

# Speeches

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## Why HILDA's Life could do with a Little Balance.

**(The significance of the Survey of Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia for women, men and family happiness.)**

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- Thankyou Professor Wooden for the opportunity to address this conference, and in particular to reflect on some of the findings of the Survey of Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia, otherwise known as the HILDA survey.
- I have found HILDA, for all her obvious torment and struggle to reconcile work and family responsibilities with her sanity intact, to be of great comfort.
- HILDA has confirmed so many half suspected and hitherto undemonstrable connections; it provides a richness of data for public policy makers, analysts, critics and sex discrimination commissioners.
- HILDA makes a great contribution to our understanding of Australian society; it is hard to imagine how we ever got by without it and I commend the Government on funding this important initiative. Evidence led policy should be the result, we all hope.
- Naturally HILDA is a bit like a Rorschach ink blot; we see in her what we are looking for. So undoubtedly the inferences I draw from HILDA will be different to those drawn by others.
- In the short time I have available today, I would like to address a couple of key findings and draw some conclusions that might be useful for public policy. In particular I've applied a gender analysis to my understanding.
- We know from ABS data that men of prime parenting age are working the longest hours of any work force age group, we know that 57 per cent of mothers work part time.
- We know that part time work for fathers is most uncommon.
- HILDA tells us what this means for the way they live and how they feel about the way they live. This is a great contribution to policy planning.

- First, HILDA demonstrates that the work and family collision truly is a barbecue stopper- peoples attempts to balance work and family are a source of stress for many.
- This is not surprising.
- That men and women experience these stresses differently is also unsurprising, since they are likely to reflect traditional gender roles, but it is the significance of those experiential differences for work and family policy, and indeed for fertility policy, which has given me food for thought.
- In this address I have relied on a number of HILDA research papers, including Department of Family and Community Services research paper by Kathleen Fisher and another by Monika Kruesmann and others.
- Let's look at the differences for men and women.
- Fathers, according to HILDA, are much more likely than mothers to feel they are missing out on being a parent, or on home and family activities (well over half the fathers surveyed).
- A third said the requirements of their job made family time less enjoyable and more pressured.
- Fathers also tended to be less satisfied with their jobs than mothers; only a third were very satisfied with their work flexibility arrangements and a quarter with their working hours.
- You'd have to say from this survey that Australian dads are not a happy lot.
- Mothers, by contrast, were much more satisfied with the family friendly conditions available to them at work. Perhaps their expectations were lower.
- However a third of mothers observed they had to turn down work opportunities because of their family responsibilities, whereas only a quarter of fathers did.
- But were mothers happy? No, but for different reasons.
- While their paid jobs were apparently more accommodating than those of their partners, their home lives were not.
- This was particularly the case for mothers working full time.
- Full time working mothers were more likely than fathers to believe being a parent was harder than they had expected, and over half said they were often tired, worn out or exhausted from meeting the needs of their children.
- One in five mothers who worked full time said taking care of her children was more work than pleasure.
- And a sense of injustice permeates their responses.
- Fifty eight percent of mothers working full time felt they did more than their fair share of *child care* and sixty four percent felt they did more than their

fair share of *housework*.

- This is not surprising- HILDA shows that sixty percent of full time working mothers did eleven or more hours of housework a week, compared with a mere twelve percent of full time working dads!
- Female dissatisfaction is probably compounded by the clash of the reality of parenting with expectations of it.
- In particular, the traditional division of household labour continues (meaning women do the bulk of both child care and housework) according to HILDA.
- This is despite the fact that 91 per cent of mothers and 86 per cent of fathers believe that if both partners work they should share equally in the housework and child care!
- And for those of you who believe Australian women still hanker after traditional roles, 70 per cent of those surveyed said children do just as well if the mother earns the money and father cares for home and children.
- Sixty percent of dads agreed with them.
- With contradictions like these, with an abyss stretching between words and action, no wonder there are tensions at home, no wonder relationships break down and people feel stress.
- This mismatch in expectations between mothers and fathers, both at home and at work, and their differing sources of discontent, are also reflected in the fertility demographics.
- HILDA data demonstrates that women are least likely to partner, and therefore to have children, if they have tertiary education and are in full time, well paid work.
- These women, according to researchers Birrell and Rapson, are said to be seeking *collaborative* partnerships where work and family responsibilities, including the earning of income, are born equally.
- This is not necessarily true of men of equivalent socio-economic status, who may want a collaborative partnership but are as likely to want to be the main bread winner. It is certainly not true of less educated men, their other potential partners.
- Amongst men it is the poorly educated in insecure employment who are the least likely to want and to have children.
- These men are also those who adhere most strongly to the family breadwinner model; not surprisingly they are unwilling to partner and to have children if they do not consider their employment circumstances enable them to perform this role.
- Collaboration for them is, literally, for the birds. At both ends of the socio-economic spectrum then, there are mismatches between the values of men and women looking for partners and having children.
- In these mismatches we surely have at least part of the explanation for

