

behavioural data. Policy outcomes in the 21st century in rich modern societies will be shaped by lifestyle preferences more

than any other single factor, so we might as well start taking women seriously when they tell us what they want

References

- ¹ C. Hakim, *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century: Preference Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000. All the studies and policy examples discussed in this article are taken from this book. Many of the studies discussed in A. Manne's article 'The family policy/fertility link; the failure to predict', *People and Place*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2001, pp. 6-25, are also taken from my book.
- ² Tables 1 and 2 are based on the 1999 British survey, the results of which are reported in full in *Modern Work and Lifestyle Choices in Britain and Spain: Ideals and Realities*, forthcoming 2002. The 1999 study was a personal interview survey of a nationally representative sample of 3,561 adults aged 16 and over in Britain, and was carried out by the Office of National Statistics for the author, C. Hakim.
- ³ M. Evans and J. Kelley, 'Employment for mothers of pre-school children: evidence from Australia and 23 other nations', *People and Place*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2001, pp. 28-40
- ⁴ It can also be used to help pay for private childcare services, but most mothers take the allowance for themselves.

WOMEN'S PREFERENCES, FERTILITY AND FAMILY POLICY; THE CASE FOR DIVERSITY

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The causes of fertility decline in western countries are complex and multimodal. While pronatalist policies have no guarantee of success, this article argues that the best approach is one recognising the diversity of women's preferences. Australia should institutionalise pluralism in family policy by adopting a stance of active neutrality, supporting all women in their diverse work/lifestyle preferences.

THE FAMILY POLICY/FERTILITY LINK; THE FAILURE TO PREDICT

'Fuck for the Future!' This unambiguous instruction, from sex symbol Bjorn Borg, was recently splashed across a Swedish government sponsored billboard. It was part of an advertising campaign directed at stopping the recent collapse of the Swedish birth rate, following economic troubles, down to 1.5, below replacement level, and below Australia's fertility rate at 1.7.¹ Peter McDonald has argued² that nations which consign the outmoded male breadwinner/homemaker family model into the dustbin of history, and instead promote women's post feminist preference to combine work and family, will do best in arresting the dramatically declining fertility rates beginning to exercise the imagination of the West. Sweden has the highest female workforce

participation rates of OECD countries,³ the best extended paid parental leave, the most child friendly daycare. It has dedicated itself to engineering the death of the breadwinner/homemaker family. It should be the best case scenario for the thesis that a Nordic/European family policy regime best solves the contemporary crisis of reproduction. But it has failed.

In the early 1990s Sweden was hailed as the exemplar of the kind of family policy regime needed to arrest falling fertility. Briefly, fertility did climb back to replacement levels. This may have reflected not an overall increase in births but an alteration in the timing of births — pronatalist policies encouraged Swedish women to complete their desired family size faster. Moreover, their strategy — of tying parenting benefits to women's

permanent employment — proved highly vulnerable to an economic downturn.⁴ As unemployment rose, fertility fell. As short-term contracts rose and permanent employment fell, fertility fell. Women responded to turbulent economic times by postponing first births and investing in education. Surveys also show the salience of individualistic and post materialist values; young women's life narratives are dominated by goals like freedom, education and travel. Perhaps most significantly, declining stable partnerships mean four out of ten women who were childless at 30 had no permanent partner. Such circumstances are simply not conducive to childbearing.⁵

Sweden is not alone. In almost all developed countries, fertility is in significant long term decline. The following table, shows the pattern.

From the outset we must distinguish the moral force of gender equity policies from the factual question of their relationship to fertility. Startlingly, given all the

excitement over Scandinavian and French fertility rates in the media, it is the United States (2.1) in 2001, followed by New Zealand (2.01) and Ireland (1.9), which are closest of OECD nations to replacement fertility levels at 2.1. None of these countries share the family policies that McDonald predicts will lead to higher fertility. McDonald has belatedly admitted the US and the Swedish exceptions to his rule of a causal relationship between higher women's workforce participation rates, gender equity policies and higher fertility rates,⁷ but cuts off his list of exceptions prematurely. The United Kingdom does not have the generous family policies of Sweden, but has high women's workforce participation rates and a higher fertility rate. The contradictions continue. The Netherlands has much lower women's workforce participation rates, and generous provision for the homemaker role — so by McDonald's family policy fertility link should have low fertility —

Table 1: Total fertility rates, selected countries⁶

Country	1960	1970-1975	1980	1990	1995-1997	2000
United States	na	2.48	1.84	2.08	2.06	2.06
New Zealand	na	3.17	2.03	2.18	1.96	2.01 _n
Ireland	3.70	3.40	3.30	2.19	1.90	1.89
Norway	2.91	2.50	1.72	1.93	1.85	1.85
Australia	3.45	2.86	1.90	1.91	1.78	1.75
Finland	2.72	1.83	1.63	1.78	1.75	1.73
Denmark	2.54	1.95	1.55	1.67	1.75	1.76
France	2.73	2.47	1.95	1.78	1.71	1.89 _p
United Kingdom	2.72	2.43	1.90	1.83	1.71	1.64 _p
Canada	3.90	2.33	1.68	1.71	1.66	1.60 _c
Sweden	2.20	1.92	1.68	2.13	1.52	1.54
Japan	2.00	2.13	1.80	1.54	1.44	1.34
Germany	2.37	2.03	1.56	1.45	1.36	1.34
Italy	2.41	2.42	1.64	1.33	1.22	1.25
Spain	2.86	2.90	2.20	1.36	1.15	1.22
Czech Republic	na	(1975) 2.43	2.07	1.89	1.18	1.14
Hungary	na	(1975) 2.38	1.92	1.84	1.46	1.33
Poland	na	(1975) 2.27	2.28	2.04	1.60	1.34
Russian Federation	na	(1975) 1.99	1.89	1.89	1.34	1.17*

