

**ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE FOR
MOTHERS OF YOUNG CHILDREN:
IMPOSSIBLE DREAM OR AGENDA FOR CHANGE?**

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Statement of Originality and Ethics Approval

This work has not previously been submitted, in whole or in part, for a degree or diploma at this or any other university. It includes no material previously published or written by any other person, except where due reference is made in the text and notes.

This research was approved by the Victoria University of Technology Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval Number HRETH 42/96.

Marty Grace

August 2002

Dedication

Three of my family members died during my candidature. My parents Fred and Valma Grace supported and encouraged my work. My grandson Vaughn inspired me with his zest for life. This work is dedicated to them.

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ABSTRACT

This research examines ideas for change in Australia's social arrangements for care of young children. It focuses on mothers who, in spite of the impact of second-wave feminism, continue to provide most of the care of young children. The central thesis of this work is that Australia's arrangements amount to exploitation of the labour of mothers of young children by the rest of the community, and that it would be reasonable for the rest of the community to contribute much more in the way of economic resources to this work.

This research brings together ideas from alternative economics about the economic value of unpaid work, sociological research into time use, and feminist critiques of the ideology of motherhood and the institution of the family.

The research examines the issues through the lens of contemporary critical social theory, including relevant feminist theory. This framework emphasizes the concepts of oppression and exploitation, and draws heavily on the feminist critique of the public/private divide.

I conducted personal interviews with eight high-profile Australian social commentators whose public statements were consistent with the theoretical framework, and presented their ideas for change to focus groups of mothers of young children for comment. Findings of the research include the need for a 'coherent agenda for change' that comprises an agenda for long-term, transformational change, and an agenda for short-term social policy change that is consistent with the longer-term agenda. Transformational changes proposed include attending to the whole of the economy, treating the care of young children as real work, enabling women and men to participate equally in family work and market work, and challenging the ideologies of motherhood and the family.

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PREAMBLE: Personal background to the study

The impetus for this research came from my own experiences of raising children. I had my first two children in the 1970s, as a young married woman in my twenties. Influenced by some of the child development theory (Bowlby 1963; Winnicott 1965) taught in my Bachelor of Social Work course at the University of Queensland, I decided that the only safe way to look after these children was to do it (almost) all myself. I found it extraordinarily difficult. I rapidly became exhausted and frustrated, constantly working and never catching up. By 1980, the children had started school, I found full-time employment, and life gradually became more manageable.

Almost 20 years later, with those children having grown up and left home, and the marriage over, I found myself expecting another baby. This time I was influenced by the State of Victoria's very active Women's Employment Branch. It was led by Ann Sherry¹ and was within the Department of Labour where I was working as a middle-level manager with the Youth Homelessness Taskforce. I decided that it would be possible to raise this child as a single mother in full-time employment. As an experienced mother with solid earning capacity, I believed that, if I could arrange appropriate childcare and some flexibility at work, all would be well. It was not. Once again, I found my life extraordinarily difficult.

The second time around I was chronically exhausted, struggled financially, and never seemed to be able to catch up either at work or at home. My situation as a full-time employed single mother of a young child was clearly very different from either of my earlier experiences as a mainly at-home mother of young children, then later as a full-time employed mother of school-age children.

In the 1970s, in my twenties, I had blamed myself and my own inadequacies for my difficulties. In the 1990s, in my forties, I was less inclined to blame my own

¹ Ann Sherry went on to become First Assistant Secretary in the Office of the Status of Women, and has worked in senior management with Westpac Bank since 1994 (*Who's Who in Australia 2001*). In 2002 she is Chief Executive Officer of Westpac.

inadequacy, and more inclined to look at the social conditions around me to understand my struggles. However, before discarding the self-blame hypothesis, I decided to examine it in some detail, in case I was suffering from denial and projection rather than from oppressive social conditions.

I decided to monitor my time usage to see if I was wasting time and energy. Maybe I was doing things inefficiently, maybe doing unnecessary tasks. I was shocked to find that if a child attends childcare for 40 hours per week, there remains approximately 55 hours of work for the parents (as detailed in Table 1.1). This does not include parents' self-care, or ordinary domestic chores such as sweeping, mopping, cleaning the bathroom, and mowing the lawns. Nor does it include dealing with illnesses, accidents or any special needs children may have.

Table 1.1: Weekly parental care required for children in full-time day care

Getting up, breakfast, bathing, getting dressed, packing bag, interaction, explaining to the child what is happening that day, taking to childcare	1.5 Hours x 5 days	7.5 Hours
Picking up from childcare, shopping for food, preparing food, supervising meal, tidying up after meal, washing up, getting ready for bed, putting to bed	3 Hours x 5 Days	15 Hours
Chores after child is in bed: tidying away toys, clothes and books, unpacking bag, laundering clothes	1 Hour x 5 Days	5 Hours
Weekend: Two full days of childcare, including food preparation, meals, tidying up, washing up and attending to laundry either while child has afternoon nap, or after child's bed time: 6.30 am to 8.30 pm	14 Hours x 2 days	28 Hours
	TOTAL	55.5 Hours

Still wondering if it were just me, I decided to consult the literature, to discover whether others had worked out the situation better than I. Perhaps someone had discovered some short-cuts. I was even willing to face the possibility that I was old and washed-up, unable to cope with routine hardship that a younger woman would take in her stride.

I found no evidence to support the self-blame hypothesis. I discovered only one person saying that combining a baby with employment was easy, and that she did not know what all the fuss was about. That was television personality Nicky Buckley. She had a full-time nanny, as much help as she wanted at home, and could eat at restaurants (without baby) whenever she wanted.

I decided to throw out the self-blame hypothesis, and returned to my original question. How could I be so wrong? Why did I, a competent, experienced, educated, well-informed person, believe that it would be possible for a single mother to provide for herself and her child, being economically independent and self-supporting only to find myself going backwards financially and struggling to get through my days and weeks?

Trying to work this out, I started to trace back some of the ideas and understandings which had influenced me to launch into a way of life that I had managed to survive only by going further into debt, damaging my health, and totally neglecting my friends.

This thesis is the story of that research into ‘Is it just me?’, ‘How could I be so wrong?’, and ‘How can we change things to make life more manageable for mothers of young children in the future?’

CHAPTER 1

CARING FOR YOUNG CHILDREN: THE NEED FOR CHANGE

Brief overview of the study

This study focuses on ideas for increasing the economic independence of mothers of young children who, in spite of the impact of second-wave feminism, continue to provide most of the care for young children in Australia. This brief overview introduces the topic, the research questions, the theoretical framework, the methodology and the findings of the study.

Feminism has a long history of fighting for economic independence for women (Spender 1983). Economic independence is not the same thing as economic security. Economic security is a more paternalistic concept that implies acceptance of dependence on individual men or on the state as acceptable for women. Second-wave feminism emphasised labour market participation as the means for women to achieve economic independence (Lake 1999). Contemporary feminist literature has drawn attention to the limitations of this strategy (Okin 1997). One of the limitations is the extreme difficulty experienced by mothers of young children attempting to support themselves by labour market earning. Very few Australian mothers of young children earn enough in the labour market to support themselves and their children. This could be seen as a lifestyle choice. However an examination of time-use data and labour market data comparing single mothers with couple-family mothers indicates that lack of labour market earning is more probably due to lifestyle constraint of a young child than to lifestyle choice (Grace 2001).

For most women, unless they are independently wealthy, the birth of a child brings economic dependence on a male or female partner or the state. The physical demands of childbirth and recovery, and the amount of work involved in caring for a young child constrain labour market activity. Mothers of babies under one year of age

undertake approximately 90 hours of unpaid work per week. If women undertake paid employment, their unpaid work does not disappear. Most of it remains, and is waiting for them when they return home from their paid work. On the whole, male partners do not share equally in the unpaid work even when mothers take on paid work (Bittman & Pixley 1997). Other limitations on women's labour market earning include women's poor access to well-paid work, workplace expectations that are incompatible with family responsibilities, and men's failure to participate equally in unpaid work (Bittman & Pixley 1997; Pocock 2000, Probert 2001, 1989). These limitations are linked with the social arrangements for the care of young children, particularly expectations that caring for young children is a private parental responsibility rather than a community responsibility, and expectations of self-sacrifice placed on mothers (Cox 1999). A significant body of literature, as discussed in the following chapter, identifies the need for change in these arrangements, and the lack of a coherent agenda for change.

The aim of this study is to contribute to the development of such an agenda, with particular attention to achieving greater economic independence for mothers of young children. This focus on economic independence is maintained in the study because some of the most compelling literature calling for change uses the argument that caring for young children is in fact economic activity, even though it may be treated as 'not working', 'doing nothing', or 'caring' (Bittman & Pixley 2000, 1997; Folbre 1994; Ironmonger 2001, 1989; Waring 1997, 1988). This literature presents the idea that raising children produces a public benefit at the expense of individual mothers. This situation amounts to exploitation of the labour of the women involved, and given that the rest of the community benefits from this exploited labour, it would be reasonable for the community to contribute much more towards the resourcing of this work. The focus of the study is on the social arrangements for caring for young children because of the amount and intensity of the labour involved, and its immediate and long-term impact on labour market earning (Ginn et al 2001).

My own orientation towards critical social theory and feminist theory influenced the development of the aims of the study and the framing of the research questions. These

bodies of theory are appropriate as a theoretical framework because the study focuses on exploitation, pays attention to the material conditions of life of the exploited group, and has a political intention of contributing to change (Agger 1998; S. Leonard 1990; Mullaly 2002). The research utilises an explicitly feminist perspective. It draws on streams of feminist thought that are most consistent with the critical social theory aims of bringing about social transformation to establish fairer and more egalitarian social conditions for exploited groups. Ideas for change that would increase women's oppression, for example by maintaining or increasing pressure on mothers to be self-sacrificing, are not considered as part of this research.

The literature identifies a situation of impasse in relation to women and employment, stalled progress towards gender equality, and high levels of dissatisfaction with the conditions of their lives among mothers of young children (LeBlanc 1999; Maushart 1997; Probert 2001; Purdy 1997; J. Williams 2000; Wolf 2001). This sense of impasse indicates a need for research such as this study. A lack of change may be due to barriers including institutions and ideologies that support and perpetuate the status quo. Lack of change may also be due to lack of mobilization and collective action. Second-wave feminism demonstrated that the articulation of a critical analysis of a situation of oppression can contribute to mobilization to fight for change. This research adds to the existing critical analysis by bringing together critical ideas from household economics, sociology, social policy, demographics and women's studies in a way that has not been done before. It suggests that the agenda of second-wave feminism is no longer an adequate guide for change. This research takes the approach that a coherent agenda for change must include what Nickie Charles (2000) calls a 'long agenda and a short agenda'. The long agenda is a clear statement or vision of the transformational changes to institutions and ideologies that would be required to bring about the desired change. The short agenda consists of at least a beginning statement of strategies that would produce more modest changes that are nevertheless consistent with the desired transformational change. The short agenda is likely to target social policy and industrial relations, and the long agenda is likely to target institutions and ideologies. Coherence between the long agenda and the short agenda in relation to underpinning philosophy, desired outcomes and acceptable means of achieving those

outcomes would mean that 'short agenda' changes could contribute towards, or at least be consistent with, the desired 'long agenda' changes.

Because of the lack of consensus among feminists about an agenda for change in the unsatisfactory social conditions for mothers of young children, the research questions for this study are:

1. What changes, consistent with feminist ideals and critical social theory, and taking account of the views of the women carrying out the work, could increase the economic independence of mothers of young children?
2. What are the pathways towards and the barriers impeding egalitarian change in this area?

A number of Australian authors who utilize a critical approach have commented on the unsatisfactory social conditions for mothers of young children in discussions of the welfare state, childcare, unpaid work, low fertility and (paid) work/family conflict (Bittman & Pixley 2000, 1997; Baxter 1993; Bone 2001; Brennan 1998, 1996; Bryson 2000, 1996, 1995, 1992; Cox 1999; Cox & Leonard 1991; Everingham 1994; Gilding 1994; Goodnow & Bowes 1994; Ironmonger 2001, 2000, 1989; Lake 1999; Lawrence 2001; McDonald 2000b, 2000a, 2000c; O'Connor et al 1999; Pocock 2000; Probert 2001, 1989; Probert & Murphy 2001; Reiger 2000, 1991; Ryan & Conlan 1989; Shaver 2001, 1998; Thomson 2000; Travers 2001; Wearing 1984; Wolcott & Glezer 1995). However, there is no sustained piece of work on the material conditions of life of mothers of young children that brings these ideas together and examines pathways towards emancipatory change. Much of the published comment on the lack of economic independence of mothers of young children is in passing rather than being the main focus of the work. In order to include the most up-to-date thinking of some of these authors, the research design includes interviews with eight of them. These high-profile Australian social commentators were asked to think specifically about the situation of mothers of young children, their vision for a better future and how that could be achieved. Their ideas for change were presented to focus groups of mothers

of young children to gauge the acceptability, relevance and feasibility or otherwise of the suggestions. This method was chosen for practical and theoretical reasons. In practical terms, changes that cannot gain the support of the people whose situation they are supposed to improve have little hope of success. Consistent with a critical social theory approach, the participation of the exploited group in the development of an agenda for change is a vital part of emancipatory practice.

The interviewees and the focus-group participants all agreed that caring for young children produces a public benefit and that it would be appropriate for the rest of the community to offer much more support to this work than is at present the case. The participants contributed items for inclusion in an agenda for change. Transformational changes proposed include: attending to the household economy as well as the market economy in all matters of public policy, legislation, statistical monitoring and research; treating caring for young children as work with economic value; enabling women and men to participate equally in family work and market work; and challenging the ideologies of motherhood and the family. Specific strategies for change proposed include: paid maternity and paternity leave; better children's services and supports for parents; greater respect and valuing of the work of caring for young children; better education, training and return to employment strategies for mothers; workplace and employment conditions compatible with family responsibilities; and an increase in fathers' involvement in caring for young children. Focus-group participants expressed dissatisfaction with social arrangements and made suggestions for change, but a thread of scepticism ran through the focus groups as some of the participants wondered if the ideas for change might be an impossible dream.

Complex factors shape the everyday experiences of mothers of young children. Most of the remainder of this chapter identifies factors considered in the study, including the ways that various authors have articulated the problems with social arrangements for care of young children. While the study draws on international literature, the practical focus is on Australian experience. A section on the significance of the study concludes the chapter.

Dissatisfaction with social arrangements for care of young children

In Australia at the beginning of the 21st Century, both major political parties have policies offering support to people who have responsibility for children. Both parties promote paid employment as the approved way for individuals and families to obtain necessary economic resources, but at the same time support the idea that parents of young children should be able to choose to care for them at home. Both support the provision of high quality affordable childcare to enable parents to undertake paid employment, and offer all families except the very wealthy some financial assistance with the costs of raising children. Both parties draw on the idea that families should be able to choose how they arrange or balance their employment and family responsibilities. They both emphasise the importance of employment for sole parents, making commitments to improve the quality, accessibility and affordability of childcare, but at the same time maintaining the availability of income support in order that sole parents with children under school age can choose to care for them at home (Beazley 2000; Howard & Newman 2000).

On the surface, it seems that the social policies of the Howard coalition government and those of the alternative government support the diversity of Australian families with young children by providing a policy environment that makes it possible for parents not only to survive, but to choose a lifestyle that suits themselves. This policy environment owes much to the influence of Australian feminists (Lake 1999). Their achievements have included change at the political level of government policy and legislation with equal employment and anti-discrimination legislation. Changes at the community level have included the establishment of services such as childcare. Changes at the personal level mean that most Australian women and men have moved beyond the gender stereotypes of the 1950s and 60s in their beliefs, values and aspirations (Bittman & Pixley 1997; Probert 2001).

Despite the obvious gains and the gender-neutral rhetoric of public policy, there is a sense that ‘progress towards gender equality appears to have stalled in Australia’ (Probert 2001:1). In the 2001 Clare Burton Memorial Lecture, Belinda Probert argued that ‘effective policy development has run aground on submerged ideas about motherhood and domesticity, and a failure to sustain the family as a serious object of social policy’. One aspect of ongoing gender inequity in Australia is the way that women continue to carry out the vast bulk of unpaid work involved in caring for young children, and to suffer the resulting short-term and long-term economic disadvantage. This economic disadvantage involves loss of earnings in the short term, as the vast majority of women have interrupted and/or reduced labour-market earning while they have young children. The long-term economic disadvantage flows from a combination of factors: career interruption; the tendency for women with dependent children to take part-time and casual employment; the temptation to put convenience ahead of seniority and recognition; and the compounding effects of seeing a male partner’s earning as primary. Single mothers are very likely to live in poverty, and divorcing women are likely to be worse off financially than their ex-partners (Bittman & Pixley 1997; Grace 2001a; O’Connor et al. 1999; Wolcott & Glezer 1995).

Australian scholarly literature and newspapers have for some years now contained a trickle of protest at the conditions of life of mothers of young children. In the scholarly literature, for example, the book *Missing Voices: The Experience of Motherhood*, reports on an extensive study of ‘what happens to women in becoming and being mothers’, focusing on the experiences of Australian mothers of young babies. The authors comment:

It is difficult to read the interview transcripts and consider the reality of men’s and women’s working lives without concluding that there is something awry with the way in which the work of caring for children, carrying out domestic labour, and supporting the family unit economically is undertaken by men and women today. Not only does it seem unjust that ‘women’s work is (still) never done’, but it is evident that the burdens borne by women in this uneven distribution of work, especially when accompanied by a lack of acknowledgment of their work, and little emotional support from their partners, can have serious consequences for women’s emotional well-being. [Brown, Lumley, Small and Astbury 1994:226]

Brown et al.'s protest seems mild in comparison with that of Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley (1997). In their book *The Double Life of the Family: Myth, Hope and Experience* they argue that the rest of the community could be seen as free-riders on the labour of mothers. In an equally dramatic critique, Peter McDonald links the lack of gender equity within Australian families with the low birth rate. His ongoing study of international birth rates indicates that countries with high gender equity in aspects such as education and employment but low gender equity in families are at risk of dropping fertility (McDonald 2000a, 2000b).

The Age and *The Australian* newspapers have, over the past few years, regularly published articles about mothers, paid employment, childcare arrangements and the costs of raising children. Every so often there is a spate of attention, as in *The Age* in Melbourne in the months of April, May and June 2001. Leslie Cannold (2001a) criticized the media for highlighting research that claims that childcare is bad for children. In reply, Anne Manne (2001:13) claimed that '[s]upple, intelligent feminists overseas take seriously the problems emerging with childcare and are already developing new policy directions involving work practices and parental leave'. Pamela Bone (2001:11) linked the issue with recent concern about Australia's low birth rate. She stated:

[T]oday's economy needs women not only to be in the labour market but also to have babies. You would think this would give women bargaining power: make it easier for us to work and have children, or we'll either get out of the workforce or (more likely) we won't have children. But, being the polite sex they are, women are instead accepting the guilt heaped upon them for the choices they make about childcare.

If they were not accepting that guilt, the debate about whether crèches are good or bad for children would not be almost exclusively among women. Where are the articles by fathers, trying to justify or congratulate themselves on their child-care choices?

Barbara Pocock (2001:11) claimed that '[t]here can be no doubt that the poor circumstances for parenting in Australia are having an important effect on our declining birth rate'. She advocated extended periods of paid parental leave, high quality tax-deductible childcare and work arrangements that allow for care of dependants.

Leslie Cannold (2001b) argued that feminists should stop defending women's 'choice' to make motherhood a full-time job, and must instead insist that once babies are out of nappies mothers have a responsibility to bring in an income, just as fathers have a responsibility to share domestic work. Cathy Sherry (2001a:19) disagreed, identifying the key issue as 'what obligation do women have to financially support their children?' She concluded that both parents have a responsibility to love and provide for their children, and defended the right of couples to choose their own division of labour. Both Cannold and Sherry alluded to class issues, but neither dealt with the situation of single mothers. Both drew heavily on their own experiences as well as unsourced demographic data to make and justify their points.

Like the scholarly literature, newspapers have made the link between Australia's low birth rate and the social arrangements for care of young children. A June 2001 *Sunday Age* feature on Australia's low birth rate scanned diverse opinions on the issue. Mandy Sayer (2001) wrote in defence of her choice to remain childless; Tom Nankivell (2001:17) argued against family tax breaks, family friendly policies and other 'discriminatory pro-parent policies'; Peter McDonald (2001a) wrote about the demographics of childlessness, stating that the main cause of Australia's low fertility rate is fewer children per woman rather than childlessness, and Nora Tchekmeyan (2001) argued that having children is irrational because of the economic, personal and lifestyle costs involved.

The newspaper articles scanned above are a small sample, but fairly typical of the issues raised regularly in the media. Hardship, including economic hardship, is often mentioned, along with Australia's low birth rate, claims in the name of feminism, criticism of feminist ideas, arguments in favour of or against formal childcare, criticism of mothers who are perceived to have made different choices from those of the author, defence of the author's own choices, defence of or attack on the idea of choice, and a questioning of why the issues are problems for women rather than men.

A women's issue?

Because women take on (or are left with) most of the responsibility for young children², anything to do with the care of young children is usually seen as a women's issue. Seeing childcare as a women's issue unfortunately reinforces the stereotype of caring for young children as mothering – the responsibility of individual mothers –, rather than of parents, or indeed of the whole community. For this reason, I generally favour the terms 'parents', 'caregivers' and 'adults'. However, because women remain overwhelmingly responsible, the use of gender inclusive terms would be as inappropriate as calling research on heart attacks in men over 60 'Heart Attacks in Older People'. The term 'mothers' will be used throughout this work, but this does not indicate an acceptance of the dominant understanding of what it means to be a mother, or an acceptance that the primary carer of babies and young children is necessarily a female parent.

I acknowledge that hardships involved in caring for young children are experienced by men as well as women, or at least have flow-on effects to male partners. This research will focus on women, their situations, their experiences, and their views, for the reasons outlined above. The way that care of young children is socially constructed is inextricably intertwined with the material conditions of women's lives, and their overall position within society. The interdependence of the two issues – care of young children and oppression of women – has been explored by second-wave feminism. Is the care of young children undervalued because women do it, or are women undervalued because they care unpaid for young children? Care of young children, like all women's unpaid work, is undervalued because of its invisibility, location in the 'private sphere' and status as non-work. On the other hand, women undertake so much productive work for no pay that their labour may be seen to have little economic value, leading to low wages and career disadvantage for women regardless of whether they have children or not.

² By 'young children' I mean children under school age. By 'responsible for the care of' I mean either personally caring for, or responsible for arranging alternative care for young children.

Motherhood, of course, does not have an homogenising impact on women. The economic impact of responsibility for young children is mediated by life circumstances. Independently wealthy women can purchase nannies and other helpers to give themselves genuine choice about how they spend their time, without compromising their basic survival. Women with high-earning partners may be able to do likewise, but their advantage is as precarious as marriage. Disadvantaged women, for example single parents, women with disabilities and Aboriginal women, are likely to experience compounding and cumulative impacts of their various disadvantages and oppressions (Young 1990).

Conditions of life and economic arrangements of Australian mothers of young children

The status of those who care for young children is strangely ambiguous and contradictory. On the one hand, mothers are ascribed an almost holy status, providing some recognition of their contribution, but locking them into expectations of extreme self sacrifice. On the other hand, their work is considered non-work, is not economically rewarded, and is not widely respected.

These unsatisfactory conditions of life for mothers of young children have been addressed to some extent in reports taking a progressive approach, for example *The Heart of the Matter: Families at the Centre of Public Policy* (National Council for the International Year of the Family 1994), and the Australian Institute of Family Studies major report *Work and Family Life: Achieving Integration* (Wolcott & Glezer 1995). These reports both advocated a more equal sharing of domestic work, in order for women to participate equally in paid work. If ‘domestic work’ is housework of the sort generated by every member of the community, there seems no reason why a person could not do his or her fair share and adequately perform a full-time job as well. This position breaks down when the ‘domestic work’ includes the care of a young child or children because the amount of work involved is so much greater than what is generally considered as ‘housework’. The work involved in caring for young children is clearly not just a small extension of the housework. It is intensive,

extensive, demanding, skilled, time-consuming work that does not disappear if children attend childcare during working hours.

Some progress in the emancipation of women has improved the lives of many women in a number of ways, making it possible for women to have more power and control over their own lives, and expanding the range of choices available to women. A problem arises, however, when despite progress, a particular group of women remains unable to exercise power and control within their own lives, and when the choices available to them are pseudo choices – the freedom to choose between bad and worse, for example choosing between abuse and poverty.

Despite the rhetoric of choice present in political policy statements and newspaper articles, the actual choices available to most mothers of young children appear quite constrained. Independently wealthy women are able to support themselves in the economic sense while they have young children, but the vast majority of women with young children rely on economic support from other individuals and/or the state at this time of their lives. As reported in *Women in Australia 1999* (Office of the Status of Women 1999), full-time labour market participation is very low among mothers of young children (only 7% for female lone parents and 14% for married (*sic*) mothers of children aged 0-2), and increases gradually with age of youngest child. While there is considerable diversity in how Australian women live their lives, I have tentatively identified four typical arrangements. These are presented, with comments, below.

1. *The 'Private Welfare' system – being financially supported by a male or female partner while caring personally for young children*

The heterosexual couple is the dominant social expectation of the most desirable arrangement. Gay and lesbian couples with young children may adopt the breadwinner-homemaker pattern of living, but do not attract anything like the same level of official approval as heterosexual couples. This dominant pattern is firmly based on the patriarchal view that women and children are the responsibility of individual males, and on the idea that parents are individually responsible for their children (rather than children being a community responsibility). It is consistent with

the view that having children is some sort of private indulgence (e.g. Nankivell 2001), and fails to recognise caring for young children as a contribution to the society at large.

This arrangement retains support because it works for some people, for example people with high incomes, where parents are able to stay together. Its other appeal lies in its ability largely to avoid the scrutiny of the State – to keep private lives private. It may be perceived as the safest option for gay and lesbian couples, as it reduces the scope for dominant group attacks on their situation.

2. *The ‘Public Welfare’ system – receiving a below-the-poverty-line income support payment from the State*

Under this system people *who are already working* (at caring for young children) may receive welfare benefits at a level that makes sole parent poverty a significant problem in Australia (Shaver 1998). Current social policy seeks to alleviate their poverty by improving their access to the labour market by retraining and providing childcare. This system encourages the community to see sole parent pensioners as a burden on the community/economy rather than as valuable contributors to the community/economy.

3. *Full-time employment with the child in full-time care*

This option is used by both single and couple-family³ mothers, often resulting in crushing burdens of paid and unpaid work for individual women (Bittman & Pixley 1997). It appears to work best for people with very high salaries, or who are rich in extended family support in the form of free childcare (see for example *The Australian’s* September 2001 feature *Work and Family: The Crunch*). High salaries enable people to employ nannies, and to purchase other goods and services that

³ The expression ‘couple-family’ is used to include married and de facto, heterosexual, gay and lesbian couples.

reduce the burden of unpaid work. High levels of extended family support are becoming less common as more grandmothers are in paid employment themselves.

Anecdotally, women report that the full-time employment and full-time childcare option results in chronic exhaustion, because of the notorious double shift (Hochschild 1989). Single parents also complain of chronic poverty because their incomes are whittled away by the need to purchase goods such as prepared meals and services such as lawn-mowing in order to survive without a partner's assistance at home. This was my own situation before my youngest child started school, and I have found no shortage of women eager to recount similar hardships.

4. Part-time employment and part-time childcare

This option, according to an Australian Institute of Family Studies publication (Wolcott & Glezer 1995), provides the most satisfaction for women with partners. Their study considered this option to be the best available for women trying to balance work and family responsibilities. For sole parents it can result in the worst of both worlds – not enough money and a double shift.

The part-time option reinforces the status of women's paid work as secondary to men's and the unpaid work as mainly women's responsibility. Any such arrangement perpetuates the power differentials between men and women by reinforcing gendered patterns of earning capacity (value) and the primacy of men's participation in the public sphere.

Much discussion of arrangements for the care of young children utilizes the concept of 'choice', as though mothers of young children had a smorgasbord of options spread before them, with the implication that individual women should choose carefully to suit themselves, and then take individual responsibility for their choice. If personal preference were indeed driving 'choices', we would expect to see similar patterns of arrangements among mothers of older and younger children, similar patterns for single and couple-family mothers, and possibly similar patterns for women and men.

But as the following section indicates, clearly factors other than personal preferences are affecting mothers' 'choices'.

Time use: Paid and unpaid work

In order for a baby to survive, someone must contribute very long hours of work. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) time use surveys of 1992 and 1997 collected data on how Australians spend their time, including time spent by parents caring for their own children (ABS 1994a, 1998a; Bittman 1995). Like most ABS surveys these included large and representative samples of diverse Australian households, not only nuclear heterosexual couple families.

The most recent time use survey showed that women and men undertake similar amounts of total work, but that men do much more paid work than women, and women do much more unpaid work than men (ABS 1998a). In other words, men are much more likely to be paid for their work than are women. Unpaid work in the time use survey included many more categories than 'childcare', but in relation to childcare, they found 'only half as many men as women spending time on direct care for children ... and they spent considerably less time doing the activity' (ABS 1998a:6). Based on their data, I calculate⁴ that in Australia each day women spend 5.7 million unpaid hours on caring for children. Even those men who did some direct care work spent much less time than women on this work contributing only a total 1.9 million unpaid hours.

Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley (1997), in their own analysis of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 1992 *Time Use Survey* (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1994a), found that mothers whose families included an infant (0-1) spent between 60 and 90 hours per week on unpaid work. Mothers' hours of unpaid work dropped gradually to about 37 hours per week by the time their youngest children were 15+. Fathers' hours

⁴ ABS (1998a:36) Table 14 reports that 133,800 men spent an average of 88 minutes per day and 2,249,800 women spent an average of 151 minutes per day on childcare. Total hours per day for men and women were calculated from these figures.

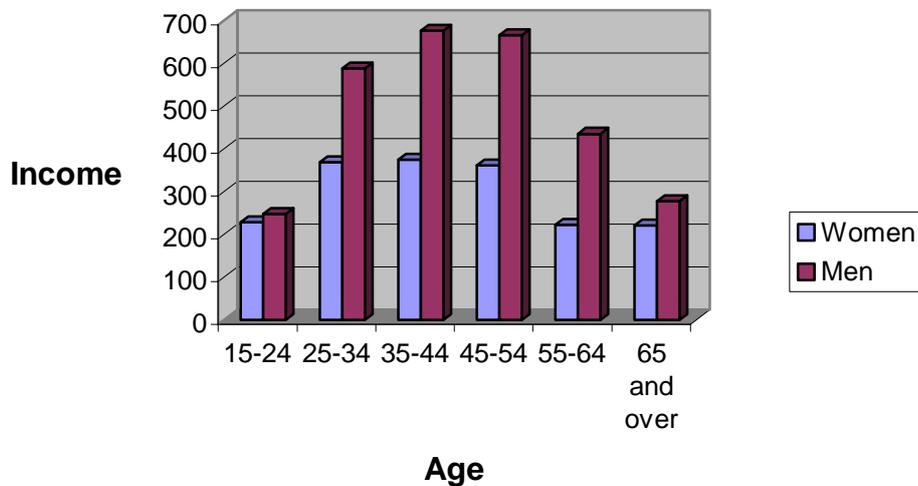
of unpaid work were much lower, and varied much less, from around 22 hours per week when their youngest children were infants to around 19 hours per week when their youngest children were 15+ (Bittman & Pixley 1997). Clearly mothers of young children in Australia are spending more hours per week on unpaid work than what would be considered a normal working week.

Surprisingly, women's participation in paid employment made little difference to their hours of unpaid work. Bittman and Pixley (1997) estimated a reduction in unpaid work of about 5.5 hours per week for a woman employed for 40 hours per week. This means that, in general, when women have paid employment their partners do not take on an equal share of the unpaid work, nor does the unpaid work go away. Women with young children, whether with a partner or single, whether employed full-time, part-time or with no paid employment, undertake more than a full working week's worth of unpaid work. Separate information about mothers with female partners is not available, but whether the unpaid work is shared equally by same-sex couples or not, a similar total amount of unpaid work would be necessary to care for children.

The impact of this unpaid work on labour market earning can be deduced by examining labour market participation patterns. As reported in *Women in Australia 1999* (Office of the Status of Women 1999), women's labour market participation increases with the age of their youngest child. Single mothers with a child aged less than 2 years had the lowest participation rate at 28%, with only 7% employed full time. Their participation rate rose to 65% when their youngest child was aged 12-14 years, with 31% employed full time. For couple-family mothers with children aged 0-2 years, nearly half (47%) participated in the labour market, 14% full time. The participation rate for couple-family mothers of older children aged 12-14 years was 79%, with 40% employed full-time. On the whole, women's labour market participation is lower than men's, reflecting women's caring responsibilities. Men aged 20-54 years had participation rates between 86% and 93%. Women's rates were between 68% and 76% (Office of the Status of Women 1999:35-36).

Gender differences in labour market participation are also reflected in differences in both source and level of income. In June 1998, women made up 93% of all Parenting Payment for single parents recipients (Office of the Status of Women 1999:48). The following graph shows that women had much lower mean gross weekly incomes than men in 1996-97, using figures published in *Women in Australia 1999* (Office of the Status of Women 1999).

Figure 1.1: Gender comparison of mean gross weekly income, Australia, 1996-97



Women's lower incomes reflect the segmentation of the labour market, with women clustered in low-paying occupations, and at the lower rungs of better-paying occupations (Office of the Status of Women 1999). In addition, women's lower incomes reflect patterns of labour market participation, with women more likely than men to be out of the labour market, or employed part-time rather than full-time. This is not to say that Australian women perform less work than Australian men, but rather that men are more likely than women to be paid for their work (ABS 1998a). Responsibility for young children has a marked impact on women's labour market participation and therefore on their incomes. Clearly the time and energy that would otherwise go into earning income is being used to care for the children.

Care of young children as exploitation of women's labour

Caring for young children is skilled, demanding work that consumes the time and energy of those who carry it out. As Brown, Lumley, Small and Astbury (1994:202) comment:

'A woman's work is never done' is a phrase embedded in our language and our cultural consciousness. In spite of this, motherhood is rarely seen in terms of the work involved. Becoming a mother is so often represented as a 'taken for granted' part of being a woman that the work women do in the name of motherhood, their 'labours of love' – child rearing and domestic work – remain invisible. There are some major problems with this that the women in our study were grappling with on a daily basis, not least of which was that caring for children was much harder than most women would ever have imagined prior to starting their own families. Yet once they did have children, the work of motherhood was very real for women. It took up practically all their waking hours – if they were not also employed outside the home – and often some of their sleeping hours as well, yet it so often went unacknowledged by their partners or anybody else. Often, women's work at home – and many women readers are likely to identify with this – was only noticed when it did not get done.

Caring for young children clearly contributes to the collective good. It is not only humane but pragmatic to ensure that the next generation survives and is well cared for. Without the next generation, the society would soon die out. Adequate care of young children is necessary to ensure functioning adults to carry on all the activities that are generally taken for granted, and are necessary to support both the older generation and the next generation of children. Mothers who care for young children make a very significant contribution of their own labour to the welfare of the whole community in the future, yet this work does not even earn them superannuation benefits. Bittman and Pixley (1997) have similarly argued that the rest of the community could be seen as free-riders on the labour of mothers.

I have argued elsewhere that motherhood could be seen as economic exploitation disguised as choice (Grace 2001a). Many people contribute in a voluntary way to the community, but the work of caring for young children consumes so many hours of a mother's time that it compromises her ability to earn and benefit from labour market income. When individual women's 'choices' lead to gendered outcomes that disadvantage women, it suggests that social and institutional arrangements are

constraining women's choices. It seems that for many women the birth of their children marks the time when their 'choices' set them on pathways that have broader significance than their individual circumstances because they result in patterns of disadvantage. 'Choice' that systematically disadvantages women is not real choice.

Because women take the main responsibility for the unpaid work of caring for young children (as well as people with disabilities, sick people and frail elderly people), men are freed to pursue paid employment. Any sharing of status, power and assets accumulated via paid employment is largely at the discretion of individual men, placing women in a disadvantaged position, as demonstrated by the widespread poverty among single, separated and divorced mothers and their children (Shaver 1998; Travers 2001). As argued by Bittman and Pixley (2000, 1997) caring for young children is socially useful and necessary work that produces a public benefit but is resourced by the unpaid labour of women at the expense of their own economic well-being. They state that within orthodox economic theory, 'public goods' are provisions like lighthouses and street lighting that cannot be supplied to one person without automatically becoming available to all, and their individual users cannot be made to pay for them. The birth and raising of children produces a public benefit by ensuring the future of the society. Employers rely on being able to employ functioning adults. All of the elderly rely on other people's children to keep the society functioning. Bittman and Pixley (1997:197-8) state:

Parents pay directly for the costs of children, and mothers pay in foregone earnings and in effort (however enjoyable). Mothers in particular have received virtually no economic benefits from this heavy investment. More precisely many women have been doomed to poverty for making this provision in modern societies.

Australia's arrangements for the care of young children amount to exploitation, as defined by Mullaly (1997:146, following Iris Marion Young 1990):

Exploitation refers to those social processes whereby the dominant group is able to accumulate and maintain status, power, and assets from the energy and labour expended by subordinate groups.

Caring for young children and public policy

The continuing exploitation of women in their role as care-givers of young children has been acknowledged (Bittman 1995; Brown, Lumley, Small, & Astbury 1994; Moen 1992; Wolcott & Glezer 1995), but no clear direction has emerged to redress the situation effectively. This area is marked by a plethora of vested interests and divergent understandings of the issues (e.g. Hakim 1995 and Ginn et al. 1996). A complex interplay of forces and circumstances perpetuates this exploitation. This complexity makes it difficult to understand and therefore difficult to redress.

The ideas and values underpinning the historical development of Australia's present social policy provisions contribute to this complexity. Frank Castles (1985:103) characterized Australia as having a 'wage earners' welfare state'. As Lois Bryson (1992:6) states:

[T]o the extent that Australia can be called a welfare state, this was achieved through securing protection for male wage-earners and their families, rather than through a social democratic emphasis on citizenship and universal income-security measures and the social wage.

Jane Thomson (2000:83) argues that the 1907 Harvester Judgment, which established the principle of the family wage, 'was understood to be a positive piece of social legislation, with implications for people's welfare in the broadest sense', but she supports Deborah Brennan's (1996:108) assertion that '[s]ince it applied exclusively to men, ... the living wage was of no benefit to women who supported families on their own'.

In Australia, as in other Western democracies, 20th Century feminist activism has brought about significant gains in women's opportunities for economic independence, including voting rights and the right to hold public office, the right of wives to own property, women's access to universities and professional careers, the end of the marriage bar in public service employment, the principle of equal pay, equal employment opportunity legislation, and women's eligibility in their own right for government pensions and benefits (Lake 1999). However, welfare state provisions retain the influence of the male breadwinner – female homemaker model, while

political and employment practices reflect a concept of the ideal citizen as male (Bryson 1992).

A recent study (O'Connor et al. 1999) of social provisions in Australia, (along with Canada, Great Britain and the United States) found that for women, typically, labour market access is constrained by the responsibility for unpaid work, on which the paid labour force depends. The study found elderly women as well as single mothers very vulnerable to poverty because of women's patterns of paid and unpaid work. The authors' discussion reverses the concern with de-commodification (protection from dependence on the labour market for survival), typical of discussions of social citizenship rights. They argue that both access to the labour market and protection from sole reliance on the labour market are essential. In addition, they argue that both paid and unpaid labour are relevant to citizenship rights. They emphasise the importance of protecting women, particularly those with children, from forced economic dependence on the income of a marital partner. The authors conclude that apparently gender-neutral social policy and legislation will continue to disadvantage women in the nation-states studied. They found that the gender-neutral or gender-inclusive wording of social policy concealed its inherent bias towards the ideal subject of liberal man, whose body does not bear children, and whose public participation is supported by the invisible unpaid work of women. They state that only social policy that acknowledges gender differences could ever hope to deliver equality for women (O'Connor et al. 1999).

Lois Bryson (1996) frames women's unequal access to satisfaction and rewards as a citizenship issue, referring to earlier works regarding our dual social system with two forms of citizenship, one for men and one for women. 'Citizenship' remains a contested concept, particularly because past influential ideas, focusing on civil, political and social rights and responsibilities, have been blind to economic and gender inequalities (Dalton et al. 1996:49-50). Dalton et al. (1996:50) refer to Mary Wollstonecraft's (1792) critique of the limited value of equal opportunities for women without fundamental changes in the private, as well as the public sphere. They state:

[T]he citizenship discourse will only be of relevance and value to all people when the subjects of the discourse are gendered, when they adequately address differences of race, ethnicity and sexuality and disability and when debates about citizenship rights and participation are extended into the sphere of productive and reproductive relations in both the public and private spheres.

In contemporary Australian social policy, the need to support families caring for young children has been specifically identified by both major political parties (Beazley 2000; Howard & Newman 2000). However the current Prime Minister's *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy* (Howard & Newman 2000) includes welfare and limited community development strategies rather than any attempt to allocate a fair share of the community's resources to the people who carry out the work involved in caring for young children. Rather than a concept and discourse of 'interdependency', the concepts and discourse of 'welfare dependency' and 'mutual obligation' continue to inform the Australian Government's approach to supporting families with young children (Reference Group on Welfare Reform 2000). In the current political climate income support for unemployed couples with children and for single parents is seen as a stigmatized form of welfare rather than entitlement.

Our society recognises mothers' responsibility for their children, but denies them economic rights, failing to recognize caring as work with status and attendant benefits. More equitable social arrangements might incorporate a view of mothers as citizens, entitled to a fair share of the society's resources, rather than being forced into dependence on either individual men or the state.

Feminism and motherhood

Feminism has a long history of fighting for economic independence for women, but dominant feminist views have changed over time, and at any time there have been differences between feminists about the agenda for change. As Dale Spender (1983:376-7) wrote in *Feminist Theorists: Three Centuries of Women's Intellectual Traditions*:

That women should have economic independence, that they should cease to be economically exploited, is not a controversial issue in feminism, although there are some differences when it comes to formulating the means for achieving this end.

Early in the 20th Century, Australian feminists finally won the right for (white) women to vote. They subsequently turned much of their energy towards improving the economic situation of mothers (and some energy towards securing the vote for all women). Many post-suffrage feminists advocated motherhood endowment in the form of a state-paid wage for mothers, but in the end achieved only a minimal one-off payment. These early claims were clearly based on women's needs because of their difference, as child-bearers, from men.

By the 1930s, influential Australian feminists, like those overseas, believed that the pathway to equality lay in access to the labour market rather than in recognition of the domestic contribution of women (Lake 1999). This approach left behind claims based on gender difference and continued on into second-wave feminism.

The resurgence of the women's movement and broad community interest in feminist ideas of the 1960s and 1970s included strong challenges to women's traditional roles in families. Christine Everingham, in her book *Motherhood and Modernity* (1994:3) states:

Feminists in the 1960s and early 1970s had a clear objective, equality and greater personal autonomy for women. The major obstacle was mothering. Feminist activists argued very persuasively that women's responsibility for the care of children was responsible for the sexual division of labour and women's position of subordination. If women were to be liberated and achieve equality with men then the ties of motherhood which bound women so closely to the domestic sphere had to be loosened, if not transcended altogether.

During this period of second-wave feminism, feminist authors including Oakley (1974) opposed 'wages for housework', because of the danger of women being essentialised and trapped in housewife roles.

Since the 1970s, the Australian women's movement has given high priority to women's participation in the labour market, advocating for high quality, accessible affordable childcare and flexible work arrangements, with considerable success (Lake 1999). In 1961, the labour force participation rate of married (*sic*) women aged 25-34 and 35-44 was 17 and 21 per cent respectively. By 1994, those rates had risen to 63 and 71 per cent respectively (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1994b, Australian Bureau of Statistics 1986).

The 1990s and early 2000s have seen a questioning of the second-wave feminist agenda, with attention to the continuing disadvantages and hardships experienced by women. The disadvantages include lack of economic independence. Women's expanding labour-market participation has been predominantly in casual and part-time work, which apparently offers convenience in the short term but in the long term offers little in the way of career advancement, paid leave, training and professional development, or superannuation benefits (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1995). As Janice Peterson (1994:xiii) states:

Increasing women's participation in paid labor, for example, has been viewed by many as the road to liberation and a sign of increased equality. Yet without accompanying institutional change, this has led many women to bear a double burden of work in and outside the home. While this has increased the work they must perform, it has not always increased their status or well-being. In addition, for many women the type of wage labor available limits the liberating potential of their participation. Liberation must imply more than the mobilization of women as economic resources; it must bring with it a more equitable distribution of power.

Susan Moller Okin identifies the failure to value childcare and housework as a major source of oppression for single mothers (Okin 1997). Laura M. Purdy (1997:69) in her essay 'Babystrike!' claims that following the early second-wave feminist critique of marriage and the family, feminism moved on to other issues such as sexual harassment, workplace equity and pornography. She states:

[T]he critiques of marriage and family seem almost forgotten as feminists, like society at large, now seem generally to assume that all women – including lesbians – will pair up and have children. Those for whom the old critiques are still vivid seem a bit old-fashioned, a bit stuck on tired, worn-out issues. Yet as I watch friends struggle to accommodate both family and work in their lives, as I watch the economic

situation deteriorate for most women, cutting their reserves to the bone, I wonder whether contemporary feminism truly represents a new, more mature theory, or whether it simply buries those fundamental issues that are so threatening to society at large.

The recent feminist literature indicates dissatisfaction with the outcomes of the equal opportunity agenda of second-wave feminism and an inclination to revisit feminism's earlier attention to women's distinctive life experiences as child-bearers. Similarly, many of the regular newspaper contributors on the topics of motherhood, childcare and paid employment identify themselves as feminists (for example Bone 2001; Cannold 2001a, 2001b; Manne 2001; Maushart 2001; Sherry 2001a, 2001b). These newspaper articles express dissatisfaction with present social arrangements, and diverse views regarding desirable change. There is some consensus about the need for change, but no consensus about an agenda for change, indicating a need for sustained work on agenda-development. This research is a contribution to that work.

