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# Demographics and the Changing Canadian Family

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## Demographics and the Changing Canadian Family

### Abstract

*This paper starts with a synthesis of changes in families, work (paid and unpaid), reproduction, and the situation of children and youth. Alternate models of family policy are then elaborated, along with a discussion of policies in given domains associated with earning and caring, the division of labour, children and lone parents. Taking seriously the interest to arrive at a model that would increase the **overlap in the earning and caring activities of men and women**, the paper ends with a suggestion based on shared parental leave and part-time work, followed by the early entry of children to nursery schools and kindergartens. For low income families, it is important to increase the child tax benefit, and for lone parents, joint custody and advance maintenance payments. These provisions would help establish parents as **co-providers and co-parents**. State support for child benefits, for other basic social benefits, for parental leaves and education as of age three, would undermine gender differences in families, and consequently in the broader society. In particular, this would undermine the potential for exploitation of one spouse by another, based on inequality in their earning capacities that are generated by their family responsibilities.*

The study of families inevitably involves units, partnerships and bonds across individuals. This includes a need to resolve differences and to come together in a common identity and destiny. However, there is also a need for individuals to be different and to maintain their own identity. This may be seen in the sharing of paid and unpaid work, where there is both a push to reduce the differences between women and men in the distribution of work activities, and an interest to maintain differences in these key areas of life. While we may blame men for being unwilling to undertake caring activities, there may also be a resistance on the part of women who want to maintain their position as the main persons responsible for the caring activities that "make family." There can also be resistance in terms of paid work, with some men resisting the incursion of women, and an unwillingness of some women to enter paid work under conditions established for men. In effect, there are even disadvantages for wives and husbands to be competing in given domains; participation in a common pursuit can produce togetherness, but it can also become a source of friction and competitiveness rather than cooperation.

There are other similar trade-offs and contradictions that we often prefer to ignore because they are too hard to face. We like both **nuclear** families of parent(s) and children, and **extended** families that include grandparents and other relatives. But here again there can be tensions, especially in terms of which has ascendancy in cases of conflict. For instance, there is both an interest in continuing the family traditions that one has inherited, and in establishing the unique orientation of a given family unit, to say nothing of the difficulty of melding the traditions that may come from different families of origin. There is an interest in establishing one's **independence**, rather than being dependent on the care of others, along with an interest providing care as a loving activity and in **receiving the care of others**. Many of these contradictions can affect the bonds and partnerships between men and women; their interests in a given family can be rather different, and yet families are built on a commonality of interests.

These dialectics can also be visible across **siblings** in a family. There is both a common interest

and a need to be different. If one is successful at school, will the other seek to excel at sports; if one is good at saving, might the other avoid this competition by excelling as a consumer, if one is the Mary who focuses on emotional support, will the other seek to be Martha who excels at providing care. It is not hard to see that these dynamics may especially differentiate siblings who are of different sexes.

The contradiction that we may be most unwilling to face is that between the interest of **adults** and **children**. On the one hand, families are largely organized around the interests of children, and their caring needs in particular. While parents gain much satisfaction from the presence of children in their lives, they are also interested in obtaining satisfaction from their relationships with marital partners. Similarly, children gain much from parents, but they also want to establish their own independence and relationships. Consequently, children may be exploited in the interests of adults, or they may be abused by adults who are frustrated by the strong caring needs of children, or by a lack of fulfilment in their relationships with children. Similarly, parents can be exploited by their children, especially once the parents lack independence or are in need of care. There can be much variation in the extent to which a parent seeks their own satisfaction, in comparison to the interests of the child. This question continues beyond the time that the children have left home: how much do I spend for myself and how much do I invest in the reproductive inheritance that is passed to the next generation.

The contradiction between the interests of adults and children is most manifest in the **dissolution of relationships** and the formation of **other partnerships**. Some marriages are maintained for children, but in the context of an abusive relationship that entails a complete loss of independence and identity. More often, the interests of adults to change their lives in order to have fulfilling marital relationships are at the expense of the financial, human and social capital that they provide to their children.

There is more likely to be **sharing of resources** when people are living in the same household. This is most clearly manifested in the lesser transfer of absent fathers to children who are living with their mothers, which follows in part because of divided loyalties. Needless to say, there is less sharing across spouses who have separated. But there is also more sharing with children who are living at home, than after they have left home. Consequently a longer period of home residence typically represents larger investment in children. As another example, lone parents are less disadvantaged if they live with their own parents. The importance of co-residence is even visible in immigration through family sponsorship: the sponsored immigrant is less likely to become dependent on social assistance if they live in the same household as the sponsoring relatives.

### Changing families

The main change in families is a greater looseness in bonds that hold marriages or partnerships together. This flexibility in relationships was first observed in rising **divorce** rates, but an equally important manifestation is the increased **cohabitation**. The phenomenon of cohabitation has changed not only pre-marital relationships, but also marital relationships, and post-marital relationships. In particular, children born to adults who have cohabitated are subject to a much higher likelihood of experiencing the separation of their parents (Marcil-Gratton 1998). In an historical context, Lewis and Kiernam (1996) observe that the greater flexibility in relationships means a reduced boundary between marriage and non-marriage. This has also accentuated the importance of fathers to the lives of children, not only in terms of

providing resources, but also in term of their presence and involvement (McQuillan and Feree 1998).

The trends in divorce, lone parenthood, reconstituted families, blended families, cohabitation, children in cohabiting unions, all mean more **diversity** in the family experiences of both adults and children. At the same time, there is a certain **uniformity**, at least in terms of dwelling units. That is, most households comprise either one family or a person living alone. In 1996, 71.1 percent of households comprised families, and another 1.6 percent comprised relatives who were not immediate family members (Schembari 1998). However, only 3.1 percent of these family households included unrelated persons living in the same dwelling. For the remaining non-family households, 70.0 percent comprised one person.

