

The Labour Market Participation of Mothers

– Understanding the Role of Occupational Norms.

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Track 3: Work, Family and Community

This paper examines occupational norms within the Australian labour market and traces the occupational mobility of Australian mothers from 2001 to 2005. It is proposed that the labour market is not divided into occupational groupings that are based solely on skill, but also on norms of employment behaviour. These norms of employment behaviour, including norms regarding working hours, work contract and work scheduling, are mechanisms, which constrain or enable access to occupations over the lifecycle. The result is indirect discrimination against mothers who are unable to comply with these norms.

The research reported adopts a process-based approach to explain how labour market segmentation develops. Focusing on gender and motherhood patterns within the Australian labour market, the paper proposes an explanation of how women, in particular mothers, become concentrated in occupations where access to part time employment is attended by low socio-economic status. The central argument of the paper is that patterns of labour market segmentation are not the result of the choices or preferences either of women as employees (Hakim, 2000), nor of employers, but are the result of contestation over norms of employment behaviour within occupations. This contestation over norms occurs primarily with regard to working hours. For this reason, when mothers become excluded from an occupation, the exclusionary process can be defined in terms of indirect or systemic discrimination.

The focus on processes of segmentation enables a focus on the dynamic between structure and agency. Segmented labour market theory has evolved from a rather static view of firms as creating or denying access to 'jobs' with particular characteristics such as pay and security. There has been less discussion of the mechanisms of access to 'occupations', defined primarily in terms of, bundles of skills deployed within particular jobs. This paper builds on the work of Fagan and O'Reilly (1998) by focusing on the barriers and triggers to

transitions between labour market segments that impact on career trajectories. However the focus on occupational access rather than on locating jobs in primary or secondary, internal or external, core or periphery markets moves the analysis beyond a static mapping of segments and outcomes to a focus on process and possible causation.

The focus on labour market processes is important in a new world of work where the traditional features of employment, the workforce participation of women, employment legislation and public policy with regard to work and family are continually changing. While the direction of change has increasingly enabled the labour market participation of women, that participation is frequently constrained through a myriad of norms governing behaviour with regard to work and care. The hours a woman works will depend not only on the number and age of her children and the degree of social support she can receive outside of the labour market but also, importantly, on her occupation. It is the norms within an occupation that will allow a woman continued access to employment within a given job should her circumstances change. As a key change at the entry to and progression through motherhood is time available for employment it is primarily norms regarding working hours that become critical.

The research presented focused on answering the following three questions:

- What are the key employment norms -for women, mothers and women without dependant children, and how do they diverge from those of their male counterparts?
- How do key employment norms vary according to occupation?
- How do these patterns of occupational norms interact to generate segmentation processes?

The analysis utilised 5 waves of data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics of Australia Survey, 2001 – 2005. This is a panel survey that was commissioned by Department of Families, Housing, Communities and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) and managed by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research.

The analysis focused on identifying and measuring the strength of occupational norms. These norms encompass employment behaviours such as: working hours, work scheduling, contract of employment, the ability to take work home from the office; and occupational characteristics such as: the socio-economic rank of the occupation, gender, parental role and age of those employed. Norms for employment behaviours were also identified for women, mothers and women without dependant children. Principal component analysis was then used to identify patterns of correlation between these norms and their strength.

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