A Feminist Family Agenda: 
Putting the Mother Back into Sole Parenting

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Introduction

In this paper we offer a feminist approach to recuperating the position of the single mother within contemporary policy debates that make reference to, and are of concern for, sole parents. Feminism has a long history and, correspondingly, feminist approaches are numerous and complex (see for example Cook and Bessant 1997; Scutt 1995; Women’s Coalition Against Family Violence 1994). The key tenets informing our feminist approach are: that there are social norms and beliefs that construct the gendered categories of masculine and feminine; a recognition of the need for an examination of structures of power and dominance that operate in the relations between men and women, interrogation of the belief that women and children are the property of men and an analysis of the unequal values placed on the public and private spheres. Most critically, we take a feminist approach by placing a concern for women’s’ wellbeing at the center of our analysis.

We look first to positive depictions of single mothers that were apparent when the Council of Single Mothers and their Children (CSMC) was founded. We then move in to an examination of the ways in which the interests and concerns of contemporary single mothers may be subsumed within the generic term ‘sole parent’ or worse, vilified and ignored in favor of the interests of a vocal male minority of single fathers. We demonstrate that specific policy consideration needs to be given to sole parents as mothers, as it is women who still bear the overwhelming majority of the time, cost and labour of the work of parenting following relationship breakdown.

Perceptions of Single Mothers: From Liberation in 1970 to Neo-misogyny in 2005

The Council of Single Mothers and their Children, hereafter referred to as CSMC, has advocated and lobbied on behalf of single mothers and their children for over 30 years. Upon its establishment, when the government’s minor financial provisions for single mothers included ‘milk money’ allocated under the ‘National Disasters Fund’, CSMC was influential in lobbying to establish the supporting mother’s pension during the Whitlam era. Examination of current family policy and work-family debates, however, indicates the possibility of a return to the days of the marginalisation of, and discrimination against, single mothers as ‘national disasters’.

Rosemary West, one of CSMC’s founding members, has written of the halcyon days of the organisation in inner city Carlton in the early 1970s during the heyday of the women’s liberation movement. One of CSMC’s many achievements during this time was to effectively generate public support for single mothers:

‘By telling our personal stories and by showing our faces and our children in the media we were able to speak directly from our experience to the public to demonstrate the need for the policy reforms we sought. We were able to show we were normal, loving mothers albeit under stress from the disadvantages heaped on us and that we had well-cared for and appealing children. Should we be denied justice? We asked.’ (West 1991:176-7)

This recognition of single mothers as ‘normal, loving mothers’ is in stark contrast to the response to an appearance by Kathleen Swinbourne, President of the NSW Sole Parent Union (a CSMC affiliate), on the 60 Minutes story ‘What Men Want’ in May 2004. Kathleen appeared with her three children to discuss their reservations regarding a legal presumption of 50/50 joint custody and was subsequently vilified and bombarded with hate mail, most particularly for including her children in this appearance.1 Kathleen has been vilified a number of times over recent years (personal correspondence) for her advocacy on behalf of single mothers, including a message from Dads R Us, a fathers’ rights group, which threatened:

“We have the family court, Child Support Agency, embittered self-centred women such as yourself and their effeminate/poofter men supporters clearly in our sights” (Sawer 2000:152)
Such abuse has not been confined to Kathleen; many other advocates for single mothers regularly experience similar treatment (Dunn 2004). Dunn has identified both the media and some fathers’ rights activists as mutually reinforcing a male centred discourse in parenting debates, which focuses on gender conflict:

‘…While sometimes there are journalists who attempt to canvass alternative opinions, largely the debate of a rebuttable presumption of shared care was reported from the “fathers losing out” perspective, and often with an impassioned sense of grief … as evidenced in the 60 Minutes story. In taking a sensationalist approach encouraging conflict between the sexes the commercial media gains improved ratings and sales but neglects social obligations.’

(Dunn 2004:17)

The next section examines one of the key constructs of this ‘gender war’ discourse on post-separation parenting; single fathers’ claims for victim status at the hands of hostile, possessive, single mothers, who refuse them contact with their children.

