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MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

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This is the Published version of the following publication

Grace, Marty (1998) The work of caring for young children: priceless or worthless? *Womens Studies International Forum*, 21 (4). pp. 401-413. ISSN 0277-5395

The publisher's official version can be found at
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395\(98\)00040-5](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(98)00040-5)
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The work of caring for young children: priceless or worthless?

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Women's Studies International Forum, 1998, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 401-413

In July 1996, a woman, referred to in the press as 'Mrs Drum', was sitting quietly breastfeeding her baby in her home in an Australian country town when a stranger burst in and abducted her two children. Nearly 20 hours later, the children, distressed but apparently unharmed, were reunited with their parents. Melbourne's premier daily newspaper, *The Age*, reporting on this horrific act of random violence, quoted Mrs Drum's brother:

"The fellow came in the back door, she tried to fight him off, but his target was obviously the kids." He said his sister told him the man began talking about religion before allegedly assaulting her. "When he was beating her, she asked him to stop because he was scaring the kid. He then picked one girl up under each arm and ran out." (Hewitt & Tippet 1996:1)

The reporters seemed unsurprised that, while being viciously attacked, the mother's main concern was that the attack was frightening her child. Because mothers regularly transcend self interest in protecting and caring for their children, the mother's heroism went unremarked. The general community awareness, even expectation, of the heroic within mothering leads to the perception of mothering as priceless.

The intangibles of human relationships are indeed priceless, but the social construction of mothering contains a contradiction. 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 generally

respected. Mothers who care for young children have their time and energy fully occupied with socially useful and necessary work, but find themselves defined as dependants within the society rather than as either workers or full citizens (Bryson 1996).

The purpose of this article is to discuss and support my claim that caring for young children is socially useful work, and to trace some of the attention which the women's movement has given to this topic. It comments on the lack of impact of the women's movement on the lives of this particular group of women. Finally it considers what might be done to begin to redress the situation.

This article draws on the international theoretical literature, but makes particular use of recent Australian quantitative and qualitative research. Like life in Australia, this article is both particular to this context and part of what happens in the rest of the world. My impression is that Britain, Europe, New Zealand and North America share a similar social construction of this work with Australia. Marilyn Waring's (1988) analysis points out that so-called 'developing' countries run the risk that 'development' projects will undermine the economic status of women in those countries by treating women's work as non-work. I believe that the issues canvassed in this article are international, and I hope that readers from a range of cultures will find some interest in a discussion which challenges the conventional ways of viewing this topic.

Definitions

By 'young children' I mean children under school age. I contend that caring for young children involves much more work than caring for school-age or older children. Young children generate more work than adults or older children, and are less able to assist with any of it. Whilst it may be possible to skimp on some aspects of child care, providing a bare minimum standard still requires more hours than a 'normal working week', whether or not parents are in paid employment (Richards 1994:84-5; Gilding 1994;113).

By 'responsible for the care of' I mean either personally caring for, or responsible for arranging alternative care for young children. I resist the tendency to dichotomise mothers into 'working' and 'non-working'. Social policy is often seen to favour one group or the other, for example valuing employed mothers' contribution to the visible economy by providing subsidised child care; or alternatively valuing the unpaid work of mothers not in paid employment by initiatives such as the Australian Parenting Allowance¹. These provisions artificially construct two groups with opposing interests. I believe it is time to look beyond the sectional interests, and to identify a common claim of mothers to recognition of their work as a necessary and valuable contribution to the overall functioning of the society.

The question of whether to focus on parents or mothers presents a dilemma. Whenever we refer to child care as a women's issue we are reinforcing the stereotype which defines 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, a preliminary analysis of the care of young children in Australia reveals that women remain overwhelmingly responsible (Bittman 1995, Wolcott & Glezer 1995). In such a

situation 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'.

