

# Governments, workplaces and households

To what extent do they shape how mothers allocate time to work and family, and what role do preferences play?

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Rather than talking about the role of preferences, it might be more useful to talk about the role of supports, pressures and additional labour in determining how mothers allocate time to work and family.

Compared with 30 or even 20 years ago, there has been an increase in choices available to mothers who combine paid work with family responsibilities, largely made possible because of the growth in the number of part-time jobs and the growth in the number of child care places. Mothers can choose to work full-time, or a range of part-time hours. They can choose to leave their children in the care of a range of child care providers. But how do mothers actually make decisions about how many hours to spend in paid work and how many in the unpaid work involved with family responsibilities?

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2004), while only 14 per cent of all employed people are mothers with dependent children, around 58 per cent of all mothers with dependent children are in paid work. Mothers in paid work are a big issue for families (how will a household cope with the absence of the mother?), and perhaps a smaller issue for employers because mothers make up a relatively small proportion of all employed people.

On the other hand, skill shortages in the labour market and the ageing of the population mean that mothers may well become more valuable (and therefore a bigger issue) to employers over the longer term.

Historically, households are accustomed to the absence of the father for the purposes of paid work. If the father is absent from the household while the mother is present, then the father's absence is not much of an issue. One adult can generally do all or most of the unpaid work required to run a household and look after children. But the strong rise in

the labour force participation rates of mothers over the last 30 or so years has not been accompanied by fathers dropping their paid work hours so that they are present in the home while the mother is absent. In fact, only around 1 per cent of all fathers in Australia report being at home full-time specifically in order to care for children (unpublished data, HILDA 2001).

While total hours of work are generally similar between men and women – when combining the paid and unpaid work they do each week – men's share is mostly made up of paid work. Mothers are overwhelmingly more likely to work part-time than fathers, and this helps them keep their total weekly hours of work to a similar level as fathers. Of all mothers with dependent children in paid employment, 56 per cent are in part-time work, whereas of all fathers with dependent children in paid work, 7 per cent are in part-time work (ABS 2004).

Where women and men work the same number of paid hours, women tend to do more total hours of work per week than men (Bittman, England, Sayer, Folbre and Matheson 2003; Bittman and Pixley 1997). Mothers with dependent children who are working in full-time jobs and living in couple families are likely to experience very high levels of stress (de Vaus 2004: 315; and see Wooden 2000: 140 for a discussion of gender differences associated with working hours and stress).

Why is this the case? How do mothers arrive at this skewed allocation of paid and unpaid work within their households?





### *Choice and preference: the role of households*

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 2002) and that we should celebrate the increased choices available to mothers with regard 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. Given that she found from a survey conducted in the United Kingdom in 1999 that around 60 per cent of mothers are “adaptive” (that is, they tend to do part-time work and/or drop in and out of the workforce depending on their family responsibilities), Hakim (2003) argues that government policies should focus on supporting this group.

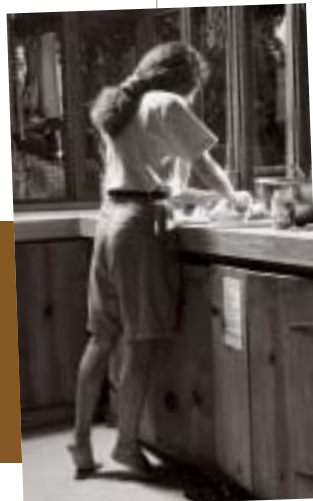
Other researchers argue that choices and preferences are highly constructed and constrained, and rather than being used as an outcome measure for policy evaluation, or a basis for policy development,

they might better be used as a springboard for “what lies beneath” (Crompton and Harris 1999; Probert and Murphy 2001; Williams 2000; Cass 2002).

Over the last couple of decades some household research has focused on how the highly specialised arrangements concerning paid and unpaid labour within households are maintained and negotiated by working parents (West and Zimmerman 1987; Baxter 2000; Benjamin and Sullivan 1996, 1999; Pyke 1994, 1996). 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 (1987) 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 (2003) 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 amounts similar to their husbands (Potuchek 1997; Spade 1994).

Arlie Hochschild (1989: 15) talks about the patterns of interaction that couples use as "gender strategies", defining 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". Gender strategies are the result of applied gender ideologies. These ideologies are a set of beliefs about men and women and marital roles (1989: 190). Hochschild (1989: 18) calls gender strategies "the basic dynamic of marriage" and she categorises them as ranging from egalitarian through to transitional and traditional. Wives with a "traditional" gender ideology who are working full-time might still



Sometimes pressures can make it very hard for parents to keep their work arrangements (that is, the way unpaid and paid work is distributed in households) in place, and parents need to do a lot of additional labour if they want to keep things the way they are.

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 many hours on the domestic work at home.

This gender approach goes much further than Hakim's (2000) preference theory in terms of providing insight into how parents allocate time to work and family. By discussing the importance of the couple dynamic it reveals the effect of the household on individual preferences.

