Invisible Fathers

How Commonwealth gender equality policy shapes men's caregiving

If we want men to care, what kind of *father* does policy actually recognise?

A qualitative study of policy as text, practice and culture across 100+ Commonwealth documents, senior policymaker interviews, and public discourse analysis.

THE PUZZLE

We increasingly invite fathers to care more —
yet the share of care remains unequal.

THE INVITATION



Care.



Take leave.



Work flexibly.

> Many fathers say they want to be present and emotionally engaged with their children.
>
> Yet the division of care remains stubbornly unequal.

THE EXPLANATIONS WE ALREADY KNOW



WORK
hours, availability, workplace expectations



MONEY
earnings, income replacement, household budgets



NORMS
who is expected to work; who is expected to care



POLICY?

What if policy is not merely responding to family choices, but helping to construct the conditions in which those choices are made?



Policy can make one choice easy, another expensive, another risky; and some roles barely visible at all.



MY RESEARCH

Policy doesn't just set rules. It shapes who, and what we see.

THE LARGER RESEARCH PROJECT



My doctoral research examines how law, policy and culture shape our understanding of masculinity and fatherhood — and in turn, how this influences boys' and men's sense of identity and belonging, and the roles and choices they see as available to them.



TODAY'S FOCUS



What does Commonwealth policy tell us about fathers and caring men?



Instead of asking whether fathers choose to care, I ask what makes men's choices visible, feasible, and supported by policy.



Policy can make men's caregiving easier or harder, shaping the choices realistically available to families.



METHODOLOGY

No single source tells the whole story. I looked at policy from three different angles.

1. WHAT POLICY SAYS



100+ Cth documents

Legislation, explanatory memoranda, second reading speeches (2RS), national strategies, national plans, reports + implementation material.



Reading one policy document can make sense in its own context. Looking across many documents reveals the bigger pattern.

2. HOW POLICY IS MADE



20+ policymaker interviews

Senior Commonwealth policy makers across the federal government departments responsible for social policy (gender equality, care, health, anti-discrimination, family).



Interviews with policymakers reveal the thinking behind policy decisions: including what gets noticed, prioritised, or overlooked.

3. WHAT POLICY SIGNALS



Public discourse + contrast

Selected media and public-discourse cases, plus international material and interviews used as a point of contrast.



Media and public discussion show how policy ideas about men are picked up, repeated, or challenged; and what policy can signal about our values, priorities and expectations.



Across all three, I asked: What problem is being solved? | Where do men appear? | What role are they given?

FINDING

Men appear in policy, but usually in a limited set of roles.

FIVE RECURRING SUBJECT POSITIONS

1	PERPETRATOR / RISK	Men become visible where policy manages violence, harm or risk.
2	BENCHMARK	Men's outcomes become the reference point against which women's disadvantage is measured.
3	INSTRUMENTAL CARER	Men's care is often given greater policy attention when it advances another goal — particularly women's workforce participation.
4	HEALTH SUBJECT	Men become most visible in the health system. E.g. poorer outcomes, risk factors or intervention needs.
5	CONDITIONAL / AT THE EDGES	To a limited degree, men are recognised in care and equality policy, but their own gendered needs and barriers to equality are rarely the starting point.

WHAT DO WE SEE LESS OF IN POLICY?

The ordinary, pro-social, caring man.

Men are less visible in policy when things are going well — as carers and positive contributors, with needs, interests and rights of their own, and as people who can benefit from gender equality in their own right.

How policy sees men is not fixed. It has been shaped over time, and it can be shaped differently.

CONTRAST CASE

Norway shows that men as equality subjects can be built into the policy architecture.

MEN'S LIVES

40+ years of policy attention to men. Two national Men's Commissions (1986 and 2024) examined men's equality challenges across family, work, health, education, violence, and exclusion.

TIME WITH CHILDREN

Father-specific paid parental leave: 15 weeks, non-transferable, paid at replacement wage (this initiative was a direct result of recommendations arising from the 1986 Men's Commission). Caring discrimination protections explicitly cover both fathers and mothers.