Significance of the study

This research into changes that would increase the economic independence of mothers of young children is being undertaken at a time when there is controversy within the community regarding mothers' unpaid work. A decade has elapsed since women with young children increased their labour market participation to their current levels (Travers 2001:109). Both academic researchers and the women themselves are realising that new options for women have not necessarily improved their well-being.

This study is distinctive because of its sustained focus on mothers' unpaid parenting work, the significance of that work both in preventing mothers of young children from being self-supporting via the labour market, and in its production of an unrecompensed public benefit. It challenges the conventional wisdom evident for example in *The Australian* newspaper's September 2001 week-long special feature entitled 'Work And Family: The Crunch', that the key issues are employment-related, for example paid maternity leave, work-life balance and workplace childcare. This study, consistent with the approach of critical social theorists, examines possibilities

for broad transformational change in the power relations that produce and reproduce social arrangements, as well as particular social policy strategies for change.

Feminists have drawn attention to the importance of economic independence for women. They have criticized institutions that treat women as dependants rather than as individuals or citizens in their own right. Critical authors and researchers have identified mothers' unpaid work of caring for their own children as economic activity that produces a public benefit that is not recognized or recompensed as such, amounting to a situation of exploitation. The lack of gender equity in arrangements for care of young children, household work and labour market activity has consequences for the society, including low fertility, anger and resentment among mothers, and lifelong economic disadvantage for women. Critical authors and researchers have called for emancipatory change in this area, and have identified both the lack of and the need for transformational change.

For centuries, feminists have emphasised the importance of economic independence for women (Spender 1983). This means access as individuals in their own right rather than as dependants of men to the resources to sustain life. Australian social policy and industrial relations treated women as gendered family members to be supported by males until the challenges of second-wave feminism started to take effect. Women's poor access to economic independence remains an important social policy issue in Australia today (O'Connor et al 1999; Shaver 1998; Thomson 2000; Travers 2001). Although there have been changes to bring women closer to full citizenship status in Australia, there is still much to be done. One area that remains problematic, as discussed in this chapter, is the gender-based exploitative and under-valued work that goes into the care of young children.

Given the long history of this issue, the number of women and children it affects, its importance to society's well-being, and the inability of governments, the women's movement or social policy to deal effectively with the situation, research into barriers to change and ideas for change in this area is urgently needed. This research is innovative because it names lack of economic independence for mothers of young

children as a problem. The following chapter discusses the influences on our contemporary way of life that conceal the existence of this issue, and the contributions of critical authors and activists to exposure and change of related social conditions.

Structure of the thesis

Chapter 1 has introduced the complexity of the problem under study. It identifies the focus of the study as ideas for change that are consistent with the tradition of critical social theory and feminism, and scans important streams of thought that form the academic context of the study. The literature review in Chapter 2 explores these streams of thought further. Some theoretical material is introduced in the literature review, which is followed by a chapter on the theoretical framework of the study. Chapter 4 describes the research design. Chapters 5 and 6 present interview findings and focus group findings. The final chapter presents a beginning articulation of a coherent agenda for change, returns to a consideration of the research questions, and presents suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

PAID AND UNPAID WORK:

CRITIQUE AND IDEAS FOR CHANGE

This research focuses on the unpaid work of caring for young children and its implications for the economic independence of the women involved. Conceptually, the work is located at the intersection of ideas about women's economic independence, the economic significance of unpaid work, and motherhood. Many authors on social policy, economics, time use, families, and motherhood have made some comment on the economic arrangements for the care of young children, even when this has not been the main focus of their work. In order to examine the unpaid work of caring of young children, it is necessary to review literature on the historical development of current social arrangements, and on the critique of those arrangements including:

- historical changes to paid and unpaid work that have resulted in the functioning of contemporary households,
- the concept of public and private spheres,
- the devaluing and invisibility of women's work,
- the ways that a concept of women as properly the dependants of individual men has both shaped and been reinforced by Australian social policy, and
- the contributions of feminist theory and activism to understanding and challenging the exploitation and disadvantage suffered by women because of gendered patterns of responsibility and access to resources.

Historical changes to paid and unpaid work

There is nothing natural or inevitable about the gendered division of labour evident in Australia and elsewhere (Mies 1986), and women's unpaid work is clearly economic

activity, even when it is not counted as such (Waring 1997, 1988). Yet the gendered division of labour continues, with women performing much more unpaid work than men, and being paid less than men for their paid work (Probert 1989, Office of the Status of Women 1999). There is no evidence that Australians have come to grips at a personal, cultural or structural level with the idea that unpaid work is economic activity, or with the notion that this activity may produce a public benefit. The two intersecting sets of social conditions – the gendered division of labour, and the patterns of resource distribution (including payment for work) – have come about over a period of time. They have become part of the consciousness, the taken-for-granted reality, of most policy-makers and many who live out their lives within the constraints of those social arrangements. However, they have been challenged, particularly by feminist authors.

The contemporary gendered division of labour and resource distribution in Australia developed, not from the ecologically sustainable way of life of Australian indigenous people, but from the experience of British colonisation. The traditional way of life of Australian indigenous people, established for many thousands of years prior to colonisation, included a major emphasis on the role of the people as custodians of the land, clear gender divisions of responsibilities, and a strong ethos of sharing resources in the group (see for example Huggins & Huggins 1994). It is difficult to know whether the traditional indigenous lifestyles involved more or less subordination of women than contemporary lifestyles. However, the strong ethos of sharing resources with other group members would have prevented some of the inequalities that are very familiar in contemporary individualist Australia. For example, it seems unlikely that mothers of young children would have gone hungry if they had been unable to gather their own food on a particular day.

The interdependence of indigenous group members is clear. In a subsistence society, people would have had daily reminders of the necessity of the different roles of hunting, gathering, food preparation, shelter maintenance and caring for children. Without a money economy and a labour market to cloud the issues, the value of different activities, and the consequences for the whole group if they are not carried

out, is obvious. It would have made no sense to deprive pregnant and breastfeeding women of their share of food and shelter, for example, because of the awareness of the need for healthy children and strong women to ensure their survival.

Feminist critiques of earlier accounts of hunter-gatherer societies argue that the relative importance of men's contribution has been over-emphasised. Maria Mies (1986), for example, suggests that subsistence societies often have or had a gendered division of labour but, in relation to hunter-gatherer social groups, she highlights the reliance on women as gatherers of daily food as well as reproducers of the population. Where the men were hunters and women were gatherers, she states that '[w]omen necessarily had to secure the "daily bread", not only for themselves and their children, but also for the men if they had no luck on their hunting expeditions, because hunting is an "economy of risk"' (Mies 1986:58). She criticises ideas that link male dominance with the role of hunter as major provider of food:

The man-the-hunter model as the paradigm of human evolution has been the basis of numerous scientific works on human affairs and has been popularised by the modern media. It has influenced the thinking of millions of people, and is still constantly advanced to explain the causes of social inequalities. Feminist scholars challenged the validity of this model on the basis of their own research and that of others. They unmasked this model, including its basic premises of the male bonding principle, the importance of meat as food, etc., as a sexist projection of modern, capitalist and imperialist social relations into pre-history and earlier history. This projection serves to legitimise existing relations of exploitation and dominance between men and women, classes and peoples as universal, timeless and 'natural'. [Mies 1986:60]

When the British colonised Australia, they looked on the hunter-gatherer way of life as inferior, and destroyed as much of it as possible. They brought their own background, expectations and social arrangements (Reynolds 1999). The beginning of colonisation in Australia coincided with the early stages of industrialisation in Britain. Australian sociologists including Janeen Baxter (1993) and Belinda Probert (1989) treat Australian social conditions as having a shared history with social conditions in Britain, identifying as key factors family forms, gender division of labour, and the impact of industrial capitalism on patterns of paid and unpaid work.

In relation to patterns of work in pre-industrial England, Janeen Baxter (1993:22), Australian researcher and author on women's paid and unpaid work, states:

In both rural and urban areas, the household was the centre of production and consumption. Family members, including women and children, worked together to provide the labour and resources needed to ensure the survival of the family-household unit ... As many historians have pointed out, women's activities in the pre-industrial household were crucial to the family economy ... At the same time, women's work was clearly differentiated from, and considered subordinate to, the activities of their husbands.

While the broader societal subordination of women may have masked to a degree the value of their work, women and men both clearly participated in production and consumption at the household level. Broader social perceptions had not yet located men in a public sphere of production and women in a private sphere of consumption. The interdependence of pre-industrial household members is clear. It seems that these households were based on an acknowledgement of the value of the labour contributed by all adults and older children in the household, whether that labour was in household production, care of young children, marketing of household-produced goods, or in labour market earning. With less of a labour market at that time than later, the slippage of the concept of 'work' towards meaning only labour market activity had not yet occurred. Since most production occurred at the level of the household, it seems likely that women's household-based work was more recognisable as economic activity. Similarly, the work involved in raising the next generation of workers would have produced clear economic benefits for parents because of the expectation that their children would provide and care for them in their old age.

Industrialisation in England from about 1750 onwards brought changes to many of the work patterns that had characterised pre-industrial society (Baxter 1993:23). As Baxter (1993) and Probert (1989) both acknowledge, the gendered division of labour and oppression of women pre-dated industrialisation. In addition, a labour market existed prior to industrialisation (Tilly & Scott 1987:5). However, it seems that the burgeoning of the labour market brought the beginning of the shifts in perception towards 'work' being synonymous with labour market activity. The household-based

work continued in many forms, but the exchange of labour for money became visible, and the (unpaid) work that makes labour market activity possible sank further and further into the background of public consciousness. An example of this perception that industrialisation moved work out of the home and made women dependent on men can be found in the writing of the respected British social policy author Richard Titmuss (1958:110):

Thus, with the shift from domestic to industrial production women became more dependent on men ... The survival of the family as a social unit became more dependent on the labour power, the health, and the strength of the husband and father – the one who now ‘earned life’ for the whole unit. These and other effects of the earlier stages of industrialisation can still be traced in the pattern of family life in Western societies.

This kind of analysis portrays part of the picture, but masks the similar dependence of the household on the presence and health of an adult female. Such views highlight the dependence of women on men within households, but overlook the less visible dependence of men on women. As Baxter (1993:24) states, particularly in relation to working-class women:

Contrary to popular assumptions that married women’s work in the home is non-productive, the work performed by these women was essential to the economic viability of the family-household. ... The belief that work was taken out of the home and into the factory ignores the work that women continued to perform in the home, including unpaid domestic labour such as childcare and housework and paid activities such as piecework. The home continued to be a place of work for women. Nevertheless, as evidenced by the definition of work adopted by official statistics and records from this period onward, work was now defined as those activities performed in the formal labour market in exchange for a wage.

With industrialisation, working-class women’s paid and unpaid work continued, but middle-class women’s household-based work changed towards a role as full-time mothers and home managers. Middle-class men were able to earn enough to employ young single working-class women as household servants. Baxter (1993) identifies these social conditions as the origin of the ideology of the male breadwinner family. Citing Humphries (1982, 1977) and Barrett and McIntosh (1982) she states ‘Concerned about the threat of cheap labour from working-class women and children, early nineteenth century unionists (mainly “skilled” male upper strata) advocated the

introduction of a family wage' (Baxter 1993:25). The new family ideology brought changes in meanings, definitions and organization of work, and linked these changes to new ideals of masculinity and femininity (Baxter 1993).

The particular combination of social and economic changes brought opportunities for people already privileged within the existing system to consolidate their privilege in the emerging social and economic conditions. Concomitantly, women's disenfranchisement and subordination was built into the functioning of the new dominant money-based economy (Charles 2000). Women were prevented from equal earning in the labour market, and the idea of separate public and private spheres gained broad acceptance (Gittins 1985). Exchanges and production within the money-based economy were located in the public sphere. Exchanges and production that were household based receded into the invisibility of the private sphere. Over time, the public sphere became understood as including production and economic activity, and the private sphere as including relationships. This concept of the private sphere masked and continues to mask the economic significance of household-based work.

Criticism of the public/private split

Feminist scholars have criticised the public/private split as a patriarchal liberal fiction that has resulted (among other effects) in the devaluing of work traditionally done by women (Pateman 1989). If the private or domestic sphere is seen as the sphere of relationships, feelings and caring, then the time- and energy-consuming work carried out in that sphere becomes invisible. When some of that work moves into the public sphere as paid employment, as with nursing, teaching and childcare, it is seen to have little economic value (Probert 1989). Pateman claims that the separation of the two spheres serves to restrain women towards domestic matters and away from powerful participation in civic and political life, and at the same time affirms men's powerful roles in all aspects of life including domestic, civic, political, and employment. Other authors point to the confusion in the use of the terms 'public' and 'private', with 'private' sometimes used to refer to domestic matters, but at other times used to distinguish private from state enterprises (Charles 2000; Dahlerup 1987).

Marilyn Waring's (1988) work draws attention to the way that the concept of a public/private divide has become embedded in the discipline of economics and in social policy practice, particularly by the invention of the concept of a 'production boundary'. She explains how the conventions utilised in calculating the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Product (GNP) render women's unpaid work invisible. Using the United States as an example, she states:

The GNP of the United States, as reported by the US Department of Commerce, includes only "final products". This means that the value of a product is counted only once, even when the product is found at intermediate stages in the production process within a short time span. Wheat is a good example: produced first by the farmer, it is then transported, processed, and milled into flour. The flour producer then sells the product to the baker, who processes it into a final product for sale and consumption. The correct procedure is to count the wheat at point of first sale, then to include only the "value added" by labour at each point in the further production process. If a woman does all this herself it is neither production nor consumption. It is economic inactivity. It lies outside the production boundary. [p.58].

In case women might agree that their unpaid work is too difficult to account for, and that their exclusion does not matter anyway, Waring explains how other apparently 'difficult' activities, those carried out in government departments, are included in calculating the GDP and GNP:

If the market price valuation were used for general government activity in the same way as for business activity, the product (that is, the value added in the general government sector) would be a substantial negative amount. The government's purchases of intermediate goods and services from other sectors would exceed its sales to other sectors. The measure of the services that government provides is thus taken to be the cost of producing them. Despite the lack of a market price, a value of production attaches. The measure of the same services provided within a household apparently costs nothing to produce and is valued at nothing or assumed to be household consumption, if any expenditure is involved. [Waring 1988:53]

Waring argues that the location of so much of women's traditional work on the 'no value' side of the production boundary reflects the ideologies and interests of those involved in its formulation, rather than a realistic assessment of the contribution of this work. This invisibility of unpaid work leads to distortion in policy-making:

Like the GNP, the GDP is used to monitor rates and patterns of growth, to set priorities in policy making, to measure the success of policies, and to measure "economic welfare". Activities that lie outside the production boundary – that is, in

every nation, the great bulk of labour performed by women in an unpaid capacity, – are left out of the GDP, as they are left out of the GNP. It is not a large step from that point to leaving them out of policy considerations altogether. [1988:53]

Feminists have challenged the relegation of women to the private sphere by demanding reforms for example equal opportunity in employment and politics. However, Charles (2000:205) draws attention to the need for transformational change to institutions, ideologies and power relationships (the ‘long agenda’) as well as legislative and policy reform (the ‘short agenda’):

[I]mplementing the short agenda enables women to participate in the public domain on men’s terms and within existing power relations. The long agenda brings so-called ‘private’ issues into the public domain and, in the course of attempting to implement it, power relations and the distribution of resources on which they are based are challenged.

Social policy

In Australia, as in Britain, social policy has been built on acceptance of separate, gendered public and private spheres. Definitions of social policy usually acknowledge intangible aspects (such as values and processes) as well as tangible aspects (such as legislation and written policy documents). As noted by Tony Dalton et al. (1996), ‘[t]he term “social policy” is often used loosely to include laws, regulations and written policy guidelines’. I am using the term in this sense, but also as informed by Bryson’s (1992:34) statement:

Feminist writers have been instrumental in broadening the focus of the analysis of social policy over recent years, as well as pointing to the limitations of the traditional boundaries. They have pointed to the relevance of the connections between home and work, reproduction and production, and the artificiality of separating other areas from social policy.

The opportunities for and barriers to the economic independence of mothers of young children are embedded in the social policy environment including the conditions of paid employment, income support and related matters that have become known as welfare state provisions. In the 1980s, Frank Castles (1985:103) drew attention to the

distinctiveness of Australia as a ‘wage earners’ welfare state’. A decade later, he wrote:

[W]hat most distinguishes the basic model of Australian social protection as it has developed from early on this century through at least until the early 1970s has been the fact that, in general, the institutional arrangements which have been used for the achievement of social policy objectives have been found not so much in the functionally differentiated realm of social service provision, but rather in the domain of mainstream economic policy-making, and most particularly, in the realm of wages policy. [Castles 1994:123-4]

Lois Bryson (1992) has argued that Australia’s institutional arrangements have been a *white male* wage earners’ welfare state with women having little access to the social protection afforded by wages policy.

Gender-based wages policy

Women’s poor access to the benefits of paid employment dates from the time of industrialisation, with the expansion in the availability of paid employment. Probert (1989:94) identifies the Factory Acts and the recognition of a man’s right to a ‘living wage’ or ‘family wage’ as establishing the exclusion of women from well-paid work. The Factory Acts, passed in Britain and the Australian colonies in the second half of the nineteenth century, restricted women’s working hours and conditions:

The arguments that were put forward in the late nineteenth century in favour of protective legislation for female workers reflected the development of a set of interrelated beliefs which promoted the notion of ‘separate spheres’ for men and women, in which women’s role was increasingly confined to the domestic sphere. By the 1890s the ideology was being used to justify an even more far-reaching attack on women’s status in the workforce, with the rapid spread of support for a ‘family wage’. [Probert 1989:96-7]

The principle of a family wage was established in Australia in 1907 when Justice Higgins of the Commonwealth Arbitration Court handed down what became known as the ‘Harvester Judgment’ establishing a male minimum wage at a sufficient level for a male worker to support himself, a wife and three children in ‘frugal comfort’ (Thomson 2000). As Lois Bryson (1992:168) points out, ‘[w]omen breadwinners were ignored, but men received the family wage whether or not they supported a family. It was not until 1974, two years after the granting of equal pay to women, that the ‘family’ element of the minimum wage was abolished ...’. Bryson agrees with

Edna Ryan and Anne Conlon (1988:xvi) that '[a]s soon as women proved they too had eligibility for the adult minimum wage, the family concept was discarded altogether, indicating that the family wage had been no more and no less than a ploy to discriminate in favour of males'.

Historically, industrialisation came about at a time when women lacked basic citizenship rights such as voting and equality before the law. Lacking an effective power base, women were excluded from well-paid work. Their unpaid household-based work continued. If, as has been argued by some economists (for example Peterson & Brown 1994), the economy consists of all activities necessary to sustain and reproduce the life of the people, then their work was clearly economic activity. However, the rise of capitalism brought a dominance and visibility of the money-based economy. The subordinate position of women at the time would have minimised challenges to the development of phallo-centric perceptions of 'the' economy and its functioning. Another contributing factor was the desire of middle-class married women to be seen to be 'not working' in order to enhance the social status of themselves and their husbands (Baxter 1993).

Voting rights were finally achieved in Australia on a colony-by-colony basis between 1894 and 1908 for white women (Lake 1999), and in the 1967 referendum for Aboriginal women⁵ (McMahon et al. 2000). Australian women have made progress in relation to equality before the law, and in rights to equal pay with men (Lake 1999). However, the segmentation of the labour market was already entrenched by the early 1900s and has not yet been reversed (Probert 1989). Women's poor access to well-paid work has combined with ideologies of femininity and the (male breadwinner) family to shape women's contemporary experience of heavy burdens of unpaid work and poor access to a fair share of the community's resources (Bittman & Pixley 2000).

Under capitalism, citizens can, in theory, gain access to money to obtain the necessities of life by selling their labour. Historically, women have had poor direct

⁵ Although for a brief period prior to Federation South Australian Aboriginal women also had voting rights.

access to this way of earning a living, and have experienced pressure to conform to the norm of indirect access via a male breadwinner. Australia's family wage supported the middle-class ideology of the male breadwinner family. It gave recognition to the household-based work performed by women, acknowledging that employed men needed the services provided by wives in order to fulfill their obligations at work. This implied recognition of the work as economic activity, and a right of the women involved to a share of the community's economic resources. The Harvester judgment explicitly linked wage levels with workers' needs rather than employers' ability to pay. However, it was both based upon and reinforced the idea of the status of women as the dependants of individual men (Thomson 2000).

Since the introduction of equal pay for the same work in 1972, abolition of the family wage in 1974, and the abolition of public service marriage bars during the 1970s, some of the impacts of the earlier gender-based wages policies have been modified. Other influential factors have been the increased flexibility of hours and availability of part-time and casual employment, introduction of paid and unpaid maternity leave, subsidised childcare services and increased school retention and higher education participation for women. Women's labour market participation and pay rates have increased. However, women remain clustered in low paying occupations, at the lower rungs of more prestigious occupations and in part-time employment that offers convenience in the short term but little in the way of longer-term benefits (Bryson 1995). Similarly, as is discussed below, income support aspects of Australian welfare state provisions reflect the influence of the idea of separate spheres for women and men, with women as properly the dependants of individual men.

Income support

As Australia developed income support for unemployed, aged, sick and disabled people, women's entitlements such as widows' pensions were developed on the basis of their status as dependants rather than citizens (O'Connor et al.1999). For men, entitlement rested on inability to participate in the labour market. For women, it rested on the failure of the expectation that they would be financially supported by a man. This underlying assumption of dependant status has been gradually eroded, mainly by

feminist challenges. In 1973, the Whitlam Labor government introduced a supporting mother's benefit for women who had never had a (male) partner. Since 1978, the wording of eligibility has gradually moved towards gender neutrality. Fathers may be carers and mothers may be breadwinners, moving the rhetoric of income support from gender difference towards gender equality. However, the underlying idea of women's dependency means that women immediately lose independent entitlement once they cohabit with a male partner (Bryson 2000). O'Connor et al. (1999) claim that, because of the underlying history of income support, the move towards gender inclusive eligibility will not deliver equitable outcomes for women. They state that because of women's positioning within states, markets and families, only policies that attend to gender differences can be fair to women.

Just as the gendered division of paid employment can be traced back to the Factory Acts, so contemporary income support can be traced back to the British Poor Laws. Following earlier Poor Laws that were seen as having been too generous, the *Poor Law Amendment Act 1834* established certain principles that remain influential today, particularly in politically conservative circles. These principles include the idea that poverty is the result of deliberate personal choice rather than the result of factors beyond the control of the individual, the 'principle of less eligibility' which prescribes that state income support must be set at levels below prevailing minimum wage rates, and the application of a 'work test' to the able-bodied seeking assistance (Carney & Hanks 1994:26-8).

Australia has a complex and confusing system of payments, benefits and pensions. The grafting of gender-neutral language onto a profoundly gendered system, and attempts partly to replace the family wage with cash transfers to families with dependent children have contributed to that complexity. On 1st July 2000 the Commonwealth government introduced a new system of payments to families with dependent children. Under this system, parents or caregivers may choose to be paid a 'Family Tax Benefit' within the welfare system by Centrelink, or have it incorporated into their income tax by withholding tax instalments or increasing their tax refund at the end of the financial year. Benefits are means tested, with no independent

eligibility for parents with (heterosexual) partners (Newman & Anthony 2001). Income support for single parents remains firmly within the welfare system, with loss of independent entitlement if (heterosexual) cohabiting, and pressure on parents to seek employment once children reach school age (Centrelink 2001b). Although there is clearly a commitment to state support for families raising children, means testing creates poverty traps. There is recognition that single parents of pre-school aged children are contributing to the community in that there is no suggestion of applying a 'work test' to these people, but at the same time the principle of less eligibility is applied to this group, keeping their payments at very low levels.

Unpaid work and women's economic position

Until the 1890s, household labour was counted in the Australian census as economic activity, but over the next decade there was a move towards classifying everyone in the population as either economically active or dependent (Bryson 2000). Marilyn Waring's influential 1988 book *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth*, shows how the invisibility of women's work has been institutionalised, particularly in the United Nations System of National Accounts. The 1980s and 1990s saw other challenges to the exclusion of domestic work and its value from national statistics.

Australian Duncan Ironmonger (2000, 1996, 1989) has written about the importance of household-based economic activity, and has completed internationally recognised work on the quantification of the household economy. One of the impacts of such work has been an increase in data collection in relation to unpaid work. The Australian Bureau of Statistics carried out a survey of time use in 1992, and another in 1997 (ABS 1994a, 1998a). In addition to the ABS reports, other researchers have carried out their own analysis of the survey data, revealing significant gender differences in time usage (Bittman 1995; Bittman & Pixley 1997).

Mothers' unpaid work of caring for young children has received some recognition as work (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998a), but is still not generally regarded as

economic activity, even though reproduction, along with provisioning (in the sense of providing food, clothing and shelter) could be seen as the most basic and necessary of all economic activity to ensure the ongoing survival of a social group. Peterson & Brown (1994:x) state that 'the focus of economic enquiry should be on the processes by which societies provision and reproduce themselves'.

Recognition and acknowledgement have been hindered by the invisibility of women's work, as discussed by Lourdes Beneria (1982), Ester Boserup (1970), Kathleen Newland (1979) and Barbara Rogers (1981). For example, this work is denied when it is called 'caring' instead of 'work', and when women themselves say 'I don't work. I'm at home with the children'. Marilyn Waring (1988) and Janice Peterson & Doug Brown (1994) point out that we need new ways of thinking about, discussing and writing about women's unpaid work. Peterson & Brown criticise the public-private dualism of traditional economic theories of capitalism and socialism:

Work and production have been defined as activities that take place within the public sphere: activities that take place in the private sphere are not defined as work and are not examined as economically relevant. This has had serious implications for the economic status of women. It has distorted our perceptions of women's activities and the nature of the economy. It has reinforced the view of women as non-economic, unproductive beings and provided the basis for policies that ignore the needs of women and are detrimental to their social and economic wellbeing ... Simply adding women to existing categories of analysis, such as the labor force or the working class, does not explain why women have previously been ignored. It is necessary to reevaluate and redefine existing categories from the perspective of women's experiences. Without such a reevaluation, economic analysis and policy will continue to work within and reinforce the existing biases. [1994:x-xii]

Lois Bryson (1996) traces the development of, and critiques, the 'gendered yardstick' of economic value. Although clearly advocating official recording and recognition of the existence of unpaid work, she states that it is more important to attend to the key question 'Who benefits?' from women's unequal responsibility for this work. Recent research (with its primary focus on heterosexual couples, separate comment on lone parents, and no attention to same-sex couples), such as the Australian Institute of Family Studies major project (Wolcott & Glezer 1995), indicates that couples' decision-making about labour-market participation is contributing to a pattern of women's continuing material disadvantage. As Michael Gilding (1994:114) states:

There is no question that the optimal outcome for the family overwhelmingly favours men. This is partly because men secure the strategic power which comes through control of household income, whereas women become 'dependent'. It is also because men's labour market value appreciates through continuous participation, whereas interrupted participation by women depreciates their labour market value.

Disadvantages to women under the present system are clear – the greater burden of unpaid work, reduced career opportunities, reduced access to positions of power and authority within the society, vulnerability of women and their children to poverty in the event of parental separation, and the likelihood of very poor access to superannuation benefits on retirement (Rosenman 1995; Sharp 1995; Shaver 2001). Women's family responsibilities reduce their earning capacity in the longer term as well as the short term (Chapman et al 2001; Ginn et al. 1996; Hutton 1994; Joshi et al. 1999; Waldfogel 1997). This 'non-work' gains no credit for mothers, and it is not perceived as adding to their human capital.

Feminist attention to this disadvantage and lack of recognition has led to extensive feminist critique and activism in relation to women's access to economic independence.

Feminist theory and activism

Twentieth-century feminist authors and activists paid a great deal of attention to the economic disadvantages suffered by women, identifying the structure of the labour market and women's roles within families as key contributing factors. Through the 20th century and into the early days of the 21st century in Australia, different views have been perceived as the dominant feminist position. Dominant views rallied support for sustained campaigns, but debate, diversity and contest characterised the development of these views, and their change over time (Lake 1999). Early in the 20th century most feminists supported gender-based roles to the extent that they valued the home-based contributions of women, particularly mothers, and they argued for a style of economic independence that accepted different social roles for women and men as a given. Later, feminists generally shifted their attention away from a goal of

independence based on difference from men towards a goal of equality with men based on the idea of sameness or gender neutrality, rejecting gender-based roles. This trend culminated in second-wave feminism with its high-profile rejection of the role of housewife and the institution of motherhood. Throughout, issues of class, race and politics have influenced views, campaigns and outcomes. The final decade of the 20th century and the early days of the 21st century have seen a questioning of some of the orthodoxies of second-wave feminism, including calls to value women's unpaid work (Waring 1988), to revalue the household economy (Bryson 1996), and to base social policy on a concept of gender difference rather than gender neutrality (O'Connor et al. 1999).

First-wave and post-suffrage feminism

Early 20th century feminism based on the idea of women's difference from men became known as maternalist feminism. The idea of maternalist feminism as used by Australian feminist historian Marilyn Lake encompasses two concepts. The first relates to the idea that the state should legislate to protect women. This maternalism is similar to paternalism, constructing the state in a parental way, with an obligation to protect vulnerable people. The second kind of maternalist feminism relates to an interest in the life circumstances and living conditions of mothers. While both of these kinds of maternalist feminism may be somewhat unpalatable today, as discussed below, they did hold relevance for their times (Lake 1999).

Maternalist (cf. paternalist) feminism would seem unpalatable today because it constructs women as vulnerable and in need of protection, with connotations of inferiority. However Lake characterises it as an attempt to establish an ethical state for women, and sees it as a parallel to the more well-known, respected and successful masculine project that established Australia's male wage earners' welfare state, protecting men from exploitative employers (Bryson 1992; Jamrozic 1994). Lake (1999:55-6) states:

In Australia, feminists looked to the state to provide the conditions for women's freedom – positive liberty – by protecting them from predatory and violent men and the forces of intemperance, selfishness and vice. Their campaigns were animated by a profound sense of the harm that men's sexual licence did to women and girls. It was a politics that spoke to widespread experience of venereal disease, degradation and debasement; unwanted pregnancies, poverty and ill health. The sexualization of women increasingly evident in the wider culture seemed inimical to the advancement of women as citizens.

The second kind of maternalist feminism, relating to an interest in the life circumstances and living conditions of mothers, led feminists to seek economic independence for mothers, campaigning for state-funded incomes for mothers:

[Women activists] made a particular case that the state should support those who worked as mothers, providing them with an income which would free them from a demeaning dependence on husbands. It was this commitment to the independence of mothers, their desire to end the despotic power of husbands, that brought feminists into direct conflict with liberal and labour men who wanted to secure, not just the male citizen's industrial rights, but also his conjugal rights to women's domestic and sexual services. [Lake 1999:56]

This kind of maternalist feminism is questioned today partly because of a rejection of the way that the sexualization of women leads to all women being treated as mothers or potential mothers. Maternalist feminism may be criticised as essentialist, acting as though all women were the same, sharing similar experiences, and even becoming normative, as though implying that women *should* have these experiences (Okin 1997).

Post-suffrage maternalist feminists fought for and gained some improvements in mothers' economic and legal circumstances, but the opposition was strong and ruthless. An early gain was the introduction, in 1912, of a Maternity Allowance, a one-off payment of 5 pounds, equivalent to around five weeks' wages for a woman – clearly worth much more in relative terms than the rate of \$780 in March 2001 (Centrelink 2001a). This piece of Labor legislation was welcomed by Labor women, particularly because it included unmarried mothers, but it was criticised by non-party feminists for its explicit exclusion of mothers who were 'Asiatics' or 'Aboriginal natives of Australia, Papua or the islands of the Pacific'. Lake (1999) notes that the Labor women of the time were as committed as Labor men to the White Australia

policy that protected male unionists from the possible competition of cheaper labour (see also Bryson 2000).

Post-suffrage feminists also fought for mothers' legal custody rights over their children. They achieved the right for widows automatically to become their children's legal guardians with the Testator's Family Maintenance and Guardianship of Infants Act 1916. In 1934 in New South Wales and 1940 in South Australia women with husbands still alive won equal custody rights. Lake (1999) notes the maternalist feminists' disappointment with the final outcome of the long campaigns, in that the law gave no special rights to women as mothers, giving them rather equality with men. This was seen to be a nominal equality, hiding a blatant double standard of very different expectations of female and male parents, with the courts acting punitively towards women who did not conform to those expectations. As Lake (1999:86) states:

[W]hat became clear was that there were different expectations of mothers than fathers. A mother's right to custody of her own children was conditional on her being not an exemplary citizen, but a good woman: white, married, chaste and economically dependent on a husband. Motherhood had become – partly as a result of feminism's own efforts – an exacting business, and the priority accorded by the state to children's welfare served to lock mothers into an ever more demanding 'role'. Feminists continued to insist, however, that motherhood should not lock women into a degrading dependence on men.

In the 1920s, feminists successfully defended the Maternity Allowance against politicians and the medical establishment who sought to abolish or slash it. They clearly saw it as a symbolic recognition of the right of mothers to recompense. To their disappointment, in the 1930s a Labor federal government reduced the allowance to 4 pounds and introduced a means test, moving it towards the concept of a targeted welfare benefit rather than a right or recompense. Like the disappointment over the child custody issue, this outcome contributed to the eventual disillusionment with maternalist feminism. Lake (1999:82) summarises the argument:

It became all too evident that the state was more responsive to demands for an increase in resources for babies and children – the future citizens – than to improving the wellbeing of current women citizens ... Authorised to enter the public domain as the protectors of children, feminists found that in the longer term the cause rebounded

on them, as the welfare of children became the justification to undermine the rights of mothers.

Eventually even Muriel Heagney, labour organiser and strong advocate of the right of working-class women to state support to care for their own children, decided that women needed to follow men into the labour market to secure their economic independence (Lake 1999).

World War II removed men from their places of employment, and industry needed women to take their places. Women increased their wages in some industries from 54% to 90% of male wages, and state-regulated childcare facilities were established. However, following the war, childcare centres closed and women experienced ideological pressure to return to unpaid domestic roles in order that men returning from the war could have the jobs. With the post-war baby boom, high wages for men, and the increase in Australian suburban living, the ideal of 1950s domesticity dominated the ideological landscape (Curlewis 1984; Matthews 1984).

Second-wave feminism

By the late 1960s and early 1970s a groundswell of women's dissatisfaction with the conditions of their lives became second-wave feminism. At this time, feminists focused on the relationship between women's roles within families and their lack of labour market earning, moving very explicitly away from earlier claims for state-provided incomes for mothers. Ann Oakley (1974:226-7), arguing for the abolition of the role of 'housewife' stated:

Perhaps housewives should be paid for their work? The political contention that the housewife role must be abolished needs to counter this objection. Proposals in favour of a 'housewife's wage' are made today by both liberationists and anti-liberationists. The liberationist advocates wages for housework because she sees it as crucial recognition of women's traditional unpaid labour in the home, and a step in the improvement of women's social status. Anti-liberationists argue for the same development on different premises. Their premise is one of 'hygiene': that woman's place is, and should be, in the home, and everything should be done to make it as pleasant as possible. This is the crux of the argument: if housewives are paid, the status quo will be maintained. A system of state payment for the woman-housewife's labour in the home will recognize and perpetuate the validity of the equation woman = housewife'.

Oakley then went on to argue that payment would perpetuate the privatisation and social isolation of the housewife's work, and that '(a)s wage labourer she will not easily generate the political power other groups of workers can exercise: for her conditions of work are inimical to the organization of housewives in trade unions with collective bargaining power and the ultimate deterrent of strike action' (Oakley 1974:227). In an important distinction, she continues:

Many proposals for a housewife's wage are actually proposals for paid child rearing. This is a different matter altogether. Since the state invests so much money in the education of children (beyond the magic age of school entry) and in child health and development generally, it is reasonable to suggest that some financial recognition should be given to the childcare role of the parent in the home.

Similarly in 1983 Dale Spender wrote sceptically of the possibility of greater material recognition of the value of women's unpaid work. Like Oakley, Spender (1983:376-7) concluded that women have more to lose than to gain by 'wages for housework':

At the risk of leaving intact the existing inequalities among men (for it is patently obvious that men have not distributed equitably among themselves the 99 percent of resources they own), and at the risk of institutionalising women's domestic work, child-rearing responsibilities, and isolation, some have urged that women's work in the home which has for so long been invisible and unpaid be given the same status as work performed by men and that wages be paid for housework. There are some advantages in such a scheme, which ideally, would redistribute wealth and provide women with more material resources. But it is doubtful whether the long term gains would be great – or even that men would consent to such an arrangement.

Advancement for women by access to paid employment was a major theme of 1970s feminism. Social historians Louise Tilly and Joan Scott (1987:1-2) draw attention to the theorising of the 1970s, and their own subsequent reflection that the analysis of the time had emphasised oppositions at the expense of interconnections:

Much of the theorizing of the early 1970s stressed the relationship between work for wages and improvements in women's status; "work" (usually undefined, but by implication paid labor) was offered as the solution to the oppressive confinement of domesticity and to the dependent situation of women in families. We thought this was too simple a correlation, for it ignored the complexities of social and economic history; wages alone, after all, had not historically conferred autonomy or higher status on all male workers. The link between wages and liberation for women also seemed to be associated with the idea that self-determination was possible in the labor market but not in the family, that the family represented the hold of tradition while

the labor market held out the promise of modernity, that one left family ties behind when one took a job. To us, those oppositions between family and work, tradition and modernity, dependency and autonomy, women and men seemed overdrawn. The history of work, as we had studied it, involved interconnections of those factors rather than strict oppositions between them.

Second-wave feminist authors (e.g. Firestone 1970; Greer 1970; Millett 1970; Mitchell 1971) put a name to the oppressions suffered by women, and set an agenda for liberation. Refusing to fulfill roles based on gender stereotypes and demanding full access to the labour market were important aspects of that agenda, clearly drawing more on a concept of 'equality' than 'independence'. Marilyn Lake (1999:4-5) comments on this shift:

Equality is a necessary but limited goal. The problem with the pursuit of equality is that, while admitting women to the world of men, it reinforces the idea that men's way of organising the world is natural.

Significantly, in the long history of the women's movement in Australia, feminists were more likely to name 'independence' and 'freedom', rather than 'equality', as their goals. Alert to the many married women subject to the gross or petty tyranny of their husbands and the degradations of economic dependence for them and their daughters, feminists have long championed economic independence for women ...

Feminists generally advocated a combination of different reforms to achieve economic independence: legislation to require husbands to share their family wage and to grant ownership to wives of household savings; motherhood endowment and later a supporting parent's benefit; the public provision of childcare; and equal pay or the rate for the job. As it became clear that the only way women would enjoy their own income was by following men into the labour market, so 'equality' – in wages, opportunities and conditions – became feminism's defining goal.

Feminist advocacy for economic independence for women became strongly linked with arguments about labour market earning. There was consistent support for sole parent pensions as a safety net, and some ongoing interest in the economic significance of women's unpaid work. In addition, a stream of feminist literature on families and motherhood continued.

Second-wave feminism is often identified with a rejection of the conventional post-war family way of life. Laura Purdy distinguishes between the naked rage at men and at family arrangements of feminists such as Mary Daly, Kate Millett and Shulamith Firestone and the reasoned critique of writers such as Jessie Bernard, Ann Oakley and Ellen Peck. She argues that media distortion played into the fears of ordinary people,

and feminism was seen as threatening family security, love and roots. Thus rejection of the naked rage led to a lack of impact of the reasoned critique (Purdy 1997:70).

Okin (1997), surveying early second-wave feminist thought in relation to families, argues that United States liberal feminists wanted to achieve women's equality by minimizing rather than abolishing family responsibilities. They advocated reproductive choice, maternity leave, job training for women in poverty, subsidized childcare and an end to sex discrimination in employment. The English Marxist feminists deplored the exploitation of women's reproductive and household labour in families, but did not seek to abolish families altogether. By contrast, radical feminists in the United States challenged not only the current structures and functioning of families, but their very usefulness and existence:

Some radical feminists, most notably Shulamith Firestone, viewed pregnancy and motherhood as in themselves oppressive, concluding that technological advances in reproduction would finally free women from the constraints of female biology ... For many radical feminists, opting out of families and separatism from men were the only tolerable answers for women. [Okin 1997:16]

An important part of second-wave feminist critique of the institution of the family was the attention given to motherhood and mothering. As Christine Everingham (1994) states, feminists criticised conventional child development theory (e.g. Bowlby 1963; Winnicott 1965) with its emphasis on the well-being of the child, with the mother as agent for the society, rather than possessing her own agency. The earlier focus of mainstream psychology, medicine, sociology, and literary study was on the perspective of the generic male child, but feminist authors focussed on mother-daughter relationships, and later on the experiences of mothers (Adams 1995). The professional wisdom of the late 1960s and early 1970s implied that one-to-one care by their own mother was the best, probably the only safe and responsible way of caring for infants and young children. Second-wave feminism brought a dramatic shift from the focus on the experience of the infant/child to the experience of motherhood, from the point of view of the mother (for example Oakley 1979; Wearing 1984).

Ann Snitow (1992) states that in the 1960s and early 1970s feminist authors rejected the idea of motherhood as a destiny for all women. She sees the later 1970s as a

sceptical time of examination of the social and subjective meanings of motherhood, and the 1980s as a time of reaffirming and celebrating motherhood. According to Ellen Ross (1995), the more recent literature reflects a shift from a personal focus on mother-child relationships to a more social and political focus on the relationship of mothers to society as a whole.

Later work on social and political aspects of motherhood has built on Adrienne Rich's (1976, 1986) distinction between motherhood as (challenging and rewarding) experience and the (oppressive and exploitative) institution of motherhood. In the early 1980s, Australian Betsy Wearing (1984) reflected on the ideology of motherhood that obscures the lived experiences of women who are responsible for children. She hoped that 'investigation of the ideology of motherhood would reveal strongly-held beliefs which legitimate the subordinate, economically dependent and relatively powerless position of many women in contemporary society due to their responsibility for childcare' (p.10). She identified the following beliefs or tenets as making up an ideology of motherhood among the 150 suburban Sydney mothers she interviewed:

- Motherhood is an essential part of womanhood
- Motherhood is hard but rewarding work
- A 'good' mother puts her children first
- Young children need their mothers in constant attendance
- Mothering is an important but low status job.

Among employed and feminist mothers, Wearing (1984) found, in addition to the above ideas, another set of ideas that challenged or modified the dominant ideology, and looked to a future with more autonomy, personal fulfilment and shared parenting for women. She clearly saw a need for women to increase their access to resources in order to develop a sufficient power base to successfully challenge the existing gender order and bring about change.

Feminist philosopher Sara Ruddick (1990) could be seen as both reaffirming the value of mothering and as having a social and political focus. Ruddick claims that maternal

practices produce a valuable perspective that is lacking in public affairs. Similarly, Carol Gilligan's (1982) work explores the way that women's moral development and awareness has been left out of past theorising, and she explores, describes and values women's 'ethic of care'. In Australia, Christine Everingham's work continues with examining, valuing and theorising mothering practices.

Everingham (1994) reiterates the feminist critique of the public/private distinction, and suggests that nurturing takes place in a social sphere, fitting into neither the public nor the private categories. She alludes to material support and the limitations of the economic system, but the thrust of her work is theoretical. Her empirical work observing mothers' interactions with their children at playgroups supports her arguments about the nature of mothering. Everingham attempts to refocus the lens on mothering as interactive between mother and child and to demonstrate that quality mothering fosters the autonomy or agency of both mother and child. She seeks to revalue mothering in the abstract sense rather than in any concrete or material sense.

Third-wave feminism

The 1990s and early 2000s have produced what could be seen as 'protest' or 'breaking the silence' literature. *Missing Voices: The Experience of Motherhood* (Brown et al. 1994) reports on a large study of mothers of young babies in Australia. The study found that becoming a mother had a profound impact on women, as they experienced themselves and the world in new and unimagined ways. Careful to report the joys as well as the trials of motherhood, the study nevertheless shows that the women often experienced isolation, lack of support and lack of preparation for the demands of caring for a baby.

Australian-based Susan Maushart (1997:47) writes in *The Mask of Motherhood: How Mothering Changes Everything and Why We Pretend It Doesn't* that 'mothering is the most powerful of all biological capacities, and among the most disempowering of all social experiences'. She claims that second-wave feminism washed over motherhood, leaving its contours remarkably intact. However, she says, women's lives have changed dramatically, from the 'tranquillised', empty lives that Betty Friedan

described to lives of ‘juggling’ multiple expectations and responsibilities. She states that ‘our thinking about motherhood as a role and as an institution has become hopelessly muddled over the course of the past two generations’ (Maushart 1997:12), citing ambivalence about day care as an example (see also Probert 2001).

