

DIFFERENT MERRY-GO- ROUNDS

FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES AND THE 7-DAY ROSTER

Katherine Gibson

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FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES AND THE 7-DAY ROSTER

is the result of a research project involving women from
coal mining communities in Central Queensland.

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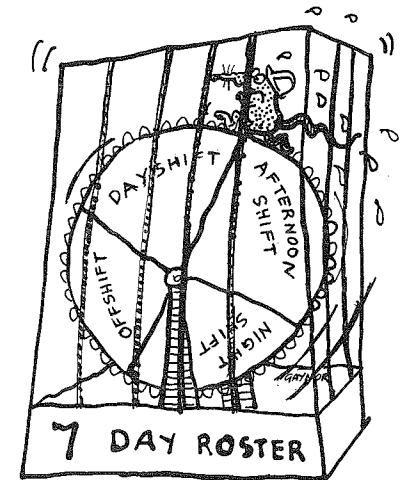
I would like to thank all the women and men in the Queensland coal towns who gave of their time so freely to talk to me about their experiences of work and family life during my visits to the region in 1987, 1990 and 1991. In particular I would like to acknowledge the work of Robyn Cross, Marie Allen, Jane Deimal, Jan Hicks, Gayle Johnston, Elaine Jones, Patti Martin, Gayle Merrick, Kerry Porter, Marcia Saunders, Judy Stephenson, Chris Sutton and Wendy Tancred who were all involved in the research process reported here. Thanks are also due to the United Mine Workers branches at Collinsville, Moranbah, Tieri and Moura who gave generous financial support for the research workshops held in Tieri and to the Manager of the Oaky Creek Mine, Mr Jack Emery, for his support and assistance. I would also like to thank David Tait who provided childcare and research assistance during my field trips and the partners of all the women mentioned above who kept the home fires burning while the workshops were in progress. Finally publication of the research in the form of this booklet would not have been possible without the financial support of the United Mine Workers, Queensland District Branch, the editing, typesetting and organisation undertaken by Jenny Cameron and the cartoons of Gaynor Cardew (aunty of Derek and Alison of Capella).

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 1980's coal mining companies in Australia initiated discussions about a new Industry Award designed to 'remove restrictive work practices' in the industry and increase production levels at lower costs. After a ruling by the Coal Industry Tribunal a new Award was introduced in 1988. This Award allowed for the adoption of a new work schedule called the **7-day roster**.

This roster involves dividing the production workforce into four groups. At any one time there is one group working a day shift, one group working an afternoon shift, one group working a night shift and one group off work. Each group works seven consecutive days on either the day, afternoon or evening shift before rotating to the next shift. Between shifts each group has one or two days off and at the end of working each of the shifts a longer period of four days off. Under this roster most workers end up being off work for only one Saturday and Sunday each month.

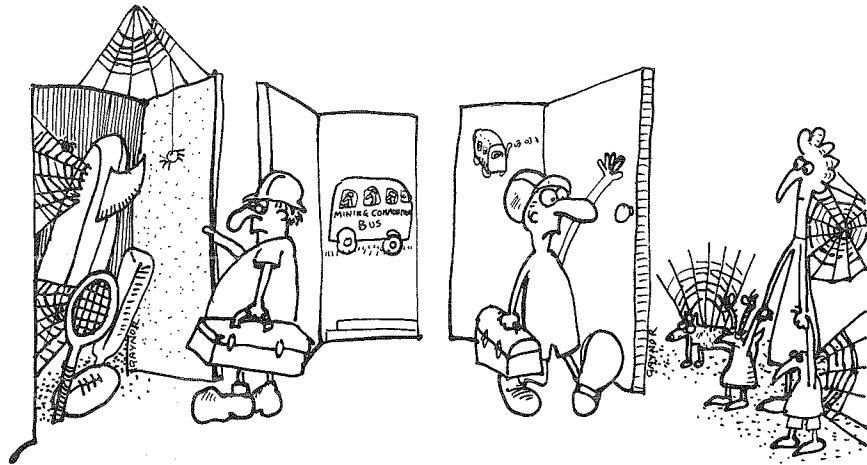


There have been countless studies of the effects of shift work and different roster arrangements on workers themselves. However little research has examined the impact of these upon the partners, families and communities of shift workers. **This booklet is designed to outline some of the major impacts of the 7-day roster on families and communities from the perspective of women in four coal mining communities in Central Queensland.**

