

# Work-family balance: international research on employee preferences

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When the Australian Prime Minister recently referred to the issue of work and family as a 'barbecue stopper', it was clear that the issue is both firmly on the policy agenda and highly controversial. (Editor, 2002) While there has been considerable political jockeying in regard to the desirable degree of state intervention to better enable employees to combine work and family, a perhaps more fundamental debate has emerged concerning the forms of intervention and benefits that employees want. What policies and practices do working men and women consider would make a positive difference, in terms of helping them to find a better balance between these two spheres? The object of this paper is to shed light on what employees want by pulling together research data on employee preferences in regard to work-family benefits throughout the western world.

Research on employees' preferences in western countries in the last fifteen years reveals clear patterns in terms of common themes and differences in aspirations which can inform discussion of what Australian employees consider would help them to better balance work and family. This paper examines the findings of some of the largest surveys on employees' preferences in regard to work and family issues in Western Europe, North America and Australia. In combination with the findings of smaller qualitative studies in particular countries, this material provides insights on employees' preferences in regard to working time, parental leave, childcare and other related priorities that employees with families share.

The largest and most comprehensive surveys on people's preferences for work-family measures have been those of the Families and Work Institute in the US, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, as well as the 1991 *Gotenberg* study in Sweden, the 1998 *Work-Life Balance Study* in the UK and earlier *British Social Attitudes* surveys, and the research of publicly funded, family policy institutes in Canada and Australia. The 'work and family' literature concentrates most heavily on the difficulties that working parents face in combining these two spheres. There is little survey data that specifically identifies the priorities of employees with other dependent care responsibilities, and this limitation is reflected in the paper.

### **What does balancing work and family mean?**

For employees with dependent care responsibilities, balancing work and family typically refers to finding and maintaining some degree of workable and acceptable combination of these often conflicting spheres. There is an extensive literature which documents the forms and levels of work-family conflict that working men and women feel and the negative consequences of this for their work, personal lives, families and communities. (see Russell and Bowman, 2000; and

Glezer and Wolcott, 1997 for Australian material) Ultimately, the concept of balance is a perceptual phenomenon characterised by a sense of achieving a satisfactory resolution of the multiple demands of these two domains. The conflict which employees seek to balance is related to the extent to which work and family roles exert incompatible pressures on them. Ultimately, the psychological experience of 'balance' is shaped by the level of demands individuals face at home and at work, and the meanings they attach to their participation in the work-family system. For example, a working mother subject to what appear to be substantial family demands may feel little work-family conflict if she has a low psychological attachment to the family role which those demands suggest, and perhaps, assigns that role to someone else. (Saltzstein *et al*, 2001) Experiences of balance are also shaped by the opportunities that employees have available to them, their ability to use these options, and their understanding and expectations of what is possible and what is preferable. Further, as Felstead *et al* (2002) argue, relative autonomy is an essential element of work-life balance. For employees to find a balance, they require a degree of autonomy and flexibility in negotiating the ways they coordinate and integrate work and non-work aspects of their lives.

In thinking about work-family balance, various units of analysis are available because families take diverse forms. Many consist of people related by marriage, biology or adoption, but others include people related through affection, obligation, dependence or cooperation. Surveys of employee preferences for managing work and family typically take the household as their unit of analysis – although the household is not equivalent to the family. Inevitably, employees' preferences for family-oriented benefits will reflect definitions and realities of family structures in their cultures. (Rothausen, 1999) In this paper, we take the units of analysis used in the various surveys cited as representative of 'family' for the purposes of discussion.

The existing literature casts the management of work and family for employees in terms of three main dimensions. First, it involves time management, and the logistics of responding to work and family demands. Second, it involves levels of inter-role conflict, generally cast in terms of role overload and interference. Overload exists when the total demands on time and energy associated with these multiple roles are so great as to produce discomfort. Interference occurs when conflicting demands make it difficult, in a practical sense, to fulfil the requirements of multiple roles, often because different activities must be performed at the same time in different physical locations. Recently, the concept of role interference has expanded to include directional components: family interference with work and work interference with the family. (Higgins *et al* 2000: 19) Third, managing work and family involves care arrangements for dependent family members. It requires access to affordable, acceptable family care arrangements that match employers' demands for employee attendance at work and/or concentration on work.

Thus, work-family balance initiatives include a range of work and other facilitative arrangements, both formal and informal, that assist employees to fulfil employers' expectations while also meeting the needs of family members. The work-family literature abounds with examples of arrangements that meet these conditions. Some of the main arrangements include:

- Shorter working hours;
- special leave and career breaks, including maternity and paternity leave, parental leave, carers' leave and bereavement leave;
- part-time work and other non-standard work arrangements eg. job sharing, homeworking and telecommuting;
- flexible work arrangements eg. flexitime, compressed work week, term-time work, time banking, annualised hours schemes and employee choice rostering;
- child care and elder care services and support;
- assistance with parenting eg. parenting seminars;
- job security, protection of entitlements and equity in career prospects for those who use family-oriented benefits.

In examining the preferences of working men and women for family-oriented benefits, we need to look not only at their stated preferences, but also at the extent to which they use existing *family-friendly* benefits. While surveys and case studies of employee preferences can tell us what employees believe their needs to be, and what they view as attractive propositions, the actual use of policies provides an indication of whether particular benefits are realistic and accessible. To the extent that utilisation reflects the adequacy or inadequacy of existing benefits, the correlation of stated preferences and levels of use may indicate the nature of the shortfall, and hence, indicate employees' real preferences.

### **Factors shaping diverse preferences**

The needs and preferences of working men and women for particular family-oriented benefits are diverse within and between countries. These differences prevent any simplistic transfer of findings, particularly from one country to another. However, differences also throw into sharper relief those consistencies to which research studies point. The main factors shaping diverse preferences are as follows:

- (a) stage of the *life cycle* – a combination of age, parental status and career stage characteristics (e.g. younger adults entering their early career stage with young children may have different preferences than older workers entering the pre-retirement phase with aging parents).

(b) *parenting phase*, based on the age of dependent children in a household, and particularly, the age of the youngest child. Whereas parents with young children may have an intense interest in day care arrangements, for example, those with school age children may be more concerned with on juggling unpredictable and emergency parenting demands. Parents' preferences are also affected by the number of children in their household, which has an impact on potential childcare costs, parenting time and other demands. (Buchanan and Thornthwaite 2001) The key age brackets of the youngest child in a household are:

- birth
- 0-5 years
- 5-12 years, and
- over twelve years

(c) *Household model*. While there are many possible household models, incorporating various combinations of extended family and kinship networks, the five key models in western countries are:

- Single breadwinner model: the two parent, single earner household (usually with male breadwinner).
- Dual earner model: two parents, both in full-time, paid employment.
- Modified dual earner model: two parents, one working full-time (usually male) and the other, part-time (usually female).
- One parent model: single parent family.
- Married childless couple.

(d) *Country*: employees' values, experiences, expectations of what is possible, and priorities in regard to work and family vary considerably by country – as a result of culture, legal systems, historical legacies, traditions, industrial relations systems, and other influences.

(e) *Gender*: men's and women's preferences differ work-family issues – due to the household division of labour and resulting patterns of labour market participation.

(f) *Class position*: employees' preferences differ according to whether they are associated with the working class, middle class or higher class within their society. This paper does not discuss the debate concerning what constitutes class but simply reports survey findings which refer to class position.

(g) *Occupation*: surveys suggest that employees' preferences, in particular those of women, are linked to occupations and associated educational and income differences.

(h) *Career Orientation*: the nature of an employee's career attachment shapes preferences.

(i) Other influential factors include *earnings levels, current length of working hours, partners' working hours, forms of work/family imbalance already experienced, and current and anticipated levels of management support.*

To the extent that preferences are moderated by concrete experience, existing policy and expectations of what is possible, it is critical to maintain caution in attributing conclusions to the data canvassed in this paper. While preferences express individual desires for change, they are shaped by current reality and objective factors within each individual's life – public childcare provision, the labour market situation, income levels and so forth. As Bielenski et al (2002: 16) concluded, 'preferences are usually compromises between what is desirable and what is feasible'. What might be unthinkable to some, may be both desirable and possible to others. Hence, for example, the preference for part-time work may result from this being the only form of work accessible to a mother with young children. (Latta and O'Conghaile, 2000) Employees' preferences will differ according to whether the state in which they live treats women primarily as wives and mothers or as labour market participants. Workers in 'strong breadwinner' welfare states, such as the UK and Ireland, may have very different priorities in regard to family-oriented benefits than those in 'weak breadwinner' states, that have a strong policy commitment to supporting the continuous employment of working mothers. (Fagan and Rubery, 1997)

Further, preferences can be expressed without any practical consideration of the associated monetary and non-monetary costs and benefits: they are a statement of desirability rather than of intent. Also, the decision to act on preferences must be negotiated with other members of a household. As a result, preferences do not provide a perfect or even robust measure of future behaviour, for constraints and other priorities also affect outcomes. Hence, to take the part-time example further, not everyone who says that they would like to work part-time would do so immediately if this option was available. Nonetheless, to the extent that the stated preferences of working men and women indicate a discrepancy between current and preferred realities, they constitute a challenge to policymakers. (Bielenski et al, 2002; European Foundation 2001a: 2)

Despite the diversity of preferences, employees' priorities in regard to measures to facilitate the combination of work and family fall within three general categories. These are:

- working time arrangements – including total working hours for individuals and households, the implications of these in terms of preferred household model, and the availability of flexible working arrangements, or *family friendly* working time measures;
- parental leave entitlements - for employees with dependent children. Included in this category are maternity and paternity leave, extended parental and carer's leave, and other forms of specific leave to manage dependent care responsibilities;

- Childcare - this category includes questions of availability, accessibility, quality and costs in relation to a range of provisions including day care, vacation care, after school care, emergency care and so forth.

