

SYDNEY

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# WEEKEND

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## *My* **MOTHER,** *My* **MUSE**

Bianca Spender has lost both her parents in the past three years. Grief changes you, and while her journey is far from over, carrying on the Carla Zampatti legacy is more important to her than ever

LISA MAYOH



**PAT RAFTER**  
A TREE CHANGE, AN EMPTY  
NEST AND LOOKING FOR KOALAS

**CHANTELLE OTTEN**  
THE SEXOLOGIST'S NO SHAME,  
NO SECRECY SELF DISCOVERY



Story LISA MAYOH

# WORKING ..... *the* ..... PROBLEM

Australia's parental leave policies have improved, working from home has become acceptable, flexible days and hours are now common, and support for personal challenges and family requirements is de rigueur – so why are so many working parents still struggling with high levels of stress?

**N**ot that we mean to stress you out, but working Australian families are more stressed than ever – women especially.

A new report has found that 74 per cent of women felt stressed balancing work and family commitments, compared with 57 per cent of men – a marked increase from the 51 per cent of women and 34 per cent of men who reported feeling stressed just five years ago, pre-Covid.

The alarming findings come from a new national study of more than 6200 Australian working parents and carers for the 2024 National Working Families Report, released on Thursday. Commissioned by Parents At Work and UNICEF Australia, the survey was conducted by Deloitte Access Economics and sought to understand the experiences of working parents and carers in balancing work, family and personal commitments.

While its findings feel chaotically grim, Parents At Work chief executive Emma Walsh tells Sydney Weekend there are positive signs that investment in family-inclusive policies do make a difference – parents and carers who work for certified Family Friendly Workplaces reported less negative impacts and were more satisfied with their work life balance.

“The results show us that despite efforts by policymakers in government and business to improve gender equality, caregiving is still very much viewed a ‘women’s job’ and workplace policies and cultural norms around flexible work and parental leave continues to reinforce the

gender bias around caregiving,” Walsh explains.

“It tells us that women continue to bear the associated stress load of unequal caregiving, which not only impacts wellbeing and financial outcomes for women and children and other loved ones they care for, but it also prevents men from leaning into caregiving as a valued and expected norm that men need to make time for as part of their working lives.”

So are workplaces doing enough?

“In short, no,” Walsh says. “While there are positive signs that the workplaces that invest in family-friendly policies and culturally embed, do see better engagement and improvement to gender bias, there are many workplaces still oblivious to the harm unfamily-friendly workplace practices have on their employees and business bottom line.

“We advise parents and carers to lean in to help direct the systemic shift required.

“As the survey has revealed, there are very clear suggestions from employees that, if followed, will equate to better wellbeing outcomes for families and ultimately better outcomes for their employers.

“Employees are encouraged to know their rights and voice their requirements with their employer, including at the interview stage, so that both parties are clear on expectations.

“The more these needs are vocalised, the more likely they will become mainstream conversations and filter through to company policy.”

On the back of the findings, they recommend that workplaces invest in and

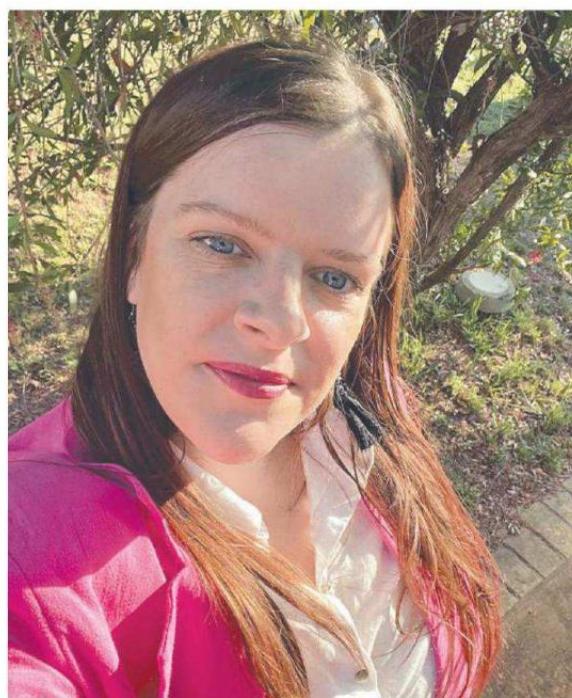


progress Paid Parental Leave schemes, with best practice being 18-26 weeks, as well as provide equitable access to family-friendly workplace policies that are fully inclusive of all employees regardless of gender, sexual orientation, cultural background, length of service or family type.

She encourages parents and carers to present new ideas and innovative ways to work, as some employers may not have considered alternative ways to work flexibly, or have realised the options for how commonwealth-funded paid parental leave can be taken between parents.

**Walsh says change in the work environment over the past decade has happened – albeit slowly.**

“While we see an improvement in caregiving policies and support provided to working families,



caregiving as a role in society, and skill, is still under-valued and under-funded," she says.

