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## CHANGES IN PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT: AUSTRALIA, 1984 to 2001

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*This paper investigates continuity and change in public attitudes towards paid work for mothers of young children between 1984 and 2001, using the wide range of measures on this topic available in the International Social Science Surveys of six large representative national samples of Australia. The results confirm earlier research suggesting that most Australians are generally supportive of female employment, but that most think full-time homemaking is better when there are preschoolers at home. Only around one third of Australians feel confident that young children would not suffer as a result of maternal employment, and only about one fifth think that full-time maternal employment does not make childrearing difficult. We probe more deeply into the reasons for people's concern about deleterious effects of maternal employment on young children, and find that the most widespread concern is that maternal employment impairs mothers' teaching activities, but that there is also concern about the likelihood of emotional deprivation and concern that employment erodes the level of energy needed for good discipline. Attitudes toward maternal employment have remained broadly stable over almost two decades with, on many issues, a modest shift toward more supportive views of four to eight per cent points per decade.*

What is the good life? What lifestyles bring forth people's best and noblest attributes? What are their fundamental duties? Such questions have intrigued moral philosophers since at least the time of Plato, and they continue to spring up today, being raised anew by social, economic, and technological changes that have substantially changed the array of life possibilities open to us. These questions have been raised in a number of zones of life, of which an especially important one that continues to be contentious is the issue of family duties.

The appropriate focus and range of activities for men and women, especially during the parenting years, have, over the centuries, formed the focus of negotiation and debate. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries there was concern that men's leaving the farm for the office and the factory would weaken the family's success in their key task of teaching their children right from wrong, of providing them with the moral foundation for a good life as autonomous adults. The development of schools over that same period lightened some of the

family's tasks. More recently, concern has focused on women.<sup>1</sup> Australia entered the post-war period with very few married women in employment.<sup>2</sup> As recently as 1950, only about 10 per cent of wives had a paid job, a figure that skyrocketed to about 40 or 50 per cent by the late 1970s, and has been drifting gently upwards since.

What policies the Australian government ought to pursue concerning women and work is an issue that must, at least, take into account the views of the populace at large.<sup>3</sup> Philosopher kings (and queens) amongst us might wish government action to aim towards their goals, even if divergent from Australian mass culture, but it would be irresponsible in a democracy not to take seriously the moral feelings of the populace. If Tony Blair's calls for evidence-based policy-making in Britain are a harbinger of things to come, then it may be that even the strongest ideologues will need to come to terms with social science evidence on the ideals and attitudes of the populace, as well as with evidence on the actual benefits and

costs of different policies, and evidence on the personal preferences of the citizens directly affected.

#### **ASSESSING PUBLIC OPINION ON MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT**

To assess the moral feelings of the Australian public, the surest method is through sound survey research. Introspection is not a reliable method, because of diversity of opinion: other Australians are not necessarily (or even usually) just like one's self. Nor can moral feelings be inferred from behaviour, because moral feelings are only one influence on behaviour — constraints, tastes, and rewards also exert their sway. Neither is content analysis of media presentations a reliable guide to mass opinion, because the audience is not universal and even an avid newspaper reader will leave large portions untouched. For example, daily horoscopes are standard fare in newspapers — possibly occurring more often than any single topic is reported on the news pages — but it would be incorrect to infer that all, or even most, Australians read them.

Survey research is a method both venerable and new of ascertaining opinions and social practices. It was evidently invented by Aristotle who conducted a survey of leaders of Greek cities in an attempt to trace the consequences of different methods of governance. But its use as a tool to ascertain practices and feelings of the public at large only became possible with the invention/discovery of systematic characteristics of probability, and the development of the discipline of inferential statistics to which advances in probability gave birth. These developments enable us to select a few representatives of a population in such a way as to generalise from them to the views of the larger population.

The findings of survey research are necessarily only dependable if the questions addressed to respondents are good measures. This is a problem common to all the sciences: the quality of one's results depends on the quality of one's measurement instruments. It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe in detail the full battery of assessments that are brought to bear in the development and validation of good questions used in survey research, but let us note several general principles here:

1. write items in the ordinary language of the population, even if that includes 'politically incorrect' phrases;
2. ask multiple questions to measure each topic;<sup>4</sup>
3. trial the questions on a variety of people and de-brief them to make sure they understand from the question what you intended to ask;
4. run an analytic pretest on several hundred respondents including at least twice as many items as you intend to keep, because many attitudes items do not work (for unpredictable reasons);
5. analyse the results of the analytic pretest to check that the multiple measures designed for each topic have high correlations with each other and that each of the measures on one topic has correlations of a similar magnitude with criterion variables;<sup>5</sup>
6. be prepared for your respondents to disagree with your own feelings;
7. collect data using your measurement instruments from a properly drawn sample, ideally a simple random sample of the nation as a whole;
8. collect a large enough sample to allow statistically reliable inferences, preferably 1,500 or more.<sup>6</sup>

All the items we discuss in this paper have been subject to these stringent development and selection procedures. To

keep the discussion non-technical, we will describe the answers to the questions themselves rather than the composite indices developed from them. Research using the multiple-item indices is, for example, available in Evans,<sup>7</sup> Evans and Mason<sup>8</sup> and Evans, Kelley and Hayes.<sup>9</sup>

Prior research on moral views on the ideal activity of mothers of preschoolers finds that there is diversity of opinion, but with the most widely endorsed ideal being full-time homemaking among the populace at large,<sup>10</sup> among mothers<sup>11</sup> and even among young women.<sup>12</sup> This research focused on a single item from the IsssA's (International Social Science Survey/ Australia) module of questions on moral feelings concerning women's employment at different life cycle stages; this module has been adopted in abbreviated form by the International Social Survey Programme, and hence for it there is precisely comparable international data available. This is extremely valuable because it enables us to see how Australia compares to other countries. In fact Australians are more likely to endorse a full-time home-making ideal for this life course stage than are denizens of most other countries, both when we consider the population as a whole<sup>13</sup> or when we focus in on mothers.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, any single question (like any other single measurement) is subject to error, so it is wise when possible to examine an array of conceptually related questions, although it is difficult to find such an array available in international data for comparative research. Some critics have questioned the measurement accuracy of the item on which the existing research is based,<sup>15</sup> so, it seems wise to focus in on Australia where we are fortunate enough to have survey data on a wide array of questions, approaching

the issue of moral feelings concerning the employment of mothers from several different angles.

