

Rethinking Care: a Critical Analysis of Family Policies, Caring and Women's Negotiation of Dependency

Kerreen Reiger¹, Joan Garvan² & Sinem Temel³

1. Associate Professor, School of Social Sciences, La Trobe University
2. Gender, Sexuality & Culture, Australian National University
3. The Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers.

The social and political changes of recent decades have had a major impact on the capacity and preparedness of women and men to provide the care that is essential to human wellbeing and social life. As intersections of state, family and market change, new contradictions are emerging. What Hancock (2002) has called a 'care crunch' is the result of escalating work demands and diminished state supports which have generated a crisis in caring for dependents and managing family work. This article first considers aspects of Australian family policy as they developed particularly under the Howard Government.¹ In spite of conscious attempts to develop 'family'-oriented policies, they were, in effect, shaped both by neoliberal assumptions about making rational 'choices' around work and family life, and by the inequitable gendered constructions of the 'ideal worker' and carer traditionally embedded in Australian social policy (Shaver 1998; Pocock 2003). There is little suggestion in these developments that family caregiving was adequately conceptualised, let alone effectively valued: indeed the 'gender equality agenda' as Probert pointed out, had 'stalled' in both the workplace and the home (Probert 2002:8). In the second part of the paper, we outline an alternative basis for public policy, a conceptual framework drawn from care ethics as concerned with social conditions that support human flourishing and collective responsibility for inevitable human dependency. The final section turns to considering how care within families is presently neither about 'choice' nor socially valued. It reports qualitative data on how women manage the transition from their status as paid workers to that of being economically-dependent, socially devalued mothers. In this transition, we argue, they experience a disjuncture between social expectations of gender equity and family forms that still structure dependency and domestic labour on gendered lines. For them, the organisation of family care responsibilities is hardly about rational 'choice' between work and home, but about struggling to manage their identities and relationships in the contradictory context of the 'ideology of domesticity' (Probert 2002; Williams 2000). Rather than liberal concepts of 'choice' derived from the marketplace and seen as exercised by 'autonomous' adults, we

contend that gender-equitable and effective family policies must take more account of the inevitable human need for caregiving and dependency.

'Choice' as Family Policy Rhetoric

In light of the women's movement's claims, the Labor Party's social policy reforms in the late 1980s- early 1990s sought to facilitate women's transition into the workforce through social wage adjustments to incomes of families with children. Critical analysts like Shaver (1995) and Mitchell (1999) thus noted some shifting away from the traditional policy concept of dependent spouse towards women being seen as independent carers or wage earners. While recognizing that real gender equity, which acknowledges 'difference' not just 'sameness', still had a long way to go, Hancock (2002, p.130) argues that 'Labor policy did at least support women's policy aimed at achieving gender equity in the long term'. With a change in government in 1996 to a socially conservative and neoliberal Liberal-National Coalition, many of the policy shifts began to reflect reversion to a conservative gender contract that still constructed women as carers and men as breadwinners (Mitchell 1999; Probert 2002; Samson 2002; Summers 2003). From the (in)famous 'white picket fence' family imagery in 1988 on, support for the traditional family as the centre of Australia's national life was widely seen as a goal of the Howard Government (Mitchell 1999). However, encouraging market participation and enhancing production were also paramount policy goals. Embedded within its work and family policies, therefore, was lingering confusion over the role of women—were they workers, were they carers, is it possible to be both? Just what social support and resources might be necessary for optimal caregiving in family and community contexts was rarely addressed.

To manage contradictions between economic and family policy objectives, Prime Minister Howard relied on the neoliberal discourse that what families needed was rational 'choice' of work/family arrangements. On regaining Liberal Party leadership in 1996, he reiterated his views on the importance of families and promised that, if elected, he would address the difficulties facing parents seeking to integrate their paid work with family care and responsibilities: he would offer '...more choice for families, more choice

