



**TITLE:** Mothers in Transition: Changing Gender Dynamics in the Home through Strategic Absence

Author/s: Dr. Petra Bueskens

Affiliation/s: Australian College of Applied Psychology/ The University of Melbourne

In the sociological and feminist research on motherhood there is consensus that key gender differences in income, employment status, leisure, autonomy as well as time spent in childcare and domestic work take shape and consolidate after “partners become parents”. Notwithstanding the prevailing ethos of equality in contemporary western societies, the advent of parenthood leads to a steep decline in women’s, though not men’s, access to the key resources of income, leisure and employment given the largely unshared nature of childcare and domestic work. Despite a widely shared egalitarian ethos among western couples, it is still women who typically assume what I call the “default position” in the home and who adjust themselves accordingly to the schedules of children including infant care, school routines, hobbies, illness, pupil free days and so on. Consequently, most women who are mothers of dependent children work in lower paid part-time and/or casual employment. Given the prevailing ethos of liberal individualism – defined by freedom and equality of opportunity for all – this position is increasingly contentious and a subject for debate in contemporary western societies. This paper explores my empirical research with ten mothers who used periodic absence from the home to reconstruct gender dynamics towards greater equality.