Laura Purdy (1997) in her essay ‘Babystrike!’ identifies the disadvantages of childbearing for women, and the lack of any effective fight to improve the situation. She states that the only people who seem to care are those who are weighed down by the responsibilities of child raising, so have no time and energy for the fight. Wondering what would happen if women did refuse to reproduce, she states:

I think we could expect extremely intense pressure to get them to reproduce, by force if necessary. I suspect that this development would open women’s eyes to the fact that society wants babies, but that it prefers women to think that producing them is both naturally women’s lot and that doing so is an individual decision. After all, in those circumstances society owes women no help in bringing up new generations. If women stopped having babies, the resulting pressures would unmask the reality. [p.73]

Purdy (1997) attends to the obvious criticism that disadvantaged women who see early childbearing as their best chance at love and satisfaction would be unlikely to forego childbearing until such time as society offers them an achievable alternative. She does not see this as a great obstacle to the effectiveness of a babystrike, because the elitist and racist views of the dominant and powerful groups in society would ensure the impact of a strike by white middle-class women. She acknowledges that some will laugh off her suggestion as utopian or ridiculous, and the tone of her essay sometimes suggests that she does not expect to be taken seriously. However, in its week-long special entitled ‘Work and Family: The Crunch’ *The Australian* newspaper refers to Australia’s ‘birth strike’. Australia’s falling fertility rate is linked to women’s expectations that they will have careers as well as families, lack of family-friendly workplace provisions, and lack of federal government support for dual-career families (*The Australian* 3-10 September 2001). The many articles included in the special did not suggest a strike in the sense of an organised campaign with particular demands, but rather a situation of diverse views, circumstances and individual or couple decisions. In one of the articles, Australian academic Barbara Pocock (2001:14) refers

to her report 'Having a Life: Work, Family, Fairness and Community in 2000' (Pocock 2000). She states:

Women are trying to do more, especially in paid work, and the tensions are well known. The surprising thing is the lack of real change. And it is far from obvious that the next generation of women – through better choices, the deferral or refusal of motherhood, or smaller families – will do better.

I'm betting that the traditional stereotype of the good mother will arise as surely in their minds as it did for women in our study, and that young women of the next generation will face work structures that are not far removed from those today. Not all of them will have children, that is true, but many will have some kind of dependent responsibilities in their lives.

Despite well-assembled evidence of pressure, there has been all too little real change in workplaces, kitchens and households. Women's guilt – so widespread and striking – is an indicator of the privatised nature of the present pursuit of balance, and the privatised nature of disappointment that individuals alone can't always achieve it.

Maureen Freely's (1995) *What About Us? An Open Letter to the Mothers Feminism Forgot* is a biting critique, claiming that feminism has never really explored the conditions of life of employed mothers, or fought hard enough for fair treatment for mothers. Freely's work draws on her own life as a sustained example. She identifies herself as one of a generation of feminism's guinea pigs, putting into practice the ideas of the great feminist thinkers who either already had their children or never had them. She states: 'We have none of us figured out how to make motherhood into something other than ready-made oppression, but we don't see what feminism has to offer most women of the world unless we keep trying' (p.12). And reiterating the need for change: 'Let's face it. If the world were arranged to support parents' needs, there would be no problem combining work with the rearing of children. If we owned a share of the restaurant, we'd be writing the menu' (p.17).

Wendy LeBlanc (1999) in *Naked Motherhood: Shattering Illusions and Sharing Truths* draws on a large Australian data set to argue similarly that life is unreasonably difficult for mothers of young children, and that feminism has not brought sufficient change to women's lives. Naomi Wolf's (2001) *Misconceptions* draws on her own experience of having children, characterising as 'nurture shock' the impact of the sudden and dramatic changes that babies typically bring to women's lives. She

reiterates the familiar questions about how she could have reached her thirties without knowing what it would be like, and why no-one told her.

Need for change and barriers to change

Susan Moller Okin (1997:14) argues that most feminists since Mary Wollstonecraft have advocated changes in the institutions of marriage, the family and motherhood rather than the abolition of the family:

[A]s they have critiqued existing family forms and divisions of labour, most feminists think that a greatly changed conception of family – less exclusionary, much more egalitarian, and decidedly less idealized – could have an important place in a better future. And they argue that the achievement of such families will depend on substantial changes in all spheres of life.

Okin (1997) traces ambivalence towards the institution of the family from Mary Wollstonecraft in the late eighteenth century through Harriet Taylor half a century later, the early Marxists, English Fabian socialist George Bernard Shaw to Virginia Woolf in the 1930s. Mary Wollstonecraft advocated equality for (middleclass) women and argued that optimal development of women's reason would make them better mothers and strengthen families. Engels thought that socialization of the means of production, the communalisation of housework, and the engagement of all women in the labour market would result in the liberation of women, but did not foresee a future without families. George Bernard Shaw wanted to change the dynamics and functioning of families by the nationalization of industry, requiring all adults to work, and distributing the profits equally to every child, woman and man. Virginia Woolf also identified the economic dependence of women and children as a source of (abused) power for men. She advocated wages for mothers to free them from economic tyranny.

Okin (1997) claims that in contemporary times there is a renewed feminist interest in the forms and practices of families, a willingness to challenge and undermine the traditional gender-structured family, and a vital impetus to develop more egalitarian and inclusive family forms and relations in the future. In the 1990s and the early 2000s, feminist attention has included some questioning of the effectiveness of

‘equality’ arguments, and a revisiting of ideas to do with gender difference. For example, Okin (1997:21-22) states:

The failure to recognize and valorize childcare and housework as work continues to disadvantage women in many different family situations ... As the current attack on Aid to Families with Dependent Children has made clear, whatever her race (though especially if she is Black), her age, her situation, a single mother asking for aid is accused of not “working” unless she takes a paid job. Unfortunately, little attention has been given to the obvious feminist response: she *is* working. She is doing some of the most important of society’s work, albeit often under extremely difficult circumstances. Ironically, this expectation that poor women should “work”, while their children are small, is expressed most vehemently by the same conservative politicians and pundits who insist most strongly that more affluent mothers, who are supported by a man, should stay home with their children. Apparently they think the answer to the question, Does an infant or small child need its mother to stay home to take care of it? depends on the income of the child’s parents (though they would be hard-pressed if required to defend this strange view of children’s needs).

Okin clearly distinguishes the feminist valorising of mothering from the anti-feminist profamily position that takes mothering for granted. She identifies the New Right in the United States as equating ‘family values’ with the traditional patriarchal family, with a clear agenda of getting women and children back under the control of men.

Work and family conflict: ideas for change

One stream of literature addressing the need for change could be characterised as ‘work and family’ literature, focussing on the tensions between adults’ (paid) work and family responsibilities. Australian authors have drawn attention to the way that the gendered division of labour means that tensions between labour market work and domestic work are borne predominantly by women, and are seen as women’s problem (Baxter 1993; Game & Pringle 1983; Goodnow & Bowes 1994).

The Australian Institute of Family Studies conducted a major study into participation by Australian parents in paid and unpaid work. The report (Wolcott & Glezer 1995) indicates that women remain overwhelmingly responsible for the unpaid work necessary to keep homes and families functioning. They found that families with pre-school children were in a different category from other families with dependent children. The families with young children found the going much tougher than those with school-age and older dependent children, because of the quantity and the

demanding nature of the work involved. They found part-time paid work to be the most satisfying option for women with dependent children.

Tuula Gordon's (1990) study of feminist mothers in Britain and Finland found diversity in the amount of paid work undertaken, and in the reasons for the women's arrangements. Even the women who thoroughly enjoyed spending the vast bulk of their time caring for their children reported using formal childcare to pursue hobbies such as woodwork. Many had a mixture of paid and unpaid work because they needed the money, variety, and/or stimulation of paid work. Many of the women expressed high levels of commitment to their paid work but criticised what they perceived as a unidimensional masculine concept of building a career. Nevertheless, they wanted to be financially rewarded for their experience and expertise without having to take on administrative roles or enter into hierarchical dynamics (Gordon 1990). This analysis is much more complex than that put forward by Catherine Hakim (1995). She claims that '[t]he commitment of a part-time worker to a part-time job does not equal the commitment of a full-time worker to a full-time job' (p. 434). Further, she states that the adult female population falls into two groups – career-oriented women who invest in education and training, and those who give priority to marriage as a career. Her article attracted criticism for attributing women's labour market disadvantage to their own choices (Ginn et al. 1996).

In relation to ideas for change, Gordon's (1990) respondents identified specific improvements such as free, flexible, high quality childcare, improved public attitudes towards children and mothers, employment practices that take account of responsibility for children, secure affordable housing, better local facilities, more attention to the environment, and changed expectations of fathers and assumptions about fatherhood. They emphasised the importance of paid employment as a symbolic and material source of power that they needed to balance their experience of motherhood. Gordon herself identified a need for more fundamental, transformational changes related to social structures and mainstream cultures, including the development of a concept of equality that takes account of sex-gender as an issue.

Phyllis Moen (1992) draws attention to the ‘extraordinary social transformation’ in America over the past twenty years, with the employment of mothers of preschoolers and infants having become commonplace. Yet, she says, ‘our basic institutions – family, work, government, school – have only begun to respond to this fundamental reconfiguration of women’s lives’ (p. 123). She draws attention to the reasons why women will not give up their hard-won access to paid employment.

[Paid employment] has broadened women’s options and has promoted their self-esteem and their economic independence ... Through employment, women are beginning to access the economic and psychic resources previously confined largely to men. [p.124]

She acknowledges ‘the mental and physical health costs and benefits of employment remain somewhat ambiguous, especially for mothers of young children’ (Moen 1992:124), but goes on to claim that women’s labour force participation is a benefit, almost a responsibility to future generations, and to the national economy:

In addition to facilitating their own career development, the movement of women into the labour force has created opportunities for future generations of women ... [C]hildren can see their mothers as well as their fathers engaged in productive, socially valued activities. The national economy also benefits by acquiring the skills, talents, and productive capability of the female half of the population.

Moen does not question the system of values which means that young mothers, in order to feel valued (for being productive) as well as respected (for caring adequately for their children) must carry a double work load.

She raises the question of possible solutions to the dilemma of trying to fill two roles, and draws attention to the ‘unevenness and complexity’ of post World War II social change. Referring to Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein’s classic book *Women’s Two Roles: Home and Work*, published in Great Britain in 1956, she puts the view that Myrdal and Klein’s ‘sequencing’ solution is out of date for American women in the nineties. Moen sees the possible solutions as returning to a **traditional**, gender-based division of labour, adopting the **male model** solution, the **technological** solution, the **new man** solution, and the **life course** solution.

The first possibility discussed is returning to a **traditional**, gender based division of labour, based on the government providing economic supports to permit one parent (or the single parent) to remain at home, a scenario she sees as unlikely in the current economic climate. She states: ‘The reality is that most families require two incomes to make ends meet’. For this reason, and because of women’s career aspirations she sees that ‘the evidence suggests that exclusive homemaking is no longer a viable option for most women, even during the child-rearing years’ (Moen 1992:126).

The second possible solution is the **male model** solution, feasible only if ‘government and employers take on the responsibility for providing a comprehensive program of childcare, freeing women to concentrate on their jobs in the same way that women have traditionally freed men from domestic concerns’. She sees this model as running counter to social values which reflect an ‘enduring commitment to the traditional family’ and which reject ‘exclusively institutional childcare’ (Moen 1992:127).

She describes as ‘a variant on the male model’ a situation where women choose one of two ‘tracks’, ‘one, like men’s, aiming toward occupational success; the other accommodating work to family roles’ (Moen 1992:127). She points to the obvious disadvantage that women choosing the ‘family track’ would be disadvantaged on the job market, and calls for ‘a concept of equality that does not use men’s occupational achievement as the yardstick’ (cf. Betty Friedan 1981).

The **technological** solution includes both labour-saving devices, and the home-based work option. She discusses buying in goods and services to reduce the domestic burden, ‘reducing the demands on women’ without increasing demands on men, but does not discuss the obvious situation of lone parents. She sees people as willing to send toddlers, but not infants out to childcare (Moen 1992:128).

The **new man** solution:

[I]t has thus far “made sense” from the perspective of the household economy to have the man in the family invest most heavily in his job. Consequently, to achieve true

equality would require changing the structure of work for *both* women and men, as well as providing men with the skills, supports, and motivation to share in domestic work. [Moen 1992:128]

The **life course** solution is Moen's 'most radical' option: 'to rethink and redesign not only the structure of work, but also the configuration of the life course'. She suggests encouraging 'both men and women to cut back on their working hours or to take extended sabbaticals while their children are young'.

She says

This is a radical option but it is also a conservative one. Rearranging the life patterns of work to permit some reductions during the child-rearing years (such as parental leaves, sabbaticals, a reduced work week) would, in effect, bolster the sanctity of the family. Children would see more of their parents; family life would be less hectic; and neither parent would be forced to sacrifice career for family, or vice versa. Recasting the conventional patterning of work, education and leisure over the life course to be more flexible could actually reinforce the traditional image of the family as the caretaker of children, while, at the same time, encouraging a partnership between mothers and fathers in the sharing of both the breadwinning and care-giving roles. [Moen 1992:128]

Moen claims that the preferred solution is radical, but does not question underlying capitalist assumptions of present arrangements, particularly the implicit assumption that caring for young children is non-work. She does not distinguish between care of young children and other domestic labour. In addition, she acknowledges but offers no strategies in relation to the issue that part-time jobs in the United States, as in Australia, typically offer few benefits and little job security, pay low wages, and lack opportunities for advancement.

Australian Eva Cox has articulated her vision for a future where men and women can participate in a balanced mix of paid work, caring work and collective involvement in political and community affairs. In addition to her well-known advocacy for more accessible affordable childcare, she states that we need more women in positions of power and leadership, but that a system still geared to men and male values is holding us back (Cox 1999).

Belinda Probert (2001:1) claims that ‘progress towards gender equality appears to have stalled in Australia’, and identifies contradictions and ambivalence in what she terms gender culture – ‘the norms and values that underpin what come to be defined as the ‘desirable’ forms of gender relations in a particular society, and the accepted ideas about the division of labour between men and women’. She reports some findings from a large study of changes between the 1950s and 1990s in men’s and women’s working and family lives. The study found that in the 1990s relatively few women earn enough to be economically independent. Prior to having children, most women expected to combine child rearing and paid work, but only about half the women interviewed approved of childcare centres. Both women and men in the 1990s expect mothers to have paid employment. Fathers wanted closer emotional ties with their children, but fathering practices remained relatively unchanged since the 1950s, with hardly any fathers working hours or developing careers that allowed time for their children. Probert (2001:10) draws attention to an aspect of gender culture that Joan Williams (2000) calls the ideology and practice of domesticity:

The ideology of domesticity marginalises not only the care of children, but all tasks related to care-giving. Virtue comes to be associated with bourgeois sexual propriety rather than civic life; selflessness comes to be associated with motherhood rather than with the citizen’s pursuit of the common good.

Probert (2001) found that Australians continue to see a major role for parents in caring for young children, rather than movement towards the dual breadwinner/state-carer model characteristic of Denmark and Finland. However, she states, we are not moving towards a dual breadwinner/dual-carer model in which state provisions and labour market practices enable men and women to share caring work. She agrees with Peter McDonald (2000c, cited in Probert 2001) that:

[R]eform is not a matter of tweaking this and fiddling with that. What is required is nothing less than a new social contract that enables the market approach to proceed but which, at the same time, provides just rewards to social reproduction, especially to parents and more especially to mothers.

Probert (2001) states that in these circumstances moving towards gender equality will mean attention to parental leave, labour market reform and re-regulation, working hours and the politics of time, and gender pay equity.

The ‘work and family conflict’ literature indicates that women bear the brunt of conflict between paid work and family responsibility. It includes calls for changes in institutions, ideologies, culture, practices and social policy, and some suggestions about what changes would be useful.

Scandinavian models

In considerations of paid employment and family responsibilities, social democratic Scandinavian countries are usually seen to have more egalitarian outcomes for women than the liberal democracies (Bittman & Pixley 1997; O’Connor et al 1999). They provide generous childcare services, paid parental leave and active labour market policies. However, even under apparently ‘model’ conditions, men undertake much less unpaid work, including caring for young children, than women, and have not taken full advantage of the opportunities for parental leave (Baxter 1998; Bittman & Pixley 1997; Mitchell 1998). Although Scandinavian countries provide evidence that policies such as paid parental leave can be implemented, and can bring about change, they do not offer a perfect solution, ready for transplant to Australia. Janeen Baxter acknowledges the usefulness but also the limitations of the Scandinavian policy models, pointing to the need for fundamental reshaping of gender itself:

[I]t is clear that we must look beyond the kind of social democratic welfare policies that have characterised attempts to institutionalise equality in Scandinavia. Clearly, women’s responsibility for domestic labour is not just based on structural impediments such as wage inequality, the lack of childcare facilities and the availability of suitable parental leave options ... [T]he domestic division of labour does not operate in a vacuum. It is part of a broader gender division of labour that equates the private sphere of the family with women and the public sphere of paid work with men. Reshaping the domestic division of labour is dependent, therefore, on reshaping these broader divisions as well. [1998: 70-71]

This study in relation to the literature

Over time, many people have drawn attention to the unsatisfactory conditions of life of Australian mothers of young children. Early 20th century feminists sought state financial support for mothers, but this agenda was largely given up in favour of labour market access. Attention to family forms and motherhood has exposed the disadvantages for women of traditional arrangements, and authors have argued for significant changes to existing structures and practices. There is evidence of considerable change in women's lives over the past century, and some changes in gender culture, but there is also evidence of continuing disadvantage for women, particularly those who are responsible for young children.

There is considerable direct and indirect evidence that Australian mothers of young children have little access to economic independence. Direct published evidence includes high levels of poverty among single mothers, and low levels of full-time employment among both single and couple-family mothers of young children (Grace 2001a; Shaver 1998). Indirect evidence includes Australia's low fertility rate (McDonald 2000a).

Australian social policy retains a commitment to some financial support for families raising children, but much of the assistance is means-tested, and structured to provide disincentives for labour-market earning by mothers of young children. Dominant ideas about mothers' responsibilities and about what is appropriate care for young children appear to be influencing the arrangements mothers make for care of their children, to the detriment of their own economic wellbeing.

Various ideas have been put forward over time to improve the economic independence of mothers of young children. These have included specific social policy strategies such as more, better, cheaper childcare; ideological and cultural change in gender relations and expectations of mothers; and calls for the re-making of broader institutional arrangements. None of the literature attempts to bring together the social policy, cultural/ideological and structural analyses to construct a vision for a better future that takes account of all of these areas. This research is innovative in that

it attends to all these levels of analysis in one piece of work. Another gap in the literature is the absence of a theoretical framework for conceptualising the complexity of this area. This research brings together relevant theoretical concepts within an overall contemporary critical social theory framework. It utilises concepts of oppression and exploitation, and differentiates social reform from transformational change (Mullaly 2002). It combines these latter ideas with Nickie Charles' idea that social movements are both political and cultural, and her usage of the concept of a short agenda (social reform) and a long agenda (transformational change).

This research takes up Waring's (1997, 1988) and Peterson & Brown's (1994) call for new ways of thinking about, discussing and writing about women's unpaid work. This study contributes to new ways of thinking and discussing by holding firm throughout the study to the ideas that unpaid work has economic value, and mothers' unpaid work of caring for young children produces a public benefit. By using these understandings as a starting point for asking questions about change, the research confronts the distortions to perceptions of women and economic activity identified by Ironmonger (2000, 1996, 1989) and Peterson & Brown (1994).

This research builds on Tuula Gordon's (1990) study of feminist mothers in Britain and Finland and Phyllis Moen's (1992) work on women's two roles in the US. Gordon's study focuses mainly on feminist women's experiences of motherhood and also reports on the respondents' ideas for change. Moen's work puts forward some ideas for change, but it fails to distinguish between care of young children and other domestic labour. This research is different from these studies because it emphasises the economic value of unpaid work, and the unrecompensed public benefit that results from the work of caring for young children. While many of the ideas from international research have significance for Australia, it is important to have an Australian study because change must start from present conditions and take account of historical development and cultural factors that are specific to this country.

Many authors have acknowledged the hardships and economic disadvantage suffered by mothers of young children, and their recent work contributes to an understanding of the factors inhibiting change in this area (McDonald 2001b; Pocock 2001; Probert 2001). These same authors have indicated that there is a need for transformational social change, but that there is a diversity of views within the community and among the people responsible for carrying out the work of caring for young children, making it difficult to build consensus regarding future directions. Recent exchanges in the media (Cannold 2001b; Manne 2001a) and in the academic literature (Evans & Kelley 2001; Manne 2001, Probert & Murphy 2001) indicate that there is not a single feminist analysis and agenda in relation to economic independence for mothers of young children. In particular, some authors are challenging what they see as a feminist orthodoxy regarding the use of childcare, claiming that many mothers want to care for their own young children and should be supported in doing so, not denigrated for staying out of the labour market.

This study uses critical social theory including feminist theory to explore the philosophical underpinnings of different positions. It also uses historical developments within feminist theory and activism to shed light on present claims and disagreements. It presents and utilises a theoretical framework for developing coherence in an agenda for change. This research will contribute towards the development of a coherent social change agenda by gathering together the most recent thinking of some of the key Australian authors on this topic, obtaining reactions to those views from a range of Australian mothers of young children, and, taking into account the historical developments that have led to our social arrangements, analysing the views and reactions within a framework of relevant feminist theory and critical social theory. The following chapter presents this theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 3

THEORISING AN AGENDA FOR CHANGE

Many aspects of the social conditions of mothering young children are of interest, but this study focuses on material and structural conditions of life with the intention of contributing to transformational change in the exploitation of the labour of the women involved. Its theoretical approach falls within the tradition of the group of theories known as critical social theory (Agger 1998). Marxism is arguably the first in this group of theories, and Marxist ideas (Bottomore & Rubel 1963) about relations of domination and oppression, particularly the exploitation of the labour of one group by another, are fundamental to this research. Also important are Marxist ideas about power, ideology and false consciousness⁶ that critical theorists including Lukacs, Gramsci, members of the Frankfurt School and Habermas have rebutted, refined, and elaborated, adding complexity and subtlety (Agger 1998). Other critical social theorists have acknowledged Marx's contribution to the understanding of class dynamics, but have criticized the neglect of gender, ethnicity and 'race'⁷ issues (F. Williams 1989). Feminist theorists including Michèle Barrett, Nancy Fraser, Donna Haraway and Iris Marion Young have been particularly important in developing social theory that builds on the emancipatory intention of earlier critical social theory, and takes account of the criticisms that the earlier theory examined class oppression but ignored other sources and experiences of oppression (Hennessey & Ingraham 1997).

Contemporary critical social theory

According to contemporary social theorist Ben Agger (1998), what is *critical* about 'critical social theory' is the idea that knowledge exists in history and can change the course of history if appropriately applied. Agger (1998) states that a critical social

⁶ Following Mullaly (2002), the term 'internalized oppression' is used in this study because of problems with the term 'false consciousness'.

⁷ Following Williams (1989) I use 'race' while acknowledging the limitations of the expression.

theory (CST) must have certain features. Below is my summary of his list of seven features:

1. CST opposes positivism, particularly the idea of describing natural laws of society, believing instead in historicity and susceptibility to change.
2. CST addresses its insights and analyses to social movements. It distinguishes the domination, exploitation and oppression of the past and present from a possible better future, and aims to raise consciousness.
3. CST has a major focus on structural domination of people's lives by large social institutions such as politics, economics, gender and race.
4. CST utilises the concept of false consciousness (internalised oppression) to understand the reproduction of the structures of domination. Against the power of internalised oppression, CST juxtaposes the power of agency, both personal and collective, to transform society.
5. CST avoids determinism and endorses voluntarism, arguing that social change begins in people's everyday lives.
6. CST rejects economic determinism, conceptualising instead a dialectic between structure and agency. Structure conditions everyday life, but knowledge of structure can help people change social conditions.
7. With its focus on the dialectical connection between everyday life and structure, CST holds people responsible for their own liberation and admonishes them not to oppress others in the name of distant future liberation.

Stephen Leonard (1990) contrasts critical social theory's political intention for change with conventional social theory's focus on describing and understanding social conditions without any intention of contributing to change. He identifies three defining characteristics of critical social theories:

1. They locate the sources of domination in actual social practices.
2. They present a vision of a life free from such domination.
3. They present material about domination and their vision of a better future in ways that are intelligible to those who are oppressed.

Within this framework, transformative feminist theory is also critical theory, although feminism is much more than a theory, since it is a philosophy and a social movement as well. Because of the significance of feminist theory for this study, relevant aspects are discussed in a major section later in this chapter.

Overall, this study takes a contemporary CST approach, as proposed by Agger and Leonard. They both propose, as do other authors (e.g. Ife 1999, 1997; P. Leonard 1997; Mullaly 1997, 2002; Pease & Fook 1999) a synthesis of modernist and postmodernist critical social theory that incorporates the strengths of both, and takes account of the postmodern critique of modernist theory. Modernism represents the belief in the power of reason and scientific inquiry to overcome the domination of superstition and received ideas. Contemporary CST rejects the modernist application of positivist scientific method to the social world. It criticises the universalising of modernist CST, but retains the emphasis on political emancipatory intention (Mullaly 1997).

Mullaly (2002) and others who argue for a synthesis of modernist CST and postmodernism point out that there is a range of postmodern ideas, with the more sceptical being incompatible with CST, but the more affirmative being compatible (Ife 1999; P. Leonard 1997). Pease and Fook (1999) point to the usefulness of postmodern and poststructural ideas for understanding the complexities of power relationships, compared with oversimplified binary analyses of earlier critical models.

This study utilises Mullaly's (2002) critical theory of oppression that brings together insights and ideas from conventional CST and postmodern theory. It draws on ideas from the affirmative end of the postmodern continuum of ideas rather than the conservative, individualistic and nihilistic end of that continuum. As discussed by Mullaly (2002), the concept of *oppression* refers to the domination of subordinate groups by dominant groups. It does not imply evil intent on the part of individual members of a dominant group, and it acknowledges that individuals can be both oppressor and oppressed by virtue of their belonging to different groups, for example

white (dominant) woman (subordinate). Contemporary authors state that oppression operates and is experienced at personal, cultural and structural levels (Mullaly 2002; Thompson 1997), with oppression at each level supporting, reinforcing and influencing the operation and experience of oppression at the other levels. This model attends to culture as well as the personal and structural aspects that are traditionally the focus of CST. Mullaly (2002:71) utilises the term 'culture' to mean 'a common set of values and norms, including shared patterns of seeing, thinking, and acting, that a group holds'. He sees culture as including ideologies, and discusses the ways that the dominant culture presents a view of reality that privileges dominant groups and their perspectives over subordinate groups.

Mullaly (2002) states that traditional CST's emphasis on the oppressive role of social structures or institutions runs the risk of structural determinism, and can be balanced by postmodernism's emphasis on human agency. With this synthesis, people are seen as both products and creators of social structures, with some ability to act and some constraints on action to bring about change. This postmodern CST or critical postmodernism adds the ideas of dispersed power, multiple sites of power and acts of resistance to the conventional CST idea of institutional power, with its implication that only large collective social movements can bring about change:

Both social structures and individuals are able to exercise power. However, it is patently obvious that a social institution will be able to exercise more power than an individual, and that an individual from a dominant group will, for the most part, be able to exercise more political, social and economic power than a member of a subordinate group. Power may be dispersed throughout society, but it is not dispersed equally. [Mullaly 2002:22]

A critical postmodernism utilises both the well-established CST concept of ideology and the postmodern idea of discourse. Mullaly (2002:23) suggests that 'a discourse may be viewed as the linguistic embodiment of an ideology'. Mullaly (2002:23) defines ideology as '*any* consistent set of social, economic and political assumptions, beliefs, values and ideals'. Agger (1998: 8) states that 'to be effective in reproducing people's conformist behaviours, [dominant] ideologies must not be sheer illusion but

must in some respects correspond to “reality” as people experience it’. This research is informed by literature identifying an ideology of motherhood (Reiger 1991, Wearing 1984), and other work on an ideologically-based gender system or gender culture that divides the population into ‘male’ and ‘female’ categories, and sets expectations of ‘proper’ roles and behaviour for males and females (Probert 2001, J. Williams 2000). While institutions tend to promote and reinforce dominant ideologies, contemporary society is characterised by competing ideologies (Mullaly 2002).

Pease and Fook (1999:15) state that ‘from a materialist perspective, discourses can be understood as part of the ideological apparatus which operates to legitimate the social order’. The concept of discourse is useful for understanding how a new way of seeing social arrangements can displace an existing hegemonic interpretation. Postmodern ideas about multiple sites of power and resistance to hegemonic discourses provide hopeful ways of thinking about transformational change:

[T]he liberatory potential of Foucault’s notion of discourse is that it provides the possibility of creating alternative discourses and repositioning ourselves in the dominant discourses. Personal and social change comes about by unravelling the discursive power of dominant discourses and re-creating ourselves as the basis for a collective politics of the future. [Pease & Fook 1999:15]

In situations where people’s beliefs support their oppression, the concept of *internalised oppression* is used rather than the Marxist concept of ‘false consciousness’ which has been criticized because it appears to privilege the perception of the observer as ‘true’ (Mullaly 2002). Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard (1992:16) refer to internalised oppression as ‘a psychological advantage for the oppressor’ and give a useful example of the relationships among the concepts of oppression, ideology and internalised oppression:

It is primarily the work women do, the uses to which our bodies can be put, which constitutes the reason for our oppression (that is, which explains why we are kept in relationships which enable men to profit from our labour). Women's material oppression, like various other material oppressions, also produces a psychological advantage for the oppressor, but this is a product of, and forms part of, an ideology which maintains the appropriation of the subordinates' labour. Material appropriation of work is, in our view, what is most important, and most often forgotten.

One of CST's distinguishing features is its political intent. Consistent with its CST framework, this study identifies particular institutions and ideologies as targets for transformational change. Traditional CST emphasises the importance of solidarity and collective action for bringing about change. This emphasis has been criticised for minimising diversity and differences within oppressed groups. While acknowledging the importance of solidarity and collective action, Mullaly's (2002) synthesis suggests that taking account of diversity provides an important counter to traditional CST's tendency to impose an essential subjectivity on oppressed groups:

[S]olidarity within and among oppressed groups is crucial in the struggle for emancipation, but to avoid various forms of oppressive inclusions and exclusions that have occurred in the past it must incorporate a progressive politics of difference. [p. 25]

This study treats mothers of young children as an oppressed group, on the basis of the exploitation of their labour, as discussed earlier. Iris Marion Young (1990) identifies exploitation as one of five forms of oppression, along with marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. She states that oppressed groups usually experience more than one of these forms of oppression. The unpaid work of caring for young children consumes the labour and energy of mothers, producing a public benefit at the expense of individual mothers (Bittman & Pixley 1997; Folbre 1994). This situation is consistent with Mullaly's (1997:146) definition of exploitation:

Exploitation refers to those social processes whereby the dominant group is able to accumulate and maintain status, power, and assets from the energy and labour expended by subordinate groups.

The situation of mothers of young children carries other characteristics of exploitation, including loss of confidence and self-respect (Cox & Leonard 1991; Mullaly 2002), and a transfer of power from the subordinate to the dominant group. Mothers' responsibility for the necessary but unrecompensed and disrespected work frees men to participate in well-rewarded and well-respected work, resulting in a one-way flow of power from women to men (Young 1990). Young states that exploitation cannot be overcome by a simple redistribution of material resources, although this redistribution is essential. Lasting change must include institutional and cultural change to alter the structures and practices that support the exploitation.

The lives of mothers of young children are characterised by other forms of oppression as well as exploitation. Joan Williams (2000) states that contemporary Western societies provide care for dependants by marginalising the caregivers. Young (1990) discusses powerlessness in terms of non-professional workers exercising little creativity, judgment, technical expertise or authority, and commanding little respect. While mothers of young children exercise considerable creativity, judgment, technical expertise and authority in their work, they experience the powerlessness consequent on the transfer of power discussed above, and the loss of status associated with 'not working'.

The most dramatic example of the oppression by cultural imperialism in relation to Australian mothers was the large-scale removal of Aboriginal children from their mothers, on the pretext of 'protecting' the children (National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families [Australia] 1997). The impacts of this policy continue in Australia today. A discussion of violence against women and children is beyond the scope of this work, but both literature and social work experience suggest that responsibility for children increases women's vulnerability to domestic violence, including limiting women's ability to escape from dangerous situations (Laming 2000, la Nauze & Rutherford 2000; McHugh & Hewitt 2000, Pease 2000, Weeks 2000)

The focus and value-base of this study are consistent with contemporary CST. The possibility of working towards a better future is central to the design of this research, and it accepts the power of personal and collective agency to transform oppressive and exploitative aspects of society. At the same time it acknowledges the limiting and hegemonic power of existing structures, institutions and ideologies. The study is committed to maintaining a sense of the diversity of experience within the identified exploited group of mothers of young children. This awareness of diversity protects against the possibility of oppressing one sub-group in order to liberate another. It is important in this study because of the pattern of poor, minority and Third World women providing low-cost (exploitative) childcare that allows middle-class White women to participate in paid employment and civic life, building status and power at the expense of subordinate groups (J. Williams 2000).

Agger (1998) claims that work within critical social theory promotes structural understanding that can liberate the imagination and lead to transformational (overcoming domination) political practices. Rather than looking for cause-and-effect, or social laws, this study identifies a situation of exploitation of a particular group of people, and focuses on ideas for change in that situation.

The use of contemporary CST implies a distinctive approach to understanding social problems and bringing about social change. Using the work of Horton (1966), Reasons and Purdue (1981) have outlined two competing sets of assumptions about people, society and social problems and their inter-relationships that underpin mainstream social theory and CST. They propose two groupings of theories: order theories and conflict theories. They make it clear that these groupings are not absolute categories and that people will often hold a mixture of views. The following discussion of order and conflict perspectives draws heavily on the work of Mullaly (2002) and his table showing the characteristics of the two perspectives is reproduced below as Table 4.1.

The order perspective is associated with the work of Weber, Durkheim and Parsons and is consistent with contemporary neo-conservative politics. This perspective views

human beings as competitive, contentious, individualistic and acquisitive, requiring stable and enduring institutions (political, economic, educational, religious, family) to regulate human interactions and avoid disorder. Society is seen as a balanced organism or system, and its institutions as prevailing because of agreement (consensus) within society. People are expected to conform and adapt to the social arrangements created by these institutions. The order perspective sees faulty socialisation (individual pathology) as the cause of social problems. Dealing with social problems involves mainly 'treatment' approaches to change individual behaviour, with minor attention to social reform consistent with the nature of the existing system.

The conflict perspective, consistent with socialist politics and with CST, sees people as cooperative, collective and social, and social institutions as dynamic and changing in order to facilitate economic cooperation, sharing and common interests. Society is characterised by structural inequality with social institutions serving private rather than public interests, and prevailing by virtue of dominant-subordinate relationships, control and coercion. This perspective questions the acceptance, conformity and adaptation of people to a coercive and hierarchical social order. Social problems are seen as stemming from discriminatory institutions and rules that promote the interests of the dominant group. The approach to social problems includes changing institutions, ideology, social processes and practices to protect the social nature of human existence and promote the celebration of cultural diversity. Behavioural change can involve only minor adjustments consistent with the cooperative and collective nature of society. It sees massive commitment to behavioural change as a form of blaming the victim.

The characterisation of order and conflict perspectives presented in Table 4.1 is useful for this study because it assists with identifying the philosophies and principles underpinning particular suggestions or ideas for change. As discussed in the previous chapter, contemporary authors challenge some of the orthodoxies regarding what are considered emancipatory or progressive views. For example, Anne Manne rejects suggestions that her defence of women caring at home for their own children is

conservative (Manne 2001b). In this environment, it is important to have tools for assessing ideas for change.

Table 4.1: Assumptions of order and conflict perspectives⁸

	ORDER	CONFLICT
Beliefs about human beings	competitive, contentious, individualistic, acquisitive	cooperative, collective, social
Nature of social institutions	must endure and regulate human interactions (political, economic, educational, religious, family) to avoid disorder	dynamic with no sacred standing; facilitate economic cooperation, sharing and common interests
Nature of society	consists of interdependent and integrated institutions and a supportive ideological base; viewed as an organism or system with each part contributing to the maintenance of the whole	in a society of structural inequality the social nature of human existence is denied with social institutions serving private rather than public interests
Continuity of social institutions	prevail because of agreement (consensus) among society's members	prevail in a society marked by dominant-subordinate relations because of control and coercion
Nature of relationship between people and society	members are expected to conform and adapt to consensus-based social arrangements	acceptance, conformity, and adaptation to a coercive and hierarchical social order is questioned
Nature of social problems	socialization will occasionally fail whereby reverence for institutions and respect for rules will not be learned; such occurrence on a large scale is a social problem	faulty socialization is more a matter of discriminatory institutions and defective rules that promote the interests of the dominant group
Approach to social problems	<p>a) behaviour must be changed through resocialization (rehabilitation, counselling) or neutralized through formal systems of state control (criminal law, prisons, asylums, etc.)</p> <p>b) social reform can only involve minor adjustments that are consistent with the nature of the existing system</p> <p>c)</p>	<p>institutions, ideology and social processes and practices must be changed to protect the social nature of human existence and promote the celebration of cultural diversity</p> <p>behavioural change can only involve minor adjustments consistent with cooperative and collective nature of society; massive commitment to behavioural change is a form of blaming the victim</p>
Social work theories and approaches	psychodynamic, systems, ecological	feminist, radical, structural, anti-racist, anti-oppressive

⁸ Source: Mullaly (2002:9)

This research utilises the distinction between social reform and transformational change developed by critical social theorists. I take these ideas further and introduce the idea of a 'coherent agenda for change' as a useful theoretical construct for dealing with complex problems such as economic independence for mothers of young children.

Social reform and transformational change

Critical social theorists including feminists criticise social institutions and ideologies that have been formed by and reflect dominant interests including capitalist and patriarchal interests. Those dominant interests, institutions and ideologies have been shaped by and reinforce the gender system or gender culture. Transformational change efforts are aimed at institutions, ideologies and culture, to bring about change in the larger systems and structures under which we live our lives (Galper 1975). On the other hand, '[t]he superstructure, or the fundamental nature of what exists, is not challenged by reformism. Reformism seeks change and improvement within the boundaries of what is' (Galper 1975:76). Galper sees much social change effort as wasted in the long run because it may improve the position of one group relative to others, but does nothing about the social conditions that caused the problems of both groups in the first place.

This distinction between transformational change and social reform is important within this study. Mullaly (2002), like Galper (1975) argues that small changes and challenges to social arrangements are worthwhile if they contribute towards overall transformational change. Both argue that change usually comes about a little at a time. This understanding is combined within this research with Nickie Charles' idea of a long agenda and a short agenda to produce the idea of a coherent agenda within which the ideas for short-term or social policy change contribute towards the long agenda of transformational change. Mullaly's (2002) concept of 'challenging oppression' is utilised to identify the oppressive institutions and ideologies that are targets for change.

This position does not imply a refusal to participate in existing arrangements. On the contrary feminists have claimed the right to participate in institutions such as education, government and the law. Women's participation has contributed to reducing the patriarchal exclusivity of these institutions. However, feminists have also claimed the right to change the institutions, while participating in them, to overcome their oppressive characteristics.

The idea of a coherent agenda for change

This study utilises the idea of a coherent agenda for change. Such a coherent agenda would address issues of exploitation and disadvantage with a view to bringing about egalitarian change that is both short-term (redistributional) and long-term (transformational). It would encompass the diversity of situations of mothers of young children. It would be built on both women's equality with men and their difference from men in relation to childbearing. Coherence based on underpinning philosophy, theory or analysis would ensure that achievement of short-term gains would be consistent with and would contribute towards the long-term agenda. Assessing ideas for change by reflecting on the ideas they represent (about people, society, social problems and bringing about change) can contribute to coherence in an agenda for change. This study utilises these understandings to analyse ideas for change in Australia's social arrangements for care of young children. Using this material promotes the purpose of the study, to contribute to an agenda for change that is consistent with CST and feminist ideals, and takes account of the views of the women carrying out the work. A coherent agenda for change would:

1. Be based on an analysis that is internally consistent and is used consistently in relation to the issues – (in this research the 'consistent analysis' uses a framework of contemporary CST and feminist theory)
2. Include a vision for a better future
3. Aim for lasting, transformational change

4. Establish a long-term agenda and a short-term¹⁷ agenda that are consistent with each other.

Feminist theory

This study draws particularly on feminist thought that is consistent with CST in its emphasis on transformational politics. As many writers point out, there is no unitary feminism and no unitary women's movement, but a range of feminisms, and a range of women's organisations and campaigns. As Julia O'Connor, Ann Shola Orloff and Sheila Shaver (1999) state, typologies of feminisms are not universally accepted, and have been less used since around 1990 than previously. However, because some feminist thought is more consistent with CST than other, I think it is important to position this research in relation to the usually-identified streams of feminism.

Liberal feminism is usually seen as the most conservative stream of feminism, working to achieve equality of opportunity for women, along with the elimination of discrimination, in order that women may participate alongside men in the existing system. Other feminists usually see liberal feminist strategies as necessary but not sufficient to achieve gender equality (O'Connor et al. 1999:200). Liberal feminists may advocate similar strategies to radical and socialist feminists, but would usually base their ideas more on order perspectives of society than on conflict perspectives. The underlying philosophy of liberal feminists would not be compatible with the CST approach of this study.

Radical feminists are generally seen as highly critical of existing social institutions, with strong practical activism in relation to women's services and women's rights campaigns (O'Connor et al. 1999). Radical feminists see patriarchy as fundamental, giving rise to other forms of oppression, and they value women's distinctive culture. This valuing of women's difference from men has been criticised for essentialising women, implying that all women possess the valued 'feminine' qualities (F. Williams

¹⁷ Following Nickie Charles (2000) I sometimes use the terms 'long agenda' and 'short agenda' for 'long-term agenda' and 'short-term agenda' in this chapter.

1989). The strong critical approach of radical feminism is consistent with the approach of this study. The acknowledgement of women's different role from men in biological reproduction is also consistent, although this study does not claim valued 'feminine' qualities as the exclusive province of women.

Socialist or materialist feminisms 'stress the material basis of gender inequality and the importance of recognising the interaction of gender, class and race in analysing inequality' (O'Connor et al. 1999:201). Socialist feminism's conflict perspective, its attention to material conditions and its identification of institutions as a target for change are compatible with the approach of this study.

Cultural feminists emphasise gender difference and focus on the cultural features of patriarchal oppression rather than material aspects. For cultural feminists, social change is understood mainly in terms of struggles over representation and meaning (Hennessy & Ingraham 1997). Postmodern feminists have been criticised for attending to differences among women and local variations in experiences to the extent that everything becomes relative and they lose any hope of solidarity or emancipatory politics (Bell & Klein 1996). As discussed above, ideas about diversity and the power of discourse are utilised as part of a contemporary CST approach, without either abandoning attention to structures and institutions, or slipping into relativism.

This study draws particularly on those elements of radical, materialist and socialist feminist theory that focus attention on the material conditions of women's lives, and see the institutions and ideologies that shape and limit people's lives as the targets for transformational social change.

Mary Evans states that feminist theory, while criticising white, male middle-class theory, has taken inspiration from and utilised the tools of theorists including Marx and Foucault: 'Their radicalism may not have contained a radicalism about relations between women and men, but at the same time it contained a vision of human emancipation and human equality that remains important today' (Evans 1997:2).

Feminist theorising particularly relevant to this research includes work on issues of equality and difference, criticism of patriarchal ideas and practices in relation to the so-called public and private spheres and citizenship, and discussions of the institution of the family and the functioning of families. The following sections discuss these issues and a final section presents a framework for considering future change.

Equality/difference

As discussed in ‘Chapter 2: Literature Review’, Marilyn Lake (1999) suggests that Australian women’s claims early in the 20th century were made on the basis of women’s difference from men and that later in the century second-wave feminism brought a new articulation of claims on the basis of equality (sameness) with men. She discusses how ‘difference’ was used against women to trap them in domesticity, and suggests that ‘equality’ has also been used against women, for example trapping them in the double shift.

Chris Weedon (1997) locates emphasis on equality (sameness) or difference within different political forms of feminism. She states that liberal feminism emphasises equality of opportunity within the existing social and political system. Liberal feminists expect changes in the sexual division of labour and norms of masculinity and femininity to flow from ‘equality’, requiring the provision of childcare and domestic labour from outside the nuclear family. The radical feminist emphasis on and valuing of ‘difference’ leads to a politics of separation from men and patriarchal structures in order for women to reclaim their true and natural femininity. Socialist feminism on the other hand sees gender (‘femininity’) as socially produced and historically changing. It sees the interlocking oppressions of patriarchy, class and ‘race’ as being abolished only by a full transformation of the social system.

Further articulating a socialist feminist view, Weedon (1997:2) identifies ‘a fundamental patriarchal assumption that women’s biological difference from men fits them for different social tasks’. She makes a similar point to that of Lake (above)

about the limitations of women's gains under the 20th century mix of ideas about women's difference from and equality with men:

Many of the social and political gains made by women over the last hundred years have been the result of struggles to include women in the rights and privileges which men have instituted to serve their own interests. Yet women's inclusion in education, the franchise, public life and the labour market have been on terms designed to meet the needs of individual men, unfettered by ties of motherhood, childcare and domestic labour. Women seeking inclusion have had to negotiate the conflicting demands made upon them by their dual role as best they could on an individual basis. [Weedon 1997:2]

Weedon (1997) sees a need to reconstitute the meaning of femininity and biological sexual difference. O'Connor et al. (1999) similarly see a need to develop practices that acknowledge both women's equality with men and the gendered differences in typical patterns of women's and men's lives and responsibilities. As does Ruth Lister (1997), they criticise the fiction of gender-neutral citizenship and call for a transformed, gendered citizenship.

The other major theoretical significance of 'difference' is in relation to differences between women. Theorists have questioned the validity of the category 'woman' because of the diversity among women. They have criticised a tendency among white middle-class second-wave feminists to claim to be speaking for all women when they were representing their own experiences and interests to the exclusion of women with different experiences (Evans 1997). This criticism has come particularly from working-class, Black and /or lesbian women. Questioning the validity of a category leads to questions about whether discussions of oppression and exploitation are possible, and whether a collective can exist or develop to overcome oppression. According to bell hooks (1984), sisterhood and solidarity are still possible, but only with a heightened awareness and constant acknowledgement of diversity. Kerreen Reiger (2000:309) suggests that it is possible to conceptualise mothers as 'a political collectivity with distinctive, though not homogeneous, interests and needs'. She links this concept with a 'reconceived' idea of citizenship that takes account of feminist criticism of the concept of separate public and private spheres, and of traditional ideas about citizenship.

