

# THE 2021 WOMEN'S AGENDA AMBITION REPORT

PROMOTIONS & PAY RISES  
WITHOUT THE BURNOUT.

A survey of more than 1400  
women on what they want from  
their careers and what they  
believe could get in the way.

Supported by AGSM at the  
University of NSW Business School.



# ABOUT WOMEN'S AGENDA

Women's Agenda is a 100% female-owned,  
independent news hub for career-minded women.

We publish daily news and views regarding how we live and  
work, and regularly advocate for measures that can better support  
women in the workforce.

We support our journalism by working with clients on strategies they can use  
to successfully engage with this audience through content, bespoke events,  
advertising, sponsorships and research.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Burnt Out Ambition



## Women fear burnout ahead, despite their ambitions mostly being as high as ever.

We're living through the pandemic years, and it's changing how women perceive and think about ambition.

But this upheaval is not necessarily seeing women wanting anything less from their careers and lives. Rather, the opposite may be happening.

Our latest survey on women's ambitions -- the third in this series over six years -- is our most important research to date. It highlights how COVID-19 and its impacts on how we live and work has changed what women want from their careers and the workplace incentives and support mechanisms that really matter.

A massive 47% of our 1400+ respondents surveyed prior to extended Winter lockdowns in 2021, said that COVID-19 has changed their ambitions for the next two years, due to its impact on work and home life.

In some cases, the pandemic has actually opened up more work and opportunities, with 69% of respondents saying they now have more options to work from home and access to flexible working arrangements.

But these pandemic years have also increased the load on women. Around a third (31%) said they're spending more time on domestic work, and 28% said they are spending more time on caring responsibilities.

Meanwhile, 28% of women out there are feeling less optimistic about their career prospects now, than prior to COVID-19.

### So what ambitions are high on the agenda?

Despite these shifts in ambition levels, we found the overarching themes around what women are looking to achieve in the next two years were remarkably similar to what women reported during both our 2019 and 2017 surveys.

The proportions of women who said they were looking to get a pay rise, or get a new promotion, or start a new business -- were almost identical to the previous two times that we've run this research.

Once again, 'confidence in my abilities' came up as the most reported hurdle that could get in the way of ambitions, with 45% stating they believe this could be a problem over the next two years. This is slightly lower than in 2019, when 51% reported this.

But in 2021, there is a more concerning hurdle that women are up against or expect to be up against in the future: burnout. A massive 39% of women said this may get in the way of their ambitions over the next two years.

We can't compare this high rate of burnout concern with previous years, as this is the first time we explored it. However, burnout rarely came up in the long answers about potential obstacles in 2019 and 2017. We believe this finding in 2021 reflects some of the realities and additional burdens placed on women over the past 18 months, and the longtail of exhaustion and fatigue COVID has created.

We know women have been carrying multiple loads, including paid work and unpaid work with more caring and remote learning duties, along with the emotional and mental load that has come during this period. We also know women have held the bulk of frontline roles in responding to COVID-19. As nurses, teachers, early childhood educators, supermarket employees etc.

We do this research to provide employers, policymakers and anyone interested in women's success and wellbeing, with the data they need to help dismantle barriers.

We do this to identify gaps in the support that women need, knowing that filling these gaps can lead to

greater women's workforce participation, more work-life satisfaction, and an easing of gender pay and superannuation gaps.

We also know that supporting women with their ambitions will improve their mental and physical health, especially when it comes to easing competing pressures, avoiding burnout, and ensuring women have the time and space to prioritise their own needs.

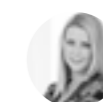
Employers must consider some of the findings of this report. They must recognise the pains and hurdles that women are saying are not only getting in the way of their ambitions, but are actually preventing them from living their lives free from debilitating stress.

There are clear fixes that can be made immediately, to support women. They start with the obvious: stamping out all forms of discrimination, ensuring flexible careers are possible, paying women more and giving them access to opportunities.

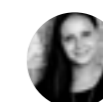
This research provides a snapshot of what women are looking to achieve right now, as well as the hurdles that are in the way -- hurdles that could potentially be overcome with the right support and adjustments made to how we work.

Understanding these ambitions, addressing the impediments and particularly taking note of the concerns women have, will also provide a vital boost to the economy. A boost gained by growing women's workforce participation and economic opportunities, enabling more female entrepreneurs and getting more women into leadership and decision-making positions.

