

fac making a difference

**BALANCING PARENTING AND WORK:
Understanding women's work
orientations and working realities,
and pressures of balancing parenting
and work**

**AIFS Conference Presentation
12-14th February 2003**

**Monika Kruesmann
Edmond Hsu
Kim Vella
(Department of Family and Community Services)
Frank Jones
(Adjunct Professor of Social Science, University of
Queensland)**

The opinions, comments and/or analysis expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not represent the views of the Minister for Family and Community Services or the Department of Family and Community Services, and cannot be taken in any way as expressions of government policy.



**DEPARTMENT OF
FAMILY AND
COMMUNITY
SERVICES**

Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services

Setting the scene: Women's work orientations and choices about work and family	3
Theoretical considerations	4
Methods and limitations	4
Part 1) Work orientations	6
Part 2) Work and family choices	7
Concluding remarks	8
References	10
Appendix A: Sex-role preference questions from HILDA (D1 - self-completion questionnaire):	11
Appendix B: Sensitivity Test of the classification of women into the 3 preference groups.....	11
Appendix C: Work and family choices.....	12
Appendix D Non-response and confidence interval	17

Setting the scene: Women's work orientations and choices about work and family

The purpose of this paper is to explore the tensions and conflicts arising from women's work orientations, working realities¹ and work/family choices. The paper has been divided into two parts:

1. Conflict between work orientations and working realities; and
2. Conflict between balancing parenting and work.

The study focuses especially on women's perceptions of the effect of their working realities on their work and family responsibilities, and with identifying associations between these. This analysis adds to work previously undertaken by the Department of Family and Community Services (Fisher 2002), which showed that parents experience compromise and tension when balancing family and work, with time pressure being more acute than they thought it would be, particularly among women who work full-time. In addition, women tend to take on a greater share of responsibility for family responsibilities while men perceive that they bear an unfair load of housework and caring responsibilities.

It is essential to view this study in its proper context. Namely, it is a cross-sectional analysis of wave 1 of FaCS' HILDA data. It is only over time, and through longitudinal analysis, that women's behaviours, experiences and attitudes can be fully understood. For this reason, an understanding of women's work orientations and their relation to women's working realities based solely on a cross-sectional study (of HILDA or other data) is necessarily tentative.

The sample for this study includes all women from the HILDA sample aged between 18 and 59 (inclusive of those working, not working, with children and childless, and partnered and not partnered, but excluding those who claim to have retired). Therefore, this paper discusses sample frequency and proportions and makes no attempt to infer the experiences of all women in Australia. However, further analysis of the data in this paper will be undertaken using inferential statistics.

Over time, HILDA data will help determine the social, economic and political forces shaping women's chosen identities and working realities. However, this study cannot, through analysis of wave 1 data only, determine whether women change their preferences across their life course. This will become clearer as further waves of data are gathered.

The analysis in this paper is somewhat limited, compared with what was originally intended. For instance, the preferred way to explore these tensions and conflicts is to compare women's work orientations with their working realities and their preferred number of hours in work. However, only the first

¹ "*Working realities*" describes whether women are in paid work (full-time or part-time), studying (full-time or part-time), or a combination of both that equates to a full-time or part-time load.

two of these three dimensions were available for all women in the HILDA (Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia) study and this study is limited in its focus to these two dimensions. The preferred number of hours in paid work is only collected in respect of women already in paid employment and those who are unemployed and actively looking for work.

Secondly, the study intended to compare men's and women's experiences of balancing work and family with regard to the domestic division of labour, with the unit of analysis being the couple. However, this was not possible because the HILDA dataset does not allow comparison of perceptions of fairness, and actual numbers, of hours devoted to housework. The latter is unreliable because some respondent's double counted their hours.