The remainder of his paper examines survey findings in regard to employee aspirations for benefits in each of these categories.

### ***WORKING TIME PREFERENCES***

When working parents consider how they could better balance work and family, they invariably express strong preferences concerning working hours. The issues of primary concern are total working hours for individual parents and for households, access to part-time work, and the availability of flexible work arrangements. Research in a wide range of countries has identified common themes and diverse preferences concerning each of these working time issues.

#### ***Working Hours***

Surveys in Western Europe, North America and Australia have found a widespread and growing preference among men and women for shorter working hours. The longitudinal *National Study of the Changing Workforce* in the US, for example, found that the proportion of fathers and mothers wanting to work fewer hours had climbed from about one half in 1992 to two thirds in 1997. Surveys have consistently found that those working the longest hours are the most likely to express a preference for shorter working hours. However, preferences for reductions in working hours also vary by country as a result of differences in actual working time regimes. Those countries with the longest average working hours are those recording preferences for the greatest reductions in hours. At the same time, people working fewer than 20 hours per week tend to express a preference for an increase in hours. As well, in all western countries, a significant minority would prefer to work more than 45 hours each week or fewer than 20 hours per week.

The European Foundation's 1998 survey of 30,000 people in sixteen European countries asked respondents to identify their working hours preferences, given their need to earn a living. The survey found that over 80% of those working very long hours (50 and over) would prefer a shorter working week. More than half of those in short part-time jobs (20 hours or less) would prefer to work longer hours. On average, men would prefer a 37 hour week and employed women a 30 hour week. This translates into an average reduction of six hours a week for employed men and four hours a week for employed women. Job seekers have similar working time preferences to those in employment. In addition, however, a substantial proportion of men

would prefer to reduce overtime and reduce full-time hours to thirty or less. (Latta and O’Conghaille 2000; European Foundation 2001a) Overall, it is employed men who are more likely to want to change their hours than employed women. In part, this is because they have been less able to find their preferred working hours in the labour market. It is also because women are more likely to exit the labour market if they cannot obtain the shorter working time arrangements that they consider necessary if they are also to meet dependent care responsibilities. (European Foundation, 2001a).

In Western Europe, the strong preference among men to reduce long full-time hours is not linked specifically to fatherhood, but rather to the desire of men to have more time for themselves and their own activities. (Latta and O’Conghaille, 2000; Spalten-Roth *et al*, 1997) However, the European Foundation’s survey did find that spending ‘more time with the children’ was a significant reason for men wanting to reduce working time from full-time to part-time. (see Table 1) More than half the men surveyed indicated that this was one of the reasons for their preference. For men aged between 30 and 39, this was a more common reason than the need to reduce the strain resulting from full-time work. In practice, all three of these needs are inter-related for many women and men. Thus one might want to work part-time for all three reasons, and, effectively, to find a better balance between different spheres of life. (Latta and O’Conghaille 2000: 9)

Table 1. Reasons for wanting to reduce working time from full-time to part-time (16 European countries).

REASONS	Age Group 30-39		Age Group 40-49	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
More time for self & own activities	80	66	75	77
More time for children	58	77	55	52
To reduce strains resulting from full-time job	44	55	57	70

Source. Latta and O’Conghaille (2000: 8). Data drawn from *Employment Options of the Future (1998)*, European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions survey of over 30,000 people aged 16-64, in 16 countries.

Research in EU member states on the *combined* working hours preferences of couples with children has found that the presence of children in a household has little influence on either the actual or preferred combined levels of working hours in paid employment. Couples with children under 6 years report the lowest number of hours (59 hours per week) and a preference to increase this slightly to 61 hours. In other groups – those couples with no children or older children – current weekly hours are slightly longer (63 hours) and the preference is for shorter

hours (61 hours). While the actual and preferred working hours bear remarkable similarities across the groups, the way these hours are distributed within the couple vary considerably by group. The younger the children, the less likely it is that both partners work full-time, and the more likely it is that the man is employed and the woman is not. The modified dual earner model (male full-time and female part-time) correlates strongly with the presence of children in a household. (European Foundation, 2000b)

Similarly, in the US a majority of employees indicate a preference for shorter working hours, and the proportion is rising. The 1997 *National Study of the Changing Workforce* found that the percentage of fathers wanting to work fewer hours had climbed from 54% in 1992 to 67% in 1997, while for mothers it had increased from 47% in 1992 to 63% in 1997. The study found little difference in the proportions of men and women who wished to work fewer hours. The preferred reduction in hours – close to 10 hours for both men and women – is higher in the US, reflecting the longer hours currently worked there. However, when asked about the number of hours they preferred to work, working mothers and fathers reported similar preferences to their European counterparts. Employed mothers would like to work 30.6 hours a week on average (compared with the 41.4 hours they actually work) and employed fathers would prefer to work 38.8 hours on average (compared with the 50.9 hours they actually work). The difference in the reduction sought, 10.7 hours for mothers and 12.1 hours for fathers flows from the existing difference in the actual working hours of US men and women. (Families and Work Institute, 1997; Galinsky and Swanberg, 2000: 25)

According to the Families and Work Institute, such preferences illustrate parents' dissatisfaction with their current work-family balance and the time available to spend with children. Its 1998 study, *Ahead of the Curve*, reported that half of all parents with infants and toddlers end most days feeling that they have spent less time with their young child than they had wanted (1998a: x) However, US studies indicate that it is not just the length of working hours, but also the intensity and demands of work, that impede work-family balance. Another Families and Work Institute study, *Feeling Overworked*, found that the majority of respondents had felt both overworked and overwhelmed by their workloads at least sometimes in the previous three months alone. A majority (56%) also felt that they never seemed able to get everything done. The resulting stress and fatigue negatively impact on these employees' abilities to meet family responsibilities. (Galinsky et al, 2001)

Australian studies show similar preferences for reduced working hours among working men and women. A 1995 survey found that 26% of full-time workers are unhappy with their hours, with most wanting fewer hours. Of those Australian women who work full-time, 43% would prefer to work fewer hours (ie. part-time). By comparison, most women working part-time are

satisfied with their hours. The most content appear to be those working between 15 and 29 hours per week. Of those working fewer hours, 15% would prefer longer hours, and of those working between 30 and 34 hours, 25% would prefer fewer hours. For those women with older children, between five and twelve years of age, the preferences are quite similar. (Glezer and Wolcott, 2000: 53) In Australia, dissatisfaction with working hours is related not only to the difficulties that working parents encounter in balancing the actual number of working hours with their family responsibilities, but also to the way those working hours are arranged. Unpaid overtime is increasingly a feature of work, there has been an erosion of compensation for night work and weekend work, working hours are increasingly anti-social, the predictability and security of hours is declining, and the pace and intensity of work is increasing – all factors which decrease the ability of employees to balance work and family. (ACIRRT 1999; Pocock et al, 2001; Buchanan et al, 2001)

The working hours preferences of Australian men are broadly similar to those of their US counterparts. In Australia, most fathers work more than 41 hours per week, including 68% of employee fathers and 70% of self-employed fathers. Of those working more than 41 hours per week, some work more than 51 hours, including 29% of employees and 48% of self-employed fathers. Typically, fathers are not satisfied with these arrangements. As Russell and Bowman (2000) reported, 68% of fathers feel they have too little involvement with their children. The majority consider that their working conditions, particularly long and inflexible working hours, prevent them from being the kind of father they want to be. This has not shaken the preference of most for full-time work, but it has strengthened their aspiration for a maximum 40 hour week.

In the western world, therefore, there is a widespread preference for shorter working hours. For women, this is clearly linked to a need to better balance work and family responsibilities, but, for men, it is linked more to a desire to achieve a better balance of work and lifestyle, although this includes, in part, a desire to reduce work/family conflict. In many cases, the preference for shorter working hours represents a desire to work part-time.

