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Work and Family Futures

How young Australians plan to work and care

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Summary

This discussion paper analyses the perceptions of some young Australians about their future paid and unpaid work and childcare plans and aspects of their own early childhood care. It assesses qualitative empirical data collected in two Australian states in late 2003 by means of 21 focus groups comprising Year 6 and Year 11 males and females (aged 10 to 18 years) from high and low socio-economic situations in both urban and rural locations. In total, 93 young people were consulted for the study.

All the young men and women in this study expect to have a paid job when they finish school and study. None of the young women anticipates being consistently dependent on the support of her partner. Many young men and women look forward to enjoying their jobs while putting their skills and abilities to work. The overwhelming majority – 90 per cent – intend to have children. It seems that the anticipation of childlessness amongst this group at least (about ten per cent) is much lower than that actually predicted for their cohort in the population (around 25 per cent), suggesting that the explanations for declining fertility may lie more in disappointed expectations than in early, planned childlessness.

Most young people in this study assume they will live in dual-earner couple households and share the care of their children with their partner. These objectives can be expected to drive a continued decline in the traditional male breadwinner household and continued growth in dual-earner households.

Although most young men and women plan shared parental care of their children, some young men take it for granted that their partners will assume this role. By comparison, a much smaller proportion of young women plan traditional maternal care while a larger proportion foresee a pattern of intermittent maternal care, shared with extended family, partners and formal childcare. The plans of these young people with respect to the division between work and childcare demonstrate some significant mismatches between the genders.

While young women anticipate working around their care responsibilities, the reverse is true of many young men who expect to engage in care around their work with plans for childcare being contingent upon job flexibilities. They will 'lean against the door' of workplace flexibility, but if it does not fall open they will leave the nurturing to their partners, the default carers.

Many young women hold high expectations that their own mothers will back them up in their labour market participation by taking care of their grandchildren. There are few signs of 'A New Australian Wife' who, having witnessed her mother's efforts to hold down a job while performing the bulk of the child raising, is intent upon finding a wealthy male breadwinner to earn while she devotes her time to the children. It is likely that the plans of young people with respect to extended family care and shared care with partners will be sorely tested by reality – both in terms of workplace flexibilities such as leave, and availability of grandparents. This will probably drive continuing growth in the demand for formal childcare.

Around a third of the children and young people in our study had experienced formal childcare. Two thirds of those who had been in long day care remembered it positively in contrast to the memories of those who attended out-of-school-hours care, which were less positive. Issues of quality are very significant for these young people whose experience of childcare, whether agreeable or disagreeable, is positively associated with their plans to use formal care for their own children.

Three models for the allocation of domestic work are evident from the ideas of these young people: shared, outsourced or performed exclusively by women. There is evidence of tactical planning on the part of both sexes as they attempt to manipulate the situations that they want. Male resistance to housework is strong. Young women, however, are keen to share and know they will have to 'start strong and stay strong' to persuade their partners to agree.

Over half of those in the focus groups would like to see domestic work generally shared, an impulse which is stronger amongst young women than it is amongst young men who, in surprisingly large proportions, expect that their partners will do it ('fingers crossed' as one put it). A small proportion of young women anticipate this and some hope young men will 'mature into' housework. Thus a significant mismatch of preferences is evident, with a gender struggle over housework likely to persist. A quarter of young women look to the market for help with domestic work, and this is likely to fuel continuing growth in the commodification of all forms of domestic work – pre-prepared food, childcare, cleaning, gardening and so on.

A significant group of young men in both higher and lower income groups intend to share housework, but there are signs of a planned evasiveness - a hope that they can find a wife who will do it, that women won't notice unequal sharing or that their monitoring will weaken with time. These trends suggest that inequality in housework is likely to be very long lived, that gender troubles around domestic work will persist and that, consequently, the market in domestic services can be expected to continue to expand strongly.

Working class and young country women are more likely to espouse equal sharing of housework, while women from higher socio-economic areas appear more resigned, or will do it themselves to ensure high domestic standards and feelings of virtuous accomplishment. Young working class women tend to employ a more assertive discourse of fairness. For these young women, the institutions that shape their labour market and care transitions remain critical. A supportive regime of parental leave, integrated quality part-time work and quality accessible childcare is of primary significance. Without supports that facilitate their work/care transitions, young women's responsibility for children will jeopardise their labour market position, and they will be forced to make care 'choices' from limited options.