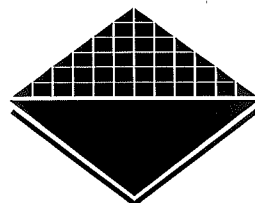


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Number 13

WORK AND FAMILY:  
THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE

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AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF  
HEALTH & WELFARE

July 1996

COPY No. 394682  
MASTER No. 998179



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### **Suggested Citation**

Meyer P, Moyle H and Golley L. 1996. Work and Family: the Australian Experience. Canberra. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (Welfare Division Working Paper No.13)

This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 1996 Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, New Orleans, USA, 9-11 May. The views expressed are not necessarily those of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

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Published by: The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare

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# Work and family: the Australian experience

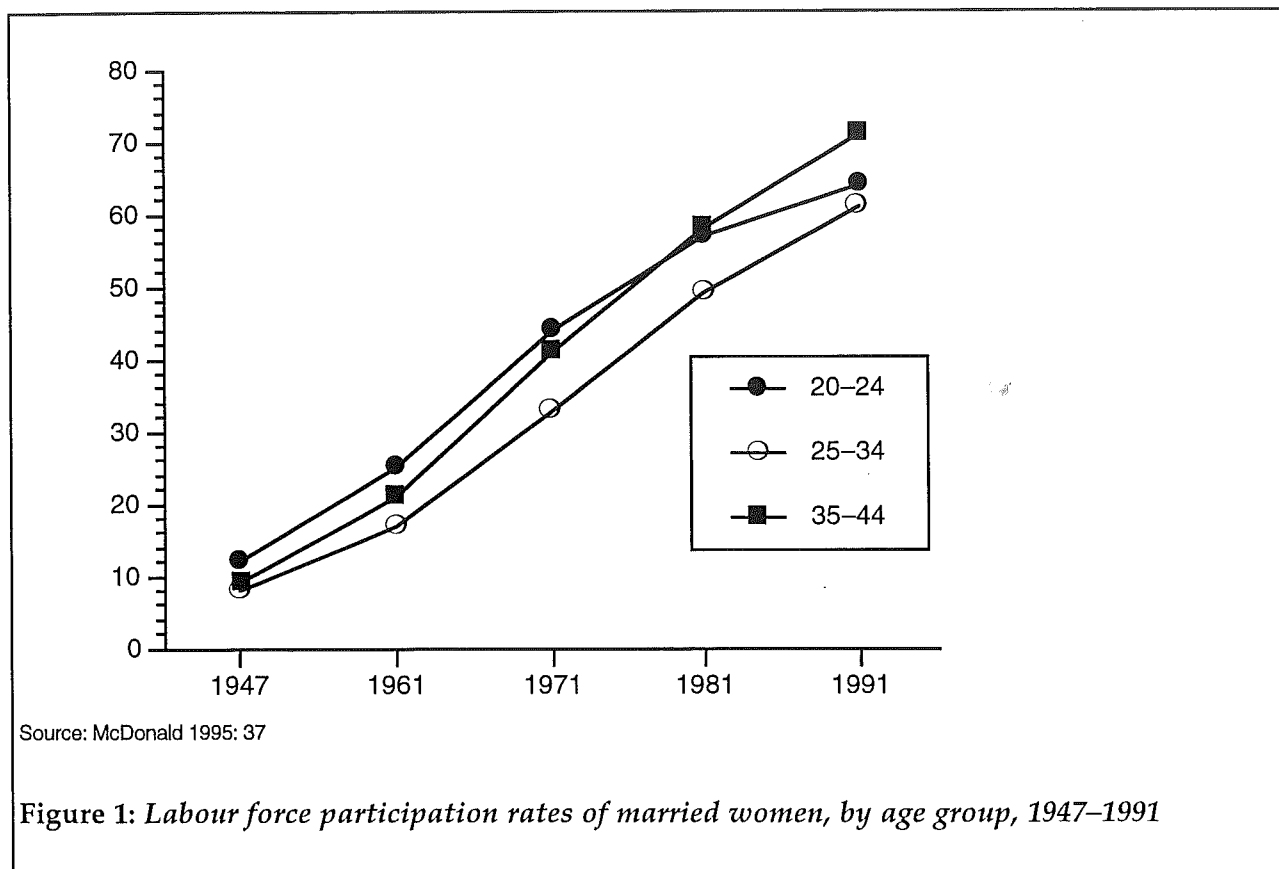
## 1 Introduction

Australia has experienced many of the social and economic changes that have affected industrialised countries since the end of World War II. One of the major changes occurring in post-war Australian society, as in other industrial countries, has been the increasing participation of women in the labour force. This change has been supported in part by the desires of women for careers, for independent incomes, and for personal resources for retirement, and also by the increasing need in couple families for two incomes in order to achieve and maintain home ownership. At the same time, most Australian women still wish to have a family and raise children. Government policies have sought to assist women in achieving these goals by expanding the opportunities for them in the labour market, providing education and training, creating family-friendly employment conditions, and meeting the need for child care. This major social change is documented in this paper by drawing on a variety of sources to examine trends in education and labour force participation, changes in marriage patterns and family relations, levels of fertility, legislation on provision of maternity and other forms of leave, and policies on provision and subsidisation of child care.