Accordingly, to develop a clear, well-rounded picture of Australians' moral feelings on mothers' employment, we turn to the longest and most comprehensive series of surveys containing questions on this issue — the (IsssA). These representative, nationwide surveys have been conducted every few years since 1984, and they provide a rich collection of items on this topic, with over 15,000 respondents on many items. Survey credibility is crucially dependent on following a scientific sampling procedure, ideally purely random sampling, and on high quality data collection and processing procedures. The IsssA is based on purely random samples drawn from the electoral rolls (which are public documents) with elaborate procedures developed to deliver very high quality data. Details on sampling, data collection procedures, and the like are in the Technical Appendix and in Kelley and Evans.<sup>16</sup>

#### **GENERAL ORIENTATIONS**

Let us begin by describing long-term trends. The earliest questions available put the issue in rather general terms that provide a context for the more specific questions we developed later. We'll begin with three items that form our 'senior' legitimacy of employment scale.

Most Australians generally endorse the permissive norm that it is morally acceptable for women to work, and this has long been true (see Table 1). A comfortable majority of over 60 per cent already endorsed the view that 'I approve of a married women earning money in business and industry, even if she has a husband capable of supporting her',<sup>17</sup> in the middle 1980s when the question was first asked in Australia. This had risen to

**Table 1: 'I approve of married women earning money in business and industry, even if she has a husband capable of supporting her', Australia, 1984 to 2001\***

Answer (points out of 100)	1984	1986	1989-1990	1993	1996	2001
<b>Panel A: Frequencies</b>						
Strongly disagree (0)	4	8	4	7	2	2
Disagree (25)	20	15	14	14	13	6
Mixed feelings (50)	14	12	14	15	12	10
Agree (75)	53	45	50	46	56	59
Strongly agree (100)	9	20	18	19	17	23
Total (per cent)	100	100	100	100	100	100
<b>Panel B: Means</b>						
Women under age 40	65	70	73	73	78	82
Women 40 & over	56	62	62	62	68	71
Men	61	61	66	62	66	72
All [1]	61	63	66	64	69	73
Valid cases	2,977	1,437	4,432	2,182	2,106	1,172
Per cent missing	1	6	4	1	2	4

[1] Time trend: Increasing at 0.9 points per year ( $t=21.9$ ,  $p<.001$ ). See technical appendix for details.

\*Source: IsssA data, various years.

over 80 per cent by 2001. This is an easy question for people to answer.<sup>18</sup>

If we score the answers at equal intervals from zero to 100, where 'strongly disagree' is scored zero and strongly agree is scored 100 with other answers in between, the average answer in 1984 was 61. Approval continued to climb over the intervening years, reaching 73 points, on average, in 2001. This is a modest but steady increase of, we estimate, about eight-tenths of a per cent point per year — or some eight per cent per decade (see the Technical Notes for details). An analysis of the pattern of age differences in answers to this question in the earliest surveys suggests that the greatest changes in the approval of married women's employment had occurred

quite early in the 20th century.<sup>19</sup>

Approval is greatest among younger women (Table 1, first line in Panel B). The mean level of support begins at 65 points out of 100 in 1984 and rises to 82 points by 2001. Older women are a little less approving, by roughly 10 points out of 100, with support again rising over time (second line in Panel B). Views on this do *not* reflect any substantial conflict between the sexes: on the contrary, men's view are essentially indistinguishable from older women's views (third line in Panel B). We will see all these patterns repeated in later tables.

Another classic question on this topic is 'A married woman should not attach much importance to a career'.<sup>20</sup> More than half of the populace disagreed in 1984, and the figure has risen to over 60 per cent in 2001 (see

**Table 2: 'A married woman should not attach much importance to a career', Australia, 1984 to 2001**

Answer (points out of 100)	1984	1986	1989-1990	1993	1996	2001
<b>Panel A: Frequencies</b>						
Strongly agree (0)	4	7	4	4	3	3
Agree (25)	23	16	16	13	13	12
Mixed feelings (50)	22	22	27	23	25	21
Disagree (75)	43	40	41	40	42	42
Strongly disagree (100)	8	16	13	20	18	23
Total (per cent)	100	100	100	100	100	100
<b>Panel B: Means</b>						
Women under age 40	63	68	67	75	78	77
Women 40 & over	55	57	57	64	64	68
Men	55	59	59	63	61	64
All [1]	57	61	61	65	65	67
Valid cases	2,970	1,426	4,417	2,178	2,104	1,165
Per cent missing	1	7	3	1	2	4

[1] Time trend: Increasing at 0.9 points per year ( $t=20.8$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

Table 2). On a points-out-of-100 basis with the most anti-employment answer scored zero and the most pro-employment answer scored 100, the average view in 1984 was 57 points out of 100 in 1984, well past the half-way mark. Views became more positive over the following decades and a half, reaching 67 points out of 100 in 2001.

Again, young women are the most supportive, about 10 points more so than older women. And again, men have much the same views as older women.

The third classic question on the legitimacy of women's employment is: 'A woman should devote almost all her time to her family'. Here again, more people give pro-employment answers than anti-employment answers. But, in contrast to the earlier questions, there is little trend (see Table 3), only four points per decade. On a points-out-of-100 basis, the average view fluctuates just on the pro-employment side of the centre point (50 points) representing mixed and neutral views.

