

## ***A Labor of Love: EMILY's List Gender Gap Research and the Care Economy***

**Tanja Kovac**

**National Co-ordinator, EMILY's List Australia**

---

*"I mind grandchildren one day a week and support four elderly parents aged between 81 & 84 years old when they need us – I spend about three days a week on that at the moment. I have a nephew who is dying of leukaemia so there's a support role for the family." – La Trobe Victoria*

*"I've been an absent parent for many years and have missed seeing my kids' first steps and that is a precious thing you don't want to miss out on. I've recently changed that to work from home – I don't want to miss out anymore." - Boothby South Australia*

*"I think the Government has a role to play to make things like this easier." - Macquarie NSW*

As EMILY's List Australia has done for the last 15 years, in the lead up to the Federal Election 2010, we commissioned Gender Gap Research, the private polling *of women, by women and for women* in six marginal seats to find out what women really need from Government. These comments were made in three different electorates – Latrobe in Victoria, Boothby in South Australia and Macquarie in NSW. Women said similar things in the other electorates of Bowman and Dickson in Queensland and Stirling in Western Australia.

Our research was fed, as it usually is, into ALP National Office and the Parliamentary leadership. Significantly, Labor gained only one of these seats.

Our polling revealed a consistent theme – the daily challenge women face juggling paid employment with their considerable care responsibilities.

Women in Australia are under extraordinary pressure. Pressure to maintain a work life, a family life and to give to the communities around them. The first time I heard the term "juggle struggle" it was when then Deputy Opposition Leader Gillard launched Virginia Haussegger's book, *Wonderwoman: The myth of having it all*<sup>1</sup>. Twelve months later I came to learn this term first hand, as I tried to juggle an 8 week old, employment without paid parental leave and my volunteering for the 07 Election.

At the centre of the challenge in women's daily lives is time to care. Our economy is so greedy for profit and growth and so dependent on labour to get it, that women are being pushed, pulled and pummelled into the workforce, with little recognition that they still carry the burden of the double shift at home. We are coming to realise, through the GFC and Climate Change debates that the market economy is built on falsehood, where phantom investments are traded between shifty corporate entities and profits are made without the true cost to the environment being levelled home to the carbon industry that caused them.

Women's lives are at the heart of the false economy. By failing to properly value care – formal paid care work, unpaid caring in the home and care in the community – mega profits and mega growth is nothing but an illusion.

This paper will explore three things:

1. How women care and the attitude of Australian women to caring responsibility
2. How a feminist discourse can help us shape a care economy
3. How Labor could elevate care as central to policy and a visionary thematic frame
  - a. Caring for Carers
  - b. Caring for the Nation
  - c. Caring for the environment

### **How women care and current women's attitudes to caring responsibility**

People care in five ways: we care for children, we care for the elderly, we care for the ill/infirm and we care for the community. We do this in a variety of paid and unpaid ways. Whether care is done for the traditional labour reward for a wage or out of love, affection and obligation – society and the economy has undervalued this work. This is because the provision of care is a highly gendered activity, with more women than men providing both paid and unpaid care.

Valerie Adams, in her important work for Security4Women, *Scoping the Australian Care Economy: A Gender Equity Perspective*, offered two helpful definitions – the concept of Formal Care Work (which is paid) and unpaid care (which is not). Formal care work includes the caring professions of nursing, educating, caring for the community. It encompasses women and men working in the aged care, childcare and counselling sectors. Unpaid care activities usually centre on the home where a care recipient – children, elderly or the infirm – are provided with assistance in the activities of daily living, such as feeding, dressing, toileting, bathing and communication<sup>ii</sup>. To these responsibilities, Carers Australia adds constant vigilance, supervision, encouragement and nurturing<sup>iii</sup>.

#### **Consider these statistics on Formal Care Work:**

- 93% of residential workers and 91% of community based workers in the residential and community aged care workforce are women
- 88.4% of care workers are female
- 90% of workers in nursing, therapies, pre-primary school teaching and child care are female

#### **Consider these statistics on Unpaid Caring** prepared by Access Economics for Carers Australia<sup>iv</sup>

- 64% of all primary and non-primary carers are women
- 71.3% of all primary caregivers are women.