The changes toward more divorce and cohabitation has sometimes been interpreted as undermining families, and some have called for a return to family values. However, these conclusions are based on a specific **model of families** that pays insufficient attention to converging gender trends that have produced greater adult independence. The converging gender trends are most clearly manifested in education and at work, but they also are seen in unpaid work, in the manifestation of interest in relationships with children, and even in responsibility for contraception. The call for a return to family values typically implies a return to traditional **complementary** roles for women and men, and it does not recognize the potential for family models based on companionship or a collaborative approach. That is, with all its difficulties, there is the potential for much more **symmetry** in the distribution of family activities of women and men. Besides the advantages of reducing dependencies, these new models provide more insurance in the case of loss of a partner or the inability of a given partner to provide income and other resources (Oppenheimer 1994). While many marriages remain based on a neo-traditional division of labour, where he takes more responsibility for earning activities, and she for caring activities, the general move toward more symmetry has changed the understandings of women and men. In particular, there is a much stronger interest in sharing responsibilities for both earning and caring. Instead of seeking to divide men and women, there is a greater understanding of a need for partnership between men and women in meeting the basic needs of families.

#### Work: paid and unpaid

The strong increases in women's labour force participation has meant significant strains on the work-family system. Women have carried the burden of much of this strain, as manifested especially in work **interruptions**.

In other cases, women have done a second shift at home, or have carried a double burden. However, when we consider **time use in all productive activities**, both paid and unpaid, there is much less imbalance. In the majority of families the man spends more time in paid work and the woman in unpaid work. The second largest category is where they do about the same amount of paid work, but she does significantly more unpaid work. Besides these cases of traditional divisions of work and double burdens for women, there are other cases where the division of both forms of work is more equal, and even those in which the husband does more of both paid and unpaid work. That is, there are several models for the division of work, which produce, on average, about the same total productive time for women and men. In two-parent families with children, the total productive time is most equally divided

between women and men when one of them is working full-time and the other part-time.

Based on past studies, it is clear that women are doing more paid work, and that the distribution of unpaid work has become somewhat more equal, but there remains considerable gender differences in the distribution of this total productive work. In the early 1980s, one might have said that women did two-thirds of the unpaid work while men did two-thirds of the paid work. The greater equality is clearly not half and half, but it has moved beyond the one-third and two-thirds division.

**Children accentuate the unequal distribution** of time use, since their presence tends especially to increase women's time in unpaid work, but also men's time in paid work. However, the more the division of labour becomes traditional with the birth of children, the greater the loss of marital happiness, especially for nontraditional wives (Thompson and Walker 1989: 863). In addition, the couples where the wife returns to work full-time after a lengthy interruption, may have the most difficulty in re-adjusting their unpaid work. Having set themselves into patterns where the wife did most of the unpaid work, it can be difficult to make alternative accommodations when she becomes employed full-time. In other words, women's full-time work commitment makes a difference in the amount of unpaid work undertaken by men.

That is, **paid and unpaid work are closely intertwined**. Persons, especially men, with higher paying jobs may avoid housework, just as employers may set women workers on career paths under the assumption that they will be responsible for housework. Structural differences in marriages can play into these differences, especially if men are older and have higher status at work. As Coltrane (1998b: 16) indicates, "opportunities in the job market thus affect decisions about family work at the same time that assumptions about family work affect the structure of the job market." In particular, the assumptions made about responsibility for domestic work may encourage women to choose careers that present more flexibility to accommodate unpaid work. The presence of women in these jobs may bring pressure for further accommodations to women's family activities, in these same occupations. If the jobs held overwhelmingly by men are not subject to these pressures to accommodate families, there can be a further differentiation in the jobs typically held by men and women, in terms of the extent to which they are family friendly.

There are other important changes associated with **paid work**. For instance, in the period 1986-96, for persons aged 25-44, the proportion of women working full time has not changed, but men's proportions have declined from 85 to 75 percent. There has also been a relative deterioration in the income levels of young men. While the occupational segregation has not changed extensively, it has moved in the direction of more equality, and for the total white collar professional and managerial occupations, the numbers of men and women have become rather equal. However, in given professions such as nursing or engineering, there remains considerable imbalance.

At the individual level, it is often assumed that there is **competition between work and home**. However, Moen and Yu (1997) find that success at work does not necessarily compete with success at home. Especially for persons in later stages of the work life, there is a positive relationship between feeling successful at work and feeling successful at home. It is at ages 25-39 that the experiences of men and women are most different, with men feeling successful both at work and at home, and women having

low feelings of success in both domains. That is, the high time demands of the child launching stage remains a particularly gendered experience.

### Reproduction

While there have been considerable change in work patterns, reproduction has been stable over the period 1976-96, at least in terms of average births per woman. However, an important change has occurred toward later ages of childbearing, along with a greater predominance of families with two children. Men's accommodations in unpaid work may have enabled fertility to remain constant, in spite of the continued increases in women's labour force participation. Later childbearing can also enable women to receive more support from husbands and workplaces. That is, slow adjustments in paid work, along with housework and child care, and their distribution by gender, have permitted fertility to remain at levels not much below replacement.

Finishing school and becoming established at work are now positive predictors of having a first and second child (DeWit and Ravanera 1998). The accommodations are more difficult for three or more children, which are more likely to occur when women are not working (Bélanger and Dumas 1998). That is, couples who have three or more children would have more difficulty achieving symmetry in their work activities.

The difficulties in establishing secure employment, and also uncertainty in relationships, may be responsible for failures to achieve life goals in numbers of children. That is, younger persons indicate that they would like to have some 2.3 children on average, but the experiences of somewhat older cohorts who have completed childbearing has been in the order of 1.9 to 1.8 children.