* = Eurostat estimate; *c* = Canadian data; *n* = New Zealand data,

p = Eurostat notation signalling provisional data dated 15.200; see endnote ⁶

but has the same fertility (1.7) as Finland and higher fertility than Sweden. Ireland has low provision for women to combine work and motherhood, but one of the highest fertility rates in Europe, higher than Scandinavian countries.⁸

European family policy scholars, Linda Hantrais and Anne Helene Gauthier, both supporters of gender equity policies, nonetheless caution against a simple cause and effect model of family policy and fertility. Hantrais, after a detailed examination of different European family policies, noted the many exceptions to rule in family policy/women's work and fertility, and concluded,

no direct and irrefutable link can be established between policy outcomes and policy measures...⁹

Gauthier's survey of twenty two industrialised countries found increasing cash transfers to families by 25 per cent would increase the total fertility rate by only 0.02 children per woman. According to Gauthier:

This assumed effect between policies and demographic behaviour is surprising, considering the limited and often questionable empirical evidence available to support this assumption.¹⁰

McDonald has predicted that Australia's fertility rate — as a direct consequence of our 'male breadwinner regime' — is likely to continue falling, pointing to the exceptionally low fertility of the socially conservative countries of the southern Mediterranean like Italy, Spain and Greece. While no cause for complacency, the most recent figures released in October 2001 show that Australia's fertility has held steady at 1.75, with births slightly increasing. Women's workforce participation rate in 2001 is relatively high at 71 per cent,¹¹ thus it is a little mysterious why Australia should be

identified as a 'male breadwinner' regime. Australia is more appropriately considered part of the pluralistic liberal Anglo-American group of countries. While their fertility is declining over time, *along with all other Western nations*, it is comparatively higher than either Eastern Europe or the Southern Mediterranean countries. Thus in 2000, the U.S. (2.01) New Zealand (2.0) Ireland (1.9), United Kingdom (1.6) Australia (1.7) Canada (1.6) have fertility rates which are comparable, or even a little higher than Nordic/Scandinavian countries — Sweden 1.5, Finland 1.7, Norway 1.8, Denmark 1.7. Again family policy fails to predict fertility; the two groups have similar fertility rates despite radically different economic regimes and family policies.

Given the strong Catholic, conservative culture in Spain and Italy the low birth rate is striking, possibly pointing, as Manuel Castells¹² suggests, to a female fertility strike against patriarchal mores. But Castells wisely includes other factors.¹³ Spanish women do not only have machismo to deal with. As with Sweden, a strong or weak economy also has a powerful effect. The Spanish and Italian economies have struggled with catastrophic levels of unemployment during the period of the fertility free fall. In Spain for example it was high as 22 per cent in 1996, while youth unemployment hit a staggering 42 per cent in 1996 and still rests at 30 per cent.¹⁴ Housing shortages and youth unemployment have hit family formation particularly hard, with many young people still residing with families of origin. Ahn and Mira found a significant link between low fertility in Spain and high male unemployment rates and temporary work contracts.¹⁵

The low fertility Southern Mediterranean countries also have very low rates of part time employment. In

Nordic and liberal economies like Australia high rates of part time work assist the compatibility of motherhood and employment. Low fertility countries also differ over liberal attitudes and state support for ex-nuptial births.¹⁶ Such births are markedly lower than in America, or indeed anywhere that fertility rates are higher. In Norway ex-nuptial births were 49 per cent of all births in 1996-1997, in Sweden they were 54 per cent, while in France they were over 40 per cent of all births in 1998.¹⁷ Finally Spain, Greece and Italy rank the lowest of European countries on state support- either through direct cash transfers or the tax system — for the family.¹⁸ All these factors have multiple impacts on fertility.

Most telling of all, to further muddy the neat picture McDonald presents of a simple cause and effect model between higher fertility and policies promoting high female workforce participation, consider falling fertility in Eastern Europe. Decades of policies to promote women combining work and motherhood, like universal day-care in Eastern Europe, saw steadily *declining* fertility rates from 1970 to 1990. The birth-rate in state socialist countries fell dramatically by the mid 1960s, and the one-child family became the norm for many. Governments responded by either draconian measures, or by establishing extended maternity leave, which lasted until the child's third birthday.¹⁹ And in the economic and social turmoil of the post communist transition fertility rates have gone into free fall; their average, at 1.2, is lower even than Southern Europe.

What of Norway, one of the fertility-rate heavy weights and family-policy virtuosos, that McDonald claims to have a fertility rate 'well above' Australia, and on which the case for a 'paradigm shift' in family policy rests? Norway's fertility rate at 1.85 is stable but only slightly

higher than Australia's at 1.75. Taxation revenue as a proportion of GDP, which provides the basis for the indeed generous Nordic family policies, was in 1998, around 52 per cent in Sweden, and the lower 40s for Norway. Australia was closer to 30 per cent.²⁰ Nordic family policies depend upon high tax regimes supporting a large social investment. In Australia both political parties are 'racing to the bottom' in terms of taxation, with bipartisan agreement in the recent election on the necessity of budget surpluses. McDonald's 'paradigm shift' to Nordic style policies are part of a budget which would require a 15-20 per cent increase in the tax revenue in order to, just possibly, establish slightly higher, or lower in the case of Sweden, fertility rates. This is simply not currently politically feasible.