Theoretical considerations

British sociologist Catherine Hakim's (2000) preference theory recognises the heterogeneous nature of women's choices. While her theory does not attract universal acceptance, her work provides useful concepts on which to base our classifications of women in the HILDA sample. Hakim's (2000) preference theory argues that women in developed societies belong to one of three preference groups according to their orientations to work and family (or their sex-role preferences): work-centred, adaptive, or home-centred. She argues that the work and home-centred women will constitute the smaller of the three groups and that these women have enduring orientations to work and family whatever their circumstances or stage of life. The former will plan to work throughout life and the latter will choose a marriage career and not plan to work (Hakim 2000:99). Women in the adaptive group, argues Hakim (2000), may move from work to home-centred orientations depending on their circumstances and this group is highly receptive to social policy and other political and economic forces.

Preference theory assumes that women's preferences are intrinsic and constant chosen identities – so their preferences are not affected by their circumstances or life stages. In particular, a woman's preference to be work or family-centred will persist throughout her life, despite changes in her life-style, financial situation and so on. Notwithstanding the persistence of orientations to work, Hakim (2000) acknowledges that there are transitions into and out of congruent and conflicting working realities. However, analysis of wave 1 data cannot determine the nature or extent of these transitions, though there is much anecdotal evidence of this fluidity in women's roles and lives.

Methods and limitations

The first step was to identify women's work orientations using descriptive statistics. The sample for this study comprises the 5003 women in the HILDA study not claiming to be retired, between the ages of 18 and 59, regardless of whether they were in paid work, or had children (below 15) or partners.

Fourteen was chosen as the cut-off age for children, because from age 15 onwards, children are able to be employed, and therefore potentially support themselves at least partially. Younger children also tend to require the most intensive care, both physically and emotionally, and therefore to present the most challenges for a parent seeking to balance work and family responsibilities. Also, from the age of 15 onwards, children begin to become

eligible for certain payments and benefits. Single and partnered women have been included to allow contrasts to be made between the different pressures and life-outcomes that being single or partnered lead to.

Women's work orientations were inferred through a series of attitudinal questions and forced-choice answers of five items in HILDA's D1 (refer to **Appendix A**). These variables relate to women's work/family choices and their impact on their work, family and themselves. They allowed identification of the centrality of work, family, or combining work and family to women's chosen identities. For instance, D1a asserts that "In order to be happy in life it is important to have a paying job", and asks respondents to give the assertion a rating between 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree). For a woman to be classified as work-centred in this study, she would have to answer either 5, 6 or 7 to this question. She would also have to give comparable answers on 5 other questions. Similarly, for women to be home-centred, they had to give appropriate answers on all five questions.

Where a woman did not answer all five questions according to the pre-established pattern (for instance disagreeing with a question that required an 'agree' answer, or choosing to neither agree nor disagree) she was classified as adaptive. This means that in the adaptive group, there may be women who answered four questions in accordance with other work-centred women, but who are classed as adaptive because they answered differently once. Where a woman returned a non-response for any one of the five questions, she was classed in a separate miscellaneous group, because her data was incomplete and therefore not comparable with other results.

These questions have not been specifically designed for our purpose, and this may colour the results. However, the strengths of HILDA, such as its large sample size, broad geographic coverage and broad social coverage, mean that it is still a useful vehicle for undertaking this study. It is possible that in future waves of data, other even more useful questions may be added.

The next step was to cross tabulate these results with the working realities of these women. In this way, analysis determined how many women in each of the groups is involved with either:

- Full-time work or full-time study, or a combination of part-time work and part-time study equivalent to a full-time load (both activities exerting comparable pressures on mothers).
- Full-time home duties.
- Part-time work or study.
- Unemployment (but looking for work)
- Other not specified.

In order to ensure the robustness of the results, it was necessary to test whether the selection of particular questions created a bias-effect. Two approaches were used (refer to **Appendix B**). Firstly, single questions were systematically omitted from the five; the results indicated that no one question had a particularly dominant influence. This test supports the chosen methodology, indicating that the choice of questions has not created a bias towards or away from any a particular preference group.