**Table 3: 'A woman should devote almost all her time to her family', Australia, 1984 to 2001**

Answer (points out of 100)	1984	1986	1989-1990	1996	2001
<b>Panel A: Frequencies</b>					
Strongly agree (0)	5	9	6	4	6
Agree (25)	27	22	23	20	23
Mixed feelings (50)	20	20	22	25	23
Disagree (75)	43	39	42	43	41
Strongly disagree (100)	5	10	6	8	7
Total (per cent)	100	100	100	100	100
<b>Panel B: Means</b>					
Women under age 40	58	63	60	65	56
Women 40 & over	53	52	52	59	57
Men	52	52	54	55	54
All [1]	54	54	55	58	55
Valid cases	2,979	1,430	4,427	2,113	1,176
Per cent missing	1	6	3	2	3

[1] Time trend: Increasing at 0.4 points per year ( $t=9.1, p<.001$ ).

See technical appendix for details.

Source: IcssA data, various years.

Again young women are the most supportive, with older women perhaps five or 10 points less favourable. As usual, men's views are vary similar to older women's.

Thus, women's employment is seen as legitimate by a comfortable majority of the population, and, moreover, that view is becoming more prevalent (Tables 1 and 2). But there are more signs of reservations when employment calls into question whether women's first duty is to commit their time to their family (Table 3).

### CONFLICT BETWEEN WORK AND FAMILY?

A key source of doubts about the legitimacy of women's employment is the concern that maternal employment might have deleterious effects on their family, so it is important to ascertain how widespread these concerns are in the population. Let's begin with some items from the IcssA's long running 'career costs' scale.

First, consider the general issue of the quality of life of the family as a whole. We asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed that 'All in all, family life suffers if the woman has a full-time job'.

Since 1984, opinion has fluctuated a fair bit, but has probably trended in a pro-employment direction (see Table 4). Today, mass public opinion is roughly evenly divided on the issue, with about forty per cent agreeing, about forty per cent disagreeing, and about twenty per cent with mixed feelings taking a neutral stance. This once again is clear evidence of a wide diversity of attitudes on

**Table 4:** 'All in all, family life suffers if the woman has a full-time job', Australia, 1985 to 2001

Answer (points out of 100)	1984	1986	1989- 1990	1993	1996	2001
<b>Panel A: Frequencies</b>						
Strongly agree (0)	11	22	15	14	15	9
Agree (25)	41	37	34	38	40	31
Mixed feeling (50)	20	15	16	16	15	19
Disagree (75)	24	20	26	24	22	31
Strongly disagree (100)	4	6	9	9	9	10
Total (per cent)	100	100	100	100	100	100
<b>Panel B: Means</b>						
Women under age 40	47	46	51	52	53	69
Women 40 & over	40	37	43	45	43	52
Men	40	33	43	41	40	46
All [1]	42	37	45	44	42	50
Valid cases	2,972	1,437	4,414	2,181	2,122	1,167
Per cent missing	1	6	3	1	1	4

[1] Time trend: Increasing at 0.8 points per year ( $t=18.49$ ,  $p<.001$ ). See technical appendix for details.

this topic: there is no single, shared perception.

Again, younger women are the most supportive, with older women perhaps 10 points less supportive. Men's views are similar to older women's: again, there is no great conflict between the sexes.

Probing more closely into the question of what female duties people might think were threatened by employment, we focused on mothering. One classic question on the topic concerns a mother's emotional responsibilities to her children, 'A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work' (see Table 5). Note that the question asks whether a good relationship is possible, not whether it is likely, so it is likely to elicit more positive answers than would a differently framed question.

The balance of opinion in Australia in 1984 was towards the view that maternal employment does not preclude a good relationship with the children — 50 per cent 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that it

is possible to combine good mothering with employment (see Table 5). This view became more prevalent in the ensuing decade and a half, being held by about 60 per cent of Australians in 2001, rising at about four per cent a decade. On a points-out-of-100 basis with the strongly anti-employment views scored zero and the strongly pro-employment views scored 100, the average response on this item was very near the neutral point in 1984, with the mean being 54. Opinion continued to move in the pro-employment direction until about 1990. Since then, it has fluctuated without trend at about 60 points out of 100.

Young women are a little more supportive than older women. And, as usual, men are similar to older women.

Nonetheless, Australians do not think it is easy to rear children if both parents have heavy work commitments. When asked whether they agreed or disagreed that 'It is more difficult to raise children successfully when both parents work full-time', 70 per cent of respondents agreed in 1984 (see Table 6). Since then, responses have fluctuated slightly without much trend so that in 2001 opinion on this issue is little changed since 1984, rising at around three points a decade. On a points-out-of-100 basis, the mean was 33 in both 1984 and 2001. Taken together with the previous items this suggests that Australians perceive the combination of successful mothering with substantial work commitment as possible, but a major struggle.

The prevalence of persistent concern about the effect of women's employment

**Table 5:** 'A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work', Australia, 1984 to 2001

Answer (points out of 100)	1984	1986	1989-1990	1993	1996	2001
<b>Panel A: Frequencies</b>						
Strongly disagree (0)	7	10	7	12	7	5
Disagree (25)	31	30	26	27	27	22
Mixed feelings (50)	13	8	9	11	13	14
Agree (75)	41	30	35	33	33	47
Strongly agree (100)	9	22	23	17	20	13
Total (per cent)	100	100	100	100	100	100
<b>Panel B: Means</b>						
Women under age 40	58	64	67	64	70	65
Women 40 & over	56	61	62	59	63	62
Men	49	50	55	48	53	56
All [1]	54	56	60	54	58	61
Valid cases	2,971	1,440	4,428	2,186	2,122	1,173
Per cent missing		6	3	1	1	3

[1] Time trend: Increasing at 0.4 points per year ( $t=8.6$ ,  $p<.001$ ). See technical appendix for details.

on their family life, especially on their children, led to the development of several new questions specifically focused on children at particular ages. The earlier questions had left the age of the child unspecified, and so there was the problem that the public might have different moral views about female employment at different life cycle stages. Accordingly, beginning in 1989-90, we asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed that 'A pre-school child is likely to suffer if their mother works'.

