

CAREERS, RELATIONSHIPS AND CHILDREN: HOW WOMEN CAN “HAVE IT ALL”

**A speech on International Women’s Day 2005 to the Faculty of
Monash University submitted to the Federal House of
Representatives’ Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family**

**Dr Leslie Cannold, Fellow, Centre for Applied Philosophy and
Public Ethics, University of Melbourne, 3052**

Please address all correspondence to Dr Cannold at:

Lcannold@unimelb.edu.au

In 2003, the New York Times magazine ran a front-page story about the return of the ‘stay-at-home’ mum: a story that had already and would continue to receive coverage in Australia.ⁱ According to journalist Lisa Belkin, women’s flight from career represented their refusal to submit to the male-oriented demands of work. Having spent their twenties earning postgraduate degrees and forging careers in the law, business and the media, these women – having suddenly realised that motherhood was the most important job of all - were abandoning their careers and choosing to stay full-time at home.

But how fair is it to call these women’s decisions “choices”? Here are just two examples of what Belkin’s so-called opt-out generation — women she describes as ‘elite’, ‘successful’ and married to men with ‘substantial salaries and health insurance’ⁱⁱ —told her about why they left work.

Columbia law school graduate Katherine Brokaw moved to Atlanta with her husband to ensure a short commute to her law firm. She worked full-time

and had a great nanny. But when her daughter was just six months old, Katherine became the lead associate on a major case, which forced her to spend three months working a 'crushing schedule' of up to 15 hours a day, seven days a week while nursing a child who was still not sleeping through the night. When the trial date arrived, the judge postponed the case and then took it off his calendar indefinitely. Later, Katherine found out he'd decided to spend two weeks fishing.

Journalist Sally Sears, a mother of one, took nine years to regretfully quit her six-figure job in TV. 'I would have hung in there,' she said, 'but the days kept getting longer and longer.' She tried to go part-time but her station refused, saying it was all or nothing. Says Sally, now the homeroom mom at her son's school, 'It was wrenching for me to leave Channel 2. I miss being the lioness of the newsroom — walking through and having the interns say "There she goes." It kills me that I'm not contributing to my [retirement fund] anymore.'

What these stories strongly suggest is that it was not choice - but a palpable lack of it - that drove these women from the workforce. Indeed, one American researcher investigating the stay-at-home decision of highly successful women found that a large proportion felt this decision was forced on them by 'long work weeks, unsympathetic employers and inflexible workplaces'. The majority (66%), she said, would have preferred to be back at work.ⁱⁱⁱ

Yet, despite acknowledging the difficulties her interviewees faced in corporate America, Belkin suggested that these women bowed out because of a peculiarly feminine desire for 'balance', and a lack of ambition and drive:

As these women look up at the 'top', they are increasingly deciding that they don't want to do what it takes to get there. Women today have the equal right to make the same bargain that men have made for centuries — to take time for their family in pursuit of success. Instead women are redefining success. And in doing so, they are redefining work ... There is nothing wrong with money or power. But they come at a high price. And lately when women talk about success they use words like satisfaction,

balance, sanity ... Why don't women run the world? Maybe it's because they don't want to.

Belkin's uncharacteristically sloppy analysis here (her work for the *Times* is usually first-rate) falls down in a number of places. First, and most importantly, she assumes that what women do is what they *choose* to do. Not only is such a presumption illogical; it also has little in the way of evidence to back it up. Unfortunately, this has not stopped it corrupting not just the conclusions of journalists, who could be forgiven for not knowing better, but some sociological researchers, too. I'm speaking here about the work of British sociologist Catherine Hakim, who confidently argued from the facts of female workforce participation that women choose the low-quality work in which they predominate. The reason women choose low-paid, insecure jobs, argues Hakim, is that most women are grateful slaves: selflessly dedicated to their children and husbands, and appreciative of any work at all as long as it provides the flexibility they need to put their families first.

