



The 2023 Maybanke Lecture

By Georgie Dent

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I want to acknowledge and pay respect to the traditional owners of the land on which we meet – the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. It is upon their ancestral lands that we gather tonight. Later this year we will all have the opportunity to cast a vote in a referendum of profound significance. We can accept the gracious and generous invitation extended in the Uluru Statement from The Heart for all Australians to walk together and create a better future. It is an invitation that I encourage each of you to consider with the grace and generosity with which it was extended.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the Maybanke Fund for continuing the support of Maybanke Anderson's work. It is humbling beyond measure to be here and join a list of esteemed leaders who have delivered this lecture previously. From the incomparable Adele Horin, Prof Larissa Behrendt, Prof Marilyn Waring, Lucinda Brodgen, Virginia Bell, Elizabeth Broderick ... I stand here tonight on the shoulders of giants, in shoes too big to contemplate.

Upon being invited to deliver this lecture I was delighted and mortified in equal measure. How had I not heard of the extraordinary Maybanke Selfe Wolstenholme Anderson? A woman of formidable historic significance who was once a household name to several generations of Australians is, these days, largely unknown. Born in 1845 in England, she arrived in Sydney at age 9 with her parents and brothers and was educated as a teacher.

She was a woman who made things happen – as a teacher, a writer, a leader, an advocate and feminist. One of the many obituaries on her death in 1927, noted Maybanke “had a genius for initiating movements for education and social betterment.”

That Australian women were able to vote in the new Commonwealth, nearly three decades earlier than was possible for women in the United Kingdom, was just one of Maybanke's legacies.

She published and edited her own fortnightly paper, the Woman's Voice – which she described as being ‘democratic but not revolutionary; womanly but not weak; fearless without effrontery; liberal without licence’.

In 1895, she established the first free kindergarten in Australia, pioneering the free kindergarten movement, helping children and their working mothers.

As Dr Susan Feez noted in the 2014 Maybanke Lecture: “Maybanke's own experience as a young wife, losing four of her seven children and being deserted by her husband, led her in the early 1890s to campaign for desertion as grounds for women to divorce their husbands, and to campaign for women's property rights, but having achieved that, she continued campaigning for a raft of social reforms, including women's suffrage and family planning. The thread that weaves together the various reforms Maybanke pursued is her concern with the education of children and young people.”



For the last three years running The Parenthood, an independent advocacy organisation representing parents and carers, I've been singularly focused – professionally – on one of the causes Maybanke Anderson identified as being fundamental to the wellbeing, safety and security of children and women in 1895. A cause that remains as pertinent today as it was over a century ago. That is the provision of totally affordable quality early childhood education and care.

It is a cause I have been variously passionate, incensed and consumed with for the last 12 years... almost to the day. I am acutely aware that 12 years is the blink of an eye in the full history of campaigning for early childhood education and care in Australia.

But before I get to that I want to be explicit about this having been a professional pursuit for the past three years. Being paid to advocate and champion change isn't something to gloss over.

Because, quite simply, advocacy needs to be funded. The reality is that too many causes – particularly those connected to the rights of women and children – rely on the heroic unpaid labour of mostly women who are already mostly stretched beyond their means – in time, in money, in power.

These women are, like Maybanke Anderson, propelled by a profound sense of social justice. They cannot help but seek to right the wrongs they see. They go above and beyond their job descriptions every single day. They push the limits of their own time and energy to fight for change that is bigger than they are – but it comes at a cost.

I'm thinking of women who work with refugees, in domestic violence, in women's legal services, in juvenile justice, in human rights, in schools, in health. Women who in their day jobs see the symptoms of systemic flaws, and devote their unpaid labour to rattling the cage in pursuit of the broader, structural reforms that are required. I have seen up close the toll this advocacy takes and it's not pretty.

Being paid to advocate a cause doesn't erase the human cost associated, **but** it is a fundamentally different proposition than relying on the unfunded, voluntary goodwill of time-poor women.

Tonight I want to pay tribute to and thank the organisations and individuals who financially support The Parenthood. The last three years have been hugely consequential in relation to policies pertaining to early childhood education and care.

While part of the huge shift we've seen in attitudes, understanding, expectations and policies was due to the pandemic, in my view, it is no accident. In the last two years \$55 billion has been committed to early childhood education and care reform by Commonwealth, state and territory governments.



