

The International Corner

Work and Family In New Zealand

by Paul Callister, Deputy Director, Institute of Policy Studies, Victoria University, Wellington and
Lindy Fursman, Senior Research Associate, Institute of Policy Studies

As in all industrialized countries, New Zealand has experienced dramatic long-term changes in patterns of paid work. In the mid 1950s, over 90% of working-age men but only 29% of working-age women were employed. By the end of 2008, the employment rate for men had declined to 72%, but for women, it had risen to just under 60%.

While much of this change in paid work has represented new opportunities, it has also created a variety of work and family challenges for particular segments of New Zealand society. Some of these challenges and opportunities are the result of the complex changes in employment by age and education that underlie these gender shifts.

For example, much of the early decline in male employment was driven by the earlier retirement of older men and the trend of more men receiving tertiary education. More recently, the decline has been driven by a loss of jobs for low-skilled men. For women, much of the gain in employment has resulted from a major increase in the employment of women with young children.

While the aging of the New Zealand population is creating a number of work and family challenges in the country, this article focuses primarily on men and women in the main child-rearing age groups. In New Zealand, as in other industrialized countries, there has been much change in the living arrangements of men and women in traditional couple-forming and child-rearing age groups.

- Since the 1970s, there has been a rapid decline in the proportion of those in their mid-working life living as married, heterosexual couples.
- These changes have been accompanied by the rise of largely female single parents, with similar rates to that of the United States, as well as an increase in men living alone.
- Other family arrangements have also become more prevalent, including same-sex couples (who can now form legal civil unions), unmarried heterosexual unions, single fathers, and couples without children.
- There is also more movement between family types over time, and there has been a rise in dual-earner couples with dependent children, with both partners working full-time in 36% of couples with dependent children in 2006.

For families with dependent children, regardless of their structure, key work-family issues in New Zealand include finding affordable quality childcare (especially care for school-age children, during school holidays, and

when children are sick) and the impact of long working hours. New Zealand has one of the highest proportions of individuals working long hours in the world, with 2006 data indicating that 23% of all workers and 29% of full-time workers worked 50 or more hours each week.

These long hours are a persistent barrier to work-family balance, particularly for men, with men making up three-quarters of those who work more than 50 and more than 60 hours each week. In 2006, 36% of men working full-time worked 50 or more hours each week, while 16% worked 60 or more hours.

It has been a challenge for government policy to evolve to support or even accommodate the work-family challenges experienced by diverse family forms. A variety of policies have been put in place that assist in reducing work-family conflict, although in most cases, work-family concerns were not the primary goal of these initiatives. These policies include:

- Childcare and out-of-school care subsidies for low-income families
- The introduction of 20 free hours per week for the education and care of 3–4 year olds
- Tax credits for working parents
- An extension of annual paid holiday entitlement from 3 to 4 weeks after the first year of employment
- Free doctor's visits for children under the age of 6
- The introduction of paid parental leave in 2001.

The most recent innovation has been the Employment Relations (Flexible Working Arrangements) Amendment Act of 2007, which came into force in July 2008. This act gives employees with caring responsibilities a statutory right to request flexible work, requires employers to consider the request, and provides the only grounds upon which they can refuse, as well as providing a process for making and responding to requests for arbitration. While employers initially opposed the introduction of this legislation, there has been little concern expressed since its introduction.

While the recession of 2009 has dampened policy innovation, a number of areas related to work and family stand out for further improvement in New Zealand. These include developing more effective ways of reducing child poverty, reducing the long hours worked by many New Zealanders, improving paid parental leave provisions, and developing more effective ways to enable fathers to be actively involved in family life.

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network appreciates the extensive support we have received from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the Boston College community.

E-mail: wfnetwork@bc.edu - Phone: 617-552-1708 - Fax: 617-552-9202



www.bc.edu

The Sloan Work and Family Research Network is funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation