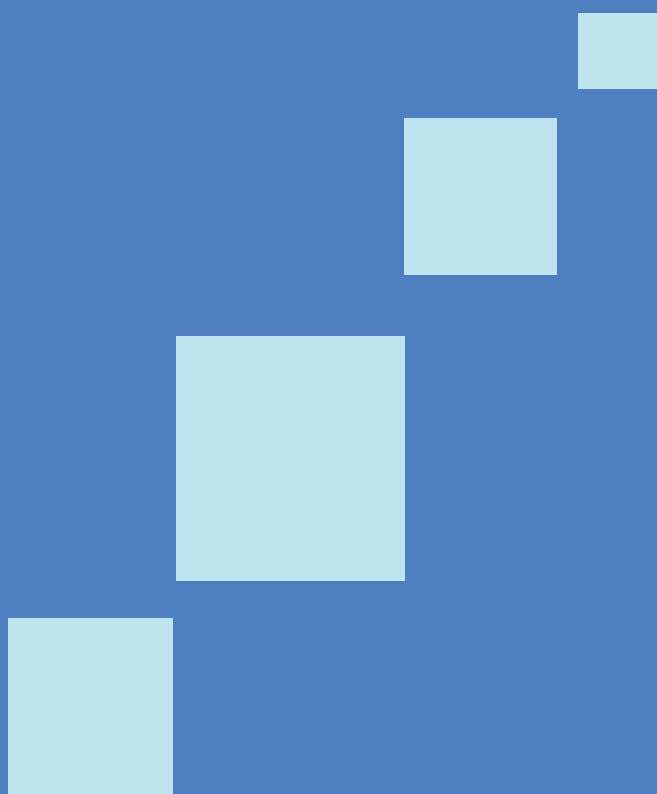


Gen X Women and the Gender Revolution: Pioneers or Traditionalists?

Hernán Cuervo, Johanna Wyn & Jessica Crofts
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**GEN X WOMEN AND THE GENDER
REVOLUTION: PIONEERS OR
TRADITIONALISTS?**

Authors: Hernán Cuervo, Johanna Wyn &
Jessica Crofts

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Youth Research Centre
Melbourne Graduate School of Education
The University of Melbourne VIC 3010

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INTRODUCTION

In the last four decades, there has been a dramatic increase in women's participation in education and in the workforce. These changes, which were also experienced in the many other developed countries, have been so far-reaching that they have been regarded as revolutionary (Esping-Andersen 2009, Gerson 2010) and as creating a distinctive new generation (Andres & Wyn 2010). In the period from 1979 to 2009, the proportion of women in the workforce increased from 40% to 55%. At the same time, men's participation in the workforce decreased from 74% to 68% (ABS 2010a). The changes in gender composition are even more dramatic in education: in 1976 only 9% of women and 16% of men in their twenties were involved in post-secondary education. A quarter of a century later, women overtook men, with 24% of women compared to 23% of men in their twenties attending an educational institution (ABS 2005). By 2009, more young women aged 20-24 years had a further and higher education qualification than their male counterparts (48% and 41% respectively) (ABS 2010a).

Despite these increases in women's participation in work and education, the last few years have seen the emergence of debate about an 'unfinished', 'incomplete' or 'stalled' gender revolution (see for example: Charles 2011, Cuervo & Wyn 2011, England 2010, Esping-Andersen 2009, Jackson 2010, van Egmond et al. 2010). The notion of an 'incomplete' or 'unfinished' revolution has also gained currency in Australian public opinion, framed largely as an economic issue. Commentators regularly point out the enduring nature of the gender wage gap (Irvine 2009, Iyer 2012, Parliament of Australia 2009, Vickers 2011), and others have highlighted the economic boost that employed women can provide to the national economy (Toohey et al. 2009, Hill & Pocock 2008).

The gender wage gap is revealed in figures that show that in 2009 on average women earned 17% less than men, the largest gap in 28 years, with some industries like insurance and finance recording a gap of 32% and the resource sector in Western Australia a 36% difference (Parliament of Australia 2009). A study by the Parliament of Australia (2009) attributed the difference between men's and women's pay to women's 'disproportionate participation in part-time and casual employment', which leads to less work advancement and skill development for women than for men, a concentration by women in low paying jobs, social expectations about the 'role of women as workers, parents and carers' that positions them in unpaid work; and 'working in service rather than product related markets' (Parliament of Australia 2009: 8-9). Other research shows that the costs and nature of nine-to-five childcare constrains women's capacity to compete for the same jobs as men (Hill & Pocock 2008).

Economists argue that closing the gender gap in workforce participation is imperative for sustaining and strengthening Australia's economy (Toohey et al. 2009; ABS 2010a; ABS 2010b; Hill & Pocock 2008). This argument, correlating increases in women's workforce participation with national economic competitiveness has global resonance (see World Economic Forum 2009). A policy report by the Grattan Institute calls for the inclusion of more women and older people, in the workforce and argues that this is the best way to increase economic growth (Grattan Institute 2012). A recent Australian

study estimates that increasing women's workplace participation to the same level as men's would boost Australia's economic growth by at least 13 per cent and help solve the looming fiscal burden of an aging population (Toohey et al. 2009).

This research report contributes to these debates through an analysis of women and employment, drawing on the findings of the Life Patterns longitudinal research program. It discusses the experiences of the women in the first cohort of the study, who were aged around 38 in 2011, focusing in particular on the ways in which they balanced the areas of career and family life across time. Our analysis enables us to contribute beyond economic arguments to debate on women's work and parenthood, including issues related to gender roles, wellbeing, identity and institutional arrangements that are barriers to achieving equality.

