The issue of work and family is currently a very popular issue in Australia; there is a lot of debate about the way our society enables people to balance a family as well as a career. My thesis aims to address how mothers’ employment and their decisions regarding work are affected by childcare. Research is being conducted to investigate the impact of childcare, and related taxation and welfare issues, upon the lives of a small group of Australian mothers. The qualitative data obtained in this research is intended to provide insight and context to the childcare and work debate in Australia. Existing literature is being compared with the qualitative findings from my research to bring further depth and detail to the experiences of Australian mothers. In-depth interviews are being conducted to generate this information, allowing each participant’s unique situation to be compared to the existing information.
INTRODUCTION

My honours thesis in human resource management is to investigate the following topic “Childcare: the real issue behind women’s employment?”. This topic is something that I’ve been thinking about for around two years, although it has changed quite a bit in that time. I chose this topic for my thesis because throughout my degree I’ve always been very interested in women’s role in the labour force, and I think it was important to spend this year putting this interest to good use.

In the last twelve months the topics of paid maternity leave, baby bonuses and discrimination have been all over the news and papers, which I have been noticing with interest since I’ve been planning this question for a while. I think the issue of childcare is really important at the moment; it plays a major role in the ability of women to balance work and a family, particularly when most mothers do both, not one or the other. This research question aims to investigate further the extent to which childcare impacts the decisions women make about employment. A wide range of existing information has been accessed, from feminist and social policy theory, as well as surveys and reports from various sources, such as ABS.

AIMS OF RESEARCH

The objective of this research is to investigate the barriers that childcare poses to women’s employment, and how it impacts upon their decisions regarding paid employment. Other related factors, such as welfare benefits and taxation issues (like HECS debt) are being pursued in regards to the impact they have upon childcare options and women’s employment. The qualitative responses collected will be compared to existing data, in order to bring further depth and detail to this information. This will assist in determining the overall significance of the research undertaken. The validity of the research will also be enhanced by this comparison of findings. It is hoped that this will generate some new areas of interest, and in some way, help understand the conflicts that exist for working mothers.

I chose to do qualitative research for this topic instead of quantitative, for this topic I felt that interviews would give further insight and background to this information. By thoroughly investigating and understanding the unique situation of each respondent, I felt that my thesis could bring an original approach or angle to this topic. To ensure that women from a range of backgrounds have been included, participants were selected according to these criteria:

- Employed and unemployed mothers
- Single and married/de facto mothers
- Full-time and part-time employees
- Permanent and casual employees
- Blue-collar and white-collar employees
- Urban and regional mothers
- Mothers with varying ages and numbers of children
- Range of mothers utilising all categories of childcare: at home by parent, community-based child care centre, private child care centre, family day care, nanny/private arrangement, unpaid care provided by family or friends, childcare facilities at work, pre-school, long day care and occasional care.
- Women without children, currently working.
To provide insight into the current experience of Australian mothers, two employed women, who do not have children, will be interviewed. This has been done to provide further comparison and understanding of the experience of Australian working mothers.

BACKGROUND TO ISSUE

MOTHERS AND PAID EMPLOYMENT

From 1978 to 1999, the percentage of women in paid employment increased from 50 per cent to 64 per cent (Cass, 2002:144). Of all Australian mothers, approximately 70 per cent work, particularly those in the lower income range (Goward, 2003:19). Of these increases, the percentage of employed women in part-time jobs rose from 35 per cent to 44 per cent, while there was only an increase from 30 per cent to 33 per cent of those employed women engaged in full-time paid work (Cass, 2002:144). Recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has indicated that many women return to work relatively quickly after having children, “…more than one-third of mothers with babies under one year old have a paid job… By the time the youngest child in a couple-family has turned two, 52 per cent of the mothers are in work, usually part-time” (Horin, 2003:27).

This trend has not occurred without creating doubt among working mothers, due to the conflicts with outdated social norms

“…the work/family collision has also whipped up an ‘epidemic’ of mother guilt: ‘ If you are at home with your kids, you should be out working. If you are out working you should be at home…’” (Horin, 2003:27).

According to Wooden (2002:176), the popular option for couples is to have one partner working full-time and the other working part-time, usually the mother holding the part-time job. This possibly due to two reasons, firstly: this type of balance of employment in the family is most familiar with people, secondly: or that women prefer this model because of the differing options open to them (Wooden, 2002:176). Desai and Waite (1991) have highlighted an important issue for research and discussion, namely, that for those women less “committed” to paid employment, the ease with which childcare can be arranged was more likely to affect their employment (in Evans and Kelley, 2002:188-189).

Studies on unemployment figures and hidden unemployment have highlighted the fact that mothers are one of those groups which experiences an above average rate of hidden unemployment, partly due to the fact that there is a lack of affordable quality childcare, as well as employment opportunities (ACOSS, 2003: 10-15). A study in 1999 estimated that 183 000 mothers could not or did not pursue paid employment, although they wanted to be employed, because they had caring responsibilities (ACOSS, 2003: 41-43). ABS data shows that more than half of the 183 000 women (55 per cent) preferred to care for their children themselves, but another 83 000 mothers still wished to have paid employment, however they could not access childcare (ACOSS, 2003:41-43).

