Finance Sector Union

The leave revolution

The case for universal paid parental leave

A report by the Finance Sector Union | September 2026

FSU member Nicholas Mohr, with his newborn daughter in 2025.

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Executive summary

Over the last century, Australia has seen significant changes in the way parental leave is shared between parents as well as the amount of leave available to families on the birth of a child.

Today, a quiet revolution is taking place in Australian workplaces when it comes to paid parental leave (PPL) – and the finance sector is leading the way.

Specifically, a growing number of employers are moving away from primary and secondary carer models towards a universal PPL scheme. In other words, towards a gender-neutral scheme that allows both parents to access PPL equally.

Today, 31 percent of finance employers provide universal PPL.

As a result of this shift, **men are now taking PPL at similar or higher rates than women in some parts of the finance sector.**

This shift hasn't happened by accident. It's thanks to finance workers fighting for systemic changes to how PPL is implemented, who has access to it, and importantly, who takes it.

At a glance:

- **Removing the distinction between primary and secondary carers can contribute to a more equal use of parental leave.**
- **Where universal PPL is provided at full replacement wages and actively supported by employers, men are much more likely to take the leave available to them.**
- **Policy design is only part of the picture. Workplace culture, active encouragement and practical measures that make it possible for workers to take extended leave all play an important role.**

This report traces the evolution of parental leave in Australia, and argues for a new model that combines a universal PPL scheme with full replacement wages and a workplace culture that actively supports people to take leave.

In particular, finance workers are calling on all employers to commit to a simple principle: that both parents get the same paid leave, at the same rate, with no "primary carer" hoops to jump through.

In other words, paid parental leave should belong to the parent, not the gender.

Who cares? A century of work and family

A century ago, paid work and unpaid care were divided very differently in Australian families. Women's participation in paid work was much lower, particularly after marriage. Today, most working-age women participate in the workforce[1.]

In 1907, the Harvester Decision established an important principle behind Australia's minimum wage: workers should receive a "fair and reasonable" wage sufficient to meet the basic needs of a family, rather than having wages determined solely by the market. It set this wage as enough to meet "the normal needs of the average employee, regarded as a human being living in a civilised society". The wage was calculated around the needs of a male worker, his wife and three children, the "family wage". It reflected the prevailing division of work and care, where men were expected to undertake paid work, while women were expected to perform unpaid domestic and caring work.

It was within this framework of work and care that many of the workplace policies we recognise today were developed.

1920s – 1960s: Work changed, care didn't

Women's workforce participation increased gradually over the following decades. In the 1920s just one in four women were in paid employment. Participation increased during World War II as women entered jobs previously held by servicemen. Although many left paid work after the war, attitudes were changing and more married women returned to work during the 1950s, often in part-time roles, such as teaching, nursing, clerical, and retail roles.

By the mid-1960s, women's workforce participation had reached 37 percent, compared with almost 85 percent for men[2.]

1970s and 1980s

The 1970s brought major reforms that supported women's participation in paid work, including equal pay decisions, the removal of the marriage bar[3], anti-discrimination laws and greater access to contraception.

Maternity leave (52 weeks leave with 12 weeks paid) and paid paternity leave (one week) were also introduced for federal public servants.

In 1979, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) won a test case that established a standard (unpaid) maternity leave entitlement for permanent workers. Many elements of that entitlement remain today, although it did not extend leave to men.

In the 1980s there was an increase in dual-income households, tertiary-educated women, and greater use of part-time work and childcare.

1. www.fwc.gov.au/about-us/history-sir-richard-kirby-archives/waltzing-matilda-and-sunshine-harvester-factory [accessed 29.07.2026]
2. www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-australia/jun-2026 [accessed 30.07.2026]
3. The "Marriage bar" refers to legislation passed in the early 1900s that barred married women from being employed in the public service – a mechanism to protect the jobs of men.

Another ACTU test case extended unpaid maternity leave to adoptive parents, although the entitlement remained available only to women. Paid maternity leave was still largely confined to the public sector.

> "At the time I had children, there was no paid maternity leave or paid parental leave, which financially was difficult."
>
> *Sangeetha, Bank worker, Western Australia*

1990s

In 1990, the ACTU won a parental leave test case that sought to equalise access to leave for men. The Commission's decision brought maternity, paternity and adoption leave together under award provisions and extended adoptive leave to both parents.

In 1994, the provisions were expanded to a universal right to unpaid parental leave.

Enterprise bargaining also expanded during the 1990s, creating new opportunities for workers and unions to negotiate pay and conditions above award standards.