This paper is the product of studies by the Child and Family Services Unit in the Welfare Division of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. One of the tasks of this Unit is to monitor the provision of services for families and children in Australia, and an understanding of the general social context in which these services are provided is a necessary part of this work. The first part of the paper examines changes in the labour force and the family over the past 50 years. The second part of the paper is a review of government policies and programs affecting work and family relationships over this period. The provision of child care is then analysed in some detail as a case study of one policy approach taken which attempts to assist Australians to balance their work and family commitments.

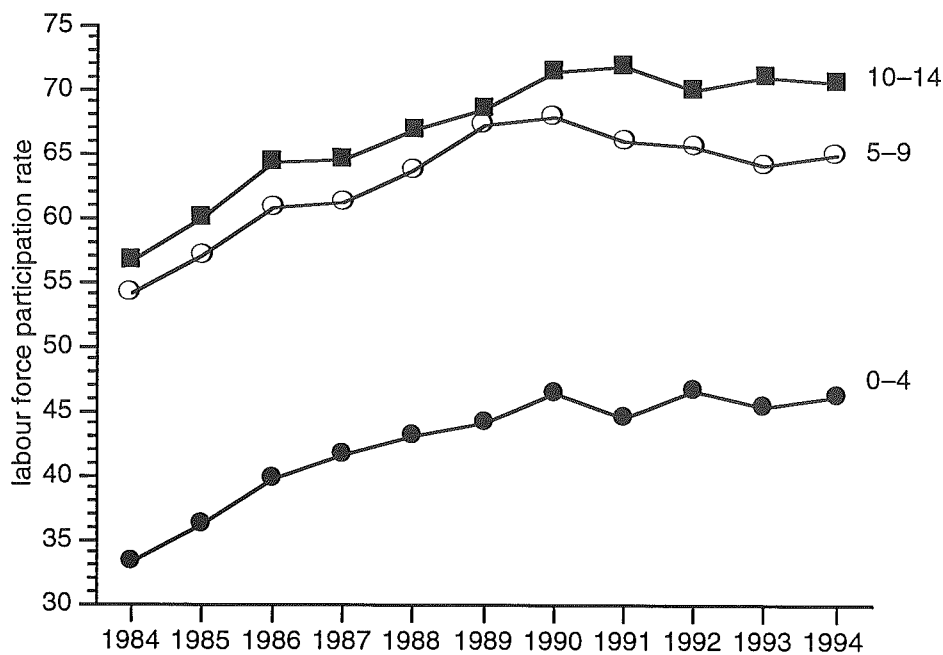
## 2 Labour force participation of women

The proportion of women participating in the labour force in Australia has increased steadily since the middle of this century. In the immediate post-war years, participation rates for women were quite low (about 10%) but, by 1994 the overall workforce participation rate for women aged 15–64 years had risen to 53%, and women constituted 43% of the labour force (McDonald 1995: 37; Wolcott and Glezer 1995: 7). For married women in the main child-bearing and child-rearing age groups (20–44 years), participation had risen to over 60% (Figure 1). This trend is in contrast to the participation rates for men, which have declined steadily, to 73% in 1994. On an international comparison, participation rates for women in Australia are slightly higher than those in Germany, and slightly below those in the USA and UK (DEET 1994: 24–25).



Participation in the labour force by women is strongly influenced by the presence of dependent children and the ages of those children. Labour force participation rates for mothers increase as the age of the youngest child increases, and also are higher for mothers in couple families than for single mothers. In the past decade, labour force participation rates increased for all mothers regardless of age of youngest child,

and the pattern of greater participation with increasing age of the youngest child was maintained (Figure 2). Thus from 1984 to 1994, labour force participation rose from 33% to 46% for mothers whose youngest child was aged 0–4 years, from 54% to 65% where the youngest child was 5–9 years and from 57% to 71% where the youngest child was 10–14 years.



Source: ABS Catalogue No. 6224.0.

