

# Work-Life Balance What's that?



**NACEW**

**NATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL ON  
THE EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN**

*MANA WAHINE, MANA MAHI*

To all working women,

*For most women workers, work is just one part of our lives. This may not be a problem. But for many of us, balancing work with our families, home and community responsibilities is a daily struggle and one of our greatest worries. The tensions of getting the balance right are continually stressful.*

*This struggle can be overwhelming. Work is often structured around tight deadlines and 'market demand'. We work in a culture that often rewards competition, long hours, endurance under pressure, and loyalty to meeting those work goals above and beyond our life outside work. Our children, families and communities are just expected to fit in around our paid work.*

*But you can take back your life, or at least some of it! In this brochure we interview four women who juggle complicated lives, facing difficult choices and constant negotiations as part of their everyday lives.*

*Your story won't be the same as theirs, but you share one thing in common: the right to have real choices in life. That's whether you have some balance already, or don't even have time to think about it! These stories show the positive outcomes for four women who took the time to think about strategies that could work for them. They could work for you too - talk to your employer friends, family or colleagues.*

*The stories of these women can be a starting point for tackling your work-life balance. Don't wait until you're in a crisis to do something about the choices you have in life right now.*



Suzanne Snively  
Chairperson  
National Advisory Council  
on the Employment of Women

## CATHERINE

### Personal Assistant Wellington

Catherine works in Wellington as a personal assistant and juggles her work with raising her two year old son with her husband. Half of her earnings go on childcare. Catherine arrived in New Zealand from Malaysia in 1986, finished a Bachelor of Commerce and Administration, and has worked in administration in several companies.



Before she had her son, Catherine worked full-time for a partner in a major company. "Most nights I would stay longer than 5 o'clock, sometimes coming in at the weekends and even going in during public holidays." After her son was born, she wasn't keen to go straight back into high pressure full-time work and while she couldn't get part-time work with her old firm, her employer recommended her to another company and she got part time work.

An average work-day starts at 6.30am (see Catherine's Day). She and her husband drop their son at child-care and catch the train into the city. She usually works three full days and at the end of the day collects her son, shops and starts dinner.

Catherine's biggest challenges are when work is busy or her son is sick. With her family still mostly in Malaysia, she misses her family network, although she's lucky that her husband has more flexibility in his work as an electrical engineer. "If our son is sick, my husband would generally take the day off because he has more sick leave and has special leave as well. He gets special leave in case, you know, of a sick child, things like that. He has that - whereas I don't."

Work conditions and pressures mean that she faces work-life conflicts even when her husband can care for their son, especially if he becomes unwell while at childcare.

"At the moment I've got projects on. I need to be at work and if I need to work late or anything, like past 4.30 this

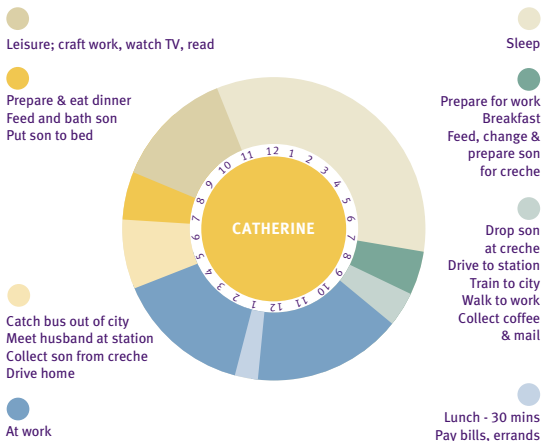


means I can't get back to pick him up. When I'm working full days I can't just leave. I can call my husband and he can take the afternoon off and take him to see the doctor. But I'm conscious of the fact that I'm worrying about him. I'm not there to see how he's doing."

Her current employer's understanding and support is valuable. Sometimes she takes certain work home – at other times she swaps her days of work around if she's missed a day.

But Catherine also believes many women office workers don't have a lot of choice. "Some organisations look at woman and say: 'Oh no you've got a child. Even though you're coming back to work full-time, you may not be as committed as you were before'."

### CATHERINE'S DAY



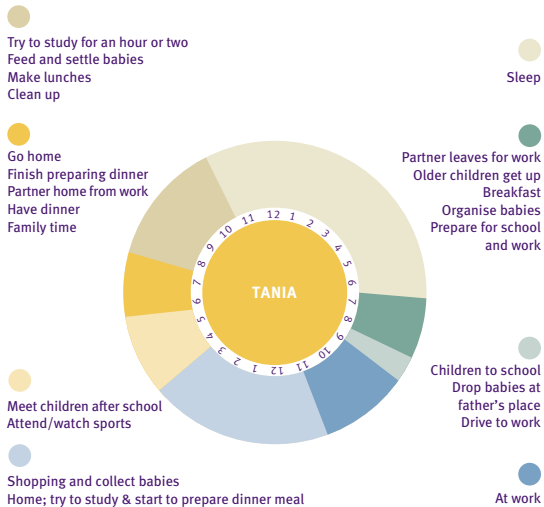


needs to take her father to health services in Gisborne, and occasionally tries “to have a social game of netball now and then.”

