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A NEW WORK/CARE REGIME: WILL IT PROMOTE AN EQUAL DIVISION OF DOMESTIC LABOUR?

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ABSTRACT

Despite women's increased involvement in the workforce, there has been little corresponding change to the division of domestic labour between men and women. According to Barbara Pocock (2003) and HREOC (2007), this lack of change reflects a wider mismatch between women's changing roles in society and the implicit assumption of a traditional division of domestic labour within the workplace and other key social institutions. Both these social commentators call for a new work/care regime to recognise caring responsibilities across the life cycle. However, other research suggests that while a new work/care regime may help make an equal division of labour more feasible, it may make little difference to men's involvement in domestic labour.

1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, Australian families have undergone dramatic social change. Women with children have greatly increased their overall workforce participation while men's workforce participation has slightly declined. However, these developments have made little difference to the division of domestic labour between men and women (ABS, 1999). According to two specific social commentators, namely Barbara Pocock (2003) and HREOC (2007) the continuing gender inequality surrounding the division of domestic labour reflects a wider lack of change to the key cultures and institutions that shape our everyday actions at both home and work (Pocock, 2003:1). In other words, key institutions and culture lag behind the contemporary realities of Australian family life. The current mismatch between current family life and outdated social institutions can be understood as a 'work/life collision' (Pocock, 2003:2). To address this discrepancy, Pocock (2003) and HREOC call for a new work/care regime in which caring responsibilities are recognised by key social institutions such as the workplace. While this approach may help address a range of difficulties associated with balancing work and family responsibilities, it is rather limited in its ability to bring about an equal division of labour.

2 DISCUSSION

At the core of the work/life collision framework is a critique of the embedded social norm of an 'ideal worker' in the majority of workplaces in Australia and overseas (Connell, 2005; Pocock, 2003; HREOC, 2007). An ideal worker can be described as someone who moves immediately into paid employment once they have obtained relevant career credentials and works long hours without interruptions or breaks for extended periods of time. Rewards such as

promotions, high pay and high status tend to be reserved for workers who most closely fit the norm of the 'ideal worker' (Drago, Black and Wooden, 2004:2).

The requirements involved in fitting the 'ideal worker' norm imply that such an employee is not encumbered with caring responsibilities (Pocock 2003:177). It is assumed that such workers have 'wives' who are primary care-givers to children (or other dependents) and who take primary responsibility for managing the household. In other words, a traditional division of labour between men and women within the family is assumed. This assumption is built into the structure and expectations not just of the workplace, but of many other significant social institutions such as schools, whose scheduled hours and vacations are often not compatible with the work hours and expectations of full time employment (Edgar, 2005; HREOC, 2007).

These expectations are out of step with the realities of the contemporary Australian workforce. The notion of an ideal worker as an unencumbered citizen makes it especially difficult for mothers, who currently bear a significantly larger burden of unpaid child care and domestic work than fathers (ABS, 1999), to participate in the workforce. Those who do undertake paid employment often seek out arrangements that are compatible with their family responsibilities such as permanent part time work, and making use of family-friendly provisions (Pocock, 2003; Connell 2005:375). However, the use of family friendly provisions is associated with various penalties including less pay, inferior employment conditions and reduced prospects for promotion (Connell, 2005; Pocock, 2003).

Meanwhile fathers, (often the primary earners of their families) who try to meet the 'ideal worker' standard by working long hours have little time available to spend at home with their families (Pocock, 2003). Hence, they are restricted in their ability to share unpaid domestic work and child care more fairly. According to HREOC (2007:91) 'Factors associated with the workplace present major barriers to father's involvement in caring for their children', and ultimately means that they are 'unable to contribute fairly to caring work' (HREOC, 2007:97). In other words, the time demands of their employment effectively prevent a more equal division of labour between men and women. Within this theoretical framework, the inflexible nature of key social institutions (particularly the workplace) is the major culprit that has prevented men and women from sharing domestic responsibilities more equally.