The public/private divide and citizenship

O'Connor et al. (1999) characterise Australia, Canada, Great Britain and the United States as liberal democracies, and liberalism as enforcing a public/private split, with states and markets on one side of the divide, and families on the other. Joan Williams (2000:54) explains that this system provides care for children, the sick and the elderly by marginalizing the caregivers:

The current system rests on the assumption that all people at all times are the full-grown, healthy adults of liberal theory, making the social compact and pursuing citizenship and self-interest within it. This is a very unrealistic view of human life. The time has come to recognise that humanity does not consist only of healthy adults. We have changed from a society that formally delegates to women the care of children, the sick and the elderly to a society that pretends these groups do not exist. The result, to women's credit, is that women still do the caregiving. But they pay a stiff price for doing so.

Ann Jennings (1993), drawing heavily on Linda Nicholson (1986, cited in Jennings 1993), discusses the dualistic origins and mixed usage of the terms 'public' and 'private'. Whether origin is traced to Aristotle (Vickery 1998) or John Locke (Jennings 1993), authors agree that the terms are used in fluid ways. Seventeenth-century ideas of public and private related to a state/household distinction. The ascendancy of 'the economy' in the nineteenth century led to a state/market distinction:

An interesting ambiguity in conventional understandings of public and private resulted. While markets became "public" with respect to the "private" family in the nineteenth century, they retained their "private" status vis-à-vis the "public" state. In both cases, public/private distinctions privileged the market but, because the market had become both public and private, the social ranking of public and private varied accordingly. [Jennings 1993:121]

Feminists have criticised the 'public/private' way of describing spheres of activity as inappropriately oppositional and dualistic, particularly because one side of the dualism is valued more highly than the other, and women are consistently associated with the less valued side of the dualism. Jennings (1993:121) illustrates this point by setting out a partial list of social distinctions:

public / private
(market) economy / family
man / woman
rational / emotional
mind / body
historical / natural
objective / subjective
science / humanities
economics / sociology
competitive / nurturant
independent / dependent
individual / ?

She notes that no term is paired with ‘individual’ because there is no good word for a non-public person. Women’s struggle to be recognised as ‘public persons’ or ‘individuals’ with full citizenship rights highlights a tension between individualism and collectivism. Progressive social change efforts from a conflict perspective will often emphasise collectivism and the social as a counter to competitive, individualistic and acquisitive aspects of social arrangements. Reiger (2000:312) refers to this as ‘[a] contrast between communitarian and individualist social visions’. Barrie Thorne (1992:5) discusses this tension in relation to change in family arrangements:

The public/private dichotomy is linked to an ambivalence embedded in feminism since the nineteenth century and strongly evident today. The ambivalence moves between values of individualism and equality – values that women have historically been denied and are now claiming – and values of nurturance and community, which are symbolically associated with women and the family. These latter values have been affirmed by some feminists as a basis for broader social change.

This tension between individualism and collectivism presents challenges, particularly in relation to constructing an agenda for change that is consistent with CST.

Attempts to enforce a public/private divide in 19th century Britain and America included the emergence of an ideology of domesticity and a deterioration of women’s public power and professional opportunities (Vickery 1998). Although 20th century women successfully claimed voting, legal and employment rights, an ideology of domesticity continues to limit women’s full and equal participation in society (J. Williams 2000). The Victorian ideal of the bourgeois family with married women

confining themselves to matters of home and family emerged at the same time as 'work' was coming to mean labour market employment, and the ideal of domesticity came to be expressed as women 'not working'. Working class women were castigated for their employment and accused of neglecting their motherly and housewifely duties (Hall 1998). The association of women with a private, domestic sphere was promoted during the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, but was resisted for example by women who were intrepid travellers, philanthropists, scholars and political activists (Vickery 1998).

The slogan 'the personal is political' expresses feminist rejection of the notion of separate spheres. Treating the public and private as separate spheres gives men the opportunity to exercise privilege in both 'spheres', limits women's access to exercising authority and responsibility in the 'public', and makes women vulnerable to oppression and exploitation because of the value of privacy (lack of public scrutiny) in the 'private sphere' (Pateman 1988). Feminist critics of the public/private divide have pointed to the complex interdependence between the spheres, and to the ways that women's lives and activities typically demonstrate the artificiality of this construct (Fraser 1989; Pateman 1988; Showstack Sassoon 1987). Ruth Lister (1997) states that the public/private divide has both descriptive and normative aspects, with the descriptive aspects a distortion of the reality of interdependence and the normative aspects benefiting men at the expense of women. She states that the construction of a 'private sphere' defines what happens within homes and families as moral rather than political or economic, and that the public-private divide is central to the exclusion of women from citizenship in both theory and practice (Lister 1997). Citing Iris Marion Young (1990), Lister suggests that some aspects of life should remain personal and private, but that the boundary between public and private must be contested in order to challenge barriers to women's citizenship. Reiger (2000:323) advocates a differentiated citizenship providing a framework for women as citizens to seek justice in relation to specific needs. She states:

[I]t is not in the intrinsic attributes of mothers that their citizenship credentials reside. Rather it is in the developing of a political consciousness and presence through collective activity.

Reiger is thus treating citizenship as a practice to be exercised rather than as a status to be claimed. This collective perspective challenges traditional individualist interpretations of citizenship. Feminist theory has also challenged traditional ways of seeing 'the family'.

Family

'Chapter 2: Literature Review' contains a review of feminist literature on families as a major site of women's oppression, and as the site of some of women's most valued experiences. It discusses the ideology of motherhood and the continuing construction within social policy of women as properly the dependants of men. It also discusses 'maternalist feminist' valuing of skills and qualities developed and demonstrated by mothers, including how these qualities, if applied more broadly, would transform the world into a better place. Some second-wave feminists (e.g. Firestone 1970) identified women's responsibility for children as the source of women's oppression. Within this view, the pathway to emancipation lies in freeing women from the individual responsibility for their children, substituting collective responsibility in the form of formal childcare, and persists in the popular imagination as 'the' feminist position (Everingham 1994; J. Williams 2000).

This research builds on feminist literature (discussed earlier) that values the experience of motherhood while exposing the oppressive ideology of motherhood. It sees the exploitation of mothers' labour as a major form of oppression. Within this view, the pathway to emancipation lies in facilitating economic independence for mothers of young children without requiring them to either relinquish responsibility for their children or work a crippling double shift. This is consistent with Nancy Fraser's rejection of the 'universal breadwinner model' and the 'caregiver parity model' in favour of transformation of the gender order (Fraser 1994).

Feminist theory has articulated the links between 'private' family arrangements and women's disadvantage in relation to employment and economic security. These

circumstances are an important focus of contemporary feminist attention. Joan Williams (2000:x, 3) discusses these circumstances as ‘work-family conflict’:

To end the marginalisation of mothers that persists up to the present day, we need to change not the way we dress or who pierces their ears: We need to change the way we organise (market and family) work ... Domesticity did not die; it mutated. In the nineteenth century most married women were marginalised outside of the economy. Although women have re-entered market work, most remain marginalized today. This is not equality.

Williams (2000:20) criticises the rhetoric of ‘choice’ used to describe women’s decisions in favour of domesticity, stating that it diverts attention away from three aspects of the gender system that constrain decision-making:

The first is employers’ entitlement to demand an ideal worker with immunity from family work. The second constraint is husbands’ right, and their duty, to live up to this work ideal. The third involves the definition of the duties of a mother, as someone whose life should be framed around caregiving.

Williams (2000) proposes a reconstructive feminism that aims to change the gender system of traditional beliefs about women’s and men’s roles, and to restructure market work, family work and entitlements to encourage all adults to participate in both kinds of work. She states that coalition-building and the mobilisation of collectives is necessary to bring about change, and that in order for this to happen, reconstructive feminism needs to replace in the popular imagination the ‘full commodification’⁹ proposal for equality, proposed by Betty Friedan’s (1965) *The Feminine Mystique*.

Framework for considering future change

Consistent with critical social theory, this study explores possibilities for the transformation of the care of young children. As indicated by Probert (2001) and McDonald (2001b), current Australian social policy and legislation contains contradictory and confusing intentions and outcomes. This study examines both the long-term commitments and ideals that might underpin future more egalitarian social

⁹ Williams (2000) attributes the expression ‘full commodification’ to economist Barbara Bergman.

policy, and the specific strategies that would contribute towards the policy framework in a transformed system. The research includes attention to the possible pathways from present social arrangements to a better future. This aspect of the research draws on Nickie Charles' (2000) work on the relationships among feminist social movements, states and structural and cultural change.

Charles (2000) criticises conventional social movement theory, showing its inadequacies as theory in relation to second-wave feminism. She argues that cultural changes are both cause and consequence of social movements, and that social movements are both political and cultural. She states:

[W]omen's liberation movements in Western Europe and North America ... are both cause and consequence of profound socio-economic and cultural change ... [A]s with the state and social policy, there is a dialectical relationship between structural and cultural change and social movements. [p.3]

Charles (2000) emphasises the complexity of this dialectical relationship. She argues that important dimensions for understanding include the existing/changing socio-economic context, contests over meanings and resources, the construction of new collective identities, forms of organization for engaging with the state, and the existing/changing structures of a society. In relation to the socio-economic context, she argues that changing material conditions and practices are likely to foster the emergence of social movements, by changing existing resource distribution, and at the same time exposing previously hidden inequities. In relation to meanings and resources she states:

[F]eminist social movements are about meaning and making visible previously invisible gendered power relations. In this way they challenge hegemonic definitions of social reality which render these relations invisible and therefore unchallengeable.

Feminist definitions are, however, in competition with others and it is only to the extent that they become hegemonic that they have a significant impact on social policy ... Feminist social movements are ... involved in struggles on two levels: over meanings and over the distribution of resources within society. This implies that they are both cultural and political, something which existing social movement theory finds difficult to accommodate (2000:203, 206).

This study utilises the idea of a coherent agenda for change. Such an agenda would include long-term, transformational structural and cultural change, and short-term social policy change that is consistent with the 'long agenda'. This reflects the socialist feminist position that liberal reforms are necessary but not sufficient to bring about equality for women. Charles suggests that feminist social movements' struggles are both cultural and political. Linking this idea with the idea of a coherent agenda for change, political struggles could be seen as seeking redistribution of resources with social policy as the target, or they could be for broader transformational change in the structures and institutions that shape everyday life. The cultural struggles over meanings could relate to a short agenda change such as counting unpaid work in the census, or to a long agenda change in what is defined as work within the institutional structure of society.

Charles (2000) sees the construction of new collective identities, particularly in relation to structural inequalities as an important part of social movement formation and mobilisation. She also advises attention to the defence of existing identities that are threatened by proposed redistribution of power and resources. She sees bringing about change in gender identities as particularly painful and difficult. She discusses the need for feminist social movements to work within and outside of existing organizations, and points out that some form of organization is necessary to change social policy. Her final dimension for analysis is structure, referring to aspects such as the public/private divide and the unequal distribution of resources between women and men. She rejects the idea that 'old' social movements such as the labour movement are located within the economy while 'new' social movements such as environmentalism are located within civil society. She states:

[F]eminist social movements emerge from gender divisions which are structured by unequal access to resources in both the public and private domains and the construction of feminist collective identities takes place on the basis of these structural inequalities in both spheres. Thus gender interests emanate from the economy and from civil society, or – using other concepts – the spheres of production and reproduction, the market and the family (Charles 2000:212)

Analysis and discussion of interview and focus group data in later chapters draw on Charles' framework, particularly in relation to possible pathways towards social

change. Given Probert's (2001) view that progress towards gender equity in Australia is stalled, the possibility of the emergence of a strong social movement for change will be considered, in light of the above, and of Charles' (2000:213) statement that 'whether or not feminist social movements emerge at all depends fundamentally on the state's ability to respond to changing gender relations and to represent the new gender interests to which such changes give rise'.

Contemporary critical social theory provides the framework for this study. It theorises the exploitation that is central to the conceptualisation of this project. It affirms the value of political emancipatory intent within the research, rejects positivism, and posits a dialectical relationship between structure and agency. It avoids both the conservative tendencies of order theories and the universalising and essentialising aspects of modernist CST. The idea that conflict theories have a different understanding of people, society, social problems and social change from consensus theories provides a method for working towards a coherent agenda. Coherence involves developing an understanding of principles and philosophies underpinning particular ideas for change, with a view to ensuring that the gains of the 'short agenda' contribute to the aims of the 'long agenda'.

The situation of mothers of young children in Australia, as elsewhere, seems entrenched and resistant to change. Late 20th century and early 21st century calls for change constitute fragmented protest in the absence of a coherent agenda. Diverse situations, interests and philosophies contribute to confusion and possible despair among people wanting to work for change. Knowing what changes to advocate or support in the short term may be difficult if there is no long-term vision for a better future. Small short-term gains may seem futile if they are not understood as part of a longer agenda. By utilising a contemporary CST framework, this research aims to explore ideas for change that could form a tentative, coherent agenda for change. Such an agenda could play an important part in bringing about long-term transformational egalitarian change by providing a basis for solidarity and collective action, and providing a vision to sustain motivation in a long campaign. For these reasons, the research questions are framed to include the theoretical orientation of the study, the

participation of people with first-hand knowledge of the situation, and the idea of working towards egalitarian change:

1. What changes, consistent with feminist ideals and critical social theory, and taking account of the views of the women carrying out the work, could increase the economic independence of mothers of young children?
2. What are the pathways towards and the barriers impeding egalitarian change in this area?

Scholarly literature and popular media include some ideas for change. The methodology for this research created opportunities to explore those ideas with some of the people who have put them forward, and to discuss those ideas with groups of Australian women with current experience of being responsible for young children.

CHAPTER 4: CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

No one Australian author has presented a focused and sustained analysis of the economic situation of mothers of young children. A number of authors have presented partial analysis and some ideas for change. No study has sought the views of Australian mothers of young children on proposals to improve their economic independence. This study contributes towards filling this gap in the research and literature. It is unusual to focus specifically on the economic situation of mothers of young children, and much of the published material consists of comments in passing rather than being the focus of the work. I decided that the best source of ideas for change that would fit with the contemporary CST framework of this study would be researchers, authors and commentators whose published work showed both an interest in the situation of mothers of young children, and evidence of a contemporary CST approach. It seemed to me that these people would have ideas in addition to those they had already published, or at least that focusing specifically on the economic situation of mothers of young children would clarify and elaborate what they had already said. Since no one person has made a specialty of this area, eight people who had published comments consistent with the theoretical framework of this study were interviewed. The individuals were selected to provide a good coverage of ideas, within the limitations of the size of the study. This study makes an original contribution in bringing these ideas together and relating them to each other. In addition to this synthesising work, the study sought reactions to the ideas for change from focus groups of mothers of young children. This step provided a test of the practicality and acceptability of ideas for change, from the points of view of those most grounded in relevant everyday practices.

This chapter presents a rationale for the choice of an exploratory and descriptive qualitative study, and briefly introduces the strategies utilised to answer the research questions. It then describes the overall methodological approach of the study

including the feminist approach to research, and the reflexive nature of the research. A third section of the chapter provides details of the methods of data collection and analysis used to answer the research questions, and a final section focuses on ethical considerations and limitations of the research.

Rationale for methodology

This research is both exploratory and descriptive, seeking to identify and explore ideas for social transformation and social policy change, and to develop understanding of the relationships among the ideas generated by a select group of high-profile Australian social policy commentators, relevant bodies of theory, and the opinions of women carrying out the work of caring for young children. Traditionally, exploratory studies are used to begin study in a new area, when a researcher is breaking new ground, identifying variables, and defining concepts (Babbie 2001; Sarantakos 1998). As demonstrated in the Literature Review chapter, interest in the situation of mothers of young children is not new. However, identifying the issue as ‘economic independence for mothers of young children’ rather than for example as work/family conflict, as support for families, or as single parent poverty, is unusual in recent times. This innovation in conceptualisation of the issues, the sense of impasse in the literature, and the lack of dedicated work on the development of a coherent agenda for change mean that an exploratory study is appropriate. However, because of the amount of work already carried out for example on the economic significance of unpaid work and on time use, the study is descriptive as well as exploratory. It identifies relevant ideas, brings them together in a new way, and describes their relevance to the topic and their relationships with each other (Sarantakos 1998). The aim of the research is to identify possibilities for change. Some ideas for change have already been put forward in the literature, but the development of an agenda for change is clearly at an early stage. The use of exploratory and descriptive methodology keeps the research open to new ideas rather than limiting it to established ideas.

The subject matter of this study – ideas for change and their relationships to each other and to theory – is best explored by using a qualitative approach in the research

(Sarantakos 1998). The aim is to gather together a range of ideas with attention to the qualities of those ideas rather than with any intention to quantify the material. As discussed above, the field of research is not sufficiently developed to make more quantitative methods such as survey research appropriate. Although mailed, structured surveys are less expensive and time-consuming than face-to-face interviews and focus groups, they require researcher definition of the variables, and the purpose of this study is to open up possibilities rather than close them off by premature definition of variables. Semi-structured mailed surveys could have been used for this research, but would not have yielded the richness of data obtained by face-to-face methods. The interviews and focus groups gave opportunities for the researcher to answer questions, and to seek additional information from respondents. Any misunderstandings of the topic, focus and intention of the research could be quickly corrected. This is important when, as with this study, the topic definition challenges conventional ways of seeing the world.

Research strategies

The rationale for the research questions is presented in Chapters 2 and 3. This section introduces the methods used to answer the research questions. Details regarding these methods are included later in this chapter.

The first research question: *What changes, consistent with feminist ideals and critical social theory, and taking account of the views of the women carrying out the work, could increase the economic independence of mothers of young children?* focuses on ideas for change. The second research question *What are the pathways towards and the barriers impeding egalitarian change in this area?* ensures the practicality of this project, including the articulation of a vision for a better future, and identifying some pathways for change. The framing of these questions recognises that an agenda for change would include an overall vision for the future as well as specific goals that are consistent with the overall vision. The idea of pathways for change acknowledges that serious social change efforts involve articulating intermediate steps that would advance social arrangements in the desired direction as well as stating a vision for transformational change.

The methods used to answer the research questions included interviews and focus groups. Eight high-profile social policy commentators were interviewed individually about their visions for the future, ideas for change and their opinions about pathways towards and barriers impeding change. A summary of their ideas was taken to focus groups of mothers of young children, to obtain their reactions to the ideas and any additional ideas they wanted to put forward.

The following section presents details of the feminist approach and the reflexive nature of the research, providing an explanation of the overall approach of the research within which the various research activities were carried out. Details of research activities and methods follow.

Feminist approach of the research

The overall approach of the research reflects the vision of feminist research proposed by Liz Kelly, Sheila Burton and Linda Regan (1994:28):

Feminism for us is both a theory and a practice, a framework which informs our lives. Its purpose is to understand women's oppression in order to end it. Our position as feminist researchers, therefore, is one in which we are part of the process of discovery and understanding and also responsible for attempting to create change. This orientation draws on what we understand as the liberatory intention and method of consciousness-raising (CR) – to use our experiences of living as women as a starting point from which to build explanatory frameworks which would inform activism. Our hope is that the research we do reflects the dynamic and cumulative process of CR, combining personal and social change in a continuing and reflective process ...

Our desire to do, and goal in doing, research is to create useful knowledge, knowledge which can be used by ourselves and others to 'make a difference'. Feminism as a praxis is not based on the simple fact of women sharing a gender in common, but on a common agenda - the liberation of women.

The research is consistent with this vision of feminist research articulated by Kelly et al. (1994). It explores a particular example of women's oppression: the exploitation of the unpaid work of mothers of young children. The aims of the research include advancing understanding of the topic, and contributing to change. I used my own experience of living as a woman with children as a starting point and combined that

knowledge with my skills and experience as a female academic to design and carry out a study that is both theoretical and practical. During the research, I have written articles and given presentations to give others access to my work in order to contribute to making a difference in the social conditions I have studied¹⁰. This process of communicating my research findings will continue.

Reinharz (1992) states that feminists use many different methods in their research, and there is no one 'feminist research method'. The identity of this study as feminist research lies in its overall approach, including the utilisation of feminist literature and theory to guide the research, and the attention paid to gender-based disadvantage, the material conditions of women's lives, and the thoughts and narratives of women experiencing the circumstances under study.

According to Liz Kelly (1988), distinguishing features of feminist research include the questions we ask, the way we locate ourselves within our questions, and the purpose of our work. The questions asked in this research are about change. These questions have guided the research to produce knowledge that can be used to make a difference in women's lives in the future. My location within the research is as an informed researcher, with personal experience of the subject of the research. One of the criticisms of feminist academic work is that it often generalises from the experience, understanding and analysis of a narrow, privileged segment of the community (Stanley & Wise 1990:28). I have been careful to avoid this over-generalisation. Within this research, my own life experience provides a point of connection. Since my experience is that of only one person it is not central to the research. My own experiences and my feminist agenda contribute to the quality of the research, by providing me with enough first-hand knowledge to utilise grounded concepts and constructs in my analysis of the material. However, I have been careful to maintain a sense of my own experiences as background to the research, rather than using the research as a vehicle for self-exploration.

¹⁰ See Appendix 4 for a list of presentations and publications.

My location as an informed researcher provides me with the tools and the willingness to challenge what Mary Maynard, in discussing epistemology and the nature of feminist knowledge, has called ‘men’s power to create the world from their own point of view, which then becomes the truth to be described ... Feminism not only challenges this partiality; it also critiques the purported generality, disinterestedness and universality of male accounts’ (Maynard 1994:18). This research challenges male-centred views of the world, as identified by a number of authors. These male-centred views in relation to care of young children are embedded in:

- the institutions of state, market and family (Bryson 1992)
- the gendered division of paid and unpaid work (Bittman 1995, Probert 1989)
- dominant views and definitions of what constitutes economic activity (Waring 1997, Ironmonger 1989)
- ideas about the appropriate responsibilities of motherhood (Cox 1999)
- expectations that women will bear children regardless of the consequences for them (McDonald 2000b)
- the widespread assumption that matters to do with care of young children are women’s business (Bone 2001)
- present avenues for participation in community and public life (Lawrence 2001).

My location in my questions includes my status as an experienced mother with a range of relevant experiences with my own children, with relative poverty and relative affluence, with social work, as an avid reader about and discussor of issues for over 20 years, as someone who has listened extensively to women and men from a whole range of backgrounds, and as a university academic. I am inspired by knowing from my own experience that the taken-for-granted reality at one time can be dramatically overturned by twenty years later. In the research I aim to contribute to a vision for the future by exploring in detail the possibilities as to what this might mean (Maynard 1994).

One of the aims of this study is to engage in an ‘interpretive and synthesising process which *connects* experience to understanding’ (Maynard 1994:24). The starting point

for the research process was the synthesising and interpreting work already begun in connecting my own experience with the literature and with public policy. The work of connecting experience to understanding continued throughout the research process. This process has involved gathering together ideas for change from eight leading social policy thinkers in Australia, and bringing those ideas to groups of women, who would otherwise have had no opportunity to discuss them, to obtain their reactions and feedback regarding the suggestions for change. The research created the opportunity for interaction between the experience and understanding of high-profile social commentators and researchers and the experience and understanding of women engaged in carrying out the work of caring for young children. Part of the feminist commitment of the research was to give respect and credibility to the expertise and experiences of the focus group participants as well as to that of the high-profile interviewees. As Mary Maynard (1994:20) states, drawing on the work of Ramazanoglu (1989):

The terms 'feminist' and 'women's' are often used interchangeably in the literature and, although a feminist approach is almost definitionally one which starts out from women's experiences, most women are not feminists and would not necessarily agree with accounts of the social world generated from a feminist stance.

The overall approach of the research is feminist, and that commitment includes seeking the views of women who do not identify themselves as feminist.

Reflexivity in the research

Before formally commencing this research, I spent many years becoming familiar with the work of caring for young children and its impacts on the women involved. This early, informal stage of the research included reflection on my own experiences of caring for young children (in Australia, in both the 1970s and the 1990s). It also included listening extensively to other women whom I met through my personal networks or my practice as a social worker, and reading a range of literature including personal accounts and opinion pieces in magazines and newspapers, professional literature regarding working with families, and social policy literature – books, issues papers and pamphlets – about women, employment and childcare. Feminist comment

always appealed most to my value system, and the impetus for the research came when I tried to implement what I perceived to be a feminist praxis of combining economic independence with caring for my mid-life baby.

As with research questions in many fields of scholarship, my questions arose when I applied theory to a practice situation and obtained a result that was different from what I expected. The theory I was applying was (my understanding of) the feminist position that it would be possible for a single mother in Australia in the 1990s to be economically independent by engaging in full-time employment and utilising childcare arrangements. Looking back, I can see that my 'theory' was not particularly rigorous, drawing more on media and bureaucratic representations of a feminist position than it did on what feminists had actually written on the topic, and assigning 'a position' to feminism. Similarly, throughout the research, among the women I spoke to socially and in my focus groups, I found an influential popular concept of what feminism stands for. This popular concept seems to have a separate existence from the body of literature detailing what feminists have written on various topics, and the diversity of views within feminism.

The research arose from my feminist consciousness as it existed at the time, and the process of carrying out the research has developed and changed that consciousness in a reflexive way. According to Gerda Lerner (1993:274):

Feminist consciousness consists of (1) the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group and that, as members of such a group, they have suffered wrongs; (2) the recognition that their condition of subordination is not natural but societally determined; (3) the development of a sense of sisterhood; (4) the autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their condition; and (5) the development of an alternate vision for the future.

My own attempt at combining economic independence with care of a young child made me question whether it is a realistic option for women. Once I spoke with other women and explored the literature a little more, I became convinced that my personal experience was indicative of a broader social problem. It seemed that, in spite of the impact of second-wave feminism, the responsibility for young children was still having very painful and limiting impacts on women's lives. My previous exposure to

feminist and progressive social work literature gave me the conceptual tools to think about the nature of the societal determination of this example of women's subordination. I was already aware of a sense of sisterhood among mothers. This research is an attempt to utilise my dual connection with motherhood and scholarship to contribute towards 'the autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their condition; and ... the development of an alternate vision for the future' (Lerner 1993:274).

My research proposal included an explicit commitment to reflexivity, and that commitment has had impacts on my positioning, my concept of the aims of the research, and on the methods utilised. Early in the research process, I was positioning myself as an advocate for mothers of young children, keen to bring their voices and experiences into the academic arena. At this early stage it seemed to me that mothers knew that what they were doing was work, but that academics and policy-makers treated it as non-work. It also seemed to me that the women's movement treated responsibility for young children as something that could be replaced by childcare services, freeing women to participate alongside men in the responsibilities and rewards of paid work. Once I explored the literature further it became evident that women's voices had been documented by academics, and that the economic value of unpaid work was well accepted, at least by CST-oriented academics. Similarly, the feminist literature was much more diverse than I had thought. These discoveries relieved me of the need to be an advocate, and led to a questioning of the aims of the research. Since other researchers had clearly articulated the issues, there was no need for me to do so. Others had identified the need for change, but an agenda for change and an articulation of pathways towards change seemed elusive. My role as researcher, with my 'dual citizenship' as both academic and mother became that of drawing together and synthesising the ideas for change of some of the academics and public commentators who had already recognised the issues, and providing the opportunity for groups of mothers of young children to interact with those ideas, testing them out in relation to their daily-life experiences.

In those early stages of the project when I was positioning myself as advocate and bringer of mothers' voices to the academic literature, I commenced data collection with mothers of young children and found that they did not have the 'answers' to their own situation. This experience, along with my engagement with the literature led to the change of focus towards ideas for change, and that led to a change in the data collection plan. In the early stages of the research I conducted three focus groups and found that my expectations of the participants had been unrealistic. My original plan had been to go to the women carrying out the work of caring for young children, recognising them as the experts on their own experience. I thought that drawing out their insights and ideas would illuminate possible pathways towards a better future, and with some further consultation could contribute to an agenda for change. In 1996, I commenced data collection regarding ideas for change in the social arrangements for caring for young children by conducting three focus groups¹¹, asking the participants:

1. What are your arrangements for caring for your young children?
2. What is good about your arrangements?
3. What is not so good about your arrangements?
4. What would make things better for you?

I provided the participants with information about my research to stimulate their thinking prior to the focus-group discussions. Please see Appendix 1 for copies of all documents used with this first round of focus groups.

Following the three early focus groups, I realised that the participants were very well able to articulate their areas of dissatisfaction with the societal arrangements within which they cared for their young children. However, their ideas for change seemed more limited than ideas put forward in the literature. They wanted more respect and recognition, more sharing of responsibility with their male partners, better support services and better facilities. Although they knew that the economic arrangements were clearly on the agenda for my research, they had no suggestions for change in this area. They saw the material conditions of their lives as a given, to be worked around

¹¹ See the following section on 'Methods of data collection and analysis' for details of information, consent and data gathering procedures in relation to focus groups.

rather than as a target for change. The participants were experts on their own experience, but their experience was limited. All of the participants could be considered novice mothers. They commonly spoke of the steep learning curve following the birth of their children. Few of the participants had any experience of social arrangements that were significantly different from those they were experiencing. Given the demanding and unsupported nature of the role of mother, they reported working very hard at arranging their own lives in a sustainable way. I sadly realised that my expectations of these focus groups had been unrealistic. ‘The autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their condition; and ... the development of an alternate vision for the future’ (Lerner 1993:274) would clearly take a much longer and more extensive process than was possible in this research.

Following consultation with supervisors, a revised methodology was developed. Originally, I planned to compare the views of focus-group participants with those of people with recognised academic and/or professional expertise in the field. These publicly-recognised people have spent many years researching Australian social conditions and the disadvantages for women that are inherent in those social conditions, and thinking about change that would improve conditions for women. Clearly it was unrealistic to expect groups of mothers with first-hand experience rather than systematic study to generate ideas with similar sophistication to those of the high-profile individuals. In view of the limitations of the focus groups already conducted, it was decided to interview eight high-profile Australians who had spoken publicly and/or written critically about the situation of mothers of young children first, and then to present their ideas for change to focus groups for reaction. This gave the opportunity for the focus-group participants to interact with ideas for change in material conditions rather than the researcher accepting that they had nothing to say on the topic.

This revised research design proved successful. All eight of the identified high-profile Australian social policy commentators agreed to participate and were very generous with their time and ideas. The interviews with them were conducted and analysed. A

summary list of ideas from the interviews was presented to each of the second-round focus groups. This approach was vindicated in that once focus-group participants were exposed to the ideas and had the chance to ask questions about them, they contributed abundantly to the discussions of those ideas. Details of the interview and focus-group findings are included in Chapters 5 and 6. The following section of this chapter provides details of the methods and techniques used in the study.

Methods of data collection and analysis

The data collection methods of semi-structured interviews and focus groups were chosen because they allow participants to express their thoughts and ideas (Reinharz 1992). The interest in the respondents' ideas is qualitative rather than quantitative. The research seeks to find out how people understand the ideas and why they think they would make a difference rather than quantifying the level of support for any particular idea. Statements could be followed up by the researcher to elicit more information about participants' understandings of the ideas under discussion. The prepared agendas for interviews and discussions provided enough structure and focus to ensure that the data collected were relevant to the study, without closing off possibilities of new ideas entering the discussions. The following paragraphs provide details of recruitment, conduct of the interviews and focus groups, and subsequent data analysis.

Interviews with high-profile social commentators

On the basis of my knowledge of the literature and consultation with supervisors, eight high-profile Australian social policy commentators were invited to contribute to the research. All had published work that explicitly acknowledged women's exploitation in the social arrangements for caring for young children and advocated egalitarian change to these arrangements. All of these individuals were clearly willing and able to think outside of conventional streams of thought. The people approached to participate included four sociologists, an economist, a demographer, a journalist and a politician. People from more than one disciplinary background and from more

than one sphere of influence were included to give the research as broad a coverage as possible, consistent with the orientation of the research towards progressive rather than conservative thought. The people approached to participate were:

- Emeritus Professor Lois Bryson, Research Centre for Gender and Health, University of Newcastle and Adjunct Professor, School of Social Sciences and Planning, RMIT University.
- Professor Belinda Probert, School of Social Sciences and Planning, RMIT University
- Ms Eva Cox, Senior Lecturer, Department of Writing, Journalism and Social Inquiry, University of Technology, Sydney.
- Mr Michael Bittman, Senior Research Fellow, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney.
- Associate Professor Duncan Ironmonger, Head, Household Economic Research Unit, Department of Economics, University of Melbourne.
- Professor Peter McDonald, Head, Demography and Sociology Program, Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University, Canberra.
- Ms Pamela Bone, Associate Editor, *The Age* newspaper, Melbourne.
- Dr Carmen Lawrence MP, Federal Member for Fremantle, Opposition (Australian Labor Party) Spokesperson on the Status of Women.

I wrote to each of these people, enclosing a brief statement about my research and a copy of an article published in *Just Policy* (Grace 2001a). They all agreed to be interviewed. Each interview was conducted in late 2001 in a location chosen by the interviewee, usually his or her own office, but a favourite coffee shop in one instance (See Appendix 2 for a sample letter, research information, article and a sample interview schedule). Because the aim of these ‘expert consultations’ (Sarantakos 1998) was to explore the thoughts and ideas of the respondents, interviews were chosen as the most appropriate form of data collection (Reinharz 1992). Although much more expensive than mailed surveys because of travel costs as well as the cost of the researcher’s time, the interviews yielded much more extensive and detailed data than could be expected on a written questionnaire. The researcher’s obvious investment of time and resources in each interview would have communicated to the interviewee the value placed on his or her contribution. Literature on research

interviews does not usually cover interviews with high-status individuals (Babbie 2001, Sarantakos 1998). However, clearly the courtesy of a personal interview provided an excellent outcome in this research, and yielded ideas and statements in addition to those already published by the respondents. These were some of Australia's foremost public intellectuals whose published works indicated that they had given critical thought to the social arrangements for care of young children. The interviews provided the opportunity to explore their published ideas further and to find out about any additional ideas they had developed.

The interview schedules were individually prepared for each of the interviewees, and were emailed to them one week prior to the interview. The first question on the schedule referred to the published work of the interviewee. The remainder of the interview schedule was used as a guide, asking how they became interested in the topic and why they thought it was important, what was their vision for a better future, how they thought we might get from where we are now to that better future, and what barriers they could perceive to the changes they desired. Prior to each interview, consent was sought to tape-record, transcribe and utilise the interview material in the research (see Consent Form A, Appendix 2). After transcribing, the transcripts were coded and a summary of each interview was prepared. In order to verify the researcher's interpretation of the data (Miles and Huberman 1994), each summary was sent to the relevant interviewee, with a request to check and notify me of any changes. The email sent with the summary emphasised that the purpose of the summary was to represent the views of the interviewee and encouraged the interviewees to add to or modify the summaries as they saw fit. A second consent form including agreement to be identified by name in the research was sent, with a self-addressed reply-paid return envelope (see Consent Form B, Appendix 3). The interviewees approved the summaries and requested very few changes. They all consented to being identified by name in the research.

Following the data reduction procedure of preparing the interview summaries (Miles and Huberman 1994), further analysis was carried out, identifying topic areas covered (eg labour market participation) and ideas within that topic (eg support, education and

training for women re-entering employment following time out to care for young children). The interview summaries were coded, and a matrix was prepared detailing what each interviewee said about each of the identified topics, and this was used in the preparation of 'Chapter 5: Interview Findings'. A summary list of suggestions for change was developed and checked with the interview transcripts to ensure adequate coverage. These suggestions for change were taken to focus groups for reaction and comment (see Appendix 3, Focus group questions, for the list of suggestions).

Second-round focus groups

The purpose of the focus groups was to obtain reactions from women involved in carrying out the work of caring for young children to the suggestions from the high-profile interviewees. Participants were recruited in ways designed to maximise the diversity of participants. Details regarding the characteristics of the focus-group participants are included in 'Chapter 6: Focus-group findings'. A networking approach was used for recruiting participants. As I discussed my research with a range of people whom I met in my everyday life, a number of them offered to organise focus groups. Each focus group consisted of people known to the organiser. Only one of the group participants (in addition to the organisers) was already known to myself, indicating that the recruitment procedure gave the research access to networks outside my own circle.

Bloor et al. (2001) discuss options regarding size of groups and whether groups of strangers work better than groups of people who already know each other. They state that no one combination has been shown to be better than another, and report credible research with groups varying in size from three to fourteen participants. They identify advantages and disadvantages of both groups of strangers and those already known to each other. Large groups of strangers, they state, are often preferred by market research companies as an economical alternative to individual interviews. The advantage lies in the possibility of tapping into a greater range of views in the time taken for one interview, compared with the possibly more homogeneous views of existing groups. The disadvantage lies in the lack of trust and understanding of each others' perceptions, leading to lesser possibilities for exploring ideas and having in-

depth discussions. In relation to size of groups, Bloor et al. (2001) suggest that smaller groups may be better than larger groups for dealing with complex topics. They state that large groups may be difficult to facilitate, and participants may experience frustration at insufficient time and opportunity to express their views. However, they point to the danger of cancellation of groups if only a few people are invited, and the possibility that discussions will be very limited if some participants in a small group are shy or reticent.

In this research the focus groups consisted mainly of people who already knew each other. The advantage of having participants comfortable enough to discuss a fairly personal topic in some depth was considered more important than the risk of limiting the range of views within focus groups. To ensure coverage of a range of views, twelve focus groups were conducted. Some participants met each other for the first time at the focus groups, but each group quickly developed a supportive atmosphere with a level of trust that facilitated open discussion without over-disclosure. Procedures used to facilitate this style of discussion are described below. It seems likely that the mutual connection with the focus-group organiser gave the participants a sense of belonging to the same network, even if they did not already know each other. The issue of homogeneity of views was dealt with by recruiting the different focus groups from within geographically and culturally diverse networks.

In relation to size, I initially set a maximum size of eight participants and a minimum size of three as likely to produce the kind of discussion required for the research, based on my previous experience as a social worker and as an academic in facilitating group discussions. During the research I found that groups of three or four participants worked best. All the participants were eager to share their views, and even shy or reticent participants had plenty to say on the topics. In the larger groups, the shy or reticent participants tended to have difficulty breaking into the discussion. I could facilitate their participation to an extent, but particularly when some participants were talkative, I found that the research did not gain the full benefit of what the less talkative participants had to contribute. On two occasions, only two participants attended a group. More had accepted, but had been unable to attend at the last minute,

usually because of family responsibilities. I went ahead with these discussions, to show my appreciation of the people who did attend, and to maximise the number of participants and the views represented in the research. These small discussions lasted for about 40 minutes each, compared with about 1 hour 20 minutes for the larger groups. The material included in these small discussions was useful and relevant for the research. On one occasion, a participant who had been unable to attend the scheduled group was very eager to contribute, and an individual discussion was conducted with her.

Nine focus groups were conducted in the second round, making a total of twelve focus groups for the research, including forty-three participants. Data from the first round of focus groups was included in the analysis because some of it was very relevant, particularly in providing examples of the conditions of life that caused hardship for the participants. During the research I found that the focus groups were attracting few full-time employed mothers and few single mothers, probably because I was usually unable to provide childcare. To counteract this trend, I approached the committee of the childcare centre one of my children had attended when he was younger, and where I had served on the committee. They readily agreed to my conducting two focus groups at the centre. Because the children were being cared for at the centre during the focus groups, mothers were attracted who otherwise may not have been able to attend. Groups were conducted in Queensland in Brisbane and Townsville (3), around Melbourne in Melton, Brunswick (2), Footscray (2), and St Albans (2) and in Dereel in country Victoria.

Once an organiser had agreed to arrange a focus group, I briefed her about the process, we set a date, and I provided invitations, information and a copy of a journal article (Grace 2001a) for her to distribute to each participant. At the beginning of each focus group, participants were informed of the procedures, the risks to them of participating, their right to withdraw from the discussion at any time, and were offered debriefing following the discussion if required. The risks of participating included the possibility that participants would feel dissatisfied with their circumstances following the discussion, and the possibility that they would disagree with each other,

potentially damaging established relationships. They were also advised of the possibility of over-disclosure (Bloor et al. 2001), and advised to monitor and control their own level of self-disclosure. They were advised that if they felt uncomfortable during or at the end of the group discussion regarding their level of disclosure they could mention this to the group and ask for what they had said to be treated with the utmost respect. A confidentiality agreement was negotiated with each group, acknowledging that it would be desirable for them to discuss the issues outside the group, but agreeing to protect each others' privacy if any personal material was disclosed in the course of the discussion. I gave examples of how they could discuss issues raised in the group without repeating personal information. I explained that the discussion would be tape-recorded, that a transcript of the tape would be prepared, and that what they said could be used in my thesis, and in subsequent publications and presentations including media interviews. They were informed that I would choose pseudonyms for them, and would protect their privacy in my reporting of their comments. Following the detailed briefing, participants completed consent forms and demographic data forms (see Appendix 3 for copies of all documents used with this second round of focus groups).

Each focus group was tape-recorded, and the tapes were transcribed in full. The QSR Nud*ist Vivo (Qualitative Solutions & Research Pty Ltd 1999) software program was used in the analysis of the focus-group data. A coding tree was prepared, using codes developed during the analysis of the interview data. Each transcript was fully coded, and codes were added to the tree as necessary. Each node was printed, and these hard copies were coded further using highlighter pens and margin notations. 'Chapter 6: Focus Group findings' was prepared directly from these print-outs.

Ethical considerations

This study received ethics approval from the relevant Victoria University committee. The research was carried out under supervision, with a commitment on the part of supervisors and researcher to high standards of ethical conduct in all aspects of the research. Details are provided here of the competence of the researcher, the

procedures to ensure informed consent by participants, and the protection of the welfare of the participants.

Ethical standards of the research design and competence of the researcher

The Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee (AVCC) states that research should conform to the highest ethical standards, and that researchers should conduct only research that they are competent to perform (AVCC 1990). The ethical standards included in the design of this research were ensured by the Victoria University processes of candidature approval and ethics approval, both of which required review of the proposed research by a number of academic colleagues. Research activities included interviewing high-profile individuals, and conducting focus groups. My qualifications, experience and demonstrated competence in social work and academic work provided a sound basis for the work of interviewing high-profile individuals and conducting focus groups.

Informed consent

Procedures for obtaining informed consent were quite different for the two groups of participants, the high-profile interviewees and the focus-group participants. Research interviews usually involve offering anonymity, the right of the participant *not* to be identified in publications (Sarantakos 1998). However, in this research the status of the interviewees meant that they had spent many years developing their ideas, and those ideas could validly be considered their intellectual property, making them entitled to acknowledgment. The procedures used took account of this factor, but left the opportunity for the interviewees to remain anonymous if they so chose. The initial approach to the high-profile interviewees included information about the research, the procedures to be used in the research, and details of how the material from the interviews would be utilised in the research. A two-stage consent procedure was used. Consent Form A, completed just prior to the interview, gave consent for the interview,

and for the interview material to be used in the research. Consent Form B was sent at the time that the interview summary was sent to the interviewee. This second consent form gave permission for the interviewee to be personally identified in the research. At the interview, all interviewees indicated that they were happy to be identified, however this formal consent once they had a chance to read over the summary and make any changes ensured that they had a appropriately high degree of control over material that would be attributed to them.

The procedures for the focus groups were much more conventional, with participants receiving written information about the research prior to the focus groups, being informed on the day about how the focus-group material would be used in the research and about the procedures for the group including their right to decline to answer questions or to withdraw from the discussion at any time. They were assured that their anonymity and privacy would be protected in all publications based on the research.

Welfare of participants

Sarantakos (1998) draws attention to the responsibility of researchers to give adequate consideration to the welfare of research participants. The welfare of the high-profile interviewees was protected by clear and open communication of the purpose, design and procedures of the research, by giving them the opportunity to participate anonymously if desired, and by sending them summaries of their interviews before obtaining final consent for them to be identified in the research. They were sent the interview schedules prior to the interviews to enable them to gather their thoughts and decide what to say, and were given the opportunity to edit the interview summaries to ensure that their views were accurately represented in the research. All dealings with the interviewees were clear and respectful. Interview arrangements were made carefully with the main consideration being the convenience of the interviewee. Arrangements were not changed except at the request of the interviewee.

The welfare of focus-group participants was protected by providing clear information about the research in advance of the groups. Research procedures and how the material would be used in the research were explained before the groups. Participants were notified of potential risks, and there was discussion of how to manage those risks (see above). Participants were offered further discussion with the researcher and referral for professional help if required in the case of any adverse reaction to participation in the groups. No participant requested this assistance. Feedback immediately following groups was very positive, indicating that the participants found the experience stimulating and worthwhile. This supports the researcher's competence to conduct the research, and the effectiveness of the procedures.

Limitations of the study

This is an exploratory and descriptive qualitative study focussing on ideas for change. It utilises a critical social theory framework, drawing particularly on feminist ideas. The study focuses on conditions in Australia at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. The findings are particular to this theoretical framework, location and time. Ideas for change that are inconsistent with the theoretical approach of this study have not been considered.

The research explores and describes a relevant range of ideas from high-profile social policy commentators, and from women engaged in carrying out the work of caring for young children. The interest in the ideas is qualitative rather than quantitative, with a focus on understanding the ideas and their implications rather than quantifying the support for any particular idea. Because this is an exploratory and descriptive study, it explores in depth the views of a limited number of people rather than surveying a representative sample of the population. Any such sample would be much larger than the number of participants in this study. Obtaining the views of a large sample would require a different methodology such as a written questionnaire, and would lose the possibility of interactive development of understandings and ideas that are crucial to the methodology of this study.

The disadvantage of the relatively small number of participants is the danger of interacting with only a narrow segment of the population, with the accompanying risk that the views incorporated in the research are too homogeneous, and miss other, possibly widely-held views. Efforts were made, as detailed earlier, to avoid homogeneity of respondents, but more extensive research is required to ensure coverage of ideas. Similarly, more quantitatively-oriented research with a representative sample of Australian mothers of young children would be necessary to gauge support for the ideas covered in this research.

