

**Beyond Preference and Choice: How Mothers Allocate  
Time to Work and Family**

**Dr Alison Morehead**

**Deputy Director – Research**

**Australian Institute of Family Studies**

[Alison.morehead@aifs.gov.au](mailto:Alison.morehead@aifs.gov.au)

Phone 0403 842 631

03 9214 7881

**Paper presented to:**

**Families Matter AIFS conference 9-11 February 2005**

**Abstract:**

A new framework is presented for understanding how mothers allocate time for their household and their workplace. The three categories in the typology are: gender-skewed work arrangements (where the distribution of paid and/or unpaid work is uneven between parents); gender balanced work arrangements (a more or less even distribution of paid work); and sole parent work arrangement (where the employed mother is the sole parent in the household).

Three dynamics underpin the typology: supports, pressures and additional labour. Supports and pressures act simultaneously to help maintain or shift a particular work arrangement within a household. The 'additional labour' that mothers do simply to keep their work arrangement intact is revealed.

The paper concludes the household beats the workplace hands down as a site where gender matters and where gender determines what you do. The paper argues that theories prioritising mothers' preference and choices miss the point. Preferences are simply one type of support or pressure on a particular work arrangement – there are many others that play a significant role in shaping mothers decisions around allocating time. Policy implications are discussed.

In this paper, a new framework is developed which seeks to go beyond the concepts of choice and preference when explaining how mothers allocate time to work and family. The paper argues that the most useful way to understand how mothers allocate time to work and family is to focus not so much on the labour market or the workplace, but on the extremely strong influence of the household on the mothers labour force participation.

All people who have a job have to manage the relationship between work and home, between their paid and unpaid responsibilities. Managing the relationship between home and work is an ongoing everyday task for all employees. For parents, managing this relationship can be hard work.

Of all employees, over a third are parents, that is, they have a dependent child under the age of 25 years living with them (ABS 2002).

But some very powerful statistics, for people interested in work and family, are also the most simple. And that is, that while only sixteen per cent of all employees are mothers, around 60 per cent of all mothers are in paid work (ABS 2002). These statistics show that mothers in paid work are a big issue for families, and a smaller issue for the labour market.

The household has in the past been under regarded as an influence on working time arrangements largely because it's true that it hasn't, and still doesn't, have much of an influence on men. Consider this statistic – only 1 per cent of all fathers in Australia are at home full time in order to care for children

(HILDA 2001). This is probably why economists and a lot of the statistics collected about labour market participation, focus on the individual as the unit of analysis and not the household – because men, including when they are fathers, do operate more as individuals in the labour market, they are ‘freed’ from the household, while women, and most particularly mothers, don’t operate in this way. To understand mother’s employment behaviour, its not so useful to look at them conceptually as individuals who are just like fathers, rather, it is more fruitful to look at them as members of households.

What happens within households still matters much more for women (and mothers in particular) than for men or fathers, and so it is worth turning to the household to get better insight into current labour force patterns.

While total hours of work are generally similar between men and women – when you combine the paid and unpaid work they do each week – men’s share is mostly made up of paid work. Where women and men work the same paid hours, women tend to do more total hours per week than men (Bittman 1992; Bittman and Pixley 1997).

It could be said that the household beats the workplace hands down as a site where gender matters and where gender determines what you do. It not only generates family responsibilities, it allocates them unevenly between men and women.

Things on the home front haven't shifted much despite women's rising labour force participation rates. Mothers going out and doing paid work is obviously not enough to really shift how unpaid work is distributed at home.

Why is this the case – how do people come to this uneven allocation of paid and unpaid work? Is it mostly about preferences and choices, or is there something else going on?

### **Choice and preference**

The concepts of choice and preference in the work and family debate are both widely used and often contested. Some researchers argue that women are relatively free to choose their allocation of time between work and paid work, based on what they prefer to do (Hakim 2003, Evans 2003, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2003) and that we should celebrate the increased choices available to mothers with regards to possible ways of combining paid and unpaid work (Hakim 2000). Hakim bases her whole model of work and family on what she calls 'preference theory' (women are either 'work oriented', 'adaptive' or 'home centred') where she argues that women's actual combinations of paid and unpaid work largely reflect their preferences. In other words, she sees the exercise of choice as pretty well the same as the exercise of preferences. Given that she found from a survey conducted in the UK in 1999, that around 60 per cent of mothers are 'adaptive' (ie they tend to do part time work and/or drop in and out of the workforce depending on their

family responsibilities) Hakim argues that government policies should focus on supporting this group (Hakim 2003).