In the finance sector, paid maternity leave began to be formalised through enforceable enterprise agreements. Initially, aside from the Commonwealth Bank, which had a 12-week entitlement prior to privatisation, most leading agreements provided for six weeks' leave.

> "To someone who had their children 30 years ago the current maternity leave government payment seems good. I was lucky to have 12 weeks' leave from my employer, but a lot of my friends did not even get that."
>
> *Kerry, Bank worker, South Australia*

2000s – towards a federal PPL scheme

By the 2000s, all the large finance employers and most smaller employers offered some form of paid maternity leave. Paid paternity leave was less common and, where available, was generally limited to one or two weeks around the time of the birth of the child.

By the middle of the decade, momentum was building for a universal, federally funded PPL scheme. Following the election of the Rudd Labor Government in 2007, the Productivity Commission was asked to investigate options for a national scheme. This ultimately led to the introduction of a federally funded scheme providing eligible working mothers with 18 weeks of paid leave at the minimum wage.

FSU campaign: We Say... "Put Paid Parental Leave in the Budget 2009"

2010s

The 2010s marked the beginning of a broader shift towards more inclusive parental leave policies.

The federally funded PPL scheme came into force. This led some employers to 'top up' the scheme's minimum wage payment to full replacement wages for 18 weeks. Most of the large finance employers continued to offer 12–16 weeks of PPL at full replacement wages in addition to the federally funded scheme.

Over the decade, employers also began moving away from separate maternity and paternity leave entitlements towards gender-neutral "primary" and "secondary" parental leave, but this shift did not result in a corresponding increase in the number of men taking primary parental leave.

In 2013, the federal government expanded the federally funded scheme to provide two weeks "Dad and Partner Pay" to "secondary carers" at the minimum wage. Private-sector employers also began changing their policies to support greater access to paid leave for fathers and partners. The take-up of *Dad and Partner Pay* remained low, with the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) finding just one percent of families accessed the scheme between 2013 and 2022[4].

4. aifs.gov.au/all-research/research-reports/take-parental-leave-pay-and-dad-and-partner-pay-among-australian pg 6 [accessed 14.08.2026]

> “I think it is vital for both parents to be able to spend quality time with their newborn, it helps develop a special bond for parent and baby. Some of my best memories are the times I have spent with both of my daughters when they were babies, and I think it is vital for the development of the children in their formative years to spend that time with their parents.”
>
> *David, Bank worker, Western Australia*

In the finance industry, it became standard for fathers to have access to between two and four weeks’ paid leave at full replacement. In the early part of the decade, leave for fathers was framed around supporting the birth parent and newborn, rather than enabling fathers to become the primary carer. Employers also increasingly paid superannuation on the unpaid portion of (primary) parental leave, in part as a measure to attract and retain workers.

Following the election of the Coalition Government in 2013, the federally funded scheme remained largely unchanged for the remainder of the decade.

During this time, leading private-sector employers continued to expand their parental leave policies, with parental leave gradually moving from *maternity* and *paternity* leave, to *primary* and *secondary* carer models. In some cases, this included genuinely gender-neutral leave, providing equal access and entitlements for both parents. The transition was gradual and uneven, with larger employers generally among the first to change.

2020s – towards 'shared care'

The 2020s have seen a marked shift in how Australians balance work and care. At the beginning of the decade, the federally funded PPL scheme had remained largely unchanged since the introduction of two weeks of Dad and Partner Pay in 2013. While the scheme provided financial support for parents to take time off work, its design did little to encourage a more equal sharing of care.

In 2022-23, more than 99 percent[5] of people accessing the scheme were women. Data on the uptake of employer-funded PPL showed a similar pattern. Although 92 percent of private-sector employers made primary PPL available to both men and women, women accounted for 87 percent of those accessing primary PPL in 2021–22[6].

Following the election of the Albanese Labor Government in 2022, the first major reforms to the federally funded scheme since 2013 were announced. Parental Leave Pay progressively increased by two weeks a year from 18 weeks to a total of 26 weeks on 1 July 2026.

The reforms also placed a greater emphasis on shared care. Dad and Partner Pay was incorporated into the broader entitlement, with a minimum of four weeks reserved for each parent on a "use it or you lose it" basis. Families could decide how they split the remaining leave. For the first time, **this introduced a specific incentive for both parents to access the federally funded scheme.**

> "My husband is a manager of a team and was concerned he would lose his job if he took the full amount of time he was entitled to. There wasn't any other person that could take over his job for him and his team would have suffered. I wish the fathers were encouraged harder to take their full paternity/ parental leave. My son and partner would have both benefited a LOT from spending that time together and it would have had lasting benefits for me too in that I wouldn't be considered the 'primary carer' moving forwards."
>
> *Tasha, Bank worker, Tasmania*

5. genderequality.gov.au/baseline [accessed 12.08.2026]
6. aifs.gov.au/all-research/research-reports/take-parental-leave-pay-and-dad-and-partner-pay-among-australian pg 9 [accessed 14.08.2026]

Where are we today?

