

Chapter 4

Working With Men to Strike a Balance

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In the process of carrying out the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's work on paid maternity leave in 2002 and as a result of the many submissions we received, it became clear that paid maternity leave, while a significant step in enabling women to better balance their paid work and family responsibilities, was not the whole answer. Issues such as the role of men in family life and women's continuing greater responsibility for caring and household work needed considerable attention.

Striking the Balance

I launched our discussion paper, *Striking the Balance: Women, Men, Work and Family* in June, 2005 and from the interest that has been generated with the general public and in the media, it is clear that we are on the right track and have hit a nerve in the community.

Much of the commentary in the media and the community feedback has focused on the statistics around paid work and family care and the inequity of who does what in the home.

These statistics will probably be familiar to many of you, but are worth repeating because they so starkly illustrate what is going on in the homes of Australian families. Time-use data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics¹ and the Household Incomes Labour Dynamics in Australia survey² tells us that:

- While single men and women do around the same amount of housework, once they partner, women begin doing more (a woman with a male partner does 71 minutes a day more housework than her partner).
- With the birth of a child, unpaid work more than doubles for men and women. Men's unpaid work increases from 50 minutes to 2.5 hours per day and women's increases to just under 8 hours per day.
- Much of this extra work — 4.5 of the extra 5 hours a day of unpaid work — is taken up directly with childcare, with the shortfall made up by the extra domestic tasks that go along with caring for children.
- However, while men spend 3.5 hours per day on childcare and women 6 hours, parenthood actually reduces the time men spend in unpaid housework by almost 45 minutes a day.
- Overall, women's housework accounts for 70 percent of all household work — including traditional male "outdoor" tasks³ such as car maintenance, lawn mowing, rubbish removal etcetera.

- Including childcare, fathers spend an average of 10.7 hours a day in paid and unpaid work, while women spend an average of 12.6 hours.⁴

- In couple households where both women and men are employed full-time, women do more than twice the amount of indoor household tasks than men — 14.3 hours compared to 6 average hours per week.

- When their youngest child is more than five years old, fathers do less housework than men in childless couples.⁵

- Overall women make up 71 percent of primary carers of older people and people with disabilities and 91 percent of parents receiving primary care are cared for by their daughters.⁶

Inevitably, when I run through these statistics with women I see a room of nodding heads. No surprises here!

But to lots of men they are very confronting. I have had a lot of correspondence from men telling me that the statistics I use must be wrong, that I obviously haven't taken into account the contribution men make in outdoor work and so on. I sometimes feel I need to break it to them gently that in fact the statistics are based on robust, objective, national survey data. Certainly not my data.

So what does it have to do with equality and isn't it really something that we should leave to families to decide for themselves within the confines of their own kitchens?

Gender Time

The fact is that the problems of balancing these unpaid family responsibilities are having significant impacts on women's paid work. Unsurprisingly, since there are only 24 hours in a day and what we do with our unpaid responsibilities directly affects the hours left over to work.

For men, the reverse is true. It's what they do at work that directly affects the hours left over for unpaid responsibilities.

Time, like almost everything else, is gendered.

What are these impacts?

On lots of levels, the picture of women in the paid workforce has never looked rosier. Young women are better educated than ever; girls on average outperform boys in secondary schooling and women now make up more than half of all university graduates.

The gap between men's and women's employment is closing rapidly with 45 percent of all Australian women in the paid workforce compared to 55 percent of men.

Women, particularly women with children, have

surged into the paid workforce in recent decades and now more than 60 percent of women with dependent children are employed. Some 40 percent of mothers return to the paid workforce within a year of giving birth.

The Casual Brigade

However, the way that most women currently manage to combine their paid work and family responsibilities is by working part-time and often in casual employment. Almost three-quarters of part-time workers in Australia are women, and more than 80 percent of women working as casuals, work part-time.

Women account for slightly more than half of all casual workers, and a third of women work in casual jobs.

Mothers with small children are particularly likely to work part-time — of all Australian mothers in 2003, 35 percent were employed part-time, 25 percent were full-time and 40 percent were not employed. When their youngest child is aged under five, 15 percent worked full-time and 31 percent part-time and by the time children are aged 10-14 years, 32 percent are working full-time.

And why should it be of concern that women work part-time and in casual positions?

Well the first and probably most important reason is money.

