

# Gender Equality Submission

Submission by the Council for Single Mothers and Their Children (CSMC)  
March 2016

## Introduction

The Council of Single Mothers and their Children (CSMC) is a state wide, membership-based, community organisation run by and for single mothers. CSMC supports the principle that all women need support from the community, from all levels of government, as well as from community and business employers, however CSMC is primarily concerned with supporting single mothers and working for changes to systems, services and community attitudes. CSMC believes that single mothers face disadvantage on a number of fronts including, but not limited to poverty, workforce barriers, and lack of community support.

Mothers are important members of our community. If women chose not have children, we would have no future. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) indicates that there are 2.8 million couple families with dependent children and approximately 879 000 one-parent families (of which mothers head eighty-seven per cent).<sup>1</sup>

Mothers (both single and in couple families) experience gender inequality at cognitive, practical and structural levels. Mothers need support to counter these, as well as support to facilitate their essential role in the community of raising the next generation. Mothers, whether or not they have a partner, usually shoulder most of the responsibility for child(ren). Mothers are still regarded as primary caregivers and are responsible for preparing meals, organising schedules, taking responsibility for overseeing education, taking children to community and sporting events, reading stories before bed, organising bath times, and generally being on call 24 hours a day. The list of daily and weekly responsibilities that takes up a great deal of energy and effort is unending. Added to this, women are the ones expected to take time off from work to care for sick children.

Of families with dependent children, the percentage where mothers were employed has generally increased in each ABS survey cycle since 1997, for both couple and

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 'Family Characteristics in Australia,' <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/4442.0Main%20Features22009-10?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4442.0&issue=2009-10&num=&view=>

lone mother families. In 2009-10 mothers were employed in 66% of couple families with dependent children and 60% of lone mother families compared to 59% and 46% respectively in 1997. This increase has been most noticeable in families with older children. For instance, in couple families where the youngest child was a dependent student aged 15-24 years, 81% of mothers were employed in 2009-10 compared to 71% in 1997. In 2009-10, of lone mothers whose youngest child was a dependent student aged 15-24 years, 83% were employed compared to 69% in 1997. <sup>2</sup>

## **Disadvantages faced by Single Mothers**

### **1. Lack of secure Income Support payment**

By far the most significant barrier to a life worth living for sole parent families is the abolition of the former Sole Parent Pension, later called Parenting Payment. This measure has been an unmitigated disaster for single mothers and their children. This is reflected in current poverty statistics that show that poverty is increasing in Australia.

- Two and a half million Australians, or 14 per cent, live in poverty.
- More than 600,000 children, or 18 per cent, live in poverty. One child in six lives in poverty. <sup>3</sup>

Pensions for sole parents, or Parenting Payment, are now temporary payments until the youngest child is aged seven years. From the time the child turns six, parents are required to meet demands of activity and work testing set by Centrelink, and sometimes Employment Service Providers, whose lines of accountability are to themselves and their (sometimes overseas) shareholders.

These Employment Service Providers are private businesses whose aim is to make a profit, not to assist those they are providing a service to. They receive funding from the Government to carry out this job, but this is largely unregulated and subject to abuse and rorting.

Parenting Payment is now separate from other pensions and is treated under different rules. This is significant for a number of reasons:

- The recognition of a woman's role as a mother has been de-valued, disrespected and denigrated.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> [ACOSS Poverty in Australia Report 2014](http://www.acoss.org.au/poverty-)  
<http://www.acoss.org.au/poverty->

- A mother is expected to ready herself for full-time work in a short time frame, when often the lead-up to gaining work is through a long-term process: part-time jobs, the gaining of tertiary education, undertaking a technical course (for example a basic degree takes at least three years, longer if you study part-time, as many sole parents do).
- The decision about how and when to return to work is taken away from the mother. If your child has a disability, you may be exempt, but if the disability is mild, then you are unable to make your own judgement about when your child is ready to be separated from you if you find full-time work.
  - o If you judge that your own child is at risk, for example, of drug or alcohol abuse, of personal safety problems or some other individual circumstances, you cannot make the decision to work part-time so that you can be there for your child when he or she needs you.
- While you are forced to choose between full-time work, if you can find it, or desperate poverty on Newstart Allowance (unindexed – adequately - for 21 years and now \$150 per week below the poverty line and the pension rate), the very valuable and helpful Jobs, Education and Training (JET) scheme has been abolished. This has been replaced by privatised (and sometimes corrupt) ‘employment services providers’ who frequently fail to take account of a person’s individual circumstances and status as a parent. <sup>4</sup>
- The JET program has also been replaced by Work for the Dole and a range of unreasonable and inappropriate ‘activity’ testing requirements, such as being forced to undertake training courses which are irrelevant and unnecessary for the individual or family concerned.
- The Basics Card (income management) has been introduced in some areas, removing financial decision-making from women and infantilising them in a paternalistic way.
- Cuts to child care subsidies.
- No action on problems in the child support scheme.
- Other family- and woman-unfriendly policies.
- Lack of adequate attention to affordable housing
- Cuts to services used by women, especially in relation to family violence.

