

# **Integrating Work and Family Responsibilities: Policies for Lifting Women's Labour Activity Rates**

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## An Ageing Australia and the Imperative to Increase Female Labour Force Participation

The OECD has been active in highlighting the dangers to longer-term economic prosperity associated with the ageing of the populations. Cotis (2003) suggests that the ratio of the population aged over 65 years to those aged between 20 and 64 years will double over the next 50 years, and some countries (Italy, Japan and Spain) will have a more than doubling of this demographic proportion. This will lead to lower labour force participation rates, a growing dependency rate (population/workforce) and an emerging gap between fiscal capacity and fiscal commitments. It is estimated that the average dependency rate across the OECD will increase from 22 per cent in 2002 to 46 per cent in 2050. The proportion of the Australian population aged over 65 years is projected to increase from the current 12 per cent of the population to 18 per cent in the year 2021 and 26 per cent by the year 2051 (Bishop 1999). To address these problems the OECD has proposed policies including extending retirement ages (working longer), raising the labour force participation rates of women, removing incentives for early retirement, reforming pension systems so that retirement incomes reflect employment continuity, enhancing part-time work and eliminating tax discrimination against second family workers (Cotis 2003; Liebfritz 2003).

In Australia, there have been several official statements on the looming aging crisis and the negative implications associated with it (Henry 2003; Macfarlane 2003). The Federal Treasurer, Peter Costello, announced that the government intended to extend the working lives of Australians as a way of addressing the crisis (ABC 2004). One headline pronounced that 'Retiring Full-time is Dead' (Wade & Marriner 2004). In May 2004 the Treasurer, Peter Costello, spoke about Australians possibly having three children, 'one for the wife, one for the husband and one for the country' (Costello & McGrath 2004). Indeed, the Treasurer said that 'from the national point of view it would be helpful if the birth rate was higher' (Costello et al 2004). Part of the rationale of the 2004 budget was that 'Mums will be assisted as they come out of the workforce to have children and they will be assisted as they get back into the workforce....we are re-vamping the whole work and family area and helping Mums who are trying to juggle work and family' (Costello & Riley 2003).

While increasing the birth rate has been debated publicly, one area that has received only cursory attention is the approximate 20 per cent labour force participation gap in Australia between men and women (Preston & Burgess 2004). Although this gap has halved over the past two decades through increasing rates for women (across all age groups) and falling rates for men, the gender participation gap remains substantial. If the ageing labour force scenario is plausible then one way to address the problems of growing dependency rates and labour shortages

would be to develop policies that facilitated the continued increase in female labour force participation rates. This will mean not only higher participation rates on average for women, but increased labour force attachment over the life course for women and longer hours of employment for women (Austen & Giles 2003).

To date the policy discussion has largely been silent on this issue. One government discussion paper, *Australia's Demographic Challenges* (Australian Government 2004), notes three broad ways of increasing capacity and productivity: 'Improving capacity for work' relates to education and skill levels; 'better incentives' relates to pay and other forms of income support; and 'supporting more flexible work options' deals with flexibility in the workplace and further deregulation of the industrial relations system. Yet there is little detail on these flexible work options except to say that there is likely to be a strong demand for part-time and flexible working hours, 'especially from those with caring responsibilities'. The report suggests that part-time work and flexibility of working hours, together with the provision of childcare places, are important in addressing the gap (Australian Government 2004), yet these are only mentioned in passing in the report. Australia already has unregulated working hours, diverse working hours and a high part-time employment density (Bittman & Rice 2002; Preston & Burgess 2003), while the provision of childcare places remains low by OECD standards (Burgess et al 2004).

Population ageing will place pressure on families to meet additional types of caring responsibilities. Traditional household and workforce arrangements are giving way to greater diversity in which females have increasing and longer-lasting workforce attachment that has been to date largely accommodated by part-time and casual employment arrangements (Charlesworth et al 2002; Watson et al 2003). Nevertheless, the gender participation gap remains substantial, and is one policy area that governments should consider if they accept the need to act on the effects of population ageing. While there is the occasional reference to women in the context of returning to work after having children, *Australia's Demographic Challenges*, like the *Intergenerational Report* (Australian Government 2002) before it, is essentially gender blind. There is no discussion of women's and men's working lives and retirement incomes, despite dramatic patterns of difference.