While it is too early to assess the full impact of the recent changes to the federally funded scheme, significant changes are already taking place in the private sector, particularly among employers moving towards universal PPL.

It is difficult to pinpoint when gender neutral[7] PPL became widespread in the private sector – although we do know that one of the earliest FSU-negotiated enterprise agreements to include universal PPL was the CBUS 2021 Enterprise Agreement.

According to data published by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA):

- **From 2023-24 to 2024-25, the percentage of all Australian employers[8] offering universal PPL increased from 18 to 19 percent.**
- **In the same period, the percentage of finance employers increased from 29 to 31 percent.**

WGEA data shows that, while the proportion of men accessing primary PPL has increased over time, the most pronounced change can be seen among employers offering universal PPL. In particular, **men are now taking PPL at similar or higher rates than women in some parts of the finance sector** (see charts 1-3).

> "Much of this work, particularly caregiving, has historically been unpaid or undervalued, with the costs shifted onto families rather than employers or the state. Access to leave is shaped by employment status, income and workplace culture, and people may feel pressured not to use it because of career consequences or financial constraints.
>
> A more equitable system would recognise caregiving as socially valuable work rather than a private responsibility, helping to redistribute the costs more fairly across society."
>
> *Madeleine, Finance worker, Queensland*

7. For simplicity the term "gender-neutral paid parental leave" or "universal PPL" refers to parental leave that does not have the additional qualification of "primary" or "secondary" applied to it with the same quantum of leave available to both parents.
8. WGEA data only covers employers with 100 or more employees

