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**Illuminating and Understanding  
Women's and Men's Experiences  
Navigating Family Care Responsibilities  
and their Academic Careers**

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**VC Gender Equality Fund**

**Report:**

**‘Illuminating and understanding women’s and men’s experiences navigating family care responsibilities and their academic careers’**

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**1 Project background**

The research project arose from the March 2017 meeting of the Vice Chancellor’s Gender Equality Committee. At that meeting there was an agreement that there was an opportunity for the Vice Chancellor to consider an additional project titled: *‘illuminating and interrogating the career experiences and interpretations of academic employees with family responsibilities’*.

By drawing on the constructs *illuminating* and *interrogating*, the present research addresses that part of the research which suggests that the dominant discourses and enacted practices that underpin gender inequities are often hidden, latent and less visible, in part because of ‘recent tendencies towards “gender denial” and suggestions that ‘the problem of gender in organizations has been “solved”’ (Lewis & Simpson 2012, p. 141). Further, the literature suggests that dominant discourses can reproduce a situation where women’s delayed career development and the difficulties some women experience securing, in the case of this research, full-time tenured academic positions are interpreted and constructed as unintentional and natural.

Women are often understood or positioned as having different priorities and so their delayed career progression is a consequence of their personnel choices rather than gendered organisational practices. Accordingly, Simpson, Ross-Smith and Lewis (2010) argued that ‘discourses of choice’ can legitimate gendered workplace practices because organisations can ‘absolve themselves of responsibility’ (p. 205) for perceptions of differential career access and development. Further, Tatli, Ozturk and Woo (2017) claim that existing gender inequities and the lack of responsibility for tackling them has been legitimised ‘or rendered invisible through a belief in individual choice as the determining factor of career progression for women’ (p. 407). Thus, ‘blaming the victim’ [women] is a means of avoiding the address of gender inequity and so the practices and interactional dynamics involved in constructing and reproducing inequities are often unacknowledged and passively accepted rather than named and challenged.

The timeliness and relevance of the research project is, in part, supported by the suggestion that ‘in university employment, particularly for academic staff ‘a strongly male dominated culture persists in which female academic employees (especially mothers) continue to experience discrimination’ (Strachan et al 2016, p. 44). For many women combining family responsibilities and academic career advancement continues to reflect the proposition, flexibility versus advancement (Valantine & Sandborg 2013). That is, despite robust work life integration policies and corresponding cultural



values female academics experience and interpret their take up as limiting rather than advancing their academic careers.

The present research is also a broader response to findings emerging from aspects of an ARC Linkage Grant Report titled ‘Gender and Employment Equity: Strategies for Advancement in Australian Universities’ (Strachan et al 2016). While bringing to light issues and complexities relevant to women’s academic careers the study was quantitative in orientation. Moreover, while addressing issues pertinent to family responsibilities and work life balance, the ARC project scope was significantly broader and so exploring women’s and men’s family and academic career experiences while important was one of several other focuses.

Further supporting the studies’ emphasis, relevant research suggests that despite the development and implementation of family friendly policies, in contemporary workplaces there are tensions, ambiguities and gaps between policy formulation and enacted workplace practices (Cooper & Baird 2015; McDonald, Townsend & Wharton 2013; Putnam, Myers & Gailliard 2014). Fewer of these and like studies have explored these tensions and gaps in context to university workplaces. According, while policy supporting workplace flexibility remains an ongoing dialogue, a clear concern in these studies has been the dissonance between policy and practice which is a focus of the present study.

### **1.1 Research Aim**

The following report begins to illuminate, interrogate and understand the relationship between industrial and policy provisions designed to support workplace flexibility and the experiences and interpretations of staff wishing to make use of these policy provisions. Acknowledging the breadth of this objective, our aim was to confine the project to academic employees who have availed themselves of the University’s parental leave provisions in the period 2012-2016 (by way of the University’s Academic Enterprise Agreement) and/or who have potentially utilised provisions made available to them under Western Sydney University’s (Western) Family Responsibilities in the Workplace Policies. While our research design concentrated on staff who took leave consistent, with the terms of the immediate past and prevailing enterprise agreement, we note that the policy framework includes not only the enterprise agreement. Parental leave provisions also sit within Westerns Workplace Flexibility Policies and the VC’s Gender Equality Strategy.

By drawing on employee experiences and interpretations the research explores the gendered and gendering values, meanings and practices shaping the careers of academic staff with parenting responsibilities. In doing so the research contributes to an at present under researched material context in which to empirically explore policy coherence and sustainability.

## **2 Methodological protocol and considerations**

Following submission of the initial research proposal there have been several revisions to the project scope which are outlined and discussed in this section of the report.

The initial project proposal scope was limited to qualitative in-depth interviews. The Vice Chancellor’s Gender Equality Committee recommended that we work with colleagues from the SAGE team has seen the scope of our project include an important quantitative component. This collaboration which will be further elaborated on has proved especially valuable and we would like to formally acknowledge and sincerely thank the SAGE team for sharing their knowledge and expertise in such a collegiate and mutually beneficial way.

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The project took a two pronged mixed methods approach:

- (a) The quantitative component of the project involved the development and electronic dissemination of a survey. A screening-process was used to select a sample of Western staff-respondents: i) All staff members must have been full-time employees with Western and ii) have accessed Parental Leave entitlements within the last five years. An online questionnaire was developed and hosted on Qualtrics. The survey explored staff experiences before, during, and after returning from Parental Leave. Staff members were assured of their anonymity and the confidentiality of their responses.

The Office of Human Resources, on behalf of the researchers sent out email invites to screened employees. A total of 139 employees participated in the online survey. Completion rates varied for different sections of the survey, ranging from a high 97% to a low 25% for questions related to workload. Data was analyzed via SPSS.

- (b) Survey respondents were also invited to participate in a follow-up in depth interview which provide a context for further elaboration of Parental Leave experiences at Western. Electronic invitation to participate in an interview was included in the ‘welcome’ and ‘thank you’ pages of the online questionnaire. Participation in interviews was voluntary and was signaled by self-nomination in the form of an email generated by the potential participant when they indicate willingness to take part via the online questionnaire.

The initial aim was to interview between 25-30 employees who had availed themselves of the University’s parental leave provisions and who have potentially utilised provisions made available to them under Western Sydney University’s (Western) Family Responsibilities in the Workplace Policies. This number of in depth interviews was initially not achieved in part because of issues around the processes and practices enacted to invite employee involvement in the studies survey and call for in-depth interview participants. Namely, the report produced by the Office of Human Resources to identify potential project participants for this and the SAGE project missed a HR code and so a significant number of potential participants were not invited to participate in the project. Invitations to this group were made at a later date and additional interview responses received and interviews completed.

Fourteen employees agreed and subsequently participated in an in-depth interview of between 25 minutes and one hour. Of the fourteen employees interviewed two were professional staff and the remainder were tenured academic employees or academics employed on a fixed term contract. Interview data arising from the mentioned interviews with professional staff have been omitted from this report. We note however, consistent similarities between the experiences of academic staff and their professional colleagues, a discussion we return to in closing the report.

Eleven of the respondents were women and three were male tenured academic employees. Of the fourteen participants three female academics participated in a follow up interview. Follow up interviews were conducted as the mentioned female academic employees were about to or had recently returned from maternity leave.

An inductive analytical approach was drawn on to analyse interview data. This inductive approach was undertaken manually and enabled the identification of frequent and dominant themes inherent in the in-depth interview data. These dominant themes were then further explored in context to the quantitative survey findings. This process enabled us to glean



similarities and differences between survey responses and the more in-depth description of experiences achieved by one on one in-depth interviewing. These intersections within and between quantitative survey findings and subsequent qualitative in depth interviews are hereafter reported and discussed.

There was also a potential link between the low participant involvement in in-depth interviews and themes and ideas to be discussed in section 3.4. In preview several respondents discussed concerns that their involvement in the study could have negative impacts on their working life and career advancement at Western. In light of respondent concerns regarding their anonymity and information sensitivity further identifying information has been withheld at this time.

### 3.4 Information sensitivity

Given the study's focus on women's and men's experiences taking up provisions under Western's Family Responsibilities in the Workplace Policies and Enterprise Agreement provisions the research team was conscious of constructing a space where employees felt comfortable sharing their often sensitive and private experiences in a way that would not identify or implicate them as individuals, or would not be detrimental to their careers. This awareness was important as several female interviewees sought assurances that discussing their experiences would not identify them to their manager, supervisor or colleagues. Thus, building trust was fundamental to the research process.

Initially, the team was troubled by these issues and questioned the approach they had taken to informing participants about the way the research was to be undertaken and how the research information would be analysed and reported. It was concluded that the processes used, and the information provided, was appropriate given that participants were provided with a research information sheet and signed the consent form required by Western's research ethics protocol. Further, as a matter of process, at the beginning of each interview interviewers explained the consent form and the research information sheet. The process of assigning pseudonyms to participants has also ensured their anonymity and confidentiality.

