

How to create healthy workplaces for Women



A special report by Women's Agenda, thanks to the support of Genea.

Introduction

The workplace can be a significant determinant of women's health.

Whether that be a physical or virtual workplace, a woman's experiences at work can impact her physical and mental health in profound ways.

It can affect everything from the time she has to dedicate to physical activity, to the sense of wellbeing she has and her opportunities to take time out to rest, repair, and recover when needed.

Every so often, employers will give lip service to employee health – they may even implement special policies to help – but the rhetoric doesn't always match the action.

In what we hope is the tail end of the pandemic years, the need for a focus on women's health at work has never been more important.

We've had dramatic shifts in how and where we work, including a mainstreaming of working from home across certain sectors.

But we've also seen women reporting significant levels of burnout, career dissatisfaction, overwhelm, overwork, and distress.

We've also seen significant gaps in the experiences of women's work, depending on the sectors they work in, the size of their employer, and the employers they work for.

From 100 per cent virtual spaces to hybrid weeks involving both physical and virtual work, to physical sites, facilities, labs, and construction sites, there are significant differences in the spaces where women work.

In typically female-dominated sectors of work like early childhood education and healthcare, women have been physically going to a place of work all through the pandemic and have taken on more complex and challenging workloads as a result of the health and economic emergencies the world has faced. Some such sectors are reporting soaring rates of burnout and even predicted walkouts over the next few years.

Meanwhile, in some overly male-dominated sectors like construction, we see women facing additional barriers in voicing any health issues they are experiencing as well as limited access to facilities to support needs like breastfeeding.

So where do we go next to support women's health at work?

Women's Agenda has created this report in partnership with Genea to share some of the best ideas on how to improve women's health at work.

These ideas cover employee policy areas, as well as the cultural shifts required to make policies accessible to those who need it and the management changes required to make health improvements at work a reality.

We have collated these ideas and this overall information based on our own reports over the past year, including personally witnessing what is and isn't working, as well as running a roundtable session with representatives from some of Australia's leading and biggest employers.

Based off this research, we've compiled this report as a blueprint for women's health at work. It is one we hope that any employer that wants to improve the health of their team members.

This report is designed to speak to the experiences of all who identify as women while also acknowledging that these improvements to women's health will ultimately extend to all staff, and eventually to families and communities.

Finally, with all these ideas, we want to highlight first and foremost that they only work in workplaces that strive for inclusion – not only at the board and executive leadership level, but across all managers and all staff. We know that an individual's experiences at work, and therefore their health and wellbeing, can be significantly hindered by the words or actions of a single manager, even in workplaces that emphasise policies supporting staff.

Training, leadership, and communication are all essential for successfully addressing women's health at work, as is understanding that we're all multifaceted people with different needs, health priorities, and challenges. We also hold different views about what we want to communicate and disclose at work.

Angela Priestley and Tarla Lambert
Co Founders, Agenda Media, publisher of
Women's Agenda and Women's Health News.

About Women's Agenda

Women's Agenda is a 100% female owned and run independent media business. Every day, report the news as it affects women across politics, business, health, tech, climate, and more. Founded by Angela Priestley and Tarla Lambert, we support a small team of journalists and content creators across the country.

We support our journalism by working with partners to produce impactful content that aligns with our mission, across events, roundtables, white papers, partner content, and more.

About Genea

Genea is a world-leading baby making team offering a variety of fertility treatments and services, including IVF, testing, egg freezing, and other forms of support.

About this report

This report identifies some of the key areas of progress employers are making on supporting women's health at work. By drawing on our own journalism, research, and insights gleaned from a roundtable discussion held with representatives from leading employers in Sydney, we're sharing this information to provide powerful ideas and strategies that any business can consider taking on to help women (and everyone) thrive at work.





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Why focus on women's health at work?

Over the past two to three years, we've been forced to experience some of the most significant structural and emotional changes in how we work.

We've seen the heavy toll that has been placed on women during this period, who've taken on additional caring and domestic responsibilities, and the stats on rates of stress, distress, and burnout have soared.

While we can't yet say we're in a post-pandemic period, we are seeing some semblance of what will be permanent in this new world of work: which in many sectors and workplaces includes continued work from home and "hybrid" work weeks.

