

*Families Matter*  
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**Keynote address**  
**AIFS and the Work-Family Roundabout**

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Last Friday, The Age reported on the Employer of Choice for Women citations (awarded by the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency). Gongs went to firms such as ExxonMobil and the ANZ Bank for programs of paid maternity leave and flexible return to work options for women. We are told the number of citations has grown from 55 to over 100 in the past four years, so things must be improving. **1.**

You will forgive me for some scepticism and a sense of deja vue, for the work-family debate has been a recurring theme that has ebbed and waned over the 25 years of life of the Australian Institute of Family Studies. It's like being on a roundabout that never quite stops but is never quite fast enough for fun either.

The work-family issue has always been one of significance in my life, and when I set up the Institute back in 1980 I knew we had to look closely at the way changing work and family structures and the growing workforce participation of women were affecting family life. Income was and is a key resource for any sort of family, and our research agenda could not ignore the economics of family life.

My mother was widowed when I was 10 years old, leaving her with five children and no money. She had to work (there was no sole parent payment and the widow's pension was too low) and I used to get up early to have breakfast with her before she trotted up the hill to Fletcher Jones factory in Warrnambool to start at 8 am. I used to help my older sister get the young ones dressed and fed, rode them on my bike to school, then came home after school to prepare dinner and do my homework. My mother got home about a quarter to six each night.

Many years later when I asked a certain woman to marry me, her one concern was whether I would help with the housework? She had seen her mother confined to full-time housewifery and was having none of that. Nor was I, and we worked out a mutually satisfactory arrangement which has lasted happily for 45 years.

So what was the first study we designed for the Institute of Family Studies in 1980? It was the Family Formation Study – aimed at seeing how younger adults thought about courtship, education, marriage, the sharing of work and raising children. Who were the first overseas visitors invited out to help Institute staff design that study? Rhona and Robert Rapoport – authors of the then provocative book 'Dual Career Families'. **2** Their seminars were attended by various researchers from around the country and covered aspects such as “the effects on children of dual career parents, the different problems raised at different stages of the life cycle, the presence of conflict in career aspirations and opportunities, and the need for government policies that recognize the trend towards dual career families”. **3** Few others (including the Elton Mayo human relations school of management) had made the link, exceptions being Goldthorpe's 'Affluent Worker' project and Rosabeth Moss Kanter's 1977 'Work and Family in the United States', which insisted work and family were two highly interactive spheres.

In the Family Impact Seminars we ran across the nation during that first year, a recurring theme was the impact of employment on family life and the increasing need for community-based services to help families juggle their dual responsibilities. That was back in 1980, yet we are still locked in a battle of wills that seems to ignore the basic facts of family life.

I do not have the time to describe the many related shifts in Australian life, but it is worth remembering that

- The contraceptive pill was first marketed in the early 1960s, giving women greater control over their fertility and life choices
- The Women's Bureau was set up in 1963/4
- Expansion of the tertiary education system in the mid-60s opened up new options for many women in an economy needing skills regardless of gender
- 1966 saw the public service remove obstacles to permanent work for married women (my wife was not allowed permanency, and her pay was less than mine, though her qualifications and teaching responsibilities were exactly the same as mine)
- abortion was decriminalized in Victoria in 1967, NSW in 1971
- 1970/71 saw the formation of WEL, a powerful lobby for the rights of women
- 1974/5 saw Equal Pay cases shift Australia away from the old Harvester Judgement 'Breadwinner' model of family/work life
- 1975 introduced no-fault divorce, and a much-contested assumption of equal contributions of husband and wife to the marriage
- in 1976 Eve Mahlab, I and others drafted Victoria's first Status of Women legislation
- 1979 was the first year of private sector (unpaid) maternity leave

But it was not until 1984-5 that Australia passed Sex Discrimination and Equal Employment Opportunity legislation; Affirmative Action in 1986; and we did not

ratify ILO Convention 156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities, or introduce the idea of parental leave until 1990. The federal government set up a Work & Family Unit in the Department of Industrial Relations in 1991 and in 1992 the federal government, Business Council and Financial Review launched the first Corporate Work and Family Awards (an idea proposed by consultant Barbara Holmes and pushed by then EEO Director Heather Carmody).

