# Balancing act

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January 31, 2010 - 1:14AM

**Job plus kids plus house plus spouse - is the modern woman's dream of having it all really a nightmare?**

LAST year, researchers at the US National Bureau of Economic Research made an interesting discovery. Despite all the improvements in opportunities for women since the 1970s, women's happiness - both in absolute terms and relative to men's - had declined over the past 35 years.

The decline was seen among stay-at-home mothers and those who worked; uneducated women and educated ones; married women and divorcees. And, the researchers said, other surveys suggested a similar story among women in other countries.

One possible explanation, they said, was that "the increased opportunity to succeed in many dimensions may have led to an increased likelihood of believing that one's life is not measuring up".

In other words, the higher our expectations, the more likely we are to be disappointed.

A few months after the study's release, the former political editor of Britain's *Observer* newspaper sparked fears that the dream of "having it all" may have been little more than a mirage when she wrote of having to quit her fantasy job because it didn't leave enough time for her family, let alone a life. Gaby Hinsliff's lament made headlines around the world and led to a flurry of me-toos and soul-searching.

The barbecue-stopper debate about work-life balance is a constant, but Hinsliff's comments seemed to hit a raw nerve. Was it because now that having it all - the glittering career, the loving children, the fancy digs - seems more possible than ever, women are suddenly wondering whether all is simply too much to handle?

CARLY Moran, 34, loved her consultancy job briefing multinational executives on the peculiarities of the Australian market. So, nine months after her first child was born, she went back three days a week and continued her regular interstate trips - carting her mother along to help look after the baby. She continued working after her second child was born, though cut back to two days in the office and got rid of the travel.

Initially, it was great being back with her colleagues, exercising her brain, earning respect for talents other than blowing raspberries. Then a client function was held on Moran's day off and she couldn't attend. It wasn't a huge deal. It was, however, the first of a series of hairline cracks that began appearing in her life. Like the day she had to try to counsel a client over the phone while "at the park, pushing my two-year-old on the swing and breastfeeding the baby".

Then there were the times when her husband (a lawyer) mentioned he needed to get into the office early the next day "and I'd say, 'That's my day at work, I have to be there early'." Or seeing all the areas where her business could grow, but knowing she "couldn't do it … I couldn't do what I considered to be a proper job" because she simply didn't have the time.

Eventually, six months in, Moran said to her husband "either I do five days a week and we get a nanny or I have to quit".

Once upon a time, work-life collision meant little more than some finger-painting on your report to the board, or a very small person getting a hold of your Dictaphone to demonstrate their farting prowess for your secretary.

Nowadays it's a lot more serious. Every new survey, it seems, shows our time being devoured by work, as leisure activities, conversation, even sleep disappear from our lives. According to the latest figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 47 per cent of women and 43 per cent of men often or always feel rushed or pressed for time. It's even higher for two-parent families with young children; 67 per cent of mothers and 61 per cent of fathers feel frequently or constantly rushed, though the bureau doesn't specify whether they're working or not.

All the pressure is claiming casualties. According to a 2008 survey of professionals by consultancy firm Beaton, 29 per cent of respondents said work interfered with their family to a high degree. Further, 36 per cent of childless women blamed career for their lack of a family, while 39 per cent of mothers said they had delayed having children because of their jobs.

University of New England professor of sociology Michael Bittman has been studying time pressure and health and, though his findings are not yet published, he believes feeling pressed for time "often" to "always" entails a health risk the equivalent of binge drinking or smoking. There is a cost to "having it all", he says.

Moran, like Hinsliff, decided it wasn't possible to juggle everything at once (though she plans to return to work at some point and wonders whether she might have kept working had she been in a career that better lent itself to child-rearing).

She has been a stay-at-home mother for 12 months now (as of 10 weeks ago, a stay-at-home mother of three) and says she and her family are much happier.

"I just didn't feel like I was doing anything well," she says.

Others continue to juggle. Jane Rainey, 40, tried being a stay-at-home mother after her son Teddy (now 4½) was born. But she was unhappy.

"I needed the mental stimulation of the job," she says. After advice from health workers, she returned to work - managing husband David Friend's show, *Puppetry of the Penis* - when Teddy was three months old. By the time her son was eight months, "he had five different stamps in his passport", she says. Rainey now has a more nine-to-five job as a talent producer on the ABC's *Spicks & Specks*, while Teddy is in childcare for two days a week and at home with his father for three.

SYDNEY lawyer Kate sometimes thinks it would be easier if she and husband Tim (we've changed their names for privacy) "were a more traditional family". But Tim, who had planned to be a stay-at-home father, realised after six months at home with their second child that "he'd go mad". "Neither of us is someone who would be entirely happy staying home full-time."

The couple decided to work four days each, spend a day apiece caring for their two children and take turns leaving work early to collect the kids from childcare. This year, with both children in school, the couple will each spread four days' work over five, so they are home for their children in the afternoon.

So they've found the answer?

It's a pretty good balance, says Kate, but "there's no such thing as having it all". There are school musicals in the middle of major transactions, midnight oil burnt the evening before a day off, a "list a mile long" of things that need to be done and careers progressing more slowly than they'd like.

Kate, like a sizeable chunk of Australian workers, according to the 2009 Australian Work and Life Index, wishes she could work less. "[But] you're really choosing not to progress career-wise if you drop down to three days," she says. Even on four, Kate often feels she's treading water. "If I hadn't had kids, I would probably have made partner a long time ago," she says. "Other people are prepared to give their career 150 per cent and you can't compete with that if you want to see your family."