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in industrial relations, more choice in education, more choice in child care...' (Howard 1996). The refrain of encouraging free choice echoed through measures relating to tax incentives for mothers at home, leave entitlements, childcare benefits, Australian Workplace Agreements and pay conditions as well as casual and part-time employment. As Morehead (2005) and Samson (2008) have also argued, the Howard government's approach to such policy areas stressed encouraging choices, but in effect, supported only those consistent with traditional gender norms. While Samson's careful analysis of the role of the state in shaping women's labour market and family options, does not go far enough in critically interrogating the very discourse of choice or preference when family caregiving is involved, Morehead rightly points to the limitations of the gender assumptions involved. As she notes, in juggling his disparate policy agendas, Howard became an enthusiast for the work of UK sociologist, Catherine Hakim (2000), sending a social policy advisor to London to find out more about her research on women's 'lifestyle preferences'. Hakim argues that women are not homogenous but should be seen as including distinct groups who 'choose' between three different work /family lifestyles. According to Hakim, a minority of women are work-centred, and give priority to their employment. The majority is part of what Hakim (2000) refers to as the 'adaptive' group, those who prefer to structure their work around their family responsibilities, while a small proportion of 'home-centered' women prefer to prioritise their family over work. In 2003, Hakim spent a number of weeks in Australia, including being feted in Canberra. During her stay, she argued that in order to increase fertility the Government '...should focus ... on policies to support home-centered women, who have the highest fertility rates and can most easily be persuaded to increase their family size' (Hakim 2003). As in the UK, Hakim remains a controversial figure amongst Australian academics and policy bureaucrats, many of whom, on evidence like that of Morehead (2005) and echoed in a qualitative study reported below, argue that her categorisation of women does not deal with the messiness and competing priorities of real women's lives in gendered families.

The confusion within the Howard Government as to how women should be conceptualized and which 'choices' should be supported revealed not only misunderstanding of work-family intersections as just a matter of personal 'preference' rather than social structures, but a lack of commitment to gender equity or the value of caregiving work within families or society. It is not possible here to explore the details of the Howard Government's Baby Bonus / Maternity Allowance / Maternity Payment / Baby Bonus series of policies. However, the recommendations for national paid maternity leave presented by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in the carefully researched discussion paper, *Valuing Parenthood: Options for Paid Maternity Leave*, were rejected. As feminist commentators like Anne Summers (2003) pointed out, the policy responses to supporting working women with families went hand in hand with resurgent pronatalism which constructed

women primarily as 'breeders'. Faced with declining fertility rates and an ageing population as stressed by Treasury's Intergenerational reports in 2002 and 2007, the Howard Government saw an increased birth rate as crucial to the prosperity of the nation. While this awareness seemed at least to recognise value of reproduction, this was not carried over in any serious way into effective recognition of the work of caring in families. Although Budget reports and papers told a glowing story of the priority being given to supporting families with children, other measures were less supportive of prioritising family over market work (Samson 2002). Not all 'families' nor all 'choices' were, after all, equal—the imposition of distinctly family-unfriendly WorkChoices industrial relations policy told another story, one widely discussed and too complex to expand on here but which promoted long working hours thus diminishing family time (WISER 2006; Pocock 2007). As Probert (2002:15) like others has pointed out, it is in treatment of single mothers that neglect of the value of caregiving work, and the absence of 'choice' stands out most clearly. While the move to an ostensibly 'gender neutral', labour-market oriented policy that neglects mothers' caring load was not peculiar to the Howard government (Shaver 1995), moving single mothers from welfare to work stood in stark contrast to that Government's proclaimed ideological support for 'women at home'. Instead of a 'choice' framework, the emphasis on mutual obligation and work tests for all welfare recipients, including single mothers with primary school-aged children, shaped the possibilities. For sole mothers trying to care for their children and undertake paid work, these policy shifts placed them in a highly contradictory situation, living out a tension between the two objectives of employment and good parenting. In a context of a '24/7' expanding economy and the demands of an increasingly unregulated labour market, the policy emphasis on 'choice' ignored complex and deep-seated structures and cultures of work allocation between women and men in family households in general, and the situation of those with specific needs such as single mothers in particular. The dominance of choice rhetoric and the absence of a discourse that recognised the realities of human caregiving reduced the possibility of equitable options of balancing care demands with economic participation.