These were big improvements, but there was an inherent underlying problem – balancing work and family was seen to be a ‘women’s issue’, a ‘problem’ for employers caused by women wanting to have both a paid job and children. I shall never forget a Seminar the Institute arranged in 1991 to bring together top CEOs and work-family researchers. The CEO of Shell Australia, Ric Charlton, walked into the foyer, shook my hand, looked around and declared, with contempt, “They’re all bloody women!” They were not and I soon had him calmed down talking to several other senior male executives who were implementing a lot of ‘family-friendly’ workplace practices. He sat through the whole seminar, went back to his office and demanded to know why Shell was not “into this family-friendly stuff”. Esso had recently enjoyed good publicity because its return rate from maternity leave had improved markedly through allowing part-time return and keeping in touch with women while they were on leave. Charlton found, to his surprise, that Shell’s human resources department had in fact run a survey the year before on its 1000 employees, with a quarter of them reporting considerable work and family stress. Former CEO Kevin Gosper had told them to sit on it, it was ‘soft’ and of no relevance. To his credit, Charlton insisted the report be published, and Shell suddenly became a ‘family-friendly company’. 4

That sort of superficial game continues with many companies today.

By the 1990’s the family-friendly jargon had been picked up enthusiastically by the media and many companies struggled to jump on the bandwagon. But there was underlying resistance. Despite good American and British evidence for the

cost-benefits of work-family programs in the workplace, Australian managers still largely saw it as an area for government, not corporate action. **5** Plus, they kept arguing that overseas research did not apply in Australia, a nonsense given that most of them had been trained overseas or had overseas corporate masters.

Moreover, the research played into employer bias against women because it focused on child care rather than on spousal responsibilities and family functioning more broadly defined. There was little (apart from Graeme Russell's research into 'stay-at-home Dads') that addressed men's problems in relation to the work-family balance.

In a talk I gave to the Business Council of Australia in 1987, I challenged the bulk of research in industrial relations and human resource management by examining years of studies into absenteeism. **6** What I found was that close to 50 per cent of all absenteeism could be attributed to family-related causes (such as alcohol and drug abuse, off-the-job accidents and the ubiquitous 'Sickie'). Yet not one writer had used the word 'family' in reporting on absenteeism and its causes. I provoked some strong reactions when I suggested to Australia's top CEOs that it was they who were responsible for much of the 'family breakdown' they lamented, the rising divorce rate, the 'neglect' of children, the delays in marriage and family formation we had detected in Institute studies.

They did not want to hear such a message because it meant something had to change in their own workplace practices, within their entire corporate cultures that might prove current management theory lacking.

As time went by, the evidence of stress, loss of productivity and staff turnover grew and could not be ignored. Studies such as the Institute's Family Reformation Project, Audrey VandenHeuvel's study 'When Roles Overlap: Workers with Family Responsibilities' (1993), Helen Glezer's major survey

of 'Maternity Leave in Australia' (1988), Ilene Wolcott's detailed studies of small businesses and how they handled such problems (1991 and 1993) all indicated the growing damage being done to Australian families by inflexible, uncaring workplace practices and attitudes. **7** We all talked about the 'stages' of family-friendliness suggested first by Galinsky and Friedman – first piecemeal reform, then EEO and Affirmative Action initiatives, then a more comprehensive Work-Family Program, and (maybe, in some cases only) the development of a more integrated, family-friendly workplace culture.

By 1993, I was becoming increasingly cynical about the chance of reform. Our evaluation studies of the new Child Support Scheme were framed too much in terms of women's needs and rights, thus alienating many men who may have been more understanding had we insisted more clearly on the 'joint responsibility' basis of maintenance under the Family Law Act. **8**

The Labor Party was never very sympathetic to 'family policy', in part because of an outmoded left-wing suspicion of family as a 'bourgeois' institution, in part because of bureaucratic feminist opposition. The Right was resurgent, with white picket fence propaganda and antagonism to the dire impact of child care on children's 'attachment' to their mothers. (We were in the midst of a massive study of child care which proved the opposite.) **9** Woman's place was either/or – either in the home where they belonged, or in the workplace, without kids or other family distractions and pushing hard at the glass ceiling.

So when the ANZ Trustees invited me to put up a proposal for funding on any topic I saw as of fundamental importance to Australian society, I argued for a new approach to work-family issues. That was in late 1992, and they heard proposals from other experts on youth issues, health issues, the likely impact of information technology and so on. But they chose my project – The New Links Workplace Project – because they could see it might cut across much of the current jargon and tired old arguments of the day.

