



MONASH University

## Submission:

Commonwealth Parliamentary  
Inquiry into Balancing Work and FamilyStanding Committee on Family and Human Services  
Parliament of Australia  
House of Representatives

## Diverse Families at Work:

## Findings from the Families, Fertility and the Future Study

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## 1. Background

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services has reviewed the 2003-2004 Annual Report of the Department of Family and Community Services and on 9 February 2005 resolved to conduct an inquiry. The Terms of Reference for the Review require the Committee to inquire into and report on how the Australian Government can better help families balance their work and family responsibilities. The Committee has indicated that it is particularly interested in:

- o the financial, career and social disincentives to starting families;
- o making it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid workforce; and
- o the impact of taxation and other matters on families in the choices they make in balancing work and family life.

This submission is provided by the Centre for Women's Studies and Gender Research at Monash University in Melbourne. Based in the School of Political and Social Inquiry in the Faculty of Arts on the Clayton campus of the University, the Centre was established in 1987 and for 18 years has provided undergraduate and graduate teaching in feminist and gender issues, served as a focal point for research into a wide range of gender issues and provided an important point of contact between the University and the broader community on matters pertaining to women and gender.

The Centre recently led a large team in a research project: ***Families, Fertility and the Future: Understanding the Current Downturn in Australia's Birthrate***; focused on the factors that drive fertility decisions. The research sample of one hundred women were drawn from five different areas across Victoria, including metropolitan, outer urban and rural. The areas included were: the City of Port Phillip, Casey, the North West, focused particularly on Brimbank and Maribyrnong, Gippsland and Bendigo. The women came from diverse family backgrounds, represented a broad range of ethnicities, and differed in education levels and socio-economic location. Study participants were asked about their decisions to have children, their workplace needs and the impact of government policy on family formation.

The project was prompted by increasing public concern over Australia's falling national birthrate and on-going political debate regarding the role and provision of paid maternity leave and other initiatives designed to encourage or support those Australians planning or raising families.

Qualitative interviews were used to probe how people assess social, economic and policy factors in their choices about having children. This type of data is a necessary addition to survey and demographic data for effective policy setting, since that data can illuminate patterns, but can only guess at the underlying reasons for such trends. In depth qualitative data is necessary to understand how women's reproductive choices, in particular, are negotiated in relation to social, economic and institutional factors. The final project report:

***What Women (and Men) Want: Births, Policies and Choices*** was released in September 2004.

The findings of this research are pertinent to this Inquiry, and are particularly relevant in respect of the financial, career and social disincentives to starting families and of the potential social policy interventions that would make it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid workforce.

## 2. Key Policy Implications from Research

### **2.1. Family policies and workplace policies are not separated in women's and men's choices about children and family life.**

Currently, social policy research and recommendations such as those from the Childcare Task Force (2003) are developed without reference to peak employer bodies and their approaches to flexibility and family-friendly workplaces. This separation means that the effectiveness of family support policies is likely to be diminished. In our research, women with one or two children particularly report that the successful management of work and family demands is often extremely difficult to achieve. This difficulty impacts on their work choices and on their choices about having further children. Sole mothers in our research report great desire to gain paid employment, but a considerable struggle with workplace structures which militate against this (*see Appendix 1*). The ease of achieving viable compromises with workplaces that allow for and facilitate the combination of family life and professional aspirations is central to how women determine the number of children they will consider, as shown in our research by the strong workplace attachment of women with three or more children. These women specifically linked flexible employment to their reproductive decisions.

The role that workplaces play in influencing the decisions that women feel able to make about child bearing and child rearing needs to be given significant policy attention. This research suggests that social policies that aim to support families and family formation, without also addressing employment, are not going to be effective in addressing women's and men's needs and aspirations to combine these endeavours.

