

For Richer or Poorer: Women, Men and Marriage

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Abstract

In 1972 Jessie Bernard argued that women fared much worse in marriage than men. She suggested that in every marriage there are two marriages “his” and “hers” and his is much better than hers on almost every indicator—demographically, socially, and psychologically. Almost three decades later the issues raised by Bernard are still being debated. Waite and Gallagher (2000) have argued that all married people are happier, healthier and better off financially than unmarried people. Most recently, DeVaus (2002) claims that marriage reduces the risk of mental disorders for both men and women. Our paper addresses these issues. Using data from the Negotiating the Life Course survey we examine the relationship between marriage, gender and a range of social outcomes. We focus on two main areas—outcomes associated with the labor market and outcomes associated with the household. In particular we advance debates in the areas by examining the experience of de facto cohabitations separately from legal marriage. This enables us to examine the impact of the institutional status of marriage on outcomes as opposed to cohabitation more generally.

Background

In 1972, Jessie Bernard argued in her well-known and influential book *The Future of Marriage*, that “there are two marriages ... in every marital union, his and hers. And his ... is better than hers.” (1982 Edition: 14) In support of this argument, Bernard pointed to men’s power over women within marriage, women’s responsibility for unpaid household labour, improved mortality and health rates for married men compared to unmarried men, and higher reported levels of happiness and mental wellbeing for married men compared to both unmarried men and married women (Bernard, 1972). In contrast, although on some indicators of health, married women also fare better than single women, compared to married men the benefits of marriage for women are far less. More wives than husbands report negative feelings about their marriage, consider their marriages unhappy and have considered separation or divorce, and moreover, wives have much poorer mental and emotional health compared to husbands and to unmarried women (Bernard 1972).

Bernard considers the possibility that these findings may be due to sex differences between men and women, that is, that women may be more prone to depression and psychological distress than men. But she dismisses this argument by showing that the mental and emotional health of women prior to marriage is as good as or better than that for men suggesting that it is something about the marriage process itself that leads to women’s poorer health. Additionally she considers the argument that selection effects might explain the marriage differential, with certain kinds of men and women being selected into marriage. Although, as Bernard notes, it is virtually impossible in the absence of clinical experiments to rule out selectivity effects completely, she argues that it is unlikely that they play a large role. It may be true that healthier men are more likely to be selected into marriage than unhealthy men and this may account for some of the health benefits observed for married men. But most people marry at some stage in their lives, at least at the time that Bernard was writing. And the explanation does not work for women since it is unlikely that men would choose to marry women who are unhappy, depressed or psychologically distressed. Rather we would expect that women with these characteristics would be selected out of marriage.

Almost thirty years later, Bernard's argument has been challenged by a leading American demographer, Linda Waite. In recent work Waite and Gallagher have argued that:

Overall, the portrait of marriage that emerges from two generations of increasingly sophisticated empirical research on actual husbands and wives is not one of gender bias, but gender balance. A good marriage enlarges and enriches the lives of both men and women (2000: 163)

Waite and Gallagher acknowledge the evidence cited by Bernard in support of differences in depression rates for married men and women, but argue that women are simply more prone to depression than men. Moreover, they suggest that when broader measures of mental health are used, there are no differences in rates of mental wellbeing between married men and women (2000: 164). At the same time, they argue that the cumulative results of a range of recent work that specifically examines depression, rather than overall mental health, shows that marriage does not account for the depression gap between men and women. On the contrary, marriage has a positive effect on women's levels of depression. Married people are less depressed and emotionally healthier than comparable singles (2000: 166).

And they suggest that the reason the benefits in married men's physical health are so great compared to single men is because single men are far more likely to lead unhealthy and antisocial lives compared to married men. On the other hand, single women do not lead considerably more unhealthy lives than married women. "In other words, the reason getting a wife boosts your health more than acquiring a husband is not that marriage warps women, but that single men lead such warped lives" (2000: 164).

Waite and Gallagher also argue that Bernard's work fails to distinguish between the effects of marriage and children. While it is the case that in the time that Bernard was writing, (the sixties), marriage was nearly always accompanied by children, Waite and Gallagher argue that, "later work that controls for the presence of children finds that marriage protects mothers from depression" (2000: 165). So while they acknowledge that women with preschoolers report higher levels of stress and depression than women without young children, and are more likely to report feeling a "time crunch" than their

childfree counterparts, they argue that the impact of marriage and mothering need to be considered separately (2000: 164-165).