Chart 1 **Gender split of participation in PPL by leave type 23/24 FY**

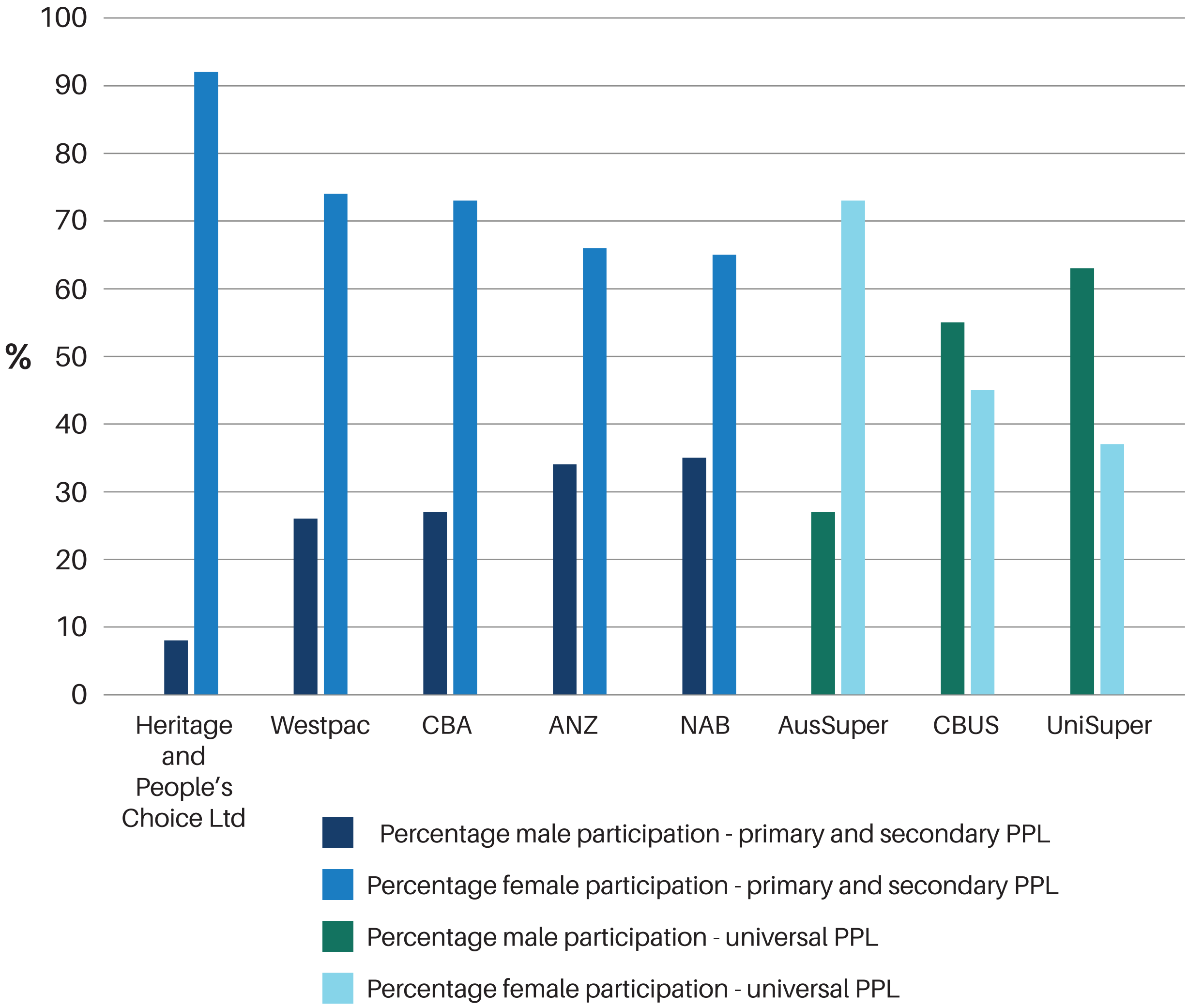


Chart 2 **Gender split of participation in PPL by leave type 24/25 FY**

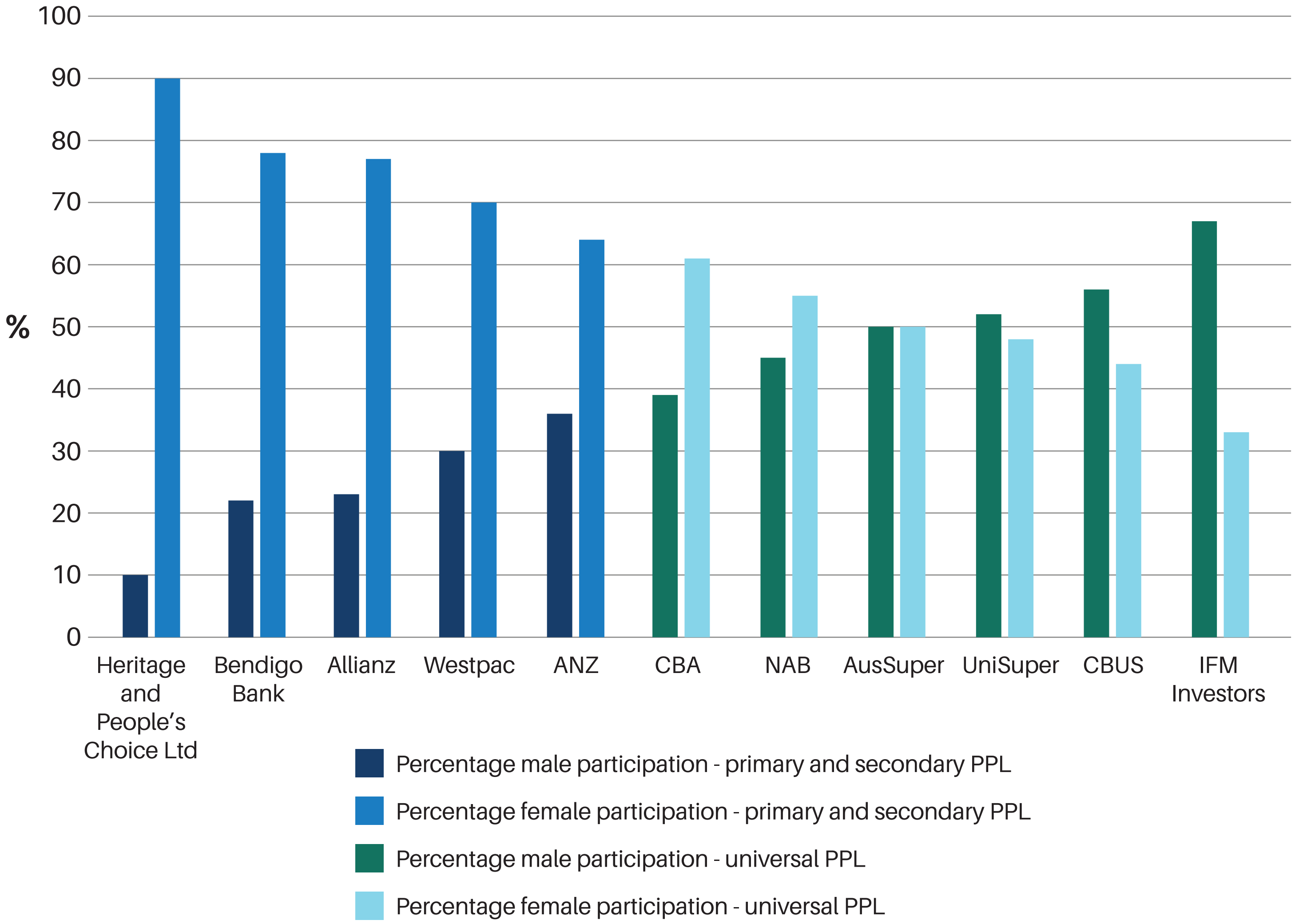
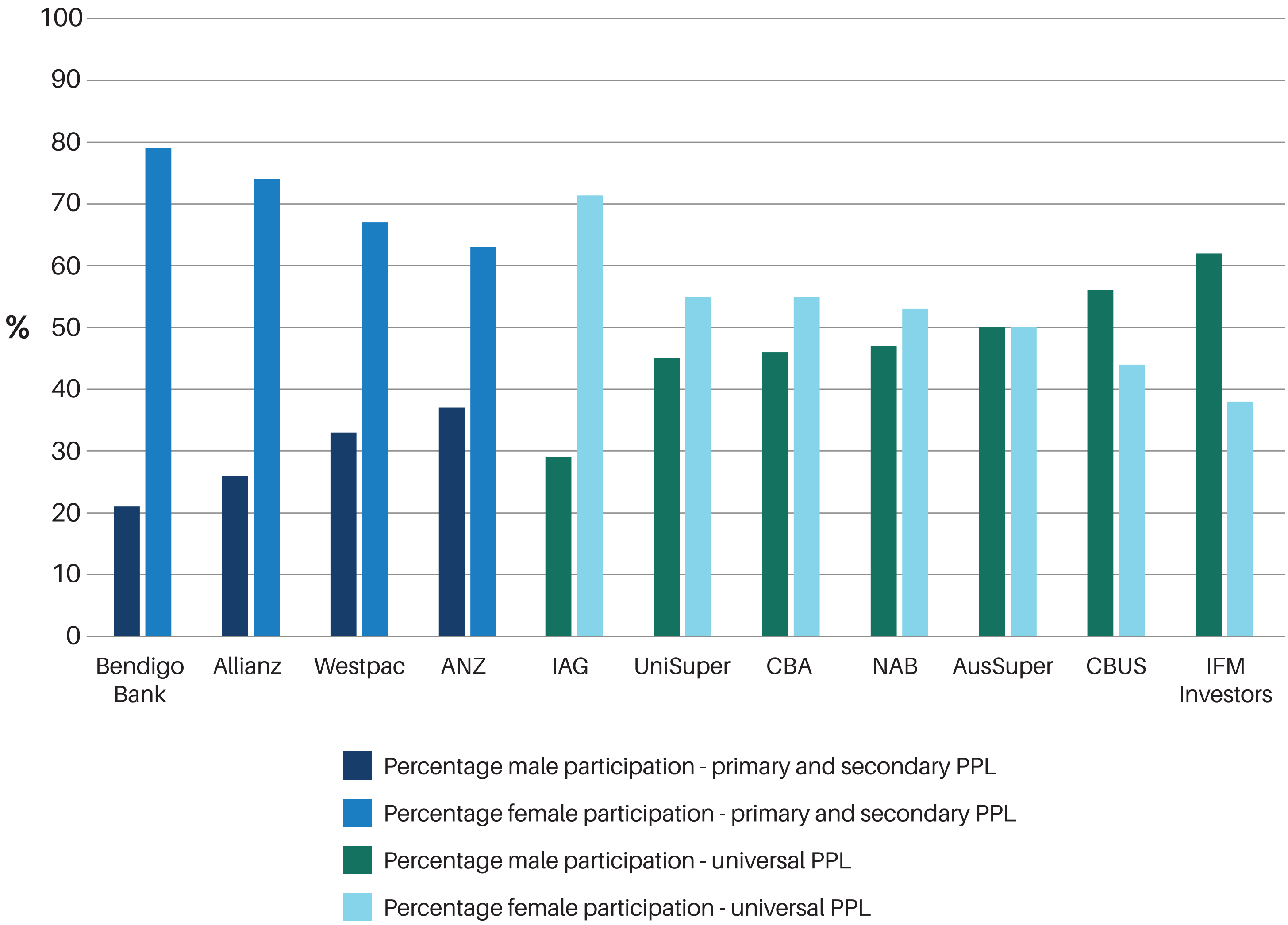


Chart 3 Gender split of participation in PPL by leave type 25/26 FY



> "To me, fair parental leave is about giving all parents the opportunity to be present for their children while maintaining their careers. It helps remove the pressure of having to choose between family responsibilities and professional growth, and it supports greater gender equity both at home and in the workplace."
>
> *Sarah[9], Bank worker, Queensland*

9. Name has been changed

Today's system barriers

Despite Australian families and workplaces having changed dramatically since the male-breadwinner model (for example, most families with school-aged children now rely on two incomes[10]), women continue to take most of the paid and unpaid parental leave[11].