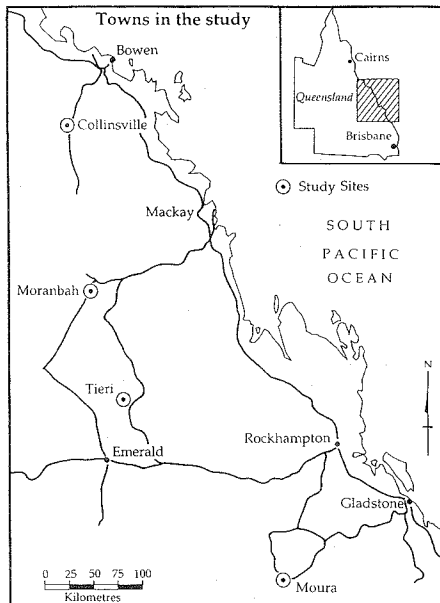
While the 7-day roster has been introduced to various coal mines, mining companies are starting to talk of the introduction of other working arrangements. For example, 12 hour shifts are being worked by non-United Mine Workers' members at the Blair Athol mine near Clermont in Central Queensland, and many companies are interested in the widespread adoption of this shift throughout the coal industry.

At the North Goonyella mine, near to both Glendon and Moranbah, workers commute long distance from Mackay and live in quarters near the mine while they work for concentrated periods before heading home to the coast. Long distance commuting is another possibility on the agenda for workers at new mines in Central Queensland.

Both these methods of introducing different working arrangements will have important impacts on families and communities.



This booklet raises some of the issues encountered by men, women and families after the introduction of the 7-day roster. It highlights the need to consider factors broader than increased pay arrangements and men's leisure before drastic changes in working arrangements are agreed to.



The information in this booklet is the result of research conducted in 1991 in four mining towns in Central Queensland where the 7-day roster has been introduced: Collinsville, Moranbah, Moura and Tieri. At a two day workshop a survey questionnaire designed to generate in-depth discussion was developed by twelve women drawn from the four mining towns. After the workshop each of the participants then administered the questionnaire to six women in their community. Using this process 83 women (including 11 of the 12 workshop participants) were interviewed. A range of age groups, family types and stages, and partner's jobs are represented. One of the recommendations from the workshop was that the information gathered be disseminated to other mining towns to let them know about the situation and to encourage communication about the effects of the 7-day roster. This booklet is a direct result of that recommendation.

OVERALL EFFECT OF THE 7-DAY ROSTER

Overall, the introduction of the 7-day roster has had a negative effect on women, their partners, their families and relationships in families. 63 per cent of the women interviewed reported that the roster had a negative effect on them, compared with 10 per cent who reported that its effect was positive. Similarly 60 per cent of women reported that the roster had a negative effect on their partner, while only 8 per cent reported that it had a positive effect.

	Negative Effect	No Difference	Mixed Effects	Positive Effect	Total
Impact on Women	63.2%	16.2%	10.3%	10.3%	100.0%
Impact on Men	60.3%	7.3%	23.6%	8.8%	100.0%

There were differences in the reporting of negative impacts between different towns. Generally less negative impacts were reported from Tieri. This town had recently received an influx of families from other mining towns as a new mine was brought into production and the workforce was increased. These new arrivals came to Tieri knowing that the 7-day roster was in place and this could account for the higher degree of acceptance and adjustment to it compared to other towns. The most pronounced negative impacts were reported in Collinsville (where the roster changes were mainly introduced more recently in 1991 as a more or less forced alternative to significant scaling down of operations) and Moranbah.