That's a direct reflection, in my view, of what is possible when coordinated, collaborative advocacy is funded. It's not that the evidence or cause is new – far from it.

What is new is that for the three years I've been in this role The Parenthood has been a part of a nationally coordinated and collaborative campaign called Thrive By Five.

It is led by Jay Weatherill, and is funded by the Minderoo Foundation. There are now 90 campaign partners, ranging from the Telethon Kids Institute, SNAICC, Goodstart Early Learning, UWU, Chief Executive Women, Royal Far West, Early Childhood Australia and more.

There are almost 100,000 supporters. In the last three years the campaign has funded various research projects, advertising, communications, the most-watched TedTalk of 2021,; it has been an umbrella under which individuals and organisations invested in better outcomes for children, communities and families have come together.

The mantra from day one was simple. Many voices, one message. The message? That Australia needs universal access to quality early childhood education and care delivered by a properly paid workforce. There are – quite literally – billions of reasons to support this and as a campaign we have sought to coalesce around as many as humanly possible.

Before I delve further into what has been achieved, and what comes next, I want to explain how I came to be here. Agitating for political and policy change **has** been a professional pursuit for three years – but this cause is deeply personal.

It is 12 years – almost to the day – since I first came face to face with the reality of early childhood education and care in Australia. My husband and I were living overseas when we had our first child, a delightful daughter who has just turned 13. We relocated overseas after my husband was offered a position to study for his master's.

A few months before we were due to come back to Sydney from the UK, I was offered a job back on BRW, the business magazine I had left. It was a maternity leave cover role 4 days a week and I couldn't have been more delighted. Having had a very brief legal career before a devastating breakdown at age 25, the joy, purpose and satisfaction I derived from my first role as a junior reporter was immense.

Nick and I were youngish parents at 27 and both very much in the formative and junior stages of our careers. Our firstborn was a little over 1 and we assumed, naively, that we would find a spot in day care for her 4 days a week somewhere near wherever we would be renting an apartment. Neither of us had parents living in Sydney so recruiting grandparents to help with child care wasn't an option. Engaging a nanny even a day a week at that stage in our working lives was entirely out of reach financially.

Having sent off a swag of emails to different daycare services it became apparent very quickly from the replies that we had been dreaming. Finding day care was going to be near impossible – the waitlists were such that perhaps in 18 months they could take our daughter. One day a week.

For a while it seemed that finding a spot was beyond us and we didn't really know what that would mean. It felt like we hit the jackpot when we woke up one morning to an email from a Montessorri nursery offering us 4 days week. That it was located in the CBD and neither Nick or I worked in the CBD wasn't ideal. That it cost \$165 a day wasn't exactly dreamy.

But it was a place in a wonderful service four days a week that gave us both the ability to work while our daughter was beautifully cared for, educated and entertained. It was a systemic enabler – in the long and short term – for our family.

Logistically however it was diabolical. The twice-daily bus rides with a toddler....the cost when the subsidy ran out ... the on commute to work....

The childcare subsidy was described at the time as a 50% rebate – except that it was only 50% up until \$7500. After 3 months, because of the high daily fee our subsidy ran out so we were then out of pocket \$2,640 a month. That first year our out of pocket fees were \$26,820. That was more than private school – but there was no alternative.

It was a watershed experience: I couldn't unsee this barrier. Suddenly I could see how this would be playing out.... our experience compounded and amplified in households and families across the country dismissed as "choice".

As a journalist I wrote about it as a major structural impediment to women's workforce participation. As a mum I blogged about it.

Here I have to confess that I was fortunate and naive enough to grow up believing gender equity was basically sorted. That bubble began to burst for me upon entering the professional world.

Prior to moving overseas and having a baby I had my curiosity about gender equality properly piqued. I interviewed Liz Broderick who was the Sex Discrimination Commissioner at the time. She explained the gap between women's educational attainment in Australia and workforce participation. At that point in 2008 Australia ranked #1 in world for educating women and girls but 22nd in the world for economic participation. In 2021 that gap had grown from first in the world for education to 70th for women's workforce participation.