### ***Part-time or Full-time?***

#### *Western Europe*

In Western Europe, the majority of men and women in couple households would prefer that both parents have paid employment. Most prefer either the dual earner or modified dual earner household. Although only 20% of couples practice the modified dual earner model, almost one third of couples express a preference for it. A significant proportion of couples (16%) also claim

that they would like to see both partners in part-time employment, although only 2% currently fit this model – and the preference appears to be independent of the presence of children. In a large minority of such households (43%), there is only one wage earner, usually male. Yet, most men would like their wives or partners to participate actively in paid employment, and preferably part-time. While 38% of employed men who are married or cohabiting have a partner who does not participate in paid work at all, only 18% said that they prefer this model. (European Foundation, 2000b)

Working women show a greater interest in part-time work, both for themselves and for their partners. While one in five men who are currently employed full-time would prefer to work part-time, more than one third of women prefer this option. Overall, there is a general preference among women for part-time work of a substantial nature rather than full-time work and short part-time work. Significantly, however, a substantial proportion of the men and women currently employed part-time would prefer full-time employment. (24% of these men and 18% of these women) (European Foundation 2001a; Latta and O’Conghaille, 2000)

That working fathers in western Europe display a weaker preference for part-time work than their partners is due to a number of factors. First, part-time work has a negative image for men, particularly because it is widely viewed as having a damaging effect on their careers. When asked if part-time work would damage their career prospects, it was largely men who felt this as a threat and it was men who felt strongly that part-timers are worse off in general. Then there are financial restrictions, societal and cultural preconceptions of women’s and men’s roles, and differences in family support structures. (Latta and O’Conghaille, 2000)

Women’s preferences for part-time work are influenced, particularly, by the presence of children in a household, their partner being economically active, and the household being financially secure. Employed mothers are more involved in part-time jobs (under 35 hours) and less likely to work long or very long hours than childless women. It is women with younger children who are the most likely to prefer part-time hours. Those with children aged under 6 years work the shortest hours. In some countries a pronounced shift occurs with motherhood. In the UK, for instance, the majority of working mothers return to part-time employment. In the case of those formerly working full-time, about 70% shift to part-time. As a result of this switch to shorter hours, where two thirds of mothers-to-be hold full-time jobs, less than one in five continue to do so. However, throughout Europe, mothers of older children tend to prefer slightly longer hours. As Table 2 illustrates, women usually increase their preferred and actual hours of work as their children grow older and make fewer demands on their time. (European Foundation 2001a, 2001b)

Table 2. Working Time preferences of employed and job-seeking mothers

	Average number of weekly hours		
	Employed women		Job seekers
	Current	Preference	Preference
	Childless	36	33
Child <6	30	27	28
Child 6-14	32	29	28
Child 15 +	34	31	30

Source. European Foundation (2001a), p.4. Data drawn from the Foundation's survey, *Employment Options of the Future* (1998).

The capacity of mothers to work their preferred working hours is also dependent upon a complex net of factors that are country-specific, including the availability of part-time employment as well as child care and family leave provisions. Amongst EU countries, for example, the highest employment rates for mothers with children are found generally in the Nordic countries as they have the most developed child care and family leave provisions. Mothers who are employed, typically work short part-time hours in the Netherlands and United Kingdom, longer part-time hours in Sweden, and full-time in a variety of countries including Finland and Portugal. (European Foundation, 2001a).

The employment of working mothers also correlates strongly with education level. Of those mothers not in paid employment, 87% lack tertiary qualifications. Relative income levels also influence preferences: in those countries, such as Spain and Portugal, that are characterised by relatively low incomes, despite the prevalence of the single breadwinner model, women express a preference for full-time work rather than part-time work because of the extra income it would bring to their household. (European Foundation, 2001a; Bielenski et al, 2002) The working arrangement of their partner is also a significant influence on women's choices. When males in single breadwinner households work long hours, this effectively precludes women in these households from seeking paid employment. While almost one half of 'single breadwinners' in Western Europe work between 40 and 50 hours per week, a further one in four work 50 hours or more each week. Latta and O'Conghaille (2000:14) observed:

In these cases, one could hardly talk about a balance between paid work and family life – for either the woman or her partner – the partner had less family life because he

consistently worked extended hours, and the women had no participation in the sphere of paid employment.

An interest in managing work and family is not necessarily the primary reason for working men and women choosing to work part-time rather than full-time. Studies in the UK show that men who have already deliberately chosen to work part-time cite a variety of reasons for this choice including that they are already financially secure (22%) or earn enough money (13%), although spending more time with family is the second most common reason they cite (20%). For women, the choice is more likely to be based on family responsibilities, with 52% of women citing as their reason the desire to spend more time with family, and 38% to meet domestic commitments. Table 3 records these stark contrasts.

Table 3. Reasons why full-time job not wanted, (% age citing reasons) UK.

REASON	Male	Female	All
Already financially secure	22	11	12
Earn enough from part-time job	13	11	11
To spend more time with family	20	52	49
Need to meet domestic responsibilities	12	38	35
Insufficient child care	-	7	6
Retired on a pension	3	*	1
Health reasons	4	1	1
Too old for full-time job	-	*	*
To have more free time	2	1	1
Personal choice	1	1	1
To run a business	6	1	1
Other	6	2	3

Note. \* Less than 0.5 per cent.

Source. Hogarth et al (2000) - data drawn from *Work-Life Balance 2000* survey.

### *North America*

Men's and women's preferences in regard to full-time and part-time work in North America are broadly similar to their western European counterparts. In the US, marriage and children have no effect on men's preferences for full-time work, but greatly diminish the preferences of women for regular full-time work. (Spalten-Roth et al, 1997) The longitudinal *National Study of*

*Families and Households* identified a widespread preference among married couples for part-time work, with the overwhelming priority being that the female partner engage in part-time employment. (Clarkberg and Moen, 1999) For US women, part-time work is strongly linked to managing work and family, but the strength of this link is related to women's occupations and career attachment - managerial and professional women are far more likely than other working women to attribute their decision to engage in regular part-time work to family reasons. (Spalten-Roth et al, 1997)

The same is true for Canada, where those who work primarily in managerial and professional fields ('career' women) have typically been employed full-time prior to opting for part-time employment. Career women are more likely than others to claim they chose to work part-time because family is a priority. Those in non-managerial and non-professional fields ('earners') – in clerical, administrative, retail, production and technical fields - are more likely to have been at home with children before seeking part-time employment and are more likely to claim that they needed the stimulation of returning to employment through part-time work after child-rearing. For the 'earners', part-time work represents a return to the workplace after child-rearing, a way of regaining their sanity through having a rest from child care, rather than an accommodation of work to family demands. For careerists, part-time work provides the time and energy for an increased involvement with their children. (Higgins et al, 2000) As Table 4 shows, therefore, while there is a widespread preference among Canadian working mothers for part-time work as a means of balancing work and family, the preference is based on different perceptions of the advantages of these arrangements.

Table 4. Working Women's Perceptions of the Home-Related Advantages of Part-time Work, Canada.

ADVANTAGES AT HOME	TOTAL (%)	'EARNER' WOMEN (%)	'CAREER' WOMEN (%)
More time with kids	50.0	35.3	67.9
My mood is improved	35.5	47.1	21.4
More time with kid's activities	30.6	20.6	42.9
Less hectic, less stressed	24.2	20.6	28.6
More time for planning	22.6	23.5	21.4
Personal fulfilment	21.0	11.8	32.1
More time for self	19.4	17.6	21.4
More time for spouse	14.5	14.7	14.3
More time for errands	11.3	8.8	14.3
More time on weekends	11.3	8.8	14.3

Source. Higgins et al (2000: 27) The findings are based on a national Canadian survey of 712 mothers in part-time earner positions and 117 in part-time career positions in 1991-2. Higgins et al defined 'earners' as those in clerical, administrative, technical, retail and production employment, and 'career women' as those in managerial and professional employment.

Canadian research points also to the way that working mother's perceptions of work/family conflict are influenced by their occupation and career attachment. For 'earners', part-time work is associated with a significant reduction in role overload, work to family interference, family to work interference, and conflict between individual time management and family time management. In contrast, career women experience a high degree of work-family conflict regardless of whether they work part-time or full-time. There are two key factors that may contribute to these different experiences. First, if work plays a less central role in the lives of women 'earners', then for them, reduced hours may offer a more suitable balance between work and family interests than for 'career' women who are less likely to perceive positive outcomes from reduced involvement in their chosen field of work. Second, job-related factors such as greater work demands, organisational culture, and career expectations may constrain the benefits that 'career' women find in part-time work arrangements. (Higgins et al, 2000)

### *Australia*

A similar pattern of preferences has emerged in Australian studies. Most men and women with dependent children prefer the modified dual earner model. Women choose to remain at home after the birth of infants for substantial periods and few return to work full-time. Half of all women employed during pregnancy do not return to employment within 18 months and when they do, the majority return part-time. Women who return sooner to employment after the first birth are those with high levels of education, high status occupations, high incomes, strong work attachment, lower-earning husbands and an attitude that substitute child care is not detrimental to young children. (Glezer and Wolcott 2000: 51).

It is not surprising then that research has consistently found a strong preference for part-time work among women with dependent children. This contrasts with the preference of men to work full-time. A large minority of Australian women would prefer not to have paid employment at all. Of those women who are unemployed, the majority with youngest child under five years of age do not want paid work and, overall, among those whose youngest child is under 18 years, 44% prefer not being in paid work. Of those that do want paid employment, however, the vast majority express a preference for part-time work. For many Australian women, full-time work is not an attractive option, given that typically, they also have more responsibility for domestic labour. The experience of women in dual earner households is not encouraging: when both parents are employed full-time, 70% of mothers always or often feel rushed, compared to 56%

of fathers, and 52% of women with no dependent children. Hence, most Australian women prefer to work part-time or not at all and they ‘do not appear to desire any extreme social engineering to change this arrangement’. (Glezer and Wolcott, 2000: 53)

As with their European counterparts, the working hours preferences of Australian women vary according to the ages of their dependent children. As Table 5 shows, when their youngest child is under five years, the majority of employed mothers prefer part-time work. Of mothers working up to 29 hours per week, 79% are happy with the hours involved in these arrangements, and the remainder are split in terms of those who would prefer either more or fewer hours, or no paid work at all. (Glezer and Wolcott, 1997) As their children grow older, and especially once the youngest child enters school, the preference of Australian women for longer working hours increases. The importance of work to these women is underlined by the finding that almost two thirds of mothers (64%) would still prefer to have a paid job even if they did not need the extra income. Significantly, however, many Australian women remain dissatisfied with the nature of their part-time working arrangements. In particular, there is much evidence that they often find managerial cultures unsupportive and that their use of part-time provisions inhibits their career advancement (Probert et al, 2000).