A simple way to consider this is to imagine household discussions following the birth of a child regarding the paid working hours of the parents. While families might discuss how the father could cut back on overtime in his full-time paid job, or whether it was feasible for him to take a few weeks leave immediately following the birth, it is unlikely they would discuss whether he should abandon his job or even drop to part-time hours.

On the other hand, the matter of how many paid working hours (if any) the mother should do is likely to be the subject of much discussion not only after the birth of the child, but during the pregnancy, and perhaps even prior to that. ABS statistics showing the patterns of labour force participation and extent of full-time work for mothers and fathers with dependent children are revealing. They show that the likelihood of mothers being in any paid work and the number of paid hours worked change markedly depending on the age of the youngest child. For fathers, however, there is virtually no association between paid hours worked

and age of youngest child, the great majority of fathers working full-time (ABS 2004).

Given that a mother's paid employment and labour force participation vary according to the age of her youngest child, there are several points during a mother's working age life where she alters her amounts of paid and unpaid work. Using the approach of Hochschild and others, it can be argued that the household effect on mothers' decisions are strong – via conversational patterns between mothers and fathers (Dempsey 2000; Benjamin and Sullivan 1996, 1999), and via the application of gender strategies.

But why do mothers change the amount of paid and unpaid work they do? If it is not because they are simply exercising preferences to be "adaptive" (in Hakim's sense) are they mostly captive to the playing out of gender strategies within the household (in Hochschild's sense)? Or is there something else going on?

It is argued here that there is something else going on – namely, that the strong household effects help produce and articulate a mother's preferences, but that these preferences are either maintained or

changed over time in response to a range of supports and pressures.

*The most common type of work arrangement in dual-earner families with children is one where paid and unpaid work is unevenly allocated between parents (a skewed work arrangement)*

According to statistical labour force and time use data in Australia, the most common way that parents arrange their unpaid and paid work is skewed such that the mother does more unpaid work than the father. Hochschild (1997) estimated from her research in the United States that about 80 per cent of couples have this skewed allocation of unpaid work.

This type of 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 it. For example: school hours do not overlap very often with paid working hours and they make it hard for both parents to work full-time; child care and outside school hours care, unlike school, is not freely provided; two part-time jobs often do not provide enough income for a family so at least 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, nor as likely to be full-time, compared with men's jobs. Combined with the strong household effects (described in the section above) that help reproduce these influences on an everyday basis, it is easy to see why this skewed

work arrangement is by far the most common – basically, our society supports it.

### ***Supports, pressures and additional labour: a new framework for understanding how mothers allocate time***

Any work arrangement (that is, the way unpaid and paid work is distributed within households) has a range of supports that help sustain it, pressures that can lead it to change to another type, and types of additional labour that parents, particularly mothers, do, to try and maintain the arrangements or, alternatively, to try and transform them.

The three components (supports, pressures and additional labour) form a new framework for understanding how mothers allocate time. They are the engines driving and determining the work arrangements that parents have in place at any one time. Scope for individual agency (for example, the enactment of preferences) is firmly in place in this framework – it is part of the engine, but it is not the only part, and nor is it the most powerful part.

Skewed work arrangements – 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 does not have to do it; extended family members help out; schools, child care, government financial help; and traditional ideology or “preferences” of parents.*

The supports for the skewed type of work 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 is great for mothers who are trying to meet the terms of a skewed work arrangement, because it means at least they can do some paid work; but it can help maintain inequities because a mother doing part-time work is likely to be more available than the father (who is likely to be in a full-time job), to do household work.

Australia rates reasonably 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 while these sorts of supports make the workplace more accessible for mothers, they were policies designed from a workplace perspective, not a household perspective. As a result they get women doing paid work, but they do not get men doing the unpaid work in the household.

Outsourcing domestic work rather than getting the father to do more is one support strategy used by parents in these work arrangements, and of course for more affluent families this is an option – they can ensure the father does not have to replace the mothers labour in the home.

Another important support is where both parents share a traditional ideology or “preference” – that is, they both think the mother should be in the home more than the father, and doing more of the household work. This is the support that Hakim focuses on in her work on preference theory. She privileges this support above all others, whereas the

framework developed here does not. (Traditional) preferences are merely one type of support for this (skewed) work arrangement.

Skewed work arrangements – PRESSURES are: *mother works more to get more income, can not 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 from the household; and one or both parents have an egalitarian ideology or “preference”.*

In today’s world, the skewed work arrangement has many pressures on it. Households can struggle to just one full-time income or on one-and-a-half low incomes, so the mother may feel 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 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 (Presser 2000; Glass 1998). One or both parents might have or develop an egalitarian ideology – this can be a pressure on the skewed work arrangements.

