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**R**ecently-published data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics on the Australian workforce of the future make fascinating reading. Projections of the size and composition of our labour force have been made on the basis of an extensive study of current participation rates and the previously-released projections of population between 1993 and 2041.

Australia's population is predicted to grow by 19 per cent — to about 21 million — by the year 2011. In the same period, ABS forecasts an even larger increase of 23 per cent — to 10.6 million — in the national labour force. Strongly rising employment of women is projected as the major reason why predicted workforce growth exceeds that forecast for total population. Projections suggest that by 2011 almost 5 million women will be in the labour market, an increase of more than a third on present levels. Male employment levels are expected to be up by a more modest 15 per cent to about 5.8 million.

This information on the changing demographics of Australia's workforce is complemented by other ABS data on working arrangements now applying. In a recent edition of its regular report *The labour force*, the Bureau released details of a comprehensive study of employment conditions which paid particular attention to the way in which working hours are currently structured. In reviewing this material there is a strong suggestion that greater flexibility will be required in this area to match the trends identified in labour force projections.

About two-thirds of Australian employees, for example, start and

finish work at rigidly-fixed times. Among the remaining third whose times at work are not strictly fixed, a third are not able to vary starting and finishing times on a daily basis. In all, only 21 per cent of Australian workers enjoy this type of flexibility by right and the majority are men: 23 per cent of employed men as against 18 per cent of employed women. Among the 28 per cent of employees with access to Rostered Days Off (RDOs), the majority again are men: 34 per cent to 20 per cent. The relative inflexibility in arrangement of working hours may at least partially explain the data on absences which indicate 19 per cent of full-time employees had at least one absence from work in the two-week period leading up to the Bureau's survey.

In light of the changing shape of the national workforce, there clearly will be an increasing case for further flexibility. This is confirmed by still more material released by ABS on *Families and the labour force*. Already 93 per cent of husbands and 61 per cent of wives with dependants are in the workforce in Australia. And the projected 34 per cent increase in employment of women in the next decade and a half, discussed above, will obviously see the present 58 per cent of couple families now with both parents in the workforce increase substantially. It is likely that families with dependant children in which both husband and wife do not work will represent a small and declining minority. When the growing number of sole parent families is also taken into account, it is apparent that the vast majority of working parents will have a real need for maximum flexibility in

structuring their working time.

The data analysed here indicates again the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of labour market reform. On the one hand we hear ringing policy commitment to balancing of work and family responsibilities. On the other, available statistics confirm that much remains to be done in real workplaces if improved outcomes are to result. Several recent Australian developments confirm that this will be an important aspect of industrial relations in the next decade. They include the Federal Government's ratification of International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 156, workers with family responsibilities, its commitment to elimination of barriers to women's equal participation in the workforce and its statement on the need to include in enterprise bargaining initiatives for a better balance between work and family responsibilities.

Predominantly, library and information workers are women. All current research confirms that it is still women, whether in the workforce or not, who shoulder the bulk of responsibility for child-care in the home. Given that this is so, librarians, as members of one of the major feminised professions, should place achievement of maximum flexibility in working arrangements near the top of their list of objectives for enterprise bargaining and negotiation of employment conditions in the immediate future. The demographic labour market trends now emerging suggest strongly that the tide is flowing in women's favour. Librarians, together with other women in the workforce, should be determined to capitalise on that.