

# Women, work, care and COVID

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# Overview

The long periods of COVID-19 lockdowns in Victoria in 2020 were difficult and stressful for many people. As lockdowns continue across Australia through 2021 the variable impacts on diverse groups in our communities are becoming more apparent. This report contributes to our understanding of those impacts. Its focus is on partnered women in paid work and the impacts of lengthy household lockdowns on work and family.

The *Women, Work, Care and COVID* research project was designed as exploratory research to investigate the ways in which workplace, individual and household responses to the pandemic may be impacting on the work and career opportunities of women. We explored the work and family experiences of women in part-time or casual employment who were living with a male partner and had primary-school aged children. We interviewed 14 Victorian women between October and December 2020 and explored their experiences of the ways in which individual, household and workplace responses to the pandemic impacted on work and career opportunities and on household, work and care arrangements.

Internationally, COVID has been found to have increased women's economic disadvantage and impacted negatively on gender equality, including through women's job loss and their loss of working time and income. Our research points to some of the ways in which these outcomes are generated by changes at the household level that strengthen gender divisions in family, care and employment arrangements and responsibilities.

The accounts of the women participating in our research reveal how traditional gender roles in two-parent households with young children can strengthen under COVID lockdowns. In most households in our study it appears mothers became the shock-absorbers of the domestic upheaval caused by COVID. Women both took on, and were left to pick up, the bulk of additional work in families, both visible and invisible work. While working remotely, women managed most of the home schooling, domestic work and care, and they organised the household so everyone else could get their work done. This was incredibly stressful for some women who, towards the end of 2020, were exhausted from trying to meet their work responsibilities, manage remote schooling and their children's care and welfare and keep their households running.

## Key findings



### Managing households, work & schooling

Pre-COVID, most of the women in our study were in households with traditionally gendered divisions of participation in paid labour. Most women combined their part-time paid work with parenting and domestic work while their male partners worked full-time. There were only a very few households with men in part-time employment and, in these, parents shared household and family work on a more equal basis. Most of the time, the women in our study managed their dual loads, moving between the (usually) separate worlds of home and paid employment.

Under COVID household lockdowns, in the face of the entirely unexpected shift of work and school to home and massive increases in demand for care, schooling and household provisioning and management, a clear pattern seen in the majority of the households was towards a strengthening of traditionally gendered divisions of parenting and household labour: in lockdowns most women managed the household, undertook most of the work associated with children's schooling and often performed a lot of the other childcare and household tasks.



### Family and work boundaries

Everyone in the women's families made big adjustments to adapt to life under lockdown. However, women's accounts of their work and family responsibilities suggest they often had to make many more adjustments to their work arrangements than their partners did due to their combined responsibilities for home-based work, family and schooling. Their accounts suggest it was often easier for men to separate work from family and household responsibilities.

Women often struggled to feel like they could do a good job while working remotely from home and they experienced severe weakening or even the disappearance of spatial and temporal boundaries between work and home. Men increased their contributions to household and family loads but often appeared to do so with far less disruption to their paid work.



### Winding back work & careers?

Many of the women in our study lost hours of paid work, used up leave and/or lost income during 2020 due to their multiple loads under lockdowns. Possibly of greater consequence in the long-term, they lost opportunities for career development and advancement, sometimes as a result of changes occurring in their workplaces, but often as they reluctantly stepped away from opportunities in the face of time pressures and the physical and psychological strains of increased household and parenting loads.

Some women were in jobs they felt offered less challenge or responsibility than was commensurate with their skills and experience. They were in these jobs as the jobs offered part-time hours while the women were parenting young children. Several women were now at a stage in their working lives where they were considering or making moves to take on more work or change jobs to build or re-build careers. However, the events of 2020 meant that activities and plans for job changes and/or career progression were put on hold as women just managed their current jobs and their increased care and household loads.



### Flexible workplaces crucial but not enough

In the main, women in the study experienced their employers as supportive during lockdowns. Most felt their organisations and managers acknowledged their family responsibilities and made adjustments. However, organisations and managers varied a lot in the support they provided to employees. Our findings reflect those of the existing (pre-COVID) research literature on workplace flexibility that has pointed to the importance of individual managers' approaches and responses as critical to whether (or not) parents and carers are supported to manage work and family.



## Context

Globally, the economic and social disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have dramatically exposed gender inequalities in work and highlighted women's vulnerability to economic disadvantage. Women's continued weaker labour market position and their responsibility for most care provision and household management appear to be key compounding factors as they limit women's ability to pursue and maintain employment (Adams-Prassl et al. 2020, Conaghan 2020, WGEA 2020).

In Australia, women in couple households with pre- and primary school-aged children are a cohort whose economic participation is likely to be affected in these circumstances, with potential disruptions to women's education, work and careers. Traditional gender social norms persist in heterosexual couple families with children, with a one-and-a-half earner model dominant in most of these households (ABS 2020b). Indeed, in comparison with other OECD countries, in Australia, there is distinctive 'motherhood' gap in participation in paid work. Fathers are much more likely to be in full-time employment while mothers are much likely to be working part-time, combining employment with care and doing most of the unpaid household work (ABS 2020a; Baird et al. 2018).

### Women's work and care in COVID times: Impacts on gender equality

Internationally, COVID has been found to have negative impacts on gender equality in a variety of countries, with pandemic restrictions increasing gender divisions in household and employment arrangements. Reports from the UK and USA suggest women undertake most of the home schooling of children, even when both partners are employed (Adams-Prassl et al. 2020). In the USA and Australia surveys found both men and women do more domestic tasks while working at home but women continue to carry the greater load (Ruppanner et al. 2021). In Turkey, research found that, even where mothers were able to work from home during the pandemic, they became separated from their outside work, and both their secondary earner status and primary carer status within the household were reinforced (Çoban 2021). In Iceland, a country lauded as one of the most gender equal, COVID may not have increased gender inequality, but it has exposed pre-existing inequalities in the domestic division of labour (Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir 2020, p. 12). Research found that the sheer burden of the additional domestic work and emotional labour required had predictable impacts on mental and emotional health of mothers in couple families, and women experienced greater stress and frustration than their male partners (Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir 2020).

