

# *Farewell the* CORPORATE MAN

*In the 60s and 70s, women's struggle was to get out of the home and into the workforce. The big issue of the 90s, according to Karen Throssell, will be rather different. The relationship between work and home life is the key to a new gender settlement.*

**W**hile it patently is not and has not been the reality for some years, Australian society is still structured around the presumed norm of the 'at-home wife'. Many tradespeople still only call between 8.30-5.00. Schools close at 3.30 and have more and more child-free days, while only a small number run 'after-care' programs as back-ups (as if it were only for a 'few' children).

Our work practices are still rooted in the work culture of the 50s: rigid adherence to a 38-hour week (and much more for the 'seriously career minded'); a concept of career paths

inconsistent with the life-cycle of a person with serious family responsibilities; notions of equity formed in a different era (ie, treating everyone as though they had a wife at home); performance evaluation systems that confuse effort with results by equating hours of work with productivity, and confusing presence at the office with work.

Despite this growing mismatch between the rules of the workplace and the needs of the workers, things are changing slowly. After all, employees still get to work and do their jobs. Somehow the plumber finds the key. We know the children, the adolescents and the elderly are somewhere. Women's entry into the workforce has been increasing for 20 years and the system still appears to function.<sup>1</sup>

However, a slight glimmer of light is appearing on the horizon with the relatively recent emergence of 'home/work balance' as a social and political issue. The issue has clearly surfaced in response to the increasing pressure this accelerating imbalance places on families and organisations. In one sense the arguments in the 'home/work balance' debate are similar to those involved in the debates around women's dual role and lack of access to the 'real world of work'—in other words, the imperative on women to come home to cook the evening meal rather than staying back for that evening meeting.

But the 1990s 'home/work balance' debate brings in some new emphases sometimes lost in the debates about women's 'dual role'. Among them is the central question: whose responsibility is it to ensure a better balance of tasks both within households and within society as a whole and who benefits from a better balance?

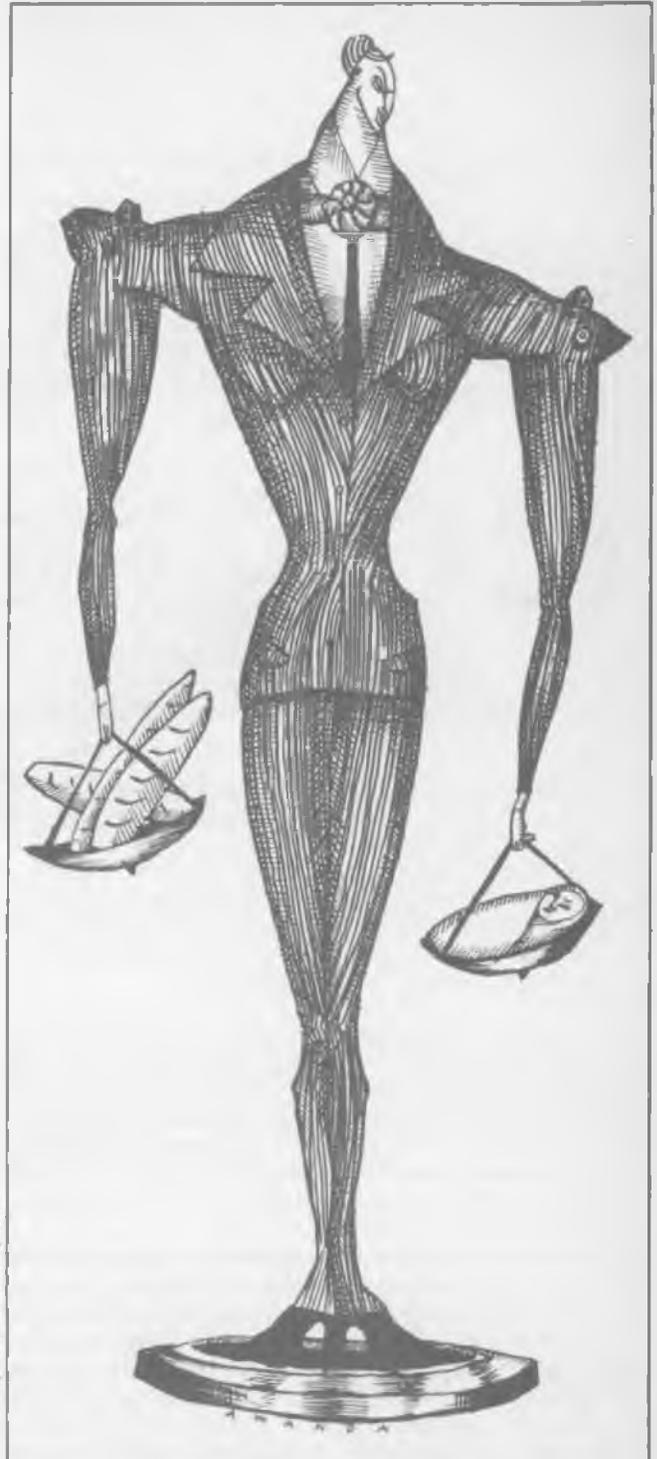
Thus, where the traditional emphasis in feminist debate has been on the personal—how you can get your partner to have responsibility for child-care/housework; how you adjust to the competing demands of home and work—there is now a greater emphasis on the employer's and ultimately society's, responsibility for ensuring a better balance between home-life and work-life.

