

A CALL TO ACTION BALANCING WORK AND NON-WORK RESPONSIBILITIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR WOMEN'S HEALTH

Families, friends and communities play an important role in the lives of most individuals: they help forge our identity, they provide us with emotional support and a sense of belonging, and they are where a large portion of everyday social interaction takes place. We all need these relationships: they are part of being human, and are integral to our physical and emotional well being.

WE KNOW THAT...

- ...there are more and more women in the workforce. In Canada, the need for families to have a double income and the desire of women for greater autonomy has led a growing number of women to work outside the home. In 1999, 55% of all women aged 15 and over had jobs, up from 42% in 1976.¹
- ...A growing number of women with children, including women with young children, work outside the home. In 1999, 61% of women with a child under 3 had jobs, which is more than twice as many as in 1976.²
- ...in two-parent families, both parents usually work. For example, in 1996 in Quebec, both parents were in the labor force in almost 2/3 of two-parent families.³
- ...in single-parent families too the parent usually works. In 1993, 13% of families were single-parent families, and more than 60% of these parents were in the workforce.⁴ Women continue to make up the large majority of single parents (83% in 1996)⁵. Overall, there were 945,000 single-parent families headed by women in Canada in 1996.⁶
- ...many people in the workforce must also care for elderly or disabled relatives. In fact, the proportion of the workforce involved in elder care is expected to increase from one in five to one in four in the next decade.⁷
- ...many people must care for both children and elderly relatives. In 1996, 15% of women and 9% of men between the ages of 25 and 54 took care of an elderly person in addition to children.⁸

It is clear that more and more Canadians have to balance work and family responsibilities. Some working conditions, however, can make that task especially challenging. Let's take a look at some increasingly common examples of problematic working conditions:

EXTENDED WORK HOURS

Many people are working longer hours than before. In Canada, the incidence of long hours for men (50 or more hours of work per week) has increased from 15.7% in 1976 to 19.6% in 2000, and for women, from 3.8% to 6.8%.⁹ At the same time, a growing number of Canadians are putting in overtime. In the first quarter of 1997, 1/5 of the Canadian workforce reported overtime hours, an average of 9 extra hours of work per week.¹⁰ In addition, technological advances such as fax and email have resulted in more and more people extending their workday by bringing work home. One study of Canadian workers has shown that much of the increase in time spent in work (from an average of 42 hours a week in 1991 to 45 hours in 2001) can be attributed to the fact that in 2001, workers were more likely to take work home to complete on their time off (52% in 2001 versus 31% in 1991).¹¹ However, it is important to remember that some workers who cannot bring their work home may also face longer work hours. Consider the example of health care workers who often have to work extended hours as a result of restructuring and budget cuts.

The same Canadian study also examined the effects of extended work hours on the worker and his or her family: it showed that 70% of those who spent more than 45 hours per week in paid work reported feeling overloaded by the total demands on their time and energy, and 60% reported that work made it difficult to fulfill family responsibilities.¹² The study showed, on the other hand, that employees who have greater flexibility (those who have some say as to when and where they work, who can interrupt their work day and return, who can take holidays when they need to or arrange their work schedule to meet family commitments) report fewer problems related to work-family conflicts, even when hours of work are controlled for.¹³ Likewise, employees who can refuse overtime are better able to balance work and family demands, since it makes it possible, for example, to schedule family time.¹⁴ It should be noted that even for those without family responsibilities, extended work hours can pose problems for life outside the workplace, like making it difficult to take classes or participate in social activities.

VARIABLE, IRREGULAR AND UNPREDICTABLE SCHEDULES

Reconciling work and family obligations can be especially difficult when the work schedule is variable, irregular or unpredictable. For example, consider how difficult it might be to arrange for childcare for a salesperson who works on different days from week to week, for a cashier who starts work at different times on different days, or for a substitute teacher who works on call. But arranging for childcare (or elder care) is only one of the problems that can be caused by these types of schedules. Variable, irregular and unpredictable schedules often do not coincide with the schedules of other family members or those imposed by schools and communities. Nurses who work on rotating shifts, for instance, are often working when their families are at home. This is also the case of many restaurant workers who often work during evenings, weekends and holidays, thus making it difficult to plan family and social activities.