Efforts were made to ensure diversity within the focus groups. However, too few women from particular groups were included for the researcher to be confident that issues particular to those groups are adequately covered in the research. These groups include Indigenous women, rural women, women for whom English is not their first language, single women, women with disabilities and lesbian women.

Because people are always developing their ideas, the ideas of the people interviewed within this research will change with time. Other ideas will emerge, and other implications of ideas will be explained. This research aims to contribute to understanding of the issues and to a coherent agenda for change. However, this contribution is tentative and further work is required to document fully the material conditions of Australian mothers of young children and to test support for ideas for change.

Summary

This research is an exploratory and descriptive qualitative study of ideas for change to improve the economic independence of mothers of young children. Within an overall feminist approach, methods utilised include interviews and focus-group discussions. Visions for the future, ideas for change and barriers to change were sought from eight high-profile social commentators whose published comments are consistent with the contemporary CST framework of this study. Ideas from these interviews were collated, summarised, and taken to focus groups of women who are responsible for the care of young children. At the conclusion of this process, the ideas from the

interviews and the responses from the focus-group participants were further analysed in relation to the idea of a coherent agenda for change, as developed for this research and discussed in 'Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework'.

The chapters that follow present details of the ideas put forward by the high-profile interviewees and the reactions of the focus-group participants to those ideas. The final chapter includes a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature and theory identified in earlier chapters, and draws conclusions about a possible coherent agenda for change.

CHAPTER 5

SOCIAL COMMENTATORS' IDEAS FOR CHANGE

Interviews were conducted with eight Australians who have written about the unpaid work of caring for young children and its impact on women's lives. Each of these people is well known in his or her own field and more broadly within the general community. The interviewees' previously published comments included a range of ideas, with each individual drawing on his or her own research and thinking. They were chosen for coverage of a range of ideas, and because their published comments seemed consistent with the contemporary CST approach of this study. All have questioned the status quo and taken-for-granted ways of seeing the world. All have named the exploitation and disadvantage suffered by mothers of young children, and all have indicated that they see 'institutions, ideologies and social processes and practices' (Mullaly 2002:9) as targets for change rather than the more conservative approach of targeting the individuals experiencing the problems.

The interviewees in this study are sociologists Lois Bryson, Belinda Probert, Eva Cox and Michael Bittman, economist Duncan Ironmonger, demographer Peter McDonald, journalist Pamela Bone and politician Carmen Lawrence. The interviews were structured to find out how each person became interested in the area and why they think it is important, their vision for a better future, their ideas about pathways towards a better future including both broad social change directions and specific policy strategies, and what they see as barriers to change. The first part of this section introduces each interviewee, describing his or her perspective on the topic of this research and his or her vision for a better future. Whereas this first part is organised by interviewee, the second part is organised by topic. The second part takes particular suggestions for change and presents the range of views expressed by the interviewees in relation to that suggestion.

Interviewees' interest, perspective and vision

All interviewees had developed an interest in the area over a long period of time, at least 20 years and usually longer. All the female interviewees mentioned their own life experience as having stirred their interest and informed their views. All of the interviewees were asked to participate in this study because their published comments indicated a similar theoretical framework to that utilised in this research, including a willingness to recognise examples of women's inequality and disadvantage in contemporary society and an orientation towards bringing about change to redress that disadvantage. However, each clearly viewed the topic through the lens of his or her own research and professional interests.

Professor Emeritus Lois Bryson of the Research Centre for Gender and Health, University of Newcastle and Adjunct Professor, School of Social Sciences and Planning, RMIT University, sees women's inequality as embedded in intertwined and complex ways in the institutions of the labour market, the welfare state, and the family, to the point of impasse, with no clear and obvious agenda that would be effective in achieving equality. She would like to envision a better future and in a way considers herself well placed to be able to do so, and almost expects it of herself. However, she considers that even the European countries with social democratic policies have not been able to achieve equality for women, and there is no clear image of what would bring that change, but she is working on it. Her views have developed over many years as a sociologist, and have been influenced by personal as well as professional experiences. She recalls the experiences of women like her mother, who was forced by the legislation of the time to give up a promising public service career upon her marriage, and who, in a way, mourned the loss of that career for the rest of her life. She remembers creative and capable women who scrimped and saved to make do with very limited economic resources, while the men in their lives were never short of money for their smokes and beers and bets.

Bryson sees herself as having gained an orientation towards social change and skills in activism by her involvement in second-wave feminism. She celebrates the many gains of the women's movement, but sees that despite many of the desired changes having been legislated, women still do not have equality.

In Bryson's vision of a better future people would be identified much less as gendered family members, and more as individuals, but she has no desire to go in the direction of rampant individualism and economic rationalism. She sees a need for changes in relation to childcare, employment, social security, education/training and taxation, and believes that a 'whole of government' approach is necessary rather than fragmented and possibly contradictory initiatives.

Professor Belinda Probert, School of Social Sciences and Planning, RMIT University, in the 2001 Clare Burton lecture, referred to the 'loss of momentum in the gender equality agenda, and the existence of visible and damaging conflicts between women over family life and the care of children', and called for 'the development of a coherent family policy across the traditionally separate portfolios of industrial relations and social security' (Probert 2001:1). Probert became interested in these issues because her own research has shown that people are finding it harder to work and have family lives. She has found that workplace change is giving some women more opportunities, but that workplace experience has become one of work intensification, longer hours and more demands. Her many surveys in different industries show that women and some men are having great difficulty in being both the parents and the workers they want to be.

Probert has found, paradoxically, that in the 1990s women talk enthusiastically about wanting to have employment and careers, but they also think that young children should be cared for by their mother or a mother substitute. In resolving this paradox it seems that Australian mothers have become polarised into two groups, those who try to manage the two commitments, and those who have a clear ideology of being mothers first. Between the two groups, Probert found a gulf in empathy and

understanding, and a judgmental framework rather than a pragmatic or policy framework for discussion. She states:

Women are very critical of each other. Women who stay at home are more critical of women who work than visa-versa but there's also the case that women who work tend to be baffled by anybody who would want to stay at home.

Probert believes that the fact that women are finding it very difficult to manage work and family is somehow linked with the moral and judgmental division among women. She sees this division as a barrier to getting better policy, because even among feminists there is no consensus on the issues, as demonstrated by recent rather hostile exchanges in the media.

In Probert's vision for a better future, economic security for women is vital. She envisions more generous financial support to mothers who need it, financial incentives to remain attached to the labour market and provisions enabling both parents to withdraw strongly from the labour market when their children are young. In addition, Probert believes that we need changes in workplace cultures, legitimising parents' everyday concerns such as going home on time and taking time off work when children are sick.

In a 1999 article in *Refractory Girl*, **Ms Eva Cox**, Senior Lecturer, Department of Writing, Journalism and Social Inquiry, University of Technology, Sydney, presented her vision for a future where men and women could participate in a balanced mix of paid work, caring work and collective involvement in political and community affairs. In addition to her well-known advocacy for more accessible affordable childcare, she stated that we need more women in positions of power and leadership, and that a system still geared to men and male values is holding us back. Cox's opinions are informed by her own life experience as well as by over 30 years of sociological research. She was a sole parent from the time her now adult daughter was four years old, and has always been the family's breadwinner. Her extensive and long-term social activism, political advocacy, and academic teaching have all provided

opportunities to develop her views, and she is widely recognised as an Australian feminist activist and social commentator.

Cox believes that we need to examine current models of child rearing in the light of changed social conditions. She states that current models of child rearing propose an unrealistic role for mothers, and a restricted range of experiences for children:

We still get sold the idea that motherhood is something you do on your own. It comes in the popular media. There's still a very strong pressure on women to pick up that traditional role and I think it has become stronger over the last few years.

Cox sees Australia as 'not a particularly child-friendly society'. She draws attention to social changes that have reduced Australian mothers' access to supportive informal networks of people who would share parenting with them. She sees the resulting isolation as destructive for both mothers and children. Cox's research and community activities have brought her face-to-face with the frustration, anger and resentment experienced by many mothers of young children because of the excessive demands and expectations placed on them. Cox recommends:

We must acknowledge both the fact that we're not perfect and nobody can expect us to be perfect. It is good to recognise our fragilities as mothers and then we can recognise that there are real benefits for kids in spending some time with other adults who like doing different things. It's not changing the notion of motherhood but it's being much more realistic about the limits of any one person spending time with one or two small children.

Cox has for years been intrigued by the misperception that feminism or the women's movement constantly denigrates women who choose to stay at home with their children. 'I think there's a sort of false dichotomy that gets set up by women who stay at home assuming they are being judged and putting words and ideas in our mouths.' Cox is a well-known advocate of accessible affordable children's services, but she emphasises that she also recognises the importance of loving relationships between parents and children:

The closeness of good relationships, however, does not necessarily correlate with the time spent, i.e. more time more love. In fact, I would maintain time away, if not too

stressful and limited, makes for better qualities of relationships, as the time together tends to be more precious and valued. Obviously the younger the child, the more time they need, particularly infants. But even these can cope with other carers, if the bonds are strong. So trusting your ability to make good relationships, even without full-time attention is part of learning good emotional skills.

Cox's vision for a better future would include more and better services and supports for parents and young children, and changed ideas about mothering and the value of formal childcare. 'Kids need other kids, mothers need other adults, but this doesn't mean I think that women should work full-time with young kids. I think it's too hard.'

In *The Double Life of the Family*, **Mr Michael Bittman**, Senior Research Fellow, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney, and his colleague Jocelyn Pixley (1997), put forward a strong case that caring for children produces a public benefit, and that the costs of the high levels of care required by young children are borne predominantly by the mothers who provide most of that care. Bittman's interest stems from his years of research into time use and unpaid work. Looking at housework, broadly defined to include outdoor work and tasks such as car maintenance as well as indoor work, childcare and shopping, he found that women did twice as much as men. He found that when men reduce paid working hours, they increase leisure hours, but that women in a similar situation increase their unpaid work. He found little difference in hours of unpaid work between women not in the labour market and women in part-time employment. Thinking about these and other findings, he believes that responsibility for unpaid work acts as a barrier to women's labour market participation. He states: 'When you look at lifetime earnings then the swap away from full-time employment or even discontinuous employment seems to have a lasting effect'. He has come to the conclusion that full-time employment puts women in the strongest position, both in terms of limiting their excessive unpaid work, and in securing their economic independence.

Bittman found that men's unpaid work stayed steady at about 20 hours per week over the life course, with little variation unless they outlived wives. Women's unpaid work, on the other hand, rose dramatically on marriage, rose even more dramatically on the

birth of a first child, dropped when the youngest child started school, continued to drop as the children aged, then rose again when husbands retired. Examining reasons for the gender differences in paid work, unpaid work and leisure, Bittman found that men in the 1990s claim to believe in gender equality in relation to housework, and explain their own unequal arrangements, not in gender-role terms of 'men's work' and 'women's work' as people did a generation earlier, but in terms of expertise or individual preferences. Looking at his own findings and other research, Bittman characterises women's situation in relation to housework as 'locked bargaining', with men unlikely to share equally in unpaid work unless women take up full-time employment. He sees market substitutes for unpaid work such as restaurant meals as important in establishing new, more equal lifestyles. He found, curiously, that technology such as washing machines and microwave ovens did not reduce time spent on unpaid work. In considering what social arrangements would both improve women's economic independence and reduce their responsibility for unpaid work, Bittman has looked at conditions in Scandinavian countries as most likely to suggest possibilities for Australia. He has examined the situation in Finland in some detail.

Bittman's vision for a better future would include equity between parental households and non-parental households as well as between women and men.

At the 2001 IATUR¹² international conference in Oslo, **Associate Professor Duncan Ironmonger** (2001), Head, Household Economic Research Unit, Department of Economics, University of Melbourne, presented a paper entitled 'Caring for kids: The greatest economic use of time'. When asked about his interest in this topic and why he thinks it is important, he replied 'I think really it's guilt. Guilt because I've been giving a wrong message.' He has spent the past twenty years researching the household economy. When he examined the 1974 time-use survey he found that childcare was about third in importance within the household. Since that time he has been saying that household meal production is the biggest industry in Australia. However, once he started to look at time-use in terms of parallel time the picture changed. He states:

¹² International Association for Time Use Research

A lot of the time-use in the household is simultaneous time or parallel time. We do more than one thing at once. You can do the shopping while you're looking after the kids. You can do the ironing while you're listening to the radio. In fact, in addition to the 50 million hours a week of childcare recorded as a primary activity we have another 150 million hours that is recorded while we're doing something else. We also have another method of collecting time-use data by what we call a stylised question. I ask you did you do any childcare yesterday, and you say you did so many hours of childcare and that would include whether you were doing something else at the same time. So those two approaches tell us that childcare is actually the most important use of our time.

In Ironmonger's vision of a better future, we would take an economic view of the world that includes more than the market economy:

Work includes all this work that's involved in the childcare, all the meals or the cleaning. The gross product should include all the valuable things that we do for ourselves even though we don't pay for them and it is perhaps a bit difficult to get a monetary value on them. It really has to be put on our agenda.

Ironmonger has identified some of the areas where a more complete view of the world would make a difference to public policy. These areas include childcare, conditions for unpaid work, age pension and superannuation provisions and volunteering.

In a recent article **Professor Peter McDonald** (2001b), Head, Demography and Sociology Program, Research School of Social Sciences, The Australian National University, Canberra, described Australia's system of supports to families raising children as fundamentally flawed, and called for a national work and family review to propose and cost a coherent system of policies. His interest in and commitment to the area has come from his demographic work, including cross-national studies of fertility rates in different advanced countries. In these studies a pattern emerged. He found most of the advanced countries had fertility below the replacement rate but some of them were a long way below. He started looking at the characteristics of the countries that had reasonable fertility rates (around 1.7, 1.8, 1.9) compared with those that had very low fertility rates (around 1.2 and 1.3). The pattern emerging from those studies related to what McDonald calls gender equity. He found that countries with very low fertility rates tended to be holding on to the male breadwinner model of the family. Women in these countries had education and paid workforce opportunities but if they had children then it was difficult to combine work and family. Conversely, countries that could be characterised as having a higher level of gender equity, countries that looked to

support work and family had higher fertility rates. McDonald first wrote about this link between fertility rates and gender equity in 1997, and has been refining and developing his ideas since then.

McDonald believes that these issues are important for two reasons. The first is demographic:

Australia's fertility rate is around 1.75 children per woman now. That's not such a big issue for future population because we can quite readily balance off with migration. We don't face population decline with that fertility, but if the fertility rate were to fall below about 1.5 to anything like the European levels of 1.3 and 1.2, it becomes extremely hard to balance with migration because the levels of migration you need are way above what we're used to, they'd be huge. I don't argue that we should be trying to push the fertility rate up, much rather that we should be trying to stabilise it, trying to stop it falling any further, spiraling down to the levels in Western Europe and in Japan.

The second reason is the human reason:

We've shown from research that if you interview women in their early twenties and you ask them about how many children they want to have, they express a desire for two plus on average. So we're not producing young women through the school system and through their families who by the time they reach their early twenties don't want to have children, that's not the case. During their twenties they start to experience what it means if they do have a child and how their life is going to change and their fertility intentions start dropping downwards. In other words our social arrangements are frustrating what people want to do. People do want to have children and we're making it difficult for them to do so and that doesn't make for a healthy society.

To develop a vision for a better future, McDonald believes that we need to look more at international policy and practice as well as conducting a thorough inquiry into social conditions for parenting in Australia.

Ms Pamela Bone, Associate Editor, *The Age* newspaper, Melbourne, challenges the absence of fathers from debates about childcare. Bone became interested in the topic because she observed the vigorous debate going on about childcare in the Opinion pages of *The Age* and noted that it seemed to be taking place only among women although children have two parents. Bone's views have been influenced by her own life experience. She had four children while she was quite young in the late 1960s. At

that time it was not at all common for mothers to be in the paid workforce. Bone did not go out to work until her youngest child was nearly five and had part-time jobs for a while. She states that she did not really have the dilemma of childcare as mothers of young children do today. Bone's daughters are now having children and she sees the great difficulty they have trying to combine work and family. She states:

Women are a vital part of the workforce. The economy would collapse without women's employment and even without mothers' employment the economy would collapse. Approximately two-thirds of mothers are back in the workforce by the time their youngest child is three. Clearly mothers need and want employment. They want careers or at least jobs but they still want to have children and they experience the awful tension of trying to combine the two.

In advocating change, Bone states that it is important to keep in mind that no one measure will suit all circumstances. She sees the inclusion of fathers as vital, based on the accounts of many women who have talked to her. These women feel that they can cope with the job and picking the child up from crèche but they still bear the very large burden of everything that happens in the home including the washing and ironing, cooking and cleaning, and looking after the children. Bone agrees with Susan Maushart (2001, 1997) that mothers resent being expected to do the two jobs, and they become frustrated with men who are willing to 'help' rather than taking equal responsibility for children and household work. Bone sees some changes from when her children were young, but is disappointed that change is too slow.

In Bone's vision for a better future it would be taken for granted that childcare is an equal responsibility for men and women and that children are a benefit to the whole society and not just the parents who have them. She would like to see policies more like those in Scandinavian countries including very generous parental leave for mothers or fathers, very flexible working hours, a right of all workers to work part-time for the first five years of children's lives, and guarantees that if parents do decide to stay home totally for a few years to look after their children they can get back into the paid workforce. Bone thinks that a lot of women would really like to be at home with their children when they are tiny and some would like to be home until they go to school, but the risk is that if they drop out of the paid workforce they cannot get back in.

In her address to the Trades and Labor Council (ACT) women's breakfast on 6th June 2001, **Dr Carmen Lawrence** MP, Federal Member for Fremantle, Opposition Spokesperson on the Status of Women, outlined Australian Labor Party (ALP) strategies for key areas that affect women's lives. She included the situation of mothers of young children, paying attention to wages, childcare, working conditions, financial and community-based supports. Lawrence's interest in and commitment to these issues has developed over a long period of time, with a range of influences. At the personal level, these influences have included her qualification, practice and academic work as a psychologist, her own experience of being a mother of a now adult son, and observing her nieces and nephews with their children. As a politician she has listened to the concerns of many women and men in the community and has engaged in party processes of policy development. In the past twelve months, the ALP has engaged in a special effort to consult community organisations and groups as well as speaking to and surveying individual women to find out what matters to them.

As a feminist, Lawrence has always been keen to make sure that women's choices are maximised. This means supporting whatever aspirations women have for themselves, but at the same time encouraging women to think beyond conventional wisdom about what women can and cannot do. Her feminism informs a desire to see women's horizons expand even if they are initially a little tentative about that, and also to support the choices that women make even if they are not ones that she would make herself. Lawrence respects the choice that some women make to stay at home and care for their children, although it is not something she would have ever done herself except for brief periods. She contrasts this willingness to support a range of choices with the present government's support for women who want to stay at home with policies that make it harder for women to get back into the paid workforce if they want to.

As well as supporting a range of choices, Lawrence believes it is important not to lock women into choices that they have made at particular points in their lives:

What you want to do when your children are under two may be transformed by the time they're at school. Some women I know who stay at home with young children suddenly say 'Well actually I'd rather do a bit more with my life than simply be at home all day' and that is perfectly respectable and understandable. Women need support for their choices too in terms of retraining and access to affordable higher education to improve their skills. It needs to be made clear to women that you're not stuck with a choice that you made when you were younger, that there are other options available.

Lawrence's vision for a better future would include:

Expanding women's horizons and improving their participation – not that all women necessarily occupy positions that are seen as authoritative or powerful, although that's certainly important in a society like ours – but so that they can optimise their sense of self worth and achievement. Not every woman is necessarily going to find fulfilment in occupying positions in an elected body like a parliament or a boardroom, but if there are obstacles confronting women who want to make that choice then there are things that have to be changed. I want a future where there are no obstacles in the way of women, whatever their choices or philosophies, achieving the goals that they set out to, with some obvious exceptions like criminal activity. There is a need for stripping away of both attitudes and structural obstacles to women's participation, so that we have a life in which women are able to balance the very powerful rewards that come from the life of family and friendship, and the more prosaic achievement in the workforce which also is a source of satisfaction and fulfilment but which if carried to an extreme can actually choke off the very rewarding characteristics and outcomes that attach to a full family life.

Pathways towards a better future

In their publications all interviewees have challenged the social order of our times and advocated transformational change that would eliminate the social inequalities they have identified. In the interviews, they tended to cite social democratic governments in Scandinavian countries as having a philosophical approach and specific policy strategies much closer to an egalitarian ideal than those in Australia. However, they did not see simply adopting these approaches and policies as the solution to the situation in Australia. Lois Bryson stated that even the European countries with social democratic policies have not been able to achieve equality for women, and there is no clear image of what would bring that change. Carmen Lawrence emphasised the need

to consult widely in the Australian community as well as considering overseas policies and practices.

The interviewees suggested both broad transformational changes and specific changes in social policy provisions, workplace and industrial practices. Broad changes included Duncan Ironmonger's view that we need to change dominant ideas about what is economic activity, Eva Cox's idea that we need to challenge and change expectations of mothers and ideas about what is good for children, and a more general view, expressed in a variety of ways by the interviewees that we need to change the gender inequity that is embedded in our social structures and practices at many levels. Specific changes in social policy provisions, workplace and industrial practices identified by the interviewees included the need for much better financial and community-based support for mothers of young children, the need for changes to the underlying concept as well as the quality and affordability of formal childcare, an acceptance that mothers with babies would usually want and need some time away from employment, the idea that public policy should preserve mothers' right of return to their jobs if they took extended time away from employment, the idea of supporting gradual return to employment, fathers' sharing of the work of caring for young children, supporting mothers' return to employment at any time, removing financial disincentives for mothers' return to employment, and articulating the link between Australia's low fertility rate and the disadvantages of child-bearing.

The following section takes the themes of maternity leave, childcare, labour market participation, workplace and employment conditions, gender equity, pathways towards change and barriers to change, presenting the interviewees' views about changes that they would like to see in each of these areas.

Maternity leave

In the two months prior to the interviews, the Australian Catholic University announced its introduction of 12 months paid maternity leave for general staff, and there was a good deal of discussion in the media regarding paid maternity leave (for

example Baird 2001; Fyfe 2001; Gettler et al. 2001; Goward 2001; Milburn 2001a, 2001b; Sheehan 2001; Sherry 2001b; Sinclair 2001). Six of the eight interviewees specifically advocated paid maternity and/or paternity leave. They discussed questions of length of leave, incentives for fathers to take some of the leave, and how maternity/paternity leave would be funded. France, Norway, Sweden and Finland were all cited as having useful schemes. Generally, the interviewees supported at least 12 months' maternity leave on somewhere between 70% and 100% of previous salary, with provisions to ensure that women with previously low incomes would receive a social minimum sufficient to allow for a decent life, certainly more than current social security benefit levels. Michael Bittman and Peter McDonald drew attention to Norway's system of incentives and penalties to encourage fathers to take some paternity leave. Suggestions for funding maternity/paternity leave all acknowledged that individual employers should not bear the cost of an employee's leave. Options raised included some sort of national insurance scheme, possibly similar to Medicare or superannuation, with contributions from employers, employees and government. Philosophically, this would be based on the idea that children are a benefit to the whole society. Michael Bittman cited Nancy Folbre's idea that children produce a public good or public benefit, such that parents cannot prevent other people in the future from benefiting from the parental investment in children.

Different interviewees elaborated in different ways on ideas about paid maternity/paternity leave. Michael Bittman would like to see transformational change in the way that paid work, unpaid work and income are spread across the life course, across gender, and across parental and non-parental households. He sees this as a kind of smoothing to make life both more manageable and more egalitarian. Lois Bryson and Carmen Lawrence both saw the need for maternity/paternity leave as just one example of the need for change in relation to all kinds of caring work. Peter McDonald emphasised the importance of the intention of policy. Regarding Norway, he said:

It's their stated intention, they want them to stay at home, one of the parents at least when they've got a baby. Norway even encourages the father to stay at home for some of the time by having the arrangement where they don't get full payment unless he does stay at home so there's a big incentive in there for him to stay at home. They

have an extended leave policy so that you can continue your leave usually up to the time the child is three years old and still have a right of return to the job. When the child is one or two the policy is neutral, it's about saying well if you want to stay at home we'll provide you with some financial support to do that but if you want to go out to work then we'll provide you with the means to pay for childcare.

Carmen Lawrence emphasised the importance of flexibility in any scheme, to allow for a gradual and/or delayed return to employment.

Paid maternity leave was seen as quite different from wages for mothers. Both Lois Bryson and Eva Cox expressed their opposition to the idea of mothers' wages. Bryson has a long-held view that mothers' wages have too much potential to trap women in poverty and economic dependency. She emphasised the importance of eliminating poverty traps that act as disincentives for mothers taking paid employment at any time. Similarly, Eva Cox is very much against paying women to stay at home with their children:

The current government pays quite a lot of money to low income families if the mother is not in paid work and it's enough to actually create a barrier to her getting a job. If she takes a job, she is only going to earn low income and her childcare costs will be massive. The chances of adding a second income, which is often extremely good for both the mothers and children and for the family generally, is actually undermined.

Cox sees other provisions for families with children under five as reinforcing the idea that it must be a good thing to stay at home with your children because the government pays women to do it:

I've been saying this for years and interestingly some of the conservative groups agree with this, we need to do what they do in Europe and that is to pay a decent level of family allowance to all children which allows women to decide how they use that money but it is not income tested either for the mothers or the family income. Single mothers should probably get a bit more.

Childcare

In relation to childcare, Duncan Ironmonger strongly criticised the lack of public attention towards the unpaid childcare carried out by parents. He drew attention to the Australian Bureau of Statistics publications on childcare as an example of present distortion, stating that they exclude the 95% of childcare done by parents, and include only the 5% of childcare done by others. Because of this distortion, the focus of public policy is on how to subsidise the 5% rather than attention to 100% of childcare:

We're getting into big problems now because for young women who have gone through a tertiary education the opportunity costs of raising kids is too much. So they defer having kids and some of them are even saying 'We won't have any'. We've got big issues here about our ultimate continuation as a species if we don't watch out. Not that I'm wanting to have pro-natalist sort of ideas but basically we really have some big issues and I think largely it's due to our lack of perspective on what's valuable and what's economic.

Eva Cox also included both parental care and formal care in her thinking about childcare. She stated that we need to examine models of child rearing, to think differently about care provided for children by both parents and formal services, and to change expectations of mothers and ideas about what is good for children. Cox's vision would mean that instead of childcare being increasingly provided by private operators, predominantly as an employment-related service, we would see the development of community centres that include educational group care for children and supportive educational, training, social and leisure services for mothers. These centres could be run along similar lines to neighbourhood houses in Victoria. These services would improve the lives of both mothers and children in the present as well as in the future. Present benefits would include quality of life and breaks from each other for mothers and children. Future benefits would stem from sound early childhood education for children, and opportunities for mothers to increase their future earning capacity and job opportunities. These changes would involve significant shifts in the thinking of many people about early childhood and mothering. This shift would mean changes in practices that have flowed from Liberal government thinking. Cox would like to see childcare fees of no more than \$5 per day, the abolition of incentives for centres to employ staff with low qualifications, and the end

of financial penalties for parents who pick up children early or miss days for non-approved reasons.

In relation to particular strategies, without wanting to pre-empt the findings of the inquiry that she believes is necessary, Carmen Lawrence believes that childcare, paid maternity and paternity leave, and community supports and facilities are all important:

When we were in government here in Western Australia we set up family centres which enable women to get together and men for that matter and use the facilities for playgroups and informal care and swapping ideas. It was basically having somewhere to go and there are lots of those examples around the country where the government has responded to the need for support by saying well you want to do a lot of this yourself let's give you a small helping hand by providing facilities and equipment and so on. Whether strategies are small or major, there's still a question about who pays, and how much.

Lois Bryson sees a need for greatly increased children's services. She would like to see centres that are well-staffed and flexible, providing high quality care for children in order that parents can pursue a whole range of activities. Belinda Probert's suggestions related to the costs of formal childcare. She is in favour of making it much less expensive. Probert states that we are reaching the stage where only relatively well-off women can afford formal childcare, with less well-off women dropping out of employment as childcare has become more expensive and employment has become less secure, not because they don't want to work, but because they cannot afford to. In the past, Probert opposed tax deductibility for childcare because it is inequitable, benefiting wealthy women more than poor women, but she has changed her mind and now advocates tax deductibility because opposing it meant ending up with nothing.

Michael Bittman, Pamela Bone and Peter McDonald all drew on examples of Scandinavian social policy to think about what would be useful in Australian childcare arrangements. Pamela Bone suggested paid maternity leave for the first twelve months of a child's life and between the ages of 1 and 3 a combination of childcare payments to parents and adequate affordable high quality formal childcare. Michael Bittman, in considering what social arrangements would both improve

women's economic independence and reduce their responsibility for unpaid work, looked at conditions in Scandinavian countries, particularly Finland, as most likely to suggest possibilities for Australia. He found that Finnish parents have a universal right to childcare that is high quality because child carers have tertiary qualifications and staff ratios are quite good. These policies result in most Finnish women returning to employment by the time their children are 3 years of age. According to Peter McDonald:

The countries that I think stand out are Norway and France and probably some other Scandinavian countries as well. In Australia we distinguish in our policy only between children who are under the age of five and children who are over the age of five. But those countries make much finer distinctions particularly under the age of five. They both provide major support through paid parental leave policies for parents to stay at home when they have a baby. By the time the youngest child is three then the focus is upon the woman being in the labour force and both Norway and France provide free childcare. They also have very good after school care. This is a traditional thing in the French system. It's very much built into the school system. In Australia we have the teachers' unions saying we're not child minders and that's pretty backward I think.

Labour market participation

Interviewees saw facilitating mothers' labour market participation as important for a range of reasons. They wanted social policies that would make it easier for mothers to maintain labour market attachment, to return to employment after time out, to earn enough money to support themselves and their children, and to manage employment and family commitments without compromising either.

Lois Bryson stated that labour market attachment is an important source of satisfaction for mothers, and is the means for future economic independence. She emphasised the importance of eliminating poverty traps that create disincentives for mothers to take paid employment. She believes that support, education and re-training are necessary for women re-entering paid employment after time out to care at home for their children. Belinda Probert sees the current emphasis on targeting and means testing as having caused poverty traps and financial disincentives to labour market participation. She emphasises the importance of staying connected to the labour market and not falling so far behind that reconnection looks impossible. She believes

that mothers should receive regular support and interventions to help them back into the labour market.

Because of her own research, Eva Cox is very aware of the costs to women of having children. The vast majority of Australian women take time away from employment following the birth of children. This involves lost wages and career opportunities, as well as social, emotional and confidence costs. Cox stated that while high income women lose more in dollar terms in loss of wages, the costs for lower income women may be greater in terms of overall lifetime chances 'because the longer you stay out of the workforce when you're relatively unskilled, the more difficult it becomes to get back into the workforce'. She states:

We need changes that allow women to maintain some workforce attachment, maybe as little as half a day, or one day or 10 hours a week or something like that, by the time children turn one or two rather than making an assumption that it's appropriate to stay out of employment for that full period until kids start school and if you've got two kids that might be for 6, 7, 8 years.

In a recent study, Cox and her colleagues ran focus groups with a hundred sole parents. There were about 15 focus groups including some aboriginal women, young women and rural women:

The study showed very clearly some serious problems occurred when their marriage broke up and they had no workforce skills, and added to that, they had committed themselves primarily to being good mothers and therefore after the marriage breakdown found themselves feeling incredibly angry and hurt, that they were not going to be allowed to fulfil this role.

The women were often early school leavers who had two or three children by their early twenties:

Unless there was major intervention, they would be stuck in a lifetime of moving from one form of income support to another, particularly if they didn't have family support or adequate childcare and a reasonable trust in the system which allowed them to use the services that were there.

For the sole parents in Cox's study, many had little in the way of labour market experience and little access to jobs that would provide them with a living income and

flexibility to attend to their children when needed. She sees a desperate need for more investment in ongoing education and training for women while they have young children. An important part of that investment is making sure that TAFEs have good childcare and services.

Michael Bittman found that Finnish social policy resulted in most Finnish women returning to employment by the time their children were 3 years of age. Bittman sees policies to maintain labour market attachment over the early parenting years as the key to women's longer-term economic independence. He has become convinced that women strive to 'be economically secure and in no way dependent on what their husbands do'. He found high labour market participation among women whose husbands had high incomes and drew the conclusion that women are motivated by more than the financial need for a second income. Bittman stated that 'these women have invested quite a lot in their own training and they're quite likely to feel that there's a heavy opportunity cost if they withdraw from the labour force'. He believes that one of the motives for women's employment was to do with financial independence. 'Whatever the level of income, women feel more entitled to spend on things that they think are important when they think it's their own income'.

Peter McDonald stated that international studies have found that countries with the highest labour force participation rates for women in the child-bearing ages also have the highest fertility – those that facilitate mothers working actually end up with more mothers. McDonald stated that the emerging picture is of two factors involved in low fertility. One is the late first birth and the other is low rates of having second, third, or fourth births. McDonald believes that the late first birth is related to the economic and social conditions for young people:

Young people these days, because of the competitive nature of the labour market, have to focus very heavily on their own human capital not on social reproduction, not on other people's capital but on their own. Sometimes this is portrayed as being selfish but it is a reality which has come about by the way we've structured the labour market.

The other factor, low rates of subsequent births, is more related to lack of support for women to combine work and family. Relevant strategies to change those social conditions would include securing young people's situation much earlier, reducing the risks of starting a family, and improving the situation for mothers who already have children. McDonald says 'mothers' because that is the reality of the present situation 'children affect women's lives and have almost no effect on men's lives in terms of lifetime earnings and that kind thing'.

Workplace and employment conditions

Eva Cox believes that most women want some time away from employment following a birth. She advocates both some continuing attachment to employment and very well supported education and training opportunities for mothers of young children once they are ready. 'What we need is a workplace system and a childcare system which allow those things to happen comfortably, not that you've got to be an absolutely superb organiser in order to get it all together, which beats a lot of women, stops them even trying. It just seems too hard.'

Similarly, Michael Bittman is critical of much Australian 'family-friendly' policy as being rather hollow. He sees employees having access to a telephone and flexible hours as not enough to cover any real-life situation such as school holidays. He sees reducing working hours when children are young as much more useful. He stated that some people hold out telework as a family friendly alternative, but he sees it as a nightmare 'because it would mean you don't even get away from the domestic demands by going to work'.

Lois Bryson advocates reduced hours of work for both parents while children are young, and ongoing flexibility for workers to attend to family matters without compromising their employment or career prospects. She also advocates structural revaluation of types of work that have traditionally been women's work to eliminate the incentive to maximise male partners' paid employment because it is generally

better remunerated than women's employment. Another important change would be increased numbers of women in senior and decision-making positions. In addition to directly influencing policies and practices, senior women act as role models for younger women, and are in a position to educate male colleagues about genuinely family-friendly policies. She has found that even men with the best will in the world tend to lack the real life experience to imagine and design transformative policies in this area.

Belinda Probert stated that paid maternity leave with employment security on return, the right to work shorter hours, and a more regulated approach to the labour market would be required. She stated that the ACTU is starting to run campaigns on working hours and reasonable working conditions because they are picking up that they have to do it. She believes that we need to see maternity leave, part-time work and flexible hours as citizenship rights, with the costs to be shared across the workforce. 'I think the critical barrier is trying to shift thinking away from the focus on the enterprise and towards social standards and the notion that these are social goods not workplace-related benefits'.

Peter McDonald emphasised the importance of part-time employment and changing workplace practices such as unpaid overtime. He stated that in Norway, employers have to let workers reduce their hours to 80% following the birth of a child, with only a few jobs exempted from this provision:

Part-time work is very important. In countries with very low fertility rates, there's almost no opportunity for part-time work. In countries like Italy and Spain you either work full-time or you don't work. The notion of a gradual return is part of the system that needs to be there.

Regarding workplace practices, he stated:

Australian employers have been extremely clever over the last ten or fifteen years at getting people to work many more hours for nothing. Employers reward people who work for them for 80 hours a week. You have to get a message to employers that it's in everybody's interests if they're not doing that. There can be an attitude on the part of employers that everybody has a wife at home including the woman so it doesn't matter, you can just stay on until seven o'clock. It can be a psychological thing that

you can make people feel bad because they're going home at five o'clock when we've got this really important thing going on. Practices of employers, even things like being able to telephone during the day if you need to, those simple things are also of significance, but I think the biggest thing with employers is just that attitude about hours and being available for the employer 100% of the time as distinct from having family responsibilities. Family leave is important so you can have time off if you have sick children. Some of that is in place, but there has been a tendency through the enterprise agreement and workplace agreement approach to things, for rights for people who have young children to be negotiated away because what's in the interest of the vast majority of workers is more money. Those who have young children are a minority in any workplace. I think the movement away from a centralised system to a workplace agreement system without protection of those broader rights for parents has been deleterious in Australia. So we need to have a look at that. I think the government would probably agree, but some real action about it remains to be seen.

According to Pamela Bone some women, particularly those who delay childbearing until their mid-thirties, have achieved some seniority in their workplaces and are now in a strong position to make demands regarding flexibility for themselves. She describes these women as the trailblazers. However, she believes that collective action by unions and professional women's organizations is also vital.

Gender equity

Lois Bryson, Belinda Probert and Peter McDonald specifically drew attention to the problem of Australia's lack of gender equity. Lois Bryson sees women's future equality as dependent on men's willingness to share child rearing and housework, and on their willingness to relinquish privileges such as their advantage in relation to better pay and career prospects, but is pessimistic about the possibility that men will voluntarily give up their advantages. Belinda Probert linked mothers' lack of economic independence with both Australia's gender culture that has different expectations of women and men, and with workplace demands that make it impossible for women (and some men) to be both the workers and the parents they want to be. Probert drew particular attention to the widespread poverty among divorced and separated mothers

Peter McDonald stated that countries with very low fertility rates tend to be holding on to the male breadwinner model of the family. Women in these countries had

education and workforce opportunities but if they had children then it was difficult to combine work and family. Conversely, countries that could be characterised as having a higher level of gender equity, countries that looked to support work and family had higher fertility rates. McDonald sees lack of gender equity within families as a major factor in low fertility. He states: 'There's a lot more balance in couples before they have children but when the first child comes along the woman's out of the labour force, she's at home and she starts doing the household tasks and it never recovers from that.' He could imagine change in this situation if fathers became more likely to take time out of employment following a birth. This change would become more likely if women's wages increase so that there is less gender difference in lost wages. Other factors in this situation include children's socialisation into gender roles, risks for women who assert themselves within relationships, and work pressures on men, including expectations of working very long hours. McDonald stated:

We have a first sign of change in that the roles are becoming a little bit more fuzzy. Men are heavily involved in playing with their children and taking them to various events. They're more involved with children than they are with say internal housework – little has changed there – but certainly men's involvement with their children has changed quite a bit. They'll be involved in the bathing and the dressing and that kind of thing with young children so that's all good. Maybe that's a kind of starting point in this area.

Bringing about change

In relation to pathways towards change, the interviewees had a range of ideas. Lois Bryson expects future change to come about little by little as people fight for changes such as paid maternity leave, but she would like to see, and to contribute towards, a cohesive rather than fragmented agenda for change in this area. Eva Cox expressed pessimism about the current political climate, seeing it as a major challenge to hold on to what we have, trying to avoid further erosion of services. On the other hand Belinda Probert expressed the view that there is sufficient interest and concern in the community to drive change. 'There's a kind of pressure cooker sitting there and with the right lids coming off things will start to happen'. She has found in her research that people desperately want to talk about these issues and cites the example of recent

discussion of paid maternity leave as showing the readiness for a new mobilisation. She drew attention to the way that the discussion moved rapidly from the announcement by the Australian Catholic University that they would provide one year's paid maternity leave, to publicly expressed horror that Australia has some of the worst provisions in the world, to debates about who should pay for maternity leave and how to build paternity leave into any system.

Other interviewees recommended detailed study of social conditions in Australia, and looking at policies in France, Finland, Norway and other Scandinavian countries in order to develop a coherent agenda for change in Australia. In thinking about a better future, Duncan Ironmonger believes that:

The first requirement is to actually see clearly, have a clear vision not just of the future but of the present and what's actually going on in the world. This means not getting bamboozled by large figures about the market economy, but taking into account the equally large figures of the things we do for ourselves, the household economy, the unpaid economy. Then we would not as a consequence have our views or our laws, our policies or our rules and regulations governed as if the only thing that was worth thinking about was the market economy.

Ironmonger points out that the market economy is studied extensively, and much effort and funding is put into enhancing its functioning, and he would like to see commensurate attention to the household economy.

Australia is very well placed to actually have this better vision, better view of the world. I'm working with a number of statisticians and economists in other countries and there is a group of us who are seeing this and seeing the need to restore the balance of our picture, of our economic and social statistical picture. Once we see more clearly I think we will actually act more clearly.

Ironmonger believes that we have been putting the statistical dollar in the wrong place:

We put millions of dollars into meteorology, trying to understand what's going on with the weather of the world and trying to forecast that. We spend a lot of time trying to forecast the economic weather as well but the economy is a two legged animal and unfortunately most of the time we've just been looking at the market leg and not looking at what the household leg is doing. We think that all we produce is what the market sells us but there are more meals produced at home than in the market. There are more children and adults cared for in the home than in the market

and so on. We just have to take this wider view properly and then we can really see future social directions and specific policy strategies.

Carmen Lawrence also believes that we need a thorough investigation of present conditions and possible alternatives. She emphasises the need for groundwork, consulting widely in the community to develop and articulate a really good understanding of the problems, and then develop policy carefully so that we do what actually needs to be done in a way that does not have unintended effects of cutting off options for others at the same time. It is important to communicate to the public about why it's necessary, to evaluate and modify policies in an ongoing way:

One of the problems with Australian public policy, and this is true across all governments, is that once a policy has been introduced it tends not to be carefully assessed. It's not always clear whether it has failed because of the implementation or because of the original idea.

Lawrence considers it important to get a really detailed picture of the range of circumstances of mothers with young children:

The outcome may well be the long-term economic independence of the woman but you're obviously going to deal with it differently depending on where women are positioned. It's very important to know the state of the group in all its complexities. You need to hear from women themselves what they think are the likely solutions.

Lawrence has observed that in relation to issues such as the fertility rate and women's return to employment there is a tendency to make assumptions about women's reasons for their actions, and about what they want.

Lawrence stated that the ALP suggested an inquiry by the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) but on reflection she is not sure that is the best body to undertake such an inquiry. She believes that a body with capacity to take a broader view would be better, and that any inquiry should develop a comprehensive set of questions, and engage with academics already researching in the area:

I think mainly what's needed more is an ability to question and identify the issues. Assumptions are made about the problems that people confront, for example working from a perception that women would be working if they weren't facing discrimination

when really the question is what do women and their families want? How do they see their lives progressing? What aspects of the system are impeding the exercise of those choices? Are those choices actually feasible given the conflicting desires of others in the community? I think a government should take a cross portfolio approach, a kind of inquiry panel with a broad brief from social security through industrial relations, human rights, psychology, sociology of families and communities. Policies we have at the moment are a mish-mash. People are being forced to squeeze their lives into the workplace. We have a government talking more about further 'reform' in the workforce. I fear that actually only means that people are going to be asked to squeeze themselves even more into the straightjackets of the workplace rather than the workplace changing to accommodate people's lives.

Lawrence believes that it is important to provide sufficient flexibility by means of tax, social security, maternity and paternity leave payments and services in order that people can actually find the best mix for themselves:

Often I think we look for a simple solution to a complex problem. I don't think any of these is itself the solution whether it's paid maternity leave or better support of childcare or more after school care places or one of the things we were proposing. All those things probably are important to have there so I wouldn't, especially having just lost an election, want to foreclose on any of these. I think we need a tax system and a benefits system that doesn't create obstacles for women returning to work but equally if they return to work they have to be able to work in a way that's compatible with the other demands on them. We're in a position where we need a pretty thorough inquiry to make recommendations about future directions.

Peter McDonald believes that we need to look more at international literature and practice to develop policies for Australia. To achieve improvements in Australia's social arrangements, McDonald believes that we need both political leadership and social consensus:

Those who don't have children are going to have to pay more for those who do and that needs to be based on a social consensus that we value children and we value a future with children. I think that requires political leadership and I think it also requires some kind of independent inquiry as to the best policy direction for Australia. This inquiry would look at the policies of other countries, look at the Australian situation, see what's feasible here and then bring together a package that has some consensus behind it. That's probably the only way to achieve this kind of thing.

McDonald was aware of the inquiry proposed by the ALP, and stated that he thought the IRC was the wrong body to carry it out, because of its strong orientation towards

industrial issues. He thought that a more general approach with broad consideration of parenting would be more appropriate.

Pamela Bone believes some changes are occurring, but Australia is still a long way behind other OECD countries in the provision of parental leave and flexible work policies. She believes women must continue to push for change, and it will be a gradual process, requiring the cooperation of men. She sees hopeful signs that many men want to spend more time with their children and are interested in more flexible working hours. She stated that there is still a huge resistance to the legitimacy of family responsibilities, with people seen as not being truly committed to their workplaces if, for example, they leave work on time. She believes that attitudes will not change until men start walking out of meetings and saying 'I've got to go and pick up the child from childcare' or men start saying 'I have to work from home today because my child is home from school ill'. Bone stated that 'everyone seems to think that it's a women's issue and I think things won't really change until it's seen as a men's and women's issue'.

Bone sees getting more women into unions and management positions as important for bringing about change. She sees the inclusion of fathers as vital, based on the accounts of many women who have talked to her. Bone drew attention to Susan Maushart's (2001, 1997) writing about the underlying resentment that mothers are expected to do the two jobs. She stated that a lot of men are very willing to help but they see it as helping and they don't see it as taking equal responsibility. This, for Bone, is a key issue: 'When I go to pick up my little grandchildren from school on a Friday I see a whole lot of men there now picking up children and that's heartening. I think it's changing but it's too slow.'