CHILDCARE

The number of families utilising some form of childcare in Australia is approximately 60 per cent of households, for employed sole parents 81 per cent, for dual earner couples 69 per cent (Doiron and Kalb, 2002:206). The availability of childcare is often regarded as being determined by the
Brennan argues that the cost of non-parental childcare, which can be quite high, is a “strong disincentive” to women entering paid employment, as once childcare costs are paid for, there is a significant amount taken out of mothers’ earnings (1994, in Schofield et al, 1998:47). There is often very little financial incentive for mothers to work at all, or to increase the hours worked, especially for low-income families (Toohey and Beer, 2003:20). Some of the difficulties associated with childcare are detailed in the 2001 HILDA survey (in Pocock, 2003:191), “…over 70 per cent of those households with children under five years that used or thought about using child care in the previous 12 months [reported] having some or significant difficulties with the cost of child care and a similar proportion having some or significant difficulties with getting care for the hours needed”.

The recent trends in employment have created many tensions with balancing family life and work, including childcare, where strict pickup times conflict with inflexible workplaces (Horin, 2003:27). Pocock supports this view “The poor fit of such care to the hours of work, school and pre-school often means complex juggling – and many hours and kilometres of travel each week” (2003:191). The limited access to childcare is highlighted by Morehead (2002:169), who shows how there are few flexible and family-friendly workplaces, with one per cent of certified agreements in 1998 and 1999 including childcare, two per cent featured home-based work, and three per cent allowed for family responsibilities. Watson, Buchanan, Campbell and Briggs (2002: 150) describe the combination of government policies and uncompromising employers, “Working parents have been left to fend for themselves in trying to access quality, affordable childcare”.

ROLE OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR AND GOVERNMENT POLICY

The level of funding for childcare has fallen $850 million from 1996 to 2000, and has greatly affected the provision of childcare, providers had to either close down or raise fees dramatically (Summers, 2003:126). The lack of government assistance available to mothers is highlighted by Goward (2003:19), who argues “With the exception of child care, which makes up a mere 12 per cent of federal government spending on families, there is no assistance for those adaptive women who want work and family and in particular those who want to stay at home with their own babies”.

The provision of the childcare rebate, originally introduced in 1994, was not means-tested, as it was felt that childcare was a “…legitimate expense for parents earning an income” (Minister for Family Services, in O’Connor, Orloff and Shaver, 1999:82). However, the Howard Governments’ reforms of these childcare benefits has changed this to a income tested benefit, which would impact upon those lower and middle income earners who find childcare too expensive, or increasing the hours they work will not be financially viable (O’Connor, et al, 1999: 82-83).

In 2004 the government has introduced the $3000 baby bonus, to be given to all newborns born from 1 July onwards, however, according to Horin, this payment is not enough to make amends for the financial difficulties and disincentives created for mothers by the government (2004:41). Some authors have argued that this type of payment is more positive than paid maternity leave, as full-time mothers are not disadvantaged, and those who wish to put their children in childcare for employment reasons, can do so (Evans et al, 2002:193). Unfortunately, I’m not interviewing anyone who has received this payment, unless I can get a new participant.
Insufficient funding for childcare has left a gap between the number of places needed, and the places available, estimates range from over 30 000 extra places being required, to 174 500 children not receiving some kind of childcare (Summers, 2003:147-148). This shortage only further embeds the governments policies that effectively discourage women to enter paid employment.

DIFFERENCES IN EXPERIENCES AND DECISIONS OF PARENTS

The decisions regarding childcare and paid-employment have generally been found to differ among parents in varying family units and family relationships. This is highlighted by the greater occurrence of relatives caring for children, than formal childcare, among employed couples, with relatives living nearby whom they got along with (Leibowitz, Waite and Witsberger, 1988: and Liang, Fuller and Singer, 2000, in Evans et al, 2002:188).

The various decisions made by families in regards to paid employment and childcare must be recognised as being dependent upon the way that domestic labour is divided in the home, childcare, as well as other factors, “…public institutions of education, training and employment, workplace, tax/transfer and community services policies…shape and constrain women’s and men’s opportunities and choices (Baxter in Cass, 2002:143). In conclusion, there are many factors that contribute to determining the decisions that mothers make regarding work.

The existing literature that I have described is only a small description of the information out there; this is just an introduction to my final summary of the current situation. My research is aiming to analyse and bring existing information together, on how women manage employment and childcare decisions, and to further understand why the participants make their decisions, and what choices are available to them.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Participants

The main focus of the research is the experiences of Australian mothers; therefore participants were approached and asked about their willingness to be interviewed according to the criteria described earlier. Mothers with dependent children (aged 12 or under) were interviewed, this barrier was chosen as this is approximately the age of children as they enter high school, also an age where many are considered responsible to look after themselves and siblings.

The women interviewed were approached using networking and ‘snowballing’ techniques. I knew many participants already and approached them through contacts, and some recommended other acquaintances. Participants have been happy to be interviewed on this topic, and in general have expressed interest in the end results. The interviews already conducted were with participants from a town in NSW, and those yet to take place are with respondents from Sydney, Canberra and other regional centres in NSW.