LACK OF FLEXIBILITY

Balancing work and family can be equally difficult when the work schedule is fixed and rigid. For example, think of the problems that might arise from a worker being unable to take a short-term leave to attend to a sick child, or leave work early to take care of a family member discharged home from the hospital. The bottom line is that schedules can result in work-family conflicts when they are not flexible. The term “flexibility” sometimes creates confusion. Schedules can be “flexible” because they adjust to consumer demand, as with retail stores that adjust their scheduling to the day, the hour, the season and the short-term ups and downs of sales. This kind of flexibility may be good for consumers and business but it can create variable, unpredictable schedules for employees. “Flexibility” can also mean family-friendly business policy where the employee has some measure of control over his or her work schedule. In this brochure, “flexibility” refers to the possibility for the worker to adjust his or her schedule to family needs.

THESE DIFFICULTIES ARE ON THE RISE...

Because of the need to compete in an increasingly global and competitive marketplace, a growing number of businesses are restructuring their employment sector so as to reduce their operating costs. Since many businesses can no longer afford to have full-time permanent employees do all the work necessary, they are now looking to hire people on a temporary basis. In addition, businesses, particularly those in the service sector, are competing with one another by extending their hours of operation, many now looking to provide 24h service.

As a result, “atypical” work schedules are gradually becoming the norm. For many, a “normal” work schedule used to mean full-time, permanent work for one employer. It usually involved working from nine to five, Monday to Friday, and away from home. In 1995, only one in three Canadian workers (37%) had a “normal” work schedule.¹⁵ This type of schedule is gradually being replaced by a variety of “atypical” schedules¹⁶, which can be anything from part-time work, to night and weekend shifts, to working different hours from one day to the next. Actually, almost 30% of workers in Canada do not have the same work schedule from one day to another.¹⁷

WHAT ABOUT WOMEN WORKERS?

Women in particular tend to be employed in atypical work, and that proportion is rising. In 1989, 35% of women workers between the ages of 15 and 64 worked part-time, had a temporary job, were self-employed or worked for more than one employer. In 1999, that number had risen to 41%.¹⁸ It is important to note that atypical schedules are becoming increasingly common for women and men workers alike. The proportion of women in

atypical work, however, is still higher than men (41% compared to 29%).¹⁹ One of the reasons for this is that women most often work in the service sector of the economy, a sector that is increasingly being subjected to temporary hiring practices and 24h service provision. As a result, employees like supermarket cashiers, salespeople, food service providers and call center personnel are increasingly being subjected to extended work hours and to variable, irregular and unpredictable schedules. These forms of work, as we have seen, can make it especially difficult to balance work and family responsibilities. Part-time work should be thought of separately, however, since it can actually ease the burden of balancing work and family. On the other hand, part-time work can contribute to work-family conflicts when it is not a choice, for example when people have to work two part-time jobs because they cannot find full-time work.

BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY IS AN ACTIVITY IN ITSELF!

The actual process of balancing work and family obligations can be extremely time-consuming as well as frustrating. Consider the example of telephone operators, who have some of the most variable, irregular and unpredictable work schedules all at once. One study²⁰ showed that over a two-week period, 30 telephone operators attempted to change their work schedule an average of five times, with one successful rearrangement for every 5.3 attempts. They averaged over seven procedures to change daycare arrangements during the same period, and used an average of 4 different resources (partners, friends, mothers, sitters, etc.). Since the actions necessary to trade or change hours could not be done during work hours, breaks, lunchtime and family time were taken up by these procedures. The inability of the operators to make or receive personal calls at work also complicated the situation. Sometimes, just having access to a telephone at work can help alleviate the stress of often-conflicting responsibilities.

