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Women, Work and Preference Formation: A Critique of Catherine Hakim's Preference Theory

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Abstract

The work of the British sociologist Catherine Hakim has been used prominently to support 'neo-traditionalist' approaches to gender, work and family. Hakim (2000, 2002) argues that, in modern affluent societies, virtually all women have a genuine choice between family work and market work. Further, women make their choice based on their preference for a particular lifestyle: work-centred, home-centred or one that combines paid work and time with family. We argue that Hakim's preference theory is flawed. It fails, in particular, to account for phenomenon of 'adaptive preferences', whereby women adjust their preferences in response to persistent gender inequality and make a conscious decision not to play by the current rules of the game. We also argue that women's paid work cannot be isolated from their unpaid work. Instead we must address the critical questions about care: who does it, under what conditions and how are the costs shared? Overcoming gender inequality therefore demands much more radical social change than has occurred to date.

Introduction

A number of recent magazine and newspaper articles have highlighted women who willingly toss in their high paid professional or managerial jobs to stay at home with their children²⁴. These women are educated and have tasted success in the world of paid work. They had the option of returning to work but chose to put their family first. This is often celebrated as a matter of choice. In some cases it is portrayed as a choice feminists refuse to accept. At other times the possibility of such a choice is attributed to feminism itself²⁵.

The British sociologist Catherine Hakim would have no difficulty explaining this phenomenon. She argues that, in modern affluent societies, virtually all women have a genuine choice between family work and market work. Further, women make their choice based on their preference for a particular

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lifestyle: work-centred, home-centred or one that combines paid work and time with family (adaptive²⁶). Although Hakim does not fully articulate her concept of preferences, she clearly links preferences to dispositions and values and considers preferences to be consistent over the lifespan (Hakim 2000).

We argue that Hakim's preference theory is flawed. It fails to account for the complex

²⁴ Examples include O'Brien (2005) and Murray-Smith (2004).

²⁵ Commentators such as Bettina Arndt and Janet Albrechtson have expressed the first position in various newspaper articles, and writers such as Pamela Bone (2004) and Don Edgar (2005) the second perspective.

²⁶ Hakim uses 'adaptive' here to mean adaptive between work-and home-centred priorities. It is not the same meaning that adaptive has elsewhere in this article.

cognitive, intentional processes that lay behind choices and preference formation. In particular, Hakim's approach does not deal with the crucial phenomenon of 'adaptive preferences', whereby women adjust their preferences in response to persistent gender inequality.

Our critique of Hakim's preference theory arose out of reflection on our own research findings. The first findings emerged from a study on gender equity within the Australian corporate sector. The second came from a project for the *Security4Women* consortium of women's organisations. The consortium comprises BPWA²⁷, CPA Women, the Australian Federation of University Women and the Association of Women Educators. The Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women funded the *Security4Women* consortium to commission research into women's economic well-being and security. The third is Mary Leahy's doctoral research on work and family in Australia.

In the next section of this paper we provide an overview of women and paid employment in Australia. In section three we consider the link between paid and unpaid work and the ways that care and other productive work are rendered invisible. We then outline of Hakim's preference theory and identify some of the problems. Section five discusses in some detail choice and preference formation, in particular the phenomenon of adaptive preferences. In the final section we draw some conclusions.

Women and Paid Employment

Work in Australia is highly gendered. As the Australia-wide data in Table 1 reveal, women are less likely to work full-time and are less likely to be in managerial positions. Women are also more likely to be found in jobs that are low paid and insecure (Pocock 2003). Hence, on any measure, women earn significantly less than do men, as shown in Chart 1.