Australia's declining fertility rate. Highly paid women and low paid men are not finding partners.

- This should not surprise us- after all, as HILDA's home and work satisfaction measures have confirmed, this mismatch in expectations between men and women continues amongst people who actually do partner and raise children together.
- If we now tie this in with the proposition in Lyn Craig's research paper, *The Time Cost of Children*, we have a uniquely Australian problem.
- Craig's paper compares work and family supports and expectation of support in four countries; Germany, Italy and Norway and Australia. She ranks fertility against a number of work and family policy variables.
- Germany and Italy are both low fertility countries in which women are not encouraged to work with children, Norway is the reverse and Australia, the second highest fertility country in the survey, is a mixed bag.
- Craig's results suggest it is precisely this same mismatch in the expectations of Australian men and women which is responsible for the rise of one child families and its attendant implications for the overall fertility rate.
- According to Craig's analysis, Australian women, *before* child birth, enjoy both a relatively equal division of housework and workforce participation with their partners when compared with, say, Italy and Germany.
- This, she concludes, means women will start families. But, and I quote from her paper "where the consequences of having that child is extreme deepening of the division of labour, and great difficulty combining work and home commitments, many women refrain from subsequent births...In Australia, unlike Italy, it is the condition of motherhood itself that is unconducive to high fertility".
- Australian women suffer a real Baby Shock; the change in their lives after having a child is more extreme than for women in the other countries studied.
- For this reason perhaps, the number of only child families in Australia has gone from one in five to one in three families in twenty years.
- There are primary schools in Melbourne and Sydney where half the children in the class are only-children.
- They only had to try it once to find out they didn't like what it did for them. This I have called the "disappointment fertility" effect.
- I draw two conclusions from this:
  - The work/life collision has two sides to it; for a family's work and life to balance it must be balanced for both parents, not just for mothers, if the family is to be a happy one.
  - The mismatch in expectations between men and women manifests itself in the resentment women feel that they do too much at home and the resentment men feel that they are missing out at home. These

disappointments are clearly enormous contributors to family distress.

- It says the last thirty years of the emancipation of women has been just that- about women. Not much has changed for men. So my first conclusion is that it is time men were included in this gender change.
- My second conclusion from this data is that if women are not able to balance their work and family commitments, if they do feel they are carrying an unfair burden of family responsibilities and if this has happened because of their motherhood, then they will not have children, or, more usually, they will have fewer children.
- In other words thirty years of increasing the access of women to public life, to employment, to higher education and work opportunities may have increased the total number of opportunities available to women but it has not made the combination of any mix of opportunities easier.
- In other words, choice for Australian women is as restricted as ever it was. We have merely re ordered their choices, so that now for example, having children has become more difficult and having a job has become easier. Is this progress you may well ask?
- Overall, it should not be surprising to any of us that work and family has become a key issue for Australians.
- They talk about it, they worry about it, they try to figure out what to do about it.
- Young women blame the crazy struggle up the career ladder for their failure to find mates and have children.
- Parents wonder how they can keep going and rail against a workforce that fails their parenting needs or the lack of social supports like accessible child-care that would help care for their children.
- Grand parents either grumble about not having enough grandchildren or complain that they are unpaid child care workers for their children because good child care is so difficult to find.
- Employers try to do what they can for female employees, but frequently say they need a business case to justify it.
- Male employees who want to be involved fathers are mostly considered to be nuisances.
- Some may be disappointed that HILDA was not able to explore the links between family-friendly work practices and fertility in greater depth because fertility is currently of such wide spread public concern. But as I said in the Paid Maternity Leave discussion paper, fertility is not so much a problem in itself for Australian women, but as a clear symptom of deeper problems in their lives. So ignoring fertility, just once, just for a moment, there are other important reasons for HILDA to take an interest in family-friendly working conditions.
- I would encourage HILDA's analysts to explore the linkages between the availability of family friendly conditions and government support for working families with family stability, with outcomes for children, with economic outcomes for women and with the quality of the Australian labour market.

