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FAMILY PREFERENCES, CHILD CARE AND WORKING HOURS

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Over the past decade there have been significant changes in the industrial relations environment and hours of work. These changes have been justified on the grounds that increased labour market flexibility has benefited employer and employee alike. This paper seeks to provide a partial assessment of this claim by reviewing the extent to which the changes in hours worked have meshed with parental preferences in reconciling work and family responsibilities. The assessment needs to be viewed in the context of the much broader debate surrounding the gender division of domestic labour, the aspirations of women and the boundaries between individual and collective responsibility for the provision of caring activities, especially child care (Brennan, 1998).

The conservative position argues that the family is central to the development and socialisation of children. Advocates argue that within families women have a comparative advantage in nurturing and caring activities that arises from a biological and temperamental predisposition to such roles. Hence the welfare of children and their mothers is enhanced when women have the economic choice to remain outside the labour force. Note that this view treats the aspirations of women as synonymous with the nurture of children because of the primacy given to the gendered allocation of caring (Bittman and Pixley, 1997; Miller and Mulvey, 1998). Therefore, family decisions about the division of domestic responsibilities and labour force attachment are seen as essentially a private matter with the role of government cast as empowering and facilitating families in their decision making choices. The rhetoric of the present political climate stresses policy to allow families the flexibility to design their own solutions to the competing

demands of work and family life. Nevertheless, conservative policy is biased in favour of families who opt to have the mother out of the workforce, as evidenced by the 1996/97 federal budget (see, for example, Family Tax Initiative).

The radical response to this view of the family is to argue that the stereotypical division of caring responsibilities is part of the systematic suppression of the rights of women. Rather than being founded in comparative advantage, the assignment of women to caring roles has segmented the population and labour force in the economic interests of men. Since the production of these caring services is largely unseen and unpaid within the family, they have been undervalued relative to the paid, market based production of men. The solution requires acknowledgement that caring for children is a collective social responsibility and that the welfare of women is not necessarily synonymous with nurturing children. Society at large has an interest in the skills and attitudes of the next generation and the burden should not be solely that of parents, let alone women. One means of easing the burden of care is to recognise that, irrespective of labour force attachment, families are entitled to be able to access quality alternatives for parental child care. In this view, government and communities should seek to develop policies that provide access to affordable child care that provides families with the choice of alternatives to parental care if this is what the family wishes. Recent policy changes amount to a government retreat from this view with the decreased affordability of centre-based child care, the withdrawal of support for community-sponsored child care centres, and the introduction of a means test on the child care cash rebate (Lee and Strachan, 1998).

Yet another, perhaps narrower and more pragmatic, view cites the economic advantages to society of sustaining female labour force participation. Investment in education of the female labour force is retained and society benefits from the productivity and higher earnings of a more active skilled workforce. Of course, to the extent that market work is substituted for domestic production, the rise in market earnings will overstate the real gains in output. Indeed, the unequal allocation of time devoted to domestic production between men and women constrains the terms on which women participate in the labour force. There is

evidence to suggest 'clear links between the nature of the division of time in the household and the types of specialisation undertaken in the labour market' (Miller & Mulvey, 1998: 13). For many women, either by choice or design, attachment to the labour force is via the secondary labour market. The coordination of work and family responsibilities is facilitated by part-time work but such employment is often characterised by poor conditions, low pay, lack of training and promotion opportunities and absence of other advantages associated with continuity of employment in the primary labour market. Despite the entry of significant numbers of women with dependent children into the labour force, the social changes necessary to reconcile the often conflicting demands of work and family commitments have been slow and fragmented. The government's role, under this scenario, is to implement policies that reduce or remove these obstacles to effective and full participation of women in the labour force. In practice, recent governments have abrogated this responsibility by relying on market-induced 'family friendly' workplace initiatives. Thus onus of responsibility for workplace practices devolves to families and employers.

This emphasis on the ability of women and men to combine their paid work and family responsibilities has been espoused by governments, business and trade unions (Burgess and Strachan 1999). Both Labor and Liberal/National Party Coalition Governments have designated certain policies as 'family friendly' and changes in industrial relations have been promulgated as beneficial for workers with family responsibilities. In 1994 the Labor Government alleged that enterprise bargaining would provide 'increased opportunities for workers to achieve more flexible working arrangements tailored to suit their family needs' (Achievements So Far & Coming Events 1995: 2). Minimum entitlements included unpaid parental leave and protection against unfair dismissal for reasons including family responsibilities. The 1995-96 agreement between the ACTU and the federal Labor Government, known as the Prices and Incomes Accord part VIII, spoke about 'the cooperative development of measures - including enterprise bargaining and changes to award provisions' which would 'give workers more flexibility in meeting their family commitments' (Budget Initiatives: An Agenda for Families 1995: 2).

