BELINDA PROBERT looks at a wide range of policy changes that are affecting mothers’ participation in the paid workforce, including labour market de-regulation and workplace ‘reform’ as well as changes in child care funding, and argues for policy solutions that will redress the growing polarisation between families with plenty of work and those with none.

Looking back on the last 30 years of policy development it is hard not to be impressed by the range of measures now in place to help women have families but also remain attached to the workforce in some way. We have community-based child care, workplace child care and, increasingly, privately provided child care. Some have brief periods of paid maternity leave, and many have longer periods of unpaid leave. We have legislation to prohibit discrimination against women, and promote affirmative action in large workplaces. We have after-school programs, holiday programs (public and private) and, more recently, carers’ leave. Mothers of young children have been increasing their labour force participation rate dramatically.

Why then do so many of us feel that, while it is now indeed possible to be a mother and a worker, this in no sense adds up to a family friendly experience? Why did so many of us laugh hollowly when ex-Premier of Victoria Jeff Kennett recently addressed a private girls’ secondary school about the problem of Australia’s declining birth rate – and is there a connection between these things?

In this article I want to talk about two different (but ultimately related) frameworks within which we might think about the work-family-mother nexus – frameworks that take us beyond the current enthusiasm for identifying and praising ‘family-friendly’ employers as harbingers of a bright new future.

The first framework involves looking at the widest possible policy developments that are shaping the labour force experience of mothers, not just so-called family policy, and the specific proposition that while so much change has been occurring in a forward looking direction, there has been even more change that is working in the opposite direction, taking us at least one step backward for every one forward. These changes include things like widespread increases in work pressure, and...
reduced industrial protection from un-family-friendly employment practices.

The second framework is one that gives greater weight to the subjective experience of mothers, particularly the experience that is so often described as ‘juggling’, as though this adequately captured the skills required. This theme is less easily subjected to ‘measurement’ than the impact of discrete policy changes. Discussion of this theme tends to run along in a subterranean fashion, mainly because it involves a range of feelings, and struggles with contradictory identities for many women, which can only too easily be exploited by men seeking to preserve the domestic status quo. These feelings range from those lying behind the momentous decisions of high flying female executives at the peak of their career to give it all up for their children (from PepsiCo Chief Executive Officer to ‘soccer mum’), to the feeling, commonplace among mothers with little labour market experience, that it is all too hard to manage in the first place – ‘who would look after the kids when they’re sick, or in the school holidays?’ (Probert with Macdonald 1995). And in between are all the jugglers, including those who may have partners taking their fair share of the caring, but who just don’t seem to feel the same sense of ‘inner conflict’.

Let me start with a thought-provoking advertisement for weekly boarding run by Geelong Grammar School in July this year. It began: ‘The demands on the modern family are becoming greater every year – making it harder to find an opportunity for quality family time.’ The solution? Turn your child into a day boarder who finishes at 8.30 pm, or a weekly boarder, or a full boarder.

I was particularly struck by this advertisement as I have been watching with some interest the mushrooming of long-hours pre-school centres attached to the major private schools in the Hawthorn/Kew area. These developments seem to me to be aimed at professional and managerial two-career families, and are part of a growing market out there for sophisticated forms of ‘child care’ that recognise not only that women want to be in the workforce, but that they want to be in it in a way that can no longer be supported by the more common forms of juggled care – kindergartens, community-based child care centres, grandparents, after school programs, and the front door key for odd occasions. They are perhaps distinctively Australian in that they provide an alternative to the housekeepers and nannies found in less egalitarian societies like the United States.

The group of women and their families targeted in the Geelong Grammar advertisement constitutes a historically new phenomenon – the rise of the dual career family in which the central change is the work commitment of mothers. Australian women have secured far fewer of the managerial/professional/administrative jobs than American women, and are far more likely to work part-time, but there are nonetheless enough of them for their needs to be making an impact in the market (O’Connor et al. 1999). These women have good jobs, with career prospects, high levels of job satisfaction, and remarkably little flexibility at work. ‘Family friendly’ measures such as maternity leave, workplace child care and carers’ leave are of minor relevance over the longer term for such women.

