Reproductive Leave – It's For Every Body!

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About Unions NSW

Unions NSW is the peak body for trade unions and union members in NSW. We have 47 affiliated trade unions and labour councils who collectively represent over 600,000 union members in all industries in NSW.

Methodology and demographics

In December 2024 to January 2025, Unions NSW surveyed **1,029** workers about their experiences managing their reproductive health at work and how reproductive leave and flexibility would affect them.

The **gender** of the respondents comprised of:

- 80% – women
- 15% – men
- 2% – intersex, non-binary, or own gender

The **age** of the respondents comprised of:

Age	% of respondents
Under 18	<1%
18-24	2%
25-34	17%
35-44	25%
45-54	26%
55-64	21%
65+	8%

The **industries** the respondents work in were predominantly:

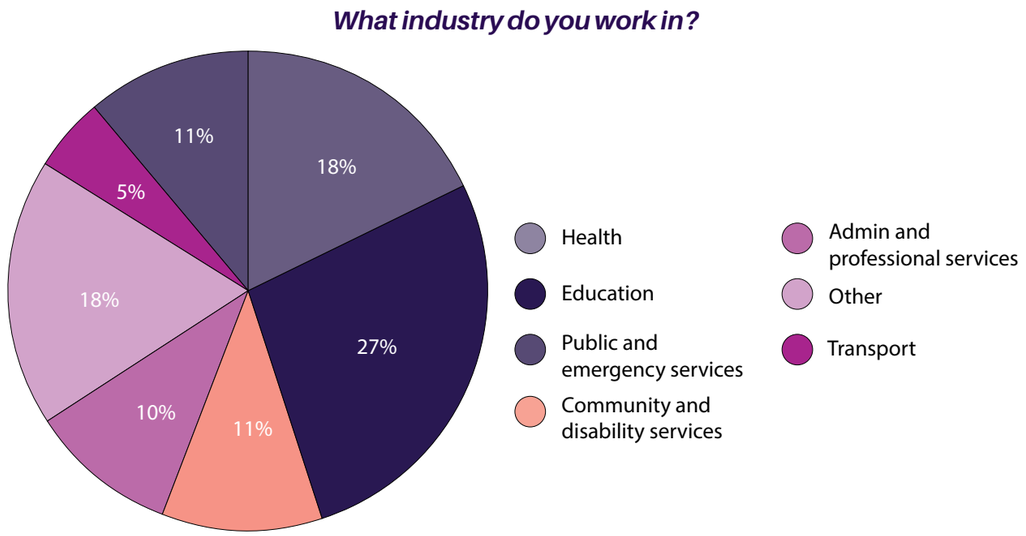

Figure 1: Respondents by industry

Key Findings

- **Workers are delaying medical care due to a lack of reproductive leave.** Almost half of respondents (49%) have delayed receiving medical treatment for reproductive issues due to an inability to take leave from work.
- **Reproductive health issues are common and impact the ability of workers to participate in the workplace.** More than four in five respondents (81%) have experienced or needed to access treatment or support for a reproductive health issue that impacted their ability to attend, manage, or fully participate in work.
- **A lack of reproductive leave disproportionately affects regional workers** – who need to travel distances to access health services. Paid reproductive leave can reduce the disparity between regional and metropolitan workers' health.
- **Current personal leave provisions are inadequate to safely manage many common reproductive health issues.** Many workers struggle to access healthcare due to insufficient leave entitlements and an inability to access leave for planned healthcare appointments.
- **The provision of paid reproductive leave is in line with the Australian Government's Men's and Women's National Health Strategies,** which set reproductive health as a priority area for both men and women and call for improved access to health services to improve reproductive health outcomes.
- **A significant majority of respondents (74%) do not think it is fair that some people are forced to attend work in immense pain because they do not have access to paid reproductive leave.**