These views have continued to be promulgated under the Coalition Government elected in 1996. Under the heading 'A Flexible and Responsive Workplace', the Liberal Party policy on women states that the Liberal/National Coalition recognises the particular needs of 'women with family responsibilities and our industrial relations policy will be of particular benefit to those women who wish to blend family and work responsibilities ... Only a flexible and responsive industrial relations system can cater to differing individual circumstances' (Liberal Party, 1997). The idea of work and family policies is now so prevalent that the 1997 budget was trumpeted as a 'family friendly' one with a supplementary budget statement entitled 'Our Commitment to Women' (Budget Statements 1997). Policies put forward at the 1998 election strengthened these themes: 'The Coalition is committed to promoting economic independence for women while respecting the choices they make about their lives' (Liberal/National Party, 1998b: cover). Family policy including child care was emphasised. Indeed, the Coalition stressed that:

families are the very heart of Australian life. Our families give us strength and support to carry us through our difficult times. Families are the best social welfare system ever devised. Stronger families and strong family life mean a stronger and better Australia (Liberal/National Party, 1998a: cover).

This policy highlights the care of children and states that the Coalition had improved access, equity and quality of child care, particularly for low and middle income families through the provision of more child care places and centres as well as financial assistance.

It is not our intention here to assess the Coalition government's claims regarding access to and affordability of non-parental child care. We have argued elsewhere (Lee and Strachan, 1998) that the present policy mix is biased in favour of families who elect to withdraw (or who can afford to withdraw) the mother from the labour force and have penalised families who opt to have the mother in the labour force. Rather, the current paper seeks to assess the extent to which the government has fulfilled the twin roles of (i) facilitating family decision-making regarding work and family commitments and (ii) reducing barriers to maternal labour force participation. For the latter, government appears to be content to rely on industrial relations reform and deregulating the labour market. The paper

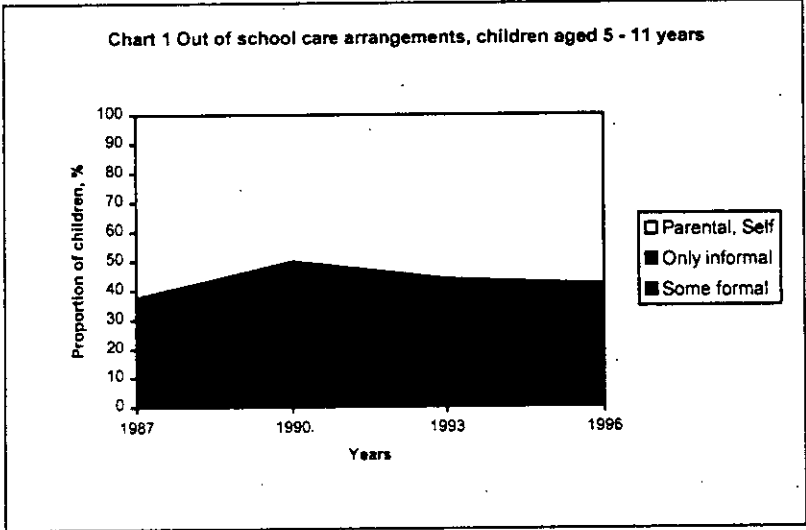
proceeds by juxtaposing the expressed parental preferences for work arrangements against the workplace arrangements that are emerging under enterprise bargaining.

Accommodating Working Hours and Child Care Needs

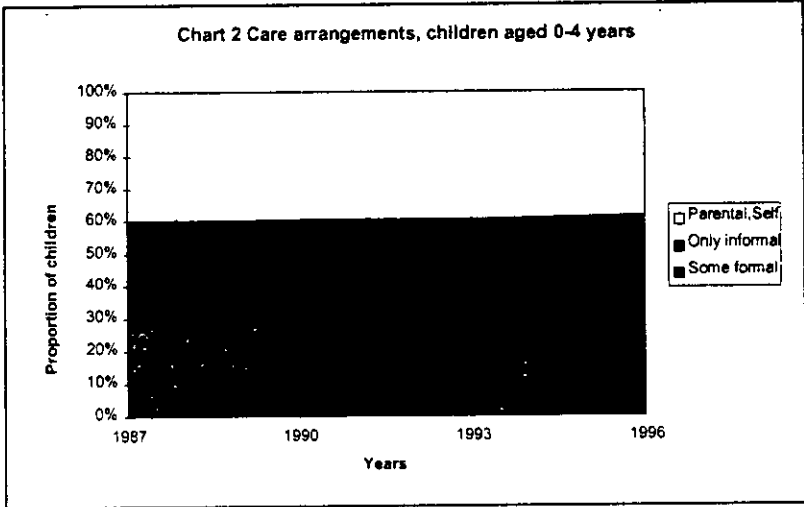
The diversity of arrangements used by families to satisfy child care needs and maintain workforce commitment reflects the differences within families. Arrangements that are appropriate for school aged children will not be appropriate for younger children. Families that have access to an extended family network will face different constraints compared to a family where relatives are not available to assist with child care. For many families the arrangements will be a complex mix of multiple care types, as parents juggle the needs of different children, the availability of care and work requirements. For classification purposes, there are three broad types of child care arrangements that parents may use. Care may be provided intra-family, either by the parents or the child; by regulated providers (formal care) or by unregulated providers (informal care).¹