About half of respondents agree, about one third dissenting, and a bit under one fifth sit on the fence (see Table 6), a picture that holds with only modest change from 1989-90 to 2001, a rise of about four points per decade. On a points-out-of-100 basis, with the 'anti-employment' answers

scored low and the 'pro-employment' answers scored high, the average score throughout the period is a bit under the halfway mark. The standard deviation is quite large, emphasising the diversity of opinion. All in all on this issue, the most prevalent or modal perception is that there is likely to be some harm to the child, but that is by no means the only perception.

#### WORK AT DIFFERENT LIFE COURSE STAGES

The observation that there are diverse moral views concerning maternal employment when the children are pre-schoolers, but with the predominance of opinion in favour of full-time home-making, is confirmed by Australians' answers to another question<sup>21</sup> concerning

**Table 6:** 'It is more difficult to raise children successfully when both parents work full-time', Australia, 1984 to 2001

Answer (points out of 100)	1984	1986	1989-1990	1993	1996	2001
<b>Panel A: Frequencies</b>						
Strongly agree (0)	18	35	23	22	21	23
Agree (25)	52	45	43	49	47	46
Mixed feelings (50)	12	7	14	11	11	13
Disagree (75)	16	9	17	14	16	15
Strongly disagree (100)	2	4	3	4	5	4
Total (per cent)	100	100	100	100	100	100
<b>Panel B: Means</b>						
Women under age 40	37	31	39	39	44	36
Women 40 & over	34	25	32	35	37	35
Men	30	23	32	29	30	31
All [1]	33	25	34	32	34	33
Valid cases	2,984	1,440	4,433	2,187	2,110	1,173
Per cent missing	1	6	3	1	2	3

[1] Time trend: Increasing at 0.3 points per year ( $t=7.6$ ,  $p<.001$ ). See technical appendix for details. Source: IcssA data, various years.

**Table 7:** 'A pre-school child is likely to suffer if their mother works', Australia, 1984 to 2001

Answer (points out of 100)	1989-1990	1993	1996	2001
<b>Panel A: Frequencies</b>				
Strongly agree (0)	14		11	11
Agree (25)	38		42	36
Mixed feelings (50)	16		16	19
Disagree (75)	23		24	28
Strongly disagree (100)	9		8	6
Total (per cent)	100	100	100	100
<b>Panel B: Means</b>				
Women under age 40	53	54	58	57
Women 40 & over	41	47	47	46
Men	41	41	39	42
All [1]	44	44	45	46
Valid cases	4,417	2,177	2,115	1,175
Per cent missing	3		2	3

[1] Time trend: Increasing at 0.4 points per year ( $t=7.3$ ,  $p<.001$ ). See technical appendix for details.

the ideal activity pattern for women at different life course stages. 'Do you think women **should** work outside the home full-time, part-time, or not at all ...When there are children under age six?' and proceeded to ask about other life course stages. The answers are in Table 8. When it comes to ideal activity patterns for mothers of preschoolers, full-time homemaking wins by far the most adherents, being endorsed by around two thirds of the populace throughout the past decade period. There is, of course, some diversity of opinion with around 30 per cent thinking part-time work is best for women at this life course stage, and about four per cent finding full-time employment ideal. Thus, people's views about the proper labour force involvement imply women with pre-school children working for pay about seven or eight hours per week.<sup>22</sup> There is little evident time trend in this, with a slight rise between 1989 and 1996,

followed by a fall to 2001.

This is distinctly different from ideals concerning other life course stages. For example, full-time jobs for young women in the newlywed stage are almost unanimously endorsed, with over 85 per cent in favour.<sup>23</sup> And the most widely held ideal activity for mothers of school aged children is part-time employment, with just under 75 per cent in favour throughout the past decade (Table 8). The balance of opinion tips in favour of full-time employment for women after the children leave home, but with somewhat more diversity of opinion (Table 8).

Interestingly, there seems to be a major shift underway in favour of women leaving the workforce when their husband retires (Table 8, Panel D). Quantitatively, this corresponds to a substantial drop of 36 minutes of work each week.<sup>24</sup> So if this trend continues, in less than a decade women with retired husbands will reduce their already low level of ideal employment to zero. However, we have only recently begun asking this question, and there are not yet enough time points to be sure. Prior research has shown that, at least into the middle 1980s, Australian women's labour force participation began to drop sharply in their early 50s and plummeted by their late 50s and that they often left the labour force when their husband retired.<sup>25</sup> But the results in Table 8 suggest withdrawal may well become increasingly abrupt in future years. If so, the shift toward early retirement for men evident in recent decades will become even more consequential in the future.

#### OTHER EVIDENCE

In our latest survey, in 2001, we also asked women to express their personal preferences on the question of staying at

home versus taking a job by rating each option from zero (cold or unfavourable) to 100 (very warm or favourable). This approach allows people to express positive feelings (or negative feelings) about each option rather than forcing people to choose among them. Fully 81 per cent of women gave positive ratings of 60 or more to the possibility of staying home without a job while their children are young, 13 per cent have views in the neutral range (40 to 60 points out of 100), and just six per cent have cool unfavourable views in the range of zero to 40 points. The mean is a warm 82 points out of 100.