France's improved fertility rate of 1.89 in 2000, may reflect a change in birth timing rather than an overall increase in Total Fertility Rate (TFR).²¹ Whatever the case, it has coincided not with a forced march into a future of dual income families, but with an embrace of a pluralistic pronatalist approach to family policy, which both supported women's labour force participation but also expanded home care allowances, and continued the most generous family income splitting taxation regime in Europe.²² The improved fertility rate also coincided with a recent up turn in the French economy, and the introduction of the 35-hour week.²³

All of the leading interpretations of falling fertility, including the gender equity theory, fit *some* of the facts, but *none* of them fit *all* of the facts. Sober caution therefore is needed in attributing cause and effect. The eminent Harvard demographer Nicholas Eberstadt, argued that the strongest single predictor was the calendar year — the later the year, the

lower the fertility. And the *cause* of low fertility?

The honest and entirely unsatisfying answer is that nobody really knows — at least, with any degree of confidence and precision If you can find the shared underlying determinants of fertility decline ... then your Nobel prize is in the mail.²⁴

All good statistics lectures begin with a joke — the correlation between the wearing of top hats in Nigeria and the Irish potato famine — to illustrate that a correlation is never proof of a cause. There is a danger of succumbing to an ideologically appealing but oversimplified monocausal interpretation of falling fertility. Exaggerated claims on the causes and solution to our falling fertility have passed, without resistance and hardly contested, into the political mainstream. Journalists and an editorial in *The Australian*²⁵ have echoed McDonald's call for a 'paradigm shift' in family policy towards the Scandinavian model in order to emulate either lower (in the case of Sweden) or only marginally higher (in the case of Norway) fertility rates. All developed countries — social democratic, communist and neo liberal, conservative and egalitarian alike — have seen fertility rates fall over the past four decades. Given all the above inconsistencies and the failure of a monocausal interpretation to predict fertility rates, we need to figure out what psychological and political work all these rather spurious stories of Scandinavian successes with fertility are doing for us.

THE DIVERGENCE / HETEROGENEITY THESIS

The popularity of McDonald's thesis is due to its compatibility with the convergence/homogeneity thesis of androgynous feminism — where equality is conceptualised as 'sameness' with men.²⁶

Men and women's roles are becoming more symmetrical, with both partners in the labour force, while women are converging on one homogeneous pattern — combining work and motherhood — natural and desirable in a post feminist age. This truth, as they say in the X files, is 'out there', if only laggardly political leaders would catch up. Countries will fail or succeed at reversing the downward spiral of fertility rates, according to whether they are in or out of step with the aspirations of modern womanhood. Hence, to both fulfil women's preferences but also to raise the birth rate, Australia needs what McDonald calls a 'paradigm shift'. Such a shift will reproduce two rabbits — higher birth rates and gender equity — out of the one hat of family policy.

Underpinning the homogeneity /convergence thesis is the deep, sincere belief in a beautiful idea — of justice and equality between men and women. Like McDonald I find it a powerful and attractive ideal. Like McDonald, I find aspects of the Nordic and French family policies appealing, so much so that wielding the big stick of claiming to fix the fertility crisis in order to usher in such policies is indeed tempting. It is that very appeal, however, which can lead to oversimplifications not only on the question of fertility rates but also on women's preferences, and, consequently, the family policy needed. McDonald is rightly attentive to past patriarchal coercion and control over of women's fertility, and thus places women's preferences at the centre of his analysis. A great deal, then, hinges on what those preferences actually are. Moreover, precisely that experience of patriarchy means that we need to be especially sensitive to overriding women's own voices, by deciding on behalf of women, what they really want.²⁷

This leads me to the British feminist and sociologist of work, Catherine Hakim. Her new challenge to the convergence/homogeneity thesis is based on its inability to explain conflicting empirical data on contemporary women's preferences and behaviour. Hakim caused a minor academic thunderstorm when she published an article in the *British Journal of Sociology*²⁸ questioning all the key elements of the homogeneity/convergence thesis on women's work. She rejected it for the same reason that I reject McDonald's monocausal explanation of the fertility/family policy link; its failure to predict. Although attacked by no less than eleven feminists in the following issue of the journal, her challenging analysis has continued apace in several articles and books. In her landmark new book *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century*,²⁹ she refines and develops the polarisation/divergence thesis, based on 'hard hat' empirical work, pulling together a huge range of international data on women's work, family patterns and preferences. Her argument is as follows.

We live in what Hakim calls 'a new scenario'. That new scenario was ushered in by five transformations affecting modern western societies. First, the equal opportunities revolution abolished the old legislative framework which engineered the breadwinner/homemaker family; unequal education, the marriage bar on female employment, unequal pay for equal work. It also established sex discrimination watchdogs, and encouraged attitudinal change towards working motherhood. Second, the contraceptive revolution for the first time in human history enabled women to reliably control their own fertility. Third, the decline of manual labour and the rise of white collar jobs increased the number of jobs which

suit women. Fourth, the deregulation of labour markets meant a sharp rise in part time work, enabling women to enter the marketplace as secondary earners. Lastly, there was a deeper seismic shift in modern sensibility to embrace what Anthony Giddens calls individualisation, where inventing one's own life occurs in a world with 'no universal certainties' and 'no fixed model for the good life'.

The new scenario, a 'radical break with the past',³⁰ means modern women not only face genuine choices about how they will live their lives, but make very different ones. That capacity to make different decisions about the balance between market and non-market family work, the relative meaning and pleasures of careers and children — as well as continuing barriers like the inequality of the second shift, glass ceilings and childcare cost and availability — has led to the confounding of expectations that all women's life patterns will converge upon men's. Instead, overall, women's patterns of work and family life are diverging and polarising. Or, as Hakim puts it, modern women are not homogenous but heterogenous, not the same but, under the new scenario, different, sometimes radically different, from one another. The capacity for those women whom McDonald champions — working women — to make radically new choices does not prevent other women making different autonomous choices.

