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3 Precarious work, over-work and family time

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Introduction

What is the impact of the prevailing policy mix on the relationship between employment, care and family time? Numerous reports have canvassed policy and corporate best practice options for ‘family friendly policy’. However, these studies have tended to work from a limited notion of ‘caring’ (concentrated on families with young children), have frequently focused on the voluntary innovations of individual corporations (rather than systemic change), and have lacked a broader intersectional approach to government policy. It makes sense to define caring broadly to encompass ‘community and family time’, care for children, ageing relatives or friends, and those with disabilities or special needs.

This paper extends beyond the usual narrow reading of household/family. It incorporates the moral underpinnings of communities and caring that draws on values of mutualism rather than individualism, and explores how we can rethink a new mix of state, market and family/community responsibility in relation to employment, care and family time. This may entail ‘bringing government back in’, where market failure has imposed unsustainable risk on to the private sphere of household, family and community.

Labour market shifts are central to this policy area. With one of the highest incidences of atypical work and the second highest rate of overwork in developed countries (full-time workers working over 49 hours), the shifting experience of the Australian workplace is impacting detrimentally on the work/life/care balance. These shifts undermine the capacity of families to both cushion risk and to meet caring needs.

This paper deals with two major paradoxes. First, that women’s entry into the labour market in unprecedented numbers has not changed the domestic division of labour or challenged the expectation and reality of women taking the major responsibility for unpaid caring work. The second paradox relates to risk: while the risks of life-course transitions are now compounding (episodic, unpredictable and frequently, multiple rather than serial and predictable), the capacity of many families and households to cushion risk is diminishing. With deepening inequalities, this capacity is unevenly distributed.

Labour market and industrial relations changes, combined with major social and demographic shifts, such as divorce and population ageing, and increasing expectations for ‘community care’, are contributing to a ‘care crunch’. Social policy needs to develop a social risk protection framework, with an explicit moral foundation, that enables a better balance between caring, work and family time.

Other countries handle this balance in different ways. In Sweden the state supports work release and caring; in The Netherlands a shared care model provides sufficient wages for parents in part-time work to support a household together with government income transfers for care-giving. The Netherlands ‘half plus half’ model is in stark contrast to the Australian ‘one-and-a-half’ model, where married women’s part-time work as a supplement to a male full-time earner is perceived as the minimum level of paid work necessary for supporting a household.

The paper addresses three main issues: the breakdown of the old social settlement breadwinner/carer model and new patterns of risk to households; policy shifts over

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the 1990s in employment, care and family time areas; and the need for a new social protection framework that accords with reality.

**Breakdown of the old gender contract and impact on households**
Rather than dealing specifically with income security, industrial relations, housing and education and training, this paper focuses on their interaction and the impact on households.

- Demographic trends reveal declining fertility, delayed child-bearing, an increase in smaller households and changing family structures. In particular, there is a decline in couple families and the rise in single-parent families (predominantly female-headed).
- Population projections suggest that average household size will continue to decline over the next two decades, lone-person households will increase in number, couple-families without children will overtake family with children, while the number of children in two-parent families is expected to decline. The traditional family of male breadwinner and full-time female care-giver now accounts for only about one-third of Australian families.
- Despite low inflation and sustained growth, the reduction in full-time work and proliferation of casual and atypical work have brought new patterns of labour market inequality that reflect a widening earnings gap between workers.
- The real winners in terms of income and the capacity for working families to live the good life, afford home ownership and self-invest in education and training are those households in the top part of the income distribution that have increased their workforce participation over the past two decades (jobs growth in part-time work has been mainly taken up by middle-class women). At the lower end of the salary scale, there is a striking increase in the risk of poverty. One in four of all children in poverty live in working families, even if social wage adjustments (mainly via forms of family allowance) have tended to have an ameliorative affect for families hovering around the poverty line.
- For those on the margins of the labour market, new patterns of work define flexibility on employers' terms and do not pay a living wage. Mitchell et al. in this volume discuss the retreat of industrial protection. And, as Probert observes, '(r)elatively few women actually earn enough to be independent.' Nor can we assume that women have another earner-provider to fall back on as about 40 per cent of marriages in Australia end in divorce.
- A household's financial wellbeing is increasingly defined according to the number of earners. Of direct concern is the growth of 'no jobs' and single-parent households with dependent children whose low incomes, whether through employment or social security, consign many to poverty.
- Most studies indicate that the risks associated with labour market restructuring are falling unevenly, suggesting a diversified labour market in which earnings, hours worked and job opportunities are increasingly polarised around age, skill, gender, household type and geographic location.
For those employed full-time, an intensification of work has occurred, especially where downsizing has been prominent and where work relies on professionalism and a reluctance to sacrifice service levels. A number of studies have highlighted the declining satisfaction with work intensification and with the balance between work and family life.