Conceptualising Care

In the last twenty years, the economic and human value of caring, along with household work more generally, has become central to many areas of debate over the ethics of public policy and social life (Waring 1988; Williams 2001; Deacon and Williams 2004). As Beasley and Bacchi (2005, p.49) indicate, care is on the intellectual and political agenda across a wide range of fields, emerging as 'an important site for re-imagining embodiment, self, community and collective/democratic participation.' Philosopher, Virginia Held, for example says care ethics offer 'a radical ethic calling for a profound restructuring of society' (Held 2006). Like others, Held argues persuasively that care is the most fundamental social value

because without it humans cannot survive, let alone develop, or, to use Ruth Groenhout's (2003) term, 'flourish'. Although earlier care ethics theorists like Carol Gilligan (1982) have been criticised for being insufficiently attentive to questions of politics and justice (Tronto 1993; Beasley and Bacchi 2005), later theorists such as Koehn (1998), Sevenhuijsen (1998), Groenhout (2004) and Held (2006), have indicated the importance of an ethic of care for analysis of social structures. As they argue, state policies and actual social practices can be assessed in terms of equity and contributions to embodied well-being. Bowden (1997) points out that, while relationships of caring are what makes social life possible, not all caring should be equally valorised—some can even be detrimental, based on disrespect, manipulation and control of one or other party. As responsibility for managing human dependency needs has been disproportionately assigned to women, questions of power and gender inequality are central to both conceptual and political analysis. Many feminist theorists have argued over the years that the social structuring of the traditional nuclear family not only assumes separation of public and private life, but privileges a seemingly autonomous adult as the 'ideal worker' and devalues the essential labour of care done within households or in low-paid sectors of the labour market (Waring 1988; Acker 1991; Fraser 1997; Williams 2000; Folbre 2001). Carol Pateman (1988) for instance argued in her landmark text on the public-private divide, that our inherited political concepts are inadequate because they do not include the relations of reproduction, effectively distorting, or blocking women from access to justice, equality and full-citizenship rights.

The relationship between gender equity and human dependency has been clearly articulated in the work of Eva Kittay (1999) and of Martha Fineman (2004). Kittay highlights the contradictory nature of a society that purports to promote equity, while at the same time upholding a gendered institution of marriage and familial relations. Under the traditional 'domesticity' regime (Williams 2000), women as primary care-givers within families are largely financially dependent on the good will of a male provider. Fineman argues that their economic dependency, and vulnerability therefore, is not an inevitable dependency like that of babies or the frail elderly, but is socially constructed as 'derivative dependency', that is derived from the gendered structuring of care labour. Care is provided not only for the children, whose care is essential to social survival, but for men, those conceived of in political theory and public policy as autonomous, or non-dependent, citizens (Fineman 2004). While women have been positioned as economic dependents within families, men's position has been both as 'citizen soldiers' serving universal interests (Lloyd 1984), and as 'citizen workers' motivated by rational self-interest in the market economy. In spite of Liberalism's stress on a masculinist citizenship ideal of individual autonomy, in reality the current western state, along with the market, remains reliant on unpaid work undertaken in the 'private sphere' of the family.

From the nineteenth century, the tensions between the norms of rational self-interest of the market, and the emotions and mutual obligation associated with the family, were managed through policies supporting what Nancy Fraser amongst others has discussed as the 'breadwinner family model' (Fraser 1997). While men were seen as primary economic providers, women were discouraged from labour market work on the grounds of their sexual difference, and only brought into the workforce under 'protected' conditions (Bacchi 1999). Since the late twentieth century, however, another policy framework has emerged, that of the sex-undifferentiated 'universal worker model' (Fraser 1997). Under the guise of their 'sameness' to men, women achieved equal pay and improved their market position, but their embodied, reproductive rights were recognised only as a 'disability' until their citizenship entitlements broadened in the context of second-wave feminist claims (Franzway, Court and Connell 1989; Bacchi 1999). However, according to the critique developed by theorists like Joan Williams (2000) and Martha Fineman (2004), a *culture* or 'ideology of domesticity' and women's *structural* 'derivative dependency' on men continue to involve gendered inequality which is at odds with contemporary equity goals. The resulting contradictions, we argue, are reflected in work-family policy objectives like not only those of Howard but of earlier Australian governments. Most importantly, they are also evident in women's experiences of transition from 'worker' to 'mother'.