Caring has been so devalued by the community, that the value of unpaid caring has never properly been assessed. Although there are intrinsic problems with attempting to assess the value of something that defies traditional characteristics of labour<sup>v</sup>, valuing care in economic terms is important work for Labor women.

Caring is statistically a feminised activity. Accepting the role women play in providing care is not taking on an essentialist feminist point of view, but responding to the lived fact of women's daily lives. Of course it would be nice for men to do more, but to date they haven't. The challenge is for policy and law reform advances that place the care economy and women's work at the centre of discussions about productivity and economic activity.

Why do we need to do this?

Feminism and the women's movement succeeded in helping women reach their full employment potential. This win has come at a cost. As the market's hunger for workforce participation grows, the productivity of women is now perceived by economists and Governments as essential to economic growth. How else to explain the raft of initiatives, including in the most recent Budget, designed to get women working and off post-child-caring welfare. Anne Manne, author of *Quarterly Essay, Love, Money and the Free Market* has argue that "maternalism" is under conscious attack by neo-liberals in both major parties. It is hard not to agree with this, given the frequency with which conservative think tanks such as IPA and CIS use the term "nanny state" to derogate any progressive, government intervention in the market.

Women feel the pressure. In 2005, former Treasurer Costello called on women of my generation (X) to have three children, "One for you, One for him and one for the nation". Women are under increasing pressure to procreate but also to rejoin the full time labour force as soon as possible, all while continuing to be the primary providers or organisers of household care.<sup>vi</sup> Any wonder carers have such a low wellbeing threshold<sup>vii</sup>.

The women EMILY's List polled were living examples of the strain, with care responsibilities for children, grandchildren and/or elderly relatives. Women talked about the pressure this put them under, especially where they were combining significant care responsibilities with paid work.

The women we polled did not feel that there were any advocates for them in the community or Parliament. Many women said they found information about support for carers difficult to access and that when information was finally available it was so complex that it simply added to their stress putting many women off obtaining help altogether. These women, swinging voters all of them, believe there is a role for government to play in educating carers about support available to them.

### **Elder Care**

The biggest care challenge for women is care of elderly loved ones. Many women in our groups found the aged care system inadequate and very difficult to navigate. They did not feel that the quality and cost of aged care facilities were appropriate and those who had caring responsibilities for elderly parents did not feel supported. This group of women, mostly in their mid to late 50's are part of the "sandwich generation"; a generation of women who are caring for children while at the same time helping elderly relatives<sup>viii</sup>. Many of these women are also trying to engage in full or part time work. One woman in the marginal Labor seat of Latrobe, in the outer suburbs of Melbourne said it best. *"My whole life is taken up looking after my three kids and my 80 year old mother."*

### **Lack of Time to Care**

Rebecca Huntley, Executive Director of the Ipsos Mackay Polling company, the oldest and most reputable poll in Australia, recently reported that the single most distressing thing for Australian people is their concern over the pressure of working too many hours and not spending time with their families. A recent *Mind and Mood Survey* commissioned by Ipsos Mackay reported that while people were feeling relatively positive about job security, they were becoming increasingly irate

about their employment conditions, in particular long hours of work and lack of wage increases since the GFC.

The ACTU's Your Rights to Work campaign was successful, not because it signified an end to Workchoices, but because it tapped into a pervasive concern in the electorate that the work – work for an every hungry marketplace was eroding time to care for children, family and the community.

Rather than juggle the competing demands of paid work and care, many carers tend to reduce their paid working hours or exit the workforce altogether. It is hard to blame women for “opting out”. The wage inequity that working in caring professions results in when compared to other occupations and industries, coupled with the lack of childcare, flexible working hours and other strategies to combat the juggle struggle make the lives of women the policy frontline. This is a battleground that Labor must engage.

### **What feminist discourse says about the care economy**

The task of feminism will be incomplete until there is a reorganisation of society that recognises time to care – fundamental and feminised labour - at the centre of economy. Feminist discourse, far from being a radical rump of economic thought, through envisioning a care economy, provides inspiration for re-visioning the market.