The key element in Hakim's reappraisal of the data was that women's 'participation rates' as an index of their attachment to work gave a seriously misleading account of their priorities. Her really new contribution was to insist on the importance of the *number of market hours*, as opposed to the vaguer participation rates, as a more accurate index of women's main activity. Part timers tend

to be closer than full time workers in the priority they give to family work. Hakim is especially scathing about relying, as McDonald does in his article, in the June 2001 edition of *People and Place*, on data which uses employment figures as vague as 'more than one hour a week' to describe women's new found attachment to the workforce.³¹ Such statistics are crude, and not nearly sophisticated enough to cater to the complexities of the new scenario. Their use often derives from partisanship because it inflates the ranks of women who seem 'work centred' by including, wrongly, those whose attachment to the labour force is low.

Considering *the hours worked*, the evidence is startling and disconcerting for those declaring that tomorrow is already here. Hakim's figures for Britain show that economic activity for married British women rose from 26 per cent in 1951 to 71 per cent by 1991. Nevertheless, if you factor in whether women's work was full time or part time, the number of hours worked; then 'the much trumpeted rise in women's employment in Britain consisted entirely of the substitution of part time for full time jobs from 1951 to late 1980s'.³² Jonung and Persson, likewise noted that increased participation rates for Swedish women did not mean increased market hours. Considering market hours, the much praised high Swedish female work participation rates (85 per cent of mothers with children under six) largely disappears. After counting all those at home on leave; only 55 per cent were at work.³³ In 1994 Swedish mothers of preschoolers averaged 15.8 market hours.³⁴ In Australia the average weekly hours of women who work only rose from 13.6 in 1966 to 16.7 in 1996. Australian women over 15 working full time in 1998 were only 27.3 per cent, scarcely up from 26.9 per cent in 1966.³⁵

Belinda Probert has estimated that women's full time work rates scarcely altered in 60 years between 1933 and 1994.³⁶ Recently Bob Gregory, delivering a paper at the 'Future of Work' conference in July 2001, reported that the proportion of women in full time work is the same as 30 years ago. (The proportion of men in full time work has also fallen significantly.)

Hakim identifies three broad preference groups,³⁷ which she argues exist in all societies, in larger or smaller numbers depending on state policies. The first is work centred women, for whom paid work is the chief source of meaning, pleasure, identity and honour, constituting between 10-30 per cent of all women. (A good example of the lower estimate of around 10 per cent would be career women under the old breadwinner regime.) In the contemporary work centred group, childless women with a single-minded career focus are concentrated. Others are mothers who demonstrate new levels of continuous work commitment, return earlier after childbirth, are orientated to career success, and have an attachment to the labour force which represents, in my view (and Hakim's) a qualitatively different attitude from the past. It is here that the 'baby versus briefcase' dilemmas are located.

The polar opposite — also constituting between 10-30 per cent of all women depending on government policy — are home centred women, for whom family life is the chief source of pleasure, identity, meaning and honour. (A good example of the lower estimate of 10 per cent is homemakers in Sweden's new regime.) In their life histories and expressed preferences (even before marriage or children) home centred women show little desire for employment, working little or not at all unless they have to. Pertinent to the birth rate, they often have larger families.

The third and largest group — between 60-80 per cent of women — Hakim calls 'adaptive'. They adopt a compromise position, or have multiple goals and want the best of both worlds. They are very responsive to different family policies, but usually seek to combine work and family in two clear patterns. Some combine work and family across the life cycle by doing it in sequence — a substantial work or career break followed by re-entry. Others do so by combining work and family throughout, taking some leave and working part time.

Hakim argues that the three preference groups exist despite all social engineering attempts — conservative or feminist — to eradicate them. Hence, she presents evidence that even after radical social engineering and universal daycare for decades, the moment liberalisation occurred in China and Eastern Europe, there was an immediate expression of diverse preferences and polarising employment patterns.³⁸ In Sweden, the dominant family type is the 'compromise' adaptive position. The majority of Swedes don't support 'symmetrical roles'. Women work but give priority to family life, and are more likely to take advantage of family friendly reforms. Only 11 per cent of men take parental leave, with some observers now attributing that to women's own reluctance to 'share the care' of very young infants.³⁹ All this despite advertising campaigns, non transferable leave components and the best, most generous system of benefits ever devised for both partners to work. Hakim estimates a stubborn minority group of about 10-15 per cent of single income families, who defy all the measures to install the new gender contract, instead continuing with the old one.

McDonald argues, via his interpretation of 1996 Australian census data on employment of mothers for more than one hour per week in couple families according to number and age of children,⁴⁰ that the proportion of mothers with preschool children who worked rose across the decade 1986 to 1996. His data, however, lack the precision we need on women's preferences on several counts. First, as he himself concedes, participation rates are not a sure guide to women's preferences. The increase in mother's workforce participation when their children are aged one to two may be due to a simple structural issue — parental leave ends after twelve months — as much as any preferences. Second, he relies on the 'more than one hour a week' model, which Hakim rejects as an inaccurate method of assessing women's workforce commitment. This collapses together women working full time on careers in the 49 hour plus bracket with women whose labour force attachment is very low. Such figures are too crude to tell us what childcare or family policy is needed, and inflate the impression that most women's chief priority is paid work.