Transitions to Parenthood: Intersections of Choice, Identity and Dependency

The women most in the sights of policy-makers have clearly been those having children. It is in considering the processes associated with the transition to parenthood and managing the pre-school years that the 'choice' discourse most clearly reveals its limitations (Samson 2002). Women are having fewer children, and often later in life, therefore when they have their first child, many bring with them educational achievements and substantial workplace and life-course experience. As they now live in a world premised, at least formally, on gender equity, the reality of caring for young children in a nuclear family context locates them squarely within the site of the major contradictions evident at the policy level (Grace 2004). As a report on research by the European Economic Union on such *Transitions* noted, 'A frequently recurring theme ... is the ways in which gender shapes parenthood and makes motherhood different from fatherhood both in everyday family life and in the workplace. The transition to parenthood appears to be a critical 'tipping point' on the road to gender equity.' (Nilsen & Brannen 2005, p.10) The term Transition to Parenthood (TtoP) has come to represent a range of adjustments that both men and women negotiate, particularly when they become first time parents. An international field of literature including both qualitative and quantitative studies highlights issues related to the sense of self when

women become first time mothers, a disjuncture between expectations and experience (Golbert and Perry-Jenkins 2004; Cowdery and S., Knudson-Martin 2005; Singley 2005). A confluence of social, cultural and economic factors promote the breadwinner model of the family frustrating attempts by many couples to achieve a form of gender equity, or egalitarian arrangements, after the birth of a child (Kluwer et.al. 2002). Becoming parents brings significant changes for both mothers and fathers, contributing to a 'critical life stage' which is often experienced as overwhelming (LeBlanc 1999; Strazdins and Broom 2004). The dynamics, including women's derivative dependency, contribute to what appears to be a trend towards traditional gender roles after the birth. The vast majority of women take on not just breastfeeding, but a greater load of the household and general childcare duties, even if they are also working full-time, and often men are working longer hours in order to provide financially for their families (Pocock 2003). In the absence of adequate state financial support for those doing the work of caring for dependents, there is a disjuncture between an expectation of equity and the cultural and structural system associated with family life (Probert 2002).

Individuals and/or couples now negotiate on a daily basis as they seek a new, gender-equitable, or egalitarian family form. Some of the data from an Australian study focusing on maternal subjectivity shows that first-time mothers, the target of much policy, might indeed make 'choices' but that this is hardly a clear-cut or entirely rational process. This qualitative research project involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with sixteen women who gave birth to their first child in 2004/5 and is reported more fully elsewhere.² The participants, for whom pseudonyms are used, were drawn from Canberra, Sydney, and one country area. Most were in their early 30s, thirteen were married, two in de-facto relationships, and one a sole parent. The interviewees responded to a poster circulated through playgroups, childcare centres, or displayed at a shopping centre. They came from a mix of middle- and working-class backgrounds and included one indigenous Australian. All but one of the respondents were employed before the birth of their first child and the other was a secondary student. At the time of the interview the first-born was most often eighteen months to two-and-a-half years old; ten of the participants had birthed a second child, and two a third. Of these sixteen women ten were back at work part-time between their infants' first and third birthdays. The interviews generally went for three hours covering issues associated with the transition to parenthood— changes to identity, life course and to relationships (partner, friends and family), negotiating more housework, and finding a line between self and baby. The project drew from feminist and other critical social theory in an attempt to locate avenues in which the agency (the ability to act) of women, as mothers, is expressed. The women's experience of caregiving was considered in terms of how they negotiated meanings (mother-infant and family) and forms of capital (economic, social,

cultural and symbolic).

These women often grappled with questions of personal identity and maternal responsibility for care, while striving to achieve a form of gender equity within their families. They generally felt compelled to sacrifice economic independence and thus were required to negotiate within the economic dependency of the male breadwinner model. They sought, nonetheless, to apply a gender equitable set of practical arrangements such as establishing joint bank accounts. In some cases the women took care of the family finances, and generally they had access to whatever money the couple could afford. However, when asked about negotiating finances, Peta for example, said:

[Claude] would never ever say to me, you can't buy that, he would never do that, but there are times when I think I won't buy that because I'll feel guilty because it's not my money, yes ... that's another reason why I am working one day a week because you feel like you've got that little bit of money. (Peta)

It was the association between full-time carer and domestic duties that caused the most consternation. Peta and Claude had managed a form of domestic equality before having children but now that she was at home full-time her husband, who worked long hours, assumed that she would also take on the vast majority of the domestic chores (both through the week and on weekends). Peta wrestled with this throughout the interview, at times praising her husband's financial contribution to the family, and his engagement with the children, but, at another, saying sharply 'and I'll think, no that's not fair.' As she did not want to become one of 'those whinging wives', she determined to just get on with it. The association between being a full-time carer, and hence her 'derivative dependency', and the duties associated with being a housewife were experienced as problematic, and they reveal the unspoken assumptions about unpaid family labour that multiplies three-fold after the birth of a child.