- **Access to reproductive leave can support workers to be more productive in their workplace and stay in their occupation.** Reproductive leave can also support more women to work in blue-collar industries.
- **During pregnancy, working women often need to access parental leave early due to reproductive health issues, reducing the time they can spend with their baby after birth.**
- **Reproductive leave could support family planning.** Excluding respondents whose situation precludes them from having children, 78% of respondents think access to reproductive leave would make having children easier for them and/or their partner.
- **Despite strong demand, access to paid reproductive leave remains low.** While four in five respondents (80%) said paid reproductive leave would help them manage reproductive health issues, only one in ten (10%) have access to it.
- **Paid reproductive leave, flexibility, and workplace adjustments are widely supported.** More than nine in ten respondents (91%) said paid reproductive leave, flexible working arrangements, and/or adjustments would help them manage reproductive health issues.
- **Paid reproductive leave, flexible working arrangements, and adjustments are good for our health and can boost workplace participation.**

Recommendations

Unions NSW makes the following recommendations to the Australian Government:

- **Recommendation 1:** Given high levels of worker support and in line with the Australian Government's **Men's and Women's National Health Strategies**, which advocate for improved access to health services, we recommend that the Australian Government commit to including 10 days of paid Reproductive Leave in the National Employment Standards to help employees access the reproductive health care they need.
- **Recommendation 2:** The Australian Government should provide a national entitlement to flexible working arrangements and workplace adjustments for workers experiencing reproductive health issues. This will help workers access the support they need to better manage their health while remaining employed in their occupation.
- **Recommendation 3:** The NSW Government should provide an entitlement to 10 days of paid reproductive leave, flexible working arrangements, and workplace adjustments for employees in the NSW Public Sector, which is the largest employer in the Southern Hemisphere.
- **Recommendation 4:** The Australian Government should provide education to all workers and employers on reproductive leave and flexible work provisions to reduce stigma, increase awareness of workers' rights, and improve health outcomes.
- **Recommendation 5:** The Australian Government should collect and publish data annually on workers' utilisation of Reproductive Leave. This will enable government and stakeholders to continue to improve the support that workers receive to safely manage their reproductive health.
- **Recommendation 6:** The Australian Government should conduct a national survey of employers, workers, and their unions, in workplaces which currently offer some form of reproductive leave. This will help guide the Government on implementing the provisions nationally.

Introduction

Whether it's managing menstruation or the impacts of menopause, accessing fertility treatments, managing chronic health issues, or accessing preventative health care like cancer screenings – whatever your gender, your reproductive health can impact your working life.

The *It's For Every Body* campaign led by union members across Australia is pushing to win 10 days of paid reproductive leave, flexible working arrangements, and workplace adjustments for workers experiencing a range of reproductive health issues.
The campaign recognises that many reproductive health issues can take a serious physical and mental toll on workers and can disrupt their ability to work, especially without the right support.

In December 2024 to January 2025, Unions NSW surveyed 1,029 workers about their experiences managing their reproductive health at work and how reproductive leave and flexibility would affect them.

At least 81% of the workers surveyed by Unions NSW have experienced or needed to access treatment or support for a reproductive health condition or issue that impacted on their ability to attend, manage, or fully participate in work.

Through the survey, many workers told Unions NSW about how a lack of reproductive leave negatively impacted their health. This is reflected in the concerning statistic that almost half of respondents (49%) have delayed receiving medical treatment for reproductive issues due to an inability to take leave from work.

This worrying trend can be addressed through the recommendations made in this report. More than nine in ten respondents (91%) said that reproductive leave, flexible working arrangements, and adjustments would help them manage reproductive health issues.

Almost half (49%) of all workers surveyed have delayed receiving medical treatment due to inability to take leave from work.

As this report demonstrates, 10 days of paid reproductive leave, flexible working arrangements, and workplace adjustments accessible to all employees is **good for our health and can boost workplace participation.**

"I suffer from severe endometriosis. I have had to take sick leave when my physical and mental health is impacted so badly I cannot work. I also have to take sick or unpaid leave to see my doctor and physio monthly and multiple days per year to travel to see my specialist over 5 hours away."