Figure 2: Female labour force participation rates for women with youngest dependent aged 0–4, 5–9 and 10–14 years, 1984–1994

Marital status also affects participation: in 1994, of mothers with a child 0–4 years, 48% of those in couple families were in the labour force compared to 31% of sole mothers. However, of those in this group who were employed, 39% of the sole mothers were working full-time compared with 34% of couple mothers (ABS 1994a: 15, 26).

Among those women with children below school age (0–6 years), labour force participation increases as the age of the youngest child increases (Figure 3). According to the 1991 population census, 38% of mothers with a child under 1 year were in the labour force. About 5% of mothers with a child under 1 year (or 15% of the employed women in this category) reported that they did not work during the week prior to the census; many of these were probably on some form of maternity leave. For those whose youngest child was aged 1 year, the proportion in the labour force rose to 49%, rising to 55% for those whose youngest child was aged 4, and to 62% for those whose youngest child was aged 5 years, that is, the age when most children begin school. The proportion of these mothers who reported that they were

unemployed was around 6% and varied little according to the age of the youngest child. Part-time work appears to be an important aspect of labour force participation for all these mothers, with just over one-half of those who were employed reporting that they worked less than 25 hours per week.



A number of factors have been identified as being associated with this major social change (Jordan 1995: 82–84; McDonald 1995: 36–37). Among these have been the increased demand for female workers, which in turn is associated with (a) structural changes in the economy (the shift from agriculture, mining and manufacturing to services), and (b) the improved education of women relative to men, with women now more likely than men to complete secondary education and to attend university (DEET 1995: 69). Another economic factor is the increased importance of women's income to families. Most families in Australia aspire to home ownership, and this has become increasingly difficult for families with only one salary earner. The increasing levels of education among women, together with efforts towards equal employment conditions and other rights, have enabled women to have greater autonomy in the form of career goals, economic independence, and access to their own resources for retirement.

### 3 Changes in family structure and fertility

Other important social changes have occurred in post-war Australia which have been related directly to the family. The proportion of women never marrying has increased from a low of about 5% for cohorts born during the war to about 15% for cohorts born during the 1960s, and current trends indicate that about 20% of women will remain unmarried during their peak child bearing years (ages 20–34). The level of divorce increased markedly after 1975, when family law changes were enacted, and since the 1980s divorce levels have been relatively steady, with about 35–40% of marriages ending in divorce. This has resulted in the proportion of families with dependent children being headed by a single parent, rising from 9% in 1965 to 17% in 1991. Some of the decline in marriage is compensated for by increasing levels of de facto relationships (8% of couples in 1991), but these types of families are less likely to have dependent children in residence (McDonald 1995: 21–22, 32, 53–54).

These declines in marriage rates and increases in divorce rates have resulted in higher proportions of the adult population living in single person households or heading single parent households. For example, the proportion of women aged 20–44 not currently married (marriage here defined as formal marriage and excluding de facto relationships) has increased from about 20% in 1976 to nearly 40% in 1994 (ABS Catalogue No. 3220.0). Part of this increase in 'singlehood' is due to the inclusion of women in de facto relationships in the 'single' category, but the trend is still clear and indicative of the increasing need for women to have the self-reliance associated with paid employment. Even within couple relationships, married or de facto, it is likely that female partners are seeking greater economic independence, due in part to their perceptions that they face a significant chance of becoming single again.

Another demographic change which may be affecting the labour force participation of women is the decline in fertility. In Australia the total fertility rate fell from the post-war baby boom peak of 3.5 children per woman in 1961 to below replacement, around 1.8 children, by the mid-1970s, and has remained fairly constant since then. The proportion of women remaining childless has followed the trend in the proportion never marrying, from a low of around 8% for cohorts born just before the war to nearly 20% for recent cohorts. All other things being equal, having fewer young dependents (or none at all) would allow women greater scope for employment outside the home.

Attitude surveys among young people, however, indicate that these trends in fertility are likely to level off, and that fertility will remain at or near the replacement level in the foreseeable future, with around 80% of women having children (McDonald 1995: 42–49). Most women therefore will still be in situations of trying to combine parental responsibilities with their commitments to employment.



## 4 Government policies

### Social justice and the 'social wage'

There has been a general acceptance in Australia, albeit not universal, of the rights of women in areas such as access to education and employment. Even more widely accepted have been measures to support families, either couple or single parent, in their efforts to provide for their children. During the 1980s and 1990s, the Commonwealth Government has attempted to provide a 'program of social justice in a climate of fiscal restraint' (AIHW 1993: 8). Elements of this program encompassed employment, taxation, income security, and services relating to health and welfare. The broader goals were: equity in the distribution of resources; equality of civil, legal and industrial rights; fair and equal access to essential services such as housing, health and education; and the opportunity for all to participate in personal development, community life and decision making.

