

24-25 June 2026 | Online

Who Cares?

**Imagining Feminist Solutions
to Australia's Childcare Crisis**

Book of abstracts

DAY 1: WEDNESDAY 24 JUNE 2026

Session 1 (10.00AM – 11.15AM)

'Waiting for Care: Childcare Shortages in Regional Areas and Their Impact on Working Mothers.'

Dr Somayeh Ba Akhlagh (University of New England)

The shortage of childcare centres in regional areas has emerged as a significant social and economic challenge, particularly affecting mothers' participation in the workforce. Limited access to affordable, high-quality childcare services constrains employment opportunities for women, reinforces gender inequalities, and undermines broader regional development. This issue is especially acute in rural and remote communities, where population dispersion, workforce shortages, and limited infrastructure reduce the viability of childcare provision. Mothers in regional areas often face considerable difficulties in securing reliable childcare, which directly impacts their ability to engage in paid work. Long waiting lists, restricted operating hours, and the absence of nearby facilities force many women to reduce working hours, accept less stable employment, or withdraw from the workforce altogether. These constraints are compounded by transportation challenges and the higher relative costs of childcare in areas with limited supply. As a result, mothers frequently experience interrupted career trajectories, reduced income, and diminished long-term financial security. This issue is not only structural but also deeply personal. As a mother living in a regional area, I experienced prolonged difficulty in accessing childcare for my own child. Despite repeated efforts to secure a place, I remained on waiting lists for an extended period, ultimately not obtaining access until my child reached preschool age. This delay significantly limited my ability to return to work and maintain professional continuity.

The experience reflects a broader pattern in which systemic shortages translate into lived constraints for families, highlighting the gap between policy intentions and everyday realities. The shortage of childcare services also has broader implications for regional economies. When mothers are unable to participate fully in the workforce, local businesses face labour shortages, productivity declines, and reduced economic growth. Furthermore, communities may struggle to attract and retain skilled workers if adequate childcare options are unavailable. This creates a cycle in which limited services discourage population growth and economic investment, further weakening the sustainability of regional areas. In addition to economic impacts, the lack of childcare provision affects family wellbeing and social inclusion. Mothers often experience stress, isolation, and work-family conflict as they attempt to balance caregiving responsibilities with employment demands. The absence of accessible childcare can also limit children's early learning opportunities, which are critical for developmental outcomes and school readiness. Addressing the shortage of childcare in regional areas requires targeted policy interventions and innovative service models. Potential solutions include increased government funding, incentives for childcare providers to operate in underserved regions, and the development of flexible and community-based childcare arrangements. Strengthening the childcare workforce through training and retention strategies is also essential to ensure service quality and sustainability. In conclusion, the shortage of childcare centres in regional areas presents a complex challenge with significant consequences for mothers, families, and local economies. Improving access to childcare is not only a matter of supporting working mothers but also a critical step toward promoting gender equity, enhancing child development, and fostering resilient regional communities.

Dr Somayeh Ba Akhlagh is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education whose research advances inclusive practice and cultural diversity. Her work bridges theory and practice, shaping both academic discourse and the preparation of future educators. She also delivers professional workshops nationally and internationally. Somayeh has received multiple

scholarships and awards for teaching and research, including a recent Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) paper presentation award.

“When it Comes to the Safety of my Child”: Mothers’ Perspectives of Male Carers in Early Childhood Education and Care Settings.’

Isabella Wilson (The University of Sydney)

Increasing the participation rates of males in the ECEC workforce has the potential to address care workforce shortages, revoke caring as strictly ‘women’s work’, and contribute to a revaluation of care. However, the current state of the ECEC system in Australia has enabled, overwhelmingly male, perpetrators of sexual abuse to infiltrate the industry and harm children. There has been a substantial amount of critique within the literature that understands Australia’s ECEC crisis through the limitations of its quasi-market system design, whereby for-profit providers dominate the sector and diminish the capacity of the State to establish safe conditions. Despite this, there has been negligible enquiry into the impact of this on public perceptions and acceptance of men working within the ECEC system. Drawing from ~17 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with mothers who currently engage with ECEC services, this paper provides insight into mothers’ perceptions of men caring for their children in the ECEC context. Elevating mothers’ experiences, this exploratory study makes visible the complex ways normative and structural barriers interact and disrupt the establishment of an ethic of care within ECEC infrastructure. With this, it hopes to contribute to the establishment of a transformative paradigm in which future ECEC policy should be rooted.

