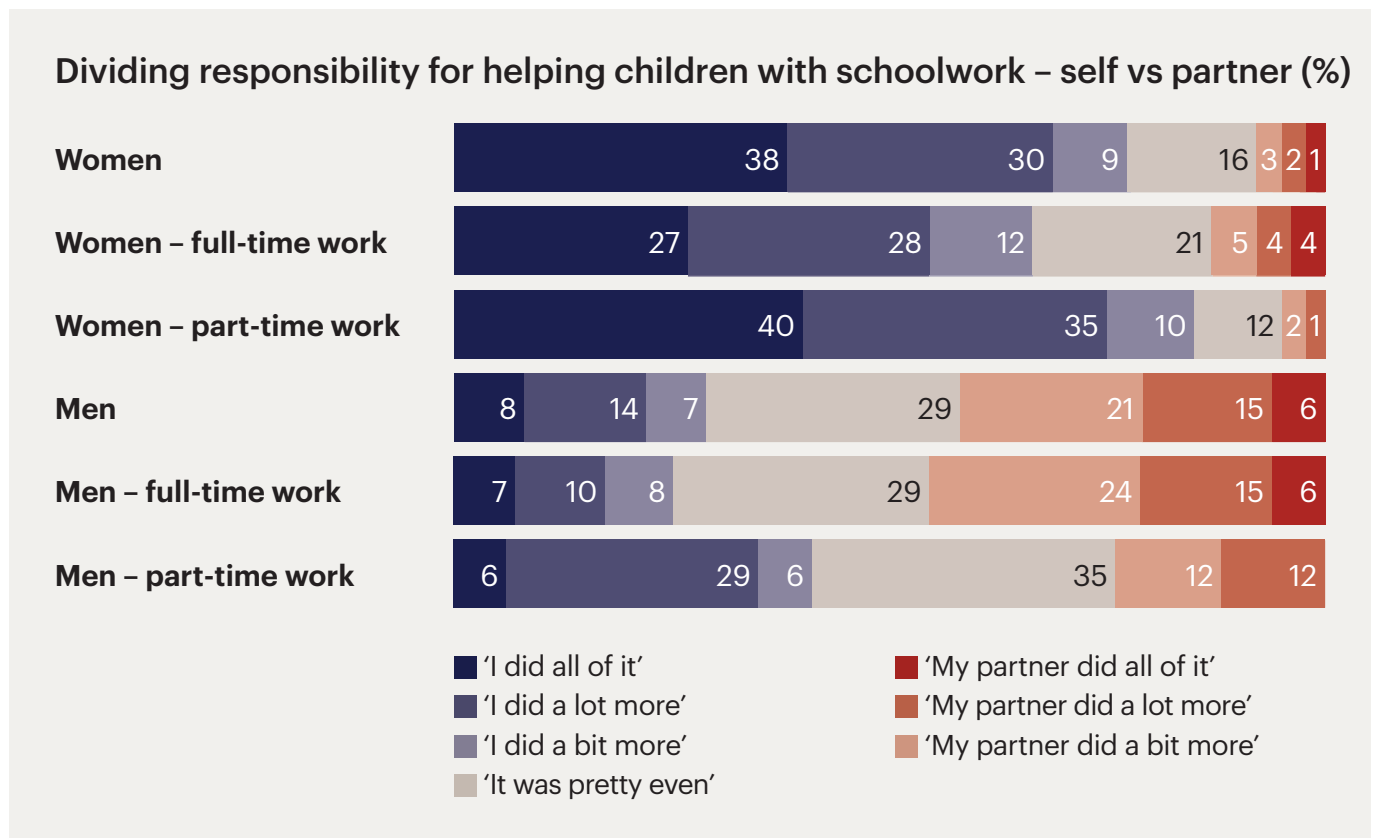
Discrimination is against the law when it occurs in areas of public life, including employment.

If you think you have been discriminated against, you can make a complaint to the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission. Call us on 1300 292 153 or lodge a complaint online at makeacomplaint.humanrights.vic.gov.au.