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 article will focus on women, their situations, their experiences, and their analysis, for the reasons outlined above, and because the way that care of young children is socially constructed is inextricably intertwined with the material conditions of women's lives, and our overall position within society. The interdependence of the two issues - care of young children and oppression of women - can be conceptualised by considering: is the care of young children undervalued because women do it, or are women undervalued because we care for young children? In other words, is the work of caring for young children undervalued because it is done by women, whose work is routinely undervalued, or are women undervalued because we continue to undertake work which is exploitative, reinforcing the view that our labour is of little value?

The care of young children is work

Caring for young children is skilled, demanding work which consumes the time and energy of those who carry it out. As Brown, Lumley, Small and Astbury (1994) comment in their book *Missing Voices: The Experience of Motherhood*, which reports on an extensive study of the experiences of Australian mothers of young babies:

... 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.

(Brown, Lumley, Small and Astbury 1994:202)

Michael Gilding reports that, in Australia, women with pre-school children do the highest levels of unpaid work, averaging more than 55 hours per week (Gilding 1994:113).

The Australian Institute of Family Studies' major study into participation by Australian parents in paid and unpaid work, *Work and Family Life: Achieving Integration* (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 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.

Michael Bittman's 1995 report *Recent Changes in Unpaid Work* indicates that women continue to carry out the vast bulk of unpaid work in Australia. He notes a major change in beliefs, in that both women and men now tend to believe that domestic work should be shared equally. Unfortunately, beliefs have changed more than actions.

The fact that the United Nations and individual countries such as Australia have started to attempt to keep some sort of account and record of unpaid work is a tribute to the work of influential people such as New Zealander Marilyn Waring (1988). Unfortunately, care of young children is often conflated with care of older children, or with housework, or with both as 'unpaid work'. The report on the Australian Bureau of Statistics time use survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1993) comments that child minding is often a secondary activity, carried out in conjunction with some other

primary activity such as shopping. 'Children' includes all children under 15 years of age, and the concept of 'passive child minding' is used. This is a useful concept in relation to older children, but masks the reality of the physical, mental and emotional demands of caring for young children.

The consequences for mothers

The problem with conceptualising this work as non-work is that it promotes the perception that mothers are unoccupied and therefore fully and unproblematically available for employment. It overlooks the reality that children's attendance at formal child care relieves mothers of only part of the work necessary to care for a young child. After a full day at her job the employed mother returns home to the prospect of attempting to cook a meal and attend to the washing and tidying whilst at the same time caring directly for her child or children, with all the physical, mental and emotional effort entailed. For a single mother this often means trying to shop, prepare and serve a meal, wash up and do a few chores with a toddler on her hip.

Recent British research indicates that women's family responsibilities reduce their earning capacity in the longer term as well as the short term (Hutton 1994; Ginn et al 1996; Joshi et al 1995; Joshi et al 1996). This 'non-work' gains no credit for mothers, and it is not perceived as adding to their human capital. So people who have learned new skills, gained in personal maturity, learned to work harder and smarter than ever before are somehow seen to have devalued themselves. Silly, isn't it?

Attempts to deal with the dilemmas in valuing women's unpaid work

Even feminists, in our efforts to assert our right of equal access to other work have contributed to the denigration of the work of caring for young children. Christine

Everingham, in her book *Motherhood and Modernity* summarises the contemporary perception of feminism's response to motherhood:

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. (Everingham 1994:3)

Generally, progressive contemporary discourse values a more equal sharing of domestic work, in order for women to participate equally in paid work (for example National Council for the International Year of the Family 1994:185; Wolcott & Glezer 1995:172). 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 their fair share and adequately perform a full-time job as well. This theory 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 provision of formal child-care and flexible working arrangements, as well as encouraging fathers to take more responsibility for their children, are often seen as key ways to improve the position of women within society (eg Joshi et al 1995:10), but the recent research throws doubt on whether such provisions will ever result in economic justice for women (Wolcott & Glezer 1995; Hakim 1995). Women remain clustered in lower-paying occupations, and at the lower rungs of more prestigious occupations. 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, co-author, states in *The Economic Status of Women Under Capitalism: Institutional Economics and Feminist Theory*:

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 wellbeing. 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 (Peterson 1994:xiii).