While the research team positioned themselves as listeners and facilitators rather than as directors of interviews, several staff actively invited our engagement and personal thoughts regarding their workplace experiences and their interpretations of these experiences. At other times, some of the women interviewed commented that they '*needed an opportunity to vent*' and share their '*frustrations*', they described '*felt[ing] better*' having spoken about their experiences. In anticipation of an interview a further participant remarked that: '*I think a chat with you will actually be therapeutic for me!*'

Given the nature of some interviews women agreed to a follow up interview. For example, three female participants were on or had recently returned from maternity leave at the time of initial interview. Accordingly, they allowed the team to make further contact upon their return and conduct a follow up interview which they did.

We here also note the mentioned methodological considerations given their relevance to the studies analysis, findings and discussion. For example, assurances relevant to anonymity in part interconnected with the fears and concerns some female employees discussed. That is, in one instance '*their speaking out*' might negatively impact their future career prospects. Another female academic sought the following clarification:

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*Can I just ask, when you are writing this up, because I'm making comments that could identify me, could you be careful"? You know how things are so highly political and I have never really spoken out and I don't really want to.*

We note a possible relationship between these expressed concerns and the difficulties we experienced accessing employees who were willing to share their experiences and interpretations.

Finally, making our researcher position visible and drawing on reflexive methodologies has contributed to the research. The significance of this positionality is highlighted due in part to one of the researchers own maternity leave and phased return to full time academic work. Central to the studies methodological approach was an acknowledgment of the way our position as researchers influenced the research questions asked, the information collected and analysed, and consequently how, as researchers, we interpreted how knowledge concerning women's and men's experiences and interpretations of Western's Family Responsibilities in the Workplace Policies are framed, presented and understood. By acknowledging our research position, we are cognisant of making decisions about whose experiences, interpretations and meanings are presented, even though they are presented, in the form of verbatim quotes.

Through the following sections of this report we illustrate and discuss findings emerging from the mentioned survey and in-depth semi structured interviews. The major recurrent themes labelled: (1) information access and communication, (2) gendered expectations, (3) return to work, (4) career development and advancement are used to guide our discussion of women's and men's experiences and interpretations making use of Westerns Family Responsibilities in the workplace policies.

Throughout the report sub-themes connected with these mentioned major themes are tabled and discussed in further detail. Consistent with major themes sub themes consistently emerged from in-depth interviews and were supported by survey data. Given the studies focus on understanding participant's experiences and interpretations intersections and complementarities between interview and survey data were explored. That is, survey data was interrogated post identification and analysis of in-depth interview findings. In this way survey data has been drawn on to contextualise and complement interview findings.

#### **4 Employees' experiences and interpretations (Westerns) Family Responsibilities in the Workplace Policies**

In the following section, women's and men's experiences and interpretations taking up provisions under Western's Family Responsibilities in the Workplace Policies are explored. Additionally, and in line with the study's methodology allied survey findings are communicated and explained.

##### **4.1 Information access and communication**

A recurring theme arising from the study's findings relevant to women's and men's experiences was the challenges they experienced locating information about Westerns maternity leave and return to work policy provisions. Arising from survey responses the following table illustrates the key sources of information employees accessed when finding out about parental leave entitlements. The data suggests that academics rely primarily on Direct Contact with HR Services, Direct Contact with Supervisor/Manager and Western Sydney University Online – HR Services.



**Table 1: Source of information\* about Parental Leave Entitlements (Survey results)**

Source	Number of academics responded	Percentage
Western Sydney University Online - HR Services	42	30.2
Western Sydney University Online – Office of Equity & Diversity	4	2.9
Western Sydney University Online – Policy DDS	16	11.5
Direct contact with HR Advisor	44	31.7
Direct contact with Office of Equity & Diversity	2	1.4
Direct contact with supervisor/manager	43	30.9
Enterprise agreement (Academic Staff)	18	12.9
Others (colleagues, government websites)	12	8.6
Total number of responses	139	

\*may select more than one option

Arising from interview respondent’s experiences three key information access/leave stages were identified. They are categorised as (a) application (b) while on leave (c) return from leave and are outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2: Themes and sub-themes in employee information access (In-depth interview findings)**

Theme	Information access & communication: application processes	Information access & communication: while on leave	Information access & communication: return from leave
Sub-themes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Policy frameworks/ guidelines application process lacked clarity</li> <li>2. Highly various policy interpretations evidenced through informal practices.</li> <li>3. Time consuming process &amp; inaccurate/no information.</li> <li>4. Positive relationship application process &amp; supervisor policy knowledge</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of communication.</li> <li>2. Feelings of isolation &amp; detachment</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Employee as distinct from university initiated.</li> <li>2. Formalised return communication processes would reduce uncertainty/enabl e smoother return.</li> </ol>

#### 4.1.1 Information access and communication: application processes

Characteristically interview participants interpreted that application processes lacked ‘*formality*’ and that ‘*informal*’ practices and highly various interpretations of guidelines meant that applying for maternity leave and associated policy provisions was a time consuming and difficult process. For example, Danielle remarked that (interview):

*There doesn’t seem to be a proper procedure driving this kind of thing’ [policy].*

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Instead procedures were in her opinion *'laissez faire'* and that this approach meant that she *'just had to go online and troll through information'* on the university website. She discussed using various *'word searches to locate information'* but that there were frequently *'no documents available or the wrong information came up'*.

In line with female academic staff experiences male employees (interview participants) discussed the challenges they experienced finding out about and applying for parental leave entitlements. Jim discussed *'going looking [for policy information] myself'*. Tom relied on *'other colleagues'* for information. Namely, a male colleague who had also recently taken up parental leave.

Cameron described the process of finding out about parental leave entitlements *'as a bit of palaver'* and not a *'straight forward experience'*. Rather, he discussed having to *'find it out for myself'* [policy provisions] and that this information gathering exercise although in part, enabled by his *'line manager'* who was *'actually quite good'* [helpful and supportive] involved *'lots of digging around'* because the information on the website was *'not immediately obvious'*.

In association with these information challenges some respondents discussed the fact that their supervisor/manager lacked sufficient policy knowledge. Accordingly, there was limited information support which constructed difficulties making enquires about and understanding relevant policy provisions and associated support.

While these difficulties arose other participants discussed the fact that their experience was positive with clear guidelines from Westerns HR department and professional staff. For example, Lily remarked:

*I felt the university had a well-structured policy and procedure. I knew where to go for parental leave and how that worked. So from a policy and collegiate point of view from the HR and professional staff it was all really good.*

In these instances, female employees also interpreted that their academic supervisors were well versed in Westerns policies and that this knowledge was well communicated and important to making them feel *'comfortable'* and *'happy'* about their leave entitlements. Hazel discussed being given the opportunity to *'formally sit down'* with her academic supervisor to discuss her preliminary maternity leave plans and the policies provisions. She discussed how this was a very positive experience:

*'She [academic supervisor] made me feel quite comfortable about it [maternity]. She also said to me that she was "happy if I wanted to change my return dates and not to be worried about it". She understood that you don't know what the baby will be like or how you will feel'.*

In part, illustrated through this quote there was also a relationship between policy knowledge and the support provided to employees upon their return from leave, a more specific discussion we return to in section 5.

#### **4.1.2 Information access and communication: while on leave**

A further sub-theme emerging from interviews with female employees was the challenges and concerns they experienced by way of communication processes while they were on leave. In particular, two employees discussed being left out of communications which significantly impacted their return to work. In both instances these women's office locations were moved with little to no



correspondence such that one of the interviewees attended her first day back at work and found that her office was empty.

Donna remarked:

*‘So these are some of the challenges since you have been out [on maternity leave]. When I came back the office I was assigned was given to someone else ... I didn’t even have a room [office]. So it took me several weeks to get that all organised. The university name has changed. We have new buildings. Things like the unit [teaching] and classroom environments have changed. So I’m still trying to get my head around it [changes]’.*

In accordance with the difficulties employees experienced (in-depth interviews) and arising from survey findings a notable percentage of respondents thought that ‘a keeping in touch’ while on leave tool/strategy would be of value and something they would utilise periodically. However, highlighting the nuances and complexities relevant to employee needs and wants while on leave Table 3 also shows that a notable number of employees were ambivalent (neutral) about the value of this tool. Furthermore, over one quarter of survey respondents indicated that they were unlikely or very unlikely to make use of a keeping in touch tool.

