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**POPULATION, GENDER AND REPRODUCTIVE  
CHOICE: THE MOTHERHOOD QUESTIONS  
DIRECTIONS FOR POLICY**

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# POPULATION, GENDER AND REPRODUCTIVE CHOICE: THE MOTHERHOOD QUESTIONS DIRECTIONS FOR POLICY\*

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This paper provides a summary of key points to emerge from the thirteen research papers presented at the workshop 'Population, gender and reproductive choice: the motherhood questions', held in February 2000.<sup>1</sup> The participants represented a range of disciplines, including demography, economics, history, psychology and sociology, and so focused a wide lens on the issues. Key policy implications of the findings which emerged from discussions at the workshop are included.

## OVERVIEW

In the 1930s, birthrates in Australia and other western countries fell to their lowest level to that time, demonstrating that in times of uncertainty, particularly economic uncertainty, fertility is likely to be restricted (Kane; Mackinnon). This shows the importance of explicit decision making for reproduction and also suggests that levels of fertility may at times be less a reflection of motherhood aspirations than external factors, in this case economic hardship. Reduced fertility in the 1930s was largely achieved through abstinence and the postponement of marriage (Cook). Some couples who made a decision to avoid conception nevertheless were unsuccessful through a lack of access to, or skill with using, effective contraception (Cook). The birthrate almost certainly would have been even lower had the vastly improved technology and knowledge of later in the century been available. Despite the very considerable advances in contraception, though, even at the beginning of the twenty-first century effective contraception remains a problem for some, particularly the young (Bryson; Evans; Kane). But, for the most part, the

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\* Part 1 of a report to the Department of Family and Community Services on the workshop 'Population, gender and reproductive choice: the motherhood questions', 10–11 February 2000, Adelaide. Cosponsored by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, the Hawke Institute, University of South Australia and the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services.

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1 Throughout this paper, relevant papers from the workshop are indicated by the author's name in brackets. A list of participants and paper titles is included at the end of this paper. Several of the papers will be published in a forthcoming special issue of the *Journal of Population Research*.

critical factor determining whether people have children, and therefore determining fertility rates, is the decisions that are made. Hence those concerned with understanding fertility issues, and with policy making in this area, must look to the social circumstances in which family formation decisions are being made.

These are times of considerable change and uncertainty, and falling birthrates must be seen in this light (Bryson; Hugo; McDonald). Over recent years Australia has had high rates of unemployment, as well as underemployment, high levels of technological change, as well as changes in government and industry policy by way, for example, of economic restructuring and trends toward globalisation (Broomhill and Sharp). Of crucial importance too is more general change in social and cultural patterns, with changes to gender relations being fundamental. Women's control of their bodies through contraception is one historic and irreversible change (Cook; Mackinnon).

A crucial clue to factors that affect decisions to have children is found in the fact that over recent years birthrates have dropped less precipitously in countries which provide social policies in support of gender equity (Hugo; McDonald). They have fallen more precipitously in countries such as Japan and Italy, where it is more difficult to combine motherhood and a career (McDonald; Hugo). Evidence from a number of studies including the Women's Health Australia Study (Bryson; Warner-Smith and Imbruglia) and the ANU's Negotiating the Life Course Survey (NCLS) (Baxter; Gray; Cobb-Clark, Liu and Mitchell), demonstrate that women's expectation of combining motherhood and parenting has become normalised. This is both for financial reasons, that is that families need two incomes to achieve an acceptable lifestyle, as well as to allow women the possibility of pursuing their own life goals (Gray). This is illustrated by demographic evidence which shows that it was more highly educated women, whose career prospects are better, who led the way in restricting the number of children they chose to have. However, patterns for less well-educated women have since followed this trend (Kilmartin; McDonald).

Women's employment has also become essential for the economy (Broomhill and Sharp). This integration of women into the workforce underscores the necessity to have policies that support women and men to combine employment and families with ease, and in ways which enhance the well-being of all family members. Evidence from the Women's Health Australia Study (Warner-Smith and Imbruglia) suggests that for women higher levels of health and well-being are generally associated with a combination of family and paid employment. Being happy with child care is a prime issue (Cobb-Clark, Liu and Mitchell; Warner-Smith and Imbruglia), as are employment conditions (Broomhill and Sharp) and the availability of appropriate supports for caring for others, as well as children.

Normalisation of the combination of employment and motherhood highlights the necessity of the ready availability of reliable, user-friendly methods for controlling

fertility and the availability of effective services and knowledge in relation to reproductive health. Research, including that from the Women's Health Australia Study suggests that the situation is far from optimal for many women, particularly for young women and those from rural and remote areas (Bryson; Evans; Kane).