In Australia, 2020 surveys suggest that while many men took on additional domestic labour and childcare— particularly home schooling—the COVID pandemic may have reinforced and deepened gender inequalities both in household labour and in paid work (Craig 2020; Craig and Churchill 2021). Gender divisions of work and care worsened in many households while, in some, lockdowns provided an opportunity for more equal caring (Craig 2020). Some women reported unequal sharing of household resources as male partners claimed both physical space and time to work from home and women and the household adjusted around them (Craig 2020, p. 5). While more fathers than mothers reported high levels of subjective time stress, unfairness and dissatisfaction, more mothers were likely to be dissatisfied with their work life and the domestic load taken by their partners than before the pandemic (Craig 2020, p. 5; Craig & Churchill 2021).

Other research found economic vulnerability increased for women more than for men over 2020, and it increased more for women in Victoria where household lockdowns were months longer than elsewhere (Carson et al. 2021). Victorian women carried the largest domestic and childcare loads with remote school continuing over months. There is some evidence that women's health has been adversely impacted, with Victorian women particularly vulnerable to poor health, anxiety and restless sleep (Carson et al 2021), and with emotional health adversely affected by financial worry through exposure to job loss and by additional emotional strain (Ruppanner et al. 2021).



# The research

The *Women, Work, Care and COVID* research project was designed as exploratory research to investigate the ways in which workplace, individual and household responses to the pandemic may be impacting on women's work and career opportunities. We explored the work and family experiences of women who were in part-time or casual employment, were living with a male partner and had primary-school aged children. Such families are prevalent in Australia, with 84.3% of all families being couple families and 43.2% of these families having dependent children. In mid 2020, among all families in which the youngest child was aged between 0 and 4 years, 63.3 % of women and 89.3% of men were in employment. In families where the youngest child was aged between 5 and 9 years 77.5% of women and 89.3% of men were employed (ABS 2020b, Table 3). The employment arrangements of the couple families in our study could be considered typical of couple families with young children as all the women in our study lived with male partners who were also in employment.

We undertook our research in Victoria—mostly in metropolitan Melbourne—where strict household lockdowns had been in place for at least 23 weeks in 2020, with some suburbs being under household lockdowns for longer. Movement outside households had been severely restricted and, for some of the time, night-time curfews were imposed. Schools were closed to almost all children during most of this time, with remote schooling extending beyond the lockdown periods for many families. Only workers deemed essential were permitted to leave home for work. During some of the lockdown time some formal childcare was available for vulnerable children and for families where parents were deemed by the government to be essential workers.

Between October and December 2020, we conducted one-to-one semi-structured video or phone interviews with 14 women, asking them about their employment and their work and family arrangements during the year. Research participants (see Table 1 at the end of the report) were recruited through neighbourhood and community centre networks, parent support and community groups, social media and through participant referrals. During interviews of around 45 minutes' duration one of our three-person research team explored women's experiences during 2020 of employment (changes to work, employer strategies, workplace support, workplace flexibility, leave access, work from home arrangements, access to JobKeeper/JobSeeker payments, employment and career decisions) and household work and family arrangements (sharing and management of childcare, schooling, cooking and other household work). We also obtained broad details from women about their partners' working arrangements. In this report we have used pseudonyms and changed some other details to prevent the identification of participants and other people.



## The women and their paid work arrangements

Most of the women in our study were living in Melbourne or a regional centre in Victoria. Many of the families still had very young children, with the youngest child in five of the families being a toddler or pre-schooler and, in another four families, in their first or second year of primary school. Only three families had an oldest child who was in secondary school.

Our research participants worked in a diverse range of jobs, although most of the women were in semi-professional or professional white-collar roles in female-dominated occupations and/or industries. Women's jobs included administration and office management, human resources, community development, social welfare, public policy, healthcare, personal services and academic and teaching roles. The women's male partners were mostly employed in white collar occupations or in trade occupations.

In designing this research we didn't set out to focus on women in so-called one and half earner families—families with a women in part-time employment and a male partner in a full-time job. However, among our small sample, 10 of the 14 families had such arrangements; in the other four families both partners were employed in jobs with part-time hours.

Permanent employee status with part-time hours was the norm among the 14 women at the beginning of 2020, with 11 of them in this employment arrangement. The women's weekly work hours pre-COVID lockdowns ranged from two days a week to full-time (one woman with multiple jobs), with most women working between two and a half and four days a week (0.5 to 0.8 EFT). Two women were self-employed, one held a fixed term contract role and two had casual jobs. Four of the 14 women were multiple job-holders, including one woman who had three jobs.

The dominant employment of the women's male partners was as a full-time permanent employee and this was the work situation of eight of the 14 partners, with another two men also employed full-time as tradesmen running their own businesses. The other four men were employed part-time. Two were employees working four days a week in permanent part-time jobs. The other two were multiple job holders, combining shorter hours' permanent part-time work with casual work.

So, the dominant employment pattern for the couples pre-COVID was the female partner in part-time and the male partner in full-time employment, a pattern typical in the larger population of couple families with young children.

# Work, family and school under lockdown

## Remote schooling: not a small job

In most households women were at home during lockdowns as were their children and partners. All but two of the women in our study began working remotely from home when the first COVID lockdowns commenced in Victoria in March 2020 and many were still working mainly from home when we conducted interviews in the last months of the year. The male partners of 11 of the women also worked from home during the Victorian household lockdowns. One other man was at home part of the time while stood down from work and another was at home intermittently due to reduced demand in his business.



Towards the end of home school, it was quite, I don't know, I was exhausted. ... the only other time I can remember being that tired is when I had a newborn, but it was a different kind of tiredness.

(Amy)

In 13 families, children were home undertaking schooling remotely for many months of 2020 and, in some households, toddlers were also at home. Remote schooling was a big adjustment for children and it was difficult for parents. In fact, it was a significant source of stress for most of the women and their families. In itself, remote schooling could be very consuming of parents' time, energy and emotion. Combining schooling with paid work put an extraordinary strain on many of the women and their partners, as illustrated:

... I'm not upset that we ... remote learned, I'm not angry about it. ... But, having said that there were days that I was so broken, just so broken by it. **(Joanne)**

(My children) needed help with their schoolwork ... they just weren't able to work independently. I think that was a real reality check for most parents and certainly it was true for us that when it came to remote learning ... it was not independent learning, it was a parent sitting side-by-side ... and really helping them with the activities and helping them understand instructions and in our case actually trying to keep them motivated which was really probably the hardest thing. **(Jana)**

Towards the end of home school, it was quite, I don't know, I was exhausted. ... the only other time I can remember being that tired is when I had a newborn, but it was a different kind of tiredness. **(Amy)**

### Schooling: mainly mothers' work?

Women took on most of the responsibility for managing and supporting children's remote schooling in 10 of the 14 households. Men took most responsibility in two households. In another household the children attended school and in the 14<sup>th</sup> household—in which the woman was an essential worker working outside the home—the parents shared schooling. Despite several couples' initial efforts to share the load equally, in almost all instances one parent—usually the mother—took on the bulk of this work. In one family the parents did eventually share the load after an initial period in which the woman did most. In other families, while women took on the schooling, their partners took on more of the household work than they had previously, for example, doing most of the cooking, or spending more time with children at the end of the school day. A couple of families had the assistance of grandparents a day or more a week for part of the lockdown periods.