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<sup>4</sup> Four Corners, 23.2.2015

## **2. Workforce Barriers for Women**

Workforce Barriers have long been identified as an issue, particularly with regard to childcare and family-friendly working conditions. Research in this field has consistently shown that there is a clear link between women's workforce experience and their parenting responsibilities.

Factors such as the "age of youngest child, mothers' health status and level of educational attainment" are significant, among a range of other factors.<sup>5</sup> The survey also did not distinguish between casual, part-time or full-time work, which is an important factor in women's workforce participation.

The complete picture is more complex than is indicated by quantitative surveys, and the whole basis of the income support system has been on one of these factors only, the age of the youngest child. It also does not account for added complexities for one-parent families.

Added to this is the fact that this income support system for sole mothers is income-tested so that all forms of part-time work no longer result in any financial reward because of the severe (and also unindexed for 20 years) income test on unemployment payments.<sup>6</sup>

The caring responsibility of mothers has been de-valued by individuals, the government and the community more broadly. When mothers consider participation in the paid workforce, their first question is how it can be fitted in with their parental responsibilities. The needs of children must come first, and parents should not be forced into choosing between the needs of their children and the demands of inflexible employers. Part-time work is often the most appropriate option for parents.

Employers have a responsibility to fully embrace the need to improve their family-friendly status. In some other OECD countries, having awards and recognition of those businesses that have the most progressive policies recognises this. However, we have seen that encouragement has not been sufficient to improve the situation in Victoria, and in Australia generally.

We need laws and sanctions that make discrimination against mothers illegal.

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<sup>5</sup> Baxter, Jennifer Research Paper No. 52, November 2013, Australian Institute of Family Studies  
<https://aifs.gov.au/publications/australian-mothers-participation--employment>

<sup>6</sup> Brady, Michelle & Cook, Kay, The impact of welfare to work on parents and their children, Evidence Base, issue 3, 2015  
<https://journal.anzsog.edu.au/publications/24/EvidenceBase2015Issue3Version1.pdf>

### **3. Low Income**

Most single mothers have a relatively low income, as there is only one parent, resulting in the capacity for only one person to gain income from employment. Income from employment is often limited and priority must be given to the needs of the child/ren over the employment situation.

Related to this is the loss of the secure reliable payment of a sole parent pension, and its replacement by a payment which is inadequate, that is, Newstart Allowance.

This payment has now not been properly indexed, or indeed increased, for the last 21 years. It has consequently fallen in value to approximately 60 per cent of the pension rate, or more than \$150 per week less than the pension rate.

It is also \$150 per week less than the poverty line. (50% of median income, the standard measure of poverty line used throughout the OECD)

### **4. Scarce Resources**

Many sole parents do not have equivalent resources to those available to those without children or single individuals. This includes housing, household goods, private transport, and can also include factors such as lack of access to other supports when they are needed.

As a one-parent family has almost the same costs as a two-parent family, an additional allowance (like the Guardian's Allowance, which existed until the 1990s) is needed to assist with extra costs associated with running a household.

This kind of payment is necessary to recognise that household goods, such as a washing machine or fridge, cost the same in any household with dependent children.

Housing costs are also greater than for a single individual, as the option to share housing is often not appropriate for sole parent families.

### **5. Isolation, including factors of geographical distance**

The need to secure affordable housing often leads single mothers to areas which are not well serviced. Lack of access to services, including schools, kindergartens and public transport.

In some cases, for example, a mother might need nearly an hour to walk with her child to school. The round trip to the local school and back could take more than an

hour and a half. If she has a car, she may not be able to afford to keep it on the road. Sometimes there is no public transport or even a school bus. Some school buses are unsafe for children and have a bullying culture.