Chart 1 reports the pattern of child care arrangements used by individual school aged children in the survey population. Parental and self care dominate the care arrangements of this age group. Similar findings are reported by VandenHeuvel (1993), investigating the care arrangements chosen by employed parents of children under 18 years of age. She found that 60 per cent of families used non-overlapping parental working hours to care for school aged children out of school hours. Chart 2 mirrors Chart 1, except that it applies to children aged 0-4 years. Over a third of children in this age group used 'some formal care' in 1996. For this age group there has been a steady drift towards greater utilisation of non-parental care.

¹ The ABS series define formal care to include long day care, family day care, occasional care, before and after school care and preschool programs. Informal care is defined as care provided by older siblings, other relatives or non-relatives not subject to government regulation.



Source: ABS (1997) Child Care, 4402.0, March 1996, p.11.



Source: ABS (1997) Child Care, 4402.0, March 1996, p.11.

Parents nominated work-related reasons as the main reason for use of before and after school care programs, family day care and long day care (87%, 74% and 60% respectively of all reasons given) (ABS 4402.0, 1997:5). Similarly, 47 per cent of parents used informal care principally for work-related reasons. Further utilisation of formal and informal care rises with full-time work status. For example, in 1996, 71.2 per cent of children in families where both parents were employed full-time used some formal and/or informal care, and in families where at least one parent worked part-time this proportion was 59.9 per cent of children. This contrasts with 35 per cent of children in families where one parent was employed and the other was not in the labour force. Thus, while formal and informal care represent less than 50 per cent of care modes for all children, access to such care is clearly linked to maternal labour force commitment.

On the other hand, a substantial proportion of families choose to juggle work and parent-provided child care. In 1996 52.3 percent of all families with at least one parent employed and a child under 12 years of age used some adjustment to working hours to allow them to both work and care for their children themselves (ABS 4402.0, 1997: 38). In families with an employed mother, 68.7 per cent of mothers used work arrangements, with the most frequently cited work arrangements being flexible working hours (31.3%), permanent part-time work (29.0%) and working at home (18.3%).

There is an impressive collection of international evidence that points to the importance that parents attach to flexible work arrangements:

Working parents consistently emphasise that what they need most if they are to manage their work and family responsibilities is time, a degree of flexibility and an understanding employer...most [parents in the VandenHeuvel study] were interested in child care support, with women (47 per cent) wanting this change more than men (33 per cent). Reorganisation of work, such as flexible working hours, changes in shifts, and shorter working hours, was suggested by almost one-third of both men and women. About 17 per cent, again more women than men, wanted revisions in family leave policies to allow time off for family matters (Wolcott and Glezer, 1995:16-17).

This emphasis on flexible working hours, increased family leave, on-site day care and supportive supervisors was repeated in Canadian, New Zealand and USA studies (Glass and Estes, 1997). Holt and Thaulow (1996:79) assert that 'flexibility is a key element in securing a family-friendly workplace'. In their definition, 'flexibility' embraces formal arrangements including flexitime, child care days and parental leave, as well as informal flexibility, a broader concept of 'latitude for adjustment' in the workplace.

In the Australian Living Standards Study (Wolcott and Glezer, 1995:40-41) parents were asked to rate the importance of certain work characteristics on a five point scale. Mothers, whether full-time or part-time employed, were consistently more likely to rank restricting work hours to family-friendly dimensions and preserving flexible work hours more highly than fathers. The contrast is particularly marked in the case of not wanting to work outside school hours and not working in school holidays. Mothers working part-time were slightly more willing to countenance work after 7pm and weekend work than their full-time counterparts.