## What Are Work and Family Policies?

'Work and family' and 'family friendly organisations' were the terms used from the early 1990s. These terms cover arrangements that assist workers combine work and domestic care activities and other family responsibilities. The focus is on organising employment arrangements and conditions that support caring responsibilities within the family. This

includes childcare, the care of elderly relatives, and other domestic duties including shopping, sporting activities and home maintenance. The responsibilities may be planned and regular (for example, taking children to and from school) through to the unexpected (supporting an ill member of the family). Family friendly arrangements provide workers with the opportunity to meet expected and unexpected family duties. Policies include flexible working time arrangements (part-time work, job share, flexitime working), flexible and extensive leave arrangements (parental, paternity, maternity, carer's, holiday), provisions for career breaks, and flexibility over work location (for example, telecommuting) (Hartin 1994). In the latter part of the 1990s more terms had been added to the lexicon. The most common of these is 'work life balance' and this typically expands the term to include non-caring activities and leisure activities. This has the advantage of broadening the agenda to encompass the life course (actual and potential caring responsibilities), to encompass the entire workforce, not just those with dependants, and to recognise other forms of care and responsibility away from the family (Charlesworth et al 2002). 'Managing diversity', a term we have discussed elsewhere, can also include elements of work and family or work life balance policies (Strachan et al 2004).

Why have work/family/life policies? Charlesworth et al (2002) identify a number of reasons:

- a. to remove disadvantage and inequality in the workplace where those with care responsibilities are unable to participate in paid labour or are forced to participate under marginal terms and conditions;
- b. to address the rival pressures and demands on time through mechanisms that seek to reconcile these pressures;
- c. to expand social choices, especially for women, whose choice is constrained if they accept a caring duty within the household;
- d. to benefit workplaces (the business case) through retaining skilled workers, reducing labour turnover and improving employee commitment.

With work and family policies there is a number of implicit assumptions. First, while the policies themselves are gender-neutral, the reality is that women usually make the accommodation of paid work to family needs. The pattern of use is largely gender structured. The policies do not attempt to change traditional gendered household constructions and the associated assignment of family duties to women. This reflects the reality shown in time-use patterns in Australia as women undertake more of the household and family care than men (Bittman & Rice 2002). Second, the locus of responsibility is located within the workplace. This depends very much on managerial prerogative and assumes that it is in the best interest of organisations and employers to develop such

policies as they will benefit the business (Charlesworth et al 2002).

### The Checklist of Family Friendly Workplace Arrangements

This discussion is centred on the workplace and what arrangements evolve at the workplace to support family responsibilities. The first step is to identify the possible arrangements that offer support for non-work responsibilities. Most of the debate and discussion in Australia has centred on care and leave arrangements. This reflects the gendered nature of the discussion and the centrality of family care in the discussion. However, as others have argued (for example, Pocock 2003) the ability to develop a career that takes into account the life course transitions that face many women is an important component of a family friendly program. If work and income are insecure, segmented into low paying and non-career jobs, then it follows that access to conditions (and income) and opportunities that support choice and caring becomes constrained. Table 1 highlights the breadth and diversity of workplace based policies that support non-work responsibilities centred on the family. It should not be seen as a list of exclusive conditions; there is interdependence between the conditions and in general they are cumulative.

**Table 1: A Checklist of Family Friendly Arrangements**

Type of Arrangement	Comment
<b>Income security</b>	Achieving at least minimum pay rates; having a regular and predictable income.
<b>Employment security</b>	Predictable hours and ongoing employment; ability to take career breaks, ability to undertake financial commitments.
<b>Access to care arrangements</b>	Childcare, in some cases elderly/disabled care; subsidies, employer provision, complementary to working time arrangements.
<b>Access to flexible leave arrangements</b>	Access to standard leave entitlements; ability to switch between different types of leave; access to paid and unpaid maternity, paternity and family leave.
<b>Flexible working-time arrangements</b>	Ability to vary hours around family commitments; flexi-time; job sharing; being able to vary hours over the life-course.