In the most recent quarterly figures women earned 85 percent of men's wages when we look at full-time adult, ordinary-time earnings among non-managerial employees. This is high because there aren't many women in full-time work — they make up only 31 percent of the full-time workforce. Inevitably, they are likely to be either childless women or women whose children have grown up.

When all earnings are taken into account for full-time workers, the gap increases to 80.8 percent and when part-time wages are taken into account, women earn just 66.3 percent of men's wages.⁷

There is no doubt that much of this gap is due to women taking work which will accommodate their family care responsibilities, instead of work which more fully rewards their skills and experience.

Recent independent research carried out for the Victorian Pay Equity Inquiry⁸ found the gender-pay gap to be significantly smaller for part-time employees — around 95 percent — but this is principally because the vast majority of part-time workers are women.

However, more disturbingly, the report also found that part-time wages have fallen as a proportion of both men's and women's full-time wages in the six years between 1986 and 2002. For men, this has been a fall of 4.7 percentage points and for women 6.7 percentage points.

Permanent part-time employees receive an average of \$20.10 per hour — with women receiving \$20. Men

employed on a casual basis receive average hourly earnings of \$20.40 compared to \$18.40 for women.⁹

Taking time out of the workforce to have and care for children and increasingly to care for family members with an illness or disability also contributes to women's lower lifetime earnings and lower retirement incomes.

Women are already two and a half times more likely to live in poverty in old age than men and it is estimated that by 2019, men will have contributed double the superannuation of women. And this is in an environment where an aging population is only increasing pressure on workers to financially provide for their own retirement by working longer and accumulating more superannuation.

There is little doubt that despite increasing levels of casualisation and part-time work in recent decades, many Australian women find themselves relegated to the "mummy track" once they return to work after having children.

Young women start out with high expectations of their future working lives, are well educated for

anticipated careers and initially gain valuable skills in the workplace. But their careers are often sidelined once they have children or have other family care responsibilities thrust on them.

Wasted Investment

Australia is wasting its investment in women's education and skill development by offering them jobs not careers.

But it is not only a matter of improving the balance between paid work and family responsibilities to make individual women's lives easier, it is imperative for the nation that we properly harness the talents of working women.

The treasurer has identified the three 'P's — population, participation and productivity — as the keys to increasing Australian prosperity. And each of these is closely tied up with questions of paid work and family balance.

Despite some small upwards movements in recent years from an all-time low in 2000, fertility in Australia remains well below replacement level.

There are a number of reasons for our declining fertility rate — the widespread availability of contraception, and men and women partnering and marrying at a later age.

But women's increased participation in the paid workforce and limited access by mothers to family friendly work practices are critical.

Research also suggests that the unequal sharing of unpaid work in the home is an important factor with a number of studies demonstrating that countries with higher birth rates are those where there is more equal sharing of household labour following childbirth.¹⁰

In addition, the aging of our population presents

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significant challenges for Australia. As the recent Productivity Commission report highlighted, by 2044-45 one in four Australians will be aged over 65, more than double today's figures.

Formal aged-care needs alone are expected to increase by between 180 and 250 percent of current expenditure in that time.

Aging is a double-edged sword for Australian families resulting in increased pressure to engage in both paid and unpaid work.

Sandwich Generation

Much of this pressure is already falling on women, many of whom are finding themselves in the sandwich generation providing simultaneous care to dependent children and elderly relatives.

Some 71 per cent of all primary carers of older people and people with a disability are women and 91 percent of parents requiring primary care in Australia are currently being cared for by their daughters.

In the context of similar patterns of demographic changes, countries across the OECD have identified that increasing participation in paid work is the key to maintaining national productivity. With unemployment at a 29-year low, there are limited directions that the labour market can expand.

Compared to other similar nations Australian women's participation in full-time work is low. In 2000, only 43 percent of Australian women with two or more children were in the paid workforce compared to 81 percent in Sweden, 65 percent in the U.S. and 62 percent in the U.K.

Only the largely Catholic nations of Ireland, Italy and Spain have comparable figures for maternal employment.

Now that there are clear national imperatives to start looking at issues such as paid work and family responsibility, it is starting to be seen less as an issue of gender equity.

Let me make it quite clear that I am not backing away from this as an equality issue, but noting that it is now more widely recognised that gender equity impacts on a range of national interest outcomes, not just fairness.

