

1 Flexible Working Time and Family Life

In the heady, pre-oil crisis, full-employment days of the early 1970s, the OECD Director of Manpower and Social Affairs wrote (Rehn, 1973:3):

Governments and industrial organisations should make it a *policy goal* to provide the individual with the greatest possible degree of freedom to determine the allocation of his own time among different uses... The individual should be free to switch between periods of income-earning work, education or training, and leisure (including retirement) according to his own interests and wishes. There should also be many different and variable patterns of working time over the course of a year, a week or a day so that the individual can always find something that suits his preferences. Of course this freedom cannot be unlimited; the task is always to find the best compromise between individual wishes and the technical, economic, and social exigencies which have led to existing rules and regulations whose role in promoting both economic efficiency and social progress should not be overlooked. **But the time has come to move to the point of compromise in the direction of freedom by offering more flexibility whenever possible** (Emphasis added).

Accordingly, the Director cited specific factors which were, in his personal view, working towards a breakthrough for greater flexibility in employment. Included among these factors were: rising levels of education fostering demand for individual self-determination; rising labour force participation rates among women with family responsibilities; expansion of service sector industries which offer increased possibilities for non-standardised work-time arrangements; continuing urbanisation and the concomitant need to reduce inner city

congestion and overcrowding; increasing use of shiftwork arrangements; and rising levels of real income and relative job security as a result of full employment (1973:3). Fifteen years later, all but the last of these factors retain potency as arguments for change in the organisation of our working lives.

The prevailing expectations of the 1960s and early 1970s that significant changes in working time arrangements were due to occur and, in many cases, had already occurred, form the background to the present report. The importance of flexibility in our working lives for the successful harmonisation of employment with family life, civic and social responsibilities, and leisure activities warrants documentation of the extent to which such flexibility has been achieved. Until the early 1980s, the words of the OECD Director quoted above appeared unusually optimistic, as the ways in which work is structured remained much the same as in earlier decades, some tinkering on the edges notwithstanding. In large measure, change in the direction of increased flexibility over these years occurred only slowly, if at all, as a result of a severe slowdown in economic growth, brought on by the first oil crisis of 1973/4 and exacerbated by the adoption of stringent monetarist economic policies during the early part of the 1980s. The belief that economic growth and technical progress would bring reductions in working hours, increases in leisure time and flexible living patterns quickly turned into concern over inflation and unemployment. However, the gradual return to economic prosperity experienced in Britain during the second half of the 1980s has witnessed a renewal of interest in more flexible ways of working, in large part with the aim of increasing productivity and hence competitiveness, but in some part also with a view to encouraging the continuing employment of women.

Thus, although change is happening only slowly, it is nonetheless happening, both in the structure of employment and in the organisation of family life. Perhaps the most important, and certainly the most obvious, of these changes has been the increase in women's labour force participation over the decades since 1950. From 1881 until 1951 the labour force participation rate of women in Britain remained constant at about 35 per cent. By 1987, however, some 50 per cent of women were in paid employment. For married women, the change has been rather more marked. Starting in 1911 with an activity rate of less than 10 per cent, married women increased their participation in the labour force between 1951 and 1979 to reach just over 50 per cent, a

level at which it has since stabilised. Restricting the analysis to only those married women of working age (16-59), however, indicates that in 1985, the latest figures available, some 62 per cent of wives were economically active. During these years, then, the involvement of wives in paid employment changed from only one in ten working outside the home to well over one in two. Moreover, as these figures refer to the proportion of women/wives in the labour force in any given year, it is important to point out that virtually all married women will spend some part of their married lives in the labour force¹.

The rising participation of married women in the labour force has been accompanied by changes in marriage and childbearing behaviour. In particular, divorce rates have risen; age at marriage has fallen and cohabitation has increased; the birth rate has fallen and the proportion of babies born outside marriage has risen (Kiernan, 1986). Britain's sharp rise in the number of divorces during the 1970s is usually attributed to the 1971 reform of the grounds for divorce. However, divorce had already been increasing by nearly 10 per cent a year from 1960, and at present, about one in three marriages is likely to end in divorce – a statistic which is often cited as heralding the death of the family (cf Chester, 1985). But although many marriages do end in divorce, marriage itself remains popular. Evidence suggests that between 65 and 70 per cent of divorcees remarry eventually. Furthermore, one third of all marriages now include at least one partner who has been married before, representing an increase from 14 per cent in 1961 (*Social Trends 18*, 1988).

Recently, evidence was brought forward suggesting that a link exists between rising participation in paid employment by married women and rising divorce rates. In a re-analysis of the 1980 survey data presented in *Women and Employment: A Lifetime Perspective* (Martin and Roberts 1984), Ermisch shows that during the first ten years of marriage, each additional year of paid employment increased the odds of divorce by six per cent among the women surveyed. Work experience after first birth, according to Ermisch, has a larger effect on the risk of divorce than work experience before first birth. And although *type* of work did not affect the risk of marital breakdown, full-time employment among married women had a much more powerful effect than part-time (Ermisch, 1986).

In order to provide a more complete picture of the impact of employment on marriage and divorce, Ermisch also investigated the probability of remarriage within three years of divorce or separation

by age, number of children and work experience. Again, employment was found to have a significant impact, with the probability of remarriage increasing with women's work experience. Age was also found to be an important factor behind the probability of remarriage, although the presence of one, two or three children did not alter women's chances in comparison with childless women (Ermisch, 1986).