Other researchers argue that choices and preferences are highly constructed and constrained, and rather than being used as an outcome measure for policy evaluation or a basis for policy development, they might better be used as a springboard for 'what lies beneath' (see for example, Crompton and Harris 1999, Probert and Murphy 2001, Williams 2000, Cass 2002).

This paper argues that it is not very useful to focus on individual preferences per se when examining how mothers allocate time to work and family. Rather, preferences should be seen within the context of household dynamics – particularly taking into account the substantial influence that fathers have on mothers 'preferences' for combining paid and unpaid work.

### **Doing gender**

Over the last couple of decades some household research has focused on how the highly gendered arrangements concerning paid and unpaid labour within households are maintained and negotiated by working parents (see for example, West and Zimmerman 1987; Baxter 2000; Benjamin and Sullivan 1996, 1999 and various work by Pyke). This sort of research finds that couples actively construct their households so that mothers continue to do most of the unpaid work. West and Zimmerman, for example, famously coined the term 'doing gender' to describe the way that far from being a given,

gender is 'done' routinely and consistently throughout social interaction. Mothers who think their extra household work is 'fair' are acting out their interpretation of what it means to be a mother and wife (in the sense of 'being feminine'). Bittman et al's (2001) findings that women who earn more than their partner tend to compensate for this by taking on more household work could be explained using this theory. Theories on gender construction can also be applied to the way that couples perceive wives employment. Research shows that husbands' employment is commonly viewed in terms of breadwinning for example, while wives' employment is often seen as 'helping out', even when wives earn similar amounts to their husbands (Potuchek 1997, Spade 1994).

Arlie Hochschild is an influential work and family researcher who takes a gender approach to the way mothers allocate time. She talks about the patterns of interaction that couples use as 'gender strategies'. She defines a gender strategy as a 'plan of action through which a person tries to solve problems at hand, given the cultural notions of gender at play' (1989:15). Gender strategies are the result of applied gender ideologies. These ideologies are a set of beliefs about men and women and marital roles (198:190). Hochschild calls gender strategies 'the basic dynamic of marriage' and she categorises them as ranging from egalitarian, through to transitional and traditional (1989:18). Wives with a 'traditional' gender ideology who are working full-time might still do the bulk of the housework because their gender strategy is to see this as a fair way to run the household. In their minds, that is what wives should do. Many 'super mothers' are traditional – working very

long hours to hold down a full time job while still spending hours on the domestic work at home.

While this gender approach goes much further than Hakim's preference theory in terms of providing insight into how mothers allocate time to work and family (because it acknowledges the importance of the couple dynamic and gendered nature of the household division of labour) it still privileges notions of preferences.

### **Fieldwork methodology**

The research upon which this paper is based seeks to locate these preferences within a broader framework to reveal firstly, how mothers come to change their work/family balance over their life, and secondly, how social institutions and policies effect their allocation of time for paid and unpaid work.

Qualitative research is excellent for understanding decision making processes. It enables insights to be gained into how various outcomes are arrived at. The fieldwork for this research, conducted in 2001, involved doing group and individual interviews at one work-site – a hospital in Canberra – and 19 households.

Nineteen mothers were recruited from the hospital. Interviews were conducted with the respondent's managers, other employees, senior management and union delegates. Lengthy interviews (around 1.5 to 2 hours) were conducted

with each of the 19 mothers in their homes. If the mothers had a partner, they were also interviewed, using the same schedule. This resulted in a total of 31 in-depth interviews in the home.

### **A new framework**

The interview transcripts with mothers and fathers confirmed much of what other research has found regarding how couples justify the unequal division of paid and unpaid work within their households, and how they 'do gender' when they split the paid and unpaid work between themselves.

But there seemed to be something more going on than 'doing gender' – for example, some people talked about changes to their working time arrangements and how this had forced some changes within the home. Not all people 'did gender' in the same way – and there was a pattern in the differences.

The pattern found in the data seemed to be pretty unstable and vulnerable to change – the couples were working pretty hard to maintain the sort of division of unpaid and paid work that they had, in the face of various pressures. It seemed that any framework for understanding how employed mothers manage their work and family responsibilities must be able to account for change and for the types of work that parents do just to keep things going in the face of pressures.

So a new framework was developed for analysing the relationships that employed mothers manage between their workplace and their home.

This framework is called a Typology of Work Arrangements. Work arrangements mean the arrangements that parents have in place to manage their paid and unpaid work. The three categories in the typology are Gender Skewed Work Arrangements, Gender Balanced Work Arrangements and Sole Parents Work Arrangements.