She might not be able to afford internet connection, or there may be none in some regional and remote communities. Phone connections and costs are also likely to be a problem.

Similarly, access to shops can also be difficult. The same applies to doctors, hospitals, maternal and child health services, education including early childhood education and other services necessary for all families.

## **6. Lack of Community Support and Current Negative Attitudes towards One-Parent Families**

Single mothers are a frequent target of negative community attitudes and government scapegoating. These are not only unhelpful, but also often untrue.

We need to move beyond stereotypes to support and recognise all family forms.

Women are told to leave family violence, but are given no support when they do so.

Lack of helpful attitudes has been an ongoing issue for many years. Governments, both State and Federal, need to lead by promoting positive community attitudes.

Instead, we have observed the opposite over the past twenty years, with Governments adding to and fuelling community perceptions of the 'unworthiness' of one-parent families, and even worse, the children in one-parent families.

As one third of all children will spend a part of their childhood in a sole parent household, this is a large number of children further disadvantaged by the scapegoating and poor treatment of their families.

The long-term psychological and emotional costs for the children needs to be borne in mind when community leaders, including politicians, promote this negativity in both word and action. This translates into policy and practice, which has blighted the lives of many hundreds of thousands of children across Australia.

## **7. Family Violence**

Family violence is one of the leading contributors to women's experience of becoming single parents. Family Violence includes a range of other, less visible, forms of violence, such as psychological abuse, emotional abuse, verbal abuse and financial abuse.

Family violence has long-term physical and psychological effects on both mother and child and better supports need to be put in place to ensure vulnerable women and children are not falling further into poverty and homelessness.

The experience of the Council of Single Mothers and their Children is that a very large proportion of our service users come from a background of violence, whether it is physical, psychological, emotional or financial.

Although it is difficult to quantify, it is likely that over 60 or 70 per cent of CSMC's service users have experienced some kind of family violence.

Family Violence is an issue that touches many of us. CSMC is extremely concerned about the fact that governments at many levels pay lip-service to this as an issue, while failing to properly support the women and children who are trying to escape family violence.

In some cases, the irony of a Government which says it is concerned about this issue, while actually cutting funding to women's refuge services, makes a complete nonsense of the claims.

CSMC is particularly concerned that there is no recognition of the problem of women in these situations being consigned to extreme poverty – the dole, as noted \$150 per week below the pension rate – together with threats of its withdrawal for 'non-compliance'.

Women who are survivors of family violence and controlling behaviour, including bullying, removal of choices for women in families, verbal abuse, belittling, and financial control – have all had their decision-making options limited.

To then be put on a payment which is reminiscent of all of this: (1) completely inadequate to provide for a family, and (2) riddled with unreasonable work and activity demands is like going from the 'frying pan into the fire'.

The kind of structural bullying sanctioned by Centrelink and the (privately owned) Job Service Providers, again takes choice away in the lives of family violence survivors.

Even the work of Rosie Batty in 2015-16 has, so far, failed to clearly establish the link between a payment system which is inadequate as well as demanding and unreasonable and the failure of our society to adequately address the issue of violence in families.

CSMC is aware of the very serious consequences of a system and Government(s) which no longer respects or supports children, parenthood, and motherhood in particular.

## **Conclusion**

As a result of the disadvantages listed above, single mother families need additional support in carrying out their role, particularly in the community, in the workplace, and in the context of attitudes and views of government and community. This consultation paper has earmarked for attention numerous areas of study where gender inequality is evident; a book-length study could be written about each of them. We know the statistics and the areas of concern need to be addressed, but how can that be done? What does it mean? And most importantly, what are the links between these areas, as experienced by women in their lives? The situation for single mothers is exacerbated by more complications, more problems, and greater responsibility for the future of our children. This needs special attention, not vilification and scapegoating.

Gender Equality has been on the political agenda since the 1960s. While there have been notable improvements in some areas of policy, in other areas the discussion appears to have gone backwards. The late 1960s and the 1970s represented a time of progress in which there was a sense of community, and in which issues were openly discussed and new concepts like affirmative action were introduced. These kinds of conversations have since been swept under the carpet and buried under governments of all kinds over the last 20 years. The Victorian state government is now in a position to lead with a vision of progressive policies for gender equality. For the future of our children we hope that this will be the case.

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