Consideration of the debate about whether marriage is good for men and women, as posed by Bernard, and more recently Waite and Gallagher (and others such as De Vaus, 2002), raises a number of issues that need to be considered. The apparently straightforward comparison of the effects of marriage on men and women is more complex than it might first appear. First it is undoubtedly the case that much has changed since Bernard presented her argument in the early 1970s. Not only have the demographics of marital formation and dissolution changed dramatically over this period, with ages at first marriage rising significantly, fertility rates declining sharply, divorce rates remaining significantly higher than in the 1960s and rates of pre-marital cohabitation rising considerably, but also attitudes toward marriage have altered markedly. Giddens (2001:17) has gone so far as to refer to these changes as a “global revolution” in how we think of ourselves and how we form relationships with others. Other commentators have made similar arguments (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). At the same time, dramatic changes have taken place in participation rates in higher education for both men and women, but particularly for women, and married women have moved into and remained in paid employment in greater numbers than ever before. Given these changes it may be that the patterns observed by Bernard in the 1960s will be quite different to those observed by researchers today.

Second it is important to clarify whether the comparison in the debate is across marital status, that is comparing married and unmarried individuals, or is across gender, that is comparing men and women. The results of these different comparisons may suggest different conclusions. For example, married women may have better rates of health than single women suggesting that marriage is good for women’s health. On the other hand, married women may have poorer rates of health than married men, suggesting that marriage is not good for women’s health. Further analyses would then be needed to determine if marriage has had a bigger positive effect on men’s health than women’s health, or whether men are just healthier than women regardless of marital status.

Third, the conclusions reached will undoubtedly vary depending on the outcome under consideration. In terms of responsibility for housework and unpaid caring work, the evidence seems overwhelmingly clear that marriage is good for men and bad for women. But other indicators may not be so clear-cut. While marriage may be bad for women in terms of participation in paid employment and individual returns to wages, it may be good for women in terms of providing access to a higher standard of living as a result of access to husband's income.

In the current paper we investigate the marriage debate using data from the Negotiating the Life Course Project. The data collected as part of this project is particularly useful for examining the debate as it contains detailed information on marital history and relationships. It also contains information on a range of possible indicators for examining the effects of marriage on men and women, including the domestic division of labour, employment participation, earnings, health, wellbeing and attitudes. Our aim is to contribute to this debate by using recent empirical data to assess the benefits of marriage for men and women.

Further we hope to advance the debate by focusing on the experience of de facto cohabitation as well as legal marriage. The percentage of couples cohabiting prior to marriage has more than tripled in recent years. In 1976, 16% of couples cohabited prior to marriage, but by 1992 this figure had jumped to 56% (De Vaus and Wolcott, 1997). By examining the experiences of men and women within de facto relationships we hope to be able to contribute to understandings of the institutional status of marriage as opposed to partnerships more generally. For example, are the patterns observed by Bernard and Waite and Gallagher apparent when comparing single people with those in de facto relationships, suggesting that the key issue is cohabitation, or are they only apparent when comparing single people with married people, suggesting that the key issue is marriage?

In this paper we focus on three key areas: the relationship between marriage and employment, marriage and earnings, and, marriage and housework.

The Negotiating the Life Course Project

The data used in this paper come from a 1996/97 national Australian survey titled “Negotiating the Life Course: Gender, Mobility and Career Trajectories” (NLC). The sample comprised 2,231 respondents between the ages of 18 and 54 randomly selected from listed telephone numbers in the electronic white pages. Each respondent was randomly selected from all 18 to 54 year olds in the household. The data were collected using computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI), with a response rate of 55%. Details of the project can be obtained at <http://lifecourse.anu.edu.au>

Experiences in the labour force: Does marriage matter?

