

Has There Been a Revolution in Women's Work?

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Abstract

This paper questions the common view that in the past half-century Australian women have radically changed their focus from unpaid domestic work to employed work. The common view is largely based on labour force participation rates. These rates give a deceptive picture. Actual work activity has to be tracked using figures on hours worked. This paper presents two sets of hourly figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, one set dating back to 1966, the other back to 1987. Neither suggests a dramatic change in women's actual work activity.

It has come to be almost universally regarded as an indisputable fact that women are moving out of the home and into the workforce. Economist Graeme Snooks sees it in this way:

One of the central events of this period [Australia, 1940–1990] was the rush of female household workers to join the market workforce. This phenomenon ... constitutes

nothing less than an economic and social revolution — a revolution shared with the rest of the Western world.... (Snooks 1994: 142)

Snooks' view is widely shared. Women's rapid entry into the workforce is regarded as an obvious fact, and not as a complex and debatable claim resting on contestable evidence. Yet in another way it has been perhaps the most 'interpreted' issue of our times. There are two levels here. On one level, the core of the issue has been treated as a simple matter of fact, but on another level the meaning of that supposed fact has been interpreted in multifarious ways. The interpreters all agree that it signifies fundamental changes — for good or ill, according to one's preferred perspective — in the home, the workplace, the economy and ultimately in the shape of Australian society. This paper will argue for two contrary contentions: firstly, there has been no revolution in women's work, and secondly, the attempt to find deeper significance in women's work trends is misguided.

The view I am contesting was well expressed in High Mackay's *Reinventing Australia: The Mind and Mood of Australia in the 90s*. Mackay put women's workforce involvement at the centre of his account of contemporary Australian life. For him, "There is no doubt about which of the redefinitions of the past 20 years [that is, 1970 to 1990] has had the most impact on the Australian way of life: it is the redefinition of gender roles which has taken place in the minds of roughly half the population — the female half". Twenty years ago, he says, women were 'second-class citizens', reduced to acquiring "a kind of second-hand identity from the men they would marry". Today, however, women say: "I am a person, entitled to the same sense of identity and the same status in our society as any other person". This redefinition changes their view of everything — of men, romance, sex, marriage, parenting, family life, work, household management, and politics. And the key

symbolic change in women's lives, the one that they chose as the "expression of their new-found definition of gender", was paid work (Mackay 1993: 24-25).

Mackay is not alone in this view. Graeme Snooks' position on women's entry into the workforce in the last half century is very similar to Mackay's. For Snooks, there has been a revolution in women's work, and its effects are far-reaching. He calls it "the greatest change in capitalist economies since the Industrial Revolution" (1994: 7). In consequence of the workforce change, birth rates and household size have fallen, marriage has become less necessary and divorce more common, family living standards have risen, and the demand for paid household services has risen with them. In general, family responsibilities have declined. Snooks differs from Mackay only — though importantly — in finding economic causes for what Mackay presents as the autonomous self-assertion of the 'new woman' (1994: 97-149).¹

More recently, Anne Manne tells us that "We are in the midst of a social revolution: in women's roles, and in the relations between the sexes. This revolution has had many consequences". For her, the central contentious point in this revolution is "the increased employment of mothers of preschool children in many wealthy societies all over the world" (2006: 20).² Fiona Stanley, Sue Richardson and Margot Prior present a somewhat less dramatic picture of women and work, but they still regard women's entry into the workforce as bringing about 'a new world order', one requiring consequent adaptive changes that are yet to be made. "How the workplace, and modern society generally, respond to this new

¹ Allon J. Uhlmann (2006: 20; see also 166-67) explicitly follows Snooks's portrayal: 'These two processes — the development of technology and the increase in service industry — brought about a major realignment in Australia's political economy in the form of a rapid increase in active participation of married women in the labour market'. However, he notes that men continued to work longer hours than women.

² Later, she is more cautious, seemingly questioning the evidence for a revolution in women's work (2006: 95-96).

world order will be crucial for the future outcomes of our children and youth" (2005: 10-11).³

What is the evidence for this supposed revolution? In Mackay's popular account it is nothing more than a one-sentence summary of the labour force participation (LFP) statistics. "In 1970, 32 per cent of married women were in the workforce; by 1990, that figure had risen to 53 per cent of all married women and 60 per cent of all mothers with dependent children" (1993: 27). Snooks' very academic discussion also rests its account of female workforce trends entirely on the labour force participation statistics (1994: 15-17). In this, Snooks and Mackay speak for the common view, the only evidence for which rests on LFP rates.⁴ This analysis is seriously inadequate, as I shall try to show.

Workforce Participation and Workforce Activity

There is no doubt that women's labour force participation rates have changed dramatically over the past few decades, as Chart One shows.

