

Work and family balance

Issues in research and policy



Homemaking (including childrearing) and breadwinning are the two main responsibilities of parents. Families have always had to cope with these competing needs, ever since human beings became hunter-gatherers. The difficulties in balancing these opposing demands did not emerge as an important social issue until an unprecedented number of women entered the labour force during the last few decades of the 20th century.

The Harvester judgement of 1907, which led to the introduction of the family (or living) wage in Australia (and soon spread to other countries), reinforced the separate roles that each parent was expected to play within the family by defining the father as the main breadwinner and the mother as the homemaker. This judgement established the minimum rates that employers were legally obliged to pay a male worker so that he could support his wife and children. The rates did not apply to women because it was assumed that they would rely on their husband or father for financial support. Women's pay was therefore considerably less than that of men.

The approach was consistent with the prevailing idea that women were only fit for routine and monotonous work and for the role of homemaker (Sawer, 2001). The fact that marriage restricted or prevented women's advancement in a number of careers (e.g., in the Commonwealth Public Service)¹ further reinforced the notion that a woman's place was in the home.

A groundswell of discontent surfaced in the 1960s, with commentators such as Friedan (1963) and Greer (1970) highlighting the inequalities of a system that confined women to a life of homemaking. Increasing numbers of women, including mothers with children, entered the labour force and the principle of equal pay for work of equal value was established in 1972. However, this did not mean that women automatically received the same pay as their male counterparts. Indeed, women in 2004 still earned 8% less than their male counterparts and this gap was slightly wider than a decade ago (6% in 1994) (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2005). Today, women comprise 45% of all employed persons in Australia, compared with around 23% in 1954 (ABS, 1998, 2008).

Figure 1 shows the dramatic change in the labour force participation of women since 1966. The rate has increased substantially across all age groups except for the youngest and oldest groups (15–19 and 65+ years). For example, the labour force participation rate of women aged 25–34 years increased from 36% in 1966 to 74% in 2008. Figure 1 also depicts the changes in labour force participation among men of different ages. Rates for men have generally declined across all age groups (although there is a small recent increase in the rate for men aged 60–64 years from 1990 to 2008). Thus, the gap in labour force participation between men and women is closing.

The increasing workforce participation of women has been accompanied by delays in childbearing and increases in life expectancy.² For instance, the median age of new mothers

increased from 26.5 years in 1979 to 31 years in 2007. As a result, a growing number of mothers in paid work are also having to provide or organise care for their elderly parents while supporting their older children staying at home. This is an issue that will become increasingly prevalent with the ageing of the population (Feldman & Seedsman, 2005).

Such striking social changes call for adjustments on many fronts, including adjustments within families, workplaces and the community. Moen and Yu (2000) maintained that families have always developed strategies and made adaptations in attempts to deal with the challenges they face. However, changing social contexts mean that any "new blueprint for living" tends to lag behind social changes. In other words, "discordant" customs and practices inevitably persist for some time after major social changes have occurred.

The multifaceted transitions needed to facilitate the move of mothers (the traditional homemakers) into breadwinning and their delays in childbearing have certainly been protracted. As a result, mothers combining the roles of homemaking and breadwinning (and possibly caring for an elderly parent) have a greatly increased overall load.

Particularly noteworthy is the slowness of fathers to take on a commensurate share of homemaking responsibilities (Baxter, Hewitt, & Western, 2005; de Vaus, 2004; Hochschild, 1989), although there is some evidence suggesting that change is happening. In addition, women are doing less "family work" by outsourcing some of the domestic chores (Bittman, Meagher, & Matheson, 1998).

"Discordant" customs and practices outside the family have also undergone considerable erosion. In 1990, for instance, Australia ratified International Labour Organization Convention 156, thereby committing to the development of policies to remove discrimination in the workplace against workers with family responsibilities. Since this period, workplaces have become more "family-friendly". For example, the proportion of female employees who are entitled to paid maternity leave has increased from 43% in 2002 to 53% in 2007, and the proportion of male employees who are eligible for paid paternity leave has risen from 38% to 50% during this period (Productivity Commission, 2008).