At least two major international studies have captured the complexity of women’s responses to such measures.

The American sociologist Arlie Hochschild (1998) provided us with a wonderfully rich account of what was going on in a remarkably ‘family friendly’ US corporation where hardly any women seemed to be taking advantage of the provisions on offer. Her unusual ability to understand both the realm of work and the realm of family life allowed her to acknowledge the powerful attractions of work in the new ‘quality focused’ workplace, and the way some American women refused the double burden, not by pulling back from work, but by pulling out of family work. Her description of a young mother carefully planning to get home after her husband as a means of refusing the central emotional role is compelling.

Judy Wajcman’s (1998) study of senior women managers in the United Kingdom also found that hardly any of them took advantage of ‘family friendly’ policies. Women adapted to the male model of a successful manager. They had made ‘a conscious choice not to have children or to organise child care and domestic life so as to be able to dedicate themselves to their careers’ (p. 82). (And despite this, they still don’t get to the top.)

Women managers in this study were more likely to be single, divorced or separated, and over two thirds of them do not have children while the same proportion of men do have children living with them.

What is going on here cannot, however, simply be described as a potential grievance for career women, or an experience of deprivation. Women get real pleasure from success and power, and from working in intellectually challenging mixed sex settings, and work can easily become the centre of emotional life. Interviews I conducted last year with young career-oriented women found extremely high levels of job satisfaction and ambition, with a realistic sense of the absence of children’s needs from their industries and workplaces. The solution? It was hard for most of them to imagine how they might make space for the kind of focus and time commitment that they saw as central to good mothering. In this, I expect that they are simply increasingly like their male counterparts who have never had to imagine how to fit these two roles together (Probert and Macdonald 1999).

It might then be argued that for some working women, most social policy aimed at supporting family life has little relevance. The only shared demand is for something they are unlikely to get because other women, and many feminist policy analysts, oppose it on equity grounds – namely, tax deductibility of child care costs. Occasionally high flying women, generally in large law firms, bring anti-discrimination cases when they find their clients and work transferred to a male colleague after taking maternity leave, but having the law on your side is small recompense. The obvious family friendly policies have not affected the behaviour of men to any great degree, nor have they changed the workplace very noticeably.

In a recent provocative review essay, Anne Manne (1999) argues that ‘hyper-capitalism has created economic conditions inimical to a flourishing family life among the overworked elites and the working poor’. 

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She is responding to a major American study in psychology that has provided a reassuring justification for the growing neglect of children, arguing that the only significant impact on child development comes from their peers. A new child has been invented for these times. ‘One who does not need nurture; does not need parents’ (p. 13).

In Britain, social policy generally is far more supportive of parenting and caring work, with more generous and less qualified payments for single mothers, meaning that they are less likely to fall below the poverty line than single mothers in the United States or Australia. At the same time, Britain is unusual in having a benefit specifically targeted on informal carers of people with a disability (O’Connor et al. 1998).

Nonetheless, the same emotional tension between work and mothering exists, but for mothers who do not wish to be the kind of mothers they think their children need, this tension is increasingly resolved by finding the closest possible substitute in the form of a trained nanny. A British study of the rise of nannies working for the new dual career professional family suggests that for many of these mothers the home is becoming another sphere to be ‘managed’ (Gregson and Lowe 1994). The most optimistic assessment of these changes comes from Judy Wajcman (1998: 166) who concludes that: ‘Managerial women are forging what might be thought of as new hybrid forms of gender identity, in which their subjectivity centres as much on the workplace as it does for men. Even their participation in domestic labour takes on the character of management. Investing more of their purchasing power and less of their gender identity in domesticity, these women are challenging the gender regimes of both the workplace and the home.’

Women who are managers are not the only women to find it difficult to ‘balance’ work and family as a result of changes in the nature of work. A major national survey of the Australian workforce asked workers about their satisfaction with the balance between work and family life. It found that very significant proportions of ordinary workers think it is getting harder to find a balance, and that this is closely related to increased working hours and increased work intensification (Morehead et al. 1997).