"I've experienced an unexpected, complicated pregnancy loss (ectopic pregnancy) during which I had to use a significant amount of sick and recreation leave. Having access to reproductive leave would have been extremely helpful during this."

"... Reproductive leave would have prevented me from using up all of my sick leave. I was eventually diagnosed with testicular cancer. Now my chemotherapy treatments are over 9 weeks and I'm looking down the barrel of not being able to support my family because of my award that doesn't accommodate situations such as reproductive leave and clinical illnesses, such as cancer."

"My body was forced into early menopause due to cancer treatment. Having some leave available to manage these sudden changes would have been extremely helpful."

"I have a family history of prostate cancer, and take my personal leave to get this checked regularly."

"I underwent three rounds of IVF and had to work extra hours to make up for the time attending appointments on the Central Coast and travelling to Greenwich in Sydney for some appointments. If I had paid leave I wouldn't have had to work extra time to make up the hours."

"I would not have had to take excess anti-inflammatory drugs to make the pain bearable enough to work."

What is Reproductive Leave, Flexible Working Arrangements, and Workplace Adjustments?

The *It's For Every Body* campaign calls for all employees, including casuals, to gain an entitlement of up to 10 days per year of paid reproductive health leave for the treatment or management of reproductive issues. The proposed leave entitlement could cover a range of issues, including:

- **Menstrual, Pregnancy, and Postpartum Health** – Includes menstruation, pregnancy, pregnancy loss, breastfeeding, and lactation.
- **Chronic and Hormonal Conditions** – Includes endometriosis, polycystic ovarian syndrome, perimenopause, menopause, and hormone therapy.
- **Fertility and Assisted Reproductive Treatments** – Includes IVF, fertility treatments, and assisted reproductive health services.
- **Surgical and Preventative Care** – Includes vasectomy, hysterectomy, and surgeries or preventative screenings related to breast, cervical, prostate, and testicular health.

In addition to reproductive leave, the campaign calls for employees experiencing reproductive health issues to gain access to flexible working arrangements and workplace adjustments where reasonable, including;

- The right to work from home,
- Access to flexible working hours and arrangements (such as change in hours, patterns, days, duties and location of work),
- Reasonable changes to the work environment to provide comfortable and safe working conditions which alleviate symptoms or facilitate treatment,
- Provision of longer or more frequent breaks,
- The ability to rest in a quiet area in the workplace, and,
- The right to access reasonable unpaid leave.

Entitlements to reproductive leave, flexible working arrangements, and adjustments should be contained in the National Employment Standards to ensure all employees have access to these provisions.

The following sections explore feedback from workers regarding how these entitlements would affect them, their families, and their workplaces.

The importance of Reproductive Leave for achieving Australia's national health goals

Reproductive health is a priority area in in both the Australian Government's *Men's* and *Women's National Health Strategies* (DoH 2018 [1], DoH 2019). Both the men's and women's strategies, and the *National Action Plan for Endometriosis,* highlight the need to improve access to services as a pathway to improving reproductive health outcomes (DoH 2018 [1], DoH 2018 [2]).

An entitlement to reproductive leave and flexibility improves the ability of workers to care for their reproductive health. Central to this, reproductive leave improves workers' access to healthcare services, which is a core determinant of health outcomes.

The Unions NSW survey results reveal a significant health risk to workers from a lack of reproductive leave. Almost half of the workers surveyed (49%) have delayed receiving medical treatment for reproductive issues due to an inability to take leave from work. This statistic is particularly concerning because delays in accessing healthcare for early prevention, diagnosis, and treatment can dramatically affect long-term outcomes for reproductive diseases such as cancer and chronic conditions (DoH 2019, p. 8).

Have you ever delayed receiving medical treatment for reproductive issues due to inability to take leave from work?

