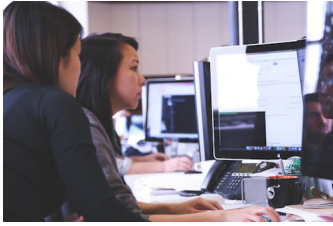


What we miss when we focus on the gender wage gap

Written by The Conversation



Beyond the gender wage gap there is a problem of persistent underemployment. Pexels

The gender pay gap currently [stands at 23%](#) in Australia, but this statistic alone does not capture the full problem. If you don't have a job, the opportunity to work enough hours, or good working conditions, then wage parity is a secondary issue.

The latest data show [9.4% of the female workforce](#) had insufficient hours of work, compared to just 5.7% of the male workforce.

Around 400,000 women of working age are unemployed in Australia and [71.6% of all part-time employees](#) are women.

And since women of all working ages in Australia [have attained higher qualifications than men](#) , we are not maximising the potential of our workforce. There is now [plenty](#) of [research](#) showing that fully utilising the female workforce leads to higher economic growth.

According to the [Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work](#) , there has been a significant increase in insecure work over the past 30 years. Insecure work includes working conditions with unpredictable pay, inferior rights and entitlements, limited or no access to paid leave, irregular or unpredictable working hours, and uncertainty over the length of a job.

And as women make up the majority of both [casual](#) and [part-time](#) workers, insecure work disproportionately affects women.

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As we have seen in both [the public sector](#) and in [higher education](#), many women are forced into part-time work because organisations are trying to reduce costs. Budget cuts in government agencies led to caps on full-time and permanent positions. Hiring on casual or fixed-term contracts makes it easier for the public sector to cut back and react to government restructuring.

The Australian higher education sector [has one of the highest rates of casual employment](#) of any industry. The increase in casual academic staff coincided with simultaneous cuts in government funding and increases in student numbers.

Women made up 61% of the respondents in a [survey of casual employees in the higher education sector](#). An inability to plan finances and the unpredictability of work were major concerns for casual employees. But the survey also revealed that there is little on-the-job training or oversight, and job opportunities mainly came about due to personal relationships.

What to do about it

[Research shows](#) that more than 10% of women working part-time would like to work more hours. Those who wish to return to permanent work after childcare can find they are [trapped](#) in a cycle of casual jobs, with limited pathways to better employment.

A [number of things](#) can be done to improve women's outcomes in the workforce. For companies, these include having more women in executive positions, recruiting employees through agencies rather than personal networks, and making workplaces more flexible by allowing for job sharing, flextime and telecommuting etc. But we should [also ensure](#) there is better access to leave, stronger anti-discrimination laws, as well as policies to ensure equal representation of male and females in part-time work.

These may reduce not only gender equity issues, but also help [improve overall workplace participation rates](#).

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With [increasing insecure work](#), ensuring balanced quotas for males and females in part-time roles may result in more work and equity for all. If part-time or flexible work is here to stay, we need to ensure it is for all. Doing so would boost economic growth and gender equality at the same time.

Petrina Coventry does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

Read more <http://theconversation.com/what-we-miss-when-we-focus-on-the-gender-wage-gap-80536>