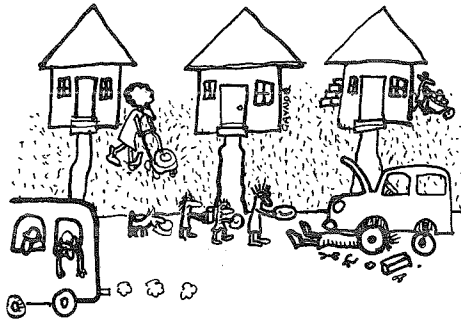
A range of effects were identified through the research and these are grouped into two main types:

- effect on family life
- effect on social life

EFFECT ON FAMILY LIFE: CHANGING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The introduction of the 7-day roster has had a major effect on family life. In particular men's working schedules have become separated from the routine of weekly family life. This separation from weekly family life means that there are changes to roles and responsibilities within the family.

Household chores regularly performed by men are now usually left up to the women to do:



Before 7-day roster my husband did certain jobs around the house - all the yard work, because he enjoyed that, he always did the washing up and so on. But now I just can't depend on him. When he's on afternoons (3pm-11pm) or nights (11pm-7am) he's away or asleep and can't do the washing up, so I do it. He can never remember when to put the garbage out now. So I tend to do everything now with no help. Also, he's so bugged I try and save him from having to do anything around the house.¹

He used to do more jobs around the house. Now I have to mow the lawns and put out the bins.

Changes to roles and responsibilities are related to the age of children and the stage in the family life cycle, with effects being accentuated for those families with younger children:



DUAL PARENT ROLES

He has total freedom from kids now as his limited social time has become sacred and I have to shoulder that responsibility. I've had to become the disciplinarian and he is seen as "Mr Fixit" by the kids, that often upsets him.

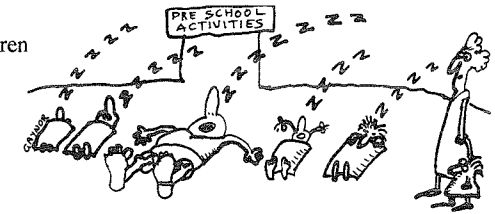
I have more responsibility for bringing the children up now, everything falls back on me. I don't see much of my husband. He just comes home, gives me a kiss and goes to bed.

Some women with younger children reported the opposite, that the roster gave men more time to spend with the family:

It's made things better for him, he spends more time at home with the children and can go to school activities with them.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all quotes are from women interviewed in 1991.

He sees more of our pre-school children and can visit the pre-school.



Changes to roles and responsibilities have also been generated by the loss of the traditional "weekend". The new roster allows only one full weekend off in four. If there are children, the mother is effectively a sole parent three weekends out of four.

The mother's got to take on the father's role on the weekend. Men are working harder and so are women. (Union Delegate)

Weekends are no different to other days now.

There's a feeling of entrapment in the town when you only have one weekend off a month - it's a long time to wait for a break.

I don't think the women are involved enough in what's going on in the industry. I mean, they are the ones that have got to be at home. When your husband's on shift work, you're the mum and dad to both kids, especially people on 7-day roster. You know, the kids have got football out at Middlemount on the weekend - it's the mum that's taking them out and stands screaming on the sidelines when it's Dad that should be there to see Johnny - Dad's at work. All to earn this money...for what? Three or four years down the track, well, mother's going to say "I'm packing up."

SINGLE PARENT PENSIONS



The pressure of changes to the roles and responsibilities in families take their toll on women:



I find I get very tired when my husband is on afternoon shift (3pm-11pm) and cross as a result. I get frustrated with [my husband] and with his lack of energy for home support.

I have no life anymore - kids all day and no time or energy to be worried about or working on our relationship with no weekends anymore. We're too tired and invariably 'days off' are spent catching up on chores I couldn't do alone during the normal week. We have to "work at it" (the relationship) but neither of us can be bothered.

On afternoon shift, the very first one for the week, the kids start - they just know and they're at it arguing, being disruptive and generally totally disobedient and every day then for 7 days is the same. By the end I've had it and now I even get tense before afternoon shift starts because I know what's going to happen and I don't seem to be able to break the cycle.

