WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Pushed for time and solutions

In rapidly industrialising places, out-of-hours stress is dangerously high, writes Barbara Pocock.

The Minister for Families, Communities, Indigenous Affairs and Disability Reform, Jenny Macklin, recently addressed the fifth International Community, Work and Family Conference, held for the first time outside Europe. The conference brought more than 250 work and family experts from 27 countries to Sydney.

Macklin spoke about the government’s paid parental scheme introduced in 2011, pointing out that “for too long Australia lagged way behind other OECD countries in providing support to women to take time off after the birth of their child”. Fast forward to 2013 – only two years later – and we find ourselves in the midst of a pre-election bidding war on paid parental leave, as it emerges as one of the pivotal party differentiators: how long should it be, at what pay rate and who should pay?

But spare a thought for the rest of the rapidly industrialising world, where the fine details of paid parental leave are dwarfed by sometimes life-threatening “work and family” issues that throw our challenges in Australia, significant as they are, into the shade.

In China, for example, as Professor Cindy Fan pointed out in her keynote address to the conference, there is now a “floating population” of 250 million who comprise a significant internal migration in pursuit of work in rapidly growing cities. This wave of immigration is larger than the sum of all migration elsewhere on the planet, and is creating fundamental changes in work, care and community. Many migrant workers who leave their rural villages lack rights to education, housing and good jobs in their new cities, and many have left their families behind, with an estimated 60 million children cared for by grandparents and other family and community members in rural areas and at least 20 million rural elderly citizens also in need of care. Urbanisation has leapfrogged from 10 per cent of the population in 1949 to 50 per cent in 2000, disrupting ancient patterns of community, work and care, and creating social challenges for care systems - both within and beyond the traditional family - and for education, health care and housing access.

Professor Fan illustrated her point with the example of a recent tragedy where three “left behind children” of migrant parents, who were being cared for by their grandmother, drowned in a village pond. The issues of an ageing population are also prominent in China where the government has amended law to require people to visit their elderly parents at least once every two months. Unfortunately, the costs and difficulties of travelling in China, and the weak citizenship rights of workers who leave their villages and migrate east, undermine the traditional fabric of community and family, creating major infrastructure and social disruption - even as they underpin China’s rapid economic growth.

These challenges affect many parts of Asia. In India, for example, 40 per cent of jobs are in the informal sector, many with low pay and few rights. Women’s participation rate in paid work remains low. Many cannot find jobs of decent quality, making them dependent upon men and the state, constraining their freedom and exposing them to exploitation.

Professor Rajini Paliwal from the University of Delhi described to the conference the deep inequalities around gender, caste, land ownership and urban-rural differences which complicate policy responses to changing work and family arrangements in India. The scale and nature of community, work and family challenges within the Asia-Pacific region are diverse. They are very different to the much-studied experience of North America and Europe. However, there is a lot to gain from sharing regional research and experience about how to put together work, labour regulation and care systems which are simultaneously productive, fair and “careful” – of children, parents and those with disabilities. This encompasses the nature of communities, workplaces and families, childcare arrangements, elder care supports, the flexibility available to working carers, and their access to quality jobs in rapidly changing societies.

Against this international background, work and family issues such as paid parental leave continue to attract appropriate attention in Australia as we respond to a workforce which is almost half female and where 40 per cent of all workers have responsibility for the care of others while they are at work. We too are confronted by an ageing population and a care system that creaks at the edges, with many women loaded with more than their fair share of domestic responsibilities alongside their growing contribution to paid work. Quality childcare, disability and aged-care systems are an important part of the solution and Australia has made important reforms in all in recent years, with more to be done – and much to be gained from a stronger Asia-Pacific conversation about these issues.

Barbara Pocock is director of the Centre for Work + Life at the University of South Australia and was a convener of the fifth International Community, Work and Family Conference.

Illustration: Kerrie Leishman