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**Table 1: A Checklist of Family Friendly Arrangements (continued)**

Type of Arrangement	Comment
<b>Controls over unfriendly working time arrangements</b>	Ability to vary long working hours, long shifts, unpredictable working hours, unsociable working hours.
<b>Access to training and career path</b>	Generates income and employment security; enhances ability to qualify for benefits.
<b>Innovative work arrangements</b>	Study leave; home work; telecommuting can allow for flexible deployment of time.

There are three cautionary points that should be remembered when assessing workplace arrangements for their 'family friendliness.' First, not all types of arrangements covered in Table 1 are necessarily family friendly. For example, the extension of normal working hours or the introduction of split working shifts can be very family unfriendly in their consequences (Probert 1995). Second, care needs to be exercised in determining who has access to family friendly arrangements and on what basis. Often casual and probationary workers are excluded and workers on low pay rates may not have access to family friendly arrangements. Hence, there is a need to consider the form, detail and application surrounding conditions that are potentially family friendly. Finally, the nature of family responsibilities will not be uniform over the life course and within the household division of labour (Burgess et al 2004).

## Work, Family and the Business Case

Through devolving responsibility to the workplace the Federal Government is able to shift the responsibility for the provision of what are regarded as essential services in other countries (for example, paid maternity leave) (Baird 2003), and at the same time give credence to the business case for integrating work and family responsibilities. The problem with this approach as we have previously argued is that it relies on

- the individual economic circumstances of the workplace;
- the responsiveness of management to such programs;
- unions articulating and bargaining for such arrangements;
- those who desire such arrangements having some voice in the determination of agreements (Sullivan et al 2003).

If a business is profitable or in the case of the public sector, a government progressive, then there may be an opportunity to

develop work and family policies for the workplace. However, where businesses are undergoing restructuring, where there are budget constraints or where businesses are marginal (many small business) then the opportunity for access is limited. Moreover, management has to be responsive and receptive to such policies. In some cases management may have limited discretion where they are subject to head office dictates or, in the case of the public sector, the global budget constraints imposed by central governments. Even if these obstacles are overcome the program has to be taken forward onto the bargaining agenda. This may be obstructed by unions that have other bargaining priorities or by the inability of workers to effectively articulate their preferences since they are in marginal forms of employment, for example casual employment. A final obstacle is that those who may be attracted into work by the presence of work and family programs are not represented in agreement making procedures.

The Federal Government has perpetuated a myth that agreement making can balance work and family needs through reconciling the individual needs of workers and workforces (Reith 1999). The stress on individualism as the answer almost suggests that individual agreement making should be the most family friendly, a situation that is not supported by the evidence (Burgess et al 2003). It fails to recognise the importance of awards for many women workers, and the fact that outcomes under individual agreement making will depend in part on luck (the nature of the industry and workplace) and bargaining power. Those who are highly skilled and with relatively high pay will gain access to such arrangements.

## The Limitations of the Bargaining Agenda

In our previous review we highlighted the limited progress in developing and implementing family friendly arrangements at Australian workplaces. Our comments at the time were that one group of workers, casuals, were likely to have received no advantage from family friendly arrangements since they are excluded from non-wage benefits and most types of leave. While they often have flexible working-time arrangements this can be offset by unpredictability and lack of control over working-time and by insecurity about employment continuity. We also noted that there is great difficulty in attempting to assess the spread of work and family policies. The literature provided little assessment except that which relied on company self-reporting or a simple listing of what policies existed in an organisation without providing details of which groups of employees are covered by these policies or the extent to which they are used by employees (Strachan & Burgess 1998).