EXPANDED POLICY

Both men's and women's experiences are recognised in public policy. For example, domestic violence refuges are required to provide beds for both men and women (government mandate), and joint parental responsibility is the legal starting point in family law proceedings.

VOICE + REPRESENTATION

Funded men's policy / civil-society infrastructure, including a nationally funded gender-equality centre focused specifically on men's issues.



In Norway, men are explicitly included as beneficiaries and recipients in public policy.

How policy sees men is not fixed. It has been shaped over time, and it can be shaped differently.

THE MISSING MIDDLE

Policy has clear ways of seeing men when something is wrong.
What about when things are going well?

Men are easy to see when things go wrong.

- Risk.
- Violence.
- Poor health.
- Disengagement.
- Manosphere.

Men are harder to see when things go well.

- Caring.
- Contributing.
- Engaged.
- Doing well.

Men are also seen through what they can achieve for others.

- Supporting women's work participation.
- Reducing the care load.
- Allyship.

Caring men aren't missing in our community.
What's less visible is the policy built around their needs and experiences.

Norway shows that policy can make the "missing middle" more visible and better supported — to the direct benefit of men, women, and their families.

A CONCRETE EXAMPLE

Paid parental leave: Dad can meet every test, and still depend on Mum's eligibility.

MUM

- ✓ Meets work test
- ✓ Meets income test
- ✓ Meets residence rules

CAN QUALIFY

Dad does not also have to meet the work test.

DAD

- ✓ Meets work test
- ✓ Meets income test
- ✓ Meets residence rules

STILL NOT NECESSARILY ENOUGH

Birth mother must also meet the work test.

If she doesn't → he can be ineligible too.

WHAT DO THE RULES MEAN?

From 1 July 2026:
20 days / 4 weeks reserved for the other parent.

Mum's eligibility can stand on its own.

Dad's eligibility can depend on both his own work-test eligibility and hers.

Fathers are recognised as carers — but often conditionally, rather than in their own right.

EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Fathers more likely to experience caregiving discrimination.

Consistent finding regardless of study design (experimental, vignette, longitudinal, qualitative, quantitative)

Berdahl (2007)	Harassment targets gender norm-violators, not just women.
Berdahl et al. (2018)	Workplaces function as "masculinity contests", pushing men toward dominance & availability, and punishing men who don't fit.
Vinkenburg et al. (2012)	Fathers who reduced hours to share caregiving scored lowest of all candidate profiles; below full-time mums.
Ewald (2018)	Fathers seeking flexible work faced reputational damage, stalled promotions and self-censorship.
Rudman & Mescher (2013)	Fathers requesting leave rated lower on commitment and leadership than mothers requesting leave.
Kelland (2022)	Caregiving fathers lost workplace standing once they took an active caregiving role.
Coltrane et al. (2013)	Fathers taking caregiving leave experienced earnings losses over time — similar to the motherhood penalty.
Petts et al. (2025)	Fathers' leave was approved only up to a threshold, then rated negatively; mothers received increasing approval.
Berdahl & Moon (2013)	Men displaying caregiving traits faced significantly higher gender harassment.
Chung et al. (2026)	When remote work was framed as a parental benefit, fathers suffered a steeper reputational fall than mothers.

THE NEXT TEST

What happens when a father actually takes the invitation to care seriously?

THE EXPECTED MALE WORKER "BREADWINNER"

Full time.

Continuously available.

Work comes first.

DAD MOVES INTO CARE

- Asks for flexibility
- Leaves at 3pm for childcare
- Takes parental leave
- Reduces his hours

THE POLICY QUESTION

If he encounters a penalty because he crossed the breadwinner boundary into caregiving — can public policy see it?

The behaviour we say we want, can collide with institutions organised around an older male role.

THE STRUCTURAL CONSEQUENCE INSIDE THE FAMILY

A barrier to Dad's care does not stop with Dad.
Policy shapes the choices realistically available to men *and* their families.