Part-time work elicits cooler ratings, on average the rating is 52, very near the neutral point. Thirty two per cent give warm ratings of 60 or more, 28 per cent give ratings in the neutral zone of 40 to 60 points, and 30 per cent give cool ratings of zero to 40 points. Full-time work in this life course stage does not elicit many cheers from women. Nine per cent give it warm ratings over 60, 21 per cent give it neutral ratings in the 40 to 60 range, and fully 70 per cent give it cool ratings in the zero to 40 range.

It is noteworthy that 81 per cent of women giving warm ratings to full-time homemaking while their children are young. This is substantially higher than the percentage achieving this way of life. But the 32 per cent giving warm ratings to part-time work is clearly less than the percentage actually engaged in part-time work in this phase of life. In other words, the data suggest that there is a substantial 'pent-up demand' for full-time homemaking among women in this stage of the life course.

Thus, the populace is in favour of employment for women throughout young adulthood and on into middle age, except for the period when there are

**Table 8:** 'Do you think women should work outside the home full-time, part-time, or not at all ... When there are children under age six? ... When the children are at school? ... After the children leave home? ... And after the husband retires?' Australia, 1989 to 2001.

Answer (points out of 100)	1989-		
	1990	1996	2001
<b>A. Ideal Activity for Women with Preschoolers:</b>			
Housewife	68	64	69
Part-time job	29	32	28
Full-time job	4	4	3
Per cent	100	100	100
Ideal mean hours worked [1]	7.1	8.1	6.7
<b>B. Ideal Activity for Women with School Age Children:</b>			
Housewife	12	11	15
Part-time job	71	73	73
Full-time job	17	16	13
Per cent	100	100	100
Ideal mean hours worked [2]	20.9	21.1	19.4
<b>C. Ideal Activity for Women with Grown Children:</b>			
Housewife	5	4	4
Part-time job	34	36	33
Full-time job	61	60	63
Per cent	100	100	100
Ideal mean hours worked [3]	31.2	31.2	32.0
<b>D. Ideal Activity After Husband Retires:</b>			
Housewife	na	56	79
Part-time job	na	31	17
Full-time job	na	13	4
Per cent	100	100	100
Ideal mean hours worked [4]	na	11.2	4.8

[1] Time trend: Increasing at 0.1 hours per year ( $t=4.4$ ,  $p<.001$ ). See technical appendix for details.

[2] Time trend: No significant change ( $t= 1.3$ , ns).

[3] Time trend: Increasing at 0.1 hours per year ( $t=4.7$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

[4] Time trend: Decreasing at -0.6 hours per year ( $t=$

young children at home. People are clearly not indifferent to women's economic contributions to the family, and, indeed, widely endorse the idea that maternal employment is, in general, a major contribution to the family. For the 2001 survey, we developed a new item on this issue: 'An employed mother is a

great asset to a family'. This will ultimately form part of a multiple-item measure of perceived benefits of maternal employment to the family. Nine per cent 'strongly agree', 52 per cent 'agree', 29 per cent have mixed or neutral feelings, eight per cent 'disagree' and just two per

cent 'strongly disagree. Thus, people are far from indifferent to women's economic contributions to the family. That means that they know that forgoing income to devote time to childrearing is a major financial sacrifice. That makes it all the more impressive that large majorities think it is best for women to stay home with their small children.

In order to assess what is it that concerns people about the employment of mothers of young children, our question development process highlighted three areas — affection, effective discipline, and effective learning. In our 1996-97 survey we had the opportunity to ask questions on all three topics of a random sample of 2,151 Australians. The results:

- *Affection.* Only about a quarter of the population feel that little children get enough affection in day care centres. The question was 'Toddlers in day care don't get enough cuddles': 37 per cent 'strongly agreed', or 'agreed', 36 per cent reported mixed or neutral feelings, and 27 per cent 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'. Institutional childcare, of course, is not synonymous with maternal employment, because a large portion of children in such care belong to a family in which the mother does not have a job. Nonetheless, for many mothers the decision to work necessitates institutional care for the children, so attitudes on such care are highly relevant to maternal employment.
- *Effective learning.* There is even more

widespread concern about the effect of employment on mothers' effectiveness as teachers. We asked people whether they thought that 'To learn well, a toddler really needs the attention of a full-time mother': 54 per cent 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed', 18 per cent had mixed or neutral feelings, and 28 per cent 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'. To be sure that it wasn't the specific wording of that question that elicited such strong results, in a different part of the questionnaire we also asked people whether they agreed or disagreed that 'It is harder for working mothers to find enough time to teach their children new things'. Here 69 per cent 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' and 14 per cent took a mixed or neutral stance. Just 17 per cent 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'. Taken together, the two items suggest quite a strong current of concern about the effects of employment on the teaching duties of mothers of young children.

- *Effective discipline.* Opinion is more evenly divided on the discipline issue. We asked people whether they agreed or disagreed that 'Working mothers are too tired to be as strict as they should be with their children'. Forty two per cent 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed', 24 per cent had mixed or neutral feelings, and 33 per cent 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'.