The Australian Government also provides financial assistance to families for child care. Public expenditure on family assistance, including child care, has increased substantially over the last two decades (Gray, Qu, & Weston, 2008), and the introduction of some form of paid maternity/parental scheme has been hotly debated. Gradually, social pressure to introduce such a scheme has gained momentum, and the Productivity Commission (2008) recently released a report on this issue. The report recommended a taxpayer-funded 18-week period of paid parental leave (with payment set at the adult minimum wage), along with an additional two weeks of paid paternity leave. Although the outcomes of these recommendations remain uncertain, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has indicated his support for a national paid parental scheme, and the Opposition Leader, the Hon. Malcolm Turnbull, has expressed his support for the

introduction of measures to help families achieve a better “work–life” balance (Nader & Harrison, 2008).

Work and family life has been an ongoing theme in the research agenda of the Institute since the early 1980s. In 1984, the Institute conducted landmark research, the *Maternity Leave Study*, which investigated for the first time in Australia the experiences of employees and employers regarding the use of maternity leave (Glezer, 1988). The commitment of the Institute to this important research area is reflected in its many relevant publications. The number of published articles, reports and conference papers provided by the Institute increased from 24 in the 1980s to 72 in the 1990s (Whithear, 2001)—a number that has shown no signs of abating in more recent years. Three articles on work and family issues appear in the present edition of *Family Matters* and the next edition will also focus on issues of balancing work and family.

Other issues covered in this edition concern the protection and promotion of children’s wellbeing, including an examination of the negative impacts of multiple partnerships on children’s developmental outcomes, the enhancement of service systems for protecting children and strategies for engaging fathers in child and family services. One of the feature articles in this edition provides a historical perspective on the social security system in Australia and highlights the comprehensive and wide-ranging financial assistance that is provided to today’s individuals and families with children.

Supporting families

Herscovitch and Stanton (pp. 51–60) point out that the Australian Government’s provision of direct support to families was initiated a century ago with the passing of the *Invalid and Old-aged Pension Act 1908*. Today, the government’s support to families is broad and complex in order to meet the different needs of families (e.g., the Baby Bonus for parents with a newborn child and the child care rebate for working families) as well as the needs of individuals who may not live with immediate family members. Herscovitch and Stanton’s overview of the history of Australia’s social security system in Australia provides insight into its development, strengths and weaknesses. The paper also discusses the principles that underpinned the system, which still very much apply today.

While Herscovitch and Stanton examine the Australian system of social security in a historical perspective, Adema and

Whiteford (pp. 9–16) adopt an international perspective in their analysis of Australia’s policies directed towards helping people to achieve a good work–family balance. Their article represents part of a review of family-friendly policies that has been undertaken by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) since 2002.

To meet the challenges of reconciling the competing demands from work and family, some couples defer having children or have fewer children than they may otherwise have preferred, while others cope by having one parent (typically the mother) reduce his or her work hours or give up work to look after the children. Of course, a combination of such options may be adopted. Adema and Whiteford point out that strategies aimed at reducing family size will affect a nation’s total fertility rate, while cutting down or cutting out paid work increases the risk of children and families living in poverty. They conclude that Australia is doing better than the OECD average on a number of indicators, such as government spending on family by tax and benefits, the overall employment rate for women, the gender wage gap, and the total fertility rate. However, they point out that Australia is one of only two countries that lack a national system of paid parental leave in OECD countries (the US is the other country) and falls behind many other OECD countries in relation to the employment rate of sole parents.

As noted above, the costs and benefits of any universal paid parental leave system in Australia has received a great deal of public attention. One of the potential benefits focused upon is that some mothers would be able to breastfeed their child for a longer period. The paper by Baxter in this edition (pp. 17–26) provides timely research evidence of the impacts of employment on breastfeeding a newborn child. Using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), Baxter examines the relationship between returning to work within three months after the birth of a child and the initiation of breastfeeding, and assesses the extent to which the timing of return to work and certain job characteristics affect the age at which the child is weaned. While the timing of return to work has an effect on whether mothers continue breastfeeding, the analysis highlights the importance of having access to part-time work and flexible work hours, which help women continue breastfeeding their newborn children.

The difficulties in achieving good work–family balance are not only faced by parents of dependent children. With the ageing of the population and increasing labour force participation of women, an increasing number of people face the competing demands of paid work and caring for elderly parents (and possibly dependent children). The article by Hill, Thomson, Bittman, and Griffiths focuses on this issue. Using data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, these authors examine relationships between job characteristics and the retention of paid work among those who are carers of elderly parents or adults with a disability. The research highlights the fact that family-friendly workplaces are not just for parents with young children but are also important to help those with other caring responsibilities.