In another study²¹ on how women juggle employment and adult care, it was shown that care arrangements might include, for example, a few hours of support from the home care agency from 1 PM to 3 PM, counting on a teenage child to cover the hours between 3 PM and 5 PM, and counting on a sister to cover Saturdays. It might also involve running home during lunch hour to feed the person and ensure that the home caregiver has arrived. Not only does this organization require multiple phone calls to make sure that everyone is where they should be when they should be, but there can be no certainty as to the reliability or permanency of each of these arrangements. Services and provisions must be constantly negotiated and family members cannot always be counted on. If, for example, the teen has soccer practice or the home care services are cut back, then the whole system must be rebuilt.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF WORK-FAMILY CONFLICTS...

➤ ...ON WORKERS?

For the most part, work is a source of economic and social progress as well as a form of personal achievement for both women and men. However, conflicting demands from work and family responsibilities can lead to physical and psychological problems like

fatigue, depression and stress, as well as to problems linked to higher levels of stress like cardiovascular disease and gastrointestinal disorders.²² These problems are common: in 1998 in Canada, of married parents of young children between the ages of 25 and 44 who worked full-time, one woman in three (38%) declared feeling stressed because of time constraints, as did one in four men (26%).²³ But workers may also be affected in a different way: when family demands get in the way of work (like when someone has to miss work to take care of a child or an elderly relative), income may be lost and opportunities for job advancement missed. The Conference Board of Canada reports that, because of family considerations, 17% of employees who were offered promotions turned them down, and 25% who were offered transfers refused.²⁴ This in turn may lead to feelings of guilt and to a general lack of satisfaction with life.

➤ **...ON FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES AND SOCIETY AS A WHOLE?**

When work gets in the way of family (like when someone is required to work overtime), less time is spent in activities that are beneficial to children (like attending a child's sporting event or having meals with the family) and family members needing care may have to be left alone. But the problem is not just with overtime: variable, irregular or unpredictable schedules can also have an impact on children, for example by affecting their sense of stability. Consider the example of the telephone operators, who had to use an average of 4 different childcare resources (including the partner) over a two-week period. The nature of the work too can have an impact on the family, like when stress from work spills over into the family environment.

But work-family conflicts do not only affect the worker and his or her family; they also have an impact on communities. Individuals who experience conflicts will have less time and energy to devote to community life, like being a good neighbor or a volunteer. At an even broader level, work-family conflicts affect us all. For example, a recent study found that extra trips to the doctor made by employees with high levels of stress caused by work-life conflicts cost Canadians half a billion dollars annually.²⁵ Another example is the lost income due to the temporary or permanent withdrawal from the workforce as a result of family responsibilities. One study²⁶ suggests that a 35 year old woman can expect a future earnings loss of about 15,000\$ following a labor force interruption of two years, 50,000\$ after five years absence, 87,000\$ after 10 years and 94,000\$ after 15 years (these figures do not take into account the lack of earnings during the interruption, nor pension losses). This situation means that we will have many poor elderly women, a problem that will face society in the future. Beyond economic concerns, these issues have to do with justice, equity and social responsibility.

➤ **...ON EMPLOYERS?**

Employers too can pay a price when demands from work and family come into conflict. Employers undergo losses related to reduced motivation and performance, poor morale, increased absenteeism and lateness, resistance to mobility and promotions, high turn-over rates and difficulties recruiting, all of which have been linked to conflicts between work

and family.²⁷ A study done for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company in the U.S. found that employees involved in personal care to an elder relative cost their employer 3142\$ per year in absenteeism, work interruptions, medical and employee assistance costs and hiring replacements.²⁸ Another study estimated that the direct cost of absenteeism in Canadian firms due to work-life conflicts was just under 3\$ billion a year.²⁹ Facilitating work-family balance in the workplace can therefore be beneficial to employers and employees alike: the Conference Board of Canada reports that of those organizations conducting formal impact assessments or evaluations of their work-family initiatives, 86% said they were very or somewhat effective in increasing productivity, 89% said they were very or somewhat effective in reducing absenteeism, and 97% said they were very or somewhat effective in improving employee morale.³⁰

WHAT ARE BUSINESSES DOING?