#### **THE STRUCTURE OF ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT**

Attitudes about various aspects of women's employment, as reflected in answers to the questions in Tables 1 to 8, are all related: those who are favourable on one aspect tend to be favourable on others, and vice-versa (see the correla-

**Table 9: Correlations and factor loadings from a maximum likelihood factor analysis with oblimin rotation.[1] Australia, 1989 to 2001.**

Item	Correlations (see tables 1 to 8 for item wording)											Factors	
	1	2	3	8A	8B	8C	8D	4	5	6	7	I	II
<b>Attitudes to woman working:</b>													
1. Married woman earning money (Table 1)	1.00											0.10	<b>0.52</b>
2. Importance of career (Table 2)	0.38	1.00										0.14	<b>0.41</b>
3. Devote time to family (Table 3)	0.42	0.43	1.00									0.22	<b>0.42</b>
8A. Work: Pre-school children (Table 8A)	0.27	0.24	0.31	1.00								0.35	0.32
8B. Work: School age children (Table 8B)	0.37	0.28	0.35	0.50	1.00							0.13	<b>0.59</b>
8C. Work: Grown children (Table 8C)	0.30	0.22	0.24	0.25	0.41	1.00						-0.10	<b>0.61</b>
8D. Work: Husband retired (Table 8D)	0.20	0.22	0.23	0.32	0.29	0.28	1.00					-0.05	<b>0.48</b>
<b>Perceptions of conflict between work and family:</b>													
4. Family life suffers (Table 4)	0.39	0.36	0.44	0.44	0.44	0.29	0.22	1.00				<b>0.77</b>	0.08
5. Relationship with children (Table 5)	0.39	0.28	0.38	0.40	0.38	0.22	0.20	0.58	1.00			<b>0.65</b>	0.08
6. Difficult to raise children (Table 6)	0.26	0.27	0.36	0.39	0.39	0.22	0.19	0.59	0.47	1.00		<b>0.65</b>	0.04
7. Pre-school child suffer (Table 7)	0.33	0.32	0.39	0.49	0.40	0.22	0.20	0.69	0.60	0.56	1.00	<b>0.91</b>	-0.10

[1] Number of cases ranges from 3,816 to 15,098 depending on the number of surveys that included the item and on missing data. Details are in Tables 1 to 8. The two factors are correlated  $r=.65$ . Source: IcssA data, various years.

tions in Table 9). They are not, however, all equally closely related. Rather, there seem to be two distinct, although closely related, dimensions: views for or against women working for pay, and views on the degree of conflict between work and family (see the factor analysis in the last two columns of Table 9).

#### **Attitudes to women working**

First, a general predisposition for or against women working for pay seems to underlie the answers to our questions on ‘married women earning money in business or industry, even if she has a husband capable of supporting her’ (Table 1); on the importance a married woman should attach to a career (Table 2); on a woman [not] devoting ‘almost all her

time to her family’ (Table 3); and on the number of hours a woman should work outside the home when there are pre-school children (Table 8A), school age children (8B), after the children are grown (8C), and after her husband retires (8D). All have substantial loadings of .4 or higher on their factor (Table 9). The only anomaly is the question on the hours that a woman with pre-school children should work — it has equally strong links, around .30, with both factors. In other words, although the question on whether a mother should keep house or work part-time or work full-time when her children are young is phrased as an overall moral assessment (and so is linked to the first factor of moral judgments), this assessment is so strongly linked in to the possibility of harm to the

children that the question is also inextricably linked to the second factor (which measures the perceived effects of female employment on the family). This suggests that the most salient conflicts between work and career have to do with young children, rather than with older children or with the husband. In addition there are certain technical complications.<sup>26</sup> Inter-item correlations for these seven items average .32 and a composite scale made from them has a satisfactory alpha reliability of .77 (standardized).

### **Perceptions of conflict between work and family**

Second, a general view about the extent of conflict between women's work and family roles seems to underlie the answers to the questions on 'family life suffers if a woman has a full-time job' (Table 4); on a working mother's chance of 'establishing a warm and secure a relationship with her children' (Table 5); on whether it is 'difficult to raise children successfully' when both parents work (Table 6); and whether 'a pre-school child is likely to suffer if their mother works' (Table 7). All have very satisfactory loadings of .6 or higher on their factor and low loading on the other factor (Table 9, last two columns). Inter-item correlations average .59 and a composite scale from these items has a very satisfactory alpha reliability of .85.

These two underlying dimensions are closely related, with the factors correlated .65. That presumably reflects a causal link: women who feel that a career would harm their family therefore reject careers, or at least reduce their commitment to them.<sup>27</sup>

### **DISCUSSION**

Thus, Australia's longest running series of surveys inquiring into public opinion

concerning women and work show that women's employment is seen as legitimate by a comfortable majority of the population and, moreover, that view is becoming more prevalent. People see female employment as making an important contribution to family well-being, and indeed see full-time employment for newlyweds and empty-nesters as ideal. But there are more signs of reservations when employment calls into question whether women's first duty is to commit their time to their family. Evidence from a number of questions shows that there is persistent concern about the effect of women's employment on their family life, especially on their children, most especially on their young children. When we inquired into these matters more deeply, we found that people are most deeply concerned with employment's effect on mothers as teachers of their young children, but it is also true that only fairly small minorities think that children receive enough affection in childcare centres or that employed mothers have the energy to exert desirable levels of discipline.

Attitudes toward maternal employment have remained broadly stable over almost two decades with, on many issues, a modest shift toward more supportive views of four to eight per cent points per decade. This shift is most rapid with respect to general attitudes toward women working (Tables 1 to 3). It is less rapid with respect to perceptions of conflict between work and family (Tables 4 to 6) and least rapid with respect to hours of work (Table 8).

It is important to emphasise that there is diversity of opinion on all these issues, so that no 'one size fits all'. Thus for example, excluding mothers of young children from employment would violate the moral feelings of some people (even

many people who find such employment undesirable), and providing benefits available only to employed mothers violate other people's moral feelings. The balance of opinion is clearly that it is best for young children if their mothers stay home with them, and so 'evidence-based policy making' ought to take special care that women enacting our most widely held social ideal are not disadvantaged.

With this in mind, it seems reasonable to say that whatever government benefits are available should be made available to the mother rather than to specific service providers. For example, if the funds now available as 'childcare benefit' payable only to formal organizations providing childcare were instead provided to the mother, the family could decide whether to spend that money on childcare while the mother works or to use it as partial wage-replacement while the mother attends to full-time mothering and homemaking. This form of benefit respects diversity of opinion without disadvantaging full-time homemaking mothers. This is particularly important for tax-funded benefits, since most taxpayers favour full-time mothering where mothers of young children are concerned.