Reasons for the division of labour between parents were unique to each household and they reflect a complex mix of factors relating to individual children's needs, children's and parents' personalities and established parenting practices, as well as parents' work demands and options for work flexibility. However, a clear pattern among a majority of the households was towards a strengthening of traditionally gendered divisions of parenting and household labour: women managed the household, undertook most of the work associated with children's schooling and often performed a lot of the other childcare and household tasks.

(In the afternoons) if we both had meetings the kids were okay at getting on..., but for the morning sessions, the reading, writing, maths, I said I would mainly do that. ... my husband took up more of the cooking, which has been really good. **(Audrey)**

Partners' greater work commitments were cited by women as the main reason for all or most of the remote schooling falling to them. Work commitments included longer hours, greater demands from employing organisations and men's higher incomes, as in Ruby's case:

I should have said to him, you can't work Tuesdays or Thursdays 'cause you've got to look after the kids. It's just not an option, because he earns a bucket load more money than me. ... It was discussed, but it was not really discussed because we both knew exactly where, what we had to do for the period of time. **(Ruby)**

In several households schooling became primarily the woman's responsibility due to women's dissatisfaction with how partners managed schooling. Some women felt their partners were either unable to give the children's schooling their full attention or were not patient enough. In addition, some children sought out their mothers' help. So, although most couples initially set out to share schooling, in 10 households women did all or most, as in Amy's case:

... I probably did end up doing more of the home schooling, just I think at that stage because I had more patience, and I had more time because I didn't have as much work. **(Amy)**

In the two households in which men did all or most of the schooling the couples had longer-standing shared parenting arrangements in place. While one of the two men had similar paid work demands as his partner, the other experienced greatly reduced work demands during 2020. The distribution of household and family work shifted with changing work commitments in both households, as illustrated:

(My partner) was doing most of the cooking and the shopping and kind of just keeping the house together. I guess a traditional woman's role really. He was doing a lot of that while I worked. Then as things changed, as my hours started to reduce and I wasn't working as much and he was actually able to go back to work that probably evened out again and probably for the second half of the lockdown we probably shared fairly 50/50. **(Molly)**

In the households where schooling was shared couples usually organised this through rostering their work days around the children's school time:

... at our handover at midday – we'd sort of jokingly call it handover notes. I'd be running into a 12 o'clock meeting and like sort of shouting over my shoulder at my partner '(they) haven't done maths or reading yet, you'll have to sort that out'. Dumping that on him as I run into my 12 o'clock meeting and slam the office door. ... he did definitely do online schooling. It was probably more like a 60/40 split maybe. **(Claire)**

The distribution and organisation of household, childcare and schooling work in most households under lockdowns appears to be along similar lines to those already established in the families prior to the pandemic. In most cases, bringing everyone's work and school to home seems to have strengthened established patterns. However, in a few instances, the lockdowns significantly disrupted arrangements between parents. In the examples below Molly's account is more typical of the women, with her household arrangements generally reflecting the ways she and her partner had already organised their family responsibilities. In contrast, Nicole experienced a significant change. While she and her partner shared childcare and schooling, she worked outside the home during the lockdowns and, for the first time, her day did not involve caring for and organising her children before going to work.

We've always been pretty 50/50 very intentionally (since) a long time ago ... To be completely honest he did pretty much all of the online, I just checked out of the online learning for a while, while he was home because I had work to do and he was available. So that was probably a bigger (change) for him. He's probably not been as involved in the school stuff before this year. But that's probably the main (area) where I can (see) a fairly significant difference to normal. **(Molly)**

... I ended up essentially role reversing with my husband. Where for the last eight years he just gets up and goes to work and for the first time ever in my life, or ever in our marriage, relationship, parenthood, I managed to just get up and go to work. I didn't have to worry about breakfast, I didn't have to worry about anything. That was actually, it took me a bit to process actually, that I could just get up and go without making lunches, without getting the kids to the car... **(Nicole)**

### Doing it all ... and school as well!

In part, children's remote schooling was managed through reducing paid work time. Women, and to a much lesser extent, their partners, took sick/personal leave, annual leave, long service leave and unpaid leave to get more free time to provide childcare and support for children remote schooling from home. However, in all households parents managed and supported children's remote schooling while maintaining paid work responsibilities.

COVID has just served to put much more pressure on women to do it all. To be mum, to work as much as you can, run the house and do all of those things with actually no extra help. ... So holding the stress of home schooling, holding the stress of your own job... And actually, what's going to be the mental health fall out, because I think women are under pressure to do all these things, without COVID coming on top of it.

**(Anna)**

A good 90% of the remote learning (and) caring responsibilities all came to me. But I also had to juggle my position as well ... So yeah, so the last few months for me have been trying to ensure that I'm committed to my (job) ... whilst trying to juggle remote learning and business, and it's been bloody hard. **(Ruby)**

In addition to schooling, women spoke of having an increased household and family load due to the whole family being in the house all the time. While their partners often did more of this work than usual, women's workloads still increased.

And everyone's home so there's so much more mess and so much more food being consumed and so much more washing because no one's leaving the house. **(Nicole)**

I think one of the hardest things ... was all the meal prep in-between. Suddenly a family of four eating three meals a day in the house, the dishwasher's running twice a day, but we have quite a small kitchen, so everyone would eat, leave their stuff, and then go back to what they were doing. If everybody left it, then you'd go to cook dinner and there was not a dish in the house, and no space to prepare any food, and everyone was hungry. **(Amy)**

in the first lockdown, I don't know, felt like I was doing all of the meals, but it wasn't just the evening meal, it was the lunches. ... when we're all home, it turns the lunch, which is normally a do-it-yourself affair, into an event. So, I just felt like I was always doing dishes, and I want to do the dishes after lunch because it's my workspace. I just felt like it was like this endless cycle of meals and dishes, meals and dishes, and it'd be a cooked lunch, and you're like, no. **(Emma)**

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So yeah, so the last few months for me have been trying to ensure that I'm committed to my (job) ... whilst trying to juggle remote learning and business, and it's been bloody hard.