Table 5. Actual versus preferred working hours, Australian women.

<b>WOMEN WITH YOUNGEST CHILD 0-4 YEARS</b>				
Hours in Paid Work per week	Happy with Hours (%)	Prefer more hours (%)	Prefer fewer hours (%)	Prefer no paid work (%)
1-14 hours	79	15	3	3
15-29 hours	79	5	8	8
30-34 hours	70	0	30	0
35 + hours	50	0	43	8
<b>WOMEN WITH YOUNGEST CHILD 5-12 YEARS</b>				
1-14 hours	69	31	0	0
15-29 hours	75	13	7	4
30-34 hours	70	7	19	4
35 + hours	56	2	35	7

Source. Glezer and Wolcott (1997), p.3. Data is from the *Australian Family Life Course Surve*, of 2000 respondents aged 25–50 years, conducted by Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1996.

#### *Forms of Part-Time Work*

Part-time work can take many forms. Amongst those full-time workers who would rather have part-time employment, there are significant differences in the preferences of men and women. Survey data from Western Europe indicates that both men and women tend to prefer regular and predictable part-time working arrangements. However, as Table 6 shows, the vast majority of women prefer either to work reduced hours each day or to compress their work into a smaller number of days each week. Men are much more likely than women to prefer flexible working time organised around a core of hours, with their actual schedules fixed at short notice, and longer periods of full-time work followed by longer periods off. One reason for this marked difference may be that, as the choice for women is based more on family responsibilities, these more predictable arrangements would better meet their needs than flexible working time which are fixed at short notice according to employers' needs rather than their own.

Table 6. Type of part-time work preferred by full-time workers, by gender. (EU Member States and Norway) (Percentages)

Part-time model	Men	Women	Total
Reduced hours every day	22	30	26
Some days per week in full-time, some days off	36	40	38
Longer periods of full-time work followed by longer periods off	14	9	12
Flexible working time arrangements with your actual working hours fixed at short notice	23	17	20
Other	2	1	1
No answer	4	2	3
Total	100	100	100

Source. European Foundation (2000a:5) based on data from the 1998 survey, *Employment Options of the Future*.

### ***Other Flexible Arrangements***

In the context of discussions on work-family balance, flexible work arrangements refer to arrangements that provide some degree of responsiveness and adaptability that help employees to combine the spheres of work and non-work. They include non-standard forms of employment, such as contracting and self-employment, and working time arrangements that provide some variation from the typical working week model. While non-standard employment is not strongly linked to questions of work/family balance, flexible working time is, at least to

some extent, for both men and women, and it is this form of flexibility on which work-family studies typically focus.

Another way to identify employees' preferences in regard to flexible working time other than through broad-ranging surveys, is to examine collective bargaining outcomes. While the importance of collective bargaining in providing family-friendly arrangements varies by country and region, the benefits contained in collective agreements provide a strong indication of the values and priorities of the employees to whom they apply. It is also reasonable to view provisions such as flexible hours schemes, as family-oriented benefits, if they are mutually agreed to, and if they are truly directed towards workers' needs and preferences. (ACIRRT, 1999)

### *Preferences in the UK*

In the last decade, some of the most detailed data on employees' preferences in regard to work time flexibility has emerged in the UK where research has identified a large, unmet demand among employees for various forms of flexibility. The *Work-Life Balance 2000* survey found a particularly strong preference for flexitime – defined in the survey as the ability to vary working hours over the working week. Nearly half the respondents (47%) who currently lack access to flexitime expressed a preference for it. As Table 7 shows, this aspiration was followed by preferences for a compressed week (35%), part-time work (26%), school term-time work (25%), temporary reduced hours (24%) and annualised hours (21%). The differences between men and women largely were differences of degree rather than substantive preferences, but a pattern emerged of a preference among women for shorter hours and schedules that matched school hours, whereas for men, the preference was more for greater flexibility and control over working time. (Hogarth et al, 2000)

Table 7. The latent demand for more flexible working time arrangements, UK.

TYPE OF FLEXIBILITY	MALES	FEMALES	ALL
Term-time working	22	28	25
Job-Share	13	20	16
Flexitime	48	44	47
Compressed week	40	30	35
Annualised hours	24	18	21
Reduced hours	23	26	24
Part-time	21	35	26

Source. Hogarth et al, 2000. Data drawn from *Work-Life Balance* survey of 7500 employees in 2500 workplaces with five or more employees, UK, 2000.

UK research has also provided rare information on the preferences for forms of flexible working time among employees in special needs groups – including single parents and ‘carers’, those looking after family members and/or friends because of ill-health, disability or problems related to old age. The *Work-Life Balance 2000* survey found evidence of a significant unmet demand for flexible working practices amongst both groups, a demand which appeared to outstrip the propensity of employers to permit flexible practices. While expressing a strong demand for most types of flexible working time arrangements, single parents and carers most frequently aspired to flexitime, term-time working, and compressed weekly hours. Single parents were also more likely to want reduced working hours than parents in couple households although, whether they would use such an option, given the income reductions involved, remains unclear. (Hogarth et al, 2000)

The *Work-Life Balance 2000* survey also demonstrated the strength of interest among working mothers for flexible working arrangements in its finding that, more women would prefer greater flexibility in working time on their return to work from maternity leave (56%) than longer maternity leave (43%). As with women’s preferences for part-time work, these preferences are related to occupational status: women managers and professionals are more likely to choose greater flexibility on their return to work over longer periods of maternity leave. However, the survey also indicated that only two in five working mothers returning from maternity leave actually obtained greater flexibility in working time. The vast majority (70%) accommodated work and family by switching to part-time work and obtaining other changes, such as returning to a different job or switching shifts. (Hogarth et al, 2000)

Other UK research also indicates the enormous strength of interest in working time flexibility. Using data from the *British Social Attitudes* survey, Wilkinson et al (1997) found that, more than 90% of women believed that employers should provide greater flexibility for parents, including 92% of working women with children at home. The survey also found a remarkable degree of commonality in the views of men and women – at least in terms of unmet demand for flexible working time. In particular as Table 8 shows, Wilkinson et al identified a large unmet demand of similar proportions among men and women for flexible hours, home-working and school term-time contracts. The data also clearly shows that men have much less interest in part-time work. It indicates, too, that although women express a preference for job sharing, few make use of this option when it is available. According to Wilkinson et al (1997: 30), younger men and women are the more concerned with work flexibility, partly because younger men want to become more actively involved as fathers and partly because they are more likely to be living with a partner who works full-time.

Table 8. Availability and use of flexible working arrangements (%ages), UK.

ARRANGEMENTS	EMPLOYEES			
	ALL	MEN	WOMEN	WOMEN, (with children under 12)
<b><i>Part-time working</i></b>				
Available at all	44	21	67	79
Do Use	20	2	39	64
Would use if available	12	12	11	10
<b><i>Flexible hours</i></b>				
Available at all	31	27	34	38
Do use	24	20	27	33
Would use if available	43	42	44	42
<b><i>Job Sharing schemes</i></b>				
Available at all	16	9	22	24
Do Use	3	1	3	9
Would use if available	18	12	23	30
<b><i>Working from home</i></b>				
Available at all	16	18	14	12
Do use	12	14	11	11
Would use if available	29	29	28	31
<b><i>Term Time contracts</i></b>				
Available at all	13	7	18	27
Do use	6	3	10	21
Would use if available	29	29	28	31
<b><i>Workplace nurseries</i></b>				
Available at all	5	4	6	8
Do use	NA	NA	NA	1
Would use if available	25	24	27	48
<b><i>School holiday care</i></b>				
Available at all	2	1	3	5
Do use	NA	NA	1	3
Would use if available	25	25	27	48
<b><i>Child care allowances</i></b>				
Available at all	1	1	2	3
Do use	NA	NA	NA	2
Would use if available	32	29	36	70

Source. Wilkinson et al, 1997: 187 (using data drawn from the *British social attitudes: eighth report*. For full reference, see Wilkinson et al.)

UK researchers have suggested that working mothers are more interested in changing the world of work so that they have the flexibility to combine the work and family spheres than on using child care arrangements outside the family. Wilkinson and others (1997: 32) assert that rather than fitting parenting around work, as subsidised child care and other forms of child care

assistance may do, many working mothers would prefer that work better fit around their parenting role. However, the data reported in Wilkinson and co-authors' study does not provide full support for this assertion. Rather, it suggests that, of those family-oriented benefits that are not commonly available – including job sharing schemes, working from home, term time contracts, workplace nurseries, school holiday care and child care allowances - women employees with children under twelve express the greatest interest in obtaining child care allowances, school holiday care and workplace nurseries. However, as Table 8 shows, part-time work arrangements were already available to more than two thirds of the surveyed women employees with children under twelve years, and flexible hours were already available to more than one third. If unmet demand were added to existing supply, flexible working hours would attract the strongest rating.