In light of these inadequate 'solutions' Pocock (2003) and HREOC (2007) have called for the current work/life collision to be dismantled and replaced with a new work/care regime that more accurately matches the needs of modern Australian families. The assumption that workers do not have caring responsibilities would be replaced by a fundamental recognition of the changing care needs of families across the life cycle. In practical terms fundamental changes need to be made within workplaces such as reduced work hours (Pocock, 2003:246) and universal access to improved family-friendly provisions (HREOC, 2007). Similarly, the key institutions and culture that frame family life including the law, the labour market, schools, preschools and institutions of care (Pocock, 2003:1) need to redesign their everyday practices to adequately reduce the current mismatch between employment and caring responsibilities. This process has been given several different names. Barbara Pocock (2003) has called it 'The New Australian Work/Care Regime'. In the recent HREOC report 'It's About Time: Women, men, work and family - Final Paper 2007', this is called a 'shared work - valued care' approach (HREOC, 2007:xii).

2.1 THE LIMITS OF A NEW WORK/CARE REGIME

A new work/care regime is designed to address a range of problems associated with the current work/life collision. The unequal division of labour is only one of many issues that reflect the problems associated with the current work/life collision. However, there appears to be little analysis of the potential of a new work/care regime to address the unequal division of domestic labour specifically. This discussion aims to fill this gap by isolating the division of domestic labour and assessing whether the measure of a new work/care regime are likely to bring about a more equal division of domestic labour.

While the current lack of change of key social institutions has played a role in keeping current domestic arrangements intact, a new work/care regime may be limited in its ability to effectively challenge the currently unequal division of labour. Some research demonstrates that even when men's work patterns do not fit a male breadwinner 'ideal worker' model, or when they reduce their time in the paid workforce, there is little difference in their involvement in unpaid domestic labour compared to men who work full time. Furthermore, when men do share domestic labour, they often set specific limits on their involvement.

2.2 WILL FEWER WORK HOURS FOR MEN MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

The following data is from wave three of the HILDA survey, which was carried out in 2003 (Headey, B. Warren, D. and Harding, G., 2006:viii). The figures discussed here are based upon men and women who live with a partner.

Table 1: TIME USE BY GENDER AND LABOUR FORCE STATUS (AVERAGE HOURS PER WEEK)

	Employment and Employment related activities		Housework and household errands		Outdoor tasks		Total	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Labour Force Status								
Employed full-time	50.7	43.9	8.0	16.9	5.1	2.7	63.0	62.9
Employed part-time	22.1	21.2	9.6	24.3	6.3	3.3	37.7	48.4
Unemployed	n.a.	n.a.	17.0	27.6	8.4	3.5	25.2	31.1
Not in the labour force	n.a.	n.a.	11.1	30.9	9.3	4.1	20.2	34.9
Total	35.5	18.3	9.0	25.2	6.3	3.5	49.7	46.2

Source: Headey, B., Warren, D. and Harding, G. (2006) *Families, Incomes and Jobs: A Statistical Report of the HILDA Survey*, The Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, Melbourne p.35

There is a gap of over seven hours per week between full time and part time employed women on housework/household tasks. This suggests that for women, time not spent in paid employment activities is redirected to unpaid housework/household tasks (and a small amount also redirected to outdoor household tasks). In other words, less time spent in the workforce does enable women to spend more time on unpaid household tasks.

However, the employment status of men appears to make a substantially smaller difference to the time spent on housework/household errands overall. For men, there is a gap of just 1.6 hours per week between full time and part time employed men. In other words, employed men spend between 8 to 10 hours per week on housework/household errands regardless of whether they are employed full time or part time (Headey et. al. 2006:35). Furthermore, comparing the differences that full time and part time employed men spend on outdoor tasks reveals a similarly minimal difference, given that the time gap between full time and part time employed men on outdoor tasks is less than one hour per week. These findings indicate that for men, time not spent in paid employment is not re-directed to either housework/household errands or outdoor tasks to the same extent as is it for women. In other words, fewer hours in paid employment do not make a substantial difference to the time spent by men on unpaid household tasks.