Negotiating a complex work and home life is not always easy. Tania says: “It’s all about time management, eh? You can’t waste a minute.” But now that her mother has moved to Gisborne to help another family member, Tania finds it challenging to deal with work and family and study. “There’s a lot of reading. At night I try to get an hour in, or during the day, if I’m feeding the baby after school, and when I finish work. Before it was good when my mum was here because she’d have them for a couple of hours. I could go over to her place and then I could go lock myself away in a room and study.”

The rest of the family and household needs usually become Tania’s responsibility during the week and she admits: “I’d love for someone to do my housework! I can never get on top of it.” She says that a life like hers is hectic, but her advice to others is to keep a sense of humour and “go with the flow . . . don’t stress out”.

### TANIA’S DAY



### KATE

Farmer  
Strath Taieri



Kate is “a mother, wife, farmer and an enthusiast for life and opportunities.” After qualifying in law and marrying a farmer, she has built a life that involves time with her two children (aged eight and nine), farming with her husband and his parents, and working on a wide variety of community activities.

Kate’s paid work involves various tasks on the family’s 750ha sheep farm, depending on the season: “I do a very intensive lambing beat for example. Other times I plant trees and do fencing for that. At the moment I’m in the middle of doing an application for changing our water right. I do all the GST, PAYE – those sorts of things. I do a lot of bookwork, a lot of phone work. I do hands-on stuff as well as making decisions. I do a lot of the financial background work although it’s all joint decision making, it will be me who goes looking for the low interest rates and working with the bank. Then at shearing I might class wool, I might pen up sheep, or I might feed out. It’s fairly intense and you don’t leave the farm. There’s always something to do.”

During lambing, an average day is very busy (see Kate’s Day). This starts with the radio news and weather, sharing the family breakfast, seeing to some community calls, telephoning her elderly mother and getting the children off to catch the school bus. Most of the rest of the day (8.15am-5.30pm) is then spent doing lambing beats, checking on ewes and assisting with lambing. At lunch time and after school, Kate returns to the farmhouse to prepare food, check the fire, do some housework (her “least favourite thing”), answer farm and community work messages, and meet the children from school. At the end of the day the family have dinner then Kate will often have a community meeting in the evening for several hours after which she goes home and tidies up business and community work on the computer.

Outside lambing and shearing times, Kate recognizes the advantage of her work conditions: “Farming is really flexible



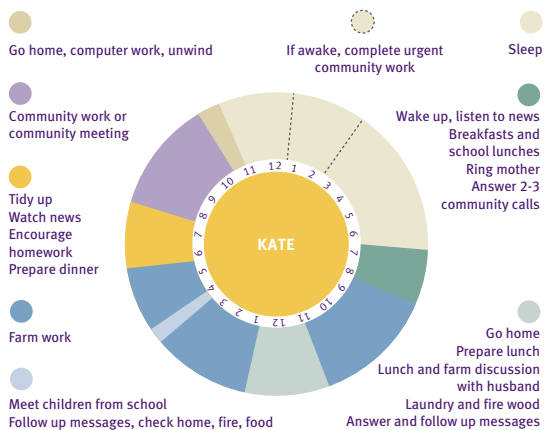
and we're really lucky like that. It may be seven days a week but it's flexible and so usually you can work around it."

Kate uses this flexibility to do a lot of general (and sometimes legal) community work in a voluntary capacity. Even at busy farm times she still maintains a lot of community input. This ranges from the local school board of trustees, the local agriculture and tourism trust, a variety of other environmental and social service trusts, several government projects and services (rural development, periodic detention), and two regular media reports.

Kate says her husband, parents-in-law and friends are essential to managing this work-life mix: "I've got wonderful, supportive in-laws who will have the children after school, but can also see that together we can make a difference. And my husband; we work very well as a team. He often does the breakfast, gets them ready and he'll do bedtime. He's also very good on homework. I'm very lucky with my family and I've got a very strong group of female friends who all look after each other's children when we need to."

Kate believes if rural women are fortunate enough to have support and opportunities to build a busy working life, they should still take care: "don't try to be superwoman, sometimes you have to say no".

### KATE'S DAY



### SELA

#### Policy Analyst Wellington



Sela is a Tokelauan-born widow and mother of three who works full-time as a policy analyst for a government ministry. After training and working in secretarial and administrative work, Sela was encouraged into a policy position where she works a 40-hour week. The work is based on a lot of reading, consultations, and analysis of policy documents. This job is often pressured when she has one or two days to comment on policy documents or several meetings in one day. Sela's work days are long (see Sela's day) but she says she is fortunate that work hours are flexible: "In terms of flexibility here at work, it's good. Just as long as I do the hours and produce the quality of work, my manager does not mind what hours I work. Say for example I start late and go home early, or start early and finish late it doesn't matter so long as the work is done well at the end of the day.