Big and small workplaces can do a lot to help workers better cope with the difficulties of balancing work and family. The Bank of Montreal, for example, offers a range of options to its more than 25,000 employees across Canada, 75% of whom are women.³¹ The flexible schedule option is by far the most popular, with a participation rate of over 80%. The flexible schedule allows workers to pick the time at which they start and finish work, as long as they work a certain number of hours within a fixed period of time. Women are not the only ones to take advantage of this option: 40% of men also work on flexible schedules. Smaller businesses can also help their employees alleviate the stress of balancing work and family. For Americanada, a medium-sized travel business with a little over a hundred employees (the large majority being women), this means being able to bring your kids to work when daycare arrangements fall through. It also means an informal but systematic application of the flexible schedule arrangement.³² But even though more and more people in Canada have access to these types of options, the majority of workers still doesn't. Estimates indicate that flexible schedules, for example, are only available to 1 in 4 Canadian workers.³³ It is important to note that merely offering the policies is not sufficient. Companies also have to demonstrate that it is acceptable for employees to use this assistance. This may be easier to do when the employee has a supportive manager. In fact, many studies have shown that employees who work for supportive managers are usually better able to balance their work and family obligations.³⁴

WHAT ARE THE SPECIFIC PROBLEMS THAT WOMEN AND MEN FACE?

Even when women and men have the same work schedules and working conditions, differences in family responsibilities mean that women might find it especially difficult to balance work and family. Although men have increased their share of household work in the past few decades, women are still largely responsible for looking after their homes and families. In Canada, women perform almost two-thirds of the unpaid household work, including meal preparation, childcare, etc.³⁵ The presence of children, for example, has a different impact on the stress levels of women and men: 38% of married mothers

who work full-time say that they experience serious levels of stress because of time constraints, compared to 20% of women without children.³⁶ Parental status, on the other hand, has little effect on stress levels among men. It is therefore no surprise that family or personal obligations are more often a cause of absence from work for women than for men. In 1999, women missed an average of 7 days of work for personal or family obligations, compared to one day for men.³⁷ This level of absence can affect the perception of women's dedication to their jobs, and this may lead to women being taken less seriously.

Women may also experience problems with workers' compensation. For example, when workers are disabled to a point where they cannot continue to perform their regular household chores like snow removal or grass cutting (chores usually done by men), programs are available to provide for supplementary benefits. Yet, when a worker's disability prevents her from doing housework usually done by women (vacuuming, laundry, diapering, cooking), nothing is available unless it is shown that the worker is incapable of looking after her own basic needs. Because women usually perform domestic tasks that cannot be postponed to the next day, the inability to perform domestic work can have negative consequences for their health and for the health of their children.³⁸

Men, on the other hand, are more likely to spend long hours in paid work (19.6% compared to 6.8% for women), and this may result in less time and energy being devoted to the family. It is important to note that for many men, placing family needs ahead of work is still considered to be a "career limiting" move. In addition, the idea that "work comes first" has not changed much in the last decades. Many men may therefore feel that they are addressing their family responsibilities by being successful at work.³⁹

WHAT ARE THE SOLUTIONS?

SHOULD WE JUST INCREASE SERVICES LIKE DAYCARE?

Increasing the availability of services like daycare or home care for the elderly is an important part of helping women and men better balance their work and family responsibilities. Consider the example of daycare services: First, there is a lack of available spaces in daycare centers across Canada. In 1996, 900,000 Canadian families had at least one child of preschool age and at least one working parent. Yet, the same year, daycare centers for preschoolers had only about 300,000 spaces available.⁴⁰ In addition, the schedules of daycare centers often come into conflict with the work schedules of parents. Some workers in the aerospace industry, for example, begin work at 6h45 in the morning. Since daycares are usually open between 7h00 and 18h00, arrangements have to be made for the in-between period.⁴¹ In fact, less than 6% of daycare centers in Canada close after 18h00, and this evidently causes problems for individuals who work evenings or nights. On top of this, many daycares work on a regular registration basis, which means that the child has to be registered for precise days of the week. This causes problems for workers who have variable schedules (only 10% of the telephone operators used daycare). The problem is not just with daycare, however:

health and social services catering to the elderly are also lacking. For example, inadequate home care or long-term care programs means that more responsibilities for elder care are taken on by the family. Increasing the availability of services is therefore important, but it should not be seen as the magic solution to all work-family problems. The focus should also be placed on improving working conditions.

