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This is the Published version of the following publication

Grace, Marty (2001) Motherhood: Economic Exploitation in Disguise. *Just Policy : a Journal of Australian Social Policy*, 21. pp. 46-53. ISSN 1323-2266

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Motherhood: Economic Exploitation in Disguise

Caring for young children is work. It is arduous, time consuming, socially useful work. In Australia, the people who carry out this work, mainly women, are seen by the community at large to have a responsibility to perform this work to a minimum standard enshrined in State legislation such as Victoria's *Children and Young Persons Act 1989*. Yet the people who do this work have no corresponding right to a fair share of community resources, and are not the only ones whose labour is appropriated and exploited in this way. Others include people caring for relatives with disabilities and people with significant disabilities who save the community resources by caring for themselves. However, this article will focus on the care of young children.

The purpose of this article is to challenge contemporary economic arrangements for the care of young children, and to present arguments to support the assertion that motherhood amounts to economic exploitation in disguise. Some findings of the author's own research

are presented, focussing on impacts of caring for young children on mothers' labour market participation, and on how mothers conceptualise and explain the economic arrangements for care of their children. In conclusion, some principles and strategies for future social policy are suggested. The article, and the author's research, come from an explicitly feminist perspective and, consistent with critical social theory, aim to contribute to bringing about fairer and more egalitarian social conditions for oppressed and disadvantaged groups.

This article draws on evidence and opinion published in a range of literature. It draws on the author's own experience and observation where relevant, not to generalise from a sample of one, but to provide first-hand examples and to fill in some of the coal-face detail normally accessible only to those who have done this work. It draws in a limited way on focus group material gathered by the author as part of her PhD research into care of young children as unpaid work. The focus groups were conducted in 1996 and 1997, and included 15 women who were responsible for the care of young children. The focus groups ex-

plored how mothers conceptualised and explained their arrangements for the care of their children, with a particular focus on their economic arrangements. This article also includes the results of the author's original secondary analysis of published Australian Bureau of Statistics data.

Definitions

By 'young children' I mean children under school age. School age was chosen because it is the age at which the community, via government funded education, starts to make a major contribution to the day-to-day lives of children. Government policy documents often refer to children under school age as a category (for example Newman 1999:20). By 'responsible for' I mean personally carrying out the work involved, or responsible for making the arrangements for other people to carry out some of the work. I will not divide mothers into those with paid employment and those without, as the evidence cited below indicates that they undertake similar levels of necessary but unpaid work.

Structure of this article

The first question I will address in this article is 'Who does the work

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of caring for young children?' I will then discuss whether I should be talking about 'people', 'women' or 'mothers'. The next section argues that caring for young children is work; that it produces a public benefit, not a private benefit; that it is done mainly by women, and that the economic costs are borne by individual women. Often couched in terms of individual choice or partnership choice, our present arrangements, it will be argued, exploit the labour of the women who carry out the unpaid work of caring for young children. This exploitation has been acknowledged for some time in the literature (for example, Rathbone 1924:65, Oakley 1974:227, Young 1990:51, Everingham 1994:124, Brown, Lumley, Small and Astbury 1994:226, Bittman & Pixley 1997:196-200), but any challenge appears not to be taken seriously. In conclusion, I will make some comments about what might happen, in terms of social policy, social practices and employment practices, if this exploitation were to be taken seriously.

Who does the work of caring for young children?

Whether young children are cared for exclusively by their own biological, adoptive or substitute parents, or by some combination of parental care, informal care and formal child care, the work of caring for young children in Australia is carried out predominantly by women (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998a, Bittman 1995, Brennan 1998, Wolcott & Glezer 1995). The focus of this article is on

the unpaid work of caring for young children, in particular parental care, mainly carried out by mothers.

Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley (1997), in their own analysis of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' 1992 *Time Use Survey* (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1994), found that mothers of infants (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 children were 15+. Fathers' hours of unpaid work were much lower, and varied much less, from around 22 hours per week when their children were infants to around 19 hours per week when their children were 15+ (Bittman & Pixley 1997:108-10). 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 makes little difference to their hours of unpaid work. Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley estimated a reduction in unpaid work of about 5.5 hours a week for a woman employed for 40 hours per week (Bittman & Pixley 1997:113). 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. For this article, I will focus on mothers because it is clearly mothers who undertake the vast bulk of unpaid work in caring for young children.

A women's issue?