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) 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. (Gilding 1994:114)

The (lack of) impact of the women's movement

Over the past twenty years it has become widely accepted that increasing women's access to education and to the labour market are key ways of improving women's lives. In theory, women's labour-market participation provides access to the public sphere, from which we were previously excluded, and provides a pathway out of poverty for women and their children. The women's movement has achieved greater wage justice for women and less discrimination in the workplace, but significant

inequities remain. As the researchers state in *Missing Voices: The Experience of Motherhood* :

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)

While feminists have generally seen women's responsibility for domestic work as the enemy of women's emancipation, others, as described by Oakley (1974:226-7) and Delphy (1984), have argued for valuing women's traditional home-based work. The debate regarding the valuing of home-based work was alive and well, as reported by Ann Oakley, in the late 60s and early 70s. In the following lively extract from her book *Housewife*, she alludes to the debate and makes her own position clear:

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 1974:226-7)

In an often-overlooked 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. (Oakley 1974:227)

Twenty years on, the care of young children is still considered non-work, but this lack of progress is not new. Oakley quotes a passage written 50 years earlier by Eleanor Rathbone, British feminist, economist, author, and Member of Parliament, in defence of mothering as work:

It may be questioned whether it has ever occurred to any but a negligible fraction of Medical Officers of Health, inspectors, councillors, committee men and subscribers concerned in child welfare schemes, that if motherhood is a craft . . . it differs from every other craft known to man in that there is no money remuneration for the mother's task, no guarantee of her maintenance while she performs it and (most important yet most ignored of all) no consequential relationship recognised by society between the quantity and quality of her product and the quantity and quality of the tools and materials which she has at her disposal. Children are the mother's product, food, clothing and other necessaries her materials and tools . . . (Rathbone 1924:65, cited in Oakley 1974:228)

In 1983, Dale Spender, in an overview of modern feminist theory, wrote dismissively of the possibility of greater material recognition of the value of women's unpaid work. Like Oakley, Spender concludes that women have more to lose than to gain by 'wages for housework' :

... 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 (...) 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. (Spender 1983:376-7)

Gerda Lerner, prominent feminist theorist, throws some light on the historical background of this suspicion by feminists that revaluing home-based work could be used against us:

For centuries women conceptualized their group coherence on the basis of their actual experience of or their capacity for motherhood. Maternal thinking and responsibility gave them a special role in society and empowered them to resist certain aspects of patriarchal thought

and practice. (...) The patriarchal "glorification of motherhood" which began in the 18th century and culminated in the 19th-century glorification of women's role in the domestic sphere, led increasing numbers of women to the recognition that their collectivity needed to be defined not by their maternal role but by their personhood. This kind of reasoning contributed to the definition of 'sisterhood' as the collective entity of women. (Lerner 1983:274-5)

Gerda Lerner goes on to emphasise the importance of economic independence for women:

Crucial to the development of feminist consciousness are societal changes which allow substantial numbers of women to live in economic independence. (...) Fully developed feminist consciousness rests on the precondition that women must have an economic alternative for survival other than marriage and that there exist large groups of single, self-supporting women. (Lerner 1993:276)

Given that mothers caring for young children are already fully occupied (Richards 1994:84-5), very few are able to participate in paid employment to the extent necessary to support themselves and their children (Joshi et al:13-19). Under present social and economic conditions the idea of 'large groups of single, self-supporting women' = childless women. Given that substantial numbers of women continue to bear children, one must question whether mothers should continue to be punished by relegation to an economic under-class.

Enough time has elapsed since women with young children increased their labour-market participation for both academic researchers and the women themselves to realise that new options for women have not necessarily improved their wellbeing at an individual level, or their overall position within the society. Women's average earnings are still less than men's, and they are massively under-represented in positions of power within society - in the parliament, in the judiciary, in the upper levels of corporate management, and even at the upper levels of academia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1995). Women are taking up the opportunity to

participate in the labour market, but are clearly not reaping the expected rewards (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1995).