These effects on women are exacerbated because men are too tired or irritable to provide support for family life:



Men were not meant to work 7 days in a row - they get so ratty.

He doesn't know what day it is anymore, and he's grumpy and tired and hard to get on with.

He's tired due to the 7 days straight each shift, he seems to be lazy and unenthusiastic.

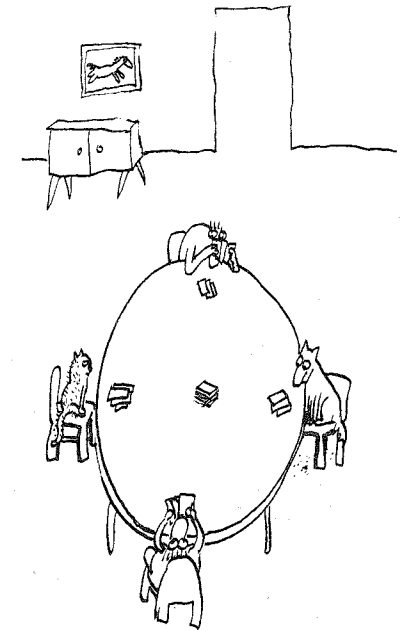
Men get so tired on 7-day roster, they have to take sickies.

EFFECT ON SOCIAL LIFE

For many families it is the effect on social life that is most noticeable. Much of the social life in these isolated towns revolves around weekend activities - sports, barbeques, dances.

Now half the mining workforce works either day or afternoon shifts during the weekend and there are fewer opportunities for socialising.

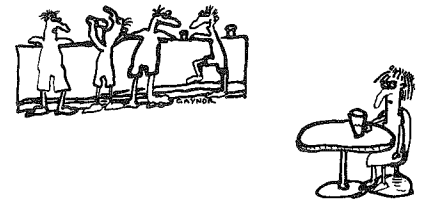
We have friends out at the railway houses, near the mine. Now we used to see them possibly every second weekend - they could come in here. My husband used to work with him on the three shifts. But now with the 7-day roster he doesn't get to see him as much so, therefore, we don't get to see them as much, as we used to know what shifts they were on. We used to have card nights. Now we can't do that. We drive out there in the morning when my husband's on afternoon shift, but only half the time J's not there he's at work on day shift so we get to see C. Never the four of us are together all the time. If you want to have a party one can't stay long because they're on day shift. That's what really puts the pressure on. We used to go to dances and everything like that, but we can't do that anymore.

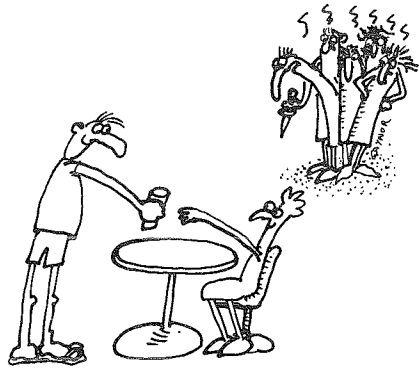


I've told the company about the effects on the community sporting clubs but they just say they don't care, they are only here to mine coal. (Union Delegate)

With half of the men in the community working during the social hours of the weekend, many women are left to go out alone or stay at home. Many stay at home because mining town culture does not provide an acceptable social environment for women alone in public:

I don't go to social activities if he's at work because I don't like going on my own.





Women don't go to things alone when their husband is working because they will be seen as loose. No matter how much everyone knows she is happily married and faithful she will still be regarded with suspicion. The men will get her drinks and see that she is seated, probably because they feel sorry for her. But their wives will see her as stealing their husbands. And the next thing you know a rumour will get back to her husband about what she was up to. Women just don't trust each other.

When the long breaks between shifts occur during the week women, particularly those with children, often have other commitments that prevent them from going away with their partners:



I'm a member of 8 voluntary organisations and I often have night time meetings during the week. The last time my husband had time off during the week he wanted to go away but I couldn't go (because of prior commitments). I said to him "You liked me because I was independent and had my own life and interests - but now you're complaining".

