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HOURGLASS CEILING: MOTHERS' CAREERS SQUEEZED

Australia's long-hours culture is much more likely to disadvantage the careers and wellbeing of mothers than fathers because of persistent inequalities around how family time commitments are shared, new research from The Australian National University (ANU) suggests.

"Career success tends to be a product of merit and, nowadays, the time to work long hours. Australia has some of the longest full-time work hours in the OECD," says Dr Lyndall Strazdins, an expert in work-life balance issues from the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health (NCEPH) at ANU.

"But our research indicates that most mothers simply don't have the same time available as fathers to put in the long hours at the office, because they are still expected to pick up the lion's share of tasks to do with raising children and other family commitments. This is exacerbated by the fact that in many instances their partners are working longer and longer hours." Strazdins cites research indicating that families are much more time poor than they once were. For example, 30 years ago about 45 hours a week was devoted by families to work. Now, with both parents working, it's often 70 or 80 hours. "That's a big difference in how much time families devote to work, and so something has to give."

In research funded by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Dr Strazdins and her colleagues found that these pressures eat into mothers' work time, with mothers planning and doing their work hours around their children's and partner's needs. Those mothers who did work full time often paid a price in terms of their own wellbeing.

Other research undertaken by Dr Strazdins with the Australian Institute of Family Studies, found that mothers in full-time employment had to trade off many more of the things that contribute positively to their wellbeing. These women tended to report more psychological distress and relationship problems.

"Mothers' wellbeing tends to be best when they were working part-time, but this entails trade offs around career achievements and income," Dr Strazdins says. "This demonstrates that among many other things, gender inequity is also a product of an uneven sharing of time between mothers and fathers, and our increasing expectations of long work hours for many full-time jobs. You could say that women are being held back by an 'hourglass ceiling'."

Dr Strazdins says that National Families Week 2008 this week is an ideal opportunity to consider the need for a comprehensive policy approach to balancing work and family issues, and fixing some of the inequalities that arise for many mothers because of time pressures. "Persistent time pressure problems can have serious consequences and costs for health and some pay the price more than others," she said.

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