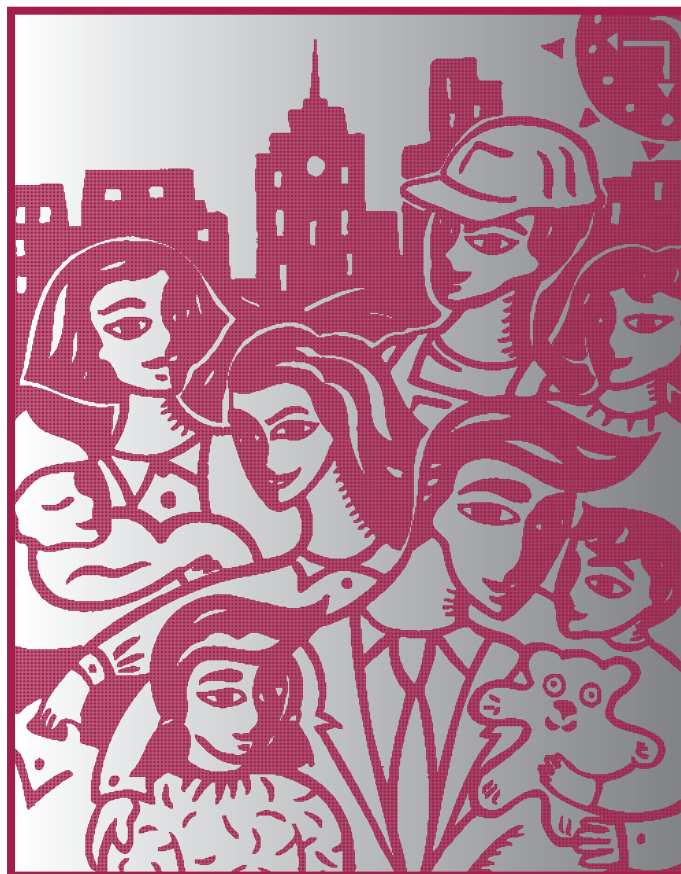


# IMPACT OF THE WORK ENVIRONMENT ON WORKERS WITH FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES



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AIFS SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOWS

This extract is from the Institute's new publication *Work and Family Life: Achieving Integration* – a major report on how women and men balance paid work and family caring. The book, produced with funding from Esso Australia, was launched on 23 August 1995 by Institute Director, Harry McGurk, and Esso Employee Relations Manager, Roland Orchard.

Family characteristics and workplace conditions can influence the quality of work and family life for workers with family responsibilities. Here we examine the aspects of the work environment most likely to affect how working parents manage their dual commitments, and the aspects parents value most.

Data are drawn from the Institute's Australian Living Standards Study, which was commissioned by the Commonwealth Government. Included is detailed information from working parents (n=4567) on a range of working conditions that have the potential to affect family dynamics and work and family satisfaction.

## Scheduling Work

The working hours and schedules of working parents are shown in Figure 1.

### **Work broken shifts, irregular hours**

A quarter of men, 15 per cent of women working full-time and 22 per cent working part-

time were often required to work broken shifts or irregular hours. Occupational status was a factor influencing the hours worked. Among males, plant

and machine operators (46 per cent) were most likely to be required to work these times, while among females it was para-professionals (36 per

cent) and sales assistants (27 per cent).

### **Work overtime and long hours**

Overtime and long hours can be perceived in different ways. They can be seen as positively contributing to a family's financial situation and/or considered to be disruptive to family life (Crouter and Manke 1994). In 1994 approximately 25 per cent of employed men worked 49 or more hours a week (ABS 1994a). In the Australian Living Standards Study sample, nearly 40 per cent of men compared with only 17 per cent of full-time and 5 per cent of part-time women said their jobs often or very often required them to work overtime or very long hours. In the Australian Bureau of Statistics survey on work and family (ABS 1994b), the main reason given by parents who had difficulties managing work and care of children was that work hours were too long (34 per cent).

When we examine the actual number of hours worked by parents, around one-third of fathers (31 per cent) indicated

they worked 50 or more hours a week. There were significant differences, however, between those who were self-employed and those who were employees. Nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of fathers who were self-employed worked these long hours compared with one-fourth of fathers who were employees. A survey of small business proprietors (Yellow Pages Australia 1993) revealed that a 58-hour week was the average work week.