**Table 3: Staff Members’ Likelihood of Utilising a ‘Keeping in Touch’ tool (Survey results)**

	<b>Number of academics responded</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Very likely	23	16.5
Likely	36	25.9
Neutral	35	25.2
Unlikely	22	15.8
Very unlikely	16	11.5
Total	132	94.9

#### **4.1.3 Information access and communication: return from leave**

Consistent with their experiences prior to and during leave several women (interview participants) discussed the challenges they experienced planning their return to work. For one women the effect of these challenges were exacerbated because of information access issues and the nature of communications with her academic supervisor. For Megan, there was further uncertainty because of the nature of her employment contract:

*‘I have spoken to [supervisor] about it and he said “I just can’t say anything at the moment”. He actually said that “I have other people to worry about first”. No one has approached me about it [contract renewal]. So I feel quite nervous about it’ [return to work].*



The data in Table 4 indicates the level of satisfaction employees expressed in relation to the support they were offered by supervisors and colleagues since their return from periods of parental leave. Survey responses highlight diverse experiences and interpretations. Namely, there was a particularly positive level of satisfaction with supervisor and manager support. And also the support of immediate colleagues. This finding is in line with the positive experiences several women (interview participants) discussed in section 4.1.1. Despite these reported instances of support and satisfaction, the data in Table 4 indicates that where there was dissatisfaction it was more likely to be with the supervisor/manager. Greater levels of ambivalence were expressed about the support provided by HR, Local Administration and Other Colleagues.

**Table 4: Level of Satisfaction\* with support offered since completion of parental leave (Survey results)**

<b>Support offered by:</b>	<b>Satisfaction %</b>	<b>Dissatisfaction (%)</b>	<b>Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied (%)</b>
Supervisor/Manager	75.8	12.1	12.1
HR	57.7	7.3	35.0
Local Administration	57.5	5.0	37.5
Immediate Colleagues	79.8	3.2	16.9
Other Colleagues	62.8	5.0	32.2

\*median number of responses = 124

Given the difficulties several women and their colleagues experienced some women (interview respondents) provided suggestions about how return to work communications and processes might be enhanced. One suggestion included ‘*a further induction*’ and strategic ‘*mentoring*’ opportunities. These opportunities were important to transitioning back to full time academic work:

*‘Something like an induction when you do return to work [from maternity leave]. So “these are some of the changes since you have been out”. I think a mentor. It may not be someone in your discipline or school. So some mentorship on how do you get back during that transition phase. Someone to get you back on track ... after such a long time you ... don’t know where to start’ (Alice).*

## **5 Gendered expectations: Policy use concerns**

Although Western’s Family Responsibilities in the Workplace Policies demonstrate the institution’s strong commitment to the development of a dynamic and innovative culture that supports inclusion and diversity these values were not necessarily reflected in the experiences and interpretations (interview respondents) of the women and men who have taken up policy provisions. While being mindful of current data limitations in this section the informal practices, attitudes and values constructing and reproducing potentially harmful gendered expectations are explored. We use the phrase harmful because of the implications for individual women’s and men’s working lives together with the broader consequences for Western’s commitment to the achievement of a genuinely inclusive work culture.

Women wishing to take up policy provisions characteristically discussed (through in-depth interviews) feeling concerned about how their maternity and motherhood status would shape their future career opportunities.



In line with Table 5 (1) a culture of work continuation, meant that while women were on maternity leave informal expectations meant that they continued to work unofficially. The perceptions of supervisors and colleagues influenced these expectations and (2) contributed to the construction and reification of attitudes and practices which saw women’s maternity arrangements as problematic, ‘*a hassle*’. Colleagues attitudes, in part, expressed through claims that maternity leave was (3) ‘*a privilege*’ and ‘*a holiday*’ were also experienced and interpreted by women as negatively shaping their academic career development.

**Table 5: Themes and sub-themes in employee policy take up (In-depth interview findings)**

Theme	Fear, hesitation & concern	Work continuation	Supervisors & colleagues attitudes/practices
<b>Sub-themes</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strategically delaying family plans due to work insecurity</li> <li>2. Hesitant to announce pregnancy to supervisor/line manager: Concern regarding immediate response &amp; implications for ongoing career trajectory.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Informal expectation that women should continue to work &amp; publish while on leave.</li> <li>2. Resentful of this expectation.</li> <li>3. Attempts to protect leave time.</li> <li>4. Failure to meet informal work expectations resulted in negative performance evaluations &amp; significantly delayed promotion.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Perception that maternity leave was a holiday.</li> <li>2. Maternity leave was not a right but a privilege that had to be paid back.</li> <li>3. Maternity leave arrangements were a hassle for supervisors/line managers</li> </ol>

### **5.1 Fear, hesitation and concern**

A number of gendered expectations (be them perceived or actual) shaped women’s experiences and interpretations. First, for the majority of women there was a sense of ‘*fear*’, ‘*hesitation*’, ‘*concern*’, or ‘*anxiety*’ when making department heads and managers aware of their pregnancy and associated leave plans. Danielle remarked:

*‘I was a bit hesitant to announce it [pregnancy] to everybody. I didn’t want the attention. I waited till after the first trimester ... I was able to hide it a bit. So when I did tell my boss I think he was a bit shocked. He was a bit oh, oh, oh congratulations. I told a few other people high up and then I told people kind of one by one’.*



Danielle's reference to not drawing attention to her pregnancy was also reflected in the experiences of other academic staff and connects with the discussion in section 6 concerning women's return from leave. While some women's careers can benefit from their heightened visibility (Benschop & Doorewaard 1998, p. 793) women can also be subjected to increased scrutiny and performance pressures if they are not representative of a normative and dominant masculinised workplace culture.

In association with these experiences some women discussed strategically and consciously delaying their family plans because of prior work insecurity or a perceived need to cement their academic career before having children. For example, Danielle discussed the challenge of securing a full time academic appointment and the relationship between these concerns and her delayed family plans. She remarked:

*So this is [current employment contract] the longest contract I have ... had. So that was when we [partner] started to think about kids. Before this I had ... these crappy little part-time contracts. That's the really hard thing ... that was really a deciding factor [securing full time academic work]. It was really then that I thought I'm in a now or never situation. I'm in my late thirties and I want to have children. So I made the decision to have a baby'.*

Similarly, Donna discussed the need to complete her PhD and secure promotion prior to starting a family:

*'I was graduating while being heavily pregnant. I could not imagine doing it [PhD] post having a little one'.*

Donna further discussed how related attitudes and practices relevant to family negatively impact women's academic career access and ongoing career development:

*'I remember during my intake interview for my PhD the professor looking at my ring finger & commenting, I see you're not married, it's a good idea not to have a baby during your PhD'.*

For Hazel her pregnancy although a 'welcome surprise' was not planned, in part because she was previously unable to secure a full time academic appointment. Accordingly, she described being concerned about the impact her pregnancy would have on her ongoing academic career prospects:

*'I was just working contractual before I got appointed to a contract. I was predominately working on my PhD so my roles were teaching, lecturing and tutoring. They [prior academic positions] were all contract roles ... and then this permanent role [recent tenured full time position at WSU] came up and I found out I was pregnant. I was nervous, I actually took up the permanent role and I didn't know I was pregnant. I didn't realise at the time that I was [pregnant]. So I was a bit worried about how [academic supervisor] would take it. [Academic supervisors name] was great'.*

## **5.2 Work continuation while on maternity leave**

Female academic employees discussed the 'need', 'unwritten' and 'informal' expectation that they would continue to work during maternity leave. A failure to do so would be 'detrimental' to their career development and would send 'the wrong message' regarding their 'commitment' to work and ongoing academic career development. Accordingly, there were significant stresses for women who were trying to fulfil their role as new mother as well as navigating informal and typically unspoken



perceived expectations regarding their continued academic work. These expectations were pervasive and influential within and external to the university.

For example, Danielle remarked:

*'It's actually been very stressful. I was writing a book. It was accepted by the publisher during the nausea of the early stages of my pregnancy. It all moved very quickly so I told the publisher among all of this that I was going to have a baby. They actually emailed me with proofs three hours after having my baby. I didn't really appreciate how much it had taken out of me [working during leave]. During the first few months of my baby's life, here I was worrying about this stupid manuscript. I also had a conference ... and other things to do ... all in the first few months of my baby's life'.*

In addition to writing a manuscript Danielle discussed the need to attend meetings and complete other academic work. She reflected on a particular experience to demonstrate the difficulties she experienced protecting her time while on leave and meeting the unrealistic and unfair expectations placed on women during maternity leave:

*'It was during my maternity leave and I had to zoom in for a meeting. There was some work I ... told them [supervisor & colleagues] about it before I went on leave [the work and project] but ... nothing got done. So all of a sudden I get an email about it while on leave. That's the thing [concern], you are kind of wondering what should and should I not be doing because I'm supposed to be on leave. So while I have a right to say well "I'm not going to this meeting you" think how will it be perceived? It will be perceived that I'm not interested in my work and career, or I'm neglecting it [work]. So you really are like a rock in a hard place'.*

Carmel discussed continued work while on maternity leave as an important way to 'stay in the loop'. She also remarked that failing to stay connected by checking emails, completing research projects and adequately preparing for her return to work meant that she never really 'switched off'. Completely switching off would have been to her 'personal detriment' especially as she neared the end of her leave period. 'Developing unit content, making arrangements for casual staff and writing learning guides' was necessary even though she was on maternity leave and not being paid for this work.