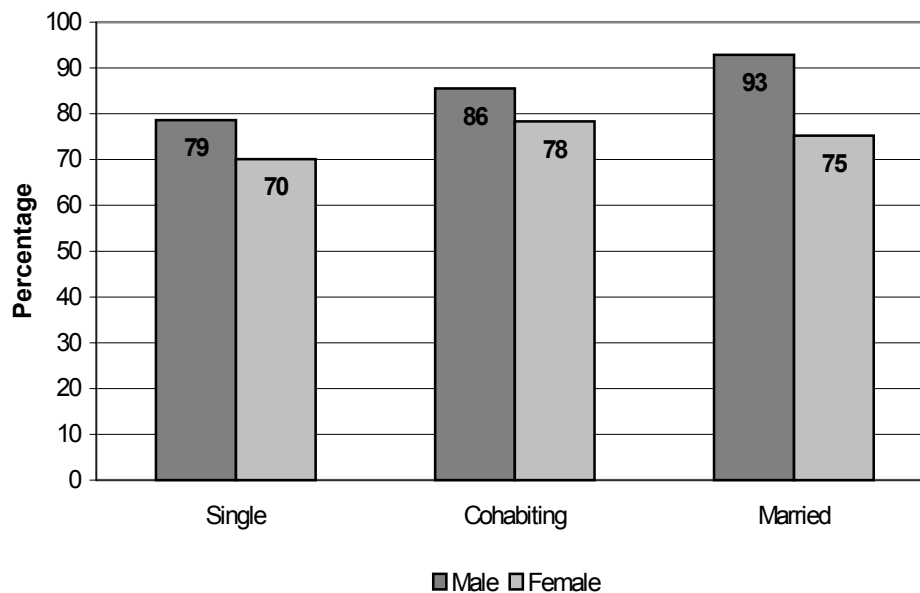
It has been previously found that there are many beneficial effects of marriage on men’s careers. Men who are married do substantially better in the labour market, particularly in terms of earnings, than men who are not married, but this is not the case for women (see for example Richardson, 2000; Korenman and Neumark, 1991; Korenman and Neumark, 1992, Waldfogel, 1997). In Western countries it has been found that for women, differential employment and career costs are due to childrearing. It is argued that it is not marriage itself that explains women’s experience in the labour force, but the presence of children. Children have an effect on both the differential employment of men and women (Waldfogel, 1997; Gornick, 1999), but also on women’s longer term earning power (Davies, Joshi and Peronaci, 2000). This is through both a loss of workplace experience, and a lowering in the value of labour market skills (Chapman, et al. 2001). Further, for mothers, educational background is also a key factor in explaining labour force involvement (Desai and Waite, 1991; McLaughlin, 1982; Gray and McDonald, 2002).

This section compares the experiences of men and women in the labour force, based on their marital status. This is part of the unpacking of the meaning and benefits (or otherwise) of marriage (as suggested by Bachrach, Hindin and Thomson, 2000). The analysis compares respondents from the NLC who are single, cohabiting or legally married. The labour force experiences that are examined include: employment status; number of hours spent in paid work per week; permanency; sector; and managerial level.

The analysis of each labour force experience is conducted for men and women and is controlled by age, education level and child status. Predicted probabilities have been calculated showing differences by relationship status for each labour force factor (controlling for influences outlined).

The examination shows that, overall, men are more likely than women to be employed, to work longer hours, to be permanently employed, and to be a manager or supervisor. However, for men there is a substantial amount of variation by marital status. This is not true for women. Controlling for age, education and child status, men are more likely to be employed if they are married than if they are single or if they cohabit (see Figure W1). If they are employed, they are also more likely to work longer hours (Figure W2) and to be in a management or supervisory position (Figure W3). There is no difference by marital status in permanence of employment or sector of employment.

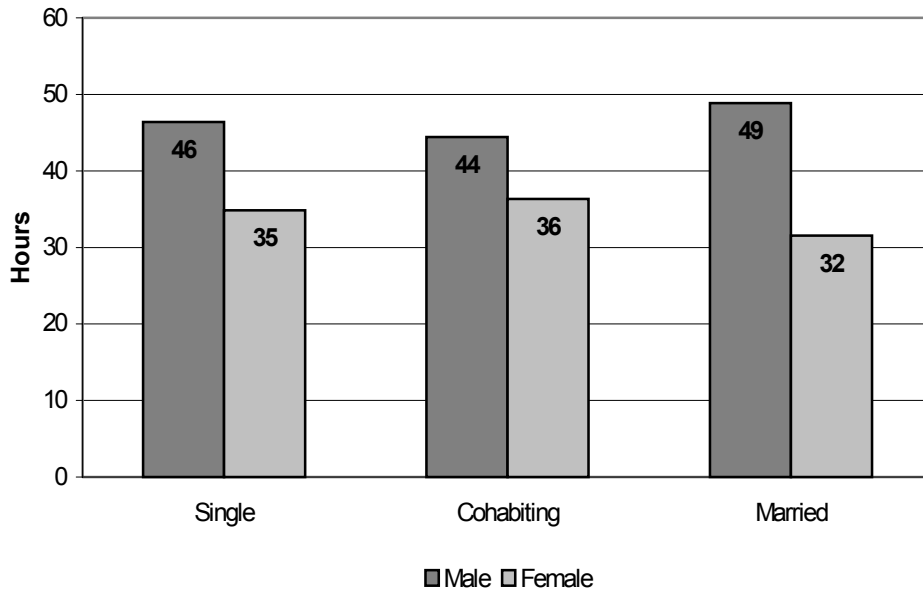
Figure W1: Predicted percentage employed by sex and partnered status controlling for age, child status and education.