The means to achieve these goals within the context of fiscal restraint were a series of 'Accords' with the union movement which saw restraint in the growth of wages being compensated by improvements in the 'social wage', defined as 'the provision of social infrastructure and access to the services provided by it' (Gifford 1992: 16). Components of the social wage included increased access to education, greater health and social security benefits, and improved amenities in housing and community services (AIHW 1993: 9). The social justice strategy included opening up employment opportunities for women and improving employment conditions for parents in general, while the social wage included the provision of affordable, high quality child care services.

### Access to employment

The position of women in the labour force has been enhanced by a number of important events. The availability of oral contraceptives, beginning in 1961, has enabled women to more effectively control their fertility in accordance with their family and labour force objectives. The Women's Bureau was established in the Commonwealth Department of Labour and National Service in 1964, recognising the important role of women in the labour force. Legislation was passed in 1966 to allow married women permanent employment in the Commonwealth public service. This was followed in 1972 by the introduction in the public service of equal pay for men and women and the provision of maternity leave. These entitlements were partially extended to women in the private sector through court rulings regarding equal pay in 1974 and the provision for unpaid maternity leave in 1979 (McDonald 1990; Brennan 1994: 61-62, 77).

Following from these changes, a number of legislative acts and programs have supported affirmative action plans to improve the position of women in the public service and in the labour force in general. A specific example is a program known by its acronym, JET (Jobs, Education and Training), which was introduced in 1989 to address the labour market disadvantages faced by sole parents, 84% of whom are women (ABS 1994a: 26). The JET program aims to improve the financial

circumstances of sole parents receiving government financial assistance by aiding their entry or re-entry to the paid labour force. It does this by providing advice and counselling on available education and training courses appropriate for the objectives of the clients, assistance with applications to these courses and subsequent employment openings, and support for child care while the clients are undertaking training and job search activities (Zanetti 1994: 98).

Another factor enabling greater participation of women in the labour force has been the increase in part-time employment, most of which has been taken up by women. The proportion of the employed labour force aged 25–54 working part-time increased from 9% in 1966 to 23% in 1992, but for women the increase was from 30% to 43% (McDonald 1995: 38). There are two competing views of this growth in part-time employment. On the one hand, it can be seen as disadvantageous to workers, as they often receive fewer benefits in such circumstances. A more likely interpretation, backed up by labour force surveys which ask what arrangements workers wish to have, is that many workers favour part-time employment as it allows them greater flexibility in meeting other requirements, including family commitments (DEET 1995: 30). As noted above, part-time employment is quite common among women with young children, but is less common for single mothers as opposed to mothers in couple families.

### **Family-friendly employment practices**

The promotion of practices which enhance the rights of women to equal opportunities in the labour market, and of parents in general to attend to the needs of their families, has been undertaken by Australian governments, particularly in the past 25 years. A major milestone in this process was the ratification of the International Labour Office (ILO) Convention 156, *Equal Opportunities for Men and Women Workers: Workers with Family Responsibilities*, in 1990. This convention commits ratifying countries to work towards promoting the sharing of domestic responsibilities between men and women, providing parental leave, prohibiting discrimination against workers on the basis of family responsibilities, and providing community services such as child care (Brennan 1994: 173). Australia had already developed some work practices of this nature prior to 1990, and others have been introduced since then.

As mentioned above, leave for parents to care for their children began in 1972 with the provision of maternity leave for women in the public service, a provision extended to women in many private sector jobs from 1979 onwards. The basic provision is for one year of unpaid leave, with 94% of women now eligible for this. Women in the Commonwealth public service and in some private companies are eligible for paid leave for 12 of these weeks. In 1990, a decision by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) widened the concept of such leave to include fathers. Parental leave, which is gradually becoming available to a greater proportion of workers, now consists of one year of unpaid leave to be shared between the parents after the birth of a child, and parents are also permitted to work part-time up to the child's second birthday. Leave to care for sick family members is also becoming widely available. Decisions by the AIRC in 1994 allowed workers to

use their own sick leave to care for family members, and to combine various forms of leave for this purpose (Wolcott and Glezer 1995: 145-147).

A number of legislative acts have also served to enhance the lives of workers in general, and women in particular. The *Sex Discrimination Act, 1984*, prohibits discrimination in employment and education on the grounds of sex, marital status or pregnancy, and was extended in 1992 to prohibit dismissal of employees on the grounds of family responsibilities. The *Affirmative Action, Equal Employment Opportunity for Women Act, 1986*, requires all private sector employers with 100 or more employees to develop and implement an affirmative action program to identify and eliminate barriers to the equal participation of women in the work force. Implicit in this legislation is the need for employers to eliminate practices which discriminate against workers, women and men, with family responsibilities. The *Industrial Relations Reform Act, 1993*, prescribes parental leave as a basic minimum entitlement of employment, and requires the AIRC to consider the ILO Convention 156 in its decision making (Wolcott and Glezer 1995: 144-146).

