



What women want

...and how they can get it

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THE TAVISTOCK CENTRE FOR COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Women in Britain, according to the consensus, have made great progress over the last 12 years. The UK has more women working than any other EU country. The number of women in Parliament is up. The earning gap between men and women has shrunk. Maternity leave has increased. This advance has been heralded in reports, speeches and policy papers.

But this welcome is based on an unspoken assumption: that women achieve self-realisation through their career. Work is a universal enterprise; success at work, a universal ambition. Women's increased participation in the workplace is seen as evidence that with every passing day, women draw closer to fulfilling their potential.

Yet the cheering and applause drown out the reality: this is not what women want. Most women don't aspire to the kind of lives that their supposed champions are busily engineering for them. Far from being committed to a career, the overwhelming majority of women would prefer to opt out of it. Instead of finding satisfaction in full-time work, most women realise themselves in their other roles as carers, partners, community members, and above all mothers.

This message emerges clearly from a YouGov poll for this report. The poll found that only 12% of mothers wanted to work full time and 31% did not want to work at all. Only 1% of mothers with children under five thought that the mother, in a family where the father worked and there were two children under five, should work full time; 49% thought she shouldn't work at all. Fathers asked the same question offered an almost identical response: only 2% thought mum should work when her husband worked and the children were under five; and 48% thought she shouldn't work at all.

Rejection of the work-centred culture is particularly pronounced among mothers. But it extends to all women. Among full-time workers, if money were not a constraint, only one in five women would continue working full-time; among part-time workers, only 6% of women said they would choose to switch to full-time work. (Among men employed full-time, 26% would choose to continue working full-time; among men working part-time, 17% said they would choose to switch to full-time work.)

This is not about women being work-shy. While 19% of women working full-time wouldn't work if they didn't have to, a whopping 28% of men working full-time don't want to; it is about women having different priorities from those promoted by the governing élite. Ordinary women – and men – value the whole woman, who can fulfill more than her role as worker.

Those who influence and design public policy claim to represent women, but choose to ignore their preferences. Their aim is to get more women into full employment, and ease their burden once they get there. Yet this policy satisfies only one in five women – and ignores the wishes of 99% of mothers with young children.

These findings call into question government initiatives such as wrap-around schools and day care centres that have cost £21 billion since Labour came to power; or the income tax system that penalises single-earner couples with children; or calls for 50-50 gender quotas. All these policies are symptomatic of an attitude found right across the political spectrum: that paid work is regarded as the most important activity that we, as a society, engage in. Progress is measured in the increase in the number of citizens in employment. The conventional establishment view is firmly entrenched, visible in the media, the law and government initiatives. To challenge this attitude is regarded as highly subversive – a female heresy whose proponents must be condemned and punished.

Why is our culture moulded by a tiny minority whose needs receive such disproportionate attention? Because this minority is vocal, visible and influential. The commentariat, where women working full time are over-represented, and the high-flying career women whom they hail and quote, set the agenda. They value work, ambition and independence; and won't tolerate any exception to its norm. They applaud policies that liberate women both from children, in the shape of institutionalised daycare that is readily accessible and affordable; and from men, through the erosion of the interdependent couple.

This élite caricatures women who have turned their back on a career as victims of sexual discrimination. Yet research already exists to challenge this view. LSE sociologist Catherine Hakim has shown that real women end up in badly paid, low status, part-time jobs, not because of inequality between the sexes, or the cost of child care, but because they choose a part-time job that allows them to enjoy family time rather than a career that compromises their family life.

These women are not victims but decision-makers; they simply have different priorities from the ones espoused by the cultural and political establishment. That establishment is determined to fashion British women in its own mould: autonomous units of production rather than creators of, and investors in, social capital. It regards women who value the family more than a career as little more than parasites; failures who depend on men and use their education to bring ease and pleasure to others' lives rather than fulfill their potential. It has set up a new hierarchy where women working full-time are at the top and those who work only part time or not at all languish at the bottom.

While the élite rush about at a pace set by profit-making, the pace for real women is dictated by their wish to lead a full life where family, work and "others" – elderly relatives, the school, the church, the community – are accorded an important place. They regard masculine materialist values as ultimately dissatisfying; and reject a system fuelled by consumption. Real women engage in an alternative, feminine, lifestyle, as carer and nurturer, offering what the psychotherapist Susie Orbach calls "free emotional services".

In doing so they are committing what, in the eyes of the establishment, amounts to heresy – and are punished for it. They must suffer the contempt in which their chosen lifestyle is held. They see their inter-dependency scorned and find themselves robbed of a voice by those hostile to their alternative value system. Real women are used to being taken for granted by men; but what they find galling is that today the hostility they encounter comes mainly from other women, who have adopted the male value system. Women pay an immense price for the misrepresentation of their desires.

But they aren't the only victims. Society as a whole is undermined by the attempt to impose masculine aspirations on everyone. The state is subsidising bad mothering and penalising good; it is subsidising individualism and punishing inter-dependency. Women feel pushed into a role that is not of their own choosing; as a result couples and families are suffering.

To illustrate these effects, this study draws on research on inter-dependency from the Tavistock Couples Research Centre. Work there shows the anxiety, anger and frustration that married women and those in marriage-like relationships suffer when their dependency needs are ignored.

Many fear that the recent economic global down-turn may affect the British work force as it has done the American one: putting men out of work and forcing women to become the breadwinner. This would deepen the gulf between what women want and what they are forced to do. But the upheaval is also doing away with the old inflexible working model: dramatic changes have taken place in the labour market, with almost a million working part-time between March and May 2009 because they could not find a full time job – a rise of 38% over last year.¹ Employers and employees are adjusting to more limited work schedules, are reducing expectations, and in many cases, rethinking their lifestyle.

What can be done?

The government could do much: it could stop pumping billions into institutionalised childcare, allowing women instead to choose how to bring up their children. It could change the tax and benefit system to stop privileging lone parents while penalising stay-at-

¹ Office of National Statistics, July 2009.

home mothers. It could cut bureaucracy to make part-time work more attractive. The government should also invest in couple support services such as pre-marriage preparation courses and couple therapy; and make clear to women entering cohabitation their perilous legal status.

But beyond policy, a profound cultural shift is needed. The establishment should stop forcing women into a mould, and allow them instead to realise their ambitions. This means accepting and supporting a value system that is family-centred, not work-centred; and rehabilitating free emotional services, from cooking family meals to volunteering at the school fair. We need to redirect our thinking about women's needs, to create a society in which women are freed from unnecessarily destructive pressures, children thrive and all can feel comfortable with the roles they fulfil not just as workers, but as parents, partners and citizens.

2. LABOUR'S GIFT TO WOMEN

“You’ve come a long way, baby”. The 1960s marketing slogan for Virginia Slim cigarettes still rings true for women in Britain. Women have become an increasingly visible and influential group in public and professional life. Their ranks have swollen in Parliament and in management. The wage gap between men and women has shrunk, and maternity leave and benefits have increased. Sexual discrimination and sexual harassment are illegal. We have a Minister working exclusively for Women. Many of these changes have been promoted by the Labour Government in its 12 years in power. It presents itself as women’s champion and its agenda as a female vote-winner. A host of initiatives has been launched – subsidising child care, introducing tax credits and enacting higher maternity pay – all of which have been designed to encourage more and more women into employment.²

So with the introduction of the National Child Care Strategy (1998) and the Sure Start policy (1999), the government offered

² Clare Annesley, Francesca Gains and Kirstein Rummery, *Women and New Labour*, Policy Press, 2007.

subsidised, institutional child care for working parents. It then launched a string of initiatives to provide welfare-to-work schemes and set up a complex array of tax credits to encourage women into the workplace. It introduced the Working Families Tax Credit (1999); this was reformed into the Working Tax Credit (2003), which included a child care element, Childcare Tax Credit, as well as the New Deal for Lone Parents (2003).

Since Labour came to power, it has spent £21 billion into subsidising toddler education and childcare. (£10 billion of it has been spent on Sure Start alone.) In 2006, maternity leave was increased to a year and maternity pay to £106 a week.³ In the same year, it introduced the Equal Pay Act, in an attempt to close the pay gap between men and women.

A system of penalties and incentives has been put in place to further motivate women to work. Stay-at-home women have had to contend with a heavier tax burden than those who work full time. The government spends an estimated £3.5 million daily on childcare tax credit, yet none of these childcare credits apply to stay at home mothers. The Childcare Tax Credit applies to single parents, who work at least 16 hours a week, and dual earner couples where both work at least 16 hours. The credit pays 70% of their child care costs and can be used to offset the cost of a childminder, day nursery or other registered carer (provided the carer is not a relative). But it cannot be claimed by one-earner couples – “where, presumably, the child caring is being done by the non-working parent.”⁴ Then, in May 2009 the Government introduced the Free Childcare for Training and Learning for Work

³ The Work and Families Act (2006).