Lily discussed the negative evaluations she received from senior staff and colleagues because she had not continued to work during her maternity leave. In this way she perceived that her colleagues who were mostly male colleagues thought that maternity leave was an entitlement that she had to 'make up for'. She discussed how:

*'Prior to going on maternity leave I was working at 140% workload. I was working on loads of grants and publishing and then teaching on top as well as PhD supervising. So there was this expectation that I had a year off and in that time I hadn't contributed to grants and to papers and so I had to make up for that'.*

Similarly, Alice discussed the interpretation that maternity leave was a privilege. Colleagues and superiors interpreted that women on maternity leave were on a university paid 'holiday' and having to navigate those perceptions. She remarked that:



*'It's how your perceived, you have a big career interruption and break so they [colleagues] think you are on holiday'. I think especially with the males the word kind of travels'.*

Accordingly, Alice interpreted that continued work while on leave was to bring enhanced promotional prospects and goodwill upon her return. This was not necessarily the case:

*I was always publishing while on maternity leave. I was always thinking ... if I publish one or two papers while on maternity leave it would be perceived very favourably. But somehow I think it backfired, I think it [extra work] wasn't looked at. I just think they [senior staff & committees] see the big gap and you jump that hurdle by being fully active and engaged and then you have the next gap. So [when returning from maternity leave] you end up working from the bottom up again.*

*I tried after my second pregnancy and it [promotion to Level C] didn't go through. I had everything they wanted and I was asked if this was a good time [coming back from maternity leave] to be going for promotion. I was told I wasn't promoted after the second baby because of research and governance but the application was discussed with several people and they all said that the application was ready. I was told that "even when I was on leave I still published, I still did academic work" but it was obviously missed or glossed over.*

Jim's experience mentoring a female academic further highlighted the challenges some women experience taking leave and returning to full time work. Jim discussed 'strategically' working with a colleague so that she could 'maximise her maternity leave' and plan her research so that she would not have a publication gap. Collecting data prior to her leave meant that while on maternity leave she had 'time to analyse and write up results'. When returning from leave his female colleague had published 'four high quality outputs'. While anticipating this would assist her career development instead 'colleagues used that against her' claiming that she had achieved these outputs by 'not doing sufficient teaching'. Jim described the 'backlash' from colleagues as 'quite unbelievable' so much so that she ended up leaving the institution.

While Hazel was 'resentful' of this expectation and she discussed wanting to 'protect' her maternity leave time she interpreted that she was in 'a catch 22 situation', in part because of the potential job insecurity resulting from her taking up leave arrangements. She commented:

*'I don't really enjoy doing it. I actually really resent it. At the same time, it's probably better for me to do it in the long run. So I say to myself, "well it's the quality of the time not the quantity of time". So I will do things when [babies name] is asleep or I will phone mum and ask her to come around to take him for an hour while I am talking with [colleague name] on the phone. I haven't started anything new, but it's just keeping up with what's going on while I am on leave. I have become better at marking time'.*

Hazel's final remark that she had become better at marking time will be more specifically addressed in section 6.4 where we discuss the intersections between women's mothering responsibilities and their academic career advancement.

The theme of needing to work during periods of official leave was also reflected through the studies survey findings. Table 6 illustrates the main reasons why survey respondents 'stayed in touch' with the University while they were on leave. Even though a significant number of survey respondents

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reported maintaining contact and completing work as a way to retain relationships and be across major developments in their department, this was not the case for all employees. Rather, a notable number of respondents reported needing to work during their leave period in order to keep on top of their workload. The negative perceptions of colleagues and perceived pressure arising from these perceptions also notably impacted women’s experiences while on leave and are further discussed in the proceeding sections of this report.

**Table 6: Reasons\* for ‘staying in touch’ with University while on leave (Survey results)**

Reason	Number of academics responded	Percentage
To keep up to date with developments in my department	60	43.2
To keep on top of my workload	47	33.8
To maintain relationships with colleagues	74	53.2
To manage my leave arrangements	39	28.1
Training/career development	8	5.8
Social or other personal reasons	29	20.9
I felt pressured to do so	17	12.2
Other reasons (handing over, PhD students etc.)	19	13.7
Total number of staff surveyed	139	

\*may select more than one o

### **5.3 Supervisors and colleagues: interpretations, attitudes and informal practices**

Supervisors and colleague support or opposition significantly shaped women’s pre and post maternity leave experiences. One theme that emerged related to senior academic colleague’s negative attitudes remarks and ‘*informal*’ practices. For example, Lily remarked that:

*‘With senior academic staff I was working with. When I was discussing being pregnant and taking maternity leave they were like, oh gee I wish I could take a year off work. So it was really high pressure and very awkward’. So it was definitely the informal practices. When much more senior people who don’t have the same experience. If that’s in relation to gender, or sexuality or family that’s what makes it difficult. It’s a tricky situation because when you are a white middle class women going off on leave to have children you are very privileged. So I try and not be too concerned with how poorly I’m being treated because I have these amazing children.*

Hazel discussed the significant support she personally received while also discussing the opposition her female colleague experienced from senior academics who were men:

*‘It was a fear. You just hear stories of other people. When people go on maternity leave its sometimes seen as a hassle. I mean even when I was asking [line manager] about the maternity leave and return to work policy. When she was explaining the policies to me I was saying how great it was policy and [line manager] said to me “and so it should be”. I had a friend ... her experience was not as positive. Her experience was that they were very disgruntled that she was taking maternity leave. The faculty was quite male dominated and there hadn’t been anyone who had taken maternity leave. She is quite tough and so she was like, “well it’s the policy, I’m entitled to it and I’m going to take it”. But it was then more of an adversarial relationship with her manager’.*

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This adversarial relationship meant that rightly or wrongly Hazel interpreted that despite policy provisions enabling flexibility her colleague would likely encounter difficulties negotiating these arrangements upon her return from leave, a discussion we next turn to.

## 6 Negotiating and navigating return to work: policy and practice

In the following section women’s and men’s experiences making use of Western’s flexible return to work arrangements are explored. The two policy provisions most frequently discussed related to phased return to work and flexible work arrangements. While these policy provisions were characteristically described by participants as ‘valuable’ and ‘generous’ there were some notable gaps between the policies intent and its implementation, such that one female respondent remarked that ‘work life balance is a silly phrase’ and as an academic with young children ‘simply not achievable’.

Reflecting on the experiences of a female colleague recently returning from maternity leave one male employee observed how ‘she [colleague] was really ‘struggling to balance everything’ [work and family]. He similarly interpreted that balancing work and home was a ‘constant struggle’ especially for female academics. He discussed understanding this struggle ‘first hand’ as his wife was also an academic.

The gaps between policy intent and implementation are in part evidenced through the survey results displayed in Table 7. While stand-alone policies such as Western’s Workplace Flexibility Policy and provisions within the current and past Enterprise Agreements specifically allow for and encourage the take up of flexible work practices employees reported feeling uncomfortable about applying for these arrangements characteristically because of discriminatory practices and missed promotional opportunities, a more detailed discussion we return to in section 7.

**Table 7: Attitudes towards policy use and career progression (Survey results)**

Item	Number of academics responded	Percentage
Felt uncomfortable asking for special leave/flexible hours	42	33.9
Felt discriminated against because of caring responsibilities	24	19.5
Missed opportunities for promotion	50	37

For women returning from leave there were highly various opportunities, challenges and complexities. While women’s and men’s experiences were nuanced and individual there were several themes that consistently emerged through interview conversations. Characteristically interview participants discussed positive experiences negotiating return to work arrangements under Westerns phased return to work policy provisions and flexible work arrangements. Despite these initial positive experiences, employees discussed having to navigate structural impediments such as childcare vacancies and costs together with feelings of guilt and the impacts of material/emotional support from family and colleagues within the university. These themes are summarised in the Table 8.

**Table 8: Themes and sub-themes in negotiating return to work (In-depth interview findings)**

Theme	Return to work arrangements	Childcare: structural barriers and constraints	Motherhood guilt and concern	Partner & family support	Support of colleagues
Sub-	1. Negotiating arrangements	3. Substantive cost &	1. Difficulties negotiating	Family support fundamentally	Negative attitudes/remarks &

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themes	with supervisors generally positive 2. Gaps between policy intent & practices	difficulties regarding childcare availability. 4. Campus childcare not convenient or practical	mothering responsibilities & return to work.	important to successful return from leave. Family provided childcare & moral support.	practices levelled by academic colleagues.
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### 6.1 Negotiating Flexibility

In general participants discussed being able to negotiate flexible work arrangements positively and respectfully with their supervisor/manager or Dean. For example, Lily remarked:

*We actually have a very supportive Dean. He is extremely supportive. I went to him and said “I would like to work two days a week. I would like to work Monday and Tuesday”. He was absolutely brilliant. He said to speak to my DAP [Department Head] and we can make that happen.*

Tom described how ‘a high degree of trust’ with his department head and colleagues meant that he could more easily negotiate flexible work arrangements. Similarly, and while initially feeling concerned and guilty, ‘I use to go into the office everyday’ Nancy discussed how here ‘high work ethic’ and ‘reputation for being reliable’ and ‘a hard worker’ meant that she made use of Westerns flexible work practices.