Because women take on most of the responsibility for young children, anything to do with the care of young children is usually seen as a women's issue. Seeing child care 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'. So the term 'mothers' will be used, 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. In a just and fair policy environment, it could be argued, the altruism and economic disadvantage of caring for young children would be shared equally by women and men.

Motherhood, of course, does not have a 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. Working class women, single parents, women with disabilities and aboriginal women are likely to experience compounding and cumulative impacts of their various disadvantages and oppressions (Young 1990).

Caring for young children is work

The work of caring for young children is often separated conceptually into 'child care' and 'parenting'. The care carried out in child care centres is seen as work. Even though the work is undervalued and the workers are poorly paid (Brennan 1998), they are covered by industrial legislation, their hours of work have boundaries and they have access to sick leave and Workcover. When similar work is carried out by parents, it is often, referred to as NOT working, as when women say, "I'm not working, I'm at home with the children". In government policy documents and discussion papers, caring for young children may also be referred to as 'not working'. For example, in a recent discussion paper Senator Jocelyn Newman, Minister for Family and Community

Services referred to 'workless families' (Newman 1999:4).

If caring for young children really was doing nothing, mothers (or fathers, or anyone) could easily do lots of other things at the same time as looking after their children. Mothers (or fathers, or anyone) could take their children to work, get their work done, AND look after their children at the same time. How much time to invest in children would be a matter of personal choice, and would vary according to the preferences and inclinations of the care-giver, rather than varying, as shown above, with the age of the child. Mothers' hours of unpaid work would fluctuate under the influence of a whole range of factors, rather than dropping steadily as their children get older. If the unpaid work was optional rather than necessary, undertaken for some reason such as personal pleasure, employed mothers would drastically reduce their hours of unpaid work, rather than, as shown above, working nearly as many hours of unpaid work as mothers not in paid employment.

Yet, in official measures of economic activity, parental care of young children falls outside the production boundary, that is used to distinguish what will be counted as production from what will not be counted as production in the United Nations System of National Accounts. Marilyn Waring (1988) explained the impact on social policy formulation of the exclusion of women's unpaid work from the official measures of the national economy, referring to GNP (Gross National Product) and GDP (Gross

Domestic Product):

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).

Mothers' unpaid work of caring for young children, whilst receiving some recognition as work (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998a), 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. Janice Peterson, co-author of *The Economic Status of Women Under Capitalism: Institutional Economics and Feminist Theory* (Peterson & Brown 1994) states that 'the focus of economic enquiry should be on the processes by which societies provision and reproduce themselves' (Peterson & Brown 1994:x). Our complex society appears to have lost sight of the basic processes that are necessary for survival - provisioning and reproduction. Clearly when children are young, they depend for their survival on high levels of parental care. That care may be a labour of love, but it is also economic activity. It takes up the time and energy

of the worker, and must be resourced in some way. As Marilyn Waring (1988) and Janice Peterson (1994) point out, we need new ways of thinking about, discussing and writing about women's unpaid work. Janice Peterson criticises individual choice theory and the public-private dualism of traditional economic theories of capitalism and socialism. She states:

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 (Peterson & Brown 1994:x-xii).

Caring for young children produces a public benefit

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 of the activities that are generally taken for granted, and that 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, in terms of their own labour, to the welfare of the whole community in the future, yet this work does not even earn them superannuation benefits. Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley have similarly argued that the rest of the community could be seen as free-riders on the labour of mothers (Bittman & Pixley 1997:196-200).

Impact on labour market participation

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 labour market income.

Recent Australian Bureau of Statistics labour force statistics (ABS 1998) indicate that women's labour market participation drops with child bearing, then gradually increases with the age of their youngest child. This is the mirror image of Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley's (1997) finding that women's hours of unpaid work rise with the arrival of children, then decrease with children's ages. Mothers clearly bear the economic costs of loss of income in the years when their time and energy are taken up with the care of young children.

To examine whether the patterns detailed above could be interpreted as lifestyle choices, particularly on the part of mothers who had partners willing to support them while their children were young, the author compared the labour market participation of single mothers and couple family mothers by age of youngest child (see Figures 1 and 2). The author carried out a secondary analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics labour force statistics (ABS 1998). The analysis revealed that a smaller proportion (26%) of single mothers of children under four have paid employment than couple mothers of children under four (47%). This finding is paradoxical in view of the fact that single mothers generally experience more poverty than partnered mothers (Thomson 2000:87), logically suggesting an additional incentive for single mothers to maximise their labour market earning.