I'm by myself a lot of the time. When he has days off he goes away and I have to stay because of the twins in school.

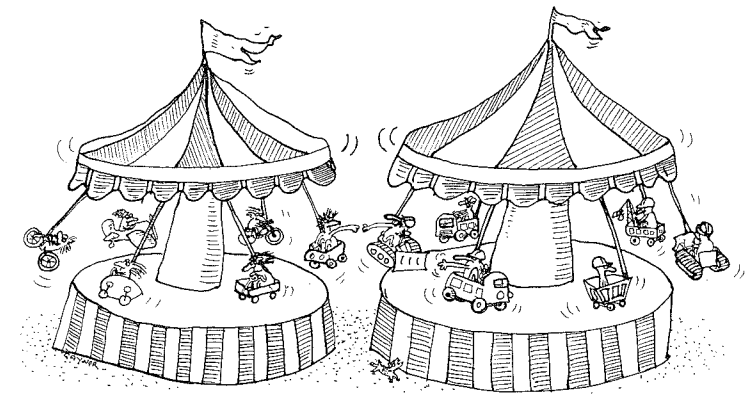
For couples without children and particularly for those approaching retirement this does not pose such a problem:

We are very happy with the 7-day roster. There's more money in the pay packet, we can go away more on rostered days off. Our son-in-law is on the same shift so we all go away together on days off.

CONCLUSION

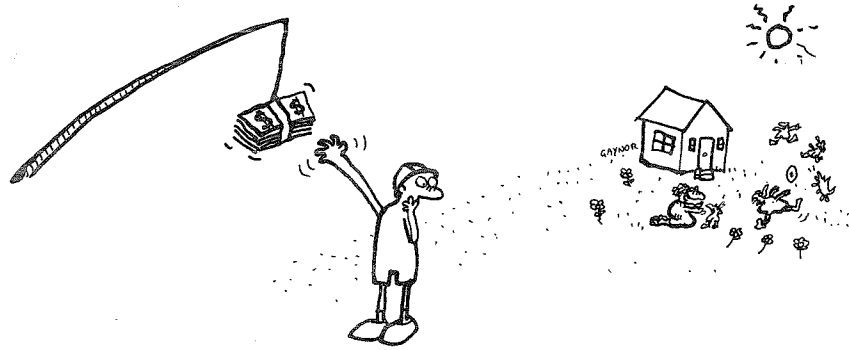
The results of the research indicate that:

- Adjustment to the 7-day roster has been most successful in families where there are no longer children living at home. In these families couples can adjust their lifestyle to fit in with the work schedule. These couples are usually older and are making retirement plans; thus the extra money the roster provides is seen to compensate for some of its negative social effects.
- For families with children living at home the benefits of extra money do not, in large part, compensate for the negative impacts of the 7-day roster. These families are tied into a regular routine of household work and school that does not correspond with the arrangements of the 7-day roster.



- Women have shouldered the burden of extra household work and childcare as regular patterns of family life have been disrupted. This especially occurs on weekends. In homes with young children the work roster is constant and physically demanding and, because of the demands of the 7-day roster, partners are often unable to provide domestic assistance.
- Children are seen by their mothers as missing the contact with their fathers, especially on weekends. Discipline problems with children have arisen for some families.
- Men miss the social life of the weekend when they could participate in regular activities in their communities with their mates, children and wives.
- The social life of many women has been affected by the new work roster. Many do not feel comfortable going out socially alone in the evening or at the weekend without their partners. Many also feel constrained when continuing their own day time social commitments while their partners are at home on rostered days off.

While families are acutely aware of the negative effects of the 7-day roster, companies too have begun to feel the negative effects. Since the introduction of the roster absenteeism has been on the rise. It is not uncommon for men to take a sick day when on the long stretch of night shift or on a weekend when a particular event is on. The money incentive which attracted many men to the new roster system is now being reconsidered. As one bloke commented to a newspaper reporter, "There's more to life than money and bloody work" (Australian, 1992 April 6:3).