Gender inequality affects workforce participation rates, economic growth and the taxation required to support welfare, especially for the rapidly growing aged population. Equal opportunity also has consequences for national fertility and demography.

Poverty levels, outcomes for children, post-custodial arrangements and therefore the sustainability of family life post divorce (especially for men) are also unintended consequences.

Perversely, the long hours of work now associated with being the male breadwinner can affect life expectancy and early death rates for men. Altogether that is a significant bundle of national interest concerns that should make any group of public policy makers sit

up and take notice.

National Conversation

Australia will not have genuinely equal employment opportunities for men and women until we start addressing the inequity in our unpaid work responsibilities. And women cannot do this alone. One of the things that the commission is trying to do through the launch of our discussion paper and the national consultations we are currently undertaking, is to kickstart a national conversation around these issues.

And this must be a national conversation that includes men. I believe that it is critical that we involve men in this debate and include them as part of the solution we need to develop or we are wasting our time, for a number of reasons.

Firstly, the current situation exists, not because Australian men are inherently sexist and believe their wives and partners belong at home fetching their pipe and slippers.

In fact, to the contrary, research suggests that Australian men and women show strong acceptance of flexible and egalitarian gender roles and research indicates that men and women believe that housework and parenting should be shared, not divided by gender.¹¹

But the choices that men and women make about questions of paid work, unpaid work and family care are not made in a vacuum. The choices are made in the context of what supports our society has set up to allow us to make those choices.

Men and women are usually making very rational, economic decisions when they make the choice that once they have children, the mother will take time out of the

paid workforce and work part-time to care for the children.

The fact that Australia still experiences a 15 percent wage gap¹² means that it is very likely that the family will lose less income if the mother, rather than the father, is out of paid work.

Our tax and welfare systems also support these arrangements through high effective marginal tax rates which discourage mothers of young children from working full-time.

A recent study by Natsem suggests that reductions in family assistance and increasing costs of childcare deter mothers with small children from working full-time and for families with two or more children, mothers are likely to be far better off working part-time¹³.

Our workplaces also drive families to make the decisions they do. Paid maternity leave, while available to only around 60 percent of the female workforce compares extremely favourably to paid paternity leave. In 2002-03, only 7 percent of certified agreements

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featured access to paid paternity /secondary carer leave.¹⁴

Despite significant steps which have been taken in making flexible work practices more widely available in recent years, it is clear that the coverage is patchy at best.

Flexibility Favours

Even where family friendly working conditions are notionally available, the evidence demonstrates that access to these conditions is highly dependent on an employee's type and size of workplace, their position and level of training, the industries and occupations they work in and the sector in which they are employed.¹⁵

One of my chief concerns in this debate is that the drivers of family flexibility seem to be pushing Australia to a point where well-educated professionals are finding it easy to access workplace flexibility by taking home the laptop and the blackberry, but your average shop assistant or barman or factory worker has no capacity to make their paid work better mesh with family responsibilities. Their only tool is low-paid or part-time casual work.

On the other hand, well-educated professionals are expected to work crazy hours, even if it does include working from home, the car and at your child's Saturday morning basketball match.

Recent research carried out for the Department of Family and Community Services has found that there still remain significant barriers to fathers taking up family friendly working provisions.¹⁶ These included:

- The unevenness of provision of family-friendly conditions.
- The novelty of men's utilisation of family-friendly conditions.
- Doubts about the legitimacy of men's claims to family responsibilities.
- Negative attitudes on the part of immediate supervisors.
- Informal practices and taken-for-granted assumptions.
- The workload burden resulting from measuring performance by length of time spent at the workplace, rather than outcomes.¹⁷

Employees, supervisors and even some senior managers thought that breaks or reductions in working hours could irreversibly damage men's careers. Without wishing to extrapolate inappropriately, I suspect that they might also think the same about women's careers if they were asked.

Men in the study reported a powerful link between earning income, having a career and their masculine identity. Loss of work, or being passed over for promotion, threatened their sense of manhood and most men tended to give priority to work over family.¹⁸

It is clear that our existing policies, institutions and

the culture of our workplaces and our homes very much influence the choices we make, which is why it is so critical that we all — men and women — work together to challenge the status quo.