That is, the changes in the work-family system have not brought a society that does not reproduce itself. Having children represents an important life priority for most persons. The difficulty is in juggling this priority with other priorities concerning relationships and work. In some regards, childlessness may be the easiest route to equality, but many couples with children manage an allocation of productive work that gives them a sense of overall fairness in the distribution of this work.

### Children and youth

Children have gained various **advantages**, they are more likely to be wanted at conception, to be born when parents are older, and to have fewer siblings who compete for parental time. However, family change has also increased the likelihood that children experience the **separation of their parents**. While most children, both in lone parent and in two parent families, are doing well, and sometimes children benefit from parental separations, on average marital breakdown brings disadvantages to children in terms of access to financial, human and social capital. It also brings disadvantages to lone parents, especially in terms of the greater likelihood of financial hardship. For the absent parent, there are difficulties in maintaining relationships with their children. On average, reconstituted adult relationships do no present advantages to children in comparison to lone parenthood.

The work patterns of parents have also presented advantages to the well being of children, while

also increasing the **diversity across children**. There is first the differentiation between children with lone parents in comparison to those who have two working parents. In addition, assortive mating means that people of similar socio-economic status are more likely to form relationships, accentuating the differences. Within family types, the largest differentiation across lone parent families: the most disadvantaged are young lone mothers who have limited human capital, and little access to support payments from former partners.

It is useful to see the situation of youth within an adaptation strategy that **prolongs the period of dependency**. While earlier entry into the labour force can ensure independence, the delay in home leaving, the longer period of education, along with later formation of relationships and later childbearing, allow young people to invest in their future productivity. The most disadvantaged are those who leave school early, and especially those who have children at an early age. It is significant that the delay is longer for men, allowing even further investment in their subsequent productive activities.

The **investment of fathers** in their children has typically been indirect, by providing resources for his wife and family (Draper 1998). This breadwinner approach has given men a family role, but it has also meant gender asymmetry. Women who are locked into reproductive relations lack independence, to say nothing of the greater potential for violence and abuse. The direct investment of fathers in the care of their children presents a rather different adaptive strategy, but one that may enhance the continuing relationships between fathers and children. This nonetheless requires that women allow men to play these roles, even when separated, and that men seek to be involved in the lives of their children. In looking for incentives for parents to act in the best interests of their children, Amato and Booth (1997: 239) thus consider not only a longer period of education, but also the encouragement for couples to share work and family roles equitably, and for couples with children to work harder at keeping their marriages together.

While families are dependent on the opportunity structure offered by the society, and poverty presents various disadvantages, it is also true that **family strategies** are important to economic well being. For instance, the largest factor in increased market income inequality across families is the rise in lone parenthood (Zyblock 1996c). Increasingly, two substantial incomes are needed to achieve stable middle class standing. Those who are able to maintain two income families are best able to invest in the well being of their children, and in their own retirement. That is, not only unemployment, but also premature reproduction, or separation into two households, present various disadvantages for the accumulation of family resources. Consequently, as a society we should look for ways to encourage young people to attain more education, and for married couples to share work and family roles

### Children in lone parent and step families

Some of the earliest research on children in lone-parent families focussed on the absence of a male role model and authority, which were thought to have implications especially for male adolescent delinquency. Subsequent research concluded that it was not the absence of a male role model but the absence of the male income that was detrimental. The policy focus was on better incomes for female led lone-parent families, including better incomes for women and stronger transfers from absent parents.

However, other outcomes indicate that children living with a step-parent are not that different



from those living with a lone-parent (Amato and Booth 1997; Amato 1998; Cherlin et al. 1997). That is, it would appear that the issues are more complex than simply the absence of a parent and the associated economic disadvantage (Haddad 1998; Ross et al. 1996; 1998a; 1998b). In effect, children in step-families have access to at least two adults who play parental roles, often three or four.

There are at least two further avenues for research. One relates to selectivity questions wherein step-parents are selected with certain disadvantages, especially in socio-economic terms. For instance, a man with more established socio-economic characteristics might be better placed to enter a conjugal relationship where he would parent his own children.

The second avenue for research concerns the difficulties that separation and reconstituted relationships may pose for children. There are clearly cases where children are better off with their parents separating, in fact there are cases where children would be better off living with neither parent. However, it is also clear that the dissolution and reconstitution of relationships is more often to the advantage of adults than of children.

Key questions requiring further research concern the conditions under which child outcomes are positive in both intact and non-intact families. Since it is not just the presence or absence of a parent, or a parent's income, what is it about parenting and parent-child relationships that predict more positive outcomes for children?

It would appear that these conditions of positive outcomes relate to the transfer of economic, human and social capital (Coleman 1988; Furstenberg 1998). For instance, the average disadvantage of children in lone-parent contexts may apply especially to the economic context of family poverty. The selectivity of step-parents may imply a deficiency of human capital. While a step-parent presents social capital, including co-parenting social capital, the child may not "buy into" this co-parenting social capital associated with reconstituted relationships. With the absence of a parent, the child in a lone-parent context is more likely to have a deficiency in the transfer of not only financial but also human and social capital. On all three levels, the relationships of the child with the absent parent could overcome this deficiency, assuming of course that the parent is available and a positive element in the child's life. In some cases step-parenting can pose additional challenges for the proper functioning of transfers from the absent parent.

### The context of family policy

Canada does not have an explicit set of family policies. At the same time, policies affecting families are implicit in many social and economic programs, including those affecting income security, the labour market, and tax provisions. In her extensive review of Canadian family policies, Baker (1995a: 5) considers the three following areas: (1) laws relating to marriage, divorce, reproduction, adoption, custody and child support, (2) support of family income through tax provisions, child benefits, leave benefits, and (3) direct services like child care, child protection, home care health services and subsidized housing. It should be noted that since the mid-1980s, Quebec represents an exception to the lack of direct policy attention to families. Various provisions have evolved in areas from housing to the labour market and social services, out of deliberate efforts "to think and act family" (Le Bourdais and Marcil-Gratton

1994).