In discussing the direction of change, sociologists are increasingly emphasising the importance of processes of individualisation. This involves risk because individual decision making becomes central in areas of social life which in the past were guided more by tradition and conventional expectations (Bryson; McDonald). Motherhood has been affected by processes of individualisation, where in the past it was shaped by traditional norms and expectations and the gender order (Bryson). Given the extensive change that has occurred, it is particularly important to consider the effects of change, and the manner in which decisions are made, if we are to understand current fertility patterns. Such an understanding is crucial for the development of appropriate policy settings to maximise individual choice in the twenty-first century (Bryson; Cook; McDonald; Mackinnon).

## **1 POLICY IMPLICATIONS: GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES**

Given that the majority of women and men retain aspirations to have children (Bryson; Gray), falling birthrates suggest that families feel some uncertainty and have lost confidence in the future. Such an environment does not provide the optimal circumstances for decision making about family formation. To restore confidence, a greater sense of the stability and predictability of a range of supportive family policies is needed. Many government policies can contribute to this, but what is needed is a whole-of-government approach. As past studies show (Mackinnon), policies in one area alone (eg labour market programs) may not succeed unless complementary policies are put in place, for example in relation to child care, training and the removal of poverty traps from taxation and social security policies.

A number of government reports relevant to these issues, including the Economic Planning and Advisory Commission report *Future child care provision in Australia* (1996), have been presented to government, but have not been the subject of wide discussion. Such discussion would provide a sound basis for policy debate. A first step would be for the Department of Family and Community Services to provide copies of relevant reports to the appropriate government departments, community organisations and interested members of the public, then facilitate focused discussion of future policy directions.

### **Recommendation 1**

A whole-of-government approach should be taken to the issue of facilitating women's family formation choices.

## **Recommendation 2**

The Department of Family and Community Services should facilitate public discussion of available reports and policy options which are relevant to the population, gender and reproductive choice debate.

## **2 POLICY IMPLICATIONS: VALUING CHILDREN**

As greater emphasis is placed on the private, there are signs that the community is becoming less friendly towards children. In a program of the ABC's *Life matters* in 1999, a strong argument was put by some participants that children are a 'private' not a 'public' good and that the child-free should not have to contribute to the cost of raising children. Such an approach treats families as 'consumers' of children, overturning historically accepted principles of public support on the basis of citizenship rights and societal benefit. Such principles underpin taxation which redistributes funds to families in order to achieve horizontal, or life course, equity. An unfriendliness to families is also seen at times in a lack of acceptance of breastfeeding in public, and is endemic in a lack of adequate public facilitation of the mobility of those with young children and those with a disability.

Because it is the rising generation on which the prosperity of a nation depends and who provide support for successive aging generations, attention needs to be paid to promoting the notion of children as a public good and a major contributor to social capital. The income testing of most benefits for families, except for the most part education, indicates that children are not being seen as a general public good (through measures for achieving horizontal equity), rather that their support is seen as an issue of vertical equity (an essential but different goal). This can be contrasted, for example, with the diesel fuel rebate which goes to all users, not just the less well-off. To facilitate decisions to have children, the issue of horizontal equity needs to be addressed.

## **Recommendation 3**

Attention should be directed to the family as a 'public good' and greater emphasis should be placed on policies based on the principle of horizontal equity for all families with children.

## **3 POLICY IMPLICATIONS: CHILD CARE**

Families increasingly rely on women's earnings for their prosperity. This is self-evidently so for families in which a woman is the sole parent, but is increasingly the case with two parent families. Increasingly, also, individual life-time earnings determine income levels during retirement. Despite the importance of women's earnings and a widening gap between rich and poor, women have been dropping out of the workforce over recent years because of work disincentives built into

government subsidies to women at home, and reduced child care support (Broomhill and Sharp). There has also been a drop in women's income as a proportion of men's from 67 per cent in 1996 to 64 per cent in 1998 (Broomhill and Sharp). Women's earnings continue to be proportionally reduced according to the number of children they have, though since the 1980s the amount of reduction has dropped and the availability of child care has contributed to this.

To facilitate women's employment and prevent children being assessed as a negative factor in decision making about lifetime economic well-being, employment policies suited to the differing needs of families need to be emphasised. The availability of high quality, affordable child care which meets the variety of different family needs and facilitates women's employment (and thus secures their earnings) is fundamental for genuine freedom of choice for women. Yet changes to child care policy over recent years appear to have undermined confidence in the formal child care system (Broomhill and Sharp; Warner-Smith and Imbruglia). Many families choose to make their own informal arrangements for child care (Cobb-Clark, Liu and Mitchell) and this indicates that child care policy should not only be aimed at a secure formal system, but also support a wide range of options, including support for arrangements made with relatives. To achieve equity and to facilitate decisions about family formation, child care should also be available whether the reason for the use of child care is to allow paid employment or for other reasons (illness, disability, unpaid work, recreation etc).