Background

The research participants in the Life Patterns research program represent what is commonly described in the media as Gen X. They entered the labour market in the years from 1991 to be faced with an unfamiliar set of conditions. These included the deregulation of employment relations, the emergence of a service sector and the casualisation of work. They were the vanguard generation for a new era in which participation in post-secondary and higher education became the norm. These education and labour changes were accompanied by social and cultural transformations in Australia and other Western societies (ABS 2010a, Charles 2011, van Egmond et al. 2010). For example, since the 1960s increased support for men and women's equal participation in work emerged, coupled with new equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation (see 1986 Affirmative Action Act). There were also attitudinal changes towards recognising women as paid workers as well as mothers, and the spread of liberal values of individualism and progress.

These changes in attitudes facilitated women's participation in education and employment. For instance, from the outset, men and women in the Life Patterns research program engaged in post-secondary education, with eight out of ten participants studying at the age of 18-19. Young women from middle and high socioeconomic status, in particular, embraced tertiary education with the goal of building and securing a professional career. This was a remarkable achievement given that almost 60% of the participants came from families where no parents had any post-secondary education (Cuervo & Wyn 2011).

However, consistent with other research (e.g. Charles 2011, Esping-Anderson 2009), the patterns of gender equality in their 'education years' (between 19 – 25 years old) did not herald gender equality in workplaces. Analysis of the Life Patterns participants' experiences shows that by their mid to late thirties gender divisions were stark. Women overwhelmingly held responsibility for bringing up children while men who were parents continued their working careers with very little interruption. The analysis of their narratives reveals that gendered patterns extend well beyond the economic domains of the division of labour in families.

In this report we reflect on the apparent paradox that traditional gender roles have been sustained despite the dramatic shift towards gender equality in educational participation. Even though women now participate more than ever before in the labour market, nonetheless their engagement with work is highly gendered. Traditional ideas about men's and women's family roles, including the belief that women are best suited to assume domestic and childbearing responsibilities, and men are best suited to careers, persist. Our discussion raises questions about this development, highlighting structural arrangements that are barriers to greater gender parity in the different domains of life.

METHODOLOGY

This research report draws on the Life Patterns longitudinal research program. This program has followed the lives of a generation of young Australians that left secondary school in 1991 in Victoria. The original database consisted of 29,155 participants. In 1996, the sample was reduced to a more manageable size of 2,000 participants, keeping gender, socioeconomic and location consistency. From 1996 to the year 2000 annual surveys and individual in-depth interviews with a sub-sample of between 50 to 100 people were conducted. From the year 2000 surveys were conducted bi-annually. This report includes survey data from 2011 and interview data from 2011-2012. (The Life Patterns program is also following a second cohort of young people that left secondary school in 2006 but data from this group does not feature in this research report.) The research has consistently explored the areas of education, work, social and personal relationships and wellbeing and health. It has looked at the goals and aspirations of participants as they make their way through different social institutions (such as education, work, and family).

Two hundred and eighty-four participants completed the survey in 2011. Of these, 70% of men and 69% of women were parenting. A subset of 36 participants was interviewed between 2011 and 2012, of which 90% were in a parenthood situation. All the data presented in this research report has a longitudinal character; that is, is based only on the responses of the 284 participants still taking part of this project. Attrition is one of the greatest challenges for any longitudinal study and this program is not an exception. We have been able to retain consistency in terms of location and socioeconomic background of our participants but more women (67%) than men (33%) have remained with us in this journey.

The Life Patterns program is a longitudinal study using a mixed-method approach, which involves two research techniques: surveys and interviews that generate quantitative and qualitative data. The data emanating from surveys and interviews enables us to fill in the gaps from each technique. Surveys contain closed questions of various types, usually requiring a yes or no option; a Likert scale, which asks respondents to tick one answer on a five-point scale or a response to a series of options. They also include open-ended questions with spaces for respondents to write their own answers. For instance, in the 2011 survey those participants in a parenting situation were asked about their satisfaction with different issues arising from their parenthood status (e.g. quality of childcare, cost of children's education, etc.). This question constructed with a Likert scale, was followed by an open-ended question that enabled participants to write at length about any issue concerning this topic. In addition, we included another open-ended question about 'the role of family' for all participants (parenting and not parenting), which enriched our understanding of what place family occupies in people's lives.

The data originating from the surveys served as a guideline in the construction of questions for our in-depth interviews of 2011 and 2012. Interviews are conducted using a semi-structured approach. This means that all interviewees are asked about the same topics, giving scope for participants to elaborate where relevant. The interaction between both techniques and the longitudinal character of the study has enabled us to better understand participants' decisions, choices and actions over these two decades. In particular it has provided a rich source of information to comprehend how some decisions in one area of life (e.g. work) affect another area (e.g. family) and how participants have been able, or not, to negotiate and balance these different spheres. The longitudinal approach allows for a greater visibility of continuity and change in participants' lives. For example, asking in the surveys over time about participant's civil status and their working situation illuminates the impact of the birth of their first child to their working conditions (see figure 5). Thus, rather than a unique snapshot in time, the Life Patterns research program has the advantage of rendering visible the dynamism and messiness of life – particularly in these last two decades of rapid social change in Australia.

FINDINGS

High expectations

This generation had high expectations for their careers. At least eight out of ten invested in some form of post-secondary education. At least two thirds believed that there is a strong correlation between acquiring tertiary education qualifications with obtaining their preferred work outcome. Table 1 shows the level of education achieved by our participants, by gender, by 2011.