Are parents satisfied with arrangements? It is impossible to answer this question decisively, partly because of the diversity within families and the resulting lack of unanimity and partly because of problems of interpreting revealed behaviour. Interpreting behaviour is problematic because it is difficult to establish causation. Do mothers reveal a preference for flexible working arrangements as a pragmatic response to the reality of the family situation and the disproportionate burden of care responsibilities that falls to the female? Or is the ranking an expression of a genuine desire to accommodate a nurturing role and an interest in family? Yet another possibility is that the population of employed mothers will exhibit selection bias in that those mothers who are satisfied with care arrangements are more likely to be employed than mothers who are not satisfied. The Work and Family Responsibilities Survey (ABS 4422.0, 1994) collected data on families experiencing difficulty managing work and care of children. It found that a majority of parents reported no difficulty combining work and family responsibilities, but a sizeable minority of 31 per cent of parents in couple families with two working parents reported difficulty compared to 22 per cent in couple families with one working parent. The incidence of difficulty increased

with the presence of younger aged children. Table 1 reports the reasons cited for experiencing difficulty with work and child care. Again we see that for families where both parents are employed work reasons are the principal cause of difficulty and again the focus is on the question of hours.

Table 1: Main Difficulty in Managing Work and Care of Children, Reported by Employed Parents with Children Aged 0-11 years^(a)

Main Difficulty	Lone Parent	Couple		Total
		Both Employed	One Employed	
Percentage				
Family reasons				
Caring for sick child(ren)	*8.5	6.7	*4.3	6.3
Cost of care	*13.9	8.5	*5.2	8.2
No suitable or available care	*13.0	9.6	**0.9	8.0
Transport ^(b)	*6.2	5.3	*3.6	5.0
Total	41.6	30.1	14.0	27.4
Work reasons				
Work hours too long	20.4	31.8	43.9	33.6
Work hours not flexible enough	19.0	18.3	18.4	18.4
Total	39.5	50.1	62.3	52.0
No particular reason	*14.3	12.6	15.5	13.4
Other	*4.8	7.2	8.2	7.3
TOTAL	100	100	100	100
Proportion of all employed parents with difficulties	44.9	31.0	22.0	29.1

(a) Excludes a small proportion of parents that did not state whether they had difficulty.

(b) Comprises transport to and/or from school and/or child care.

* Small number of observations with relative standard error between 25 to 50 per cent.

** Figure should be used with caution as relative standard error exceeds 50 per cent.

Source: ABS (1994) Focus on Families: Work and Family Responsibilities, 4422.0: 22.

Unanticipated needs for care, for example when a child is sick, are particularly difficult for parents to cope with. In couple families with both parents employed when the child was sick 26.7 per cent of fathers took time off work compared to 79.8 per cent of mothers (ABS 4402.0, 1997:35). The pattern of leave arrangements to care for sick children varied with labour force commitment. For employed mothers in households where both parents worked full-time, the mother used sick leave (31.0%), no formal leave (20.3%), unpaid leave (17.7%) and family/special leave (17.2%). Where father worked full-time and mother part-time then 35.7 per cent mothers took unpaid leave, 25.4 per cent had no formal leave and 15.9 per cent took sick leave.

In the 1993 survey employed mothers who had children absent from school or child care due to illness were asked to express satisfaction with their care arrangements. In 42 per cent of cases mothers would have preferred an alternative arrangement to the one used:

For 77 per cent of the children who were not in the most preferred care arrangement, their mothers would have liked an arrangement which included paid family leave; 23 per cent would have preferred sick care facilities at a school or child care centre; and 22 per cent, a person from a sick care agency in the child's home (ABS 4422.0, 1994:32).

Ability to take time off work for family reasons is not universal and varies with labour force status of parents. VandenHeuvel (1993) found that permanent workers generally used annual leave to deal with school holidays; used paid sick leave to cope with sick children and flexible schedules to deal with other child-related needs. Contract and casual workers relied heavily on unpaid leave for all reasons to take time off work.

In summary, a government committed to enhancing family choices should recognise that a high proportion of families choose to have the mother engaged in the labour force, and that families have a particular view of workplace flexibility that would facilitate this choice. Flexibility is defined in terms of work hours that coincide with school hours or the extended hours available at child care centres: accessing formal child care outside these hours and on weekends is difficult. Flexibility also

encompasses shift arrangements that are not so long as to prevent families from providing continuity of parent care. Finally, flexibility includes arrangements that allow families to cope with school holidays, care of sick children and other unexpected contingencies.

This suggests three main workplace initiatives needed by families with dependent children. Glass and Estes (1997: 294) have categorised these as:

- Policies and benefits that reduce work hours to provide time for family care-giving through the provision of leave for vacation, illness, childbearing, and emergency child care or through reductions in average hours worked per week;
- policies designed to give workers greater flexibility in the scheduling of work hours and the location of work hours while not decreasing average work hours;
- policies designed to provide workplace social support for parents, including forms of child-care assistance so that they work without concern for the care of dependants in their absence.

We turn next to consideration of the extent to which the government's industrial relations reforms are compatible with parental preferences for working time flexibility.