Isabella Wilson is a PhD Candidate and Research Officer based at the Sydney Centre for Healthy Societies at The University of Sydney. As a qualitative researcher across both public policy and sociology, her PhD project deploys a critical feminist lens to analyse Early Childhood Education and Care policy (ECEC) in Australia and interrogate the relationship between such policies and gender equality over time.

Co-authors:

Dr Michelle Peterie is an ARC DECRA Senior Research Fellow in the Sydney Centre for Healthy Societies and the School of Social and Political Sciences at The University of Sydney. She is co-Editor-in-Chief of The Australian Journal of Social Issues, an executive member of the Australian Social Policy Association Management Committee, and a co-convenor of The Australian Sociological Association's Families and Relationships thematic group.

Gaby Ramia is a Professor of Policy and Society at The University of Sydney where he is acting Head of the School of Social and Political Sciences. He is also a theme co-leader on ‘Work, Education and Welfare’ at the Sydney Centre for Healthy Societies.

‘Caring in the Classroom and at Home: The Experiences of Australian Secondary School Teachers who are also Raising Young Children.’

Dr Alice Cranney (Southern Cross University)

Given that women comprise 78% of the Australian secondary teaching workforce, the number of teachers who are also primary caregivers of young children is high and the demands on their time, both at home and at school, are substantial. Thus, a greater understanding of and support for this group of educators is necessary. Current literature in this area is limited, with most studies focusing on educators in early childcare, tertiary education, or teachers conducting online lessons while also caring for their children during the pandemic. This study investigates the experiences of Australian secondary school teachers, who are simultaneously navigating the demands of teaching and caring for their young children. Data from semi structured interviews with secondary school teacher mothers are analysed through the lens of Work–Family Conflict theory. Findings suggest participants experience significant strain based and time based conflict due to the ‘juggle’ of teaching and motherhood. This conflict is intensified or mitigated by support from

colleagues, school leadership, and partners. Alongside emotional strain, participants also described ways motherhood enriched their teaching through increased empathy and new perspectives. Thus, this study deepens understanding of the challenges, supports for, and strengths of teacher mothers and highlights the need for responsive policies and practices.

Dr Alice Cranney holds an Honours degree in Arts (Languages) from the University of Sydney, and a master's degree and PhD in Education from University of New South Wales, Australia. She is interested in identity and perception alteration that occur as a result of transnational and second language learning experiences. Alice's professional background is as a Spanish and History secondary school teacher. She is a lecturer in Humanities in the Faculty of Education at Southern Cross University.

Session 2 (11.30AM – 1.00PM)

Matrescence as Self-Narrative'

Dr Maddison Forcha (Macquarie University)

Women undergo profound physiological, emotional, and social changes when becoming mothers, and yet society does not pay attention to the mental health of mothers. Women are expected to be the 'perfect nurturers', yet demanding twenty-first century parenting norms have become more intense, leading to 'staggering levels of tension, guilt, and ill health among mothers' (Jones 2023). These societal pressures, along with the profound transition that women go through when becoming mothers, have impacted the mental health of women. 'Matrescence' is a term that was coined by anthropologist Dana Raphael in 1975 to refer to the transition in becoming a mother, including changes to one's body, social status, emotional life, daily activities, identity, and relationships. Despite the significance of this transition, the term remains absent from common dictionaries and public discourse. Through philosophical analysis and first-person reflections on motherhood, I argue for the institutional recognition of 'matrescence', insofar as it can be understood as a form of self-narrative that enables women to make sense of the identity transformations associated with becoming a mother. Further, the inclusion of 'matrescence' in public discourse may enable women to share their experiences with one another, supporting and fostering a feminist care ecosystem.

Dr Maddison Forcha is a sessional teaching academic and research assistant in Philosophy at Macquarie University. Her areas of specialisation are social epistemology, LGBTQIA+ justice, and feminist philosophy. She also conducts empirical research.