Table 1: Level of education achieved by 2011, by gender, N=273 (%)

	Male	Female	Total
No post-school education	14	15	14
University degree	64	72	69
TAFE/apprenticeship	22	13	17

Table 1 describes young people's strong investment in further and higher education. Despite the over-representation of people in tertiary education compared to national figures (currently 44% of those aged 25-34 years) (NATSEM 2012), participants' educational decisions reflect the trend by young women in particular to invest in tertiary education. At the same time, many other countries saw dramatic increases in women's participation in higher and further education, creating a 'gender education revolution' (Esping-Andersen 2009).

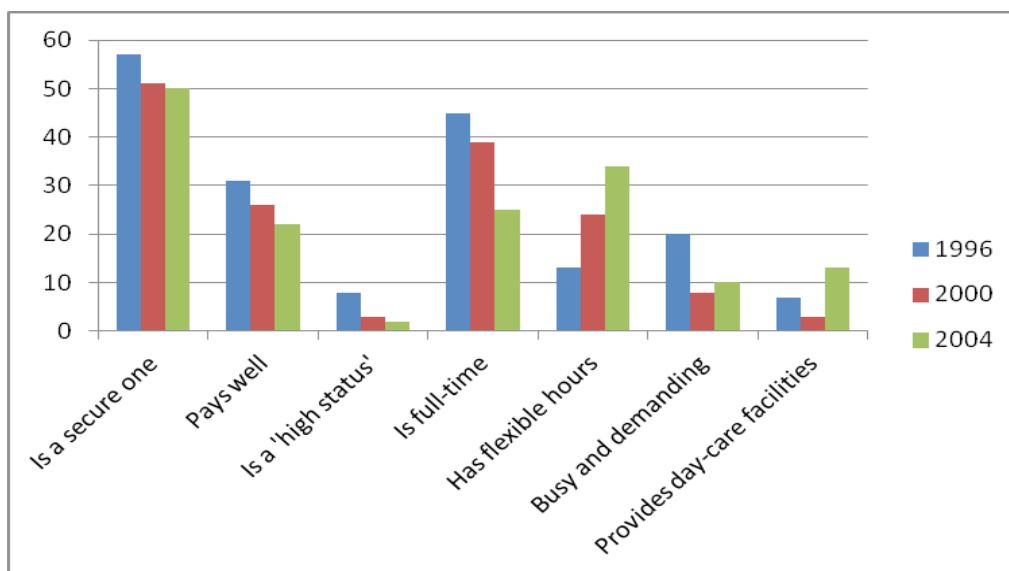
Participation in further and higher education was seen as a strategy for constructing a career. At the age of 23, a majority of women (62%) placed a strong importance on having a career, with only a small minority (4%) expressing that they would be 'happy' or 'very happy' with their lives if they ended with 'no work outside home duties'

Elsewhere we have drawn attention to the strong investment in tertiary education by young Australians as a reaction to profound changes in the economy and labour market (see Andres & Wyn 2010, Cuervo & Wyn 2010, 2012, Wyn 2009). The deregulation of the economy and labour market, the emergence of the service sector and the proliferation of casual and precarious jobs had a significant impact in how

young people viewed employment. At the age of 23, in 1996, 77% of the participants considered gaining financial independence and 60% considered having a secure job as a ‘very important’ characteristics of adult life. These ranked higher than, for example, ‘becoming a parent’ (26%) and ‘moving out from the family home’ (41%). Despite placing a high priority on financial independence and job security, by their mid-twenties, at least 40% of our participants answered their job was not a secure one.

Achieving a secure job has consistently been one of the highest priorities for the entire cohort. For women who hoped to become parents, job security was especially important. Table 2 shows that over time working flexible hours and child care grew in importance for women who were parents. Security remained a strong priority, as other goals, such as full-time work and having a high status job decreased. If we look at women who were parenting in 2004 (28% of 2011 cohort), having a secure job and flexible hours were the most important issues to them. The most significant change with those parenting between 2004 and 2011 is the greater importance of child care provision. Of those who were parents in 2004, 13% stressed the importance of child care, compared with 22% of parents in 2011.

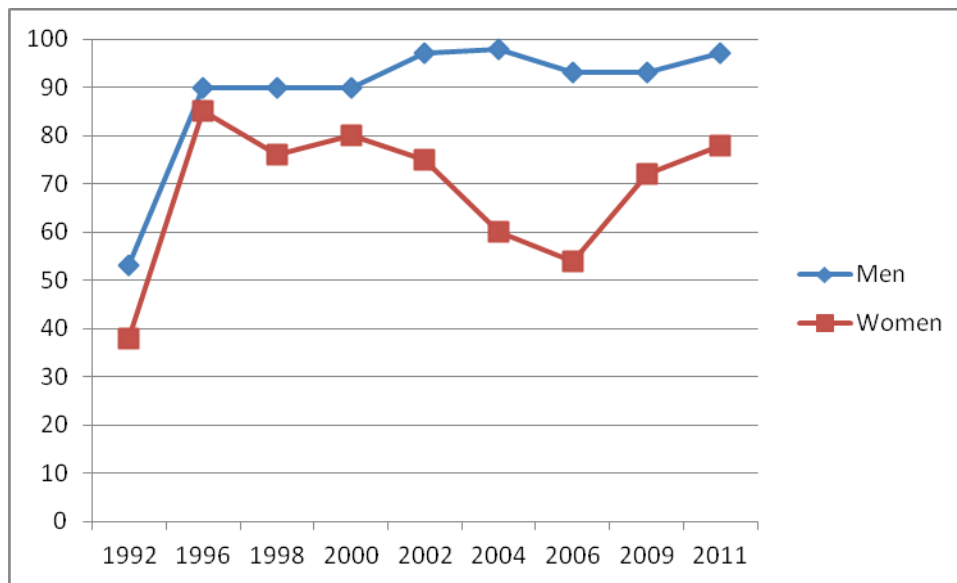
Figure 2: Females parenting in 2011, “Very important” when deciding for a future job, 1996-2000-2004, (%)



Unequal employment patterns

Given the high value placed on job security, and the achievement of gender parity in levels of educational participation, we predicted the emergence of gender equality in workplaces. However, education and work give rise to very different gender patterns of engagement. Australian women are amongst the most highly educated in the world, yet their participation in paid work remains comparatively low (Broderick et al. 2010: 8). From the outset, men and women's participation in the labour market diverged. Figure 3 shows the employment patterns of men and women from 1992 to 2011.