Barriers to change

A range of political, business and community attitudes and practices were identified as barriers to change. Widespread and embedded barriers to change included the

likelihood of men continuing to want to hold on to their existing privileges (Lois Bryson), lack of knowledge about what works in other parts of the world, and certain predictable resistances within the community (Carmen Lawrence), reluctance of some women to use childcare in the mistaken belief that it is good for children to be with mother 100% of the time (Eva Cox), and current inadequate approaches to family friendly policies in Australian workplaces (Michael Bittman).

Belinda Probert identified the lack of women in political leadership as a barrier to change:

Because of the nature of political life, senior politicians usually lack personal experience of dual responsibility for employment and young children, because their success has depended on having a wife who will look after everything to do with the children. We need more people in there with a real knowledge of the issues, and commitment to action for change.

Eva Cox saw conservatism in politics, the media and the community as a barrier to change, particularly noting the (sometimes implied) criticism of single mothers. Peter McDonald stated:

Frankly with the present Prime Minister we'll never go anywhere in this direction. As he said on television the other night, he profoundly disagrees with me. He believes that mothers should be at home so while he's there I don't think we'll see any change at all. But he's not there for very long so I suppose the next Prime Minister will probably make some moves in this kind of area. I think Peter Costello is probably reasonably good in this kind of area but he'd have a tax problem. He'd be wanting to make taxes lower and that could get in the way of good policy.

Carmen Lawrence identified the contemporary discourse about the desirable way for governments to behave in terms of deficits, tax-raising and expenditure as a barrier to change. She stated: 'In Australia, governments, plural, spend 19 billion dollars on various forms of industry support and none of those dollars comes with a string attached', contrasting this with attitudes towards social expenditure.

According to Carmen Lawrence attitudes on the part of members of the community who are not the immediate beneficiaries of policy also act as barriers to change:

People will say ‘That’s all very well but what about men’s health or that’s all very well but why should I help pay for childcare that a woman uses because she wants to return to work, I don’t have any children or my children are grown up and when I was young I didn’t have that support’ so there’s always going to be an argument.

Lawrence believes strongly in the counterargument that children are the responsibility of fathers and of the whole community as well as mothers. Lois Bryson and Belinda Probert also identified a barrier to change in the development of a child-free lobby that promotes the idea that having children is a private matter that should not be supported by the broader community. Probert sees these barriers as surmountable, because of the very large group of mothers who want and need employment, and because she thinks most Australians do see children as a collective responsibility. She stated that there are persuasive arguments that it is better to invest in parents and children than to pay the long-term costs of the unravelling of the social fabric, and a lot of evidence now emerging about the benefits to children of non-nuclear family care and the value of children’s connection into a broader network.

A number of interviewees identified barriers to change within business and industry. Michael Bittman and Carmen Lawrence identified inflexible workplaces. Carmen Lawrence stated:

Many employers do not appreciate the value of the continuity of expertise. The part-time work becomes a route to irrelevance in the workplace or such a slowed-down career path that some women just give up in frustration. There’s also a workplace culture which says that if you take time off for maternity leave, or if you are required to spend time with your children because they’re ill or you have a part-time career which you want to bring back to full-time, you are considered not to be a contributor and overlooked. You just fill in the gaps for others.

Lawrence considers that there is too little challenge to inflexible workplaces:

The financial and economic press in Australia all have this view that anything that impedes flexibility is an impediment to profitability and Australia’s broke and so on. We have to challenge some of those ideas. As a psychologist I know from acres and acres of research that if you have a workforce that is actually satisfied and committed then you have a productive workforce. If you have a workforce that is dissatisfied, is loosely attached to the workplace and has no loyalty at all to the employer, the output for that firm is likely to be diminished. But we never have that debate in the public arena and the economists tend to have their way with a very thin argument about flexibility – being able to swap people in and out of jobs – not recognising that overwork, underwork, unsatisfactory work all produce consequences.

According to Pamela Bone the main barrier to change is that most of the management of companies and other entities is comprised of middle-aged men, probably men whose experience is that their wives stayed home and cared for the children or undertook a little part-time employment. She described these managers as still in the mind-set that the woman's role is to have the children and therefore they don't really see the problem. She thinks it is probably not until women and some of the younger men who do have different attitudes start coming up through the ranks that we will see real change. However she thinks change is inevitable: 'I can't see that there will be at this stage any sort of going back. I don't think women are suddenly going to decide it was all a big mistake.'

Belinda Probert pointed out that there is a mixed culture within business. In addition to the attitude that 'we're working in a global economy and we can't afford to have all these provisions', Probert stated there is evidence of quite a few businesses realising that it is better for the bottom line to provide maternity leave and childcare than to lose female workers and bear the costs of replacing them. However she identified the increasingly deregulated environment as a barrier to change. She stated that it has resulted in appalling conditions in some industries, for example banking, with workers left to negotiate in their own workplaces for flexible employment or benefits rather than having them provided or legislated centrally:

The spin put on this is that each workplace knows its employees and its industry best, and local negotiation will provide the best outcome. In reality, most employees are in a vulnerable position, and don't negotiate good conditions for themselves. There's no evidence at all that enterprise agreements have produced any women-friendly policies and a tiny minority have any reference to women's employment needs.

Duncan Ironmonger raised the ignoring of the household leg of the economy as a barrier to change, and Belinda Probert spoke about moral and judgmental divisions among women.

Duncan Ironmonger identified the infrequency of collection of time-use statistics as an important barrier to change:

We can tell you what the price of gold was yesterday, last minute. The challenge is to get time-use data on the table as current figures, figures about now because the things that we start to think about in terms of policy or even business decisions are the information that's current. We don't pay much attention to something that's two or three or five years old. A time-use measure is probably in some ways a better measure than a money measure. Money is relative and we have to look at the prices but we all have the same amount of time. It's an absolute measure and it will be a fantastic statistic once it comes out and people get to understand it and use it to enhance and empower their view of what's going on and what needs to be done and so I think the barrier is mainly a political and financial will to put the money into these measures.

Belinda Probert sees the lack of a clear statement of what women want as a barrier to change. One of the reasons for the lack of a clear agenda is the polarisation mentioned earlier. She sees the ideology of motherhood and selflessness as a barrier to change. Discussions are far from neutral, she says, with a lot of justificatory rhetoric from people speaking from and defending their own actions and vested interests. She is particularly critical of research based on asking moral questions because asking people what they think they should do is not the same as asking them what they want to do.

Probert pointed out that a strong campaign for increased subsidies to childcare and paid maternity leave is likely to be opposed by women who stay at home because of the perception that they are being penalised for staying at home. She thinks that in this policy area it is necessary always to go forward on several fronts at once, in order to avoid the perception that specific strategies favour one group over another.

Summary

The interviewees presented richly varied ideas for changes to improve the economic independence of mothers of young children. They identified a range of institutions, ideologies, social processes and practices as targets for change. These included the distorted attention to the market leg of the economy at the expense of the household leg, institutional arrangements that place responsibility for children with individual parents rather than the community, the ideology of motherhood, and Australia's lack of gender equity in families. Specific suggestions for change included paid maternity and paternity leave, improved children's services, better education and training opportunities for mothers, employment conditions and practices that allow for family

responsibilities and improved wages for work that has traditionally been carried out by women.

Identified barriers to change included conservatism in politics, the media, business and the community, the lack of women in leadership in those arenas, the child-free lobby, the ideology of motherhood, the infrequency of collection of time-use statistics, and the moral and judgmental divisions among women on issues to do with care of young children.

The interviewees' visions for a better, more egalitarian future, and their ideas about pathways towards change varied according to their particular interests. Identified pathways towards change included challenging and changing dominant ideas about what is economic activity, what is good for children, and what can be expected of mothers; and changing the gender inequities embedded in our social structures and practices at many levels. Interviewees emphasised the need for wholistic, integrated approaches for example involving industrial relations and social security rather than fragmented approaches that fail to acknowledge the inter-connectedness of states, markets and families.

The interviewees acknowledged the usefulness of research such as this study in advancing consideration of the issues, and indicated the need for further research. Some suggested much more investment in statistical monitoring of the household economy, and more frequent collection of time-use data. Others suggested a broad-ranging inquiry to consider overseas policies and possibilities for Australia, and extensive community consultation regarding strategies for change.

Having contributed their time and ideas to the research, the interviewees were keen to hear back about the ideas of the other interviewees and about the focus groups' reactions to their ideas. These will be sent to them at the conclusion of the project. As detailed in the following chapter, the focus group participants expressed enthusiasm and some scepticism regarding the interviewees' ideas, and added some of their own concerns to the agenda.

CHAPTER 6

MOTHERS OF YOUNG CHILDREN RESPOND

For this research, forty-three participants in twelve focus groups of mothers of young children responded to the suggestions for change made by the high-profile commentators (see Chapter 5). These Australian women engaged in caring for young children brought their very immediate lived experience of caring for young children to the research. This chapter presents the richness and variety of their voices, showing their heart-felt desire for change, relating their experiences of the issues raised by the high-profile commentators, and sometimes expressing their scepticism about the likelihood of change.

The focus groups: Participants and process

The focus-group participants were recruited via personal networking, but as discussed in Chapter 3, the strategies employed ensured that the groups included women from many different backgrounds, and with a variety of experiences. Table 6.1 shows the participants' usual occupations, indicating the diversity of life experience within the groups. The occupations have been grouped into those requiring a bachelor degree or a diploma and those requiring other forms of education and training.

More of the participants were tertiary educated than Australian women in general. Approximately half the participants had degrees or diplomas, compared with 21% among women aged 25-34 years¹³ in the general population (Office of the Status of Women 1999). Comparing the participants' industry sector with those of Australian women in general, the profiles are similar (Office of the Status of Women 1999). The focus groups included a lower proportion than the population of retail workers and manufacturing workers, and a higher proportion of workers in personal and other

¹³ This age-group was chosen for comparison because, of the age-groups reported, it had the most overlap with the participants' ages.

services, but comparable proportions in health and community services, education, property and business services, accommodation, cafes and restaurants, finance and insurance, and cultural and recreational services.

Table 6.1: Occupations of focus-group participants

Occupations requiring Bachelor degree or Diploma	Occupations requiring other education and training
Academic x 3	Bank teller
Child care worker (Diploma)	Child care worker (Certificate) x 2
Chef	Clerk
Community artist	Factory worker
Industrial relations advisor	Gardener
Massage therapist	Hairdresser
Occupational therapist	Manager, small business x 3
Physician	Office administrator
Primary school teacher x 3	Own business
Psychologist	Payroll clerk
Registered nurse x 2	Purchasing officer
Research assistant	Salary/wages officer
Rehabilitation consultant	Sales assistant
Secondary school teacher	Sales professional
Social worker x 3	Secretarial worker x 3
Veterinary surgeon	Self employed potter

The focus groups included rural women and urban women from the states of Victoria and Queensland. As shown in Table 6.2, 30% of the participants were from either Brisbane or Townsville in Queensland. About 23% lived in Melbourne’s inner suburbs, and 33% were from Melbourne’s Western suburbs. About 14% lived in country Victoria.

Table 6.2: Geographic location of focus-group participants

<u>Location</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Queensland (Brisbane, Townsville)	13	30%
Inner Melbourne	10	23%
Western suburbs of Melbourne	14	33%
Country Victoria	6	14%
TOTAL	43	100%

Most of the women had male partners, either married or de facto. None of the participants mentioned female partners. Only a few women were single at the time of the focus groups, and a few more had been single mothers in the past, but had re-partnered. To the best of my knowledge, no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander women participated. A few women were from non-English speaking background, and a few more were born overseas in English-speaking countries. Two of the participants had twins and three had children with significant disabilities.

The groups missing from or under-represented in the focus groups were the most economically advantaged and disadvantaged Australian women. None of the focus-group participants was independently wealthy. A few employed a cleaner at home for a couple of hours a week, and two employed nannies, but none of them had as much help as they needed. The lower proportions of workers in retail and manufacturing, traditionally areas employing many women at poor rates of pay, reflect the expectation that people struggling financially are least able to participate in research such as this. Given that payment of focus-group participants was not possible, women whose lives were very difficult were unlikely to contribute to this research. Some of the focus-group participants were struggling financially as couple families on a single income, or as single mothers, but all had childcare arrangements that allowed them to attend a focus group. No study of this size and methodology could claim to be representative, but this study can validly claim to present the views of a cross-section of Australian women who are responsible for young children. Any future study designed to be representative would need to include adequate funding to obtain the participation of women in the most disadvantaged circumstances. It seems likely that inclusion of more single mothers, more mothers with low educational qualifications, and more non-English-speaking background mothers would have increased the frequency of the expression of some views. However, because this research is qualitative rather than quantitative, the presence of views is important rather than their frequency of expression. Care has been taken to report the views expressed by the participants from these under-represented groups. It seems likely that Indigenous

women and women living in remote parts of Australia would have some similar experiences and some different experiences compared with the focus-group participants. If this is the case, they could be expected to share some of the views expressed by the participants in this research and that they would have additional issues and views to those covered by this research.

The participants ranged in age from 23 years to 45 years, with a median age of 34 years. About one-third of the women had one child, one-third had two children, and the other one-third had three or more children. Approximately half of the women were caring full-time for their children. The other half were fairly evenly spread across three groups:

1. full-time employment and caring for children
2. part-time or casual employment and caring for children
3. full-time or part-time study and caring for children

Nearly all of the participants arranged alternative care for their children, at least occasionally. About one-half used that alternative care in order to undertake recreation or leisure pursuits. About one-third of the women arranged alternative care for their children to pursue paid employment. A few arranged alternative care to undertake unpaid work or study. Centre-based care was used by almost one-half of the women. About one-half of the women used informal care, with mothers and sisters being mentioned most often as providing the care. A few women stated that the child or children's father cared for them while she did something else. This was not listed as an item on the form that the participants completed, and it may be that many of the fathers provided care for their children when the mother was not present. Other types of care utilised included babysitters, nannies, preschools and OSH (Outside School Hours) care.

In the focus groups, participants were asked to respond to particular suggestions made by the high-profile interviewees, and then they were asked if they had any further ideas to improve the situation of mothers of young children in Australia. They were provided with a list of main suggestions extracted from the interviews, and the

researcher expanded on the details and intentions of the suggestions as required. For example, in relation to paid maternity and paternity leave it was always necessary to state that it was not proposed that individual employers would become liable for these payments. The suggestions given to the focus groups for reaction were:

Introducing paid maternity/paternity leave

Providing free or low cost, high quality child care for any purpose

Recognising unpaid work – more statistics collected, Workcover, sick leave, superannuation

Providing support, education and training to assist mothers to re-enter employment

Maintaining attachment to employment, even if minimal

Changing employment conditions and practices e.g. go home on time, take time off for sick children, vary start and finish times,

Increasing fathers' involvement in

Unpaid work

Taking time out of employment

Reducing hours

Taking sick child leave

Each focus group developed its own atmosphere, but some processes and dynamics recurred often enough to warrant comment. One of the most striking processes happened in two different focus groups. In each of these groups a young participant, in one case a single woman with one child and in the other case a married woman with two children, launched very early in the discussion into a strong statement saying that no further assistance was required. Each of these participants asserted that she was managing her life, and that the government could not afford to help any more than it was already. On both occasions, once other women started to discuss possibilities for change, and assistance that they would like, the young women concerned appeared to take a deep breath and gradually started to join in discussions about possibilities for change. It seems likely that several processes were operating on these occasions. One possibility relates to the prejudice against young mothers that was mentioned many times in the groups, and has been noted by other researchers

(Warner-Smith & Imbruglia 2001). The young women apparently wanted to make it clear that they were coping by not asking for any assistance. As Mullaly (2002) points out, the internalising of oppression means that the most disadvantaged groups are often the least likely to assert their claims to better social conditions. Once the young women discovered that it was acceptable within the group to criticise social arrangements and to suggest changes, they started to participate in doing so. This could be seen as simple conformity to the group, or alternatively it could be interpreted as a consciousness-raising impact of participating in the group.

Typically the groups included lively exchanges of information and views among the participants. In several of the groups, participants informed each other about childcare options, Centrelink benefits and other services and supports. In several groups, participants suggested that information for mothers should be better publicised because they heard for the first time at these groups about services and supports that would have been useful for them, had they known of them. When I thanked the participants, they invariably thanked me for the opportunity to discuss the issues, and to have their voices heard. Many stated that they found the discussions stimulating, and that they were very glad that someone was undertaking a study such as this because they could see a real need for change. Some went beyond articulating the need for change, and suggested strategies for bringing about change, including specific suggestions such as publicising this research, and broader suggestions including the need for women to act in a collective way in relation to the issues raised in the research. The focus groups clearly served a consciousness-raising function for some of the participants. This was evident in the process, and in the very positive and supportive atmosphere that was generated in the groups.

The remainder of this chapter takes each suggestion of the high-profile commentators in turn and provides a summary of the focus-group participants' responses. A section is included on gender equity and gender culture because these topics emerged as significant themes in the focus-group discussions. All names used in this section are pseudonyms that have been assigned to the focus-group participants. When quoting, I have included selected details about the women's situations: sometimes occupations

and, at other times, marital status or number of children or whether they are caring full-time for young children, studying, or in paid employment, full-time or part-time. Including all the details with every quotation would have been awkward, and could have been interpreted as implying that only people with those characteristics held that view, as well as being too identifying of individuals given that the participants were assured that their identities would be protected in the research.

Maternity/paternity leave

Six of the eight high-profile interviewees specifically advocated at least 12 months' paid maternity and/or paternity leave. They drew on examples from Scandinavian countries, and proposed a universal social insurance-style scheme. They discussed a range of suggestions regarding details, but none had a comprehensive detailed plan already worked out. In the six months prior to most of the focus groups, the issue of paid maternity leave received a good deal of media attention (for example Baird 2001; Fyfe 2001; Gettler et al. 2001; Goward 2001; Milburn 2001a, 2001b; Sheehan 2001; Sherry 2001b; Sinclair 2001). This attention followed the decision of the Australian Catholic University to introduce 12 months' paid maternity leave for their general staff. It seemed as though this publicity had influenced the participants, in that they engaged readily with the topic, with minimal explanation of the concept by the researcher.

In general, focus-group participants were very attracted by the idea of paid maternity and paternity leave, although many were sceptical about the possibility of it ever becoming a reality. Participants presented a range of reasons why it would be a good idea, and various objections were raised. Some participants spoke of their experiences in Australia and some referred to their knowledge of different provisions overseas. Participants pointed out that individual employers could not be expected to bear the cost of paid maternity leave, and I explained that the suggestion was more for some sort of social insurance scheme such as superannuation or Medicare with contributions from employers and government as well as individuals, with a base level payment for mothers who had low or no income prior to giving birth. The participants

grasped and accepted this idea quickly. One of the groups spent quite some time discussing funding mechanisms and details.

In some groups, the initial reaction to the idea of paid maternity leave was negative. As 'Beth', a primary school teacher on family leave with one young child stated:

I don't know how the economy could support paying women. ... I think it would be wonderful. I just don't know how governments could support dragging more revenue to another area. We've got the aged and then, I think mothers do come in last on the list.

'Isabella', a retired factory worker, thought that the government would not give mothers anything for nothing, and if paid maternity leave were introduced it would be like the Howard government's 'Work for the Dole' scheme. Participants in this group discussed the possibility that the requirement in return for payment could be attendance at some training and considered this would be a good idea and quite acceptable. Some of the women who doubted whether the government and taxpayers would ever agree to paid maternity leave suggested initially trying to secure 3 months or 6 months paid leave, rather than aiming immediately for 12 months or 2 years.

Participants in several groups argued that paid maternity leave would be useful, because many mothers did not want to return immediately to employment, and because most people now find that they need two incomes to survive. 'Alison' stated: 'Those first few years are really hard times with broken nights' sleep and you're not really up to working in a really full-on way.' Many of the participants argued that most mothers of young children want time out of employment, especially in the early years, but they also want the right of return to their jobs.

Participants drew on their own experiences and concerns to present ideas about why paid maternity leave would be a good idea. 'Sally' and 'Tamara', spoke about the impact of being unwell in advanced pregnancy. 'Sally', a married woman in her twenties expecting her second child, was working for a large retail chain during her first pregnancy:

I didn't get paid maternity leave at all and I was working there full-time for about 5 years. I had to leave work about 12 weeks early because I was having a difficult pregnancy and we found it really hard to live because I was getting no income at all. They [Centrelink] basically told me that if I wanted money I had to go and find a job. So I think that even if I got paid like 6 weeks maternity leave it would have helped. I did not get paid a cent.

'Tamara' was also unwell later in her first pregnancy:

I was with my employer for 7 years and I didn't get any paid leave. I had high blood pressure. I had a letter from my gynaecologist to say I could not work. My ex had left me, left me at 8 months pregnant. I went to Centrelink to claim, and I was entitled to nothing. I had no income. I had to be supported by mum and dad. I was entitled to nothing, not even sickness benefits that I went there for. They didn't accept it, 'Sorry', and I had nothing for 2 months.

The discussion that followed 'Sally's' and 'Tamara's' statements is an example of the participants' partial information mentioned earlier, and the way that participants used the focus groups to share information with each other. Clearly 'Tamara's' experience was inconsistent with my own knowledge of Centrelink benefits, in that a Special Benefit would usually be payable in such circumstances. One of the participants, 'Kate', recounted her experience of getting a benefit when she was 7 months pregnant and unable to work. There followed an extensive discussion of the difficulties of dealing with Centrelink. Obtaining entitlements clearly was complicated and stressful. Participants saw Centrelink as unpredictable, with different workers giving different answers to the same question, treating them badly, and apparently determined to obstruct their honest efforts to obtain payments rather than assisting them.

Another lengthy discussion arose because some participants in one of the focus groups had received some paid maternity leave. They were surprised that others with different employers had no entitlement. Those who had no entitlement were unaware that anyone would get paid maternity leave. This was typical of the way that participants' views were usually shaped by their own, necessarily limited, experience. It supported the statements by many participants that they felt starved of information, that they needed to network with other mothers to find out information they needed, and that seeking information from official sources such as Centrelink and public hospitals was a frustrating exercise. They spoke of these encounters as quests where

they had to overcome obstacles, exercise all their intelligence and ingenuity, and have exceptional luck to obtain their entitlements, or to find out about publicly-funded strategies that could assist them.

The participants put forward a number of reasons why they were in favour of paid maternity leave. Many of the participants suggested that most women want to be at home with a baby. One participant suggested that regular broken nights make a person unfit for work. 'Judith' and others thought that paid maternity and paternity leave would be an acknowledgment of the importance of the early years of children's lives, the responsibility of the whole community towards children, and the work involved for parents caring for young children. Some participants thought paid maternity leave could be seen as an investment, stating that supporting families in the early years would prevent costly social problems later, and that making it easier for women to continue breastfeeding would save health costs for conditions such as asthma. Others firmly believed that mothers should be at home with their babies for the first two years for purposes of bonding and caring for the child.

Some of the participants could see disadvantages of paid maternity leave. 'Judith' was concerned that it could tend to isolate care of young children as just the parents' responsibility:

Does it in some way set up an expectation that parents or mothers in particular would be expected to stay at home for two years? Some mothers would want to exercise the choice to return to work and continue a career but it would put a sort of subtle pressure to stay at home because you've got the opportunity to be paid.

On the other hand, some participants emphasised the importance of parents taking individual responsibility, saying for example 'An employer should not have to pay because you've chosen to have a child' ('Ruth').

'Olivia' had observed a paid maternity leave policy in operation when she worked in Italy for ten years:

There were a lot of problems with paid maternity leave. When people went for jobs it was an issue even though it wasn't meant to be an issue it was an issue. Young women, young fertile women that could go away for 12 months on maternity leave might be put aside ... if there's a male candidate and especially with enterprise bargaining. The combination, the cocktail of both worked against women so people who make the policy have to make it foolproof in that way.

Participants thought that some paid leave should definitely be available for fathers. Some thought this would help to legitimate the role of fathers. One participant pointed out that if a woman has a caesarean birth her partner should be able to take paid leave to care for her and the baby. Another discussion referred to the possibility that paid paternity leave would provide an opportunity for fathers to gain skills. Participants enjoyed sharing stories of the perceived ineptness of men with babies and household work, particularly seeing what needs to be done in the home. 'Ruth' said:

You feel like saying look, open your eyes. That's what's really frustrating. He says "Would you like a cup of tea?" I'd like him to bathe [one of the children]. I haven't folded the washing. I still have to bring in another load and by the way could you just go and wash the bath out as well?

A lively discussion followed with participants contributing examples of their partners' lack of skills and ideas about how they could be encouraged to develop their skills. 'Leanne' stated 'I would like to see a man get paid paternity leave I really would', and 'Sally' suggested 'I reckon there should be a training boot camp'. The following demonstrates the enjoyment gained in the telling and appreciation of these stories:

The first time he looked after [first baby], I don't know where I went. Where did I go? Baby shower, I went to a friend's baby shower. I think four hours is all he had and I come home and said, "How'd you go?" [He said] "Ah she screamed from the time you went [laughter from the group] and I didn't know what to do." And I said, "Did you put her down for a sleep?" because I'd said that I'd fed her. He was trying to give her another milk and she wasn't taking it and she was screaming. And I said "Yeah but she would have been tired did you put her to sleep?" [He said] "Well I went and gave her a bath and then I was holding her and she was screaming" And I said, "Did you put her down?" [He said] "Well eventually I did" – like three hours later- "Oh she went to sleep straight away, and I thought oh she was tired." He **didn't** think. Four hours is all he had her. ['Ruth']

Childcare

In the interviews with high-profile Australian commentators, Duncan Ironmonger and Eva Cox both suggested transformational change in the conceptualisation of childcare. Duncan Ironmonger suggested much more public attention and support for the 95% of childcare that is done by parents. Bitter comments about lack of access to good playground facilities by a participant caring full-time for her young children reflect some of the impacts of lack of attention to childcare undertaken by parents, as well as the polarisation (Probert 2001) between mothers who use formal childcare and those who do not:

One of the things that would improve my life enormously would be if the position of caring for small children was recognised as being important in the community at large ... [If] your child's got for example an ear infection, ... you should be able to go to the doctor then. Not in 5 hours time. You should be able to get into the doctor then. They should make allowances for you. And there's a whole [lot of other issues]. How many parks have we got with play equipment where children can play in ____? One. We've got play equipment near us in a park but I won't let my children play in it because it's always covered in glass, it's never safe. Bits are falling off it all the time. _____ Park is the only park that's safe in ____ to take children. Now it happens to be the other end of town from us. You can't walk there. We can only afford one car because we only have one income. And so there's a whole lot of things, underlying things in the way that our system is run, that means that if you are at home with small children and one car, you cannot participate. You don't get the same quality of life as someone who's getting a full income ... There isn't much money channelled into community resources. Like swimming lessons at the local pool or decent playgrounds for people who have chosen to stay at home, so their kids are not playing in the posh subsidised playground at the local crèche that's got the latest equipment in it, but they play in the poxy one up the local park that's half demolished which is our situation. ['Edith']

Eva Cox suggested that we need to think differently about both parental care and formal care, changing ideas about what is good for children, and seeing formal children's services as educational and developmental services for children – a positive experience rather than a second-rate substitute for care by the mother. A few of the participants similarly spoke about the benefits of formal childcare for children, but this was certainly not a dominant idea. Participants took the need for formal childcare for granted, seeing it as a vital social provision for women, even if they expressed reluctance to use formal childcare themselves. Most participants agonised over their childcare arrangements, and were clearly very committed to the idea of high quality

care. Most participants articulated their own need for a break from caring for children, but this was clearly a very fraught concept rather than one they could easily put into practice.

The high-profile interviewees all advocated better quality, free or very affordable formal childcare services, often suggesting combining these services with community-based supports for mothers. They referred to European examples of much more generous provisions than we have in Australia. Peter McDonald criticised the lack of attention in Australian social policy to the differing needs of children of different ages and their parents. Most of the focus-group discussions of childcare related to formal services as known to the participants from their own experience.

Participants had a range of experiences and ideas in relation to accessibility, affordability and quality of childcare. Several participants knew of overseas countries with free childcare, and thought it was a very good idea. Some others were in favour of free childcare, and some thought it should be very low cost because of the need to preserve quality and prevent ‘abuse’ of the system. Participants drew attention to a number of aspects of the cost structures and practices of formal childcare that they saw as being in need of change. A number of participants spoke about useful childcare programs they knew of, including workplace childcare and Neighbourhood House childcare. The remainder of this section presents focus-group participants’ views in relation to childcare availability, costs of childcare, reluctance to use childcare, and the complexity of their beliefs and values in relation to childcare.

Childcare availability

Participants clearly thought that the availability of appropriate childcare was as important as the cost. ‘Melissa’ recounted how JET (Federal Government Jobs, Education, Training program) obtained a place for her in a university course, but a childcare place was not available until four weeks after the start of semester. She worked very hard to patch together arrangements for those weeks, taking her child to a different relative or friend each day, sometimes to two different carers on the same

day. ‘Catherine’ and ‘Denise’ both suggested the need for changes to childcare so it enables mothers to do what they want and/or need to do. ‘Catherine’ cited the example of a friend with a baby:

[The friend] is studying, and wants a few hours of childcare here and there, but what she needs is not available. Because the centres must operate on an economic basis and they are full, there is no priority, even in the centre located on her own university campus, for her needs. The centres prefer full-time bookings. This is very stressful for [the friend].

‘Ruth’, a hairdresser, would like to take casual work at a salon when it is offered to her, because she and her husband have trouble managing on one income, but has found it impossible to get day-care for casual work because the childcare centres do not offer any casual places.

Some of the participants told of good experiences with workplace childcare. ‘Eleanor’ stated that a large public hospital crèche was an excellent service because of its flexibility, and ‘Helen’ praised a university service, but said that there were not enough places for everyone who wanted to use it. ‘Evelyn’ spoke about a school in Brisbane that had its own crèche. She expressed surprised pleasure when this service was offered to her at a job interview. ‘[The principal] said well ‘Evelyn’ we find that some of the very best applicants for our jobs are young women and it’s a way of encouraging them to work in our school.’ Another participant, ‘Frances’ spoke about the importance of having very young children close by, and of the symbolic value of having childcare offered by an employer:

I worked at the Sheraton in Sydney, a brand new one at Mascot Airport, and we had a crèche and it was brilliant. It was on the second level, really secure and [one of my co-workers had her baby there] and she was allowed to go up and breast feed and things like that which was good ...They had really good meals. It was just so much more relaxing and it encouraged everyone, well not to have a child but if they were to have a child it wasn't really expensive. I think it was just as cheap as everywhere else you could go and they had child subsidy and things like that which was good but the best thing was it was offered to us.

‘Frances’ thought that big employers like Telstra should provide workplace childcare, but not for free:

We want good quality childcare in there. If you start off with it for free, they start trying to cut corners ... I think it should be there and I think it should be close to the work ... I work in a building that has had a couple of bomb threats and I don't think I would like my child on the premises but I'd like it close so that if I need to breastfeed I can duck out, go breastfeed a child, come back again. I wouldn't feel so guilty about leaving the child and knowing I'm not accessible to that child if anything happened.

'Helen' thought that workplace childcare would encourage mothers back to their jobs, and that would be good for employers:

You might even find that you wouldn't stay away from the workforce for 12 months. If we had that kind of good quality access to the children we could go back to work knowing that they're there and we'd go. I mean maybe 6 months, maybe 3 months I mean you can take your 12 months but if it's there they can come back, they don't have to hire a temp for 12 months and stuff like that, that's got to be good for them.

'Ruth' agreed that this could be the case if it relieved the pressure and running around involved in doing a full day's employment in between taking children to childcare and picking them up:

I know when I was working a couple of days I'd be up 6.30 get the lunches, do everything, get them to day-care and then I'd be getting in the car and driving back to where I had to be. Then I was like doing my last haircut and I'm like I've got to be out of here in 5 minutes.

Another example of accessible, affordable childcare was presented by 'Natalie'. She was associated with a Neighbourhood House that provided very low cost childcare (\$3 or \$4 per session) for people enrolled in one of its courses. In addition, low-cost afternoon care was available for any purpose. A participant in a different focus group, 'Judith', praised her local swimming pool crèche because the children could go there while she had a swim, giving herself a break and some exercise.

Cost of childcare

One of the focus groups included three mothers who worked in day-care centres. They argued that childcare is now very low-cost to low-income families, and that the major problems were access to the required care, and keeping the care high quality if it became free for everyone. They pointed out that the government would not want to

pay for these provisions, or would want to increase taxes, a change that they saw as undesirable.

In almost every focus group, participants noted the unfairness of some of the charging practices in relation to childcare fees. These practices include charging for a whole day when the mother wants only a half-day, and charging a full fee (without Childcare Benefit subsidy) for days when the child is absent for a non-approved reason. 'Denise', a single mother with one child, found the cost of childcare burdensome. She was teaching in a secondary school 45 minutes' drive from her home, and her child was attending a centre near the school rather than near her home. During school holidays she did not want to take her child to the centre, and she exceeded the allowable absences and was forced to pay \$80 per day for childcare she was not using.

A number of the participants drew attention to the way that the means-testing of Childcare Benefit acts as a disincentive to employment for women with middle- or high-earning partners. As 'Eleanor' stated: 'Often you have been out of the workforce for some time and the amount of money you can earn when going back is low and doesn't justify the high cost of the childcare. Particularly if you have more than one child it's totally prohibitive.'

In every focus group there were discussions about how more accessible, affordable, high quality childcare could be funded. Most participants agreed that childcare should be available for reasons other than employment. Some needed childcare to get their housework done, others wanted to study, exercise, socialise, do their family's shopping or visit an elderly relative. Others thought it was important to acknowledge that mothers just need a break. Participants thought that all except the very wealthy should have some entitlement to a certain amount of subsidised or free childcare. 'Alison' pointed out that some way would need to be found to incorporate parents' and children's preferences for particular carers into any such scheme. She suggested that it should be possible to 'employ' friends and relatives to provide care, because they are known and trusted and the children are happy with them. She stated that

some form of payment would mean that she felt able to arrange this type of care more regularly rather than feeling able to ask a favour only very occasionally.

Reluctance to use formal childcare

Participants articulated a number of reasons why they or other women might be reluctant to use formal childcare. 'Judith' stated that cost is a factor for some women, and that expectations of mothers mean that some women do not feel entitled to a break.

You live through the debate you know is this the right thing to do for your child? A lot of what you do is also constrained by what society thinks is, and what you think is an OK thing for you to do. So it's around our conception of what motherhood and quality care is you know. Do we think this is a good idea for the child to have a break from mum or do we think this is something that should only be permissible as a last resort because it's actually going to be damaging to the child? And if the kid's going to then become very fearful you just go I couldn't do that. I'm not going to go and have an afternoon off if for the next week or two weeks I'm going to pay in the kid being grumpy or clingy you know and that's the other constraint I think.

In the focus group that included three childcare workers, participants drew attention to community prejudice against childcare. They said that people in general think the workers just play with the children, change nappies and wipe noses. 'Connie' mentioned the example of her brother who came to the centre, saw a staff member pushing a child on a swing and another playing in the sandpit with a group of children. 'He said "Well, I wouldn't mind your job". They don't realise what we do. We plan, we prepare activities, we're always looking for opportunities to help the children learn in all sorts of ways.' One of these workers found that caring for children all day and then going home to her own children was too much for her, and she was seeking a career change.

'Melissa' stated that she would like the community to be more child-friendly so that she could feel comfortable taking her child to public places such as restaurants. However, she also thought there should be more crèches at shopping centres so that mothers could do their shopping in peace.

Complexity of beliefs and values in relation to childcare

The participants clearly dealt with the complexities of their own beliefs and values as well as complexity in the environment when making decisions about childcare. ‘Sally’ did not use formal childcare when her child was very young, preferring to work at night when her husband could look after the baby, but she explained that now that the first child is older and she is expecting her second, she sends the child to day-care on two mornings per week to develop the child’s social skills and to give herself a much-needed break.

‘Helen’ spoke about how she wanted her child to go to day-care for three days per week to give herself a break:

[We need something] for us who say OK I’m not going to paid work at the moment but I do need a break. ... I wanted to get her in and everywhere said no absolutely not. A new one was built across the road from us and I rang up and I said OK I’d like to book her in there, I’m not going back to work until July and basically I said I’d like 3 days a week. [This centre could offer her a full-time place but not a part-time place.] I said “Well I don’t want to take a position away from a mother that really needs it because she’s got to go to work” because the baby units are that scarce you just, you can’t get them.

Another complex situation involved ‘Ingrid’, a very experienced mother with her youngest attending two different pre-schools. ‘Ingrid’ needed childcare because she was studying at university but used two preschools rather than one childcare centre because she believed the preschools provided a more educational form of care. Early in the discussion she stated: ‘I’m a very strong believer that mothers should be at home with their children in the early years. They’re the most important years where your bonding is created. So it’s important to be home for your children during those first 2 years.’ Later in the interview she spoke about her struggle to obtain suitable childcare and pursue her own education, focusing on a range of issues including cost of childcare. The following exchange is included to illustrate the experience of complexity and competing demands. ‘Ingrid’ started off speaking about the cost of childcare, and the researcher took the opportunity to explore an apparent contradiction between her stated values and her actions:

‘Ingrid’: Talking from my own experience like before I went to Uni I was trying to do a diploma at TAFE and I found it incredibly difficult financially because day-care is so expensive and having six children and only one wage coming into the household, being able to go to TAFE and put my child into care whilst I was trying to improve my education, it was very difficult and I ended up having to pull out of TAFE for those reasons.

Marty Grace: Oh did you?

‘Ingrid’: Yeah, so I think it’s, yeah I really believe that, that the price of having to put your child into day-care and whatever has to come down to meet the lowest socio-economic people of society because we’re only looking after those people with higher incomes. I’m sure that there’s a lot of low socio-economic people that would love to be able to go and do things, you know to improve their education and whatever but because of fees they’re unable to do that.

Marty Grace: So was the childcare good enough quality for you or was it just the fees, you know how you were saying before that your child goes to pre-schools because you think that there’s better, more stimulation there so thinking about the quality of childcare, do you have any comments to make on that?

‘Ingrid’: I actually, I would rather have had my child at home and have been spending the time with my child. I feel that as a mother we are more able to provide educationally for our children. I don’t think my child got enough stimulation in childcare but then I myself am one of those women that I suppose look for opportunities to teach my child like if I’m vacuum cleaning and he wants to know how the vacuum cleaner works I go into great detail about how the vacuum cleaner works. ... I don’t really find childcare centres stimulating enough because if my child’s at home with me they get to go out and do things with me and I don’t know whether I’m a different mother but I tend to teach my children as I’m doing things.

Marty Grace: And yet when you wanted to go to TAFE you would have been happy to have your child in care for some of the time while you were at TAFE even though you thought it wasn’t as good quality as being with you?

‘Ingrid’: Yes, yes. That was only because it was a means to an end for me to educate myself. I can’t take my child with me therefore I have to put them in day-care. If I’d had a facility, you know if TAFE made it possible for me to take my child with me which they did at first, they were really good for the first 12 months they allowed me to take him with me to TAFE which was wonderful and everyone you know enjoyed having him there but once he got mobile it became a bit more difficult and so then I had to put him into day-care for that second half of my degree but I was 6 months short of finishing and it didn’t work.

The complexity of ‘Ingrid’s’ position provides support for the warning that a simple answer to a simple survey question about parental preferences in relation to childcare cannot be interpreted as a definitive indication of what parents want (Probert & Murphy 2001). In another apparently contradictory example, ‘Tamara’ stated bluntly,

regarding using childcare in order to return to employment: 'I'm one of those, I won't go, I don't believe in someone else raising my children', although earlier she had recounted her experience of using childcare as a full-time employed single mother with her first child: 'I was one of the lucky ones, my son adjusted, he never cried. I never had a problem with him so I was lucky, I didn't have him hanging on to me and I never worried that he's missing me.'

For some participants, what they wanted to do was different from what they thought they should do. For others, what they believed in and planned in advance turned out not to suit them once put into practice. The following exchange acknowledges some of the complexity experienced by the participants:

'Frances': There's lots of people who go back, not just for the money but ... for their own stimulation. ... But along with that stimulation comes guilt because although you want to go back to work you feel guilty because [you are asking yourself] "Why don't I want to stay home with my child 12 months?"

'Tamara': Well that's what I'm saying because of the money or their own sanity.

'Ruth': See I, like, my ultimate from the day I wanted to have children was to stay at home until they went to school. Now that I've actually had children the thing that scares me the most and the thing that really gets to me is if you go to a barbecue or something and I will tell people like I'm a hairdresser, I won't ever say that I stay at home full-time because the minute you say that you stay at home full-time I've had people in other towns, not here that have actually gone 'Oh shit she can't talk' and it's like my conversation revolves around Elmo and Sesame Street and High 5.

'Leanne' spoke about the need for mothers to be able to access childcare for any reason, including having a regular break, linking this issue with the mental health needs of mothers:

I think too postnatal depression and things like that hit people at different times. I mean you might have three and you don't suffer from it but come the fourth ... you do suffer from postnatal. I suffered it for one and I found that because I wasn't working and I wasn't studying the childcare centres made it very difficult for me just to have a break and I actually had to get a medical certificate from the doctor to let me have someone to help me.

One of the other participants, 'Tamara' spoke up in favour of the need for some restrictions 'That's because of the mothers that do abuse it and that's why there need to be rules.' In this focus group the participants identified a range of needs and

circumstances, and some questioned whether childcare centres could respond to the full range, suggesting a need for respite centres to offer a range of services to mothers, babies and young children. The participants in this group knew of a respite centre operated in their town by an order of nuns. Some of the participants clearly felt alienated from the people running childcare centres as shown by the following exchange¹⁴:

‘Ruth’: It’s always the honest people [who suffer]. I always find personally I’m always honest and up front and then I’m the one that always gets penalised and the ones that lie,

‘Frances’: Yeah you feel like that don’t you?

‘Ruth’: Oh definitely, yeah. I know oh I’m getting off track I was going to say when you go to day-care centres and trying to get kids into day-care centres because they say there’s no positions on the phone and you walk in and oh yes we’ve got a whole week free would you like it?

‘Frances’: It’s very cliquey. I think for any purpose would be brilliant. ...

‘Helen’: Could they set up something like a respite centre?

Another issue raised in the focus groups included the changing patterns of childcare supply and demand, depending on the politics of the government of the day:

I think childcare is more expensive now than it was when [daughter] was first born. ... When your children are born you’re stuck with the childcare that you get from that government. [‘Judith’]

Participants saw childcare as fluctuating between being expensive but easy to get and being affordable but hard to get. ‘Judith’s’ comment above could be seen as positioning herself as helpless in relation to government action, but the sense of her statement was more pragmatic than helpless. By articulating a link between political philosophy and childcare policy, she was actively assessing her environment, rather than acting as a passive recipient of services or lack of services. However, the notion of being ‘stuck with’ the provisions of the day pragmatically acknowledges a recurring theme within the focus groups – the need for the women to make their own

¹⁴ There were no childcare workers in this focus group.

lives work with whatever was available to them at the time. Two of the participants were active in organizations – Neighbourhood House, Australian Breastfeeding Association and a child disability support group – that provided or lobbied for responsive services, but on the whole, it seemed that the participants were much more likely to take an individual approach to improvising their arrangements than to look to collective action. This position is understandable, given that there is no obvious existing collective organization taking up the issues raised in the focus groups. It seems that mothers are more likely to invest their precious energy in action that will meet their short- to medium-term needs rather than investing in advocacy with uncertain outcomes and long timelines.

Recognising unpaid work

All the high-profile interviewees had published material about the lack of recognition of women's unpaid work prior to their involvement in this research, each from his or her own distinctive point of view. Eva Cox is a long-time advocate for the recognition by employers of the skills gained by women in the course of their unpaid work (Cox & Leonard 1991). Michael Bittman and Peter McDonald both see women's unpaid work as a major factor in the lack of gender equity in Australia today, and both see facilitating women's access to the labour market as a key way to redress this situation. Lois Bryson and Duncan Ironmonger argue for greater recognition of the economic value of women's unpaid work. Ironmonger believes that greater recognition will lead to more appropriate laws and social policies. Lois Bryson and Belinda Probert both see a need for restructuring in state provisions, workplaces and families to bring about change in women's inequitable burdens of unpaid work and poor access to economic independence. Pamela Bone would like to see fathers taking equal responsibility with mothers for their children, and Carmen Lawrence would like a future where women's unpaid work no longer acts as a barrier to their full participation in employment, community and public life.

For the high-profile interviewees, their knowledge of the literature on the lack of recognition of women's unpaid work, and their own research on the topic, formed the backdrop for their thinking about what might improve the lives of mothers of young children. For the focus-group participants, the lack of recognition of their work involved in caring for young children, and lack of respect for the role of mothers of young children was clearly very painful. Participants complained of the lack of recognition by society at large, citing lack of facilities and services, particular instances of disrespect including the nature of questions on the 2001 Australian census, social discrimination and lack of recognition and respect from their male partners. Their responses were sought to particular suggestions for increasing the recognition of the unpaid work of caring for young children. The suggestions were those raised particularly by Duncan Ironmonger regarding the need for much more statistical collection, and the introduction of Workcover, sick leave, and superannuation provisions for those caring for young children. This section covers participants' views about lack of respect for unpaid work, the pressure of unpaid work, financial aspects, responses to the specific suggestions, and comments about the need for more general support for mothers of young children. Responses to the suggestion of more support, education and training to assist mothers to re-enter employment are covered in the following section on labour market participation.

Lack of respect

The lack of respect accorded to the role of the mother of young children clearly upset the participants. As 'Lorene' stated: 'It's also one of the attractions of continuing to work part-time and maintaining a connection with the workforce ... you have a label other than mother. I think [it is] sad in a way that that seems necessary but I think it's there you know'. Some of the participants connected this lack of respect with the lack of financial resourcing of the work. 'Ingrid' stated: 'We've said before that you can't change social attitudes in one day. I think it will have to start with the government having a determination for something. And then it's connected to pay; it's connected to money. It can't work otherwise because we don't live in a society where respect is a big thing.'