In one sense, families are considered to be private domains, and there has been an effort to "remove the state from the bedrooms of the nation," to quote Trudeau when he was introducing changes to the criminal code regarding penalties for adultery, conditions for divorce, and availability of contraception. However, in another sense, most policies and programs of the state have consequences for families.

A key domain is the sharing between families and the state in the care for persons who are dependent because of age, disability or health. In part, the state seeks to encourage the family support of dependents, and to encourage self-sufficiency. However, this includes contradictions because the persons who look after dependents within families will have less ability to be themselves self-sufficient in the labour market. Stated differently, there is a continued need for balance between the discouragement of dependency and the encouragement of the caring activities of families. In addition, there are the needs of persons who are not self-sufficient and who also do not have access to family support networks. In effect, there are three bases for support: individual, family and society. The state needs to support individuals and families in ways that also encourage their self-sufficiency.

A concrete example can be useful to illustrate the broad domain of family policy. At the time these pages were being written, there was much discussion regarding benefits for same sex partners. In one sense, the state should not have a concern whether or not people are living with same sex partners, and in effect homosexual behaviour has been decriminalized. In addition, there are relatively few family units where the partners are of the same sex, consequently their having equivalent benefits would not significantly expand the costs of benefits. However, the discussion is really about the basis for obtaining benefits. For instance, if there can be benefits for same sex partners, what about no sex partners? As a person in the labour force, could I not confer my benefits to a brother, or any other individual who is living with me? We then realize that benefits involving entitlements based on work are reminiscent of a "family wage" that sought to support a worker and his dependent family. The specific case of spousal support payments may not be as important for former same sex partners, because they are not subject to the gender dynamics that can produce inequality in heterosexual marriages.

While these benefit structures are means of encouraging family support for dependents, they also encourage dependency. Given that the family wage model no longer applies, it is not clear why benefits should be allocated in this manner. Instead of having entitlement based on one's family tie with someone who is employed, should it not be based on citizenship in the society? That is, what should be the interplay of individual, family and social responsibility for benefits ranging from dental care, to health and pensions? These are not idle discussions because the outcomes of such policy decisions have consequences on the kinds of families and societies in which we live.

### The changing context of the welfare state

The Canadian welfare state was mostly established in the 1950s and 1960s, at a time when the **economic, family and demographic contexts** were rather different. For one thing, this was a period of rapid economic growth with the expectation that we could afford an expanding public domain. In regard

to families, the breadwinner model was still dominant. This was a peak time for husband-wife families, after widowhood at young ages had declined, and before the rise in separation and divorce. Demographically, there were large numbers of children and few elderly. The main thrust of some of these changes toward a welfare state involved the society taking more responsibility for the elderly, through Old Age Security, the Guaranteed Income Supplement, the Canada Pension Plan and associated benefits. Not only have the numbers of elderly increased, but these programs have themselves aged. The Canada Pension Plan in particular was very cheap when it was first instituted because all employed persons were paying into the plan while relatively few were receiving benefits. There were few beneficiaries because there were fewer elderly, but also because only those who had previously contributed could receive benefits. With larger numbers of beneficiaries have come higher costs requiring significant restructuring (Beaujot and Richards 1997). This restructuring has occurred for the Canada Pension plan, but not for the elderly benefits received through Old Age Security and the Guaranteed Income Supplement.

Focusing on **women**, and analysing the Scandinavian experience with the welfare state, Leira (1992) highlights other contrasts and contradictions. In particular, state intervention in families has been highly controversial, both welcomed and contested. In one sense, state intervention has increased women's independence and has reduced women's dependency on marriage. Not only have women increased their control over fertility, but there are manifest changes in everyday life and in their economic and political participation. However, the welfare state remains tied to a gender differentiated family where women hold the first line of responsibility for caring, but where the social rights accessed through caring roles are second class compared to entitlements that occur through earning roles. For instance, through caring activities, but depending on family income, one has access to child tax benefits. However the benefits accessed through earning activities are much more extensive, including unemployment and disability insurance, pensions and even parental leave. The assumption that families will be the first line of support for dependents effectively promotes separate spheres for women and men. The noteworthy exception is health care, where there is universal access to a public system, regardless of one's family membership. An equivalent system in the economic sphere would be some kind of guaranteed annual income that would not be a benefit derived from earning roles but a universal system that would be a basic right of citizenship (Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada 1985).

Focusing on post-war Britain, Lewis and Kiernan (1996) observe that the changing boundaries between marriage, non-marriage and parenthood have brought concerns regarding **lone motherhood**. There was first a separation between sex and marriage, which was often seen as liberating, and many people went through periods of marriage, divorce and cohabitation. The state was not particularly concerned about these changing definitions of relationships. In the Canadian case the relationships of consenting adults were considered to be private matters, and some of the provisions of marriage were applied to cohabitation. The subsequent separation between marriage and parenthood brought more change, and family law was recast with a greater emphasis on the responsibilities of parenthood rather than marriage. That is, the state became concerned with relationships mostly when children were present; the focus is on the responsibilities of mothers and fathers, rather than husbands and wives. Lone parenthood thus poses a special problem due both to its greater frequency and to the proper definition of parental responsibilities.

### Indicators of well-being and pressures for policy

In terms of low income status, there is an important differentiation of disadvantage by **family and life cycle characteristics**. While 15 percent of children live with a lone parent, half of the children living below the low income line are living with one parent. Over ages, it is noteworthy that the proportions with low income have declined significantly for the elderly, but have persisted for children (Ng 1992). The disadvantaged elderly are mostly women who are not living in a family context.

Young adults have higher rates of poverty than any other adults. In addition, change in family status is associated with young adult poverty, as is not living in a couple for young women (Cheal 1997). For the total population, the taxes and transfers reduce the numbers of persons who are below 0.5 of median income by more than half. However, the least reduction is for children aged 0-14, and by far the most reduction is for persons aged 65 and over.

