

**WESTERN SYDNEY**  
UNIVERSITY



# THE FUTURE OF WORK AND CHILDCARE

Towards equity and justice for Western Sydney communities

2023

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## AUTHORS

**Lead authors:** Jenna Condie \* and Liz Ayres  
\*j.condie@westernsydney.edu.au

**Co-authors:** Nicole Bridges, Sheree Gregory, Kate Huppatz, Donna James, Sukhmani Khorana, Amanda Third, Sharlotte Tusasiirwe, Chris Woodrow

**Contributors:** Kaiya Aboagye, Elaine Burns, Emilee Gilbert, Natalia Hartge, Rebekah Grace, Hazel Keedle, Joanne Orlando, Emma Power, Meg Smith, Cristine Towney.

## FUNDING

The development of this White Paper was funded by the Western Sydney University Education and Work Research Theme.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With respect for Aboriginal cultural protocol and out of recognition that its campuses occupy their traditional lands, Western Sydney University acknowledges the Darug, Eora, Dharawal (also referred to as Tharawal) and Wiradjuri peoples and thanks them for their support of its work in their lands (Greater Western Sydney and beyond). We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and that this always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Thank you to all contributors of this white paper and to Katrina Barker and Maria Estela Varua who provided critical commentary in the review process. We also acknowledge Blue Mountains City Council and Liverpool Neighbourhood Connections for early conversations about the scope of this white paper. Thank you to Natalia Hartge and Jackson Edwards who completed their undergraduate summer research scholarships in collaboration with the research team.

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## SUGGESTED CITATION:

Condie, J., & Ayres, L. et al., (2023) The Future of Work and Childcare: Towards equity and justice for western Sydney communities. Penrith: Western Sydney University. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26183/6thz-fh85>

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Our society currently prioritises economic growth over family and community relationships, equity and fairness, community wellbeing, ontological security, and children’s learning and development.**

**Despite some progress towards gender equality, the impacts of the patriarchal economic system continue to be deeply felt by parents, more so by women, who are often primary carers, and their children.**

Access to study and education are also out of reach for many women given the limited support within current work and childcare conditions. Women typically earn less than men and are at greater risk of living in poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the existing inequalities and challenges in managing work and childcare. Becoming a parent or carer can be a struggle, especially for women from disadvantaged or marginalised backgrounds, for those without family support, and for single parents who may not always have someone to step in and support their care work when needed.

This white paper brings together a cross-university, transdisciplinary team of researchers at Western Sydney University who are advocating for more equitable models of work and childcare. Anti-colonial, intersectional feminist frameworks underpin our research to foster gender equity, gentle parenting, community building, social support and climate justice. We focus on the western Sydney region, where we are located, as the inequalities in work and childcare are acute in our communities and existing childcare educators are under increasing pressure. Western Sydney University researchers have the established community connections to passionately and collectively work towards solutions with parents, women, carers, children and childcare educators across the diversity of localities that make up our region. We are invested in working for, with, and within, our own communities and the broader region. Participatory research approaches that prioritise, and are driven by women, children, and families are crucial for achieving more just, equitable, and sustainable systems.

The care economy in western Sydney remains under-resourced and inflexible. It is stifling gender equality and maintaining unfair systems that further marginalise women, parents, carers and families who are already struggling. Meaningful change is reliant on better understanding the complex interplay between workforce participation and childcare at the local level. Currently there are significant deficits in the data and evidence that is needed for guiding good policy decisions. This data vacuum, particularly for qualitative data that records the lived experiences of women, children and their families is resulting in a lack of awareness from centralised policy and decision-makers about what is needed to fix our childcare systems. First Nations, migrant and refugee women and their families are concentrated in western Sydney localities, and we advocate for a better understanding of the lived experiences of these women as a priority, as well as for all communities residing in the region.

Our white paper culminates in a Vision statement and a place-based research Agenda designed to influence and instigate socially just policy making and practices that respond at multiple scales, from localised household and community life to the urgency for broader action to address intersecting crises. Our research agenda centres on the following six proposed streams as immediate and urgent priorities for our western Sydney region:

1. Defining characteristics of gendered workforce participation by locality across the region;
2. Understanding the providers and what the childcare sector looks like in terms of who is operating in the region;
3. ‘Thick’ mapping of the provision of formal childcare services by locality (including location, places, vacancy rates, costs, quality standards and how provision intersects with population demographics);
4. Appropriate methodologies for generating a place-based childcare stress metric that shows household spending on childcare as a proportion of income;
5. Collecting evidence on innovative models and informal childcare supports across western Sydney; and
6. Using this evidence in design justice workshops with local people, groups and the sector to co-create equitable and just systems for our region.

# INTRODUCTION

**While there have been some strides towards gender equality, there is still a long way to go in addressing the deep-rooted effects of the patriarchal economic system on women and their families. It is crucial to provide adequate support for education and study, especially for those who are also caregivers, and to address the gender pay gap and the disproportionate risk of poverty for women.**

Becoming a parent or caregiver can be especially challenging for those who are already disadvantaged or marginalised, and for those without access to family support. Ultimately, prioritising the wellbeing of families and caregivers benefits communities and society as a whole.

Becoming a parent can be a demanding and ongoing transition. The perinatal period is also a time when physical health, mental health, and well-being should be prioritised. There are substantial numbers of women and birthing people experiencing birth trauma, and rising rates of interventions in birth where longer recovery times are needed. Recovery from health complications and the mental health impacts of pregnancy, birthing, and parenting can also be compromised due to the need to return to work. Many workplace and educational settings are not designed for working parents, and it can be difficult for parents to get the support they need.

Where you live matters when it comes to accessing work and quality childcare. Your location impacts the kinds of work you can do and the availability of suitable childcare. Work and childcare interrelate with the affordability and availability of housing, transport, and other critical infrastructures. In the Sydney region, some places are childcare "oases," and others are childcare "deserts"

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'CHILDCARE'?

Throughout this white paper, we primarily use the term 'childcare' to refer to all forms of care for children, including both formal services and informal practices. While 'childcare' can be commonly understood as 'Early Childhood Education and Care' (ECEC) it is important to note that this is just one system of formalised childcare and the childcare landscape involves many different forms and practices.

(Mitchell Institute, 2022). A childcare "desert" means there are more than three children for every formal childcare place, and these deserts are concentrated in socio-economically disadvantaged locations (Mitchell Institute, 2022). Parents and primary carers who live in childcare deserts can find it more difficult to access employment or return to work. Compounding this, evidence shows it is these very communities where quality childcare is most important because of the link with long term education and well-being outcomes for children.

The market-based childcare system in Australia is not delivering the critical infrastructure required to meet the needs of parents, mothers, children, and childcare educators. As a feminised profession, highly skilled childcare educators are leaving the sector due to low pay, disrespect, and sheer exhaustion. This is resulting in workforce shortages, which means fewer childcare spaces at a time when every single place is crucial. And when demand vastly outstrips supply, access to quality childcare services declines. Our childcare educators, parents, carers and children deserve so much more.

Although there are measures to support parents in working, studying and caring for their children, they fall far short. The gender pay gap persists and deepens, and women in particular are paying the financial and emotional price for inadequate childcare provision. For many, there is no good choice when juggling work and childcare: they can either return to work and watch their income disappear on childcare, or stay home and risk longer-term financial insecurity.

The work and childcare systems we have perpetuate structural racism and class inequalities, maintaining social hierarchies that determine who can access opportunities and who cannot. Migration to Australia is often staggered through temporary visas, and some women, such as newly arrived working-class migrants without residency, have little or no access to childcare provision to support their contributions to the economy (Westcott and Robertson, 2017). Those seeking asylum may also experience difficulties accessing childcare subsidies, which are residency-dependent and only available for certain types of temporary protection visas. Informal childcare practices are not well understood, but anecdotal evidence suggests that grandparents and extended family carers often step in, forgoing their own paid work, retirement or other opportunities. At the same time, there are opportunities for new, flexible and innovative models of quality childcare to be developed to fill the gaps, particularly

for those in rostered work, and those in precarious work where childcare needs are not necessarily predictable.