Because this new thinking stresses access to home as well as work it also changes the emphasis on who will benefit from a new balance. Clearly, women still get the worst side of the bargain under the traditional balance of labour. However, there is now an acknowledgment that in our lop-sided system where men are expected to single-mindedly climb the ladder in order to 'succeed', they too have been missing out—missing out not just on the raising of their children, but also on other parts of their lives.

There is also an increasing emphasis on the benefits of a better balance for organisations and ultimately for society as a whole. Thus, just as organisations benefit from 'using the full quota of human potential' (ie, women as well as men) so will society benefit from children experiencing 'shared parenting'.

In fact, Dorothy Dinnerstein (in *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*) asserted 15 years ago that shared early parenthood was a necessary condition for the very survival of the species. She also claimed that equally shared responsibility for child-care and short and flexible enough working hours to make this possible "are so well within our technical means that the problem is to explain why they do not now exist".

So how can we explain "why they do not now exist"? Very simply. It is the nature of work that operates as the major obstacle. Earlier explanations emphasised the sex-role conditioning which accompanied the first industrial revolution—a conditioning which permeated every facet of life. In recent decades, though, attitudes have been changing towards sex roles. The declining numbers of 'housewives' and 'breadwinners' are testimony to this.



Graphic: Amanda Upton

Whereas in the 50s, it was generally believed that most married women would not choose to work outside the home, by the 70s it was inescapable that the majority of women, regardless of whether they were married, would not choose to remain at home, except when their children were very young.

This has been verified by a variety of surveys which have found that, contrary to attitudes in the 50s and 60s, there

has been a major increase in the proportion of women who considered a career as well as motherhood as important to their self-image. The fact that many employers still organise employment as though parenting is exclusively female and a career is fundamentally male means that the raised aspirations of many women are clearly on a collision path with their desire to be parents.

While women have come some distance towards a re-evaluation of their "pre-ordained" nurturing role, however, men are only just starting to look at the negative side of the breadwinner/corporate man role. The task of persuading men to relinquish what they perceive as the positive 'personality defining' sides of the equation of career-life is a much more difficult one.

This would be particularly so if, as the biological determinists assert, aggression, competitiveness and their ultimate goals, power and 'success', were innate masculine traits predetermined by an excess of testosterone. But as Dinnerstein points out "to overestimate the rigidity of [these traits] in our species' biology [is] to see it as less genuinely reversible than it actually is".<sup>3</sup> In fact, some would argue that there is a trend (albeit a very gentle one) towards a re-evaluation of masculinity. An American training and developmental journal from the late 80s put it like this:

In a sense [if] the 1960s and 1970s were about women [read re-evaluating roles]; the late 1980s are about men. Books about men are proliferating. At least 25 universities have begun offering courses in men's studies. Men are beginning to re-examine the male experience and the costs paid for the overuse of competition, the absence of close male friendships in adulthood and the Long Ranger Life.<sup>4</sup>

This gradual change has also been reflected in various surveys of priorities. For example, an Age poll in 1986 which ranked personal values revealed that 64% of men surveyed ranked family as most important compared to 4% who ranked work as most important. (Other factors measured were leisure 13%; friends 9%; religion 4% and possessions 1%.)

What is interesting (though perhaps not surprising) is the discrepancy between theory and practice. The vast majority of men act as though their priorities were the other way around—as though work-life, rather than family-life were their chief source of self-fulfilment. There is a similar clash between theory and practice evident in the conflict between men's stated increased 'commitment' to sharing housework and the amount they actually do. Some would claim that this discrepancy is because men do not really want to change. But for those who do (and for those who need some 'encouragement') the major obstacle is the inflexibility of men's paid work, and the continuing expectations of the role it should play in their lives.

