

**The Employment of Partnered Mothers in  
Australia, 1981 to 2001**

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## **Declaration**

**This thesis is my original work, undertaken in the Demography and  
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# Abstract

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The employment rate of young partnered women and partnered mothers increased considerably over the 1980s, while there was less change in the 1990s. This thesis explores these changes, with a focus on partnered mothers with young children. The objectives are to describe what the changes in female employment were, and to analyse why they might have occurred.

The analyses were primarily quantitative, although they were put into context with extensive reviews of Australian and, where relevant, international literature. The primary source of data was Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data. Other data used included those from the ABS Child Care Surveys, Negotiating the Life Course Survey and the National Social Science Survey.

Many changes in maternal employment were identified. The most notable change was the increase in the number and proportion of partnered mothers working part-time hours. Job characteristics also changed, with these women in full-time or part-time jobs more likely to be working in higher skilled professional and para-professional jobs in 2001, compared to 1981. For partnered mothers with a child aged less than one, the proportion working increased, but there was also evidence that more women were making use of maternity leave.

Coinciding with these changes were a number of compositional changes, as women of succeeding birth cohorts were more educated, and more likely to delay marriage and childbearing. Attitudinal change was also evident, as people became more accepting of working wives. Attitudes to working mothers with young children changed less, with a strong preference for mothers to be at home when their children were young. Also over this period, there were many changes in infrastructure, policy and the labour market generally that had impacts on female employment opportunities and conditions. These changes are explored in detail, and their relationship to employment change examined.

Because there were so many changes in these factors occurring over this period, the exact causes of employment change were difficult to identify. Also, an analysis of employment change is complicated because the causality of certain effects does not

run in only one direction – there are more complex links between education, childbearing and employment that should be accounted for in explaining changes over time. Similarly, changes in supply of labour are difficult to disentangle from changes in demand for labour.

Compositional changes were certainly important in explaining the growth in the proportion working, especially for younger women. These women were not only more highly educated in 2001, they were less likely to have children. For working mothers, the effect of increased education levels could be seen in the greater numbers working in higher status occupations.

The analyses of infrastructure and policy change, particularly that of changes in income support and child care provision which were covered in some detail, did suggest that certain aspects of these broader changes were associated with changes in employment, at least for some sections of the population. Income support changes may have enabled more mothers, particularly those in low-income households, to stay at home with young children. This might be part of the reason for the slower growth in female employment in the 1990s, as payments to single-income families increased.

The increased availability of formal child care was likely to have enabled more mothers to work, although the use of informal care, and parental-care only also grew over the 1980s and 1990s. The cost of care continues to be prohibitive for some families.

Increases in part-time work continued even when the overall rate of employment slowed down. Changes in industrial relations, through award restructuring and the introduction of enterprise bargaining, were associated with an increased availability of part-time jobs. This sustained use of part-time work was congruent with the employment preferences of working mothers with young children. Also, the evidence presented shows that part-time work has grown in higher status as well as lower status jobs.

Overall, while it was not possible to identify the exact causes of employment change, the compositional (education and childbearing changes in particular), attitudinal and broader infrastructure/policy changes were no doubt related.





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