Source: Appendix TableW1.

Notes: Significant difference in odds of employment by partner status for men.

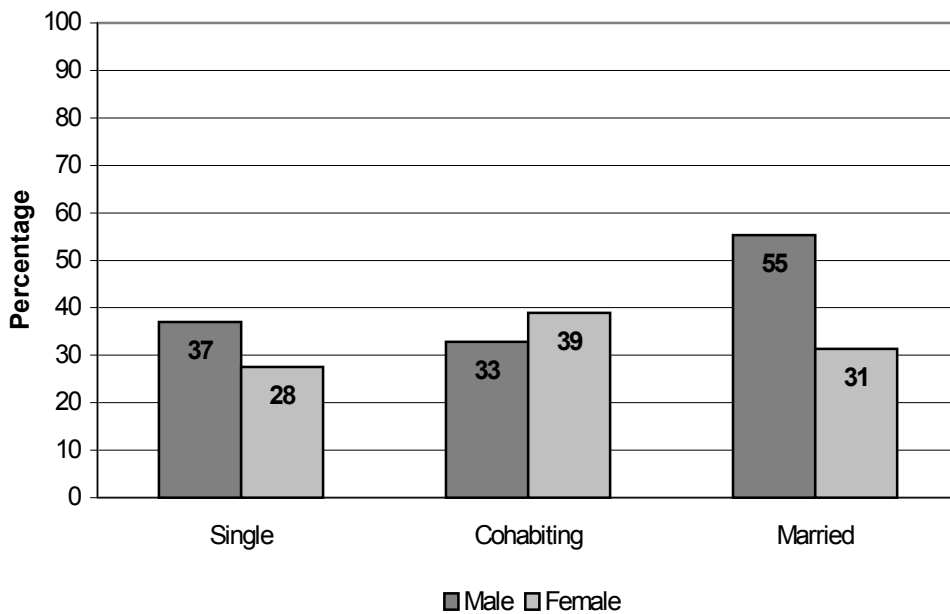
Figure W2: Predicted working hours by sex and partnered status controlling for age, child status and education.



Source: Appendix TableW2.

Notes: Significant difference in predicted hours of work by partner status for men and women.

Figure W3: Predicted percentage in a management position by sex and partnered status controlling for age, child status and education.



Source: Appendix TableW3.

Notes: Significant difference in odds of employment as a manager by partner status for men.

In comparison, marriage is only associated with the number of hours women work. Married women who are employed work fewer hours than women in other relationship states. For women, child status and education are more important in understanding workplace experiences than marital status.

These findings contribute to our understanding of the marriage premium in earnings for men. Marriage has little effect on work experiences for women, while for men, marriage in and of itself, has an effect on their work experiences. Men who are married are much more likely to be in a management or supervisory position, which contributes to an earnings premium.

The Marriage Premium for Earnings¹

A considerable amount of research has documented a marriage premium in earnings for married men (Blackburn and Korenman, 1994; Dolton and Makepeace, 1987; Ginther and Zarovdy, 2001; Gray, 1997; Hill, 1979; Korenman and Neumark, 1991; Korenman and Neumark, 1992). The research suggests that marriage increases men's earnings potential for two main reasons. First because married men are more productive in employment after marriage, largely as a result of the unpaid labour performed by women in the home, which frees men to dedicate themselves to employment. Second, it has been suggested that certain kinds of men are selected in to marriage and typically these will be men who have higher earnings potential. While evidence has been found for both explanations, on balance, the available research tends to favour the specialisation argument where the gender division of labor in the household allows men the time and energy to pursue labor market goals (Becker, 1985; Blackburn and Korenman, 1994; Chalmers, 2002; Gray, 1997; Korenman and Neumark, 1991; Loh, 1996).