This flexibility is welcomed because since her husband died, she's the sole provider for her daughter and two sons (aged 15, three years and 19 months respectively). She also supports her elderly parents when they need health or other services. Since having her third child, Sela's mother has cared for her sons (although her three year old now goes to day-care two days a week). Sela's daughter also helps with general housework and cooking, and her siblings give assistance too.

"I rely on one of my brothers a lot. He runs his own business and he does a lot of running around so he does a lot for me too, picking up my kids on rainy days, taking me shopping, fixing things at home.

Sela is also conscious that her work is hard for her children too.

"My kids hate it that I go to work every morning, especially my three year old. Most mornings we have 'fights'. He doesn't want to go to his Nanna's or childcare. You know



# For the future

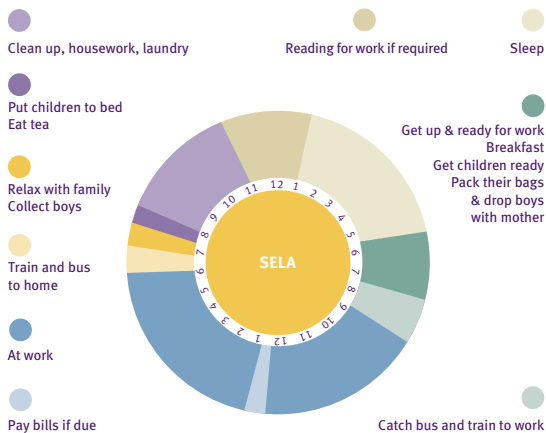
it's hard just trying to explain. I say: 'Mummy has to go to work so mummy can buy you your shoes.'

To deal with this complex life, Sela concentrates on several short and long-term strategies. She: works early or late (during quiet office times) to ensure the quality of her work; negotiates day travel instead of overnight trips where possible; tries not to take work home (although often has to do a couple of hours reading late at night); always aims to be home in time to see the children to bed (and stay longer with them the next morning if this hasn't been possible); explains to her children why she works to support the family; and holds onto the goals she and her husband held for the life they aimed to give their children.

Sela is also aware her work environment is much more positive than many women face. The Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs and managers support strong cultural and family values that acknowledge not only workers but also their families.

Thinking about other women in her type of situation Sela believes several things are very important: communicating and explaining things to her children; learning to budget; and exploring what financial support and subsidized childcare is available.

## SELA'S DAY



Catherine, Tania, Kate and Sela show how women often rely on family and friends to help solve work-life tensions. Women often reduce their hours of paid work in order to meet their wider family obligations. But research suggests this 'do-it-yourself' response to work-life conflict constrains income, reduces job satisfaction, and prevents women realising their career potential.

Instead of leaving issues of work-life balance to individual employees, employers (especially supportive managers) can also make a big difference, as Sela's and Catherine's experience shows. Indeed, research on employment, management and administration suggests employers should consider:

### Formal Policy (standard, commonly accepted strategies in some sectors)

- Flexi-time work hours
- Flexi-workspace opportunities
- Equal opportunity measures and affirmative action to advance more women into senior/managerial positions
- Comprehensive family and carer leave entitlements - for men and women.

### Informal Employment Culture (less commonly addressed, but more crucial strategies for reducing work-life conflict and associated labour costs)

- Recognize employees as complex human beings with social responsibilities as well as their jobs
- Acknowledge employees' families and friendship networks as key resources that support them in meeting their work responsibilities
- Ensure employees have access to a telephone to be contacted by their families or to check on their children
- Explore possibilities for individually designed work-timetables that meet both the employee's work obligations and their other commitments
- Challenge and remove the high status often awarded to long hours of work - long hours often don't lead to better performance
- Redesign work programmes and expectations away from deadlines and competition and towards goals and collaboration
- Reduce employee's fear of using work-life balance policies by supporting and encouraging the use of these measures.



## Things you can do to help achieve work-life balance

- Share this pamphlet with other women
- Form a women's group to talk about the issues
- Visit the NACEW website for more information  
[www.nacew.govt.nz](http://www.nacew.govt.nz)
- Show employers this brochure and direct them to the EEO Trust website [www.eeotrust.org.nz](http://www.eeotrust.org.nz) which has a number of useful work-life balance resources
- Find out more on the Government's work-life balance project by visiting [www.worklife.govt.nz](http://www.worklife.govt.nz)
- Negotiate for work-life balance arrangements in your employment agreement
- Work with others in your union and negotiate for work-life provisions in your collective employment agreement

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