Don't let the ambitions of women burn out. Let's strive to create healthy, fulfilling and accessible opportunities that can not only lift the lives of women pursuing their ambitions, but actually improve the world for all of us through innovation, participation and progress.



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# KEY STATISTICS

1425 responses from women



**47%**

SAY THEIR AMBITIONS HAVE CHANGED AS A RESULT OF COVID-19

**69%**

BELIEVE THEY NOW HAVE MORE OPTIONS TO WORK FROM HOME AND ACCESS FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS AS A RESULT OF COVID-19.

**31%**

SAY THEY ARE SPENDING MORE TIME ON DOMESTIC DUTIES NOW THAN PRIOR TO COVID-19

**28%**

SAY THEY ARE SPENDING MORE TIME ON CARING RESPONSIBILITIES NOW, THAN PRIOR TO COVID-19

**28%**

ARE LESS OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THEIR CAREER PROSPECTS NOW, THAN PRIOR TO COVID-19

**36%**

SAY THEY'RE LOOKING TO EARN MORE OVER THE NEXT TWO YEARS

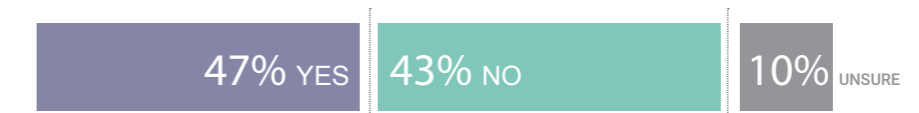
**45%**

SAY 'CONFIDENCE IN MY ABILITIES' MAY GET IN THE WAY OF THEIR AMBITIONS OVER THE NEXT TWO YEARS

**39%**

ARE CONCERNED BURNOUT MAY HINDER THEIR PROGRESS

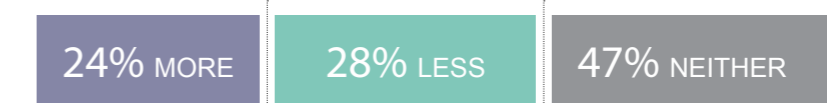
Would you say that COVID-19 and its impact on work and home life has changed your ambitions for the next two years?



Do you believe you now have more options to work from home and access flexible working arrangements as a result of COVID-19?



Would you say you are more or less optimistic about your career prospects now, than prior to the pandemic?





## TOP AMBITIONS FOR WOMEN IN 2021 AND 2022

Money. Promotions. Training. What kind of impact does a pandemic and massive upheaval on how we live and work have on women's careers?

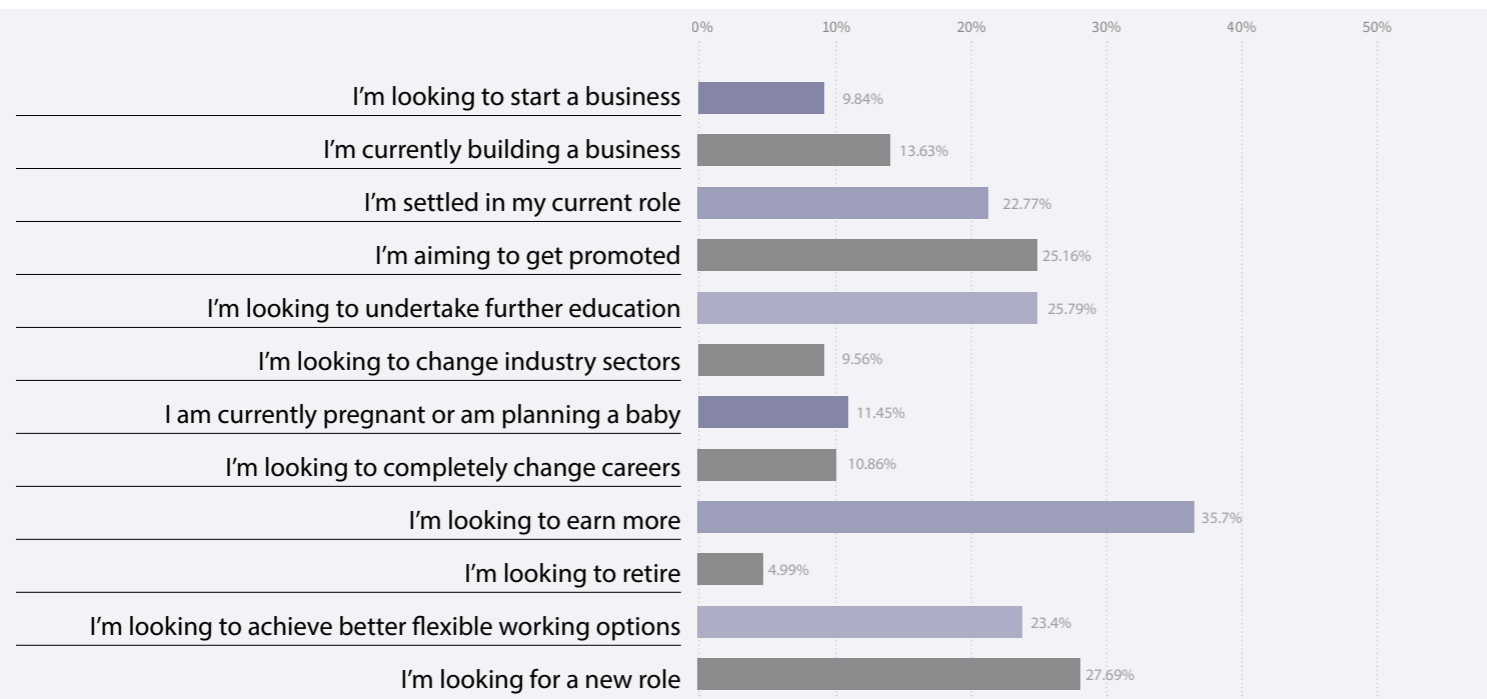
While almost half of women (47%) say COVID-19 has changed their ambitions, women are still looking to achieve similar things in 2021, as they were back in 2019.