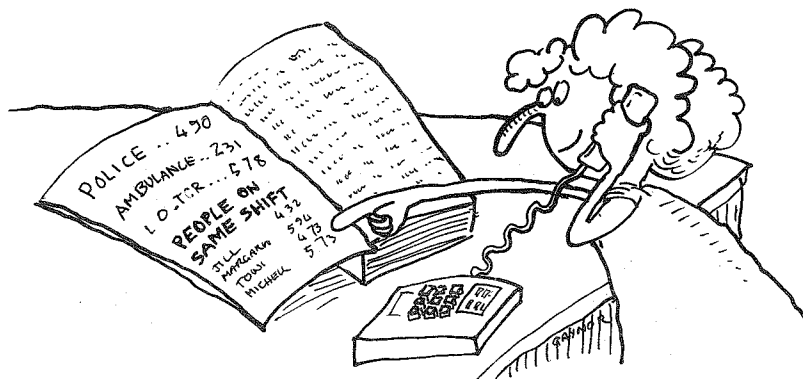


RECOMMENDATIONS

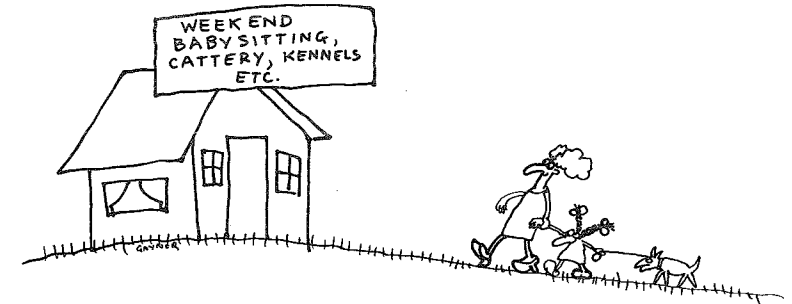
From the workshops conducted with women from the four mining towns recommendations were made as to things they or others could do to improve the situation for families affected by the 7-day roster.

Set up supports especially for families with small children, such as:

- informal support networks, for instance for women to get together when men are on afternoon shift
- phone contact lists of families on similar roster schedules



- baby-sitting facilities for weekends



- drop-in centres where children are welcome



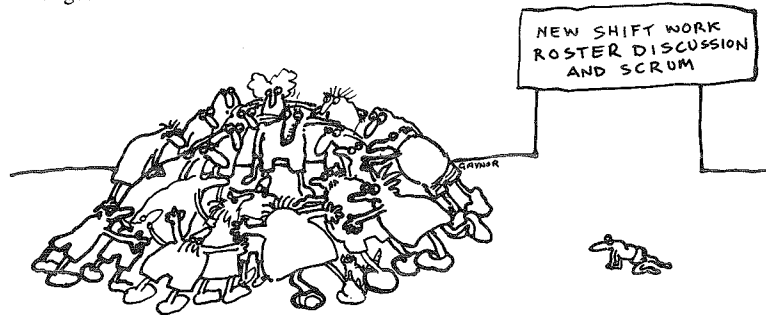
- better pre-school children's playgrounds and facilities
- an informal network for newcomers to the town which encourage one-to-one contact between old and new residents

These supports should be informal and non-professionalised to avoid the social stigma associated with social services and to enable people to make close connections with one another.



Create better links between companies, unions and women in the community to facilitate greater consultation about the effects of workplace changes on women, children and families, for example:

- organise meetings for men and women when new people come to the mine or when rosters change so the effects of shift work rosters can be discussed and information exchanged



- hold follow up meetings 6 months after a new roster has been introduced or when new people have been taken on to review effects and coping strategies

Given the push by some companies to introduce 12-hour working days and long distance commuting for mine workers, this recommendation is all the more pressing. These is a crucial need to consider shift work in its social and family context before such drastic changes are agreed to.