Back in 2008 that statistic was – theoretically – fascinating to me. By 2011, after having a baby, the theory was ripped away. **This** was why men and women were on such markedly different paths after starting a family. It all made sense.

As a legal reporter I had attended a number of workshops, conferences and roundtables where the focus was on how firms could retain female talent. This wasn't reserved only for law firms – it was happening right across professional services and boardrooms. There was a degree of bewilderment and mystery in these discussions – women were studying law in high numbers, they were entering law firms, getting admitted and rising into senior associate positions... and then they were leaving.

MYSTERY SOLVED people!

Women weren't failing to enter the equity partnership ranks or ASX executive pipeline in the same numbers as their male counterparts for any amorphous reasons. It was because they were still – quite literally - holding the baby.

Between my blog, reporting for BRW, social media and our family life my fascination and frustration with all matters pertaining to women grew.

Back in the year 2013 I didn't have a public profile, but, thanks to what really was the most profoundly remarkable and transformative website for ideas and connections – Twitter – in circles interested in gender, I was known.

That proved very useful. I was on parental leave with our second daughter in the middle of 2013 when I received a private message that made my heart skip a beat. Marina Go, a woman I admired from afar but had never met, asked if I would meet her for coffee. She was working at Private Media at the time and was the publisher of a new online publication that I adored called Women's Agenda.

If she wants to talk about a job at Women's Agenda I will die and go to heaven, I told my husband. I died and went to heaven because Marina wanted to talk about the possibility of me stepping in as Acting Editor in a few months time when the founding editor Angela Priestley was heading on parental leave with her first baby.

And the best bit came next. Marina said 'Now you have two tiny children', the tiniest of whom was cradled in my arms feeding at the time, 'and I know finding childcare is a nightmare so can you please have a think about how you think we could make the role work for you.'

That right there was a sliding doors moment in which my career – not just a job – became viable. I was offered unconditional trust, support and flexibility from the get go – at a point in life it is needed.

I was free to try and design a work week that was actually viable for our family. It was a possibility only because Marina herself had lived it – with two very young children her and her husband both managed work and their family due to the support of her father who was

able to step in and help. She knew it was possible to work and be a parent – but that it might not always look the same way.

That flexibility was particularly valuable at that moment because my husband was working as a surgical registrar at a hospital over an hour away and had not even the faintest whiff of flexibility or agency. He left home before 6am and was rarely home before 7pm, and, in addition he was on call for 3 weekends out of four in a month. These hours weren't optional: he wanted to qualify for a surgical training program and jobs like this were the only way to make that happen.

Marina offered me a lifeline in so many ways. I often wonder how the world would look if all parents of young children were greeted with such acceptance and support from their managers upon seeking to return to work.

Marina was right though. Childcare *was* a nightmare. Even trying to arrange two days of care for our youngest proved nearly impossible. Our eldest was attending day care three days a week but that service couldn't offer a place for our youngest until the next year. We managed to track down a spot in a family daycare but the double drop off was ludicrous and the arrangement only lasted two weeks.

We bit the bullet and hired the most delightful and divine nanny three days a week; we were paying her more than one of our salaries but until we could get our youngest into the same service as our eldest it was the only way I could accept the job offer of my dreams.

We took the short term financial hit. It was an investment in our family's future. Not just in financial terms – but socially and emotionally too.

The irony of almost not being able to take a dream job – on a proud publication focused on delivering news for women - due to the inaccessibility and unaffordability of early childhood education and care wasn't lost on me. My first editorial wrote itself.

To me it was so bleedin' obvious that women couldn't dream of finding any footing – let alone equal footing – without the provision of affordable, accessible early childhood education and care.

Twelve months later we moved across the bridge in search of additional living space. Our family had outgrown the two bedroom apartment we had rented for almost two years and we nabbed ourselves a little cottage with a backyard to rent on the other side of the city. It was heaven in every way except one.

We couldn't get the girls into an early learning and care service in our new suburb for another seven months. The only option was to keep them in the wonderful service on the other side of the bridge so six times a week I packed two children under four into the car before 7.30am ... to deliver them to the divine educators at KU Kira in Paddington a little

after 8, before embarking on my own way to the office. It felt like a daily endurance test – getting the three of us fed, dressed and out the door before 7.30am. The car ride involved games, snacks, songs...