Figure 3: Employment participation 1992 to 2011, by gender, N=274 (%)



Despite women's high investment in career through gaining educational qualifications, figure 3 shows that men have achieved higher levels of participation in the workforce. The extent of participation (full or part-time) in the labour market reveals even starker gender differences (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Full-time work 1992 to 2011, by gender, N=274 (%)

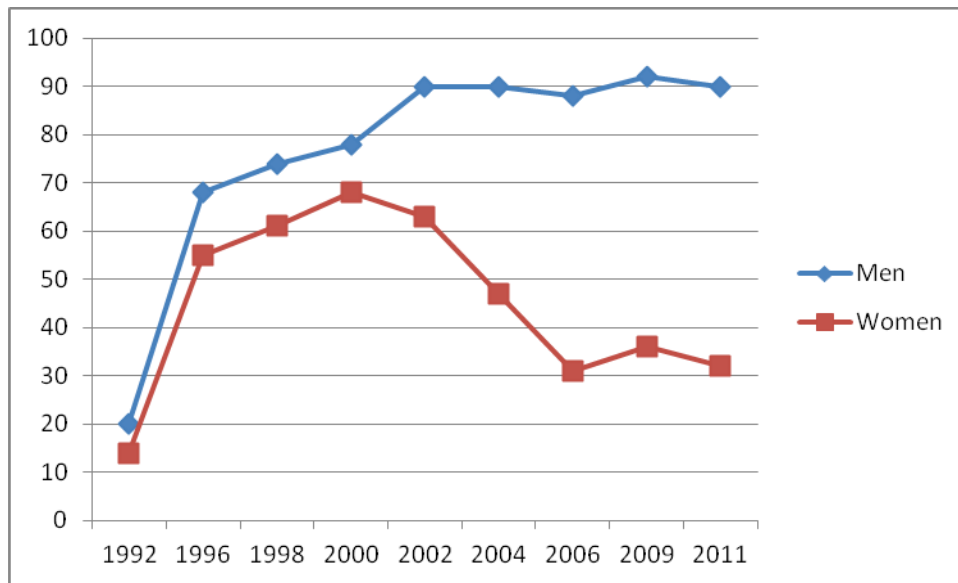


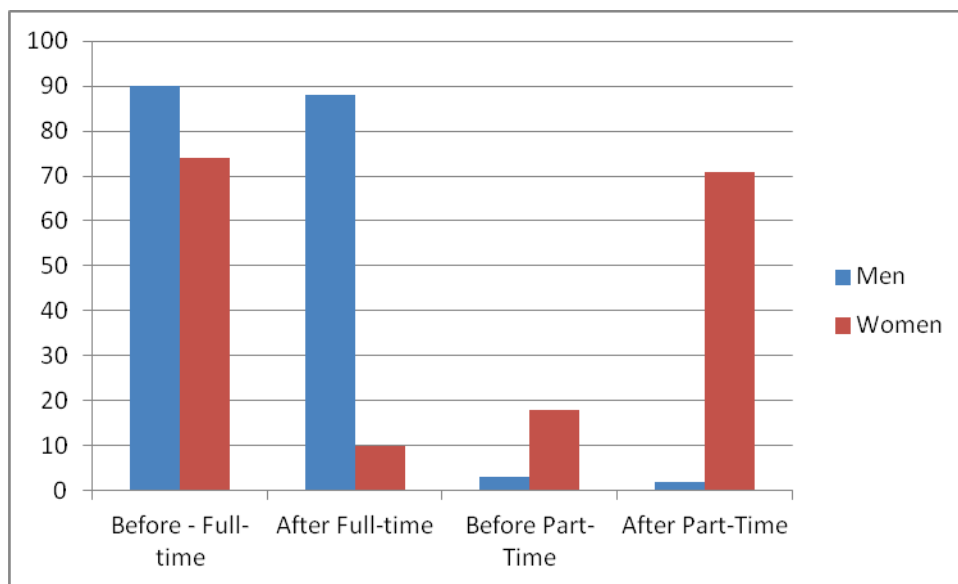
Figure 4 describes the disparities in full-time work participation by gender. The year 2000 is a breaking point for gender parity. This is the time at which the majority of our participants begin to have children. By their early thirties, in 2006, the gap grew wider, with more women abandoning full-time work to concentrate on caring for their children and taking part-time jobs.

Women managing parenthood

Parenthood emerges as the most significant factor in the divergence between women's and men's patterns of life. Since 2000, 90% of men and women have become parents. At that time, in 2000, the gender differences in workforce participation was of approximately 10% or less in favour of men. In accordance with national trends, before childbirth, workforce participation between men and women is similar (Grattan Institute 2012: 40).

