

Relationships Australia

NATIONAL OFFICE

14 October 2005

Paid Work and Family Responsibilities Submission
Sex Discrimination Unit
Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
GPO Box 5218
Sydney NSW 2001

Dear Madam / Sir

**Submission to
“Striking the Balance: Women, men, work and family” Discussion Paper**

Relationships Australia commends the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission on its commitment to tackling the difficult issue of developing policies that will assist Australians to better balance their work and family life.

As the Discussion Paper notes, this is a matter that is of increasing concern in Australia and other countries due to a number of economic, social, demographic and cultural factors. A full and frank discussion of the problem and formulation of possible measures to counter the most negative aspects of the imbalance is most welcome.

About Relationships Australia

Relationships Australia is a leading provider of professional services to support relationships. We are a non-aligned, not-for-profit, community-based organisation committed to enhancing the lives of communities, families and individuals and supporting positive and respectful relationships.

Relationships Australia operates services from 100 locations around Australia and provides family support services to almost 90,000 Australians each year. Despite reluctance in the past for men to access services, recent figures show that almost half our clients are men. Most clients seek our services to help strengthen and build relationships or resolve relationship breakdown issues.

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These services are provided through education, counselling and mediation programs, primary dispute resolution services and children's services. It is particularly important to recognise that our clients include step/blended and single parent families in which children often feel the considerable impact of their parents' work commitments. Relationships Australia has been providing services across Australia for over 50 years and we strongly believe there is growing concern in the community about striking a balance between responsibilities at home and in the workplace. Our position in the community gives us a unique insight into how individual, family, and particularly, children's needs are impacted upon by work commitments.

Focus issue

Australians work some of the longest hours in the developed world. The advent of globalisation, increased competition (both domestically and internationally), decreased home affordability, the need to invest heavily in education and career, increased child care costs, decreased job security, longer commuting times and recent rises in petrol prices are just some of the factors that have placed unprecedented strain on Australian families and relationships compounding the difficulties we face in balancing work and family responsibilities.

The imbalance between work and family commitment as well as numerous related issues, like responsibility for housework and caring, affects family relationships and the well being of children. From our experience and research, competing commitments at home and in the workplace are significant factors in increased stress and conflict in families and in marriage and relationship breakdown.

Research at Relationships Australia

Relationships Australia undertakes ongoing research in the areas of client outcomes and satisfaction and the needs of individuals, families and children. We are extremely concerned about the challenges Australian families face in balancing life and work responsibilities. A national client evaluation study conducted in 2000 surveyed 1,229 clients, of whom 43% reported that work life balance was an important or very important focus of their discussions in counselling.

We are pleased to note that reference is made in "Striking the Balance" (at page 63) to Relationships Australia's Relationships Indicators Survey conducted in late 2003. This survey is undertaken periodically in order to measure trends in the way Australians view their relationships and the factors impinging on those relationships. The 2003 Relationships Indicators Survey can be found on our website www.relationships.com.au. A copy of the survey is also attached.

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Lack of time damages relationships

The results of the 2003 Relationships Indicators Survey show a growing belief that successful relationships require a significant investment of time and energy. According to the 1,215 Australians surveyed, the top issue negatively influencing relationships is lack of time to spend together with 38% of respondents giving this answer. In addition, as many as 89% of respondents agreed with the statement that more relationships are in trouble these days because finding a balance between work and family is so difficult.

Time is the major factor in achieving many of the outcomes considered important in relationships. 28% of Australians rated companionship and friendship as the best thing about their relationship, well ahead of being in love (5%). In addition, 57% of parents surveyed said watching their child grow and spending time with them were the most enjoyable aspects of being a parent. However, despite the importance of investing in these important relationships, as many as 40% of parents felt they had no real choice in balancing between work and family.