⁴ Jill Kirby, *The Price of Parenthood*, Centre for Policy Studies, 2005.

Scheme, aimed at families earning less than £20,000, with one partner in work: the scheme would pay £175 (£215 in London) towards day care of a child under 14 when the second parent trained for a job.

In short, the Government has been determined to push women into work, and their children into institutionalised care. It is clear what the government stands to gain, in economic terms, from more working women: a bigger tax base from which to draw revenue, fewer dependents on the state, the £23 billion that, according to calculations, working women bring to the UK economy.⁵

The penalisation of marriage

The ideological roots of New Labour's hostility to marriage can be traced to Anthony Giddens, the sociologist who laid the foundations for New Labour's Third Way. Giddens promoted the "project of self", realised in "pure relationships" which are unsupported and unregulated by any external social conventions, laws or rules. What "holds the pure relationship together is the acceptance on the part of each partner, 'until further notice', that each gains sufficient benefit from the relationship to make its continuance worthwhile".⁶ This view of relationships was founded on two individuals who, protecting their independence and autonomy, came together temporarily and then moved apart again as the whim took them. Reciprocal responsibilities and mutual dependence, or inter-dependence, were not part of the equation.

⁵ Government's Action Plan, drawn up in response to the report from the Women and Work Commission, *Fairer Future*, 2006.

⁶ Anthony Giddens, "The Transformation of Intimacy", *Stanford University Press*, 1992

New Labour has subscribed to the Giddens ideal. It has tailored the tax and tax credit system so as to benefit those parents who live (or claim to live) apart far more than those who are married or cohabiting. Then, in 1998, it axed tax breaks for married couples: now, when there is only one earner, the couple gets only one Personal Allowance and one basic rate tax band for the whole family.⁷

A look at income tax paid by families 2009-10 shows how single-earner couples are disadvantaged by the present tax system: in a single-earner family with a total income of £30,000, the annual tax paid is £4,705; if there are two earners with the same total income the tax bill is £3,410 – a differential of £1,295 or £24.90 a week.⁸

Comparison of income tax paid by single and two earner couples

Total Annual Income	Single Earner couple	Two earner couple	Differential	Weekly equivalent
£30,000	£4,705	£3,410	£1,295	£24.90
£50,000	£9,930	£7,410	££48.46	£48.46
£70,000	£17,930	£11,410	£6,520	£125.38

In addition to the income tax penalty, many social security payments and tax credits now ignore the legal state of marriage or civil partnerships, with both defining a couple as a married couple who are not separated or an unmarried couple who are living together as husband and wife.

⁷ It should be noted that the trend to penalise couples that are married or openly living has been evolving over the past 40 years. See Don Draper and Leonard Deighton, *Taxation of Married Couples*, CARE Research Paper, January 2008.

⁸ *Income Splitting*, Full time mothers campaign leaflet, March 2009.

Not just a financial failure to support marriage

Legal reforms have also meant that divorce has become far easier to obtain. If current divorce rates continue, 45% of marriages will end in divorce. The Family Law Act of 1996, which dispensed with fault-based divorce, tried to steer more people into mediation, and proposed to make Information Meetings compulsory if one spouse opposed the divorce or there were disputes over children or finance. Despite this proposal, proceedings today can be started without prior recourse to mediation. The Government has also failed to use other methods of supporting marriage. For example, it has ear-marked a derisory £3.5 million for marriage services, down from the £5 million that funded the Marriage and Relation Support Service until its abolition in 2004. This parsimony seems short-sighted, as there is evidence that the appetite for couple support is tremendous: in September 2008, One plus One (a charity dedicated to families) launched Coupleconnection.net, a DIY interactive online service and social networking site supporting couple relationships. Since then, over 70,000 individuals, 60% of them between 21 and 39 years of age, have signed up to it.

Counsellors, sociologists and some politicians have also campaigned for early intervention in supporting the family. Maria Miller, Shadow Minister for the Family, proposed, at the 2007 Conservative Party Conference, pre-marriage preparation for couples marrying at a registry office. Only 8% of married couples in Britain have received any form of marriage preparation; yet in those US states that have pioneered this approach, couples who benefited from pre-marital education were a third less likely to divorce.⁹ Yet little is done here to help.

⁹ Centre for Social Justice, *Every Family Matters*, 13 July 2009.

3. WHAT WOMEN THINK: THE EVIDENCE

Mounting personal debt, stratospheric house prices, larger mortgages, and an income tax system that punishes single earner couples: mothers are being pushed out to work. But that is not where they want to be. The great majority want to stay at home. They place a low priority on career, and prefer a part-time job that allows them to spend more time with their family.

A YouGov poll carried out for this report confirms this.¹⁰ Only 12% of mothers wanted to work full time and 31% did not want to work at all.

Their attitudes towards other mothers were consistent with their expectations of themselves: only 1% of mothers with children under five thought that the mother, in a family where the father worked and there were two pre-school children, should work full time; 49% thought she shouldn't work at all.

¹⁰ Two samples – one of 2,270 women and men, one of 2,420 men and women – were interviewed by YouGov between February and March 2009. The samples reflected the national profile in terms of voting intentions, age, social grade, region and employment status. See Appendix for full survey results and details.

Significantly, fathers asked the same question offered an almost identical response: only 2% thought mum should work when her husband worked and the children were under five; and 48% thought she shouldn't work at all.

Attitudes hardly differed between Labour, Conservative and Lib Dem voters: 4% of Labour voters thought a mother with pre-school age children should work full-time, as opposed to 5% of Conservatives and 4% of Lib Dems. 53% of Labour voters, 48% of Conservatives, and 51% of Lib Dems thought that a mother with children under five should work part-time. And 36% of Labour voters, 48% of Conservatives and 38% of Lib Dems felt she shouldn't work at all. The difference between ABC1 and C2DE respondents was negligible, as was the difference in the age of those polled; while regional divisions accounted for only a few points' difference – with 39% of respondents from Midlands/Wales thinking that mothers with children under five shouldn't work at all, as opposed to 46% of those in the South (outside London).

Mothers were not alone in rejecting the materialist model. Four out of five women working full-time said they would choose not to work, if they didn't have to for financial reasons. Among women working part-time, only 6% said they would choose to switch to full-time work. 19% of women working full time said they would choose not to work at all, and 33% of women working part time said they would choose not to work at all.

This is not about women being work-shy – the percentage of men working full-time who don't want to is 28%; this is about women having different priorities from those promoted by the Government. It would seem that for women (and men), no matter what their age, income or location, bringing up children takes

priority over earning a wage packet. Working is not seen as the ultimate ambition.

They seek instead to use their education and skills to create a happy environment for others, as well as themselves, to thrive in. They hold down a part time job because they do not live to work, they live to love. They prize the care of children, husband and elderly relatives. One in six women who work part time care for an elderly relative or a disabled member of the family. 470,000 women who look after their home and families full time are carers.¹¹

Yet for those willing to look at the evidence, the message had been clear as early as 1998. Surveys, studies and consultations – some of them, such as the 1998 “Listening to Women”, government-funded – revealed how different women’s priorities are from the Government’s.¹² A survey carried out by the Department for Work and Pensions in 2004 found that even in areas where the New Deal for Lone Parents tried to introduce lone parents to job opportunities, the take-up was poor – in fact, it was even less than in those areas where the programme did not operate.¹³ The Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) found in 2002 that only 10% of part-time working women were interested in increasing their hours of work and only a quarter of non-working women wanted to be back in work.¹⁴ Of the non-working mothers

¹¹ Carers, UK, *We care –do you?*, Sheffield Hallam University 2003.

¹² See J Kirby, *Choosing to be Different*, Centre for Policy Studies, 2009.

¹³ J Hales et al, *Evaluation of the New Deal for Lone Parents: Early Lessons from the Phase One Prototype*, 2004.

¹⁴ G Paull, J Taylor and A Duncan, *Mothers, Employment and Childcare Use in Britain*, IFS, 2002.

surveyed by the IFS, 83% of those with pre-school children, and 66% of those with school-age children, said they were not looking for work because of their children.

These women invest also in social relationships. 68% of stay at home mothers help their local community for at least two hours a week and 58% work on a voluntary basis for ten hours a week. Mothers with young children carry out more than 173 million hours of community work each year. Researchers claim this unpaid labour saves the government almost £1 billion annually.¹⁵

Yet no one is listening to them. Labour has chosen to ignore the wishes of the majority of women, to design policy and invest billions of pounds in wide-ranging programmes that cater only for the small minority who are in tune with its vision of the autonomous, work-centred woman. This is government of the few for the few.

Labour didn't listen. Why? Because to do so would go against the ideological agenda imposed by the liberal commentariat.

¹⁵ Study of 2,000 mothers conducted by *Mother & Baby Magazine* and Tesco Baby and Toddler Club, August 2008.