Earning more came up as the top ambition in 2021, as it did in 2019 and 2017, with 36% of women indicating they are looking to achieve this over the next two years.

That ambition was followed by 'looking for a new role' (28%) and 'undertake further education' (26%).

When asked for 'other' responses, we came across women looking to write a book, to get more contracts, to gain more knowledge, to advocate for women in their industry and more simply 'to keep my current job'. We also heard from a number of women who spoke about 'involuntary retirement' due to illness or disability or caring and other responsibilities.

Which of the following best describes your career ambitions for the next two years?



## CAREER BREAKS AND AMBITION

How do ambitions change for those who've taken a career break for caring purposes in the past 10 years?

Of our 1425 responses from women, 39% reported they had taken a career breaking in the past ten years for caring purposes.

This segment then went on to report a number of key issues that must be taken into account when considering this cohort of women.

First and foremost is the high levels of discrimination so many women among this group report they have experienced.

From there, we note that career breaks and working flexibly or part time while also managing caring responsibilities at home, does not necessarily limit ambition.

Actually, the opposite can occur.

A massive 46% say they are more ambitious now than ever before, with leading ambitions including 'increasing my salary and earning potential' (61%) and more than half (51%) saying they're looking to further their leadership careers.

### CAREER BREAKS

"At the end of a 10 hour work day, after being up for hours before that managing kids and often during the night also, I just don't have the energy to make the leadership thing happen. I'm just absolutely done."





So what will get in the way of these goals?

We received hundreds of long-answer responses from women sharing what they've experienced, what they expect ahead and where and how they've been sidelined or overlooked.

Common trends that came up included concerns about ongoing lockdowns, burnout, a lack of qualifications, pay inequity, trying to manage as a single parent, managing a disability or illness,

family obligations, time, money, the need/desire to achieve work life balance and more.

One theme that did come up over and over again in the long answers was the word "energy".