It's even harder for Tim because some of his colleagues can't understand why a man would work part-time to help bring up the kids, she says. (When Hinsliff's essay came out, the director of the London-based Demos think tank, Richard Reeves, said it could be harder for men to balance work and family because bosses couldn't get used to the idea "that men might be involved in child-rearing".)

One thing Moran, Rainey, Kate and Tim have in common is supportive partners. And all say it's a crucial factor in achieving a happy balance.

Moran says she would not be so happy as a full-time carer but for the fact that her husband never assumed it would be her that stayed home and "genuinely values what I do".

"He sees it as a valuable job, not just someone who cooks, irons and changes nappies."

AS OF this year, Australian parents have the right to ask for flexible working arrangements as well as an extra 12 months' unpaid parental leave after they have a baby. An 18-week, government-funded parental leave scheme will be introduced in 2011. And these policies come on top of the existing 50 per cent childcare rebate for working families, plus a childcare benefit for poorer families. But whether these policies will do much to even the scales is debatable.

Barbara Pocock, director of the Centre for Work and Life at the University of South Australia, says the "right to ask" is a "modest but important step" that will make it easier for more workers to ask for and receive flexibility (many white-collars are already asking and getting, but not so many blue-collars). But, she says, while the additional unpaid leave will be helpful for those who can afford a year out, it won't do much for low-income families.

Pocock believes some of the policies on offer in other countries would not go astray here. Denmark, for example, provides heavily subsidised childcare. Norway offers 44 weeks of parental leave with full salary compensation and has had some success sharing the childcare load between men and women by making a portion of parental leave use-it or lose-it paternal leave. And then there's France with the 35-hour working week.

"Countries that have extended paid leave … have much better participation rates and high levels of worker wellbeing," Pocock says, "and countries that are trying to cut hours of work and rein in greedy jobs … have much better (worker) outcomes and high levels of gender equity."

As a rich country, Australia should aspire to limits on working hours, Pocock says. As it is, nearly one in five Australians works 49 hours or more a week and an increasing number are stuck in ever "greedier" jobs, with extended hours, intense work, a lack of paid leave and technologies that "reach into the home". Such jobs are particularly difficult for carers, like Hinsliff, "whose terms of employment just sucked", Pocock says, "and there are a big bunch of women like [her] who are saying, 'I can't do this any more'."

Still, government policy is unlikely to do much if - as ethicist and author Clive Hamilton contends - we're driven to overwork less by actual need than by a neverending cycle of consumption (the more we have, the less we're satisfied, the more we want) and a growing tendency to define ourselves by what we have. And by what job we do. Hinsliff admits that she needs to find a new identity "that doesn't start lamely with, 'Well, I used to be …' "

None of the jugglers interviewed by *The Sunday Age* could nominate a government policy that would end the work-life imbalance.

Juggler, broadcaster and *New Inventors* host James O'Loghlin believes "there's no point waiting (for a government solution) because you'll get to 50 or 60 and you'll think: 'I paid off my house nine years ago and yet I'm never going to get that time back'."

O'Loghlin recently stopped working as an evening presenter on 702 ABC Sydney because his eldest daughter (he has three children with actor Lucy Bell) was starting school and he didn't want to be leaving for work just as she was getting home. Even before that, O'Loghlin had seriously cut down on the hours he spent at work after thinking about what he really wanted from life, and how he could achieve it.

"Once you've made finding more time a priority … there are a lot of ways to do it," he says (though he hastens to add that not all employees have so much control over their work). O'Loghlin, whose book *How To Balance Your Life* was published last year, stopped "chatting to people about how their weekend was every five minutes, because I had it in my mind that … every time I stuffed around at work that was extra time I could have spent with my kids". He worked on the train on the way home and after the children had gone to bed. Too many people stay at work from eight till six because they think it's what the boss expects "when all the employer cares about is that you do a good job", he says.

AS PART of its study on women's happiness, the US Bureau of Economic Research asked teenagers to rate the importance of a range of areas in their lives. The researchers found that teenage girls were increasingly attaching more importance to almost all areas of their lives.

"Teenage girls … (are) telling us everything is becoming more important," researcher Betsey Stevenson told CNN. "They're telling us that being a good child, being a good parent when they grow up, being a leader in their community, being a good employee, all of these things have become more important and what it's costing them is time for leisure."

The head of the British Girls' Schools Association, Jill Berry, put it more bluntly when she said that young women today were facing unprecedented pressure to be "perfect". Unless educators gave girls realistic expectations about "having it all", *The Guardian* reported Berry as saying, they were in danger of betraying them.

Is the dream of "having it all" officially over? Maybe not.

Moran agrees expectations can be a problem, but not high expectations: other people's ("If you're intelligent … you're meant to want to work," she says). Hamilton, meanwhile, says we need to broaden our expectations, not lower them, "so that a fulfilling and worthwhile life can be had in many, many different ways rather than in just busting a gut to get a high TER and then getting a degree and a high-paying job".

He invokes economist John Maynard Keynes, who once said that when humans reach a certain level of wealth - which Hamilton says we are now at - they "would be able to cultivate 'the art of life'." Indeed, in *Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren*, Keynes says it is only when we are free from "pressing economic cares" that the real challenge begins. "Man

will be faced with his real, his permanent problem: how … to live wisely and agreeably and well."

O'Loghlin, who has just taken his kids to see the film *Tooth Fairy*, "the moral of which is to have dreams", is feeling inspired.

"Part of the reason people are stuck … not seeing enough of their children or having enough of another life … is they're not dreaming, they're thinking it's good enough just to have a decent earning and a plasma screen TV," he says. "Wanting it all is a fantastic aim if you actually think about what 'it all' means."