Given other demographic changes, the fragmentation of extended families, and the decreasing size of households, their ability to support and cushion individual members through life-course transitions—unemployment, underemployment, divorce, parenting responsibilities, education or ill health—is diminished.

A major paradox is that despite diversification of family forms, declining male labour force participation, increased female labour force participation and shifts in attitudes to women with children working there has been little change in domestic divisions of labour and responsibility for unpaid work. Women’s increased participation in paid work is accommodated in better off dual income households by contracting out domestic work and childcare, and in lower income households by the dual burden or triple shift for women and a patchwork of informal and frequently unsatisfactory arrangements for care.

Policy shifts under the neo-liberal agenda:
A new gender contract?

The increasing reliance on market models as allocative mechanisms for scarce resources and gendered assumptions underpinning the labour and care policy mix characterise the policy shift in this period. In this analysis, particular gender contracts and caring regimes are linked to the types of values, institutions, assumptions and policies that have constituted women’s family relationships and caring work. The mismatch between the old gender contract and the reality of modern living becomes clear. Coalition policies are based on an outdated model of women’s citizenship, with incentives for married women to care full-time for children.

Although the federal Labor government (1983–1996) embraced the neo-liberal policy agenda, its approach to social policy attempted to soften the impact of the market on low-income families in particular, by using targeting mechanisms. Policy also tended to support a citizen-worker model for women, facilitating their workforce participation while recognising the economic vulnerability of low-income and single-parent, post-divorce families (with the Child Support Scheme established in 1988 to determine non-custodial parents’ payments to assist in supporting their children). Labor sought to address the real costs of children and introduced programs to assist women’s transition into paid employment. The raft of reforms included a national childcare system delivering more affordable and available childcare, maternity leave provisions, a Carer’s Pension and provision for respite care for those caring for the disabled.

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gap between men and women, and under-achievement of equal pay for work of equal value, continued.

After the Coalition government’s 1996 election victory, policy shifts reflect a reversion to a conservative gender contract that both encourages and assumes a woman’s role as that of unpaid carer within a couple relationship. (And tax initiatives also increased the disposable incomes of non-employed single parents.) Such policies reflect a return to earlier notions of a citizen-carer model for women; at precisely the time when increasing numbers of households do not conform to this model. In contrast with Labor’s parallel support for women at home and in paid work, the Coalition government has emphasised policies supporting traditional home-makers.7

In its 1996/97 budget, the government stripped $36 million from family program expenditures, re-introduced tax rebates for non-employed spouses under Family Tax Assistance measures and introduced a Partner Allowance and wife pension paid to the spouses of male pensioners.8

The main point is to note the inequities that flow from a Family Tax Benefit initiative that is not income- or asset-tested. Although low-income earners also gained if the spouse was not working, the additional assistance to families with young children was incorrectly targeted in that it gave disproportionate assistance to high-income earners with a dependent spouse.