This shift is in many ways a positive, especially given how long we've been fighting for the normalisation of so-called flexibility, to remove it from being something that 'working mothers' alone need to access, to something everyone in a workplace can utilise. Even so, there are consequences to workplace gender equality from the work from home revolution that we're yet to see fully play out, including what happens if the gender gap between men and women who decide to work from home actually widens. There are also health consequences that can come from working from home.

Meanwhile, we're seeing the consequences of burnout, working conditions, and poor pay coming to the forefront, particularly in heavily female-dominated sectors like early childhood education, healthcare, and teaching, where workers haven't stopped going to their place of work since the pandemic.

It's telling to think that 73 per cent of early childhood educators have indicated they plan on leaving the sector **over the next three years**. A quarter of primary care health nurses have **also indicated they may soon quit**.

More positively, tectonic shifts in how we work have also opened the opportunity for more conversations about health at work and the role of an organisation in supporting the wellbeing of everyone. We've seen the launch of the Family Friendly Workplaces initiative by **UNICEF and Parents At Work**, creating a benchmark for what employers can do to create family-friendly policies.

We've seen more employers discussing their role in addressing domestic and family violence, and progress on offering paid domestic violence leave to those who need it, including from the biggest employer in NSW doubling their **existing 10 days' of such leave to 20**.

We've seen more employers launching ground-breaking initiatives, like menopause leave, miscarriage leave, period leave, and fertility leave – policy initiatives that go a significant way in opening up important conversations about enabling healthy workplaces.

During a talent squeeze across many sectors, we're also seeing employers doing everything possible to attain and retain the best talent – a prime time for them to also be addressing policies and cultural changes that can improve the lives of staff at work.

The stats

Why is women's health at work such a vital conversation, and why do employers carry such a significant responsibility in this area?

Australian women are the most educated in the world but drop significantly on the OECD measures of success when it comes to workforce participation.

And the pandemic hasn't helped to close this gap.

Women globally were found to be experiencing record levels of stress in 2021, according to Gallup's 2021 [State of the Global Workplace report](#). Nowhere in the world are women less stressed than men. Forty six per cent of women in Australia report that their mental health had declined since the beginning of the pandemic, [according to 2022 Jean Hailes research](#).

With work being such a central part of life – not only financially, but also in terms of social connections, fulfilment, and purpose – a workplace has the ability to significantly impact a woman's health.

One in three people have experienced sexual harassment at work [over the past five years](#). Sixty per cent of all workers experience bullying in their careers, with one in three women claiming mental health issues involving some [form of harassment of bullying](#).

One in three women [have experienced physical violence](#) since the age of 15, and every week, one woman is murdered by a current or former partner. The vast majority of these women are engaged in some kind of workplace. The murder rate for First Nations women is eight times [that of the non-Indigenous population](#).

Forty per cent of pregnancies are "unintended", according to [2022 research by Organon](#), with First Nations women disproportionately impacted often due to geographic isolation and difficulties accessing services and contraception.

Meanwhile, new 2022 data also showed that when their partners lose work, women were more likely to experience violence for the first time or to see existing violence escalate. A survey of more than 1000 women by ANROWS found a direct link [between financial stress and violence](#).

Physical health is another area in which women fall short due to systemic issues – and has suffered further as a result of the pandemic.

Forty three per cent of women say their physical health has declined since from before the pandemic, according to the [2022 Jean Hailes National Women's Health Survey](#).

Further:

- **30 per cent** of women reported they were less fit
- **28 per cent** said they had gained weight
- **20 per cent** said they now experience muscle and/or joint pain.
- **44 per cent** said they could not get an appointment with a doctor or health professional when they needed it
- **53 per cent** of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women reported not being able to afford to see a doctor, compared with 44 per cent of all women, and 79 per cent of women from non-English speaking backgrounds saying they can't afford to see a doctor.



Meanwhile, Jean Hailes found in 2020 that one in four women aged 18 to 24 did not know where to go to access health services. Almost one third of those aged 25 to 44 did not have time to attend health check appointments. And women with a disability, alongside LGBTQI+ women, were more than twice as likely to experience **discrimination in accessing healthcare**.

Then there are the numbers that highlight the opportunities for all businesses to better tap into the full pool of talent across Australia.

Women's economic participation is vital not only to individual workplaces, but also to Australia's future prospects. We could access an additional 500,000 full-time skilled workers by addressing the workforce participation gap between men and women, according to a recent analysis **commissioned by Chief Executive Women**.