I'd arrive at the office feeling shattered – but so happy – the easiest part of my day by far was sandwiched between the hours 8.30am and 5.30pm. Back in 2014 I extended an open invitation in writing to the Prime Minister and the Treasurer to come on one of my car rides just one morning – just to experience it. The invitation wasn't accepted. But I wrote it out of desperation. I desperately wanted someone – anyone - in a position of power to see up close what "choice" looked like.

Our experience wasn't isolated: trying to piece together care for our girls with work was a patchwork that felt desperately precarious – and yet without it life would have become far more precarious in different ways. Our intent – informed by both necessity and desire – was to invest in two careers. We didn't want all the eggs in one basket.

We didn't expect a leg up but just trying to keep two sets of feet on the ladder at all felt comically hard. Without family on hand nor an executive salary between us to cover a nanny, there was no margin for error. We both needed to work but, perversely, it felt like we could barely afford to. And we were then – as we remain – incredibly privileged.

We were both confident enough to back our future income capacity which meant – while tight – we could take the short term financial hit.

The near impossibility of the junction between work and family collided with my professional purpose. Women's Agenda was unapologetic and relentless in its application of a gender lens on the news and seeking to combat that. Gender inequity wasn't a concept we were willing to countenance as inevitable. It was a deliberate choice and we wanted that to change.

We wrote daily about sexism, harassment, the underrepresentation of women in decision making roles, the sexist tropes that trapped women, violence against women, and all of the manifestations of inequity... and day in, day out, we wrote that none of this would ever change by accident.

We were never going to stumble upon a more gender equal country in which women could enjoy the same degree of safety, respect and equity as men; it would only happen by dismantling the systemic barriers that hold women down and back. Pursuing evidence-based structural reform was the only path.

The evidence was – as it remains – incontrovertible and yet it seemed there was almost zero appetite to recognise this, let alone deal with it. We had a finance minister openly describe gender equity as a "side issue". The inequity itself was only part of the problem; the denial and dismissal felt just as seismic and maddening.



The frustration and impotence I felt back then for myself as well as families and the country planted the seeds from which my advocacy has grown.

It is how I came to be in the role I've held for the last 3 years at the helm of The Parenthood. I first became aware of The Parenthood in 2013 when I was writing for Women's Agenda. Their campaigns for better paid parental leave and improved early childhood education and care struck a chord. At Mamamia, Marie Claire and in my column at the Herald I wrote about their campaigns and policy priorities often.

This shared interest ultimately led to me joining the board in 2019. In May of 2020, when the Federal Government took the extraordinary step of making early learning fee free for parents, I stepped into the temporary role of campaign director.

Making early learning fee-free was one thing but having the Prime Minister and the Education Minister acknowledge early childhood education and care as an essential service, and fundamental to the education and development of children, was thrilling. It was completely unprecedented. The arrangement wasn't perfect, with educators and providers bearing the brunt, but it represented a paradigm shift. Early education was actually being recognised as critical infrastructure.

The campaign to prolong the fee free period was unsuccessful, but once I'd got a taste for the role, I accepted an invitation from the board to take on the role of CEO. After more than a decade commenting and reporting from the sidelines, it was time to get into the arena in a formal advocacy role. It was at the same time the Thrive By Five campaign kicked off.

It was a pretty febrile time with the country still coming to grips with a pandemic that rendered life as we knew it entirely different. It was particularly febrile for women.

Right around the world, while men and women contracted the virus in equal numbers, men died in greater numbers. But in a social and economic sense it was women - right around the world - who bore the disproportionate burden.

COVID conspired with so many of the fault lines that make women's economic and social security precarious - and compounded the damage. It disproportionately impacted women, exacerbated existing challenges and created a wider gulf of disadvantage, particularly for First Nations women, women with disability, LGBTIQ+ and culturally and racially diverse women.

Women were adversely affected by COVID19 on the frontline, in the economic aftermath and at home.

They were – as they remain - disproportionately represented in the workforces that were on the frontline of this crisis. As nurses and aged carers and disability support workers and



teachers and early educators: women dominated lots of the jobs which couldn't be done from home.

When COVID first hit, unemployment surged very quickly and while both men and women were affected, women lost their jobs in greater numbers.