"This imbalance and precarious access to flexible work in workplaces makes it very difficult for families to share caring responsibilities without a detrimental impact on their career, financial and family wellbeing outcomes.

"The pandemic opened up employers' eyes to struggles faced by working parents and carers, as the daily grind became more visible with home-based working.

"Policymakers firmly have continued to improve, with changes to parental leave, the right to disconnect, childcare subsidies, flexible work access, and psychosocial safety, squarely on the radar; these workplace policy shifts are welcome and overdue.

"Sharing caregiving responsibilities takes a village."

**Claire Webber and her daughter Tayla, top right; and Jennifer Tupaea, above right, both work for organisations that have supported their needs for flexibility; and, from left, Parents At Work chief executive Emma Walsh and Chief Advocate for Children at UNICEF Australia, Nicole Breeze, both believe more can be done to support families.**

Chief Advocate for Children at UNICEF Australia, Nicole Breeze, agrees.

"It's surprising and disappointing to see that parents and carers are more stressed than ever, particularly women, and this stress feeds into family life," she says.

"Life as a parent can be hard, especially if you are fatigued and too drained to contribute when you get home from work, or if you are worried that your job commitment is being questioned if you do request flexibility.

"What is not surprising to see though, is that our certified Family Friendly Workplaces are showing improved results, with parents and carers more satisfied with their work life balance.

"It just goes to show that by supporting the wellbeing of our working parents and carers, both men and women, we can promote gender equality, and safeguard the wellbeing of our

children to be happy, healthy and safe. A healthy balance of work and home life is pivotal to the family unit and to everyone's wellbeing within that unit.

"In my own experience, being part of an organisation that celebrates all family types and recognises the importance of family commitments – whether it's attending a school assembly or being home with my child when they're sick – adds to the quality of my life."

## CLAIRE WEBBER

NSW executive assistant Claire Webber welcomed her second daughter, Riley, in January, and received HCF's new paid parental leave of 18 weeks including superannuation for all employees, regardless of gender – including those welcoming a child by birth, adoption, surrogacy, permanent kinship or foster care.

"When I had my first daughter, Tayla, I took 12 months off and received 15 weeks plus superannuation. This time around, knowing I had 18 weeks of paid parental leave, including super, helped me feel more relaxed because I have a few extra weeks to settle the new baby into daycare before I return to work," Webber explains.

"HCF's family-friendly policies have made returning to my role after my parental leave a no-brainer.

"After my first baby, I returned to work four days a week for 12 months before moving to a nine day fortnight with full-time hours.

"Not only has that given me a dedicated weekday every fortnight to book medical appointments, but it has improved my mental wellbeing, as well as that of my young daughter.

"I get a day a fortnight off to spend with her, and I am not so stressed on the weekends since I can handle what needs to get done that day.

"The flexible work options provided by HCF have made it a lot easier to balance my responsibilities and enjoy quality time with my children.

"The ability to work from home most days has been invaluable given my long commute time, and the compressed work week has freed up the mental load; I know that I have that day up my sleeve."

## JENNIFER TUPAEA

QBE Insurance portfolio management office manager, Jennifer Tupaea, has been struggling with infertility for the past nine years. To help, she was offered flexibility through hybrid working, flexible leave policies and leave after loss, supporting her through some of the most difficult times of her life.

"Hybrid working has allowed me to attend daily clinic appointments during periods of IVF treatment planned around my work day," she explains.

"Flexible leave policy entitles me to additional leave which I have been able to use when undergoing IVF procedures which require more recovery time, and work from home availability allows me to access my preferred pain management strategies during periods of endometriosis flare, which wouldn't be possible in an office setting."

After multiple miscarriages and surgeries, the 38-year-old Glenwood woman was diagnosed >

## FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS ALSO ENGENDER A STRONG SENSE OF LOYALTY AND COMMITMENT TO MY JOB

with stage 4 endometriosis. Throughout the near decade battle with her body, health care professionals, pain management and with the sheer exhaustion of the whole process, she has also been building her career within QBE.

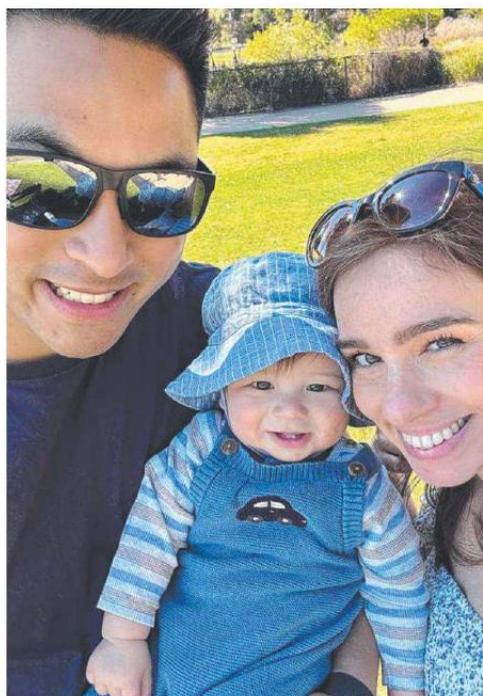
“Recognition of the diversity of family structures and experiences faced, and support of these in the workplace, has been a game-changer in terms of allowing me to show up authentically and fully at work and continue to build a successful career while managing the (personal) challenges,” Tupaea says.

