Flexible policy the key

A range of measures is needed to help families, writes Barbara Pocock.

As he was sworn in, Prime Minister Tony Abbott mentioned his intention to address work and family issues amid his other priorities. He is no doubt thinking of his parental leave policy, which attracted so much attention in the election campaign.

However, as every working carer knows, good work and family policy is about more than good parental leave: it must also respond to the intensive demands of early childhood to ensure quality care for children, and it must also address the work and care challenges that increasingly arise from an ageing population.

More and more Australians are finding themselves having to cope with the unpredictable, emergency demands of caring for an aged parent, as well as the steady demands of providing ongoing support for them.

There is strong research evidence in support of paid parental leave: it is good for mothers, fathers, families and children. A scheme that pays women more and covers superannuation will help reduce the care penalty that afflicts women’s pay and retirement earnings.

Parental leave is also good for the labour market, increasing women’s attachment to their workplace, retaining skills and boosting labour supply. Improvements to Labor’s basic 2011 scheme are needed.

The Coalition parental leave plan, proposed to start in mid-2015, is superior to existing arrangements in three ways: it lasts longer, provides superannuation and increases the pay rate. However, as proposed, its funding requirements are large and uncertain, and some details of its implementation are unclear – for example, how existing employer schemes will be treated. These aspects will no doubt attract attention in the Senate.

However, a balanced work and family policy mix is required – going well beyond paid parental leave alone – one that also recognises the important issues of childcare and workplace inflexibility.

Quality, affordable childcare is a pressing work and family priority. Good care depends on stable, quality staff who are paid decently. The lack of affordable, accessible, quality childcare inhibits women’s participation and hits family budgets hard. Research tells us that poor-quality care is especially damaging to children in poorer households, so there is a strong case for investing more in childcare in ways that especially assist children who are at risk.

Solutions rely on higher levels of direct government action to ensure quality care and streamlining childcare support.

Many working carers also need flexibility in their jobs. Our research shows that in any one year, about one in five workers asks for flexibility and they mostly get what they request. However, a further quarter of workers would like flexible working conditions, but don’t ask for them for several reasons.

Some don’t ask because they believe their jobs cannot be done in flexible ways. Others believe their supervisors won’t support more flexible arrangements, or find that their workplace cultures are hostile to doing things differently and think that asking will put their jobs or conditions at risk.

More flexibility in our workplaces is an important part of support for working families. Some employers know and act on this and reap the rewards of a more stable, satisfied and less stressed workforce, but many have a long way to go. Along with childcare and parental leave, change on this front would help realise the Prime Minister’s promise of better support for working carers.

So would more women in cabinet. Research shows that making changes to Australia’s poor international showing on the gender gap in all forms of leadership relies on strong signals from those at the top. Having only one woman in cabinet sends the wrong message to our workplaces about the need for greater gender equality.

The weak voice of women in cabinet will mean roads will get a lot more discussion than childcare and flexibility and the kinds of infrastructure that are so critical not only to economic growth but also to a good society.

Barbara Pocock is director of the Centre for Work + Life at the University of South Australia. Her latest book is Time Bomb: Work, Rest and Play in Australia today, published by New South Books.