'The Impossible Position: Maternal Normativity and the Symbolic Limits of Care Reform'

Ruke Kong (University of Ottawa)

Contemporary debates over childcare reform oscillate between two policy imaginaries: universal centre-based care, which promises maternal workforce participation, and voucher-style "choice" models, which promise familial autonomy. This paper argues that both remain bound to a deeper structure that produces the maternal position as an impossible one, in which those who occupy it (predominantly though not exclusively women) are simultaneously required to be omnipotently responsible for the child's wellbeing and disqualified from any active expression of that responsibility as "intrusive"; or "excessive". Drawing on Rebecca Kukla's analysis of how maternal bodies are produced as objects of public moral surveillance (*Mass Hysteria*, 2005), and on Luce Irigaray's diagnosis of how maternal subjectivity is foreclosed within a phallic symbolic economy, the paper reframes the "motherhood penalty" as also a symbolic penalty: those in the maternal position are denied the resources to articulate themselves as subjects rather than as threats or lacks. A genuinely feminist care ecosystem, the paper concludes, must do more than redistribute care labour: it must create the symbolic and material conditions for women to inhabit the

maternal position as subjects, with their own genealogies, desires, and relations beyond the dyad with the child, as part of a broader reimagining of care across diverse family configurations.

Ruke (Sandrine) Kong is a PhD candidate in philosophy at the University of Ottawa, working at the intersection of Continental feminist philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, and the ethics of intersubjectivity. Her dissertation reconstructs Luce Irigaray's account of the mother–daughter relationship and develops her concept of touch as a model of intersubjective mediation. She has presented at the Matrescence Symposium (2025), Margins, Metaphor, and Medium: Subaltern Voices in East Asia (2026 McGill EAS Graduate Student Conference) and will present at the Luce Irigaray Circle (Newcastle, July 2026).

'Between the Hyper-Professional and the Hyper-Maternal: Inclusive Childcare and "Wanting the Good of the Other".'

Dr Felicity Joseph (University of New England)

Political debates about childcare are often conducted upon the basis of an opposition between two extremes: what I call the 'hyper-professional' position, an emphasis upon full-time work, the benefits to the GDP of mothers' full-time participation in the workforce, and a childcare system set up on a 5-day-a-week equivalent of the adult working week. At the other end (and often a reaction to the first) is what I call the 'hyper-maternal' position, often associated with (but not reducible to) more conservative positions, which emphasises the irreplaceability of the mother and is often based on the assumption that most or even all women deep down want to be the full-time and exclusive carers for their children. To add to the complexity, children also exhibit a natural diversity in terms of temperament and identity, suggesting the need for a variety of childcare setups and sometimes even exclusive reliance on a parent. Recognising this diversity of identities, I invoke Aristotle's definition of friendship (Nicomachean Ethics 1156b15), which requires us to 'want the good of the other', and suggest that this is an appropriate ethical basis upon which to build architecture of a new philosophy and practice of childcare.

Dr. Felicity Joseph is a Lecturer in Philosophy and Political Theory at the University of New England, Australia. Her PhD thesis was on phenomenology of embodiment, and she has a particular interest in feminist applications of phenomenological and existentialist thought, as well as a feminist re-thinking of political philosophy. She is a co-editor of *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Existentialism* (2024).

Session 3 (2.00PM – 3.00PM)

'Infant Care as Sexed Care Work Equality for Mothers via Reducing the Cost of Care'

Associate Professor Julie Smith (Australian National University)

The "Three R's" of Recognising, Reducing and Redistributing women's unpaid care work is a well-established strategy for achieving women's equality and assume sex equity in caregiving as a necessary goal. However, application of this strategy in relation to infant care has had perverse outcomes for women (financial, emotional and health) and children. Notably, the motherhood penalty has remained unaddressed, as despite efforts of policy makers and some feminists, women are consistently persistent caring for their infants. This presentation will advocate that the care work of looking after infants should be excluded from measures to reduce women's unpaid care work. Rather, women's infant care should be recognised and supported while the cost of that care is redistributed. Well known actions recommended to support new mothers include paid maternity leave, flexible work and part-time career-track options. However, these do not address the societal structural factors that disadvantage mothers. Rather women's care work should be accurately measured (including multitasking) and included in satellite accounts and GDP. The inclusion of care work in national economic measurements would increase government, business and societal

support for this work and result in new and innovative ways of addressing women's inequality and upholding the rights of mothers and children.