In 2004 our conclusions on this issue remain largely the same although there are more examples of these assessments. The available evidence suggests that family friendly arrangements remain marginalised in the bargaining agenda. Pocock (2003,



pp. 231-232) reports that the percentage of agreements with family friendly provisions in 2001 was as follows: job sharing 3 per cent, paid maternity leave 4 per cent, childcare provisions 1 per cent, extended unpaid parental leave 2 per cent and home based work 1 per cent. The two most prominent clauses were family carer's leave (27 per cent) and access to other leave for caring arrangements (18 per cent). She concluded that 'enterprise bargaining has hardly resulted in widespread innovation or even the wide dissemination of existing rights to support working carers' (Pocock 2003, p. 231). Other researchers echo these conclusions. In a survey of several hundred organisations from 1997 to 2000, De Cieri et al (2002, p. 7) concluded that while there had been some progress towards implementation of work life balance strategies 'substantial barriers remain'.

In an analysis of agreement making from 1995 to 2000 Whitehouse (2001) shows a low incidence of family friendly arrangements and no major growth in their application through time. The distribution of family friendly arrangements across industry was very uneven but likely to be greater in the public sector, with trade union representation and in large organisations. Hall (2003) concludes that 'employment arrangements and conditions supporting women's participation and progression in the paid workforce are still quite limited and fragmented' and many of these policies exist only in organisational policies and therefore access to them is often discretionary. She notes that 'flexible work arrangements are positively associated with higher earnings, professional and paraprofessional and clerical/sales...occupations, structured human resources management in organisations, written EEO policies, public sector organisations, and number of employees.' Male dominated industries are likely to be free of any family friendly arrangement in agreements. However, the impact of organisational restructuring associated with privatisation, corporatisation and contracting out in the public sector has resulted in a loss of public sector rights such as paid maternity leave, flexi leave and job share possibilities do not exist in the agreements of the new business entities. In addition, the inclusion of pre-conditions and qualifying periods in order to access some arrangements precludes many workers and increases managerial prerogative over the granting of conditions (Whitehouse 2001, p. 122; Macdonald & Burgess 1999).

A survey conducted in 2003 from 1593 organisations that report under federal equal opportunity legislation showed comparatively high rates of access to some types of conditions. However, the question asked was 'do any of your employees' work flexible hours, etc and the answers therefore give no guide to the take up of these organisational policies (see table 2 next page). The government media release that accompanied this research emphasised the gendered needs of and take up of these policies: 'Working Mums and Ambition Don't Mix' (EOWA 2004a). The press release opened with the

statement that 'working mums have a better opportunity to combine work and family life as long as they don't set their sights on managerial jobs.'

The retail sector, the largest employment sector for women workers, and one of the largest employing sectors in Australia, has a very poor record of family friendly policies (Burgess et al 2003). There are major gender differences in terms of employment, pay and conditions within the sector. Women have much lower earnings and are behind the male average even when earnings for full-time employees are considered. Women are less represented in skilled occupations. Within the sector only 22 per cent of managers are women and the majority occupy low levels in the management hierarchy (Earle 2002). The casual employment density for women is over 50 per cent. In terms of access to non-wage benefits such as paid maternity leave, retailing is one of the poorest industry performers (Baird 2003) with only 18 per cent of staff having access to paid maternity leave (Hall 2003). Part-timers and casuals are likely to be excluded from benefits and have limited career path progression. We have examined the agreements of five major retailers (Burgess et al 2003). There was no arrangement to convert casuals into permanent employees. Issues of pay inequality and women in management are not addressed in the agreements. There is very little reference to specific conditions for casuals. Most agreements provide for unpaid carer's leave and provide for some form of leave conversion. Maternity leave is available, but is generally unpaid.

We found that there was very little interaction between equal employment opportunity, family friendly policies and enterprise agreements – using agreement making as a mechanism for enacting policies is the exception. It seems that internal management centred policies are seen as the appropriate mechanism for program delivery. There is acknowledgment of pay and occupational differences by gender in most reports to the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency but few have a comprehensive program with targets to address these issues. Casuals are not identified as a priority area in any of the reports. All reports are management based and suggest improved human resource practices and procedures can address the core gender workplace issues. It is also clear that agreements and union consultation are not perceived as either effective or appropriate mechanisms for achieving these objectives.