Secondly, the sample was classified using one question only. This resulted in a considerable re-sizing of the three groups, with the work-centred group being consistently dominant. This method of classification, however, lacks the depth of the other approach. It is not reasonable to suggest that a single attitudinal question can determine reliably the preferences of all women. Therefore, this outcome does not invalidate the results.

This study has several limitations; these are outlined in turn:

1. The HILDA survey is longitudinal, not cross-sectional and it is only over time that behaviours, experiences and attitudes can be fully understood. For this reason, an understanding of women's work orientations and their relation to women's working realities based solely on a cross-sectional study (of HILDA or other data) is necessarily tentative.
2. A sample approach (reporting frequencies and proportions) was used and no attempt has been made to infer the experiences of all women in Australia.
3. This study was not able to compare women's working realities with their preferred number of hours in paid work. This would have been useful in better understanding women's work orientations, working realities and their work/family choices. However, the preferred number of hours in paid work is currently only being asked of a sub-group of women; that is, those already in paid employment and those who are unemployed and are actively looking for work.

Part 1) Work orientations

This part of the paper identifies potential conflict between women's work orientation and their working reality: mismatches between the two. Mismatches between these two (for example, work-centred women are engaged in home duties, home-centred women work full-time) would indicate that those women experience stress in balancing their work and family responsibilities.

Unexpectedly, the vast majority of women in the study sample were found to have an adaptive work orientation (88 per cent), and only a small proportion of women were found to have work- (11 per cent) or home-centred (0.5 per cent) work orientations.² This is interesting in contrast with the working realities of women in this sample; nearly 50 per cent of women worked full-time and only 27 per cent worked part-time, while 10 per cent of women were engaged exclusively in home duties. These proportions cannot be treated as totally definitive. HILDA does have a non-response rate (34 per cent of households), but in comparison with other international surveys of this type, this rate of non-response is favourable.³ In our analysis there was also a large group (302

² It must be noted, however, that a large group of women (7.4 per cent) could not be classified because they failed to answer at least one of the six questions. Therefore, it is possible that, with their inclusion, the home- and work-centred groups may be larger, although the adaptive groups will remain the biggest by far.

³ Watson, N., and Wooden, M., "Assessing the quality of the HILDA Survey wave 1 data", *HILDA project technical paper series*, No. 4/02, October 2002, p.27

respondents) that we have not allocated to a work orientation because of a non-response on one or more questions.

Of women with an adaptive orientation (n=4151), nearly half work full-time, nearly one-third work part-time and nearly ten per cent are engaged exclusively in home duties. These data show that an adaptive orientation to work is not incommensurate with full-time work, part-time work and home duties. They show that while women with this work orientation are concentrated in full-time work, they do span across a range of working realities. Work-centred women's (n=527) work preferences were found to be congruent with their working realities. Of women with a work-centred orientation, 66 per cent worked full-time, while 24 per cent worked part-time and only 4 per cent were involved in home duties.

Analysis of the working realities of women with home-centred orientations (n=less than 30) is not reliable because the sample size is too small. There was also a fourth group, those women who returned non-responses (6 per cent). This means that, potentially, any of the other three groups could grow by 6 per cent, or a proportion thereof.

The conceptualisation of women as holding particular work orientations is germane to an understanding of women's work/family balance choices and conflicts. This is to suggest that women with adaptive work orientations, who constitute the greatest proportion of those in part-time work, may experience less conflict between work and family than women with work-centred orientations. The paper now turns to work/family choices and identifies which women are experiencing difficulties in attempting to balance these.

Part 2) Work and family choices

This study also examined information gathered from section F of the self-completion HILDA questionnaire. These questions dealt with balancing parenting and work responsibilities and the impact of doing so on these dimensions of women's lives. For this part of the analysis, the sample was restricted; only women both with children and in paid work were eligible to answer the questions. This is a self-selected group in the sense that those who have not been able to balance parenting and work have already exited the labour market. The results need to be interpreted in the light of this self-selection. However, because HILDA is a longitudinal study future waves will make possible the examination of how people manage this tension over time, with some not in the labour market at wave 1 in it at wave 2 or wave 3; while others may make the opposite transition.