Table 1 Managerial and non-managerial men and women May 2002 Australia %

Source: ABS (2005a)

	Full time				Part time				Total
	Managerial	Non-managerial			Managerial	Non-managerial			(rounded)
		Adult	Junior	All		Adult	Junior	All	
Men	7.5	32.1	1.1	33.2	n.a.	7.7	1.8	9.5	52.0
Women	2.5	21.7	0.8	22.5	n.a.	21.0	2.8	23.8	49.0
Total	10.0	53.8	1.9	55.7	n.a.	28.6	4.6	33.2	100.0
Male percent of category	75.0	59.7	57.9	59.6	n.a.	26.9	39.1	28.6	52.0
Female percent of category	25.0	40.3	42.1	40.4	n.a.	73.4	60.9	71.7	49.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

In starting to think about why so few women make it into the higher levels of Australian organisations it is important to note that men and women tend to have different perspectives on the nature of the problem. Our research confirms the findings of a Catalyst survey of women senior executives and mostly male Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) within Fortune 1000 companies. The survey came up with 17 barriers to women's advancement. Significantly, men and women attribute (consistently) different causes for women's low numbers in leadership roles. While male senior managers tend to look towards women's attributes, preferences and life circumstances for reasons, women are far more likely to look to the organisation itself when they identify barriers to their progression (Wellington, Brumit, Kropf & Gurkovick 2003).

A culture of long-hours of work dominates Australian workplaces. The norm of the ideal worker is still strong. He is full-time, available to work more than the prescribed hours and is free from responsibilities for care and household work (Pocock 2003). In most workplaces it is assumed that the

²⁷ BPWA was formally known as Business and Professional Women Australia.

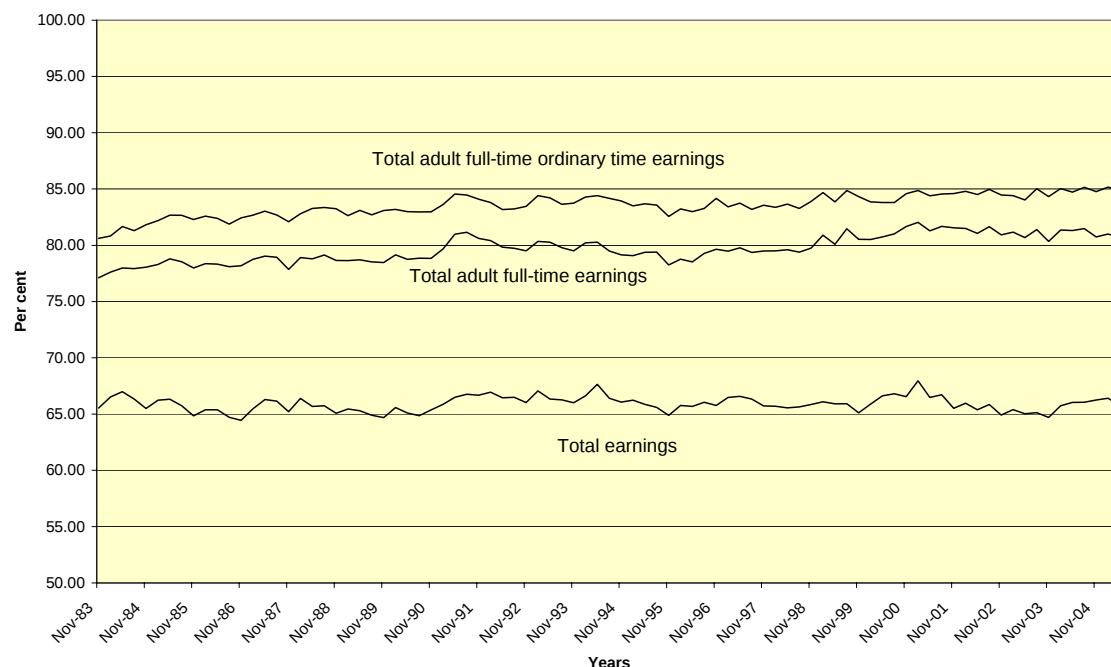
job comes first. Families are expected to fit around the demands of the workplace²⁸. Arrangements that make it easier to meet family responsibilities and hold a paid job tend to be regarded as a gift rather than as a basic entitlement.