The interviews provided a welcome opportunity for these women to talk about the first two years of mothering: the meanings, the experiences, the aspirations and the practices. Issues around identity, adjustments, and their relationships emerged, indicating a disjuncture between expectations and experience which is deeply felt in terms of personal adjustment. Marina said of her plans, they've 'gone out the window.... I just didn't know ... It is new - it's like you're sort of reborn in a way, and you are partly this new person.' Asked to rank out of ten the differences between her expectations and her experience in the adjusting to motherhood, Barbara laughingly said 'Oh 10, can I go higher? 10 Plus - it's huge - and I think anyone that says otherwise is just kidding themselves.' Apart from managing the sheer level of work, it also involved managing a new self. For example, like many other mothers in this study, Hilary had expected to return to work sometime soon after the birth, though she planned to move to a different job because of a requirement

for fieldwork which she felt would now be impossible. Although she decided that even limited work was simply too hard at present, she grappled with questions concerning her new identity:

I did go back to my job when baby was born, very briefly, and I hated it. I really did. Yes, you lose the job, and I think you lose the ability of contributing financially to the family. So, yes, you've suddenly lost that status and that feeling that you are helping and instead you are left with a 24 hour job that is absolutely exhausting (laughing) and you don't get any sleep and you're completely lost and don't know how to do it (Hilary)

Later she went on to comment 'I think this is probably the hardest part about it, trying to work out, well, who are you?

All but one of the research participants had included the prospect of having children in their life plans. The birth therefore, marked a goal in life, a personal achievement. The commitment to her child, or children, also came across strongly in the vast majority of the interviews. Many of the women spoke of the emotional issues raised by their mothering, including similarities and/or the differences with their own mother. Renegotiating the couple relationship is also a fundamental task of the transition to parenting, and for these women, it meant struggling with letting some of their old selves go. They missed time as a couple, but also as they became more financially dependent on their partners, they sought to feel they were still an economic contributor. It was not easy, and their ambivalence is clear:

... he's supportive of my role as a mother, like, the stay at home mum, but when we have arguments ... that can be, not even a big issue, but he can, sort of, say, well you stay home. I work so you can stay home all day and I do feel a bit like I should be making some money but at the same time we're both aware that, the work that I do at home and the importance of it, if you know what I mean . . . Its not like you're not working is it, or contributing... like, you are making a huge contribution but I think, again, in terms of the culture we live in, because it's not counted as work, what you're doing, even though it is work, it can slide into that thing, well, you're just at home with the kids, like, that's not doing anything ... He does see it as a job, but at the same time he's the one with the money (Lesley)

I try to give up [doing work online at home] - I mean - in my heart I know that it's important to just be a mum, but in practice, it's like, I am doing it to give money to my house - I don't feel like I'm doing enough. So I'm in a lot of activities, a lot of things for a little bit of money. (Renee)

The context in which the negotiation of identity and relationships take place then includes both emotional dynamics and social expectations. There are clearly links between the current 'natural mother' discourse (Bobel 2003) and the disjuncture experienced by many women between a pre-and-post baby sense of self. Many were also troubled though by the low status that motherhood

brought:

... now that I'm in the position, I think it's an extremely important job. I don't think society, in general, puts as much importance on it as I think should be put on it and I see, society in general, think that having a baby is just a thing that happens and it shouldn't interrupt your life. The exact same thought that I had ... before I ... even thought of having a baby. But, I can see with having the kids around that it really is fundamental to society to have a parent, but probably more predominantly the mother... I think that mothers feel that bond with their kids in a stronger emotional way, than the men do. (Anne)