In a world in which the law, social attitudes and economic realities constrain women's freedom to choose their employment, and many other things besides, it is patently absurd to simply presume from what women do what they want to do, and would choose to do, were they truly free to do so. Freedom to choose, in my world, is something that is only possible when a woman has a number of high-quality options, and the freedom to select from among them. To discover what work/family arrangements women would select if they were deciding in conditions of maximum freedom it seems - at a bare minimum - necessary is necessary to ask women. To ask them,

preferably, when they are still young enough to either be unaware of or not feel intimidated by the social forces that may later succeed in even placing a ceiling on their dreams. On the other hand, those interested in generating data in support of conservative social agendas will act, as does Hakim, to prop up the 'does equals wants' equation. This is because the 'does equals wants' equation means all is right with current social and economic structures — that women are freely choosing the economic and employment disadvantage they suffer — and business can carry on as usual.

Belkin also errs when she arrives at 'choice' as an explanation of the 'opt-out' phenomenon: a conclusion based on her false premise that women today have the same freedom as men to 'take time' out from their family 'in pursuit of success'. The fact that they don't take time from their family therefore "proves" that women are fundamentally different from men: less interested in 'money and power' and more focused on 'satisfaction, balance and sanity'.

Whoa there, Nelly! In the world I live in, the consequences for women and children of trading family time for work success are — in the main — totally different from those faced by men. When women trade-off family time for paid work, the usual consequence is that their children spend more time in paid care, and they face a second shift of epic proportions when they finally do get home. In one Australian workplace, there was a vast difference between the number of senior female managers who did the majority of unpaid work at home (42%) and the number of male managers who did (4%).^{iv} Indeed, the effects of ambition on maternal well-being are so well known that they partially

explain why goal-oriented women decline to have kids in the first place. A recent photo in the *Sydney Morning Herald* said it all. Beside each minister in the Howard Government was the number of children they'd "produced for the nation". While male ministers in the most demanding portfolios have between two and five children each, top-ranking female ministers Kay Patterson and Amanda Vanstone, are childless.

As this fertility count suggests, the cost of success for working mums and working dads couldn't be more different. When men bargain away time with their families for work success, their usually full-time wives pick up the tab. That's why male success is a predictor of more children, not fewer.

Internationally, this story is the same. Almost without exception, corporate high-flyers — nearly always blokes — have a full-time wife holding the fort at home. In the rare cases where the CEO is a woman, she has a house-husband.^v

The point is that as things currently stand, Belkin's assertion that it is different feminine values, rather than harsher female realities, that are driving women to "opt out" lacks basic evidential support. This is not to say that women and men might not have different definitions of life success, or different levels of willingness to act on them. They might, and they might not. What particular middle-class women are doing in response to extreme levels of work/life stress indicate little — in my view — either way.

What existing evidence does indicate is that in the face of a system that is badly broken - and with little hope of structural adjustment on the horizon - women with cash behind them will exercise whatever options are available to them to fashion the best private solution they can for themselves and their individual families.

The Problem with Stay at Home Mothers and Breadwinning Dads

OK, this is the part where some may throw rocks, but I'm going to say it anyway. Women 'choosing' to stay at home as a means of resolving the work/family conflict is a problem. Not, I hasten to add, on a personal level. In a society where the demands of work are radically out of kilter with the demands of family life, and in which women bear nearly all the negative consequences of that imbalance, individual women may well be justified in doing what they see as necessary to ensure their family's well-being. Like Allison Pearson's fictional working mum Kate Reddy in *I Don't Know How She Does It*, many are simply collapsing under the stress of doing it all and have no option but to find a better way — and stat.

The problem comes when the solutions well-heeled women arrive at under duress are valorised as answers for everyone, rather than highly personal solutions to political problems. The problem is when such stories are seen as evidence of women's choices, rather than of the fight/flight decisions of cornered animals. When journalists such as Belkin refuse to acknowledge how men's unwillingness to share the domestic burden has severely limited

women's work/family choices, they encourage women to direct their anger and frustration in on themselves, rather than at the men and the male-dominated institutions that have failed to provide them with real and deserved opportunities to be both good parents and productive workers. Worse, shoddy journalistic analysis encourages women to blame feminism for telling them they can have it all, rather than the system that, despite concerted feminist efforts, has so far refused to change enough to give working parents – and those who'd like to be them one day - a fair go.