To remove this obstacle there needs to be a fundamental revolution in the nature of work—in how it is defined, in what role it plays in men's and women's lives and in the nature of child-rearing and dependent care and who accepts the major responsibility for it in society.



**64% of men ranked the family as the most important priority**

First and foremost, it is necessary for employers to re-evaluate their expectations—expectations which demand that you don't just get work from your employees, you get blood defined as "full-time commitment" or "total loyalty". It has to be asserted forcefully that a life outside the office is important, and that a person who is a 'good parent' may also be a 'good worker'. Men also need to re-evaluate their priorities (or to put them into practice) vis à vis work and family.

It is essential that employers cater properly for their "workers with family responsibilities"—and "properly" could well mean tipping the current home/work balance in favour of home at the expense of work. In doing this employers must challenge not only issues as basic as the male 'hunter/warrior' role model but the entire protestant work ethic.

It may be objected that this is far too ambitious a goal—after all, does it not involve a questioning not only of most corporate culture but of the very definition of masculinity? Again, it may be argued that such a task is especially difficult during a period of political (and ostensibly social) conservatism.

Arguing that work/family integration may be an unattainable dream in the recession-bound 1990s, the pessimists marshal persuasive statistical, anecdotal and sociological data to support their position. It is important,

however, to distinguish between well-founded economic arguments and those based on an insidious return to biological determinism. These latter kinds of arguments, as presented in books like *Brainsex*, are currently undergoing a renaissance. What they involve is not only a dismissal of any change that has occurred already, but a denial on 'biological' grounds that any change is possible—replacing the feminist-inspired optimistic rhetoric on the need and possibility for change in men with a biologically-focused pessimism.

The economic arguments, however, are more difficult to dispute. These relate to the fact that poverty and the dramatically increasing incidence of one parent families make 'balancing' not a choice of the best options for fulfilment but instead a grim battle with reality. (In fact, it could be argued that the validity of these criticisms makes much of this article relevant only to two parent families.)

There are those in the trade union movement, indeed, who regard those two parent families who are able to make adjustments to the home/work balance (especially in favour of 'less work') as already so privileged that they do not merit their concern. This is a logical extension of the traditional trade union antipathy to part-time work: so the argument runs it is only the privileged (white collar) workers who can afford to freely choose to live on 'part' of their salaries. Yet, while there is, of course, some truth in the economic objection to the argument in these pages, what this ignores is the willingness of many workers (who could not all be classified as privileged) to exchange time for money.

Despite the current bleak economic climate there is a range of indications that 'home/work balance' is being considered by an increasingly wide range of organisations. This has been evident both at a legislative level (with EEO legislation and the ratification of International Labour Organisation Convention 156), and at a trade union level (with the parental level test case which cited ILO 156, and an increasing interest in work-based child care). At the corporate level there has been a gradual acknowledgment that women workers are a vital force whose special skills (and needs) must be accommodated.

This latter trend is quite striking and is worth looking at in some detail. There are two themes running through current management theory. Firstly, an acknowledgment that so-called 'female qualities' are not only valuable at a senior management level, but indispensable; and secondly, that employers (like unions) are going to have to take specific steps to attract and retain female employees—steps like establishing work-based child-care and making working hours more flexible.

It does seem to indicate a remarkable shift from the earlier view that women were not suited for the ranks of senior management (because they're not single-minded, tough, aggressive, ruthless—or even smart enough). Now there is some acknowledgment that you don't have to be tough, ruthless and so on to be a good manager—in fact that many organisations will be better off for an injection of the 'female management style'.

This increasing interest in the notion of a dichotomy of management styles (among the theorists at least) is illustrated by the variety of labels the two styles have been given: male/female, autocratic/democratic, macho/tough-love(!), control-driven/commitment-driven, left-brained/right-brained. The trend, however, is not to argue for one style over the other. Just as an individual needs to use both sides of the brain to function properly, so does an organisation need to integrate both the 'feminine' collaborative approach with some of the 'masculine' analytical, bureaucratic qualities. Thus we have the contemporary management-theory phenomenon of the 'androgynous manager'.

What has prompted this change? Objective factors, rather than a sudden burst of subjective enlightenment, are the major motivating forces. On one level this is represented by the shift from a predominantly industrial to a predominantly service economy. An economy where organisations create value from knowledge rather than muscle means that the autocratic management style of the 40s, 50s and 60s is less and less appropriate. Today's managers spend most of their time interacting with people rather than machines—thus a 'people-oriented' management style is now much more important to 'good management'.