4. WOMEN VS WOMEN

For a small, influential and unrepresentative coterie of politicians, broadcasters, journalists and public figures, progress rests on an unspoken assumption: that women achieve self-realisation through work. Every woman must be committed, fully, to work. Work must be organised so that, in terms of gender, it is equal as well as fair: it is not enough for men and women to earn the same for the same job; they must work the same number of hours within the home and outside it.

They do not question the nature of today's working practice, designed by men and for men: fast-paced, competitive, all-consuming. Success at work must be the pinnacle of everyone's ambition. The message is that to fulfil your potential as a woman, you must earn a wage packet and enjoy independent status. You must, in other words, be like a man.

There is no talk of changing a culture that regards the workplace as the only place that matters. For the commentariat by definition are engaged in prestigious, absorbing careers, rather than the mundane, bill-paying jobs that are most women's lot. Few work part time. Even fewer know the pain of leaving their children in a wrap-around school or a Sure Start day care centre.

Despite being unrepresentative, this minority controls much public space and has turned their own lifestyle choice into a cultural imperative. As one analyst has remarked:¹⁶

In more traditional times, mothers could be confident of representation in public discussions because husbands were primed to listen to them and act on what they heard. And childless women, too, took their cues from mothers. But we now have many commentators who believe that they know all they need to, and may refuse to listen.

Women who don't subscribe to this model are condemned as female heretics. Patricia Hewitt, as Trade Secretary, commissioned a report arguing that stay-at-home mums failed the state, by not making the most of their state-financed education.¹⁷ She went on to brand mothers who do not return to work in their child's first two years a "real problem".¹⁸ Harriet Harman enthused, of Gordon Brown's first Budget, that it marked the "end of the assumption that families consist of a male breadwinner".

The overwhelming preponderance of work-centred pundits, offers a skewed version of reality: it contributes to the myth that family-centred women are a tiny fraction of the population. So for example, when Rachida Dati, the former French Minister of Justice under Nicolas Sarkozy, returned to work only days after

¹⁶ Geoff Dench, "Exploring Parents' Views", *British Social Attitudes: the 25th Report*, Sage Publications, 2009.

¹⁷ Women and Equality Unit, *Delivering on Gender Equality*, 2003.

¹⁸ *The Sunday Times*, 19 October, 2003.

having a baby by caesarian, Janice Turner applauded her attitude:¹⁹

...for refusing to be defined by her maternal choices, for not relinquishing power when so many men wish she would. It is the mothers wittering about whether she is bonding with her baby, not Dati, who are selling the sisterhood out.

Other women writers have followed suit. Alice Miles has commented that:²⁰

For it's not a zero-sum game, a woman leaving the paid workforce. She – and now her children – still uses public services, doesn't she? The doctor and the subsidised trains, the schools, the roads, the health visitor, the library. And she has stopped paying for them... Have you seen how mothers of young children guzzle public services?

Lowrie Turner is equally scathing:²¹

Too many full-time mothers allow their brains to go as soft as overcooked spaghetti. They are intellectually stunted by a steady sink into a totally child-centred life.

As is Daisy Waugh:²²

¹⁹ *The Times*, 10 January 2009.

²⁰ *The Times*, 23 April 2008.

²¹ *The Daily Mail*, 19 May 2006.

There is a growing trend for middle-class women to sacrifice their independence at the altar of their children's pleasure. In the quest for self-justification it seems that no effort is too great, no childish demand on them too preposterous... All I can say is, look closely at the final product before resigning. Because between them those perfect stay-at-home mothers are producing a generation of useless monsters.

This bad-mouthing finds echo in the blogosphere where stay-at-home mums are "smug" (Mumsnet) and guilty of "moral superiority", (Alpha Mummy). Over on television, dramas such as *Spooks* and *Damages* persist in portraying women in the *Prime Suspect* mould: work-centred, fast-paced, competitive; obsessively autonomous; determined to be equal with their male colleagues in every way.

The commentariat's betrayal of feminism

The irony of the attitude shared by women in the commentariat is that, although it purports to be by women and for women, it betrays feminism and its subversive campaign to overthrow the masculine worldview.

Today's self-appointed spokeswomen want to adapt to the male world; the original feminists sought to change it. Where feminists wanted to win for women the right to choose how to lead their lives, today's establishment refuses to countenance other women's choices when they are not in line with their own.

²² *The Sunday Times*, 29 October 2006.

They act as oppressors rather than liberators, and the result is a hierarchy that quashes women's confidence, freedom and aspirations. Work-centred women are at the top; all other women languish at the bottom, second class citizens who fail to conform to the inner circle's template. The prescribed template dictates not only the terms of employment but relationships.

So in her 2004 book, *Get to work: a manifesto for women of the world*, Linda Hirshman exhorted her readers to "get to work and get a life" because marriage is no safe haven and husbands are not for life. Hirshman also instructs women to have only one child, as to have more would exhaust a working woman. Sally Gimson of the partly state-funded Family and Parenting Institute (FPI), warns of the high professional price mothers have to pay:²³ she quotes Department of Work and Pensions research showing that when they take time out for raising children, mothers' wages stagnate for the first 10 years of their return to work and then rise to only 72% of the male wage. Leslie Bennett also describes, in vivid detail, the perils of dumping your career to stay home with your kids.²⁴ Divorce is easy, children grow up fast, and re-entry in the workplace difficult for middle aged women who have been out of the loop.

For generations, women had to put up with men taking their emotional services for granted; and treating women who did not earn money as if they did not do anything – conveniently forgetting all the hours spent caring, cooking, cleaning, errand-

²³ Sally Gimson, *Listening to Mother: Making Britain Mother-Friendly*, FPI, 2 July 2008.

²⁴ Leslie Bennett, *The Feminine Mistake: Are We Giving Up Too Much?* Hyperion Books, 2007.

running that the women put in for their family. Now the men's attitude has taken root among other women.

It begins at school

From 1975 with the Sex Discrimination Act, legislation has tried to impose gender equality in every aspect of education by outlawing gender stereotyping in careers guidance and the use of separate tests for boys and girls. The introduction of a compulsory core curriculum with the National Curriculum in 1988 allows no choices in terms of subjects. Yet the minute boys and girls are allowed to choose their subjects – when they reach A levels – they revert to type:²⁵

Some subjects attract more than twice the number of entries from girls compared to boys, and vice versa. Female candidates favour English, psychology, art and design, sociology, biology and the expressive arts/drama, while boys choose physics, mathematics, economics, computing and business studies (Joint Council for Qualifications). Only 14 per cent of engineering and technology students, 24 per cent of computer science students, 22 per cent of physics students, and 32 per cent of architecture students are female. Nearly two-thirds of medicine and dentistry students are female, and women still dominate the traditionally female occupations allied to medicine. For example, 89 per cent of nursing students are female. There are more women than men studying most social science and arts subjects with a few

²⁵ *Shaping a Fairer Future*, Women and Work Commission, February 2006.

exceptions including economics, where only 31 per cent of students are female, politics, 41 per cent female, and finance, 38 per cent female.”

Even as school girls, women keep sending out signals that they don't share the lifestyle choices being imposed on them;²⁶ the government and the establishment ignore them.

The assumption seems to be that women don't know what they want.

²⁶ Elle magazine poll of 2000 readers, March 2009. This found that women at 30 were concentrating on emotional fulfillment rather than focusing on a career.

5. CHILDREN

Nowhere is this insulting message clearer – or more destructive – than in government interventions in childcare. The Sure Start scheme (launched in 1999), along with “Every Child Matters” and the Children Act of 2006 form the cornerstone of Labour’s policies on children. The programmes, costing £21 billion to date, are intended to offer “joined-up services” to help children and parents through the early years, with education and support services such as ante-natal care and advice for mothers on how to get back to work.

Chief among the services is the provision of subsidised formal child care for working parents, which stretches from 8am to 6pm. Yet ask mothers who should look after their children when they go out to work, and survey after survey reveals that they want family, neighbours, friends to care for their children, not a rota of unfamiliar minders operating in an anonymous environment.²⁷

²⁷ Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Work and Family Life in the 21st Century*, 2003.

These preferences are vindicated by neuroscience. Brains are social organisms, and just as neurons communicate through mutual stimulation, brains strive to connect with one another. Brains develop in response to experience: attention patterns can physically alter the neural pathways in the brain. In infancy, the relationship with the primary care-giver is the mechanism that stimulates the growth and organisation of the brain. When a child is consistently nurtured by an attentive primary carer, the positive dynamic between them becomes physiologically embedded, providing the foundation of trust and security from which the child can explore and grow.²⁸

This is what the founder of attachment theory, psychoanalyst John Bowlby, described as a “secure base”. Bowlby’s attachment theory was developed in the 1960 and 1970s. Today new research is giving it the neurological underpinning it originally lacked. As a result, “attachment theory” has become widely accepted among child-development experts. It outlines the need for babies to bond with one significant caregiver: that bonding – which usually takes place over the first two to three years of the child’s life – can determine if you are secure and well-adjusted, or a bundle of neuroses. Conversely, the absence of the significant carer at a crucial time can create tremendous levels of stress, and anxiety that persist well into adulthood.