**(Ruby)**

The pressures women experienced managing their workloads before the pandemic were severely exacerbated under lockdowns. For many, pressures included being the person who had to manage everything and also having high expectations that they could or should do it all:

The first time round I—pretty much in the spirit of supermum—said ‘I’ll do it’. [laughs] **(Audrey)**

I just thought, I’m just going to have to do all of this ... the result of that was that I knew that then I had to get the backend organised. So I was printing stuff, sitting in bed at night, at 10 o’clock at night working out (the school) timetable for the next day, and then just sitting with (the children) the whole time ... the whole time. And still trying to do my job. **(Joanne)**

I know that my mental load has increased significantly just trying to micromanage what’s due for the schooling, my work, food, groceries, what type of housework needs doing. **(Nicole)**

.... I think this might have been maybe four weeks into the second round of home school, that my wheels started to fall off, that I was tired, I was sick of the house being so disgusting, and I couldn’t do all the things. Probably for the first time, I couldn’t do everything that needed to be done, and yeah. **(Amy)**

For some, additional pressures related to uncertainty and trade offs between women’s time and the household budget; for example:

We’re on reduced (paid work) hours, so we didn’t want to go, ‘Stuff it, we’re just going to get takeaway’. We didn’t really want to be in that situation either, because it really felt like you should be saving your money because you don’t what’s going to happen. **(Amy)**

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**(Amy)**

# Managing work and family in household time and space

## Organising time and space for work and care

Everyone in the women's families made many adjustments and changes to adapt to COVID restrictions. However, women's accounts suggest they often had to make many more adjustments to their work arrangements than their partners did to manage the combined responsibilities of home-based work, family and schooling.

In many respects managing work and schooling responsibilities seemed to work best for families where parents could separate their work from children's schooling, with both temporal and spatial separation being important. However, separation was just not possible for many families, especially those with younger children, limited space and/or longer work hours. Some women did not wish to leave their children alone for the whole school day and, like Joanne, worked alongside them:

But (children) need to engage with someone... And I didn't want to be cut off from (my children). I know a lot of families ... put themselves in a separate room, or whatever, but I actually wanted, I didn't want (them) online with me not in the room ... or feeling ... isolated, so we sat at the dining room table together and just ... worked together. **(Joanne)**

Some households had separate rooms that functioned as office spaces and one family had the use of a nearby house that allowed parents to take and go to 'the office'. However, successfully separating work from home and school also required temporal separation. Usually, separating schooling time from work was only possible where women, and sometimes their partners, worked extremely long days. As illustrated in the example below, finding the time to work and manage everything at home as well as the space to do so also required a lot of juggling and some flexibility with both parents' work and it was difficult to achieve in most households.

So we worked out a routine where my partner would jump into the office first thing in the morning. So he might get up at sort of 7 or so and go into the office. He'd work till midday. Then we'd swap at midday and I'd work from 12 to 4, and then we'd swap again and he'd maybe work from 4 to 6. So I'd have – the upside was that I had four hours ring fenced, like every afternoon to do my own work. So when I was in the phase of taking that one day a week carer's leave, that was kind of adequate. I was kind of roughly doing my hours. **(Claire)**



I would think having the two worlds would be the perfect thing. You know, being able to go to the office maybe once or twice a week, and then working from home.

(Isabel)

While women adopted strategies to separate their work from home, these could be thwarted as the women also attempted to meet the needs and expectations of their children and when their partners' work took priority:

So, for a while I tried to organise as if they were going to school, so I would get up in the morning, I would try and make things, and make the breakfast and then prepare a lunch box. ... it worked for a few days and then they were like, 'No, I don't want a sandwich. I just want pasta.'

(Isabel)

There wasn't really much, it was definitely a big thing, ... having very, very little me time, so even when I'm trying to work (between 5 and 8 am) ... (it's) 'Can we have breakfast? Can we have this?'

(Audrey)

... we noticed when (my partner's) in the office with the door closed the kids don't tend to pester him. When I'm in the office with the door closed the kids bang on the door and slide notes under the door to me. (Claire)

When they did get space and time away from family and schooling women sometimes found working from home to be a better environment for getting some types of work done.

... of course I miss the interaction and (for some work) it would be much better to be face to face, but what I liked working from home is that I had the time and, I could focus on, for example, if I'm working on a plan or, you know, on a strategy or things like that, I really need to be focussed and not distracted. And, in my office it's an open space, we are (a lot of) people ... so sometimes I find it difficult to concentrate. So, I like that part, but I would think having the two worlds would be the perfect thing. You know, being able to go to the office maybe once or twice a week, and then working from home. (Isabel).

### Gendered time and space in the household

A common experience for the women was of continually dividing their attention between children's schooling and their paid work tasks. For most this was very stressful. Within the household and across the work and school week the absence of clearly defined spatial and temporal divisions between paid work and household/family work under COVID lockdowns was experienced by women as exhausting.

From women's accounts, a distinctly gendered pattern is evident in the spatial and temporal arrangements established by many couples, with it being common for women to be combining and juggling space and time for work with space and time for children and schooling while male partners, mainly because they were employed full-time, were more likely to have separate dedicated spaces and more clearly bounded work times separate from family responsibilities. Unlike the examples cited above where women and their partners negotiated to share a separate office space, in several households women worked in the midst of or around their family's home life, carving out time and space in between everything else.