McDonald is selective, picking and choosing those figures, which suggest 'the proportion of mothers employed rose substantially across the decade'.⁴¹ While the employment rates for mothers with the youngest child aged one to two rose, for those with children under one, it stayed the same or fell. In a nice illustration of Hakim's point about different work-lifestyle preferences of the work and child centred, mothers with only one child showed strong rises in employment and early return patterns (57 per cent by age one, 68 per cent by age four) — revealing a typical pattern for the more work centred. But for couples with three preschoolers employment rose only from 22-26 per

cent, while in families with four children and at least one preschooler, employment actually fell from 32 per cent in 1991 then dropped to 30 per cent in 1996. Overall in June 2000 the employment of Australian women whose youngest child was zero to four years was less than half of all such mothers at 49 per cent.⁴² Or to put it another way 51 per cent were at home.

Considering market hours, two thirds of that 49 per cent⁴³ of employed mothers of preschoolers worked part time. The hours of formal childcare are modest and underline my points above. In 2000 only nine per cent of babies were in formal care, 24 per cent by age one, while 33 per cent of children under school age were in long day-care. Most childcare is part time. Around 80 per cent of those children under 12 in formal care (including kindergarten and after school care) used it for less than 20 hours a week. (19 per cent used under five hours a week, 60 per cent used it less than 20 hours a week, and only three per cent used it for 45 hours or more.) Only six per cent of parents identified a need for additional childcare, with just over twenty per cent of those wanting long day-care.⁴⁴ In 1994 the average hours women with preschoolers worked were ten hours; 62 per cent mostly stayed home, 26 per cent mostly worked part time, and 12 per cent mostly worked full time.⁴⁵ Evans and Kelley argue that Australian mothers of preschoolers show, internationally, one of the *lowest* levels of attachment to the workforce. None of this is to deny the very real, even dramatic change among *some* mothers, especially those with high incomes, or with one child and a strong employment orientation.⁴⁶ Or, to put it in Hakim's terms, the clear emergence of early return patterns among a minority of work centred mothers of preschoolers, is not a universal trend.

The importance of respecting women's preferences in the new scenario is shown by research into well being according to work force status. It is crucial, Hakim argues, to use studies dated after the contraceptive revolution, because having children and looking after them are more likely to be a choice. Wolcott and Glezer's 1995 Australian research, like early 1990s Eurobarometer surveys,⁴⁷ also showed support for the existence of three preference groups. Among married and cohabiting women aged 27-43 years, less than one third would have preferred ideally to have a full-time job, over one third preferred part-time work and one third preferred to be at home full time.⁴⁸ Probert's qualitative research⁴⁹ found Australian mothers to have diverse work lifestyle preferences. A new group of high earning, work centred women, relished the new opportunities, returned early to work and used large amounts of childcare. Polar opposite were low income stay-at-home mothers in outlying suburbs 'whose chief pleasure in life was children', had no interest in using childcare and no intention of seeking paid work. Another group had adopted the 'compromise' pattern now typical of Europe; men working full time and women part time, while for an interesting egalitarian group both care of children and part time paid work were shared between partners.

The 1993 Eurobarometer survey showed a strong preference — over 70 per cent and in some countries over 80 per cent — for a mothers' care for pre school children. Such results are consistent with the most recent Australian opinion data collected for the International Social Survey Program, reported in 2001 by Mariah Evans and Jonathan Kelley of Melbourne University. This revealed 'a widespread preference for staying home'; 71 per cent thought women should stay

home, 27 per cent thought they should work part time, and only two per cent believed women with children under six work should full-time. There was a slight decline in support for full and part time work from the 1994 ISSP survey. Younger cohorts (born 1960s and 1970s) were more likely to favour full time work, but still only a tiny minority at seven per cent.⁵⁰ International data now consistently show only small variations on the theme of strong support for women working before they have children and as they get older, but with continued belief in the importance of a mother's care for very young children.

With regard to maternal depression, it also appears crucial to respect women's preferences in the new scenario. George Brown and his colleagues' careful studies of depression, reported in the 1990s,⁵¹ showed part time work to be a protection against depression. Both wives full-time in the workforce and at home showed equally high rates of depression, while solo mothers only developed depression if they worked full time. Yet the truth is even more complex than that. Brown et al. concluded that depression was least likely if women were able to fulfil their preferences, to work or not, and thus that policy should help them to fulfil their desired role. Hock et al.'s study suggested that maternal distress was contingent on women achieving their preferred role, rather than whether women were at work or at home.⁵²

The old breadwinner/homemaker regime was a coercive one, using state legislation, fiscal policy and everyday practices to enforce what in Hakim's terms looks like a minority preference for full time homemaking. (No wonder there was so much female angst!) After the equal opportunity revolution, however, we can also transform state policy to work in the

interests of another minority group. Work centred women are much more likely to achieve career success, making it into the policy-making elites. This self selection process means a certain inevitable skewing towards the interests of work centred women, with the elite cultural discourse reflecting preoccupations with the completely legitimate, but not universal, concerns of this group. Certainly feminist lobby groups and government organisations like the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, politicians, broadcasters, academics, opinion leaders and social commentators writing books like *Wifework* and *The Second Shift*, are overwhelmingly drawn from the ranks of work centred women. John Howard may be partnered by a homemaker, but many men in the opinion elites are in relationships with either adaptive or work centred career women. Hakim, despite her own evident ambivalence towards child and home centred women, implicitly repudiates the imperial ambitions of any gender wardens, old or new, to colonise all of womanhood. The logical conclusion of her divergence/polarisation thesis is state neutrality on women's choices. She rejects, in short, the vanguardist temptation for an elite to decide, on behalf of other women, what constitutes the good life

POLARISATION AND CLASS INEQUALITY

All revolutions have unintended consequences. What no one really predicted, because they expected women's preferences to quickly converge with men's in embracing market work, (rather skipping over the detail of just how many full time jobs any one economy would provide) was the polarisation of family income. With the shift to individual taxation and little compensation for the number of dependents a family's income supported,

there was a radical shakeout of class position. Simply put, families did better or worse according to the time spent with children. As *The Australian Financial Review* concluded in their recent survey of the new rich, 'the presence of children is largely inconsistent with wealth'.⁵³