Research conducted recently in America sheds light on the way stress can harm children.²⁹ Working with 195 volunteers as part of a long term sociological and medical study, Gary Evans and

²⁸ Louis Cozolino, *The Neuroscience of Human Relationships: attachment and the developing social brain*, W W Norton, 2006

²⁹ *The Economist*, 4 April 2009.

Michelle Schamber of Cornell University focused on working memory – the ability to hold information in the brain for current use (telephone numbers, for instance) – and why there was a diminution of it in the poorer members of the study. Key characteristics which differ, on average, between the lower income and middle classes, were examined: birthweight, mother's age when she gave birth, mother's marital status, and others. The study found that stress alone affected the diminution of working memory.

It is true that attachment theory has generated furious controversy, with many claiming that it attaches women to the stove. The debate about working mothers often slips into the fiercely judgemental: working mothers are good, industrious citizens who contribute to the welfare of the community; or working mothers are bad, selfish women who sacrifice their children at the altar of their ambition.

Do mums want to go out to work?

The younger the child, the less support there is for the mother to go out to work. 57% of mothers in Britain with children under five are in paid work, yet our YouGov poll found that only 4% of men and 2% of women thought that a mum with children under five should work full-time. 53% of men and women think that a mother with children in primary school should work part time (35% think she shouldn't work at all); and 61% of men and women think that a mother with children in secondary school should work part time (11% think she shouldn't work at all).

Last year, a Cambridge University survey found that support for working mothers had declined. In the 1990s, more than 50% of women and 51% of men said they believed that family life would

not suffer if a woman went to work. Since then, the figure has fallen – to 46% of women and 42% of men.³⁰

The latest British Social Attitudes Survey also found that being a parent affected significantly the way men and women, even among the younger generation, viewed working mothers: asked if “All in all a family suffers when the woman has a full-time job”, 22% of childless 18-34 year olds said yes, as opposed to 35% of 18-34 year old parents.³¹

There is evidence that these perceptions are correct. In her study of 12,500 five year olds, Professor Catherine Law of The Institute of Child Health, University College, London, has found that the children of mothers who went out to work were more likely to have poor dietary habits and were more sedentary.³² The Institute for Social and Economic Research found that the children of mothers who return to work full time in the years before they start school have slower emotional development and score less well in reading and maths tests.³³ An early return to work by the mother reduces the child’s chances of progressing to A level from 60% to 50%. Among children with mothers working part-time, there was a 6% drop in A-level attainment, but also a 2% lower likelihood of psychological

³⁰ *Women and Employment: changing lives and new challenges*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2008.

³¹ Geoff Dench, “Exploring Parents’ Views”, *British Social Attitudes*, Sage, 2009.

³² Catherine Law, “Examining the relationship between maternal employment and health behaviour in five year old British children”, *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 29 September 2009.

³³ John Ermisch and Marco Francesconi, *Working parents: the impact on kids*, Institute for Social and Economic Research, 14 November 2003.

problems.³⁴ An earlier, long-term study for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation which followed the academic progress of 1,200 pupils born in the 1970s found that low attainment was more likely in families where mothers returned to full-time work before children were five.³⁵

The Families Children and Child Care project studied the context in which childcare services were rendered. The five year study began in 1998 and involved children from north London and Oxford, who were seen at three, 10, and 18 months, and again at three years old and just over four. It chronicled their development when left at a daycare centre, or with childminder, nanny or granny. It concluded that quality was lower in nurseries than in any or all of the home-based types studied, except that at 18 months and in comparison only with child minding, nurseries offer more learning activities. Large variations in quality between one nursery and another were also found. Purchased care, such as that provided by registered childminders or by a nanny, can be considered as good (or in some cases better) than care by a relative. More expensive nurseries were less emotionally responsive. The structural characteristic with the highest impact on the quality of nursery care was the ratio of children to adults: the more children each adult had to care for, the lower the quality of that care.³⁶

³⁴ John Ermisch and Marco Francesconi, *Generational Income Mobility in North America and Europe*, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

³⁵ John Ermisch and Marco Francesconi, *The effect of parents' employment on outcomes for children*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2001.

³⁶ Kathy Silva, Alan Stein, Penelope Leach, *Children and Child Care*, Families, Children and Child Care Project, October 2005.

Many mothers – one in four – today refuse to opt for institutional childcare. Some mothers would prefer to leave their children with friends; yet to do so, as two police women in Aylesbury recently discovered, risks being accused of “illegal babysitting” by Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education. The two mothers had agreed to exchange babysitting services at one another’s home, but Ofsted warned that such arrangements could only cover 2 hours a day, or 14 days a year.

Other mothers instead turn to grandparents to look after their children. As more mothers return to work and nurseries become more expensive (a nursery place can cost up to £8,000 per child per year) grandparents provide an estimated £3.9 billion worth of child care.³⁷ The last Budget at last recognised the contribution they make: working-age grandparents who spend more than 20 hours a week looking after grandchildren aged under 12 will receive NI credits to improve their retirement funds. This is a step forward – though it still does not allow mothers tax credit and childcare vouchers when they choose to leave their child with a grandparent.

The impact of reform in this sector would be wide-reaching, for the child is not alone in benefiting when a grandparent or a neighbour steps in to babysit. This informal arrangement promotes the kind of social nexus, built on trust and mutual co-operation, that families flourish in. Parenting, once supported by a solid web of family and social ties, is now too often the burden of lone individuals or couples. Mothers, but also fathers, who once could count on a number of people for tips and training, emotional bonding, or social exchanges, now often operate on

³⁷ Grandparents Plus, *Rethinking family life: exploring the role of grandparents and the wider family*, March 2009.

their own. The intergenerational ties that help the young with advice and example, and keep the old engaged in society, are frayed. Childminding would go a long way to redressing this.

Ironically, this is precisely the kind of “joined-up” services the government is happy to pay for in its Sure Start programme. Labour has argued that lower income mothers see expensive childcare as the main obstacle to work. In fact, the take up of formal childcare is twice as likely among middle class families as among those of lower income: one in four middle class children are in formal childcare.³⁸

In the Families Children and Childcare Project, Penelope Leach found that although cost was a factor, affordability was never the over-riding criterion for parents in choosing their child care. Women were not holding back from work because they could not find affordable childcare; rather, because they wanted to bring up their children themselves.

This is in line with research conducted by the LSE sociologist Catherine Hakim since 2000. Hakim has repeatedly argued that women’s preference, rather than expensive child care provisions, or gender-based inequality, attracts them to, and keeps them in, badly-paid, low status, part-time jobs. From this perspective, women are not victims but decision-makers. They place a low priority on careers, and prefer a part-time job that allows them to enjoy family time.

Hakim has identified three groups of women: work-centred, about 25% of women, who live to work, and fit children (if they

³⁸ National Centre for Social Research, *Childcare and early years provision: a study of parents’ use, views and experience*, March 2009.

have any) around the demands of their job; family-centred, who represent about 25% as well, and prefer not to work once they have children; and adaptives (50%) who seek to combine part-time jobs or flexi-time jobs and family life.³⁹

The three groups, Hakim claims are found in all social classes, income groups and at all educational levels. This is borne out by our YouGov poll, where the difference between ABC1 and C2DEs attitude to employment was negligible (4 percentage points at most).

Yet still the minority dictates policy for the majority.

³⁹ Catherine Hakim, *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the 21st Century: Preference Theory*, Oxford University Press, November 2000.

6. FOUR CASE STUDIES

The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (TCCR) offers specialist therapy to couples experiencing difficulties to nearly 800 couples a year. The following case studies, taken from their research into the theme of inter-dependency, reveal how women can suffer when they are forced into a role not of their choosing – whether that be as a full time working mother, or as an autonomous individual who, despite being one half of a couple, finds her need for inter-dependency ignored, mocked or held in contempt.⁴⁰

Case Study: Melanie

Melanie is a shy and pretty woman in her early 30s. She and Bill have known each other since university. They married young. Bill is in advertising, and Melanie used to work in HR at a large company. Bill has always been a go-getter, ambitious and driven; Melanie did not place work – it was never a career – at the centre of her life. Once they had children, Melanie decided to stay at home and for a couple of years Bill agreed. But now

⁴⁰ All identifying characteristics have been excluded, and pseudonyms used.

that the children are six and five, he is trying to push Melanie to get a job. He is worried about being the sole breadwinner during an economic downturn; and feels stressed that everything depends on him, financially.