So the first lockdown, and for part of the second lockdown I was starting work at 5:30 in the morning, just sending off some emails, trying to prepare myself for the day. If I had any thinking work to do, I would do it between 5:30 and 7:30 (am). ... So, my kids are early risers, so unfortunately when I got up at 5:30 in the morning, they would be up at 5:30 in the morning. You think 'I'm going to beat everyone' then it's like 'that's not going to work.' ... I try to take time off during the day. ... 20 minutes of work, 20 minutes of attending to the kids, that type of thing. (Anna)



Because my workspace is in the dining, kitchen, (in the middle of) everything, the theory was I would start a bit earlier. So, if I started at 8:00, then I would finish earlier so that I'm not in the (room), trying to work when dinner's happening, ... So, I suppose there's always negotiation between who's got the space. We had a protocol, when I was on a Zoom meeting, I would turn the desk around so that the camera faced just a blank wall rather than capturing everybody's movement through the kitchen and the dishes ... (Turning the desk around was just a signal (to the family) that (I was in a meeting). **(Emma)**

I set up my computer in our bedroom ... which wasn't ideal, but it was somewhere different. (Partner) has an office 'cause he always works from home, so he has an office. ... (Early on, to get reliable internet) he was working a bit in the kitchen and we'd just have to try and disappear for that time. **(Melanie)**

A source of frustration for some women was the idea that women's work time is intrinsically flexible. Prior to the pandemic couples often relied on this flexibility and, under COVID lockdowns, expectations that women could adjust their work around everyone else's needs could be heightened:

Largely my work's kind of difficult to explain to people that don't work in the industry. So (my partner) thinks I'm just in meetings all day. He doesn't have a good concept of what I do. He's like 'You can just take time off.' It's like 'I can but it means I'm not satisfied and I'm unmotivated at work and I'm also resentful in the home because I'm doing everything.' **(Anna)**

### Family work and male partners' work boundaries

Women's accounts suggest some male partners more easily separated work from family and household responsibilities than did the women. Some men maintained full-time work routines of the same or similar hours to those they normally worked.

...he'd go for a walk in the morning, come home, and then log on at 9:00 or whatever time, stop for morning tea, stop for lunch, but it was very a normal day, but he's also very good at just logging off in the evening too. So, he wasn't falling victim to working 8-9pm. ... So, every work day he would finish his day and go for a cycle, and that was the differentiator between work and home. **(Cathy)**

But I'll ask him if he's finished at 5.00 so that he can come down and clean the kitchen, because obviously with (a full) house ... you know like it's just trashed at the end of the day. **(Joanne)**

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So (my partner) thinks I'm just in meetings all day. He doesn't have a good concept of what I do. He's like 'You can just take time off.' It's like 'I can but it means I'm not satisfied and I'm unmotivated at work and I'm also resentful in the home because I'm doing everything.'

**(Anna)**

Where partners did combine children's schooling with work during the day, women sometimes saw them as unable to separate and fully disconnect fully from work, as noted earlier, and in this example.

It's kind of hard to explain but that was probably the biggest difference and the biggest point of tension was that when he was meant to be with the kids he still had half an eye on work. Whereas I'd totally forget about work when I was with the kids. **(Claire)**

A few women described their partners as having daily and weekly schedules like the majority of the women:

... my husband was still doing his alternate weeks ... On the week my husband was home ... he had a (pre-schooler), he was trying to do part time hours ... and home school ... so it was hard for everyone. ... Yes, so (during that period) he'd do five or six hours of work and then two hours of home learning and it would just be staggered over that 12-hour day. ... He's lost probably four weeks of his long service. **(Nicole)**

### Making compromises just to manage

I started to think that the, I guess, the project manager in me tried to find efficiencies to make everything run better, but I got to the point where, I remember one night saying to my husband, "I just feel like I'm failing at everything, failing at the job, failing at keeping the house running and reasonable. **(Amy)**

Regardless of any initial ambitions for expertly managing work, family and schooling under household lockdowns, at some time during 2020, women faced the realisation it was not possible to do everything perfectly and that something had to give. Depending on individual circumstances they looked to their workplaces, schools, partners, children and/or themselves for some concessions to enable them to manage their workloads and responsibilities.

I think initially I thought I'll be able to just keep working during the day with the kids at home but it was impossible and in fact psychologically and mentally it was much better to just be very clear with colleagues and employers that 'no, today I'm not contactable and I'm not checking my emails because I can't do my best work and look after kids and do justice (to that)' **(Jana)**

Once I kind of gave myself permission to just throw in the towel and not beat myself up because the kids watched far too much Netflix for the day, then things were a little bit easier to handle. **(Ruby)**



Once I kind of gave myself permission to just throw in the towel and not beat myself up because the kids watched far too much Netflix for the day, then things were a little bit easier to handle.

**(Ruby)**

## Winding back work

Differences between the paid work participation of women and their partners strengthened during the COVID lockdowns of 2020. As a group, the women in our study lost more hours of paid work, used up more leave and/or lost more of their income than their male partners did. Potentially of greater consequence in the long-term, women also lost opportunities for career development and advancement, sometimes as a result of changes occurring in their workplaces, but also as they reluctantly stepped away from opportunities in the face of time pressures and the physical and psychological strains of increased household and parenting loads.



I could see it coming. I was just waiting. I did have some tasks, but no one was giving me any feedback on them, nobody seemed engaged in them.

(Amy)

### Losing work and dropping hours

During 2020, only four of the 14 women maintained their pre-lockdown paid work hours, while this was the case for nine of the women's partners. Five women lost some paid work time during 2020 as their employers reduced staff hours and/or shut down parts of their businesses. This group included one woman who was made redundant late in the year and another whose paid hours were cut back in stages over 2020 and who anticipated she would probably lose her job in the first quarter of 2021 when government JobKeeper payments were due to cease.

Overall, the group of 14 women experienced no greater vulnerability to losing paid work time than did their male partners, where reductions were *due to business reasons*. However, most of the women in our study *did* lose more paid work time than their partners as they reduced their hours and/or took paid leave time to manage the demands of childcare and remote schooling. None of the women reported that their male partners had reduced their paid work time to manage schooling, although a few men did take leave to do so.

Two women who had their paid work hours cut by their employers felt marginalised by the way they were treated by their organisations. One woman had aspects of her role removed and felt very isolated well before she was eventually made redundant:

I could see it coming. I was just waiting. I did have some tasks, but no one was giving me any feedback on them, nobody seemed engaged in them. They just seemed very nothing, nothing tasks. So, I think that was quite difficult because I've been quite, I don't know, I've always been more engaged in my work, and the fact that nobody cared was like, oh, this is not good.

(Amy)

The second woman had her paid work days reduced but not her duties, something women also reported as happening to their partners. Isabel felt her organisation was turning a blind eye to the fact that she still had a full workload despite her paid work hours being cut as there was never any discussion with her about which parts of her job she could let go:

...they are just pretending they don't see that I work more than they pay me, so in a way it makes me angry. **(Isabel)**

Another woman lost work as her employer moved to adjust the organisation to operating remotely without, at first, including the work the casual employees performed. Molly said she lost work because her employer was 'unorganised'. When they did get organised Molly got her work back but with about half the hours she had pre-lockdowns.