In The New Face of Poverty, the Economic Council of Canada (1992: 21-27 ) also observes that family questions have considerable consequence for income security needs. For instance, separation and divorce is associated with higher transition into poverty, especially if there are children. Being in poverty for more than one year is more common for lone-parents and single persons under 25, while there are high transition rates into poverty for single persons with children. Thus, besides the gender element of poverty, there are significant differentials associated with life cycle stage, with not living in families and with family type.

The various countries of the world have taken rather different approaches in dealing with these issues. Considering The State and the Family, Gauthier (1996: 206) observes that many countries are under pressure for more family policy, because of persistent low fertility, high female labour force participation and the large numbers of children living in poverty, especially in the context of lone parenthood. At the same time, there are pressures for less policy because of budget constraints, a social agenda that focuses on the concerns of aging, and ideologies that favour non-intervention and self-support.

Thus across countries there is a high profile of family issues, but also large disparities in the approaches taken and in the extent of benefits and services for families (O'Hara 1998). For instance, in France the focus is on pro-natalist interventions, while in the Nordic countries it is on equality and labour force participation (Gauthier 1993). In Great Britain and the United States, the political agenda is dominated by questions of poverty, lone parenthood and welfare dependency. Some countries have programs that are more universal, while others target benefits to the disadvantaged. Across Europe, the proportion of GNP devoted to family policies varies from over four percent in Sweden, Denmark and Finland, to under one percent in Greece and Portugal (Lévy 1998). The Canadian level is clearly toward the bottom of this distribution, with most funds being targeted.

### Models of family policy

The models of family policy can be differentiated in accordance with the division of responsibility between individuals, families and society for obtaining and providing these resources. A key

consideration is the extent to which there is an acknowledged social responsibility for children, in contrast to seeing children as the private responsibility of their parents (Phipps 1996).

If questions of gender are placed in the centre of models of family policy, the main differentiation is between models based on complementary roles and those based on equivalent roles for women and men. The **complementary roles** approach to supporting families and children promotes the division of earning and caring activities. In this model, the earning activities of one parent may be considered to be a family wage. There is preference for parents looking after their own children rather than public child care, and consequently there is a period of withdrawal from the labour force for one parent. In order to provide security for the spouse who is less in the labour force, especially in case of divorce, there is pension splitting and spousal alimony. Taxation is at the family level, or there are tax deductions for spouses with little income.

In a model based on **equivalent roles**, both parents are responsible for earning and caring activities. Family income is supported by encouraging both spouses to be in the labour force. There is a minimum amount of leave associated with births, and child care is seen as a public responsibility. Security in the case of divorce is provided by promoting the economic independence of adults. While child support and preferably joint custody are envisaged in the case of divorce, pension splitting and alimony are discouraged because they promote dependency. For similar reasons, taxation is at the individual level, without deductions for a spouse who is not employed.

Partly because family policies are not explicit, the policies in many countries including Canada involve some elements of **both** of these models. However, it will be argued that policies in Sweden are closer to the equivalent roles model, while Canada retains many elements that encourage complementarity in gender roles. Until the 1970s and 1980s, marital roles in Canada were largely considered to be complementary (Baker and Phipps 1997). While there have been major shifts in gender roles and the configuration of families, Moen (1992: 9) observes that we remain uncertain, if not divided, as to what men's and women's roles should be. She continues by suggesting that "the challenge is not for women to become exactly like men in their work lives, or to return to the domestic hearth, but for us as a nation to restructure both family and work roles, for both men and women." While there may be efficiencies associated with specialization and complementary roles, it also promotes dependency and does not provide insurance in case of divorce or the economic incapacity of the principal wage earner (Oppenheimer 1997).

### Policies on the well-being of children

Besides the attention to specific programs and services, it is important to pay attention to the overall economic well-being of children. The long term trend of the 1980s and 1990s has involved a slight increase in the proportions of children with low income status. This contrasts with the unanimous resolution passed in the House of Commons in 1989 to "seek to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among children by the year 2000" (Battle and Muszynski 1995: 1). Child poverty is higher in Canada than in most other rich countries. In a comparison of 14 richer countries, only the United States has higher child poverty than Canada. Also, it is only in the United States, Canada and the Netherlands that poverty rates are higher for children than for the total population.

Comparing seven countries in the mid-1980s, Baker (1995b: 82) observes that Canada did better than the United States in terms of the proportions of poor families that were lifted out of poverty by government transfers, but France, Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom had done significantly better than Canada. Baker concludes that eliminating child poverty is a daunting task, requiring a comprehensive overhaul of policies in several areas: taxes and transfers, parental leaves and employment strategies, social assistance, and child care.

Social transfers significantly reduce child poverty. In effect, since 1983, children aged 0-14 in families with incomes that are less than half of the median income receive more of their income from transfers than from earnings (Picot and Myles 1996a: 248). That is, the relative stability of child poverty results from the decline in market income which is compensated by increased transfers. In 1991, these poor families had received about 28 percent of their income from social assistance, 18 percent from child benefits, 15 percent from other transfers, and only 39 percent from earnings. For all families, total transfers of all kinds represented 22 percent of family income in 1975 and 26 percent in 1991 (Baker and Phipps 1997: 142). The federal cash benefits for children totalled over \$5 billion in 1989-90, nearly double the amount from ten years before (Baker and Phipps 1997: 199).

Besides the benefits of social transfers for poorer families, children have benefited from a number of other trends: more earners per family, more educated parents, fewer children per family, and later age at childbirth. However, they have suffered from the stable or declining real annual earnings especially for men under 35 years of age (Picot and Myles 1996a: 246). In addition, there are increasing proportions of children in lone parent families. That is, the increased transfers have not been sufficient to compensate for the detrimental trends in real wages and in lone parenthood.