The point to note about separation, divorce and remarriage is not simply that one pattern of living is replaced by another. Making the adjustment from one pattern to the other is itself a problem, and one which may arise in the reverse direction upon remarriage. The number of lone-parent families doubled to nearly one million between the 1960s and the early 1980s, and lone parents' attitudes to working time tend to have a distinctive pattern. Lone mothers, the great majority of all lone parents, are more likely than other mothers to seek full-time employment, and the relatively high earnings that go with it, but are less likely to find it practicable to be in employment at all². Lone fathers are much more likely to be in work, but with time preferences similar in many ways to those of married women. Lone fathers are less likely than other men to accept overtime, weekend working, or time-consuming commuting. Most importantly, the pattern of work commitment and working time developed during lone parenthood, or the resumption of single status without dependants, may not necessarily fit with that required by a new marriage or new parental responsibilities. Flexibility in working time may be needed more than ever in order to facilitate such changes in status.

Other changes have occurred in British society that have an impact on the amount of time men and women are willing to invest in paid employment. One of these changes concerns the growing proportion of elderly people in the population and the increasing trend towards the transfer of care of dependent persons of all ages from public institutions into the community. The overwhelming majority of carers in our society are women. In the 1960s, when the trend towards an increasingly aged population was less obvious, one prescient commentator estimated that by the end of the century at least half of all married women between ages 35 and 64 were likely to have at least partial responsibility for the care of an elderly or infirm person. Evidence from the 1980 survey *Women and Employment* (WES) suggests that the chances of the 1960s estimate being borne out are high. One in five women between ages 40 and 59 surveyed in the WES

was providing care on a regular basis for a sick or elderly friend or family member (WES, 1984:114). Altogether, 13 per cent of non-working women and 15 per cent of working women in the WES were providing care on a regular basis. The provision of care for others, like caring for small children, is likely to affect the amount of time available for other activities including paid employment. Almost one third of the non-employed women surveyed in WES reported that their employment opportunities were affected by their caring responsibilities, with an inability to work at all being the most common effect. However, even those women in work reported employment effects as a result of caring. Over half of these women found it necessary to restrict the number of hours worked, while one quarter reported having to take time off work in connection with the care they provided. The findings of WES confirm earlier qualitative research in this area (Nissel and Bonnerjea, 1982).

Under present social conditions, the pressures of providing care are translated first and foremost into a difference between men's and women's preferences regarding working time. Women are more likely to look for part-time work at times convenient for their family and caring responsibilities, to reject overtime and lengthy commuting, and, if given the choice, to prefer shorter daily hours to a corresponding increase in blocks of free time, such as extended holidays or long weekends. Men, if they have family responsibilities, tend to increase their interest in overtime, and in any case, generally demand full-time work.

Having to provide care for elderly or infirm relatives and friends may be seen as a negative constraint upon the amount of time available to some individuals for paid employment. There are, however, also positive constraints on the amount of time men and women wish to spend in employment. One such constraint is found in the return into the family of many activities formerly carried out either outside the home or by outside providers. The growth of the so-called *DIY* family has been noted by many observers, in particular Pahl (1984), with activities such as entertainment, including television and video, laundry, repair work and decorating increasingly undertaken within the family by family members. A second constraint concerns the growth of sport and other leisure activities outside the home. One study of trends in particular forms of non-work activity pointed to increases by the end of the century in the proportion of people participating in various activities, ranging from 15 per cent in the case of passive

interests like reading, listening to music, or eating and drinking out, to 22 per cent in active or spectator sports and 33 per cent in cultural pursuits. Outside activities were forecast to increase somewhat more than those based in the home (Young and Willmott, 1973).

In part, these are general trends, applying to all social groups. However, they are also linked strongly to rising education, occupational status, and income. At the beginning of the 1970s, Young and Willmott (1973) found that the number of home-based and outside leisure activities by married Londoners – both men and women – rose sharply from the unskilled to professionals and managers. Detailed analysis for men showed that this trend was linked, in order of importance, to occupational status, income, and education, with important cross-cutting influences through age and car ownership. There was a consequent rising trend, by occupational status, of mutual interference between the three spheres of work, family and leisure.

However, few of these changes mean that British men and women are turning away from work. The European Values Study found that in 1980 three out of four British respondents – more than the European average – rejected the proposition that it would be good *if work played a smaller part in our lives*. British men and women expressed relatively and absolutely high pride and satisfaction in their work and commitment to it. Genuinely discouraged workers, as distinct from those who see no factual prospect of escaping from unemployment, were a tiny minority, mainly comprising those nearing retirement. Moreover, Pahl's work in the 1980s, while confirming occupational status differentials in time spent in self-provisioning and DIY activities within the home, shows in particular that it is men and women with paid employment who are most likely to be engaged in extra work activities. As a possible feature of a good job, *good hours* count more for women than for men, but both sexes attach more importance to factors consistent with work commitment such as the interest of a job, the chance to achieve something in it, pay, security, or pleasant colleagues. British men and women are, it seems, committed to working. But in addition to this commitment, the European Values Study reveals a desire among British men and women to have control over their own working arrangements; they want employment but within time limits set by their other interests and responsibilities. Examining how far such control and flexibility in working time has been achieved is the aim of the next section of this report.