Protecting and promoting children’s wellbeing

Adema and Whiteford in this edition maintain that having a good work–life balance for parents is important to children’s wellbeing. Three articles in this edition discuss factors affecting children’s wellbeing from different perspectives.

An increase in mothers’ workforce participation is one of several striking social changes that emerged during the latter part of the 20th century. Others concern the forming and dissolving of relationships (see Weston & Qu, 2007). Professor Cherlin in this edition (pp. 33–36) draws our attention to the increasing experience of serial live-in partnerships and the

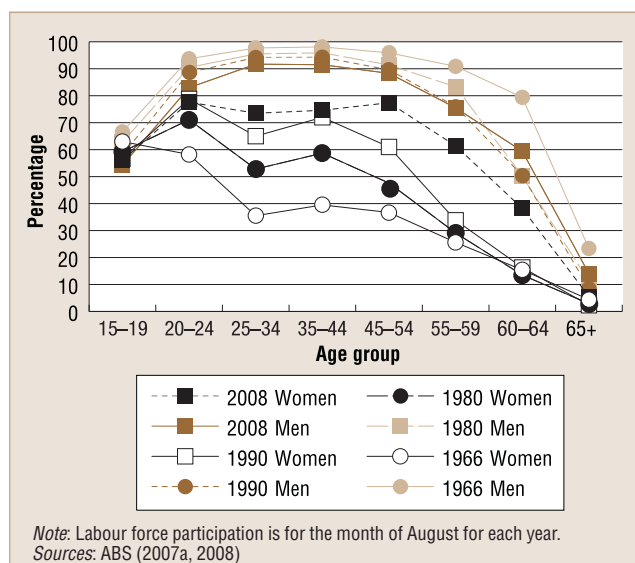


Figure 1 Labour force participation rate by age and sex

implications of this trend for children. Cherlin shows that the incidence of multiple partnerships in Australia is lower than that apparent in the US but higher than that apparent in several other Western countries. He maintains that the experience of multiple family transitions (beginning with the separation of parents, who then enter new, unstable relationships) could be more harmful to children than living with sole parents. Cherlin emphasises the importance of having policies directed towards supporting sole parents financially so that they do not feel the need to enter new relationships prematurely simply to achieve financial security—relationships that may turn out to be unstable and unsuitable for the children.

It is worth noting that Cherlin attributes the lower incidence of multiple partnerships among Australian women with low education, compared with American women with low education, to the generous financial support provided by the Australian Government to sole parents. On the other hand, Adema and Whiteford argue that, while the Australian Government provides adequate financial support to sole parents, the provision of work incentives for sole parents and quality child care is also important to help sole parents avoid long-term dependency on income support.

As Bronfenbrenner (1979) has pointed out, children's development is not only affected by their experiences in their families, but also by their experiences in other social settings, and by the relationships between these settings, including schools, neighbourhoods and broader communities. Recognising the importance of family and community to protecting and promoting children's wellbeing, the Australian Government initiated the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy in 2004. The Engaging Fathers Study is a part of the strategy's national evaluation. The article by Berlyn, Wise and Soriano in this edition (pp. 37–42) discusses some of the issues emerging from this study. While fathers used to be seen primarily as breadwinners for their family, it has become increasingly recognised that fathers' constructive involvement in their children's lives can have a profound positive impact on children's development (see Amato, 2000). Based on discussions with service providers, Berlyn et al. examine the benefits of involving fathers in child and family services, and identify good practices in as well as barriers to engaging fathers in child and family services. This paper is particularly useful for practitioners working with children and families.

The article by Higgins and Katz in this edition (pp. 43–50) provides an excellent discussion of problems in the current child protection system and of key issues involved in improving it. The authors describe some international child protection systems and practices, including those in the US and the UK, and stress the importance of adopting holistic approaches to child protection in order to reduce the likelihood of children entering the child protection system in the first place. These approaches include the coordination and integration of various services, the enhancement of community capacity to protect children, and the provision of support for families at risk of poor parenting, child abuse or neglect. Such approaches would enable the efficient use of resources to address the needs of children who have experienced abuse or neglect and of their families. The article calls for changes to the system's functions and culture, alongside the maintenance of a clear vision of the system's fundamental goal of protecting and enhancing children's wellbeing.