This brought the sample size down from the original 5003 to 1282-1286.⁴ The following results only apply to that smaller group. The lack of material on women not working means it is not possible at this point to see how many women have left the work force entirely due to the pressures of balancing work and family. However, the benefit of a longitudinal dataset like HILDA is that future waves of data should allow us to chart this scenario over the longer term.

⁴ N depends on how many women answered the particular item.

The vast majority of these women believe that combining work and parenting, though it may be difficult, has positive effects on their lives (refer to **Appendix C**). However, for one to two-fifths of women, work detracts from the enjoyment and quality of their parenting. Similarly, among more than one third of women, combining parenting and work detracts from their opportunities at, and enjoyment of, work. Women working full-time with children under 15 are struggling the most to balance work and family responsibilities.

Women with a partner and children under 15 years constitute the largest proportion of women in this sample, and of these women, those in full-time work are more likely to agree that balancing parenting and work is difficult than those in part-time work. Similarly, single women with children under 15 years in full-time work are more likely to agree that balancing parenting and work is difficult than those in part-time work. Therefore, there is an association between women's working realities and their opinions on the assertion.

The Pearson chi-square statistic is very significant for the following four assertions; that is, they have a p-value less than 0.0001. These assertions relate to the impact of paid work on family responsibilities and a large proportion of women agreed that they experienced difficulties:⁵

1. 'working causes me to miss out on some of the rewarding aspects of being a parent' (41.8 per cent)
2. 'working leaves me with too little time or energy to be the kind of parent I want to be' (35.5 per cent)
3. 'because of the requirements of my job, my family time is less enjoyable and more pressured' (23.9 per cent)
4. 'because of the requirements of my job, I miss out on home or family activities that I would prefer to participate in' (35.4 per cent)

Concluding remarks

This paper had two aims: to determine whether women in the study sample have attitudes to work which are congruent with their working realities, and to describe whether these women experience difficulty in balancing their work and family responsibility. The study sample included all women from the HILDA sample aged between 18 and 59 who are not retired (inclusive of those working, not working, with children and childless, and partnered and not partnered). The women in the sample did form three groups, as suggested by Hakim, with the largest group being those with adaptive orientations, with the other two groups being much smaller in comparison. There is no evidence of fundamental conflict between work orientations and reality. However, there is some evidence of tension between balancing work and family responsibilities, particularly among women working full-time with children under 15 years.

These results must be read in the context of a cautionary note about this study's limitations. Firstly, the study is limited in that it has adopted a sample

⁵ Refer to **Appendix C** for associated tables and graphs.

approach (reporting frequencies and proportions) and does not attempt to infer the experiences of all women in Australia. To do so requires further analysis and use of inferential statistics.

Secondly, comparing women's working realities with their preferred number of hours in paid work would be a useful measure for determining preference group membership. However, the preferred number of hours in paid work is only being asked to a sub-group of women; that is, those already in paid employment and those who are unemployed and are actively looking for work.

Thirdly, this study did not compare members of couples' perceptions and experiences of the domestic division of labour. The HILDA dataset does not allow comparison of perceptions of fairness, and actual numbers, of hours devoted to housework. The latter is unreliable because some respondents double counted their hours. This problem may be rectified in collection of future waves of data.

Fourthly, a cross-sectional analysis of wave 1 of FaCS' HILDA data cannot explain variations in women's work orientations or working realities, if they exist, over time. It is only through longitudinal analysis that women's behaviours, experiences and attitudes can be fully understood.

Future research provides an opportunity to develop a broader understanding of the dynamics of, and interplay between, orientations to and working realities. An area neglected to date will be the focus of analysis: men's working realities and their views on what their partners' orientations to work should be and, more importantly, whether members of couples have congruent or complementary views about women's work orientations. Issues of interest include relationships between tensions and workforce participation, work flexibility, access to childcare, the domestic division of labour and household financial situation, and the different impacts of these on men and women.

