A family, a career, a problem [AU] [1]

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EXCERPTS

The evidence is incontrovertible. Marriages, families and communities are suffering as the worlds of work and home collide. The time-crunch is jeopardising our very ability to care for each other, for children, for the elderly, for our friends and neighbours. Even the nation's fertility rate is at stake.

John Howard called it a "barbecue stopper". The work/family juggle was "the biggest policy issue we have", he said. It was the topic of spirited conversations around the nation's barbecues. But the federal budget came and went and families are still running on empty. The issue, considered vital a year ago, was ignored.

The impact of the workplace revolution on the fabric of Australian society is the thesis of a new book by Barbara Pocock, The Work/Life Collision.

From the marital bed to the child-care centre, from friendships to tuckshops, hardly an area of life has been immune from the malign influence of the new work world.

Four out of 10 workers at any time are trying to combine paid work with care of children or disabled or sick relatives. Over their lifetime, most workers will have to juggle these jobs.

"The combination of paid work and care of others is far from a marginal concern," says Pocock, the director of the Centre for Labour Research at Adelaide University. "But the costs in relationship strains, guilt, and the loss of caring are hidden. The stresses have been privatised."

Her in-depth interviews with about 250 Australians show the fabled "family-friendly" workplace to be a rarity. Islands of innovation exist and are heavily promoted. But most workers are being pulled in the opposite direction by countervailing pressures. Most do not have the luxury of flexible start and finish times offered by a handful of enterprises; rather they are under pressure to work longer and harder.

The combination of longer work hours, an intensified work culture, job insecurity and high rates of maternal employment has imperilled our quality of life, Pocock argues.

It has led to a loss of community, emptied our suburbs and turned neighbourhoods into friend-free zones. For many, the locus of community has shifted from where they live to where they work. At-home mothers, the elderly and the unemployed are stranded in dormitory suburbs. Yet for many workers - casuals, short-term contractors and working parents with a child-care deadline to meet - the workplace has proved an inferior substitute community.

The family/work collision has also white-anted our sex lives: "We're too tired to be intimate," a worker confides. And it has produced pressure, resentment, and rush. Bitterness over the unfair allocation of housework is eating away at relationships, Pocock found. The work/family collision has also whipped up an "epidemic" of mother guilt: "If you are home with your kids, you should be out working. If you are out working you should be at home ..."

And it has turned us into a nation of grumps. Many of Pocock's interview subjects described their hard-working partners as irritable, short-tempered and simply unavailable.

Australians can't blame feminism for their harried, overstretched lives, nor pin hopes for relief on the resurrection of the 1950s housewife. "It is not feminism that let women down but workplaces, governments, families and other institutions," Pocock argues.

Huge changes have occurred in the number of hours men and women devote to paid work. Huge social changes have reduced the hours we can spend caring for the young, the sick, the aged, our partners and our friends. But despite the transformation in our personal and work lives, key institutions have hardly changed at all. Women flocked into jobs ahead of even basic accommodations like paid maternity leave - and 30 years on they are still waiting. No wonder Australians feel they are on collision course.

Fwe would argue with Pocock's thesis about the pressures attached to combining paid work and family work. But some question whether the effects are uniformly bleak. Many people derive a lot of satisfaction from their work, leading the American writer Arlie Russell

Hochschild to argue that many prefer to be at work than at home. That's why they pass up family-friendly initiatives, even when on offer. At home chaos awaits. The office, in comparison, is a sea of calm.

Ruth Weston, the principal researcher at the Australian Institute of Family Studies, found that men who worked long hours were happy with their lot although they knew they were putting their relationships in peril. "For some time pressure can be a challenge; it's stressful but the rewards of work are great," she says. "For the real battlers who work long hours the meaning of time pressure will be different."

And world data on stress, presented at a recent Australian conference, shows women felt rushed for time the higher their income, and the more options they had in life. And they felt this pressure regardless of whether they worked. "Yuppies kvetching" - translated from Yiddish to mean whingeing - did not really deserve our sympathy, the authors of the data argued.