> "We keep talking about falling birth rates and then are surprised that the whole system (leave, childcare hours, school hours, double income required to exist etc) doesn't seem to allow increased family sizes. That said, I am a new dad who has taken his parental leave been greatly supported by my teams and managers."
>
> *Jack[12], Bank worker, Victoria*

There are three key factors that can discourage fathers and partners from taking parental leave[13]:

1. **Traditional gender roles:** Expectations about who should take responsibility for childcare and unpaid work can influence how families divide care.
2. **Workplace culture:** Concerns about the impact of taking extended leave on careers, workloads or colleagues can discourage fathers and partners from using the leave available to them.
3. **Financial considerations:** Where parental leave is paid below a worker's usual wage, families can face a significant drop in household income. This can create a financial incentive for the lower-paid parent to take more leave while the higher-paid parent returns to work. Because women are statistically more likely to be the lower-paid parent, particularly in an industry where the gender pay gap is 22 percent[14], these financial pressures can reinforce existing gendered patterns of care.

10. www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/employment-and-unemployment/labour-force-status-families/latest-release [accessed 17.08.26]
    aifs.gov.au/all-research/research-reports/employment-patterns-and-trends-families-children [accessed 17.08.26]
11. genderequality.gov.au/baseline?parents=77 pg 44 [accessed 17.08.26]
12. Name has been changed
13. OECD (2025), "Paid leave for fathers: Recent OECD policy trends", OECD Publishing, Paris, doi.org/10.1787/07442bed-en. [accessed 17.08.26]
14. Average Weekly Earnings, Australia, May 2026 | Australian Bureau of Statistics [accessed 17.08.26]

Why does it matter?

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s 2025 report *Paid Leave for Fathers* cites significant benefits for families when fathers take parental leave[15].

The research finds that greater participation by fathers can support gender equality at work and reduce gender-based discrimination by enabling caring responsibilities to be shared more equally between parents.

The report also identifies steps employers can take to address the barriers that can discourage fathers from taking leave and encourage a more balanced use of parental leave between parents.

> "Parental, maternity and paternity leave are extremely important to me... I believe these benefits are a strong reflection of a company's culture, demonstrating a genuine commitment to employee wellbeing, inclusion and work-life balance. Organisations that invest in supporting employees... build loyalty, encourage long-term retention and create a more inclusive environment where people can thrive both professionally and personally. Beyond the workplace, these policies also deliver broader societal benefits by supporting families, promoting gender equality and enabling parents to balance caring responsibilities with their careers."
>
> *Jordan, Bank worker, Victoria*

The Australian Government's gender equality strategy, *Working for Women*[16], identifies that a more balanced use of PPL is an important measure of progress towards gender equality.

One measure of success will be the gap narrowing between the proportion of men and women accessing (primary or universal) PPL.

15. OECD (2025), "Paid leave for fathers: Recent OECD policy trends", OECD Publishing, Paris, doi.org/10.1787/07442bed-en. [accessed 17.08.26]
16. genderequality.gov.au/baseline?parents=77 pg 47 [accessed 17.08.2026]

Finance sector leading the way

Some finance employers are already taking steps to address the barriers to more equal use of parental leave. This includes actively encouraging workers to take the leave available to them, building workplace cultures that support shared care, and reducing financial barriers through providing universal PPL at full replacement wages.

The case studies below show how these changes can contribute to a significant rebalancing of parental leave use.

> "As someone who is planning to have kids, the difference between a workplace that offers 20 weeks PPL for any caregiver, compared to one that offers no additional PPL on top of the government minimum is more time with my future child, my wife can return to work sooner and not miss out on career development."
>
> *James, Finance worker, Victoria.*

FSU member Alex Venaglia at Labour Day 2024.

Case study 1 – NAB

In January 2024, NAB replaced its primary and secondary carer model in the Enterprise Agreement with universal PPL, giving parents equal access to PPL regardless of their caring role. The entitlement is available to birth parents and non-birth parents, adoptive parents, parents through surrogacy, and those in long-term foster or kinship arrangements.