With two basic forms of family assistance delivered through the tax system, assistance is more beneficial to higher income tax earners. Peter McDonald describes the Family Tax Benefit as ‘the most lucrative government child benefit available to middle or high-income couples’ and an incentive for women not to work.’9 In fact, the benefit is reduced rapidly when the wife earns additional dollars but remains fully intact as the husband earns more dollars. It is also an incentive for husbands to work longer hours and participate less in family life. For a wife who chooses paid work over homemaking, the lifetime returns from Child Care Benefit are small in comparison to benefits paid to stay-at-home wives under Family Benefit.10

Industrial relations policies also impact. During the 1990s, governments have encouraged the use of enterprise-level bargaining as the preferred means of regulating relationships between employers and employees, while maintaining the award system as a ‘safety net’. The Coalition government has intensified this process, with measures that limit the scope and weaken the status of awards and marginalise the role of third parties in bargaining, such as the Industrial Relations Commission and trade unions. Burgess and Strachan11 point to an extension of direct and indirect employer control over the labour process. This has particular impact on women and on industries dominated by migrant or low socioeconomic status women and those with high numbers of female outworkers, such as clothing and textiles.

The record on maternity and family leave is patchy. Industrial relations legislation since 1994 has provided for unpaid parental leave for 52 weeks for employees with 12 months of full-time continuous services and family leave test cases have provided for access to sick leave for family purposes through industrial agreements. However, Australia has not taken up any uniform approach to the ILO paid maternity leave proposals and such leave is more common in the public service and the professions.
While enterprise bargaining is seen by some as an opportunity to address work/family issues, others argue that hard-won gains are being bargained off by the trend away from centralised institutional settlements. In such negotiations, some groups of women, such as Indigenous, disabled and non-English-speaking women, are culturally and historically disadvantaged due to their lack of negotiating experience, less formal education or an aversion to confrontation. An assessment of enterprise agreements outcomes concluded that family-friendly measures were disappointing and were included in only 10 per cent of agreements.20

Women’s increased workforce participation has not necessarily been supported by continued expansion of state-provided childcare. Whereas Labor favoured an expansion of publicly subsidised childcare places with the introduction of a Child Care Rebate and quality regulation, the Coalition government has favoured direct assistance to families under its Family Tax initiatives. Critics have questioned whether policy intervention should focus on non-specific assistance to families (towards the costs of raising children) or whether it should be targeted at making childcare services more accessible and affordable to facilitate parents of young children into work or further education and training.

Analyses of Coalition policies on childcare reveal a retreat; savings of $546 million in the 1996/97 federal budget and a further savings of $326.7 million over four years in the 1997/98 budget.21 These substantial budget cuts were followed by a high rate of closures of community childcare centres (frequently placed in areas of lower income); and rises in the cost of childcare at about three times the rate of inflation.22 The 1999 Census of Childcare Services and the 1999 ABS Child Care Australia survey indicate that low utilisation rates of childcare services relate to increased numbers of families using and paying for fewer hours of care rather than a decrease in the number of families using care.

Access and affordability issues are significant barriers, as the childcare system shifted from community (government) to private-for-profit centres. Despite increases in the number of childcare places and the number of centres providing care, these changes have not provided equitable access for working and for poorer women. Higher charging private childcare centres have set up in middle-class areas, leaving some lower income areas without services and creating cost barriers for low- and middle-income families and there are significant levels of unmet need for childcare.23

The Coalition government’s record reveals a retreat from the strong collectivist approach of the early 1990s.24 Family policy has embraced the language of choice, fairness and equity, but has effectively privileged better-off, two-parent families and base benefit-rate single-parent families. Even though single parents reliant on benefits are marginally better off, this is whittled away by the costs of the GST. Other single parents in shared care arrangements, or those who have lost the single-parent rebate, are worse off. At the same time, shifts in industrial relations law and regulation have withdrawn hard-won industrial protections or refused to engage with areas such as maternity protection. Shifts in spending priorities have also back-tracked on gender equity by closing several public-sector gender-equity monitoring units.25

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As Probert (2001) sums up:

Good workplace policy development is being undermined by other changes such as longer working hours, increased childcare costs, loss of award protection, and the failure of enterprise bargaining and individual contracts to give women's needs and interests higher priority.  