Julie Smith is an Honorary Associate Professor and awarded ARC Future Fellow at the Research School of Population Health, ANU. She is also a Fellow at the Crawford School of Public Policy's Tax and Transfer Policy Institute. Her research has focussed on the economics of breastfeeding and regulation of markets in mothers' milk, and gender analysis of Australia's taxation and fiscal policies. She has published over 60 research articles in health, nutrition and economics journals, as well as two books (*Taxing Popularity* and *Gambling Taxation in Australia*) and several book chapters.

'Pitting women against women'

Professor Kylie Smith (The University of Melbourne)

Neoliberal policy initiatives at federal and state government levels have promised investment in the early years that will produce quality education and care for children. In the early years that will produce quality education and care for children. The National Quality Framework, Early Years Learning Framework, and higher child/staff ratios are some of the tools touted as ways to support quality teaching and learning. However, there has been little significant financial investment in childcare. Quality programs and well-trained staff cost, and this cost continues to go to parents. Further, the marketisation and privatisation of childcare has resulted in childcare becoming a business rather than a social service – user pay. This has set up an environment where the economy is riding off the backs of women – women using most of their salary to pay childcare fees and women educators working in poorly paid roles. The result is women being pitted against each other – mothers engaged in unpaid reproductive labour needing affordable care and educators underpaid in education and care labour struggling to be financially healthy. What might a Feminist ethics of care bring to this complex, ethical and wicked problem? Relational solutions are required that dismiss individualism and women and children as economic commodities to be invested in and embracing collective and collaborative social pathways.

Professor Kylie Smith is a Professor of Early Childhood Studies at the University of Melbourne's Faculty of Education. Kylie has been an early childhood educator working in preschool and long day care services for over 20 years. She is a feminist scholar and activist who researches with children, families and educators to create more equitable pedagogies, policies and environments.

'Teresa Brennan's "Foundational Fantasy" and the Devaluing of Care'

Dr Talia Fell (The University of Queensland)

In this paper, I explore the psychoanalytic and sociocultural underpinnings of our capitalist-patriarchal value system that devalues care work. I do so through the work of Australian philosopher Teresa Brennan, specifically her theory of the 'foundational fantasy' in *Exhausting Modernity: Grounds for a New Economy* (2000). Brennan extends Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic theory of 'primal envy' to theorise the connection between the mother-infant relationship and capitalist exploitation. The 'foundational fantasy' is the fantasy that we are each autonomous and enclosed individuals who do not rely on anything outside of us, which Brennan argues pervades our Western systems of thought and modes of existence. The 'foundational fantasy' reveals itself in the denial of the creativity of mothers, women, care workers, and nature itself. By denying the fact of our dependence and extracting from and objectifying those who/that which we rely on, we prop up the fantasy that we are individuals who are independent and in control, warding off the fear that others are controlling us through our reliance on them. I argue that Brennan helps us to understand the deep rootedness of our capitalist-patriarchal value system and provides us with some theoretical tools for imagining feminist solutions to our childcare crisis.

Dr Talia Fell is feminist philosopher with a PhD from the University of Queensland and previous experience working as an early childhood educator. Her recently completed doctoral thesis examines authentic relations between women through the work of Simone

de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Elena Ferrante and the Italian Feminist Movement. Her published journal articles include “Envy between Girls: A Philosophical Analysis of Simone de Beauvoir and Elena Ferrante” (2025) in *Hypatia* and “Hannah Arendt and Rubbish: The Objects that Belong Nowhere in The Human Condition” (2023) in *Arendt Studies*.