Mothers who worked full-time were much less likely than fathers to work these extended hours. Overall 9 per cent of women worked 50 hours or more, with the self-employed (28 per cent) being more likely than employees (7 per cent) to work these hours. Overall 11 per cent of men and 7 per cent of women worked between 45–49 hours a week, the majority of whom were employees.

Approximately half of male managers and administrators, as well as plant and machine operators, were most likely to

work overtime or long hours. This was similar for women, although a smaller proportion, female managers and administrators (28 per cent) often had to work extended hours. Both male and female clerical workers and male labourers were least likely to work long or overtime hours.

Men and women in professional and managerial jobs were most likely to work 50 plus hours a week. The differences between the genders was again apparent with one-third of men in this occupational category compared with 13 per cent of women working these hours.

### Work weekends, or at night

Just over one-quarter of men often had to work weekends and a little more than one-fifth often had to work at night at their place of employment. Work schedules vary by industry sector. Similar proportions of women working part-time often worked at night (20 per

cent) or weekends (23 per cent) at their workplace.

A small percentage of men or women working full-time (between 15 and 12 per cent) and a few women working part-time (5 per cent) often had to work weekends or nights at home or attend meetings outside regular hours. Less than 10 per cent of men and 3 per cent of women were regularly required to travel away from home overnight.

### Flexible Work Practices

Some choice and control over the scheduling of work and flexibility in work practices to meet unexpected and routine needs of family life is considered one of the best ways to assist workers with family responsibilities (International Labour Office 1993; Friedman and Galinsky 1992). Figure 2 sets out some of the flexible work practices that were available to parents.

#### Flexible work hours

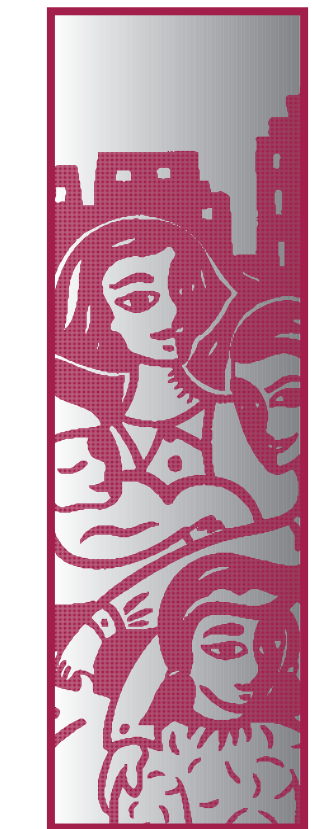
Sixty-one per cent of fathers and 59 per cent of all mothers (53 per cent full-time and 64 per cent part-time) said they could have flexible working hours if they needed them (Figure 2).

Not all workers have the same access to flexible working hours. Men who were managers, administrators and professional employees were most likely to have flexible hours available to them if needed (75 per cent), as did a similar proportion of women in these job categories (74 per cent) and women clerical workers.

Those in labouring jobs (69 per cent males and 58 per cent females) and plant and machine operators (males and females 58 per cent) were least likely to have these flexible working conditions.

#### Leave work for one hour if necessary

The majority of working parents could leave the workplace for up to an hour for personal reasons if they had to. Fewer women working part-time (73 per cent) could do this. However, higher proportions of men and women in management and administrative positions (96 per cent males and 89 per cent females) and women