Some women and their partners were able to work flexible hours and they worked in multiple short shifts over long days to manage their work along with schooling and other responsibilities. Several women kept up with their work only by spreading their part-time hours across the week and/or doing their work at night or early in the morning. One man was able to work four long days instead of five days. Another woman had to work away from home as an essential worker and she and her partner equally shared taking leave.

### Kerbing careers

Some women were in jobs they felt offered less challenge or responsibility than was commensurate with their skills and experience. They were in these jobs as they offered part-time hours; yet women were now at a stage in their working lives where they were considering or making moves to change jobs to build or re-build careers. However, the events of 2020 meant that activities and plans for job changes and/or career progression were put on hold as women just managed their current jobs:

And you know, little kids need you. If you're at home, they can't understand why you're on the phone or you're trying to concentrate on figuring out what's the next step in my project plan. They've got no time for that sort of thing. My work got down to just doing quite a lot of administrative tasks and just going to meetings and talking. That's probably the most I can manage. **(Anna)**

I did apply for a couple of jobs, and I had one interview, and at the sort of the lowest ebb, (I thought) I'm not sure that I can do this. And I think this is acknowledging how work did suffer. I thought if I leave this job and I go somewhere where I've got a six month probation period, and I'm still doing remote (schooling), there is no way that I can give a job a hundred percent. So I withdrew ... because I just thought, you know what, being realistic, sticking where you are ... and (my temporary job until mid next year) is just fine, and yeah. ... I think I performed fine (during 2020) and got everything that I needed to get done done, but there were times when I just wasn't focussed. And I don't think you can start a new job in that sort of head space. **(Joanne)**

Several women reported having little guidance, support or even contact from managers and supervisors and/or no opportunity for team engagement. These women felt they were not doing enough in their jobs, in part because of the multiple pressures on them, but also often because of feeling isolated and disconnected from work, as noted in the next section.

Other women were keenly aware that 2020 may have set their careers and workplans back significantly. Cathy moved her relatively young business online but not all her clients stayed engaged and during 2020 she lost a lot of business. She initially thought this would give her extra time to more quickly get through the training courses she was doing to expand her service offerings and build her business. However, with children's schooling, she found she had much less time to study than before and didn't get through nearly as much of her training as planned. Cathy was concerned that she might have to start all over again to build a client base despite all the work she had done. Claire's employment situation was very different but she felt 2020 may have set her career back:

"So it does hang over me as a bit of a lost year. ... I was very insulated against (job loss during 2020) but what of course is under threat is my future after this (fixed-term) contract. ... And god knows how I'll be competitive after this. (My current role is) like a career make or break. It's the biggest opportunity you get (in my occupation). I still can't even believe I'm in the role. It's amazing, but this has really fucked it, but on the other hand everything's a bit fucked. ... So I've really tried not to stress too much about the long term impacts of it because I just, who knows. But yeah, it's pretty – yeah it was a very big time for thinking about your work and your career in relation to COVID. It's huge." **(Claire)**



So I've really tried not to stress too much about the long term impacts of it because I just, who knows. But yeah, it's pretty – yeah it was a very big time for thinking about your work and your career in relation to COVID. It's huge.

**(Claire)**

# Organisational responses and support

## Diversity of employee experiences

In the main, women experienced their employers as supportive during lockdowns. Most women felt their organisations and managers acknowledged their circumstances and made adjustments in recognition of women's combined work and family responsibilities. However, organisations and managers varied a lot in the support they provided to employees. This was not only in relation to how women's extra childcare and schooling commitments were taken account of. It was also about the efforts they made to keep staff employed and to support them as remote workers. Molly's contrasting experiences in her two casual jobs illustrate this.

I'm really glad I had two ... jobs. I think many casuals (in my area) keep their fingers in a couple of pies and I think a year like this has probably shown me why we do that and the wisdom in that because essentially I've had one really fantastic employer who's done everything they can to support me and I've had one pretty bad one.

(In one job) I just didn't feel part of a team at all. I felt very on my own. No one ever checking in to see how I was going or even just to tell me what was really happening. But (they were) very quick to get onto (me) if they needed something. ... But yeah it hasn't been great ... It's not that hard to send an email once a month and to let people know what's happening. Really basic things. I didn't get paid twice. ... I felt a real lack of care from that employer. I think part of that is because I'm a casual staff member who in their eyes probably doesn't have the most important job (in the organisation) and (I) definitely felt pretty forgotten.

Then at (my other job), they've really done their best. ... I have an amazing (manager) ... so he was like, 'All of my staff are vulnerable people right now in this climate' and he's just done everything he can. He created ... opportunities for (staff). **(Molly)**

Molly felt that, as a casual, she was treated differently to the permanent employees in the organisation in which she felt forgotten. In contrast, Jana, who was also employed as a casual, felt strongly supported by both her organisation—through formal policies supporting her as a carer—and by her manager and team—through regular and supportive engagement. She said:

I was pretty frustrated in June/July when we were facing, looking down the barrel of another lockdown and the kids being taken out of school and I thought, you know, Jesus, I've got nothing, I've got no annual leave, I've got no sick leave and yes, I think I was frustrated. But that would have been compounded if I'd had a, for example, an unsympathetic employer but I didn't. ... I think even as a casual I was actually entitled to access, I think it was about 20 days of care leave to look after kids or to do something, there was something there. ... not having permanent work is stressful at the best of times but I think, of all the people in insecure work, I was at the sort of lower end of feeling insecure in that sense.

... (We had meetings where we checked in with each other) about twice a week and then our boss would make a point of probably calling each of us once a week or once a fortnight for a one on one conversation as well. **(Jana)**

## Flexible work arrangements

Women felt supported where they were able to access additional leave and/or when workplace adjustments were made around their availability and/or work performance in recognition of their extra childcare and remote schooling work:

I'm really fortunate ... So never once did I feel questioned about why I haven't been producing as much work as I normally would, or why I'm working all over the place (at all hours), and why I'm potentially a little bit cranky when they ring.

**(Amy)**

Several women attributed their organisations' responsiveness and consideration of their situations to working in a feminised industry or workplace that was accustomed to employees combining work and care. However this was not universally so, as in Alysia's case:

I reckon I was the only one with little kids in the organisation and so they were all really good to me. **(Alysia)**

Women who were able to access flexible work arrangements prior to the lockdowns found their organisations fairly readily adapted to the women working flexibly. Among those for whom this was the case were several women who were in senior positions in their organisations and had a lot of autonomy in their roles.