Data collection

The interviews were conducted as semi-structured interviews, following a questionnaire guide. This was to allow the participants sufficient opportunity to express their opinions and experiences relating to the topics provided, and to allow them to expand on previous answers. This data
collection technique has been chosen to provide depth to the current information on the issue of childcare and women’s employment.

Data analysis

Data collected will be compared to academic literature collected and analysed, as well as reports from government agencies as well as other organisations. This comparison of data will give greater reliability to the results and conclusions, particularly if statistics confirm results, and therefore make the findings more significant and applicable to mothers across Australia. Some benefits of qualitative research is that the comments from the respondents can be used to highlight specific points in utilised quantitative data, as well as possibly generate new areas for research.

INDICATIONS SO FAR…

Overall, the interviews I’ve conducted so far have shown that the topic is complicated, every person has a different situation, and preferences for certain types of work and childcare. This is a summary of some of my conclusions so far:

- Women frequently depend upon extended family for emergency as well as regular childcare.

  Respondent A: “I need family around for our situation…I would find it extremely difficult without…”

  Respondent D: “I always rely on my mum, especially in winter when my daughter’s sick”

  Respondent F: “I’m pretty lucky, I always have mum and my mother-in-law…they get lots of love and attention there…if they weren’t there I would have been in big trouble…I may not have gone back to work, would have been too expensive, not worth doing…”

- All respondents so far have said that they have the sole responsibility for organising childcare.

- Some women strongly prefer certain types of childcare arrangements to others.

  Respondent B: “I’m involved in the running of the community-based centre…one issue of concern is the rise of the private corporatised centres…profit is being made…quality has to suffer…”

  Respondent D: “I’m not very satisfied at the moment…my daughter is unsettled, unhappy, screaming at the centre…I’m hoping its very likely that I can get a place at the other centre…”

- Flexibility at work for either the respondents or their partners was very important in coping with work and caring for children.

  Respondent A: “work is terrific, I had 19 sick days, 18 for kids, one for me…lots of half days…”
Respondent B: “...my boss was very good and flexible, but he had to be...it impacted greatly on him...”

Respondent C: “I had a work environment that supported family in theory... what happened didn’t in practice...organisations don’t think about parents that work, even schools, they exclude you from opportunities at the school...”

Respondent E: “…work doesn’t really care if you have to pay extra childcare for being late...picking up on time has been hard lately...”

Respondent F: “His (partners) job is really flexible, if need be he can come home... if something comes up I can try to swap a shift, but I can’t just not turn up...its stressful and inconvenient...”

• Some childcare positions take months to become available; often other arrangements are made until the most desired situation becomes available.

Respondent B: “...I went back to work when she was 4 months old, put her name down when she was born...it took ten months...picked up a spot in family day care until then...”

Respondent C: “I had her name down at long day care in October 2002, I never heard back...she went to school this year...I have to have separate carers...still use two carers each week...I wish the children could be together...it’s a headache...it’s a lot of trouble coordinating the care...”

Respondent F: “It was stressful, going from week to week, not knowing who’d have them which day...compared to now, always my husband...”

• Some have differing opinions about the cost of childcare, after rebates, and the cost is easier to bear for some.

Respondent C: “There are two new centres...more choice available...not necessarily accessible, family day care is less expensive...it’s hard to fork out when you work all week...some parents access and don’t pay...”

Respondent D: “The single mother subsidies are good...I cope pretty well...if they didn’t have the subsidy it would be very hard to cope...I would feel better if she was happy there...”

Respondent E: “It stinks, its not fair, every time you get ahead, you go up a pay bracket, you pay more in childcare...some mothers pay $2 a day, and they don’t work...”

Respondent F: “I think I am satisfied with the value, they give my son good care... he gets a lot out of it...”

• Mothers have gone back to work at various stages after having children, and to varying conditions, such as part-time or casual, depending on what best suits their family and what was available to them.

Respondent C: “ I wouldn’t be able to get this role in a part-time capacity...I love the work, it’s a family friendly organisation...goof for where the kids are at the moment...”
Respondent F: “...I do weekend work and night work...at the time it really suited circumstances...now with three at school, I’d rather not do night and weekends, I’d rather permanent part-time during school hours...”

EXPECTATIONS FOR THE NEXT STAGES...

Since I’ve only done about half the interviews at the moment, I can’t be totally sure what my interviews will say at the end, it’s hard to tell from such a small group. I think that there may be differences in the situations between regional and urban mothers, but I can’t really tell until then. Once I’ve done more interviews it will be easier to look for similarities and differences in responses. One of the major ‘themes’ I’ve noticed so far, is that all the mothers recognise that they have a difficult job combining work and family, but they are all “lucky”, as bad as things are they always work out. This is one example of how qualitative data brings extra depth to research such as this.

In conclusion, this research will look carefully into existing literature and the data collected through interviews to improve the depth of understanding of the situation for mothers in Australia, and hopefully contribute to ensuring the participation of mothers and women in paid employment, as well as accessible quality care for children.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