References

1. ABS (1996), Australian Social Trends, Cat. No. 6204.0, Canberra.
2. ABS (1998), Caring in the Community, Cat. No. 4436.0, Canberra.
3. ABS (2001) Deaths, Australia, Catalogue number 3302.0
4. ABS (2000), Caring in the Community, Cat. No. 4436.0, Canberra.
5. Barnes, A (2001) *Low fertility: a discussion paper*, Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, Occasional Paper No. 2, February.
6. Commonwealth Department of the Treasury, 2002, *Intergenerational Report 2002-03*, Budget Paper No. 5.
7. Fisher, K (2002), Fertility Pathways in Australia: Relationships, Opportunities, Work and Parenting, Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services: Canberra.
8. Hakim, C (2000) *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century*, Oxford University Press: Oxford
9. OECD (2002) *Bosses and Babies: Reconciling Work and Family Life*, OECD: Paris
10. Tongue, A and N. Ballenden, 'Families and ageing in the 21st century', *Family Matters*, No. 52, Autumn 1999, p.5.
11. Watson, N., and Wooden, M., "Assessing the quality of the HILDA Survey wave 1 data", *HILDA project technical paper series*, No. 4/02, October 2002

Appendix A: Sex-role preference questions from HILDA (D1 - self-completion questionnaire):

- A. In order to be happy in life it is important to have a paying job.
- B. I would enjoy having a job even if I didn't need the money.
- H. Mothers who don't really need the money shouldn't work.
- I. Children do just as well if the mother earns the money and the father cares for the home and children.
- L. A working mother can establish just a good a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work for pay.

Appendix B: Sensitivity Test of the classification of women into the 3 preference groups

D1 Questions (n=4701) %	Work-centred	Adaptive	Home-Centred
A, B, H, I, L	11.2	88.3	0.5
-A, B, H, I, L	18.4	80.4	1.2
A, -B, H, I, L	14.8	84.4	0.8
A, B, -H, I, L	18.5	80.6	0.9
A, B, H, -I, L	13.7	84.6	1.7
A, B, H, I, -L	15.9	83.4	0.7
A only	60.8	15.5	23.7
B only	58.9	18.0	23.1
H only	51.1	16.9	32.0
I only	73.0	15.6	11.4
L only	51.8	18.6	29.7