By removing primary and secondary carer labels, NAB aimed to make parental leave fairer, simpler and more inclusive, while challenging the expectation that women should automatically take on the role of primary carer.

The change was followed by a sharp increase in the proportion of men accessing parental leave. In 2022, before universal PPL was introduced, men accounted for just 6 percent of NAB employees taking primary parental leave. This rose to 11 percent in 2023, and then to 26 percent in 2024, the first year of the universal scheme, and 49 percent in 2025[17]. Over the same period, the total number of NAB employees taking paid parental leave more than doubled, from 1,012 in 2022 to 2,170 in 2025. NAB also supported the policy change with a communication strategy using videos, stories and articles to build awareness of the new entitlement and encourage employees to use it.

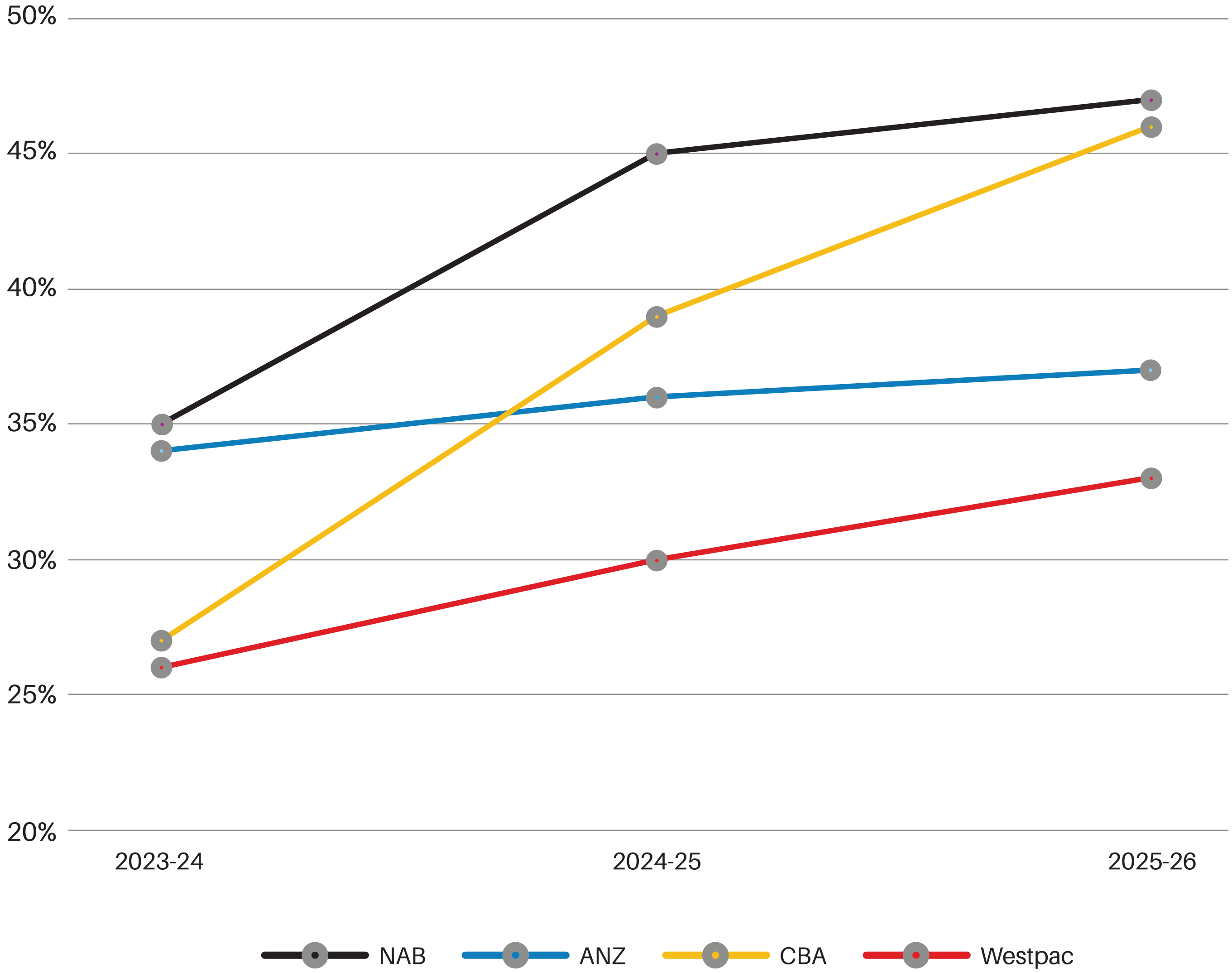
The NAB experience shows how some of the barriers identified in the OECD's *Paid Leave for Fathers* report can be addressed in practice. The sharp increase in men taking parental leave following the introduction of universal PPL suggests that equal access to leave at full replacement wages, combined with visible organisational support and a workplace culture that encourages people to take leave, can contribute to a more equal sharing of parental leave.