The pandemic has made the problems at the intersections of work and childcare more visible and left support systems in greater disrepair. It has also shown that we can live, work and care differently. Researchers have an important role in making visible the issues, challenges and opportunities that can instigate the societal shifts required to change the conditions of work and childcare. We urgently call for the longstanding and ever-deepening social inequalities impacting childcare educators, parents, carers and their children to be addressed. Our communities deserve better. It's time for action.

**Our research is underpinned by the following United Nations Sustainable Development Goals:**



# THE CHALLENGE

**In several global North countries, such as Australia, the US and the UK, the care economy remains under-resourced and inflexible, stifling gender equity. Australia's paid parental leave scheme is ranked second worst in the OECD, and one in two women report experiencing workplace discrimination during pregnancy, parental leave and/or when returning to work (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018).**

At the same time, the privatised market driven system of childcare is failing Australian families. For many families, especially those in poverty, childcare is unaffordable and inaccessible (Woodrow and Press, 2018; Mitchell Institute 2022). The consequences are that many primary carers, who are mostly women, are not always able to (return to) work and/or study. Due to residency requirements, some parents such as many migrant workers and refugees are not entitled to any financial support to access childcare services. Furthermore, the early education workforce, as a feminised profession, is underpaid and undervalued (McDonald, Thorpe and Irvine, 2018). The work-childcare systems in place are therefore key contributors to the gender pay gaps and care penalties being predominantly experienced by women.

## PANDEMIC IMPACTS ON WORK AND CARE

The pandemic both exacerbated and rendered visible the inequitable gendered divisions of labour that underpin working life and productivity in Australia (Wood et al, 2021). It showed that alternative work-family arrangements are possible; for example, new patterns of technology use

have facilitated working from home arrangements that have prompted new ways of thinking about how we balance work or education and family life. At the same time, the pandemic gave rise to new tensions between work and childcare and deepened long standing place-based and social inequalities for many families (Bryant, 2020). Across the greater Sydney region, the pandemic experiences of families and their ability to work and care for children differed vastly and in unequal ways (Cooper and Hill, 2022).

Women, children and others already experiencing disadvantage 'bore the brunt of the pandemic', which exposed the 'fault lines' in our 'health, social, government, economic and political systems' (Shergold et al, 2022). In the first few months of the pandemic in Australia, women were over 30 per cent more likely to exit the workforce than men (Shergold et al., 2022). Put simply, during lockdowns, 'women's jobs were hit harder than men's' and women were 'more likely to lose their jobs, more likely to do a lot more unpaid work, and less likely to get government support' (Wood et al, 2021, p. 3). Furthermore, mothers in couples, and single parents (80 per cent of whom are women) were more likely to leave the labour force than any other groups (Wood et al., 2021, p. 3).

Women were also less likely to receive the Australian government's Jobkeeper payments. The childcare sector, predominantly staffed by women, was also the first to lose Jobkeeper support. School-aged students in the bottom 20% by socioeconomic status were over 40 times less likely to have a computer for remote schooling than students in the top 20% (Shergold et al., 2022). The 'laptop line' (Murphy, 2022) draws a picture of an unequal Australia where those living in the inner city can work from home while those living in outer suburbs are less able to do so. For many parents in 'front line' roles, including in health, care, and retail sectors, formal childcare is essential and working from home is not an

option (Senate Inquiry Report, 2022, p. 30). Research on where childcare availability is an 'oasis' or a 'desert' shows that those who live in more affluent suburbs have far better access to childcare than those in poorer suburbs (Mitchell Institute, 2022). Structural inequalities undermine the wellbeing of communities, and no matter the chosen lens, there are many people living, working and caring in the 'cracks', 'lines', 'gaps', 'deserts' and 'fault lines' of society.

Pandemic conditions fractured our care systems and we are still in crisis. There is some evidence that the current level of informal care remains above pre-pandemic levels (Senate Inquiry Interim Report, 2022). Given the rising cost of living and deepening wealth inequalities, childcare is likely becoming unaffordable for more families. When mortgages, rents, and household bills go up, childcare can be an expense households can not pay. Childcare educators are also unable to afford continuing to work in the sector, exhausted following the pandemic, and leaving for better pay elsewhere. In one study, 73% of childcare educators surveyed plan to leave the sector in the next three years due to excessive workload, exhaustion, and low pay (United Workers Union, 2021). We need a childcare system that takes better care of staff, and we require better planning for future disasters so that childcare infrastructures remain intact and fully supported in times of crisis (Huppertz and Craig, 2022).

## RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*"The pandemic compounded gender inequality, in that it intensified care labour. However, it also made care labour more visible, and showed us that childcare policies can be reimagined. We need to harness this momentum and make use of social research to pursue a more gender-equitable society".*

Associate Professor Kate Huppertz  
(School of Social Sciences)

Contact: k.huppertz@westernsydney.edu.au

## AN INADEQUATE CHILDCARE SYSTEM

Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system and structures do not adequately support the children, women and families who need it the most. This section highlights issues that need to be addressed for a fairer and more just system.

## THE PERINATAL PERIOD

Pregnancy, birth and the perinatal period are significant periods in life. The prevalence of maternal and parental anxiety during pregnancy and birth is increasing and can become a major health and mental health issue for those affected (Schmied and Kearney, 2018). Perinatal depression has also been found to have increased during the pandemic (Lequertier et al., 2022). Birth trauma is a significant ongoing issue and can be the result of 'being subject to disrespectful or abusive care' during pregnancy and birth (Keedle et al., 2022). The perinatal period is a "time characterised by a transformation in relationships as new parenting inevitably results in changes to roles and interactions both within and outside the family context" (Hine et al., 2023, p.137). The significant changes for the mother or birthing parent that occur through pregnancy, birth and the perinatal period, particularly when trauma is involved, make gentle transitions to work and study critical for the immediate and longer term well being of parents and their children.

## RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*"Our Birth Experience Study is the largest maternity survey of women's experiences in Australia to date with 8,804 women completing the survey. In our survey, we asked women who had birthed in the previous 5 years from 2021 questions about their maternity care alongside psychosocial issues such as PTSD, mental health issues, birth trauma and obstetric violence. Our study found 1 in 3 women experienced birth trauma and 1 in 10 women experienced obstetric violence. Exploring the impact trauma has on women during the perinatal period, and the impact on their babies, is vital to ensure clinicians and services use trauma informed principles. All women deserve respectful maternity care but unfortunately, not all women in Australia receive it".*

Dr Hazel Keedle (School of Nursing and Midwifery)  
Contact: h.keedle@westernsydney.edu.au

### BREASTFEEDING SUPPORT

Breastfeeding after returning to work (RTW) varies globally, influenced by economic status and cultural factors. A systematic review analysing 42,820 women found the prevalence of breastfeeding after RTW ranged from 2% to 61%. RTW is a leading cause of early weaning, with women needing more support to continue breastfeeding (Bridges, Howell, and Schmeid, 2018). Workplace policies that support breastfeeding are often not followed, creating barriers for women in teaching, nursing, and midwifery professions (Burns et al., 2022). Breastfeeding-friendly employers and flexible working arrangements can help, but social pressures to stop breastfeeding older babies remain. Some childcare providers support breastfeeding, while others are unsure or actively discriminate against breastfeeding parents (Smith et al., 2013). Educating childcare providers to better support breastfeeding is critical for maternal labour force participation, infant nutrition and health, and gender equality.

### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*“My research agenda is concentrated on parents’ web and social media use to access breastfeeding support. My research findings on breastfeeding support have significant implications as well as practical solutions for peer support organisations and health professionals charged with the care of breastfeeding parents and their families. It is evident that social media has become a significant method of communication and social connection for the current generation of parents. By designing social media tools and integrating the use of social networking sites into the mechanisms available to support breastfeeding, these organisations can provide cost-effective and socially relevant methods of connecting with and supporting breastfeeding parents – now and into the future”.*

Dr Nicole Bridges  
(School of Humanities and Communication Arts)  
Contact: n.bridges@westernsydney.edu.au

### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*“Our Return to Work and Breastfeeding (RTW&BF) surveys 3000 women's experiences of returning to work and maintaining breastfeeding in Australia. To maintain breastmilk supply, almost three quarters of women expressed milk at work. Key predictors for ‘confidence in maintaining milk supply’ after return to work included being able to take breaks when needed, having a suitable place to express milk, having confidence in standing up for breastfeeding rights, and the age of the child at return to work (with later return to work influencing longer durations of breastfeeding). Adequate paid parental leave and childcare options for breastfeeding workers and the need for more ABA Breastfeeding Friendly Workplace accredited workplaces is important for supporting women to breastfeed”.*

Associate Professor Elaine Burns  
(School of Nursing and Midwifery)  
Contact: e.burns@westernsydney.edu.au

### CHILDCARE ACCESSIBILITY

Childcare provision is not uniform across locations (Mitchell Institute, 2022). The privatised market-based ECEC system in Australia is resulting in some localities having ‘thin markets’, where there is no consumer choice due to low supply (Mitchell Institute, 2022). Accessibility is a key determinant of parents’ ability to work: ‘Families need to be able to access quality education and care in their local communities, and that suits their hours of work’ (Community Child Care Association, cited in Senate Inquiry Report, 2022, p. 42). Without accessible childcare, women may delay their return to work, return to work for fewer hours, or not return to work at all (Senate Inquiry Report, 2022). The lack of childcare in certain areas can have ripple effects on nearby regions as parents may travel longer distances to access childcare services. Longer travel times, often by car, can be detrimental to both family wellbeing and the environment due to increased carbon emissions. In addition, longer commutes can result in increased transportation costs for families, which can further exacerbate financial pressures.

### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*“After being unable to access childcare in my area, I co-founded a community-led co-working with creche service, an innovative solution to set up some flexible childcare under voluntary creche care guidelines. Using community organising as a method, my research explores blended forms of work and childcare, and what is possible when you co-locate childcare services with workspaces in local communities. When doing this work, it is important to acknowledge and account for the privilege of flexible work practices, which are not available to many parents and carers. The experiences of setting up the service and sustaining it generate insights into gentle transitions to (returning to) work and starting childcare, supporting the continuity of breastfeeding, and the informal childcare practices that people are creating to work with their children close by”.*

Dr Jenna Condie (School of Social Sciences and the Young and Resilient Research Centre)  
Contact: j.condie@westernsydney.edu.au

### QUALITY CHILDCARE

There is a strong relationship between the quality of childcare, children’s education outcomes and wellbeing in primary school and later in life (Senate Inquiry report, 2022 p.26). The quality of childcare is also variable across services and further in-depth analysis of the quality of care offered for our most vulnerable children, families and communities is needed. Not all children are the same, and some will have different childcare needs. Children with specific learning needs, disabilities, health requirements, or diverse learning styles are not adequately accommodated within the current system. Therefore many children and families need better support to access the opportunities and possibilities that society affords. What is best for the child needs to be at the centre of an improved and quality childcare system.

### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*“Our research indicates that huge variations in accessibility, flexibility and quality across the ECEC sector pose significant equity challenges for Australian children and families. Whilst overall trends show that centres are meeting the national quality standards, it still remains the case that overall, centres operating in areas of disadvantage are of lower quality. Whilst supply remains inadequate, parents in areas experiencing higher demand have little or no choice and are forced to accept childcare of lower quality.”*

Associate Professor Christine Woodrow (TeEACH)  
Contact: c.woodrow@westernsydney.edu.au

### CHILDCARE AFFORDABILITY

For many, the costs of childcare are prohibitive, resulting in a 'poor financial payoff' from taking on more paid work which creates a major barrier to women's participation in paid employment (Senate Inquiry Report, 2022 p.22). The 2017 HILDA Survey reported that over half of parents with children under five 'struggled' with the cost of child care, up from just over a third in 2022 (Senate Inquiry Report, 2022 p.27). The unaffordability of childcare also impacts upon children. As childcare is often expensive, parents from less affluent backgrounds and marginalised communities are more likely to send their children to school earlier than is recommended. This results in poorer developmental outcomes that risk exacerbating existing inequalities among these disadvantaged groups (AEDC, 2021).

### SHIFT WORK

There is poor interoperability between the childcare system and shift work. Childcare services are generally available Monday to Friday, during the day. One key structural issue is the incompatibility between the hours of work that many parents actually do and the hours that childcare services are operational. This impacts people who are shift workers, or work to a rostering system, or are in casual, 'gig' economy, short term, or any other form of precarious work. While options for in-home care are available, such as nannies, there is a shortage of formally registered carers which has resulted in a 'bottle neck', and recent evaluations have suggested that the program is not financially viable (Australian Institute of Family Studies and Social Policy Research Centre, 2020).

### (IN)FLEXIBLE WORKING

Flexible working and the ability to work at home can support parents and carers with their childcare responsibilities. As previously noted, pandemic conditions made working at home more possible with the aid of technology use in work and education contexts. Flexible working can support extended breastfeeding too. However, flexible working also follows long-standing social inequalities, being more available to those with more resources to manage childcare than others. People in service industries have less workplace flexibility and need stronger employer rights to support their parenting journeys. Frontline workers can not work at home and therefore need accessible childcare services.

#### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*"My research agenda is concentrated on how technology use impacts family life. My research findings show that technology has given us more autonomy in defining our work hours, but it's also blurred the line between work and life. For 65 percent of us, this is contributing to work overload and job stress, and limiting our opportunities to rest away from work. This is affecting family and career balance, interfering with personal life goals and interpersonal relationships, and causing issues with parenting and marriages. It is clear that technology and current flexible work arrangements help some parents with childcare, however its current form is not a blanket, one size fits all resolution for all families. In reality, in many families, it leads to stressful home environments where parents are constantly working and juggling caring for their child. Insight from parents and families, new methodologies for gaining more comprehensive insight, and diverse thinking, can enable more empowering (and less stressful) modes of flexible work, that are more conducive to family life, career progression, and in turn better options for working parents of young children".*

Dr Joanne Orlando (School of Education)  
Contact: j.orlando@westernsydney.edu.au

### WORKFORCE SHORTAGES AND LOW PAY

The Senate Inquiry Report into Work and Care finds that there are significant workforce issues in the childcare sector (Senate Inquiry Report, 2022. p. 33). Australia's care and support workforce is highly feminised and wages are not adequate (cited in Senate Inquiry Report, 2022. p. 33-37). As childcare professionals are low paid, they are leaving the sector for better pay elsewhere. When childcare providers experience staff shortages, they have to reduce the number of childcare places available to remain within the required educator-child ratios. Relatedly, the quality of childcare may also be affected.

#### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*"The gender pay gap is a persistent feature of the Australian labour market. Wage gaps are evident in hourly, weekly and annual wages. Addressing the gap has been slow and does not reflect the educational attainment of Australian women. My research includes a focus on the undervaluation of female-dominated work and the wage disparities that arise from cumulative and multiple practices including historical and gendered assessments of work value. Such undervaluation may be evident in inadequacies in the description and classification of work, incomplete or inadequate work value assessments and the impact of normative assumptions about female-dominated work, such as child care work, on wage determinations and agreements".*

Professor Meg Smith (School of Business)  
Contact: meg.smith@westernsydney.edu.au

### SECURE WORK

More and more people are trapped in precarious forms of work. The pandemic revealed the challenges of precarity and the importance of having decent work and adequate social protections (Work and Family Policy Roundtable, 2021). Employment security and certainty enables parents to organise childcare so that they can work. Employers have a responsibility to enable flexible working for all parents, and to create workplace cultures that encourage and support men to carry out their caring duties. Secure work includes decent wages and secure employment for the care workforce. It also requires plenty of notice for shift workers so they have predictable work schedules.

#### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*"My research is concerned with women's working lives, issues surrounding contemporary work/family life in Australia, gender equality and diversity, returning to work as well as women's capacities for entrepreneurship and innovation. Women are constrained in the choices they can make about work and childcare. I explore these constraints for mothers and carers navigating precarious careers in the Australian screen industries, entrepreneurship, and the Higher Education sector. The reality of returning to work after maternity leave is more difficult than mothers expect as women experience unjust societal pressures to be both ideal workers and ideal carers. Research needs to identify support models that promote work/life balance for gender equality and flexible work and childcare arrangements.".*

Dr Sheree Gregory (School of Business)  
Contact: s.gregory@westernsydney.edu.au

## NANNIES AND AU PAIRS

Families who employ nannies and au pairs to deliver in-home care do so for a variety of reasons. Au pairs are not eligible for government-provided childcare subsidies which mean they are often a choice only available to higher income households. Au pairs who are in Australia on Working Holiday Maker visas, may also be vulnerable to exploitation from their employers (James, 2023).

### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*“My research examines the experiences of Working Holiday Makers who are employed as nannies or au pairs. I am seeking research funding to investigate the potential to introduce a regulatory framework that can better protect those carrying out informal childcare practices in Australia. The Working Holiday Maker system makes people more vulnerable to harm. Women are more likely to be employed as nannies and au pairs and at a heightened risk of being sexually harassed and assaulted, especially as this care work is often carried out in people’s homes. Those homes are often located in rural and remote areas with limited access to help. Further research should advocate for the sustainability of these important informal childcare solutions without compromising the safety of Working Holiday Makers”.*

Dr Donna James (School of Social Sciences)  
Contact: d.james@westernsydney.edu.au

## GRANDPARENTS AND EXTENDED FAMILIES

The informal work and care practices of families can be understood as ‘shadow care infrastructures’ (Power et al., 2022), often hidden and operating outside of formal work and childcare systems. Some parents and families rely on grandparents or extended families to fill the gaps in the childcare system. This can place additional burdens on family members who were not expecting or wanting to do this work, and who may also be balancing these responsibilities with paid employment. There are also barriers to migrant women bringing their parents to Australia and grandparents on temporary visas cannot access healthcare and social security in Australia, which leaves them vulnerable when living here.

### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*“My Cities of Care research program explores how cities can be made in ways that better support the capacity of people to meet their needs for care. We developed the concept “shadow care infrastructures” to understand the complex and interconnected practices through which people meet needs that are not catered within dominant or mainstream markets and welfare systems. Informal childcare, including relying on grandparents and extended families, is an example of this. Despite being a widespread practice, it is often hidden labour. Women are more likely to be responsible for this care work, increasing their hidden care burden”.*

Associate Professor Emma Power  
(School of Social Sciences)  
Contact: e.power@westernsydney.edu.au

## INEQUALITY AT THE HEART

### GENDER INEQUALITY

Structural and entrenched inequalities create barriers for women’s participation in the workforce. International comparisons also show that Australia performs poorly and that we are falling behind other countries in relation to women’s workforce participation (Equity Economics 2021a). Although Australia is ‘ranked number 1 in the world for levels of educational attainment, Australian women fall to number 70 in the world for levels of economic participation’ (Equity Economics, 2021a, p. 9). Paid parental leave is amongst the least generous and childcare the most expensive (Equity Economics, 2021a). Australia is also behind other countries in addressing the Gender Pay Gap (Equity Economics 2021a). The latest Gender Pay Gap data can be found by viewing the 2022 interactive map on Wages and Ages: Mapping the Gender Pay Gap by Age at <https://www.wgea.gov.au/newsroom/new-age-data-released>. Many women move into ‘mother-friendly’ occupations when they have children and ‘these occupations may be lower-paid than the mother’s previous work and often do not reflect the woman’s ‘human capital’ - her abilities, educational level or work experience’ (WGEA, 2016, p. 7).

Evidence shows that Australian women are far more likely than men to be employed part-time and to work fewer hours (WGEA 2016; Equity Economics 2021a). Analysis from the Workplace Gender and Equality Agency (WGEA) finds that, ‘In Australia women are in part-time

employment at three times the rate of men and women constitute 69.1% of all part-time employees’ (WGEA, 2016, p. 5). If they are in paid work, women with young children are likely to work part time. The current Senate Inquiry into Work and Care document evidence that supports this trend in an Interim Report, which includes analysis from The Parenthood who note: ‘Of women in Australia aged between 25-40 with young children just 56% participate in paid work. Of these 61% work part time, one of the highest rates of part time work of any industrialised country’ (cited in Senate Inquiry Report 2022, p.22). Gender inequality in relation to the pattern of hours worked, full time or part time, is stark. The WGEA notes that ‘the divergence in working patterns occurs from age 35 onwards when men are predominantly working full time and women are predominantly working part time or casually’ (WGEA, 2022).

Australian women also spend ‘substantially’ more time on unpaid care work than men (WGEA, 2016). Analysis by Equity Economics finds that ‘while Australian women spend 45 percent less time in paid work than Australian men, they spend 80 percent more time in unpaid and care work’ (Equity Economics, 2021, p. 9). Caring responsibilities impact on the level of income received. ABS data shows that the median gross income of carers in 2018 was \$800 per week, compared to \$997 per week for non-carers (Senate Inquiry Report, 2022 p. 16). ‘Workers who provide informal care are significantly more likely to earn less than non-carers’ (Carers Australia, cited p. 16 Inquiry Report). Caring responsibilities can also have a negative impact on women’s career progression. Smith, Tonwley, Huppatz and Bansel (2021) found that women Higher Degree Research (HDR) candidates were more likely to experience extended program completion times than men HDR candidates due to their caring responsibilities. For newly arrived academic staff parents, juggling caring responsibilities and work impacted their ability to balance teaching, research and governance expectations which curtailed their chances of getting timely promotion at work (Tusasiirwe, 2022).

Australian women also retire with less superannuation savings than men; ‘Women retire with 47% less superannuation savings than men and single women are more likely to live in poverty in retirement’ (Equity Economics, 2021, p. 9). This occurs because women are more likely than men to work in lower paid sectors such as aged care and disability support, or retail (Senate Inquiry Interim Report, 2022, p. 22). In 2022, women are still paid significantly less than their male counterparts, and retire with significantly less superannuation savings’ (Senate Inquiry Report, 2022, p. 22).

## STRUCTURAL RACISM

Structural racism creates additional barriers to workforce participation as well as access to childcare for some parents including: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who are less likely to be in the labour force than non-Indigenous women; migrant women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who are less likely to be in the labour force than women born in Australia or working class migrants from English-speaking backgrounds (Equity Economics, 2021a). These groups are also significant population groups concentrated in parts of western Sydney, making addressing barriers to workforce participation across our particular region even more critical.

### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*“My research with colleagues counters the colonial narrative of motherhood and the deficit discourses of Indigenous mothers pushed by the media, the criminal justice system and child protection services. These discourses work together to mutually reinforce the continued misrepresentation of Indigenous women as neglectful, deviant and therefore incapable mothers. These unjust and ongoing portrayals underpin the continued removal of First Nations children from their families, and weakens the matriarchal structure of the kinship network.*

*Our research seeks to counter harmful narratives of Indigenous mothers by centring and amplifying traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander practices of mothering, with a focus on ceremonial birthing practices and birthing on country. The ancient traditions of Indigenous womanhood that are an interconnected spiral of gendered knowledge’s, kinship and relational mothering practices mean that Indigenous mothering is diverse, strong and resilient.*

*We present the collectively conscious ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women’s matriarchal structures remain in place and embedded within earth and land. This ‘relational worldview’ has served not only First Nations women in their nourishment, but sustained generations of children, families and communities since time immemorial. Indigenous mothering and kinship practices are vital for a more just present and future”.*

Kaiya Aboagye (School of Social Sciences)  
Contact: K.Aboagye@westernsydney.edu.au



There are some strategies forthcoming from the Australian government designed to encourage participation in childcare. For example, from July 2023, Indigenous families will get at least 36 hours of subsidised care per fortnight for each First Nations child in their care and attending childcare. This initiative is designed to directly support Closing the Gap target 4, designed to improve early childhood outcomes for First Nations children.

However it is important to note that Indigenous families may avoid early childhood settings to protect themselves and their children from experiencing racism (Grace and Trudgett, 2012). Maternal health services and the majority of industries of employment in Australia are underpinned by white Western settler colonial systems and practices. Although there are emerging efforts to make early learning centres more welcoming for First Nations families (Grace et al., 2021) for First Nations parents in Australia, the systems can be hostile and violent. First Nations children are also disproportionately more likely to be removed from their families by child protection services, which are interlinked with maternal health and childcare services.