Figure 2: Percentage of workers who have delayed treatment due to lack of leave.

One education sector worker with endometriosis and polycystic ovarian syndrome told Unions NSW:

> *"I got offered surgery but had to turn it down due to inability to take off time from work and potentially losing substantial amounts of pay or losing my job."*

An administration worker told Unions NSW about how a lack of leave led to a dangerous delay in their treatment:

> *"Mid-way through 2024 I had an abnormal pap smear. As my doctor only operates during working hours (M-F 9-5) I wasn't able to do a follow up appointment for 6 months as it didn't align with my work.'"*

This experience reflects common feedback from workers that they are unable to use their personal leave entitlements to attend planned healthcare appointments.

Male workers also told Unions NSW about how a lack of reproductive leave is a barrier to seeking health care. Feedback from one male in the education sector highlighted how a lack of reproductive leave creates a financial burden which can contribute to delays in preventative care, leading to poorer health outcomes:

> *"I'm going through testicular cancer treatments and have only 16 days [leave]. The rest of the time I would need to rely on Centrelink or take leave without pay, financially crippling the household. In the past I have often delayed getting early preventative treatment due to the expensive nature of costs. I could have been in a position to freeze healthy sperm before finding out I have cancer."*

Access to reproductive leave can strengthen the capacity of our health system to provide quality care for workers and is essential for achieving the Australian Government's national health goals.

Reproductive leave can reduce health disparities between metropolitan and regional workers

Improving access to services through the provision of reproductive leave can be especially important for workers who live outside of cities (DoH 2019, p. 16). Reproductive leave can enable workers to travel to appointments, reducing health disparities between regional and metro workers.

One community and disability sector worker told Unions NSW about how their reproductive health issues compounded with their geographical disadvantage:

> *"I live rurally so when I was attempting to access fertility treatments, I would often have to travel 5 hours each way and therefore have to take several days off work."*

Reproductive leave presents an important opportunity to reduce the barriers that regional workers face in accessing health care.

Personal leave is inadequate for managing common reproductive health issues which can be significant and chronic

Feedback from the workers surveyed by Unions NSW highlighted that the current entitlement of 10 days personal leave per year is inadequate for managing a range of common reproductive health issues.

Three quarters of the workers (75%) surveyed by Unions NSW said they had either lost pay or used another type of leave to manage a reproductive health issue. Furthermore, many workers said they were unable to use personal leave for scheduled appointments to manage reproductive health.

Have you ever lost pay or used other types of leave (e.g., sick or annual leave) to manage a reproductive health issue?

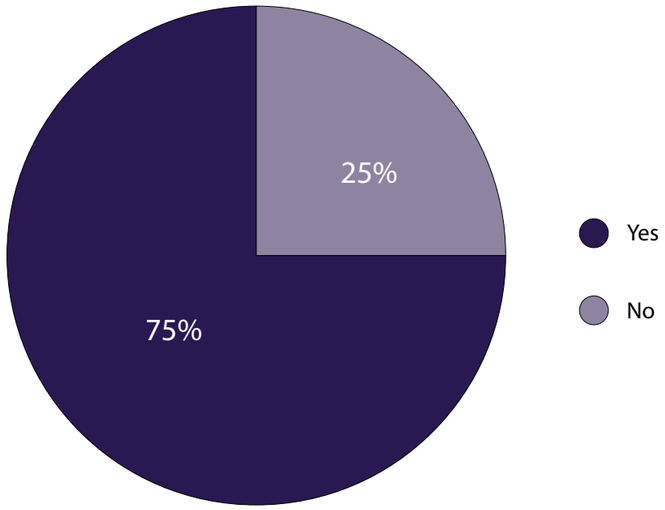

Figure 3: Percentage who have lost pay or other leave to manage reproductive health.