The Coalition's current social policy reflects a typically conservative gender contract that mobilises 'choice' within a policy mix which encourages a return to a breadwinner/carer model. This model clearly conflicts with changes to family structures and the needs, experience and expectations of work.

**Conclusion: A social risk protection framework**

Families are expected to provide stability in a rapidly changing world. However, trends to smaller families, shorter child-rearing cycles, the diversification of family types and women's intensified involvement in paid work are impacting upon their capacity to do so. Just as these intensified expectations are put on the family, it is less capable of delivering on them.

How can social risk be addressed? And how can the responsibility for labour and care be dealt with? Exploration of the answer to these questions draws on a social risk protection framework that enables discussion of which responsibilities might be borne by state, market and family/individuals to prevent, mitigate and cope with risk. The challenge for any framework is threefold: to establish a citizenship model that can balance an 'ethic of care' with a work ethic; provide an analysis that can reconcile conflicting models of women's citizenship as both worker or carer; and one that also gives some attention to achieving balance between caring, work and quality of life.

Given the unravelling of the old social settlement, one useful avenue is to develop a framework of social risk protection that responds to structural changes to households and the labour market and a new policy mix for labour and care. The social risk protection framework would also need to develop or incorporate a citizenship model based on an ethic of care and a merging of citizen as worker and as carer. It would need to determine what responsibilities might be borne by state, market and family/individuals to prevent, mitigate and cope with different dimensions of risk across the life course.

Holzmann and Steen's Social Risk Management framework for social protection cross-tabulates strategies for dealing with risk (classifying these as preventative, mitigating or coping strategies) with differences in the allocation of responsibility borne by the state, the market or families (that is, the public, market or informal/private spheres). The current policy mix in Australia is concentrated on 'downstream' mopping up or coping strategies based on market models. The focus on individuals bearing responsibility for risk shifts responsibility away from 'upstream' strategies, where the state would take more responsibility for risk reduction or mitigation through devices such as macroeconomic settings, centralised wage-fixing, measures designed to improve labour markets, enhance skills and so on. The role of government as social risk 'manager' involves three major tasks: to allocate different risks between individuals, markets and the state; to make the social investment decisions that lead to prevention or mitigation of social risk; and to maintain a balanced portfolio of these different strategies that presents a coherent response to globalisation and promotes social cohesion.
Central to risk reduction relevant to labour and care would be government investment in a new policy mix focused on investment in risk-reduction strategies. This would need to include a broader strategy for ‘decent jobs’ creation; publicly funded, accessible high-quality childcare; family-friendly work environments; industrial protections for part-time workers and a reduction in casual labour; paid maternity, parental and family leave; and services designed and run by local communities. This would take further the commitment to strengthen and preserve families. Wilkinson emphasises strengthening fragile or vulnerable families, enhancing fathers’ role in family life and various welfare-to-work programs for enhanced participation in paid employment for those on the margins of the labour market. Also, Wilkinson argues that workplace cultures and entrenched expectations in relation to women’s and men’s relative engagement in paid work and family life need to be challenged. ‘In the end’, she concludes, ‘our policies for family-friendliness in employment will depend on how far we can foster a more child-friendly culture overall, radically affecting the design of our public spaces and our community facilities as well as our workplaces’.

With rising resentment from childless people towards cross-subsidisation for families with children, or for public funding of measures such as maternity or parental leave, a more politically astute approach might also emphasise the need to accommodate care, including aged and disability care, rather than focusing concerns solely on child care. Aside from direct service provision, new policies could address carers’ unmet needs for respite leave, carer allowances and home maintenance services. These concrete proposals could be underwritten, as Fiona Williams suggests, by combining a ‘new politics of care with a new politics of time’: ‘Taking into account Australia’s record on hours of over-work, this would encourage a more sustainable balance between work, home and quality of life.

In terms of the moral underpinnings of such a model, autonomy, mutualism and care are central. As outlined by Fiona Williams:

The principle of autonomy needs to be understood as part of the principle of mutualism, where interdependence and care underpin collective risk-sharing. In addition, the principle of inclusive diversity goes beyond tolerance and demands a re-accommodation of new forms of family and nation. The last principle of voice provides the means to translate what matters to people into what works for them.