‘Slowing Down to the Speed of Life: Framing the Work-Care “Juggle” and Parents’ Time Poverty as *Haste*

Dr Belinda Eslick (University of Queensland)

In her chapter ‘The Married Woman’ in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir likens housework to the torture of Sisyphus, who, in Greek mythology, was condemned for eternity to repeatedly roll a boulder up a hill, only for it to roll back down again. Beauvoir’s analogy perhaps falls short in describing the activity of housework and the situation of mothers in contemporary neoliberal capitalist contexts. Modern motherhood is arguably characterised by an increasing number of competing, simultaneous demands, leading to a chronic sense of dispersal: there is often at least one other ‘boulder’ already rolling down the hill before the first one reaches the top. This sense of dispersal—captured in what is often described as the ‘juggle’ between care responsibilities and paid work—is, I argue, not a result of time poverty but of *haste*: a near-constant rushing that robs us of opportunities for rest, contemplation, pleasure, and connection. In this sense, it is not necessarily time affluence that would address this sense of dispersal but a slower temporality conducive to the needs and rhythms of life. In this paper, I revisit Beauvoir’s analysis of housework to consider its temporal dimensions, drawing on Michelle Boulous Walker’s work on slowness as a necessary antidote to a culture of haste. Ultimately, I argue that it is not housework and reproductive labour itself but its conditions (in this case, an excessive workload that necessitates haste) that renders it oppressive.

Dr Belinda Eslick is a Research Fellow in the Centre for Policy Futures at The University of Queensland (UQ), where she received her PhD in Gender Studies. Her research spans Continental feminist philosophy, gender studies, ecofeminist philosophy, and feminist political economy, focusing on themes of the home, housework and reproductive labour, mothering, and the ‘motherhood penalty’.

Panel Discussion (3.45PM – 5.00PM)

The Economic Conditions of Mothering in Australia: Past, Present, and Towards a Feminist Future

Luara Ferracioli is Associate Professor in Political Philosophy in the School of Humanities at the University of Sydney. Her first book *Liberal Self-Determination in a World of Migration* was published in 2022 with OUP. Her second book *Parenting and the Goods of Childhood* was published in 2023 with OUP. She is currently finishing her third book *The Future of Gestation: A Normative Inquiry* (under contract with OUP).

Associate Professor Emilee Gilbert is a feminist sociologist at Western Sydney University. Her research interests are in gender equity, women's health, and women's experiences of mothering and paid work.

Dr Kate Murphy is a historian of Australia, with a particular focus on twentieth century social and cultural history. She teaches History and Global Studies at Monash University. Kate's research interests include the history of the family and disability history. She has published a major co-authored book on the history of fathering in Australia: *Fathering: An Australian History* (Melbourne University Publishing, 2025).

Associate Professor Leonora Risse is an economist who specialises in gender equality. She is an Associate Professor in Economics at Queensland University of Technology, and a member of QUT's Centre for Decent Work and Industry, and a Research Fellow with the Women's Leadership Institute Australia. She currently serves as an Expert Panel Member on gender pay equity for the Fair Work Commission and an Expert Panel Member for the Parliamentary Budget Office, and previously worked as an economist for the Productivity Commission.

Julie Smith is an Honorary Associate Professor and awarded ARC Future Fellow at the Research School of Population Health, ANU. She is also a Fellow at the Crawford School of Public Policy's Tax and Transfer Policy Institute. Her research has focussed on the economics of breastfeeding and regulation of markets in mothers' milk, and gender analysis of Australia's taxation and fiscal policies. She has published over 60 research articles in health, nutrition and economics journals, as well as two books (*Taxing Popularity* and *Gambling Taxation in Australia*) and several book chapters.

DAY 2: THURSDAY 25 JUNE 2026

Session 1 (9.45AM – 11.15AM)

The Care Career Conundrum: Invisible Labour and the Contradictions of Contemporary Motherhood Beneath Australia's Care Crisis

Dr Sophie Brock (The Good Enough Mother podcast)