CHART ONE

Labour force participation rates, 1964–2008

(men, women, married women, aged 15 and over)

<<insert chart one>>

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *The Labour Force, Australia* (Cat. No. 6203.0), *Labour Statistics, Australia* (Cat. No. 6101.0), and *Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families*, (Cat. No.

³ They note four other major social changes: population ageing through declining birth rates and increasing longevity; globalisation, corporatisation, and increasing competition in the economic sphere; increases in divorce and sole parenthood; and the rapid growth of technological consumption.

⁴ Neither Manne nor Stanley et al offer any statistical support for their claims, yet they are clearly doing more than making rhetorical flourishes. Perhaps for them the claims have become taken-for-granted truisms.

Has There Been a Revolution in Women's Work?

6224.0); ABS (2000) *Australian Social Trends 2000*, (Cat. No. 4102.0); ABS (2007), *Australian Social Trends 2007* (Cat. No. 4102.0). Some of these figures are also collected in R. Foster and S. Stewart, *Australian Economic Statistics, 1949–50 to 1989–90*, Reserve Bank of Australia Occasional Paper No. 8, 1991; and *Australian Economic Statistics, 1949–50 to 1995–96*, Reserve Bank of Australia Occasional Paper No. 8, 1997, DOS Format Disk.

In the past forty-five years, men's labour force participation rate has fallen somewhat (from 84 per cent to 72 per cent), but women's has changed considerably, even radically. In 1964, 33 per cent of all women aged 15 and over were in the workforce. Today the figure is 58 per cent. The trend has been steadily upwards. The trend for married women is similar, though steeper still — up from 25 per cent in 1964 to 59 per cent in 2003 (Foster and Stewart, 1991: 152; ABS, Cat. No. 6203.0; ABS, 2000: 28; ABS, 2007, Work, Table 1.)⁵ These figures seem like impressive evidence of change. We might even choose to call the change a revolution, and we might postulate a wide range of effects that could flow from this fundamental change.

However, before we go further down this track, we need to focus on the core issue.

Labour force participation rates tell us little, if anything, about actual time spent in paid work, yet they are commonly used as though they reflected a person's real workforce involvement. On the standard Australian Bureau of Statistics' definition of labour force participation, a person is deemed to be participating in the workforce if he or she has been in paid employment or has been looking for paid employment in the week before the labour force survey is taken. By that definition a person could move from non-participant to participant status simply by taking a few hours casual work each week or merely by deciding to look for work. We need to distinguish between workforce participation and

⁵ Regular LFP figures for married women have not been recorded since 2003. For a review of women's LFP trends, see Evans and Kelley, 2004.

Has There Been a Revolution in Women's Work?

workforce activity. Workforce activity is a matter of the amount of work performed, and it can be measured by tracking hours worked each week. Luckily, the Australian Bureau of Statistics publishes two sets of data relevant to this indicator.

Firstly, there is ABS data on aggregate hours worked by men and women, in a series that goes back to 1966. In Chart Two aggregate hours worked is divided by the population of workforce age (15 to 64), to give an average hours worked per week by men and women. (It is assumed that very little of the aggregate figure is contributed by workers over age 64.) I will refer to this as the 'hours worked' series.

CHART TWO

Women's and men's average weekly hours worked, 1966 to 2008

<<insert chart two>>

Sources: ABS, *The Labour Force, Australia* (Cat. No. 6203.0), *Labour Statistics, Australia* (Cat. No. 6101.0); also collected in Foster and Stewart, *Australian Economic Statistics* (1991) and *Australian Economic Statistics* (1997); ABS (2007), *Australian Social Trends 2007* (Cat. No. 4102.0), Population, Table 1; Work, Table 1.

Chart Two suggests that changes have been at least as marked for men as for women. In four decades, men's average weekly hours worked have fallen from 38.6 to 31.6, whereas women's have risen from 13.8 to 19.0. The convergence between the men's and women's trendlines is coming as much from the men's trend as from the women's. Women's hours as a proportion of all hours worked have risen from 26 per cent to 38 per cent, but this is as much explained by the decline in men's average hours as by the rise in women's hours. The men's trend has been level since 1982. The upward trend in women's work

activity is steady but slow, growing at an overall rate of just over one hour per decade.

More careful scrutiny shows that the trendline was flat from 1966 to 1982, and since then has been rising at a rate of 1.5 hours per decade. This rate would see women reaching men's present work levels in about the year 2100.

Our concern here is with the female side of this story. The labour force participation chart tells one story, the hours worked chart a much less dramatic one. In four decades since the mid-1960s, women's LFP rate has almost doubled (up from 33 per cent to 58 per cent), while women's hours worked have increased by about one-third (up from 13.8 hours per week to 19 hours per week). If we are measuring actual work activity, then the hours worked figures indicates that there has been no radical change of the sort supposed by Snooks, Mackay and others.