Figures 1 and 2 show that mothers of older children are more active in the labour market than mothers of younger children. This applies to both single mothers and couple family mothers, but the single mothers are consistently less active in the labour market, except in relation to full time employment of mothers whose youngest dependant is aged 15-24. I would argue that part of the reason is that without a partner to share the work involved in caring for a child, sole parents find it much more difficult to survive the double work load of paid and unpaid work.

Exploitation disguised as choice

In 1996 and 1997 the author conducted focus groups in Brisbane and Melbourne with women who were responsible for the care of young children. The groups were recruited using a snowballing technique (Alston & Bowles 1998:93). Both single mothers and couple family mothers were invited to the groups, but all those attending were couple family mothers. Two weeks prior to the groups, they were given a briefing paper explaining that the topic of the research was mothers' arrangements for the care of their children, with particular focus on the economic aspects of those arrangements. The mothers in my focus groups spoke of their own arrangements in terms of 'choice'.

I recall that, in the 1970s, mothers of young children affirmed or defended what they were doing in terms of fulfilling their responsibilities and meeting reasonable expectations of themselves as women who were mothers. Their expectations of themselves seemed to be based on an acceptance of the sex role stereotyping of the time. My observation is supported by Chilla Bulbeck's research which found that women, looking back, reported not challenging the marriage and child rearing roles and expectations of the 1970s (Bulbeck 1997:63).

In contrast, the mothers in my recent focus groups rejected notions of sex role stereotyping, and called upon the concept of 'partnership' to explain their choices. They saw their choices as maximising the income of the partner-

Figure 1: Percentage of single mothers in employment by youngest dependant, Australia, June 1998

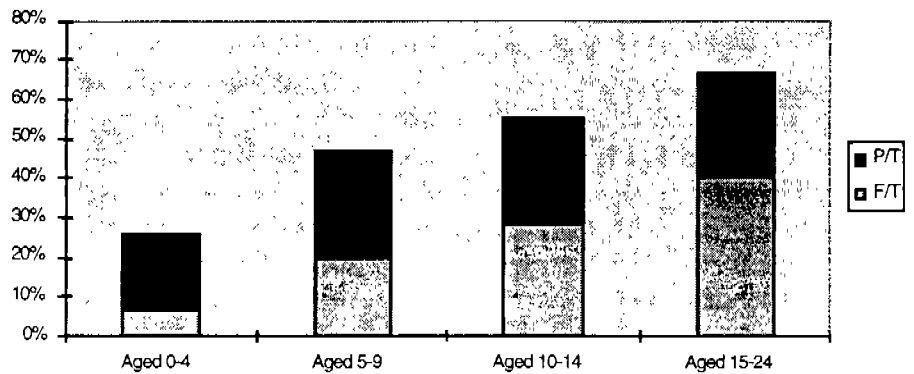
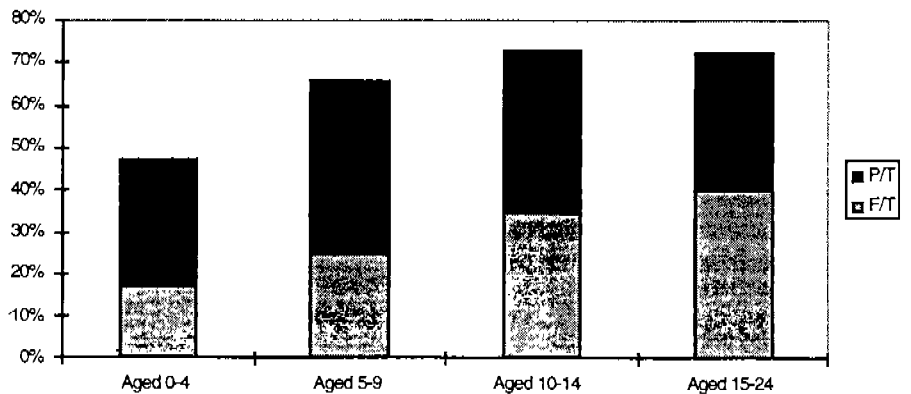


Figure 2: Percentage of couple family mothers in employment by age of youngest dependant, Australia, June 1998



Data source: Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998b, *Labour Force Status and Other Characteristics of Families Australia, June 1998*, Cat. No. 6224.0, Canberra.

ship, as accommodating the practicalities of breastfeeding, as making their own lives workable, and most importantly, as providing the best possible quality of care for their children. Some placed importance on maintaining continuity in their own careers, but this priority clearly complicated their lives, put more pressure on them, and sometimes cost them more in dollar terms than they earned from their employment.

