

## Leading article: Excessively hard-working families

*Wednesday, 6 August 2008*

A study published today by the University of Cambridge suggests that the tide of public opinion is turning against the view that women can "have it all". It finds that in Britain and the United States there is "mounting concern" that women who play a full and equal role in the workforce do so at the expense of family life.

In one respect, this finding is profoundly dispiriting. It indicates that, for all the efforts by women to achieve all-round equality, the old gender stereotypes never really went away. There is one rule for men – who are expected to be the breadwinners – and another for women, who are expected to find fulfilment in the home. When the perception is that family life has declined, it is they – not the men – who take the rap and are expected to adjust their ambitions.

In other respects, however, this study reacquaints us with an awkward truth which has for too long been obscured. The specific proposition it examines is that family life suffers "if a woman works". Rewrite this to say that family life suffers "if both parents, or a single parent, go out to work full time", and you have a thesis that would probably be less contentious.

The British job market is more flexible than many in providing part-time jobs that make it easier for employees to combine work and bringing up children – even if these jobs invariably carry inferior pay and conditions. This Government has also tried, not always successfully, to ensure that work pays more than benefits.

In its desire to get as many people as possible into work, however, it effectively penalises parents – usually, but not always, mothers – who stay at home. Tax breaks are conditional on working, and they attach to the individual not the household. Staying at home has become the preserve of benefit-recipients – single mothers before their children turn 16 – and the better-off. Elsewhere, two incomes have become the norm.

Ministers insist that they want to help "hard-working families". Their version of family-friendly policies, though, is more nurseries – whose inflexible hours and inadequate standards discourage take-up – and so-called "wraparound childcare" in the form of breakfast and after-school clubs. For some children, the choice is now between a school day that can last from 7.30am to 8.30pm and long hours hanging out on the street or in an empty house.

It has long been taboo to ask whether the unhappiness of British children compared with their Continental counterparts, and the relatively high incidence of anti-social behaviour here, might somehow be related to the long hours worked by British parents. But the question should be asked – and answered. If the Cambridge study is correct in finding widespread dissatisfaction with the quality of family life – and we suspect it is – it may not be working women who are to blame, so much as the primacy our ministers have given to paid work.

Interesting? [Click here to explore further](#)

---

**ADVERTISER LINKS**

---

---

©independent.co.uk