The Decline of the Standard Working Week

The literature which deals with women workers and child care and 'work and family' (that is the difficulties of combining paid work and caring responsibilities) has promoted 'flexibility' as the answer to successful participation in the paid workforce, while also accommodating family care. Lewis and Lewis, for example, assert that employees 'need flexibility and autonomy to empower them to balance commitments in work and beyond' (Lewis and Lewis, 1996:160), suggesting that a 'win-win' solution is attainable for both employees and employers where principles associated with 'work-family reconciliation and a collaborative partnership' can be achieved (Lewis and Lewis, 1996:159). Yet, at the same time as this has been advanced as a solution, there is

incontrovertible evidence that changes in employment patterns in the workforce, combined with altered working hours, are making this more difficult for many workers in Australia to achieve. Full-time employees are working longer hours, with more than half the full-time workforce working 41 hours or more each week with 32 per cent working more than 48 hours (ACIRRT 1999: 102).

Since the mid 1980s there has been a sustained push by successive governments to 'reform' the labour market. Deregulation of product markets, together with deregulation of the labour market, has been promoted as a solution for many of the structural problems confronting the Australian economy. The deregulation imperative has been adopted, without prior theoretical or empirical evidence (Dabscheck, 1995) and labour market deregulation has been seen as a means of enhancing labour flexibility. In Australia this has concentrated on the diminution of third party wage determination, the diminution of collective, centralised determinations of working conditions and the reduced number of minimum conditions as enshrined through the award system. Together with a reduction in the role of trade unions, these were seen as the four major ways of achieving labour market flexibility (Strachan and Burgess, 1997). Changes in the industrial relations system since 1987 have moved the determination of wages and conditions progressively to individual workplaces and even to agreements with individual workers. This has fragmented working conditions, a trend which has continued at a greater pace with the introduction of the Workplace Relations Act 1996. The major thrust of this Act is to deregulate employment arrangements and to remove the potential intrusion into workplace arrangements provided by the award system and trade unions.

In the past decade flexible working hours arrangements have dominated the bargaining agenda. Enterprise bargaining has 'achieved more than expected in just one area of policy and practice - working time' (ACIRRT March 1998:39). Over 70 per cent of agreements contain clauses that deal with changing working time arrangements - these include the introduction of annualised salaries, 12 hour shifts, 'time off in lieu' arrangements and 'banking of hours' provisions (ACIRRT March 1998:40). The result is that many employees have a longer and less predictable working week than was the case a decade ago.

Analysis of agreements has demonstrated that, where women workers predominate, agreements are more likely to contain working hours and contract of employment provisions. The Agreements Database and Monitor (ADAM) which analyses an extensive range of agreements reported that provisions for flexibility in starting/finishing times and/or in the setting of hours of work were present in 72 per cent of pre-1995 agreements and in 100 per cent of 1995 agreements examined (ACIRRT Aug., 1995). Included under the flexible working-time banner were a plethora of arrangements, including annualised salaries, elimination of overtime and penalty rate payments, the averaging of ordinary hours over a number of weeks and extension of both the span of the 'normal' working day and working week. All arrangements provided 'significant cost benefits to employers' (ACIRRT Aug., 1995:17).

The idea of the standard 35 or 38 hour week worked between 9 am and 5 pm Monday to Friday, with penalty rates and overtime paid for time outside or above these hours, is largely a thing of the past. Many agreements (up to 50 per cent in some industries) are increasing the ordinary span of hours up to 12 hours per day or longer. Some agreements average the working hours over a month (typical in finance) or year (ACIRRT June., 1997:27).

In 1996/7, 11 per cent of agreements in the ADAM survey provided for hours averaged over four weeks and 5 per cent averaged them over a year. The effect of this is that a worker can work for 20 hours in some weeks and 60 hours in another, as long as it averages 40 hours per week over the specified period. Averaging of hours is highest in female dominant sectors of Financial Services, Wholesale/Retail Trade and Recreational Services, all sectors of the economy with a greater focus on 'customer service' and expanding hours of operation. The impact of these provisions is dependent on how they are introduced and how much say an individual employee has over the schedules. By 1998 about 30 per cent of all agreements provide for 12 hour spans of work, with this rising to 43 per cent in wholesale and retail trade (ACIRRT 1999: 120). These changes may be long term as retail outlets, finance and insurance, and many other sectors of the economy move towards lengthened trading hours once predominant in emergency care and hospitality sectors. ACIRRT (1999: 120) points out that 'once a new culture of working time

begins to permeate society at large, it comes to affect most people in the workforce.'

The problems of extended trading/customer service hours combined with the averaging of hours can mean unpredictable work schedules which vary from week to week: 'while open-ended flexibility may be beneficial to the enterprise, it may prove onerous for workers with childcare arrangements that are often inflexible' (ACIRRT June 1997:28). Table 2 provides examples of clauses in agreements.