Security4Women summarised the care economy as follows:

*“The care economy is a relatively new but highly significant concept with increasing importance for the economic wellbeing of citizens, especially women. The notion of the care economy arose out of feminist critiques of mainstream economics which traditionally only considered goods and services produced in the market economy as productive. Looking at care as an economic activity makes women’s work visible so it can be valued, exposing the tension between unpaid work in the home, voluntary work in the community, and paid work in the market.”<sup>ix</sup>*

*“The concept of the care economy impacts on both macro and micro economic reform, providing a theoretical basis for the entire economy: regional, state, national or global, while also reforming economics closer to home, from the perspective of households.*

*By challenging the assumption that economic actors are non-relational, detached individuals who make decisions based on individual choice, feminist discourse on the care economy asserts the interdependence of people across the life course, from birth to old age. The care economy focuses on providing for human need, rather than the production of goods and services<sup>x</sup>.*

Some feminist economists who have championed the care economy have called for unpaid carers and housewives to be given wage. This solution, like many from second wave feminists, merely brings the market into the home, commodifying care in a way that is unlikely to do anything but harm for women in the long-term. Although this is not a position I advocate for, there is utility in economic analysis of the time women and men spend caring in the home.

A feminist economic perspective promises us a new economy, where we focus not on the labour of workers, but on their time. Making these reforms relies on women in the Labour movement demanding better economic data on when, where and how often women (and men) make time to care. Labor initiatives need to focus on winning back for workers unpaid time to care from the market. Valuing time to nurture the young, old and sick is essential to changing the inhumane face of global capital.

Acknowledging the value of time to care will have both micro and macro-economic impacts.

Time to care would elevate part time work as a common sense way to engage in formal paid work. Women know this instinctively and through learned experience. Our job, as Labor women is to extend opportunities for women and men to engage in part time work and to protect part time workers from discrimination and career inequity. From a macroeconomic level, valuing time and care through part time work provides a possible solution to unemployment and a legitimate brake on unsustainable demands for growth.

### **How Labor could use a care economy to shape policy and frame debate**

Cognitive Linguist, Professor George Lakoff argues that the way citizens understand public policy debates is based on deeply held values ingrained from birth. These values have highly gendered origins, being based on either a “strict father” or a “nurturant mother” model of parenting, with the conservative world view leading to the former and a progressive world view leading to the other. Lakoff argues that conservatives manipulate language and frames better than progressives, winning elections by appealing to deeply held values of swinging voters. Lakoff urges progressives to abandon trying to outdo conservative language and frames and start articulating policies which appeal to deeply held progressive values, such as empathy and understanding.

Nothing explains the nurturant world view better than language of care. Policies which recognise the care economy do more for Labor than simply provide a short-term point of difference from the Coalition. A care economy provides a whole of government policy framework, a long term progressive vision for Australia. In the same way that conservative think tanks have spent years demonising taxation, the elevation of the care economy by progressives would serve to recast the market in a more humane way. Care could be used to explain health, education, environmental, immigration and economic policies.

This means not just adopting policies which care for carers (microeconomic reform), but also adopting policies that make care a part of macroeconomics, the big picture of Australian society.

### **Where to from here?**

The following are policy ideas that Labor women at this conference might consider advancing as part of suite of care economy reforms. These recommendations are a synthesis of the important work of women’s NGO’s, feminist academics and advocates, especially the work of Security4Women, the Australian Work + Family Policy Roundtable and EMILY’s List Australia.

Care for Carers - Macro reforms

1. Data collection on the value of formal paid care and unpaid caring. Adopt the Security4Women recommendation that the Australian Bureau of Statistics:
  - a. undertake regular Time Use Surveys in the same year as the Census of Population and Housing to inform decisions regarding support for unpaid care work
  - b. produce satellite accounts in line with the international System of National Accounts so that estimates of the value of unpaid care services are available for comparison with the value of Gross Domestic Product.