The Australian Federal government has just introduced legislation that radically alters the way employers and employees are able to negotiate employment conditions. It gives increased power to employers and limits the role of unions. The Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) has been stripped of most of its powers (Probert 2005; Pocock 2005). The effect of the new industrial relations system needs to be considered in the light of recent changes to the welfare system. These are designed to increase participation of single parents and people with disabilities in paid employment by restricting their access to benefits.

We are yet to experience the full impact of these changes, but it is already clear that the brunt will be borne by the most vulnerable: those with care responsibilities and those in or seeking the lowest paid and more precarious forms of employment (Pocock 2005; Goward 2000a, b; see also ABS 2005a).

Chart 1 Female earnings as a percentage of male earnings Australia 1983-2005

Source: ABS (2005b)



The Links Between Paid and Unpaid Work

We have presented a quick snapshot of Australian women's paid employment. However, it is impossible to look at women's paid work unless we consider their unpaid work, which consists of care and other household labour²⁹. Women and men work about the same number of total hours, but the nature of their work differs. Men's work is more likely to be paid and women's work tends to be unpaid (Bittman 2004; Craig 2003, 2005). Alison Morehead (2001) argues that gender divisions in the home determine women's availability for paid work.

²⁸ This perspective is expressed bluntly by Jason Lea, one of the family members behind the Australian multimillion-dollar business Darrell Lea Chocolates. He said: 'You see you've got to understand a very simple premise and that is that the business feeds the family. The bloody family don't feed the business. If the business isn't successful, the family don't have a roof over their head. So whatever is best for the business has to be number one priority' (Baré, & Clark 2005).

²⁹ Barbara Pocock (2003, p. 15) makes this point, stating: "'Home' and 'work' cannot be separated into a neat binary, into neatly gendered jobs. They cannot be 'balanced,' since they are part of a seamless, messy whole: a conglomerate. Conventional categories of labour and economic analysis, which treat paid work as separate from home, life and the care that essentially underpins work, are hopelessly inadequate to the task of understanding the whole.'

Childcare responsibilities will generally mean that women will take career breaks in the so-called prime working age years. Breaks in employment continuity in turn can ruin many women's opportunities to rise in levels within their jobs and occupations. The result is a vicious cycle. Consider couple families whose remuneration corresponds to the averages represented by Table and Chart 1. In addition to the influence of traditional gender roles regarding care there is a financial incentive for the father to focus on career without interruption and the mother, who will have some break from paid work, to specialise in care and, at best, take on a secondary career. The norm of the ideal worker deters ambitious men from participating more in the care of their children (Nussbaum 2002, pp. 38-39; Wirth 2001, p. 56).

To promote women's opportunities in the paid workforce without addressing inequalities in the distribution of unpaid work results in two possible outcomes. Women do the paid work on top of their unpaid employment. This is because women taking on paid work will not experience a commensurate reduction in unpaid employment (Grace 2002). This results in a double shift (Bittman & Pixley 1997, Fisher 2002; Hochschild 1989). The second outcome is that women decide not to engage in paid employment, reduce the number of hours they work or work at a lower level.