Table 2: Examples of Working Time Provisions in Enterprise Agreements

	Example of clause
Span of hours	The spread of ordinary hours of work unless otherwise provided, shall be between 6.00 am and 6.00 pm, Monday to Friday inclusive. (Local Government)
Averaging of hours	Employees shall work 40 hours per week balanced over a 52 week period....The commencing and finishing times of each day shall be flexible to enable completion of trading and associated duties. (Electricity)
Overtime	Overtime will not be paid: The employee and his/her General Manager may agree to time off work without deduction from salary in special circumstances. (Electricity) Time in lieu when taken is paid at the normal base rate of pay irrespective of when the time was accrued. (Health Industry)

Source: ACIRRT June 1997:25-31.

Overtime and penalty rates are being absorbed into the base rate of pay, thus removing the economic disincentive for employers to utilise labour at anti-social times or in long shifts (ACIRRT June 1997:29-30). With some of the averaging hours arrangements it is hard to conceive when an employee would ever be entitled to overtime. All these changes have provided employers with much more flexibility in the deployment of labour. The amount of choice which employees have over these hours is unclear but most likely to be limited.

In the finance sector, where a majority of workers are women, there is a widespread practice of employees working until the job is done rather than working the hours that they are paid to work. In theory these workers could take time off for the additional time worked. In practice the job could not be done in the allotted time and the employees felt pressured to keep working. Because of this few workers ever took time off with the result that most staff worked 50 or more hours every week. The result was that 'some employees would have welcomed the return of the bundy clock so that they could prove to management just how long they worked' (ACIRRT March 1998:41). Other studies of banking have found that many workers routinely work longer than paid for, especially counter staff who are required to balance the ledger before leaving - with the result that much unpaid overtime was worked. The outcome of 'this growing culture of overwork is...the rise in stress and anxiety' (ACIRRT March, 1998:41). The AWIRS '95 study has confirmed this increased stress: employees reported that they are working harder (Morehead *et al*, 1997: ch. 12).

The outcome of these changes for many workers is profound:

The combination of a number of 'flexible' measures such as increasing the span of hours in a day, averaging hours over a month or even a year and absorbing penalties means that the ordinary working week for many workers no longer reflects the traditional model and can result in 'open-ended' working time arrangements where hours of work may be more difficult for employees to influence or control...Workers may be unsure of starting and finishing times nor when there will be peaks and lulls in the work flow, making their personal and leisure lives more difficult to plan and their family responsibilities more difficult to meet....The outcome of these more flexible working arrangements may prove to be progressive and productive for employees and employers alike, but may also blur the boundaries between work and the personal and recreational lives of employees. (ACIRRT June 1997:31).

Yet the range of working hours and overtime and notice provisions is increasing. Indeed, this is seen to be evidence of the success of the government's policy as:

a focus on average bargaining outcomes obscures the fact that most employees covered by agreements receive increases that are substantially different from the average - which is to be expected, and is indeed intended, in a system designed to allow the direct parties to agreements to tailor arrangements suited to their own needs (Reith, 1998).

The Balance of Work and Family Life

If they are to meet the needs of parents with child care responsibilities, these forms of intertemporal flexibility (the spread of working hours) require the employee to exercise a considerable amount of power in choosing the arrangements, including working hours arrangements, which suit them. Intertemporal flexibility has the potential to advantage many female workers who are occupationally segregated, have no career path, are tied to minimum skills based employment and have a need for flexible working-time arrangements. However, the term 'flexibility' often signifies an arrangement where the employee has less choice. The employer's flexibility agenda could see many women working unsociable hours, less hours than they desire, losing penalty rates as the spread of working hours is extended and having their employment conditions casualised. These developments are clearly at odds with the government's professed objective of being responsive to family preferences and facilitating family-friendly flexibility in the workplace.

Two annual reports on enterprise bargaining have tracked the extent of workers' satisfaction with their ability to combine paid work and family responsibilities. In 1994 one quarter to one third (27 to 32 per cent, depending on type of agreement) reported that their satisfaction with the balance between work and family was lower than the previous 12 months (compared to 12 or 13 per cent who reported that it had improved) (DIR, 1995:227). In 1995, 26 per cent of employees reported that their satisfaction with work and family life had declined in the previous 12 months, compared with 14 per cent for whom it had improved (DIR, 1996:149-51). AWIRS '95 showed once again that more workers said that the satisfaction of balance of work and family had deteriorated in the previous year - it declined for 27 per cent of employees compared to 13

per cent for whom it improved. Fifty-five per cent of male carers and 45 per cent of female carers reported a decline in satisfaction with the balance between work and family, and full-time employees were more likely than part-time employees to report this when hours increased (Morehead *et al*, 1997:289) (see Table 3).