Secondly, we have ABS time use studies, based upon diaries kept by large sample populations of persons aged 15 and over. Four such studies have been conducted by the ABS: in 1987 in Sydney; and in 1992, 1997, and 2006 Australia-wide (ABS, 1987; ABS, 1993; ABS, 1998; ABS, 2008).⁶ Table One summarises the key evidence, comparing the time use data (TU) with the hours worked (HW) data.⁷

TABLE ONE

Male and female paid work, average hours per week,

⁶ There is an earlier time use study from 1974, conducted by the Cities Commission in Melbourne and Albury-Wodonga. Its comparability with the ABS studies is questionable. See Cities Commission, n.d.

⁷ The hours worked figures are consistently higher than the time use figures, but that is to be expected, as the former is based on persons aged 15 to 64, whereas the time use figures cover all persons aged 15 and over, thereby including those who are in retirement. The larger time use divisor produces a lower average figure. Another slight distortion will arise from increased longevity. In the mid-1960s, average male longevity was 69 years and average female longevity 75 years. In 1987 it was 74 and 79 years respectively; today it is 79 and 84 years respectively. This increase will increase the time use divisor across time, and thus artificially reduce the average figure for paid work across time. However, the net effect of this distortion is small, depressing the 2006 figures by about 3 per cent.

comparing time use and hours worked data

	1987	1992	1997	2006
Men TU	30.9	28.5	27.4	28.7
Men HW	31.4	29.8	30.7	31.6
Women TU	14.7	13.4	13.8	14.1
Women HW	15.1	15.7	16.6	18.7
TU Ratio M/F	2.10	2.12	1.98	2.03
HW Ratio M/F	2.08	1.90	1.85	1.69

Sources: ABS, *The Labour Force, Australia* (Cat. No. 6204.0) and *Labour Statistics, Australia* (Cat. No. 6101.0), also collected in Foster and Stewart, *Australian Economic Statistics* (1991); ABS, *Time Use Pilot Survey*, Cat. No. 4111.1 (Sydney, 1988); ABS, *How Australians Use Their Time*, Cat. No. 4153.0 (Canberra, 2008). Note: the time use figures include breaks and overtime but not time spent travelling to and from work.

The time use figures for men show a very small downwards trend, at a time when the hours worked trend for men is flat. But for women the time use trend is flat, while the hours worked trend for the same period is slightly upwards. The ratio of male to female hours in

Has There Been a Revolution in Women's Work?

the two data sets is almost identical in 1987, but subsequently the ratios diverge, with the hours worked ratio steadily falling, while the time use ratio remain flat. The time use studies suggest that in the period 1987 to 2006 men performed about two-thirds of all paid work, and women one third. They indicate no rising trend in women's work activity, and seem to leave no room for the revolutionary thesis.

It might be thought that a generational change is taking place but that its presence is emerging only very slowly in the average figures. Ideally, we would want a cohort analysis to track such trends. The time use figures do include some age-related data. Table Two shows that younger women in the age range 25 to 54 work about two hours per week more than women ten years older than them. Amongst older women (55-64) employment activity has increased sharply.

TABLE TWO

Women's paid hours per week by age group

Age group	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64
1992	17.8	18.4	19.5	19.3	6.5
1997	17.5	20.7	19.2	20.4	7.6
2006	15.9	22.0	21.2	23.0	13.9

Sources: ABS, *How Australians Use Their Time*, Cat. No. 4153.0, (Canberra, 1993), Table 15; ABS, *How Australians Use Their Time*, Cat. No. 4153.0, (Canberra, 1998), Table 29; *How Australians Use Their Time*, Cat. No. 4153.0 (Canberra, 2008), Table 7.

This is some evidence of a generational trend, though the time span here is not great and the trend is not dramatic, except in the older age range. A careful cohort analysis of these figures would be useful, but that cannot be attempted here.⁸

Getting It Both Right and Wrong

Overall, then, the ABS hours worked figures show a general upwards trend in women's work activity, but the rise is slow and slight, while in the ABS time use figures the trend is flat. While commentators such as Mackay and Snooks have misconstrued the basic facts about women's work trends, there are two studies that do get the core trends right. One is a 2002 public lecture by economist Bob Gregory, who observes that:

Despite the rapid increase in education levels, despite large changes in social attitudes towards married women working in the labour market, despite large increases in labour market rewards and despite increased labour market involvement, the proportion of women 15 to 59 years employed full-time is much the same today as it was thirty-five years ago The overwhelming strategy has been to use part-time employment to add to the principal source of income which is delivered to women from a source outside their own full-time involvement in the labour market. (Gregory, 2002)⁹

Gregory's contention is correct, but it is based on figures for women's full-time and part-time work, and lacks any more fine-grained evidence of actual hours worked.

⁸ The 1987 figures classify age ranges differently, and cannot be used for comparison purposes, though presumably the original data could be reclassified.