Journalists stand condemned for their continuing failure to expose the central fallacy of their endless cant that women 'can't have it all': that it is women's job — and the job of women alone — to make the two-earner household function properly. After all, the underlying 'thinking' runs, it was women who walked out on 'their' job of looking after home and hearth to enter the workplace, and consequently their responsibility to clean up the resulting mess. Surprisingly, even some well-known feminist activists and bureaucrats are guilty of this sort of woman-stands-alone logic. In her recent book *The End of Equality*, Anne Summers repeatedly refers to "women" whose children use formal care and the fines childcare centres impose on 'mothers' who 'pick up late'. Fathers are never mentioned. Similarly, Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward's recent campaign to increase the family-friendliness of the Australian workplace focused exclusively on maternity — rather than paternity or parental — leave. It's no wonder that with this sort of shallow analysis, women blame themselves when they can't make the

working mother role fly, and are finding clumps of hair falling out from the stress of trying.

The classist waffle of choice

Another problem with the 'choice' explanation for working mothers' retreat from the workforce, and many working women's delay of motherhood, is that it studiously avoids the issue of social class. You see, the whole idea of motherhood (but not fatherhood) as a career move assumes that maternal careerists are married to men making big enough bikkies to support their 'choice'. Though she declines to let it alter her opt-out thesis, Belkin admits that the mothers at the centre of her story are elite women with rich husbands: meaning they can afford the choices they make.

But the truth is that wealthy families organised along 1950s lines are impeding the work/family revolution that the vast majority of families not living this way so desperately await. When wealthy high-powered mums and dads indulge in 'labour specialisation' — meaning she does all of one thing (unpaid work at home) and he does nothing but the other (paid work at the office) — they disadvantage couples who are struggling to share the benefits and costs of paid work and childcare equitably. It is simply not possible for a working mother, or a working father who does his fair share at home and whose partner also works, to compete in the workplace with a worker who has a full-time or working but oppressed wife, at home.

Well-off traditional family also reduces the number of employees in the coffee room grumbling about breakfast meetings and the low value accorded to part-time workers. They ensure, in other words, that there are fewer disgruntled workers plotting to achieve change in ways both large and small. The husband with the wife at home also exerts drag on revolutionary momentum because, as the biggest beneficiary of the unfair advantages his domestic situation confers, he's hardly likely to bite the hand of the family-unfriendly workplace regimen that feeds him.

Another problem with the 'traditional' family is that it ties the breadwinner into long hours and a daily workplace grind that preclude him from participating in a meaningful way in the life of his own family. While some men are obviously more than happy not to 'be there', others hate missing out on their children's lives and strongly believe that their absence undermines their children's development and well-being. Active fatherhood, in other words, requires quantity as well as quality time. Steve Biddulph argues that blokes at the office for more than the standard 40 hours per week simply can't be there as often as their children — particularly their sons — need them:

The bad news is that even when things are going well in the family, it may not be enough. Even when a father is present, committed and available at weekends and evenings in a healthy marriage and with all the ideal conditions, sons still miss out. It's highly likely that boys have a biological need for several hours of one-to-one male contact per day. Put another way, to have a demanding job, commute to work in a city and raise sons well is an impossibility. Something has to give.^{vi}

There is also growing evidence that at least some men find the breadwinner role oppressive, and do not freely choose it. A number of recent Australian studies reveal that fathers are 'now less likely to see their primary role as

breadwinners and are more focused on their role in providing emotional support to their children'. For instance, in a study reported in *Family Matters* in 2001, a random telephone survey found that many fathers see being accessible to their children as 'the most important aspect of their role ... in terms of the impact they have on their children's wellbeing and adjustment'.^{vii} Growing male dissatisfaction with being 'just a breadwinner' can also be seen in survey results that show a growing number of fathers fed up with having only a few hours each week to spend with their kids. The vast majority cite workplace demands as the source of the problem. In one Australian poll, 68% of fathers said work commitments were the major barrier to their being more involved with their children.^{viii} Men in The Netherlands state a preference for working fewer hours when their children are young, with many nominating a four-day week as ideal.^{ix} A 2001 Newspann of workers that appeared in the conservative broadsheet *The Australian* found one in every four men expressing mild or severe dissatisfaction at the balance between work and family in their own lives.