... I'm very lucky. So, even though we don't necessarily have flexible working options in ... our policies and procedure manual, it's most certainly something that's always been on offer for me.

**(Ruby)**

... early on, they said, 'If you need to take a day a week, that (doesn't need) to come out of your sick leave or annual leave. We'll give you special leave a day a week **(Emma)**

While welcomed, flexible working time and extra leave did not alleviate the long hours and overload women faced with their multiple responsibilities where women were in demanding jobs with responsibilities that couldn't be dropped.

... so (having special leave one day a week), I guess it was sort of a mental pressure relief. ... Although, no one does my work when I don't. ... So, I would still get back to the tsunami of emails ... and then it just got out of control, and I just was feeling like there's not much point in not working that other day a week, because I just can't manage everything. (Emma)

I ended up, for better or worse, spreading the hours across five days [laughs], and doing really early hours. I ended up doing 5:00 to 8:00 (in the morning), and then switching over to remote learning ... and then if I had any (additional work), I could do it after that. **(Audrey)**

Women who felt flexible working was not accepted or supported by their employers mostly perceived this to be due, in some part, to organisations' or individual managers' unpreparedness or inability to manage in the extremely challenging circumstances. However, in some cases, women saw the issues as stemming from organisational cultures of presenteeism and lack of trust, as in this example.

So we have a CEO who did not trust that if we were working from home we were working from home. So it was very much sort of a bit of a taboo subject to work from home ... So (when we started working from home) there was stuff that they did, they were checking in making sure that you were working, making sure that you were logged on. And a whole stream of stuff, like the levels of reporting on progress increased, ... all of those sorts of things just went, skyrocketed. **(Joanne)**

## Importance of supportive managers and teams

Our findings reflect those of the existing research literature on workplace flexibility that has pointed to the importance of individual managers' approaches and responses as critical in determining whether workplace flexibility policies actually support parents and carers to manage work and family. Anna had to purchase additional leave to manage her care and school responsibilities and felt her manager was unsupportive:

Yeah, I had to negotiate with my manager and she wasn't super happy about me doing that. Even though she had openly said in our staff meeting that people need to take time, we've all got to manage our mental health and kids and blah, blah blah. Yeah, she was a bit resentful when I did that. **(Anna)**



I actually probably have too much autonomy and that's been a cause of stress for me too because I've felt at times a little bit disconnected from my workplace.

**(Clare)**

Women's experiences also highlighted the importance of supportive managers and teams for all employees working remotely in the extraordinary circumstances.

My boss was fantastic ...he told me I was really resilient and he gave me really positive feedback. **(Alysia)**

Well again, I mean I had an amazing (team) ... we kind of supported each other through the challenges that each person was facing at different points in time ... so I think we started every staff meeting with a check-in and that was very similar for my husband as well, his work does it as a matter of course. **(Jana)**

Where women did not have regular and positive connections with their managers and work teams disengagement was an issue for their wellbeing and for their work:

I actually probably have too much autonomy and that's been a cause of stress for me too because I've felt at times a little bit disconnected from my workplace. ... So even when I had my four hours in the (home) office every afternoon it could be difficult to focus and to get what I needed done, done. **(Claire)**

Like I'm quite unengaged, or disengaged really, from work. Very unmotivated and probably struggle each day to go, okay what's your task, do this. Because I think, because there's not that accountability. Nobody's asking me what to do and there's no goal, if that makes sense. **(Anna)**



### Men's workplaces: slow to change?

Women's accounts of their partners' work and support from workplaces also indicate a diversity of responses and readiness to support men as parents. Long hours and heavy work demands appeared to be the norm for some of the men, seemingly requiring a massive shift in culture if men's roles as hands-on parents are to be acknowledged. In some workplaces it appears the pandemic had exacerbated this situation. For example, at least two men were working extremely long hours despite having had their pay cut.

By the time the second round (of lockdown) rolled around ... my husband's work got quite busy, so he was needing to pull some long hours, despite being on stand down. So, we were working basically full-time, he was working probably more than full-time and getting paid just the three days.

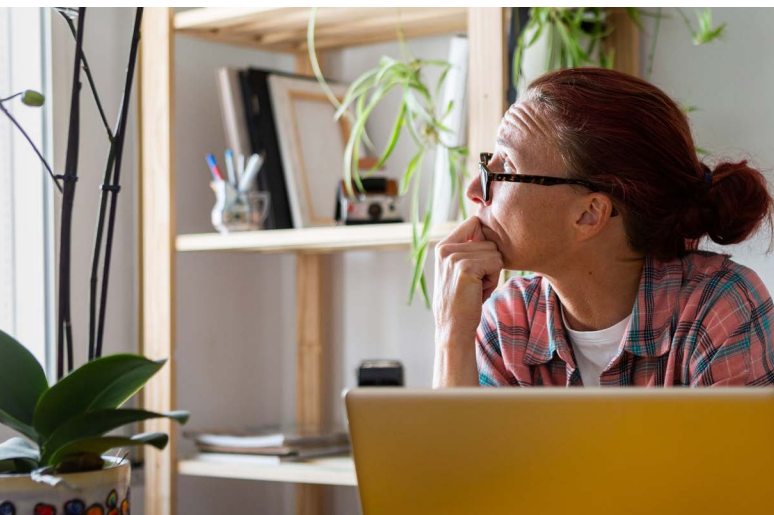
**(Amy)**

Some male partners did have supportive workplaces including Jana's partner, who took on the bulk of the schooling over one period:

... (my partner) works for a very nurturing organisation, he had other colleagues in, not quite, well similar, circumstances, you know, young kids. In the end he didn't really take a lot of leave but I think what he would do is sort of break up his hours or work a little bit in the evening once they'd gone to bed which is a very typical thing for a lot of people this year I think. **(Jana)**

A few women spoke of their partners' workplaces responding much better and acknowledging and supporting the men as parents and carers as 2020 progressed and long lockdown periods continued. In two cases women felt their male partners were for the first time in their work lives encouraged by their organisations to seek time and flexibility for family responsibilities:

And then, I think, (in) the second (lockdown) his work probably started initiating the discussion by saying, 'Do you need to have any capacity to take on some of the (home) stuff?' **(Audrey)**



## Impacts and possible futures

So in some ways the initial part of COVID was a nightmare where he was working all the time, but once that project died down everything calmed down a bit and we fell into quite a good routine. ... I feel like things are probably more equitable than ever on that front but my career has definitely taken the bigger hit. **(Claire)**

... the kids are really good around the house now. Maybe they have just matured a bit, but probably they have also seen the demands of our work. **(Alysia)**

For most of the women in our study the triple load of work, family and remote schooling over many months was exhausting and a near impossible task. However, among the experiences of overload and stress there were some positive aspects of bringing work-life home under lockdown circumstances. There was also some optimism that some of this might stick in the future. Within families some of these positives were parents having more time with children, men spending more time with the family, and couples having a more equitable division of household and caring labour.

