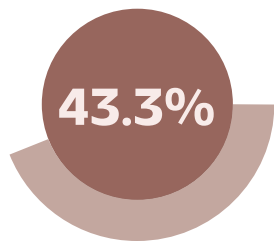


The Real Lives of Professional Working Mothers in Australia Study:

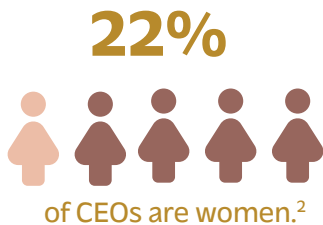
Exploring the lived experiences and resource needs of professional working mothers with children in their early years (0-5 years) to enable positive workforce participation.



The Context – Why This Research Matters



43.3% of women work part-time vs. 19.5% of men – mostly to balance care duties.¹



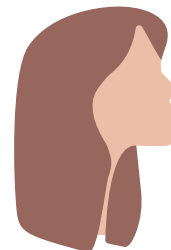
of CEOs are women.²



Superannuation gap for women is **25%** lower at retirement.

The gender pay gap is

11.5%



Women in Australia still do **9+ more hours of unpaid work** per week than men.³

The Gap

Women's unpaid and paid work gap is most significant for mothers with young children (0-5 years) leading to:

- Inequitable workforce participation
- Limited career progression
- Inequitable leadership opportunities
- Sustained pay gap penalties
- Lower superannuation
- Higher mental load and psychological distress

In Australia, mothers of young children (0-5 years) face **persistent structural and social barriers** and still experience inequitable workforce participation and career opportunities contributing to long term economic penalties.

The Progress

Australia now ranks 13th globally for gender equality (New Zealand ranks 5th).

The World Economic Forum's 2025 Global Gender Gap Report has seen Australia rise 11 places in the global rankings to 13th out of 148 countries for gender equality, the highest ever ranking for Australia since the Index began in 2006.

This positive progress must continue, as it is estimated that **achieving global gender equality** is still **123 years away** (World Economic Forum, 2025).

“Despite being highly educated, women’s economic participation in Australia isn’t where it should be.”

— Australian Business Council, 2022

1. ABS (August 2023) Characteristics of Employment, Australia
2. WGEA's 2023 Gender Equality Scorecard
3. ABS Time Use Survey (2020-21)

The Impact – Why is this important for us all?

The broader economic costs

- Globally, gender gaps cost the economy \$12 trillion annually.⁴
- Perinatal depression and anxiety cost the Australian economy \$877 million annually.⁵
- Mothers' income loss averages 55 per cent in the first five years (excluding the birth year) of having a child, with income gaps persisting 10 years after the birth of their first child, now recognised as "the motherhood penalty".⁶

The individual human costs

- 1 in 5 mothers experience perinatal anxiety or depression.
- Working mothers report higher stress, lower well-being, and higher work-family conflict.

The workplace costs

- Higher turnover and absenteeism.
- Higher psychosocial risks and hazards.
- Lower innovation and productivity.⁷

