

Working mothers - common issues

Women's access to jobs may once have been a political issue, but in today's tough economic climate, working is now a necessity for most Australian mothers. The bulk of families can no longer afford to live on one wage. Despite women's greater participation in the workforce, most men have yet to increase their share of domestic duties. This means that the majority of working mothers are also responsible for housework and looking after their children.

Income difficulties

If a mother works, then childcare has to be arranged. In some cases, childcare costs can eat up much of the mother's wage. For low-income families in Australia, a second wage may actually leave the family in the same or worse financial position than a single wage, simply because the Parenting Allowance is income-tested.

Stress loads are high for working mothers

British women recently surveyed in a health magazine reported that juggling the dual roles of mother and worker is extremely hard. Findings include:

- Over 60 per cent of working mothers feel they take out their stress on their families.
- Close to half of all working mothers would prefer to be full-time mothers, while around one fifth would like to work from home.
- Just four per cent of working mothers would elect to work full-time if they had the choice.
- Nearly eight out of 10 working mothers would quit their jobs if they could.

Housework is still 'woman's work'

Research from the University of New South Wales indicates that married women with children are worse off than ever before, which is why they are initiating divorce in higher numbers and having fewer children. Some of the findings include:

- Working mothers still perform most of the household chores.
- Full-time mothers and women who work full-time have similar working hours.
- Working mothers work more hours (paid and unpaid) than working fathers.
- Mothers who work part-time have the longest working hours of all.
- Most divorces are initiated by women.

Sick children

Many working mothers dread the possibility of their child getting sick and needing care during usual business hours. Most employers only provide paid sick leave for unwell employees. This means that many working mothers have to take annual leave or unpaid leave in order to stay home and care for their sick children. Key findings of a study published in *Family Matters* in 1991 include:

- Even when both parents are working, the responsibility of care for sick children usually falls on the mother.
- Some of the reasons for this include that the father earns a higher wage, his job responsibilities are deemed more important, and employers are more likely to accept a mother staying home to care for sick children than a father.
- Around one in 10 working mothers feel guilty about their childcare arrangements - whatever those arrangements may be - when their child is sick.

- Other common carers of sick children - apart from the mother - include grandmothers, other relatives, the usual child carer (such as babysitter or creche) and, lastly, fathers.
- Working mothers want more flexible working hours, parental leave, workplace facilities for unwell children, and more understanding from employers.

Sex lives

The Centre for Labour Research at Adelaide University conducted a study of 150 working women and discovered, through interviews, that lack of sexual intimacy was a major complaint. Some of the findings of the study include:

- Most working women are too fatigued or stressed to feel like having sex..
- Some working women resent their spouses for not doing their share of housework and other domestic duties (such as looking after children), and this anger spills over into the bedroom.
- Most working women feel guilty and sad about their lost sex lives.
- One solution to the problem is for men to do their fair share around the home.
- More flexible working hours for working mothers would also alleviate the burden.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Parentline Tel. 132 289

Things to remember

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- Most divorces are initiated by women.
- Even when both parents are working, the responsibility of care for sick children usually falls on the mother.

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