#### Care for Carers - Micro reform activities

2. An extension and expansion of Maternal and Child Health Services into Care Hubs, providing women and men support across their life course with accessing child, aged and disability care. Maternal and Child Health Services are trapped in a timewarp, where women's lives were impacted only by the care of children.
3. Progressively extend Paid Parental Leave from 18 weeks to 12 months.
4. Elevate the importance of part-time work to society and the economy
  - a. Increase minimum entitlements to paid and unpaid personal or carer's leave from 10 days to 20 days a year.
  - b. Increases in paid and unpaid leave to cover family, friend and neighbourhood care, similar to parental leave provisions, to assist carers to participate in the labour market. (Security for Women)
  - c. Extend the right to request flexible working arrangements should be extended in a timely manner to include all carers of children and adults and ultimately all employees in line with international best practise (Netherlands, Germany, UK, New Zealand)
  - d. If an employer refuses to grant a request for flexible working arrangements, there should be a robust and transparent system of review. This should be through normal workplace grievance mechanisms covering other National Employment Standards. A refusal should only be allowed where it is reasonable, based on balancing the needs of the employee and employer
  - e. To increase access to flexible working arrangements for part-time and casual workers, potentially discriminatory provisions such as 'preferred hours' clauses should be expressly prohibited in individual flexibility agreements (IFAs). IFAs should be lodged with the Fair Work Ombudsman for specific scrutiny, and audited as part of regular industry and sector audits<sup>xi</sup>
  - f. narrow the quality gap between part- and full-time jobs
  - g. prohibit discrimination on the basis of hours worked
5. Support a Share the Care Education Campaign encouraging democratic distribution of labor in the home.
6. Payment of the superannuation guarantee during unpaid parental leave is an urgent goal
7. Gender Pay Equity
  - a. Support for the implementation of the Equal Pay Claim made by community sector workers
  - b. act promptly on the recommendations in the House Standing Committee's 2009 *Making it Fair* report

- c. make gender pay equity an explicit objective of the *Fair Work Act 2009*
- d. establish a specialist Pay Equity Unit to monitor progress and champion strategies to address inequity

### Care for the Nation

- 8. Tax Time Budget Statement and Thank You Card Show that Government care's about the tax payer's investment in the country. Deliver an easy to read account of where the money is being spent with the Notice of Assessment and a thank you card.

### Care for the Environment

- 9. Recast Labor's contribution to the climate change mitigation as care for the environment. If you care for the environment, you care about a carbon tax.

### Conclusion

Super profits are built on super-market failures or falsehoods. They are built on the use of national resources without adequate recompense to the public purse; they are built without taking into account the environmental costs to the planet or the health costs to people. Where communism and socialism failed to humanise global capital, feminism may still succeed.

Since 2007, Labor has made significant improvements in the support for Australian working carers including the right to request flexible working arrangements as a National Employment Standard and a new duty on employers to reasonably accommodate parental and carer responsibilities. But there is more to do.

What the boys in head offices across the country, and in Labor think tanks and trade unions fail to appreciate is the significance of winning the women's vote. In each of the six, marginal seats EMILY's List Australia polled, the percentage of people employed in caring professions was higher than the National Average. We know that the majority of these voters are women. This is why a well-timed, strategic release of Equal Pay for the Community Sector along with policies designed to alleviate the double shift women have to do at home, would have gone a long way to swinging more than just one of those marginal seats.

The elevation of caring labour will lead to a more caring, and electable, Labor.

<sup>i</sup> Virginia Haussegger Wonderwoman: The Myth of Having it All

<sup>ii</sup> Security4Women, Scoping the Care Economy Final Report 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> Access Economics for Carers Australia, The Economic Value of Informal Care

<sup>iv</sup> Security4Women, Scoping the Care Economy Final Report 2010

<sup>v</sup> Security4Women, Scoping the Care Economy Final Report 2010

<sup>vi</sup> Anne Manne, Love, Money and the Free Market, Quarterly Essay

<sup>vii</sup> Research into the subjective wellbeing of carers found that carers have the lowest health and wellbeing of any group yet researched; female carers have lower wellbeing than male carers; and in terms of household composition, the most disadvantaged group are sole parents Security4Women Scoping the Care Economy Final Report 2010.

<sup>viii</sup> Security4Women Scoping the Care Economy Final Report 2010.

<sup>ix</sup> Security4Women Scoping the Care Economy Final Report 2010.

<sup>x</sup> Security4Women Scoping the Care Economy Final Report 2010