Critical skills are highly prioritized, given estimates we'll need an additional 1.2 million workers across the economy by 2026, according to the **National Skills Commission**.

"In order to ensure they're not losing staff, workplaces should be set up in a way that emphasizes their role in impacting and emphasizing staff health."

Workplaces must also actively demonstrate they are 'healthy' places to work in order to attain the talent they need.



42% of women say working from home has been detrimental to their mental health, according to the Society of Foundation Studies.



Only **20%** of women are meeting the recommended number of minutes of weekly physical activity.



Two in three women report experiencing sexual harassment since the age of 16.



One in ten women experience heavy periods.



One in six women could be experiencing menopause in a workplace.



What is a healthy workplace for women?

Feeling valued and well rewarded contributes to work life satisfaction and, ultimately, overall wellbeing. That's why respect is at the heart of a healthy workplace for women.

Healthy workplaces for women are actively inclusive and never assume a sense of belonging for team members will just occur.

The leadership and culture within healthy workplaces know that the actions or behaviour of a single manager or colleagues can significantly hinder and damage a woman's health. It will then take serious actions to mitigate such risks, and place serious consequences on the individuals who bully, harass, or discriminate against another employee.

“

Respect is the foundation of a healthy workplace for women.

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IN SHORT:

Factors that support women's health at work



Progressive leave policies that cover paid parental leave regardless of gender



Sick leave policies that incorporate and give permission to a broad range of health matters, such as menstruation leave, menopause leave, and mental health days



Real flexible work practices that enable career progression



Educated and well-resourced managers who can respond to the needs of workers (and don't hinder access to policies)



Inclusive environments that support individuals regardless of their background.



So how can you create a healthy workplace for women?

It starts by addressing factors that will ultimately support the health, wellbeing, happiness, and career satisfaction of all staff. Below are a number of key factors that make it happen.



Address the gender pay gap

Feeling undervalued at work has negative consequences on an individual's mental health, and pay is a crude but clear measure of how many staff feel valued.

Indeed, US research has found that women who earn less than their male counterparts have a nearly 2.5 times higher risk of depression, as well as **four times the likelihood of anxiety**.

Gender pay gaps also impact how women can accumulate wealth and retirement savings and protect against life stressors – all of which can manifest in less access to services and **poorer health outcomes**.

Addressing gender pay gaps as mechanisms for addressing gaps that women experience during periods of paid leave (such as through paying superannuation on top of paid parental leave) is a critical step to ensuring women's workforce participation and setting more women up for economic security now and into the future.

Employers must undertake gender pay gap analysis and dedicate funds for addressing the pay gaps they found. Meanwhile, significantly more work is needed at a policy

level to address the continued and persistent undervaluing of female-dominated workplaces across the care economy. Employers must also consider intersectional factors, which can further widen the gender pay gap for women.

Implement gender-inclusive paid parental leave

Paid parental leave policies have the power to transform the lives of parents – and, when gender inclusive, also have the power to shift the balance on who does what at home.

Progressive employers are now going further than offering generous paid parental leave for primary carers. They are offering equal access to such leave, removing the 'primary' and 'secondary' labels, and encouraging men to take paid parental leave in equal numbers to women.

Some employers are even going a step further by addressing the 12-month period after a staff member returns to work to support childcare costs, additional sick days, one off payments, and a reduction on KPIs. This will effectively acknowledge the added pressure the new parent is facing as they transition to working family life.



Implement the Respect@Work Recommendations

The recommendations from Kate Jenkins' review into sexual harassment at work must be implemented in full, a promise that has been made by the new Albanese Labour Government.

Employers will need to act on these changes, working across the community and government to stamp out workplace sexual harassment.

Given the link between workplace sexual harassment, burnout, stress, and the decision some women make to leave a job or career, implementing these recommendations will be significant for improving women's overall health and wellbeing.

Introduce and promote check-up days

Offering time off for routine and regular check-ups – like pap smears and breast cancer screenings – will not only support women in accessing such check-ups, but also open conversations and reminders to all staff to get their check-ups done.

The international women's pharmaceutical Organon recently offered ALL staff the opportunity to take the 8th of March off to mark International Women's Day. They used the announcements and the communications promoted by this day to encourage all staff to think about women's health and what needs to be done to support their own health.