- On this last point we are, after all, in a global economy where Australian unemployment is predicted to fall as low as four percent.
- We need to ensure we derive maximum output from all our workers, including women and girls, and in particular to maximise the return on our vast public and private investment in the education and training of women and girls
- HILDA might also be able to shed light on the implications of the emerging two tiered labour market for Australian family life.
- It seems obvious that the market for highly skilled people where workers enjoy comforts and protections is becoming increasingly separated from that other tier, the market for lower skilled or marginal workers who enjoy few or no protections.
- No doubt this has enabled Australia to become more productive and competitive, but at some cost.
- There is already evidence that work and family conditions are more available to skilled and professional workers.
- For example only 31 per cent of women have paid maternity leave entitlements and these are overwhelmingly either professional and managerial, or in the public sector.
- Paid Maternity Leave for shop assistants and waitresses is almost unheard of.
- If this trend continues, there is no doubt that access to work-life balance may well be divisive and unfair. Increasingly we will have middle-class families able to access family-flexible conditions such as paid maternity leave and work from home, but will find working class families limited to either casual and low paid part time work as a solution.
- Either that or they will continue on in their full time factory jobs, but without employer-provided support (such as flexible hours) for their family responsibilities because there is no business case for it!
- Surely dysfunctional or at risk families are a likely consequence of our failure to support all working families? And it will be class-based.
- It is for this reason that I have so strongly advocated a government-funded national scheme of paid maternity leave, rather than an employer mandated scheme.
- It avoids the discriminatory consequences for women, especially low skilled women, or of families in low socio-economic groups missing out on leave entitlements altogether.
- It is clear that family time is a problem; HILDA is evidence enough of that.
- The solutions however, are much less clear. If we want to encourage part time work for parents, for example, we have the choice of either mandating it or providing tax incentives to business that would make it possible.
- Industrial re-regulation would not be considered desirable by either this

Government or by business and the alternative, tax incentives, are far from guaranteed to create the desired outcome.

- If we want to encourage working from home, we need to address the many issues that flow from it- occupational health and safety, insurance, proper protections.
- Likewise the provision of high quality child-care, especially that home based care so sought after by parents of children under two is problematic.
- Expecting child care workers to run businesses from home and manage the paper work for a few dollars an hour per child, is a tall order.
- Making child care affordable, enabling it to extend to children having a sick day, to teenagers as well as the under twos, is clearly horrendously expensive.
- At what point does the country decide that the question is not whether we can afford to do it, but whether we can afford not to do it?
- What is not possible is a reversion to the family models of the past.
- Yes, there might be a resurgence of traditional values and young women might be persuaded to forgo their dazzling careers, wondrous educations and outstanding achievements to return to the peace of the home. I doubt it but it could happen.
- And while improved affordability of housing might free some parents from the burden of work, while the effective marginal tax rates attached to a range of family benefits might drive some women out of the work force, the truth is women are increasingly necessary members of the work force.
- The country's economy, its future as well as current economic growth prospects (especially in this era of low fertility and increasing welfare dependency ratios) depends upon more women working.
- The increasing privatisation of old age- meaning future generations will have to provide for their own retirements and health needs- all point women in one direction only. That is, to work and have children.
- The forces facing this generation are different to those of the past, their outlooks complex and opportunities greater.
- It has been thus for each successive generation.
- We have sent our girls to schools, training courses, universities.
- We have watched proudly as our daughters have topped classes, started their own businesses, made their own way.
- We have watched in awe as young women have moved into male-dominated industries like mining and heavy engineering and truck driving. We will not be able to turn them back. We will not want to.
- But as the HILDA data confirms, it is now time for men to be given the same opportunities to be engaged parents, and it is most certainly time for the country and its leaders to work with the paradigm of the modern family,

rather than against it.

- Our social and economic future are intimately linked with how well we do it.

Thank you.

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