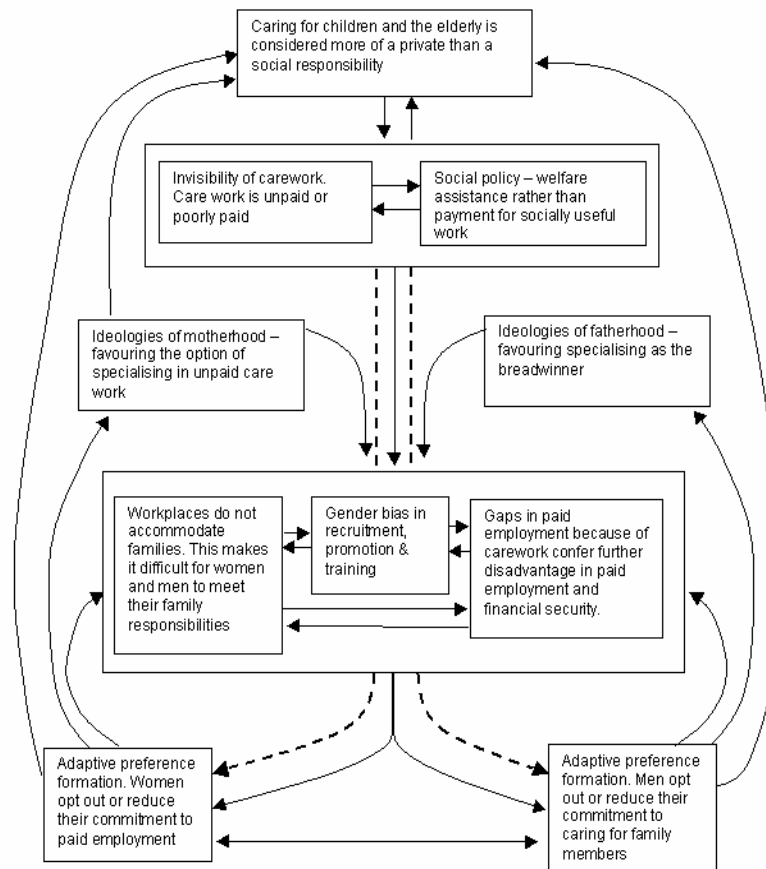
The decision to treat family responsibilities as a central part of a meaningful life is to be applauded. What is not acceptable is that many women are too often burdened with the unreasonable choice: to have children and sacrifice career or to sacrifice (or delay) having children to pursue their careers. It is unreasonable because it is a choice that men do not, as a rule, have to make.

As economist Nancy Folbre argues, unpaid work, including care and household work, has been rendered invisible. Its economic and social value is ignored. Men, business and society in general are free-riding on the unpaid and underpaid work done mostly by women (Folbre 2001, 1994).

We also need to consider the economic disadvantage inherent in taking on unpaid work in a modern capitalist economy. In a labour market that assumes the norm of the full-time worker who is unencumbered by family responsibilities there are limited options for women and men who seek to work in a different way. The consequences are limited career opportunities, reduced income and the risk of poverty in old age.

We argue that the problem of limited options has systemic or multiple interrelated causes. We might be able to pinpoint a particularly obvious problem such as the impact of a break in paid employment on career opportunities and lifetime earnings, but this exists in a network of layered social relations. Figure 1 shows how vicious cycles are generated as self-reinforcing *casual mechanisms*. We can start at any point. For instance, consider an original cause in a workplace culture that is hostile to families. This, combined with social expectations regarding the respective roles of mothers and fathers, causes women to pull back from paid employment and men to pull back from care work. Stereotypes of where the interests of men and women lay are reinforced. Social policy based on assumptions of gendered interests can further reinforce the cycle of 'pulling back'. In workplaces managers are not judged or rewarded for taking the needs of families seriously. By concentrating on typical business objectives they tacitly consolidate the existing organisational cultures, which are inhospitable to both women and men, though in different ways. Adaptive preference formation therefore is also driven tacitly by the 'same old, same old' cycles of repetition.

Figure 1 A vicious circle: barriers to participating in paid employment and to taking responsibility for the care of family members