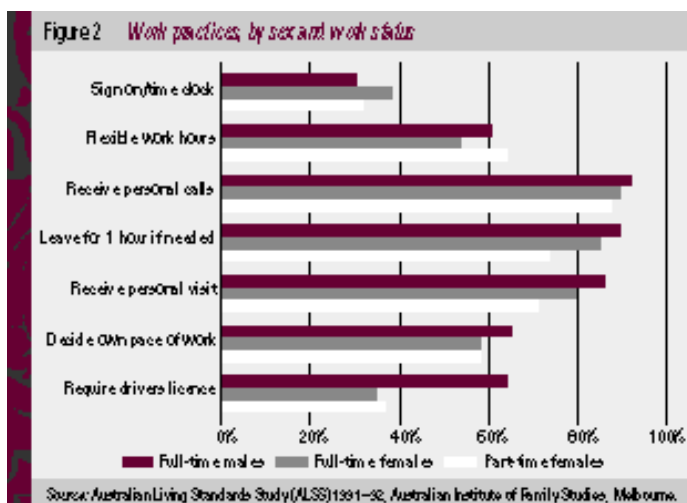
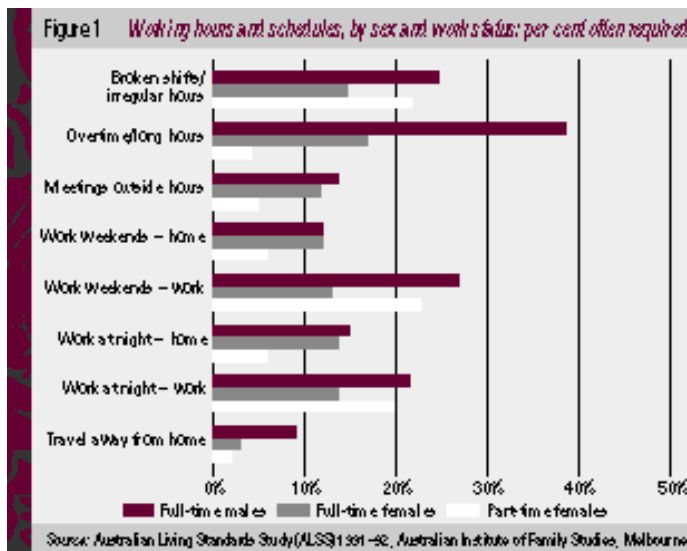
clerical workers (90 per cent) had this advantage.

#### Decide own pace of work

Nearly two-thirds of men and over half of the women (58 per cent) could also decide their own pace of work. Over three-quarters of men and women managers and administrators and two-thirds of female clerical workers had this advantage compared with only 49 per cent of male plant and machine operators and 55 per cent of labourers. A little more than half of female para professionals, sales assistants and labourers and 62 per cent of plant and machine operators could not decide their own pace of work.

#### Telephone access

For many workers with family responsibilities access to a telephone at work can enhance their ability to cope with family demands which otherwise could mean they would have to be absent from work, leave early or be distracted from their tasks at work (Cox 1993). For example, access to a telephone at work can enable a parent to remain in contact with an older child at home with a minor illness or to organise assistance for elderly parents.



# Impact of the Work Environment on Workers with Family Responsibilities

The majority of employed parents (92 per cent fathers and 89 per cent mothers) could receive at least one personal call per day during working hours. Receiving calls at work was more difficult for some categories of workers. Plant and machine operators, both male and female (17 and 34 per cent respectively) and labourers (23 per cent males and 26 per cent females) were most likely to say they could not receive calls at work.

## Clocking in

Approximately one-third of employed parents had to sign on or punch a time clock. For these parents, a dawdling toddler in the morning, the need to check on an ailing elderly parent on the way to work or to be at home for the plumber could be more problematic than workers who have less rigidity in their work scheduling.

Overall, employed parents in the Australian Living Standards Study appeared to have fairly flexible working conditions that could enable them to meet reasonable family demands.



## Leave and Child Care Benefits

Job-related benefits can range from entertainment allowances, cars, superannuation, medical insurance and discounts on goods, all of which can assist families financially, to benefits that more specifically enable parents to balance work and family life – parental leave, paid and unpaid sick leave, paid holiday leave, and long service leave.

Ninety-two per cent of Australian full-time employees received holiday leave or sick leave and 78 per cent received long service leave (ABS 1993). Less than 1 per cent received child care expenses. Far fewer part-time employees were eligible for these benefits when casual employees are included. When only permanent part-time employees are included, the proportions eligible for these benefits are similar to full-time employees.

## Paid leave

Figure 3 shows that approximately 84 per cent of men and 88 per cent of women working full-time received paid sick leave and paid holiday/recreation leave, with 77 per cent eligible for long service leave. A much smaller proportion of women working part-time (45 per cent) received sick or paid holiday leave and only 39 per cent long service leave. The smaller proportion of part-time workers receiving these benefits is related to those who are casual workers.