Specifically, 60 per cent of workers say their effort at work has increased, and this is particularly pronounced in finance and insurance (remember last year’s story about the major bank with millions of dollars of outstanding annual leave entitlements?), and the education sector – both areas where very large numbers of women work. It is not surprising that the Australian Council of Trade Unions and a number of specific unions, including my own, the National Tertiary Edu-
succeeded in developing an award that provides some of the best family friendly clauses, their ability to see the policy implemented has been overwhelmed by sheer work intensification and the downsizing of the workforce. In many finance sector workplaces the pressure to stay late or to come in on extra days is intense.

There is yet another dimension of concern to the federal government's industrial relations policy – namely, its underlying objective of eliminating trade unions from an active role in determining employment conditions. Unionised workers are in fact significantly more likely than non-unionised to have access to a range of family friendly provisions, and part-time women workers who are in a union earn 27 per cent more than their non-union counterparts. Such an earnings gap is particularly relevant here in the context of the changing costs of child care.

We know from innumerable studies that being a part-time employee effectively renders women ineligible for serious training, promotion or career development. Given this, women are clearly being expected to trade some of the power and the pleasures of employment for the power and pleasures of mothering. Yet this is to suggest that these two elements of women's or men's lives are in some way comparable – that they can be weighed up and chosen between.

In reality, most women's choices in these matters are extremely constrained. First, men's working hours are, on average, rising significantly (from a base that was already incompatible with major child caring roles), leaving less room than before for household compromises. And second, there are still no widely accessible alternative provisions for the good care of children that would allow women to move beyond 'juggling' work and family. This is not to suggest that all women would prefer to have full-time jobs and see less of their children! It is to insist on the lack of progress we have made in redesigning employment practices to acknowledge anything other than a traditionally gendered workforce. Individual women and men can choose to adopt the other sex's gendered role (childless women managers or stay-at-home dads), but the roles themselves remain unchanged.

Alongside these important changes in the industrial relations framework within which many parents must negotiate increasingly varied and variable working hours, there has been another set of changes that are likely to work against families in their attempts to combine work and parenting.

The expansion of good quality community-based child care was one of the great achievements of the 1970s women's movement, and subsequent federal Labor governments (Lee and Strachan 1999). Yet here again there can be little doubt that recent changes are making it harder for women to find appropriate and affordable child care. While enterprise bargaining has been promoted as a means by which parents can negotiate locally relevant employment terms, extraordinarily few such agreements include any mention of child care assistance.

At the same time, as Lee and Strachan (1999) have argued, further changes introduced by the federal Coalition government have: increased the effective price of child care and reduced the affordability of formal services; changed the way assistance is delivered so that parents carry more of the responsibility than providers; and continued to shift the focus onto parents as workers negotiating child care clauses in enterprise agreements. As a National Council of Social Service (NSW) survey concluded: 'The play of market forces has not provided parents with choices, but is pushing them out of the market altogether' (cited in Lee and Strachan 1999:91).

Despite the government's protestations to the contrary, there can be no doubt that these changes have caused parents unwillingly to leave the labour force, or to reduce their use of formal child care and to increase their reliance on informal care – including that old necessity, the latch-key. The upshot of these changes is that women in full-time work or better paid professional employment will be able to meet the rising costs of formal child care and remain in the labour market, while women with fewer labour market advantages will find it harder than in the past to balance work and family needs.

In this respect we are witnessing a polarisation of women's family experiences around the extremes of education and income. As O'Connor et al. (1999:228) conclude in their comparative study of gender and social policy in Australia, Canada, Great Britain and the United States: 'Child care is one of the most explicit manifestations of the working out of class differences among labour force participants and reinforces the good jobs–bad jobs divisions in all four countries.'