Acknowledge and support staff experiencing menopause

We recently learned that women aged 45 to 49 have the highest age-specific suicide rate across the female population, according to ABS statistics.

While there is no single reason for this alarmingly high rate, it's important to acknowledge the load women disproportionately carry around this age.

But, as Professor Jayashri Kulkarni [told Women's Agenda](#), we also can't dismiss perimenopausal depression that impacts some women within this group.

Meanwhile, figures from the Victorian Women's Trust in 2021 found that almost half of women experiencing menopause consider retiring or taking a break from work, and 76 per cent call [for better employer support](#).

Menopause is still very much a "secret world", with many women telling us they are taken off guard by menopause.

Some employers are already addressing this. Future Super recently unveiled its own menopause policy, based on the policy unveiled [by the Victorian Women's Trust](#) (which the NFP called on other employers to copy).



The pipeline of young women is strong – don't let it leak

More than one in three women report having anxiety at some point in their lives, according to 2019 [research from Jean Hailes](#).

But the figure increases dramatically for women aged 18 to 35, with 58 per cent indicating they were affected by anxiety. Around one third report not being able to stop or control their worrying every day.

Employers must acknowledge these stats for young women and consider the impact of career uncertainty, financial strain, confidence, and other work-related areas that may be contributing to such stress.

As our women's health at work roundtable discussed, years of promoting "the hustle culture" – which includes the push to always be 'one' by studying working, exercising, socialising, and striving for the next big goal and the pressure of needing to find work with purpose – might also be a strong contributor.

Many firms report employing equal numbers of women at the graduate and entry level, but then significant gender gaps further up the chain of leadership. Employers must consider how health and wellbeing issues might be opening leaks in their talent pipelines.

Enable fertility journeys

Those who hope, but then also struggle, to become new parents have typically pursued their fertility journeys in silence.

Of course, many will want to do this in private, but many can also benefit from support from their employer.

Such support can come from offering staff the time to attend appointments and providing a physical space to go to have injections or other things required for accessing fertility services.

Meanwhile, as we learnt from our roundtable participants, fertility is an emotional and of course deeply personal journey. Some firms, like Minter Ellison, have started having intentional conversations about fertility within the workplace, holding panel sessions and other events where employees can come together to share their stories. Minter Ellison partner and Chair of The Pink Elephants Support Network, [Katrina Groshinski](#), says this is a huge step towards "breaking the silence" on the issue and shared the success of her own firm holding a discussion on this issue by getting staff and particularly leaders to communicate their stories.

Employers are also now offering paid leave to support fertility, including Deloitte Australia, which recently announced a new policy offering five days leave to support IVF and other fertility needs.

Open conversations around miscarriage and grief

With one in five known pregnancies end in miscarriage, this is an all too tragic but common experience people face at work.

But so often women suffer in silence, unwilling to share what they have experienced and thus unable to minimize their pain.

Employers, including QBE, are now offering early pregnancy loss support and paid leave to employees who experience this.

Employers are also turning to organisations like the Pink Elephants Network to open conversations about miscarriage and give access to support services if needed.

Alison Bransdon, Head of People Fundamentals and Enablement at QBE, who unfortunately has her own lived experience of pregnancy loss, now works with Pink Elephants to not only support others in her own workplace but also to promote the need to raise more awareness about early pregnancy loss and validate the pain people can and will often feel at work.

Play a part in reducing family and domestic violence

So often, workplaces can provide a physical refuge for women escaping violence, whether her colleagues know it or not.

Access to such refuges have become scarcer during lockdowns and with more women working from home, making it more challenging for employers and colleagues to look for signs of family and domestic violence or for staff to simply find physical safety.

Workplaces need to get more creative and intentional about their role in reducing family and domestic violence, given the number of survivors – and users of violence – they have on staff.

Paid domestic violence leave is a fast policy step towards helping those in need. Progressive employers are moving towards offering ten days of such leave and other initiatives like financial payments to assist survivors.

Meanwhile, some firms are also training staff as responders. Anu Wettasinghe, Diversity, Inclusion & Wellbeing Manager at QBE, explains her organisation's Family Domestic Violence First Responder Network, which has around 60 staff members trained in supporting colleagues who might be experiencing family violence. They then partner with an external organisation to facilitate training and engage with the group on a quarterly basis.