Let's Talk Solutions

What changes to the way we work and raise children do women, not to mention men, really need if they are to be the sort of parents they want to be while retaining the power to earn and be successful at work? What sort of changes will be profound enough to encourage waiting and watching childless women, and their anxious male counterparts, to throw caution to the wind and start having the children they'd really like to have? What changes to employment attitudes, policies and practices will help women get to

motherhood not just once, but as many times as they see fit? Will enable women who have already accepted the challenge of working motherhood to meet that challenge without morphing into superwoman, breaking down from guilt and stress, or - feeling they have no other option - “abandoning the climb and heading home”. Most importantly, in what way — and with whose help — ought women go about pursuing such solutions, once they have been identified?

Can Women Have it All?

The first thing we need to get clear about – crystal clear about - is that women can “have it all” if they don’t have to *do* it all. The claim that the work/family crunch is the result of women trying to ‘have it all’ is little more than reactionary drivel dressed up as homespun pragmatism. The only retort to those who insist on describing the problem this way is to ask why, if it is fair that men can have it all when it comes to work and family, that it is so damn unreasonable for women to expect the same? Sure, the way work and domestic life are currently organised, women can’t have it all without being Superwoman with a triple bypass each day, and collapsing each night under the weight of their own guilt, frustration and exhaustion. [no wonder, as the Women’s Health in Australia report revealed on Tuesday, we’re not interested in sex!] But a key problem with this picture is the way work and domestic life are currently organised. Women aren’t the only ones losing out to misplaced social nostalgia about white picket fences. Men are too, not to mention children. The take-home point is this: parents need to share work and family obligations, not only because this is what’s fair and because it’s the only way

to ensure that both have opportunities for mastery and pleasure in their lives, but also because this is the arrangement that's best for children.

The solution to the work/family problem, in a nutshell, is to generate more of what I call "gorgeous men", and ally with them to challenge the structures of the workplace that inhibit and oppress families. Who are the gorgeous men?

Men who have the income and educational credentials to be part of the problem, but have chosen instead to be part of the solution. They include, but are not limited to:

- Single men willing to commit to women they love within reasonable time frames, or when an unplanned pregnancy intrudes on well-laid plans
- Partnered men willing to say 'yes' to a partner who wants to get pregnant while she's still young, despite his job anxieties and his knowledge that physiologically, he's still got time;
- Men who refuse to allow jibes about their masculinity or costs to their career deter them from altering their work hours so they can share the domestic work with their partner and be an active father to their kids.

Current shortages of gorgeous men (and as I document in my book *What, No Baby?*, they exist, but are in woefully short supply) are due to the unnecessarily high costs both women and men pay, or fear they'll pay, if they share both the economic and the domestic responsibilities. Make it possible for parents to raise kids without being forced to sacrifice their commitment to equality, their relationship with one another, their careers or their financial

security, and you not only reduce the number of mothers suffering nervous exhaustion - or dropping out – from the stress of trying to do it all, but create the conditions for more men and women to put up their hands for the job of parenting in the first place.

Part-time work

For many the clear answer to the work/family crunch is part-time work. But I'm not convinced. Sure, part-time work is currently the best of a none-too-stellar array of options available to working women forced to do it all. But part-time work, along with parental leave and flexible work arrangements, creates exploitative cul-de-sacs that prevent career development and advancement because of the illogical belief pervasive amongst the nation's managers that anyone working part-time or flexibly can't be 'serious'. It also pays poorly, in part because it tends to be done overwhelmingly by women, and to be the sort of 'women's work' — primary school teaching, nursing, social work — that is consistently undervalued and consequently underpaid. One American study found that over a fifteen-year period, the average woman worker earned \$449,101 less than her male counterpart; this meant she earned 38 cents for every dollar a male earned. This massive discrepancy was due in part to the wage gap but was also a result of the working patterns characteristic of mothers, in which part-time work features, and breaks in employment abound.^x What all this means is that the only way part-time work can form even a partial solution to the work/family conflict is if women start getting paid the same as men for the same day's work and (relatedly) if traditional

'women's work' starts to pay as much as jobs in which male workers dominate.

We've got a fair way to go. According to the Gender Issues Research Center, in only 8.5% of major fields do US women earn 100% or more of men's salaries. This represents just 2% of women's employment. In about half the employment fields (which account for 48% of female employment), women earn just 87% of men's salaries.