Although some research has suggested that there is resentment about entitlements between groups with and without children, this research found no negativity towards policies to support child-bearing and child caring choices even where women or men did not plan to access them. Women firmly committed to remaining childless, for example, did not question paid maternity leave or workplace assistance for women seeking to combine paid work and family. They also did not consider (except for a very small number of negative comments) that other women's and men's access to flexible employment options impacted negatively on them.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- 1. A 'whole of government' policy framework that addresses employment flexibility and equity in conjunction with social support is necessary if policy initiatives are to be effective in facilitating families to balance paid employment and child-caring.**
- 2. A work and family policy framework should make explicit the intersection of both family support policies and workplace policies in initiatives to support women and men in balancing family and employment obligations.**
- 3. Effective family support policies will be developed in consultation with peak employer bodies.**

## **2.2. Women and men identify single policy measures and limited access initiatives but do not see these as removing barriers to labour force attachment and to family formation decision making.**

In our research, **single policy initiatives and entitlements were not identified as changing decisions about the raising of children and paid work**, but these policy initiatives were definitely taken into account in how women made decisions about reproduction and paid employment. While policies and entitlements were not generally identified as the factors which directly influenced first birth timing or decisions about having children, **they were significant in choices about employment afterwards and were particularly important to women considering further children after a first birth.**

Women with one child or two children cited a sense of shock often about the effect of children on their lives: at the cost and availability of child care; and at the near impossibility of effectively managing work expectations and parenting. A number of women without children did view parental leave provisions as likely to feature in their future decisions, but these women also focused on long-term career effects of balancing work and children as crucially important to their choices about whether or not to have children. For women with and without children, **issues of work/life balance presented a challenging and often difficult balancing act.**

In this context, the issue of **limited access to paid maternity leave is a crucial one.** Only a quarter of the women in the study had access to paid maternity leave, and while the limited availability of paid leave was not identified as a 'make-or-break' factor in family decision-making, one third of the women interviewed believed it to be very important, as a way of providing additional financial support to their reproductive decisions and **as a crucial way to maintain a connection with the labour market.** Given that our research indicates that people no longer feel that their family choices are supported by governments (due to lack of childcare, diminished maternal and child health services, issues with the provision of health care and education), government action to provide universal access to paid maternity leave would provide direct support to women's and men's choices in the first instance and would re-establish government as committed to the effective balancing of work and family life.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

**An effective work and family policy framework will absorb and replace policy disincentives and discriminatory measures such as the 'Baby Bonus' and enterprise based paid maternity leave with a comprehensive suite of measures providing both universal and targeted supports.**

### 3. Findings of the Study Relevant to Terms of Reference

#### THE FINANCIAL, CAREER AND SOCIAL DISINCENTIVES TO STARTING FAMILIES

- **Broader social services, most particularly affordable child care, appropriate health care and education were identified as important by women, when describing their reproductive experiences and decisions.** When women talked about deciding whether to have children, they described health issues, child care availability and other community services as important to them. The cost of education; both retraining for themselves and education for their children, was often mentioned.  
Considerable reference was made to the limited nature of support for families and child care, however there was little direct anger expressed about the diminution of these services, such as limited visits to maternal and child health care centres, the expense of child care and access to medical care, with most women and men accepting that limited services are a fact of life in contemporary Australia. **But their choices about children, numbers of children and paid employment were clearly affected by these limits.**
- **Young women were most concerned about the economic and career implications of children.** Their observations of women seeking to balance career and family led them to be concerned about their own capacity to combine these endeavours in their own lives.
- **Most of the women in this study felt that motherhood was viewed quite ambivalently in our society.** While most of the women indicated that they personally felt it was a positive and important role, even if they were not planning to become mothers, they considered that **mothers were not accorded a high status position and that their social contribution was not always valued.** For women with children, this often meant that they valued their paid work as a crucial aspect of their identity. For women choosing not to have children, this lack of support was often mentioned in how they had decided motherhood was not for them.