Our examination of the relationship between earnings and marriage shows a large and significant marriage premium for men, but little or no association between marriage and income for women. Adjusting for a range of human capital, job, and family characteristics and confining the sample to those who were employed at the time of the survey (excluding the self employed), married men in our study earn 15 per cent more, on average, than unmarried men. We found little or no association between marriage and women's income.

Our conclusion then is that marriage is good for men in terms of earnings. While marriage has no impact on women's earnings, it may be that, marriage improves women's overall standard of living, insofar as they have access to their husband's earnings.

¹ This section of the paper is adapted from an earlier paper by Belinda Hewitt, Mark Western and Janeen Baxter (2002) titled "Marriage and Money: The Impact of Marriage on Men's and Women's Earnings."

Table 1: Marital status dummy coefficients for robust regression models predicting logged annual income.

| | M1: Baseline Model | M2: Baseline & Human Capital | M3: Baseline, Human Capital & Job Characteristics | M4: Baseline, Human Capital & Family Status | M5: All Variables |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|------------------------------|---|---|-------------------|
| Full-time employed Men | | | | | |
| Married | .310** | .174** | .143** | .189** | .139** |
| Ever Married | .148* | .053 | .050 | .054 | .048 |
| Never Married | - | - | - | - | - |
| Observations | 583 | 583 | 583 | 583 | 583 |
| R-squared | .10 | .27 | .34 | .27 | .34 |
| Full-time employed Women | | | | | |
| Married | .080 | .005 | -.027 | .018 | -.011 |
| Ever Married | .120* | .057 | .034 | .077 | .059 |
| Never Married | - | - | - | - | - |
| Observations | 422 | 422 | 422 | 422 | 422 |
| R-squared | .01 | .34 | .40 | .34 | .41 |
| Part-time employed Women | | | | | |
| Married | .335** | .100 | -.017 | .182 | .084 |
| Ever Married | .381* | .104 | .089 | .180 | .178 |
| Never Married | - | - | - | - | - |
| Observations | 294 | 294 | 294 | 294 | 294 |
| R-squared | .03 | .11 | .16 | .12 | .18 |

*P<.05, **P<.01.

The Housework Burden

Research has consistently shown that wives do more domestic labour than their husbands (Berk, 1985; Shelton, 1992; Baxter, 1993; Brines, 1994; Bittman, 1995, 1998; Bianchi et.al., 2000). Feminist reformers in the 1960s and 1970s were optimistic that changes in the labour force participation rates for married women, in combination with increased awareness of the value of women's unpaid work in the home, would lead to an increased involvement of men in domestic labour and a more equal domestic division of labour between men and women (Gavron, 1983; Oakley, 1974). To a large extent, this has not happened. It is largely indisputed that women do approximately three quarters of household work, a pattern that is evident across all western nations (Szalai, 1972; Berk, 1985; Baxter, 1997).

Our current data show that women do a significantly larger proportion of childcare and routine housework tasks than men regardless of marital status and spend considerably more time on housework than men (19 to 25 hours per week compared to eight hours per week for men). Unfortunately we are not able to compare the differences between single and married women with these data, as single people were not asked the questions on domestic labour. However, we can compare the patterns of couples living in defacto relationships with those living in married relationships. In some ways this comparison focuses the analyses more sharply on the impact of marriage, as living arrangements are held constant across both groups and the only difference is legal marital status.

The results show that men in de facto relationships do a greater proportion of indoor housework tasks than married men (40% compared to 26%) and a smaller proportion of outdoor tasks (73% compared to 83%). But there is no difference in the amount of time that men in these groups spend on housework with both spending approximately nine hours per week. For women however there is a significant difference in time spent on housework according to marital status with married women spending approximately 6 additional hours per week compared to women in de facto relationships. Women in de facto relationships also do a much smaller proportion of indoor tasks.

These patterns remain when we control for possible socio-demographic differences between de facto and married couples that might explain these differences including age of the couple, presence of children, gender role attitudes, education, labour market status and earnings.