The far greater need that women express for more flexible working arrangements, as well as for increased access to childcare, not only reflects the domestic division of labour but also practical difficulties in accommodating work to school hours and the school calendar. The opening hours of preschool and primary education vary considerably by country. The length of the school day, whether hours vary over the week or according to the age of the child, and the duration of school holidays are important considerations influencing the type of working hours arrangements that mothers want. (Fagan and Rubery, 1997)

#### *Other European Evidence of Employee Preferences for Flexible Working Arrangements*

Swedish research has also pointed to a strong preference among parents for increased flexibility in working hours as well as shorter working hours. As Table 9 shows, these preferences are significantly influenced by gender and class position. Unskilled male workers and upper class women report the strongest preference for increased flexibility in working time for families with children. In terms of shorter working hours for parents with children under eight years of age, the preference is far stronger among women of all class positions than men. Again, upper class women reported the strongest preference. The third most strongly regarded family benefit is financial support such as tax relief, for families with children. The views of men and women diverge on the relative importance of financial supports and flexibility in working conditions. For example, whereas 20% of men in the middle and upper classes gave their highest ranking to tax relief, only 4% of women did. When considering increased child care allowances, 25% of men in these strata ranked this as their strongest preferred family policy measure, compared with only 2% of women. Hence, while men strongly support measures linked to breadwinning, women strongly favour policies designed to make work and family easier to combine. (Bjornberg, 2000)

Table 8. Parent's Attitudes Towards Family Policy, 1991, Sweden.

Preferences are of men and women according to class and highest ranking alternative, in response to this question: 'Taking the current Swedish family policies into consideration, what are the most important areas in which new measures should be taken, in your point of view? Rank the three most important.'

Family Policy Measure	Unskilled Workers, Male	Unskilled Workers Female	Middle Class Men	Middle Class Women	Upper Class Men	Upper Class Women
<b>Financial Support</b>						
a. More money for families with children (eg tax relief).	17	13	22	11	21	4
b. Large monetary subsidies for families with children (eg family allowances).	6	6	4	3	0	0
<b>Child care</b>						
a. More child care places with public support.	14	9	8	7	8	11
b. More alternatives within child care system via privatisation.	0	4	7	4	6	4
<b>Working Conditions</b>						
a. Shorter working hours with full wages for parents with children below 8 years of age.	9	30	23	34	21	45
b. Increased possibilities for flexibility in working life for families with children.	20	10	8	13	14	22
<b>Parental Support</b>						
a. Parental leave allowances for more extensive period of time.	10	13	12	17	6	9
b. Introduction of care allowances or parental care 'wages'.	17	13	11	8	20	4
<b>Other</b>	7	2	5	3	4	1
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source. Taken from Bjornberg (2000: 64-5). Data drawn from the *Goteberg Survey 1992* - involving 215 fathers and 455 mothers living in Goteberg, Sweden.

In many European countries, collective bargaining has encompassed a range of flexible working time measures particularly at local/company levels, although typically these provisions are on the bargaining agenda for reasons other than promoting work-family balance. It is employers who have driven most of the bargaining on flexible working time, either to enhance

competitiveness through cutting costs and raising productivity, or to improve recruitment and retention of employees in tight labour markets. Rarely has the bargaining been oriented towards employees' needs. Even so, there are many examples of agreements that have extended employees' choices in relation to such matters as the ability to shift to shorter hours. (European Foundation, 2001c; EIRO, 2002)

Various sectoral agreements in Germany, for example, have provided employees with some leeway to schedule their work according to individual needs. A recent survey found that about one third of employees covered by these agreements stated that these allowed their working time to be adapted to their needs. However, what remains unclear is the extent to which employees view their 'needs' as related to the meeting of family and other dependent care responsibilities rather than lifestyle issues more generally. In other countries, also, family-friendly benefits have been included in sectoral agreements. In Italy, for instance, sectoral agreements introducing greater working time flexibility have included also entitlements to family-related leave, and a right to transfer to part-time employment for family reasons.

European surveys also indicate the strong preference of working parents for time sovereignty – the power to choose their hours of attendance at work. According to Webster (2001: 28-9),

'one of the most important messages to emerge from surveys into working time preferences is that women who are mothers want to be able to decide changes in their working hours for themselves...despite this clear message, working-time patterns are still predominantly being decided and implemented at company level, with little opportunity for employee control'.

There is considerable evidence in EU countries of company-level bargaining on working time provisions that provide employees with greater autonomy over the hours at which they must attend work. These include:

- *flexible work packages* eg. Part-time, term-time, flexitime, homework and telecommuting. The provision of flexible hours specifically for parents varies in form and extent. For example, while in France, 14% of employees have some discretion over their working hours, in Norway, this figure rises to 30% of employees, and in Germany 35%;
- *time accounts or hours banks*, under which employees can 'bank' extra hours worked and then cash them in for extended leave at a later date. In France, for instance, 12% of workers are now involved in such a scheme, and in Germany, 65%

of companies have introduced working time accounts, although surveys suggest that only 37% of employees are actually covered by them;

- the *flexibilisation* of daily working time, sometimes combined with employee choice rostering and other forms of shared control over working time. (EIRO, 2001; European Foundation, 2001c)

However, access to these bargained benefits is typically confined to particular groups of workers. For example, the provision of 'flexitime', whereby employees have some discretion over their working hours around core periods, is primarily a benefit for white-collar workers in Europe. In the UK, almost one million employees work on school 'term-time' only, but the vast majority are female, and more than 80% are based in the education sector. Individual companies have reached agreement on benefits to enable individuals greater options in regard to balancing work and family. In Italy, the chemical company Beiersdorf reached an agreement in 1996 on the flexibilisation of daily working time. In the Netherlands, Unilever agreed to a 'cafeteria' style package of benefits in relation to working time flexibilities. (EIRO, 2001) However, these remain isolated examples, suggestive of employees' aspirations generally, but, ultimately, indicative only of the aspirations of those employees to whom the agreements apply.

#### *North America*

In the US, the strongest preference for family-friendly working time, at least for working fathers, is not so much for flexibility but for more control, or time sovereignty. Lack of control over work schedules is the main source of job stress for working fathers, just as it is for working mothers. The primary factor in the ability of both to reduce work-family conflict and to share household tasks is the ability to schedule work hours with some degree of individual flexibility. Hence while mothers and fathers would both like to reduce total work time, an even greater aspiration is for more control over precisely when they must attend at work. However, US research also suggests that men's preferences for flexible working time may be under-reported because, given the often limited nature of men's expectations of involvement in family life, men may fail to recognise or to express their interest in flexible arrangements. (Levine and Pittinsky 1997)

Yet, while the experiences of particular US firms point to the importance of flexibility in work schedules for both men and women, they highlight particularly men's expectations and attitudes in relation to work-family balance. For example, AT & T's Global Business Communications Systems learnt through exit analyses that 28% of management associates left the company because work schedules were inflexible and 38% cited an inability to balance work and family. When flexible schedules were introduced in two federal agencies in Washington D.C. in 1980, nearly half the fathers changed their hours to spend more time with their children. DuPont found startling changes in the attitudes that male employees expressed in regard to family

responsibilities and work preferences between 1984-85 and 1988. By the time of DuPont's second survey in 1988, men had grown comfortable enough to indicate that concern about children and childcare was affecting them on a day-to-day basis and that it was having an impact on their career expectations and aspirations. Subsequently, the firm found that its workplace flexibility program, which included flexible scheduling options, had been used by 41% of its 100,000 domestic employees. (Levine and Pittinsky, 1997)

An alternative way of carving out more time for family responsibilities is to have less responsibility at work. Not only do the majority of American working mothers and fathers report a preference for shorter working hours, but also, they exhibit a growing preference for less responsibility in their jobs. Whereas in 1992, one in two employed mothers reported wanting greater job responsibility, by 1997, only 41% did. While two thirds of fathers wanted greater responsibility in 1992, this proportion had dropped to one half in 1997. (Galinsky and Swanberg, 2000: 26)

### *Australia*

In Australia, the importance of flexibility in work arrangements is clearly evidenced in surveys of working parents. Many parents value job flexibility as a critical means of carving out time with children. Employees widely consider that certain everyday events are an essential part of family life, absence from these due to work commitments is a clear indication of imbalance between work and family. For many, therefore, flexibility is more helpful in terms of managing the two spheres than are changes in total hours arrangements. The *Australian Living Standards Survey 1991-92* found that flexibility in working time was particularly important to women workers, who especially preferred more freedom in regard to starting and finishing times, and exemption from night and weekend shifts. Women also rate more highly than men the importance of working only during school hours (men 12%, women full-time 34%, women part-time 52%) and not working during school holidays (13%, 34% and 47% respectively). (Wolcott and Glezer, 1995:41-44)