Even the traditional family form of male breadwinner and full-time mother is similarly under threat from economic pressures. Quite apart from any question of rising consumption standards, there has been a dramatic increase in low-wage work so that significant numbers of families relying on one full-time wage now fall below the poverty line. Without Australia's highly targeted and relatively generous social security payments, many single income families would be in dire straits. These same families are also among the most likely to experience unemployment which is heavily concentrated among the low skilled. The polarisation of families around the over-worked and the workless is now well established (Burbidge and Sheehan 1999), and has been exacerbated by the increase in sole-parent families. One result of this is the startling fact that in June 1999 about 850,000 dependent children lived in families without a parent in employment (Senator Jocelyn Newman 1999).
under these circumstances, not only is the experience of mothering becoming highly differentiated, but so too are the experiences of pre-school children. Does this matter? And what are we to conclude from all this?

The first point I would like to make is that it is impossible to assess the progress being made in allowing parents to both work and parent in ways that do not require long-term sacrifices without looking to a wide range of policy portfolios, covering not only traditional family support services but also the increasingly critical industrial relations framework.

This is not to suggest that plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose; for many women with families today lead lives of enhanced possibilities and wider experiences as a result of the policy pressures that the women’s movement (in all its varied dimensions) has orchestrated over the last 30 years. But it would seem to be time for more critical reflection – partly because so many recent achievements are being undermined by federal government policy shifts in a variety of portfolios, many of which combine to push the family back into the private sphere.

Women, we are told, may ‘choose’ between various quantities of work and mothering; women can negotiate with their employers about the terms of the new ‘flexibility’. Yet it is equally clear that in Australia the policy gains that have been won (in child care, for example) can quite easily be lost since they have not been converted into citizenship rights. If women are to continue to be asked to ‘weigh up’ family life against working life, despite the fact that they are to a large extent incomensurable experiences and identities, then it is hard to escape the narrow framework of existing policy debate.

And changes and divergences in women’s experience of work may cause them to weigh up family and work life quite differently, leading at one extreme to the well-established phenomenon of a declining birth rate among women with tertiary qualifications. And this is partly the result of a substantial failure of the imagination and the policy development process to move beyond a family-as-deficit model at work.

In other words, policy measures designed to give women equal access to employment opportunities continue to construct women as in need of special measures to overcome their handicaps (from maternity leave to rooms for expressing breast milk). They are increasingly only available as the result of negotiation or ‘bargaining’, either at the individual or enterprise level, to be won or lost or traded against other employment conditions. Under these circumstances women are still being compared unfavourably to men in the workplace.

Most striking of all, in fact, is the almost total absence of policy designed to help fathers balance work and family life, despite the evidence that they are finding this balance increasingly hard to achieve (Morehead et al. 1997). Despite individual high profile men like Daniel Petrie (the much lauded ex-head of Microsoft Australia) who have liberated themselves from work to find more time for their families, there is no such general trend among fathers. Indeed, it is precisely the intractable nature of men’s attachment to work that makes Petrie so visible and his account of putting his children before his career a marketable publication.

Australia is not the United States where there is remarkably little policy support for parenting as such, and where caregiving is relegated to the status of a barrier to labour force participation. Nor is Australia the United Kingdom where policy tends to promote the traditional gender division of labour within families (O’Connor et al. 1999). At the same time Australia appears to be moving rapidly away from a Scandinavian-type philosophy of acknowledging the different patterns of work and parenting that best accompany different stages of the family life cycle.

As O’Connor et al. (1999: 230) conclude: ‘The policy solution that moves us closer to gender and class equality is not to retreat to gender difference, understood as permanent differences between the sexes. Rather, we need to recognize the linkages between citizens’ diverse positions in the labour market and their varying caring responsibilities in ways which allow men and women, parents and those without children, and people with different sorts of ties to friends, relatives and neighbours to participate as equals in both spheres. This will require some greater measure of politically mandated social support than a strict neo-liberal policy permits. If this is not present, we face a continuation, and perhaps a worsening, of the present situation in which those advantaged in labour market terms are the only ones allowed satisfactory solutions to their caregiving needs.’

References


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