

Are Australian workplaces family friendly?

Women have traditionally resolved the care-career-cash dilemma by not working in the paid workforce at all or by working only part-time while children were young, even though more recently we have seen an earlier return to the workforce for women with young children.

For example, in August 1995, in two-parent families with a child under age five years, just under 17 per cent of mothers worked full-time, compared with 84 per cent of fathers. Even in those 16 per cent of families where the father did not work full-time, mothers did not step in to fill the breach, and their full-time workforce participation was slightly lower, at 13 per cent, than the mothers in those families where the father was working full-time. For both lone fathers and lone mothers with a child under the age of five, full-time workforce participation was even lower.

Four in ten part-time jobs go to women with child-related responsibilities (that is, with children under 12). Seven in a hundred go to men in the same circumstances. More than three in ten of the mothers in 1995 who worked part-time gave specific family-related reasons for doing so, and a further three in ten said it was their own choice. It is reasonably apparent that the use of part-time work by women is closely related to balancing work and family responsibilities.

However, the data suggest that once women are in the workforce, there are minimal concessions available for a dual role. The Table shows that there is very little difference in working arrangements for either men or women, regardless of whether they have children under 12 or not. In some circumstances, it seemed that parents with young children were working in a less flexible environment even than their counterparts with fewer child-related responsibilities.

In 1995, parents with children under the age of 12 represented just over a quarter of the workforce – 29 per cent of the male workforce and 26 per cent of the female workforce. How easy is it for these parents to gain the additional flexibility which may be required to carry out the dual tasks of care and paid work? The latest data suggest that the answer is still 'not easy' and that the working arrangements available to them differ little from those generally available to all workers.

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Women with children under 12 had remarkably similar patterns of absence from work when compared either with other women, or with men with or without children under 12 (see Table). They were little more likely than other employees to take time off overall, and when they did, that time was more likely to be in the form of unpaid leave than the absences of other employees.

In its recent release, *Australian Social Trends*, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 1996) examined unpublished data and concluded that although it does not show in the data, there is a difference in the 'standardised' rate at which men and women take sick leave. Part of this difference is because women and men have different occupational arrangements; if the shape of both groups were identical, women would be seen to be taking more sick leave than men for each type of occupation. The analysis concludes that the largest differences between the standardised sick rates of men and women were among professionals (12 per cent for women and 8 per cent for men) and managers and administrators (7 per cent for women and 4 per cent for men).

The gender difference may be because of the differential



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Picture: Narda Sowter

care of children. Overall, the standardised rates show that 3 per cent more mothers in two-parent families with children under 15 than fathers with the same aged children would take some form of sick leave. (The *Social Trends* data deal with parents of children under 15; the data for the Table in this article deal with parents of children under 12.)

The *Social Trends* analysis does not make clear whether the periods of leave taken were of similar durations for the different genders, and therefore leave the reader understanding little better the real patterns associated with the presence of children. It does show, however, that a higher standardised percentage of lone mothers with children under 15 (15 per cent) would take some sick leave over the same period than mothers in two-parent families with children under 15 (11 per cent), or women without such responsibilities (10 per cent), and suggests the particularity of

their circumstances as lone parents with dual responsibilities and the need for sensitive policies. Overall, the *Social Trends* analysis suggests a slightly higher use of sick leave by both mothers and fathers with children under 15, compared with men and women who do not have the same child-related responsibilities.

Part from this higher use of sick leave by parents, the data show very little concession to the likely need for flexibility by negotiation (as distinct from flexibility to suit organisational needs). According to the Table, women with children under 12 were no more able than other women in the workforce to negotiate start and finish times, or to be able to work extra hours in order to take time off (when perhaps there was a child sporting event or dentist appointment to attend). Almost no mothers with children under 12 were entitled to a nine-day fortnight to relieve that burden of cramming things into the weekend, far fewer were entitled to a rostered day off than other colleagues, and fewer could choose when to take holidays. On the other hand, more women with children under 12 than other women in the workforce had work hours which varied from week to week – no doubt making child care arrangements difficult, particularly paid formal care arrangements. As well, overtime worked was not necessarily for the benefit of family incomes; about half of the women recorded as working overtime in August 1995 were likely to be doing so in an unpaid capacity.

Nor were fathers particularly better off than their male colleagues without child-related responsibilities. They did, however, appear to gain more from and by working overtime. Five in ten fathers of children under 12 said that they worked regular overtime, compared with four in ten men without children under 12. Perhaps as a consequence, fathers of children under 12 were more likely to be earning a higher income than their colleagues, although for approximately a quarter of these

fathers the overtime was likely to be unpaid. However, gaining this higher wage is obviously at the expense of time with children.

To this point, then, the data suggest that parents in 1995 had no greater flexibility in their working arrangements than their colleagues with fewer or no child-related responsibilities. Do current trends in the workplace suggest that the situation will change?