Working parents often need short periods of time away from work to meet family needs. For many working parents, organising care when a child, spouse or elderly parent is sick is a source of anxiety. When a child is born, a longer time span is necessary to care for newborns and infants.

Three-quarters of women working full-time compared with one-third of women working part-time were eligible for parental leave – in most cases probably maternity leave. Almost half the males (47 per cent) were also eligible for parental leave.

## Importance to Parents of Working Conditions

How important are various working conditions for workers with family responsibilities? Surveys of working parents frequently mention flexibility and trust between workers and supervisors as desirable working conditions. The availability of some options is perhaps less important than whether or not particular benefits are deemed important by working parents.

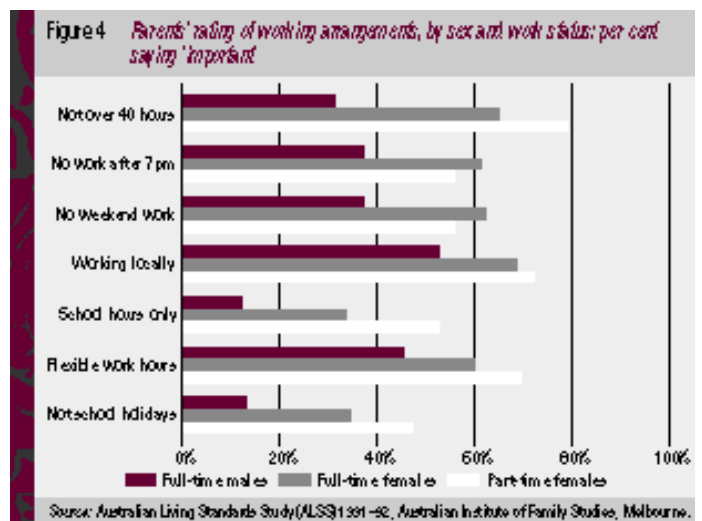
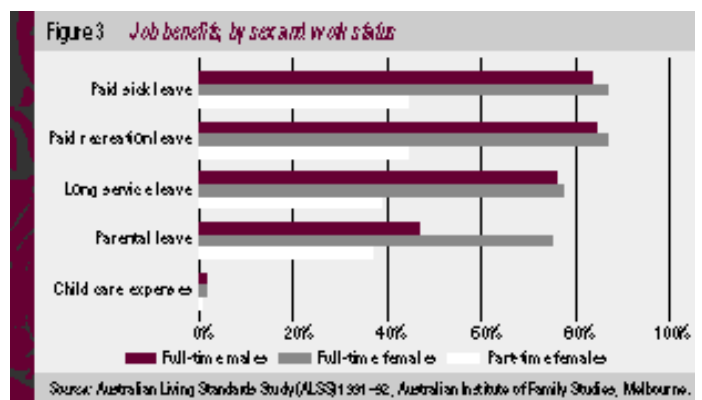
Parents rated how important various aspects of paid work were to them on a five-point scale (1 meant 'not at all important', 5 meant 'extremely important' and 3 meant 'somewhat important'). In the following analysis, ratings 4 and 5 combined are taken as meaning 'important'.

## Working time arrangements

Some choice and control over the scheduling of work and flexibility in work practices to

meet both unexpected and routine needs of family life is considered one of the best ways to assist workers with family responsibilities (International Labour Office 1993). Working flexibly, however, has several meanings: part-time work; job sharing; varying the starting and finishing hours (flexitime); averaging hours over weeks, months or a year; accruing time in lieu; and working from home. Flexible working hours may also describe a process – the ability to control the hours and scheduling of work to meet family and personal needs along with the demands of the job.

Considering what we already know about the tendency of many women to organise their working roles around family obligations in comparison with most men, it is not surprising that working time arrangements were particularly important to women (Figure 4). Women working full-time (62 per cent) and part-time (56 per cent)



cent) were significantly more likely than men (37 per cent) to rate no night or weekend work as important aspects of their job. Flexible working hours were also rated significantly more important by women than by men.

Similarly women, particularly those working part-time, were significantly more likely than men to consider that working no more than 40 hours a week was important in their job.