⁹ Gregory's main point is noted in Manne 2006: 95. Figures showing the flat trend in women's full-time work rates since 1971 had already been published in ABS, *Social Indicators Number 5*, Table 5.4, 205.

Has There Been a Revolution in Women's Work?

Somewhat earlier, in 1994, economists Deborah Mitchell and Steve Dowrick set out the labour force participation and the hours worked trends for both men and women from 1978 to 1993. They noted that LFP trends and hours worked trends (measured using the same sources as for Chart Two above) are 'rather different' for both men and women. On women's work, they say that "Despite the large increase in the numbers of women participating in the labour force, their contribution to total hours is still only half that of men." They note that in 1978 women aged 15-64 worked on average 14.2 hours per week, amounting to 29 per cent of all hours worked by men and women; in 1993 it was 16.4 hours per week, equal to 35 per cent of all hours worked. That is, in fifteen years there had been rather little increase in women's work activity. They then added: "In other words, the supply of labour by women outside the home is increasing but the potential supply is still substantially unused" (Mitchell and Dowrick, 1994: 4).

Remarkably, despite this recognition of the small upwards trend in average hours worked, the remainder of their discussion is an attempt to explain why women's labour supply has been increasing. In their view, three factors largely account for this increase: "the rapidly improving access of women to full secondary and tertiary education", "decreased discrimination in both pay and employment", and "shifting patterns of demand towards the service sector of the economy" (1994: 1). These factors may be good explanations, but what is being explained? In their account the key concept of 'labour supply' is left hanging ambiguously between participation and activity, but a moment's reflection shows that supply cannot be equated with participation. If average hours worked falls then labour supply has fallen, even if participation has risen. And since in fact women's average hours worked have risen at most only slightly, women's labour supply has risen at most only slightly. Since the rise is at most a minor one, there is nothing much that needs

explanation. Discussion of education, discrimination and the services sector is unnecessary. Somehow Mitchell and Dowrick fail to see what is obvious from their own figures. It is a nice case of the way in which perspectives shape perceptions.¹⁰

Mitchell and Dowrick also offer no defence of their claim that women's potential labour supply is still 'substantially unused'. Given their evidence, that is obviously true, if they mean unused in the paid workforce, but it may be false if they mean unused *simpliciter*. Measuring use involves measuring capacity. Women may be doing other kinds of work, and they may be at or near the limits of their working capacity (given the general standards of their time and place). The time use studies shed light on this. Total work activity counts time spent in paid work, domestic work, childcare, voluntary work, education, and shopping. The first three studies (1987, 1992, 1997) showed a close equivalence between men's and women's total work activities. The 1997 study reported that "Men and women spent almost the same average amount of time on total work (425 minutes and 432 minutes [per day] respectively)", a difference of seven minutes per day more by women than by men (ABS, 1998: 7, and Table 1, 17). The 2006 study presents a different picture. It found that men average 526 minutes total work per day and women 593 minutes, which adds up to about 8 hours more work per week by women (ABS, 2008: Table 4). Whichever of these stories is correct, overall women are not working less than men, so there are no grounds for thinking of them as relatively under-employed.

Causal Stories

The core facts, then, are not what they are commonly taken to be. The overall story is clear enough: a markedly higher percentage of women are in paid work, but average

¹⁰ Bettina Cass (2002: 144) follows Mitchell and Dowrick's analysis of women's rising LFP, though without remarking on their recognition that the trend in women's hours worked has remained flat.

hours worked have risen slightly and slowly (on the hours worked figures) or hardly at all (on the time use figures). We can sum this up by saying that paid work has been distributed more broadly and evenly across the female population. Consequently, the task for economists and social scientists is not to explain what Snooks called “the rush of female household workers to join the market workforce”. Such a rush has occurred but it has added very little to women's average paid work activity. Rather, the problem to be explained is why work activity has *not* increased strongly. This is a problem not because it is difficult to square rising participation rates with nearly flat activity rates — that presents no great difficulty. The problem is how to reconcile the low or nil rise in activity with the plausible reasons we have for expecting activity to have risen strongly.

A number of hypotheses designed to explain a rise in women's work have been already mentioned. Rising levels of education, growing demand for work in the services sector, decreased discrimination against women as workers, removal of legal barriers against women's work, and the rise of feminist beliefs and attitudes will all — it seems reasonable to suppose — have tended to increase female work activity. Snooks makes a case for the claim that a strong postwar rise in the ratio of capital to labour has driven the labour market to seek out workers in the tertiary sector, where women have some comparative advantage over men (1994: 97-123). The steep decline in the birth rate must also have made work outside the home easier to combine with childcare responsibilities. Empirical support for at least some of these contentions is readily available. For example, a study by M.D.R. Evans (1988) showed the expected strongly positive correlation between, on the one hand, education and feminist orientation and, on the other, workforce participation. Evans showed also that the birth of children lowers workforce participation dramatically, from which we can assume that a drop in the birth rate would tend to raise work activity.