I think this very much is a new direction in terms of thinking about EEO. We are familiar with the idea, for example, that we need to talk to all employees about issues such as sexual harassment in the workplace if we want to prevent it occurring, but I think that this current project involves working with men in a much more collaborative way.

Working with Men

Working with men is something that is being considered internationally as one of the important directions for achieving the advancement of women. The UN Commission on the Status of Women for the first time identified the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality as one of its two priority work areas during 2004. While this has been a new direction, the rationale is almost blindingly obvious — "Equality is a relationship between people. Gender equality is not an

issue that only concerns women. It requires active commitments by men, and partnerships between women and men."¹⁹

Clearly, there are benefits to current arrangements in our contemporary society for men and as a result there is often resistance in trying to shift thinking about institutions, which let's face it, can serve men

pretty well.

One of the things the commission gave a lot of thought to was identifying strategies across the globe which have been successful in assisting men and boys to take an active part in achieving gender equality.

Perhaps, not surprisingly, some of the strategies that were seen as being very successful were those that persuaded men that the benefits under the current system of gender relations in society are less valuable than many now think — or that they come at too high a cost.

In relation to our current project, using such strategies of persuasion is integral to what we are trying to achieve. Cultural change cannot be bought from the barrel of a gun or indeed from imposed legislation, such as the Spanish law which now makes it unlawful for men to shirk housework. Cultural change is very much about discussion, thinking, persuasion.

While I have certainly received some negative feedback from men who think that talking about unpaid work responsibilities constitutes some kind of personal attack on them, many of the men I have spoken to understand very clearly that there are real benefits for them as well as women in improving the status quo.

Men are currently very restricted in the choices they make about paid work. Recently, I spoke to a group of men — long and short-haul truck drivers — in South

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Australia about their thoughts on work and family and they strongly believed that their role was to provide financially for their families by working as many hours as possible. This is not an uncommon belief.

Men are spending more and more time at work — as are women — but the hyper breadwinner model is certainly dominated by men. Full-time male employees work an average of 42 hours a week. In 2004, more than a third of men worked more than 45 hours a week compared to only 12.5 percent of women.²⁰

Work is also intensifying. Many commentators have argued that employees across a range of sectors are carrying out more tasks and working harder and faster, reflected in the fact that over a third of employees who work overtime are not paid for it.²¹ While this can lead to personal satisfaction, it can also lead to high levels of stress, exhaustion, anxiety and work-related depression.²²

Family Breakdown

I should add that these truck drivers, also demonstrated another very important reason why the existing situation needs to change.

Among the group there were only three marriages still intact and a number of men that had experienced a number of failed relationships, which they mostly attributed to the demands of work.

And again, these men are not alone. I am not suggesting that fighting over who does the dishes and who folds the laundry is solely responsible for our increasing divorce rate, but of the research that has been carried out, it has been shown that women who perceive their division of household labour as unfair are more likely to divorce and women are more likely than men to file for divorce.²³

A Relationships Australia survey found that 89 percent of Australians agreed that relationships suffer because of work and family conflict.

There is no doubt that the drivers of this debate in terms of family breakdown and its consequences have strong emotional impact. It has been challenging for men and men's organisations to get involved in this debate, which is so much about the private sphere of home and family. But there are such strong reasons for them to do so. Not the least of which concerns family breakdown.

For men, one the greatest impacts of divorce is on their ongoing relationship with their children. The traditional pattern of unequal unpaid work responsibilities is reinforced in post-separation arrangements.

Where there is disputed custody, the Family Court, driven by the interests of the child, is likely to award residence to the parent with demonstrably stronger bonds with the child, which in most cases is the mother, who has been responsible for primary day-to-day care, and with whom the child is more familiar. There is no doubt that this is a devastating consequence for many

fathers.

I believe we are making progress in explaining the benefits for both men and women in changing the status quo.

What remains is for governments, workplaces and managers to step up and help provide the supports that make it possible for men and women to make changes that will benefit them personally, their families and our community.

Our project will be bringing out a final paper following our consultations later in the year with a range of recommendations about

how this might be done. But it is clear that a very large part of it will involve cultural change.

Managers, human-resources professionals, business owners and union leaders all have very important roles to play in helping the culture of our organisations adapt.

I urge you to talk to your employees, your colleagues, your members about these issues and send the commission your ideas.

If we want to really advance the mission of equal opportunity in our workplaces, both men and women need to get with the program. We must work together.

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