Childless couples have shot to the top of the wealth table. Dual income families with children come next, followed by single income families, with sole parents and the unemployed at the bottom of the economic heap. Nearly 67 per cent of the top five per cent of richest households have no children.⁵⁴ Rising family inequality is recognised in a wide variety of studies in Britain, USA and Australia. In the old scenario there were significant fiscal supports and tax transfers to the family from the childless and from non childrearing groups to families with children. Many analysts now see that as one dimension of the strong fertility rates of the 'baby boom'. After the equal opportunities revolution all that changed. By the mid 1990s OECD data assessing tax rates according to dependents, placed Australia in the bottom third of countries which gave little or no fiscal support for the family.⁵⁵

Under the new capitalism, preferences are profoundly shaped by the 'permanent revolution' of market forces unleashed by the resurgence of free market ideals. This makes Hakim's work on preferences explain an important part, but not the whole, of the new picture. Full time, manual and manufacturing jobs which had sustained working-class male incomes declined sharply, replaced by white collar, part time service jobs which favoured women's skills, and by poorly paid casual jobs. The economic shakeout saw growth in the ranks of male long-term unemployed at the bottom of the social heap, often partnered by women also out of the workforce, or not at all.⁵⁶

The top twenty per cent included both men and women. In terms of wealth these highly skilled, highly paid 'winners' showed in the words of *The Australian*, the rest of Australia 'a clean pair of heels'.

The ruthless sorting process of economic restructuring made different regions and suburbs, and different family types, winners or losers. By 1991, for the bottom ten per cent of SES neighbourhoods, the employment to population ratio fell by 28 per cent. For the lowest one per cent it fell by a staggering 50 per cent. Full time work fell, especially for men. In 1973 it was 80 per cent but fell to less than 60 per cent in 1996.⁵⁷ Hopes that women's increased workforce participation might help poorer families losing a male full time worker, were disappointed. Rather, as in the UK, geographic polarisation occurred between areas where families have two jobs and areas where families have none. Thus for the top 30 per cent of neighbourhoods the proportion of women employed increased by 21 per cent, while in the bottom decile it fell by 18 per cent. Simply put, in many areas there were no full time jobs to be had. Thus, to suggest that women join the workforce to supplement declining incomes in single breadwinner or no-earner families can be a suggestion along the lines of Marie Antoinette's 'Let them eat cake!'

The unintended consequence, then, of the equal opportunities revolution occurring within the new capitalism, was the dramatic reshaping of the class system, with family type playing a significant role in the poverty and wealth tables. Ann Harding's recent research for the National Centre for social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM) on the 1982-1996 period underlines the point. Government assistance targeted at sole parents and

families with both parents unemployed prevented those at the bottom of the economic heap going into free fall. Sole parents and those families with no earners improved their position somewhat — as a result of top ups from the state.

Meanwhile single income families, which remain a substantial number of families raising children under five, did go into free fall. While in 1982 just over 25 per cent of such families had above average family incomes, by 1995-6 this was down to just over 20 per cent. Most single income families slipped down to the group just above poverty levels; that is those families with incomes between half the average family income and the average. Thus there is a very good case that a battling group of single income families, were struggling under the new gender contract as implemented by the Hawke/Keating governments.⁵⁸

Nonetheless, single income families, continued to be a substantial proportion of those rearing the nation's younger children. 1996 census data show 55 per cent of women between the ages of 25-29 with a child under 15 as not employed. By age 40-45 the number dropped to 21 per cent, by 45-49 to 10 per cent.⁵⁹ This suggests the figure of 55 per cent includes adaptive women who take work/career breaks as well as home centred women. In Hakim's view, these women are more likely to have larger families.⁶⁰ The 1996 census shows both employed sole parents and employed women in couple families to have fewer children at every age group than sole parents or women in couples at home, whose mean number of live births averaged over three. Given that the phenomenon of childlessness among the work centred may continue, women who have a third or fourth child are important to maintaining fertility rates. It makes no policy sense whatever not to support them.

McDonald argues that we have 'swung back to the male breadwinner model'. How true is such a claim? As outlined above the old male breadwinner model depended on many elements. Whatever John Howard's personal views, the contraceptive revolution, the equal opportunities revolution, equal education, women investing in training and skills, the abolition of the marriage bar, widespread childcare and allowances to help pay for it, a fiscal system with incentives for dual earning, and the absence of income splitting all remain. Expenditure on childcare has actually *increased* to a projected record six billion dollars over the next four years. According to the consumer price index childcare costs dropped 14.5 per cent since the introduction of the new Tax-Benefit package last year. Childcare places have increased by 150,000 since June 1996 and there are now record numbers of children in childcare.⁶¹ Job insecurity also has encouraged the formation of 'collaborative' two income families as a buffer against the risk of unemployment. On the other hand, glass ceilings, male resistance on the domestic front, few family friendly benefits for part time workers,⁶² and that by OECD standards, minimal parental leave, mean even if the male breadwinner model has not been 'reinstalled', nonetheless patriarchy remains imperfectly dismantled. Moreover corporate Australia is often indifferent to family concerns, demanding the second longest working hours in OECD countries. Thus there is an urgent necessity to develop long term policy structures supporting many women's preferences to combine work and family.

THE PROBLEMS WITH INSTITUTIONAL CHILDCARE

McDonald's paradigm shift relies on childcare. This is not as straightforward

as McDonald suggests. Any family policy worth considering will also put at the forefront children's well being. Confronting honestly problems with institutional childcare mean that many women's preferences in the early years become explicable, rational responses to real life circumstances, not cases of them exhibiting 'false consciousness' as they succumb to 'the ideology of motherhood'.