Table 3: Changes in satisfaction with the balance between family and work life in the year prior to the survey taken in 1995

	Satisfaction Gone Up	No Change in Satisfaction	Satisfaction Gone Down
	% Employees	% Employees	% Employees
Changes in total weekly working hours			
All employees	14	59	27
Total weekly working hours gone up	14	43	44
No change in total weekly working hours	13	67	21
Total weekly working hours gone down	22	53	25

Source: Morehead *et al*, 1997:289. (Population: All employees at workplaces with 20 or more employees. Figures are weighted and based on responses from 18 091 employees.)

Both the enterprise bargaining reports (DIR, 1995:213-14) and the AWIRS '95 study show that about one quarter of the employees surveyed reported that they had worked longer hours in the year prior to the survey. The 1995 report on enterprise bargaining concluded that the working hours of a quarter of all employees had increased in the previous 12 months (only 56 cent of this group received increased wages) (DIR, 1996:149-150). The AWIRS '95 study confirms these changes as one quarter of all employees reported that their total weekly working hours increased in the year prior to the survey (Morehead *et al*, 1997:264). Half the employees had 'a lot' or 'some' control over the times they started and finished work and the other half had 'a little' or 'none'. 34 per cent of workers reported that they had no influence over the times they started and finished work (Morehead *et al*, 1997:266).

The clear indication from an assessment of recent agreements and these surveys of workers is that flexible working hour arrangements are not necessarily beneficial for women or men. In fact, some arrangements are directly detrimental, especially where they have involved 'increased uncertainty and irregularity in working hours, reductions in minimum hours for part-time workers and increases in the span of working hours' (Buchanan *et al*, 1997:117).

The rhetoric of enterprise bargaining emphasised that workplace bargaining would allow employees and employers to achieve employment arrangements which were suited to particular workplace needs. Yet, despite this focus on solutions to specific workplace issues, there has been little inclusion of clauses which deal with any aspect of child care in enterprise agreements. The ABS Child Care Survey, March 1996, asked parents about employer assistance and noted that 6.2 per cent of parents were offered some type of assistance by their employer with child care. Work based child care facilities were offered in 3.7 per cent of cases; child care referral/information service in 2.0 per cent of cases; reserved places in local child care centres in 1.0 per cent; employer supported vacation care in 0.8 per cent; salary package which included child care in 0.4 per cent of cases (ABS 4402.0, 1996). The ADAM survey of enterprise agreements reported in March 1998 that 0.5 per cent of agreements (20 agreements) specified that there were child care facilities at the workplace; 0.1 per cent (4) specified a child care/elderly care referral service and 1.1 per cent (49) said they would examine child care facilities for the workplace (ACIRRT unpublished data 1998).

These figures match a survey of all federal awards and agreements conducted in January 1998.² There were 387 agreements which specifically mentioned child care, representing approximately 2.6 per

² Federal awards and agreements were examined using OSIRIS (Australian Industrial Relations Information Site) produced by the Australian Government Publishing Service using a search on the words child care.

cent of total agreements.³ A survey of these clauses, however, showed half (52 per cent) the clauses specified proposed future activity. The overwhelming majority of these state only that child care issues will be examined (Lee and Strachan, 1998).

The majority of the 205 clauses which specify some activity in connection with child care address the issue in relation to a specific activity (see Table 4). The majority of these clauses cover organisations in the public sector, health and education. One third of these clauses require the employer to reimburse child care costs when working or overtime, working or training away from home, out of hours, weekends and public holidays. Almost two-thirds of these clauses are in local government, the majority being councils in South Australia. The remainder are mainly in other public sector organisations, with less than ten per cent in the private sector. A further 19 per cent of clauses include child care costs in salary packaging arrangements. These thirty nine agreements have been concluded in twenty five organisations of which ten were in the health sector, six in education (four universities), three in finance and five in the public sector (two in transport, one in a utility and two small commission/council). Only one was outside these largely public sector organisations in a private printing firm. Eight of the fifteen agreements in health related to specific groups of professional and managerial workers, as did one transport and the utility agreements. Only 17 per cent deal with the provision of child care or assistance with obtaining child care. Work-based child care was mentioned in eight agreements which represented six organisations. These comprised two universities, one grammar school, one hospital, one bank, one public service commission and one vehicle manufacturer.