This presentation offers a motherhood studies-informed sociological lens on Australia's care crisis by exploring the broader ecology of maternal strain beneath childcare debates and public discourse. Drawing on insights from my work as a motherhood studies sociologist and mother supporting mothers and mother-care practitioners, I examine how childcare challenges are embedded within wider systems of invisible labour and structurally incompatible temporal demands. Using the concept of the Care Career Conundrum, the presentation explores the deeper contradiction at the heart of contemporary motherhood: mothers are expected to participate in paid work within social, workplace, and economic structures that remain largely incompatible with care, while simultaneously navigating cultural expectations associated with idealised motherhood and intensive mothering ideology. Rather than experiencing 'childcare' as a discrete issue, many mothers describe fragmentation, exhaustion, guilt, identity conflict, workplace rigidity, breastfeeding incompatibility, and the ongoing negotiation of competing demands across both paid work and parenting. The presentation seeks to make visible the largely invisible forms of labour through which mothers try to sustain both paid workforce participation and caregiving, including cognitive and emotional labour, mental load, maternal thinking, and intellectual labour. In making these forms of labour more visible, the presentation also seeks to foreground the often overlooked relational and generative value of care within contemporary society. The presentation also briefly considers the adaptive strategies many mothers pursue in response to institutional rigidity and intensive mothering ideology. Ultimately, the presentation positions the sociological concept of the Care Career Conundrum as a framework for understanding the contradictory ideological, cultural, and structural expectations shaping contemporary motherhood and the broader care crisis.

Dr Sophie Brock is a motherhood studies sociologist and mother whose work explores the social, cultural, and structural dimensions of contemporary motherhood. Working independently across advocacy, education, and practitioner training, she supports both mothers and mother-care practitioners through courses, professional training programs, speaking, workshops, practitioner mentoring, and The Good Enough Mother podcast.

'The Tension (and Intersection) of the Perception of Choice (and the Systems that Influence those Choices)'

Lucinda McKimm (Ready or Not podcast for working mums)

When it comes to feminism, 'choice' is a word that's uttered frequently. But, in a system that still significantly works against women, are all choices made equal? And how does the concept of choice change for women once they become mothers, particularly when we look at financial freedom, independence, ambition and the workplace? In this session, Lucinda McKimm - co-host of motherhood and career podcast Ready or Not - draws on data,

interviews, and stories to examine the tension that exists between the perception of choice and the systems that influence it.

Lucinda McKimm is a mother, writer, producer and co-host of motherhood and career podcast, Ready or Not. She's passionate about advocating for mothers work; both inside and outside of the home.

Remembering we have Mothers in Prison'

Tahlia Isaac (Project: herSELF)

Tahlia Isaac brings both professional expertise and lived experience to the national conversation on women and the criminal justice system. She is the founder of Project:herSELF, a non-profit social enterprise established in 2024 to support previously incarcerated women to rebuild their lives. Tahlia's own journey is one of courage and resilience. A former ice user, she was sentenced to two years' imprisonment in 2018. Following her release, she completed degrees in both business and criminology, and is today a wife, mother of two and a powerful advocate for women navigating the justice system.

Perspectives from Inside the Sector: Care, Relationships and the Need for Change'

Jane Saxton (Early Childhood Educator and Higher Degree Research student)

I am seeking to either connect with or contribute to this round table as a sector representative and emerging feminist scholar. The voices of those who deliver care work must be central to any discussion of the multiple childcare crises. Policy conversations cannot be framed only as a parent or family issue. A central tenant of early childhood education and care in Australia is that educators and families are in partnership. These crises simultaneously affect educators as much as families and children. Further, educators, as low paid women, are often excluded from policy discussion where decisions affecting them and subsequently children and families, are made. These crises cannot be understood, much less resolved, without the voices of educators, many of whom are mothers themselves. The sector does not have enough trained educators to meet demand. Without any guarantee in the Federal Budget that the 15% pay rise will be upheld, the workforce is precarious. The devaluing of care work is the commonality for mothers and educators. But as the people living this reality, they are best placed to reimagine alternatives to existing systems. My contribution to this roundtable will argue that a sustainable, feminist response to the ECEC sector crises must include the stability of the workforce. I propose to bring a sector grounded perspective, highlighting why the voices of those who work with children and families must be part of any solution.

Jane Saxton is a Higher Degree Research student at Queensland University of Technology and an early childhood educator, with experience across a range of early childhood service types. She has passed her first milestone, is working on a policy analysis for publication, and is on track for confirmation in January 2027. She uses feminist phenomenological approaches to understand how Queensland's early childhood educators experience wellbeing. Feminist methodologies capturing the contextual, embodied, situated nature of educators' work are key to her study because of the embedded, structured gender inequality upholding the early childhood sector. Her research includes policy analysis to

show how educator wellbeing has been problematised, situated within an ethics of care framework. Her daughter is an early childhood educator working in family day care.