It would take us off the present track to attempt an evaluation of these various hypotheses. They may seem plausible enough. Yet the evidence of the present essay leaves us in the odd position of having good explanations for something that — if our focus is on work activity and not merely on workforce participation — has not happened to any marked degree. Faced with this, we can go in two very different ways. We can use the non-happening of the thing to be explained to discredit the would-be explanations; or we can accept the explanations as valid and postulate that some other factor or force must be operating to prevent the effect from following from the supposed cause. Neither move is particularly compelling. A good explanation remains a good explanation even if, on some particular occasion, it fails to be followed by the expected effect. Something might be blocking the usual mechanism. The sensible strategy is to look for the spanner in the works, and then, only when we are sure there is none to be found, give up the explanatory theory.

In this case, however, there is no compelling theory about what might be doing the blocking. Legal barriers to women's paid employment have fallen in the period. The only candidate that comes readily to mind is women's rising relative wage rates. A rise in the female/male wage ratio will of course increase female labour supply but — arguably — it will lower employer demand. The rise has been a large one, increasing from 0.55 in the 1930s to 0.93 in the 1970s, according to Snooks. He shows that it has stayed around that figure since that time (until 1990) (1994: 143; Table 8.16, 222). In his account of rising female labour market participation, Snooks constructed a regression model in which he tested the thesis that market participation might be a linear function of changing female wage rates relative to men's, of changes in the birth rate, and of change in the

capital/labour ratio. Using data from 1946 to 1985, he found that, by itself, the capital/labour ratio could account for 98 per cent of the variation in female participation (1994: 88). This suggests that relative wage rates are a minor factor in LFP trends. Interesting though this is, the interest would be much greater if his analysis told us anything about work activity. Since LFP is very different from activity we cannot jump from Snooks' finding to any conclusions about activity trends.¹¹

One possible explanation of increases in women's paid work is simply that women today have on average one or two children fewer than women a few decades ago. They therefore have more time on their hands, and part-time work fills that time quite nicely. This is a neat explanation except for the fact that it can be so easily reversed: it is equally possible that women have fewer children because they are working more.¹² But what if women are not working much more today than they were in the 1960s? The last four decades have been the era of the baby bust. The fertility rate has fallen from 3.5 children per woman in 1961 to 1.8 today (ABS, 1992: Table 2.3.1, 54, and ABS, 2007: 1.) Yet women's average work activity is not much greater at the bottom of the baby bust than what it was at the height of the baby boom. Given this, then obviously the baby bust cannot be explained by increases in women's paid work. The interesting issue is why increased work does not follow much more strongly from such a marked reduction in

¹¹ For a more recent analysis of the literature on female labour supply, see Birch, 2005. She emphasises the complexity of the subject — no simple or single factor predominates in determining women's labour supply.

¹² This is how Snooks argues. On his account, rising female wages and marked increases in demand for female labour explain the decline in the other sort of female labour. His economic model, he claims, can explain '99 per cent of the change in family size' in the period 1946 to 1990. 'Hence the first great change in the size of the Australian household in a century ... can be explained virtually entirely in terms of fundamental economic forces' (1994: 68-69).

fertility. No obvious explanation comes to mind. The birth rate trends simply make the whole problem more puzzling.¹³

Indeed we seem to have not even the beginnings of a plausible theory to make sense of the actual trends in women's work, largely because the actual trends have been misconstrued, owing to the failure to distinguish between participation and activity.

Possible Consequences and Implications

Interpretations abound of the meaning and ramifications of these supposed trends, focused mainly on questions of women's identity and role and on secondary effects on the family. Hugh Mackay, for example, contends that the key change in recent Australian life is women's redefinition of their social role, arising mainly from their new participation in the workforce. Other social phenomena — female fatigue, eating out, out-of-home childcare, talk of 'quality time' with children, tension between spouses over housework, high divorce rates, male backlash, etc — are presented as a by-product of this re-definition. As with Mackay, so with many others: the story of women's entry into the paid workforce is no bare factual account. It is almost always told in such a way that it is made to seem charged with significance. The story centres on a core of supposed fact, which for many functions as an article of faith, one which tells us that the world really is moving forwards, and for others is a sign of decline, a movement away from the time-honoured order of the male provider and the female nurturer.

¹³ A further complicating possibility is that some of the small increase of women's paid work hours is work that was previously done in the home. Housework has been to some degree commodified. What was once unpaid work is now low paid work.

Has There Been a Revolution in Women's Work?

