

Every Child.
Every Need.



Universal Childcare Is a Workforce Policy — and Right Now, Mothers Are Paying the Price

Australia's investment in universal childcare is often framed as social policy. But at its core, childcare is workforce policy — and when it fails, women pay the price.

For thousands of mothers of children with disabilities or complex needs, the promise of universal childcare does not exist in practice. They are not choosing to leave the workforce. They are being forced out by a system that cannot support their child.

These mothers are enrolled in childcare on paper. In reality, they are called to collect their child early. Hours are reduced. Placements break down. Eventually, they are told — sometimes gently, sometimes bluntly — that there is nowhere that can safely meet their child's needs.

This is not a personal failing. It is a structural one.

Australia's universal childcare reforms have rightly focused on affordability and access. But universality cannot be measured by subsidies alone. A system cannot be considered universal if families cannot rely on it to show up consistently, safely, and sustainably.

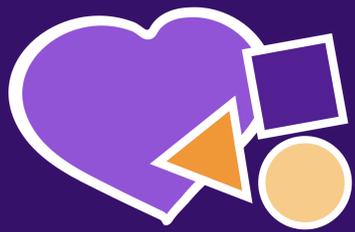
For mothers, unreliable childcare is not a minor inconvenience. It is a career-ending event.

When care collapses:

- mothers reduce hours or exit paid work;
- household incomes fall;
- superannuation gaps widen;
- economic security is undermined; and
- gender inequality is locked in for decades.

Unions have long understood this. Across the labour movement, women's workforce participation is recognised as a cornerstone of gender equity. But participation is impossible without care — and care must work for the families who need it most.





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The problem is not inclusion as a principle. It is that our current inclusion models are not delivering **equitable inclusion**.

Children with the highest needs require more support — higher staffing ratios, specialist capability, and sustained resourcing. When those supports are not in place, educators are placed in unsafe situations and services cannot cope. The result is predictable: exclusion in practice, even when policy intent says otherwise.

This failure lands squarely on mothers.

They are the ones who leave meetings early.

They are the ones who stop applying for promotions.

They are the ones who quietly step away from work altogether.

And because this exclusion happens behind closed doors — through phone calls, reduced hours, and “informal” arrangements — it remains largely invisible in workforce data.

Universal childcare cannot claim success while it systematically excludes families with higher needs.

A truly universal system must recognise that **equity is essential to participation**. Treating all children the same does not create fairness when needs are unequal. It creates barriers — and those barriers push women out of the workforce.

Equitable inclusion is not a niche issue. It is economic policy. It is gender equity policy. And it is workforce sustainability policy.

If Australia is serious about closing the gender pay gap, lifting workforce participation, and building a fair economy, then childcare policy must be designed around reality — not rhetoric.

Because when childcare fails, it is not abstract.

It is mothers who disappear from the workforce.

And that is a cost Australia cannot afford.

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