There are also a number of communities that are not eligible for childcare support yet their labour and economic contributions are critical to the Australian economy, such as international students and migrant workers for example. There is little to no provision for these parents who are working and studying with no access to formal childcare due to the residency requirements attached to public services.

### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*“Our research team has investigated Acknowledgement of Country practices in early childhood education and care, the processes that contribute to their implementation, and the meaning attributed to these practices by educators, children and parents. We have developed recommendations and are developing learning materials to supporting services to embed Indigenous knowledge in the space and programming. These practices contribute to making centres welcoming spaces for Indigenous families, and to developing children’s engagement in citizenship and social justice”.*

Dr Cris Townley (Research Centre for Transforming Early Education and Child Health (TeEACH))  
Contact: c.townley@westernsydney.edu.au

### ACCESS TO PARENTAL LEAVE PAY FOR NEWLY ARRIVED RESIDENTS AND MIGRANTS

Australia has residency or waiting period rules that systematically exclude migrant parents shaping when and who has children in Australia. For example, the Paid Parental Leave Act 2010, section 31 A states that the person granted a permanent visa must wait for 104 weeks (2 years) to access parental leave pay. These restrictions interact with the ‘staggered’ migration context of Australia, where working class migrants often have to transition through multiple visa types, prolonging the pathway to permanent residency. This can delay major life events and affects migrants’ partnering and parenting decisions (Westcott and Robertson, 2017). Many working-class migrants must wait lengthy periods to be eligible to access parenting payments including Parental Leave Pay, Dad and Partner Pay and the Carer’s Payment, whether they are single or partnered. These systemic rules can deny parents the ability to spend quality time with their newborn children when they need it most. Some migrants will attain permanent residency after years of living, working, and paying taxes in Australia, making their denial of access to parental leave pay unfair and detrimental to the wellbeing of the parents and their children. This law punishes many migrants that need support, as most of their extended family support may remain overseas. For migrant parents in self-employment without any employer-provided parental leave, the denial of parental leave pay from the government means that they have no fallback support.

### LONE MIGRANT MOTHERS AND CHILDCARE SUPPORT

Australia is one of the more popular destinations for labour migrants (Khadria, 2022), including for women who migrate as lone mothers. For most lone migrant mothers, migrating to Australia is presumed to open a window of opportunity in terms of an improved economic life. But migrating as a lone mother presents a complex web of social, cultural, and economic challenges. Most importantly, migrating comes at the cost of dismantling and disrupting immediate and extended family systems of social support that play a vital role in childcare support and overall well-being (Wali and Renzaho, 2018).

Lone mother’s marginality is underexplored in the public and policy sphere (Nagaddya and Stout, 2022). This invisibility exposes them to the risk of poverty and poor health outcomes. Yet, according to the Labour Force Status of Families Survey (ABS Statistics 2020), they constitute 14.4 per cent of all families in Australia.

### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*“My research explores the role of place-based childcare support in the socio-economic inclusion of lone migrant mothers in Australia. I highlight the invisibility of lone migrant mothers in the childcare-poverty discourse in Australia. Yet a significant proportion of the labour migrant population is lone mothers who are homogenised as single mothers.*

*In this research I underscore the fact that in the pursuit of a better economic life in Australia, lone mothers migrate with their young children but without their support system of spouses/partners or extended family.. This impedes their labour participation, engagement in community building and organising and access to community resources. Most of these mothers tend to live in marginalised neighbourhoods.*

*I demonstrate that providing childcare support through a place-based model that allows lone mothers to remain close to home and their communities, is not only a welfare service but a tool for settlement, integration and building localism. It is within this context that lone migrant mothers create healthy spaces of engagement that are vitally important in building community cohesion, neighbourhood capacity and consequently socio-economic inclusion.”*

Dr. Teddy Nagaddya (School of Social Science)  
Contact: t.nagaddya@westernsydney.edu.au

### INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND CASUAL ACADEMICS WHO ARE PARENTS

Existing evidence shows that international students who are parents often also work casually at universities (Tusasiirwe, 2022). Their intersecting identities as parents, students, casual workers, and spouses/partners results in multiple responsibilities as they have to negotiate parenthood, study, work, family responsibilities, in a new country where they have limited extended family and social network support, following their migration from overseas.

International students who are parents and workers are excluded from the government’s childcare subsidy scheme, which is available only to Australian citizens and permanent residents. Childcare costs are unaffordable for many international students and to be excluded from the childcare subsidy scheme is counterproductive and inequitable.

### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*“My research centres international students who are parents. It demonstrates how the international student parents strive but struggle to meet obligations that come with their intersecting identities as students, parents, spouses, and employees. Their voices are often marginalised and left behind when it comes to equitable childcare support in Australia. They call for childcare grants to support their studies and research activities. This will enable them to progress their careers and participate in academia more fully”.*

Dr Sharlotte Tusasiirwe (School of Social Sciences)  
Contact: s.tusasiirwe@westernsydney.edu.au

### REDESIGNING WORK AND CHILDCARE

Now we are three years into the COVID19 pandemic the challenge is to resist returning to ‘normal’ or a ‘new normal’, and to implement pandemic learnings by radically reconfiguring the ways we work, live and care for a more just world. If the pandemic ‘is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next’ (Roy, 2020), then what are the new possible futures at the intersections of work and childcare? To seriously address gender equality and create a socially just society in Australia, the systems of work and childcare must change. New ways of thinking are needed to innovate work and childcare systems, redesigning them in ways that prioritise wellbeing, inclusion and connection for all communities. What possibilities might be available to us if we design work and childcare systems around the needs of women, parents and children?

# THE OPPORTUNITY

**There is growing political interest and action towards addressing the inequities and injustices at the work-childcare nexus. Some of the recent announcements from the Australian government such as extending paid parental leave and reducing the costs of childcare are welcome but do not go far enough.**

In taking a transdisciplinary approach, Western Sydney University (WSU) researchers are well placed to drive policy change and to instigate new systems to shift the ways in which we can work whilst providing quality and affordable care for children. In utilising our existing local connections and partnerships, we are best placed to work alongside western Sydney communities in order to collectively generate the evidence needed to bring about the changes people want. Here we document the opportunities for a transdisciplinary collaborative and design justice approach to improve the childcare systems in the western Sydney region.

## **MAKING WORK-CHILDCARE EXPERIENCES KNOWABLE**

There are opportunities to change the rigid structures that restrict the choices of women and households when accessing childcare. However, change can only happen once the problem, or set of problems, is well understood. Otherwise any solutions are just problems renewed (Ahmed, 2017). Currently, the way evidence and data are collected obscures the lived experiences of women. Collecting new evidence or collecting it in a different way can provide better and more nuanced descriptions of the problem and a more accurate picture.

What is left out of national data collections speaks volumes about societal attitudes and values. These values and

attitudes are what keep these rigid structures in place, and as researchers and scholar-activists, we can push against them by presenting evidence. Prioritising the stories and lived experiences of women from different backgrounds and communities is crucial. Currently, such stories are barely represented in national or large data collections.

We know that what is counted as data or evidence can be used to instigate social justice. For example, Destroy the Joint's 'Counting Dead Women' Campaign keeps a continually updated register of women killed by violence in Australia. These shocking statistics continue to shine a light on violence against women, helping advocates and communities to highlight how gendered violence manifests, in order to bring about systemic change.

The issue of evidence gaps is also recognised in the Interim Report prepared by the Senate Inquiry into Work and Care (2022), where 'data poverty' is identified as one of seven immediate challenges that require addressing (Senate Inquiry, 2022 p. 15). One example provided in the Interim Report is that an adequate picture of unpaid care cannot be drawn, because this data isn't collected as the ABS does not record a person who looks after a child as being a carer, unless the child has a disability (Senate Inquiry, 2022). Little is known about the informal childcare supports that women and households access, or innovative models and approaches to childcare that have emerged in the gaps in formal childcare services provision.