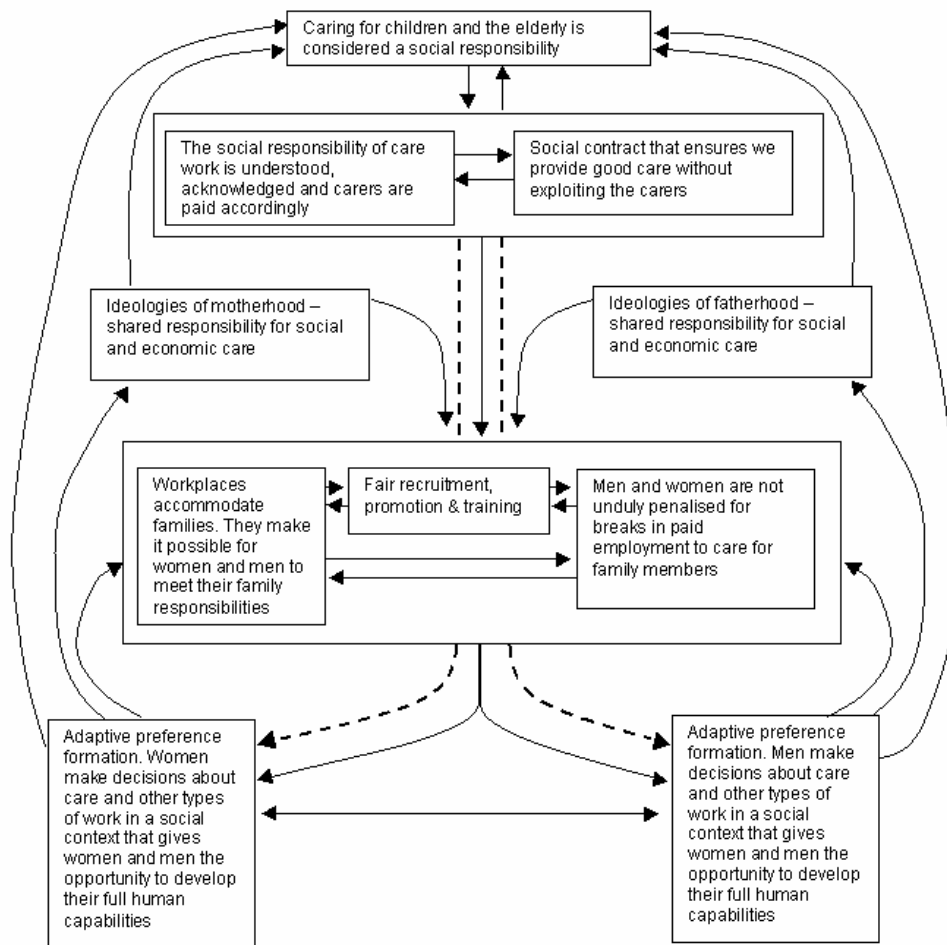
The important question we need to answer is how do we, as a society, ensure that we provide quality care to those who need it without exploiting the caregivers? The conditions under which care is provided are often left out of the research and discussion. This is understandable, though inexcusable. It is expensive to provide high-quality care without exploiting caregivers. If we recognised the social value of care we would pay childcare workers as skilled workers and not at rates barely above the minimum wage. If we recognised the social value of care then we would share the costs of raising children between fathers and mothers and between parents and non-parents (Crittenden 2001: Folbre 2001, 1994). This would not be in the form of transfer payments but as payments for productive work (Folbre 2005). Rethinking the problem in this way would enable us to move to the virtuous cycle represented in Figure 2.

It is important to state that, in suggesting that we need to find better ways of sharing the costs of caring for our children, the elderly and the sick, we are not advocating that we simply turn over everything to the market. This is not the necessary outcome of recognising care (and other unpaid work) as economic activity. The problem is the way we unthinkingly conflate the economy with the market economy. As Duncan Ironmonger points out the economy is a two-legged animal. Most of the time we only look at the market leg, ignoring the household. Yet the household is responsible for more care of adults and children and for making more meals than does the market economy³⁰. Although it recognises care and other household work, Ironmonger's metaphor still maintains the strict division between the market and the household. To account adequately for care we need an economics based

³⁰ From Marty Grace's (2002, pp. 137, 194) interview with Duncan Ironmonger. See also Ironmonger (1994).

on *oikonomia* (the management of the household to increase use value to all members over time) and not just *chrematistics* (the manipulation of property and wealth for short-term gain)³¹.