But even if part-time workers get treated seriously and women achieve pay equity, it won't solve the problem of full-time workers resenting the break parental part-timers get from the oppression caused by the intensification of work and the open-all-hours culture of the corporate world. Despite the losses part-timers accept (in salary and career advancement) for the 'privilege' of working part-time, there is increasing evidence to suggest that full-time workers resent their part-time parental colleagues and feel they are being cheated because of their lack of opportunity to reduce their full-time hours, and because their workload increases in response to the part-time parental worker's absence. This is why I have to be frank and say that, human nature being what it is, I have grave doubts that any 'special privileges' type of solution to the work/family crunch will ever fly.

Whatever change is going to be put in place to enable parents, and those who want to be parents, to be egalitarian partners, active parents and responsible workers, it's going to have to be available — and of benefit — to all workers

equally. At the heart of such a change is a fundamental shift in our perception of workers. At the moment, we pretend that all workers are the same, and that none has significant responsibilities outside the workplace. What we need to start realising is that nearly all of them do have such responsibilities, or will, or would like to, if they had the chance.

A Question of Time

According to Australian historian Marilyn Lake, at the heart of the problem is the question of time. In particular, the lack of time in contemporary societies to meet existing relationship and caring responsibilities, and to generate new ones. In a seminal article on the work/family crunch, Lake argues that for women to achieve at work, they need equity in the home (while men, I would add, need less oppressive employment conditions if they are to have equity in the home). While childcare is an important part of the women's liberation equation, says Lake, it isn't the whole story, or even the most important part. What is imperative is the reconstruction of society in general, and the workplace in particular, to enable men and women to share the work of raising children equally. 'In an ideal society,' writes Lake, 'we would all share the satisfactions of productive and creative work with the responsibilities and rewards of caring for people.' Such a vision cannot, she notes, be achieved without a 'direct challenge to the ... organisation of work'.^{xi}

For Lake, if we are to have the time necessary to properly manage our responsibilities to care, a reduction of the standard working week to around 30 hours, or a few hours short of four 8-hour days, is required. Such a reduction wouldn't just be for parents; it would be for everyone. Such a change is long

overdue in the 21st century, in the same way as the introduction of the 40-hour week was long overdue at the start of the 20th century. It would allow parents of older children to pick their kids up after school and cover school holidays, and it would allow those with young children to pool their hours to cover half the working week, and share the remainder with grandparents (who, if they still work, would have more time, too), other parenting couples, a childcare centre, or another child-minder. For the childless, time to develop a life outside the office could be put to use engaging in meaningful activities, including forming and nurturing romantic relationships, while empty-nesters would have time to look after their ageing parents, their grandchildren and, eventually, one another. Finally, a 30-hour week would allow those without pressing relationship demands to really live: to engage in further study, learn an instrument, read, travel or volunteer in the community, for example. In addition, a reduction of working hours offers the potential for workloads to be redistributed, from the overworked to both the under-employed and the unemployed, with a consequent reduction in the individual and societal costs associated with these problems.

I know a 30-hour week seems, given the current insanity of corporate culture, like so much Boston crème pie in the sky, but by world standards, it's far from outlandish. In 2000, the French brought in a 35-hour week. This was designed to increase employment and productivity, and make the lives of individuals and families less conflicted and more — get this — enjoyable. Despite the usual Henny-Penny predictions from the business community about unsustainable costs, uncompetitiveness, the certain collapse of the French

economy (insert more predictable corporate yada-yada here), several years on, the sky not only remains in its usual firmament locale, but French citizens enthusiastically support the changes because they've delivered such vast improvements in the quality of life. In addition to improving the quality of jobs (an issue likely to be of real concern to 'fully employed' US workers who are compelled to hold down two minimum wage 'McJobs' to make ends meet), the 35-hour week has lowered unemployment. The Jospin Government attributes at least one-fifth of the new jobs created in France from 1997 to 2001 to the 35-hour work week.^{xii}

What would happen if governments in other Western countries actually sought to represent workers and small business owners, who are often forced to work long hours to remain competitive with the corporates, and demanded an end to the employment *status quo*, in which corporations keep the number of available jobs artificially low in order to max-out the hourly contributions of those they do employ, with little concern for the detrimental impact such work conditions have on workers and their families' well-being? What if, instead, governments committed themselves to ensuring that all workers had access to the sort of humane employment conditions that would allow them to claim back their lives or to build secure and meaningful ones? What if, in the absence of such a concerted government push, workers started asking those claiming to represent them why at a time in history when Western citizens are enjoying unprecedented levels of health and wealth, our quality of life — as measured by the time we have to live, to love and to contribute to a better future — is declining?