Melanie says she would like to find something, but somehow she is always sabotaging her application: she gets the date of the interview wrong, sends the application form to the wrong address, fails to brief herself properly about what the job entails. It is clear that Melanie thinks her real place is not at work but at home, and yet she dare not express this, given Bill's hostility to her position.

Melanie becomes depressed. She feels guilty that she is not a career woman, that she is not contributing to the household, that she is unable to keep up with Bill's colleagues when she meets them. She feels pressure to work and contribute to the household, and to do something considered "interesting" . She feels bombarded by images of Superwomen who manage everything she does, plus a high-profile career. She becomes fearful lest Bill, who is a high-achiever surrounded by equally accomplished and ambitious colleagues, will find another woman through his professional world.

Melanie feels alone with her two small children. She feels she cannot talk to Bill anymore: he doesn't want her to depend on him in any way, he seems to stand aloof of the couple. She feels outside the loop – where are the women in her situation? Her parents live in the country, her friends all work: she feels as if she is on the edges of the real world, a member of a disappearing little group. Melanie longs for a traditional marriage model, where she is nurturer and carer and Bill is the breadwinner and each depends on the other in a complementary relationship.

She feels though that her longing for this form of interdependency has to be kept a guilty secret, even from Bill. When he wants to push Melanie into a mould she does not feel comfortable with, she becomes conflicted: she is conscious of her secret needs, but also that Bill regards them as unreasonable. Melanie is made to feel that she is too needy, both on a financial and an emotional level.

Moreover, Bill is not alone in seeing Melanie in this way. Melanie is very conscious that the outside world does not validate her work: she can see that none of Bill's colleagues "rate" her, as she has opted out of the world they know. Because the external reality is hostile to her image of herself, Melanie struggles to adapt: part of her would like to conform to the cultural ideal, by becoming a working woman who can handle career and care.

But at a sub conscious level she does not aspire to any of this, hence the sabotaging of every attempt to find work. To compound Melanie's difficulties, the support system that was available to her mother or grandmother, who were also stay-at-home mums, has disappeared. There is no extended family, teacher, family doctor, priest to help out, listen, or just give advice.

Case Study: Ally

Ally is glamorous, 40-something and a big shot at an independent television production company. She earns significantly more than Karl, her house-husband. He is a freelance writer, who works from home. He focuses on their two children, ferrying them to and fro school and activities, being there for their tea, supervising their homework. The couple lead parallel lives, with Ally working 24/7 and Karl predominantly at home in the carer's role.

Ally is driven by memories of her mum, who was always in poor health during Ally's childhood. The mum was a creative ambitious woman who never got anywhere and, Ally suspects, became ill as a result. Karl claims to be happy with his mothering role – but he shows plenty of symptoms of resentment. He seems gentle and soft spoken, but he withholds attention and affection from Ally: she remembers how, when she got a pay rise, and shared the news with Karl, he cut her short quickly to tell her about how their son had been acting up all day.

Ally's own attitude to her husband doesn't help: although she is genuine in her praise for his hard work at home, she is slightly condescending, too. While he is defensive about not earning as much as his wife, she is defensive about not being available to the children and, in particular, to her husband. She feels a huge pressure to be sexually available all the time, inventive and inexhaustible.

They come to the TCCR when Karl confesses to an affair. It's on-going and he is not sure he can give it up. Ally is devastated. As the decision-maker and the can-do partner in this relationship, Ally is the one to seek counselling: practical and pragmatic to the nth degree, she wants to do everything in her power to save her marriage. She sees divorce as a failure. Karl speaks of her "control freakery" and dominance". Ally has always identified dependency with weakness: that's how she was brought up, what she learned at school, and what she sees repeated over and over in her cultural milieu. She resolved to bury the dependent part of her forever. She took up professional challenges as they arose, and proved to herself she was capable and courageous. The more she achieved the more she quashed the dependency needs until they were hidden so

carefully that both she and Karl fail to recognise that she has any.

Ironically, Karl's infidelity is based on Karl's need for Ally to show that despite being so independent of him in terms of finances, she actually does turn to Karl to satisfy her emotional needs. Unfortunately the affair confirms Ally's worst fear about herself – that she is not lovable, not feminine, not sexually attractive, and not necessary as a carer/nurturer.

For this couple, the two crucial environments – work and home – are becoming increasingly unhappy. Karl is not feeling fulfilled in his role as worker because his earnings and status are overshadowed by his powerful wife. Ally is not finding confirmation of her feminine side, because the children turn to Karl for nurturing, and Karl does not look to her for the sexual relationship he has started with someone else.

Ally is used to the highly organised world of work: she understands the power structure there, which is explicit; and the competition and collaboration involved. She has been brought up to think that making it in a man's world is the epitome of success and that independence is the epitome of self-realisation. Her husband's affair challenges these assumptions.

Case Study: Rachel

Rachel, an elegant, energetic lawyer in her late 30s, is married to Mark, also a lawyer, with whom she has a two year old son. Rachel had always expected that Mark would allow her to stay home and look after their baby for its first years. Her own mother had been a career woman who had been largely absent from Rachel's childhood, and Rachel is determined to give her own children a different upbringing.

Since she had worked extremely hard throughout her 20s and early 30s, and now holds a very good position, Rachel feels entitled to take some time off to bring up her son. Mark, however, feels differently: he insists that they cannot afford for Rachel to stay away from work beyond her maternity leave. The global economic crisis worries him and he says he cannot cope with the burden of being the sole breadwinner.

The couple quarrels over the issue, with Mark refusing to believe that Rachel the successful lawyer, could possibly wish to be, as he calls it, 'a kept woman'. Mark enlists the couple's friends to put pressure on Rachel: is she really going to forfeit all the gains she has made in her professional life? is she going to allow her skills to grow rusty as she settles into dull domesticity? is she ready to take a back seat in life?

For her part, Rachel argues that Mark should support her decision to look after their baby. She is convinced that the best thing for an infant is to have a stay-at-home mum. She is willing to return to work, but only once their son is three or four.

After months of rows, Rachel gives in and goes back to work when their son is one year old. She feels tremendous guilt at having to hand over her child to a nanny. She compensates by over-indulging the little boy, spoiling him materially and giving in to his every wish. She hovers over him anxiously whenever at home, and rings several times a day from work to check up on him. She grows jealous of the nanny, who has developed a great relationship with Rachel's son.

Her resentment of Mark, for refusing to support her decision to stay at home, grows. She feels that he has deprived her of something crucial she can never regain. Rachel begins to question her dependence on him: he has not been there for her

at a critical period – why should she trust him now? And why should she be there for him, anymore, when he has let her down?

She withdraws from Mark physically and emotionally, and avoids any opportunities for intimacy. She wonders whether she will ever forgive her husband. Motherhood, as Rachel is finding, is the ultimate test of gender roles.

Rachel suffers from a pattern that often recurs among professionally accomplished women: that once she has a child, she wants to revert to her nurturing, caring role. The difficulty arises when she realises that her nurturing services are accorded a low status by the rest of society – including, sometimes, her partner.

By spurning Rachel's economic and emotional dependence, Mark has triggered a profound identity crisis. Rachel, who once felt confident enough to acknowledge her dependency needs, seeing them as a natural part of inter-dependency in a couple, now feels they are taboo. Her confidence is shaken and she feels angry and resentful. With her husband failing to satisfy her emotional hunger, Rachel like many mothers, risks looking to her child to gain emotional fulfillment.

Case Study: Hannah

Hannah is a pleasant, soft-spoken professional in her early 30s. She is part of a dual career couple. She and James, her partner, met at work – they are in the same IT business. A great deal of their identity as a couple is bound up in their work. They enjoy a close collaboration, share ambitions to “make it” and congratulate themselves on how far they have already come from their parents' uninspiring lifestyles.

The couple makes sure everything is equal between them: they have separate bank accounts, go 50-50 on most things, and generally want to “be their own person”. Hannah appreciates her work for providing a forum in which she challenges herself and can reach her true potential. It also gives her professional status and a good salary – and money and image are fundamentally important to this couple. Although Hannah feels pressure to be a Super-achiever and Super-earner, she buys into this vision of herself without trouble.

Then she and James have a first child. Hannah decides to go back to work part time when her baby is six months old. Her workplace (an hour’s drive from home) has a nursery, so she leaves the baby there. She finds the separation from the baby very stressful. She and James have a second child. They work out that the cost of travel and the nursery for two children add up to almost as much as Hannah’s earnings.

After mutual discussion, she leaves work and opts for consulting (one day a week). James continues working at the office, but he’s not a very hands-on dad. Although he used to contribute to the housework, he now thinks that’s not part of the 50-50 deal. Although he is happy for Hannah to stay at home, James is also quick to point out that his needs, as the main breadwinner, come well before Hannah’s as the part time worker. Hannah feels overburdened: she has taken up not only the concerns of her consulting work and children but also domestic chores.