UPSTREAM

Policy conditions make father's care harder to recognise or support, or costlier

→

FAMILY RESPONSE

The family adapts to the constraint

→

DOWNSTREAM PATTERN

Dad: more paid work
Mum: more routine care

WHAT CAN FOLLOW

→ Greater maternal care load → Less paternal care time → More parental strain → Narrower family choice

A FAMILY DECISION

Who takes the leave?
Who reduces hours?
Who stays attached to paid work?

The eventual arrangement can look like preference.
But what looks like preference can partly reflect
the conditions in which families had to choose.

THE FINDING

The caregiving gap isn't only cultural. It is also institutional.

To date, Australian policy has done more work in seeing men through the categories of:

Perpetrator / Risk; Benchmark; Instrumental Carer; Health Subject; Conditional/Peripheral

What senior policymakers say when asked about developing public policy for men:

"It's a delicate space, I would say, for us"
"People associate masculinities as being a bad thing"
"Men's discrimination policy doesn't sit quite as comfortably"
"It is a very contested space"
"Am I fearful that [men's interest groups] would then turn into a right-wing misogynist group? Yes, I would be"

But, policy can expand to see, support and protect men's caring:

See the missing middle, and design systems that recognise pro-social, caring masculinities and caregiving men (fathers)



The argument is not that policy causes the care gap. It is that policy helps to organise the environment in which men are most coherently seen, and how work, money, norms and family preferences subsequently operate.

WE'VE ASKED THIS KIND OF QUESTION BEFORE

Policy has long asked what makes participation genuinely possible

WOMEN → WORK + PUBLIC LIFE

We built policy tools to make participation possible.

SUBJECTHOOD	Women as primary beneficiaries of policy in their own right.
ANTI-DISCRIMINATION	Legal protection against caregiving discrimination
PAID PARENTAL LEAVE (PPL)	Time + income to support participation in work and care
FLEXIBILITY	Work designed to accommodate caring responsibilities
DATA + TARGETS	Inequality is measured, made visible and tracked
ADVOCACY + INSTITUTIONS	Dedicated voice, expertise, accountability and policy machinery for women's interests

MEN → CARE + FAMILY LIFE

Have we built the same policy tools around men's participation in care?

SUBJECTHOOD	What standing do caring men have as beneficiaries of policy in their own right?
ANTI-DISCRIMINATION	Limited / fewer protections for fathers (see 116# Lightning Talk)
PAID PARENTAL LEAVE (PPL)	Does PPL recognise fathers' caregiving independently and make it feasible (commensurate time, income support)
FLEXIBILITY	Formal access may be equal, but fathers can face greater penalties for using it to care.
DATA + TARGETS	Do we measure the barriers men face when moving into care?
ADVOCACY + INSTITUTIONS	Where is the policy voice, expertise and accountability for men's movement into care?

The barriers are not identical. The policy question, is whether men's movement into care has received the same seriousness of structural thinking.

THREE QUESTIONS, THREE PAPERS

Recognition is only the first condition of genuine caregiving choice.

AIFS #114: Invisible Fathers paper

Q: CAN POLICY SEE HIM?

How does policy construct caring men, and fathers?

AIFS #115: Paid to Serve, Unpaid to Care paper

Q: CAN HE AFFORD TO CARE?

What does policy signal about the value of care with other forms of socially valuable work?

AIFS #116: When Equality Law Doesn't Protect Male Caregiving paper

Q: IS HE PROTECTED WHEN HE DOES?

What happens when men cross over from the breadwinner role into caregiving?

- Recognition
- Feasibility
- Protection
- Measurement
- Institutional Pathways
- Belonging



Wanting fathers to care is not the same as creating the structural and policy conditions in which fathers can care.

Q&A

Contact details:

E. Diana.Riley@anu.edu.au

M. 0493 391 632

LI. www.linkedin.com/in/drriley-werisetogether

Connect on LinkedIn