The post-separation father as victim of the vindictive mother who refuses contact

The issue of post-separation parenting has been the site of contentious, often combustive, recent political debate on parental rights and responsibilities, calculations of child support and the child-contact and child support nexus in Australia (Fehlberg and Smyth 2002; Flood 2003; House Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs 20033; Smyth, Caruana and Ferro 2004, Smyth and Weston 2004). These issues, in fact, became so contested that they formed the basis of the Commonwealth Government’s 2003 Parliamentary Inquiry Into Child Custody Arrangements in the Event of Family Separation (HSCFCA 2003). Such issues also have broader international policy relevance, having come under detailed consideration in Britain (Millar 2000; Millar and Rawlingson 2001; Rhoades 2002).

The father as victim and the vindictive, mother who punishes him by denying him contact with his children have become popular stereotypes in post-separation parenting debates (Dunn 2004; Rhoades 2002). There is a grave danger in the uncritical acceptance of these images as they serve to hide the reality that women continue to do the bulk of parenting, to obscure the genuine poverty of many women and children and to underestimate the high incidence of domestic abuse.

Rhoades examined the stereotype of the mother who denies the father access to the children in her retrospective analysis of family law court files that sought to enforce contact orders:

‘…Stories about family law, and particularly about disputes over children, have become commonplace in the Australian press in recent years, as they have in the UK and other western countries. Typically, they feature hostile and possessive mothers on the one hand, and frustrated men on the other, men who have had to resort to court action in an attempt to see their children and who have found the legal system wanting.’

(Rhoades 2002:73)

When men argue they are denied access to their children by their ex-partners, what they often fail to mention is that this is because they have been violent, abusive or have breached an order. Rhoades’ detailed analysis of 100 files where contact orders were disputed revealed only two where a mother unreasonably denied contact and repeatedly breached contact orders (Rhoades 2002:76). In both these cases the women believed the father had sexually assaulted their child. However, in both cases the court found there was no evidence and granted residency to the father.

The most frequent reason for contact order disputes was domestic violence perpetrated by the father (n=55), including stalking, threats of violence (including death threats), and assaults, including sexual assault. In only nine cases, was there a finding that a resident parent had breached a contact order and only three where the breach was serious enough to merit a penalty (Rhoades 2002: 75-6). Rhoades found that:

‘…A non-resident father’s failure to maintain contact with his children attracts no legal sanction while the mother’s failure to encourage contact attracts penalties and parenting classes to teach her the importance of contact to her child’s well being’

(Rhoades 2002:78-9)

Apart from lacking empirical evidence, the myth of male victimhood in the form of denial of access to, and time with, their children at the hands of vindictive, possessive women, effectively obscures the evidence that most women always have, and continue to do, the bulk of the time and work of parenting. The next section explores how such stereotyping and marginalisation of the interests of single mothers influences policy formulation that obscures the poverty of single mother headed families.
The policy ideal of ‘equality’ obscures the real burdens of care and cost for women

Rhoades argues that family law changes are being made on the basis of an idealized vision of equal shared parenting, that rarely exists; either while marital relationships are intact or post-separation:

The past several years have seen the emergence of a number of new discourses of parenthood in family law, discourses that centre on an idealized vision of the symmetrical family where power and roles are equal. In Australia this has occurred against a backdrop of legislative reforms that established a new regulatory framework for post-separation parenting. The new laws promote the idea of a cooperative parenting project between separated parents. (Rhoades 2004:71)

CSMC and many of the single mothers we work with support the notion of egalitarian, shared parenting. The notable exception to this support would be cases that involve domestic violence or abuse. Confining ourselves here to the cases where egalitarian parenting is viewed as a laudable ideal, this reconstruction of gendered parenting roles is rarely evidenced in either reality or any of the research to date (Flood 2003: viii). According to Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services data, a mere 5,500 separated families receiving income support share care at equal rates (60/40%) (Hansard 11/4/2000:13240). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2.6% or 25,400 of children from separated families had a care arrangement of over 30/70%. Therefore, for 97.4% of children with separated parents, their resident parent is providing 70-100% of their care. (HSCFCA 2003:12-13, Table 1.3). Nearly 90% of these sole parents are women (HSCFCA 2003:11, Table 1.1).

Before marital separation, the figures for care are not very different. Bittman and Wajcman (2000:174) studied time use across a number of nations, finding that even when married women and men both work full-time, women retain on average 72% of the unpaid work in the home. Grace found that women with young children undertake more than a full working week’s unpaid labour, regardless of whether they are employed or partnered (Grace 2001: 47).