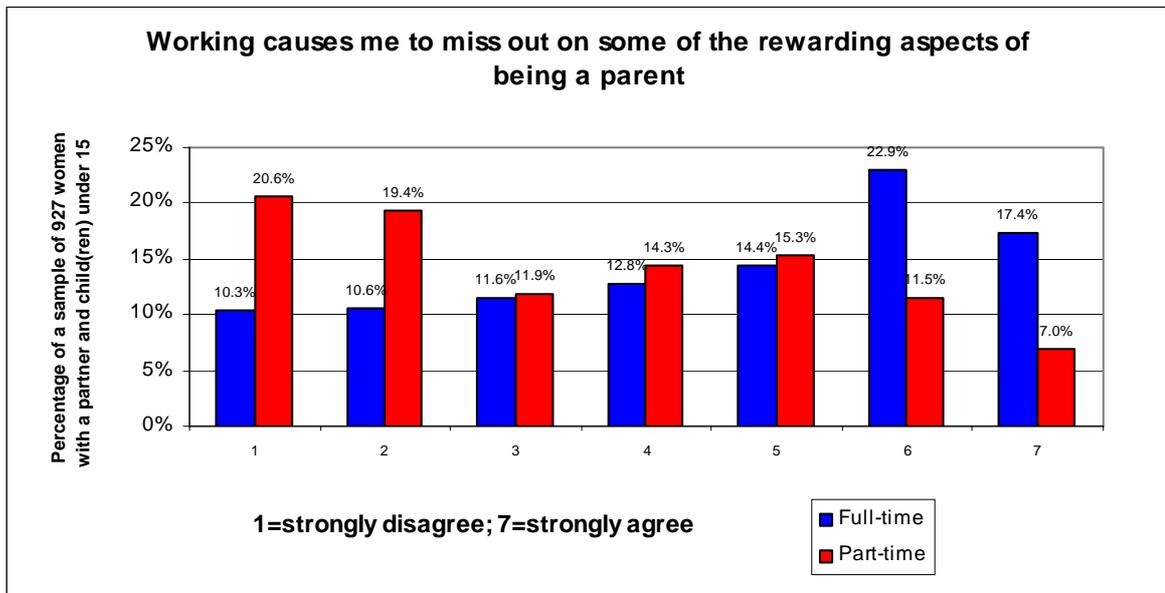
Appendix C: Work and family choices

1. Results of section F of the self-completion HILDA questionnaire
2. Tables and graphs of responses for each item by working reality and family type (presence of children and/or partner).

	Assertion	Agree	Disagree
Impact on work	I worry about what goes on with my children while I'm at work	42	45
	Because of my family responsibilities, I have to turn down work activities or opportunities that I would prefer to take on	30.9	55.5
	Because of my family responsibilities, the time I spend working is less enjoyable and more pressured	22.5	60.8
Impact on family	Working causes me to miss out on some of the rewarding aspects of being a parent	41.8	44.8
	Working leaves me with too little time or energy to be the kind of parent I want to be	35.5	48.5
	Because of the requirements of my job, I miss out on home or family activities that I would prefer to participate in	35.4	51.1
	Because of the requirements of my job, my family time is less enjoyable and more pressured	23.9	61.5
	The fact that I am working makes me a better parent	37.2	38
	My work has a positive effect on my children	52.1	18.6
	Working helps me to better appreciate the time I spend with my children	65.1	14.9
Impact on self	Managing work and family responsibilities as well as I do makes me feel competent	74.8	8.9
	Having both work and family responsibilities makes me a more well-rounded person	69.3	8.9
	Having both work and family responsibilities gives my life more variety	81.4	4.6

Working causes me to miss out on some of the rewarding aspects of being a parent⁶

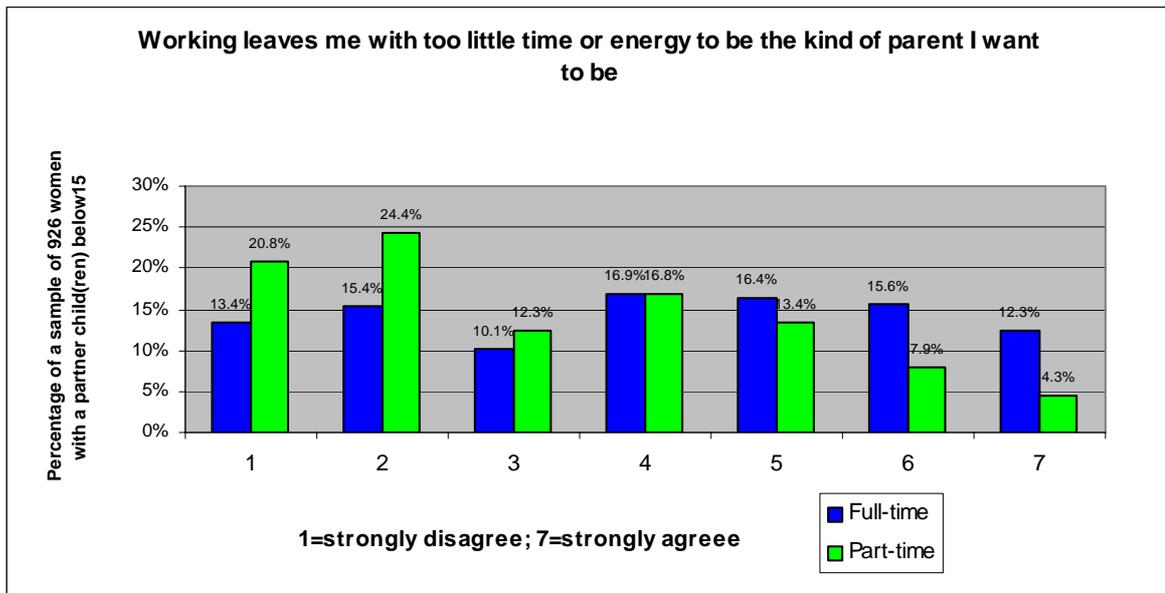
FREQ (n=1286)	Full-time	Part-time
1 (strongly disagree)	73	153
Expected	103	123
2	64	142
Expected	94	112
3	68	76
Expected	66	78
4	71	102
Expected	79	94
5	95	100
Expected	89	106
6	117	78
Expected	89	106
7 (strongly agree)	97	50
Expected	67	80