One worker told Unions NSW about how their cancer treatments could not be covered through their personal leave, and the financial impact that is having:

> *"My chemotherapy treatments are over 9 weeks and I'm looking down the barrel of not being able to support my family because of my award that doesn't accommodate situations such as reproductive leave."*

A common theme throughout respondents' feedback was that personal leave is inadequate when juggling significant or chronic reproductive health issues with other uses of personal

leave. For example, a health worker told Unions NSW about how a lack of reproductive leave can risk harming workplace health and productivity:

> *"Using all sick leave after a miscarriage with complications meant that I had nothing left for the inevitable colds and flu that occur. If you can take a couple of days off at first sign of symptoms it means a faster recovery and not passing it around to other staff."*

Another health worker told Unions NSW about their experience having to exhaust both personal and annual leave, indicating a risk of burn-out:

> *"I have endometriosis and have to take day 1 of my cycle off every month due to extreme pain, nausea, vomiting, migraine. When all sick leave has been exhausted, I take annual leave. It means I haven't had a holiday in years."*

Heavy pain from reproductive issues is a common amongst working women. For example, a UK study found 5-10% of women experience debilitating pain from their periods (Vafapour & Murray 2023, p. 1).

One worker told Unions NSW:

> *"For the past 6 years while working in film I have suffered from endometriosis and my pain levels are so bad that I pass out and throw up while working."*

According to the Unions NSW survey, a significant majority of respondents (74%) do not think it is fair that some people are forced to attend work in immense pain because they do not have access to paid reproductive leave.

Do you think it is fair that some people must go to work in immense pain because they do not have access to reproductive leave?

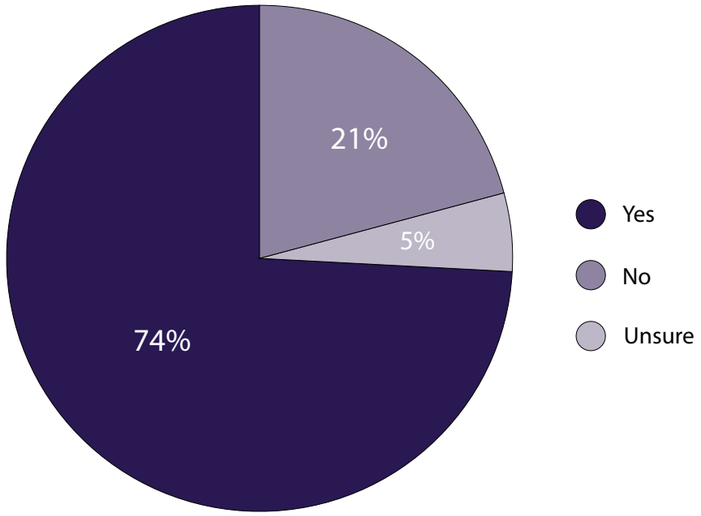

Figure 4: Perception of fairness regarding working in immense pain.

Regardless of individual needs, the survey indicates that many workers would support all employees having access to paid reproductive leave as a matter of fairness. Reproductive leave and flexibility can boost workplace participation by giving workers the support they need.

Reproductive health issues can negatively impact workplace participation without the right support.

Endometriosis sufferers have a lower likelihood of working in their desired profession and report a loss of income because of having to take time off or work part-time (Sperschneider et al. 2019, in McKell Institute 2024, p. 9).

According to an Australian survey of over 700 workers who suffer from menopause, 12.6% of respondents were forced to retire or take a break from employment when their symptoms became severe (Circle In 2021, p. 2).

This research is consistent with the feedback received through the Unions NSW survey. One media and communications worker with endometriosis told Unions NSW about how reproductive leave would support them to participate in their workplace and help them progress their career:

> *"It would allow me to manage my pain better and manage my work in a sustainable way, so I can hold down a job long term rather than have to quit because of such barriers or reduce my hours. It would allow me to have confidence to take on more responsibility or promotions, as I can still look after my health in the process."*

Another worker in the education sector indicated that reproductive leave could have enabled them to retire later and contribute more to their workplace:

> *'Menopause symptoms contributed to my decision to retire from paid employment early. Hot flashes, sleeplessness and discomfort were really embarrassing and awkward to manage in public facing roles.'*

Survey responses commonly highlighted personal embarrassment and difficulty discussing reproductive health in the workplace. This stigma presents an additional barrier to workforce participation by creating discrimination and making it harder for workers to manage their reproductive health.