Post-sixties feminism has taken a number of forms, but one thing the various feminisms have in common is the doctrine that paid work is personally beneficial. For women with children the main alternative to paid work is life as a homemaker and parent. Many feminists have thought that paid work is a good thing partly because it can be challenging and interesting, but equally because it frees women from homemaking and childcare. In the past, this story supposes, women's talents have been dammed behind the wall of the family. Now the wall has been breached — by feminism, or technology, or market forces, or whatever — and those talents have been set free to energise the wider society. The story tends to leave family life in limbo, as a condition which has merely been left behind, when in reality many who accept the story also want family success of a fairly traditional sort.

The story is nothing if not familiar. But consider its photographic negative, as told by the conservative social commentator, B.A. Santamaria. As he saw it, four main factors work against the health and strength of the modern family: the divorce revolution, as facilitated by the Family Law Act; the sexual revolution, as commercialised by Hollywood and television; the rise of radical feminism in the bureaucracies, the media and the universities; and “the industrialization of married women by their progressive absorption into the paid workforce” (1995: 8-9). Of these four he believed the last of these to be the most powerful.

According to Santamaria, this absorption takes two forms: in one, a minority of educated professional women seek personal fulfilment in a career; in the other, a majority of working or lower middle class women are compelled into the workforce by the relative economic decline of families with children. In consequence of the second trend — not the first — “The strength of the family and its capacity to fulfil its various social functions rapidly broke

down under the strain...." (1995: 11). That second trend is a product not of women's free choices but of market forces, forces let loose by governments, employers and economic theorists, who saw an opportunity to drive down the wages of male breadwinners by forcing them to compete with women workers.¹⁴ Santamaria supports his account with evidence of economic polarisation, using taxable income figures said to show that the middle is being squeezed out by the rapid growth in the proportion of higher and lower income types. The failure, under pressure, of the modern family is evidenced by rising levels of divorce, sole parenthood, unemployment, youth suicide, and sexual abuse of children in non-standard family types. Behind his story lies an assumption about the importance of the 'biological' family.

We have, then, two main story types, feminist and conservative, sharing a single account of the workforce trends and agreeing that those trends are hugely important, but seeing very different implications in them. It is easy to lose sight of their central assumption — that women have been undergoing progressive 'industrialisation'. On the work activity evidence, both feminists and conservatives are arguing from a crucial false premise. Whatever gains or losses women have made or the family has incurred, none can be accounted for by the general work trends. The point can be generalised: there are no recent social changes, good or bad, which can be explained by a general growth in women's paid work activity, for the simple reason that there has been very little such growth.

Two commentators, Hugh Mackay and Anne Manne, combine elements of feminism and conservatism in interesting ways. Mackay's position is far less black and white than the

¹⁴ On the central importance of market forces as drivers of workforce change, Santamaria (1995) and Snooks (1994) are in agreement; Uhlmann (2006), however, argues that there is a two-way interaction between market forces and the gendered structure of the household.

typical feminist and conservative accounts, but it turns on exactly the same axis. On his view the family is being redefined, in ways involving both gain and pain. This redefinition follows from women's self-redefinition, but in a somewhat complex way:

It is probably true that much of the present instability in Australian family life springs from changes in the role and status of women, but not in the simplistic way often assumed by those who try to forge a direct causal link between the working mother and the unstable family. The real connection is far more subtle than that: it has to do with the fact that women's roles have become much less easy to define and, as a result, the transition from being a girl to becoming a mother appears to be a more demanding, more confusing, more complex and more painful transition than it was for previous generations of women. (1993: 65-66)

Today's grandmothers generally followed a single path: school, work, marriage, children, retirement. Then came what Mackay calls the "pioneering generation of working mothers" who broke this mould (1993: 47). Younger women today play multiple roles which "tend to diminish the relative significance of each one of those roles". "They are so used to making choices — and to the idea of staying flexible — that the inflexible and irrevocable reality of parenthood comes as something of a shock". This makes them "much more ambivalent about mothering and [much more] flexible about the nature of family life than their own mothers were" (1993: 67-68).

Unfortunately, Mackay's 'pioneering generation' is difficult to locate in the work activity evidence. No doubt there was a generation of women in the 1970s who pioneered new ways of thinking about work and its relation to personal identity. But Mackay's account

requires widespread changes in work behaviour (the exercising of real choice), not just in ways of talking about work, if it is to explain family change or anything else. That evidence is lacking.

Manne's main concern in *Motherhood* is that the rise of women's work has led to the loss of parental time with children, but she also places strong emphasis on the gains women have made in the workforce. Many who support the revolutionary thesis do so in part because they favour the liberation of women from the home. Others accept the thesis but, like Manne, worry that increases in women's paid work are tending to take time and energy away from children's nurture. Since the general trend for women's paid work is rising only very slowly, this concern could be justified only if the trend for mothers work is quite different from that for women in general. The ABS hours worked data tell us nothing about the paid work of parents of dependent children, but the 1987, 1992 and 1997 time use surveys include comparisons between sole mothers, married fathers and married mothers.