Lily also commented that:

*I was going in [to the office] every day. I was leaving at 6.30am to get into the office. But as the year has slowed down and my teaching has finished I am working more from home. I like being in the office, it’s just the commute that’s the issue. I think because I have been at the university so long, I get my work done so no one minds. So there is something about having a reputation and so having a little bit more flexibility.*

Cameron reflected on the support, understanding and flexibility his department head provided. This was especially important given the sickness of his new born child and ongoing care commitments during this time:

*I think without a supportive line manager it can be made very difficult. I told her [academic supervisor] that I needed extra time [due to child’s health] so I was signed off by the doctor to get some extra time. I took all of my personal leave and I took annual leave. But if you have not got that line manager, speaking with some colleagues it can be difficult if they don’t understand the pressures of a new parent. It’s really hard ... it was perhaps six to eight weeks before we had any idea about what was really going on, before we event left the house’.*

Table 9 illustrates employee perceptions regarding flexible work arrangements and supervisor support. Characteristically, employees (survey respondents) experienced/interpreted that their supervisor was supportive of their requests for flexibility in their working arrangements. We do also note that a notable number of respondents were ambivalent about the support provided while others

somewhat agreed with or in fact strongly disagreed with the proposition that their supervisor was supportive of their requests for flexibility.



**Table 9: My supervisor is supportive of requests for flexible working arrangements (Survey results)**

Item	Number of academics responded	Percentage
Strongly agree	62	50.4
Somewhat agree	31	25.2
Neither agree nor disagree	19	15.4
Somewhat disagree	3	2.4
Strongly disagree	8	6.5
Total	123	100

Table 10 illustrates academic employee’s interpretations regarding their taking up flexible work arrangements and opportunities for personal and professional development. While a significant number survey respondents interpreted that staff engaged in flexible work arrangements were offered the same opportunities as those who were not the majority of respondents were ambivalent or disagreed with this statement. Accordingly, there was gap between employees’ experiences negotiating flexibility and perceptions regarding how taking up these arrangements impacted the nature/type of developmental and other opportunities they were afforded. These results in part support the proceeding discussion and also provide a context for the discussion in section 7 of this report.

**Table 10: School/Division/Institute offers staff engaged in flexible work arrangements the same opportunities as those who are not (Survey results)**

Item	Number of academics responded	Percentage
Strongly agree	18	14.8
Somewhat agree	34	27.9
Neither agree nor disagree	38	31.1
Somewhat disagree	20	16.4
Strongly disagree	12	9.8
Total	122	100

## 6.2 Work life balance: complexities

For all participants balancing family and work commitments was a constant challenge. This challenge was especially relevant to women’s experiences. While flexibility underpinned Westerns Family Responsibilities in the Workplace policies some women discussed concerns and anxieties organising and making amendments to these arrangements. Erin remarked:

*I think I’m a different person and so I have grown. Next year I will need to work Wednesday and Thursdays [current arrangement Monday/Tuesday]. I had written an email to my DAP. In the original email I put “can I ask for your consideration and approval that I change my days from Monday and Tuesday to Wednesday and Thursday”. I then thought about it and re wrote the email by saying “my needs are such that I will be working Wednesday and Thursday”. There are a lot of semantics in it. Rather than begging and asking. I was being very polite; I was giving*



*him plenty of notice [in excess of 6 months' notice] so we could get a plan going. So not asking just doing. It is a right under the policy to this stuff so.*

In addition to these concerns women remained sceptical of policy implementation processes and practices. While flexibility and work life balance were espoused as important organisational values, 'Western Sydney University is committed to providing a flexible, supportive and diverse working environment and encourages employees to live a balanced lifestyle, combining work and family responsibilities' women's experiences infrequently reflected these values. For example, Carmel interpreted that while phased return to work arrangements 'sounded really good' and 'looked good on paper' their implementation was not so positive. Although the policies intent was to reduce working hours and days Carmel interpreted that she just needed to 'do more work in less days'.

Similarly, Jim interpreted that while policies enabled flexibility for parents, and although 'collapsing his work into four days' he continued to work well in excess of his 'agreed workload'. He rationalised that while this was a personal decision he had reduced his weekend and late evening work after the birth of his youngest child. He further remarked that:

*I'm quite firm on that [no weekend work]. I got caught in that, I don't want to say trap but it is a trap. On a Sunday I look at my emails just to clean them up. I don't action anything but it means I'm more efficient when I get in the office Monday.*

Although taking up Westerns flexible work arrangements, Lily was formally working two days per week she discussed consistently working 'well in excess of these hours'. She reflected on an informal cultural expectation which was exacerbated when trying to juggle family responsibilities and informal work expectations:

*I work in a culture where everyone is working above their load. It seems to be that if you are on workload or below then there is something wrong with you. It's a culture of being over worked that makes it harder [balancing care and work responsibilities]. So officially I'm working at 20% but really it's more like 50%. So as with everyone the research component breaks down. I actually have a book contract. At the moment it gets done once everything else gets done.*

Consistent with interviewees descriptions of their experiences managing workload expectations survey participants characteristically agreed that current academic workloads made the achievement of work life balance problematic.

The difficulties employees experienced negotiating family and home commitments is further illustrated through Table 11. It is important to note that while more than a third of survey respondents interpreted that balancing home and work was a challenge a notable number of respondents were ambivalent (neither agreed nor disagreed) about this difficulty. Further demonstrating the broad spectrum of responses some employees 'somewhat' or 'strongly disagreed' with the assertion that academic workload expectations made it difficult to balance their professional and home responsibilities.



**Table 11: The expected workload at Western Sydney University makes it difficult to balance work and home responsibilities (Survey results)**

Item	Number of academics responded	Percentage
Strongly agree	22	15.8
Somewhat agree	44	31.7
Neither agree nor disagree	23	16.5
Somewhat disagree	23	16.5
Strongly disagree	9	6.5
Total	121	87

Lily also discussed her experiences returning to work under Western’s phased return arrangements. While policy arrangements were valuable she reflected on how the attitudes and practices of others negatively impacted her ability to make use of these policy provisions. Lily’s experiences highlight tensions and gaps between policy provisions and subtle everyday workplace practices

*‘I came back to work on the phased return. So you are paid for five days but you are only clocked on for four. So I was under that [policy arrangement] for 6 months. It really didn’t work for me. It wasn’t that the policy didn’t work but the people I was working with. Even though I was working four days a week there was an expectation that I was available five days. It was a bit weird and difficult for them all that I would be leaving at 3.30pm or 4.00pm, even though I had been in the office since 7.00am. So I always felt quite awkward about that’.*

Alice also reflected on phased return to work arrangements. While a valuable policy arrangement she discussed the personal difficulties she experienced negotiating workload expectations and family care responsibilities:

*‘You can only take that [phased return] if you come back within 10 or 12 months. I think it should be offered to all returning from maternity leave. Even after a year ... when you do come back you really, really need it. I just don’t understand. I did that with [child’s name]. I came back to full time work after 10 months] but that was really short for her. To go to full time day-care. I got lots of phone calls to come and pick her up ... when she would get sick. So I found all of that very, very difficult to manage with fulltime work. Had I waited a bit longer [prior to putting child in care] and I still could have done the phased return it would have made things easier, not having as much sickness and picking up’.*

In part arising from these experiences several other respondents discussed possible revisions to current policies and practices. For example, in starting to think about her return to work one respondent interpreted that:

*‘In starting to think about the future. If I was having a second child I probably would not want to go back [to work] full time. I would probably look to go back part-time. So I would wonder how the negotiation around that would go. At the moment to me it looks like the policy is very much geared to going back full time’.*



Male interviewees acknowledged that Western was making important policy changes which better met men's family care responsibilities. Cameron remarked that:

*'Look, I think things have changed a bit in the past two years. It's [parental leave] is more talked about especially with the new enterprise agreement. When I was taking leave it was not really talked about'. Increasing the provision [leave entitlements] for fathers recognises that it's touch having a newborn in the first few weeks. It recognises that it's no longer the case that the father gets a phone call ... to say that you have a new baby. I wanted to be and was actively involved in the processes'.*

While acknowledging these changes men and women interpreted that there was significantly further scope for policy revisions which better enabled men to be involved parents: Lily commented that:

*I think also if men were given the same opportunities to take leave as women and I think they should. So it would sort of normalise men's involvement and not make them so visible. I really think that's a key issue.*

Cameron further remarked:

*'Increased the amount of parental leave available by a considerable amount [sic] ... the policy is still not really valuing the fathers' contribution. There is still a long way to go if they want [WSU] to be a leader in gender equality'. The policy should be recognising that it is male and female doing it together. It's a step but it's not really moving to an equal footing'.*

*'In Europe its quite a long block of time that can be taken. So there is a recognition of the negotiation between the male and the female So the female could take the first 6 months and then the father. It recognises that as a father you may not take that time straight after the birth. That would be a progressive step. With the current leave it recognises the birth but not the ongoing process [being an involved father] I think that is something to look at and its more flexible. So even like a day a week later on or half a day a week down the line'.*

Referring to improved policy revisions for men balancing home and family commitments Tom discussed feeling *'a little like a rock in a hard place'*. He described feeling *'fortunate'* especially when considering his experiences and those of friends and family working in other industries. While he didn't have a *'complaint'* he discussed concerns generally about policy application across the university. He remarked that *'while there are some great initiatives centrally'* sometimes he felt like he *'worked at a different university'*. The Dean's influence meant that he often heard remarks like *'we can't do that in our school'* despite the fact that policy provided for particular processes and practices.