In April 2020, 325,000 women became unemployed representing 55 per cent of all jobs lost in Australia. Female work hours reduced by 11.5 per cent, compared to a 7.5 per cent reduction in male hours during the same month.

In Victoria in July 2020 ABS figures showed women lost jobs five times faster than men did. In NSW it was double the rate.

Kate Jenkins warned at the time this was "laying the groundwork for some pretty serious poverty for women".

Women were congregated in industries hit hardest by COVID19 and over represented in casual employment which constituted a hefty double whammy of job and income losses.

In households with children, the social experiment known as lockdown created an additional six hours of work caring or supervising children. Of those 6 hours Lyn Craig's research found that in heterosexual nuclear families women took on four hours of them, while men took two.

On housework the pattern is similar. Women, on average, took on an additional 70 minutes a day while men did less than 30 minutes.

This impacted the capacity of women to engage in paid work.

Lots of women reduced their work hours during lockdown because it just wasn't possible to work and care the way they needed to. This is a cohort of women who technically might not have lost their jobs, or been on the frontline, but fell prey to COVID19.

We know that almost one in 10 Australian women in a relationship experienced domestic violence during the coronavirus crisis. The Australian Institute of Criminology surveyed 15,000 women aged 18 years and older online in May 2020 about their experience of domestic violence.

The research provides the most detailed information in the world about the prevalence and nature of domestic violence experienced by women during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The data reveals that 4.6 per cent of all women who responded to the survey—and 8.8 per cent of women in a cohabiting domestic relationship—experienced physical or sexual violence from a current or former partner in the three months prior to the survey.

Many women reported it was the first time their partner had been violent, while others said the violence was getting worse. For 33 per cent of these women, this was the first time they had experienced physical or sexual violence within their relationship.

Despite the well documented ways in which COVID was presenting difficulties for women, much of the recovery efforts were aimed at men.

Construction workers received million dollar packages while early educators - among the lowest paid workers in the country - were the only cohort of workers in Australia to have JobKeeper taken off them.

This was the context in which the then-biggest spending budget in Australia's history was handed down in October 2020.

In it, one third of one percent of the total budget deficit - \$240million - went to women's economic security. \$240million out of \$215billion deficit.

This was called out immediately across newspaper and broadcast coverages. From News.com, SMH, the ABC, Channel Nine, The Guardian ... all declared women the big losers in the budget.

The former sex discrimination commissioner Liz Broderick famously said if you don't intentionally include women in policies you will unintentionally exclude them ... and the Oct 2020 budget did just that. To say women were mad was an understatement.

It was my first Federal budget in this role and it was hectic. After writing a furious op-ed on the Tuesday night for Women's Agenda criticising the budget's failure to address the systemic drivers of women's economic security, I woke up on Wednesday primed for a media onslaught.

I did at least 5 TV interviews, more radio segments, provided lines to a number of print journalists and recorded a podcast. This was between managing three children in different locations on account of it being school holidays.

When an unknown number flashed up on my phone I thought nothing of it. This phonecall wasn't like the others. It was a senior member of staff in the Prime Minister's Office.

They didn't appreciate my criticism of the budget. I was told I was a public figure and what I said mattered. I should correct the record. The budget is for all Australians. Did I know the tax concessions applied to women and men? As a matter of fact I did. I also knew that unless women's income was the same as men's their benefit wouldn't be equal.

The conversation ended with a killer line. "No one credible" was criticising the budget.



I disagreed and promptly messaged as many women as possible – a broad church – and gave them a run down. I made a suggestion: Add #CredibleWomen to any budget-related tweets or posts on social media.

Within hours their collective efforts saw more than 15,000 tweets posted and kept #CredibleWomen as the top trending subject on Twitter in Australia for days.

The next day another major turning point occurred. The Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese made a bold pledge in his Budget Reply.

“Labor created Medicare – universal health care. We created the NDIS – universal support for people with a disability. We created superannuation – universal retirement savings for workers. And if I’m Prime Minister, I will make quality, affordable childcare universal too.”

It wasn’t just a line: a major reform of the CCS was announced too that recognised the high cost of early education **and** care and the impact it had on women and children. And the commitment was made to ask the PC to investigate how universal early childhood education and care could be delivered.