While the 30-hour week is the major plank of my proposal to reduce the stress of working mothers and the incidence of women ending up childless by circumstance rather than choice, other economic changes will also be required if we are to create more gorgeous men and facilitate their partnering and procreating with child-desiring women. Job security is a big one: it is essential if we are to get waiting and watching women (and men) who are nervous about the impact parenthood could have on their economic security to stop dithering and make a move. It seems clear that governments did not foresee the impact on birth-rates of allowing businesses the 'flexibility' to contract and dispose of labour as needed, and it is high time, as Fagin once said, to 'think this one out again'. Emergency leave and flexible working hours are also important, and while ideally they would be available to all, they are definitely essential to any parent-facilitating employment package. The same holds true for parental leave arrangements (with built-in financial incentives for parents to share leave between them), low-cost high-quality childcare, quality government schools and tax and child endowment benefits. All are necessary parts of defraying the cost of parenthood, and thus reducing parents' need to work overtime to make ends meet.



Know the joke about the Irish traffic cop? A bunch of visitors in a car stop to ask him the way to a well-known tourist haunt. 'Oh, that's easy,' he says. 'It's ... you just ... well if you go ...' He pauses. 'That's funny,' he says, scratching his head. 'I don't think you can get there from here.'

The powers that be put a lot of energy into making us feel like that police officer. That the most logical solutions are too outlandish to even be spoken out loud, let alone achieved. That the *status quo* is not just the way it is, but the only way it can be — for the sake of the economy, of course. That we simply cannot get to a world in which women are truly free to have the children they want and to engage in meaningful work and parent well at the same time from the society we live in now.

Well I say phooey. Western societies have long gone past sense when it comes to talking about the economy; they have lost sight of the fact that economies are meant to serve people, not the other way around. The question is, which people is the economy currently set up to serve, and if we were to change things, who would be served worse, and who better? If there isn't time for the average person to have children, to raise them well and to enjoy them, then as a nation our priorities are out of order, and any economic system that produces or tolerates that disorder deserves to be challenged, and overthrown.

Besides, most big business claims about the unchangeable fundamentals of economic management are just propaganda. Take the constant assertion of Australian and American businesses that their top priority when making decisions about how the company operates is to increase shareholder value. If this means, as it so often does, that staff have to take a cut in pay or conditions, or even lose their jobs, chief executives consistently suggest that

that's just the way it has to be because the first responsibility of a corporation must be to its shareholders.

Well, this is just rubbish. In Japan, Germany and France, business is accountable to multiple stakeholders including employees and customers. These arrangements, an outgrowth of both corporate law and corporate practice, ensure that the impact of corporate policy on these groups is considered before decisions are made.

My point is that there is nothing necessary or inevitable about the way business conducts itself: with all the power in the world, big business has a choice. If the chief executives of the Fortune 500 companies decided tomorrow that they wanted to reduce the hours of the standard working week, in a few months' time, the wheels would be in motion. Anything can change, and does, if those with power want to change it. The question is are parents, and those who want to become them, powerful enough, and united enough, to convince the powers that be that the time has come for such a change?

ⁱ {Overington, 2003 #663}

ⁱⁱ {Belkin, 2003 #643, 44}

ⁱⁱⁱ {Hewlett, 2002 #636, 95}

^{iv} {CCH Australia, 1994 #733, 303}

^v {Beard, quoted in Summers, 2003 #695}

^{vi} {Biddulph, 1994, 1995, 1995, 113}

^{vii} Hand, K and Lewis, V (2001). 'Fathers views on family life and paid work'. *Family Matters* 61 (Autumn): 26-9.

^{viii} As quoted in Hand and Lewis, p. 26

^{ix} {Netherlands Family Council, 2000 #563, 3}

^x {Hewlett, 2000 #546} Madrick (2004)

^{xi} {Lake, 1986 #600, 135-6}

^{xii} {Trumbull, 2001 #746}