No doubt prejudice, discrimination and workplace practices and cultures mitigate against women's equal participation with men, but it seems as though women's greater responsibility for home and family also plays a part (Gilbert 1993; Bittman 1995; Wolcott & Glezer 1995). Some recent research has emphasised that large numbers of women engage in part-time work because of their greater responsibility at home (compared with their male partners), and that these women regard their employment as important, but secondary both to their home responsibilities, and to their male partners' (more lucrative) employment (Wolcott & Glezer 1995; Hakim 1995). Wolcott & Glezer saw part-time employment as the best option for mothers because it provided them with more satisfaction than either full-time employment or no employment.

The 'choices' of women to engage in part-time employment provides a perfect example of the meaning of the feminist slogan 'the personal is political'. 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 women and men by reinforcing differential earning capacity (value), putting mothers at risk of poverty in the event of separation, and reinforcing the primacy of men's participation in the public sphere.

'Choice' which systematically disadvantages women is not real choice. My own experience resonates with what I have found in the literature, that for many women with young children, any of the available choices have significant costs to be borne by the individual woman. The situation is problematic because no political philosophy

appears to have an adequate response, and no clear direction for progressive public policy exists. Even a clearly feminist agenda seems elusive.

What can be done?

Current ways of thinking, talking and writing tend to reinforce the invisibility of women's work, as discussed by Barbara Rogers (1981), Ester Boserup (1970), Lourdes Beneria (1982), and Kathleen Newland (1979). For example, this work is denied when it is called 'caring' instead of 'work', and women themselves often say 'I don't work. I'm at home with the children'. Even the well-informed literature which emphasises the social value of caring for young children, and its status as work, often talks about 'balance' and 'juggling'. Such terms depoliticise the issue, implying that there is nothing wrong with the system, and that any failure to successfully 'juggle' or 'balance' is a personal matter.

In a preface to Marilyn Waring's book *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth*, Gloria Steinem pays tribute to Marilyn Waring's work in showing how the invisibility of women's work has been institutionalised, and to her unique credibility because she

(...) has been the Chair of the Public Expenditure Select Committee in the Parliament of a major country, and had the international experience to rethink mega-economics. In other words, it's one thing to blow the whistle on industries that pollute, or to question why water carried through pipes has a value, but water carried daily and a long distance by women does not. It's something else to name, challenge, and propose a substitute for the way these injustices are enshrined and perpetuated by the economic record keeping of most nations, and even by the United Nations System of National Accounts. (Steinem G., in Waring 1988:xi)

Waring (1988) understands but challenges women's willingness to ignore economics and to consider it irrelevant to our existence. She says:

It is not surprising then, that many people and women in particular, have "economics anxiety"
(...) It is reinforced by a lack of direct access to the discipline through sex-role stereo-typing or

streaming. The anxiety is also evidence of a quite sane alienation from the subject matter. This occurs when I tell any housewife that she is unoccupied, economically inactive, and doesn't work. If a system treats you like that, you won't spend much time examining it. (Waring 1988:37)

Waring (1988:12-59) provides a critical account of the development, purpose and functioning of the United Nations System of National Accounts. She explains clearly the conventions utilised in calculating the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Product (GNP). In relation to the GNP 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. (Waring 1988:58)

Her challenge comes as she explains the role of the national accounts in the development of public policy. In case women might agree that their work is too difficult to account for, and that their exclusion does not matter anyway, she explains how other apparently 'difficult' activities are included in calculating the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Product (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).

She continues by explaining why exclusion **does** matter:

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 (Waring 1988:53).

The Economic Status of Women Under Capitalism: Institutional Economics and Feminist Theory (Peterson & Brown 1994) shows how institutional economics can be used to analyse the economic oppression of women and to promote progressive social and economic change. Janice Peterson, in the Introduction, indicates that the publication is inspired by 'a concern over the economic status of women and a belief that the dominant approaches to economic analysis are limited in their ability to analyse the subordination of women and to prescribe policy responses' (Peterson 1994:x). She explains the institutional approach to economics:

Radical institutionalism is the branch of institutional economics most explicitly concerned with sexism and the economic status of women (...) Radical institutionalists argue that the focus of economic enquiry should be on the processes by which societies provision and reproduce themselves (...) Individual behaviour is far too complex to be explained in terms of abstract rationality or maximization. Nor can it be explained entirely in terms of property ownership and one's relationship to the means of production. Individual choice is only meaningful within the cultural context of the decision maker (Peterson 1994:x-xi).