Identity and work

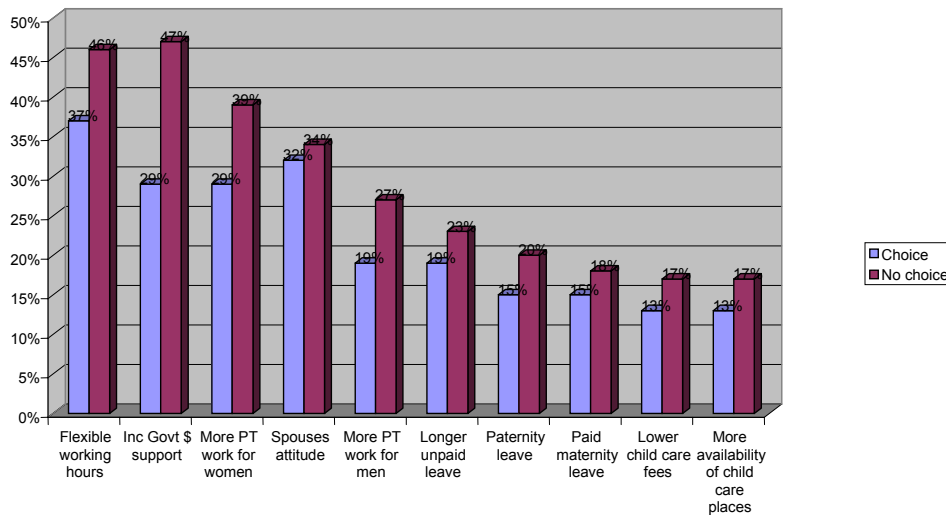
On the issue of identity and the importance of certain factors in describing oneself, 91% cited being a good parent and 93% cited being a good partner as important or very important. This compares to just 40% citing earning a lot of money as important or very important in describing one's identity. This tends to indicate that Australians are seeking to better express themselves in terms of the most important relationships in their lives rather than through work and money and would welcome assistance in balancing work and family responsibilities.

Factors that could redress the balance

Even more illuminating, in our 2003 Relationships Indicators Survey, is the response to the question on what factors would assist in balancing work and family responsibilities: both for those who consider they have no choice and for those who feel they do have a choice. The responses are represented diagrammatically below:

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**Balancing work and family:
what helps those who feel they have a choice &
what those who feel they don't have a choice would like**



Significantly, 47% of those who felt they currently had no choice said increased government financial support would assist to balance work and family responsibilities. Other options cited were: flexible working hours (46%) more part-time work for women (39%), more part-time work for men (27%), longer unpaid leave (23%), paternity leave (20%), paid maternity leave (18%), lower child care fees (17%) and more availability of child care places (17%).

Conflict in families

Time at home with families is essential in reducing the potential for conflict. There is significant research pointing to the impact that parental conflict, and particularly entrenched conflict, has on children. It is a 'potent predictor of child adjustment'.¹ 'Secure family environments and emotionally responsive parenting, in all family constellations, provide the core foundation for the developmental needs of children.'²

There is compelling evidence³ to show that children at different ages respond to entrenched conflict in some of the following ways:

- preschoolers tend to regress in their development
- 8-9 year old children tend to become very anxious and worry a lot
- between 9-12 children become extremely angry, especially boys tend to become angry or undertake daring behaviour

¹ Jennifer McIntosh 'Enduring Conflict in Parental Separation: Pathways of Impact on Child Development' Journal of Family Studies, volume 9, No 1, April 2003, p 65.

² Jennifer McIntosh, Ibid.

³ Jenny Reich Information gained from 'An Investigation into Responses to Separation' Family Court Research, unpublished document.

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- young teenagers may withdraw from emotions or may take sides and reject a parent and have behavioural problems at school.

Reich's research also indicates that after children have opportunities to talk through these issues, their relationships with siblings, parents, teachers and peers improve. Children need enough time with parents to work through problems and issues. Children need to explain things while they are fresh in their minds. Parents need peaceful, unstressed time to reassure children. Children ideally need 'quality time' with both parents.

For all these reasons, parents need to make home a more attractive place than work for themselves. Often there is not enough time to promote the good things about home because work becomes the dominant force in people's lives. Family life becomes non-existent. Unavailable stressed parents can perpetuate the cycle of conflict.

Possible solutions

The above research clearly points to the need to redress some of the problems associated with an imbalance in work commitments and family life. Relationships Australia supports some of the key solutions set out above to these problems. Paid family leave, financial relief for families, greater flexibility in work rosters, more availability of part-time work and better child care arrangements are all measures that we wholeheartedly support.

Considerations around workplace culture

Measures introduced by Australian industry and government will, of course, only be successful to the extent that they find validation in cultural attitudes and values.