Gender skewed arrangements are where either the father or the mother does more paid work than the other, and/or either the father or the mother does more unpaid work than the other. While theoretically, this sort of domestic arrangement could be skewed so that the father does most of the unpaid work, in practice that is rare. According to statistical labour force and time use data in Australia, the most common arrangements would be gender skewed such that the mother does more unpaid work than the father. Hochschild estimated from her research in the US that about 80 per cent of couples have an uneven sharing of unpaid work (Hochschild 1997).

In this type of household, the father's job commonly takes priority, fathers help with housework but don't take responsibility for it, and the father tends to have a large influence on the mothers paid working hours. The stereotypical example here would be where the mother works part time, the father works full time. That's likely to be a pretty low stressed household. Or another example would be a super-mother household, where both parents work full

time, but the mother does most of the unpaid work. This household is likely to be high stressed, and these mothers are the most stressed-out group in the whole economy.

It is argued here that the gender skewed work arrangement, particularly where the mother works part time and the father works full time, is the one that 'naturally' falls into place after the birth of a child. It is what could be called the structurally prescribed work arrangement. Social institutions are to a large extent, set up to support that type of work arrangement – for example, school hours don't overlap very often with paid working hours so it makes it hard for both parents to work full time, childcare, unlike school, is not freely provided, two part time jobs often don't provide enough income for a family so one parent usually has to work full time, and so on. There are also strong social norms that elevate the mothers' role in the parenting of young children above the fathers, and women's jobs are often not as well paid, or as likely to be full time, compared to men's jobs. That's why this work arrangement is by far the most common – our society basically supports it.

A number of measures were used to identify the gender balanced work arrangement, including that the domestic chores were more or less evenly shared in terms of a count of tasks.

In this arrangement, the parents jobs are seen as equally valid, the father takes responsibility for his share of the unpaid work, each will use family friendly policies at work, and either neither are available for long hours jobs, or

alternatively, both are. The stereotype example of this household is where both parents have full time paid jobs, and both are pretty stressed, or, both parents have part time paid jobs in which case it would be a pretty low stressed household. The gender balanced work arrangement where both parents work part time could be seen to be an ideal in many people's eyes – it is often the suggested model for a more civil society. Although not within the scope of the research – this work arrangement would also fit those households where both parents are unemployed, with both sharing all the unpaid work.

The sole parent work arrangement could apply to both mothers and fathers. Given that 86 per cent of sole parent families are headed by mothers, this type of arrangement, in practice, applies mostly to mothers. With the sole parent work arrangement, most of the unpaid work is done by the mother. It is more like a gender skewed arrangement with a super-mother than a gender balanced one.

So those are the three types of work arrangements. But, importantly, each of these three types of work arrangements is inherently unstable – even the most supported one in our society, which is the gender skewed work arrangement. This is because there are contradictory pressures operating that pull households away from each type, at the same time as various supports help parents maintain their current arrangements. In terms of the role of preferences, it is argued here that the chances of getting the work arrangement you want, or keeping the one you have depends on how

prepared you are to do additional labour, and how successful that labour is in the face of pressures. These pressures come both from within the household – for example, from the father, and externally, for example, from the workplace and the wider society.

### **Supports, pressures and additional labour**

The next part of this paper describes the framework developed for the three categories of work arrangements. For each type of work arrangement, there is a list of the types of supports that help sustain it, the pressures that can lead it to change to another type, and the types of additional labour that parents, particularly mothers, do, to try and maintain the arrangements, or alternatively to try and transform them.

Those three things: Supports, Pressures and Additional Labour, are the crucial components on the framework. They are the engine driving and determining the descriptive categories and determining which one a mother will belong to at any point in time. Scope for individual agency is firmly in place in this framework – its part of the engine, but its not the only part, and nor is it the most powerful part.

*Gender skewed work arrangement – SUPPORTS are: family friendly policies; low paid hours of work for mothers (part time); reasonably paid jobs for fathers; outsourcing domestic work so the father doesn't have to do it; extended family members help out; schools, childcare, government financial*

*help; traditional gender/parenting ideology of parents (these are like 'preferences')*

As discussed, gender skewed work arrangements probably account for around 80 per cent of couple households with dependent children.