The themes emerging from men's experiences demonstrate how gender and other categories of difference intersect in ways which differentially shape both men's and women's academic careers. For men wanting to take on a more hands on parenting role there were equally challenges and difficulties navigating the attitudes and practices of others.



### 6.3 Childcare: structural barriers and constraints

While the university has several childcare centres characteristically respondents did not make use of these facilities. Those employees who made use of university childcare facilities discussed the benefit of being near to their children and not having to ‘drop off and pick up’ from multiple locations. Equally however the distance between the university and their place of residence made using university childcare facilities impractical.

For other participants the distance between home and university childcare was challenging. Danielle remarked:

*‘No I’m going private [childcare provider]. We just live too far from campus. So it’s actually going to cost me twice as much for a spot [childcare place]. It’s just not worth me driving an hour to campus to drop off [child] when I don’t necessarily need to be on campus. Also with the new campus move the childcare is actually going to be disbanded anyway. So I don’t actually think there is any childcare on the new campus at all. So there is also no point to me putting my child in childcare on campus and then having to move again in a few months’ time’.*

While not directly related to Westerns policy provisions respondent’s experiences accessing childcare and the cost associated significantly shaped their return to work arrangements. For example, Danielle discussed how the cost of childcare was prohibitive:

*‘We will be paying an absolutely exorbitant amount per day ... about \$170.00 per day. There were other cheaper ones [centres] but we really thought this was going to be the best one for her’.*

There were also difficulties locating childcare openings. Such was the concern and difficulty making these arrangements Donna remarked:

*‘We actually put his name down [on a waiting list] when I was pregnant because of how difficult everyone said it was’.*

A further theme emerging from women’s discussion of childcare arrangements was linked to policy knowledge. Few of the women interviewed were aware of their ability to salary sacrifice childcare costs and so substantively reduce the fees they pay for formal care.

### 6.4 Motherhood guilt and concern

While there were structural constraints to women’s leave and return to work women often discussed the personal feelings of guilt they experienced sending their children to care. Danielle explained:

*‘We have [child] booked into childcare. On one level I really feel quite worried about it. That we [partner and I] have [child] going to childcare ... so young. I’m really quite torn about the whole thing. Sometimes I just think, my irrational mind says I wonder if I should just give up my job and become a house wife? Look, I would not ... I would be thinking what on earth have I done’.*

Nancy discussed being ‘torn’ between her work and children. When dropping them off at childcare she discussed ‘crying in the car’. As her children have since gone to school her guilt is felt when missing things like ‘school swimming carnivals’.



For one interview participant this sense of guilt and concern was reduced because she had employed a nannie to assist with the care of her children. This arrangement meant that her children were in the home environment rather than a care facility. While this arrangement was of great value she acknowledge the substantive cost associated and that this was not necessarily a feasible option for other women.

For other women there was a significant emotional investment in their work and so this investment detracted from their mothering responsibilities. For Lily the *'emotional labour'* which went into academic tasks and then *'having to transition into her family role'* was *'conflicting'*. Carmel also discussed how work was a constant pressure that she often took home.

While working *'solidly in the office four days a week'* and *'often not taking a lunch break'* she discussed regularly working of an evening when *'the children went to sleep'* and when they were *'taking a day nap on the weekend'*. While her family and children were *'the most important thing'* she experienced difficulties separating work and home life. Trying to be *'present at home'* and not distracted by work was a constant challenge and something she and her husband discussed. *'He [husband] will say to me, "are you here [participants name] or at work"'*.

Alice discussed feeling *'guilty'* about leaving her children in front of the television while she worked. Reflecting on a recent experience she discussed preparing for a lecture and visiting academics on a Sunday: *'My husband was away for work so I put a movie on for the kids'. I asked them to just give me two hours'*. However, one of her young child questioned *'why do you work all the time mummy? can't you watch it with us?'*. This questioning significantly increased her guilt but it was also *'an important reminder that her children come first'*.

## 6.5 Partner and family support

Partner and family support was fundamentally important to women's experiences returning from leave and taking up flexible work arrangements. For example, Hazel discussed wanting to make use of phased return to work arrangements made available under Westerns Family Responsibilities in the Workplace Policies. However, this was contingent on her partner and mother taking on substantive care responsibilities. She remarked:

*'I have thought about it. I do wonder how it will be managing things. I feel like I'm in a pretty good position because of having a very supportive partner and family. That will make the transition much easier. I feel a bit anxious about how I will manage everything. My partner travels a lot for work. My mum and dad have a business. My mum works from home so if I'm at work and [partners name] is at work then she can pick up [babies name] from childcare if he is sick. I'm obviously really comfortable with her. So that's a really good safety net'*.

In a follow up interview Hazel discussed making the decision to extend her maternity leave. She discussed wanting to spend more time with her son prior to returning to work. She reflected on wanting to *'leave her head in the sand a little longer'*. She remarked that over the past six months her son had *'grown up so quickly'* and that *'she would never have that time again'* [maternity leave]. However, Hazel was cognisant of the impact this extension of leave may have on her career progression. Her concerns were in part alleviated by the support and understanding of her academic supervisor who had children and was more empathetic and intimately understood her situation.

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For Danielle her return to work was contingent on the flexibility her husband's work enabled. Given his employment role they were able to *'work around one another's schedules'* so that their child was only in formal care two days per week. Unlike other respondent's broader grandparent and other family support was not possible due to time and distance. For male respondents Tom and Cameron, a lack of extended family support was also a significant challenging. Their personal situations meant that both sets of grandparents were living abroad and so they were *'flying solo'* and *'lacked that extra support'*.

Carmel's return to full time work was also dependant on her husband's work commitments. For Carmel she and her husband had decided on a *'role reversal'*. She discussed how her husband had taken on a *'stay at home role'* while she was progressing and concentrating on her career, *'my husband has a job and I have the career'*. While this role reversal worked *'for them'* she acknowledged the greater difficulties that other mothers and fathers experienced balancing work and home life when both parents were working full time.

Nancy was one of those women. Her husband's *'higher profile and demanding work'* meant that she had to be *'highly effective'*. She interpreted that how she and her husband managed work and family life was a little like *'doing the tango'*. It was *'difficult' and 'hard'* but she described the incredible support of her mother in law. She described wanting to *'make a statute of her in gold'* and that without her support and what had become *'mentorship'* she could not do what she does.

## 6.6 Colleagues attitudes and practices

While participants interpreted that they were *'incredibly fortunate'* to work in an organisation with *'so much flexibility'* the attitudes, expectations and practices of colleagues meant that this flexibility often came with professional and personal costs. Interview participants' experiences are of further interest given that survey respondents overwhelmingly interpreted that having returned from leave their colleagues were supportive (see table 4).

Cameron thought that despite policies encouraging flexible work practices colleague's attitudes and societal norms were a negative impact:

*'There seems to be an expectation that the mother should be doing the rearing of the children and the father should be going off to work'*.

Cameron experienced a culture which reified *'patriarchal' relations and a 'backward'* and *'not as advanced recognition of gender equality'*. He interpreted how these cultural norms constructed and reproduced a situation where there was an institutional and societal failure to adequately recognise the role that some fathers such as himself want to play in their children's upbringing.

Several women reflected on the important and positive role of female colleagues, especially women with children. Alice discussed the negative attitudes of male colleagues. However, female colleagues whom she described as *'friends'* welcomed her back, were *'a great support'* and the people with whom she was recently *'collegially'* collaborating with and why she was *'enjoying'* her return from leave.