Figure 2 A virtuous circle: sharing responsibility for care and provisioning



Hakim's Preference Theory

We have discussed the barriers facing women in paid employment and the link between their paid and unpaid work. We have mapped out the interlinking causal mechanisms that influence the decisions both women and men make about paid employment and the care of family members. However, many of our basic assumptions are not shared by Catherine Hakim. For example, she has explicitly rejected a shared responsibilities approach, arguing that this reflects the interests of some women (her 'adaptive' women) but not others. Though she does consider it possible that, in future, men may demand the same options she considers currently available to women, at the moment they do not (Hakim 2000, pp. 1, 5-9). We must consider the challenge that Hakim's theory presents.

³¹ Aristotle valued *oikonomia* far above *chrematistics*. (Aristotle 1984; Crittenden 2001; Daly & Cobb 1989).

Hakim's theory has four central tenets:

1. In the late twentieth century five historic social and labour market changes have introduced new options and opportunities for women. These five changes are:
 - the contraceptive revolution;
 - the equal-opportunity revolution;
 - the expansion of white-collar jobs, which are more attractive to women than traditional blue-collar jobs;
 - the creation of jobs for secondary earners (people who do not wish to give priority to paid work at the expense of other interests); and
 - the increasing importance of attitudes, values and personal preferences in lifestyle choices.

Hakim states these five separate changes do not necessarily occur at once, but all are necessary for 'the new scenario' that offers women free choice between family work and market work. She claims that this new scenario has been reached in most modern affluent societies.

2. Different women have different preferences and priorities, so once they have a free choice they will have different patterns of market employment. She classifies women's work and lifestyle preferences into three ideal types: home-centred, work-centred and adaptive.
3. These different groups of women have conflicting interests. It is this that gives men, with their comparatively homogeneous interests, a great advantage and explains the success and resilience of patriarchy.
4. Finally, it is the heterogeneity of interests among women that has resulted in a divided response to social policies. Hakim argues that predictions and policies concerning fertility and employment would be more successful if they were based on her preference theory and knowledge of the numbers of work-centred, home-centred and adaptive women in that society.

Hakim considers that, while it is appropriate for women and men to have the same opportunities in paid employment, most women reject a work-centred life. She states that, because women tend to take breaks in their paid employment, they cannot possibly achieve at the same level as do men and women who have a history of continuous full-time employment. In her view family-friendly policies cannot remove the conflict between two time-consuming and demanding activities (Hakim 2000, p 5).

There have been many critiques of Hakim's work that point to her failure to identify constraints and to recognise that preferences change over time (Pocock 2003, Probert & Murphy 2001, Morehead 2005)³². Other recent research seeks to disprove the effect of preference types on women's participation in paid employment (Chalmers & Hill 2005).

We have already pointed to the systemic gender bias evident in contemporary workplaces that challenges Hakim's view that the equal opportunity revolution has been achieved. Her theory explicitly assumes a rigid division between the private and public worlds. This is symptomatic of an approach that fails to appreciate fully the social value of care. We also take issue with the way she frames the problem. Hakim developed her theory in an attempt to understand divergent patterns of male and female employment. Although Hakim claims her approach is holistic, it is actually very narrow. She does not link gendered employment patterns to the social provision of care. Her work fails to address the critical questions about care: who does it, under what conditions and how are the costs shared?

Hakim claims that research on women's paid work and family responsibilities focuses on what women are expected to do and what they are prevented from doing but fails to consider what they might want to do. The contribution Hakim claims to make is the reintroduction of this third dimension of women's preferences. However, Hakim fails to appreciate that preferences cannot be considered in isolation of

³² A critique of Hakim's (2000) preference theory could also be based on Folbre's (1994) work on the structures of constraints.

other constraints. In this paper we turn our attention to preference formation and in particular the problem of adaptive preferences.