2.3 WHAT THESE FIGURES INDICATE:

Ultimately the notion that a new work/care regime with reduced work hours will lead to a more equal division of labour is not supported by these findings in the division of domestic labour. The minimal difference in the time spent on housework/household errands between full time employed men and part time employed men suggests that even when men's employment patterns do not conform to that of the 'ideal worker' male breadwinner model, they still spend substantially little time on housework/household errands compared to men who work full time. This ultimately suggests that the current inflexibility surrounding the workplace may not be a major factor in men's currently limited involvement in unpaid domestic labour.

This is not an isolated finding. Several recent qualitative studies have also found that working shorter hours for men is no guarantee of that they will make a substantial contribution to unpaid domestic labour or child care. Research into the labour market transition experiences of Australian mothers (Smyth, Rawsthorne and Siminski, 2006) indicates that domestic responsibilities continue to fall to women regardless of their own or their partners' labour force status. One participant in this study was a mother of two children who began working full time after her husband reduced work hours to part time. However, the fact that her husband was working fewer hours than he did not make a difference to the division of domestic labour, as she 'still did everything' (Smyth, Rawsthorne and Siminski, 2006:44). Another participant worked four days a week a long distance from her home, and hence spent substantial time commuting to and from work each day. Meanwhile, her husband worked within walking distance of their home, and finished work at 3.15pm each day. Despite her husband spending significantly less time at work and commuting, she was solely responsible for the household tasks (Smyth, Rawsthorne and Siminski, 2006:44). These findings indicate that even when men spend less time on employment related activities to their female partners, they do not necessarily increase their contribution to domestic labour and child care.

While Pocock (2003) advocates a 'New Australian work/care regime', some of the evidence in her own study indicates that men do not necessarily increase their contribution to domestic labour when they do not function as 'ideal workers'. One of Pocock's participants explained that her former husband's lack of employment made little difference to his involvement in domestic labour:

'My partner got retrenched. He stayed at home ...and he didn't do anything other than cook. I use to have to nag to get anything done. He wasn't willing to give and take. He didn't do anything at home and then used to complain on the weekends when I has doing the housework instead of spending time with him.'

(from Pocock, 2003:115)

Even when men are willing to participate in domestic labour at times when they are not at work, there are still significant limits to their involvement. Some men deliberately attempt to minimise their involvement in domestic labour by intentionally drawing extra attention to the domestic work that they do in their household. One male nurse explained:

'Like most males I do housework that's noisy so it's noticed. Like mowing the lawns, vacuuming, things like that'
(from Pocock, 2003:119).

Furthermore, men can be fairly selective about the kinds of tasks that they *are* willing to share with their partners. In Pocock's research (2003), several male participants simply refused to do certain domestic tasks. One man explained:

'I don't clean toilets and showers. But I do everything else'
(from Pocock, 2003:119).

Another man who also refused to clean the toilet even suggested that women over-dramatise the task by saying:

'I think women think that cleaning toilets is 70 per cent of the housework! (laughter) Men never clean toilets. Men cleaning toilets!! No!'
(from Pocock, 2003:120).

Pocock's (2003) findings ultimately indicate that men appear to resist sharing domestic labour because they associate the refusal of housework with contemporary masculinity. While Pocock (2003:249) explicitly recognises this, she does not directly assess the potential limits of the new work/care regime that she advocates to effectively challenge the current division of domestic labour. A likely reason for this oversight is because the new work/care regime is designed to address a range of problems and issues including the division of labour, as opposed to the division of labour exclusively. Nevertheless, the findings in Pocock's study ultimately raise questions as to whether a new work/care regime will bring about a more equal division of labour between men and women.

3 CONCLUSION

These findings overall indicate that a new work/care regime with shorter work hours for men will not necessarily lead to men doing more unpaid domestic labour. While it is a *necessary* part of enhancing the feasibility of an equal division of domestic labour, it is ultimately not *sufficient* to challenge the division of domestic labour. In addition to minimising the tangible constraints that prevent men from sharing domestic labour fairly, the issue of men's resistance to domestic equality needs to be confronted in the wider community. In particular, the perceived association of the avoidance of domestic labour with masculinity needs to be dismantled. Only once this occurs can a redistribution of domestic labour between men and women take place.

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