Early childhood education and care was **finally** on the map. Not being able to access or afford quality early childhood education and care remains the single biggest impediment to women’s workforce participation in Australia.

For many of the 80,000 parents and carers in The Parenthood community this is not just an abstract, hypothetical. It’s their reality. Inaccessible or unaffordable early learning is a barrier that impacts families day to day. And it’s not just a financial impact – it’s a barrier to additional support. To being able to feel plugged into a community. To forming your own village.

Our mission at The Parenthood is, quite deliberately, to make Australia the best place in the world to be a parent, because it is only when parents and caregivers are supported that children can thrive. For children to thrive and lead happy, healthy and productive lives, they need support, and so do their parents and carers¹.

Becoming a parent is a wonderful, life-changing experience but it is not without challenges and difficulties. It is never more wild than being a first time parent, inexplicably responsible for a teeny human with no operating manual.

Parenting and raising children matters. Every child, in every household, shapes our future. In raising children, parents and carers, communities and nations have the future in their hands. By the age of 5, 90% of a child’s brain is fully developed². The early years set the

¹ Equity Economics, Making Australia The Best Place In The World To Be a Parent, 2021

² Center on the Developing Child (2007), The Science of Early Childhood Development (InBrief).

foundations for life long optimal health, educational³, wellbeing and economic outcomes⁴. And yet too often the reality of raising children is minimised or dismissed. It's trivialised. Taken for granted.

The health, development and wellbeing of young children is inextricably linked with the health and wellbeing of their parents and caregivers. Twenty per cent of mothers experience depression and anxiety in the perinatal period (being pregnancy and the first year of parenthood), which is linked with adverse outcomes for children⁵. Suicide is one of the leading causes of maternal death in Australia⁶.

Families in Australia don't find it difficult to raise a family and provide for their family because they're doing it wrong. They're not making the wrong choices. It's hard because our systems are not fit for purpose. We have not invested in the infrastructure that parents need to be able to move between work and home.

In 2021 The Parenthood commissioned a piece of research exploring what policies would make Australia the best place in the world to be a parent. There were two threshold questions.

1. What are the policies that have the biggest positive impact on parents and children? and
2. Where does Australia rank in relation to them?

The findings were compelling. Three key policies could make Australia the best place in the world to be a parent. The same policies would also lift national productivity in the short and long term, reduce inequity and deliver better outcomes for children.

These policies are:

- Adequate and equitable paid parental leave. A world leading policy would offer 52 weeks of paid leave shared between parents.
- Universal access to affordable quality early childhood education & care delivered by a well paid and qualified workforce.
- Family-friendly workplaces that offer flexibility and a culture that values parenting among men and women.

Right now all three remain a pipe-dream for the vast majority of parents in Australia. After a decade of stagnation progress *is* underway. The significance and credibility of these issues has been affirmed.

³ Brennan and Pascoe (2017), *Lifting our Game*.

⁴ Mitchell Institute. *Preschool – Two Years are Better Than One*. 2016.

⁵ https://gidgetfoundation.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/GFA2019_WPP_DL_web.pdf

⁶ AIHW (2019), 'Maternal Deaths in Australia', <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mothers-babies/maternal-deaths-in-australia/contents/maternal-deaths-in-australia>



According to a UNICEF report from 2020, Australia is ranked 32 out of 38 wealthy countries on child wellbeing measures. The long term cost in social, health and economic terms to children, families, communities and the nation from failing in the early years is catastrophic.

At present, one in six Australian children live in poverty and one in five children in Australia arrive at school developmentally vulnerable. In rural and remote areas it's two in five. Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children half arrive at school developmentally vulnerable. The evidence is clear that children who arrive at school behind rarely, if ever, catch up to their peers. Children who attend quality early learning in the early years are half as likely to arrive at school behind. They enjoy lifelong advantages – in their health, education and wellbeing – as a result.

No credible conversation about growing the strength or sustainability of our communities, our country, our future or our economy can overlook access and affordability of quality early childhood education and care.

In economic terms, early childhood education and care is fundamental for women's workforce participation. The government's Cheaper Childcare package that will take effect from the 1st of July this year will result in 8 percent more hours being worked by secondary earners with young children – mostly mums.