NAB is one of the two big four banks to have introduced universal PPL. Chart 4 compares men's participation in PPL across the big four banks following the introduction of universal PPL at CBA and NAB.

17. Data supplied by NAB

Chart 4

Male participation in paid parental leave across the big four banks over three financial years



NAB and CBA both moved from a primary/secondary carer model to universal PPL during the 2024-25 financial year, which coincides with the sharpest increases in male participation shown above. ANZ and Westpac, which retained a primary/secondary carer model over the same period, show more gradual growth by comparison.

Note: NAB case study figures (calendar year, as supplied by NAB) and Chart 4 figures (financial year, sourced from the Workplace Gender Equality Agency) use different reporting periods, which accounts for any apparent variation between the two.

Case study 2 – CBUS

CBUS introduced universal PPL through its 2021 Enterprise Agreement, removing the distinction between primary and secondary carers and providing parents with equal access to PPL. The change was designed to recognise changing care arrangements and support a more equal sharing of care. CBUS also saw the policy as an opportunity to lead by example and was deliberate about supporting the change across the organisation.

Importantly, the new entitlement was supported by practical measures to make taking parental leave easier. Employees were actively encouraged to use the leave available to them, including those in senior roles, to help build a workplace culture where taking parental leave was normal and supported.

CBUS also identified concerns in some operational areas about how extended absences would affect workloads and whether employees taking parental leave would be replaced. In response, the organisation budgeted to backfill all PPL absences, as appropriate, addressing a practical barrier that may otherwise have discouraged employees from taking leave.

CBUS has now had universal PPL in place for more than five years, providing a longer-term picture of how the policy is being used. As Charts 1–3 show, **male employees have accounted for a greater share of PPL users than female employees across each of the past three reporting periods**, despite the CBUS workforce being broadly gender balanced over the same period.

The CBUS experience reinforces the barriers identified in the OECD's *Paid Leave for Fathers* report and shows how they can be addressed at the workplace level. Equal entitlements alone may not be enough to change how parental leave is used. Providing leave at full replacement wages, addressing practical barriers such as backfilling, and creating a workplace culture that actively supports people to take leave can all contribute to a more equal sharing of parental leave.

The leave revolution has arrived

The leave revolution has arrived in Australia's finance industry. While the shift has happened quietly and gradually, universal PPL is changing who has access to leave, and, importantly, who takes it.

In 2025, the Australian finance sector employed more than 720,000 workers[18], and WGEA data shows that 31 percent of employers in our industry now provide universal PPL.

The evidence from finance employers is clear:

- **Removing the distinction between primary and secondary carers can contribute to a more equal use of parental leave.**
- **Where universal PPL is provided at full replacement wages and actively supported by employers, men are much more likely to take the leave available to them.**
- **The NAB and CBUS case studies also show that policy design is only part of the picture. Workplace culture, active encouragement and practical measures that make it possible for workers to take extended leave all play an important role.**

Achieving universal PPL matters beyond the period of parental leave itself. The OECD's *Paid Leave for Fathers* report finds that greater participation by fathers in parental leave can support gender equality at work and reduce gender-based discrimination. More balanced use of PPL is also an objective of the Australian Government's gender equality strategy.

The ultimate test will not simply be whether universal PPL changes who takes leave, but whether it also changes how families share care long after the leave ends.

18. www.futureskillsorganisation.com.au/fso-workforce-platform/ [accessed 21.08.2026]

Our ask: Universal paid parental leave

Paid parental leave should belong to the parent, not the gender. We're calling on employers to commit to a simple principle: both parents get the same paid leave, at the same rate, with no "primary carer" hoops to jump through.

In practice, that means:

- **Equal weeks:** both parents are entitled to the same number of paid weeks, not a token allocation for one and the substantive scheme for the other.
- **Equal pay:** leave is paid at full replacement rate for both parents - not a reduced rate for whoever isn't designated 'primary carer'.
- **No primary carer test:** eligibility doesn't depend on proving who does more of the caring. Both parents qualify, regardless of how the household splits things.
- **Super:** superannuation continues to be paid on both paid and unpaid parental leave, for both parents, the same way it would if they were at work.

The leave revolution: The case for universal paid parental leave

A report by the Finance Sector Union

www.fsunion.org.au
Authorised by Julia Angrisano, FSU National Secretary