As many respondents identified, a workplace entitlement to reproductive leave can help normalise discussions, assisting workers to receive the support they need to unlock their full capacity.

This can be particularly important in non-white collar and blue-collar industries where there is lower workplace flexibility or understanding of reproductive issues. This point was highlighted in the survey feedback. One female worker told Unions NSW:

> *"I have been mid field survey when I got cramps and delayed saying why I needed to leave for the afternoon to get medication, largely due to potential embarrassment of the field supervisor (and yes he was embarrassed when I finally caved)."*

One woman working in the construction sector told Unions NSW that reproductive leave could help address stigma in her workplace:

> *"I would not feel the pressure to stay at work while I was in pain. The existence of this leave would do a lot to destigmatise period symptoms."*

This feedback indicates that reproductive leave can encourage more women to work in blue-collar industries by creating more supportive workplaces.

The benefits to fertility and parenthood from reproductive leave

One in six Australian couples experience fertility issues, and one in eighteen babies are now being born through IVF treatment (McKell Institute 2024, p. 9). Many assisted reproductive health services are time sensitive and range from simple to invasive procedures and multiple procedures are often required.

Feedback in the Unions NSW survey reveals how sickness and complications related to pregnancy lead to strains on leave entitlements that negatively affect both parents and babies.

Excluding those workers whose situation precludes them from having children, 78% of workers think access to reproductive leave would make having children easier for them and/or their partner.

Do you think access to reproductive leave, e.g. for preconception care, fertility treatments, or routine pregnancy care, would make it easier for you and/or your partner to have children?

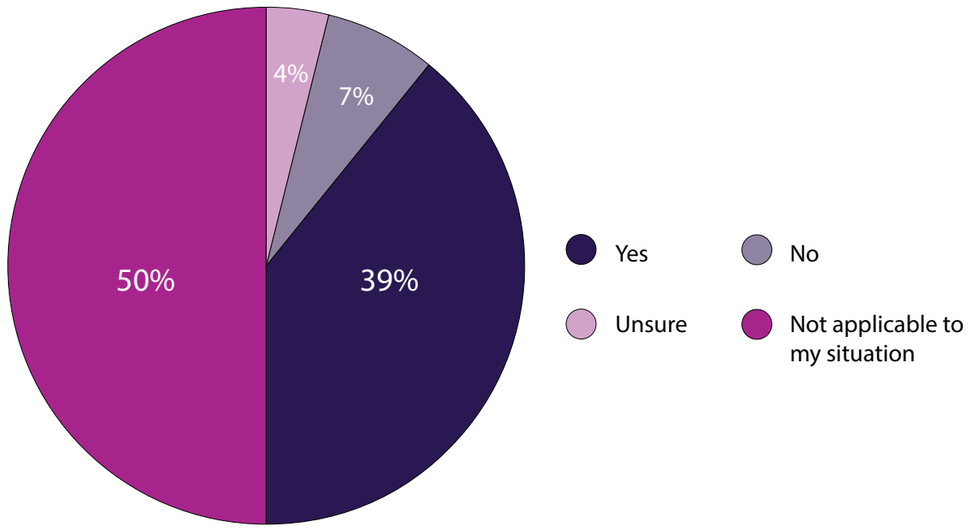

Figure 5: Perception of whether reproductive leave would assist having children.