Policies in the 1970s and 1980s took up the challenge of supporting women in paid work, with reforms around equal opportunity and affirmative action, the establishment of a public childcare system and attention to carer issues, which reflected a move to a notion of individuals—both women and men—as ‘citizen-workers’. Yet more recent policy settings around childcare and assistance to families with children have taken a conservative U-turn back to a mother/carer citizenship model for women. Ironically, new concern about these issues is driven by the downward slide in fertility. Perhaps younger women are thinking it is just too hard to combine paid work with children.
Endnotes

1 Couple families decreased from 89 to 83 per cent between 1980 and 1999, and single-parent (predominantly female) households increased from 11 to 15 per cent over the same period. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Household and Family Projections Australia 1996-2021, cat. no. 3238.0, AGPS, Canberra, 1999. Only 3 per cent of children of divorced parents are in (equal) shared care arrangements, the majority (88 per cent) live with their mothers and less than half the families where a natural parent lives elsewhere receive child support payments. Bateman, M., ‘Review: Australian social trends 1999’, ESRC Newsletter, vol. 74, 1999, pp. 74-5.

2 Ibid. ABS 1999, cat. no. 3238.0


4 Recent work by three prominent Australian economists argues that macroeconomic indicators of growth mask the disadvantage and distress in many ‘Australian communities’. Bonan, J., Gregory, B. and Sheahan, P., ‘Inequality and economic change’ in Boland, J J., Work Rich, Work Poor: Inequality and Economic Change in Australia, Centre for Strategic Economic Studies, Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, 2001.


7 See O’Donnell, A. and Hancock, L., Introduction: the challenge of tracing the social settlement’, in Gowan, vol. 48, 2000, pp. 1-18. Compared with the standard working week (40 hours for the majority of working-age workers in the 1970s), one-third of the workforce now work a standard week, with greater numbers working less than a standard week and one-third working more than 49 hours a week (ACTU, 2001).

8 AIR (Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Teaching) Australia at Work—Just Managing?, Financed by the Australian Government, 1999, p. 20.


10 See Birtman M. and Pexey J., The Double Life of the Family, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1997. Probert, Murphy and Wiseman’s study of 170 men and women, comparing respondents who were parents in the 1950s to those who are parents in the 1990s, found that while the expectation that parents engage in paid work ‘a new dominant paradigm’, attitudes to motherhood and children’s needs ‘are remarkably unchanged since the 1950s.’ In particular, the practice of fanning is relatively unchanged despite the changes in expectations since the 1950s: Probert, Grateful Slaveries, pp. 9, 12.


12 In this period, social welfare adjustments tended to have an equalising effect, mainly via family allowances and supplements (see Harding and Szulakatka, Making a Difference). But targeting benefits to low-income households became one way to reconcile the increasing demand for social services with fiscal austerity imposed by governments.

13 Commonwealth initiatives spawned a range of community childcare centres supported by capital, infrastructure and fee relief funding as well as funding for family day care.


16 Age restrictions acknowledged the poor employment prospects of older women by quarantining those born before July 1955 from activity-testing.


18 Ibid.


20 ACIRRT (Australian Centre for Industrial Relations Research and Teaching), Agreements Database at Monash, University of Sydney, 1995, p. 33.


22 Tasker, G. and Siemon, D., ‘Is Child Care Affordable? Pressures on Families and their Use of Formal Long Day Care’, Broomehill at St Laurence, Melbourne, 2000. Cuts were implemented by the loss of the operational subsidy to long day care centres, limits placed on hours of care, tighter eligibility criteria for Childcare Assistance, reductions in the Childcare Cash Rebate, a limit of 20 hours per week of care—non-work-related Childcare Assistance recipients a 10 week limit of non-long day care places eligible for Childcare Assistance each year. Ibid, p. 5.


26 Probert, Grateful Slaveries, p. 9.


28 Ibid.


32 Ibid, p. 123.


34 Ibid, pp. 8-9.