A number of participants resented the lack of acknowledgement, particularly by employers, of the skills gained in raising children:

As well as all the skills that you built becoming a mother and the child management stuff and the time management stuff, ... you've confronted your old values. ... Every decision you make about that child throws up [the question] 'Well what do I really believe in?' All of that growth that you've made, a bloke at work hasn't thought about in 7 years – has not considered his reactions to people and people skills and considering another person's life and there's a whole lot of growth that's made that's never considered, never acknowledged. You're coming back, in fact a lot of people returning to work in a people kind of environment where you would require someone to have good people skills you'd be better off employing a mother over a non-mother of the same age because they'd automatically have built some of those skills in that time. ['Alison']

'Joanne' made a similar point:

So instead of you having positive growth as a mother in economic terms they would see you as negative growth, do you know what I mean? You haven't grown as a mother you've actually gone almost below zero.

The following exchange recounts 'Judith's' experience, and is typical of the way that the participants frequently used a kind of dark humour¹⁵ when speaking about their experiences:

'Judith': I stopped working for the department ... when my first child was born and then set up a private practice and worked in that but even so when I returned to my original form of work, that's when I became keenly aware of how much people devalue whatever it was I had done in the interim ... purely because one of the things that I'd done in the interim was be a mother. It wasn't to do with anything else. The way I was treated was to do with the fact that one of the things that I had been doing in that 7 years was be a mother.

'Alison': It would have been better to be ill for 7 years.

'Judith': Look you know mentally deranged probably would have been OK. I could have got through that [laughter] and you know but being a mother. ...

¹⁵ Another example of this dark humour occurred when participants were trying to come to grips with the idea of Workcover. They were thinking about what kinds of injury one might suffer. 'You could die in child birth' said one, and the others laughed hilariously. This followed on from an earlier discussion of their resentment at how much their lives had changed and how little their male partners' lives had changed. The laughter seemed like guilty pleasure at the thought of their male partners trying to manage life with a baby and without them.

‘Alison’: But you are still a mother [loud laughter]

‘Judith’: I am still a mother. Like one woman, the woman I was negotiating my pay with you know I was coming back and trying to negotiate what salary I would go back in on so I was explaining about how I’d had an independent practice and this was the hourly rate that I’d worked at ... I had to get verification from people of what that would work out as an annual salary and then in the end they wouldn’t accept that anyhow as grounds for the negotiation. That was bad enough but the other stuff was just devastating. [I said] “I haven’t been on another planet I’ve just not been in your department” For all intents and purposes the only thing that I could work out that I had done wrong was that I’d become a mother. There was a total disregard of the other things that I’d done, but I’d been on family leave and that was the thing that you know, ...

‘Alison’: [sarcastically] You’ve been at tennis and painting your nails and you expect them to have paid you for it? [talking over]

‘Judith’: Nothing that I had done in that time was able to compare with what my colleagues who had stayed at work had done and that was the point that was being clearly made to me ... The reality is that you go back and all that work of career building and all the rest that happens before you have children [doesn’t matter]. I was back at the base grade because I’d gone on maternity leave and family leave ... I’d studied overseas. I’d done a whole lot of things but people were not interested – “Don’t care about all that. What we want to do with you is slot you back in and this is how we slot women back in. This is what we do to them and we’re not prepared to make any exception for you.”

In one of the focus groups, following the discussion of the prepared questions, the participants spoke at length about the need to increase the status of the work of caring for young children. ‘Connie’ spoke about her brother, who implied that her job was easy: ‘Give him a couple of kids for the day and he’d be lost. He wouldn’t know what to do’. Another participant ‘Anna’ recounted how, after 7 days in hospital following the birth, she walked out with her daughter. ‘I hadn’t felt fresh air on my face for 7 days. I remember the feel of it, and I looked down at my daughter in the capsule and said to myself “Well, this is it. It’s up to me now.” And I just wanted to run right back into that hospital.’ ‘Connie’ agreed “Yes, back to that nurse who would swing her when she grizzled’. Participants agreed that caring for young children is very skilled work. ‘Connie’ and ‘Anna’ both spoke about educated, competent women who were obviously not coping with looking after their babies. They met these mothers in the course of their work at children’s centres. These mothers looked to the childcare staff

for education and reassurance. ‘Anna’ found it ironic that these intelligent, educated, high-flying, well-paid women looked to her for advice and support.

I’ve spent a lot of time with them, because I see their babies crying or something and I know what’s wrong and what to do, because I’ve looked after so many babies, so they look to me, and I explain to them, and after 6, 8 months, well you wouldn’t know them for the same people. They’ve learned, they’ve got a handle on it. Some of them, at the start, you can see they’ve got postnatal depression, they’re so anxious and down and everything. They don’t know what to do. They’ve had nothing to do with children and suddenly they’re solely responsible’.

Pressure of unpaid work

Many participants spoke of the pressure of their unpaid work, and of working from early morning until late at night, sometimes without any break at all. Some of the participants spoke of finding it either very difficult or impossible to maintain paid employment at the same time as having young children:

You get cranky. When I lost my job I remember going into the day-care centre and I was in tears because I owed them money, I owed everyone. I was a mess and she said “What’s wrong?” and I said, “I can’t do all of it, I can’t be a good mother, I can’t stay at home, I can’t do it all and I’m only working 2 days a week” and I remember doing a few extra days at one stage and thinking “I can’t do this” I was screaming at the kids all the time, I was busting my bum – get up, get in the car, get going ... [‘Ruth’]

‘Ingrid’ spoke about being reluctant to spend social time having a coffee with other students at university because during the day when she had childcare was her only time to study and prepare assignments. All of her time at home was taken up with unpaid work. ‘Beth’ questioned the advisability of taking on full-time employment while children are very young:

Those women that do go back to work I really admire because I think “How can you do both?” I don’t envy them at all. I think ... they’re being forced via outside pressures because you know you’re meant to be back at work after you’ve stopped breastfeeding or “Your child’s old enough now why don’t you get back to work please?” I just think no-one wins when another mother goes back to full employment when the child’s really young. I think no-one’s a winner at all. The child’s not the winner, the mother’s not because the mother’s obviously probably doing you know twice as much. I mean they perceive that society’s saying it’s fine go back to work and I think in reality I’ve seen girls come back when their children are young and it’s

ugly ... trying to juggle getting into work, getting the child to some sort of childcare, picking the child up, just the whole household, too much pressure.

Financial aspects

A number of participants reported sadly that they were surprised when their male partners made them feel after the birth of a baby that they were contributing less than before, and that their current contribution was worth less than his. Many participants mourned the loss of their financial independence following the birth of children. The following exchange regarding loss of income illustrates one of the impacts of means-testing:

‘Kate’: I was going to school and I was at least getting Austudy at the time and I was supporting myself and I was living in a home by myself but then I moved in with my boyfriend and we were living together and then he was the one who was working and then it was terrible. It was terrible because I didn’t have any money because I couldn’t get Austudy and because I hadn’t had [son] yet I wasn’t getting any money at all so I had to kind of wait until I had him and then I think you get some money after that, like I got,

‘Frances’: It’s not encouraging you to get ahead with your life, to get your life together.

‘Kate’: It was really yeah it was terrible. If you’ve never lived with someone before and then you’re having a baby and kind of like asking them to look after you I mean it’s just a strange thing.

Usefulness of gathering data and publishing statistics

Participants generally agreed that more statistics should be collected, but their specific comments seemed limited by their own direct experience of completing forms such as the census. In his interview, Duncan Ironmonger suggested the need to change dominant ideas about what is economic activity. He criticised some Australian Bureau of Statistics publications for ignoring the household economy, and called for much more monitoring and reporting of activities such as meals produced at home and children and adults cared for in the home. However focus-group discussions did not really go beyond participants wanting to be included much more meaningfully in the

census and in other data collection. Participants in three of the focus groups discussed the subversive replies they gave to questions on forms such as the census. These replies were individual acts of resistance to the lack of respect and devaluing of their work that they experienced and resented. Some listed multiple occupations including nurse, cook, life coach and so on. Others made up fancy titles such as domestic engineer for themselves. In one of the groups, the participants pursued the idea that while offended by the lack of respectful inclusion of their situation when caring for young children, they nevertheless felt bad about disguising their true occupation, feeling as though they were colluding with the disrespect, when in fact they thought their work was very important and demanding.

Whereas participants were able to discuss paid maternity/paternity leave, Workcover, superannuation and sick leave, they did not engage as much with the idea of collecting more data and publishing more statistics about their unpaid work. It seems likely that they lacked familiarity with products such as time-use statistics and Australian Bureau of Statistics surveys and publications, and possibly did not make the connection between market economic indicators and household economic statistics. It was clear that participants felt disregarded, but whereas their working knowledge of industrial relations gave them a basis for discussing the idea that mothers might obtain paid maternity leave, and be included in Workcover, superannuation and sick leave provisions, their working knowledge of economics seemed limited to the idea that any additional public expenditure would lead to increased taxes. Despite the influence in academic circles of the work of authors such as Michael Bittman (1995), Lois Bryson (1996), Duncan Ironmonger (1996) and Marilyn Waring (1997), the idea of the economic value of unpaid work and the possibility of much more monitoring of this activity did not provoke detailed discussion in the groups as other topics did. This lack of engagement resonates with Marilyn Waring's (1988) comments regarding women's understandable alienation from the discipline of economics.

Workcover

Participants generally took a little while to grasp the suggestion that mothers of young children should be covered by Workcover. It seemed that this concept was well outside of what they could imagine. Once the idea was clarified, some participants thought it was a great idea. Others thought that individuals should take out private health insurance, and suggested that some people would abuse any such scheme, and it would be necessary to police it. ‘Kate’ recounted a relevant experience, and the subsequent interchange illustrates the exchange of information that occurred in the focus groups, and the way that participants engaged very actively with the ideas, challenging each other and working on developing their own responses within the supportive atmosphere that invariably developed in the groups:

‘Kate’: When [son] was a real little baby I was a gardener, that’s what I went to TAFE for to do gardening. To get extra money, we used to go and do a lady’s house and we had these litres and litres of mulch that we had to put on her garden. I was still breast-feeding and [son] was only about 4 months or something and we’d done all this garden and half way through it [son] started crying. So I went and picked him up and my back just went and I was in agony and I couldn’t get off the floor and he was just a tiny baby and I thought what am I going to do now because [partner] had to go to work. ... He ended up finishing off the mulch and we ended up having to pay like lots of money for me to go to physio because I actually couldn’t get off the floor that’s how bad my back was. I was crying because I’m thinking like I’m 22, my back is stuffed, I can’t even move and my child ...

‘Ruth’: But isn’t that what sickness benefit is?

‘Kate’: What do you mean?

Marty Grace: Well if you’ve got a partner with an income you’re not entitled to any sort of sickness benefits from Centrelink.

‘Kate’: Oh no I didn’t know about it even if I could have gotten something and it was just really frightening so yeah you know maybe something like that might be and even to let people know about it.

‘Ruth’: Like you said, how do you police that see I don’t know.

‘Frances’: See you could have hurt yourself doing the mulch then went over picked up the baby and said I hurt myself picking up the baby you just, you couldn’t do that no.

‘Helen’: You’ve got MBF and things like that that you can pay for, I think that’s,

‘Ruth’: That’s what I mean by like I’ve got,

'Kate': What do you do if you can't afford that?

'Frances': Yeah it puts you in a disadvantage because I can afford it and you can't so that's wrong.

'Ruth': Also I can't afford it but one thing that my father's said, can you afford not to afford it? That's what my ...

'Kate': \$50 a month when I, I mean that was a little while ago I mean \$50 a month I mean there was no way known to man that I could ...

'Ruth': [talking over] I mean we can't afford it now, I mean trust me we can't afford it now but it's like, like I said my father's always taught me can you afford not to afford it.

'Helen': And sick leave and superannuation, superannuation's based on your wage. You don't *get* a wage.

Sick leave

Participants reported that being sick themselves was one of the worst experiences for them. Many of the participants recounted episodes of illness that went on for weeks because they had to keep working (at caring for their young children) while sick. One of the participants spoke of crying and begging her husband to stay home from work, but he said he could not do that because they were really busy at work. Others spoke of being able to manage because their husbands took time off work or their mothers came to stay, or they went to stay with their mothers, or they guiltily called on friends who were already overloaded with caring for their own children:

'Valerie': When my twins were 6 months old I was so sick. I had mastitis so badly I couldn't even drag myself to the doctor. I laid on the couch and threw them [the babies] biscuits until John came home, and I couldn't move. I was just dying. And literally had to get taken to the doctor. I was so ill I had to get taken to the doctor. It's only happened once, but there was nothing. You know, no-one you could call on, nothing you could do. Or the day you had your bad back. You had to ring me, mother of twins round the corner to come.

'Deborah': I said, "I can't get up off the floor, can you come up."

'Valerie': My two kids are in their high chairs and husband's 45 minutes away. And so I bundled all mine in and came round. But there's those times that are just [helpless hand gesture], and there's no support system. There's no, I mean if you're sick at work then someone will drive you home and put you to bed. If you're sick at home, forget it.

‘Deborah’: You’re gone.

Some of the participants tried to work out how a scheme would operate, and came up with many obstacles, including funding, the importance of introducing children carefully and gradually to childcare, and their own reluctance to hand their children over to someone they did not know. In one of the groups, ‘Ingrid’ spoke about a scheme in Switzerland that provided a helper to come into the home when the mother was sick: ‘You don’t really use it right away. You use it when you don’t have a mother. You always use all your family resources first. ... I remember when my mother had her foot broken and we were four children and we had someone who does the dishes in the morning and goes to the shops.’ After some discussion, I summarised:

So you’re saying that ideally it should be somebody who already knows the children. ... OK let’s just say you were designing this scheme which you say there certainly is a need for. You might have people with qualifications so they’d probably want some sort of nursing and childcare qualification so that you’d have confidence in them and you think that it would ideally be somebody who would come to your house and look after your children at home, do your cooking and your shopping so you can lie in bed when you’re sick. [Marty Grace]

‘Lorene’ summed up the feeling of the rest of the group: ‘Ideally but I find it hard to imagine though [laughter], yeah obviously.’ However ‘Ingrid’, having experienced such a program did not find it hard to imagine: ‘I didn’t think that it was *ideal* but that was one thing that was happening.’

Some of the participants were very concerned about the costs of any scheme, how it would be funded and organised, and the need for policing to prevent ‘abuse’. Some of the participants pursued the ideas further, imagining the needs of women with cancer or mental health problems. Some thought there was a need for a respite centre that could care for mothers and babies and young children, providing a range of supports and services in addition to occasional acute care. These participants knew of such a centre in their local area.

Superannuation

For some focus-group participants, the idea of getting some superannuation benefits while caring for young children was as difficult to comprehend as the idea of Workcover. However, for others superannuation was a burning issue that had concerned them for some time:

I think superannuation is a big issue. I mean when you take time out from working or if you're working part-time it's very difficult to contribute any of those precious dollars to superannuation, and it does mean that a lot of women finish their working lives with very little superannuation compared with what most men do and I think that's a big issue. ['Lorene']

'Ingrid' suggested that raising children should be recognised as a job, because of the hours required and the contribution to society 'to make your children not burdens but contributors later on'. This recognition as a job would mean that it would not seem so strange for sick leave, Workcover, and superannuation provisions to apply to mothers of young children.

Support for mothers

Participants generally thought that more recognition for the work involved in caring for young children should translate into more supports for mothers. They discussed a range of supports, both things that applied to themselves in the present or the past, and supports for women without the advantages they could perceive in their own situations. In one of the groups, the situation of wealthy women was acknowledged:

'Beth': You've got the girls who, you know the Ann Peacocks, that have the full-time nanny, go off to the Crown Casino and go to her meetings and then they play with the children for 5 minutes at the end of the day. You know I read an article – I almost laughed when she sort of said, "Oh it's moments like these", and I sort of thought yeah it is *moments* like these [laughter]. [She] doesn't see the child for that long.

'Judith': She doesn't do the work.

'Beth': No.

'Judith': Because it's one thing to play with the child and it's another thing to actually accomplish the work that's created by the birth of a baby.

‘Beth’: I mean I’m not envying her position at all. I think it’s missing out you know. But yeah it all stems on what financial strata you come from. ... There’s rich mothers and then there’s sort of the middle class and then you’ve got the poor single mothers.

Participants suggested schemes that would allow mothers limited amounts of very flexible in-home services. ‘Beth’ suggested a gold card for mothers of young children, in recognition of their service to the community. This gold card would entitle the woman and her children to free entry at venues such as the museum and the zoo, and free train, tram, bus and ferry transport. ‘Alison’ agreed that a gold card would be very useful for some mothers, but others in very challenging circumstances would need the assistance of another person to get out and avail themselves of opportunities for stimulation for themselves and their children. ‘Kate’ thought it would be good if Centrelink let people know about existing schemes, and in the interchange that followed ‘Frances’ spoke about the hostility she saw as being directed towards mothers who stay at home with their children:

‘Kate’: There’s lots of hidden things in amongst it all, lots of things they don’t tell you about. Like I go to uni and they’ve got this PES thing, Pensioner Education Scheme and they don’t tell you about that. You actually have to find that out. I had to find that out myself which was quite interesting.

‘Ruth’: So that’s, yeah you’ve got to ask, you’ve got to dig [talking over]

‘Helen’: Why do they do that? Why do they do that?

‘Frances’: Because they see it as I’m working why are you getting something for nothing and I’m out here in the workforce and my child’s in day-care, why are you staying home and getting a government grant you know whatever? It’s true you hear people talk about it all the time you know.

Many of the participants appreciated their own mothers as a source of support and assistance when needed, and expressed sympathy for women who could not call on their own mothers for assistance.

Whereas participants generally drew on their own experience, ‘Catherine’ contributed an original idea, suggesting significant changes in relation to housing. She had clearly given this matter considerable thought and was convinced of the logic and rightness of

her idea. She said that the house should be in the mother's name and the mortgage should be paid by the father. She saw this as a recognition of the work and contribution of mothers. In addition, she stated that the early years lay the foundation for the rest of life and they should be characterised by security, not fear and insecurity.

Labour market participation

The high-profile interviewees saw labour market participation as very important for women's personal, social and economic well-being. They advocated adequate paid leave for women following a birth, flexible conditions for return, elimination of poverty traps that act as disincentives to employment, accessible affordable childcare, and generous education and training opportunities for women with young children. The focus-group participants were clearly very interested in employment as well as in caring for their young children. Some resented social pressure to return to employment while their children were young. Others praised employers who made return easy and provided crèches. Even those participants who were against employment while children were young generally argued for adequate provisions for those women who needed to make an early return to employment. In relation to labour market participation, the focus groups discussed the provision of support, education and training to assist mothers to re-enter employment, disincentives to labour market participation, maintaining attachment to employment, and employment conditions and practices.

Support, education and training to assist mothers to re-enter employment

Participants in all focus groups liked the idea of more support, education and training to assist mothers to re-enter employment, and they presented a range of reasons for their views. Some of the participants stated that even 12 months away from employment meant that things had moved along and some retraining would be

necessary. For many participants, they had taken or anticipated taking more than 12 months away from employment. Some wanted no more than a refresher course to introduce them to new systems and technology. Others stated that women matured and developed as a result of the high levels of responsibility involved in caring for young children: 'You've also grown a lot you know. You've got so much more experience in life and stuff and you may not want to go back to a shit-kicker job that you came from and that should be recognised too' (Natalie). It was clearly difficult for women to find resources to put into their own education and training:

I know women who are trying to go back to some part-time work and undertaking training and they have to pay for the childcare at exorbitant rates whilst they're undertaking that training and actually earning no money. I think providing low cost, high quality childcare to enable those things is important ... A lot of jobs these days have a lot of training involved in the first instance and it's easy to get behind if you're not there. ['Natalie']

Many participants spoke of the loss of confidence suffered by mothers. One participant mused about why the experience of caring for young children, which led to gaining so many skills, led to a drop in confidence:

I think mothers understand where they've been placed in the world ... The more time I spent at home the less confident I felt in the world. Before I had my children I was ready to take on anybody basically you know. I did a leadership training course, cut it with all these guys who were in management and thought well I can do this you know. By the time [I was ready to return from family leave] I wasn't confident that I could run a meeting do you know what I mean? I think that connection with the world is a feedback process. Why do all mothers suddenly lose confidence? Why is it that mothers don't feel confident about the world? I mean this is an odd thing isn't it that all mothers would lose confidence or that we would all recount some feeling of that and I mean you know you see women cowering in the corner returning to work ... There must be something in the dynamic. ['Judith']

Participants in several of the groups spoke about the lack of information they had about what was available. They spoke of their own experiences of finding out about assistance by chance, and sometimes the focus groups themselves became a means for participants to share information with each other. Several of the groups identified the need for a service for women to find out about employment and training opportunities and assistance they could obtain. In one group the participants spent quite some time

sharing their ideas about what such a service should be like. They agreed that some one-to-one assistance would be useful, and emphasised that the quality of the staff would be important. They suggested people who had children in order that they would understand the issues, and a frequent turnover of staff so that people stayed interested and did not become jaded and ‘detached like Centrelink staff’. They also suggested courses where women could find out about their options for future employment.

Disincentives to labour market participation

In several of the focus groups, participants drew attention to disincentives to labour market participation. Although employment is generally seen as a way to earn money, the major disincentive identified was the financial cost of taking up employment. Several women spoke of decisions by themselves or their friends to ‘invest in their careers’ by taking up employment even though childcare, travel, purchased meals and appropriate clothing were costing them more than they were earning. This was particularly the case if there were two or more children in the family. As ‘Eleanor’ stated: ‘I think the general agreement of friends and colleagues of mine is that if you can break even that’s fine.’

Maintaining attachment to employment

Some participants liked the idea of maintaining attachment to their employment, others emphasised the benefits of a break, and others stated that given the diversity of mothers and their situations there should be support for a range of options. Some of the participants valued the idea of maintaining confidence by keeping some attachment to employment. Others thought the stimulation and social contact would be good for mothers. Some said they could not cope with any more than the baby in the early years, and others that time away from employment offered an opportunity for reassessment of what they wanted to do. Some participants thought that employers could not be expected to put up with the disruption of having someone at work for such minimal hours as, for example, half a day per week.

Employment conditions and practices

Participants responded positively to suggestions about changing workplace conditions and practices to allow workers to go home on time and take leave to care for sick children. They clearly thought that such provisions should apply equally to men and women. Some participants recounted their experiences with prejudices against mothers in employment.

Several participants spoke about flexibility in their partners' workplaces, allowing them to take time off for sick children, leave work early sometimes, and attend special events at children's schools. Several others spoke of having similar flexibility in their own workplaces. Flexibility seemed to be associated with a workplace culture of valuing parental roles, and a sort of reciprocity, with workers determined to repay employers for flexibility, and employers rewarding workers in a range of ways including with flexibility. 'Alison' described the increase in carer's leave provisions as 'a little leap in the right direction'.

A number of participants spoke about excessive workplace demands on workers. As 'Alison' stated:

I think it would be good for everyone to go home on time – mothers or fathers, all workers. There's a real push in our society for more and more hours. You know people working from home fall into the trap of always working, easily fall into that trap of no knock-off time.

One participant described flexibility as 'a two-edged sword':

It works for people who are in positions where you can't be replaced and you're valued, but I have listened to radio programs of women who are factory workers and the difficulties they had when their hours were no longer set. All of a sudden they felt this intense pressure to do unpaid overtime. No-one asked them but they were really just saying 'Look I'm really committed to this' and that's why I think the comment here about definite finishing time is really important because there's always more work you can do and if you're saying to everybody 'Now go home, it's time to go home, this is it and don't take stuff home' [laughter] that's a really good thing. ['Evelyn']

Some participants spoke about differences between mothers and non-mothers in relation to putting in extra effort at work. Some stated that non-mothers resent the

limits imposed by mothers. 'Denise' recounted a recent staff meeting at the school where she was working. She often had to leave meetings to collect her child before the childcare centre closed. At one meeting, a well-respected male member of staff stated publicly that if people could not attend late meetings then they shouldn't be working there. 'Denise' challenged the statement at the time, and was disappointed that the importance of children and the legitimacy of having childcare responsibilities could still be challenged in this way. She thought that if more men shared the responsibility for children there would be less acceptance of this sort of statement in the workplace.

'Melissa', aged 25, spoke about having to overcome a range of prejudices:

That's the problem when you are uneducated and you're going for jobs. It's not so bad now I'm older but when I had [daughter] I was 22. I was young and I was a single parent and I had a problem with trying to get some jobs because they thought because I was the young single parent I would be unstable, I would be going home all the time because my kid's sick. I had to sort of guarantee that I wasn't going to be running off all the time, like there was just that prejudice. ... But you can get over it because I did get jobs you know it's just that sometimes you get a bit annoyed that you have to sit there and justify yourself ... and I thought "Why do I have to prove myself to a stranger anyway that I'm still a good person even though I'm a single parent?" You know before I had [daughter] I used to get jobs like that [flicking her fingers] and I was still getting jobs but it seemed I was really having to work my way through it to get a job. ['Melissa']

Another example of failure to recognise and value family commitments was presented:

Even the university when you go in there at the beginning of the year, you get lecturers, they stand up and say "Well if university isn't coming first then you shouldn't be here" and I sometimes feel like standing up and saying "Well excuse me, my family comes first. I have obligations to my children. They can't look after themselves. They're not adults so therefore they should be coming first." ['Ingrid']

In one of the focus groups, the difficulties for small businesses were discussed, with both employer and employee perspectives being represented. The participants could

clearly see both sides of the situation – the waitress who wanted Saturday night off at short notice because her child was sick, and the small business operator who has four children of her own, works a 60-hour week in the business and gets upset with staff who do not meet their commitments.

Gender equity and gender culture

The high-profile interviewees all referred to the lack of gender equity evident in the situation of mothers of young children in Australia today. Peter McDonald sees the lack of gender equity in families as a major factor in Australia's low fertility. Belinda Probert sees Australia's gender culture as perpetuating fixed ideas that prevent change. Almost all focus-group participants took the opportunity to protest about the lack of gender equity in their own lives and more broadly in Australian society. Even when they did not use the same technical terms as the high-profile people who were interviewed individually, they were clearly talking about and giving examples of the same social conditions. The focus groups included discussions about the lack of gender equity, the role of gender culture, and possibilities for future change.

Increasing fathers' involvement

The high-profile interviewees clearly saw increasing fathers' responsibility for the work involved in caring for young children as an important way to redress the disadvantage of the present inequitable situation for mothers. Participants were most enthusiastic about the idea of increasing fathers' involvement in unpaid work, fathers taking time out of employment, reducing working hours and taking sick child leave. Some participants pointed out that many men are keen to spend more time with their children. Others were sceptical about actually achieving these changes. The following example is typical:

'Ingrid': Mum will always make time to go and see that concert if she can because they know their child's doing something at school or whatever whereas dad's attitude is "Oh no I can't do that because the company won't like it if I do that." It seems to be more

acceptable for women to be able to go and do those things than it is for a male ... It would be lovely if you could have your husband come home and I don't know do the nappies for you for the day or cook dinner for you. By the end of the day, having a young baby you're absolutely exhausted ... But how to, how to go about encouraging them to do something when they got home, I mean you'd, the government might be willing or companies might be willing to give them the time off to go home and help their wives but if they're not taught to help around the house are they going to go home and help their wives? Yeah that's an interesting question. It would be lovely to have them come home and do those sorts of things but my mind's thinking "Well would they actually?"

Marty Grace: You're suspicious.

'Ingrid': I'm suspicious that they would probably come home, sit down and put their feet up.

Marty Grace: And have a bit more leisure time.

'Ingrid': A bit more leisure time for themselves instead of giving their wives that leisure time. ... Yeah I'm a little suspicious as to whether men would actually help us.

Lack of gender equity

Participants discussed the ways that, even in relationships where the intention was equal sharing, the women ended up with the major responsibility for the children. There was considerable discussion of how this comes about, and what broader social attitudes and conditions shape that direction. As 'Pamela' stated in relation to taking time off for sick children: 'I think often it's the mother or the female that will take the time off rather than the father. Maybe because it seems like the mother's job is of less importance so you can take the time off, to take the sick leave.' Similarly, 'Catherine' complained that although she and her husband and two children had moved to Victoria in order that she could study a particular university course, his paid work seemed to have priority over her study. If something went wrong at work, he was expected to work back, up to 7 or 8 hours, even though she was counting on the time to write an assignment or prepare for an examination.

Single mother 'Melissa' stated that she did not feel as though she was missing much by not having any help from her child's father, because the other fathers she knew of were not doing much to help with their children: 'Fathers' lives just seem to have a hiccup and then they go back to work, back to their normal lives.' She contrasted this

with the totally life-changing experience of becoming a mother. At the same group, 'Evelyn' spoke about double standards in her place of employment:

We both work at the same place though in quite different sections even in different locations in the city, and when he [husband] had our school boys there in the holidays from time to time in his own room just there reading or whatever ... he got sent an email about the university policy on children in the workplace and yet I'd never had that ... It was very, very, very interesting and so then, I said well that's alright they can come and sit in my office [loud laughter] so I think yeah it's hard to know what was behind that but there certainly is that sense that ... mothers can easily do it, it's almost assumed. ['Evelyn']

'Evelyn', whose youngest child has a significant disability, also stated that managing all the child's health and education needs tends to fall to the mother. She saw this as partly because she was necessarily the person on the spot in the days following the child's birth, and from that time her expertise and knowledge increased and her husband's fell further and further behind as health professionals all spoke to her, not him.

The participants spoke about the way that mothers not only do the bulk of the work involved in caring for young children, but that it is considered their responsibility, rather than a joint parental responsibility, and fathers are seen to be wonderful and to be 'helping' if they do anything at all, rather than as simply meeting their responsibilities. One of the groups drew on their own experience of double standards in expectations of women and men in relation to care of young children:

'Judith': If he's changing nappies he's considered fantastic. You know my mother would say, "Oh you're so lucky" and everybody else does the same thing and says "Aren't they fantastic men, they are just so fabulous. Look at all the help they provide." So it's sort of you're being told that you should think that this is fantastic, the fact that they participate is fantastic you ...

'Beth': It's not a choice [talking over]

'Alison': You're expected to and they're fantastic. Mmm, I went bush walking recently and I came across a group of blokes out doing the macho thing up the mountain and they said you know "And what have you done with your kids, where have you packed your kids off to?" and I said "Well my husband, their father has taken a week's leave and is at home with them while I'm on holidays" and they're going "Aaagh" and the shock on their faces [laughter] [And I thought] "So have a little think about that boys next time you take off, that someone else might like to." Yeah you know, they think that's OK for them to do that and it's not OK, it's unusual for me to do

that, it's not OK for women to go off and do something away from the children or it's sort of the reverse of that you know fantastic that they help or participate [talking over].

Marty Grace: And did anybody ask them who was looking after their children while they were bush walking?

'Alison': No well it was just me and them and I just knew who was looking after them [loud laughter]. It wouldn't even be a question to ask, it wouldn't enter around the campfire discussion.

Role of gender culture

A number of the participants argued that while there had been change since they were children, different expectations of women and men still meant that men could avoid most of the work of caring for young children. One of the examples given a number of times was the way that men think that their day's work is done once they come home from work, expecting wind-down time and some relaxation, whereas the women worked from early morning until late at night and often did not even feel entitled to a coffee break during the day. Another frequent example was the way that men avoided responsibility by demonstrating their incompetence with children and household work.

Some of the participants spoke about women's contribution to gender inequality. Several acknowledged that they had started out with firm ideas about sharing household responsibilities, but had gradually drifted towards doing more and allowing their male partners to do less. Others stated that they were protective of their children, sometimes to the exclusion of the child's father, or even defensive of their territory, not wanting to lose or even share a valued role.

Possibilities for change

Many of the participants wanted to see change in gender equity and gender culture in Australia. Some saw themselves as individual trailblazers, not acquiescing to external pressure but trying to advocate for equality in their own relationships. They were

willing to endure a level of tension and conflict for their ideals, as the following exchange shows:

‘Judith’: It’s kind of like I think “Should I just accept that women are better organisers, that they can do 20 things at one time or should I just keep trying to push for a bit of change because every little bit makes a difference?”

‘Alison’: [Husband] argues that I don’t value what he does, that I don’t see what he already does. And then I started to think about it and I thought, “Well you have got a point but it’s just a little hard to find.” [laughter]

‘Judith’: Yeah I get that as well [talking over] [Husband] said to me recently he said “Oh this is my first Saturday off in how many weeks” and I just said “I never get it off.” I know he works hard at work. He says “I work hard at work” and I said, “I know you do but it doesn’t mean anything because I work hard at work too but when I get home I’m still going.” I kind of feel guilty [for being mean to him] but I feel like he gets enough recognition for the fact that he’s a male at work from society.

‘Alison’: Well after [husband] had that week off at home parenting and painting the windows I said “Oh so do you feel good? Do you feel good having had a week off work?” He said, “Well I haven’t really had any break” so I said “Well that’s how it is isn’t it when you’re at home you don’t have a break. [laughter] That’s why I left and went away so I could have a break because if I stay home I don’t have a break even if I’m not at work you know.” [laughter] So he just felt like me for a week.

In one of the groups, a lively discussion concluded that men are conditioned to hold back and let women do the work involved in caring for children. Since this is learned behaviour, they argued that it could be changed. They thought men needed to develop their skills as well as their willingness to participate equally in the work of caring for young children, but they did not think the women should be responsible for training the men. Instead, they proposed a training institute for fathers – ‘boot camp’ as ‘Sally’ called it. In another group, ‘Ingrid’, mother of a large family of boys, stated that she had given up on her husband, and was concentrating on raising her sons to take some responsibility for household work. Prior to giving up, she had gone on strike:

‘Ingrid’: I’ve tried the method of “OK well I’m going on strike I’m not going to do anything” and I tried that for 4 months. Well you should have seen my house at the end of 4 months. My bath hadn’t been washed for 4 months, my tiles in the kitchen hadn’t been wiped for 4 months, washing was just like horrific in the laundry. They only washed what they needed. So that just basically didn’t work. I know it works for some people but in my household for some reason I got nowhere with that.

Marty Grace: I think you did well to sustain it for 4 months.

‘Ingrid’: Oh look it drove me mad, absolutely mad especially hopping into the shower it was like ohhh, I didn’t want to touch any walls or anything while I was having a shower and I’m thinking “He’s got to clean this eventually” but no he never did so in the end I couldn’t stand it any longer. I got in there and gave it a good clean. It was horrific, absolutely horrific. I think the only thing we can do is what I try to do with my children and that is to educate them to do it.

Other participants had tried strikes or partial strikes with limited, if any, success. One had gone away for a weekend because she was desperate for some time out and had returned to find her husband a shattered man because he had been unable to cope. Another does no household work at the weekend by negotiation. Her husband manages to care for the children but is unable to get any housework done at the same time, resulting in a ‘bomb site’ for her to deal with on Mondays. This participant described herself as lucky because she gets the rare privilege of a weekend. Another participant described friends who appeared to share equally in household work and caring for children. Both had a great deal of flexibility at their employment, and they planned ahead and worked as a team with either able to pick up the necessary tasks at home when the other was not there.

According to ‘Ingrid’:

It’s very important just finding the ways to make it easier for mothers in a man’s world, because it very much is a man’s world. I’m not one of these big feminists or whatever but I think that somewhere, somehow we’ve got to as women start pulling together to get men to give us more help. Yeah, they’re very big questions aren’t they?

Overview of the focus groups

The women who participated in the focus groups gave generously of their time and ideas. There was no great difficulty in recruiting mothers to participate, even though it was not possible to pay the participants. For many, the opportunity to do something for a couple of hours without their children was rare. They welcomed the opportunity for the discussion and made special arrangements in order to participate. They expressed appreciation for the opportunity to discuss the issues, and offered encouragement to the researcher.

The participants all agreed on the need for change in Australia's social arrangements for mothers of young children. There was a strong sense in all the groups that the work of caring for young children is extremely important, that it is not understood except by those who have done it, that this work makes a significant contribution to the wider community, and that the work is generally unrecognised and undervalued. Mostly, the participants' ideas about change were limited by what they had seen or experienced in either Australia or European countries. There was a clear difference between women who could not imagine anything other than Australia's present social conditions, and those who knew of working alternatives elsewhere. The fundamental changes most often advocated were for a radically different recognition for unpaid work, and for greater gender equity in responsibility for young children. In relation to specific policy change suggestions, participants reflected thoughtfully on advantages and disadvantages. In general, it seemed that any additional resources and supports would be welcome, although doubts were expressed regarding funding and political will.

While many of the issues were clearly very familiar to the participants, it seemed that discussions about desirable change were rare. There was a sense of individual isolation, as though each woman felt responsible for working out her own situation to the best of her ability. To an extent, the focus groups acted as consciousness-raising discussions for the participants as they heard different opinions, gained a sense of shared experiences, and encouraged each other to see change as possible and desirable. Some of the participants expressed the view that women need to work together for change, but there was no sense of an existing, well-articulated agenda that women could support.

CHAPTER 7

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The high-profile interviewees and the focus-group participants in this research put forward many ideas to improve the situation of mothers of young children in Australia, but the ideas were fragmented, lacking a framework to hold them together. This chapter presents such a framework, utilising the concept of a ‘coherent agenda for change’, developed by myself as part of this research and presented in ‘Chapter 3: Theorising an agenda for change’. This chapter includes a brief review of the reasons for carrying out the research, its design, the conceptualisation of the problem, and the concept of a coherent agenda for change. Following a summary analysis of the operation of domination and oppression in the situation of mothers of young children, I present three principles for developing a coherent agenda for change, and propose four ideas for transformational change. These ideas represent a beginning long-term change agenda. In order to demonstrate the application of this framework, I discuss paid maternity leave as an example of a proposed short-term agenda change. The chapter concludes with a brief section on bringing about change, and suggestions for future research.

My own experience, and the literature reviewed for this research suggest that Australia’s arrangements for care of young children are unsatisfactory, and that we lack an articulation of a way forward. This research focuses on ideas for change that are progressive, emancipatory, and consistent with contemporary critical social theory (CST) and relevant feminist theory. I obtained ideas for change from social commentators whose public statements fall within this theoretical approach. Focus groups of women with young children commented on these ideas for change. The research sought answers to the questions:

1. What changes, consistent with feminist ideals and critical social theory, and taking account of the views of the women carrying out the work, could increase the economic independence of mothers of young children?
2. What are the pathways towards and the barriers impeding egalitarian change in this area?

This research articulates ‘the problem’ as lack of economic independence for mothers of young children. The tension for mothers may be felt as ‘work’/family conflict¹⁶, lack of gender equity in unpaid work, arguments over formal childcare and mothercare, career disadvantage or income disadvantage. Exploration of these issues reveals continuity between present struggles and feminism’s long fight for economic independence for women. The mid-20th century ‘wages for housework’ campaign sought independent incomes for women on the basis of the value of their home-based work. Second-wave feminists rejected this campaign in favour of access to labour market earning as the means to achieve economic independence for women (Lake 1999). Women’s expectations regarding labour market, political and community participation have changed, partly because of the impact of second-wave feminism with its claims for equal pay, access to paid employment and rejection of relegation to the domestic sphere. However, social conditions have only partly changed, making it difficult for women to meet their expectations (Probert 2001). The family wage has been replaced by individual wages (Thomson 2000). Caring work, formerly resourced, at least in theory, by the family wage, is no longer resourced. Yet many women continue to carry out this work, at the expense of their ability to achieve economic independence (Williams 2000).

Within this research, I have developed the idea of a coherent agenda for change, and I propose that the development of such an agenda would be a way of getting movement in a situation that seems stuck. The idea of a coherent agenda for change draws on the work of Jeffry Galper and Nickie Charles. Galper distinguishes between social reform and transformational social change. ‘Reformism seeks change and improvement within the boundaries of what is’ (Galper 1975:76). Galper sees much social change

¹⁶ In literature on work/family conflict, ‘work’ means paid work.

effort as wasted in the long run because it may improve the position of one group relative to others, but does nothing about the social conditions that caused the problems of both groups in the first place. Transformational change efforts target institutions, ideologies and culture, to bring about change in the larger systems and structures within which we live our lives. Galper states that almost all change happens gradually, and the difference between reform and transformational change lies in the extent that changes challenge oppressive structures and ideologies rather than whether they are large or small, militant or non-militant.

Nickie Charles emphasises the need for a long-term agenda for change as well as a short-term agenda. Achieving long-term transformational change that is cultural and structural involves understanding how short-term changes fit into the longer-term agenda. My concept of a coherent agenda involves developing a long-term agenda for transformational change that challenges oppression, and situating smaller, short-term changes within that agenda, with a view to ensuring that the gains of the ‘short agenda’ contribute to the aims of the ‘long agenda’. A coherent agenda would:

1. be based on an analysis that is internally consistent and is used consistently in relation to the issues – (in this research the ‘consistent analysis’ uses a framework of contemporary CST and feminist theory);
2. include a vision for a better future;
3. aim for lasting, transformational change; and
4. establish a long-term agenda and a short-term agenda that are consistent with each other.

Without this coherent agenda, people are likely to expend energy on strategies that have little or counterproductive long-term impact. There is also a risk that, without a vision of long-term aims, activists will lose hope and burn out.

Part of the purpose of this research is to examine the situation of mothers of young children through the lens of contemporary CST including relevant feminist theory. This theoretical framework attends to domination and subordination, and includes a central value of contributing to egalitarian change. The sustained use of this

framework contributes to increasing understanding of the situation, establishing alternative discourses in relation to the issues, and developing possibilities for change. The following discussion presents an analysis of sources of domination, proposes principles for a coherent agenda for change, and identifies four ideas for transformational change.

Sources of domination and oppression

The central thesis of this work is that care of young children produces a public benefit at the expense of individual mothers, and that this amounts to exploitation on the part of the rest of the community. The research identified several sources of domination that allow this exploitation to continue.

The identified sources of domination consist of inter-related structures, institutions, practices and ideologies that support each other and act as barriers to change. Acknowledging this complexity, Lois Bryson, in her interview for this research, suggested that states, markets and families must be considered simultaneously to have any hope of bringing about lasting change.

One of the institutions that acts as both a source of domination and a barrier to change is ‘the economy’, usually meaning in both discourse and practice the market economy, with minor attention to the role of the state in maintaining the functionality of the market economy by intervening for example in interest rates. ‘The economy’ is an example of the intertwined functioning of states, markets and families. Within liberal democracies such as Australia, ‘the economy’ is treated as central. Families produce and support workers for the market, and consume market goods. The state props up the market, intervening to counteract ‘dangerous’ trends in the economy, such as overheating. This discourse and practice ignores the household economy. Duncan Ironmonger, in his interview for this research, emphasised the distorted attention to the market leg of the economy at the expense of the household leg. He stated that once we see the economic situation more clearly we will be able to act more clearly. A discourse of ‘the economy’ that includes the significance of household work in general and of caring for young children in particular would bring

change at the cultural level. Because of the dialectical relationships among culture, institutions, and personal practices, this alternative discourse would contribute to change at all levels.

As shown earlier, the subordination and disenfranchisement of women at the time of the institutionalisation of 'the economy' meant that the economic value of unpaid work could be disregarded. The development of the concept of the public/private divide further entrenched women's exclusion from 'the economy'. Despite women's voting rights and increasing participation in paid employment, politics and community life, the public/private divide has survived. Women's unpaid work is simultaneously exploited to support the market and ignored in terms of its economic significance.

The exploitation of women's unpaid work is supported structurally and culturally by the way that market work and family work are treated as belonging to separate spheres, in spite of their interdependence. Market work is constructed on the basis of the availability of 'ideal workers' without significant domestic responsibilities (J. Williams 2000). Most women and men can participate on this basis until/unless they have children. Following the birth of children, most women need time away from employment for physical recovery and breastfeeding. The lack of economic resourcing for this reproductive work is a source of domination/oppression, plunging most single women into either poverty or the excessive workload of early return to employment. Women with partners may avoid these outcomes, but the pressure on the partner to 'provide' for the family leads to a tendency for the mother to become economically dependent, to specialise in unpaid work and the male or female partner to specialise in paid work. Once established, this pattern proves resistant to change. Some of the focus-group participants spoke of trying to achieve gender equity in their personal arrangements, but the pressure of social conditions seemed constantly to push their arrangements towards the gender stereotypes they were trying to avoid. Without constant vigilance and effort, they said, they kept losing parts of what they wanted and had negotiated with their partners. Examples of this included 'Catherine's' study time being used for her partner to stay late at work, and 'Ruth'

sharing the childcare and household work on weekends even though she was supposed to have weekends off.

Distortion in the relative value placed on market work and family work is a source of oppression for women. The factors making change difficult include the tendency of employers to expect long hours of work from their 'ideal workers' who are not expected to have any domestic responsibilities (Williams 2000). Partners who spend long hours on paid employment fail to develop the skills necessary to care fluently for babies and young children. Lacking skills, they often find the work excessively difficult and avoid it if possible. A subtle shift in power typically occurs and the employed partner comes to see the release from household work as an entitlement, and the mother sees her excessive workload as necessary to sustain the family income. For mothers, escape from major responsibility for children and household work becomes difficult. Whether single or partnered, they usually cannot perform as the 'ideal workers' the market demands, because they do not have a 'wife' at home relieving them of domestic responsibilities (J. Williams 2000). In this situation, a dominant ideology of motherhood, like an opportunistic virus, suggests to women that it is good to be always available to their children, that mothercare is best for children and that sacrificing their own desires to the demands of motherhood is a good thing.