Our longitudinal research included the documentation of type of work, hours worked per week, job status and other data, recorded over two decades. The research also recorded changes in working patterns after the birth of the first child. This is a significant moment when many adjustments have to be made, including deciding who will be the primary carer (in the case of shared parenting) and determining what kind of government welfare support is available for people unable to afford private care or who are without family support. In looking at the work patterns at this point of participants' lives we found that women exclusively accommodated to the birth of the first child by leaving work or going part-time. Figure 5 describes the work patterns for men and women before and after the birth of their first child for all Life Patterns participants who became parents between 1992 and 2011.

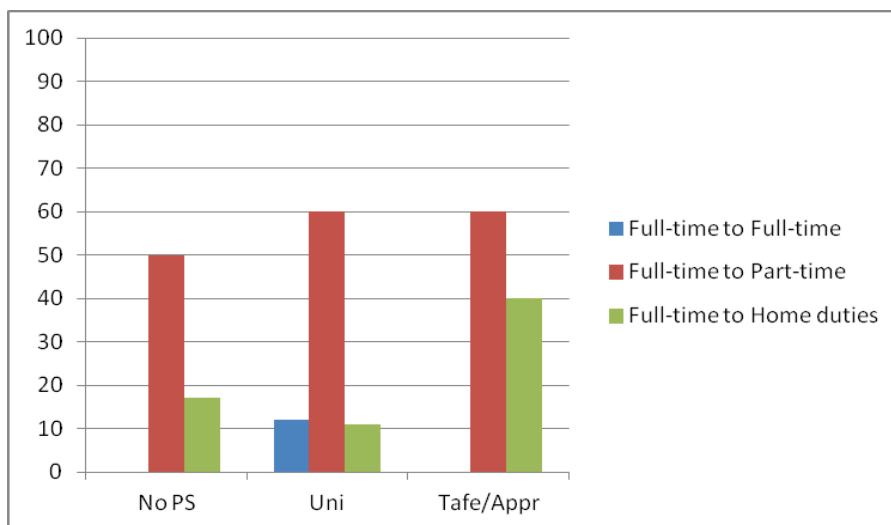
Figure 5: Full-time and part-time work before and after birth of first child 1992 to 2011, N=175, (%)



Prior to becoming parents, 74% of women were working full-time. Of those women who became parents, the majority (58%) were out of the workforce for up to one year after their first child was born. Another 12% took up to two years out of the workforce. That is, 70% of women who became parents were back working within two years of giving birth to their first child, signalling a desire or need to return to paid employment. However, after giving birth to their first child only 9% returned on a full-time basis, while 54% returned on a part-time basis. Parenthood has had a lasting effect on women’s capacity to work full-time with 60% of women who became parents not re-entering the workforce after the birth of their child, and only 22% taking up a full-time job.

When looking at the impact of post-school education on careers, we see that all the women that were most likely to continue full-time work after the birth of their first child had at least a university degree. Nonetheless, despite their higher education credentials 60% went from a full-time to a part-time position.

Figure 6: Work conditions for women before and after birth of first child by level of education 1992 to 2011, N=118 (%)



9% of female parents who continued working full-time after giving birth to their first child had at least university degree. Another 15% with a higher education credential returned to full-time work after a few years of giving birth. At least 6 years after becoming a parent, 20% of women with no post-secondary education were in full-time work, while no female with a TAFE or apprenticeship qualification has gone back to a full-time job by 2011.

Other researchers have commented that the small proportions of women with post-secondary school qualifications who return to full-time work signifies a poor economic return on their educational investment. For example, research by the Grattan Institute (2012) shows that women find it harder to come back to full-time work after working several years on a part-time basis or not working at all. Women's reduced participation in full-time work has a significant impact on their income. The Grattan Institute estimates that having one child is estimated to cost 31% of lifetime earnings (Grattan Institute 2012).

Figure 7: Full-time work for parents and non-parents 2000 to 2011, N= 282 (%)

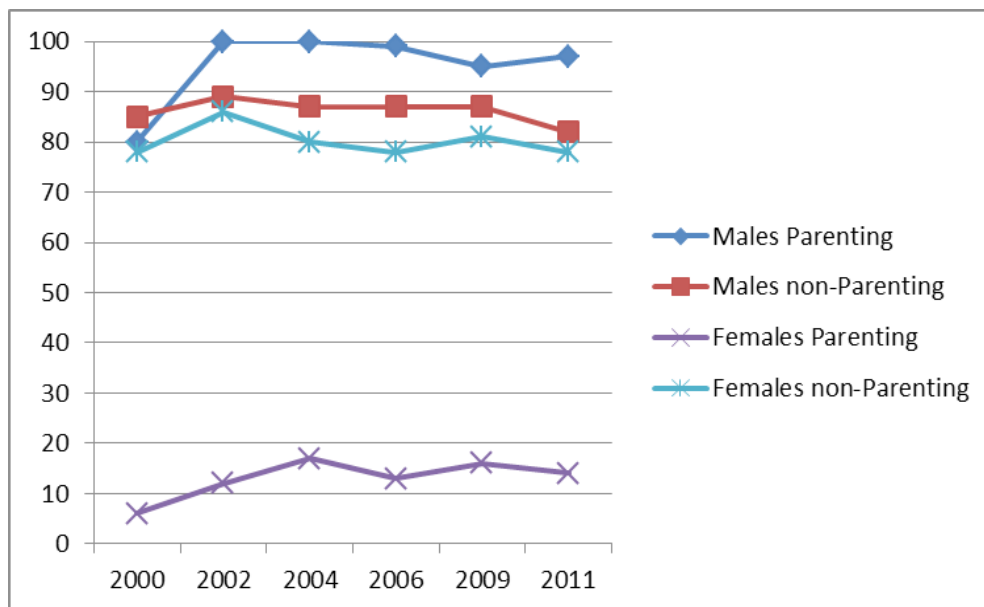


Figure 7 describes the patterns of employment participation for women who are parents. Successive surveys recorded people's parental and work status. Figure 7 describes the patterns of full-time employment for men and women, parents and non-parents over a decade, revealing the differences in workforce participation between men and women who are parents. Although many of the men who were parents have been actively involved in raising their children during the 12 years between 2000 and 2011, none described being a parent as their 'main' work commitment. This compares with 20% and 30% of women who stated that 'domestic responsibilities' were their 'main' work commitment in 2004 and 2006 respectively.