Moving away from the government benefits issue, there are other policies one might consider that facilitate people transferring their own incomes towards this time of life. Currently, we lead frantic lives as young adults, cramming family formation and most of our working lives into a few short years before early retirement withdraws us forever from the labour force in the prime of life. Some people may well prefer and choose that kind of life, but it may well be worthwhile expanding the range of options, particularly since other ways of

life would be more congruent with modal values about employment of mothers of young children. For example, a life-long employment bank could be established. This could allow women in couples who agree to defer the age pension (to cover, say, just the last five years of an average life) something like ten years of support during the childbearing years. This support could be used as a replacement wage or could be spent on paid childcare. Alternatively, allowing early access to superannuation in return for later uptake ages at the ends of careers is also an option that should be considered. Both of these possibilities would provide income flexibility across the life course, enabling parents to concentrate income flows into the crucial stage when there are preschoolers in the home.

## **Technical Appendix**

### *Data*

The IsssA surveys are from simple random samples of Australian citizens drawn by the Electoral Commission from the compulsory electoral roll. They are conducted by mail using a modification of Dillman's<sup>28</sup> Total Response Method. First, a personally addressed preliminary letter announces the survey, then the survey itself arrives in the post some weeks later. For non-respondents, this is typically followed by four follow-up

mailings, two with fresh copies of the questionnaire, over a six to 12 month period. Completion rates (defined as completions as a percentage of the sum of completions and refusals) run around 60 to 65 per cent, which compares favourably with recent experience in Australia, the USA, and many other industrial nations — for example, the well-regarded International Crime Victim Survey averaged 41 per cent in 14 nations.<sup>29</sup>

Benchmarking information comparing the IsssA surveys to the Census (on the limited range of variables available in the Census) shows that the survey closely resembles the population as a whole but with under representations of very young adults whose frequent movements elude the electoral rolls and of the very old, some of whom are troubled by dementia and other conditions that make survey completion difficult.<sup>30</sup>

#### Measurement

Item wording is given in the text (Tables 1 to 8). In calculating means, we assume equal intervals between answer categories and for clarity and without loss of generality, assign zero to the lowest

category and 100 to the highest. Any other equal interval scoring would give results that are a linear transformation of ours. A more elaborate unequal interval scoring based on the intervals implied by ordinal multinomial logistic regression analyses leads in practice to essentially identical results.

Ideal hours of work (in Table 8) are calculated by taking ‘full-time’ as 40 hours (a bit optimistic), ‘part-time’ as 20 hours, and ‘homemaker’ as zero.

#### Assessing time trends

The size and significance of trends over time (reported in Tables 1 to 8) are based on a simple model, estimated by ordinary least squares regression:

$$y = a + b_1 \text{YearOfSurvey} + b_2 \text{Age} + b_3 \text{Sex} + e$$

(Eq. 1)

where y is the outcome variable and year of survey is the year in which the survey was fielded. Since we have a maximum of six surveys with the data relevant to this paper, we consider only linear time trends; the data in Tables 1 to 8 does not suggest any substantial curvilinearity. The co-efficient  $b_1$  gives the time trend and associated significance test, as reported in the notes to each table.

#### References

- <sup>1</sup> Important contributions to the history of women’s labour force participation in Australia include K. Alford, *Production or Reproduction?*, Oxford University Press, London, 1984; A. Larson, *Growing Up in Melbourne: Family Life in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Family Formation Project Monograph Number 12, Department of Demography, Australian National University, Canberra, 1994; and G. Reekie, *On the Edge: Women’s Experiences in Queensland*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1994.
- <sup>2</sup> See especially, M.D.R. Evans, ‘Working wives in Australia: influences of the life cycle, education, and feminist ideology’, in J. Kelley & C. Bean, (Eds), *Australian Attitudes: Social and Political Analyses from the National Social Science Survey*, Allen & Unwin, Melbourne, 1988, pp. 147-162; S. Eccles, ‘Women in the Australian labour force’, in D. Broom, (Ed.), *Unfinished Business*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1984, pp. 80-93; R.G. Gregory, P. McMahon and B. Whittingham, ‘Women in the Australian labour force: trends, causes, and consequences’, *Journal of Labor Economics*, 3:S293-309, 1985; G. W. Jones, ‘Is demographic uniformity inevitable?’ *Journal of the Australian Population Association*, vol. 10, 1993, pp. 1-17; M.D.R. Evans and J. Kelley, ‘Gender and employment biographies in Australia’, *Australian Social Monitor*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2001b, pp. 103-105; M.G. Santow, ‘Work and family in the lives of Australian women’, in H. A. Becker, (Ed.) *Life Histories and Generations*, University of Utrecht Press, Utrecht, 1991, pp. 89-114; H. Ware, ‘Fertility and work-force participation: the experience of Melbourne wives’, *Population Studies*, no. 30, 1976, pp. 413-27; C. Young, ‘Life cycle experience of cohorts in the evolution of female labour force participation in Australia’, in D. Pope and L. Alston (Eds), *Australia’s Greatest Asset*, The Federation Press, Sydney, 1989; C. Young, *Balancing Families and Work: A Demographic Study of Women’s Labour Force Participation*, Australian Government Printing Service, Canberra, 1990; K. Zagorski, *Social Mobility into*