Peterson raises many of the same issues as Marilyn Waring (1988), and points to the need for new categories, new ways of thinking about, discussing and writing about women's unpaid work:

In traditional economic theories of capitalism and socialism the public-private dualism is reflected in definitions of the economy that exclude many activities performed by women. 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. Most studies of the economic status of women have taken place within this context. Often, attempts to incorporate gender into economic inquiry have simply resulted in the addition of women to the existing categories of analysis. Given the bias in existing modes of inquiry, this is not enough. 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 (Peterson 1994:xii).

In her recent article 'Revaluing the Household Economy', Lois Bryson (1996) traces the development of, and critiques, the 'gendered yardstick' of economic value. Whilst clearly advocating official recording and recognition of the existence of unpaid work, she draws attention to the key question 'Who benefits?' from women's unequal responsibility for this work. Disadvantages to women under the present system are clear - the greater burden of unpaid work, the reduced career opportunities, the reduced access to positions of power and authority within the society, the 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 (Olsberg 1995). Until recently, we could hope that these disadvantages were vestiges of an earlier era, and that they would gradually disappear because of women's improved access to education and employment opportunities. Recent research, as detailed above, indicates that this hoped-for change is not happening.

In terms of social policy, who benefits from strategies such as child care assistance and flexible working arrangements is unclear. As documented by authors including Catherine Hakim (1995) and Belinda Probert (1996), the expansion of women's labour force participation in both Britain and Australia has been in part-time work. With a large secondary or potential labour force of women who would like to work

part-time if they could find suitable jobs (Probert 1996), 'flexibility' is likely to be stacked heavily in favour of employers rather than employees.

Eva Cox has argued persuasively that the Australian Parenting Allowance is more like a poverty trap than a useful policy, pointing out that it reinforces the perception amongst low-socio-economic status mothers that the best thing they can do for their children is to stay out of the labour market. The trap lies in the way that the children suffer the disadvantages of family poverty, and the women themselves will, over time, find themselves devalued when they want or need to enter the labour market (Cox 1995). Another problem with the Australian Parenting Allowance is the way it reinforces men's existing advantage in the labour market, at the expense of both their own female partners and their female colleagues who, despite working a double shift, are expected to compete for career advancement with men (or women) who have a 'volunteer' assistant at home.

Abstract 'recognition' of the value of unpaid work, whilst absolutely necessary, does not make it any easier for women to feed, clothe and shelter their children. Nor does token resourcing such as the Australian Parenting Allowance really improve the circumstances of either mothers or their children, as pointed out by Eva Cox (1995). Lois Bryson (1996:216) 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 (Bryson 1992, Pateman 1987). A thorough discussion of the links with citizenship theory is beyond the scope of this article, but the following brief comments point to the relevance of ideas about citizenship to this topic.

'Citizenship' remains a contested concept, particularly because past influential ideas, focussing 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 critique of the limited value of equal opportunities for women without fundamental changes in the private, as well as the public sphere.

They state:

(...) the 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 (Dalton et al 1996:50).

Our society recognises mothers' responsibility for their children, but denies them individual economic rights. I advocate mothers' right to be viewed as citizens, entitled to a fair share of the society's resources, rather than being forced into dependence either on individual men, or on the state.

Objections to economic justice for the mothers of young children

When confronted with these ideas, many people respond with some variant of: "But you can't put a dollar value on mothering". This response presumably refers to the 'pricelessness' of mothering, based on the observation that mothers often transcend self interest in a way that is recognised as heroic, noble, or saintly. The implication is that any remuneration would taint the purity of maternal devotion.