Preference Formation

The notion that there are dispositional types with well-ordered preferences is spelled out by Hakim:

A review of recent research evidence (Hakim 2000) shows that once genuine choices are open to them, women choose three different lifestyles: home-centred, work-centred or adaptive. The three preference groups are set out, as sociological ideal-types ... with estimates of the relative sizes of the three groups in societies, such as Britain, where public policy does not bias the distribution. (The distribution of women across the three groups corresponds to a 'normal' distribution of responses to the family-work conflict.) ... These divergent preferences are found at all levels of education, and in all social classes and income groups. They are found in all European Union countries, and in most other modern societies (Hakim 2002).

The idea is that preferences are akin to hard-wired mental dispositions (in fact hard-wired 'types' of dispositions). This view of preferences sits behind a lot of choice theory. The embedded nature of the preference leads to the view that choices are essentially predetermined. This is a highly deterministic approach to preferences and a limiting approach to choice. We will place this limited type of 'choice' in scare quotes.

According to the standard preference-'choice' approach, rational deliberation has little to do with preferences. Instead preferences sit behind and inform rational deliberations. Rational 'choice' simply concerns *how* to achieve the actual states represented by the (hard-wired mental) preferences. For example, Hakim's home-centred 'type' would make choices about marriage, employment and family size in order to achieve a home-centred lifestyle. Reason, deliberation and choice are merely instrumental.

The view of desire, preference and 'choice' here goes back at least to the 18th century Scottish philosopher David Hume. Hume held a non-cognitive theory of motivation, by which he meant that we could not deliberate rationally over the ends that motivate us. He did say, however, that we deliberate on the means we might employ to achieve those given ends. Hume considered that social customs and habits formed the ends that motivate us. According to Hume these customs and habits in turn were based on our inherent psychological dispositions and changed at a glacially slow speed. This is what he meant by his seemingly strange belief that reason should be the slave of the passions (Hume 1748-40, 1739, Book III Part I Section I). The passions behind our desires and preferences could be trusted, said Hume, because they were indeed relatively *passive* and conservative mental dispositions.

Hume's ideas are especially influential in 20th century economics: hard-wired desires (wants) shape preferences, and preferences are the ends towards which 'rationality' seeks efficient means.

Now the view that preferences are non-cognitive (or pre-cognitive) and that we deliberate merely over 'choosing' how to enact our preferences (achieve our given ends) is arguably false. We will point to three particular problems.

The first problem is that 'preferences' about what to do can result from deliberation, and they can change. We wrestle mentally over our choices. We do make decisions that, within limits, alter our life courses. Hakim's notion of an 'ideal type' is too close for comfort to Hume's notion of hard-wired and unchangeable dispositions. Second Hakim's perspective seemingly ignores the problem that preferences can be adaptive, in other words that they are formed in response to circumstances. This leads us to the third problem: if prevailing circumstances embody a history of discrimination and or disadvantage, adaptive preferences can reinforce and reproduce the history of discrimination and or disadvantage. Preferences are not a clean sheet. For this reason revealed preferences – shown in actual choices and social roles – are not a sound guide for policy (Nussbaum 2000, p. 112). For all these reasons we can say that Hakim's is a 'neo-traditionalist' approach to gender, work and family, not withstanding that the designation is seemingly an oxymoron.

In addition the very idea of pre-formed or hard-wired preferences necessitates that such preferences be well-ordered. They must be able both to be ranked (ordered) at any point in time and to be consistent over time. If non-cognitive, pre-formed preferences were to exist without order and consistency life would be confused. We would be paralysed by an unresolvable clash of conflicting but unshiftable wants, needs and desires. The philosopher John Searle counters this perspective:

The ... point I want to take up is the question of consistency ... the claim that the set of primary desires from which one reasons must be consistent – does not seem to me just a little bit false, but radically mistaken. It seems to me that most practical reasoning is typically about adjudicating between conflicting, inconsistent desires and other sorts of reasons ... And this is not a bizarre situation; rather it seems to me typical that we have an inconsistent set of ends ... and the task of rationality, the task of practical reason, is to try to find some way to adjudicate between these various inconsistent aims (2001, p. 30).