As in the US, there is evidence that working parents in Australia who lack this flexibility make decisions to forgo income and/or advancement in an effort to meet the demands they face in these dual spheres. Three methods they use include changing jobs, with consequent loss of work status and income, rejecting jobs that involve too much travelling, and changing preferences for shift work as the ages of their children rise. Those who chose shiftwork when their children were young, as a way of meeting childcare responsibilities, often re-evaluate its suitability as their children get older. Of those dissatisfied with their current work arrangements, however, many cannot afford to change them. (Lewis et al, 2001)

### *The rhetoric and reality of flexible working time*

Employee preferences for particular forms of flexibility do not necessarily translate into efficacious work-family management measures. For example, US research suggests that compressed schedules have no positive effect on work-family balance for men, and they have a negative effect for single mothers. For parents of small children, the longer working days entailed in compressed schedules rarely coincide with available child care options and radically truncate already too-short workday evenings. For parents of older children, the associated non-work days do not provide additional time because of school schedules. The only group for whom compressed schedules are linked with greater satisfaction in work-family balance are mothers with unemployed spouses, and this appears to be related to the availability of the spouse to meet housework and child care needs during the mother's days in paid work. (Saltzstein et al, 2001)

This raises the question of the extent to which employers introduce these so-called 'flexible working time arrangements' to benefit the firm or employees. As Hogarth et al (2000) observed, while in some cases employers introduce them to benefit employees as well as themselves, in others they are intended solely for the employer's benefit. For example, annualised hours may provide the employer with the means to avoid costly overtime payments during periods of peak demand by spreading work over a 12 month period. Yet from the employee's perspective, having to work longer hours at their employer's convenience may prove inconvenient despite the subsequent compensation of shorter hours. While employers may harness the rhetoric of 'family-friendliness' in promoting changes to working conditions, the reality may be that the new conditions are simply a way of exploiting workers more profitably and that the implementation of them incorporates little or no consideration of family context. For example, an employer may offer flexibility by allowing employees to work from home without considering who cares for the children. Such 'flexible' arrangements as temporary and fixed-term contracts, subcontracting and self-employment, also, are not necessarily family friendly, given that they do not guarantee income or job security. (Brannen and Lewis, 2000: 105)

#### ***Fathers.***

In recent years, interest in fathers' experiences of work-family conflict has burgeoned in western countries. This has generated discussion on the extent to which men want to change their current working arrangements to better facilitate their involvement in parenting. The preference for reduced working time that many working fathers have expressed in industrialised market economies can be linked to concrete outcomes in terms of fathers' relationships with

their children. Research shows that work patterns are the single greatest determinant of fathers' relationships with children. The kind of father a man wants, hopes or intends to be has a slight bearing only on the kind of father he becomes. Working patterns account for almost half (46%) of this variance. Involved fathers are those who are employed fewer hours than other men, and whose wives work more hours outside the home than other women. While in many countries, new fathers often increase their working hours, this would seem to have more to do with compensating the household for the mother's loss of earnings than an innate preference for long working hours. In Sweden, where more than three quarters of mothers with children under three are in paid employment, fathers with very young children work the shortest hours of all fathers. (Burgess, 1997: 143-5)

Generally, men in western market economies are dissatisfied with their work-family balance. A British survey found that only one in four men believes his family relationships are *not* damaged by his working life. It is clear, however, that the societal assumption about their breadwinner role delimits what men see as possible and acceptable – and shapes their preferences accordingly. In the US, one in five men surveyed in 1994 said that, if the household had enough money to live comfortably, they would prefer to be at home looking after the family. UK research found that 43% of males with children under 12 regard their jobs as 'just a means of earning a living'. Yet, only 4% of men, on becoming fathers, reported changing either their job or employer to obtain hours that would better enable them to spend time with mother and child. Several US studies have indicated that working fathers are increasingly requesting parental leave and working time arrangements that accommodate child time. Studies also describe how fathers 'fiddle' their work arrangements to claw out time for the family. Burgess describes, for example, how fathers concoct 'meetings' to spend time with their children or collect them from school, and how they use flexitime, compressed hours and homework to engineer time with their families. The ingenuity and persistence of fathers in these endeavours attests to the strength of their preferences. (DTI, 2000; Burgess, 1997)

A 1992 Swedish study found that almost two-thirds of men (62%) had made some sort of restriction in their jobs because of their children. The adaptations they had made were similar to the strategies women also used – they had reduced working hours, refused more responsibility at work, requested more flexible working conditions, and reduced their overtime. (Bjornberg 2000: 67-8) As Table 9 shows, although men were not as likely as women to have made these changes, more than one in three had obtained flexible work hours and/or reduced their overtime to better manage work and family. Upper middle class men were far more likely to have obtained more flexibility and reduced hours – which may indicate their greater capacity to do so. Other Swedish studies have shown that middle-level white collar fathers have become less interested in promotion if it means more time away from home, and only one third of top male

managers prioritise work over family. Despite men's interest in spending more time with their families, they can face substantial barriers to this. Many organisations either passively oppose parental leave or provide it on the basis of certain conditions, such as men lacking alternatives for their children's care, or the employee being indispensable and hence 'worth going to the trouble for'. (Haas and Hwang, 2000: 147-151)

Table 9. Parents' Strategies for Combining Work and Family Roles, 1992, Sweden.

Table based on replies to the question: 'Have you made any adaptations in your job because of your children?' (numbers are percentages who made adaptations)

	Unskilled		Middle Class		Upper Class		Totals	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Reduced work hours	17	62	20	72	34	71	24	68
Obtained flexible hours	23	40	34	41	42	53	35	42
Refrained from career	6	27	18	31	26	38	17	30
Changed to family-friendly job	11	46	20	35	12	33	16	39
Reduced Overtime	34	51	39	50	34	53	36	50

Source. Bjornberg, U. (2000: 68), with data from the *Gotenberg* survey 1992.

Men's aspirations to spend more time with their families are all the more significant when we consider that work can appear a relatively more attractive option, a perception that has three main bases. First, men may lack the skills or confidence to feel they can make a meaningful contribution at home. Second, they may have learnt to rely on work for emotional fulfilment. Third, the routine, structured, rewarded, neutrality of work in institutions can supply an attractive sense of achievement and self-worth. (Burgess, 1997)

Eveline (2001), however, argues that men's preferences for more involvement with their children are more ambiguous. Eveline's comparative study of male senior managers in Sweden and Australia found that the majority in both countries were either ambivalent or uninterested in the experience of primary parenting. For most of the Swedish men, who were entitled to extended paid parental leave following the birth of their children, the experience of parental leave, if anything, had crystallised their preference for the corporate world, the world with which they were so familiar, and which was so central to their identity. Few sought to repeat the primary parenting experience with subsequent children, and they justified this on the basis that their career had greater potential for their family's advancement than did the careers of their wives. Most of the Australian men in Eveline's study considered family work to be

fundamentally the responsibility of women and tended to believe that they were the ones who should continue on their career paths unhindered by interference from domestic responsibilities. While there are exceptions in each country, the study points to a potentially very significant difference between theory and practice in men's preferences towards the management of work and family.

### ***PARENTAL LEAVE PREFERENCES***

Parental leave refers to periods of leave available to employees to fulfil parenting responsibilities. It includes maternity leave for mothers and paternity leave for fathers in the period immediately before and after birth, and extended leave for child rearing purposes. Employees have preferences in regard to the six main dimensions of parental leave benefits. These include whether the leave is paid, the length of leave, its timing in relation to birth, employment security, the combination of maternity and paternity leave entitlements, and flexibility on return to work (this is discussed earlier in the paper). To identify employee preferences in regard to parental leave, we need to look not only at stated preferences but also at the factors which influence the decisions of mothers and fathers to use parental leave entitlements and those that influence women's decisions to return to paid employment after taking extended leave.

Most women use their entitlement to paid maternity leave. It is at the end of maternity leave that maternal employment patterns diverge, both between countries and between different groups within countries. Leave entitlements that are unpaid are rarely used for longer than the minimum statutory requirement to take leave immediately preceding and following the birth of a child. For example, less than two percent of entitled parents took unpaid parental leave in France in 1992, and a disproportionate share of those taking leave were women with three or more children who thus received some financial support. In contrast, a high female take-up is found in Sweden and Denmark where the wage replacement rate is much higher. (Fagan and Rubery, 1997: 366-8)

Other employment conditions also deter working mothers and fathers from using parental leave entitlements. Employees are deterred from taking leave if they consider that their employment conditions on return to work are not adequately protected, or where leave periods are excluded for seniority or promotion purposes. That this is a common perception is indicated in UK research findings that 35% of respondents feel their current job and career prospects would not be secure if they took parental leave. (Wilkinson et al 1997) Another deterrent is employer reluctance, which is likely to be strongest in small businesses, where employers may consider leave-taking to be more disruptive. Longer periods of leave tend to be taken in the public sector,

a difference which reflects both the enhanced financial support for parental leave and more supportive culture in public sector organisations. Further, use of leave entitlements is affected by occupational status. In the UK, women with high levels of qualifications or earnings take shorter periods of leave. This may reflect the influence of educational investment, but also their generally higher earnings make it more feasible for them to pay for childcare. (Fagan and Rubery, 1997: 369)