To ensure stability, predictability, affordability and quality, and ensure that there is confidence in the provisions, radical change is most appropriate. A system of free child care should be the goal. This would mean universal provision by the state for children of all ages, not only for those of school age who have been catered for on a universal free basis since the 1870s. An effective system would recognise cultural diversity and provide appropriately for the variety of needs of pre-school children of different ages and for different family requirements. Catering for families from rural and remote areas poses particular issues and requires special attention.

Given the uncertain times for families, free child care would have both practical and symbolic benefits. Practically it would provide certainty that appropriate care for children is available. Symbolically it would be an explicit statement of public valuation of children and families. It would have the effect for parents of raising the recognised value of both employment and unpaid work and provide the best circumstances for preserving the cultural capital represented by employed women's training and experience.

Such a program would not prove unduly expensive for three reasons: first, there is a declining number of young children in Australia; second, there would be increased revenue from the taxation paid by the increase number of employed

mothers and/or fathers; and, third, this would result in increased national productivity.

#### **Recommendation 4**

Child care should become free and a community responsibility in the same manner as universal school education.

#### **Recommendation 5**

Special attention within the child care system should be paid to catering for the needs of children of different ages and cultural backgrounds and for families with different work patterns and care preferences, to ensure positive outcomes for the child's development and well-being.

#### **Recommendation 6**

Within the child care system special attention should be paid to the needs of children with a disability, or other special needs, to allow for their optimal development and their integration into the community.

### **4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS: CARING FOR THOSE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS OF ALL AGES**

Because caring responsibilities generally fall disproportionately to women in their younger years (though older men do often care for their spouses), if women are to be genuinely free to make choices about family formation, attention needs to be directed not only to child care but to the care of adult relatives. Such care needs to take account of women's employment aspirations.

#### **Recommendation 7**

Care for disabled and frail adults in the community should be considered in policy decisions at the same time as issues in relation to child care and other family friendly policies.

### **5 POLICY IMPLICATIONS: SHARING THE CARING**

Although recent decades have seen considerable challenge to earlier conventional views of what constitutes the appropriate role for mothers and fathers, time and again research has shown that old habits die hard. Although both women and men almost universally accept that domestic work should be shared equally when both parents are employed, women still do the greatest proportion of domestic labour (Baxter; Gray) and it is women's careers that are adjusted to the requirements of family (Broomhill and Sharp). Policy attempts to distribute family caring

responsibilities more equitably between men and women have mostly proved less than successful, with Sweden's long-term attempts providing an example of less than satisfactory results. Thus it is clear that greater legitimacy is needed for men to play an equal part in child raising.

It has been shown (Baxter) that the higher a woman's earnings the greater her partner's domestic contribution. This suggests that working to eliminate the gender gap in earnings is a way to achieving fairer sharing and more genuine gender equity. Yet occupations in which women are concentrated continue to attract lower remuneration. This is compounded by the fact that women are employed for fewer hours in order to accommodate their family responsibilities. Women not only need to be assisted to be able to pursue equally remunerated employment, in as uninterrupted and comfortable a way as possible, but creative policies are needed to encourage men to contribute more to domestic labour. To date most of the entitlements for government benefits based on caring work are at least tacitly seen as applying to women. Well publicised provisions that might prove attractive to men might relate, for example, to leave entitlements which are only available if taken for caring purposes, and/or tax concessions based on contributions to caring.

#### **Recommendation 8**

Policies to achieve genuinely equal pay for women should be pursued.

#### **Recommendation 9**

Policies should be developed to a national standard which establish parental and caring leave structures which encourage fathers to take a greater share of responsibility for caring activities. Employers should be urged to contribute to this policy development.

### **6 POLICY IMPLICATIONS: THE WORKPLACE**

While child care is probably the single most important policy issue in relation to the employment of mothers and fathers of young children there are many aspects of the structure of work and the workplace that are also relevant. There has been some development of a range of family-friendly policies in Australia, and, as reflected in the nation's comparatively high birthrate, important advances have been made. During the 1990s however, some gains were lost, as is exemplified by the reduction in the overall proportion of women's earnings to men's (Broomhill and Sharp; Warner-Smith and Imbruglia). This issue needs systematic policy attention, including attention to the role of taxation incentives to smooth the fit between employment and family responsibilities.

To manage to combine employment and family without undue strain, the relationship of working hours to other responsibilities needs to be addressed. Yet

there are no established mechanisms for doing this and there is actually a trend to increasing hours of work (Broomhill and Sharp), whereas reduced hours would be of benefit to many families. In some positions working excessively long hours acts as something of a badge of honour (Bryson). The Women's Health Australia Study found that for mothers somewhat shorter than standard hours of employment were associated with the highest levels of physical and mental health (Warner-Smith and Imbruglia).