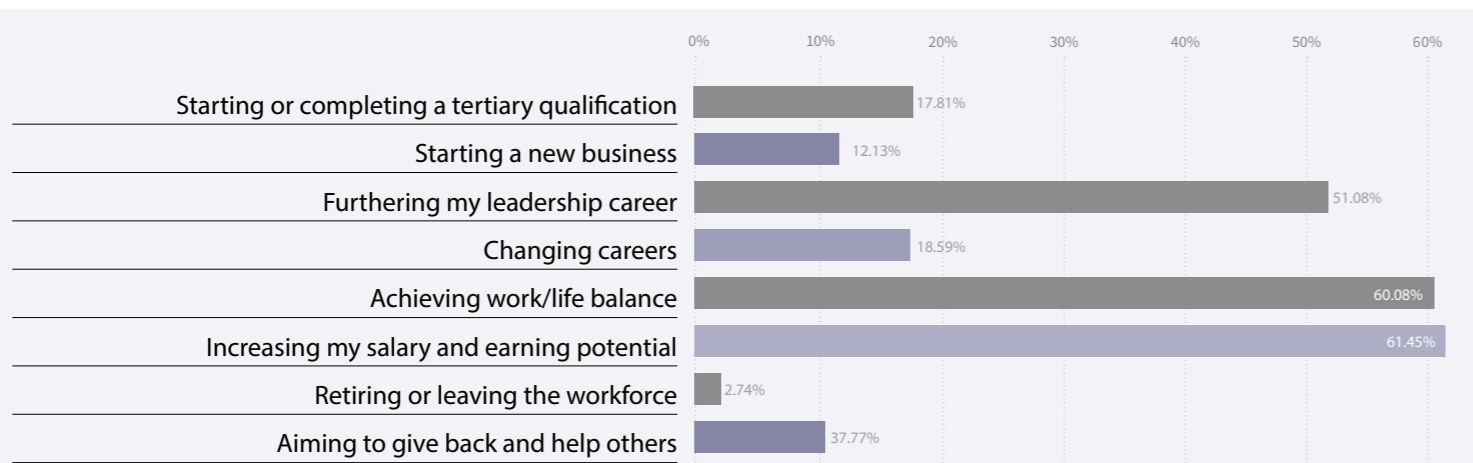
Women reported that with so many competing demands between paid work and unpaid work and trying to manage their own health and other needs, they're running short of the energy required to pursue and/or achieve other ambitions.

**CAREER BREAKS**

**"I want a promotion. But I also want to focus on my health, stay fit and well and mentally OK. I will also prioritise health over a job."**

**"I need to network, but how is this even remotely possible with young kids at home, and as a sole parent?"**

What are your main career goals over the next two years (for those who've taken a career break)?



**Of those women who've taken career breaks for caring purposes over the past 10 years...**

**46%**

SAY THEY ARE MORE AMBITIOUS THAN EVER BEFORE

**35%**

CITED TIME FOR MANAGING THEIR OWN WELLBEING AS THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE THEY FACED, OR EXPECT TO FACE, ON RETURNING TO WORK AFTER KIDS

**48%**

SAY THEY HAVE CONSIDERED STARTING A BUSINESS SINCE HAVING CHILDREN

**40%**

SAY THE IMPACT OF CARING COMMITMENTS ON MY CAREER CHANGED DRAMATICALLY AS A RESULT OF COVID-19

**37%**

DON'T BELIEVE THEY HAVE A STRONG SUPPORT NETWORK AT HOME HELPING THEIR CAREER

**54%**

SAY THEY FEEL LIKE THEIR CAREER IS ON HOLD DUE TO CARING COMMITMENTS

**71%**

BELIEVE THEY MAY HAVE EXPERIENCED BURNOUT IN THE PAST 12 MONTHS

**52%**

SAY WORKING PART TIME OR FLEXIBLY HAS HINDERED THEIR CAREER



**"There was just the unsaid implication that as a part time working mother you should be 'grateful' for the flexibility alone."**

A significant proportion of women feel discriminated against in the workplace (or when applying for work) following a career break

Of the 392 who reported taking a career break in past 10 years

- 31% reported pregnancy discrimination
- 35% believe they experienced discrimination while on maternity leave
- 9% felt discriminated against due to breastfeeding
- 35% felt discriminated against when returning to work
- 62% felt needing flexibility or part time work saw them discriminated against
- 32% felt discriminated against due to having school-aged children
- 23% reported age discrimination





## WHAT'S GETTING IN THE WAY

Every woman's experiences and circumstances are different, and the pandemic period has exacerbated -- and in some cases really brought to the fore -- the hurdles that stand in the way of achieving ambitions.

But once again, we found a number of underlying themes in this research, indicating some of the key issues that women expect to hold them back from achieving their key goals.

At the top of the list is "confidence in my abilities" with 45% of women saying this could potentially hinder their progress over the next two years. That figure is slightly down on the 2019 result, which was 51%. We don't see these figures as indicating that women "lack confidence" -- especially when you consider the opposite of this finding: that 55% of women do not believe that confidence in their abilities will get in the way. Rather, upon examining other figures in our data (particularly around discrimination), we believe there may be a number of cumulative factors that lead to women expressing confidence concerns.