The focus group participants expressed some frustration at an un-

intended consequence of their arrangements; they were investing in their male partners' earning capacity at the expense of their own. They saw this as an advantage for their nuclear family unit, but expressed some anxiety and disappointment about what it meant for their own career aspirations, earning capacity, and ability to command respect and recognition in their present or anticipated places of employment.

The choices that these women saw as their own individual choices

were clearly part of the patterns that can lead to long term disadvantages for women: vulnerability to poverty and lack of power and influence within the broader society. This situation is an example of "the personal is political". Women's vulnerability to poverty is unacceptable within an egalitarian vision for society, and is clearly linked with the numbers of Australian children living in poverty (Thomson 2000:87).

When individual women's 'choices' lead to gendered outcomes that disadvantage women, we must ask what 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 their feet 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.

Recognised but not redressed

In a discussion of forms of oppression, Iris Marion Young (1990, cited in Mullaly 1997), utilises the concept 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' (Mullaly 1997:146). I have argued that 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. This

amounts to exploitation, and has been recognised as such in the literature. For example, 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 acknowledgement 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).

The continuing exploitation of women in their role as care-givers of young children has been acknowledged (Moen 1992; Brown, Lumley, Small, & Astbury 1994; Wolcott & Glezer 1995, Bittman 1995), but no clear direction has emerged to redress the situation effectively. The development of effective public policy to redress unsatisfactory conditions depends on a shared analysis of prevailing social conditions, but this area is marked by a plethora of vested interests and divergent understandings of the issues (see for example Hakim 1995 and Ginn et al 1996). This situation of social injustice involves a complex interplay of forces and circumstances

that perpetuate it, and make it difficult to understand, and therefore difficult to redress.

Future policy principles and objectives for the care of young children

In Australian social policy, the need to support families caring for young children has been specifically identified (Howard & Newman 2000). However the Prime Minister's *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy* (Howard & Newman 2000) includes welfare and 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. The concepts 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). If the people who care for young children were considered as workers rather than dependants, and as contributors to the community rather than as a drain on community resources, we would see very different policies and strategies. In such an environment, and consistent with the position taken in this article, policy provisions and strategies for supporting parents while children are under school age would have a dual focus:

1. Protecting mothers and children from poverty while children are under school age and full labour market participation by mothers is unrealistic AND

2. Providing opportunities for mothers to maintain or increase their earning capacity without penalty to their current circumstances.

The latter means not reducing income support when mothers earn in the labour market. This may seem contrary to current residual welfare principles, but this apparent dilemma could be overcome by moving the resourcing of the care of young children out of the residual welfare system. Present arrangements act as a disincentive for mothers to retain or develop their earning capacity.

Instead of disincentives, providing incentives for participation in education and training, so that mothers increase their qualifications and ability to earn in the future, should apply to both single and couple family mothers because they are quite likely to change status over the following 5 years. We cannot pick those individuals who are going to have to earn their own living and financially support their children in the future. This means that in thinking about eliminating poverty traps for single mothers, we also need to be thinking about partnered mothers and investing in their future earning capacity because of the typical pathways that lead mothers into and occasionally out of vulnerability to poverty.

The objectives of such policy development should include:

- Giving ALL mothers of young children a high degree of flexibility and control over how they spend their time;
- Maximising 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;

- Protecting 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;
- Maximising 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;
- Introducing 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.

Strategies to achieve these objectives would include:

- I am serious about suggesting quite significant changes to the resourcing of the care of young children. As in the case of any significant change, strategies may have both intended and unintended effects. Thorough consultation with groups in the community is the most effective way to assess likely impacts and to obtain creative input into policy strategies. I put forward the following suggestions as items for discussion and development, not as a proposed com-

plete list:

- Free or affordable child care (eg a \$20 fee for a full week of care, regardless of how many children in the family) for any purpose including exercise, meditation, education, social activities, and education as well as employment. Realistic incomes for all mothers of young children (transferable to another primary carer if warranted), with no penalty for earning additional income.
- High quality long day care and out of school hours care.
- Workcover for mothers of young children.
- 'Sick leave' provisions so that a qualified carer could come into the home to care for both mother and children when the mother is sick.
- Superannuation benefits.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that parental caring for young children is economic activity that benefits the whole community, to the economic detriment of those, mainly mothers, who carry out the work. I have shown that the hours of unpaid work required to care for young children make it almost impossible for mothers of young children to earn their own living in the labour market. In conclusion, I have proposed some policy principles, objectives and strategies that would be consistent with a more egalitarian approach to resourcing the care of young children in contemporary Australia.

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