Session 2 (11.35AM – 12.50PM)

'Care is Infrastructure: Building an Australia Where Every Family can Flourish'

Tegan Gilchrist (The Parenthood)

The Parenthood is Australia's largest advocacy organisation representing parents and carers. With 85,000 members across every kind of family configuration, our mission is simple: make parenthood affordable for all and Australia the best place in the world to raise a family. Australia requires a fundamental public policy reckoning with how we value care itself. This presentation argues that Paid Parental Leave and quality, affordable early childhood education and care are not competing policy priorities but complementary pillars of a genuinely feminist care infrastructure. Care work is socially and economically essential, whoever performs it, and must be recognised as the foundation from which genuine agency for mothers and families can grow. In line with feminist social reproduction scholarship, we argue that replacement-wage PPL is the legislative instrument through which the state can formally recognise the value of care, creating structural conditions for agency rather than trapping families through economic necessity. We believe distributing care more equitably across all caregivers, in partnered, sole-parent, same-sex, and diverse family configurations, is central, not peripheral, to feminist goals. We invite the symposium to imagine a care ecosystem in which Paid Parental Leave, quality and affordable ECEC, sustainable family payments and genuine support for shared caregiving are not trade-offs but rather a coherent, feminist infrastructure built around families as they actually are.

Tegan Gilchrist is Senior Director of Strategy, Campaigns & Community at The Parenthood, Australia's largest parent advocacy organisation with 85,000 members across every kind of family configuration. The Parenthood's mission is straightforward and urgent: make parenthood affordable for all, and make Australia the best place in the world to raise a family. With more than two decades of experience across politics, national program design, and media — including senior roles at Mamamia Women's Network and leading nationally significant initiatives in digital inclusion and girls' participation in innovation — Tegan brings both policy depth and a practitioner's understanding of how systems shape the lived experience of families.

At The Parenthood, Tegan leads the organisation's campaigns and advocacy on the three pillars she believes are inseparable: paid parental leave that genuinely recognises the value of care work; high quality, affordable early childhood education and care that is accessible to every family regardless of where they live; and workplaces that treat care as a core part of life, not an obstacle to productivity. These are not competing priorities — they are the complementary infrastructure of a society that takes families seriously.

Her advocacy is personal as well as professional. As a mother of three children, she has navigated Australia's early learning and parental leave systems across a decade of incremental reform — and knows first-hand the gap between what is available and what families can actually afford to access.

'A Holistic Approach to Early Learning and Care'

Virginia Tapscott and Alannah Batho (Parents Work Collective)

Parents Work Collective is a not-for-profit advocacy organisation focused on improving how Australia recognises, supports and values unpaid care and parenting work. This presentation will explore the growing gap between family policy assumptions and the lived realities of families with young children — particularly around labour force participation, caregiving preferences, childcare access and flexibility, and the economic invisibility of unpaid care.

Drawing on ABS and Productivity Commission findings, we are interested in contributing a perspective that examines how current policy settings can unintentionally narrow genuine choice for families, especially mothers of very young children. We also discuss the importance of broadening policy conversations beyond workforce participation metrics alone to include child wellbeing, parental wellbeing, community resilience and the long-term social and economic value of caregiving.

Virginia Tapscott is co-founder of Parents Work Collective and author of All Mothers Work. In her book she explores solutions to Australia's failing childcare systems with a particular focus on ensuring mothers have legitimate choices to assume caregiving or paid work roles. She also co-authored a [family policy paper](#) with the Page Research Centre. She has a Bachelor of Journalism and worked in the media industry for 15 years before beginning her medicine degree in 2025. Her columns in The Australian newspaper and Mamamia have directly helped change the conversation around the value of care and what true choice for women looks like.