These provisions do not cover the whole of the work force in Australia, in particular those who are working either part time or on a 'casual' basis. Using data collected in 1991-1992 in a survey of workers in the larger urban areas of the country, a study by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, found that over 80% of full-time workers said they had access to paid sick leave, which now can be used to care for family members, and that about 75% of full-time female workers and nearly 50% of full-time male workers said that they could take parental leave. Less than 40% of part-time female workers said that they had such benefits. The survey also asked workers if their employers allowed work practices which reduced the stresses parents at work sometimes encounter. About 60% of workers reported that their work hours were flexible, 90% said they could receive personal phone calls at work, 80% could receive a personal visit while at work, and 80% could take leave for an hour if needed. Part-time workers reported nearly the same availability of these workplace practices as did full-time workers (Wolcott and Glezer 1995: 34-38).

## 5 Child care provision

A major policy response in Australia to the increasing labour force participation of women, and to the desires of non-working women to be in paid employment, has been the provision of affordable and high-quality child care services. This response will be examined here in some detail, as a specific example of the development of a policy aimed at improving access to employment for parents in general and for women in particular, wishing to combine work and family commitments.

Large-scale provision of child care did not begin in Australia until the 1970s. The 'traditional' view held that all women should be married and be 'home-makers' while their husbands worked and were the 'breadwinners', and thus child care was seen as a welfare service for poor working women, the 'needy' (Brennan 1994: 21–27). The wartime experience of women working in the place of men who were in the armed forces, and the provision of child care for such women during that time, quickly returned to the traditional model as the troops were demobilised. A small number of day nurseries and commercial long day care centres for children were available in urban areas in the 1950s and 1960s, but these were viewed as exceptions rather than as desirable (Brennan 1994: 44, 48–51).

Significant involvement of the Commonwealth Government in child care began in the early 1970s, with increasing pressures from women wishing to be in the paid work force and from employers wanting to hire more women. In 1972 the *Child Care Act* was passed, enabling the Commonwealth Government to provide funding to community-managed, non-profit organisations to set up and run long day care centres (Brennan 1994: 53, 67, 90). Family day care schemes (which provide care for children in the homes of carers), and care services for school-aged children (which mainly are after school and in premises attached to schools) also began to expand. The Commonwealth Government responded to this expansion in 1976 by creating the Office of Child Care in the Department of Social Security. By 1982 the Commonwealth Government was spending around \$50 million per year (in 1989–90 constant prices) on child care, subsidising the provision of 41,600 places—18,600 in centres for long day care, 15,100 in family day care, and 7,900 in school-aged care (Brennan 1994: 99, 203).

The inclusion of child care into the 'social wage', as mentioned above, began with the series of 'Accords' negotiated by the Commonwealth Government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions in 1983. Instead of child care policy being seen as peripheral to other economic, social security and labour market policies, it became an integral aspect of such policies. The Office of Child Care was relocated to the Department of Community Services, providing a clear indication that child care was no longer regarded as a welfare service for the needy but as a mainstream community service (Brennan 1994: 166, 177).

Under the first Accord, the Commonwealth Government announced plans for a 50% expansion (20,000 places) of subsidised child care in long day care centres, occasional care centres, and family day care, plus some increases in school-aged care services (Brennan 1994: 177). A system of planned expansion was begun, based on

geographic areas of greatest need. Subsidies (termed Fee Relief) to low- and middle-income families using non-profit child care services were introduced. Services receiving Commonwealth Government assistance, including these subsidies, were required to follow guidelines giving priority of access to working families and to children with special needs, a designation that included children with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and children from a non-English speaking background) (AIHW 1993: 131, 136).

Debate regarding the appropriateness of Commonwealth Government involvement in planning and subsidising child care services was partially resolved by the publication of a report in 1988 from a team of academic economists (Anstie et al. 1988, cited in Brennan 1994: 197-199). This report argued that publicly-funded child care created major economic and social benefits for society as a whole as well as for parents. These benefits included helping low-income families out of poverty by facilitating participation in the work force, increasing the tax base by bringing more people into the labour market, and making more efficient use of the human capital developed by the education system. Publicly-funded child care was also shown to provide positive financial returns to the government through increased taxation revenues and reduced benefits to non-working parents. The report quantified these gains as \$296 million in that financial year, in contrast to budgeted child care expenditures of \$190 million

