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Women stretched to snapping point

Sydney Morning Herald Article

By Adele Horin

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THE Howard government's family policies left a legacy of stressed, overworked parents and set gender equity back a decade, a new study shows.

Despite their high academic achievements over the decade, women are now less likely than in 1997 to work full-time while their children are young. And when they do, they take on more of the housework and child care.

A study by Lyn Craig and Killian Mullan, of the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW, shows the ascendancy of the family model promoted by the former prime minister: a father in full-time work and a mother in part-time work, depicted in his speeches as "the policeman and the part-time sales assistant".

The 1.5-earner family became the predominant form between 1997 and 2006, from 35 per cent of all couples with children under five to 46 per cent. But life for parents grew harder and less equal. By 2006, all parents were more likely to report feeling stressed.

"There was reduced gender equity and strikingly increased reported time pressure," the study found. Based on 772 families in 1997 and 652 families in 2006, and using Australian Bureau of Statistics data, the research will be presented at the Australian Social Policy Conference next week.

It shows part-time working mothers put in as many hours overall as full-time working mothers - when paid work, housework and child care were tallied - and worked longer than their 1997 counterparts.

The Howard government promoted the 1.5-earner model with family tax policies that provided most benefits to single-earner families and to couples with an 80:20 income split.

During a decade of economic growth, more mothers of preschool-aged children moved into jobs, leading to a 7 per cent fall in the proportion of "traditional" families headed by a male breadwinner, and the proportion of mothers of preschoolers working full-time fell from 14 per cent to 11.8 per cent.

The full-timers put in fewer hours at their jobs but did much more child care and housework than those in 1997. As a result, their workload grew to surpass that of their husbands. The men's workload barely shifted, so the gender division of labour became less equal.



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"I thought there might have been a movement to full-time work because ... part-time work is associated with lower wages and poorer career prospects," Dr Craig said.

Unsurprisingly 93 per cent of full-time working mothers reported feeling highly stressed compared with 79 per cent in 1997. About 80 per cent of part-time working mothers were also highly stressed, up from 73 per cent. And the proportions of stressed fathers rose.

Dr Craig said paid parental leave would help solve the "stress problem".

Sian Ryan, a senior associate at a law firm and mother of two, increased her work from three to four days a week when her son turned one. Her husband works in the racing industry on race days only. "It's not a progressive model for dads to be working long full-time hours and mums to do part-time jobs and work hard at home," she said.

"It's about sharing responsibility for care of the children."

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