In Australia, paid work remains highly sex segregated and remuneration disparate between genders. (Goward 2002; ABS in WEPEU 2002:16). In 2001, the average weekly earnings for full-time work for men were around $907, while women received $736 (WEPAU 2002:21). This income inequity commonly functions to maintain sex segregated domestic life in two parent families. Parents, struggling to meet family costs, often decide who will undertake paid work and who will do the unpaid parenting work, on the basis of earning power (Flood 2003: xi). These decisions can become self-perpetuating.

Probert has criticised the ideal of equitable parenting as having little basis in reality. She argues that family policy cannot be developed in isolation from other policy realms, most critically that of employment and industrial relations, noting the:

‘lack of progress we have made in redesigning employment practices to acknowledge anything other than a traditionally gendered workforce. Individual women and men can choose to adopt the other sex’s gendered role (childless women managers or stay at home dads) but the roles themselves remain unchanged’ (Probert 1999: 62).

Correspondingly, Bittman et al’s (2004) study of men’s uptake of family friendly employment provisions demonstrates that even when such provisions are made, take up rates for Australian men are low:

‘In 1999, only 18% of fathers used flexible hours to balance work and family, and 73% did not use a single family friendly provision. A mere 2 % of men indicated that they had switched to part-time work for childcare reasons.’ (Bittman et al 2004:ix)

In a labour market dominated by ‘masculinist’ career patterns, women and men alike find that by reducing their employment participation, they diminish their career prospects and likelihood of promotion, and reduce their superannuation and long service leave entitlements. Probert has noted that recent trends of work intensification, long hours and unpaid overtime make juggling family and career even more difficult. (Hochschild 1998, Wajcman 1998 in Probert 1999:61). Manne has identified ‘hypercapsitalism’ as the underlying force driving work conditions and social culture in a direction ‘...inimical to a flourishing family life’ (Manne 1999 in Probert 2002: 61). Neither men nor women stand to gain from such a system.

For single mothers, the barriers to entering the paid labour market or to maintaining paid work are more overwhelming, as they have (in many cases) little care assistance from ex-partners, are facing work-related costs (in particular child care) and often have the additional stress of a triple shift of parenting, paid work and caring for extended family. (Walter 2002; 2003)

Thus it is clear that most women continue to do the bulk of the work of parenting both during relationships and post-separation. This reality is significantly obscured, however, by the often desirable, yet thus far not widely achieved, ideal of more equitable parenting. This is an important recognition for policy makers, the media and the public alike who sometimes react with a knee-jerk sympathy response to a vocal minority of
Men’s claims to a more active parenting role. While this goal should be encouraged and supported, it should not be allowed to obscure the very real levels of work and responsibility most women continue to bear following relationship breakdown (Flood 2003: viii). The next section will demonstrate how the very real and significant poverty of single mothers and their children is effectively rendered invisible within policy debates that uncritically accept such constructs and complaints.

Mothers and children live in poverty post-separation

Gender is an important consideration when developing policy around family financial support post-separation. Research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies has proven that women in Australia are generally financially disadvantaged in relation to men upon the breakdown of their relationships (Weston and Smyth 2000: 10-15, cited in Sheehan and Smyth 2000:113; Sheehan and Hughes 2001). When relationships break down, the poverty of mothers is revealed. Single mother headed families are among the most financially disadvantaged in Australia. Single mothers, who have no paid work or manage on part-time wages, are frequently surviving on incomes under the poverty line. In 1999-2000 single parent families had an average income of $295.00 a week. (ABS 1999-00 Cat No 6523 in Colvin 2003:4). NATSEM recently estimated the weekly cost of raising two children to be $310 a week (HSCFCA 2003:132).

Child support is of minimal assistance for many sole parents, as 41% of single parents receive no child support (HSCFCA 2003:14,). According to the Child Support Agency, mothers constitute 91% of parents who are entitled to child support. Of these mothers, only 4% have incomes over $50,000 per annum and 75% raise children on incomes below $20,000. Related information on child support payers demonstrates that:

- 40% pay $5.00 or less a week
- 16.2% pay between $5-40 a week
- 22.3% pay between $40-$100 a week
- 21.4% pay over $100 a week child support

(HSCFCA 2003:14, 127,128).

Thus it can be seen that the majority of single mother headed families receive very little in the way of child support. It is important to realise that the child support means test ensures that Centrelink family tax benefit entitlements received by single mothers are reduced, creating government savings from these most disadvantaged children.