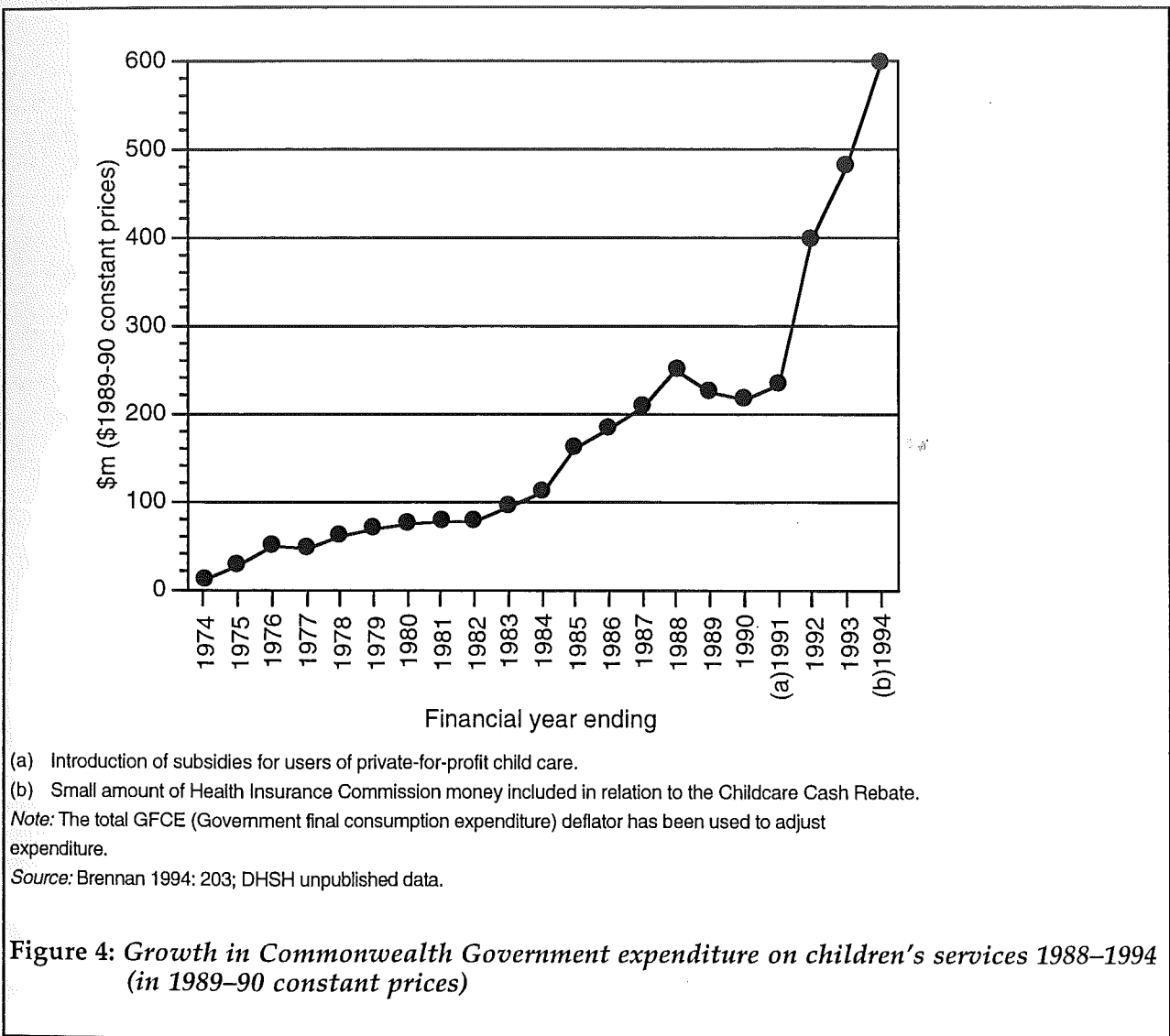
As a result of this report and considerable lobbying by community organisations, in 1988 the Commonwealth Government announced the first of a series of National Child Care Strategies. These strategies have greatly expanded the supply of child care places and are designed to meet the work-related demand for child care by 2001, estimated to be 354,500 places. Other components of this national plan included expansion of school-aged child care, joint funding of services with the governments of the States and Territories, and providing loans and grants to local governments, community groups and employers to provide or sponsor services. The scope of Commonwealth Government funding was widened significantly in 1991 as the subsidy to parents (renamed Childcare Assistance) was extended to cover those using private-for-profit child care centres (and also the small group of employer-sponsored and other non-profit centres). This has led to a dramatic expansion of the private sector in child care, to the point where today most new child care centres are in this category, and it has surpassed by a large margin the non-profit sector in size (AIHW 1993: 132-133; AIHW 1995: 122, 130-133; Brennan 1994: 200-203).