The ambivalence expressed here is indicative of processes of change at work in the everyday meanings and practices associated with both mothering and family functioning. Even though many of the interviewees struggled with contradictory feelings regarding their sense of self, their work contribution, and their relationships, there was no indication that the women were ambivalent about their children. Often bemused by their own mixed feelings, they expressed their surprise sometimes at the depth of feeling the children evoked in them—their willingness to put the needs of the child, or family, before their own and a keen commitment to the best interests of their children, who they wanted to become good people. How could it be that the achievement of their life long plan to have children seemed to bring forth unexpected and often difficult consequences? Even now when gender-equity is largely expected, when a woman becomes a first-time mother, she is confronted with the most entrenched aspect of our patriarchal history—the relegation of responsibility for human dependency to the privatized, and gender-inequitable, family unit. The move from the breadwinner model of family, particularly in this unsettled post-industrial phase, will require a substantial policy response to issues related to work/family balance, one going beyond that of Howard Government or even that of the Labour Government in the U.K.. The latter has been concerned with childcare and workplace flexibility, but still not given sufficient attention to gender equity in the process (Lewis and Campbell 2007).

Conclusions

The family, as a social unit, has proven difficult to access and analyse, let alone to support through policies that recognise the fundamental human dependency needs which it serves. For decades feminists have drawn attention to the interconnections between the so-called public and private realms, and sought to conceptualise the changing links between family, markets and the state. This paper has argued for improved understanding of the assumptions built not only into policy, but which also shape the personal negotiation of identity and relationships. It drew on conceptual debates that suggest that caring for the vulnerable and dependent is essential to overall human well-being or flourish-

ing, and supporting it is therefore central to sound social policy. While we are all interdependent, our need for care – our vulnerability – varies across the life course and in relation to health and social circumstances. Acknowledging this is undermined though by the fundamental premise of western notions of citizenship, that autonomous, implicitly male individuals are engaged in making free choices about selling their labour in the market. Against this, women are 'different', located in the private not public sphere, where they are allocated the responsibility for undertaking care of the vulnerable, but neither seriously valued nor financially supported for doing it.

This set of arrangements—described variously as a social settlement, social contract or 'work/care' regime—makes real gender equity highly problematic. As Acker (1991) and Fraser (1997) argued years ago, and Williams (2000), Folbre (2001) and Fineman (2004) more recently, this 'ideal citizen/worker', who remains a man, has his dependency needs taken care of by others, usually by a woman in the context of the family. The male breadwinner, or single earner, model of employment has, however, declined in the latter part of the twentieth century, both reflecting and contributing to changes in the relations between the workplace and the family, and between women and men in households. In recent years, we have argued, Australian family policy has been highly contradictory in responding to such developments. To manage the tension between valorising market work yet promoting a traditional gendered family model, the Howard Government relied on ideas of women's 'lifestyle preferences' to cater for different ways of negotiating work and family demands. In spite of traditional assumptions about women as 'naturally' carers, this strategy assumed that the market notions of rational choice could be applied to private sphere decision-making. Families' reality, as we have demonstrated here, is a good deal more complex. Like policy measures, though, it reflects tensions between autonomy/rationality and emotional and embodied needs and dependency. What is suggested by the research evidence is that women, having accepted the contemporary social expectations of gender equality—couched as they tend to be, largely in terms of the ideal worker/citizen—come to the transition to parenthood with assumptions about their own autonomy and about equitable gender sharing of family work. The lived reality of 'derivative dependency' and managing family workloads subsequent to the birth of the first child therefore brings the contradictions to the fore, even as it also offers the potentialities inherent with a new life and new adult identities. Women, and their partners, struggle to negotiate the resulting tensions within themselves, their relationships, and within society.

Both the conceptual literature and Australian evidence point therefore to the need for a new, more consistent and equitable policy framework to remedy existing disjunctures between policy and practice and to support the emotional and physical carework of families. We have argued here that a new 'public ethic of care'

is required, one that acknowledges that we are all interdependent and that, as caring for the vulnerable is essential to social life, it must be socially supported. Recent announcements on parental and carers' leave signal that the new Rudd government is moving towards a gender equity policy framework that takes account of physical difference and social caring responsibilities. It is too early to tell though, especially in view of the escalating financial crisis, if it can really move Australian family and 'work-family balance' policy towards what Fraser (1997) has termed the 'caregiver parity' rather than 'universal worker' model, let alone to a fully gender-equitable 'universal caregiver' policy framework, one which encourages everyone, including men to take their share of caring responsibilities. The ideological mechanism of the last decade, that of rational 'choice' as the basis of women's and men's decisions about juggling (hardly 'balancing') family and paid work, might not yet be out of favour in spite of its limitations.

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