

# Women and work 21<sup>st</sup> century style



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With work and family issues still posing problems in the modern workplace it is clear that maternity leave will continue to be a high-profile issue. Many divergent views are already evident. But behind that ubiquitous topic, a deeper battle is being joined for ascendancy in policy-making for Australia's women.

At its heart are the theories of British researcher Catherine Hakim of the London School of Economics who has recently completed a three-week tour of Australia. Dr Hakim has written extensively on women and the workplace, covering a wide range of topics from the compatibility of career and parenting, the role of economic conscription in dual income families to the place of public policy in setting some 'ideal' for women at work.

Hakim's latest book *Work-lifestyle choices in the 21st Century* [Oxford University Press 2001, ISBN 0 19 924210 0] develops what she calls 'preference theory'. Using extensive research, she argues that on these contentious work issues, contemporary Western women are far from united. Rather, they have a wide variety of preferences that policy-makers must take into account.

Hakim identifies four elements in preference theory. First, specific historical changes have led to a new environment for contemporary women and their work choices. They are: the contraceptive revolution in the 1960s, the equal employment opportunity movement, the rise of white collar and professional work, the creation of jobs for secondary work in which career is not the number one priority and the increasing importance of preferences, choices and lifestyle options in affluent societies. Secondly, women now have many different perspectives on work. In particular, she says, there are three idealised preferences. About twenty per cent of women are home-centred; about twenty per cent are work-centred; and the remaining sixty per cent are 'adaptive', focusing on both work and home to differing degrees at different times.

Preference theory's third element finds that their preferences can create conflict between women about social and workplace policy. Men are said to be more homogenous and therefore greatly advantaged. Fourth, and finally, the diversity of preferences means that public policy needs also to be diverse. Rather than aiming for a single approach to women's work needs, public policy should cater for the variety of work preferences exhibited by women. One size will not fit all, nor should it try to.

Arising from this analysis, Hakim's policy prescription eschews any standard mould. If some women want to stay at home and avoid

the paid workforce — especially when their children are young — government policy should recognise that preference and assist them to follow it, she says. Research appears to indicate that, for all sorts of reasons, only a minority of women will want, or will reach, senior positions of real power. Many women prefer lower level part-time work or no paid employment at all. Hakim says that 'contrary to much feminist rhetoric', the research confirms that many women are not 'chafing at the bit to flee the home for life as a career woman'. But plenty are. Accordingly, government policy should cater for both, and other, preferences. These differences are likely to remain, 'despite the expectations or manoeuvring of feminists', according to Hakim.

Apparently, preference theory has greatly impressed Australia's Prime Minister. Perhaps not coincidentally, it has generated much hostility among prominent Australian feminists. Writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* recently, Ann Summers, for example, described Hakim's work as 'outmoded and irrelevant ideas'. She objects to the contention that women's preferences often involve substantially different value systems, rather than mere circumstance-determined serial options. Summers is particularly irked by the suggestion from Hakim's research that some home-centred women 'resent their husband's taxes being used' to provide child-care subsidies to women who 'can't be bothered to look after their own children'. It is not difficult to understand why a long-term feminist campaigner, along with many other people, would object to this. But there seems to be an element of shooting the messenger in Summers' attack. Certainly, her simultaneous demand that social policy not be constructed on the basis of the way we wish things were sounds hollow, given her failure to bring forward any counter evidence to refute the finding that some women do hold these views. Conceptually, much of her critique sounds suspiciously like support for the one-size-fits-all approach identified in Hakim's research as unacceptable to many women. Much of the general hostility to preference theory seems long on passionate assertion and short on statistical or research data.

The question of how labour market and social policy can best be structured to cater for the complexity of modern women's lives will almost certainly continue to generate vigorous discussion. Current proposals for maternity leave and changed workplace practices will clearly be high on the agenda. But debate will need to go much further than that to encompass varying views and sincere disagreement. Positive outcomes to suit the needs of all women are not likely if new ideas and contentious proposals spawn only knee-jerk assertions and routine resort to sacred cows. ■

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