Women and work in Australia

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Work is defined broadly as productive activity that requires time, energy and skill. It includes paid employment as well as unpaid care and domestic work. Across cultures and throughout history most women have worked. However, their options were extremely limited, usually restricted to care and domestic work. Today Australian women have far better opportunities for paid employment than were available 60 years ago. Nevertheless ‘women and work’ remains an issue because the allocation of paid and unpaid work is still inequitable (Craig 2007; Pocock 2006, 2003).

Women, on average, work slightly longer hours than men, but spend more of this time on unpaid care and domestic work (Craig 2007). These types of work, traditionally undertaken by women, are often not recognised and do not necessarily generate an entitlement to a fair share of family or community resources.

Most high quality paid jobs are designed for ‘ideal workers’ who do not have significant care or household responsibilities (Pocock 2003). A common Australian way of reconciling employment and care/domestic work is for one parent (usually the mother) to work part-time. This does not reduce the mother’s overall working hours (Bittman & Brown 2005; Craig 2007) but does reduce her lifetime earnings (Booth & Wood 2006; Chalmers & Hill 2007). In Australia part-time and casual work is often low quality - poorly paid and precarious (Chalmers, et al 2005a). Inequalities in resources and opportunities make ‘women and work’ an issue of justice.

Changing patterns of employment
Women’s labour market participation rate continues to increase - 58% in 2006 compared with 48 per cent in 1986 (ABS 2008). However fewer women than men reach the more highly paid professional and managerial positions (Ross-Smith & McGraw 2010). Women still face discrimination in recruitment and promotion (Doughney 2007). On average, women have lower lifetime earnings compared with men, retire with less superannuation and own a smaller proportion of the national wealth. Women are more likely than men to live in poverty, particularly after relationship breakdown (Sharam 2001; Doughney et al. 2004; Goward et al. 2005; Vu & Doughney 2005).

In Australia there is a two-tier employment market with high-status, well-paid jobs often involving long hours at the top and poorly paid, precarious and often part-time jobs at the bottom. Paid employment has many benefits. However, there is evidence that working in poor quality jobs may be worse for individual well-being than the experience of unemployment (Butterworth et al. 2011). Research from the UK highlights a problem where people in low-wage jobs experience a combination of time poverty and income poverty (Burchardt 2008).

Framing the issue
Whether or not they are made explicit, the theories that frame the way an issue is approached have practical consequences (e.g. Nussbaum 1998, 2000a,b). There are three central questions to ask when analysing policies around women and work:

- Are women viewed instrumentally as either workers (focussing only on employment) or as carers (focussing on relationships) or as individuals with both aspirations and relationships?
- Are children primarily considered to be an individual responsibility or a social responsibility?
- How do we understand the decisions made by individuals?

If women are viewed instrumentally, policies will be constructed to support them as workers or carers but not as full rounded individuals. If children are considered to be a private rather than a (partial) social responsibility, there is no justification for publically funded financial support for families. If parents' decisions concerning employment are considered to reflect fixed individual preferences (e.g. aversion to out-of-home child care) rather than a response to constraints (e.g. discrimination in the workplace) then governments and employers do not need to address sex-based discrimination. This third point is argued by UK sociologist Catherine Hakim (2011, 2000).

Hakim’s preference theory (a type of rational choice theory) has been highly influential, helping shape family policy in Australia. Hakim argues that compared with men, women are less successful in the labour market because most prefer to concentrate on raising their children rather than paid employment (Hakim 2000, 2011). There are three major
critiques of Hakim’s work. First, she fails to see the constraints faced by women. Secondly, she fails to recognise that an individual’s priorities are not fixed but change over the lifespan (Pocock 2003). Thirdly, Hakim does not take into account the theories of choice, preferences and decision making that challenge rational choice theories (Leahy & Doughney 2006). Hakim considers decision-making to be an instrumentalist process of realising fixed preferences. However when making decisions individuals often need to work out what it is they want, and how to respond in situations when they want things that are incompatible under current circumstances (Leahy & Doughney 2006). An individual’s preferences are strongly influenced by their experiences, particularly in situations of entrenched discrimination and disadvantage. As a result policies based on preferences tend to reinforce the status quo (Nussbaum 2006).

Common models of work regimes
Models have been proposed to explain the way a society organises paid and unpaid work and these are outlined below. They either describe the current situation, past situations or are presented as alternatives, some in hope and others as a warning.