The casualisation of the workforce has hit women more than it has men, because they are more likely to be working part-time or in areas more subject to the casualisation of labour. Casualisation, by definition, is employment which does not bring with it either sick leave or holiday leave. Neither, in most cases, does it carry with it long service leave, which is available to 84 per cent of full-time permanent workers and more than half of the part-time permanent workers. Also, in August 1994, only about six in ten casual employees

received a superannuation benefit, regardless of whether they were male or female, full-time or part-time. In theory, then, the earnings of casual workers ought to be sufficient to cover this loss.

Men working full-time and women working full-time have similar rates of permanent employment: 90 per cent for men and 92 per cent for women in 1995. Part-time women in fact have considerably higher rates of permanent employment than part-time men: 42 per cent for women as compared with 22 per cent for men. Nevertheless, 37 per cent of women with children under 12 are casual employees, compared with 13 per cent of men with the same aged children.

And along with that level of casualisation come effects upon working benefits, particularly on income. In 1993, women working as full-time casual workers earned less than 80 per cent of the income of women working as full-time permanent

workers (ABS 1993). This brought the average earnings of a full-time, casual, female worker down to less than two-thirds of the income of a full-time, permanent male worker. For men, the difference was not quite so dramatic: full-time male casual workers earned on average 88 per cent of full-time male permanent workers. In the part-time field, the contrasts are even more stark. So for casual employees there are, on average, no income gains to make up for other lost working benefits.

The percentage of casual workers has been dropping marginally as new workplace agreements are negotiated – from 23 per cent of the workforce in 1993 to 22 per cent in 1995. But those drops have been mostly in the part-time female workforce. In the full-time workforce, both male and female, between 1993 and 1995, the percentage of casual workers has risen slightly – from 8 per cent to 9 per cent of the male full-time workforce, and from 4 per cent to 5 per cent of the female full-time workforce. And it has traditionally been the permanent full-time workforce which has brought with it the most enhanced workplace benefits: items such as holiday, sick and long service leave, transport and telephone, goods and services, housing expenses, entertainment allowance, and study leave. These concessions or allowances are provided in addition to wages and salary.

Male casual full-time workers now outnumber male casual part-time workers. In 1994, the number of workplace benefits which attached to male casual full-time employees was significantly lower than those which attached to permanent female part-time positions (ABS 1994).

Female casual part-time workers, although reducing, still significantly outnumber female permanent part-time workers. Again, in 1994 the benefits attaching to female casual part-time workers fell far short of those attaching to female permanent part-time workers (ABS 1994).

Casualisation, then, continues to bring with it lower wages and fewer workplace benefits.

Between 1993 and 1995, there have been some changes in the working arrangements and working conditions of men and women, but it is not clear whether, on balance, these changes offer much in the way of support for families. There has been a shift towards more variability in start and finish times, an increase in parents working weekends and working overtime on a regular basis, and a slight decrease in parental entitlement to rostered days off. At the same time, there has been a slight increase in the ability to work extra hours in order to take time off. There has also been a slight increase in the use of sick leave, particularly among casual workers.

The improvements in maternity, paternity and parental leave also seem to have had marginal impact. Between 1993 and 1995 there was no perceptible rise in the use of those forms of leave by parents. In August 1995, more than twice as many men took bereavement leave as took paternity or parental leave. Although three times as many women as men took parental leave, again their numbers were not much higher than the number of women who took bereavement leave in the same period.

Overall, as the Table shows, those workers juggling parental responsibilities get, at most, the same workplace benefits as their fellow workers without young families. It would seem that workplaces could well make further adjustments to assist parents in their dual roles.

References

- ABS (1996), Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Australian Social Trends, 1996*, Catalogue No. 4102.0.
- ABS (1994), *Employment Benefits Australia, August 1994*, Product No. 6334.0.40.001.
- ABS (1993), Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Weekly Earnings of Employees (Distribution) Australia, August 1993*, Catalogue No. 6310.0.

Working arrangements of men and women workers according to whether they have children under age 12 years, Australia, August 1995

Working arrangement	Employees with children under 12		Employees with no children under 12	
	Men (%)	Women (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)
% with an absence from work in previous two weeks				
paid	15	13	14	14
unpaid	3	7	4	5
% of all workers who in last two weeks took				
sick leave	10	10	9	10
maternity, paternity or parental leave	*	2	*	*
holiday leave	5	3	5	4
% of all workers who in last two weeks took an absence of				
less than one day	2	1	2	2
1 whole day	3	3	3	3
2-5 whole days	6	6	6	7
6-9 whole days	1	*	1	1
10 or more whole days	1	2	2	2
% whose start and finish times are fixed and not negotiated with employer	45	45	50	54
% able to work extra hours in order to take time off	41	38	36	37
% entitled to a rostered day off	33	14	33	21
% who can work a 9 dayfortnight	1	*	1	*
% who can choose when to take holidays	84	76	83	79
% working overtime on a regular basis	50	23	40	28
% whose workdays vary from week to week	10	15	11	13
% earning \$480+ per week	75	29	61	40
% with permanent employment	87	63	82	75

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics. Working Arrangements, Australia, August 1995. Product No. 6342.0.40.001.