#### Economic well-being in lone parent families

While overall poverty rates have eased downward in the past two decades, this has not been the case among lone parents (Hunsley 1997: 1). Lone parents have also come to occupy a lower strata of the poor, compared to other groups such as elderly women and two-parent poor families. For instance, among ten countries, only the United States and Australia were doing worse than Canada in terms of the median net disposable income of lone mothers compared to two parent families in 1987 (Hunsley 1997: 43). While the median net disposable income of lone mother families was 52.6 percent of that of two parent families in Canada, it was 74 to 87 percent of the income of two parent families in France, Germany, Norway and Sweden. In terms of the proportions at low income, all countries show more disadvantages for lone parents, but the extent of these relative disadvantages is noteworthy in the United States, Australia, Canada, Ireland and Germany (Battle and Muszynski 1995: 7).

The problems are compounded by the increased numbers: between 1975 and 1992, the proportion children living with lone parents increased from 8.7 percent to 14.7 percent of all children, and they have come to represent 47.1 percent of all child poverty (Table 7.9). These figures are not that different from other countries. In 1990, lone parents represented 10 to 15 percent of all families in countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and 25 percent in the United States (OECD 1990).

In all countries, children living with one parent do less well than those living with both parents, but transfers reduce the gap more in some countries than in others (Smeeding et al. 1995). In most cases, earnings and social transfer play a larger role than private transfers in helping to reduce the poverty rates of children in lone parent families. In Sweden, the private transfers from fathers play a very small role, but the labour force participation of lone mothers is similar to that of married mothers, and the lone parents are more likely to be working full-time. In addition, the policy framework does not differentiate solo mothers from married mothers, and as a consequence the poverty rate for children in lone parent families is close to 5 percent.

Phipps (1998) compares the situation of children with lone mothers in Canada, Norway and the United States. In terms of mean adjusted disposable income, in the United States children with lone mothers have 52 percent of the income of all children, compared to 66 percent in Canada and 81 percent in Norway. The main differences that she observes for Norway are more generous and universal family allowance (which is doubled for lone parents), advance maintenance of child support payments, and higher labour force participation of lone mothers.

The policy models used for two parent households are difficult to apply to the one parent case. Eichler (1996) contrasts the three models called "patriarchal model," "individual responsibility model" and "social responsibility model." In particular, the individual responsibility model, which is dominant in Canada, assumes that parents are responsible for the economic well-being and the care of dependent children. This presents problems for a lone parent who cannot, at the same time, be both earner and carer, especially for young children. In Canada, lone mothers of young children are now less in the labour force than mothers in two parent families. Eichler concludes that we have the right policies for health and primary and secondary education, but we need better provisions for day care, post-secondary education and family days off. More generally, she argues for the social responsibility model, where "the public is responsible for the cost of care of adults who cannot care for themselves, and shares the responsibility for the cost of care of dependent children" including "taking over the financial contributions of the unavailable parent" (idem. p. 320).

### Child support payments

The law has evolved to seek to ensure that absent parents retain their financial responsibility for their children. This has included the potential to garnish wages, even for absent parents who are in another province. However, the rates of default on child payments remain high. Indeed, in 1994-95 more than half of the children's parents had settled their custody arrangements out of court (Canadian Council on Social Development 1998: 14). Regular child support payments were being received for three-quarters of out-of-court agreements and half of court-ordered agreements. That is, the state has not been able to impose the "individual responsibility model" on absent parents. In some cases, an absent parent is unemployed or otherwise unable to pay. Given the significant numbers of lone parenthood cases associated with early parenthood, some of the cases of default can be attributed to the general difficulties in the economic integration of young adults.

The provisions in Sweden offer an important contrast, and have managed to significantly reduce levels of poverty for single parents, in spite of comparable rates of separation and divorce. An important

element is the advance maintenance provisions wherein the payments are set by the state and made directly to the lone parent, with the state subsequently seeking to obtain the child support funds from the absent parent. In addition, joint custody is the default condition and some 80 percent of cases involve joint custody. The payments are also relatively low, at about \$215 per month per child in 1997. These can be perceived as fair, corresponding to the effective additional costs sustained by the parent with whom the child is living.

Not only does the state make the payments directly to the parent, but the collection is only taken from the absent parents who can pay. For instance, an absent parent can argue that they need to make only partial payments to the state because a full payment would not allow them to have the housing necessary to accommodate the child at certain times of the year. In effect, the state collects only 70 to 75 percent of the total advance maintenance payments (Kindlund 1997). Another useful observation is that absent fathers are paying only 30 to 35 percent of what the state pays to lone mothers, under various provisions.

In Canada, only 21 percent of child custody arrangements established in 1995 involved joint custody, while 68 percent involved mothers and 11 percent fathers with sole custody. In 1996, child support guidelines were initiated. This helps to ensure that child maintenance payments established by the courts follow comparable standards. For instance, with two children, a father with an income of \$20,000 would pay \$285 per month, but this would be \$700 per month if his income was \$50,000 (Driedger 1998).

A Parliamentary committee recommended in 1998 that the Divorce Act be changed to replace the concepts of "custody" and "access" with "shared parenting" (McIlroy 1998). This would give absent parents more input and responsibility in how children are raised, but not necessarily change the amount of time spent with each parent. If parents cannot agree, the committee recommended that parents take a mandatory course on the impact that a bad break-up can have on children.

