

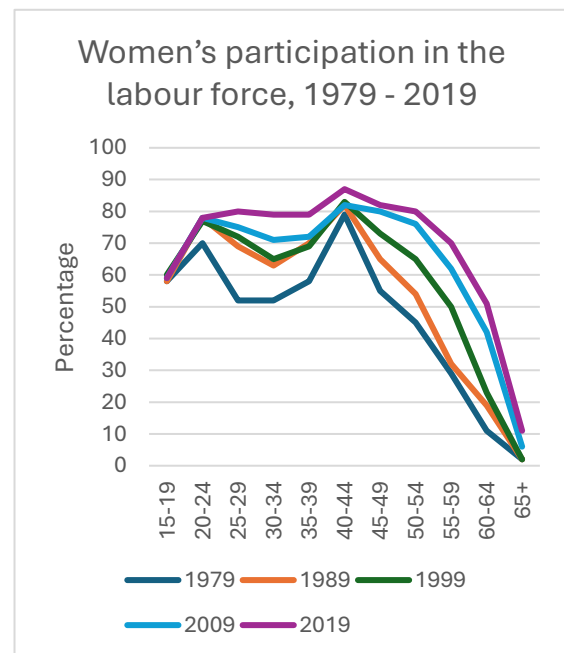
What does it mean to be a *good mother*?

For generations, society's answer was clear: a mother's place was at home, devoted entirely to her family. But as the decades roll on, this traditional image is being reshaped—and a new narrative is emerging.

Since the 1980s, Australia has seen a significant rise in working mothers, with their participation in the workforce more than doubling since 1984 (Warren et al., 2020).

Female labour force participation once followed an M-curve—women would leave the workforce during their childbearing years and return once their children were older (Warren et al., 2020).

Now, the curve has flattened. Many mothers remain in the workforce by leveraging flexible options: 55% are incentivised by the availability of part-time roles, 49% by access to childcare, and 26% by the ability to work from home (ABS, 2024). Meanwhile, women are delaying childbirth to pursue higher education and career goals, further supporting these shifts (Warren et al., 2020).



Source: Australian Institute of Family Studies (2020)

What we are seeing is a cultural transformation, with the once-dominant image of the stay-at-home mother giving way to that of the working mother.

Historically, the stay-at-home mother epitomised the ideal of "good motherhood."

Society often described this role as selfless, communal, and deeply centred on caregiving. A mother was expected to prioritise family needs above all else, remaining at home to manage household duties and care for children (Eagly & Steffen, 1984).

In contrast, working mothers were frequently viewed as neglecting their maternal responsibilities, regardless of how a lack of professional fulfilment might impact their well-being and, by extension, their ability to nurture their children effectively (Gorman & Fritzsche, 2006).

But societal attitudes toward motherhood are shifting.

Increasingly, studies highlight the positive impact working mothers have on their children, especially their daughters.

A 2018 Harvard Business School study spanning 29 countries, including Australia, found that daughters of working mothers are more likely to join the workforce, assume leadership roles, and earn higher wages than those raised by stay-at-home mothers.

In fact, they are 1.21 times more likely to pursue employment and report higher annual earnings (Gerdeman, 2018).

So, how does this happen?

Working mothers act as powerful role models, shaping their daughters' gender attitudes and aspirations. Their example often leads to higher educational attainment, which translates into better career prospects. Moreover, the socio-economic advantages of working mothers, such as higher family income and educational levels, create an enriched home environment that fosters learning (Augustine, 2018).

Importantly, the expectations mothers hold for their children's education play a pivotal role. The Australian Institute of Family Studies found that more educated parents set higher academic goals for their children and actively engage in their education, directly impacting children's academic and career outcomes (Yu & Daraganova, 2015).

These expectations spark ambition, leading children with higher aspirations to achieve better academic and labour market outcomes. Furthermore, when children witness their mothers pursuing education later in life, they are inspired to adopt similar expectations of themselves, having seen the value of perseverance and academic growth firsthand (Augustine, 2018).

The impact of working mothers is clear: they cultivate a cycle of ambition, benefiting not just their children but future generations.

But this raises an important question: Does a mother's employment affect her **child's happiness** and **emotional well-being**?

The answer, reassuringly, is no.

Harvard Business School's global review shows that children of working mothers are just as happy in adulthood as those raised by stay-at-home mothers (Gerdeman, 2018).

The key lies not in the mother's work status, but in the nurturing environment she creates. Despite racing against the clock, working mothers prioritise and deeply value quality time with their children—time that proves immensely beneficial (Haslam et al., 2015).

So, what **does** it mean to be a good mother in today's world?

The definition is evolving. A good mother is not confined to traditional roles but is someone who nurtures her children's happiness while inspiring them to dream big, aim high, and break barriers.

Working mothers exemplify this balance, proving that supporting a family goes beyond financial provision. It involves serving as role models and paving the way for future generations to thrive.

In rethinking motherhood, working mothers demonstrate that being "good" is not about fitting into a mould. It's about empowering children to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

Acknowledgement

This article is written in admiration of my mother, Alexandra. I am incredibly fortunate to be her daughter—her hard work and perseverance are nothing short of inspiring. I know that I would not be where I am without her.

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