### WHAT'S HOLDING ME BACK?

"The men above me applying their idea of merit to my (prove) capabilities and experience"

Another major perceived obstacle is burnout, with 39% of women saying this could get in the way. This survey was the first time we presented burnout as a possible hurdle, after seeing it come up continually over the past 18 months during conversations with women.

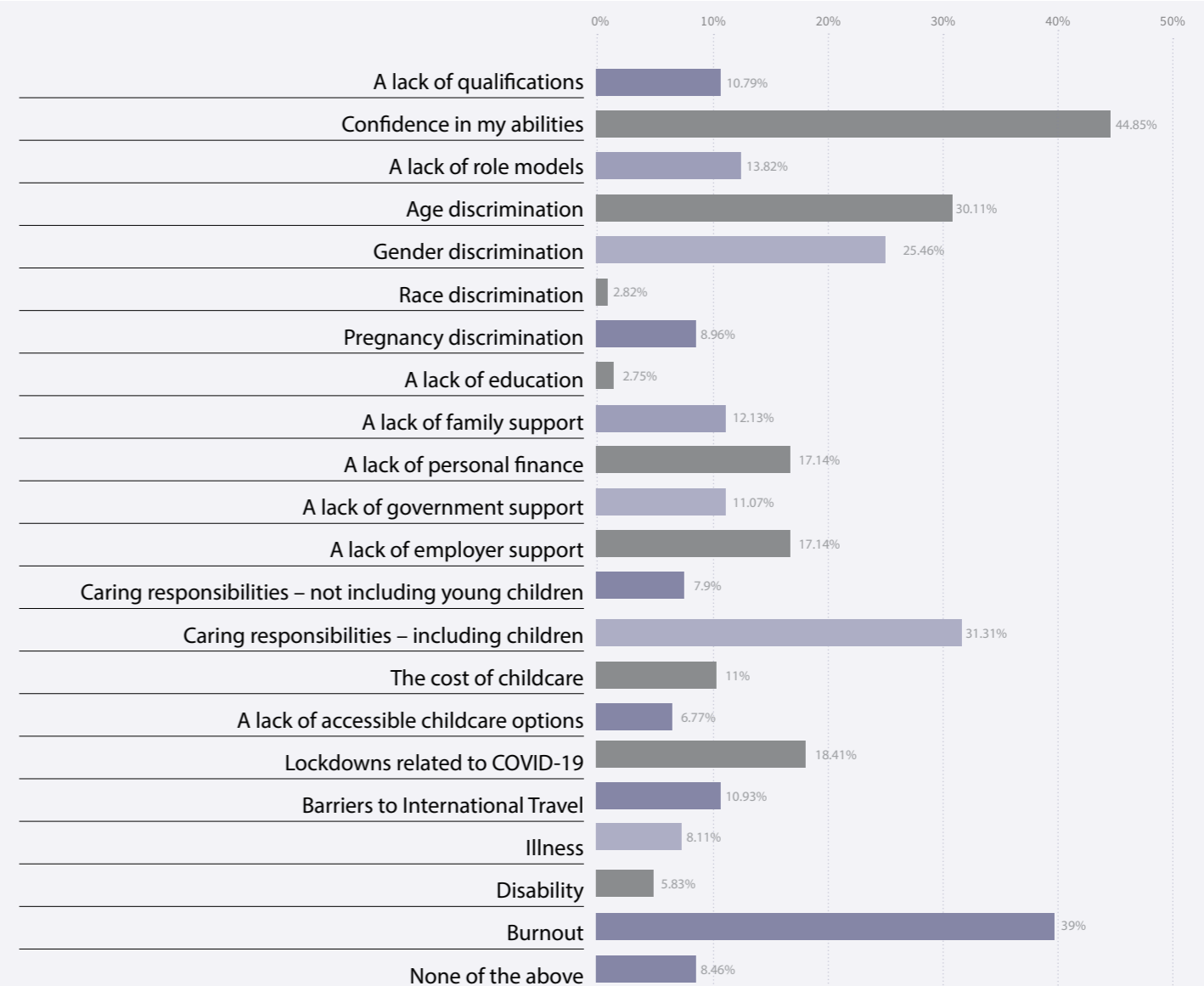
It's concerning to see that more than one third of women are worried about burnout impacting their ambitions over the coming two years, and it may speak to just what women have gone through during these initial pandemic years.