TABLE THREE
Paid work, hours per week,
Couples and sole mothers with dependent children 0-14

	1987			1992			1997		
	Married mothers	Married fathers	Sole mothers	Married mothers	Married fathers	Sole mothers	Married mothers	Married fathers	Sole mothers
Hours per week	13.7	47.0	11.6	12.7	42.9	13.8	15.6	42.0	13.7

Has There Been a Revolution in Women's Work?

Sources: ABS, *Time Use Pilot Survey*, Cat. No. 4111.1 (Sydney, 1988), Table 1.6; *How Australians Use Their Time*, Cat. No. 4153.0 (Canberra, 1993), Table 22; *How Australians Use Their Time*, Cat. No. 4153.0 (Canberra, 1998), Table 10. The 2006 time use study does not include figures on married couples and sole parents.

Here the twenty-year trend shows a small rise in married mothers' hours worked, and a small fall in married fathers' hours worked. In general married fathers do about three times as much paid work as their partners. Married mothers work about the same hours per week as the average for all women, while married fathers work much more than the average for all men (about 42 hours per week, compared with about 28 hours per week). The figures for sole mothers show a small upward trend, much like that for married mothers.¹⁵

The time use figures in Table Three — which is the best evidence we have — do suggest a weak tendency towards reduced maternal time with children. But two further factors need to be taken into account. Firstly, as already noted, the birth rate has fallen sharply in the post-1965 period, so increases in mothers' paid work may simply be occupying time freed up by that fall. And, secondly, as Table Three shows, fathers' time available for children has increased more than women's time has decreased, so children today may enjoy a net increase in parental time compared with 1987. Looking as far back as the evidence will take us (1987), we can find no general trend showing children being cast aside by their work-obsessed parents. Once again, the revolutionary thesis — this time in its conservative version — is contradicted by the evidence.¹⁶

¹⁵ Time use figures on sole fathers are available but are not likely to be reliable.

¹⁶ The situation of children of sole parents may be different. In general, sole mothers have slightly fewer children than married mothers and tend to have a little less paid work, so they will normally have more time

Conclusion

As this discussion has illustrated, social trends can be interpreted in diverse ways. There is a feminist interpretation and a conservative interpretation of women's supposed work trends, and there are also hybrid interpretations such as those put forward by Mackay and Manne. And, of course, one cannot win any arguments about the merits of a trend merely by citing the trend — history may be progressing or it may be retrogressing. What is surprising is the remarkable consensus between proponents of quite opposed interpretations about the basic direction of the trends. Although two studies — those by Mitchell and Dowrick and by Gregory — have supplied good grounds to question the consensus, those studies have largely gone unheeded.

Australia is fortunate in having good ABS figures on hours worked, going back to 1964, and, since 1987, good time use studies. This paper has attempted to bring this important evidence into focus. The main theses of the paper are, firstly, that female work patterns have changed much less in recent decades than is commonly thought, and, secondly, that since this is so, general trends in women's work behaviour cannot be used to explain other social phenomena. It remains possible that significant changes are taking place in some sections of the female population (for example, amongst some professionals), even while the overall pattern is stable, but this has to be treated as no more than conjecture. New evidence will need to be brought forward before we can be confident of any such trends or effects.

available to spend with their children. But of course the children of sole parents are likely to get less total parental time owing to the absence of a resident second parent.

Has There Been a Revolution in Women's Work?

The methodological moral of the story is that labour force participation figures are not a reliable guide to workplace trends. As Catherine Hakim put it back in 1993, the “headcount approach is not well suited to women’s work histories with long spells in permanent part-time jobs, repeated movement in and out of the labour force, seasonal and casual work, and jobs taken as and when they are available” (1993: 108). Both popular belief and academic theory have generally assumed that economic change (structural adjustment, increased international competition, microeconomic reform, the rise of the services sector) and social change (women’s liberation from the home) impact on women’s work rates, and that LFP figures are a reliable index of this impact. These assumptions need to be questioned. The LFP rate is not a reliable index, and more reliable indicators show that these background changes have had little impact across time on women’s paid work activity.

Has There Been a Revolution in Women's Work?