To ensure the provision of high quality services in long day care centres, a process of accreditation was begun at the same time as the extension of subsidies to the private sector. As a condition of continuing eligibility for the subsidies, long day care centres are now required to register with the National Child Care Accreditation Council and to undertake the 'quality improvement and accreditation' process (Brennan 1994: 200-201). A parallel, but separate, process has been the development of national standards for the relevant levels of government to follow in licensing and regulating child care centres, family day care schemes, and school-aged child care programs (AIHW 1993: 135).

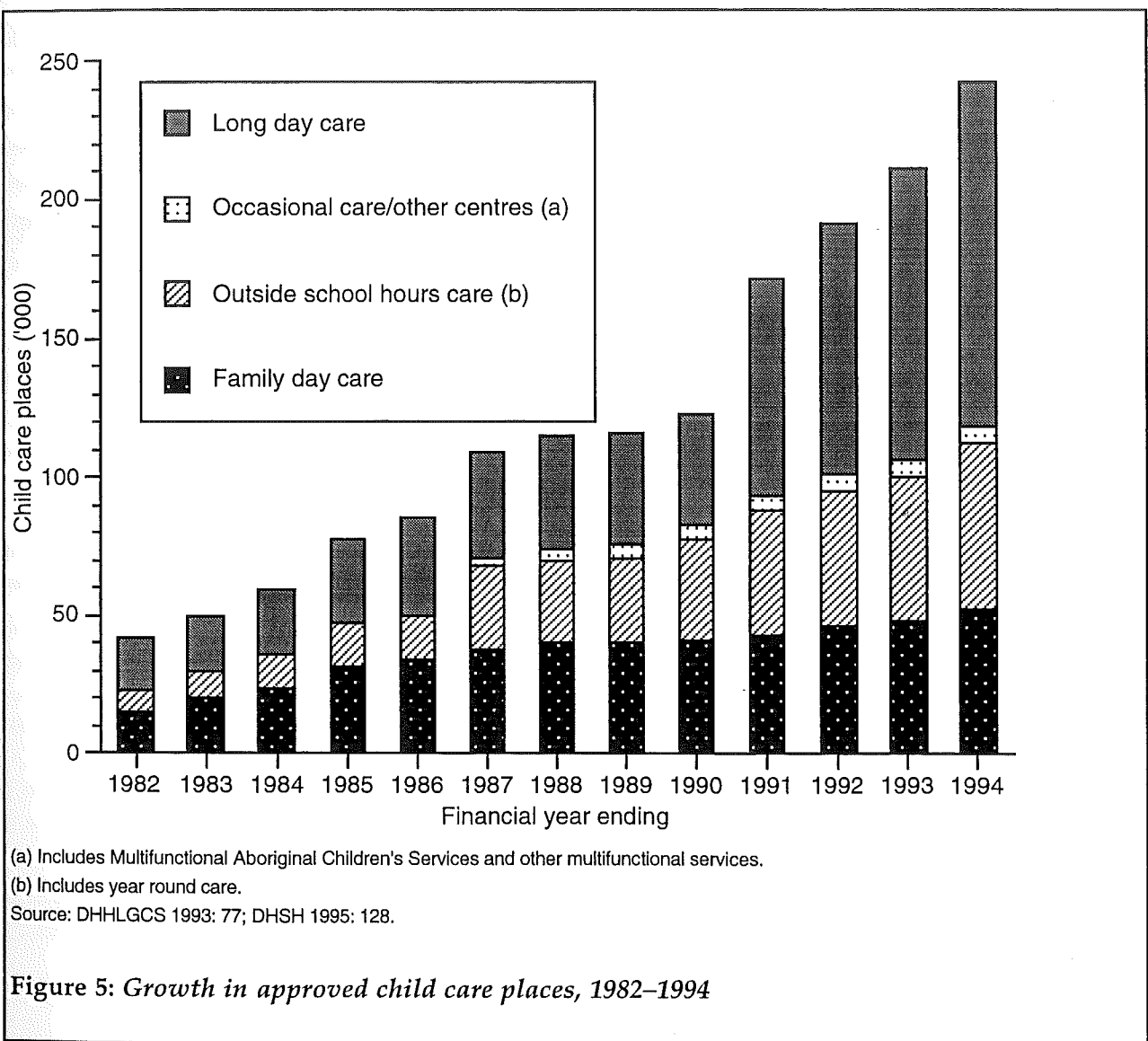
In 1994, the Commonwealth Government introduced another initiative to improve the affordability of child care services in the form of the Childcare Cash Rebate,

which can be claimed for part of the costs of work-related child care in formal services and also in 'informal' child care, such as that provided by paid baby sitters. This rebate was provided regardless of the income of the parents, in contrast to Childcare Assistance, which is limited to those on low and middle incomes (AIHW 1995: 121-122).