Underpinning McDonald's childcare strategy is the unexamined assumption that only availability and affordability affect childcare usage, not women's own preferences. Research shows these assumptions to be questionable.⁶³ The gradual recognition of the reservations many women feel in relation to childcare, has had an impact on overseas family policies which have either replaced childcare for the youngest age groups with parental leave, or, in a growing trend, matched the provision of childcare places with home care allowances and job protected leave.

The literature on childcare is far too voluminous to be summarised here. However, three important developments in the childcare debates may be noted. The first is an explosion of neuroscience research into early brain development has affirmed the long term importance of secure relationships with parents, especially the primary caregiver who remains usually the mother. On the other hand, research has also demonstrated the harmful effects of poor quality care⁶⁴ (whether through poverty, neglect, maternal depression or poor quality childcare) in the first three years, including the long term elevation of levels of anxiety and aggression.⁶⁵

Secondly, in most Western nations there has been a reluctant recognition that given the importance of nurturant responsive care, the quality of institutional care

available to many parents is inadequate and in a significant number of cases, very poor. A 1994 American Families and Work Institute study found only nine per cent of the day care arrangements they surveyed fell in the 'good' range on standard measures of quality, 35 per cent rated as 'poor', 56 percent as 'custodial'. Despite rhetoric that Australian childcare is exempt from such concerns, no examination of the evidence can support such claims. When *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Sally Loane investigated Australian childcare in 1996 — after years of dramatic expansion — she found mediocrity predominated. On national figures 63 per cent of centres achieved less than the highest standard of accreditation.⁶⁶ Caregiver turnover rests at around 85 per cent over two years. The largest, most powerful player in Australian childcare, is the private for-profit sector. The problem is that high quality care is expensive care. This means that Australia is, on regulations and ratios, locked into accepting lower than internationally recognised standards, unless we substantially raise government subsidies. For example, the caregiver to infant ratio has been watered down from the international standard of one to three to one to five. According to several visiting childcare experts, that is 'no one's definition of high quality care'.

The third development is that *quantity* of care is also proving to be important. The most important evidence (but by no means the solitary example) on the possible deleterious effects of a large quantity of care regardless of quality comes from the latest and most sophisticated longitudinal study every undertaken by the American National Institute of Child Health and Development.⁶⁷ The NICHD study, which began in 1990, is being conducted by a team of over twenty

of the world's most eminent child psychologists (overwhelmingly women and most of them pro childcare), and involves more than 1,100 children from ten US cities. At age four and a half, children in over thirty hours of care in all ranges of quality of care and including father care showed three times as many aggressive behavioural problems as children in care for less than ten hours.

All variables like quality of care, type of care, mother attributes and stability of care were carefully taken into account. Quantity, not quality, was the issue. There was a straightforward linear relationship; the more time in care, the higher the problem behaviour. Although Australian responses consisted of the usual heads buried quickly in the sandpit, supple, intelligent feminists overseas — like Helen Wilkinson of the British progressive think tank Demos — now take seriously the problems emerging with childcare and are already developing new policy directions involving work practises and parental leave. Wilkinson, has argued that since attitudes to working motherhood radically change with older children, cautious attitudes towards childcare (of the kind Mariah Evans and Jonathan Kelley have been tracking), may represent 'perceptions of young children's needs rather any traditional attitudes'.⁶⁸ Likewise another internationally recognised childcare expert concluded that decades of research have led him to 'come to share the reservations, if not convictions, of the recently-surveyed American parents', two thirds of whom 'disagreed with the notion that the care children receive even at a "top notch daycare centre' is just as good as that they get at home with a parent".⁶⁹ Hakim argues that factoring in children's interests makes it 'clear that no single, uniform approach to services for children,

and hence family policy, is possible. Diversity is accepted as necessary and positive...' Thus the 1996 European Commissions' Childcare Network included amongst its recommendations the need to actively promote choice between employment and caring for children at home, encouraging parents to remain home until the children are three.⁷⁰

MODERNISING AUSTRALIAN FAMILY POLICY; INSTITUTIONALISING PLURALISM

Motherhood then, as a monolith, a hegemonic idea, is breaking up. In the new scenario women are replacing the old patterns of the past not with just one, but with many patterns. Indeed those paths are polarising and diverging, resulting in continual outbreaks of what I call the Motherwars, the tension between women at home and women at work and everyone in between, and battles over state funding for different choices. This is where the dilemma for family policy in a liberal democracy is to be found. The European Parliament has recommended that the tax system should be neutral between single and dual income families, while others in the European Commission like Allan Larsson have 'effectively stated that Commission policy was to outlaw the so called "traditional"...sexual division of labour'.⁷¹

In Australia we are also divided. Eurobarometer surveys show that Anglo American liberal nations like Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US have internationally, the *most* pluralistic, diverse and heterogeneous attitudes to sex roles.⁷² Do we accept the Orwellian dictum from *Animal Farm* that after the revolution all women are equal but some are more equal than others? Or do we recognise that all women, and all families, are equally deserving of support,

and that accepting diversity is the best path to improving fertility?

McDonald has argued against state neutrality,⁷³ against support for single income families,⁷⁴ against the idea of 'choice', except for a brief period when choice will be allowed for a child aged from one to three. After that policy should be 'heavily skewed' towards childcare.⁷⁵ He cites the Norwegian and French family policies as exemplars of non-neutrality. Yet the Norwegian foreign Minister, Janne Matlary, recently described the philosophy behind a new home care allowance as 'giving freedom of choice, nothing more, nothing less'.⁷⁶ Explicitly designed to give equity between parents at home and those at work, it prompted the fiercest ideological debate since the 1970s. Some feminist groups opposed the idea of choice, but the policy proved popular with the electorate. Parents caring for a young child under three are now paid the equivalent of the cost of a childcare place, around \$US 6000 per year. They also have three years of job-protected leave.