She finds it very hard to talk to James about how anxious she is getting. She longs to go back to the pre-baby days when they were equal in their share of work and money. Now instead she feels trapped: because of the children she does not consider full-time work; yet because of not working she feels totally dependent on her husband financially.

The couple begins to have stress arguments, and the tension between them keeps mounting. She refuses to complain to James because to do so would be to admit defeat– that the Superwoman had failed. The two grow apart.

Hannah is unable to redefine her role as wife and mother, and although she is working as a consultant, she regards this part-time work as a huge demotion. She longs for the equality she and James enjoyed when they were working in the same industry, being paid more or less the same amount, and investing an equal amount of time and money in their couple/household. She was brought up to believe in marriage as a union of equals – but having children shows her the gulf between this ideology and the reality, where she rather than James feels the need to nurture their children and move them to centre stage in her life.

Hannah feels trapped. In a culture that idealises self-sufficiency, Hannah sees dependence on her man, emotional as well as financial, as a loss of herself. She cannot see that dependency is not a human failing but a feature of the human condition, something that follows us from birth till death. She has been brought up to think that her primary objective is independence. Self-fulfilment in her eyes is about standing on her own two feet.

She turn feels lonely, unsupported: she cannot share the pressure of demands on her time, emotions, earnings with James.

7. MARRIAGE AND COHABITATION

Work with couples, as does a glance at women's magazines and the Self Help shelves of bookshops, reveals that women want solid and long lasting relationships. But what kind of relationship? And should government policies support one kind over another?

Marriage remains most women's aspiration: 75% of those under 35 currently in cohabiting relationships want to get married.⁴¹ It is also regarded as the ideal couple relationship by the general public: 62% of 50-64 year olds, 43% of 35-49 year olds and 38% of 18-34 year olds regard marriage as "Still the best kind of relationship."⁴² 85% supported giving some financial incentive to married couples through the tax system as a way of promoting marriage.⁴³

⁴¹ Institute for Social and Economic Research, *British Household Panel Survey*, 2009.

⁴² Geoff Dench, "Exploring Parents' View", *British Attitudes Survey*, 2009.

⁴³ David Hodson, *Every Family Matters*, Centre for Social Justice, July 2009.

In practice, though, many, especially younger women, prefer cohabiting. Among those aged 18 to 49, the proportion has increased from 11% in 1979 to 33% in 2007.⁴⁴ The Government Actuary's Department has predicted that over one in four of all couples will be cohabiting by 2031.⁴⁵ Reasons differ: procrastination, lack of commitment by men and a positive choice by some women who may see marriage as a "patriarchal" institution and its contractual basis as a demeaning ball and chain.

Cohabitation includes many different models.⁴⁶ As a government paper recognised:

Whilst there were cases where couples had drifted into cohabitation with little thought for the implications of this or for the future of the relationship, some cohabitants... described highly committed relationships within which they had children or owned property together, or had plans to do so in the future. Similarly, some cohabitants' sense of responsibility during the cohabitation – for the relationship, for their partner, and especially for children involved – was highly developed.

How do the two models of relationship compare? Marriage rates are at their lowest since 1895. Yet those who do marry are

⁴⁴ Office of National Statistics, *General Household Survey 2007*, January 2009.

⁴⁵ Office of National Statistics, *Focus on Families*, October 2007.

⁴⁶ Department for Constitutional Affairs, *Separating from Cohabitation: making arrangements for finances and parenting*, Government Social Research, October 2006.

staying together longer: divorce rates are falling, not rising, and have been for several years. In 2007 11.9 married couples per thousand got divorced, as opposed to 12.2 the year before. Marriage lasts longer than other couple relationships: the average length of a cohabitation relationship in 2006 was 6.9 years and for cohabiting with children, 8.5. One in two cohabiting parents split up before their child's fifth birthday, compared to one in 12 married parents.⁴⁷ And, as a recent study confirms, marriage provides "a greater potential to increase social support."⁴⁸

What remains unclear however is whether this longevity is a correlation or causation: as sociologist Penny Mansfield, director of One Plus One, the UK's leading relationship research organisation, points out, an "election effect" operates in terms of marriage in the 21st century. Now that opting out of marriage has become socially acceptable, people can deliberate about whether to cohabit or remain single; those who do marry are highly motivated, subscribe to a certain value system and possibly religious outlook, tend to have a degree of assets, and emotional security.⁴⁹

Even if it can be proved that marriage is a kind of glue that makes relationships last longer, promoting it over cohabitation risks being seen as stigmatising those who have made other choices; or who have simply not been able to secure the "gold

⁴⁷ Office for National Statistics, *Focus on Families*, 2007.

⁴⁸ Anne-Marie Ambert, "Cohabitation and Marriage: How are they related", *Contemporary Family Trends*, The Vanier Institute of the Family, September 2005.

⁴⁹ In conversation with author.

standard” relationship. Given that cohabiting women are younger, poorer, and have less legal protection, a policy promoting marriage – even though marriage is more popular among women and more supportive of women – could be seen as further punishing a vulnerable group. Encouraging marriage because of its benefits to society may also be dismissed as a vain attempt to turn the clock back.

But the far more powerful case for marriage is a different one: that it is a much better deal for women. Marriage grants women more legal rights and leaves them better off financially in the event of the relationship ending. A married woman manages over her life span greater wealth accumulation than her cohabiting counterpart.⁵⁰ And for the majority of women, particularly mothers, the conditional nature of cohabitation is a source of uncertainty and confusion. Marriage still represents their best chance of achieving the security of an interdependent relationship.

The advantages of marriage are particularly evident when women reach retirement age. For though cohabiting confers many of the same rights and responsibilities as marriage, important distinctions remain in terms of inheritance, child custody, pension and property. Cohabitants who separate must use the general rules of property and trust law to determine their entitlement to property acquired during the relationship.

⁵⁰ J Wilmoth and G Koso, “Does Marital History Matter?”, *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64, 2001, quoted in Anne-Marie Ambert, “Cohabitation and Marriage: How are they related”, *Contemporary Family Trends*, The Vanier Institute of the Family, September 2005.

The danger is that few cohabiting women are aware of their legal position. As the Law Commission has pointed out:⁵¹

There is a widespread belief that English law recognises cohabitants as 'common law spouses' once they have lived together for some period of time and that they are thereafter treated for legal purposes as if they were married.

The truth is that "common law spouse" confers no legal status. The Law Commission slammed the rules pertaining to cohabitation as 'illogical, uncertain and unfair'.⁵² The Cohabitation Bill currently before Parliament proposes that on the breakdown of a cohabiting relationship, a judge should be able to decide what is a fair outcome and allocate support to the ex-partner for up to three years in order to seek child care and enable that person to get back into work.

But the problem is that because of the fluid nature of cohabiting relationships – many couples slide into cohabitation rather than consciously decide to live together and share assets and children – it is impossible to offer legal protection to cohabiting women on the same level that marriage does. If the essence of the relationship is its lack of structure and formal contract, at what point can the law be applied? Cohabitation has a fuzzy beginning (and sometimes a fuzzy end).

⁵¹ The Law Commission, *Cohabitation: the financial consequences of Relationship Breakdown*, 2006.

⁵² See also Gillian Douglas, Julia Pearce and Hilary Woodward, *Dealing with property issues on cohabitation breakdown*, Universities of Cardiff and Bristol, 2006.

Marriage, by contrast, has a precise legally defined beginning. Bob Rowthorn, Professor of Economics at Cambridge advocates the retention of a clear legal distinction between marriage and cohabitation. He argues that erasing this distinction would undermine the “signalling function” of marriage – whereby individuals signal the seriousness of their intentions by getting married.⁵³ Without it, individuals would start to behave defensively by investing less in their marriages. They would behave in accordance to personal needs rather than to the needs of a couple.

The Tavistock case studies show how wary many women have grown of depending on their men in any way. Financial dependence is now an alarming prospect. This is particularly true for women who cohabit. As a measure of self-protection, women who do enter into couple relationships therefore aim to earn enough to stay independent. They are likely to seek a union of autonomous equals – where he and she work the same number of hours, and do not rely on one another financially. An American survey shows that although two-thirds (65%) of singles say that they believe that marriage will improve their economic situation, an even higher percentage say it is extremely important to be economically self-sufficient before they marry.⁵⁴ A large majority (82%) agree it is unwise for a woman to rely on marriage for financial security.

This symmetrical family type is ideal for work-centred women committed, full time, to their career. For this minority, working

⁵³ Robert Rowthorn, “Marriage and Trust: Some lessons from Economics”, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 1999.

⁵⁴ Rutgers University, *Marriage Survey*, 2004.

the same long hours, earning the same wage packet, and operating in the same competitive environment as their partner/husband, is a goal in itself.