It is interesting, as Marcil-Gratton and Le Bourdais (1998) have observed, that payments from absent parents are more regular when there is not a court-ordered custodial agreement. It may be that the private or informal agreements are more similar to joint custody in the sense that parents do not need to define their custodial agreement through the courts and consequently they may effectively be sharing the custody of the child, even if the child lives largely with one parent. It is understandable that, just as in intact families, the form of involvement with each parent can change over time and the important thing is that there be some acceptable agreement between the parents on questions of custody and child care. There is consequently a need for the potential for change in the agreement as circumstances evolve. While there are clearly cases where it is important to define one parent as the custodial parent, and even sometimes to prevent the other parent from relating with the child, in other circumstances the child would benefit from maximizing the potential interaction with both biological parents. That is, policy should first focus on the needs of children, regardless of their living with one or both parents. It is particularly important that there be some kind of accepted agreement regarding the involvement of separated parents with their children.

#### Toward new family models for a balance of earning and caring

Even with more equal opportunity in education and the labour market, if women and men continue



to have different options and responsibilities in the family domain, this will continue to affect their economic independence. As Nasman (1997) has observed, we have "gender-symmetric public regulations and gender-typed family behaviour." That is, even with a society that promotes gender equality, if family behaviour remains unequal, the opportunity structure of women and men will remain differentiated.

On the other hand, looking at "The future of fatherhood," Coltrane (1995: 273) sees a potential for the "erosion of separate gender spheres within the family as potentially contributing to a fundamental reordering of relationships between men and women throughout society."

These perspectives clearly emphasize the importance of what is happening within families, and their consequences for either maintaining or reducing gender inequality. Other authors suggest that we should start with the broader society. Pupo (1997: 144) proposes that couples may negotiate their own division of unpaid work, "but they do so within the context of cultural assumptions and expectations regarding men's and women's roles and a social structure that may not easily accommodate their desire for change." For instance, Duffy and Pupo (1996) observe that most of the employment possibilities for women are in the service sector which includes significant numbers who are subject to lower pay, fewer benefits, less security, and more part-time work. This in turn leads to the continuation of inequality in the home. If men continue to be the primary breadwinners, patriarchal dynamics inside the home are likely to be maintained.

However, given more equal opportunities for education and jobs, we can also suggest that the earning strategies of women and men are based on what is happening within families. In particular, women may be more oriented toward jobs that allow for flexibility in the interphase of the family and work spheres. Ultimately, it is not possible to answer the question as to whether the persistence of gender differences is due to family questions or to the broader society. Both are involved in complex interactions.

There is a long way to go before males and females are equal in families, but "the state must stop seeing men and women as vastly different in terms of roles within the couple and the family" (Pamomba 1995: 195). The state must encourage women's economic roles, and also encourage men to find more of their identity in a fatherhood that is based on companionship rather than authority. The propositions that follow are based on the view that restructuring at work is not sufficient. Already, the opportunities at work are being pushed in a gender symmetric direction, through equal opportunity legislation. The emphasis must be on creating more symmetry in the private domain.

It is for these reasons that my own policy conclusion will emphasise the reduction in the division of labour within the home as a primary question, along with further efforts to establish equal opportunity in the broader society. This is also in line with the Swedish experience that involved a "concerted effort by government, organized labor and other institutions to distribute the burden of parenting between men and women, and to facilitate the employment of all adults, including those caring for infants and children" (Moen 1989: 5). As we have seen, this has involved various provisions including the requirement that one parent take no more than 11 of the 12 months of leave. There are other explicit attempts to reduce spousal dependency, such as no provisions for pension splitting and, for couples who married after 1989, no widow's pensions. However, while men's involvement in parental leaves has increased, there are reported cases of cohabitation where a man's parenthood is not declared so that the mother can take the full twelve

months. Also, while either parent can reduce their work to 30 hours per week until a child is eight years old, it is overwhelmingly women who opt for these alternatives. Consequently, the gender differences in Swedish society are persistent. For instance, the gender division of part-time work is even more unequal than in Canada, and occupational segregation is probably higher.

Instead of seeking to better distribute the burden of parenting between men and women, some analysts propose that the state should be more involved with child care, especially through day care. Addressing the policy needs to overcome the separation between public and private spheres, Pupo (1997: 151) starts with high quality accessible child care, and also suggests improved respite and health care programs, along with family friendly workplace policies. While this would relieve women's burden, it does not necessarily increase men's involvement. One could even argue that couples who look after more of the child care themselves may be forced to involve fathers to a larger extent than if child care becomes a public responsibility.

To encourage co-parenting in two parent situations, the requirement should be for **equal parental leave**. For instance, parental leave could be increased from six months to one year, with the requirement that neither parent may take more than 26 weeks. There is nothing magical about the 15 weeks of maternal and 10 weeks of parental leave that currently exist. There is no specific threshold associated with a child's 26th week, in fact many are still not sleeping through the night at this age. At young ages, many parents consider it best to be themselves largely responsible for child care, which also justifies a longer period of leave.

For similar reasons, one might suggest another two years where one parent could **work part-time**, let us say six hours per day, but again a given parent could only take one of the two years. With more flexibility in parental time, this could be complemented with **community-based child care** involving volunteers, parent fees and state subsidies. In effect, many parents of children under three currently arrange these kinds of combinations of part-time work, shift work, parental care along with some day care or informal care. As parents know very well, there will always be an opportunity cost to having children. Adults who cannot shoulder some of these costs should not be having children. But essentially, each parent would have the right to reduce work hours for one year and return to full-time work after the child is three. In addition, part-time work involving 30 or more hours per week should be subject to the same benefits, pro-rated, as full-time work. This proposition is taken from the Swedish experience where one parent has the right to reduce their work hours to six hours per day until the child is eight years old, and to return to full time work at any point.

That brings the child to age three, at which point public nursery schools, **kindergarten** or day care could become available, as it is in France. In effect, the Royal Commission on Learning (1994) in Ontario proposed that children should start being at school as of age three. The research which they reviewed convinced the Commission that this was the optimal arrangement from the point of view of the child's educational welfare. Johnson and Mathien (1998) have proposed an integrated system of care and school for children aged four and five. It is also similar to a program proposed by Cleveland and Krashinsky (1998) for children aged two to five, with full- and part-time nursery schools and kindergartens.