Alannah Batho is the co-founder and director of Parents Work Collective, a grassroots organisation advocating for greater recognition and support of unpaid care work. A mother of three and an employment lawyer with more than a decade of experience, Alannah holds a Bachelor of Arts/Law and a Master of Employment and Labour Relations Law. Through her advocacy and writing, she explores the value of care and the systems that shape family life. She is also the author of The Art of Care, a new publication helping parents to approach the work of raising children with greater purpose and joy.

The Invisible Care Workforce: Family Choice and the Future of Child Care'

Mary Winkels (Care Economy Consultant)

The childcare policy debate around choice has revealed a striking absence of voice for carers and families in decisions that directly affect their lives. Choice-based reforms in childcare not only respond to the expressed preferences of Australian families - particularly mothers - but may also offer a pathway towards a more sustainable, equitable and resilient early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. Recent national polling indicates majority support for childcare choice among Australians, including 79% of mothers with young children, with support consistent across political preferences (Fox & Hedgehog). Yet policy discussions continue to focus predominantly on formal childcare services, often overlooking the diversity of care arrangements that families rely upon and value.

This presentation situates Australia's childcare debate within a broader international care crisis. Across developed economies, ageing populations, workforce shortages and rising service costs are placing increasing pressure on care systems. These pressures are frequently absorbed by unpaid carers, informal carers and professional care workers - most of whom are women - whose contributions remain under-recognised and inadequately supported and outside the system. In this context, consumer-directed or choice-based approaches offer a promising alternative. By enabling families greater flexibility in how public support for care is used, policymakers can better recognise diverse caregiving arrangements, strengthen family agency, and reduce reliance on a single model of care provision by acknowledging informal care alongside formal care. Expanding care choice has the potential to improve sustainability, accessibility and equity within ECEC while elevating the social and economic value of caregiving itself.

Mary Winkels is a Brisbane-based public policy strategist and care economy consultant specialising in the quality and safety of care systems, regulatory design, and the long-term sustainment of care infrastructure. She brings a distinctive blend of frontline regulatory and Tier 1 advisory experience, having worked as a policy specialist within the Commonwealth aged care system before leading engagements across health, human services and economic policy at KPMG. Mary currently works as an independent consultant to government and providers, and serves as policy spokesperson for the Childcare Choice campaign, having engaged with government at all levels on childcare reform. She has appeared before the recent childcare inquiry and is a frequent media commentator, contributing to public debate through the AFR, ABC Radio, and 2GB. A mother of four who has navigated the tensions

between professional life, caregiving, and the very systems she works to reform, Mary brings both technical policy rigour and an intimate understanding of what is at stake for mothers and families — and a conviction that genuine reform must centre their wellbeing and freedom, not primarily serve as a mechanism to drive economic productivity.

Session 3 (1.50PM – 3.10PM)

'The Care Argument: A Policy Debate That Should Have Ended Long Ago'

Dr Terese Edwards (Single Mother Families Australia)

Dr Terese Edwards is CEO of Single Mother Families Australia and a nationally recognised advocate for single-mother families. She has led reforms to Parenting Payment, childcare access, child support, and the abolition of ParentsNext. A member of national advisory bodies, she champions economic equality, family policy reform, and social justice.

'The Critical Importance of Childcare for Single Mothers'

Jenny Davidson (Council of Single Mothers and their Children)

Jenny Davidson is CEO of the Council of Single Mothers and their Children. She is a values-based leader with twenty-five years' experience in the non-profit sector, largely focused on gender equity, and an MBA from Melbourne Business School. She is passionate about growing equality and creating opportunities for others to flourish.

'The Care Crisis We Created: Imprisonment, Child Removal and the Punishment of Mothers'

Debbie Kilroy OAM (Sisters Inside)

Debbie Kilroy OAM was first criminalised at the age of 13 and spent over two decades in and out of women's and children's prisons. Driven to end the criminalisation and imprisonment of girls and women. Debbie established Sisters Inside, as well as her law firm, Kilroy & Callaghan Lawyers. An unapologetic abolitionist, Debbie's activism work centres on dismantling the Prison Industrial Complex and all forms of carceral control and exile. With a firm belief that there should be 'nothing about us without us', Debbie established the National Network of Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls to centre the voices, experiences and aspirations of criminalised and imprisoned women and girls in order to change the face of justice in this country.