The supports for the gender skewed arrangements include family friendly policies. Because of their highly gendered take-up rate, family friendly policies can help maintain inequities – they free up the mother to do more of the unpaid work. Part time work is the same – it's great for mothers who are trying to meet the terms of a gender skewed arrangement, because it means at least they can do some paid work, but it can help maintain inequities because mothers doing part time work are likely to be more available than the father, (who is likely to be in a full time job), to do household work. Australia rates pretty well in terms of these sorts of supports – we are known for our good part time jobs and for our relatively family friendly workplaces – but it is argued here that while these sorts of supports make the workplace more accessible for mothers, they were policies designed from a workplace perspective not a household perspective. And as a result they get women doing paid work, but they certainly don't get men doing the unpaid work in the household. If family friendly policies were designed from a household perspective, the policies would focus more on getting fathers to be present in the home more often so they could do more of the unpaid work and free the mother up for paid work.

Outsourcing domestic work rather than getting the father to do more is a support strategy used by parents in gender skewed arrangements, and of course for rich women this is an option – rich women can sweep gender issues in the home under the carpet by ensuring neither parent has to do the domestic work.

Another important support is where both parents share a traditional gender ideology (this like a 'preference') – that is, they both think the mother should be in the home more than the father, and doing more of the household work. And this is precisely the support that Catherine Hakim focuses in her work on preference theory, she privileges this support above all others, whereas the framework developed here doesn't.

*Gender skewed work arrangements PRESSURES are: mother works more to get more income, gaining a power of absence from the home; can't afford to outsource domestic work so the father is forced to help out at home; only jobs available might be full time for the mother; non-overlapping shifts between parents grant the mother power of absence; one or both parents have an egalitarian gender/parenting ideology (this is like a 'preference')*

In today's world, the gender skewed arrangement has many pressures on it. Households can struggle on just one full time income or on one and a half low incomes, so the mother may be forced to work more paid hours to help make ends meet. If she is doing a lot of paid hours but the household income is still

low, outsourcing domestic tasks might not be an option, and this can make the father have to pick up more domestic work.

Other pressures can come from the workplace: the only jobs available to the mother might be full time, so if she has to work, she might have to work full time even though both parents would prefer her to work part time.

Non-overlapping shifts are becoming more common between parents, and these can pressure the father into doing more at home if he is home at a busy time of the domestic day while the mother is at work. Later in the paper, this situation will be shown to lead to a 'power of absence' for the mother.

One or both parents might have or develop an egalitarian gender ideology – this can be a pressure on the gender skewed arrangements.

Maintaining gender skewed work arrangements in the face of various pressures that might shift it towards being gender balanced, often means mothers have to do additional labour.

One of the major arguments in this paper is that the very act of maintaining and negotiating the relationship between work and home constitutes a form of additional labour, and also, this ongoing everyday reconstruction of arrangements allows for changes in the allocation of paid and unpaid work to occur. The additional labour falls between the dichotomy of paid and unpaid work, and is not something that we ever measure, in the same way that we

measure units of paid and to a lesser extent unpaid work. It is argued here that this additional labour is 'hidden' from most researchers and policy makers, and by developing a new framework, it can be revealed. Before showing what the types of additional labour are for the gender skewed work arrangement, the concept will be discussed more generally.

### **Additional labour: definition and types**

Additional labour means work that is done by parents when they work at maintaining the arrangements they have in place for doing their paid and unpaid work, including maintaining their paid working time arrangements.

There are a range of types of labour which is done simply to keep the arrangements between home and work going. When this labour becomes too hard to carry out, or when it is getting you nowhere in the face of other pressures, then the arrangements between home and work can change.

*Types of additional labour include: managing family responsibilities while doing paid job (synchronising time); negotiations with supervisors over working hours; working long hours (unpaid overtime) at paid job; negotiations with partner over domestic work; managing change from a couple to a sole parent family; creating support networks (social capital).*

This sort of labour is ongoing – it is the work done on an everyday basis so that the current relationship between home and work can continue. During the

interviews conducted for this research, parents explicitly cited this type of work as they explain how they keep their arrangements for paid and unpaid work in place.

*Gender Skewed Work Arrangements: ADDITIONAL LABOUR is: mother does mothering while at paid work, and/or paid work while at home (synchronising time); mother keeps paid work down, or gets certain shifts that suit the temporal rhythms of the home by negotiating with supervisors; super mothers – doing everything at home and work (large total weekly work load) can include overloaded part timer; father stays at work longer than officially necessary to enhance job prospects or to keep job; transformative: mother negotiates at home to try and get father to do more unpaid work.*

To keep a gender skewed work arrangement going, a mother might have to synchronise tasks and manage family responsibilities while she is at her paid job. For example, there are several quotes from the data where mothers tell how they phone home while at work to check their kids have left for school, or returned home from school. These mothers are covering for their absence from the home by still mothering even while at work. It's a form of additional labour that isn't measured by researchers or taken into account by policy makers, and it's difficult to reveal when using standard concepts of time or applying standard site-related definitions of paid and unpaid work.