As a consequence of these initiatives, total expenditure by the Commonwealth Government on the Children's Services Program (CSP), through which child care services are funded, has increased dramatically in real terms, from \$10.5m in 1973-74 to \$597.0 million in 1993-94 (using 1989-90 constant prices) (Figure 4). The rate of growth has not been even, with the sharpest increase following the 1990-91 extension of Childcare Assistance to parents using private services. In the most recent budget (1995-96), the current price figure has surpassed \$1 billion (Commonwealth of Australia 1995: 3-120).



Since the early 1980s, there has been a very large increase in the number of child care places funded by the Commonwealth Government under the CSP (Figure 5). This has been a consequence of the expansion in the coverage of different types of services and of the increase in the number of services within those types. Between 1982 and 1994, the number of child care places approved under the CSP increased from 41,578 to 245,881. The number of places in family day care services and community-managed long day care and occasional care services doubled between 1982 and 1987, while the number of places in outside school hours care increased fourfold, but from a very low base—from 7,910 places to 29,593 places.



While the number of child care places approved under the CSP doubled between June 1988 and June 1994, the number of approved places in long day care centres

increased around three-fold over the same period. This was mainly due to existing private-for-profit and employer-sponsored services receiving CSP funding beginning in 1991 and to new services in these sectors being set up from then on. Over the period June 1991 to June 1994, the number of places in private-for-profit centres and employer-sponsored services more than doubled, while the number of places in community-managed centres increased by only 9%. In recent years, family day care services have also expanded more rapidly than community-managed long day care centres. The number of children attending child care services funded by the CSP has also increased dramatically, from 74,000 in 1984 to 396,000 in 1994 (Table 1).

**Table 1** *Estimated number of children attending Commonwealth Government funded services by type of service, Australia, selected years*

Type of service	1984	1988	1992	1993	1994
Long day care	36,150	55,300	158,400	190,550	227,300
Family day care	37,700	51,250	66,100	78,800	88,700
Outside school hours care	..	25,700	50,750	53,500	63,900
Other formal care	..	4,900	26,450	15,750	16,800
<b>Total children</b>	<b>73,850</b>	<b>137,150</b>	<b>301,700</b>	<b>338,600</b>	<b>396,700</b>

Note: numbers are estimates only and are rounded to the nearest 50.

Source: AIHW 1993: 133; DHHLGCS 1993: 78; DSHS 1995: 130.

There is also a large 'informal' sector in child care: a 1993 national survey found that of the 3.1 million children under age 12, nearly one-half had used some form of care during the previous week, a large proportion of these (1.2 million) using informal care or a combination of formal and informal care (ABS 1994b: 6). Almost half of the children using informal care (47%) were in that form of care mainly for work-related reasons, compared to about three-quarters (75%) of children in services in the formal sector (ABS 1994b: 12; AIHW 1995: 138).

The rapid expansion of funding for child care services has led to new concerns about equity issues in such programs. Some groups have argued that the Commonwealth Government should put as much effort into supporting mothers who choose to stay at home to raise children. In acknowledgement of this view, the Home Child Care Allowance was introduced in 1994, and merged into the Parenting Allowance in 1995, to provide support to parents caring full-time for their children at home. Furthermore, recognition of the lack of universal access to paid maternity leave led to the establishment in 1996 of the Maternity Allowance, which is equivalent to six weeks of the Parenting Allowance and payable to all mothers eligible for the Basic Family Payment (Wolcott and Glezer 1995: 142-143).



## 6 Conclusion

This paper has examined the increasing participation of Australian women in the paid labour force, one of the major social changes occurring in this country in the second half of the twentieth century. Associated changes which have also been documented here are smaller family sizes (due to lower fertility) and higher proportions of families headed by a sole parent, usually the mother. Since the 1970s, government policies have responded to the increased labour force participation of women and have been designed to enhance their employment opportunities, particularly for single mothers. Three forms of these policies have been covered in this paper: social justice measures designed to promote equal employment opportunities; adoption of ILO Convention 156, which promotes improvements in working conditions for workers with family responsibilities; and promotion and subsidisation of child care for working parents. Access to affordable, high quality child care for many parents in Australia has resulted in part from the pressures brought by working parents, mainly mothers, in both single parent and couple families. In turn, the availability of child care has probably facilitated further participation, especially by women, in the paid work force, indicating that increases in female labour force participation are both a cause and effect of improvements in workplace practices and provision of community services such as child care.

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