The Benefit: Why Recalibrating the Costs to Working Mothers Can Benefit Us All

The Economic + Social Wins When Mothers Thrive

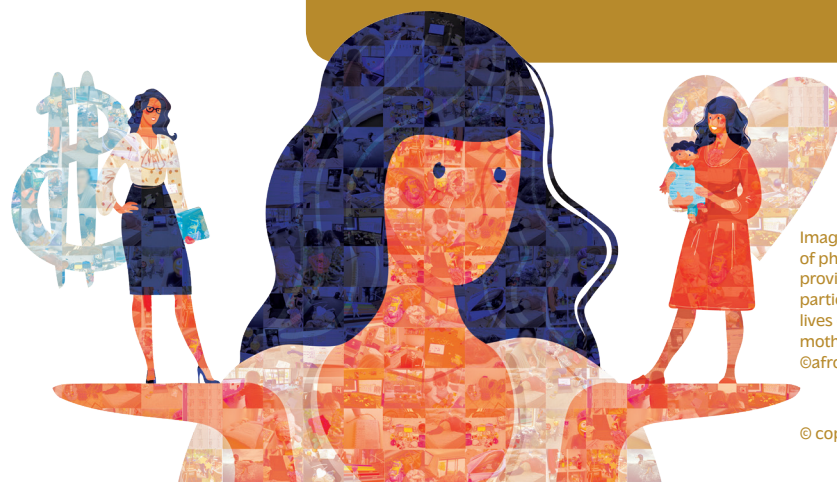
- **Workforce gains:**
If mothers participated in the workforce at the same rate as fathers, Australia's GDP could increase by \$353 billion by 2050.⁸
- Increasing the number of women in key leadership positions by 10 per cent or more increases a company's market value by 6.6 per cent or an average \$105 million.⁹
- **Health savings:**
Better mental health outcomes for mothers reduces pressure on our public health system.
- **Superannuation equity:**
Closing the super gap supports dignity and economic security in retirement for women.
- **Education Return on Investment:**
Supporting the equitable representation of highly educated women in the workforce unlocks an incredible opportunity to fully leverage Australia's human and skill capital.
- **Community well-being:**
When working mothers are supported, there's a ripple effect:
 - ▷ Positive early childhood development outcomes
 - ▷ More equitable sharing of unpaid work and household labor
 - ▷ Healthier family dynamics
 - ▷ Positive role modelling for future generations
 - ▷ Economic security and safety for women and mothers.

The Social Return on Investment

- Studies show that every dollar invested in policies and practices that support working families (e.g., paid parental leave, flexible work) returns \$2.20 to the economy in the form of:
 - ▷ Reduced absenteeism
 - ▷ Higher workforce retention
 - ▷ Greater productivity
 - ▷ Improved mental health outcomes
 - ▷ Diverse and representative teams = better innovation, engagement, and performance.¹⁰

It is widely accepted now that in order to gain these multi-level wins for working mothers, society and workplaces, we need to address the inequalities from the same multi-level perspective and move beyond just policy alone. Addressing the social and structural issues exacerbating gender inequality is a collective effort we can all play a role in changing.

Ms. Afrouz Shoghi, working mothers study researcher



4. McKinsey Global Institute (2015)
5. Gidget foundation 2019 report
6. Australian Treasury report, "Children and the gender earnings gap" (2022)
7. World Economic Forum (2019)
8. She's Price(d)less" report, a comprehensive analysis KPMG (2022)
9. Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2020
10. Deloitte Access Economics. National Working Families Report (2019)

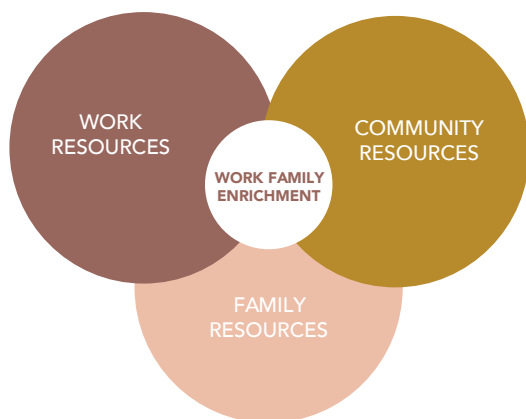
Image is a collage collection of photos mothers provided as part of their participation in the "real lives of professional working mothers research study. @afrouz shoghi

The Research

Study Overview

The *real lives of professional working mothers with children in their early years (i.e. 0-5 years of age)* aimed to understand what professional working mothers' lived experiences were in accessing or needing resources¹² from a work, family and community perspective.

Research Study Model



Who: 42 professional working mothers across Australia working in healthcare, education, science, law, engineering and administration/management.

How: Conducted a total of 16 focus groups (90 minutes) online and face to face.

Findings Part A:

Broad lived experiences of professional working mothers with children in their early years.

Five core themes identified



Mental health & well-being

Strained mental health and well-being; including physical fatigue.