#### MAKING IT EASIER FOR PARENTS WHO SO WISH TO RETURN TO THE PAID WORKFORCE

- **Workplace experiences were a crucial part of women's considerations about reproduction.** Many women recounted incidents of difficulty in combining working and motherhood that they had experienced or that they had observed. For women with and without children, these incidences reflected an ambivalent attitude in our society towards combining mothering and paid work, **where genuine flexible support was lacking.** Given that all of the young women interviewed intended, if they became mothers, to continue in paid employment, this finding is an important one.
- **The centrality of flexible, available and satisfactory part-time work to the reproductive decisions women made** was further supported by the stories of women with three or more children, who very often cited their supportive work circumstances as central to their decisions about having a second or third child.
- **Women who were not in the workforce described the pressures and difficulties faced in trying to combine a satisfactory working life and motherhood as important to their choices.** Limited and costly possibilities for education and retraining were identified as a concern even where women were not immediately contemplating a return to the workforce. There were often anxieties about future opportunities and security expressed, even when women with children were not seeking employment at the present time.

## **THE IMPACT OF TAXATION AND OTHER MATTERS ON FAMILIES IN THE CHOICES THEY MAKE IN BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY LIFE**

- **Single policy initiatives and entitlements did not directly influence the decisions made about fertility, but they did form the landscape in which women and men negotiated their choices about families, work and life.** Rather than operating as a direct inducement, policy initiatives formed the backdrop that influenced and shaped women's decisions in particular. Although policies and entitlements were not generally identified as the factors **which directly influenced first birth timing or decisions about having children**, they were significant in what occurred afterwards and **were particularly important to women choosing to have more than two children.**
- **Policies that are specifically focused on managing parenting, and mothering in particular, such as maternity and paternal leave were most significant to women who have already had a child.** A number of women without children did view parental leave provisions as likely to feature in their future decisions, but these women were just likely to cite cultural pressures and expectations of motherhood as important to their choice whether or not to have children as they were to focus on potential benefits. The exception to this was **issues of work/life balance, identified by women in all groups as a challenging and often difficult balancing act.**
- **Access to maternity leave is not universal, and only a quarter of the women in the study had access to paid maternity leave.** While most women said that the availability of paid maternity leave did not directly factor in their decision to have children, one third believed it to be important, primarily as a way of providing necessary financial support and **as a crucial way to maintain a connection with the labour market.**

## **OTHER KEY FINDINGS RELEVANT TO THE INQUIRY**

- **Overall, many women indicated they had ended up lowering their expectations about what both governments and employers would provide in supporting their fertility decisions.** The women and men in this study generally accepted what Kerreen Reiger has identified as a new phase in Australian social history where “the production of children is now viewed more and more as a private choice rather than a social contribution” (2001: 4). They recognised the low level of government support as part of what they had to negotiate when thinking about children.
- **Common stereotypes about how differently situated women consider motherhood and its relationship to paid work, government benefits and policy were challenged.** For example: women choosing not to have children did not reflect the common image of them as career-driven high achievers or women who can’t find partners; and women with multiple children featured strongly among those exhibiting significant and on-going attachments to the labour market.
- **Focus on fertility “decision-making” obscures the extent to which reproductive patterns are the result of situation and circumstance.** Amongst the women with children, the prevalence of unplanned pregnancy was startling. Almost half of first pregnancies were described as either totally accidental or occurring much earlier than had been foreseen by the women concerned. This indicates that in our community reproduction is less planned than is often assumed. It supports our conclusion that **policy initiatives will be more central in women’s choices to move from one child to more children.** Very often, it was the decision about a second child that respondents characterised as a clear and thoughtful decision, where they weighed up available support and other life options. The experiences they had with their first children were crucial here.
- **Men and women approach thinking and talking about fertility in different ways.** The issues that were most important for men were not necessarily the issues that were most important for their partners, or for the other women who participated in this study. Reflecting society-wide constructions of men as breadwinners and providers, the males tended to be far concerned more about money, age and lifestyle and far less concerned (if at all) about career interruption, difficulties associated with birthing or child care arrangements