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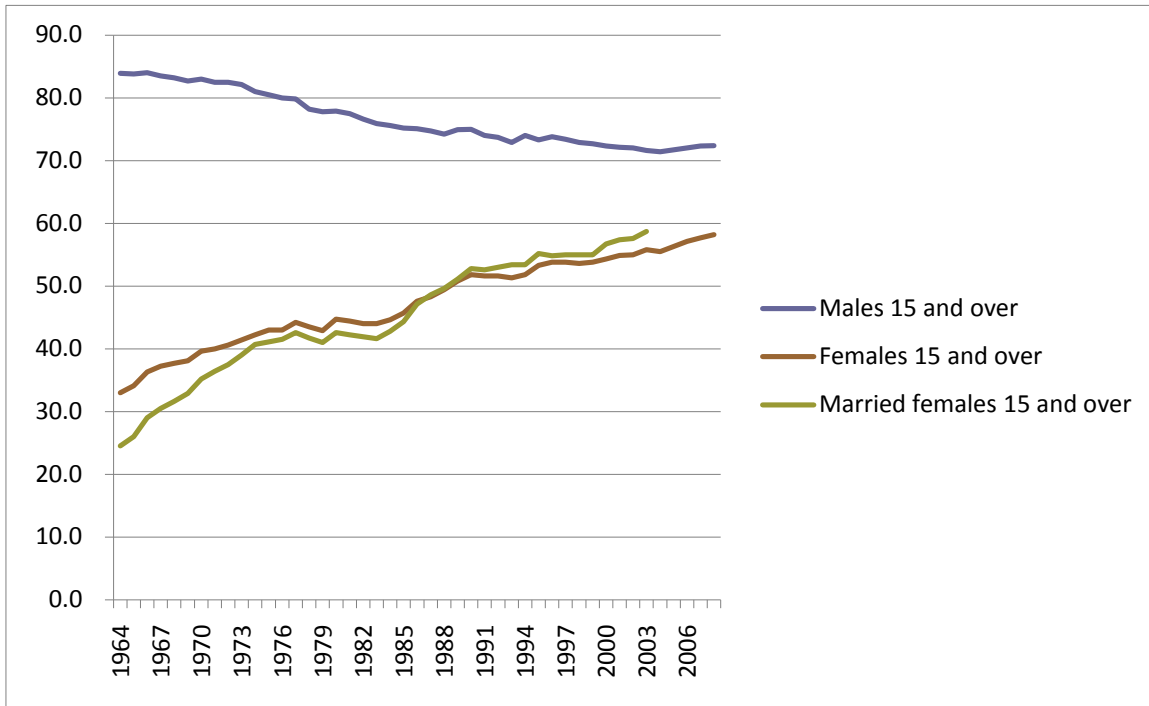


CHART ONE

Has There Been a Revolution in Women's Work?

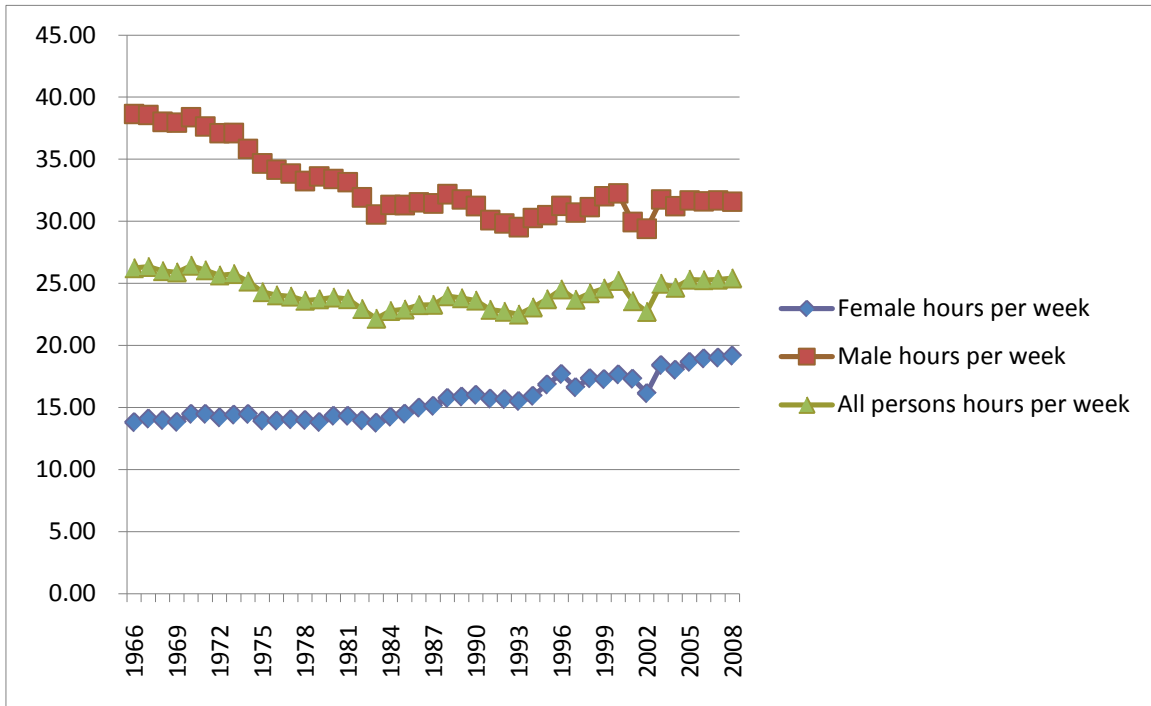


CHART TWO