Another type of additional labour mothers might do to try and keep to the terms of the gender skewed work arrangements is to keep their paid hours to

a part time quota, but then intensify their working time because really the job can't be done in part time hours, and/or do unpaid overtime. This is a common story – the work intensified and extended part time professional.

Another example found in the data was where nurses spend considerable time negotiating over rosters and number of weekly working hours so that they could still meet the terms of their gender skewed work arrangements. The 'room to move' that is built into flexible workplace policies, and things like self-rostering, while certainly giving mothers opportunities to work the maximum number of paid hours while still meeting the terms of their gender skewed work arrangements, actually can result in additional labour for mothers, as they find themselves negotiating and organising their working time arrangements on an ongoing daily basis. The interviews with managers and union delegates show that the 'room to move' that accompanies more flexible work practices, must meet two objectives: tighter hospital budgeting requirements so that flexibility in staffing reduces labour costs, and giving nurses what they want in terms of flexible rosters and preferred weekly hours. Managers try hard to be supportive to nurses requests due to the national nursing shortage – and the consequences of this can be ongoing discussions about rosters and working hours between mothers and their supervisors (see Morehead, 2003 for a detailed analysis of this).

The other types of additional labour for a gender skewed arrangement include the type that is transformative rather than supportive: where mothers negotiate with fathers to get them to do more of the household work.

*Gender balanced work arrangements – SUPPORTS are: same as for gender skewed, but both parents access them, both parents have reasonably paid jobs and reasonable working hours, outsourcing at home is done to lower total load, not mothers load; both parents have an egalitarian rather than a traditional gender/parenting ideology. PRESSURES are: disparity of income between parents; one parents workplace demands long hours; one parent has lots of travel for work; one parent has a traditional gender ideology.*

Family friendly policies, when used by both the mother and the father, operate as a support for this arrangement – so they can contribute to a more equitable division of paid and unpaid work, but only when fathers use them as well as mothers, and when both parents within a household can use them. But this doesn't happen much, and this is because of household effects – the workplace has them available to both, but the household provides the cultural engine, if you like, that drives the take up rate being so heavily skewed towards mothers.

On the pressures side, things that can drag a gender balanced arrangement toward a skewed one include a disparity of income between the mother and the father so that it makes more financial sense for the mother to take chunks of unpaid leave, and thus slip behind in terms of her career prospects.

Workplace pressures can include one parent being pressured to work longer hours, which may skew the distribution of work within the household, or sex discrimination such that one parent falls behind at work compared to the

other. Lots of workplace initiated absences such as travelling for work can mean one parent is left behind to do the unpaid work.

And if one or both parents have a traditional gender ideology, they might work to push the arrangement toward being gender skewed.

*Gender Balanced Work Arrangement – ADDITIONAL LABOUR includes: synchronising time more evenly shared between parents; mother manages the fathers domestic work; transformative – one parent does long paid work hours.*

In terms of additional labour, the types that are supportive include where both parents synchronise time so that paid and unpaid work is done at the same time – this shares the load of this type of labour between the parents. Mothers may need to manage the father's household labour to keep things evenly shared – this is a common finding in the housework literature. A transformative form of labour would be when one parent does long hours at work and is absent from home at a time when domestic work needs to be done – that sort of additional labour will skew the arrangements.

*Sole parent work arrangement: SUPPORTS are the same as for gender-skewed; and mother has a 'breadwinner' gender/parenting ideology, or is prepared to compromise her traditional ideology to remain in paid work.*

*PRESSURES are: income from job is not enough to allow the mother to work*

*full time; workplace wants longer hours that mother can't do; mother has a traditional gender/parenting ideology.*

Single mothers are not a common type of employee. Of all employees, only around 3 per cent were single mothers in 2000. But they are a growing family type, and sole parents (male and female) now comprise over 20 per cent of all families with dependants. Single mothers are less likely than married mothers to have a paid job.