And yet couples in this kind of marriage are twice as likely to be divorced or separated as those who prefer some differentiation of roles.⁵⁵ A 2001 study by the Department of Psychiatry at Queen Mary's School of Medicine also found that middle aged men whose partners worked full time had higher depression scores than those whose partners worked part time or not at all. Similarly, a US study of fragile families found that the "economic stability of the male partner appears to be an important criteria for whether mothers are willing or able to set up a household with the father of their children".⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Centre for Longitudinal Studies, *National Child Development Study*, April 2008.

⁵⁶ Marcia Carlson et al, *Union Formation and Stability in Fragile Families*, Northwestern University/University of Chicago, 2002.

8. PART-TIME WORK

Married women, single women, cohabiting women: most see work as a necessity. Yet they also recognise its many benefits: money, social contacts and personal identity; improved mental health; an important role model and message to children about the importance of work (cited often by lone parents); and the opportunity to give to the community.⁵⁷

How can women enjoy these benefits without compromising their values? Part-time work would seem to be an answer.⁵⁸ It allows women to contribute financially while also meeting caring responsibilities. It reduces the dependency on a sole breadwinner as well as the time squeeze faced by two full-time earners.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Shirley Dex, *Families and work in the 21st century*, Joseph Rowndtree Foundation, 2003.

⁵⁸ In the UK, part-time work is defined as less than 31 hours a week; 30% of part time workers work 16 to 30 hours. Office of National Statistics, *Labour Force Survey*, May 2009.

⁵⁹ Tracey Warren, "Working Part-time: achieving a successful work-life balance?", *British Journal of Sociology*, 2004.

The sector has grown during the recession. The latest statistics indicate that, between March and May 2009, a record 927,000 individuals were working fewer than 30 hours a week because they could not find a full-time job, a rise of 38% on the previous year. Several major employers have offered staff reduced hours or extended holidays in an attempt to cut costs. BT, for example, offered tens of thousands of its staff the right to take a holiday of up to a year if they accept a 75% pay cut; British Airways has asked many of its staff to work part-time or for free. More than a quarter of manufacturers including Ford, Honda and JCB have also asked staff to work reduced hours.⁶⁰ But even before the economic down-turn, almost half (41.6%) of the 13.6 million women working in the UK were working part time.⁶¹ And, as our YouGov poll shows, 57% of all women wanted to work part time.

It is true that part-time employment tends to involve low pay and low status: hourly earnings are on average 26% lower than for women who are employed full-time.⁶² 30% of employed women earn less than a £100 a week, according to the TUC.⁶³ Almost one in four women is employed part time as a sales assistant, a cleaner, or care assistant; the rest mostly work as teachers and nurses. Only 7% of managers and senior officials work part time compared to 33% of those in administrative and secretarial occupations. Only 8% of those in skilled trades occupations work

⁶⁰ *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 July 2009.

⁶¹ Office of National Statistics, *Labour Force Survey*, May 2009.

⁶² Professor Alan Manning and Dr Barbara Petrongolo, "The Part-time Pay Penalty", *The Economic Journal*, February 2008.

⁶³ TUC, *The Iron Triangle: women's poverty, children's poverty and in-work poverty*, June 2008.

part time compared to 52% of those in personal service jobs and 57% in sales and customer service jobs.⁶⁴

The Labour Government saw the low pay and status characterising part time work as a wrong that had to be righted. Part timers were clearly the victims of a conspiracy between patriarchal business models and misogynistic male employers. The result was policy initiatives like the National Minimum Wage (1999) and the Part-Time Workers Regulations (2000). Neither, however, has had much impact on the part-time pay penalty, according to Professor Shirley Dex, of the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the University of London Institute of Education.

Gender stereotypes in career choices were also blamed for women's choice of part-time positions: the Women and Work Commission claimed that career counsellors, too often piloted women towards those jobs, like caring and catering, which are family-friendly.⁶⁵ The Commission decreed the practice should be stamped out:

Government information campaigns should show women in occupations not traditionally taken up by them, and men as parents and carers. The media, in particular drama and advertising, should be encouraged to do likewise. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport should set up two high-level groups, of advertisers and key players in television drama, to encourage non-stereotypical portrayals of women and men at work.

⁶⁴ Women and Work Commission, *Shaping a Fairer Future*, February 2006.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

It does not seem to occur to either the Labour Government or the establishment that actually women might be *choosing* part time work, rather than being forced into it.

Women rating time with family, friends, and the community above time at work: such behaviour is tantamount to female heresy. Yet studies and polls such as the YouGov one for this report show that the great majority (79%) of women in part-time employment do not want to move into full-time work. After all, most women do not see life exclusively in terms of the promotion, the wage packet, or the job title.⁶⁶ Women working part-time in fact express higher levels of satisfaction than those who work full time.⁶⁷

The Labour Government persists in talking of more regulation of the part-time sector to flush out the supposed sex discrimination. The Equality Bill, published in April 2009, demands gender pay audits in which firms will have to reveal the pay gap between male and female employees. But arm-twisting employers in this manner will only reinforce the image of the part-timer as troublesome. And increasing the regulatory burden will make employers think twice about hiring a part-timer.⁶⁸ Again, the Government has failed to listen to what most women want.

⁶⁶ See the summary of Catherine Hakim's work at the end of Chapter 4 above.

⁶⁷ Alison Booth and Jan van Ours, "Job Satisfaction and Family Happiness: The Part Time Work Puzzle", *British Household Panel Survey*, August 2007.

⁶⁸ The regulatory burden on employers is already high. Over a third of 3,500 businesses polled in April 2009 by the British Chamber of Commerce found it difficult to navigate the recruitment legislation. That proportion increased to 47% among very small businesses (i.e. those with five employees or less – the type of business which is more likely to attract part-time workers.)

9. CONCLUSION

Our work-centred culture is based on a fundamental conundrum: the economy depends on workers, while society depends on carers.

Women, in particular, are torn. Only by resolving it will we create the conditions for a society in which adults fulfil their potential as professionals, partners and parents. Both the Labour Government and its supporters in the commentariat should listen to real women.

The present economic crisis provides an opportunity for change. Some of the certainty and security women (and men) found in their work are under threat. More than 80% of women are worried about the impact of the global slump on their life.⁶⁹ But beyond job security, the credit crunch threatens the old inflexible working models and ideological posturings.

⁶⁹ Government Equalities Office, *The Economic Downturn – the concerns and experiences of women and families*, March 2009.

Can – should – government intervene in such an intimate sphere? The answer is a resounding yes: couple relationships may be private but when they break down they become a very public matter, affecting everyone around the couple, and more widely society, in terms of health costs, public housing, benefits.

Now is the time for reform. The following reforms would go some way to meeting the needs and wishes of real women:

- The government should change its childcare strategy. Pumping billions of tax payers' money into a child care system that is both unpopular with mothers and has been shown to harm children's emotional development makes no sense.
- Instead, through the tax credit system and childcare vouchers, the Government should enable families to choose their childcare, including parental or close family care.
- The 2007 Pensions Act, which introduces weekly national insurance credits for carers of children and the disabled as of April 2010, is a step in the right direction. The credits will count towards the State Basic and State Second pensions. But the new proposals will only apply to those people who have 20 qualifying years of NI contributions (taking account of any Home Responsibilities Protection) who reach State Pension Age between 6 April 2008 and 5 April 2015 (i.e. women born between 5 April 1948 and 5 October 1952). More should be done in this direction.
- The government should reform the tax and benefit system so that they no longer penalise stay-at-home women. Income-splitting could redress this. Income-splitting regards the household rather than the individual as the basic economic

unit. It allows married and cohabiting couples with children to be taxed jointly rather than as individuals. This would remove the disadvantage single-earner families, and many one and a half earner families, currently face compared to dual earner couples. In practical terms, they would feel immediate financial benefits – potentially up to £190 per week at 2009-10 tax rates.⁷⁰

- The government should provide information and support at crucial stages. Present funding of marriage services is a derisory £3.5 million per year. Directing some of the £21 billion the government spends on childcare provisions such as day care centres to supporting couples, both married and cohabiting, would be a step in the right direction.
- It should be easier, not more difficult, for businesses to employ part time workers. At present only a little over half (66%) of businesses have part-time workers; the volume and complexity of employment regulations are not likely to attract more businesses to take on more employees of any kind. The government should act quickly to cut these regulations and their accompanying paperwork.
- Finally, we need to break the stranglehold that a small coterie of women who work fulltime and buy into the macho way of life, enjoy on our public life. They have, for years, misrepresented real women who reject the masculine value system for one that rates caring above a career, and interdependence above independence.

⁷⁰ The Institute of Fiscal Studies, *Green Budget 2007*, 2007.

Real women do not want to commit full time to a job. Real women do not see that as the route to self-realisation. They recognise that there is far more to life than a healthy profit or a great deal.

Material woman, who apes material man, is over. The economy cannot sustain her, society feels betrayed by her. The future belongs to the real woman, who points to a lifestyle embracing feminine values. Let's hope this Government – or the next – is brave enough to heed her call.