A GLOBAL APPROACH IS NEEDED

We need a global approach to help reconcile work and family responsibilities. This means involving different levels of government, employers, workers, unions, and health, education and social services networks. Caregiving at home, for example, must be supported by a comprehensive range of accessible, integrated and culturally appropriate services. These are social issues requiring a collective solution. They cannot be reduced to a family or an individual responsibility. We also need to look at all aspects of the problem. For example, in addition to flexibility, complementary measures should be put into place like pension benefits, paid leave for parental or family reasons and sick leave, all of which may be less available to employees in atypical work. Everyone needs to work together to adopt policies and set up initiatives that will help women and men better balance their dual responsibilities. This will benefit everyone, by improving both quality of life and work performance. Most importantly, we need to remember that the workplace should be adapted to the worker, and not vice versa. This will ensure that individuals are able to contribute to society not only as workers, but also as family members, as friends, and as members of a community.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

In March 1998, a group of researchers, stakeholders and representatives of women workers gathered to take part in a symposium in Montreal on “Improving the Health of Women in the Work Force: A Meeting Of Representatives Of Women Workers and Researchers”. Participants adopted an action plan outlining a list of priorities for action and research in the area of women’s occupational health. The following recommendations came out of these proceedings.

The complete action plan is available at:

<http://www.unites.uqam.ca/cinbiose/ANGLAIS/PUB/PUB.ACTIONPLAN.HTML>

What everyone can do:

Measures should be taken to promote regular, permanent employment.

Workers should not be required to use their own resources to compensate for gaps in care and services.

Workers who perform atypical work should be given employee benefits, pro-rated on the basis of the time worked.

What the government can do:

The deterioration of working conditions in the public sector should be stopped and measures should be instituted to guarantee adequate staffing and proactive scheduling of work, with due consideration for workers' need for a fulfilling life and their children's need for family time.

Current moves toward the reduction and privatization of health services should be halted while the effects of these changes on health services, health-service workers and women's ability to reconcile personal and professional responsibilities are studied.

A legislative framework should be introduced to guarantee that on-call workers and others required to remain available to their employer receive minimum financial benefit; there should also be limits to the number of hours of continuous availability that can be required of employees.

Minimum standards legislation should provide measures to facilitate reconciling work and family obligations. This means that:

- paid short-term leave for family emergencies should be provided for;
- workers with family obligations should have the right to unpaid long-term leave while retaining their employment;
- all workers must be able to be reached directly by telephone and must have access to a telephone to deal with family responsibilities;
- workers should have better control over their hours of work, including shift work. Minimum hours of work per day and the right to refuse overtime should be legislated.

What employers can do:

Life quality issues should be integrated into occupational health interventions. Such issues should be integrated into workplace design and work organization, as well as workplace policies.

What researchers can do:

Research in the area of occupational health and safety should address issues relating to life outside the workplace.

Women's strategies for reconciling professional obligations and the health care needs of their families should be studied and measures should be taken to facilitate such strategies.

In studies of work organization, workloads, the double workday, and stress, ways should be developed to take into account the fact that many women's jobs and domestic tasks require multiple simultaneous operations.

What organizations responsible for compensation can do:

Worker's compensation legislation should be screened for provisions which lead to systemic discrimination against women workers. This means that compensation should be provided when a work accident impairs the worker's ability to care for her children and her home.

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and contributors and do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of Health Canada.

This project has been supported by funding from the Centers of Excellence for Women's Health, Women's Health Bureau, Health Canada.

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