Working women shoulder a greater burden of parenting and caring duties

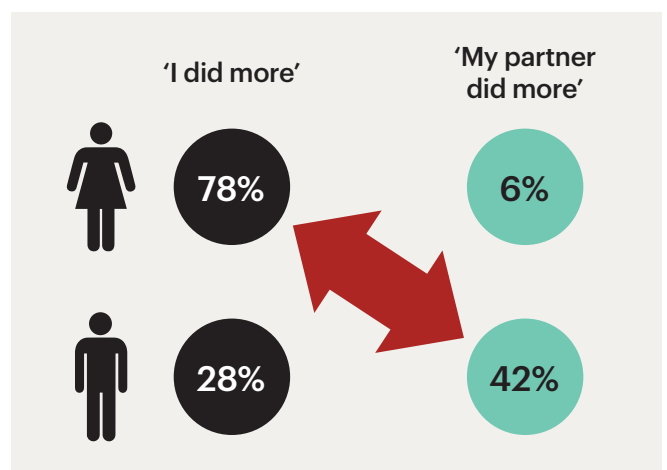
Irrespective of whether they worked full time or part time, women took on the greatest share of parenting and caring responsibilities throughout the pandemic.

- Women were more likely than men to spend time looking after their children (**54%** compared to **47%**).
- Men were more likely to report that their (usually female) partner spent more time with the children during the pandemic than before (**72%** compared to **61%** of women who said this).



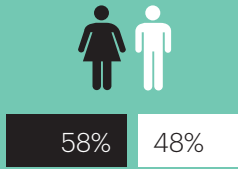
Men appeared to underestimate the amount of work women believed they were doing, suggesting that they undervalued women's efforts.

- Almost four in five women (**78%**) surveyed reported that they helped their children more than their partner, contrasted with only **42%** of men reporting that their partner did more.
- **28%** of surveyed men believed they took on more responsibility for helping children with schoolwork, again contrasting with only **6%** of women believing this to be the case.



Free childcare benefits the performance and career of working parents

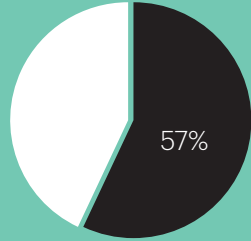
Many working parents benefited from free childcare during the pandemic and wanted it to continue. Women, in particular, reported that ongoing access to free childcare would have a very positive impact on their careers.



Working women were more likely to say free childcare had a very positive impact on their work performance during the pandemic (**58%** of women compared to **48%** of men).



61% of women said free childcare would have a very positive impact on their career progression if it continued (compared to **48%** of men).



Over half of working parents with school-aged children (**57%**) used free professional childcare during the pandemic.

82% of working parents said they would use childcare if offered for free in the future.





What next?

The pandemic highlighted the struggle many carers and parents face in juggling their work and caring responsibilities, and the benefits of working flexibly in order to balance these responsibilities. Workplaces now have an opportunity to embed flexibility and enable caring and parenting to be shared equally within households, advancing gender equality and enabling all working parents and carers to make valuable contributions in the workforce and in public life more broadly.

The Commission's research demonstrates a need to:

- 1 **explore opportunities for free, accessible and adequately funded childcare to support greater workforce participation by parents, particularly women**
- 2 **embed flexible work as part of a business-as-usual approach, enabling parents and carers to better balance and share caring responsibilities**
- 3 **ensure workplace equality is prioritised by the Victorian Government as part of its response to COVID-19 and recovery efforts**
- 4 **invest in strategies to transform societal attitudes towards unpaid caring and parenting, to adequately ascribe value to the 'second shift' many workers perform outside of their formal working hours**
- 5 **strengthen enforcement of the Equal Opportunity Act to better protect parents and carers from discrimination.**

Further information

For more on how the Commission is working to help employers to support parents and carers to juggle their commitments, 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.

humanrights.vic.gov.au