### Legislative Inaction on Supporting Work and Family

The problems in developing and implementing a work and family agenda are illustrated by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) work and family test case before the Australian Industrial Relations Commission in 2004. Australia has very

**Table 2: Workplace Arrangements 2003: Percentage of organizations in which at least one employee accesses work/life flexibility arrangements**

Access to Work/ Life Flexibility Arrangements %	Work Flexible Hours		Work from Home		Work Compressed Hours		Work Part Time	
	Managers	Staff	Managers	Staff	Managers	Staff	Managers	Staff
Do any employees access this?	73	80	55	45	13	25	43	94

Access to Work/ Life Flexibility Arrangements %	Job Share		Use Family Carers' Leave		Use Child Care	
	Managers	Staff	Managers	Staff	Managers	Staff
Do any employees access this?	10	52	84	89	6	7

Source: EOWA 2004b.

low employment rates for mothers with young children (13 out of 14 OECD countries) and low activity rates for women with children under 6 years of age (ACTU 2004). The key reforms being sort by the ACTU are

- the option of part-time work after the birth of a child;
- flexible working hours, school friendly holiday times and more workplace choice;
- an option to take up to two years unpaid parental leave;
- five days paid carer's leave;
- access to unpaid emergency leave (ACTU 2003).

Predictably, the Federal Government opposed the ACTU claim on the grounds that these policies would have a negative impact on the economy, that such arrangements are best left to the individual needs and workplaces, and that workplace bargaining already provides flexible working arrangements. The government's opposition ignores the capacity of different industries to accommodate the claims (Commonwealth of Australia 2004).

The debate about paid maternity leave has become more public and some organisations have introduced or extended this leave. Hall (2003) reports that 57 per cent of public sector employees and 24 per cent of private sector employees in organisations with more than 20 employees have paid maternity leave available although the duration of this is varied (Baird 2003). Incidence remains industry specific, from 93 per cent in communication services to 12 per cent in wholesale

trade (Hall 2003). In other areas there remain gaps in terms of coverage and support for those who wish to work, combine this with caring responsibilities and save for retirement. The push for self-funded retirement incomes, for example, has failed to recognise that many women's non-continuous and non-standard employment means that self-funded retirement incomes can never be generated (O'Brien & Burgess 2004).

## Conclusion

Since we undertook the original analysis six years ago, a lot has happened. Work and family policies feature in every budget and now make headlines. Work and family policies are critical in maintaining women's attachment to the workforce and hence their lifetime earnings and retirement income. Yet access to these work and family arrangements depends on the organisation. Many organisations have policies but we do not know how many people use them. Larger organisations are more likely to codify arrangements such as jobshare. Managers have less access to some policies than other employees, yet this access increases by nearly one third as the representation of female managers increases from under 10 per cent to more than 60 per cent (EOWA 2004b). Access to childcare remains low at less than 10 per cent. In 1999 we noted that

the move to family friendly policies has taken the focus from women and their position in the workplace to that of women and men. The accommodation of work and family demands has been made usually by women who have looked to broken working patterns, part-time

work and refusal of promotion to fit these two sets of demands (Burgess & Strachan 1999, p. 303)

## These Working Patterns Remain The Same

The government policy framework to support work and family is minimal and policies remain the province of organisations. This means that certain organisations choose to introduce policies that provide workers with options about how they combine work and family demands throughout their lives. While some organisations have incorporated work and family policies into enterprise bargaining agreements, most have not. This leaves them in company policies and vulnerable to easy removal and heightens the opportunity for them to be applied in a variable fashion across the organisation, highly dependent on local management. Again like EEO policies, changes in senior management can introduce dramatic reversals in these policies and their uptake. We agree with the government's press release title 'Working Mums and Ambition Don't Mix' (EOWA 2004a), as we still conclude that workers with primary care responsibilities find it difficult in many organisations to meet both their paid work and home responsibilities.

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