

A M A T U R E A P P R O A C H

Over the last 20 to 30 years, the Australian Government has looked to attract more women into the workforce through family-friendly policies, better childcare availability and anti-discriminatory legislation. But older women are still not well represented, the population is ageing, and a labour shortage is looming.

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THE labour force dilemma has been building for some time. Baby boomers have begun to retire, fertility rates have decreased, and life expectancy has increased. The Australian population is experiencing major demographic change: the proportion of our population aged 65-plus is projected to climb from 13.5 per cent to 23–25 per cent by 2056. We are moving into an era where an insufficient workforce will reduce Australia's capacity for economic development, and the reduced tax base may compromise our ability to provide basic community needs.

Having addressed many of the issues affecting women's capacity for paid work during their child-rearing years, the government's policy intention is now to increase the retention of older women workers. Removing the barriers to employment for older women is particularly important because, compared with men and younger women, they are currently much less likely to be in paid work. They are also a fast-growing demographic. 'Mum with

grown-up kids' is the likely face of Australia's future labour supply.

Unfortunately, research and policy attention on older workers has generally focused on men, and factors hindering the retention of older women in paid work are still poorly understood.

Associate Professor Siobhan Austen, Director of the Centre for Research in Applied Economics within the Curtin Business School, is addressing this knowledge gap through a range of research projects investigating women in the workforce. One project is on studying older women working in the aged care sector to identify the factors causing them to leave, or that would encourage them to stay.

"All of the bigger-picture problems in the labour market are exacerbated in this sector," explains Austen. "It's the perfect storm: due to the ageing population, it is a growing employment sector; it is a sector that is highly 'feminised' – about 90 per cent are women – with the median working age

around 50; and it is already experiencing labour shortages. It's a sector that needs to think about how it will hold on to its labour supply, and therefore how it responds to this particular workforce demographic."

The project began in 2011 with intensive data collection. Austen and co-researchers sent surveys to more than 7,000 women working in aged care across Australia, asking about the factors affecting their willingness to stay in their jobs. Data analysis is ongoing, but a number of trends are becoming clear.

"There are high numbers of 'intention to leave' evident," Austen says. "We asked workers if they had thought about leaving their role, and how frequently: 43.4 per cent reported having these thoughts sometime in the previous 12 months, with 12.4 per cent reporting having them at least once a month. That's a significant proportion of the workforce, and it correlates with other evidence in the aged care sector of high staff turnover."



In exploring the factors causing people to think about leaving, pay dissatisfaction correlated strongly with intention to leave. It is widely acknowledged that aged care workers are poorly paid considering the challenging nature of their work and the high levels of responsibility.

"It's not just that," Austen says. "A lot of the pay dissatisfaction also stems from the women's sense that their roles, although important, are undervalued by the community. There's almost a disrespect afforded to women working in the sector."

Another issue was the physical demands of the work, particularly with an ageing workforce. Many women found that previous workplace injuries ('bad backs' sustained earlier in their careers) became more problematic with age, and being on their feet all day became tiring.

Professor Gill Lewin, co-researcher in the Faculty of Health Sciences and Research Director at Silver Chain, adds: "The data showed that an employer's willingness to modify work roles, or improve the design of the work environment to reflect the physical capabilities of the workers, promoted the likelihood of older workers staying in employment."

"At the moment, legislation doesn't support someone asking for their work to be redesigned in order to cope with declining physical capacity associated with age. That contrasts with existing discrimination legislation, which allows people with disability to request that an employer adjust the work environment to enable them to function and continue to work. Age discrimination legislation needs to be strengthened to encompass this."

SOME issues were unique to the current generation of older women, also known as the 'sandwich generation'. These women often have dual-care responsibilities: they may be caring for dependant adult children, grandchildren and/or elderly parents. Thirty-four per cent of the workers surveyed reported they spent at least seven hours each week in an informal care role.

A related study by Austen and co-researcher Associate Professor Rachel Ong, from Curtin's School of Economics and Finance, investigated how the size of an informal care role affected the likelihood of older women retaining a job. Unsurprisingly, if the informal care role increased, the likelihood of retaining paid work decreased. But surprisingly, the impact was much larger for people in permanent full-time work. Even



with access to a range of leave provisions, people were not able to adequately manage changing care responsibilities. The issue seems to be inflexibility.

"Current leave provisions are not sufficient to enable people to accommodate their informal care roles," Austen says. "The leave provisions might not be generous or flexible enough, or able to be bundled to deal with an acute situation. The full-time job itself often has limited flexibility to manoeuvre: changing the working hours, reshaping the role or backfilling to cover a leave of absence."

SO what should be done?

The problems in the aged care sector are early warning indicators for the workforce as a whole.

"Policies are needed in the areas of workplace flexibility and leave provisions for general care responsibilities," says Austen, whose co-researchers also include Associate Professor Therese Jefferson, from Curtin's Graduate School of Business, and Professor Rhonda Sharp, from the University of South Australia.

"The right to request flexible working arrangements should be extended more

generally to all older workers. Similarly, carer's leave should be extended to the care of any dependant, not just children."

Ironically, this needs to be backed up with improved institutional support for informal carers, including the provision of affordable high-quality residential, day and respite care for the frail aged and those with disability. This will require more funding for the sector as a whole, which must also address the pay dissatisfaction generally felt by its workers.

These messages are reaching policymakers through Austen and Lewin's involvement in aged care reforms for the Australian Government's Productivity Commission, the Work + Family Policy Roundtable, the Advisory Panel on Positive Ageing and submissions to the Australian Law Reform Commission.

Luckily, the aged care sector is already on board: they have been involved in the data collection and want to know the outcomes of the research. They are looking to directly implement recommendations and strategies within their organisations, and are lobbying government directly. **■**