“During my first loss, I took two weeks annual leave, and on returning to the office I told my team that I had had a virus. There was a lot of shame, guilt and stigma I felt surrounding the loss and that bled into how I handled the management of my endometriosis symptoms and fertility treatment.”

More recently, QBE has extended its 12 weeks parental leave policy to become available to mothers, fathers and LGBTQIA employees experiencing loss. They’ve also partnered with the Pink Elephants support network and host support circles to provide awareness, education and an opportunity for employees to share.

“My most recent loss was last June and I was able to take off six weeks without question,” she says. “This was absolutely essential to my recovery and while you never really ‘get over’ loss, the simple acknowledgment of just how devastating the experience is ... allowed me the confidence to be more open about my struggles.

“Creating this safe space has extended into how I deal with and communicate my ongoing experience with endometriosis and my fertility journey, and I really believe makes me a better employee and leader.”



**Luc Farago with his youngest daughter, Evie, 11; and Christopher Chu with his partner, Daniela, and their son, Rafael. Both dads access flexible working arrangements to be more present with their families.**

## CHRISTOPHER CHU

Christopher Chu is a senior risk and compliance manager at ING who planned to take two weeks parental leave when partner Daniela had their son, Rafael.

However, he was able to take a lot more, as ING offers parents 20 weeks parental leave without needing to be a primary carer.

“We felt like we needed more time together and ING was happy for me to take an extra two weeks of leave,” the Earlwood 32-year-old says.

“(Then) a few months into parenting, I was able to take four months as parental leave to spend time with Rafael and watch him grow, while supporting my partner in her transition back to work.

“Since having Rafael, with my partner and I both returning to full-time work, I’ve definitely felt the need to be more flexible in how I work.

“There are always special moments, events and medical appointments that I don’t want to miss so my hours have changed from the regular 9 to 5.

“If I need to finish up to pick my son up from daycare early, or there’s an appointment I need to attend with him, I feel encouraged and supported to do so.

“I’ve been fortunate to work at a family-friendly, supportive workplace and it’d be great to see this become the norm.”

## LUC FARAGO

Northern Tablelands environmental scientist Luc Farago is a principal policy officer for local land services with the Department of Regional NSW.

The 47-year-old father of three says flexibility at work has enabled his family to best support youngest daughter Evie, 11, who has cerebral palsy.

“Over the years I have accessed flexible work arrangements that supported me in balancing work and home demands – these include flexible hours/days, working from home arrangements, paternity leave for the birth of my daughters, and carers leave to support Evie’s medical appointments and treatment for cerebral palsy,” Farago says.

“I have also accessed carers leave to support my other kids while my wife takes Evie to Tamworth or Newcastle for treatment.

“The last 12 months has seen a continuation of the Department’s ongoing focus of disability and carers awareness and support, as well as bedding in post-pandemic flexible work arrangements.

“Feeling supported by the Department makes a huge contribution to how I view my employer.

“Flexible work arrangements also engender a strong sense of loyalty and commitment to my job.

“The early phases of Evie’s diagnosis and treatment were very intense when she was younger. Now the support for Evie is in a sustained routine phase, while the extra ‘capacity’ of myself and my wife is taken up with her doing more paid work and us running teenagers around for work and sport commitments.

“The key point here is that the flexible work arrangements offered by the Department support these changes over time.” ■

# Number-crunching the issue

## Key findings from The National Working Families Survey

■ Nearly half (48 per cent) of men were found to take less than one month of parental leave for their last child, while nearly all women (91 per cent) take longer than four months.

■ The most common reason cited by men for not taking a longer paid parental leave period was that they were

not eligible for longer based on their employer’s policy, at 51 per cent.

■ 74 per cent of women feel stressed when balancing work and family commitments compared with 57 per cent of men.

■ 42 per cent have difficulties looking after their

own physical and mental health to balance competing work and family pressures. This includes 50 per cent of women compared with 35 per cent of men.

■ 58 per cent are often too physically or emotionally drained when they get home from work to contribute to their family.

■ 26 per cent were worried about their reputation at work if they used flexible working arrangements offered by their employer.

■ 28 per cent of women and 25 per cent of men agreed they would consider a 10 per cent pay cut for their workplace to adopt or continue working flexibly.