If a doctor, nurse or ambulance officer saves my child's life, I cannot put a dollar value on what that means to me, but I certainly have no objection to that person being paid for the tangible work involved in making that priceless contribution. Perhaps the tendency to lapse into illogic when it comes to the care of young children is because it is part of that invisible undifferentiated mass of 'women's unpaid work'. Under patriarchal capitalism, a woman whose time is fully occupied on this socially useful and necessary work finds herself unable to economically support herself by her own labour.

Another major argument against economic justice for mothers of young children is the notion that this work rightly belongs in the private sphere, away from the scrutiny of government. This argument is sometimes based on the idea that having children is some sort of private indulgence that brings individual benefits to parents, and is of no public value. This view ignores the future. At a broad community level, the care of future citizens ensures the future quality of the whole community. At a more individual level, all those people who live for many years beyond retirement will have a very real need for younger people to be keeping the community functioning.

At other times people express a very understandable protest against economic rationalism and the marketisation of our society, often characterised: 'Why do we have to put a dollar value on everything we do?' Like the argument above, this response is based on the much criticised public-private dualism, but my main problem with both of these objections is that their net outcome is exploitation and disadvantage for women. Whenever some apparently altruistic idea has such an outcome, it seems wise to suspect that it forms part of an oppressive ideology, rather than accepting it at face (altruistic) value.

It may be considered unrealistic and outrageous to expect the public purse to adequately resource the care of young children. It is tempting to think this way because of habitual ways, steeped in patriarchy, of viewing social arrangements, rather than for any good reason. I find it useful to remember that women are substantial contributors to the public purse, and that many of us face very vulnerable times in our lives. The idea of full citizenship for women implies a right to call upon collective resources as well as a responsibility to contribute. Women's tax dollars subsidise the superannuation of wealthy men, and guarantee high incomes for medical practitioners (in Australia through the Medicare levy). Why are we reluctant

to overcome poverty amongst young children and their mothers by payment at a level similar to other essential services workers in the community? We are so used to being shut out of economic systems that we are allowing our precious tax dollars to benefit men at the expense of women.

Conclusion

Social policy, academic and popular discourses contribute to the social construction of the work of caring for young children as non-work. Over the past twenty years, progressive discourse has sought to relieve mothers of their responsibility for young children as a way for them to achieve economic independence via labour market participation. In reality, this has resulted in a double shift for many women, with little prospect of economic independence in either the short or longer term.

The net outcome has been the continuing exploitation of the labour of the women who carry out the vast bulk of the unpaid work of caring for young children. I propose that, instead of considering women's responsibility for young children as the problem, we should consider the exploitation of these women as the problem. If the responsibility is perceived as the problem, we will continue to try to remove that responsibility from women, meeting both resistance from women, and lack of success in the broader sphere. If, on the other hand, we perceive the exploitation as the problem it may be possible to find a way forward in terms of progressive public policy. By developing a better understanding of the exact nature of the exploitation, it may be possible to plot a pathway through what Cox describes as the 'confused ideological morass of views on mothering' (Cox 1995:35), rather than continue with the present hit and miss approach to public policy development in this area.

I am proposing that we must find new ways to think and talk about this work, in order to provide mothers of young children with a fair share of the society's resources. At

the simplest level, this involves women having the status of citizens and workers rather than being considered dependants. Any such fair share, to be useful, must be structured to ensure that women's life chances are not truncated by motherhood as they are at present. Whilst a proper wage may seem an appealingly simple solution, it could create as many problems as it solves. Economic modelling of a range of alternatives is necessary to design a system most likely to redress existing disadvantages without creating chaos.

Proper recognition of the work of caring for young children would involve adequate material provision for the people who carry out this work. Adequate material resourcing has the potential to give mothers real choices instead of pseudo choices. Mothers of young children could genuinely choose their extent of involvement in employment, without being forced into exhaustion from a double, sometimes triple shift. Resources attached to their mother role could be used to purchase services to reduce their amount of work related to that role, for example meals, house cleaning, laundry and shopping. I am not talking here about wealthy women exploiting poorer women to do the menial tasks, but about all mothers having real choices because of access to material resources. In this vision of a preferred future, women's well-being would be enhanced, as well as their overall position within the society. Mothers not in paid employment would have access to child care, because of the recognition that everyone needs a break. Child care would be used to give mothers the opportunity to participate in sport and recreation, education and training, and professional development activities as well as to undertake paid employment. Professional development could relate to child care, to mothers' other occupation, or to both.