If the pressures outweigh the supports, the skewed work arrangement would shift to become a shared work arrangement. But if at least one of the parents has a traditional ideology (a set of preferences where mothers do most of the unpaid work and fathers do most of the paid work) then the mother might do additional labour simply to maintain the skewed work arrangement in the face of various pressures. In this way, preferences are expressed as additional labour that is done to maintain (or change) work arrangements.

One of the major arguments here 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.

### ***Additional labour as an expression of preferences***

Additional labour means work that is done by parents simply to maintain the arrangements they have in place for doing their paid and unpaid work. It is the

effort parents put into keeping the relationship between home and work going. Sometimes pressures can make it very hard for parents to keep their work arrangements in place, and parents need to do a lot of additional labour if they want to keep things the way they are: if it all gets too much, their work arrangements will change in the direction the pressures are pushing them. The degree of effort a parent is prepared to put into this additional labour is a direct reflection of their preferences.

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.

*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; building social capital links in the community for back-up care support etc; transformative – mother negotiates at home to try and get father to do more unpaid work.*

To keep a skewed work arrangement going, a mother might have to synchronise tasks and manage family responsibilities while she is at her paid job. For example, a mother might telephone home while at work to check that her children have left for school, or returned home from school. These mothers are covering for their absence from the home by still mothering while at work.

Another type of additional labour mothers might do to try and keep to the terms of the 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 not be done in part-time hours, and/or do unpaid overtime. This is a common story – the work intensified and extended part-time professional (Epstein et al. 1999).

Another example is where mothers might spend considerable time negotiating over rosters and number of weekly working hours so they can meet the terms of their specialised work arrangements. The “room to move” that is built into flexible workplace policies, and conditions like self-rostering, while certainly giving mothers opportunities to work the maximum number of paid hours while still meeting the terms of their 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 (Morehead 2003).

The skewed work arrangement is one (very common) way that parents allocate paid and unpaid work between themselves. Other ways include sharing the work in a more balanced way, or running a sole-parent household. These other arrangements have their own range of supports and pressures and additional labour that allow them to be maintained. For example, a support for a balanced work arrangement

would be family-friendly policies that are accessed by both mothers and fathers. A support for sole parents would be their ex-partners sharing the care of the children.

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 affect how mothers manage the relationship between work and home on a continuous basis. By revealing this additional labour within the framework we can see that the type of relationship that mothers have between home and work is not something that they “freely choose” based on their preferences. Rather, their preferences are a driver for the additional labour they do: the stronger the preference, the more effort the mother will put in to the additional labour. In this respect, preferences are just one of a range of supports or pressures on a particular work arrangement.

### *What role do governments and workplaces play in supporting or putting pressure on work arrangements?*

The list of supports and pressures provided above for the most common type of work arrangement (the skewed work arrangement) indicates the significant role that both government and workplace policies play in determining how mothers allocate time to work and family. Government policy provides inducements for parents to split work between them in certain ways and workplace policies and forces external to the household help determine the domestic arrangements within it.

If the mix of supports and pressures is changed, which could be done via policy, then the number of couple families with skewed work arrangements can be increased or decreased. Mothers’ preferences are quite easily overwhelmed if pressures or supports for their work arrangements mean they have to put in too much effort (via additional labour) to maintain current work arrangements.

Should policies continue to strongly support the skewed work arrangement, and if so, can some of the new pressures (mentioned above) be removed? If we want more balanced work arrangements, (and this paper does not say that we do – households with skewed arrangements can lower stress levels and allow parents to specialise more in some tasks than others, at the same time as providing a high level of maternal care for children), then the policy supports for that type of arrangement would need to be increased and the pressures reduced.

What does this mean in practice? The research shows that non-overlapping shifts are an effective way of pushing work arrangements to be more balanced, but there is a price that is paid for that – families spend little time together and relationships might be stretched to breaking point. An important and more positive way of encouraging more 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 fathers have to be targeted specifically. Research shows fathers do not tend to take time away from work if it is not paid, and even when it is paid some men will not take it (Bittman, Hoffman and Thompson 2004). Father-only policies where parents can not choose which one of them takes the workplace family-friendly options might work, because if there is a choice, its likely to be the mother that takes up the policy. Paid paternity leave – where if the father does not take the leave the mother can not have it, thus constituting 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 were paid to be in the home, being at home would start attracting some of the benefits previously only available at the workplace, and being at home would be both a more attractive option for fathers and increase choices available to mothers. Allowances paid to parents who are at home full-time caring for their children help raise the status of being present in the home, as do paid parental and carers leave.

What if we want to take another tack, and rather than saying we want to promote one type of work arrangement over another, we want to let parents more “freely choose” whatever work arrangement they want? Policies would need to be developed that supported all types of work arrangements (including both skewed and balanced ones), and the policy mix would also have to help relieve pressures on the work arrangements and not have contradictory effects.

Perhaps if we could achieve this, then finally Hakim’s theory might be of some use; perhaps then preferences would be the main driving force in work and family decisions. But it is difficult to see how a mix of policies could be so delicately and finely tuned that they could achieve this more perfect world.

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