And for both of us really to have a bit more insight into what the kids were actually doing (in school). ... I mean that's definitely something we'd like to keep up .. **(Audrey)**

On the work front, women believed or hoped that organisations might be more open to their employees working from home. Some also believed that the importance of men having family-friendly flexibility in their jobs might now be better acknowledged by employers and also by men themselves.

I think in a systemic sense working from home will no longer be frowned on as some kind of easy option, and that women with children, I don't know what they think we're doing, just sipping champagne in the bath...or whatever. So systemically hopefully there will be a real, a change in attitude, a shift in attitude around that. I mean there has to be doesn't there? **(Joanne)**

I think, like everybody, (we) have completely reassessed the need to be in an office full time. (My partner) has been able to get his employer to agree to let him to work remotely ... so that's a huge change, I mean that's not something that he could have asked for before this pandemic. **(Jana)**

(My partner) developed more, I don't know, maybe more confidence and flexibility with his work ... He got better at being able to say 'I'll move some meetings around' or 'I'll tell my colleagues I'm unavailable in the afternoon' or whatever. **(Claire)**

Less positively, as outlined above, while the lockdowns offered some women a chance to re-think what they were doing and wanted from work, negative impacts on women's careers were often significant. Other potentially significant impacts are likely to be on women's and families' economic security. At the end of 2020 the latter was looming as an issue for some women and their families, including Molly whose casual work was intermittent over the year.

... in the summer break I don't work but I'm also not getting paid because I'm a casual. I think in the past with being able to stockpile, that's really been okay. I'm not like losing sleep over it but I'm probably a little bit more anxious about this summer break coming up than I have in the past because I don't know if we've been able to quite prepare for that. **(Molly)**

# Conclusions

This research demonstrates how the secondary nature of women's part-time employment and the gendered allocation of unpaid household and family work in couple households can be deeply problematic for gender equality, especially at times of crisis. Strengthened gender divisions of labour have significant short-term—and possibly long-term—negative consequences.

Women's part-time jobs can be treated as secondary in their households. This is not to suggest that women or their partners regard women's jobs as secondary; women take their jobs and careers seriously. Rather, jobs become secondary *in comparison to partners' jobs* and *in relation to family needs* where men's jobs are full-time and their incomes higher than women's and women are the primary care-givers for children. In times of crisis such as the COVID pandemic women's secondary job status makes it almost inevitable that mothers of young children will bear an extraordinary load of domestic and family work.

The COVID pandemic has exposed how deep gender divisions in parenting and household labour are under Australia's one-and-a-half earner model and how this contributes to the precarity of women's economic independence. The already entrenched construction of women's paid work as secondary is reproduced in multiple ways under lockdowns:

- Women are often in jobs with fewer responsibilities than commensurate with their skills, experience and ambition, as a result of needing part-time hours or as a strategy to avoid work-family conflicts that might lead to failure at home or at work.
- Most men in full-time jobs do not have access to established routines of flexible work to support family responsibilities, including due to workplace norms of overwork and 'presenteeism'.
- Women continue to have primary responsibility for day-to-day parenting of young children and for household management, a workload which during COVID lockdowns and remote schooling could become extreme.
- Men's engagement in household work and many aspects of parenting tends to be more clearly defined and bounded (e.g. cooking evening meals, playing with the children) and is less likely to entail organising and managing care and the household.

The deferral of employment plans and stalling of careers experienced by women in this study is probably an experience shared by many people in the labour force during 2020 and 2021. Notably, it is especially a problem for many young people trying to enter the workforce. Women returning from time out of the paid workforce post-childbirth are also likely to be a group facing difficulties. However, women, like those in our study who are already in paid work, are not especially visible as a group whose employment and careers may suffer in the longer-term, although the part-time career penalty for women returning to work has long been recognised. Our study suggests that the disruptions caused by COVID may be critical for women at this life stage as it may increase women's career disadvantages and it may reinforce traditional gender roles.

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## Table 1: Research participants

Name <sup>1</sup>	Employment	Partner's employment	Children
<b>Amy</b>	P/T employee, 3 days pw	F/T employee, office-based	2 children aged pre and mid primary
<b>Joanne</b>	P/T employee, 4 days pw	F/T employee, office-based	2 children late primary and high school
<b>Nicole</b>	P/T employee 4 days pw	F/T employee, office-based	2 children aged pre and mid primary
<b>Audrey</b>	P/T employee, 2 days pw	F/T employee, office-based	2 children early and mid primary
<b>Ruby</b>	P/T employee 25 hrs	F/T self-employed	3 children early and mid primary
<b>Anna</b>	P/T employee 4 days pw	F/T self-employed	2 children, pre and early primary
<b>Cathy</b>	P/T self-employed	F/T employee, office-based	3 children – one high school, two mid-upper primary
<b>Isabel</b>	P/T employee, 4-5 days pw	F/T employee, office-based	2 middle primary
<b>Claire</b>	P/T employee, 4 days pw	F/T employee, office-based	2 children, 1 pre and 1 primary
<b>Alysia</b>	P/T employee, 30 hours pw	FT employee, office-based	3 primary school
<b>Molly</b>	P/T 3 jobs: self-employed & casual (total 3+ days pw)	P/T employee, not office-based	1 primary school, 1 older
<b>Emma</b>	PT employee, 4 days pw	P/T in 2 jobs: employee & self-employed	1 child, mid-late primary
<b>Jana</b>	Casual employee, 4.5 days a week	P/T employee, office-based	3 children, 1 pre and 2 primary-school
<b>Melanie</b>	P/T employee 2 jobs (total 3 days pw)	Casual employee 2-3 days, not office-based	1 child early primary

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