While a public system that starts at age three necessitates more parental leave and part-time work,

it reduces the child care costs. The federal cost of a full system of child-care centres for all ages would be in excess of \$8 billion (Kent 1999). Parents who want to return to full-time work more quickly could use their higher income to pay for the costs of child care. The proposition is also based on a prevalent view among parents, that they would like to be primarily responsible for the care of young children, especially as babies and toddlers. There is also the cost factor, since the federal cost of a full system of child care centres would probably be in excess of \$8 billion (Kent 1999). Nonetheless, there is need to enhance the budgets for child care centres, and for subsidizing the child care costs of low income parents.

In one-parent situations, a first priority is to establish **joint custody** as a default condition, except in cases where one of the parents is incapable or harmful to the child. There could still be the possibility for separated parents to share leave time and part-time work, and consequently to be equally involved as parents. Alternatively, these leaves and part-time work could all be taken by the parent with whom the child is residing. More important, **advance maintenance payments** would ensure that, if a parent is not paying the child support payments, the moneys would still flow to the lone parent. While provisions vary, some twelve European countries already have systems of advance maintenance payments (Hunsley 1997: 100) and Sweden uses the default condition of joint custody.

In terms of **child benefits**, my sense is that we have it about right. That is, while the payments could clearly be higher, a system operating through taxes permits redistribution toward those with lower income, and a type of guaranteed annual income for children. It is important that government seek to have all social assistance to children operate through this system so that persons on low income receive the payments, regardless of the source of income, be it low wages or social assistance. That is, there would no longer be an incentive to remain on welfare in order to have access to welfare provisions for children. To have all social assistance to children operate through the child tax benefit, it is necessary to raise the benefit to \$2,500 per child (Battle 1997c). There are already some plans in this direction, as the total budget which was \$5.1 billion in 1997, was raised by \$850 million in 1998, and by another \$425 million in each of 1999 and 2000.

This is another advantage of the child tax benefit, it is easy to add funds and change the benefit levels. Battle (1997c) suggests that we aim at \$4,000 per child by the year 2010 or sooner, to cover a low estimate of the cost of children. It is important to observe that this would reduce the depth of poverty in poor families, but it would not eliminate child poverty. To move all children above the low income line would probably cost in excess of \$15 billion, besides the \$6 billion of current expenditure.

Once the level of \$2,500 is reached, an alternative might be to use a slower sliding scale so that there is a less rapid reduction in benefits at family incomes above \$30,000. That way, the program would not be seen as mostly benefiting low income families, and lone parent families in particular. This might even increase the willingness of middle class families to pay the taxes for a system that brings them some benefit. At least for symbolic reasons, and also to provide some redistribution between those with and without children, some minimal payments at higher incomes would indicate the support of society to families with children. Most European countries have some form of family allowance, which is normally subject to taxation, as a means of supporting some of the costs of children, regardless of the income level of the family. Such payments help to equalize the standards of living of families with and without children. Nonetheless, especially for reasons of cost, the structure of the benefit should retain a sliding

scale to the advantage of families with the lowest income.

Other **social benefits** should be less tied to work, while being more tied to basic citizenship in a welfare state. As others have argued, a universal program such as guaranteed annual income would permit more efficiency in the delivery of benefits (Royal Commission on the Economic Union 1985; Beaujot 1991; Courchene 1994; Woolley 1998). In addition, such a universal system would remove the vestiges of the family wage model wherein dependents gain access to benefits through their family connection with an employed person. In effect, the income-tested guaranteed annual income that now exists for the elderly and for children would be extended to the adult population, regardless of the reason for lack of self-sufficiency. The difficulty with this particular proposition is that some categories of persons now receive considerably higher benefits than would be received under a guaranteed annual income system. Existing systems provide greater benefits for the elderly, for persons benefiting from the disability provisions of the Canada Pension Plan, and from employment insurance. Adults who cannot work, but who also cannot benefit from these particular plans, have much lower benefits. Equalizing the benefits would thus include some savings. However, this would need to be done slowly, in order not to suddenly disadvantage certain categories of recipients.

Proposals suggested here would help establish parents as **co-providers and co-parents**. State support for child benefits, for other basic social benefits, for sharing parental leaves, and education as of age three, would undermine gender differences in families, and consequently in the broader society. In particular, this would undermine the potential for exploitation of one spouse by another, based on inequality in their earning capacities that are generated by their family responsibilities.

Two things in particular seem to be blocking the kinds of discussions suggested here. One is the pressure for globalization, which is often interpreted to mean a limited amount of space for policy that is independent of the American model. While the economic context cannot be ignored, instead of a "race to the bottom" in social policy, why can we not move our policies closer to European provisions, encouraging societal support for families and the economic independence of adults. As Ursel (1992: 302) argues, the pressures to globalization need not bring a move to reprivatize the costs of reproduction.

The other major constraint on the discussions of family and social policy involves our disagreement regarding the relative roles of the provinces and the national government. Quebec has taken a much more pro-active stance in the family area, as one of the means through which to take control of its future as a distinct society. Consequently other discussions, particularly those that would span the interests of the provinces, present an additional difficulty. Following the establishment of the block funding through the Canada Health and Social Transfer, inter-provincial understandings were to evolve with regard to health, education and welfare (Courchene 1994; 1995). In February 1999, all provinces but Quebec signed a social union understanding in terms of national standards, opting-out provisions, and the roles of federal and provincial governments. If this asymmetry is accepted, it may allow Quebec to maintain more provincial control over social programs, and a social union of the rest of Canada with continuing federal roles to ensure national standards.

These dimensions of family policy consequently have extensive ramifications. They not only determine how we define ourselves as a society, including its opportunity structures for women and men,

but also how we relate to other societies, both next door and in a globalizing world.

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