A redesigned Census and other data collections is needed. The way key concepts such as 'work', 'families', 'households', and 'childcare' are defined and measured impacts how the issues are understood. Unpacking these concepts and redesigning them is part of the work of revealing important hidden stories. Bronwyn Carlson (2022) highlights how the structure of the Australian Census reflects and reinforces misunderstandings about First Nations peoples and communities. For example, one

limitation is that there are 'no questions about what constitutes a family, a household or parenting from our perspectives' (Carlson, 2022). Carlson gives the example of the apparent reduction in people over 55 caring for 'other people's children' noting that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandparents would see 'children they care for' as 'theirs' (Carlson, 2022).

In drawing on our existing connections and partnerships, as well as building new ones, Western Sydney University is well placed to collaborate with women, parents, carers, groups, communities and services to collectively work towards building an evidence base that can be used for advocating for more and better childcare that meets community needs, as well as tailored place-based solutions to local problems.

## **TOWARDS A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING FOR WESTERN SYDNEY**

### **DESCRIPTION OF THE REGION**

The western Sydney region proudly spans a large geographic area, almost 9,000 square km. There are thirteen Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the region including: Blacktown, Blue Mountains, Camden, Campbelltown, Canterbury-Bankstown, Cumberland, Fairfield, Hawkesbury, Liverpool, Parramatta, Penrith, The Hills Shire and Wollondilly. Westir analysis of the latest Census data shows that the largest populations are concentrated in Blacktown (396,766, 15.2%) followed by Canterbury-Bankstown (371,006, 14.2%) and Parramatta (256,729, 9.8%). The latest Census shows that there are more than 2.6M people living in the region, which is an increase of 13% from the previous Census (Westir, August 2022).

Western Sydney is one of the youngest and fastest growing populations in the country. The population has been steadily increasing since 2006 (Westir, August 2022). The median age across LGAs is 35 which is younger than Greater Sydney (37), the Rest of NSW (43), and NSW (39) (Westir, August 2022). For all LGAs except Parramatta, 0-14 years is the most common age group (Westir, August 2022). These statistics clearly demonstrate that childcare for our region is a growing and pressing need.

The vibrant amalgamation of cultures in western Sydney, each with their own unique features, qualities and identities, has created a richness and depth of place. The

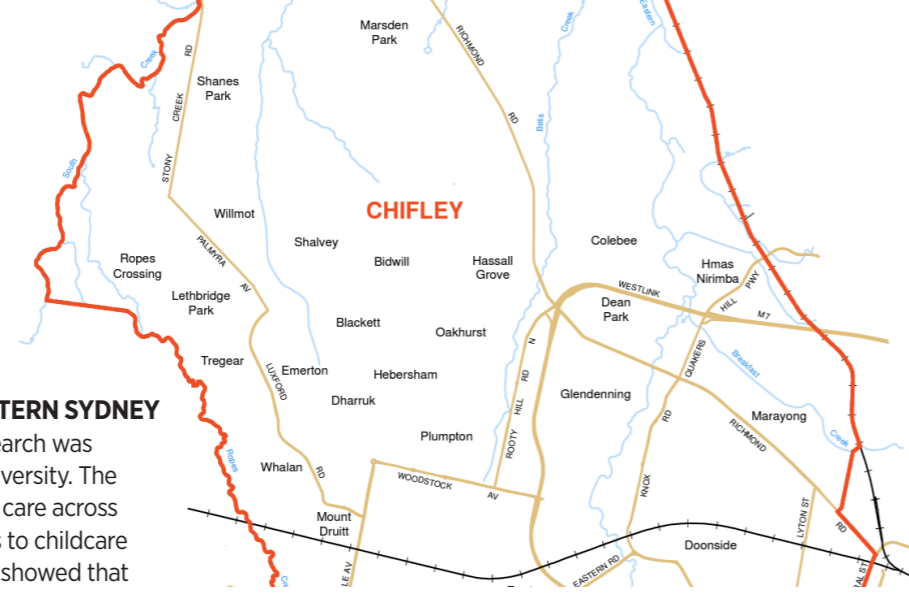
region is the most culturally and linguistically diverse in NSW. The traditional custodians are the Bidjigal, Cabrogal, Darkinjung, Dharawal, Dharug, Gundungurra, Gweagal and Tharawal Aboriginal people. In 2021, the Census showed a large and growing number of First Nations people (nearly 55,000) live in the region (Westir, November 2022b). The Blacktown LGA is home to the highest number of First Nations people (11,812, 3%) followed by Penrith (10,925, 5%) (Westir, November 2022b).

Western Sydney is also a popular home for new migrants, who contribute to the rich language diversity. Nearly 50% of people in the region use a language at home other than English (Westir, August 2022). Demonstrating the vibrant cultural diversity of the region, the top 10 languages spoken at home are Arabic, Mandarin, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, Tagalog, Nepali and Korean (Westir, November 2022).

## **RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT**

*"My project with Western Sydney University colleagues specifically focuses on young migrant women in the Southwest Sydney region due to their work being more significantly impacted by the pandemic. This region and its workers also faced the brunt of scapegoating, racism, tighter lockdown measures, increased care responsibilities in the domestic sphere and worsened domestic violence. These circumstances make the project vital and timely in seeking to understand the employability and entrepreneurship of young newly arrived migrant women in Southwest Sydney through a holistic, structural perspective that a) reframes a deficiency vs resilience binary lens; b) views migrant settlement as including employment and broader measures of social security; c) contributes to knowledge on the importance of social capital for employment outcomes; and d) emphasises the place-based aspects of a superdiverse satellite city that generate particular business and employment needs".*

Associate Professor Sukhmani Khorana (UNSW)  
Contact: s.khorana@unsw.edu.au



**FOCUSED FURTHER RESEARCH FOR WESTERN SYDNEY**

Last year, some ground-breaking national research was produced by the Mitchell Institute, Victoria University. The researchers mapped the provision of long day care across Australia and what they found was that access to childcare across the nation is very uneven. The research showed that about one third of Australians live in a ‘childcare desert’ (Mitchell Institute, 2022, p 4). These areas involve approximately 568,700 children aged 0-4 years (Mitchell Institute, 2022, p. 4). Further, it was also found that areas with the highest fees also generally had the highest levels of childcare accessibility (Mitchell Institute, 2022). These childcare ‘oases’ are in wealthier locations, and ‘deserts’ are in poorer areas which has significant policy implications. It may also suggest that providers are not only establishing services where there are greater levels of demand, but where they are likely to make greater profits’ (Mitchell Institute, 2022, p. 8).

The Mitchell Report authors note that childcare deserts ‘are often in suburban and outer suburban regions’ (Mitchell Institute, 2022, p.5) and when ‘compared to childcare ‘oases’ they generally have a greater relative disadvantage or a higher proportion of culturally and linguistically diverse populations’ (Mitchell Institute, 2022, p.5). This matches what we know anecdotally is happening with childcare and women’s workforce participation in western Sydney. This should ring alarm bells because of the strong evidence linking quality care for children from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds with success in life. It also may explain women’s lower workforce participation rates in the region where ‘difficulty in accessing childcare leads to parents and carers choosing not to participate in the workforce while their children are young’ (Mitchell Institute, 2022, p.8).

Before the Federal Election in May 2022, the Mitchell Institute released further analysis in the form of a policy brief on Early Childhood Education and Care by electorate. The electorates with the least affordable childcare in NSW are: New England (rural), Page (rural) and Chifley (western Sydney). NSW electorates with the most children starting school who were ‘developmentally vulnerable in one or two domains’ are: Fowler (western Sydney), Chifley (western Sydney) and Parkes (rural).

As part of the research behind this whitepaper, a preliminary ‘thick mapping’ exercise of childcare services in the Chifley electorate has been completed to assess the feasibility of extending this methodology to the whole of the western Sydney region as part of a future project.