The degree of their career attachment also influences the use men and women take of parental leave. Those who view work as an important source of self-identity are less likely to take leave, particularly if they regard it as a threat to their career goals. Those with the highest attachment to work tend to be those in higher socio-economic groups. A study of highly qualified women showed that they were less likely to take part-time work than less qualified women, were less constrained by child care responsibilities (given that they could afford high quality care), and were more likely to share responsibilities with their partner. The extent and use of parental leave is lower for this group because of their lower need (better able to pay for child care) and lower motivation (because of career concerns). The periods of leave they take may be substantially shorter as well. Professional men may be more likely to make alternative arrangements, such as taking normal leave, rearranging work hours and working some days from home to spend time with their children. (Wilkinson et al, 1997: 117)

UK research conducted prior to the recent extension of maternity rights in that country, found that the nature of maternity leave entitlements also affects the rate and form of women's return-to-work following childbirth. Three main elements influence the return-to-work decision:

- (a) Women who qualify for maternity leave are more likely to be in employment nine months after the birth than other mothers who worked when pregnant, and they are also more likely to return to full-time work with their employer.
- (b) The more generous the duration of leave, the higher the proportion of women returning to work after childbirth. Women who qualify for extended maternity absence are more likely to return than those only entitled to the statutory minimum entitlement (72% compared to 56%).
- (c) The generosity of compensation also affects women's behaviour. Women who receive contractually-enhanced maternity pay (86%) are more likely to return to work than those who receive the statutory entitlement (66%). An important caveat is that receipt of those payments is frequently dependent on returning to work for a period of three months, and it is possible that some women may quit shortly after completing this term. (Fagan and Rubery, 1997; Callender et al, 1997).

There is also evidence that women’s decisions concerning whether or not to combine work and family with their first child are a critical influence on, and indicator of, their subsequent labour market participation. Women who work continuously during the pre-school years of their first child are more likely to remain continuously employed thereafter. Hence, women taking their second period of maternity leave are more likely to return to employment than first-time mothers. These findings suggest that a filtering process takes place as families form – women who remain in employment after the first child will tend to continue to combine paid work with parenting. Subsequent childbearing rarely undermines their preference for paid employment. This may be because these women have made arrangements that sufficiently reconcile employment with their caring responsibilities. (Fagan and Rubery, 1997)

In the UK, when mothers return to employment after taking maternity leave, as noted earlier, the majority return to part-time employment. As Table 10 shows, working mothers make other changes to working arrangements as well. The most frequent is to increase the flexibility of their working hours, something that four out of ten returners from maternity leave do. Others return to different jobs, switch to a job-share situation, or work from home. These changes suggest strongly that working mothers have diverse preferences in terms of working arrangements following maternity leave, and that they place a high value on flexibility in these arrangements.

Table 10. Changes in working practices after a period of maternity leave, UK.

CHANGES	Percent of returners post-maternity leave
Switched to part-time work (previously worked full-time)	70
Had greater flexibility over hours worked	44
Had some other change in working arrangements:	32
<i>Job/role changed</i>	8
<i>Worked from home</i>	1
<i>Changed shifts</i>	3
<i>Changed to a job share</i>	<i>under 0.5%</i>
<i>Other</i>	5

Source. Data drawn from *Work-Life Balance 2000* Survey, cited in Hogarth et al (2000). The survey consisted of 7500 employees in workplaces of five or more staff.

Probert and others’ (2000) study of the Australian finance and teaching industries, highlights the considerable variation in levels of employee awareness of, and management support for

working parent's use of parental leave benefits. Of those employees who are aware of their entitlements, many report a lack of support from co-workers and managers when drawing on the benefits. More generally, in Australia, many men are dissatisfied with their current levels of involvement with their children. Yet, even where family-oriented benefits are available, they are reluctant to use them. Men fear that taking parental leave will damage their career prospects because of the way managers and others in the workplace might view their decision. Managers may see them as less committed or productive, colleagues may claim they are cynically taking advantage of 'women's rights', or supervisors may undervalue their work, given that presence in the workplace is valued over actual performance and outputs. (DEWRSB, 1999: 3; Biggs, 1998) Recent research has observed that fathers who want to claw more time for involvement with their children often are forced down a 'daddy track' which has the same adverse career consequences traditionally associated with the 'mummy track'. (Pocock et al, 2001)

In Sweden, Haas and Hwang's (2000) study observed that the proportion of men who take parental leave is no longer rising, and may be declining, and that fathers take a relatively small proportion of the leave available. Where in 1990, fathers were taking parental leave for 55% of children born in Sweden, in 1994, this figure had dropped to 51%. Haas and Hwang also explain these patterns in terms of the often negative responses of employers to the provisions and to the attempts of male employees to use them. It remains to be seen whether having a non-transferrable component of parental leave allocated to men increases their use of the benefit.

Even though progress may be stalling, the extent to which fathers use parental leave benefits is higher in Sweden than in any other country that offers men this option. Since 1974, one fifth of children born in Sweden have had their fathers take regular parental leave to care for them. In Canada, by comparison, only 5% of biological parents who are fathers file a claim for parental leave benefits each year. However, fathers in western countries are highly selective in the type of parental leave they are prepared to take. In Sweden, they take a relatively small proportion of regular parental leave, which includes twelve months leave from work with 80% wage compensation, available until the child is eight years of age. Swedish fathers take a little more than 10% of these available days. Similarly, in the UK, while most fathers take some time off after the birth of a child, typically 7-8 days, few take their full entitlement, and few take all the time as paternity leave. Most prefer to take some of the time as holiday leave. (Haas and Hwang, 2000: 145-46; Johnson et al, 2001:70; DTI, 2000:21-22) In Sweden, fathers are more likely to use the temporary parental leave entitlement of up to 60 days per child per year, which compensates parents caring for sick children, accompanying children to receive health care, visiting day care centres or schools, and caring for children when their caretakers are sick. In 1996, men took 34% of all temporary leave days taken by parents. Men's use of both forms of leave, however, declined through the 1990s. Studies suggest that where women earn less,

couples almost inevitably choose the traditional alternative of women taking all or most of the leave. The fathers who take leave are those whose partners have similar education and occupational status to them. (Haas and Hwang, 2000: 145-46)

Overall, men are far more reluctant than women to use unpaid parental leave entitlements. Generally, they only use paid paternity leave and holiday entitlements to spend time with children. There are a number of reasons for this marked reluctance of men to take unpaid parental leave:

- a. Given that fathers usually have the highest income earning capacity in a household, couples in dual earner and modified dual earner households typically make a strategic choice to maintain the man's income and to structure men's time in ways that maximise this income. Thus, men are unlikely to take unpaid leave to look after children.
- b. As employers rarely hire replacement labour for men who are absent on parental leave, their work accumulates, intensifying work pressures on their return.
- c. men fear an adverse impact on their careers (as discussed earlier).
- d. men often feel socially inadequate and excluded among the primarily female networks of carers that they confront on becoming the principal child carer in a household. (see DWRSB, 1998b; Burgess, 1997; Wilkinson et al, 1997; )

By pooling the insights of various studies on parental leave preferences, we can identify the circumstances under which men take parental leave? There are ten critical factors associated with men's use of parental leave entitlements. These are that;

- full salary compensation is available for the entire leave period;
- managerial and workplace culture transmit strong support to working fathers;
- women are in the majority (or in significant numbers) in senior management positions;
- other forms of assistance are also available to help employees balance work and family;
- men are highly educated;
- men have well-educated partners with high incomes and a strong commitment to employment. In other words, male take-up is higher in households where women have a 'career' orientation and take shorter periods of leave.
- men are employed in the public sector (as parental leave benefits are more strongly associated with this sector);

- men are employed in female-dominated jobs;
- parental leave is designed to encourage fathers' involvement - for instance, in Austria and Sweden, men have choices about the structure of their parental leave (they can take it in short or long blocks, part-time or full-time) and part of the statutory entitlement is a non-transferable allocation to the father, giving men a stronger case when they approach employers.
- men's preferences for leave are also influenced strongly by their partner's preferences. In Sweden, where men make a comparatively high use of parental leave entitlements, fathers tend to take the leave (usually as short or part-time absences) after mothers have completed their periods of leave. (Fagan and Rubery, 1997; Burgess, 1997; Wilkinson et al, 1997; DWRSB, 1998b)

Thus, to the extent that women's preferences can be inferred from their use of existing benefits, comparative European studies of the use made of parental leave entitlements also provide strong indications of the elements most desirable to women workers. The first is that the scheme offers a significant level of wage replacement together with job protection, if it is to benefit low paid as well as high paid women workers. Second, the leave should be underpinned by commitment to a non-transferable leave component for both parents, flexible leave (allowing both parents to reduce working hours), and supportive workplace cultures. Third, provisions must offer flexible, extensive periods of leave, with a minimum of twelve months duration, opportunities to spread the leave entitlement over longer periods of time, and provisions for reduced hours on return to work. Fourth, the schemes have to be accompanied by high quality, affordable child care and incentives to encourage reductions in working hours and other flexible arrangements (see Wilkinson et al, 1997).