Another aspect of this vision of a preferred future, would be the recognition of the value of the skills acquired in learning to care for young children. Currently women can end up with an eight-year gap in their CV. They know that they have a lot more

to offer in many occupations than before having children, but household management, familiarity with child development, and consumer experience of health and education services don't feature on lists of selection criteria. If, in job interviews, we start giving domestic examples of 'coping under pressure', 'dealing with competing demands', and 'mediation and negotiation skills', we would risk being considered inappropriate, unprofessional, and as not having established adequate boundaries between work and home.

Clearly, working within current concepts and institutions will not achieve significant progress. I believe that future research must challenge the underlying assumptions about what is possible and not possible in order to achieve progress. I make the following suggestions which will make it more likely that we can develop shared understandings which can lead to real progress.

Suggested Strategies

The Australian Bureau of Statistics already separates out child care from housework. I recommend that all future Australian Bureau of Statistics reports on unpaid work and time-use separate out care of young children from care of older children. This would show differences for example in the category 'passive child minding', and start to quantify the work involved in caring for young children.

More research is required to explore why mothers are making the 'choices' they are. Are mothers trying to avoid the exhaustion of the double shift - trying to maximise their lifestyle? Are they giving top priority to quality of life for their children? When contemporary research reports for example that women are most satisfied with a particular option, we must ask what they see as their alternatives, and whether they perceive and have taken account of the likely costs to themselves of their 'choices'. What outcomes are women seeking? Only with a more thorough understanding can

we hope to generate options which will mean that women have satisfactory choices available.

We need studies of the activities involved in the work of caring for children of different ages to establish work value and some benchmarks of the time required to provide a reasonable level of care. Childcare workers' awards are not a good source because of the undervaluing of this 'women's work' (Probert 1989:95-107), because of the amount of work carried out at home even when children attend long day care, and because of the need to include those children not in formal child care because of special needs.

In order to develop truly useful and progressive public policy, we require thorough research and economic modelling to explore a range of options and develop a package of measures which will:

- Give ALL mothers of young children a high degree of flexibility and control over how they spend their time;
- Maximise the functioning of mothers in the present, for example by ensuring that all mothers have access to some breaks from their responsibilities, and that it is not necessary for mothers to grind themselves into the ground physically in order to provide materially for **and** adequately care for their children;
- Protect the future welfare of mothers by ensuring that they do not have to sacrifice future earning capacity in order to survive in the short term;
- Maximise children's welfare by eliminating poverty traps, adequately resourcing their care while they are under school age, and ensuring that their mothers have pathways into earning a living wage in the future;

- Introduce structures and systems within the industrial relations system for systematic recognition of the value added to individuals' human capital by their work of caring for young children.

Some people may consider it unrealistic to seek change in this area. I recall how domestic violence and sexual abuse were viewed in the late 1960s, as totally private interpersonal matters, with blame attached to the woman or child who was abused, and probably to the mother of the abused person. The women's movement has played a powerful role in raising community consciousness in relation to these issues, to the point where a feminist analysis informs public policy. Whilst popular views and public policy fall well short of utopia, undeniable progress has been made. This gives me hope. The women's movement has achieved so much in my lifetime that I believe it is possible to bring about change in the confused and confusing ideas circulating currently about the work of caring for young children.

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¹ The Australian Parenting Allowance, introduced in 1995, is a payment for the partner in a couple who 'stays at home' to look after the children. The basic payment, to a maximum of \$68.40 per fortnight, is paid in addition to Family Payment, is not assets tested, and is independent of the employed partner's income. The 'additional rate' for low income families is means tested and pays a maximum of \$280.20 per fortnight (Department of Social Security 1995).