Lily also discussed the greater understanding of female colleagues with children and how this workplace culture was more welcoming and accepting upon her return from maternity leave. Returning from her second maternity leave she discussed ‘*changing as a person*’ and having greater confidence responding to the negative and discriminatory remarks of some colleagues:

*I’m better at restricting my emails but there are times that I just have to get my work done. I don’t have a problem this time around with people asking me why I’m leaving at 3. 30pm. I also work in a culture where there are quite a number of other mothers. They are not necessarily new mothers but they are understanding.*

While being ‘*grateful*’ for the support of her female peers Lily also discussed how her male colleague’s practices made these working arrangements difficult. She remarked:

*Things like meeting hours. Meeting are often at 5.00pm till 6.30pm followed by a drink afterword. And those meetings are not at good times for parents and by parents I mean mothers because they are the ones who do the majority share of picking up and dropping off.*

*So there is that going on. And also, because I have only come back two days per week the school meetings tend to be on a day when I’m not there. So I don’t expect that people should change it but it would be nice for example if meeting minutes could be made available. Or more detail around those kind of things for people that are not able to attend those kind of things.*

The survey results presented in Table 12 also point to some of the difficulties women with mothering and other care responsibilities experienced arising from their colleagues’ practices. While the majority of survey respondents interpreted that meetings and other required work events were scheduled during family friendly hours not all employees felt this way. A noteworthy number of respondents reported being ambivalent or disagreed with the assertion that the timing of work events and meetings was family friendly.

**Table 12: Meetings and other required work events at Western Sydney University are scheduled during family friendly hours (Survey results)**

Item	Number of academics responded	Percentage
Strongly agree	36	25.9
Somewhat agree	39	28.1
Neither agree nor disagree	12	8.6
Somewhat disagree	24	17.3
Strongly disagree	11	7.9
Total	122	87.8

Alice discussed the negative attitudes and remarks of a male colleague during a research meeting with potential external funding partners. When introducing the project research team her male colleague remarked that, ‘*This is [respondents name] she has three [children] under seven and I’m not quite sure what contribution she will make*’. When asked during the interview if her colleague was trying to be funny Alice remarked that, ‘*I did not end up being involved in the project*’.



A further theme emerging from Hazel, Alice and several other women’s experiences was a reluctance to *‘speak out’* and challenge negative attitudes and associated practices. Accordingly, when returning from maternity leave Hazel discussed needing to *‘prove she was back’* and that she was *‘ready to do it all’*. During the interview she clenched and raised her fist in a humorous way for emphasis here.

Alice discussed *‘ignored[ing] those negative attitudes’* and *‘just did her work’*. This however was an *‘isolating’* experience and her expressed preference was to collaborate, work with and learn from others, *Academia lends itself to doing individual work so you just go do it. I just do my work.*

While women discussed the frequent support of female colleagues and supervisors with children Carmel remarked that while she worked in a department dominated by men, she was one of few women her male colleagues were generally very supportive. She interpreted that this support was because they were *‘generally empathetic people’* who also had young families. A male colleague from the same work group remarked that he worked with *‘a really good bunch’* and that flexibility was not a problem because most of the team also had young families.

### **7.0 Career Development and Advancement**

Career advancement and professional development was important to all interview participants. However, female academics (interview participants) characteristically thought that their mothering responsibilities significantly limited their career development and advancement opportunities.

The survey results presented in Table 13 shows that characteristically survey respondents interpreted that their family care responsibilities negatively impacted their future career prospects. These findings are particularly concerning given the robust policy frameworks governing academic career development and promotion. While a significant number of survey respondents interpreted that their career progression was negatively impacted it is important to note that a notable number of respondents neither agreed or disagreed with the statement that carer or family responsibilities impeded their academic career progression.

**Table 13: Carer or family responsibilities impede career progression at Western Sydney University (Survey results)**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Number of academics responded</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Strongly agree	28	20.1
Somewhat agree	37	26.6
Neither agree nor disagree	34	24.5
Somewhat disagree	17	12.2
Strongly disagree	6	4.3
Total	122	87.7

While several male and female respondents interpreted that motherhood/fatherhood brought with it a *‘change of perspective’* and *‘priorities’* they remained very committed to progressing their academic careers. For Carmel, she wanted to enjoy her young children and *‘smell the roses’* while also wanting to make a *‘mark’* in her research field. Alice discussed being *‘very ambitious and not hiding this fact’*.



Although maintaining this commitment these same female respondents thought that their family responsibilities negatively impacted their career development prospects. Lily remarked how:

*I have already spoken to my DAP about what I need to do by way of working toward promotion. At the moment there are a lot of academic staff who I work with who have not had children and not been on maternity leave and they are going for promotion to Associate Professor. I come home regularly and say to my husband that should be me.*

Alice reflected on her experiences applying for promotion. She interpreted that there was a direct link between her failure to gain promotion and her maternity leave/family responsibilities:

*I tried after my second pregnancy and it [promotion] didn't go through. So it backfired. I had everything they wanted and I was asked if this was a good time to be going for promotion. So I guess my strategy is like always, just to put my head down and do the work. Do the governance and the research and then hopefully move ahead I guess. I was told I wasn't promoted after the second baby because of research and governance but the application was discussed with several people and they all said that the application was ready. I was told that even when I was on leave I still published, I still did academic work but it was obviously missed or glossed over.*

In line with these remarks Cameron interpreted that women's 'traditional role as mother' and 'more active involvement in childrearing' despite their paid employment limited their academic careers. Other male respondents also acknowledged that their female colleagues career development was inevitably slowed by their childcare and other responsibilities. They themselves discussed working before children went to school and after kinds went to sleep at night. Tom remarked how he worked 8am-4pm and then once the kids go to bed 7pm-11pm. He acknowledged that as a father this workload was difficult but perhaps more so for women.

Several women discussed/interpreted a link between their delayed career progression, periods of leave/flexible work and research. Alice made suggestions on how policies and practice could support women's career progression especially after repeated and extended breaks:

*I think something like a mentor. So it may not be someone in your discipline or school. So some mentorship on how do you get back during that transition phase. Ok so assistance with the first paper or it might be well things have changed so. So someone to get you back on track you are obviously doing 75% of the work but they are supporting. After such a long time you kind of don't know where to start. So I think it's the research and the teaching. Setting myself some goals and looking to achieve them.*

For Nancy 'children had absolutely been a career impact'. Negotiating learning, teaching, governance responsibilities and PhD completion meant that she was constantly working on weekends. Trying to 'tick all of these boxes' was stressful. She discussed how it had become 'normal' that she went into the office on weekends and she wanted work to stop 'eating into her weekends'. She wanted to spend time with her husband and children and go on holidays.

Nancy also interpreted a relationship between her career development prospects and cultural values in her school and across the university. She observed that recently promoted women in her school typically had 'no children or their children were much older'. She discussed recently applying for a governance position which was more senior and attracted a salary increase. Despite being encouraged

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to apply for the role she *discussed ‘not even receiving an interview’*. Crying before and after work for weeks. Nancy reflected on the insensitive remarks, *‘you showed resilience, you got kicked in the guts but’* of the male senior member of staff who oversaw the recruitment process.

The findings arising from interview respondent’s descriptions of their workloads was in part illustrated through the survey findings presented in Table 14. Of the limited number of responses received 12 survey respondents perceived an increase in teaching workload allocations. Correspondingly, a reduction in research allocation, was reported by 14 participants. Interestingly, an equal number of academics (n = 12) claimed that their governance roles had either increased or decreased in terms of number of hours.

These results are tentatively outlined, given only 32 (of the 139) respondents answered this particular survey question.

**Table 14: Reported changes to workload allocations after returning from leave\***

	Teaching Workload	Research Workload	Governance Workload
Did not change	10	14	8
Decrease in hours	10	12	12
Increase in hours	12	7	12

\*results expressed as raw numbers due to low response rate

Carmel interpreted that her recent maternity leave and two young children had *‘inevitably’* slowed her career progression. However, and more positively she also discussed how Western career break scholarships had enabled her to *‘accelerate out of her maternity leave breaks.’* Carmel was grateful of these scholarships and felt that they were important to enabling women to *‘gain and maintain research momentum’* after a career break. These experiences align with recent policy implementation and further important recognition in valuing the contribution of employees with children wanting to balance family responsibilities and their academic career development/advancement.

### **Conclusions**

In conclusion, our investigation of women’s and men’s experiences and interpretations making use of Western’s Family Responsibilities in the Workplace Policies highlights how highly nuanced and complex ways parental and other care responsibilities differentially shape women’s and men’s academic careers.

Although the report highlights areas of strong policy support and implementation, especially around maternity leave policy provisions and manager/supervisor and colleague support the interview and survey findings also indicate that there were quite localised areas of challenge where there was dissatisfaction and where colleagues felt isolated. Accordingly, it can also be concluded that tensions and gaps continue to exist within and between university policy and every day workplace practices.