Traditional breadwinner
Under this model men work full-time and receive a ‘family wage’, which is a wage sufficient to support a wife and children. Women care for the children and sick or elderly relatives and are responsible for running the household. The ideal family is single-income, nuclear, male headed and heterosexual (Fraser 1997; Pocock 2003). In Australia, the traditional breadwinner model was entrenched by the 1907 Harvester judgment, which defined the basic living wage as the minimum required to allow a life of frugal comfort for a male worker, his wife and three children (Bryan 2008; Robbins & Harriss 2007). In Australia, the traditional male breadwinner/female homemaker family is now in the minority. By 2003 only 32 per cent of couple families with children were in this category.

Modified breadwinner
The more common model today is for both partners to be employed – the case for 62 per cent of couple families with children (Pocock 2005). A majority of these dual-income couple families have one-and-a-half incomes. In most cases, the male is employed in a full-time position and the female in a part-time job. Although part-time work enables mothers to retain their connection to the workplace, their longer-term financial position is weaker than if they had remained in full-time employment. The risk is that the modified-breadwinner model reinforces gender inequality, casting women as the primary carers and men as the primary earners. The situation would be different if men and women were equally likely to work in part-time jobs, an outcome that is unlikely given the poor quality of most part-time work.

Universal breadwinner
Under the universal-breadwinner model (Fraser 1997), sometimes referred to as the adult-worker model (Lewis & Giullari 2005), citizenship is linked to paid employment (Craig 2008; Lewis & Giullari 2005). To achieve equality women need to adopt a traditional male work pattern. Proponents of this model argue that households should contract out their care and domestic work (e.g. Bergmann 2000). However, often this is not an option for poorly paid care workers. A successful society depends on unpaid care and domestic work as well as on paid work. There is a risk that the universal-breadwinner model will result in a reduction in the availability of care (Craig 2008; England 2005). The universal-breadwinner model does not address the low status of care work and women’s experience of the double shift of paid and unpaid work. Less prominent in Australia, the universal-breadwinner model is influential among US feminists (according to Fraser 1997) and policymakers in Western Europe (according to Lewis & Giullari 2005).

Caregiver parity
This model aims to achieve equality by supporting care and domestic work. Instead of insisting that women become like men, a distinct female path is recognised and the costs of that path are minimised, usually through some form of payment for care work. Philosopher Nancy Fraser (1997) argues this approach informs current political practice of most Western European feminists and social democrats. This model has some advocates in Australia, notably writer and social commentator Anne Manne (2005). The problem with caregiver-parity model is that it cannot protect women from marginalisation and is unlikely to achieve income equality.

Universal caregiver
Finding limitations with both the universal-breadwinner and caregiver-parity models, Fraser proposes a third approach, which she calls the universal caregiver. The intention is to dismantle the opposition between bread-winning and caregiving. For this to be possible all jobs would need to be designed for people who are carers and workers. Conditions would include shorter working hours than are currently typical of full-time employment. Support for working carers would be partly achieved by integrating care work and paid work into a single social-insurance system. This would produce a fairer distribution of different types of work across the community. There is strong support for some form of universal caregiver model among academics and commentators from Australia (e.g. Craig 2007; Pocock 2003, p. 39; Squire & Tilly 2007) and Europe (e.g. Bubeck 1995; Himmelweit 2008).

Policy developments
In Australia there is a history of governments providing financial assistance to families in the form of means-tested...
transfer payments through the welfare system (e.g. Family Tax Benefits A and B and the Child Care Benefit) and rebates through the taxation system (e.g. Child Care Rebate). In January 2011, the Australian government introduced a long-awaited publically funded scheme providing 18 weeks Paid Parental Leave (PPL) set at the federal minimum wage, which is currently $589.38 per week (Fair Work Australia 2011). The stated aim of the scheme is to provide one parent with financial security to enable them to spend at least the first few months caring full-time for their child (Family Assistance Office 2011). Although generally welcomed, there are concerns the PPL scheme does not provide wage replacement and therefore is unlikely to be used by men (Baird 2009).

Conclusion
Women are sometimes seen primarily as workers dealing with the logistical challenges of managing employment and family responsibilities. However, many theorists assume a fuller, richer account of women and men, attentive to the nature and quality of both relationships and work. If Australian women and men are to become recognised and rewarded as both carers and workers changes are required, including a significant shift in social attitudes, changes to the nature of work, a restructured tax/transfer system and more comprehensive system of high-quality care services for children and elderly and disabled people. There would also need to be a drastic improvement in the status, remuneration and conditions of employment for paid carers.

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Further resources, policy documents and statistics are available online at: http://apo.org.au/guide/women-and-work-australia