*Sole parent work arrangement, ADDITIONAL LABOUR is: synchronising time; increase paid work hours etc; but also two extra types: managing change and constructing support. Transformative: new relationship resulting in formation of a new household.*

Single mothers have two specific types of additional labour that they must do if they are to maintain a relationship between paid work and home. These are managing change, and constructing supports. If they are coming from a couple family household, they have to rearrange the domestic arrangements so that they can remain in paid work, and this may require increasing their paid hours of work, or doing more study so they can get a better job. They lose the support of the husband at home, so they have to work at building up supports to assist them manage their absence from the household. The importance of keeping a good relationship with the father so that the unpaid work of parenting the children can be shared to some extent is obvious, but of course, not every mother will leave a marriage with sufficient skills to

undertake the necessary additional labour required to keep in paid work (Morehead 2003).

In summary, the framework described above shows that just to keep current work arrangements in place requires additional labour because of the various supports and pressures that effect how mothers manage the relationship between work and home on a continuous basis. Certain types of this labour are supportive of current arrangements, and others can help change them. All of them add to the paid and unpaid workload of parents, and particularly to the mothers load.

By revealing this additional labour within the framework, a contribution is made to the literature by showing that the type of relationship that mothers have between home and work is not something that they 'freely choose' based on their orientations to paid and unpaid work. Rather, their orientations operate as either a support of a pressure to their current arrangements and as a driver for the additional labour they do. Nor are their working time arrangements something determined by the labour market or by a rational decision about maximising household income while raising children. Rather, the arrangements they have in place are better viewed as a gendered, complex compromise, inherently unstable in the face of pressures and requiring actively constructed responses on a daily basis to keep going. The framework is capable of showing how these sorts of structures are actively reproduced and changed over time by parents.

It is easy to see why the gender skewed work arrangement is so prevalent within households today – while it is coming under threat from the pressures of modern working life, it still has strong institutional support and could be said to be structurally prescribed after the birth of a first child in couple families.

But how does a GSWA change to a gender balanced work arrangement – is that possible? One of the pressures on this type of work arrangement (described above) was non-overlapping shifts between parents, and in particular, where the mother is away at her paid job while the father is at home during a busy domestic time – say, for example, when children get home from child care or school and need dinner, bath and bed.

### **The Power of Absence**

A new concept called the power of absence, helps explain why some GSWAs change to GBWAs. This term is developed to talk about what happens to parent's experience of time when mothers are absent and fathers are present in the home at busy times of the domestic day.

*POWER OF ABSENCE is the domestic power within households that accrues to parents who are not in the household because they are at their paid job. It can be transformative: from a gender skewed to a gender balanced work arrangement.*

This is a relatively new occurrence – and it has accompanied the rise in women's labour force participation and the growth in non-standard hour jobs. There is some recent work and family research looking at the trend to parents working non-overlapping shifts, and what this means for family time (Presser 1994, 2000, Glass 1998). Mostly, the literature is negative because these sorts of families only get a small amount of time when they are all together at once.

But it is argued here that for mothers, this absence from the home when the father is present gives her maximum opportunity to exercise her power of absence – to such an extent that it can shift a gender skewed arrangement to a balanced one.

### **Power of absence – a pressure**

By power of absence is meant the domestic power within households that accrues to parents who are not in the household because they are at their paid job.

Traditionally, men have had the greatest power of absence from the home. In the male breadwinner model, the father works in a paid job at the same time as the mother is in the home doing the unpaid work. The husband's absence grants him the power to do very little of the household work. Absence from the home doesn't diminish his labour market chances – it increases them, because he's gaining skills at work and so on. Presence in the home doesn't

confer similar benefits. In fact, the longer you are away from paid work, the worse your labour market chances are.

This traditional power of absence for fathers is at its height when mothers are at home full time. As rates of maternal employment increase, the fathers power of absence starts to diminish – the unpaid work is no longer getting done while he's doing his paid job. Time use data confirm that fathers do tend to do more of the unpaid work when mothers do paid work.

But while mothers gain a power of absence by doing paid work, it is proposed here that 'being absent' from the home is an inherently gendered experience. For each hour that mothers do paid work they gain some power of absence, but they gain it at a slower rate than men.

Research has recently shown that when mothers do non-overlapping shifts to fathers, fathers tend to do more unpaid work (Presser 2000). Working time schedules thus become an important variable in determining the division of household labour. It is argued here that where the mother works a non-overlapping shift to the father, she gains power of absence at a greater rate than when her paid hours of work completely overlap with the father.