The gendered division of labour amongst Life Patterns cohort 1 participants is reported by both men and women. Ninety-three percent of men who were parents asserted that their partners were not working full-time and were the primary carers for children (even if they were working part-time). Women who were parents reported that 95% of their partners were working full-time; including in a few cases where the women were earning a higher salary than their partners.

Women's views

These strongly gendered patterns of domestic labour are an outcome of choices that men and women are making about how to manage in the best interests of their own life and their family's future. Over the years, our interviews with a sub set of the whole cohort highlights a more complex view of women's choices. It shows, for instance, that for a small group of women, being a full-time 'stay at home mum' was a satisfying and fulfilling arrangement, enabling them to devote their time to raising their child/ren. A few of these commented that they would need to return to work due to financial pressures. Indeed, financial issues, including the cost of living and the strain of house mortgage repayments were the primary concerns for all women (including cost of child care, education and health for those in a parenting situation), followed by financial and work stress. This accords with national data from the 2011 census that shows that mothers are returning to work earlier than in previous decades due to financial pressures (e.g. they cannot rely on one income in the family and feel the mortgage pressure) (Karvelas 2012). Women who were full-time parents and dependent on their partner for income emphasised the importance of keeping a close watch on expenses and making do with less in order to survive on one income. Other women valued the flexibility of working part-time or on a casual basis while raising their children, a preferred arrangement to working full-time.

However, the qualitative data also showed that some of women who were parents found their roles frustrating and destabilising to their sense of identity. These points are illustrated in the following case studies which we have chosen because they represent the themes recurring in the interviews. Encapsulated in these three stories are many of the complexities that arise in the dynamics of women parenting: issues of wellbeing and health, gender inequality related to housework, the role of work, identity issues, gender essentialism and so forth. Each of the case studies provides insights into the constraints on their 'choices' and the pressures that result in women opting out of work. Their choices and actions in their post-secondary school transition reveal the gap that has opened up between the relative gender equality of education and the gender-divided world of work. The decisions they faced on becoming parents highlight the challenges many women of their generation have come to confront.

Lyn

Lyn is from a regional town where she attended the local government school. Her father worked as a farmer and her mother performed home duties. After graduating from secondary school Lyn attended university, completing a Bachelor of Science and a postgraduate diploma in nursing. She began working as a nurse which she said provided her with personal fulfilment.

In the year leading up to 2000 Lyn married and had her first child, and by 2004 had a second child. Balancing the care of two small children with her work as a registered nurse in a regional hospital proved to be very difficult and she was forced to resign from her job which she had held for 9 years. After the birth of her second child she found that her workplace was too inflexible and childcare too expensive:

"I have recently been forced to resign as cost of day care for 2 kids counteracts what I would earn. My place of employment and field of training is unwilling to assist in set shifts, permanent nights, etc."

After 5 years out of the workforce and 3 children, Lyn began working again as a nurse on a casual basis, usually working 5-10 hours a week. While she began to feel that she unfulfilled in her current situation:

“My family is my life. But after being mum to all my kids (and husband), I am finding that I’m losing myself. I love my family but I need to find me too.”

In 2011, Lyn was still working as a registered nurse on a casual basis and had increased her commitment to between 10 and 20 hours a week. She said that she felt ‘unhealthy’ both physically and mentally and added that she often felt worn out, tired or exhausted from meeting the needs of children. She commented that she often felt trapped by her responsibility as a parent. Her husband works over 40 hours each week as a chartered accountant but Lyn felt that she was unsupported by him in childrearing.

“My family is my life. I am the cook, taxi, cleaner, etc. Even though every day is hard work, I couldn’t live without them. I wish my husband could understand what he is missing out on and that I need support too. That’s what’s hard. Every mother is supposed to have super powers!”

Maria

After completing Year 12 at a government school Maria studied full-time at university and completed a degree in science. She continued at university and was awarded a PhD in 2002.

During and after the period of Maria’s PhD, she worked in numerous jobs within her field including research assistant, sessional tutor, lecturer and in 2011 was working as a research fellow in a regional university, with teaching and research responsibilities, a position she has held since 2004. She has always held insecure positions (sessional or limited term contracts) and prior to 2004 she changed jobs frequently.

In 2008 Maria and her husband had a child, and she began to feel that she was unable to achieve the right balance between her work, family life and social commitments. In 2009, when Maria was working 20-30 hours each week, we asked about this balance and her health:

“Doing too much at home - I feel I have slipped into a 1950s housewife role (caring for child, cooking, cleaning) except that I am also working!”

Struggling to fulfil all the different roles have impacted on Maria’s health:

“I have chronic back and neck pain - which also leads to fatigue. I feel overloaded at home and don’t feel I have enough social support - at home or through extended family and friends. Therefore [my] mental health is starting to really suffer.”

