
**WORK AND FAMILY -
AN INCOMPATIBLE UNION?**

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Work and Family - An Incompatible Union?

The way we think about and structure work hasn't changed in the last forty years. This is largely because our assumptions about the family haven't kept pace with reality. We still assume that the typical family consists of a father who works and a mother who stays at home with the children. Today only 16% of families fit this description. Yet the workplace continues to be organized in ways that make it extremely difficult for anyone with family obligations and responsibilities. We have few government policies that support working parents and the workplace is by and large inflexible and unresponsive to their needs.

"A woman with career aspirations jeopardizes her prospects every time the school nurse phones about a sick child or the babysitter falls ill - a "family" man demonstrates quite clearly when he is the one who leaves the office in response to the school nurses' call that he is a professional lightweight and an employee who is definitely not on the yuppie fast track to success."

(Taken from "How Workplace and Family Impact Each Other" - a report prepared for the Family Unity Committee. Red Deer, Alberta, November 1987, p. 1)

There have been some dramatic changes to the Canadian family since 1951. Then, only 11% of all married women were in the labor force compared to 57% today (1986). Even when you just look at working mothers the numbers are still high. Mothers with children under the age of three make up 51% of the labor force in Alberta. This figure goes as high as 74% for mothers with children aged six to fifteen years.

Women work for a variety of reasons: to get ahead in their careers, for personal fulfillment and, for a growing number, because two incomes are needed to survive. According to a study done by the National Council of Welfare, one out of every five single earner families was poor in 1983. The National Council estimated there would be 68% more low income families in Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba if wives quit work.

Because government policies do not place a lot of value on parenting and the workplace is based on outdated sexual stereotypes, working mothers

are under a great deal of stress. They are being asked to do more with less time and without adequate support systems. If society has a commitment to strengthening the family, the workplace needs to be adjusted to reflect the reality of working parents, which is most parents these days. Three areas in particular need to be addressed:

- 1) childcare;
- 2) labor legislation; and
- 3) alternative work schedules.

I will briefly discuss each one.

1. Childcare

Our childcare system is a glaring example of the lack of support afforded working parents. According to a recent study by the National Council of Welfare, nearly two million Canadian children under the age of 13 needed some form of care because their parents worked or studied outside the home. Yet there were licensed childcare spaces for only 13% of those children. The figure for Alberta is slightly higher, we have licensed spaces for 20% of the children needing care. So what should we do? A good start would be a national childcare policy that assures an adequate number of accessible and affordable spaces, consistent regulations across the country that would ensure uniform standards of care, and a recognition that there are a diversity of childcare needs (eg. children with disabilities, rural needs, 24 hour care for shiftworkers). Governments are just beginning to realize that most mothers work. We still have a long way to go before we even begin to meet the needs of working parents.

2. Labor Legislation

Our labor laws actively discourage people in the labor force from having children. Mothers are given insufficient time off and inadequate compensation while fathers have no benefits at all. I will just highlight some of the major features of the legislation.

- a) In Alberta you must have been employed for 12 continuous months with the same employer to be eligible for maternity leave. This means that if you have been laid off and have been forced to find another job or if you have accepted a new position, you are not entitled to any leave and could lose your job.
- b) Expectant mothers in Alberta are entitled to 18 weeks unpaid maternity leave assuming they have qualified with 12 months continuous employment. This leave can be extended by another 3 weeks if the mother has a good reason and a medical certificate. Fathers are not entitled to any leave. It has been suggested that at least 26 weeks of leave be granted to parents; 17 weeks for the mother and the remaining 9 to be taken by either parent. Most parents would rather take time off to take care of their newborn infants than place them in a childcare program. In addition to the obvious benefits to parents, a longer leave would save public money as infant care is one of the most expensive components of a child care program.

- c) There is no job protection or maternity benefits for domestic workers or women employed in family businesses such as farming or fishing.
- d) Employment and seniority rights do not accumulate during the leave.
- e) Unemployment insurance provides 15 weeks of maternity benefits to mothers at 60% of their earnings. There is a 2 week waiting period during which a mother receives nothing. This poses a serious financial penalty on women taking maternity leave. Especially hard hit are low income parents.
- f) Women who work part-time may not be entitled to any UIC benefits if they have worked less than 15 hours per week. In 1985, 73% of all part-time employees in Alberta were women.

Forty percent of Canadian part-time workers were ineligible for any UIC benefits in 1985.

- g) Pregnant women who are involved in a labor dispute are not entitled to any benefits. This means that if a women's union goes on strike just before her maternity leave begins, she will receive no UIC benefits during the time of the strike.
- h) Parents are not allowed any days off to look after sick children or other family members, such as elderly parents.

The argument has always been that we cannot afford to provide better benefits. We can if governments re-arrange their priorities and the political will is there. A national commitment to the value of parenting has been legislated in other countries, the most notable example being Sweden. There, parents can share a total of 18 months leave at 90% of their regular earnings. In addition, parents may reduce their working hours to 6 hours a day if they have a child under 8 years of age, without any loss of pay or benefits.

3. Alternative Work Schedules

The standard 40 hour work week and 9 to 5 work schedule has become an institution. It is clearly an outdated one as it does not respond to the needs of working parents. In a recent study by the Canadian Mental Health Association, time pressures between job and family responsibilities were cited as a major source of stress. This is hardly surprising as the total employment hours for the average family has increased to between 60 and 72 hours per week. Working parents are under a great deal of stress as they try to juggle job responsibilities with the needs of their children. They often have to cope with feelings of anxiety, frustration, exhaustion and guilt as they try to adapt their lives to the demands of the workplace rather than vice versa. Family responsibilities affect employees on the job through increased absenteeism, lessened productivity, reduced mobility, inability to work overtime, difficulty in attending out of town work-

related events and a reluctance to accept promotions or added responsibilities.

We need to allow employees work options that better integrate their roles of worker, spouse and parent. According to a 1985 survey by the Conference Board of Canada, one third of all workers would be willing to work less with a corresponding drop in pay. Some work options include:

- a) job sharing - two people share one full-time job, with salary and benefits pro-rated;
- b) permanent part-time - an individual works on a permanent part-time basis but keeps their seniority rights and promotion opportunities, benefits are pro-rated and they are paid a rate of pay comparable to full-time work;
- c) V-time - work hours are reduced anywhere from 5 to 50% for a specific period of time;
- d) authorized leaves of absence without loss of any employment rights;
- e) banked overtime - an individual has the option of taking compensating time off instead of being paid for overtime;
- f) flextime - employees work a standard number of hours per week with flexible starting and quitting times;
- g) compressed work week - employees work the standard number of hours within fewer days (eg. 40 hours in 4 ten hour days).
- h) work at home - employees in certain types of jobs are allowed to work at home part of the time.

Because job hours are tailored to the workers' needs, work options have a number of advantages, including:

- a) providing a better balance between work and family life;
- b) improving job performance and productivity;
- c) keeping valued workers that employers would otherwise lose; and
- d) helping to reduce unemployment. In Edmonton, unemployment rates above 10% are still the norm. It has been estimated that a 5% decrease in worktime would result in a 2% increase in employment. Work reductions would also reduce social program and health care costs due to job and unemployment stresses.

Summary

If government has a real commitment to children and families, then they must act accordingly. Policy changes in the areas of childcare, labor legislation and alternative work schedules need to be implemented. Other countries, such as Sweden, have also been faced with serious budget problems. It is really a question of getting your priorities right and the political will to carry through.

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