The interviews with parents working non-overlapping shifts showed this – fathers took over the domestic work when it was time dependent and the mother was away doing paid work. But some interesting results were found in the interviews with the seven single mothers, where it was revealed what

happened to them when they tried to exercise this power of absence during their marriages. Some of them were in relationships where the fathers actively worked to negate their power of absence – for example one father would ring the mother up at work constantly, telling her to come home because he couldn't cope with the children. Another would refuse to pick the kids up from school even though he was at home, and put them in expensive after school care that meant the mothers wages were almost worthless because they went on childcare. It seems that mothers power of absence can be dependent on the father's co-operation. This points once again to one of this papers key arguments: that mothers are not 'free' to choose the arrangements they want between home and work – they do the best they can given the pressures and supports and capacity for additional labour, that they have available to them.

### **Can policies change how couple families share paid and unpaid work?**

Perhaps the first question to be asked is: can governments really make policies that change how parents within households share paid and unpaid work? The framework developed in this paper can be applied to show they can. Government policy provides powerful inducements for parents to split work between them in certain ways and the lists of supports and pressures that drive the typology of work arrangements shows how policies and forces external to the household help determine the domestic arrangements within it.

### **Should policies promote one type of work arrangement?**

A second question that can be asked is: given we think policies can influence how couples divide up the paid and unpaid work, should policies favour one type of work arrangement over another? While the policy debate in Australia is currently focused on the rhetoric of choice, in reality the gender skewed arrangement clearly has the most institutional support and is certainly the most common. There were some analyses done in the press straight after the federal budget in 2004, for example, that tried to assess what sorts of paid work arrangements between couples would benefit the most from the budget measures and the families with mothers working part time and fathers working full time came out pretty well – and this of course is in the context of these gender skewed work arrangements already having lots of supports.

If we change the mix of supports and pressures, which can be done via policy, then we can reduce or increase the number of couple families with gender skewed work arrangements. That's a point this paper is trying to make: the policy mix can change the number of families in each of the work arrangement categories. So what do we as a society want? Should policies be continuing to support so strongly the gender skewed arrangement, and if so, can we remove some of the new pressures (mentioned above) that are pushing these arrangements towards either sole parent ones, or gender balanced ones.

### **What if we wanted more gender balanced arrangements?**

If we want more gender balanced work arrangements, (and this paper does not say that we do) we would need to increase the policy supports for that

type of arrangement and reduce the pressures. What does this mean in practice? The research shows that non-overlapping shifts are a great way of pushing work arrangements to be more gender balanced, but look at the price that is paid for that – families that spend little time together and where relationships might be stretched to breaking point. If policies were to be developed that pushed for more gender balanced work arrangements it is hoped we could think of other less negative ways of giving mothers power of absence from their households. An ability to return to work part time after maternity leave would help here. But a really important way of encouraging more gender balanced work arrangements would be to get fathers taking up family friendly policies, because this would get them to be more present in the home at times when unpaid caring work needs to be done. To do this, it seems you have to target fathers specifically. Research shows fathers don't tend to take time away from work if it isn't paid, and even when it is paid some men won't take it (reference) So, there needs to be father only policies where parents can not choose which one of them takes the workplace family friendly options, because if there is a choice, its likely to be the mother that takes up the policy. Paid paternity leave, where if the father doesn't take the leave, the mother can't have it, so that it constitutes a 'use it or lose it' approach, is one example of this.

Policies would also need to start raising the status of being present in the home. If parents are paid to be in the home, it starts attracting some of the benefits previously only available at the workplace and it would be a more attractive option for fathers. Paid parental and carers leave are classic

examples of these types of policies, as are allowances paid to parents who are at home full time caring for their children.

But if we wanted to promote gender balanced work arrangements, where paid and unpaid work is shared pretty evenly between both parents, the stay-at-home policies should never be a keep-out-of-paid work policy. They must work with each other not against each other, or else they will produce more gender skewed work arrangements.

### **Supporting sole parents to do paid work**

In Australia, sole parent families are on the rise, and some 86 per cent of them are headed by women. Single mothers have lower labour force participation rates than married mothers and governments of all persuasions would like to see more single mothers in paid work. It is argued here that one reason for their lower labour force participation rate is that single mothers have two more types of additional labour than mothers in couple families: managing change and constructing support. Policies could be directed at giving all mothers the skills to do such additional labour. This could help lift the labour force participation rate of sole mothers.

### **Where does this leave the concept of 'choice'?**

The research referred to in this paper shows that mothers' choices about paid and unpaid work are often the result of a gendered, complex compromise with

fathers and with workplace supervisors, inherently unstable in the face of supports and pressures and requiring active responses and often additional labour, on an ongoing basis. Choices are only made within a context, they are never context free, and it is argued here that the types of supports and pressures described in this paper are a major driving dynamic of this context.