APPENDIX

The following data are from YouGov online polls undertaken between 10 and 12 February 2009 and between 12 and 16 March. The total sample sizes were 2,270 and 2,420 adults. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

Imagine a family with mother, working father and two children at primary school. Assuming it is not absolutely essential for financial reasons for both parents to work, and all else being equal, do you think it is best for the mother...

	Total	Voting Intention			Gender		Age			Social Grade	
		Con	Lab	Lib Dem	M	F	18 - 34	35 - 54	55 +	ABC1	C2DE
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Sample	2270	777	537	316	1089	1181	714	750	806	1225	1044
To work full-time	5	5	9	4	7	3	8	6	2	5	5
To work part-time	53	51	57	55	50	56	58	53	50	55	52
Not to work at all	35	40	28	30	36	34	24	34	45	33	37
Don't know	7	4	6	12	7	6	10	7	3	7	6

	All parents				Fathers				Mothers			
	All	Child age <18	Child age 11-17	Child under 11	All	Child age <18	Child age 11-17	Child under 11	All	Child age <18	Child age 11-17	Child under 11
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Sample	1431	588	254	425	655	295	134	204	775	293	120	220
To work full-time	3	5	7	4	4	6	10	6	2	3	4	3
To work part-time	53	56	54	54	50	54	49	54	55	58	61	54
Not to work at all	40	34	34	36	42	34	34	34	39	34	33	38
Don't know	4	5	5	6	5	6	7	6	4	5	2	6

	Employment status			Men - Employment status			Women - Employment status		
	Full-time	Part-time	Not working	Full-time	Part-time	Not working	Full-time workers	Part-time workers	Not working
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Sample	894	327	310	552	107	124	342	220	186
To work full-time	8	2	5	9	5	9	6	1	3
To work part-time	56	62	43	52	53	45	62	66	42
Not to work at all	29	29	44	32	32	37	24	28	47
Don't know	8	6	9	7	10	9	8	5	9

Now imagine a family with mother, working father and two teenage children at secondary school. Assuming it is not absolutely essential for financial reasons for both parents to work, and all else being equal, do you think it is best for the mother...

	Total	Voting Intention			Gender		Age			Social Grade	
		Con	Lab	Lib Dem	M	F	18 - 34	35 - 54	55 +	ABC1	C2DE
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Sample	2270	777	537	316	1089	1181	714	750	806	1525	1044
To work full-time	20	19	24	23	22	18	33	18	11	22	18
To work part-time	61	66	59	59	57	65	51	63	70	61	62
Not to work at all	11	11	10	8	12	10	6	12	16	9	13
Don't know	7	5	7	10	8	6	11	7	4	8	7

	All parents				Fathers				Mothers			
	All	Child age <18	Child age 11-17	Child under 11	All	Child age <18	Child age 11-17	Child under 11	All	Child age <18	Child age 11-17	Child under 11
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Sample	1431	588	254	425	655	295	134	204	775	293	120	220
To work full-time	15	21	17	23	17	22	19	25	14	20	16	22
To work part-time	67	64	67	62	63	60	63	59	71	67	71	65
Not to work at all	14	11	12	10	15	12	13	11	12	9	11	9
Don't know	4	5	5	5	5	6	6	5	3	4	3	4

	Employment status			Men - Employment status			Women - Employment status		
	Full-time	Part-time	Not working	Full-time	Part-time	Not working	Full-time workers	Part-time workers	Not working
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Sample	894	327	310	552	107	124	342	220	186
To work full-time	28	14	16	27	18	21	29	12	13
To work part-time	58	71	55	57	60	48	59	76	59
Not to work at all	7	9	19	9	11	21	6	8	18
Don't know	7	6	11	8	11	11	7	4	10

If it is/were not essential for you to work for financial reasons would you...

[Base: those work part-time or full time, BASE, n=1497]

	Total	Voting Intention			Gender		Age			Social Grade	
		Con	Lab	Lib Dem	M	F	18 - 34	35 - 54	55 +	ABC1	C2DE
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Sample	2270	777	537	316	1089	1181	714	750	806	1525	1044
Work full-time	20	20	26	19	25	15	27	19	9	19	22
Work part-time	51	53	47	53	46	57	50	50	55	51	52
Not work at all	26	26	25	26	27	25	19	27	36	28	24
Don't know	3	2	2	1	2	3	3	4	1	3	3

	All parents				Fathers				Mothers			
	All	Child age <18	Child age 11-17	Child under 11	All	Child age <18	Child age 11-17	Child under 11	All	Child age <18	Child age 11-17	Child under 11
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Sample	1431	588	254	425	655	295	134	204	775	293	120	220
Work full-time	17	22	24	20	22	29	28	28	12	13	20	11
Work part-time	51	47	46	48	46	39	39	39	56	58	56	59
Not work at all	31	29	28	30	31	31	32	31	31	26	23	28
Don't know	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	3	2	3	2	3

	Employment status			Men - Employment status			Women - Employment status		
	Full-time	Part-time	Not working	Full-time	Part-time	Not working	Full-time workers	Part-time workers	Not working
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Sample	894	327	310	552	107	124	342	220	186
Work full-time	24	9	0	26	17	0	20	6	0
Work part-time	49	57	0	44	57	0	57	57	0
Not work at all	25	30	0	28	24	0	19	33	0
Don't know	3	3	0	2	3	0	3	3	0

Thinking about government policy, media coverage and so on, do you think the general climate of opinion in Britain these days concerning mothers of primary school children is...

	Total	Voting Intention			Gender		Age			Social Grade	
		Con	Lab	Lib Dem	M	F	18 - 34	35 - 54	55 +	ABC1	C2DE
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Sample	2270	777	537	316	1089	1181	714	750	806	1525	1044
In favour of mothers working FT	27	28	26	27	25	29	25	30	26	27	27
Against mothers working FT	32	34	30	34	31	33	26	30	39	34	29
Neutral	32	29	37	30	34	29	37	30	28	31	32
Don't know	10	8	7	9	10	10	12	10	7	8	12

	All parents				Fathers				Mothers			
	All	Child age <18	Child age 11-17	Child under 11	All	Child age <18	Child age 11-17	Child under 11	All	Child age <18	Child age 11-17	Child under 11
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Sample	1431	588	254	425	655	295	134	204	775	293	120	220
In favour of mothers working FT	29	32	31	34	26	27	26	29	31	37	37	38
Against mothers working FT	34	28	29	27	33	28	29	28	35	29	30	26
Neutral	30	34	33	34	33	40	38	39	27	27	28	29
Don't know	7	6	6	6	7	6	8	4	7	6	5	7

	Employment status			Men - Employment status			Women - Employment status		
	Full-time	Part-time	Not working	Full-time	Part-time	Not working	Full-time workers	Part-time workers	Not working
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Sample	894	327	310	552	107	124	342	220	186
In favour of mothers working FT	27	21	34	26	16	32	28	24	36
Against mothers working FT	31	37	26	29	37	24	33	37	27
Neutral	32	33	30	35	40	30	28	30	30
Don't know	10	9	10	10	8	15	11	10	8

Imagine a family with a mother, working father and two children under five. Assuming it is not absolutely essential for financial reasons for both parents to work do you think it is best for the mother...

	Total	Voting Intention			Gender		Age			Social Grade	
		Con	Lab	Lib Dem	M	F	18 - 34	35 - 54	55 +	ABC1	C2DE
Sample	2270	777	537	316	1089	1181	714	750	806	1525	1044
To work full time	3	3	4	1	4	2	5	3	2	3	3
To work part time	47	48	53	51	44	50	52	48	42	48	46
Not to work at all	41	44	36	38	41	41	31	40	51	40	43
Don't know	9	6	7	11	11	7	12	9	6	8	9

	All parents				Fathers				Mothers			
	All	Child age <18	Child age 11-17	Child under 11	All	Child age <18	Child age 11-17	Child under 11	All	Child age <18	Child age 11-17	Child under 11
Sample	1431	588	254	425	655	295	134	204	775	293	120	220
To work full time	2	1	2	3	3	2	3	4	1	1	1	2
To work part time	44	42	49	47	43	38	55	46	46	45	44	48
Not to work at all	48	52	41	44	47	54	30	43	49	50	51	46
Don't know	6	5	8	6	8	7	12	7	4	5	3	5

	Employment status			Men -Employment status			Women - Employment status		
	Full-time	Part-time	Not working	Full-time	Part-time	Not working	Full-time workers	Part-time workers	Not working
Sample	894	327	310	552	107	124	342	220	186
To work full time	4	2	2	5	3	3	4	1	1
To work part time	52	48	39	48	41	37	58	52	39
Not to work at all	34	44	46	36	47	41	31	43	49
Don't know	10	6	14	11	10	19	7	5	11



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