

COUNTRY - SPECIFIC ARTICLES

The Attempt to Combine Work and Motherhood in Australia

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Australia, like many other mature industrial countries, has an ageing population. In 2007 people aged 65 years and over made up 13 percent of the population¹. In the past year this figure has increased by 2.7 percent². In contrast, over the same period, the number of people aged less than 15 years of age increased by only 0.6 percent³. As a result of this ageing population, Australia will incur several social and economic costs. Namely, there will be a decrease in the number of people involved in the paid workforce, and an increase in the amount of money needed to support the aged in healthcare, the pharmaceutical benefits scheme, pension funds and aged residential care. In order to offset these costs there is a need to increase the number of individuals involved in the paid workforce. Women with children have been targeted as one of the major groups at the centre of this recruitment process⁴. As such, this issue of women combining work and family after becoming mothers has become a hot political topic in Australia, previous Prime Minister John Howard labelling it “the great Australian barbeque stopper”⁵.

Sarah Palin, the US Republican Party vice-presidential candidate, is the current focal point in the issue of women combining paid employment and motherhood. With five children, including an infant with Down syndrome and a pregnant 17-year-old, Palin’s candidacy has set off a fierce argument about whether there are enough hours in the day for her to take on the vice-presidency, and whether it is “right” for her to try⁶. Palin believes that women can balance family life with ambitious careers, and this belief has sparked mixed responses. Her defenders have included mothers of all ideological shapes and sizes; social conservatives, long time defenders of stay-at-home-motherhood, have applauded Palin’s work/life choices; some working mothers have reacted angrily; whilst others are concerned that Palin’s performance in the vice-presidential race may negatively reflect on the ability of working mothers in general⁷. These mixed reactions are indicative of the fundamental confusion in contemporary society about the status of caring for young children, and the role mothers ought to assume in the task.

The issue of women with children combining their roles of mother and paid employee is a hot topic within Australian society. Traditional notions of “good motherhood” continue to permeate; that is, as a result of biology (pregnancy, breastfeeding, etc), women are instinctively and “naturally” the ones who should take on the primary care role of children⁸. And that “good mothers” should be devoted to their children to the exclusion of their own needs⁹, including perhaps, the

need or desire to engage in paid employment. These traditional notions suggest that at present in Australian society there exists a troubled relationship between maternal embodiment, choice and freedom. That after becoming a mother, women appear to make decisions about work and motherhood underneath an umbrella of social constraints and expectations in regards to “natural” and “good” motherhood¹⁰.

Access to high-quality, affordable childcare is perhaps the most obvious manner in which to facilitate women in combining their dual roles of mother and paid employee. Adequate childcare arrangements are an important determinant in women’s labour market participation, which affect both the timing and intensity of the labour force commitment of women with children¹¹. In feminist scholarship, two approaches to childcare provision have held centre-stage: the “hands-off” approach of the American and British governments which effectively have no national policy in this area; and the systems of extensive, state-funded provision exemplified by the Scandinavian countries, in particular Sweden, Finland and Denmark¹². Australia is one of several countries lumped into a third category of “other cases”¹³.

Australia has experienced a “mixed economy” in the development of its childcare services. From the late nineteenth century, philanthropic organisations provided the main source of care for children of working mothers, whilst private, for-profit services operated on the periphery¹⁴. It wasn’t until the post-war economic boom reached its peak in the late-1960s, that the Commonwealth Government took action to subsidise the provision of non-profit, community-based childcare services¹⁵. This continued into the 1980s, when concern over the cost of childcare in the government budget began to surface. As such, in 1991, a major shift in Australian childcare policy occurred with the government extending subsidisation to privately owned, for-profit care¹⁶. This shift in Australian childcare policy away from non-profit, community-based services towards the private sector firmly cements Australian childcare policy in a unique position when placed in an international context¹⁷.

The shift towards the “marketization” of childcare services in Australia has resulted in a growing number of families unable to pay for childcare. This combined with the continued strength of traditional notions of motherhood has meant that Australia has yet to find and put into practice adequate measures to facilitate women in combining their dual roles of mother and paid employee. Taking into account the social ills likely to be experienced as a result of the ageing population,

it is imperative that a solution be found in order to equip women with the ability to be both a good mother and a paid employee.

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7 Ibid.

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9 Jacqueline Lerner (1994)

10 See Reid, Rhiannon "Women, Work and Motherhood" *Honors Thesis in Human Geography*. (2007) Unpublished research.

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15 Brennan, D. (1998)

16 Brennan, D., "The ABC of childcare politics" in *Australian Journal of Social Issues*. 42 (2007) 2: 213 – 216.

17 Baldock, C. V. (1994)