Simply put, I suggested that it did not matter how family-friendly a company itself became, if the wider community in which employees lived was unfriendly towards, unsupportive of, family life. Remember, the Institute had also been doing studies of family support services **10** and every one of those studies had demonstrated that social infrastructure in support of family life (ranging from child care access to advisory services, from the un-family-friendly hours of schools and other community agencies to inflexible shopping hours and union awards) was equally essential to family functioning and wellbeing. And we knew from those studies how important was the community context in which families had to juggle their work and family responsibilities.

So this was a proposal for action-research, working with several major companies, to develop and test the proposition that if you could get both the company working in support of families and the community in which employees lived providing a family-friendly environment, there would be clear cost-benefits to both the company in terms of performance and productivity, and to the wider community in terms of family stability and improved capacity to cope. At that point, I had to leave the Institute because of a cancer operation, and the study came with me to Monash and RMIT, since it was my baby and no-one knew who would be the new Director or whether they would be interested. It ran for over three years, with Alcoa, Australia Post and Lend Lease as major participants.

Through a simple Community Scan in each employee catchment area, and through major Employee Surveys conducted in each workplace, Graeme Russell, Heather Carmody and I demonstrated the validity of my original premises: there was a mismatch between company policy and community support. Active intervention by the companies with local and state governments, making links across and between separate programs of Equal Opportunity, Occupational Health & Safety, Work-Family, management and supervisor training, plus building up local family support initiatives, all served to improve worker morale,

reduce stress, enhance performance and productivity and help workers with family responsibilities manage their lives more effectively. By making better links – across the corporate culture and between company and community – we were able to see marked and measurable change. **11**

The usual objection to implementing work and family programs is that they cost too much, it's easy for large corporations but it's too difficult for small business to contemplate. The Institute and many others have amply demonstrated that this is not the case. **12** . I have worked with the Young Professionals Group in Perth and a group of small businesses in Adelaide showing how they can build consortiums, share the costs and gain clear benefits.

We have seen promises from both the Coalition Government and from the Labor Opposition to further improve work-family practices, but little has changed. The ideological blinkers remain.

There is a fundamental divide between those who see flexibility as the answer and those who want to protect workers from too much flexibility. Why can't we have flexibility as well as some basic protection of workers from exploitation?

The Prime Minister finally saw the light and accepted that women are not all the same, following the visit of UK sociologist Catherine Hakim (there are now, apparently, at least three types of women!), **13** but Prue Goward is still battling to bring about some pretty basic change. Mark Latham may have understood the issue, but there was little evidence that anyone else in Labor did, and who knows what Kim Beasley thinks? Despite the government's efforts to flag the future ageing of Australia's population and the challenge of global competition to how we handle paid work and the unpaid work of family care, an ostrich-like attitude seems to permeate the corporate world.

There is also a growing backlash against family-friendly work practices, not just from those who think woman's place is in the home and formal child care is harmful to children, but also from the 'New Honchos' – those gung-ho young executives who have not and will never marry, don't and won't have children, who can partner without commitment, play hard and work hard, and whose attitude is – it's your choice to have a wife and family, don't expect me to pay for it, or even to adapt my management attitudes to accommodate it. **14** The mantra of choice rules supreme, ignoring the many structural constraints on real choices desired by both men and women in relation to work and family life. **15**

And, worst of all, there remains a belief that all this hoo-ha is caused by women wanting too much. Many men do not see it as their issue and managers fail to treat all employees as equally responsible for family care because, in truth, that responsibility is not yet shared by men. Men demand an assumption of 50-50 when it comes to post-divorce access to children; they would scream if government mandated 50-50 real-time responsibility for children during the marriage! The fact that many working men and fathers do express regret and stress over their lack of time for children and partners seems to get less media attention than a few reports of good corporate practice in relation to maternity leave. **16**

I look forward to hearing what Prue Goward has to say about a new policy direction aimed at men. My own book, due out in a few weeks, titled 'The War Over Work', has a lot to say about the ongoing gender battle and the inter-generational battle for work between young and old.

But I am proud of both the early and the ongoing work of the Australian Institute of Family Studies in highlighting to the Australian public, and to policy makers at every level, just how central is the negotiation of work and family responsibilities in the lives of Australia's men and women. Getting this right should be a high priority for every government, every opposition, every union and every citizen.

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