## 4. Concluding Comments

The picture of work/family balance and the decisions women and men make regarding child caring and paid employment in Victoria that emerged in our research was a complex one. A policy framework that makes explicit the intersection of social and employment policies is crucial to any policy approach that seeks to understand and support how women and men make choices about family formation, family care and workforce participation. The one hundred and fourteen women and men in this study, whether they were childless or not, in full-time or part-time employment or out of the workforce, identified the importance of flexible work, supportive workplaces, community services and cultural attitudes in how they chose to negotiate their varying life aspirations. There were many in this study who noted that they felt less secure now than they had previously. While women with children did focus more specifically on maternity leave, all the women interviewed talked of issues of work/life balance as important for them. It was clear that single policy initiatives addressing reproduction, family support or workforce participation of women with children will not be effective unless they are provided in the context of broader social, community and workplace supports for women and men.

Our research also found a distinct ***lack of resentment about and expectation of governmental support and initiatives***. While there were a number of women that particularly identified changes that had impacted negatively on their work/family choices, overall the people in this study were resigned to limited assistance in how they negotiated the challenges of work and family.

This indicates that people's work/family decisions, whilst influenced by perceptions of limited government or publicly supported services, difficult and/or expensive access to childcare, and concerns about workplace flexibility or inflexibility, are accepted as private decisions from which government and public policy are distant. Key workplace indicators such as the number of hours Australians work, and the concentration of women in part-time work suggest that work/family balance is becoming increasingly challenging for women and men. Public policy influence and leadership on issues of work/life balance, workforce participation by women and men with child care responsibilities, and family formation decision-making by men and women, will remain marginal at best, and negative at worst, unless a comprehensive policy framework is developed that:

- o locates and integrates workplace and employment policies with social and family support policies,
- o recognises the significance of paid maternity leave as demonstrating a public policy commitment to child care and women's workplace re-entry and
- o engages peak employer bodies in policy approaches to workplace attachment for women and men with children; skills retention within the workforce; and family formation decision-making .



## 5. Study Publications Relevant to Terms of Reference

### **FULL REPORT**

MAHER, JaneMaree, DEVER, Maryanne, CURTIN, Jennifer and SINGLETON, Andrew. *What Women (and Men) Want: Births, Policies and Choices*, Monash University, 2004. <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/ws/research/projects/families-fertility-future.html>

CURTIN, Jennifer. 'Representing Women's Interests in the Paid Maternity Leave Debate'. Australasian Political Science Association Refereed Conference Proceedings, University of Tasmania, 29 September – 1 October 2003, <http://www.utas.edu.au/government/APSA/RefereedPapers.html>

DEVER, Maryanne and CURTIN, Jennifer. 'The politics of reproduction: The Howard government, paid maternity leave and family friendly policy'. *Fertility, Families and the Future Working Paper No 3*. February 2004, School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University.

DEVER, Maryanne and MAHER, JaneMaree. 'Families, Fertility and the Future: Preliminary Thoughts and Findings'. *Fertility, Families and the Future Working Paper No 1*. October 2002, School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University.

DEVER, Maryanne and SAUGERES, Lise. 'I forgot to have children!': Untangling links between feminism, careers and voluntary childlessness. *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering: Special issue on 'Mothering and Work/Mothering as Work'*. 6(2): 116-126, 2004.

MAHER, JaneMaree 'A mother by trade: Australian women reflecting on mothering as activity, not identity'. *Australian Feminist Studies* 20 (46): 17-30, 2005.

MAHER, JaneMaree. 'Skills, Not Attributes: Rethinking Mothering as Work'. *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* 6 (2):7-16, 2004.

MAHER, JaneMaree and DEVER, Maryanne. 'What matters to women: Beyond Reproductive Stereotypes'. *People and Place*, Sept 2004.

MAHER, JaneMaree and SAUGERES, Lise. 'To Be or not to Be a Mother?: Cultural Representations and Ideologies of Mothering in Australia'. *Fertility, Families and the Future Working Paper No 2*. February 2004, School of Political and Social Inquiry, Monash University.