Even stronger contrasts were observed between men and women in their ratings of the importance of working only school hours (men 12 per cent, women full-time 34 per cent, women part-time 52 per cent) or not working school holidays (13 per cent, 34 per cent and 47 per cent respectively). Given that women often have the main responsibility for child care and household tasks, working locally was

significantly more important for women than for men.

The same pattern held at all job levels. Whether professional, lower white collar or blue collar, men rated work flexibility and working hours as less important than women across the same job levels. Women working full-time in lower white collar jobs placed the most importance on work hours, and women working full-time in blue collar jobs

placed the least emphasis on work flexibility.

### *Qualities of the job*

Stressful experiences on the job can impact on family relationships. Job characteristics mentioned earlier that are considered to be stressful encompass both work that imposes complex demands and high levels of responsibility as well as monotonous and repetitive jobs or those with little

# Institute Represented at International Seminar on Work and Family

**A** seminar 'to explore how work organisations can be restructured to promote genuine gender equity' was held in Satra Bruk, Sweden in May-June. The seminar, 'Organisational Change and Gender Equity: International Perspectives on Fathers and Mothers at the Workplace', was sponsored by the Ford Foundation, the Allmanna Barnhuset Fund and the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences. It was held at the beautiful estate of the Allmanna Barnhuset Fund in southern Sweden.

The seminar brought together researchers who are conducting pioneering research in the area, and provided a forum where theoretical perspectives on the meaning of gender equity and barriers to its achievement could be explored within the context of empirical research and pragmatic experiences within organisations.

Sessions were organised around the following topics:

Formal company support for fathers and mothers at the workplace; Company culture and gender equity; Impact of organisational culture on fathers and mothers; Dynamics of organisational change; and Future directions for theory, research, organisational practice and social policy.

**I**n all there were 22 participants representing the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark and Australia. The Australian contingent, who received travel support from the Department of Industrial Relations, ensured that Australian studies and policy initiatives were on the agenda.

Rohan Squirchuck (Council for Equal Opportunity in Employment) presented an overview of Australian workforce participation and family demographic trends. Phil Drever (Labour Relations Policy Branch, Department of Industrial Relations) provided input on the wide range of government work

and family programs and policies. The paper by Helen Glezer and Ilene Wolcott (Senior Research Fellows, Australian Institute of Family Studies) reported on findings from two studies conducted by the Institute that examined the impact of workplace conditions on family relationships and how family commitments affect the workplace. Graeme Russell (School of Behavioural Sciences, Macquarie University) described the results of one company's survey of employees' work and family needs and the efforts to develop a strategic policy response. Don Edgar (National Key Centre in Industrial Relations, Monash University) discussed the New Links Workplace project aimed at changing the corporate culture and work practices in two companies to reduce work and family conflict.

A majority of the United States and European participants were conducting action research studies in

individual large corporations and then attempting to work with management to implement change. The Swedish research appeared to have a more direct focus on determining the impact on fathers and whether policies encouraged fathers to take on more family caring roles.

**T**he seminar posed the question: 'How can organisational culture and structure be transformed to promote gender equity?' The answers, as explored in the seminar sessions, encompassed the far more complex notion of universal social change as reflected in the attitudes and values of men and women regarding gender, family and work identities. These aspects of change are incorporated in but extend beyond the boundaries of organisational culture and structure change.

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autonomy (Crouter and Manke 1994).

Somewhat surprisingly, as Figure 5 shows, a job with little stress or pressure was rated important by only half (51 per cent) of men and 59 per cent of women working full-time; this job characteristic was more important to women working part-time (63 per cent). Having a responsible job, however, was important to 84 per cent of both men and women working full-time, with women working part-time feeling a little less strongly (77 per cent) about the importance of this.

In contrast to the more structural aspects of jobs, having an interesting job was important to nearly all men (92 per cent) and women working full-time (93 per cent) with women working part-time (87 per cent) only slightly less concerned about this aspect. Given the importance of an interesting job for these workers, it is not surprising that a sense of satisfaction about what they were achieving was important to more than 90 per cent of men and women.