Lowering the cost of care for these families will free up the equivalent of 44,000 additional full-time workers. Immediately. This potential workforce is right here. They're experienced, skilled and want to work more. Many of these cohort are already currently employed.

Of women in Australia aged between 25-40 with young children just 56% participate in paid work. Of these 61% work part time, one of the highest rates of part time work of any industrialised country.

High rates of part time work and lagging participation rates among women reflect that for too many families the cost of care is so high – or is so inaccessible – that two parents simply cannot afford to work. It is, almost invariably, mums who reduce or stop work as a result.

The Prime Minister Anthony Albanese recognised this “economic insanity” and made it a centrepiece policy in the May 2022 election. That it's front and centre in the Commonwealth government's economic reform is profoundly significant.

But, and this is a big but, to realise the increased productivity and myriad benefits for children we need an Early Childhood Education and Care sector that can accommodate the extra days that families will need in order to work additional days and hours.

Turnover in early learning has always been high sitting around 20%, which is considerably higher than the 12% rate in education generally. In the past year turnover has accelerated sharply and some services have reported turnovers rates between 30-40%.

There are at least 20,000 vacancies in early childhood education and care right now.



Staff vacancies have more than doubled since Covid19 first hit.

Every unfilled educator role impacts between six to twelve families. At the moment 16.4% of long daycare services are operating with a waiver because they don't have the staff they need. This workforce contracting is a problem for every child, employer and organisation in the country. Because if a parent cannot access suitable, quality care, they cannot access work. And if a child cannot access suitable quality ECEC they miss out.

Without early educators there is no early education. Without accessible, affordable, suitable early childhood education there can be no increased productivity, no tapping into the great unrealised 'iron ore' deposit that is female workforce participation, no systemic erosion of inequity and no chance to give every child in Australia access to the life-changing educational benefits of quality early learning.

The most significant obstacle that stands between where Australia is on all of these measures, and where we *could* stand on all these measures, is a strong and sustainable early childhood education and care workforce.

This is the moment we need to confront the reasons that early educators are leaving. We cannot ignore that in this sector, as with so many female-dominated workforces, skilled, valuable and demanding work is paid considerably less than less skilled, less valuable and less demanding work.

Women in female-dominated workforces earn between a quarter and one-third less than men with an equivalent qualification in male-dominated workforces.

The award commences with a rate of pay for a qualified certificate III educator of \$23.39 per hour and a centre director, role often degree-qualified, starts at \$35.17 per hour. The average median hourly rate in Australia is \$41.

Consider this gap in earnings revealed on the Labour Market Insights compiled by the National Skills Commission. The average take home pay for an early educator in Australia is \$1,059 per week. This compares with an entry level Building Labourer who, on average, takes home \$1,550 per week.

A survey of 4000 early educators in late 2021 showed that 73% of the workforce plan on leaving within three years. Pay is, undoubtedly, a big factor but so too are rising stress levels, not feeling valued or respected, and not enjoying secure employment. Feeling like they have to perpetually be doing more with less and burnout are real too.

Early educators are leaving because they feel like they cannot afford – financially or mentally – to stay. None of us can afford that. Not children. Not parents. Not employers. Not governments.

It is time to make the necessary investment in this nation-building infrastructure. Not just in making early education more affordable and more accessible for all children, but in ensuring we have a strong, sustainable and growing workforce.



If there is concern about the cost attached to this investment, let's remind ourselves that the cost of inaction is higher. We are already paying for a system that doesn't work well enough.

The average Australian woman misses out on \$693K in income & \$180K in super over the course of her life due to inadequate parenting policies. That is the motherhood penalty in Australia and it's individual mums who foot that bill.

We spend at least \$15billion every year on late intervention for children and young people. That is money that can be avoided by investing in the early years.

We know that for every dollar invested in early education programs we get at least \$2 in return. That is an investment – not a cost. And there is not a person or organisation in Australia that won't benefit from us making this investment now in an early education and care system that works.

The evidence is incontrovertible. The moment is upon us. It will pay for itself time and time again. It will help solve, at once, a number of significant economic and social challenges we're facing. The question is no longer *if* we should implement this bold reform but *when*. The only credible answer, is now.

By the end of the year the Productivity Commission will hand down an interim report mapping out a path towards universal access to early childhood education and care. May the report match the vision and legacy of Maybanke Anderson.