While all work-based child care arrangements, child care referral services or vacation care which is organised from the workplace may not be included in agreements, the examination of clauses does indicate the importance this issue is given on the bargaining agenda and the extent of

3 The number of agreements and awards on the system is not certain - the estimate is from 15,000 to 18,146 (McLeod 1998). Using the lower estimate of 15,000, agreements and awards which discussed child care represented 2.6 per cent of the total.

interest in the issue. All three surveys used indicate the overall lack of interest in child care issues at the workplace. In the context of extended and less predictable working hours for many employees, the lack of clauses which address child care issues signals more difficulties in combining 'work and family' responsibilities for many workers.

Table 4: Child Care Clauses in Federal Agreements and Awards which Report Activity

Details of Clause	No. of Clauses
Reimburse costs of child care for overtime, weekends, training, travel	70
Consider child care arrangements for additional working hours, shift changes etc	45
Child care in salary packaging	39
Consider child care arrangements in transfers and relocation	17
Workbased / employer assisted child care	14
Provision of child care referral / advisory service	5
Subsidise child care fees	4
Bring child to work if this does not interfere with performance	4
Reservation of child care places in local child care centre	3
Other	4

Source: Osiris Database, Jan. 1998. Total number of clauses is 428.

The changing work hours and the relative powerlessness of many female employees means that problems associated with accommodating work and family responsibilities spill over into the child care market. For example, the Report on Future Directions, 1996-97, noted that there were still limited child care places for children under two years of age and there was parental concern about the availability of care outside core hours of 8.30 am to 6 pm. The Report from the National School Age Care Pilot and Research Program found, with respect to outside school hours care, that:

flexible working conditions were highlighted as important as were flexible, safe and high quality child care options. Specifically, parents would like to have access to outside school hours care at short notice or 'on demand'. Flexibility of operating hours also poses a problem for parents and there appears to be

demand for earlier drop-off times and extended closing times as late as 6.30 pm or 7 pm (DHFS, 1997c:10).

However, the ability of care providers to respond to these demands is constrained. The operation of centre based care requires large fixed overheads in the facilities and the labour input is quasi fixed as well, since centres are required to operate with minimum staff-child ratios. Economic viability of the centres therefore requires that the centres be used at or near capacity, which means filling available child care places. Unfortunately for centres, many parents do not require full-time, full-week care so the scheduling problem requires providers to attempt to minimise the places underutilised at different periods throughout the day or week. For centres to factor in an ability to respond to care 'on demand' they would need to deliberately roster excess capacity that would lift operating costs. To offer this service outside core hours would require even higher fees, not only because input costs may be higher but because the numbers demanding the service are likely to be extremely low per centre. Family day care providers are somewhat different to centre based providers. While the main operating hours for family day care are between 8 am and 6 pm, some providers do offer extended hours of care. In 1995 5.9 per cent of children in family day care received overnight care between the hours of 8 pm and 6 am (DHFS, 1997a:5).

An additional cost of this demand for flexible care falls on care providers. Many sources (Heiler, 1996; Lyons, 1996) refer to the poor pay and conditions experienced by care providers and the high staff turnover. For example:

workers [in OSHC] are generally dissatisfied with either the amount of pay received and/or the lack of conditions....Unpaid work varied from 1 to 15 hours per week and included such tasks as shopping, staff management, administration and program planning (DHFS, 1997c:19).

Recent developments in the workplace have clearly disadvantaged families seeking to combine work and family responsibilities. This suggests that the government has failed in its objective to enhance the private choices of parents in this area. Further, the means by which it has chosen to pursue facilitating maternal labour force participation has also

failed at least one portion of its constituency. Relying on labour market deregulation has imposed on families a model of workplace flexibility that does not embody the attributes of flexibility that working parents value.

Conclusion

Changing work organisation practices have held out the promise of reconciling the often-competing claims of work and family responsibilities that assail employees. If the family-friendly work place is able to provide employees with flexibility to accommodate their dual roles, and at the same time reduce stress and improve worker productivity, then the solution might truly be described as optimal. Unfortunately the evidence reviewed here points to a disparity between the notions of flexibility used by employees and employers. Parental preferences with respect to arrangements for care of dependent children contrast with the changes occurring in working hours towards longer hours, more evening work, more weekend work and less predictability in hours and shifts. These changes are coupled with little overt acknowledgement from employers of the need to assist in balancing work and family life. If one party to the work bargain is unwilling or unable to amend the more deleterious work practices then the optimal solution to the work-family dilemma will slip away. A remedy might be found in a pro-active government that is prepared to coax or coerce the parties into achieving a truly mutually satisfactory outcome.

Unfortunately, the response of the Howard conservative government to the changes of the 1990s is passive and rests on the naive belief that freeing parents and workers to negotiate their own work and care packages will produce optimum outcomes. It ignores the market realities of differential bargaining power. Where employees have weak bargaining positions employers will be able to dictate work hours with little regard for family preferences. Family-work conflicts will receive second best solutions, generating negative spillovers for family relationships and/or care providers.

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