The gendered inequality of income support

Recent policy initiatives have valorised fathers who undertake a relatively small proportion of the care of their children in relation to that undertaken by their mothers. In 2000 a Centrelink care test was introduced so that Family Tax Benefit was split between separated parents when non-resident parents undertake 10% of the care of their children (36 nights a year). This redirection of a percentage of the money that had previously been directed to single mothers undermines adequate financial support of these women and their children (Keebaugh 2003:164). There have been repeated attempts to reduce child support on the basis of non-resident parents providing care at rates as low as 10-30%. So far these have been unsuccessful. As Denham states:

‘...reducing a resident parent’s contact from 100% to 80% does not result in a proportional reduction in their cost of caring. Indeed cost may remain constant or increase... the research needs to be done’ (HSCFCA 2003:144)

These policy initiatives dangerously link low levels of care with money and thus create the potential for increased conflict about care. The 2003 inquiry into child custody recommended the removal of all links between care and child support liability.

This evidence of the very real poverty of the majority of single mothers and their children is deeply hidden, the public focus being on fathers’ poverty due to child support responsibilities, which have been shown herein as generally quite low. This also obscures the real reasons why many single fathers may be living in poverty, namely low wages or inadequate levels of government income support, precisely the same conditions suffered by single mothers.

These myths fuel common misconceptions of women walking away from relationship breakdowns with the family home, the majority of assets and lucrative handouts from the government (Branigan 2004) Gender-neutral policies fail to recognise that poverty post-separation is intrinsically gendered.

Conclusions and Recommendations

We have demonstrated in this paper that the interests of parents post-separation are often demarcated along gender lines. Inflexible workplace conditions trap parents in gendered parenting roles, even for those who may desire to step out of them. Following relationship breakdown, women in general bear the bulk of costs of providing for children and suffer most significantly due to lost earnings resulting from their parenting role. The strategic gender interests embodied in the construction of post-separation parental stereotypes function to effectively obscure this reality.
For single mother headed families, reality needs to be addressed and several policy considerations need to be made:

- Single mother headed families may no longer be constructed as either anomalies or ‘national disasters’. The design of the social security system three and a half decades ago was predicated on the idea of single motherhood as a temporary state, the sole parent pension being to tide women over until they found a new male partner. Policy development needs to catch up with the contemporary reality that single mother headed families now constitute a significant proportion of Australian families. Around 900,000 Australian children are now raised in single parent families and women head the overwhelming majority of these families (ABS 1997 Cat 4442 in HSCFCA 2003:13)

- Language, terms and debates that obscure the vulnerability and poverty of single mothers and their children impede the development of effective policies to address such inequalities. This is unacceptable within an egalitarian vision for society.

- Policy on families must be developed alongside significant changes in industrial relations that encourage the development and uptake of truly flexible, family friendly work conditions and a living minimum wage. Culture and systems must also be established within industrial relations for systemic recognition of the work of caring for children and the corresponding value this adds to society’s human and social capital.

- Current industrial and family policies do not recognise or reward the high levels of shared care (40/60) of the idealised ‘new father’. Parents who equally share the joys and the burdens of parenting post-separation could be provided with improved industrial conditions, more liberal income tests or both be given access to parenting payment single.

- The ‘breadwinner’ model, which underlies the income security system, needs to be reviewed and revised. This model, which assumes father as wage earner and mother as unpaid carer, inspires policy that undermines mothers’ rights as individual citizens. For single mothers, the breadwinner model is evident in policy where their social security entitlements remain dependent their children’s father remittance of child support payments and proportion of care. Creating mutually exclusive payments or tax rebates for resident and non-resident parents, which are above the poverty line, and removing links between care and family tax benefits and child support liability would enhance a more individualised and contemporarily relevant model.

- In the context of this gender biased policy environment, it is critical that influential non-government organisations like VCOSS and ACOSS take a pro-feminist approach to family policy. A gender-neutral approach only serves to render invisible the poverty and discrimination that women experience as single mothers. A pro-feminist approach would foreground the very real difficulties faced by single mothers and their children, thus rendering them likely to receive the attention and redress they deserve.

**References**


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Notes

1 See Dads on the Air website http://forum.dadsontheair.com/viewtopic.php?f=368

2 From here on referred to as HSCFCA 2003

3 ‘Payer’ is a Child Support Agency term for the parent who is liable to pay child support. A ‘payee’ is CSA term for the parent entitled to receive child suppor