Concluding remarks

This edition of *Family Matters* presents papers with a focus on issues of balancing work and family, as well as papers on protecting and promoting children's wellbeing. While the papers cover a range of different issues and adopt a variety of perspectives, all the discussions highlight important impacts

that government policies have on individuals, children, parents or families. The papers in this edition also demonstrate the importance of research in government policy development. We hope that it contributes to ongoing policy debates and developments on work–family balance and on protecting and promoting children's wellbeing.

Endnotes

- 1 Until 1966, married women could not hold a permanent position in the Commonwealth Public Service.
- 2 Such delays are a function of many factors, including increased participation in tertiary education, delays in couple formation and marriage, increases in the proportion of cohabiting relationships that end in separation rather than marriage, and declines in partnering (see Weston, Qu, Parker, & Alexander, 2004). Life expectancy at birth has increased from 68.3 years in 1971 to 78.7 years in 2005 for men and from 74.8 years to 83.5 years respectively for women (ABS, 1997, 2007b).

References

- Amato, P. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and Families*, 62, 1269–1287.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (1997). *Australian demographic trends 1997* (Cat. No. 3102.0). Canberra: Author.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (1998). *Australian social trends* (Cat. No. 4102.0). Canberra: Author.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2005). *Australian social trends* (Cat. No. 4102.0). Canberra: Author.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2007a). *Labour force historical time series, Australia: Labour force status by age and sex* (Cat. No. 6204.0.55.001). Canberra: Author.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2007b). *Life tables Australia 2004–2006* (Cat. No. 3302.0.55.001). Canberra: Author.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2008). *Labour force, Australia: Detailed. Electronic delivery, August 2008* (Cat. No. 6291.0.55.001). Canberra: Author.
- Baxter, J., Hewitt, B., & Western, M. (2005). Post-familial families and the domestic division of labour. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 36(4), 583–600.
- Bittman, M., Meagher, G., & Matheson, G. (1998). *The changing boundary between home and market: Australian trends in outsourcing domestic labour* (Social Policy Research Centre Discussion Paper No. 86). Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, New South Wales University.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- de Vaus, D. (2004). *Diversity and change in Australian families: Statistical profiles*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Feldman, S., & Seedsman, T. (2005). Ageing: New choices, new challenges. In M. Poole (Ed.), *Family: Changing families, changing times*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Friedan, B. (1963). *The feminine mystique*. New York: Norton.
- Glezer, H. (1988). *Maternity leave in Australia: Employee and employer experience* (Australian Institute of Family Studies Monograph No. 7). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Gray, M., Qu, L., & Weston, R. (2008). *Fertility and family policy in Australia* (Australian Institute of Family Studies Research Paper No. 41). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Greer, G. (1970). *The female eunuch*. London: Granada.
- Hochschild, A. (1989). *The second shift: Working parents and the revolution at home*. London: Piatkus Ltd.
- Moen, P., & Yu, Y. (2000). Effective work/life strategies: Working couples, work conditions, gender, and life quality. *Social Problems*, 47(3), 291–326.
- Nader, C., & Harrison, D. (2008, September 30). PM's maternity leave pledge. *The Age*. Retrieved 10 November 2008, from <http://www.theage.com.au/national/pms-maternity-leave-pledge-20080929-4qej.html?page=1>
- Productivity Commission. (2008). *Paid parental leave: Support for parents with newborn children* (Draft Inquiry Report). Canberra: Author.
- Sawer, M. (2001). Women and government in Australia. In *Year Book Australia 2001* (Cat. No. 1301.0). Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Weston, R., Qu, L., Parker, R., & Alexander, M. (2004). "It's not for lack of wanting kids" (Australian Institute of Family Studies Research Report No. 11). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Weston, R., & Qu, L. (2007). Australian families: Continuity & change. In E. Shaw & J. Crawley (Eds.), *Couple therapy in Australia: Issues emerging from practice* (pp. 23–48). Kew, Vic.: PsychOz Publications.
- Whithear, D. (Comp.) (2001). *Collected works: 1980–2001. Australian Institute of Family Studies* (Research Report No. 6). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Lixia Qu is a Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.