Other concerning hurdles that came up include: age discrimination (with 30% listing this as a potential

hindrance) as well as gender discrimination (25%) and caring for young children (30%).

Meanwhile -- and a reminder this survey was done prior to lengthy Winter lockdowns -- one in five believe lockdowns related to COVID-10 may further get in the way.

In long answers, women reported concerns about discrimination, being undervalued and underrepresented and overlooked. They also highlighted a lack of options for travelling, living regionally and remotely as well as the need to work part time and flexibly as seeing them rejected from promotions and opportunities.







## THE INCENTIVES THAT MATTER

So what helps women achieve their ambitions? What helps propel women towards achieving more fulfilling and satisfying work and home lives?

We asked respondents about a number of different employer-related incentives to determine which ones they believe have the most impact.

- 86% Say flexible work options have been 'important' or very important' at some point in their careers
- 57% Say paid parental leave has been 'important' or very important'
- 57% Say paid carers leave has been 'important' or very important'
- 74% Say leadership training courses has been 'important' or very important'
- 68% Say mentoring and sponsorship programs has been 'important' or very important'
- 85% Say visible female role models have been 'important' or very important'
- 85% Say a diverse workplace culture has been 'important' or very important'
- 60% Say opportunities for employer-paid further tertiary education has been 'important' or very important'
- 81% Say clear pathways for promotion have been 'important' or very important'

## SO WHAT NEXT?

Women have serious ambition for the next 24 month period, even despite the enormous additional loads so many have been carrying through these pandemic years.

Yet given such a high proportion are also raising concerns about burnout, this is an issue that must be prioritised in any programs aimed at supporting women's careers. Such concerns are a call to immediately prioritise action on all forms of discrimination women are reporting, as well as to elevate the importance of women's physical and mental health.

What's the point of a great mentoring program or further leadership or training, if women are merely being set up for a wall of even more exhaustion in the future?

Addressing and preventing burnout starts with examining the heavy loads that women are carrying, something that at a macro level requires more research and information in

order to determine just how much of women's time is going to domestic work, to caring work, to paid work, to their own health and wellbeing, to recreation and to sleep. From there, we need to take steps to reduce this load – through gender neutral policies that aim to give men as much opportunity to work and take part in home life as women, as well as by reducing added financial burnouts women take on through gender pay gaps, through the superannuation and savings gap, through the high cost of childcare and other care-related expenses and needs.

There is so much here that relies on good and better policy making to support the needs of women. These are the things that can and will be slow to change, and thus not solely relied on when so much is at stake. Employers, industry groups, advocates and supporters can act much more quickly.



## So what can employers specifically do?

While large and small employers can differ significantly in their ability to support big, bold policy initiatives like paid parental leave, return to work incentives, and leadership training program, there are still cultural adjustments and less expensive things that all employers can aim to address.

- **Prioritise staff health.** The pandemic period has highlighted this need, now is the time to make it happen. Create cultures that emphasise the productivity value of supporting and encouraging time and opportunities for physical health, as well as space and check-ins for mental health needs.
- **End discrimination.** Don't wait for a staff member to raise some form of discrimination they've experienced. Discuss and consider all forms of discrimination staff might be experiencing, and open safe channels for them to communicate it.
- **Do a pay audit.** No matter how small or large your organisation, pay audits are possible. And they're the first step to identifying discriminatory pay practices. Find the gaps. Fix them.
- **Look to those working flexibly and part time.** Don't let them languish or linger. Remember their ambitions are likely as strong as ever, as is their desire for interesting and important client projects.
- **End assumptions.** These assumptions are exhausting and can be a major hurdle in the way of a woman's careers. Open communication channels to discuss ambitions, as well as some of the hurdles staff perceive to be in the way.



## ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

This research was undertaken by the team at Women's Agenda, published by the independent and 100% female-owned Agenda Media. The research received support from AGSM, part of the University of NSW Business School.

We received 1415 responses during June and July 2021, through our five-minute online survey involving a mix of multiple choice and long-answer questions. The majority of respondents were aged 30 to 50.

We conducted a similar version of this survey in December 2016/January 2017, but adjusted some questions and included some additional themes in order to better reflect the feedback we received to the initial research and immediate concerns we wanted to address in 2019.

We've received additional feedback in 2019 that will again be applied to future iterations of this study, and hope to better explore further issues that came up in this study in later research.

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