

Family policy and workforce participation go hand in hand



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Gender equity in Australia has stalled. And progress has slowed primarily for cultural reasons. So says RMIT's Professor Belinda Probert in her fascinating 2001 *Clare Burton Memorial Lecture*.

More women are occupying managerial and professional jobs. A much higher proportion of women is undertaking tertiary study. Almost as many women as men are graduating in high-status professions like law and medicine. But the presence of well-paid women in dual-income homes is the major contributor to greater polarisation of Australian household incomes. There are a growing number of households in which nobody has a paid job. The number of so-called working poor is ballooning and many in this category are stuck in casual, part-time, contract or agency work. Women are strongly over-represented. These divergent trends make assessment of women's overall economic and labour market situation difficult. What is certain is that, despite much rhetoric about work and family balance, both women and men are finding it harder, not easier, to combine domestic and workplace responsibilities.

Probert argues that if we wish to understand the reasons for a clear loss of momentum we need to give serious critical attention to cultural issues. In particular, conflict around attitudes to family life and the care of children is pivotal. We tend to assume that the trend away from the sole breadwinner regime toward a more symmetrical household model is virtually identical in all developed nations. In fact, there are substantial differences between them in the way women participate in the labour market. And this diversity is a product of differences in how households organise the care of their children.

Using a major research project for her data, Probert compares Australian attitudes in the 1950s and the 1990s. Unsurprisingly, the project reveals that Australia's gender culture has been revolutionised in the past forty years. Yet the findings are complex and uneven. The biggest change concerns women's role as economically productive citizens. Clearly, today's pervasive paradigm is that mothers should be heading back into the workforce. Even those who disagree with it still note the dominance of this view. But, asks Probert, does this mean that Australia has become committed to women's self-actualisation or financial independence? Probably not, is her answer. Most of the support for working mothers is expressed in terms of the need for two incomes to maintain living standards.

Just as men's contribution to parenting is seen as 'helping out', so women primarily 'boost the family income.' Relatively few women earn enough to be independent and there are growing areas of feminised employment, such as shop and hospitality work, that do not pay a living wage. The gender pay gap is actually widening.

While attitudes to women and paid work have changed dramatically since 1950, no similarly seismic shift was found in views on motherhood and children's needs. The vast majority of contemporary parents still believe small children should be with their mothers. Opinions on when they are old enough for other forms of care vary markedly and there is a complete absence of agreement on what these should be. The range of views on childcare centres, family-based arrangements, nannies and day care are invariably based more on ideology and gender culture's moral framework than on empirical evidence or any sound knowledge of human development. The research finds absolutely no coherent pattern in attitudes to the needs of young children. It is no surprise then to find no consistent view of what should be the role of either the state or the market in provision of childcare or parental support.

Probert argues that the major gains in gender equity policy over the years have been achieved through mobilisation around clear and shared objectives. Given the absence of any such consensus at present, further real progress toward greater gender equity is unlikely. On the contrary, erosion of gains is more likely, as exemplified by the recent swing toward private provision of childcare and its damaging effects for all but the highest-paid women. Currently, government policy is confusingly contradictory. Single mothers are increasingly being pressured not to remain at home with their children because social and workplace skills will be eroded. But married mothers are being encouraged to accept exactly that fate. While this is often presented as a choice issue, its effect is to create substantial public conflict among women about the merits of 'mothers who work and mothers who mother'. In turn, this conflict prevents any broad community view on desirable financial and other assistance to allow paid work and motherhood to co-exist satisfactorily.

This clearly needs to change, and soon. As Belinda Probert convincingly argues, without a coherent family policy, which brings together traditionally separate social security and industrial relations aspects, the pursuit of workplace gender equity will continue to languish. ■

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