In terms of domestic labour then, the results are very clear-cut. Marriage clearly benefits men and has negative consequences for women.

Table 2. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Domestic Labor Variables by Gender and Marital Status

| | Men | | Women | | | | T-Value ^a | T-Value ^b | T-Value ^c | T-Value ^d | | |
|-----------------|------------------|---------|------------------|---------|------------------|---------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|-----------|-----------|
| | De Facto | Married | De Facto | Married | De Facto | Married | | | | | | |
| | Mean (SD) | N | Mean (SD) | N | Mean (SD) | N | Mean (SD) | N | | | | |
| Childcare Hours | 24.70 (23.29) | 20 | 23.31 (20.58) | 325 | 65.20 (37.29) | 41 | 56.76 (33.52) | 407 | -1.52 | -0.29 | -4.44*** | -15.77*** |
| Childcare Tasks | 35.50 (16.56) | 20 | 38.35 (16.08) | 326 | 69.45 (13.79) | 41 | 69.37 (16.19) | 407 | -0.03 | 0.77 | -8.44*** | -25.85*** |
| Housework Hours | 8.58 (5.78) | 66 | 8.86 (7.25) | 521 | 18.88 (14.08) | 111 | 25.04 (13.54) | 701 | 4.43*** | 0.30 | -5.67*** | -24.78*** |
| Indoor Tasks | 39.23 (22.87) | 66 | 25.92 (17.53) | 523 | 71.41 (19.31) | 111 | 81.02 (16.23) | 702 | 5.65*** | -5.60*** | -10.00*** | -56.80*** |
| Outdoor Tasks | 72.54 (23.59) | 66 | 83.37 (15.01) | 523 | 29.73 (19.75) | 111 | 27.83 (20.45) | 702 | -0.91 | 5.12*** | 12.96*** | 52.46*** |

- a. A t-test for difference between de facto and married women
b. A t-test for difference between de facto and married men
c. A t-test for difference between de facto women and de facto men
d. A t-test for difference between married women and married men

***p<.0001

Conclusion

The two areas of research that have been covered in this paper, labour force and household labour, demonstrate the direction of research of the current project. The work/family sphere is pertinent to sociological analyses of the family, and this research advances debate on the institution of marriage and its association with the experiences of men and women.

The findings show that both gender and marriage are associated with paid and household labour. Although research has consistently shown the division of labour by gender, the marriage effect has not been as well documented. This research finds that married men fare better in the workplace than both cohabiting and single men, and that marriage has clear benefits in terms of domestic labour.

The future focus of this research is to examine the relationship between marriage and other aspects of life, such as work satisfaction, self-perception, wellbeing and attitudes. This will contribute to the debate on the benefits, or otherwise, of marriage.

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Appendix Tables

Appendix Table W1: Coefficients from logistic regression analysis of employment by social and demographic characteristics.

| | B | S.E. | Exp(B) | Sig. |
|----------------------|-------|------|--------|------|
| Men | | | | |
| Ager | 0.01 | 0.01 | 1.01 | 0.48 |
| Cohabiting | 0.48 | 0.38 | 1.62 | 0.21 |
| Married** | 1.27 | 0.31 | 3.58 | 0.00 |
| Youngest child <5 | -0.25 | 0.38 | 0.78 | 0.52 |
| Youngest child 5-12 | -0.45 | 0.36 | 0.64 | 0.21 |
| Youngest child 13+ | -0.42 | 0.39 | 0.66 | 0.29 |
| Degree** | 0.84 | 0.32 | 2.32 | 0.01 |
| Associate diploma | 0.71 | 0.46 | 2.03 | 0.13 |
| Vocational qual* | 0.51 | 0.26 | 1.67 | 0.05 |
| Secondary | 0.12 | 0.26 | 1.13 | 0.65 |
| Constant | 0.79 | 0.41 | 2.19 | 0.06 |
| Women | | | | |
| Ager | 0.00 | 0.01 | 1.00 | 0.95 |
| Cohabiting | 0.44 | 0.27 | 1.55 | 0.11 |
| Married | 0.26 | 0.16 | 1.29 | 0.12 |
| Youngest child <5** | -1.70 | 0.19 | 0.18 | 0.00 |
| Youngest child 5-12* | -0.46 | 0.20 | 0.63 | 0.02 |
| Youngest child 13+ | -0.44 | 0.23 | 0.65 | 0.06 |
| Degree** | 1.14 | 0.21 | 3.13 | 0.00 |
| Associate diploma** | 1.09 | 0.24 | 2.99 | 0.00 |
| Vocational qual** | 0.66 | 0.19 | 1.93 | 0.00 |
| Secondary* | 0.45 | 0.19 | 1.56 | 0.02 |
| Constant | 0.87 | 0.34 | 2.38 | 0.01 |

Source: NLC data 1997.