Twentieth-century feminists wrote extensively about sources of domination and oppression of women. They argued for social change on the basis of either women's sameness to men (equality) or on the basis of women's difference from men (maternalism). Both arguments have been used against women, and contemporary feminists advocate the development of practices that acknowledge both women's equality with men and the differences between women and men in regard to child-bearing (Lister 1997; O'Connor et al 1999; Reiger 2000; Weedon 1997; Williams 2000). Contemporary feminist theorists also emphasise diversity among women and the importance of taking differences into account when developing an agenda for change (Evans 1997; hooks 1984).

Feminist theorists have criticised the public/private divide and the liberal ideal of citizenship, and have argued for recognition of the interdependence of the so-called 'spheres', and for a concept and practice of citizenship that includes women (Fraser 1989; Lister 1997; Pateman 1988; Reiger 2000; Showstack Sassoon 1987; J. Williams 2000). While valuing the experiences of motherhood and family life, feminists have criticised the institutions of motherhood and the family for being oppressive to women (Gilligan 1982; Rich 1986; Reiger 1991; Ruddick 1990; Wearing 1984). This oppression is often expressed or played out as conflicts between work and family. For men, this work/family conflict may mean conflict between paid work and relationships, but for women it is much more likely to mean conflict between paid work and unpaid work. Until the gendered nature of this discourse is clarified, general discussions of work/family conflict will continue to be of limited usefulness.

Locating these sources of domination presents the opportunity to develop principles for analysis of the situation of mothers of young children. Taking into account all aspects of this research – the literature review, the theoretical framework, the interviews and focus groups, I propose three principles for analysis of the situation. They are: challenging the public/private divide; treating women as individuals; and developing a gendered citizenship. This 'consistent analysis' can be used for developing a coherent agenda, promoting alternatives to dominant discourses, challenging domination/oppression, and bringing about change. In the face of many disparate suggestions, these principles can provide a theoretical and practical guide for developing a coherent agenda, and planning steps that will bring about change in the direction of the desired long-term transformational change.

Principle 1: Challenging the public/private divide

As discussed in 'Chapter 2: Literature Review', the idea of separate public and private spheres is a patriarchal liberal fiction that oppresses women. The separation of the spheres hides the interdependence of state, market and domestic activities. A consistent analysis of the situation of mothers of young children must challenge the fiction of the public/private divide, by emphasising that caring for young children is work (however lovingly performed) with economic value, and that this work produces

a public benefit at the expense of individual mothers. This analysis rejects any essentialising association of women with the domestic. It maintains an emphasis on both women and men as participants in domestic activities, generating economic resources, and in community life. While rejecting the idea of separate public and private spheres, this analysis retains a commitment to a value of privacy in personal areas of life (Lister 1997; Young 1990).

One of my contentions is that housework and childcare should be viewed and treated in quite different ways from each other. As shown by Ironmonger (1989) and Waring (1989), housework is economic activity, but it could be argued that it does not produce a public benefit in the same way as raising children (Bittman & Pixley 1997). If we accept the idea of separate spheres, we are forced to decide whether raising children is a private matter or a public matter, or perhaps an activity with private and public components. If, on the other hand, we reject the notion of separate spheres, it becomes possible to discuss public resourcing of the work of caring for young children, even when the caring work is carried out in the 'private' spaces of parents' lives.

The consistent analysis that I am proposing as part of a coherent agenda for change would reject the ideas of separate public and private spheres as oppressive, and would reject the ideas that flow from such an analysis.

Principle 2: Treating women as individuals

Peter McDonald states that to improve gender equity for women who become mothers, public policy must treat them as individuals rather than gendered family members. On the surface, this idea could be seen as in conflict with contemporary CST, as represented in Table 4.1. According to this representation, 'order' (liberal/conservative) perspectives include a belief that human beings are competitive, contentious, individualistic and acquisitive, and 'conflict' (CST) perspectives view people as cooperative, collective and social. Bettina Cass' (1995) discussion of gender in the labour market and the welfare state provides useful background for consideration of this apparent contradiction. She draws attention to the Australian

welfare state treatment of heterosexual couples as the unit of income- and assets-testing for benefits. Sole parent pensioners lose their pensions if they start (heterosexual) cohabiting. Women's eligibility for support such as Austudy and Child Care Benefit is means-tested on the combined incomes of themselves and male partners. It is this treatment as gendered (patriarchal) family members that McDonald seeks to reverse, rather than promoting a competitive, acquisitive individualism. This treatment as autonomous or independent citizens can co-exist with the expectation that people will act in cooperative and collective ways. As Carole Pateman (1989, cited in Cass 1995) states:

[F]ully democratic citizens would be both autonomous and *interdependent*, they are autonomous when each enjoys the means to be an active citizen, but they are interdependent when the welfare of each is the collective responsibility of all citizens. [p.203]

This concept of fully democratic citizenship emphasises autonomous (individual) access to the means to be an active citizen – the economic resources to sustain life and participate in the community.

Treating mothers as individuals rather than as members or potential members of heterosexual couples would have far-reaching consequences for women. This would increase mothers' economic independence in the short term. It could potentially reduce the stigma attached to single motherhood and the pressure on women to ensure that their children have a live-in father. This change is likely to increase the birthrate, since many Australian women at present delay childbearing until they have a stable relationship and economically secure circumstances (McDonald 2000a). In practice, treating women as individuals would involve the abolition of means-testing based on couples' incomes. I would argue for the abolition of means-testing altogether, with family allowances seen as a citizenship right rather than as welfare. However, an intermediate step could be means-testing Child Care Benefit and income support payments on women's individual incomes. In relation to single women, this would mean abolishing the assumption, built into Centrelink eligibility rules, that a woman co-habiting with a man is being financially supported by that man. Single mothers would not lose their benefits if (heterosexual) cohabiting. Such a change could

succeed only if the discourse of single mothers as a drain on the economy were replaced by a discourse of single mothers as contributors to the economy.

Principle 3: Developing gendered citizenship

Traditionally, women's advocacy for change has been based on either equality (sameness) with men or on difference from men, particularly in relation to childbearing and caring responsibilities. Some contemporary feminists argue for a gendered citizenship that emphasises women's equality with men AND acknowledges biological differences in relation to pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding (Gordon 1990; Okin 1997; Reiger 2000; Williams 2000). This perspective values women's reproductive experience without essentialising women, or subscribing to the dominant ideology of motherhood, or accepting that care-giving work is properly the responsibility of women.

Cass (1995) and other feminist authors criticise structures and institutions predicated on the ideal citizen of liberal theory – an able-bodied male, unencumbered by domestic responsibilities (Fraser 1989; Lister 1997; Pateman 1988; Reiger 2000; Showstack Sassoon 1987; J. Williams 2000). They argue for changes to institutions to make them more inclusive of women, but not at the cost of institutionalising women's responsibility for household and caring work. Cass (1995) argues that a reconceptualized citizenship for both women and men must include expectations of taking responsibility for dependant care.

The concept of gendered citizenship implies women's right to participate in society's institutions that have previously excluded them, but at the same time reserving the right to work for change in those institutions.

Ideas for transformational change

Transformational change must challenge the domination/oppression inherent in a social situation. Consistent with the principles articulated above, four ideas for broad transformational change emerged from the interviews and focus-group discussions.

These ideas could be seen as a beginning articulation of the ‘long agenda’ part of a coherent agenda for change:

- Item 1. Duncan Ironmonger’s call to change what is considered as economic activity – to include in all matters of law, politics, policy and practice the consideration of the whole of the economy, including the market economy, the household economy and the environment.
- Item 2. A change in the status of caring for young children from ‘doing nothing’, ‘not working’ or ‘caring’ to recognition as real work with value for the whole community.
- Item 3. Changes in the organization of market work and family work to encourage women and men to participate equally in both, and in political and community life.
- Item 4. Changes to the gender system that prescribes ‘proper’ and different roles and behaviours for women and men. This gender system includes ideologies and dominant discourses of motherhood and the family.

These ideas provide at least a beginning map of the complexity of the long agenda in a coherent agenda for change. They are consistent with a conflict perspective, identifying institutions, ideologies and social processes and practices as targets for change (Mullaly 2002). This agenda is clearly transformational, going further than ideas for change within the existing system, such as those put forward by Phyllis Moen (1992). Her ‘life-course’ model suggests rearranging the life course, and includes ideas about reduced (paid) working hours for both parents while children are very young, and a hope that it will no longer be necessary for either parent to sacrifice career for child-raising. However, she does not name existing structures and ideologies as oppressive, and does not target them for change. Her suggestions are reformist, within the existing structure (Galper 1975). Joan Williams (2000) on the other hand, does identify ideologies and structures as targets for change. Compared

with Joan Williams' (2000) suggestions for changes in market work, family work and the gender system, the agenda emerging from this research places more emphasis on changing the broad economic system as well as attending to the organisation of market work and family work, and changing the gender system. The targets identified in this research for challenge and change include dominant discourses of 'the economy', perceptions of the value of children, ideologies of motherhood and domesticity, the lack of gender equity for women with family responsibilities, and barriers to women's full participation in positions of authority and responsibility.

Economic arrangements and the role taken by the state reflect both the politics of the present government and those of previous governments (Jamrozic 2001). The tentative agenda for transformational change presented above would clearly be more compatible with social democratic politics than with the neo-conservative politics of Australia's Howard government. However, using the concept of a long agenda and a short agenda gives the opportunity to advocate for proposals that move in the desired direction rather than waiting for the election of a government that will relate to arguments based on contemporary CST. Several of the interviewees pointed out that, while countries with social democratic governments have more egalitarian policies than Australia, no one country could be considered a blueprint for Australian policy. Rather, overseas provisions could all be considered in developing Australian policies that reflect contemporary Australian community standards and aspirations.

The following section takes each of the four 'long agenda' items that make up the vision for a better future identified within this research, and discusses them in relation to the ideas highlighted earlier in this chapter. It also identifies some of the 'short agenda' changes that would contribute towards the long-term transformational changes. A following section takes paid maternity leave as an example and shows how applying the ideas discussed earlier in this chapter can inform thinking and planning in relation to a particular short-agenda proposal.

A transformed idea of ‘the economy’

In Duncan Ironmonger’s vision of a better future, we would take an economic view of the world that includes the household economy as well as the market economy¹⁸. Ironmonger states that if we saw the world in this way, we would gather much more information about the household economy, and the significance of this information would be viewed differently from at present. Seeing things more clearly would lead to many changes in policy, legislation and practices:

Proper recognition of the household economy will have arrived when national household accounts are published each quarter alongside national accounts for the market economy. These data will enable greater scientific research on the organization of household production, the interactions with the market economy, the role of households in building human capital, on the effects of household technology and alternative social and economic policies on gender divisions of labor and on family welfare. [Ironmonger 2000:11]

Including unpaid work in what is considered to be economic activity could involve counting, valuing and resourcing that work. Counting does not necessarily mean valuing, and valuing does not necessarily mean resourcing. Australia’s time-use surveys have begun a process of counting unpaid work (ABS 1997; ABS 1994a; Bittman 1995). Many of the focus-group participants wanted their work as mothers counted in the census. They were offended that the 2001 census offered them no way of recording their work. The conservative Women’s Action Alliance (WAA) conducted a campaign at the time of the 2001 census for the inclusion of household work. They distributed protest stickers for people to attach to their census forms. In her interview for this research, Eva Cox noted that conservatives and progressives will sometimes advocate for the same things, but for different reasons. WAA policy states that valuing unpaid work would ‘give a realistic basis for discussing items such as tax relief for families, a wage oriented towards families rather than individuals, or a homemaker’s allowance’ (WAA 2002). This is clearly at odds with the idea of

¹⁸ Ironmonger, in his interview for this research, acknowledged the need to include the environment in any complete economic view of what is necessary to sustain and reproduce the population.

treating mothers as individuals rather than as gendered family members (Cass 1995), and with the idea that care of young children is quite different from housework (Grace 2001a, 1998; Oakley 1974). Progressives would also want unpaid work included on the census, but as a way of challenging the exploitation of women's labour and the distortion embedded in the public/private divide rather than, as with the WAA, wanting to privilege the traditional patriarchal nuclear family with stereotypical gender division of labour.

Of the three ways of recognising unpaid work as economic activity, counting requires the least commitment, valuing requires a little more, and resourcing requires the greatest commitment. Valuing unpaid work in addition to counting it would involve inclusion in the quarterly national accounts (Ironmonger 2000). It would also involve inclusion of unpaid workers in superannuation, Workcover and sick leave provisions. Many focus-group participants were angry about their exclusion from superannuation, and their lack of entitlement to income support, treatment and rehabilitation if sick or injured. Changes in these arrangements would be useful short-agenda items that are consistent with the long-agenda aims of transforming 'the economy'.

Acknowledging the economic value of the work of caring for young children suggests that those who benefit from this work, that is, the rest of the community, should be resourcing this work, rather than it being carried out at the expense of individual mothers. The idea of publicly-funded wages for mothers was canvassed during this research. Some focus-group participants were enthusiastic about the idea, saw it as just and reasonable, but thought it was unrealistic. As discussed earlier, the 'wages for housework' campaign was an early attempt to claim economic recompense for unpaid work. Mid 20th century feminists rejected the campaign. Ann Oakley argued for the abolition of the occupation of 'housewife'. She also argued for much better resourcing of the care of young children (Oakley 1974). Both Lois Bryson and Eva Cox, in interviews for this research specifically rejected 'mothers' wages' as an option for economic independence for mothers of young children. Both have been feminist activists since the time of second-wave feminism. Cox explained her view that if the government pays 'stay-at-home' money, mothers will interpret this as an official view

that it is a good thing to stay at home. It seems that wages for mothers would be too much like the ‘wages for housework’ that many second-wave feminists rejected, with potential for conservatives to claim that motherhood is the ‘proper’ role for women, and to exert pressure to exclude women from other work.

Cox and Bryson, along with all other participants in this research, supported the idea of paid maternity leave as a way for the rest of the community to contribute more towards the resourcing of the care of young children. Following this section, I have included a detailed discussion of what type of maternity leave scheme would, as a ‘short agenda’ change, contribute towards the ‘long agenda’ of transformational change proposed in this research.

A less distorted view of the world would include, as Michael Bittman emphasises, a recognition that raising children produces a public benefit, and that it is reasonable for the whole community rather than individual parents to bear the costs of children. Some of the areas where a more complete view of the world would make a difference to public policy include childcare, conditions for unpaid work, age pension and superannuation provisions and volunteering. This would severely challenge the public/private divide and make clear the interdependence of the two ‘spheres’. Short agenda changes advocated in any of these areas could contribute towards the long agenda by challenging the oppressive structures, ideologies and practices that make up the public/private divide.

Transformation in the status of caring work

Viewing parental care of young children as economic activity that produces a public benefit would mean treating it as real work with value for the whole community. If, as argued by the research participants, much more public resourcing would be appropriate, we need more research and public debate into what kinds of care are acceptable to the community and what level of care is required for children of different ages. As long as public resourcing is minimal, as at present, qualitative arguments are used to justify public expenditure. However, claims for substantial

funding may need to include quantification of the economic value of this work to the rest of the community. Community standards will determine what types of care are supported for children of different ages. For example, this research supported previous findings that infants require very long hours of care – more than a normal working week (Bittman & Pixley 1997), and found considerable support for enabling parents to provide that care themselves. Research could focus on what strategies, in this country, would encourage and enable fathers to share more equally in that care. It could also explore in detail how the level of care required decreases as children get older. If paid maternity and paternity leave and/or generous family allowances are introduced, how long should they go on for? In their interviews for this research, both Peter McDonald and Carmen Lawrence suggested a broad-ranging public inquiry into Australia's social arrangements for caring for young children. They suggested such an inquiry should be carried out by a panel with a range of expertise and would:

1. examine provisions in other countries particularly Scandinavian countries including Finland;
2. consult academic research and opinion already published in this country;
3. provide proactive processes for community participation in the inquiry, including extensive community consultations; and
4. make recommendations across portfolio areas.

Viewing care of young children as real work with economic value rather than as 'love' implies that it would be appropriate for this work to be covered by sick leave, Workcover and superannuation arrangements. This idea was extremely popular with focus-group participants. In particular, sick leave was seen as an urgent need. Some participants laughed at this idea and called it an 'impossible dream' but others set about designing a scheme. Implementing these ideas would involve breaking down the public/private divide in people's minds, discussions of the issues, and in legislation, policies and practices.

Changes in market work and family work

Including the value of the unpaid work of caring for young children in discussions of the economy challenges the public/private divide, how activities are relegated to one or the other, and how women and men are expected to conduct themselves. It blurs the line between market work and family work, by asserting that at least some family work is a matter of public responsibility. Peter McDonald associates low fertility with lack of gender equity in 'private' matters, when society's institutions relate to women not as public individuals but as private family members. Family allowances, for example, construct mothers as family members to be assisted with their family work. Means-tested family allowance is an example of treating women as family members rather than as individuals, because a woman's entitlement is reduced by her male partner's income. Non-means-tested family allowances would blur the divide by treating a woman as an individual rather than as part of a couple in her role as a mother. Paid maternity leave constructs mothers as workers on leave from their market work in order to carry out family work. Paid maternity leave blurs the public/private divide by affirming the economic value of family work.

Transformation of the gender system

Neither paid maternity leave nor non-means-tested family allowances would contribute towards encouraging men to participate equally in family work. The barriers to equal participation include ideologies and practices. The ideologies of domesticity, motherhood and family were identified by research participants as barriers to change. These ideologies support the gender system that means mothers mostly bear the costs of caring for young children. The ideologies and practices were seen to be mutually reinforcing. For example, the ideology of domesticity assigns unpaid work to women, supporting the idea that women's work is of little economic value. This contributes to low wages for women, making it difficult for couples to break away from the gendered division of market and household work because deviating from gendered roles would involve loss of wages at a time when they need to maximise their economic resources because someone must care for the baby.

Public comment in newspapers indicates that childcare is still perceived as a women's issue. Focus-group discussions repeatedly returned to the idea that most men are willing to help, but lack skills, require constant direction and supervision, lack initiative and seldom take responsibility in relation to family work. Research participants indicated that many Australian men want to be more involved with their children. The popularity of Steve Biddulph's work (2001, 1995, 1994) indicates that men are searching for ways to change fatherhood. Ideologies and practices usually change in tandem (Charles 2000). Present social arrangements act as barriers for men who have made ideological shifts towards wanting greater involvement with their children. They need practical opportunities to gain skills, experience and knowledge about babies and young children. This would require re-education of professionals who have contact with new parents, as well as literature and public comment encouraging people to think differently about the responsibilities of motherhood and fatherhood. Workplaces continue to expect to be able to reclaim fathers as ideal workers, and institutions including health and welfare relate to and educate mothers about babies and children. Participants identified the need for changes in workplace cultures, legitimising parents' everyday concerns such as going home on time and taking time off work when children are sick. They saw a need for more and better services and supports for parents and young children.

The focus-group participants saw themselves as having chosen their arrangements for pragmatic and personal reasons, rather than conforming to sex-role stereotypes or expectations. However, institutional arrangements worked against any challenge to gender roles, and the longer stereotypical arrangements were in place the more difficult it became to break out of them. Mothers became increasingly skilled at caring for children, but suffered depreciation of their ability to earn labour market income. Fathers, on the other hand, fell further and further behind mothers in their ability to care for and manage their children, but maintained or increased their ability to earn labour market income.

Aspects of motherhood ideology also work against fathers' participation. These aspects include the idea that a mother is the best person to care for a child, and the

idea that a ‘good’ mother is always available for her children. Changing the ideology of motherhood involves challenging ideas about what is good for children and what it means to be a good mother. Many of the focus-group participants spoke of guilt about leaving their children with other people while they did something else that they wanted to do. The idea of guilt reflects the moral imperatives that form part of the ideology of motherhood – what a mother ‘should’ and ‘should not’ do. It also reflects the selfless ideal of motherhood. The ideology of motherhood supports domesticity by suggesting it is morally good and provides good quality care for children. The mothers in the focus groups were very concerned about quality care for their children, whether talking about their own practices or about arranging for other people to care for their children. Eva Cox, in her interview for this research, challenged conventional ideas about motherhood and what is good for children. She suggested that variety is good for both mothers and children, that mothers will provide better quality care if they have regular breaks from their children, and that children benefit educationally and socially from group care.

Belinda Probert drew attention to the need for change in the ideologically-driven and damaging moral and judgmental divisions among women. She saw women defending their own arrangements by attacking other possibilities for example in relation to use of formal childcare, indicating that debate in the area is excessively moral rather than constructive. The ideology of domesticity locates caring for children in the private sphere and identifies it as love rather than labour. Treating caring for young children as a matter of love and relationship makes it seem like an arena of beliefs and morals. Treating it as work that has an economic value and produces a public benefit may contribute to a more (re)constructive approach.

Lois Bryson and Peter McDonald suggested that a better future would include gender equity for women with family responsibilities. Mothers of young children would be identified and treated much less as gendered family members, and more as individuals. This suggests an overthrow of the ‘compulsory altruism’ of motherhood, whereby the mother becomes ‘selfless’ setting aside her selfhood or personhood in the interests of her children. They emphasised that they are not suggesting rampant

individualism or economic rationalism. This proposal is consistent with the idea of a gendered citizenship that recognises both a woman's status as an individual and her life experience that may include childbearing. This change also opens up the possibility of reducing the gender-specificity of parenting by disconnecting the physical experience of childbearing from the ideological role expectations of mothers, allowing men to exercise some of the devotion and nurturing at present expected of mothers.

Carmen Lawrence emphasised an additional aspect of gender equity relevant to women's citizenship. Her vision for a better future includes stripping away both attitudes and structural obstacles to women's participation in community and political leadership.

Long-term change towards gender equity would require short-term strategies to educate and train fathers to care in a skilled way for their children, along with family allowances, paid leave arrangements and workplace expectations that eliminate or reduce the financial disincentives for fathers' participation in childcare.

Changing ideologies of domesticity and motherhood would involve ideas, attitudes and practices. Ideas would need to be challenged among mothers of young children and those who advise them. Seeing childcare services as educational and supportive for children and parents rather than as an employment-related service would be a major shift at an institutional level. Relevant practices for challenge would include funding, staffing and management of formal childcare.

The four 'long agenda' items – transforming 'the economy', the status of caring work, market work and family work, and the gender system – make up a vision for a better future, and express aims for lasting, transformational change. The analysis presented earlier locates sources of domination to be challenged and establishes principles including challenging the public/private divide, treating women as individuals and developing a gendered citizenship. Moving towards long-term change will depend on developing short agenda items. A vision for the future and the analysis above provide

a framework for considering short agenda items. This framework can be used to question whether particular suggestions would be consistent with the overall agenda for change. It can be used to examine whether new policies or practices would challenge oppression and move in the direction of a better future. The following discussion applies the framework to the example of paid maternity leave.

Analysis of paid maternity leave example

At the time of writing, Australia is experiencing lively public discussion of the possibility of introducing legislated paid maternity leave. Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward released an interim paper on paid maternity leave in April 2002. Response moved rapidly from whether Australia should have a scheme, to what type of scheme we should have.

This section applies my idea of a coherent agenda for change to a specific example of public policy development. A coherent agenda for change would include a consistent analysis, a vision for a better future, an aim of bringing about lasting transformational change, and long agenda and a short agenda that are consistent with each other.

The consistent analysis in relation to paid maternity leave and related issues is that caring for young children is real work that produces a public benefit at the expense of individual mothers, and it would be reasonable for the rest of the community to contribute much more to the resourcing of this work. The vision for a better future is of a more egalitarian society, with less inequality between rich and poor, and between men and women. The pathway towards this better future includes breaking down the public/private divide (while preserving a value of privacy), treating women more as individuals and less as gendered couple or family members, and moving towards a gendered citizenship that acknowledges both women's equality with men and their distinctive role in childbearing. The aim of achieving lasting transformational change means that changes should challenge oppressive institutions and practices.

Using the idea of a coherent agenda for change means that it is important to design a paid maternity leave scheme to be consistent with the broader agenda in order that it

can become one of the small changes that contribute to long-term transformational change.

Arguments put forward by Pru Goward (2000) in favour of 14 weeks' paid maternity leave include contributing to arresting Australia's dropping fertility by making it more economically feasible for 'couples' to have children, compensating women for their loss of income resulting from family responsibilities, an appeal to mothers' right to a period of rest following a birth, the deservingness of mothers and babies to have time for each other following birth, and an argument that it is in the interests of business and industry to retain skilled workers by offering paid maternity leave. She does not use the argument that caring for young children is work with economic value for the whole community. Goward's final proposal, to be presented in November 2002 following extensive community consultation, may challenge the oppression embedded in the public/private divide by viewing mothers as workers on leave from paid employment. However, the arguments presented in the interim paper do not challenge the exploitation of mothers' labour, or the definition of caring for young children as non-work. Goward's paper both reinforces and challenges motherhood ideology. Her argument that paid maternity leave gives babies full-time access to their mothers for the first 14 weeks of life draws on the idea that mothers should be always available for their babies. Goward's paper acknowledges the need for changes to facilitate fathers' ability to care for their children, thus including a minor challenge to motherhood ideology. The challenge remains minor, with Goward citing pragmatic reasons for concentrating on paid maternity leave while flagging the need for other provisions.

Vision for a better future and pathways towards that vision

Achieving a fairer more egalitarian society would involve eliminating racism and inequality, and establishing gender equity. Designing a paid maternity leave scheme that attends to these three issues at the same time could present some challenges. For example, overcoming women's gender-based economic disadvantage would involve advocating full income replacement for as long as possible for well-paid women. However, this would increase inequality between rich women and poor women.

Two ideas may assist in dealing with this challenge. They are the idea of learning from the mistakes of the past and the idea that women can participate in AND change the institutions of society. Early last century, Labor women made the mistake of trying to exclude Aboriginal and Islander women from the Maternity Allowance they were fighting for (Lake 1999). With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that while it is good to fight for improved conditions for employed women, it is also important to express solidarity with women, including Indigenous women, who are disadvantaged in relation to employment. According to this principle, we should ensure that all women are covered by Australia's paid maternity leave scheme.

Australian women want to participate in education, employment, politics and community life AND to change them (McDonald 2000a; Pocock 2000; Probert 2001; Weedon 1997). Because of the historical development of our institutions, practices are built on a gendered division of labour, and the fiction of separate public and private spheres. One example is the way that employers have come to demand what Joan Williams terms 'ideal workers' free of domestic responsibility. These workers exist only if an unpaid worker at home does their washing, cooking and housework and cares for their children. Women want to participate in employment, but not on a take it or leave it basis. We want to change the rules of employment to enable us to be both the workers and the parents we want to be (Probert 2001). This idea of participating while bringing about change provides a basis for thinking about how to structure paid maternity leave for employed women. Some women may want to change employment in the long run to reduce or eliminate inequality, but in the meantime participating equally with men in the existing system is a worthy goal. This equal participation means increasing the rewards in financial, career and status terms for women in employment. According to this principle, we should ensure that women in employment receive full replacement of wages while on paid maternity leave.

Ideas about good motherhood and good fatherhood get in the way of gender equity in parenting. Inequity in parenting gets in the way of equity in employment, politics and community life. A paid maternity leave scheme that contributes towards a future more

egalitarian society must challenge the gendered roles that script our present arrangements.

Ideas that good mothers are self-sacrificing, are always available for their children, and arrange their lives around care-giving responsibilities lead women to take excessive responsibility for childcare and unpaid work. This tends to result in very good relationships with their children, but underdevelopment of women's potential in other areas, and poor access to economic resources. The idea that good fathers are principally breadwinners leads men to excessive commitment to paid work, to the detriment of their participation in childcare and relationships. There are signs that both women and men want greater equality in care-giving and income-earning. Women's bodies bear and breastfeed babies, and paid maternity leave gives recognition to this reality. However, a scheme must avoid any suggestion that babies and young children are the responsibility of individual mothers rather than of both parents, and of the community.

Belinda Probert suggests that in Australia progress towards gender equity has stalled. Peter McDonald states that if we want to maintain the birth rate in Australia we need to improve economic security for young people, and increase gender equity for women who bear children. What kind of paid maternity leave scheme would move us towards gender equity as well as providing income for women at a time in their lives when they cannot be expected to earn income via paid employment?

Who should pay?

The whole of the community benefits from the work that parents, mostly mothers, carry out to care for babies and young children. It is reasonable that the community, via a government-funded scheme, should fund paid maternity leave. If businesses paid directly it could become very unfair for some businesses and lead to discrimination in employment against women of child-bearing age. However, businesses do benefit from the early return to employment of skilled workers, and the ACTU suggestion that an employer levy could be used to top-up the government-funded scheme to average weekly earnings is reasonable (ACTU 2002). As suggested by the Women's

Electoral Lobby, it should be possible for employers to further top-up payments, for example to income-replacement level (WEL 2002). The publicly-funded paid leave should not be contingent upon return to a particular place of employment. However, it would be reasonable for employer-funded top-up payments to carry an obligation to return to that employer.

A universal scheme

There has been some discussion of whether paid maternity leave should be only for women in paid employment at the time of a birth, or for all women, regardless of employment status. Restricting a publicly-funded initiative to those already most advantaged in the community runs counter to the ideal of working towards a more egalitarian society. Women who are students, pensioners, unemployed, living in remote communities, are supported by a partner or are not in paid employment for some other reason prior to a birth should not miss out. Most of these women have paid taxes in the past, and most will again in the future. The timing of a birth, or employment disadvantage including geographical location should not be used as an excuse to exclude women from paid maternity leave.

Level of payment

The ACTU (2002) web page suggests:

[U]nder the ACTU's maternity leave model, an estimated 87% of working mothers would be eligible for 14 weeks' leave on full pay, with others receiving at least average weekly earnings (currently \$981.10) ... Payments up to the minimum wage (currently \$431 per week) would be funded by the Commonwealth. Top-up payments up to the level of average weekly earnings would be funded by an employer levy costing less than \$1-a-week per employee, with possible exemptions for small businesses.

Some women already have an employer-funded entitlement of around 14 weeks on full pay, and it is important that this should not be reduced, in accordance with the principle of working towards greater gender equity within the existing system, while working for change towards a more egalitarian system. Any scheme must provide a universal government-funded minimum payment, and allow for additional employer-funded payments.

Gender equity

Fourteen weeks of paid maternity leave will not bring gender equity to this country. Even with paid maternity leave, it will still be unreasonable to expect one person to look after a baby, wash, cook, clean and shop for a household, seven days a week without breaks. We will still have all the problems of finding high quality affordable childcare and of women's double shift of paid work and unpaid work when they return to employment.

Fathers' long hours of work are damaging to mothers. Mothers suffer physically from overwork and lack of sleep. They suffer mentally and emotionally from lack of rest and lack of breaks from their work, from isolation and shouldering excessive responsibility for children and housework. Relationships suffer because women feel abused by the working conditions imposed by their motherhood.

We need to enable both fathers and mothers to take time out from employment, and/or limit working hours without economic or career penalty. If we want men to participate equally in caring work, we need paternity leave, some to be taken simultaneously with maternity leave. It may be necessary to provide guidance to encourage fathers to perform and gain skills in household work and childcare, since this expectation runs counter to the practices of some sections of the community.

Long-term change

Paid maternity leave potentially recognises both the status of women as workers in the labour market, and the economic value of the work involved in caring for babies and young children. However it is important to see this small step for women as part of a larger undertaking – to overcome the distortions embedded in our way of life.

The market lives as a parasite on the unpaid work carried out in homes, predominantly by women. Distortion in what is treated as economic activity results in distortion of distribution of economic resources. The undervaluing of work traditionally carried out by women, and ideas about what makes a good mother and a good father, force

individuals' choices towards males specialising in market work and females specialising in caring work. Because caring work is treated as 'doing nothing', women with male partners are expected to perform the man's share of housework, as well as their own. He gains sympathy for working long hours. Her efforts are taken for granted.

We need to find ways to allocate a fair share of economic resources to people undertaking caring work. This could include a range of strategies, including paying decent wages for childcare and personal care workers; drawing more caring work into the market as paid work; providing more services to people undertaking caring work to provide breaks, education, training and respite; and providing generous family allowances, not means-tested on income.

Many Australian women and men are ready to move towards more egalitarian participation in caring for young children, employment, politics and community life, but structures and practices based on old ideas are working against them.

In accordance with the idea of a coherent agenda for change as developed in this research, the aims of paid maternity leave and related provisions could include:

1. providing support for mothers who are out of the labour market, in part-time employment, or in full-time employment;
2. increasing gender equity in parenting young children; and
3. improving mothers' access to the rewards of labour market participation.

Discussions of paid maternity leave have generated a great deal of public interest, and a degree of mobilisation on the part of supporters of the idea. As discussed in earlier chapters, there are many other ideas for short agenda change to improve the situation of Australian mothers of young children.

Short-term change

As stated by Peter McDonald and Carmen Lawrence, it would be appropriate for Australia to have an inquiry into the conditions for caring for young children. Pending such an inquiry, the following items could be seen as important aspects of a short agenda for change:

- Item 1. Twelve months paid maternity leave for mothers, and twelve months paid paternity leave for fathers. Up to six months to be taken concurrently, more in the case of multiple births, more than one child in the family under 3 years of age, or babies/children with special needs. The paternity leave is not transferable, and must be supported by education and training to enable fathers to gain skills in caring for young children (this is because our present systems focus mainly on mothers). Maternity and paternity leave to be universal and publicly funded, at a level between minimum wage and average male weekly earnings, with the right but no obligation to return to previous employer. Individual employers may provide additional payments, for example more leave (paid or unpaid) or top-up payments to salary replacement levels. Unpaid leave would not include an obligation to return to previous employer, but additional paid leave or top-up payments would involve an obligation to return.

- Item 2. High quality, flexible, free or very low cost childcare available for all babies and children to be used by parents for any purpose, including having a regular break from caring work, respite when children or parents are sick, fitness, leisure or artistic pursuits.

- Item 3. Arrangements for mothers who wish to return to employment soon after a birth to ensure that they can obtain suitable, flexible care for their babies, and have sufficient income left to sustain life.

- Item 4. Generous family allowances to assist with the costs of raising children. These allowances NOT to be means tested because of the way that means-testing provides incentives for mothers to stay OUT of the labour market.
- Item 5. Much improved supports for parents caring for young children, for example information services, household assistance, drop-in centres with diverse programs including supervised children's activities, user participation in developing leisure, artistic and educational activities for parents, cooperative meal preparation, and other activities, as determined by the participating parents.
- Item 6. Physical infrastructure improvements including secure housing for families with young children, safe, accessible playgrounds, and accessible, affordable public transport.
- Item 7. Excellent universal Out of School Hours programs including school holiday care.
- Item 8. Flexible education and training opportunities for mothers of young children to facilitate future labour market earning.
- Item 9. Industrial relations legislation introducing employment conditions that allow both female and male employees the flexibility required to attend to caring responsibilities. Employer pressure to work unpaid overtime should be treated in the same way as sexual harassment in the workplace.

The above items represent a beginning short agenda for change. In a rational process of change, a public inquiry would examine possibilities, consult widely with the community, and make recommendations to the government of the day. However, particularly with a neo-conservative federal government, it is much more likely that sections of the community will mobilise to demand change. That mobilisation could take the form of a strong third wave of feminism, or a more occasional mobilisation in

relation to particular issues as with the community response in 2002 to discussions of paid maternity leave.

Economic independence for mothers of young children

Economic security for women is an important part of a vision for a better future. The vision that emerged in this research is much more subtle and differentiated than the full commodification idea often associated with feminism. It involves supporting mothers and fathers to withdraw fully or partially from paid employment for up to two or three years following a birth, with equally strong support for them to return after this period to full or substantial labour market earning. The high-profile interviewees saw improved direct financial support for mothers and fathers of very young children, and much better access for mothers to labour market income as vital. Belinda Probert, Michael Bittman and Peter McDonald emphasised the importance of labour market income for mothers' long-term economic well-being. This would involve increasing remuneration in women's typical areas of employment, supporting both ongoing attachment and return to employment following a birth, and increasing support, education and training for women returning to employment after a period away undertaking dependant-care work.

The high-profile social commentators saw a need for changes in relation to childcare, employment, social security, education/training and taxation with a 'whole of government' approach rather than fragmented and possibly contradictory initiatives. They suggested looking at international policy and practice particularly in Scandinavian countries with social democratic governments, as well as conducting a thorough inquiry into social conditions for parenting in Australia in order to develop a vision for the future. They did not see any particular country as having a successful arrangement that could act as a blueprint for Australia. Rather, they suggested learning from the experiences in other countries and exploring options by examining their policies and practices. They drew attention to the importance of consulting with the Australian public and the academic research community.

In discussing my research with other people, I have encountered two objections to treating caring for young children as economic activity. One is that it is not desirable to turn child-raising into just another kind of work, and the other is that discussing caring for children in economic terms devalues it. These objections represent a potentially important barrier to bringing about change. This barrier could be seen as a defence of the 'private sphere' and of the relative freedom that some mothers have experienced in terms of being able to raise their children as they see fit. The objections expressed above seem to draw on the idea that the family is a place for the expression of human values, and on a reluctance to expose care of young children to the values represented within economics. My answer to these criticisms would be that they are based on oppressive ideas about what constitutes 'the economy', and what is 'work'. As discussed in earlier chapters, we have come to see work as paid work and the economy as the market. These distortions underpin the operation of markets and families on the basis of very different values from each other. Challenging the public/private divide and giving recognition to caring for young children as real work and as economic activity does not mean imposing the ethics and values of markets on family work. People have understandable concerns about the operation of the market. However, the concept of the economy that underpins this work refers to all activities necessary to feed, clothe, shelter and reproduce the population. Economic independence for mothers of young children would provide the opportunity for this marginalised group to both participate in AND change paid employment, political and community life.

Bringing about change

Many people see a need for change in Australia's social arrangements for care of young children. Since I commenced this research in 1994, there has been a steady increase of public attention to the need for change. Pru Goward's initiation of public discussion regarding a paid maternity leave scheme has accelerated that attention during 2002.

Since the time of second-wave feminism, Australia has seen many changes to market work, family work and the gender system. These changes have revealed further

problems rather than resulting in satisfactory arrangements. This research uses a contemporary CST framework to examine and discuss these unsatisfactory arrangements in terms of oppression, exploitation, ideology and discourse. The issues are complex, because of the way that oppression acts at personal, cultural and structural levels (Mullaly 2002), and because of the inter-relatedness of states, markets and families (Bryson 1992). Pressure towards change, barriers to change and dialectical relationships, for example between structure and agency, take place in a complex arena that could be seen as a grid with nine cells. The following table includes examples of pressures towards change (P) and barriers to change (B) in each of the nine cells. These are examples only, and many more issues could be included in each cell:

Table 7.1: Examples of pressure towards change and barriers to change

	States	Markets	Families
Structural	P: Public demands for paid maternity leave B: Conservative ‘family values’ of white males in government	P: Employees want more family-friendly conditions B: Dominance of ‘free market’ ideology that emphasises competition and profits	P: Women want both career and family B: ‘Couples’ rather than ‘individuals’ remain the subject of public policy
Cultural	P: Men want active involvement in parenting B: People in power in government and business are predominantly men who have no experience or understanding of this cultural shift	P: Increasing use of market substitutes for household work B: Mistrust of market substitutes because of perceived difference between public (market) values and practices and private (home and family) values and practices	P: More people wanting egalitarian relationships B: Ideology of motherhood and ‘the family’ puts pressure on women and men to ‘choose’ gender stereotypes
Personal	P: Women want better conditions for mothering B: Lack of belief that things could be different (liberation of the imagination)	P: Women want better conditions such as paid maternity leave B: Individual mothers’ energy consumed with making their lives work under difficult conditions in the short term – little energy to fight for change	P: Women want gender equity in families B: Under present arrangements, the welfare of women and their children is excessively dependent on the goodwill of male partners

This complexity makes it difficult to consider all aspects of the situation at the same time. This research contributes some frameworks and tools to assist with consideration of the issues.

This research has identified a four-item agenda for long-term transformational change, and three principles for change that are consistent with the theoretical framework of this study, draw on the ideas of some of Australia's foremost commentators on the issues, and take account of the views of women responsible for young children. Lasting transformational change will depend on achieving change in all the cells of the above grid. Because of the dialectical relationships between social attitudes and government policies; structure and agency; structural, cultural and personal change, changes are likely to occur in cycles. These cycles are likely to involve people identifying the need for a particular change as their circumstances and consciousness connect, and fighting for that change. The change will then create the conditions under which further need for change is identified, and so on.

The present attention to paid maternity leave provides an example of how change is likely to occur. Belinda Probert, in this research, suggested that the level of dissatisfaction in the community creates potential for mobilisation. However, that potential requires a catalyst to bring about mobilisation. In this instance, Pru Goward's initiative in relation to paid maternity leave provided the catalyst. Prime Minister John Howard's initial public reaction was dismissive, but following the immediate community response to the issue, he quickly modified his position. Almost-daily articles in newspapers indicate a high level of public interest in contributing to the discussion. This could be seen as part of the process of development of new discourses. Alternative discourses are being stated and challenged in rapid succession. Ideologies are being both challenged and re-stated. Feminism has been blamed, praised and challenged. New concepts such as 'men who mother' have entered the public debate. This public discussion is both result of and contributor to the personal and cultural consciousness of the issues in the community. The articulation of perspectives such as Australia's 'backwardness' in not having paid

maternity leave potentially challenges internalised oppression such as that expressed by focus-group participants who asserted that change was not possible, and the government would never agree to spending more money on mothers.

Charles (2000) discusses the emergence of new collective identities and the likelihood of defence of old identities. Both are represented in the current environment. A new collective identity is being claimed by a group of feminist mothers entitled 'Mothers of In(ter)vention'. (See Appendix 5 for a copy of the flyer advertising their maternity bra-burning launch on 22nd September 2002). Newspaper letters to the editor include reminders of the joys of motherhood and raise doubts about emphasising the hardships. This could be seen as defence of existing identities.

Conclusion and suggestions for future research

This research examined what changes, consistent with feminist ideals and critical social theory, and taking account of the views of the women carrying out the work, could increase the economic independence of mothers of young children. It identified pathways towards and barriers impeding egalitarian change in this area.

The findings of this research contribute towards structural understanding that can liberate the imagination and lead to transformational (overcoming domination) political practices (Agger 1998). Within this research I have developed the idea of a 'coherent agenda for change' that includes a long agenda and a short agenda, and have identified 'long agenda' items for transformational change. I have suggested three principles that can be used to assess and develop 'short agenda' changes to ensure that they contribute towards the 'long agenda' by challenging oppressive structures and ideologies.

Peter McDonald and Carmen Lawrence drew attention to the need for a broad-ranging inquiry to examine Australia's social arrangements for care of young children and make recommendations about future social policy. The process of carrying out such an inquiry would raise consciousness at personal and cultural levels regarding the

experiences of mothers, Australian research, international provisions, and possibilities for change. It could be a powerful vehicle for the development of alternative discourses to those that currently dominate.

Duncan Ironmonger explained the need for much more monitoring and research in relation to the household economy. Future inclusion of unpaid work in the census, much more research into the care required by babies and young children of different ages, and patterns of unpaid caring by parents, relatives and friends would be examples of this kind of research, although Ironmonger's vision would go well beyond these limited ideas.

Research following up specifically on this study could include more extensive consultations with mothers of young children regarding suggestions for improving their lives. This research indicates that simply asking mothers of young children what would improve their lives will result only in suggestions for limited social reform. Developing strategies for transformational change requires methods such as that used in this study of taking ideas to groups for comment. Further research following up on this study would require sufficient funding to obtain the participation of the most disadvantaged groups in Australian society, including mothers living in poverty, mothers from non-English-speaking backgrounds, mothers living in remote areas, indigenous mothers and mothers of children with disabilities, life-threatening conditions and degenerative disorders.

In relation to improving economic independence for mothers of young children, future research could examine the role of secure housing in preventing the worst outcomes of poverty for this group, with the possibility of recommending future housing policy priorities. Another possibility for exploring ways for mothers of young children to achieve economic independence would be 'pathways' research based on the concept developed by Chris Chamberlain and David MacKenzie (1994) in their homelessness research. This research explored typical pathways towards homelessness for young people, and identified 'turning points' that led, depending on the nature of the 'turn' either towards deeper problems with homelessness or towards exiting from

homelessness. This methodology would appear to have usefulness in a complex area such as improving economic independence for mothers of young children, with potential to identify useful services and 'intervention points'. It would do this by studying what had enabled some mothers to achieve economic independence, and what had prevented others from achieving this outcome. Because the women's experiences and journeys are likely to be complex, studying pathways rather than, or perhaps as well as, particular variables is likely to yield useful results.

History shows that despite structural and cultural constraints, internalised oppression and the power of dominant discourses, people can act to bring about social change. The women's movement has been a powerful agent of change. The women who participated in the focus groups spoke of their individual actions that challenge their everyday oppressions. It seems likely that these multiple sites of resistance will lead to collective action as new collective identities are emerging in the current environment. It is possible that we are on the cusp of a new and major mobilisation of women and their allies.

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APPENDIX 1

Documents used with first round focus groups

Invitation to attend focus group discussion

Letter to focus group participants

Briefing paper for focus group participants

Demographic data form

Consent form

Agenda for focus group

Note: These documents use the original thesis title. The change of title was approved by the relevant Victoria University committee.

APPENDIX 2

Documents used for interviews

Sample letter sent to prospective interviewees

Copy of article 'Motherhood: Economic exploitation in disguise'

Briefing paper

Sample schedule for semi-structured interview

Consent Form A

Consent Form B

Note: These documents use the original thesis title. The change of title was approved by the relevant Victoria University committee.

APPENDIX 3

Documents used with second round focus groups

Invitation to attend focus group discussion

Briefing paper for focus group participants – see Appendix 1

Copy of article ‘Motherhood: Economic exploitation in disguise’ – see Appendix 2

Demographic data form– see Appendix 1

Consent form– see Appendix 1

Agenda for focus groups

Focus group questions

Note: These documents use the original thesis title. The change of title was approved by the relevant Victoria University committee.

APPENDIX 4

Presentations and publications

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APPENDIX 5

'Mothers of In(ter)vention' launch flyer