What are employees' preferences concerning the funding of parental leave schemes? In a recent UK survey, the majority of employees favoured a system in which the costs of parental leave are shared between both government and employers (40% of respondents) or government, employers and employees (23%). As Table 11 illustrates, very few employees considered that employers or employees should, alone, be responsible for these costs. In terms of generating funding, Table 12 shows that the most unpopular method is a loan for people taking parental leave, either through government, employers or private companies. The majority of employees consider that costs should be shared on a universal contributory basis or that employers and employees should contribute to a pension fund that provides wage-replacement for parents on parental leave. (Wilkinson et al, 1997)

Table 11. Who do you think should fund parental leave schemes? (UK)

<b>SCHEME</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Both the government and employers	40
Costs should be shared between government, employers & employees	23
The government	17
Employers	9
The employee	5
Other	1
Don't know	5

Source. Wilkinson et al (1997: 191). Data is drawn from MORI Omnibus survey of 2000 British adults in February 1997.

Table 12. How do you think contributions to parental leave should be paid? (UK)

<b>SCHEME</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Costs shared between government, employers and employees on a universal contributory basis (like National Insurance)	33
Employees and employers pay into a fund like a pension fund that replaces employees' wages when they take parental leave	25
Through general taxes	12
Employers replace the wages of staff	8
Government provides loans for people taking parental leave	7
Employers provide loans for people taking parental leave	3
Private companies provide loans for people taking parental leave	2
Other	1
Don't know	9

Source. Wilkinson et al (1997: 191). Data is drawn from MORI Omnibus survey of 2000 British adults, February 1997.

### ***CHILDCARE PREFERENCES***

Demand for formal child care facilities is monitored only in the minority of countries with comparatively well-established systems of childcare, and the lack of standardisation in these

national surveys combined with the lack of information in most other countries, prevents robust cross-national comparisons of employees' preferences. (Fagan and Rubery, 1997) What is clear, though, is that an insufficient supply of accessible, affordable childcare impedes the labour market participation of women. UK research, for instance, found this to be a major reason why women who had intended to work after the birth of their child were not employed at the end of their maternity leave. For many of those women who do not plan to return to employment after childbirth, it is also a major reason: 24% cite the lack of good quality, reliable childcare at suitable times and in their local area as significant reasons for their decision. (DTI, 2000: 32; Fagan and Rubery, 1997)

In Australia, childcare arrangements are a source of considerable concern for working parents. Recent increases in the 'flexibility' of working time have increased the problems that employees face in relation to childcare – particularly when flexibility is implemented largely to benefit employers rather than to meet employees' needs for work-life balance. Without much notice, working hours can swell as employers require their employees to work longer hours in a day or extra days in a week, perhaps including weekend work to finish a job. Roster changes and overtime pose problems, as does the sheer unpredictability of blocks of work for many in non-standard employment arrangements. Work-related travel and out-of-hours training can also be extremely problematic. Childcare services structured around 'standard' working time, the incidence of which is steadily declining, and on the basis that work is planned, regular and predictable do not satisfactorily cater to their needs. In Australia, the operating hours of childcare facilities alone, regularly pose difficulties for almost one in five working parents. Childcare services are also structured around the 'well' child and rarely extend to sick and contagious children. These characteristics of childcare provision constrain the choices of working parents at work and affect how they meet caring responsibilities. The mismatch of work and school hours is also problematic for working parents. For example, many families spend few holidays together as parents schedule holidays separately so that children are cared for. When both partners are shift workers, many parents work opposite shifts for many years to manage childcare. Working parents note also that childcare arrangements constrain their ability to concentrate at work, and to accept more responsibility and promotions. (Wedgewood and Forbes, 1994; DIR, 1996; Heiler, 1996; Pocock et al, 2001)

Australian research has reported that 60% of workers with children aged under five years experience problems with child care arrangements. A Victorian survey found that the most common difficulties are related to the time that care is available, breakdowns in childcare systems when children are ill, and the costs of care. (WACCAS, 1996) Similarly, Queensland research found that, of the 14 main practical problems that working parents experience in Australia, with their present child care arrangements, the three most critical are finding sick

care, temporary care, and emergency care. As Table 13 illustrates, overall, the most significant difficulty for working parents is locating suitable care options when usual arrangements fail or are not available because a child is excluded from care due to illness. (Wedgewood and Forbes, 1994) In the UK, where employees have a statutory entitlement to unpaid time off work to cope with family emergencies, working parents report a far lower experience of problems with childcare. A recent survey found that, while 49% of working parents had experienced at least one family emergency involving their children in the previous 12 months, only one in four considered that their childcare arrangements had posed problems in that same period. (DTI, 2000:43-49)

Table 13. Problems with present childcare arrangements, Australia.

PROBLEM	Percent of working parents
Finding sick care	26
Finding temporary care	22
Finding emergency care	19
Hours care is available	16
Costs of care	16
Finding school holiday care	15
Finding desired care	12
Finding before & after school care	10
Location of care	10
Transport to care	8
Quality of care	8
Reliability of care	7
Finding care for special needs children	7
Having multiple forms of care	7

Source. Wedgewood and Forbes (1994: 122). Data drawn from survey of 21,300 employees in 13 firms, Qld, Australia.

What sort of assistance do working parents consider they need with childcare? Table 14 illustrates that for Australian parents, the top four forms of assistance sought are emergency care, vacation care for children aged 5 to 13 years, before and after school care, and childcare centres near work. There are differences in priorities between the forms of assistance that working parents consider they need and the expressed problems they have currently with

childcare arrangements. (see Tables 13 and 14) This suggests that the most problematic situations may not be the most difficult for working parents to actually resolve. Hence for instance, while finding sick care is the most commonly cited problem, it may be more difficult to make emergency care arrangements than sick care arrangements in practice.

Table 14. Working parents preferences for direct forms of child care assistance, (percent of parents nominating each form), Australia.

Forms of Child Care Assistance	Preference (%)
Emergency care	54
Vacation care, children 5-13 years	51
Before & after school care	50
Child care centre near work	49
Care for sick children	43
Information and referral service	43
Child care centre near home	35
Family day care near home	30
Workshops on parenting	25
Family day care near work	21
Other	3

Source. Wedgewood and Forbes (1994: 124). Data drawn from survey of 21,300 employees in 13 firms in Qld, Australia.

In Sweden, there is a strong preference for public childcare facilities. A 1992 study of families with five-year-old children, indicated that 73% of families used public childcare. The preference for public childcare varies by class and gender. Women show a stronger preference for public childcare facilities than men. While both men and women preferred that professional staff care for their children, rather than depending on informal networks, women showed the strongest preference. Class differences were significant especially in regard to the care of children under 3 years: the higher their occupational strata, the more support men and women showed for the use of public childcare facilities. In the lower occupational strata, this preference was stronger among women, which suggests that men's attitudes vary more by class than women's on this issue. (Bjornberg, 2000: 66-7)

Working parents in North America report similar difficulties in meeting childcare needs to those of their Australian counterparts. More than half of all employed women with children under the age of five have serious problems with childcare. Major difficulties include the use of multiple

childcare settings during early childhood, and often on a daily basis, the transportation of children from one care situation to another, and helping children to manage transitions. In America, mothers who do not have access to a childcare centre within 10 minutes of home are almost twice as likely to leave their jobs as those who do. Although few employees express a preference that their employers provide work-based childcare, working parents with access to childcare facilities at work report high levels of appreciation of it, fewer anxieties concerning the care, and higher satisfaction with the quality of care. As in Australia, childcare services in the US are structured around the 'standard' working time model. Hence, finding facilities is especially difficult for parents who work evening or weekend hours and for those who work rotating shifts. (Families and Work Institute, 1998a)

In addition, given the inflexibility of childcare services in the US, it is a strong priority of working parents that employers provide time off for illness and assistance with child and elder care to help them better manage work and family. More than two thirds of women (68%) and 50% of fathers with dependent children say it is very important that employers provide employees with leave to care for sick family members. Further, women without dependent children report the strongest preference for employer assistance with elder care, a preference that is likely to rise, given that more than two in three Americans in their thirties expect to have responsibility for an elder parent or relative within the next ten years. Between one quarter and one third of parents also believe that employers should provide flexibility in working hours, time for teachers' visits and time for routine medical appointments, to help employees balance work and family demands. (National Partnership, 1998)

## **Conclusion**

While it is difficult to draw cross-national comparisons on the basis of available survey evidence in regard to employee preferences for work-family benefits, some patterns are clear. There is a strong preference among employees with dependent care responsibilities for shorter working hours, part-time work and flexible working time. Another priority is for access to affordable childcare that is available at hours that mirror the existing diversity of working time arrangements. In relation to parental leave benefits, there is a pervasive preference for leave entitlements that are paid, especially for working fathers, as well as provisions for shorter hours and flexible arrangements on return-to-work, employment security and supportive corporate cultures. In all three areas, the implicit preference of employees is that benefits be provided as an entitlement rather than a privilege. Male employees, in particular, but not exclusively, are reticent to use benefits that are provided purely at an employer's discretion, due to the fear of adverse career consequences.

Whatever the stated priorities are, however, they reflect only what employees can imagine and conceive as possible. Employees' desires are influenced by the objective characteristics of their situation, and their desires evolve in response to evolving circumstances. Employees' preferences for work-family benefits vary according to stages of the life cycle, household model, the ages of their children and a host of other factors. That there are such strong, consistent patterns in employees' preferences throughout the western world is, perhaps, more surprising than that there are differences. Overall, however, the literature suggests a need to cast the net wide, to encompass a cafeteria of inter-linked and mutually reinforcing benefits to help employees combine the work and family spheres.

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