⁶ Note that contrasting colours highlight the discrepancy between the expected and observed frequency.

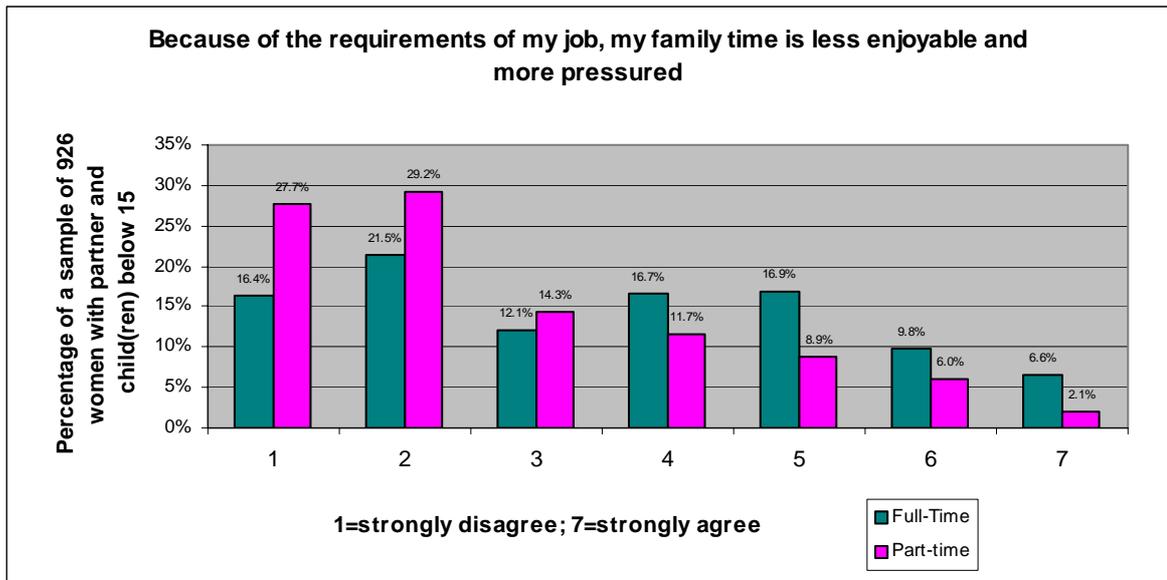
Working leaves me with too little time or energy to be the kind of parent I want to be

FREQ (n=1285)	Full-time	Part-time
1 (strongly disagree) Expected	75 105	155 125
2 Expected	98 119	164 143
3 Expected	52 60	79 71
4 Expected	97 93	108 112
5 Expected	108 95	100 113
6 Expected	89 68	60 81
7 (strongly agree) Expected	66 46	34 54