Policies of reduced (but still well-remunerated) hours for the caring parent of younger children has been the norm in the Scandinavian countries for many decades. For an optimal environment in which to make decisions about family formation, attention needs to be directed to the issue of hours of work. Such attention is also indicated in the light of other issues, including the fostering of social capital and social integration in the community generally; the level of unemployment and underemployment; the stress on the environment caused by industrial production; and issues of health and optimum productivity, since overwork has been associated with poorer performance.

Because women have a low profile in senior positions in Australia (Broomhill and Sharp) they are not in the best position to influence decision making so that policies become genuinely more family-friendly. A concerted effort is still needed to ensure that more women occupy senior, decision-making positions. On top of the practical value of this, there is symbolic value in having women in senior, high profile positions. This can act to educate the male decision makers in other organisations and these women can act as role models and mentors for women in more junior positions and young women generally.

#### **Recommendation 10**

A comprehensive assessment of the availability of 'family friendly employment policies' should be undertaken and a strategy for progressively further encouraging the implementation of appropriate practices should be developed. Such a strategy must involve employers.

#### **Recommendation 11**

The issue of the appropriate balance between hours of paid employment and other life circumstances should be progressively addressed, as part of the process of addressing the general issues surrounding 'family-friendly employment policies'.

#### **Recommendation 12**

A policy should be developed to ensure that more women occupy places on boards of public companies and organisations.

**Recommendation 13**

Support and retraining, where appropriate, should be available for parents who choose to remain at home with their young children to facilitate their re-entry to the workforce.

**7 POLICY IMPLICATIONS: CONTRACEPTION AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH**

In an environment in which the value of children is publicly supported and emphasised, ensuring that women have genuine choices in respect of fertility control must be a high priority. Yet evidence from a number of studies including the Women's Health Australia Study (Bryson; Evans; Kane) shows that, particularly for young women, there remain a number of concerning issues with respect to control over sexual encounters, contraception and reproductive health. Some women do not have access to adequate information, and services may be inadequate or service providers unsympathetic to the women's concerns. Some doctors have been found to be moralistic about prescribing contraception for young single women and some women have difficulty gaining access to post-coital (emergency) contraception when it would have been their choice and could limit the need for pregnancy termination (Kane). There also remains the issue of control over sexuality and ability to withstand pressure and coercion, especially, though by no means exclusively, among very young women (Evans).

Problems tend to be more acute for women in rural and remote areas where access to services is restricted and special issues of transport and privacy are posed by the very nature of the communities (Bryson; Kane). In country areas it is often not possible to attend a female doctor, yet a majority of young women would prefer a female doctor, at least in some circumstances (Bryson). While effective methods of contraception are widely available, cost, information about side effects and privacy remain problems for some women.

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) also pose problems for reproductive health, although the issue has received a higher profile in recent years because of HIV/AIDS. Most attention has been focused on HIV, yet a number of STIs of central importance to women, particularly chlamydial infections which can lead to infertility, remain inadequately addressed.

**Recommendation 14**

Education to a national standard should be available to all young people in respect of the negotiation of family and sexual relationships, reproductive health and contraception.

**Recommendation 15**

Universal accessibility should be guaranteed to the widest range of safe, affordable methods of contraception, in a manner which respects rights of choice and privacy.

**PAPERS DELIVERED**

The references in this working paper are to the following papers which were delivered at the workshop 'Population, gender and reproductive choice: the motherhood questions', 10–11 February 2000, Adelaide. Requests for copies of these papers may be directed to the Hawke Institute.

Janeen Baxter, 'Families in transition: domestic labour patterns over the lifecourse'.

Ray Broomhill and Rhonda Sharp, 'Economic theory and gender regimes'.

Lois Bryson, 'Motherhood in the new millennium: policy implications of recent social change'.

Deborah Cobb-Clark, Amy Liu and Deborah Mitchell, 'Reassessing the role of childcare costs in the work and care decisions of Australian families'.

Hera Cook, 'What is more important, a car or a wife?: The sexual revolution 1770–1980'.

Ann Evans, 'Power and negotiation: young women's choices about sex, contraception and motherhood'.

Edith Gray, 'Colliding spheres: work and family initiatives, and parental realities'.

Graeme Hugo, 'Declining fertility and policy intervention in Europe: some lessons for Australia?'.

Penny Kane, 'Challenges to reproductive health in Australia'.

Christine Kilmartin, 'Who is not having children? Recent evidence from Australia'.

Alison Mackinnon, "'Women and children first": population, gender and policy in Australia in the twentieth century'.

Peter McDonald, 'The status of gender equity in theories of fertility transition'.

Penny Warner-Smith and Carla Imbruglia, 'Child care and the health and well-being of young mothers'.

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