This is epitomised by the change in terminology which took place over the 80s. Where the 'personnel' departments of the 50s confined themselves to hiring and firing, promoting and advancement, the 'human resources' departments of today look much more creatively at broader personal development needs through counselling, training, staff development and organisational development.

In fact, at a conference on work-based child-care in Melbourne last year the two main reasons given for the increased employer interest in this issue were: more enlightened human resource management and (as a result of this) the dramatically increased emphasis on training within organisations.

Of course, one of the major motivating influences on this has been the entry of women into the workforce. If women's entry into the workforce put family issues on the agenda, then the fact that they will comprise 80% of new entrants to the workforce in the next decade will ensure that they are high on the agenda.

Naturally, the bottom line of the motivation of employers in these debates is productivity. A recent article on work-based child-care put it this way:

Child-care—and many issues that have usually fallen into the same category—is increasingly being seen by forward-thinking Australian employers as a factor that impinges significantly on staff retention and recruitment, productivity, turnover and absenteeism, morale and corporate image. In other words—a dollar issue.

The assistant director of the Business Council of Australia, Michael Angwin, speaking at a conference on "labour

market flexibility for a changing workforce" cited the globalisation of the economy as one of the major factors forcing business to respond to the needs of the changing labour market. Thus, in a situation where economic success depends on the ability to compete in the global marketplace, it is now no longer enough to be competitive in finance and marketing alone. Organisations now have to be competitive in employee relations.

This is the theory. Is there any evidence that organisations are actually responding to these theoretical developments? There is some. According to the Institute of Family Studies, many employees are now considering measures aimed at assisting workers to balance the demands of family and work responsibilities. The range of measures in place or being considered include: the provision of child-care; flexible work hours and schedules; the provision of permanent part-time employment and job sharing; and special leave provisions (such as maternity, parental and special leave).

A recent national survey of 183 private sector employers found that 45% supported the provision of child care and are actively investigating options; nearly 75% of large companies offer permanent part-time work; 40% allow flexible working hours; and 19% have introduced job-sharing.<sup>6</sup>

There is significant evidence that there is a gradual change in employer behaviour. At the same time, there are real dangers in the use of rhetoric about family responsibilities to justify so-called reforms which are in reality crude cost-cutting measures. It is necessary to observe how the concept of flexible working hours is defined. It has already been used to justify the abolition of penalty rates (flexibility to meet employers' needs rather than the families'), increased casualisation and 'contracting out'—all in the name of allowing women more time with their families.

Changes to bring about a better home/work balance must also cut across class as well as gender barriers. In this regard it is the constant reference by managers to the need to attract and/or retain 'skilled' workers that causes particular concern. The fashionable theory that the workforce of the future will comprise two tiers—a 'core' of 'skilled' highly paid information workers and a 'periphery' of casual/contract/manual/support workers—compounds this concern.

Does this mean, for instance, that child-care places are offered only to our senior women because they represent a greater dollar investment; or that part-time work is offered only to junior staff (because you have to keep getting blood out of your senior workers)? Does it mean that 'workforce flexibility' may not only exclusively benefit senior middle-class women, but in fact penalise working-class women—eroding their working conditions and locking them further into their dual role?

And where do male workers/parents fit into the employers' home/work balance agenda? For both unions and corporations, it seems that the other side of the balance—the male/home side—is still downplayed if not ignored. Initiatives like the recent ACTU Paternity Leave



### 'Workforce flexibility' may exclusively benefit middle-class women

case have the potential to make major inroads into the association of women exclusively with nurturing, and men exclusively with the 'competitive' world of work. However, even here, more work needs to be done on an attitudinal front to ensure that the leave is actually taken up.

It is thus vital that the agenda for home/work balance is not written exclusively by employers. Trade unions, women's organisations and other pressure groups need to ensure that we contribute to this agenda so that when the workplace finally emerges from the 1950s into the 1990s, the changes that occur do ensure a real and lasting balance for women and men between living to work and working to live.

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1. Fran & Charles Rodgers Susaner, "Business and the Facts of Family Life" in *Harvard Business Review* Nov-Dec 1989, p.121.
2. Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Rocking of the Cradle and the Ruling of the World*, The Women's Press (London 1987), p.25.
3. Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion—Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (London 1990), p.3.
4. Alice C Sargent & R J Stupale, "Managing in the 90s—the An drogynous Manager", *Training and Development Journal*, Dec 1989 V43/12, p.30.
5. Paula Ruzek, Child Care:L "A point of Difference in the 1990s", *H.R. Monthly*, Sept 1990, p.8.
6. F Maas, Paper for "Workplace Australia—Designing the Future" Conference, World Congress Centre, Feb 1991.