As mentioned above, further research being scoped involves in depth ‘thick mapping’ (Presner, Shepard and Kawano, 2014) of the provision of formal childcare services

across western Sydney. This work builds on the mapping undertaken by the Mitchell Institute but seeks to expand the analysis by including other types of childcare (including preschool, family day care, informal care etc). The scope of our pilot involved childcare services registered within the Chifley electorate. We included the following data for suburbs that fall within the Chifley electorate: suburb, postcode, address, service name, service provider, provider type, capacity, opening hours, NQS rating and date, and date service approved. Provider data was gathered through the national ACEQUA service provider database that is publicly available online. Some suburbs are split across electorate boundaries, and the addresses of services were checked using the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) website to identify those that fall within the Chifley boundaries. The ASIC Register of Organisation and Business Names was used to identify the type of company in order to classify providers by sector (i.e. for profit, non-profit, public). Our mapping pilot did not involve gathering the cost per day for each service, but this would be included in the full mapping exercise.

**WHAT OUR ‘THICK MAPPING’ METHODOLOGY CAN TELL US**

- Suburb level gaps in childcare provision
- New childcare provision in relation to population growth
- New childcare provision in relation to population growth
- Pace-based features of the sector (e.g. organisation type, opening hours, quality)
- Child affordability
- Barriers and inequalities for specific communities

*Preliminary ‘thick mapping’ results for the Chifley electorate*

**EXISTING DATA**

- ABS population, demographic and workforce participation statistics (e.g. Census)
- NSW Government datasets including Local Health District, preschools datasets
- ACEQUA service provider database including quality ratings
- Provider data e.g. opening hours, Date service approved, type
- Residency status

**MISSING DATA**

- Children’s perspectives
- Data on students who are parents
- First Nations perspectives
- Informal childcare services
- Parents perspectives
- Grandparents and extended families providing childcare
- Family day care
- Sector perspectives

Our pilot covers just one electorate, and a full mapping analysis would gather data by LGA (not electorates) across western Sydney. Chifley was selected for the Pilot because it was identified by the Mitchell Institute as both critically lacking childcare and also having a high number of ‘developmentally vulnerable children at school age’. ‘Thick mapping’ across the 13 western Sydney LGAs would enable comparisons to be drawn across the region.

A ‘thick mapping’ analysis would also overlay qualitative data, which would capture the richness, complexity and lived experiences of work-childcare arrangements in the western Sydney region. A full analysis would also cross-tabulate childcare provision data with demographic data (e.g Census data) from the particular LGA. Such cross-tabulation and subsequent comparison with other areas such as childcare ‘oases’, would generate insights into how childcare inequalities are operating across New South Wales and Australia. It would also show how childcare experiences differ at the intersections of gender, race, class, place, nationality, residency type, and household

**RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT**

*“My research design and methodological experience comes from working across government, university and community sectors to build evidence that directly answers pertinent social policy questions. Bringing together multiple and varied data sources for analysis to tell a fuller story of what is happening in a place is essential for evidence based policy-making. Researchers can act as bridges between communities and policy makers to make the voices of the people the policy is intended for, heard”.*

Dr Liz Ayres (School of Social Sciences)  
Contact: l.ayres@westernsydney.edu.au

composition. Such inequalities could then be accounted for in any measures or metrics created to identify a level of childcare stress. There is a lot of missing data when it comes to ‘thick mapping’ the work-childcare nexus at a localised level. This data will be collected in future projects.

**CREATING AN CHILDCARE STRESS METRIC**

Usable statistics can have a substantial impact on influencing political decisions and realising social change. With more data on childcare accessibility and affordability, we anticipate developing an Australian measure for childcare stress, which would set the percentage of income at which childcare costs become too much for a household to sustain. There is precedent for a childcare stress metric from other countries, such as the US where households are in childcare stress if childcare costs more than 7% of their household income (Mitchell Institute 2022). In Australia, we have a metric for housing where households in the bottom 40% of earners are considered to be in housing stress if they spend 30% or more on their rent or mortgage. It is a metric drawn upon to advocate for more public, social and affordable housing. A similar tool for childcare could help advocate for more affordable and accessible childcare in Australia.

The housing stress metric accounts for economic inequality by incorporating income level. A childcare stress metric should do the same. Given the data possibilities of ‘thick mapping’ highlighted above, other structural inequalities could also be accounted for to more accurately represent the levels of childcare stress being experienced in particular places. Accounting for socio-spatial inequalities and how where you live impacts upon your work and childcare opportunities is essential to generating an appropriate childcare stress metric.

### CREATING AN CHILDCARE STRESS METRIC

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### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*"A childcare stress metric would enable decision makers and communities to understand the severity of the issues and challenges facing working parents in contemporary times. As researchers, we need to be ambitious and strategic in the ways that we do our research, and to find ways to consult parents and children about their experiences, to ensure evidence directly impacts policy decisions and, in turn, speeds up the cultural shifts required for a more gender equitable and socially just society".*

Associate Professor Sukhmani Khorana (UNSW)  
Contact: s.khorana@unsw.edu.au

### THE POSSIBILITIES FOR UNIVERSITIES

The Higher Education sector was not designed for women and primary carers of children, and still has a long way to go to provide parent- and child-friendly institutions of education and work. Given that many of Western Sydney University's campuses are located in childcare 'deserts', our students and staff need more support to work and study at the University. The University has resources that can contribute to alleviating the childcare crisis. As Western Sydney University was ranked 3rd in the World for Gender Equality, and 4th in the World for Reducing Inequality (Times Higher Education Impact Rankings 2022), we are well positioned to make a substantial contribution to addressing gender and childcare inequalities in our region.

### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*"Being a parent and a university student at the same time is challenging. It has given me an insight into how limited access to childcare can isolate student-parents from their learning communities and make studying a lonely experience. By contributing to this white paper research on childcare in western Sydney through the University's undergraduate summer scholarship research programme, I can see how my experiences of childcare are shaped by where I live and how childcare needs to be purposefully designed and managed to meet the needs of changing communities and locations. I can also see the crucial role the University can take in better supporting student-parents' education by providing more childcare options on campus. In my Masters research, I will be focusing on the direct consequences of urban sprawl and accelerated population growth in the Sydney region, and how to ensure vital social infrastructures like childcare are prioritised and available everywhere."*

Natalia Hartge, School of Social Sciences  
Contact: 19581880@student.westernsydney.edu.au

Pandemic conditions generated a number of socially progressive initiatives that could be continued to better support parents. During the pandemic, Western Sydney University provided \$3,000 Higher Degree Research Carers bursaries for doctoral students who are parents. Recently the School of Social Sciences has provided a carer's research grant to support those with caring responsibilities

to progress their research agendas. Elsewhere other institutions have initiatives in place to enable staff who are primary carers to participate in scholarly activities such as conference travel (e.g. UNSW's Carer's Support Fund).

At Western Sydney University, the Vice Chancellors Gender Equity Fund ('The Fund') has generated a wealth of research on women and parents' needs when it comes to support and childcare. The Fund offers professional and academic staff the opportunity to apply for support in facilitating gender equity initiatives and promoting workplace inclusion at Western Sydney University. Some of that research has been drawn upon in this white paper (e.g. Tusaarwe, 2022). It is important that the recommendations of research studies carried out through The Fund are reviewed to see how well they have been implemented and what else needs to be done. For example, Bowyer et al. (2020) produced a report on the need for new campus-based childcare options. Recommendations included piloting a children's holiday programme on campus, offering drop-in creche care services, and becoming "child friendly" campuses. To our knowledge, there is very limited occasional care on campus with only one childcare space per day reserved for casual care at the campus-based long day care services. Occasional and flexible childcare options are more commonplace at TAFE where some courses offer free childcare to support students with their studies. Such models could be examined and applied to Western Sydney University campuses to better support students and staff who are parents.

The University does not collect data on whether its students and staff are parents. Collecting this data would be an important step for the University and its capacity to properly support those parents. The accessibility and affordability of childcare is a significant issue for student retention and completion of studies, as well as career progression for staff. The return to work for parents who have been on parental leave is a challenging time. More flexible forms of care on campus could go a long way to creating a supportive and gender equitable environment. Such care would also support international students and working class migrant academics who are ineligible for government-supported childcare subsidies.

### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

*"My research with colleagues has examined mothering experiences in academia from both staff and student perspectives. With a VC Gender Equity funded project, our research found that many of our most stubbornly entrenched inequalities do not simply follow gendered fault lines, but rather care fault lines; with mothers doubly disadvantaged in universities by their gender and caring role.*

*We found problematic institutionalised practices of objectification and discrimination towards mothering in universities, which had profound effects for mothers' sense of self. Our results relating to institutional support show that there is an ideological disconnect between gender equity policies in academia and mother's ability to adopt these policies in practice. They also show that most mothers are unsure about the availability of many formal policies, and that whilst flexible work arrangements are positioned by academic mothers as necessary to effectively negotiate mothering and academic work, such arrangements can have unintentional negative gendered consequences.*

*The absence of policy frameworks, representation and allied supports for student parents contributes to (re)producing a higher education context where they are overlooked. Students who are parents deviate from the ideal/normative university student who is "young, carefree and childfree" (a bachelor). It's time that expectations of students and their learning needs were updated to incorporate the high possibility that they are also parents with childcare needs".*

Associate Professor Emilee Gilbert,  
School of Psychology  
Contact: e.gilbert@westernsydney.edu.au

# FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The white paper culminates in a Vision and Agenda designed to instigate socially just policy making and practices that respond at multiple scales, from localised household and community life to the urgency for broader action on a planetary scale that restructures our global societies for liveable futures.

This white paper locates work and childcare practices within the complexities of society's present condition, where living through a pandemic is just one of many 'intersecting crises' shaping our lives (Ang, 2021). The ecological, economic, ideological, educational and cultural crises facing society require that we reimagine work and childcare for more equitable and caring futures, and dismantle structural systems that benefit neoliberal capitalism at the expense of family relationships, community, education, health, and wellbeing.

## OUR VISION

Reimagined systems that prioritise the care and wellbeing of all women, parents and children, enabling our workplaces, childcare providers, and communities to realise a more just and kind society.

## OUR AGENDA

Our agenda draws on a design justice approach (see box below). We seek to instigate change at a number of levels in collaboration with the people the changes are intended for.

### 1. In the University

Western Sydney University has a deep commitment to the western Sydney region. Particularly given the locations that the University operates within are childcare 'deserts'. The University has substantial resources that are used to create a leading child and parent friendly institution.

## WHAT IS DESIGN JUSTICE?

Design justice rethinks design processes and centres "people who are normally marginalised by design, and uses collaborative, creative practices to address the deepest challenges our communities face" (Design Justice Network, 2018). There are ten principles that design justice practitioners use to guide their work with communities. Firstly, practitioners should consider what is already working at a community level before seeking new design solutions. Indigenous knowledges and practices should be fully acknowledged and centred. Design should be used to sustain, heal, and empower communities, as well as to liberate people from exploitative and oppressive systems. Design justice approaches centre the voices of those who are directly impacted by the outcomes of the design process, prioritising design's impact on the community over the intentions of the designer or others with decision-making power. Design justice practitioners should work towards sustainable, community-led, and community-controlled outcomes.

For more information, see the Design Justice Network website: <https://designjustice.org>

The white paper team is committed to reviewing the research funded by the VC Gender Equity Fund, with a particular focus on creating more childcare options on campus to increase the presence of parents and children on campus.

### 2. With local communities

Research funding and partners will be sought to continue the in depth 'thick mapping' of the Chifley electorate and other local areas that have acute childcare shortages as well as the most 'developmentally vulnerable' children in the western

Sydney region. Perspectives of children, parents, and childcare educators will be centred through 'design justice' workshops.

### 3. Influencing policy

Researchers at Western can develop usable statistics and metrics that measure childcare stress, which also account for the structural inequalities impacting many western Sydney communities. It is important that policy decision makers understand community needs at the work-childcare nexus in times of intersecting crises. Researchers also need to turn their gaze towards the childcare 'oases' and suburbs with an abundance of childcare. We also call for researchers to examine how privilege and power is operating within our work and childcare systems.

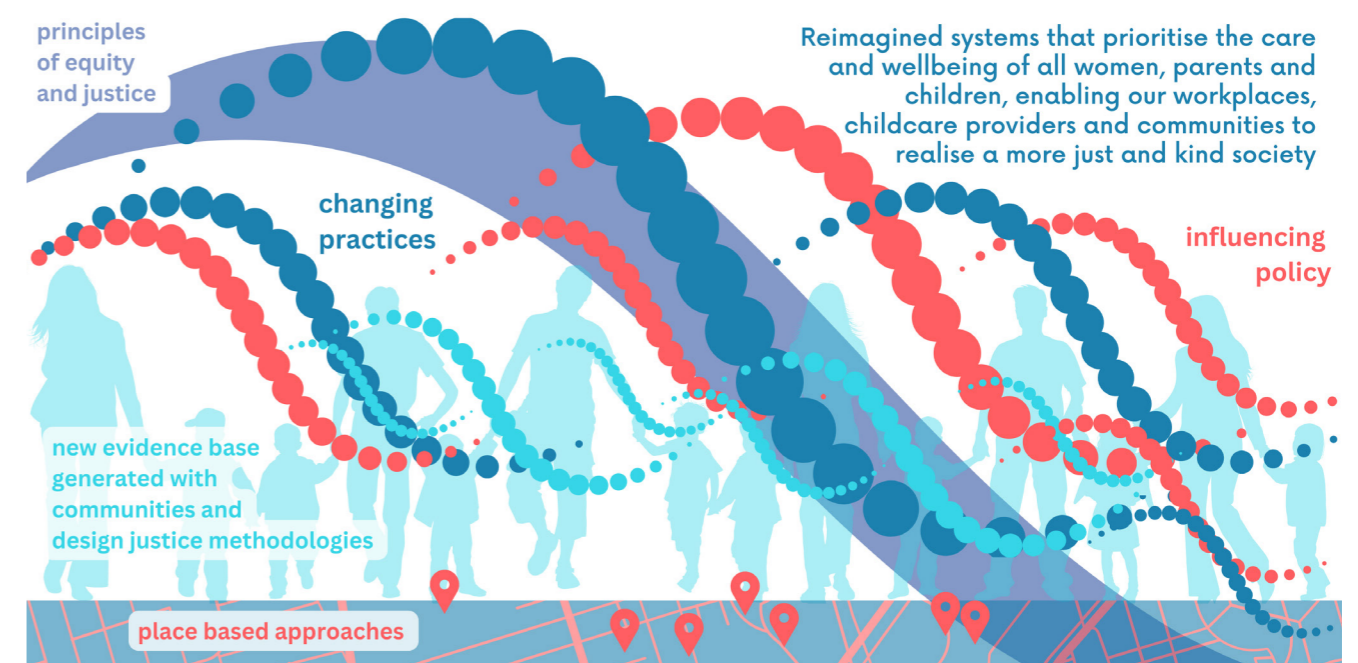
### 4. Campaigning for change

Childcare is a critical infrastructure that needs to be managed and sustained by the government with community consultation, and not left to the private market to determine where is most profitable to deliver and establish services. Informal childcare practices also need to be acknowledged and supported. Academics have a responsibility to advocate for the rights of parents, children, families and childcare educators as they intersect within the changing conditions of everyday life.

Specifically we have developed a place-based research Agenda designed to influence and instigate socially just

policy making and practices that respond at multiple scales, from localised household and community life to the urgency for broader action to address intersecting crises. Our research agenda centres on the following six proposed streams as immediate and urgent priorities for our western Sydney region:

1. Defining characteristics of gendered workforce participation by locality across the region;
2. Understanding the providers and what the childcare sector looks like in terms of who is operating in the region;
3. 'Thick' mapping of the provision of formal childcare services by locality (including location, places, vacancy rates, costs, quality standards and how provision intersects with population demographics);
4. Appropriate methodologies for generating a place-based childcare stress metric that shows household spending on childcare as a proportion of income;
5. Collecting evidence on innovative models and informal childcare supports across western Sydney; and
6. Using this evidence in design justice workshops with local people, groups and the sector to co-create equitable and just systems for our region.



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## CONTACT DETAILS

Dr Jenna Condie [j.condie@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:j.condie@westernsydney.edu.au)

Dr Liz Ayres [l.ayres@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:l.ayres@westernsydney.edu.au)



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