- <sup>3</sup> See for example A. Manne, 'Women's preferences, fertility and family policy; the case for diversity', *People and Place*, vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 6-25, 2001. C. Hakim, 'Taking women seriously', *People and Place*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2001, pp. 1-6, points out that family policy consumers — that is young adults especially — deserve to have their personal preferences taken into account, as well as the moral views of the taxpayers who would be funding the policy which are the focus of this article. Accordingly, we are also undertaking a trend analysis of the personal preferences of Australians for different combinations of family/ work balances at different life course stages.
- <sup>4</sup> The use of multiple items enables one to reduce random measurement error (this is very important in measuring relationships among variables), and provides a better sense of the distribution of opinion, because the specific wording of different items may carry different 'emotional weight' — people may move from less extreme to more extreme positions, depending on the wording.
- <sup>5</sup> Alternatively to procedures four and five, one may re-analyse existing data to select items and confirm their performance on multiple-item indices.
- <sup>6</sup> A small, unsystematic sample of a couple of hundred cases such as B. Probert and J. Murphy, 'Majority opinion or divided selves? Researching work and family experiences', *People and Place*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2001, pp. 25-33, use could be valuable as a means of developing items for a subsequent larger and more scientific survey, but in itself is of little scientific value in describing opinion in the nation as a whole.
- <sup>7</sup> Evans, 1988, op. cit., pp. 147-162
- <sup>8</sup> M.D.R. Evans and K.O. Mason, 'Currents and anchors: gender role attitudes in Australia in the 1980s', in J. Baron, D. Grusky and D.J. Treiman (Eds), *Social Differentiation and Social Inequality: Theoretical and Empirical Inquiries*, Westview Press, Boulder, C.O., 1996
- <sup>9</sup> M.D.R. Evans, J. Kelley, & B.C. Hayes, 'Family values and labor force participation: Ireland in international perspective', *Gender Issues*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2000, pp. 84-120
- <sup>10</sup> M.D.R. Evans, 'Women's participation in the labour force: ideals and behaviour', *Australian Social Monitor*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2000, pp. 49-57
- <sup>11</sup> M.D.R. 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, 2001a, pp. 28-40
- <sup>12</sup> M.D.R. Evans, 'Moral views on maternal employment', *Australian Social Monitor*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2001a, p. 49
- <sup>13</sup> Evans, 2000, op. cit., pp. 49-57
- <sup>14</sup> Evans, 2001a, op. cit., pp. 28-40
- <sup>15</sup> Probert and Murphy, op. cit.
- <sup>16</sup> J. Kelley, and M.D.R. Evans, 'Australian and international survey data for multivariate analysis: the ISSA', *Australian Economic Review*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1999, pp. 298-302
- <sup>17</sup> Measurement properties of the item are discussed in Evans and Mason, 1996, op. cit.; Evans, 1988, op. cit.
- <sup>18</sup> One traditional indicator of a 'hard' question is that a lot of people decline to answer it. There are between one and six per cent of respondents who do not answer this question (Table 1), and that is well within the 'normal' range of closed-ended attitude questions (open-ended questions would be higher, in general). Moreover, prior research shows that this item has strong correlations with other relevant variables. Evans and Mason, 1996, op. cit., whereas a question that is meaningless to respondents tends to be answered at random and hence to have low correlations with conceptually relevant variables.
- <sup>19</sup> Evans and Mason, 1996, op. cit.
- <sup>20</sup> Today we know that items with 'not' in them tend to have more random measurement error in them (in part because hasty or careless readers or listeners sometimes disregard the 'not'), but some such items work well, and this one has provided abundant evidence over the years of superior performance. Its measurement properties are discussed in Evans and Mason, 1996, op. cit.
- <sup>21</sup> Results on this question, and the others in the module on ideal activity for women at different life cycle stages, have previously been reported in M.D.R. Evans, 'Norms on women's employment over the life course: Australia, 1989-1993', *WwA: Worldwide Attitudes*, 1995.11, pp. 1-8; Evans, 2000, op. cit.; Evans, 2001a, op. cit.; Evans and Kelley 2001a, op. cit.; Evans, Kelley and Hayes, 2000, op. cit.
- <sup>22</sup> Treating 'full-time' as 40 hours, 'part-time' as 20 hours, and 'housewife' as zero hours. The importance of looking at hours worked rather than a cruder measure of labour force participation is clear, see C. Hakim, *Working-lifestyles choices in the Twenty-first Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000.
- <sup>23</sup> Evans, 1995, op. cit.
- <sup>24</sup> As .6 hours corresponds to 36 minutes; see Table 8, note 4.
- <sup>25</sup> Gregory et al., 1985; op. cit.; P. Miller and D. Volker, 'A cross-section analysis of the labour force participation of married women', *Economic Record*, no. 59, 1983, pp. 28-42; and Young, 1989, op. cit.

- <sup>26</sup> This item has a much lower mean than the others, so floor effects may reduce its correlation with them.
- <sup>27</sup> It is probably an upper bound estimate because those strongly committed to a career for exogenous reasons may distort their perceptions of conflict with the family to reduce dissonance.
- <sup>28</sup> D. A. Dillman, 'The design and administration of mail surveys', *Annual Review of Sociology*, no. 17, 1993, pp. 225-49.
- <sup>29</sup> J.J.M.van Dijk, P. Mayhew, and M. Killias, *Experiences of Crime Across the World: Key Findings from the 1989 International Crime Survey*, Kluwer Law & Taxation, Boston, 1990
- <sup>30</sup> C. Bean, 'Comparison of national social science survey with the 1986 census', *NSSS Report*, Suppl.(2)6, 1991, pp.12-19. Available at [www.international-survey.org](http://www.international-survey.org); J. Sikora, 'International survey of economic attitudes in Australia, Finland and Poland: comparison with the census', *WwA: Worldwide Attitudes*, 1997.12, pp. 1-8. Available at [www.international-survey.org](http://www.international-survey.org); M.D.R. Evans and J. Kelley, *Australian Economy and Society*, Federation Press, Sydney, 2002, (in press) and M.D.R. Evans, and J. Kelley, 'Small families or large? Australia in international perspective', *Australian Social Monitor*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1999, pp. 13-19.