So what is the most common context in which choices are made about paid and unpaid work? It's the gender skewed work arrangement – the one that seems to 'naturally' fall in place after the birth of a baby in a couple family but which in reality, is the one most heavily supported in our society.

### **Where does this leave policy?**

In order to develop policy responses, we have to first ask the question: what types of work arrangements do we, as a society, want to support? Why would it be good to keep supporting the gender skewed work arrangement more than the gender balanced one? We need to think about that by referencing broader issues, such as: Will it help with an ageing population? Will it help lift fertility rates? Will it help lower the divorce rate? These are some of the things that need to be discussed.

If we want to take another tack, and rather than saying we want to promote one type of work arrangement over another, we think we really want to let parents more 'freely choose' whatever work arrangement they wanted, then we would need to develop policies that supported each type of the three work

arrangements, and we'd have to make sure the policy mix also helped relieve pressures on the work arrangements and didn't have contradictory effects. Perhaps if we could achieve this, then, finally, Hakim's theory might have some use – perhaps then preferences would be the main driving force in work and family decisions. But they aren't now, and it is very difficult to see how a mix of policies could be so delicately and finely tuned that they could achieve this more perfect world.

In conclusion, it is worth again raising the issue of change. Change happens all the time with these work arrangements, they are unstable, they become more or less gender skewed, they become more or less gender balanced, and people move in and out of the sole parent work arrangement depending on whether they find a partner or decide to drop out of paid work altogether. Where the work arrangements are at, at any one point of time, is the result of that dynamic effect of the supports, pressures and additional labour that characterise each type.

With the right policy mix, the overall share of work between parents could be made to shift, and the household would start following the lead (imperfect though it might be) of the labour market in terms of changing who does the paid and unpaid work. It all depends on what type of work arrangements the policy mix aims to support.

(words: 7669).

## REFERENCES

ABS (2002) Labour Force Australia June 2002, Catalogue no. 6203.0.

Baxter J. (2000) The Joys and Justice of Housework, *Sociology*, vol. 34, No. 4, pp. 609-631.

Beck U. and Beck-Gernsheim E. (2002) *Individualisation*. London: Sage Publications.

Benjamin O. and Sullivan O. (1999) Relational Resources, Gender Consciousness and Possibilities of Change in Marital Relationships. *Sociological Review*, vo.47, pp.794-820.

Bittman M. (1992) *Juggling Time: How Australian Families Use Time*. Canberra: Office of the Status of Women.

Bittman M. and Pixley J. (1997) *The Double Life of the Family*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Cass B. (2002) 'Employment Time and Family Time: The Intersection of Labour Market Transformation and Family Responsibilities in Australia' in Callus R. and Lansbury R.D. (eds) *Working Futures*, Sydney: Federation Press.

Crompton R. and Harris F. (1999) *Employment, Carers and Families: The Significance of Choice and Constraint in Women's Lives*. In Crompton R. (ed) *Restructuring Gender Relations and Employment: The Decline of the Male Breadwinner*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Evans M. (2003) Contribution to the chapter 'Work and Family' in Dawkins, P. and Kelly P. (eds) *Hard Heads, Soft Hearts: A New Reform Agenda for Australia*, Melbourne: Allen and Unwin.

Hakim C. (2000) *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Preference Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hakim C. (2003) *Seminar Presentation 27 February*, Sydney: University of Sydney.

Hakim C. (2004) *Models of the Family in Modern Societies: Ideals and Realities*. Ashgate Publishing.

Hochschild A.R (1989) *The Second Shift*. New York: Avon Books.

Hochschild A. R. 1997) *The Time Bind*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Potuchek J. L. (1997) *Who supports the family? Gender and breadwinning in dual-earner marriages*. California: Stanford University Press.

Probert B. and Murphy J. (2001) Majority Opinion or Divided Selves? *People and Place*, Vol.9, No. 4, pp.25-33.

Pyke, K. D. (1996) Class Based Masculinities, the Interdependence of Gender, Class and Interpersonal Power. *Gender and Society*, Vol. 10, No.5, pp.527-549.

Pyke, K. D. (1994) Women's Employment as a Gift or Burden? Marital Power Across Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage. *Gender and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 1 pp.73-91.

Spade J. Z. (1994) Wives and Husbands Perceptions of Why Wives Work. *Gender and Society*, Vol.8, No.2, pp.170-188.

Williams J. (2000) *Unbending Gender*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

West C. and Zimmerman D.H. (1987) Doing Gender. *Gender and Society*, Vol. 1, No.2, pp.125-151.