In 2011 Maria continued to work part time at the University while her husband worked full time as a teacher. Their three year old child attended pre-school at an independent school. Maria still felt the strain of combining work and parenting, especially as she felt she did much more of the parenting than her partner. She often felt tired, worn out, or exhausted from meeting the needs of her child:

“I am a well educated and informed parent - but still can't get the swing of this parenting thing. At times when I have hinted I needed help from professionals, I feel I get brushed off - I think because I am well spoken and educated that they think I've got it all together! Since becoming a parent and going back to work - there has been no time for friends and me time, so my family (husband and child) and my parents are my greatest support. This at times is great but I am starting to feel the social isolation and community disconnectedness - especially when family life is not that great and who would have imagined that your mother (and father) become your coffee buddies!”

Interestingly, Maria's job brings a greater income to the household than her partner's but this has not influenced the way in which domestic responsibilities are realised.

“Working part time in my job brings in more money than my husband's full time job as a teacher - so some pressure on me as the main income earner. We will pay our mortgage off at the end of next year - which will be an enormous relief for us. Finances put pressure on our relationship.”

The household finances were not the only thing that suffered from the daily pressures. Maria felt that health has been deteriorating in the last months as a consequence of the challenges of parenting.

“My physical health over the last 10-15 years has been poor - chronic neck & back pain. However, I have been able to manage it (sometimes better than others). However in the last 12-24 months my mental health has severely been impacted on. I feel lonely, isolated, and the burden of everyone's expectations on me as a mother, wife, daughter, worker. This is starting to take its toll. Mixed with this is chronic pain and every year now a season of colds & flues. I tell myself this is a phase in life. The 3 1/2 year old will grow up and things will get back to.... normal? Pre-child days aimlessly filling in time...”

Annie

Since leaving high school, Annie has devoted a great deal of time and energy into her studies and career. She studied medicine full-time at university completing her medical degree in 1998, beginning a 6 year course to specialise in obstetrics and gynaecology soon after. Annie tells us that she gets a lot of personal fulfilment from her career in medicine but also from her continued engagement with education in the field. She married a doctor in 2004, and at this time commented that she was looking forward to having her first child so that she could work less hours than she currently was (around 50 hours per week as an obstetrics and gynaecology registrar in a regional hospital):

“Can’t wait until I have a child (pregnancy delayed by training) and can justify to employer to work part-time and have a life!”

Annie gave birth to her first child in 2005 followed by her second in 2008. She realised that her specialised medical training would take around ten years rather than six and that continuing with this training would be a barrier to having more children.

“Becoming a medical specialist will take me 10 years, including 2 children and maternity leave - I take a year off from the official training (6 years in total) per child but still do bits a pieces to stay interested and in the loop (e.g. a morning a week in the first 6 months then 2 mornings a week from 6-12 months). My college insists on finishing training in 11 years which makes it difficult to have more than 2 children and raise them/breast feed them then go back part time (21 hours per week) for a year.... and they should know better!”

It is during this time that Annie begins to voice her disappointment that her medical career will not be what she wants it to be due to struggles to balance her work and family with her own identity:

“There is not enough time for everything - something has to give and now I have kids I can’t be a famous world expert on some medical thing without shafting them.”

After giving birth Annie also experienced some health concerns.

“[I] had post partum depression/baby blues for 3-4 months so luckily my husband could work part time and take on more child and wife caring! Coming to terms with being a stay at home mother [which is] poorly regarded by society... my entire sense of self worth is tied up in my job (despite me feeling ashamed of this!)”

In 2011, Annie and her partner decided that Annie would return to work full-time while her husband would continue working part-time and be the main care giver for their 6 year old and 2 year old children. She reported that her physical and mental health has improved in the move back to full-time work.

Challenges

Our finding of what appears to be the re-traditionalisation of gender roles amongst Australians is confirmed by research in other countries. For example, researchers in the United States find a resilience of traditional forms of division of domestic labour. Charles (2011: 361) argues that despite gender equalisation in educational attainment and other areas, domestic work and child care in the United States continue to be almost exclusively the domain of women. Charles suggests that gender stereotypes have the power to influence the nature of gender divisions in work, education, household arrangements and even government welfare provisions. England (2010: 162) affirms that, in the United States, while women have entered managerial positions that were traditionally held by men, the devaluation of women's work has prevented men from 'making the gender revolution a two-way street'.

The case studies depicted above illustrate some common issues confronted by women in a parenting situation. In the first place, women face structural barriers to continuing work – especially full-time work. The lack of affordable child care represents a major obstacle for women who wish to work and the negative trade off between their income and the cost of child care makes it unviable to sustain a full-time job. As one participant affirmed in 2004:

“I work permanent full time night shift in [so] we can afford a nanny to stay at home with our three children as the cost of day care would take all of my income without penalties. It is difficult to balance a happy home with furthering career.”