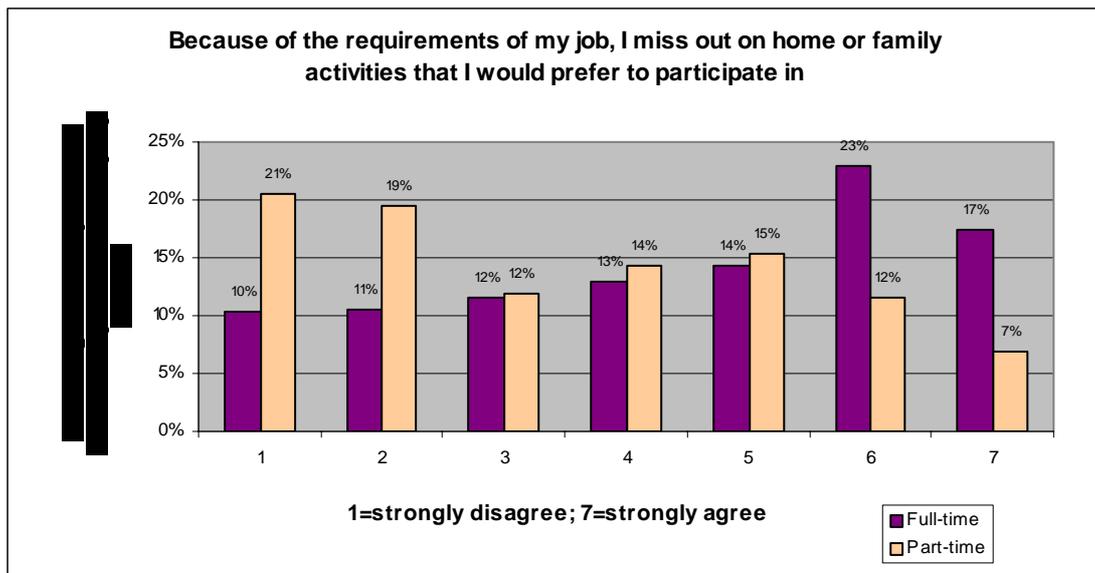
Because of the requirements of my job, my family time is less enjoyable and more pressured

FREQ (n=1282)	Full-time	Part-time
1 (strongly disagree) Expected	98 135	199 162
2 Expected	127 148	199 178
3 Expected	72 75	93 90
4 Expected	99 85	89 102
5 Expected	98 73	63 88
6 Expected	57 45	42 54
7 (strongly agree) Expected	32 21	14 25



Because of the requirements of my job, I miss out on home or family activities that I would prefer to participate in

FREQ (n=1284)	Full-time	Part-time
1 (strongly disagree) Expected	87 115	165 137
2 Expected	86 117	171 140
3 Expected	66 67	81 80
4 Expected	82 79	92 95
5 Expected	103 87	88 104
6 Expected	94 72	63 85
7 (strongly agree) Expected	67 48	39 58



Appendix D

Non-response

The initial sample selected for the first wave of the HILDA Survey comprised 12,252 households selected from 488 different neighbourhood regions across Australia, of which 11,693 were subsequently identified as in-scope. Interviews were successfully conducted with 13,969 members of 7682 households, giving a **household response rate of 66 per cent**.

Several points about non-response:

- Residents in Sydney under-reporting compared with residents elsewhere in Australia.
- There is an under-representation of men and an over-representation of women, which is not uncommon in voluntary surveys.
- Married persons are over-represented (and unmarried persons under-represented).
- Dependent students, non-dependent children and non-family members not living alone appear to be under-represented (and couples with children under 15 and lone persons are over-represented).
- Adults living alone were more likely to respond, possibly because the modest cash incentive, which was household-based rather than individual-based, was more likely to have a positive effect on small households.
- Immigrants from a non-English-speaking background comprise only 14.7 per cent of the HILDA sample, which compares with a population estimate of 17.5 per cent.
- HILDA sample excludes persons living in institutions, which will tend to mean a lesser representation of older people.
- Persons working part-time are over-represented while persons outside the labour force status are under-represented.
- There does appear to be an under-representation of own account workers (that is, the self-employed) in the HILDA sample.

However, despite of all the problems mentioned above the wave 1 data of HILDA compare favourable with other surveys of this type around the world. For details please see the HILDA Project Technical Paper No. 4/02: 'Assessing the Quality of the HILDA Survey Wave 1 Data' by Nicole Watson and Mark Wooden (October 2002).