Career & identity

Limited career opportunities and conflicting professional and personal identities



Mother-child relationship

Positive relationships and attachment with child/children from time spent caregiving



Personal development

Positive personal development and growth gained from time spent caregiving



Financial

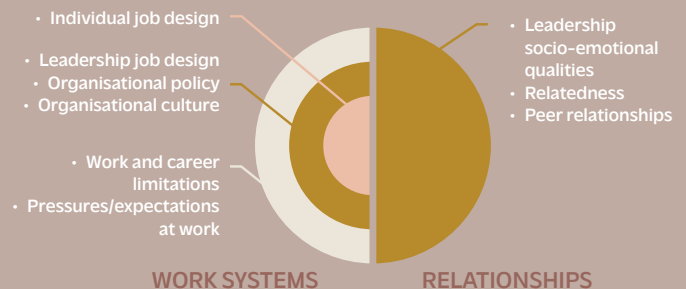
Financial loss and insecurity

- Professional working mothers with young children were defined using the following participant eligibility criteria: Are an Australian citizen or resident currently living and working in Australia and are a mother to a child/children who is 5 years or under and currently hold a tertiary-level qualification directly or indirectly related to your current work role and are currently in paid employment for at least 8 hours a week.
- Resources are structural or psychological assets that may be used to facilitate performance, reduce demands, or generate additional resources.

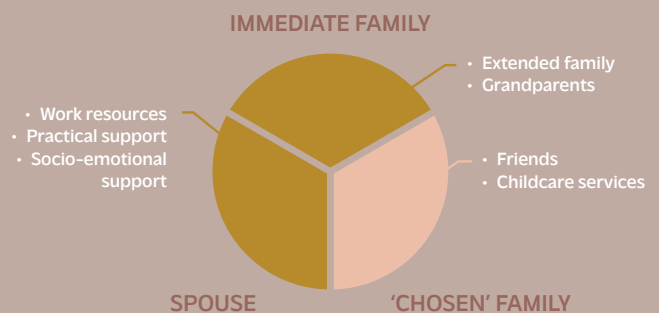
Findings Part B:

Resource experiences across work, family and community.¹³

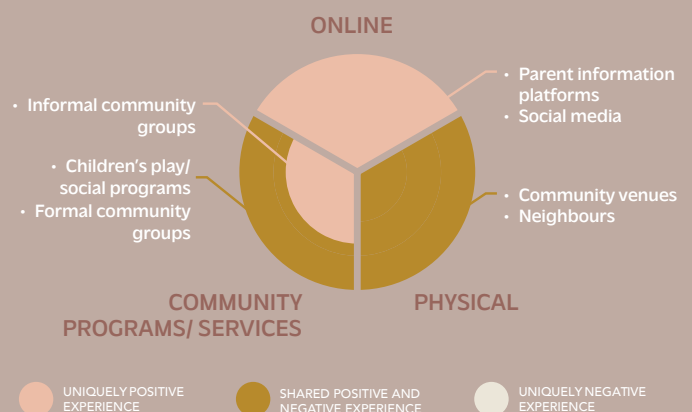
WORK RESOURCES



FAMILY RESOURCES



COMMUNITY RESOURCES



- Resources were identified across work, family and community using a qualitative analysis process. Identified resources were categorised according to whether they were experienced only positively or only negatively or if they had both positive and negative experiences associated with the identified resource.

The Meaning – What This Tells Us

- Working motherhood is complex, multi-layered and deeply shaped by our social and systemic structures.
- Common challenges show a need for real support systems—that leverage off and just rely on policy.
- Positive and negative experiences often come down to resource availability and access.

“Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world.”

— United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Goal 5)

Our Collective Role

- This isn't just a women's issue—it's a *societal opportunity*.
- When mothers thrive; families, businesses, and communities thrive.

What's Next?

- The next research project will test *which resources* (work, family, community) drive *work-family enrichment* – to enable positive workforce participation outcomes
- **Goal:** Provide practical solutions for workplaces, families, and communities.

“It's not a women's problem to solve. It's everyone's problem to solve.”

— Engineer, mother of three



Final Thought

Working motherhood today is shaped by a complex and evolving landscape of social, organisational, cultural, and community influences and, our systems and supports are still trying to keep up with the rapid changes faced by modern working mothers and working families. This research affirms that the challenges facing working mothers in our current society are not simply women's issues, they are societal opportunities. By collectively acknowledging and addressing these barriers in our families, workplaces and communities, we can create a society that enables mothers positive workforce participation which, we know, benefits everyone.

—Ms. Afrouz Shoghi, working mothers study PhD researcher and Organisational Psychologist



Contact

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