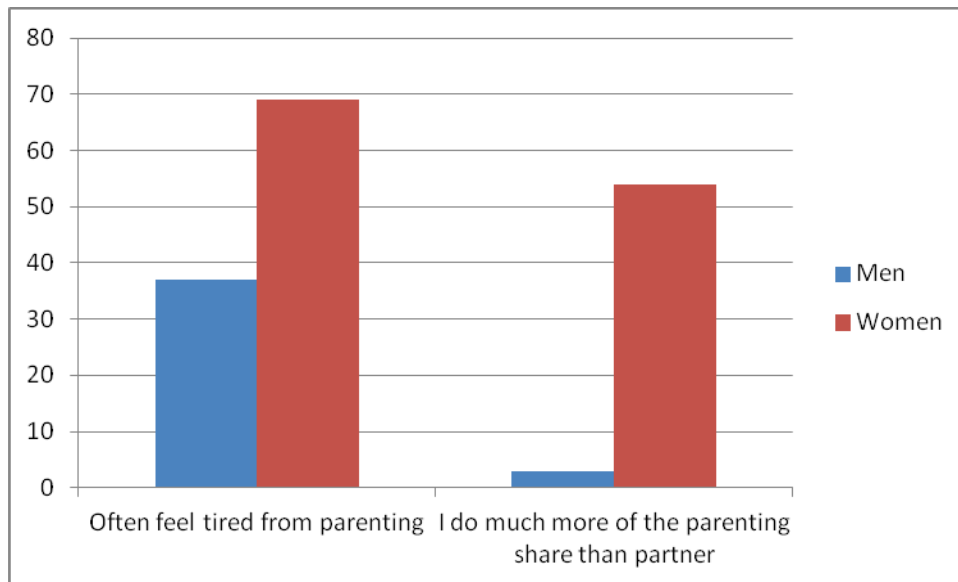
As a recent policy report suggested, changes in the taxation system and childcare costs would provide incentives to more women to return to work by increasing the income they take home (Grattan Institute 2012). More than a fifth of the female participants in the Life Patterns research program who were parenting were dissatisfied with the availability of quality and affordable childcare, while, interestingly, almost 40% of males were dissatisfied. At least two thirds of parents were highly concerned with their children's 'cost of education' in the future.

Another concern expressed by participants was a lack of support in their workplace. As Pocock (2003: 1) explains, despite gains by women in many social fronts, workplaces still view the 'ideal worker' someone who is 'care-less'. As a consequence, women who choose to suspend work to care for their children lag behind both men and women who have continuous full-time work, and often never catch, even when they do resume their careers (Grattan Institute 2012, Hill & Pocock 2008, Maher et al. 2008). This stagnation in their professional careers has significant impact in their income power, their superannuation fund and in their possibilities to reach to the top of their professions.

Finally, it is important to recognise the impact of the gendered division of labour in the home and in workplaces on identities. Women expressed a strong sense of responsibility for spending enough time caring for their family, and in some cases feelings of guilt for being away of home that resonates with other studies around the balancing of work and home life (see Pocock 2003). This sentiment is expressed by one of our participants who said: *“I am not satisfied to just be a mum, I want a career but it is difficult to juggle both, sometimes I feel my kids miss out and I feel guilty”*. Maria and Annie, depicted above, also voiced their concerns around their multiple roles and the difficulty of balancing life. The case studies also reflected the common concern that there was not enough time to carry complete all their responsibilities. Many also identified the lack of structural (workplace) and personal (partners) support to reach the right balance.

Despite their sense of duty towards their family, the surveys and interviews conducted in 2011 reveal a common experience of feeling tired and a perception that the responsibility for managing the balance between work, childcare and domestic labour was mostly held by them. Figure 8 presents their responses.

Figure 8: Opinion about following statements, by gender, 2011, N=188, by ‘strongly agree’ & ‘agree’, %



The feeling by our female participants that they do ‘much more of the parenting share than their partner’ concurs with other studies that assert that even if both men and women work similar hours, it is the woman that add ‘unpaid domestic work’ to their working load (see Grattan Institute 2012, Pocock 2003). When we analysed women’s responses to these issue by type of work, we found that women in a full-time work position reflect a much lower dissatisfaction with the sharing of parenthood and feel slightly less tired from parenthood chores than women on part-time work or not working at all. It was the ‘stay at home mums’ and, particularly, those in part-time work who felt less able to balance life (at least 35% for both groups), tired from parenting (at least 70%) and doing more of the parenting than their partners (at least 60%).

The construction of identity through work is also important for many women. The three participants highlighted in the case studies above, and many of their counterparts in this study, commented on the need to go back to work not only for financial reasons but as a way of returning to ‘normality’, as one participant put it, and as a matter of gaining back their identity. Doherty (2009) contesting the ‘end of work thesis’ argues that workplaces are still an important site where social relations and identities are created and sustained. Some of our participants reflect this view. They are prepared to come back to work even if the vast amount of the income they earn will go to pay for the child care. In other words, participation in work goes beyond the provision of an income - it sustains a sense of self.

CONCLUSION

The last quarter of a century has seen an unprecedented increase in youth post-secondary school participation. Women have answered the call to become highly educated, in order to secure a job in an uncertain labour market. This investment, however, has not provided the same economic returns for the majority of the women as for their male counterparts. This issue, which in other countries has been called an 'unfinished' or 'incomplete' gender revolution is tied to the fate of the Australian economy. There is more to the 'unfinished' revolution however than national economic gain. What is also at stake is the maintenance of traditional gender differentiation that has a profound impact on women's (and men's) lives. Public policies need to acknowledge the importance of the interrelationships between education, work, family and wellbeing.

It is important to re-state that some of our female participants have affirmed that they are happy staying home caring for their children, even though they have largely invested on higher education. Others are satisfied with the possibility of having flexibility at work and share their careers with caring for their children and homes. In some ways, these reflect a notion of 'gender essentialism' with the idea that women are the best placed to care for the household. Our analysis shows that women accept the prime responsibility for child-rearing. Yet the analysis of their responses reveals a feeling that something is not quite right. Those who feel constrained or 'pigeon-holed' in motherhood wish to return to work, not just for financial reasons, but also in order to affirm an identity outside of a traditional mothering role.

The struggle between motherhood and work goes beyond economic arguments to include issues of identity, wellbeing, and the right to work. The views and experiences of the women who contributed to this report are a testimony to the anachronism of workplaces and policies that position women as carers and limit their possibilities for the successful career they have worked hard for. The parental leave scheme introduced by the Federal government in 2011 is only the tip of the iceberg of a series of reform needed to provide men and women with real equal opportunities at work and home.

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