Although there has been a significant cultural shift in recent years, we believe that more can be done to augment the value that society places on unpaid work and caring for children. 34% of those interviewed in the Relationships Indicators Survey 2003 indicated that a change in their spouse's attitude may help achieve a better balance between work and family.

Michael Bittman's study on 'Men's uptake of family friendly employment provisions' also points to the cultural issues influencing the work / family balance⁴. He demonstrates that corporate culture is often not supportive of men taking up family friendly provisions. Many workers feel trapped in a labour

⁴ Michael Bittman, Sonia Hoffmann and Denise Thompson. *Men's uptake of family friendly employment provisions* Policy Research Paper No 22, Department of Family and Community Services. Canberra 2004.

market that is demanding and stressful. Fear of being labelled uncommitted can influence whether or not men take up family friendly provisions. This results in people working very long hours which in turn affects family relationships and is a major cause of family stress and conflict.

We believe that the cultural shift needs to be one of placing greater value on the bringing up of children and the place of children in society, or else we have a blueprint for a society that has no place for children.

Fiction of a level playing field

Relationships Australia commends the Commission for its willingness to confront the issue of achieving equality between men and women in their work and family roles. The last 30 years has seen an enormous increase in opportunities for women in the workplace and increasing recognition of the right of both men and women to play a role in paid employment and in non-paid household and caring work. As the report notes, however, the reality is that many women are still burdened with the “second shift” of household responsibilities over and above their duties in paid employment.

Much of the current dialogue on issues of equal shared parenting responsibilities, and in particular, the push by some groups for 50/50 shared parenting time for separated couples assumes a fiction of a level playing field in which women and men have equal access to career and employment opportunities. The reality that we would be wise to acknowledge is that women often do not enjoy the same income-earning capacity. By virtue of their time out of the employment market as mothers and home-makers, many women (despite often higher educational achievement) are unable to compete for higher paid jobs in today’s highly competitive labour market that values uninterrupted career paths. Having taken time to raise a family, women often find themselves unable to catch up to their male counterparts.

This lack of an equal playing field has particular relevance to issues of post-separation parenting. A majority of non-resident fathers want to spend more time with their children⁵ and a large number of resident mothers also support this. However, the reality is that the greater value that the labour market places on the father’s uninterrupted career makes the ideal of such a balancing out of roles in practice difficult to achieve. The preference in couples’ arrangements for the man to work longer hours in paid employment is also born out by recent HILDA research.⁶ Relationships Australia supports the government’s

⁵ Smyth, B & Parkinson, P. (2003) *When the difference is night and day: Insights from HILDA into patterns of parent-child contact after separation*. Paper presented at HILDA Conference, Melbourne, March 2003.

⁶ Van Ours, JC & Booth, A. (2005). *Does part-time work make the family happy?* Paper presented at HILDA Survey Research Conference, Melbourne, September 2005.

commitment to shared parental responsibility for separated couples, but we also believe that a more equal balance in parenting responsibility needs to be tempered by the reality that there is not yet an equal playing field in men and women's economic lives.

The laudable objective of shared parental responsibility is also not supported by the current Family Tax Benefit arrangements that effectively act as a disincentive against both parents entering the workforce, as noted at page 107-108 of the report. Relationships Australia supports greater consultation and discussion on promoting consistency between the goals of the Family Law (Shared Parental Responsibility) Bill and current tax benefit arrangements.

In summary

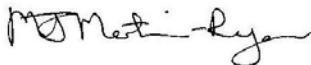
In the ongoing quest for a good work/life balance, our research found that relationships remain central to the lives of Australians. Individuals and families in happy relationships make for a more productive workforce and a more cohesive and resilient community.

Relationships Australia fully supports the introduction of family-friendly workplaces and government policies to give Australians more choices to enhance their relationships and nurture children. This includes financial relief for families, paid family leave, greater availability of part-time work, more flexible work rosters, unpaid leave options and better child care arrangements. This will, however, also require a shift in attitudes among Australian employers and employees in recognising and accommodating people's needs and desires for flexibility in the workplace.

We also invite greater consideration of the reality of inequality in men and women's economic lives and how this impacts on achievement of the objectives of the most recent changes to the Family Law Act.

Once again, we welcome this report and continued consultation with the community on this important issue.

Yours sincerely



Mary Mertin-Ryan
Acting National Director
Relationships Australia

Encl: Relationships Australia Relationships Indicators Survey 2003

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