It is quite reasonable for women to want to pursue (1) a career to the full and (2) have children, knowing that this will be a difficult decision precisely because to act on (2) will conflict with (1). It is also possible for a woman to want (1) today and not in the future and to want (2) in the future but not today. She may also want (1) and (2) but not in the restrictive ways both are commonly available. None of these desires are unreasonable. Women are not greedy. It is considered completely unremarkable that men desire these things and more.

However, to return to Searle's argument:

The standard way out of this problem in the literature is to say that rationality is not about desires as such but about preferences. Rational deliberation must begin with a well-ordered preference schedule. The problem with that answer is that in real life deliberation is largely about forming a set of preferences. A well-ordered set of preferences is typically the result of successful deliberation, and is not its precondition (2001, p. 30).

Moreover formation of preferences is complicated by the phenomenon of adaptive preferences. As the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000, p.136) and the economist Amartya Sen (2000, pp. 62-63) have argued, individuals adjust their desires in accordance with the way of life they know.

This brings to mind the problem known as 'sour grapes' (Nussbaum 2000, p. 136-9). In Aesop's fable of the fox and the grapes the fox is unable to reach the grapes and so decides they must be sour. Based on experience women might well consider that many careers in today's workplaces are out of reach. For some the possibility of having a child is also out of reach³³. Whether this leads women to think work or family therefore 'sour' in the manner of the fox is another question. However, it does lead to adaptive *decision-making*: i.e. of the type that says 'I do not really want to be part of that'. Similarly the 'mother track' outcome cannot rightly be considered as forming an adaptive preference as such (i.e. adaptive *thinking*). Instead the decision-making adapts to the circumstances by 'making the best out of a bad lot'. The thinking, desires and preferences may also adapt, but it is not necessary that they do. It is clearly possible for women to see things clearly for what they are, to rail against the injustice of it all and to prefer the world were different.

In contrast the more genuine forms of preference or desire adaptation, according to Nussbaum (2000, p. 139), are those that include 'lifelong habituation, and [not] ... simply giving up on a desire one once had'. This is especially relevant to women because key 'cases do involve lifelong socialization and absence of information'. Socialisation and absence of information are factors that define the known way of life and constrain women imagining possible alternatives to it. Nussbaum also highlights a

... closely related group of arguments ... recently advanced, in law, political philosophy, and public policy. These arguments show, in various ways, that people's preferences are in many ways constructed by the laws and institutions under which they live. This being the case, we can hardly use preferences as a bedrock in our deliberation about what laws and institutions we wish to construct. John Rawls, for example, emphasizes that 'the institutional form of

³³ See for example Cannold's (2005) work on involuntary childlessness.

society affects its members and determines in large part the kind of persons they want to be as well as the kind of persons they are' (Nussbaum 2000, pp. 142-143; citing Rawls 1996, p. 269).

Nussbaum (2000) makes the important point that the plurality of the actual desires and preferences women have should be respected. Nonetheless that should not blind us to the forces shaping those preferences and desires. Nor should a respectful approach to women's choices today blind us to the institutional changes required if women's choices are to be more open in the future.

Concluding Comments

Hakim fails to pay attention to the complex, cognitive process of preference formation and, in particular, to the phenomenon of adaptive preferences. Although she loudly espouses choice, she conceives the available options in a very limited way. It is Nussbaum's and Sen's ideas on preference formation, not Hakim's limited preference theory that can more profitably guide researchers, policy makers and enlightened managements. They need to appreciate the systemic biases and the self-reinforcing effect depicted in Figure 1.

To move out of this vicious circle we must accept the social nature of care and other household work. We must establish a social contract that ensures good care is provided to those who need it without exploiting the carers. We must pay close attention to the nature of all jobs. Do they allow women and men to have the time and the energy to care for their families? Or do the jobs and the culture of the workplace punish care work? We need to find much better ways of sharing the work (paid and unpaid). We need to ensure that women and men are no longer penalised when they care for family members.

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