"When we started having events on conversations about this, the penny dropped with other leaders. We realised the sheer numbers in this, and just how much of a problem it is for staff."

Pink Elephants Chair and Minter Ellison Partner Katrina Groshinski



Tell stories

Storytelling is essential when it comes to some of the mental and physical health challenges that arise for women – and for all staff – at work.

During our roundtable discussion, the theme of “breaking the silence” came up often: silence around menopause, miscarriage, period pain, fertility, domestic violence, and fertility.

Our experts – many of them responsible for the diversity and inclusion functions of their firms – spoke about how creating policies is just the first step in aiming to support staff through health challenges.

But the more important step is creating the workplace culture and the open environment required to enable staff to actually access such support mechanisms.

They also noted how things like five or so days of menopause leave won't solve some of the most difficult parts of this transition, but the very act of having it in place gives permission and space for staff to have conversations about it.

“When you find the storyteller who shares that personal story, who opens up that conversation and brings the ‘why’ to life - that is so powerful.”

Antoinette Totta, Diversity, Inclusion & Wellbeing Manager at Hall & Wilcox

Diverse leadership matters

When it comes to advocating for greater support for women's health, having women at decision-making tables matters.

Indeed, often, the benefits of having gender diverse leadership is advocated as being about addressing gender pay gaps and promotions for women. But it's about so much more – it's about the lived experiences that come from including women.

It's about women in leadership who understand the challenge of returning to work after having a child, or the impact of endometriosis or heavy periods.

It's about women in leadership who can reflect the experiences of a much broader pool of staff members.



Inclusion for all

The above conversations need to happen for all people who identify as women, while also acknowledging the unique differing needs of women who may face additional barriers in the workplace that may also be detrimental to their health, including for First Nations women, migrant women, LGBTQI+ women. Workplace should intentionally demonstrate how the spaces they create for inclusion are spaces that filter through to every aspect of a team member's working life.

Also essential as an aspect of inclusion is giving people the space to not participate.

While people have shared experiences, they don't have shared reactions to them or exactly the same desire to speak about and hear more about them.

As one of our roundtable participants noted: "There is a fine line between calling attention to the unique challenges that women have and not painting women as more problematic."

"We need to think about how we can make spaces for all people who identify as women to feel included in these conversations as well, including trans women who have had a tough time in recent months, especially being used as political weapons."

Lucille McCart, the APAC
Communications Director, Bumble



Get flexible and family-friendly

Policies that promote "family friendly" environments will significantly aid women's health, especially where they can highlight how all team members have care and relationships responsibilities outside of work.

"We believe that a Family Friendly Workplace culture positively impacts the quality of work-life for all our employees and contributes to the wider health and wellbeing of our society and economy. It increases productivity, reduces stress, absenteeism and gender inequality."

Heidi Carfax-Foster, Health Safety
and Wellbeing Manager, Genea

Enabling real and genuine flexible work opportunities to all team members is key, as is considering how leave policies can be evolved to be more gender-neutral.

During our roundtable discussion, Genea noted being one of the first companies in Australia to be certified as a "Family Friendly Workplace", by meeting key benchmarks outlined by Parents At Work and UNICEF Australia, including on paid parental leave, workplace flexibility and family wellbeing.

Optimistic for the future

Can we expect a change on women's health at work?

We believe that policy shifts on accessible and affordable childcare, as well as structural reform support improving pay and conditions for those working in female-dominated sectors, could create some of the biggest macro changes to how we feel about work.

The new Albanese Government has promised to implement all of the Respect@Work recommendations, which will help in reducing sexual harassment and bullying at work.

From there, we believe that employers are generally working harder to address the health of women at work.

This is especially true for employers in sectors facing acute talent shortages, as they must continually sell to fresh talent what's on offer in their workplaces and demonstrate how they will support the lives and families of those they hire.

Our concerns regard the care sector, where the longtail of the challenging past couple of years we've just had remains. We know how poor pay, working conditions, and burnout on these workers not only impacts them individually, but ultimately could lead to the collapse of the infrastructure required to make our economy tick.

And our concerns remain for the health of those working in small to medium sized businesses who may not have the resources and structures in place to dedicate to improving women's health – and generally don't have to deal with the scrutiny that larger employers face.