Finland in the late 1980s introduced a similar choice between publicly funded childcare and a cash benefit during three years of job-protected leave. The amount of the homecare allowance varies but is up to 40 per cent of the average monthly earnings of female employees. Hugely popular, it is also an interesting indication of women's preferences because women can choose between the allowance and a guaranteed child care place. By the mid 1990s three quarters used it in preference to childcare.⁷⁷ Likewise over 80 per cent of French parents preferred financial support for home care rather than expanding childcare. France introduced in 1986 a home care allowance as a pronatalist measure for parents with three children, until the youngest child's third

birthday. Widened in 1994, it is now paid from the birth of second child. By 1997, as in the Finnish case, popularity and usage of the scheme surpassed all other childcare subsidies. It was during the period of expanded choice via home care allowances that France's fertility rate increased.⁷⁸

Matlary also pointed to another element important in all Scandinavian countries to help balance work and family and aid fertility; extended parental leave. This is the new kid on the social policy block. It recognises preferences, the importance for many women of long-term connection with the labour force, and the problems with childcare. There are few countries, which have supported high women's workforce participation without introducing extended leave. Eastern Europe had to do so. Germany, Finland, France, and Sweden all offer such leave for the child's first three years, while Denmark offers two years, Austria two years full-time or four part-time.⁷⁹ Accompanied by greater or lower income replacement, all give the right to return to the previous job. Mothers or fathers, or some combination of both, can take leave, and if their children are closely spaced, take a career/job break followed by return to their old job. Longer leave enables women to structure childbearing without losing their attachment to the labour force.

In family policy there is no such thing as a free lunch. Modern nation states have radically different takes on the new 'gender contract'. All have different virtues and vices. In all of them some groups bear greater costs than others. *Active engineering* regimes are usually small, homogenous nations, like Sweden and Norway. All the very generous benefits for working parents have a down side; they are paid for by life long work,

and choice, after the first few years, is not a large element. In some ways Scandinavia has inverted coercive elements of the old regime in installing the new gender contract. Moreover, preoccupation with mothers of young children working has a long history, since the 1930s, of being tied to xenophobia and concern over immigration. The unquestionably virtuous gender equity rhetoric works as a closet 'white Scandinavian policy'.⁸⁰

France is closer to *active neutrality*. This large and heterogenous nation is a pronatalist but more pluralist alternative to the Nordic model. France supports working motherhood through extensive childcare provision at older ages. Home care allowances provide equity and choice in the early years. It has a further advantage for single income families. O'Donoghue and Sutherland's comparative study of family tax regimes, in the *Cambridge Journal of Economics*,⁸¹ judged it the most generous family tax system in Europe. Its joint taxation with a quotient system taking account of the number of dependents in a family treats non working spouses in single income families equitably. Women's differing preferences, especially in the early reproductive years, appear to be greeted by a Gallic shrug and state support.

Inactive neutrality in neo liberal societies like America means pluralism exists, but the state provides minimum support for any choice. Benefits are tightly means tested. Families struggle with the vagaries of non-family-friendly, full-time work while children go into 'kennels for kids' — poor quality child care provided by the market — and where indices of child well being grow ever more worrying.⁸²

If Hakim is right about the diversity of women's preferences — and I think she is — then the most realistic 'paradigm shift'

will be to an inclusive Australian family policy which is characterised by *active neutrality*. *Neutral*, by refusing forced marches into the future or back to the past; *inclusive* because it supports all families; *active* by recognising that the new scenario is a radically new circumstance demanding new and innovative policy supports. Active engineering along the Swedish/ Norwegian lines is coercive and is unlikely to be accepted in a pluralist nation like Australia, in which there is sharp and sometimes wild disagreement over what the outcome of family policy should be. Unhappily, neo liberal economic objectives in both parties will for the foreseeable future, keep budgetary outlays modest. Our capacity to be active in creating a hospitable environment for diverse paths of family life is likely to be restricted.

Neutrality will always frustrate those who have colonial ambitions. But it is closer to reality. After all, political parties, unlike academics, have to be elected! One of the strengths of an analysis, which recognises difference, is to free up the kind of regard for other groups which gets lost in the motherwars. It is partly the either/or and competitive element over a shrinking family pie in neo liberal societies which turns every discussion so nasty. We must jettison forever the noxious notion that only one family type be declared virtuous and thus worthy of support — whether dual or single income. Given the diversity of Australian women's preferences, our family policy must institutionalise inclusiveness and pluralism by giving as much autonomy to parents as possible. We should take heed of the principle behind the Nordic and French system of neutrality, for example payments to the primary caregiver to be used for either income replacement for staying home or for childcare fees, or a

part time work/home option. Given the majority preference for homecare for children in the early years it is, as Evans and Kelley have suggested, unconscionable in a democracy not to support it. Extending parental leave would protect women's long term links with the labour force, while we should also be pro-active in forging ahead with policies which allow a better mesh between work and family. The quality of childcare must be improved and its flexibility increased by offering the widely preferred part time

care. Policy regimes, which reflect and accept women's diversity, are most likely to help women achieve their desired number of children. There will be no one size fits all. As Hakim puts it;

Difference and diversity are now the key features of the female population, with the likelihood of increasing polarisation between work centred and home centred women in the 21st century. And in a civilised society difference and diversity are positively valued.⁸³

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