While Western has implemented robust policy frameworks aimed at the development and valuing of inclusivity and diversity these values were not universally enacted. Instead informal gendered practices, values and attitudes negatively impacted women with children’s academic career access, advancement and development. Rather than challenge, call into question or formally report inequitable and challenging practices women characteristically navigated around them. For many of the interviewees participating in the research project was of itself a decisive act which enabled them,

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in a safe non threatening to share their experiences and in doing so finally making them and their harmful impacts known. However, as we explored in section 3 a mitigating and overarching consideration was that their participation was anonymous as they feared ongoing implications for their career advancement. This fear and concern in part illuminates how gender inequitable practices are concealed, reified and taken for granted.

By bringing to light some of the informal practices shaping women's careers one of the projects aims has been realised. That is, in order to challenge informal, latent, taken for granted gender inequitable practices they first need to be unearthed and made known. The sensitivities relevant to employees' experiences and their concerns regarding potential identification highlight potential future research approaches. While the fourteen employees spoke candidly about their experiences and interpretations the research team suggest that a greater number of interviews might be achieved if future research in this space was conducted by a third party external to the university.

Several further key findings emerged from survey results and in depth interview themes. Namely, while policy frameworks relevant to work and family existed policy knowledge among employees and their managers/supervisors can be enhanced. Encouragingly, employees discussed more positive experiences when supervisors were well versed in policy provisions.

Employees reported that requesting and negotiating flexible work arrangements was a generally positive experience. While they acknowledged the generally positive support of managers and supervisors a difficulty experienced by several interview participants related to the informal practices and attitudes of some colleagues.

While policies such as phased return from maternity leave and flexible work options were initiated to support parents balancing work and home commitments unrealistic workload expectations meant that employees characteristically interpreted that work life balance was challenging. When trying to place more stringent parameters around their work and family life employees interpreted that their commitment to work and career was questioned. This was particularly problematic for women who discussed investing significantly in their work and who wanted to advance their academic careers.

Cultural constraints were further exacerbated by structural barriers relevant to childcare availability and cost. Moreover, family support and challenges relevant to personal and professional identity equally impacted the working and personal lives of employees with children.

More positively there were examples of institutional, managerial and colleague support. These examples demonstrate how a culture of inclusivity and respect can contribute to enhanced individual and collective outcomes. Further, recent policy amendments and developmental programs such as the VC career interruption scholarships were identified as particularly positive and enabled employees to forward their career after returning from an extended period of leave.



**Appendix 1:**

**Policy Context Overview**

Section	Provisions
<p>Part G: Flexible Work Provisions</p>	<p>The University is committed to the implementation of working arrangements that find the best possible match between the interests of the University and those of an individual Employee. In this regard, <i>the University recognises the possibility of work being performed in a flexible way to allow an Employee to balance personal and work commitments</i>. An eligible Employee may make a request for flexible working arrangements in the following circumstances:</p> <p>(a) <i>the Employee is the parent, or has responsibility for the care, of a child who is school age or younger;</i></p> <p>(b) <i>the Employee is a carer within the meaning of the Carers (Recognition) Act 2010 (NSW);</i></p> <p>(c) <i>the Employee has a disability;</i></p> <p>(d) <i>the Employee is 55 or older;</i></p> <p>(e) <i>the Employee is experiencing violence from a member of their family; or</i></p> <p>(f) <i>the Employee provides care or support to a member of their immediate family or household who requires care or support because they are experiencing violence from the member's family.</i></p>
<p>Part H: Leave Entitlements</p>	<p>Personal Leave: may be granted to assist Employees (other than casual Employees) to achieve a work life balance. <i>Personal leave acknowledges that Employees of the University are also members of families and communities and have commitments not related to work</i>. An Employee, other than a casual Employee, is entitled to up to 6 days' personal leave without loss of pay in any 12-month period and may also use up to a maximum of 10 days of their sick leave entitlement in any 12-month period:</p> <p>Parental Leave consists of:(a) <i>maternity leave taken by an Employee in connection with her pregnancy or birth of her child;</i></p> <p>(b) <i>adoption leave taken by an Employee in connection with the adoption of a child; foster parent leave for fostering a child on long term placement; or</i></p> <p>(d) <i>partner leave taken by an Employee in connection with their partner's pregnancy or birth</i></p> <p><i>of their child ("partner" includes spouse, de facto spouse and partners of the same sex).</i></p> <p>Maternity Leave: an employee (including a casual Employee) who becomes pregnant is <i>entitled to up to 52 weeks' maternity leave</i>. An Employee may apply to the</p>

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	<p>University for additional leave without pay and other leave entitlements to a total of 104 weeks, which the University will not unreasonably refuse.</p> <p>If an ongoing Employee or fixed-term Employee has completed at least 1 year of continuous paid service prior to the commencement of maternity leave, they will be <i>entitled to be paid for up to 20 weeks of their maternity leave at their Base Rate of Pay or 40 weeks at half their Base Rate of Pay.</i></p> <p>Adoption Leave: an ongoing Employee, or fixed-term <i>Employee, who is the primary care giver is entitled to up to 52 weeks' adoption leave to care for a child whom they adopt</i>, other than a child who has been living with their partner or with them continuously for 26 weeks or more. An Employee may apply to the University for additional leave without pay and other leave entitlements to a total of 104 weeks, which the University will not unreasonably refuse.</p> <p>Partner Leave: an ongoing or fixed-term Employee, who has completed at least 1 year's continuous paid service is entitled to up to 2 weeks' partner leave paid at their Base Rate of Pay for the birth or adoption of their child and, if they are the primary carer of their child but are not entitled to maternity leave, up to an additional 50 weeks' unpaid partner leave.</p>
Return to Work after Parental Leave:	<p>An Employee entitled to paid maternity or adoption leave who <i>returns to work full time or on the same part-time arrangement as prior to taking leave within 12 months of commencing the leave, will be entitled to a phased return to work. If engaged full-time the Employee may be absent on pay for up to 1 day per week (or 20 per cent of their ordinary hours) in the following 30 weeks</i>, or prorate for an Employee engaged part-time. Employee and the work area.</p> <p>After maternity or adoption leave an Employee who is entitled to return to work may work reduced hours during a period of up to 2 years from the commencement of maternity leave. The Employee may also apply for an additional defined period of reduced hours of work.</p>

Section/Clause	Amended Provisions
Clause 7	<p>Individual Flexible Arrangements: The University and an employee can enter into an Individual Flexibility Arrangement (IFA) to vary certain aspects of the Agreement to meet the needs of the University and the employee, and explains how an IFA is made.</p> <p>IFAs can be made in relation to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) the purchase of an extra 4 weeks of annual leave per year; and</li> <li>(a) the taking of extra leave without pay following the birth or adoption of a child.</li> </ul>
Clause 15	<p>Conversion: clause 15 is a new clause that combines the various conversion provisions for different categories of employees.</p>



	<p>The clause describes how certain fixed-term employees can apply for conversion to ongoing employment, and how employees in fixed-term Contract Research roles can apply for conversion to ongoing funding contingent employment.</p> <p>The clause also introduces a new mechanism that allows eligible casual employees to apply for conversion to fixed-term employment for a period of 2 years, at the end of which employees can apply for conversion to ongoing employment, and will be converted, if they meet certain specified criteria.</p>
Clause 25	<p>Flexible work provisions: clause 25 provides an overview of the flexible work provisions contained in the Agreement to assist employees with identifying their entitlements.</p>
Clause 26	<p>Right to request flexible working arrangements: Clause 26 outlines: the circumstances in which eligible employees can request flexible working arrangements;</p> <p>(b) examples of the types of arrangements that may be put in place;</p> <p>(c) how a request for flexible working arrangements may be made; and</p> <p>(d) the grounds on which the University may decline a request.</p>
Clause 30	<p>Personal Leave: clause 30 deals with the accrual, and taking, of personal leave by ongoing and fixed-term employees.</p> <p>Employees are provided with 6 days of paid personal leave per calendar year, and may also use their accrued sick leave entitlement for personal leave purposes. The previous limitation on being able to use a maximum of 10 days' sick leave for such purposes has been removed.</p>



**Appendix 2:**

**Indicative semi structured Interview Questions**

**1. Personal biography**

- a. Tell me a little about yourself? (demographic and socio demographic information)

**2. Career Biography**

- a. Educational background degree and other qualifications
- b. Prior academic/university appointments
- c. Prior to parental leave nature/level of substantive academic position
- d. Thoughts and values regarding family and work, career aspirations/planning

**3. Parental leave experiences**

**Prior**

- a. Parental leave information and policy (i.e. understanding/knowledge, availability of information)
- b. Expectations and experiences regarding parental leave prior to taking leave (i.e. anticipated nature/length of leave, concerns)

**Return**

- c. Experience of going back to leave after the period of parental leave?
- d. Negotiating transition/return from leave (personal and institutional)?
- e. Experiences of support frameworks and colleague's/supervisors attitudes and practices
- f. Positive and negative aspects of transitioning back to work
- g. In light of your experience suggestions for improved policy and practice