One health worker told Unions NSW about how a lack of leave was a barrier to them having children:

> *"Reproductive leave would have been very useful when I was undergoing IVF. As a female medical doctor, it was very difficult for me to have children during my training as I was on year-to-year contracts. As such I had to delay until I was older, affecting my fertility."*

One IT worker told Unions NSW that for them and their partner, reproductive leave:

> *"Will allow us to have more children."*

One administration worker told Unions NSW that reproductive leave would have helped them care for their newborn:

> *'I had to start maternity leave early because I was unwell during my pregnancy and burning through my sick leave (and annual leave). Then I had to come back to work before my baby was old enough for daycare because I had started maternity leave earlier than intended.*
> *If I didn't have to use sick leave, annual leave, and maternity leave in place of reproductive leave, I could use them for what they're meant for. I could have spent more time focusing on my baby."*

Experiences of having to access parental leave early due to reproductive health issues was common in the survey and highlights the positive impact reproductive leave can have for babies and their health.

It's For Every Body! – Workers support a workplace right to paid Reproductive Leave and flexibility

Reproductive health issues are common across all genders and many issues are significant and chronic. The Unions NSW survey results reflect broad support amongst respondents for paid reproductive leave and flexibility rights.

More than nine in ten respondents (91%) said paid reproductive leave, flexible working arrangements, and/or adjustments would help them manage their reproductive health issues.

This reveals the capability of these provisions in addressing critical workplace health issues.

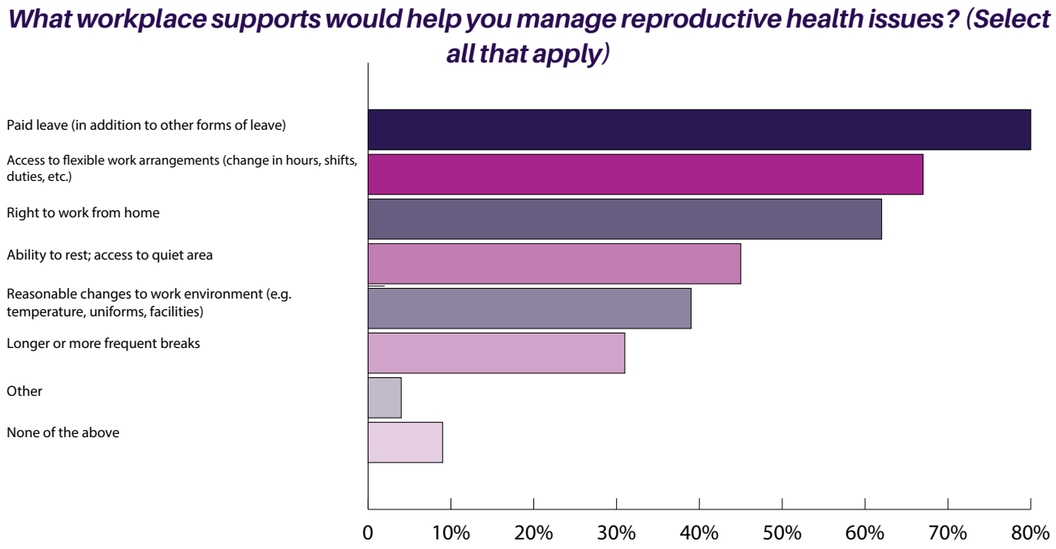

Figure 6: Perception of workplace supports in managing reproductive health.

However, most workers do not currently have access to the workplace support necessary to manage common reproductive health issues. The survey results found that while 80% of workers think reproductive leave would help them manage their reproductive health issues, only 10% of workers have access to it.