Notes: * Significant at the P<0.05 level.

** Significant at the P<0.01 level.

Appendix Table W2: Coefficients from linear regression analysis of hours in employment (for those employed) by social and demographic characteristics.

| | B | Std. Error | Sig. |
|-----------------------|----------|-------------------|-------------|
| Men | | | |
| Ager* | 0.12 | 0.06 | 0.05 |
| Cohabiting | -1.97 | 2.22 | 0.37 |
| Married* | 2.47 | 1.23 | 0.04 |
| Degree | -2.48 | 1.58 | 0.12 |
| Associate diploma | -0.38 | 2.19 | 0.86 |
| Vocational qual | -1.85 | 1.47 | 0.21 |
| Secondary | -1.89 | 1.77 | 0.29 |
| Constant | 43.27 | 2.57 | 0.00 |
| Women | | | |
| Ager | -0.06 | 0.07 | 0.36 |
| Cohabiting | 1.47 | 1.96 | 0.45 |
| Married** | -3.30 | 1.27 | 0.01 |
| Youngest child <5** | -11.56 | 1.72 | 0.00 |
| Youngest child 5-12** | -8.54 | 1.43 | 0.00 |
| Youngest child 13+ | -2.72 | 1.73 | 0.12 |
| Degree** | 6.55 | 1.56 | 0.00 |
| Associate diploma | 2.53 | 1.78 | 0.16 |
| Vocational qual | 2.34 | 1.65 | 0.16 |
| Secondary | 1.34 | 1.67 | 0.42 |
| Constant | 39.87 | 2.74 | 0.00 |

Source: NLC data 1997.

Notes: * Significant at the P<0.05 level.

** Significant at the P<0.01 level.

Appendix Table W3: Coefficients from logistic regression analysis of management status by social and demographic characteristics.

| | B | S.E. | Exp(B) | Sig. |
|---------------------|----------|-------------|---------------|-------------|
| Men | | | | |
| Ager** | 0.03 | 0.01 | 1.03 | 0.00 |
| Cohabiting | -0.18 | 0.35 | 0.83 | 0.60 |
| Married** | 0.75 | 0.25 | 2.11 | 0.00 |
| Youngest child <5 | -0.31 | 0.28 | 0.74 | 0.27 |
| Youngest child 5-12 | -0.13 | 0.29 | 0.88 | 0.65 |
| Youngest child 13+ | -0.15 | 0.33 | 0.86 | 0.66 |
| Degree* | 0.56 | 0.24 | 1.75 | 0.02 |
| Associate diploma** | 1.05 | 0.36 | 2.86 | 0.00 |
| Vocational qual | 0.16 | 0.23 | 1.17 | 0.50 |
| Secondary | 0.18 | 0.27 | 1.19 | 0.52 |
| Constant | -1.85 | 0.43 | 0.16 | 0.00 |
| Women | | | | |
| Ager | 0.02 | 0.01 | 1.02 | 0.08 |
| Cohabiting | 0.52 | 0.28 | 1.68 | 0.06 |
| Married | 0.18 | 0.20 | 1.20 | 0.35 |
| Youngest child <5 | -0.22 | 0.25 | 0.80 | 0.38 |
| Youngest child 5-12 | -0.14 | 0.22 | 0.87 | 0.53 |
| Youngest child 13+* | -0.56 | 0.27 | 0.57 | 0.04 |
| Degree** | 1.03 | 0.25 | 2.81 | 0.00 |
| Associate diploma** | 0.74 | 0.28 | 2.10 | 0.01 |
| Vocational qual* | 0.52 | 0.27 | 1.68 | 0.05 |
| Secondary* | 0.54 | 0.27 | 1.71 | 0.05 |
| Constant | -1.96 | 0.43 | 0.14 | 0.00 |

Source: NLC data 1997.

Notes: * Significant at the P<0.05 level.

** Significant at the P<0.01 level.