Around three-quarters of men and women working full-time felt that having a job with opportunities for training and career advancement was important, compared with less than two-thirds of women who were working part-time. On the other hand, having fringe benefits was important only to 40 per cent of men, 34 per cent of women working full-time and 28 per cent of women working part-time.

Good relationships with workmates were highly valued by working parents (Figure 5), with 93 per cent of women and 87 per cent of men indicating this was an important aspect of work. Equally, a good relationship with their employer or supervisor was important to 94

per cent of women and 86 per cent of men.

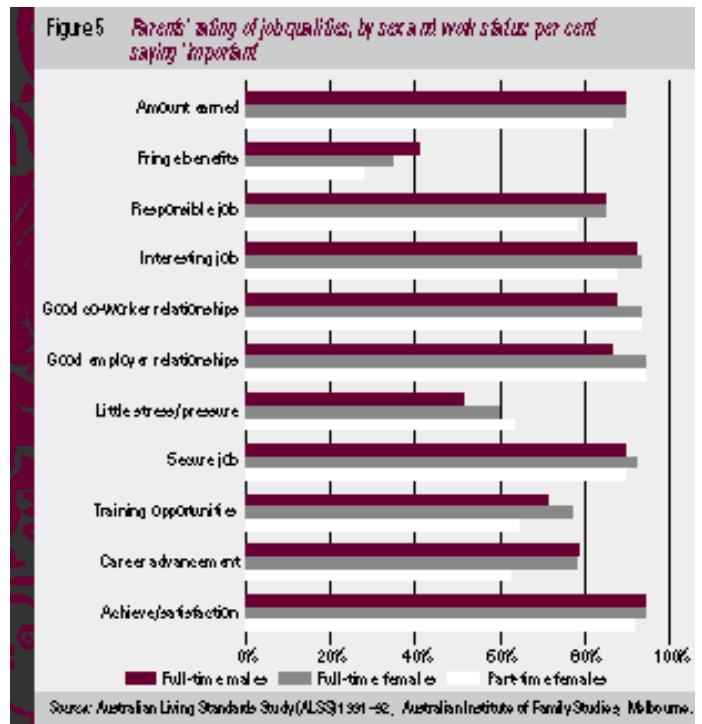
Supportive relationships with co-workers and supervisors have been observed to moderate the impact of work stress and are positively linked with employee job satisfaction, commitment and ability to accommodate family needs (Galinsky, Bond and Friedman 1993; VandenHeuvel 1993).

Mackay (1989) observes that work is a 'therapeutic experience' for many people, providing not only structure but satisfying social relationships among colleagues, and a degree of self-fulfillment.

Nevertheless, earning and contributing to family income is a reason most people give for being in paid employment. The amount earned was important to the majority of men (89 per cent) and women working full-time (89 per cent) and part-time (86 per cent). In times of recession and 'downsizing' in workplaces, job security was important to about 90 per cent of men and women.

### Summary

Working parents (both mothers and fathers) in the Australian Living Standards Study judged as important a job that is interesting and provides a sense of achievement in an environment that fosters good relationships with co-workers and supervisors. Job security and income were also important to almost all parents. Working time arrangements that would provide more time for family life – working during weekdays and daytime, working locally and less hours – were more important to mothers than fathers, thus reinforcing the view that organising work time to suit family needs is still more the province of women than of men.



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**Work and Family Life: Achieving Integration**, by Ilene Wolcott and Helen Glezer, published by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne, 1995, is available from the Institute. Please see price and other details on pages 54-55 of this issue.



**IYF Conference  
proceedings  
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In November 1994, the Australian Institute of Family Studies, the Commonwealth Department of Human Services and Health, and the South Australian Government, co-hosted the official national conference for the International Year of the Family.

Proceedings of the conference, *Australian Families: The Next Ten Years: International Year of the Family Conference Proceedings*, are now available. The conference produced over 70

papers, covering the four broad themes of: 'The many faces of Australian families'; 'The family in Australian society'; 'Dimensions of family care'; and 'Building alliance for family wellbeing'.

Copies of the publication are available for the cost of \$30.00 (plus postage). Enquiries should be directed to: Office for Families and Children, PO Box 39, Rundle Mall, Adelaide SA 5000. Telephone (08) 226 6721.