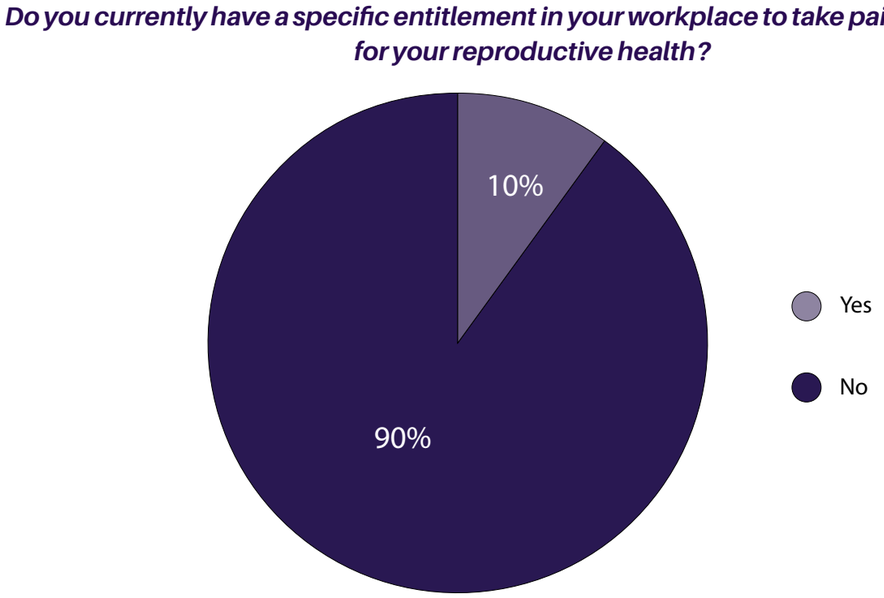

Figure 7: Percentage of workers with workplace entitlements to paid reproductive leave.

Recognising the potential benefits, some Australian employers now offer forms of reproductive leave. These include:

- Victorian Women's Trust (since May 2016)
- Future Super (since January 2021)
- Modibodi (since May 2021)
- Sustainability Victoria (since March 2023)
- Victorian public sector (since August 2024)
- Queensland public sector (since September 2024)

The Executive Director of the Victorian Women's Trust, Mary Cooks AO said their policy was having a positive effect on the workplace:

> *'We have been trialling this policy for 12 months and I can say that there has been a positive take up in the spirit in which it was intended without disruption or dislocation.'*
>
> (Victorian Women's Trust).

The Australian Government could learn from employers, workers, and their union in workplaces which currently offer some form of reproductive leave by surveying their experiences of how provisions can successfully operate.

Conclusion

The *It's For Every Body* campaign is made up of thousands of union members who want fairer and healthier workplaces for every employee in Australia. Workers need the right to access up to 10 days per year of paid reproductive leave, flexible working arrangements, and workplace adjustments to safely manage their reproductive health while continuing to work. As reflected in the results of the Unions NSW survey of over 1000 workers; **reproductive leave and flexibility is good for our health and can boost workplace participation.**

To begin delivering these health benefits and improving workplace participation across Australia, Unions NSW recommends:

Recommendation 1: Given high levels of worker support and in line with the Australian Government's *Men's* and *Women's National Health Strategies*, which advocate for improved access to health services, we recommend that the Australian Government commit to including 10 days of paid Reproductive Leave in the National Employment Standards to help employees access the reproductive health care they need.

Recommendation 2: The Australian Government should provide a national entitlement to flexible working arrangements and workplace adjustments for workers experiencing

reproductive health issues. This will help workers access the support they need to better manage their health while remaining employed in their occupation.

Recommendation 3: The NSW Government should provide an entitlement to 10 days of paid reproductive leave, flexible working arrangements, and workplace adjustments for employees in the NSW Public Sector, which is the largest employer in the Southern Hemisphere.

Recommendation 4: The Australian Government should provide education to all workers and employers on reproductive leave and flexible work provisions to reduce stigma, increase awareness of workers' rights, and improve health outcomes.

Recommendation 5: The Australian Government should collect and publish data annually on workers' utilisation of Reproductive Leave. This will enable government and stakeholders to continue to improve the support that workers receive to safely manage their reproductive health.

Recommendation 6: The Australian Government should conduct a national survey of employers, workers, and their unions, in workplaces which currently offer some form of reproductive leave. This will help guide the Government on implementing the provisions nationally.

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