Indisputably, however, more Australians are grappling with the time-bind. A measure of the profound social change in Australia is the rising number of mothers with young babies in paid work. New data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) shows, for example, more than one-third of mothers with babies under one year old have a paid job, a proportion that has doubled in 20 years. By the time the youngest child in a couple-family has turned two, 52 per cent of the mothers are in work, usually part-time. Whatever the motivation to work, the average mother of young children has added a half-time job to her unchanged load of domestic duties.

At the same time, many men, in particular, work longer hours, and spend more time commuting to work than in the past. The average full-time employee works three hours a week longer than his counterpart of 20 years ago. Even if long-hours workers love their jobs, their partners don't, Pocock found, and their children miss out. "Thank heavens for the video camera or he would have missed everything," a woman married to a flight attendant told her.

Foremost among the institutions that are culprits in this story are workplaces. For all the family-friendly rhetoric, and some celebrated cases, most workplaces still operate as if the ideal worker is "care-less". Yet the ideal worker with a wife at home full-time is the minority - just over 60 per cent of Australian couples with children are dual-earner families. Labour laws, schools, and men's participation in domestic work have also changed far too little. Even the myth we cling to of what constitutes a proper mother - "there morning, noon and night" - is unreconstructed from the 1950s.

As well, the amount of leave workers are entitled to has hardly changed in 30 years. In a society pressed for time, and desperately needing a break, a shrinking proportion of workers has access to basic leave provisions. With 45 per cent of workers in non-permanent jobs, a smaller proportion of Australians than ever before is eligible for annual holidays, sick leave and long-service leave. Ironically a lot of the workers who miss out are mothers.

Yet Australia's "working carers" need access to more leave, not less, Pocock argues. And they need different, more flexible leave from the kind that emerged in the past to ameliorate the lives of long-term male workers. "This is bigger than paid maternity leave," she says. "Paid maternity leave is essential but we need a comprehensive new regime of leave provisions."

This should include making long-service leave portable between employers, and an extra two weeks' leave to care for sick dependants. Currently employees have to use their own sick leave entitlements - where they have them. Employees should be able to accumulate leave instead of pay increases, she argues, and men should get two weeks paid paternity leave on the birth of a child. As well, workers should have the right to extended unpaid leave.

Pocock has a raft of suggestions to ease the pressures on working families, many requiring government action, and changes to industrial awards, and more costs for employers. And it is here that she is likely to find argument with the Howard Government.

The government is likely to offer some response before the next election to the demands for paid maternity leave. Women out of the workforce are likely to benefit, too. But while John Howard is strongly committed to the notion of giving mothers more choice, he is unlikely to tackle the hard issues of workplace reform that Pocock sees as essential to the choice debate. She believes both dual- and sole-earner families need more support. But women's choices, she argues, are restrained by a hostile work environment, including the long hours many husbands have to work. The offer of more money to women at home - in the absence of real reforms to the workplace, and affordable child care - is a false choice, Pocock says.

But a cap on overtime and a reduced standard working week are suggestions Mark Wooden, of the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, describes as "fanciful".

To restrict the hours Australians are allowed towork will lead to sackings, more overtime, or the restrictions will just be ignored, he says.

"Unless the CEO starts working fewer hours, no-one else will," he says.

For a while it seemed that Australian women had fashioned their own unique solution to the clash of work and family. Compared with women in many countries, Australian mothers are overwhelmingly part-time workers. And surveys by the Australian Institute of Family Studies have consistently shown part-time workers to be happier than full-time or non-working Australians. Is there a problem with the Australian way?

It is this area of part-time work that requires, in Pocock's view, major rehabilitation. For many, part-time work has proved to be the answer. But many long-term casuals, as well as part-time lawyers and doctors, resent their second-class status, the reduced conditions, lack of promotion, training and job security. "It is a choice men simply do not face," Pocock says. Taking the "mummy track" is a choice some women make to accommodate their husband's long work hours, or because full-time work is so inflexible, greedy, and incompatible with caring.

The conditions of part-time work need to be "levelled up" and part-timers made permanent with access to proper conditions, Pocock says. Pocock has plenty of ideas for Howard's family/work agenda. It's a nirvana he is unlikely to embrace. But the first step would be to drop the pretence that fancy award nights and jawboning have already delivered Australians the family friendly workplace. "It is time," says Pocock, "for the institutions to catch up with the realities that are now our lives."

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