Argument

Seeking child support is a relational and interactional process, not (only) an administrative issue

DHS-CS is central to single mothers’ lived experience of vulnerability, disrespect and disempowerment
Context: Child Support Scheme

- Child Support Scheme: standardize, institutionalize & normalize payments
  - The child support formula
  - DHS-CS

- 85% of separated parents work within the CSS
  - Private Collect (amounts privately determined; agreement lodged with DHS-CS)
  - Child Support Collect (DHS-CS assesses and collects child support)

- CSS intersects with the welfare system
Context: Single mothers’ precarious dependency

- On former partners:
  - Masculine financial autonomy & discretion post-separation
    - Personal
    - Institutionalized

- On welfare state in the context of rollbacks and punitive approaches:
  - Welfare to work
  - Primary responsibility for care of children
  - Poverty
The study

- Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 37 women
- Entitled to receive between $0 - $560 pw, mean = $86; one third entitled <$25 pw
- 8 received amounts in full and on time
- 25 had fearful/ high conflict relationships
- Average income $42,000
What works?  
DHS-CS is a buffer between women and their former partners

I was obviously in a panic at the time, I wasn't working and I was pregnant. And so I think the Child Support, what would have happened is the Child Support Agency took my details, took my ex-partner's details, and explained to me and explained to him, you know, how it's calculated and he just said, 'Yeah, fine', that he'll pay. ... It's actually a really good system. It's, you know, it's less likely to cause friction if it's imposed, I think, and also if the calculation's done by a third party, the government... I think it's been a really good way of preventing a lot of conflict. [Narelle]
What works? DHS-CS is a buffer between women and their former partners

I know there are parents – I have a very close friend, she actually sorted, like, all the support and all the agreements just between herself and her ex-partner and they’ve done really well. And I will never be – you know, we can never do that. If Child Support was not there he would never have paid me anything. [later in the interview] See, as I told you before, if there was no Child Support Agency I would not have got any money from [child’s father]. [Mardi]
What works? Support and advice

Sometimes I feel relieved, sometimes I feel supported, sometimes I feel infuriated, and other times I feel I’m wasting my time. [later in the interview] By and large I’ve felt like they’re on my side, if you want to put it that way. That’s, it’s not quite an accurate way to put it I suppose, but I feel like, oh phew, at least they’re trying to assist. ... Well as I said, the Child Support Agency at times when I’ve spoken with them, I have felt supported. And by that perhaps all I mean is that I haven’t felt set upon and denigrated. That’s all it takes, really. [Hannah]
What doesn’t work? Costs of raising children

[Child’s] father does have costs because he has costs to feed him and he buys him clothes to stay. That wasn't always like that because I used to supply all the clothes and then I refused because I said, "Well, you actually get a child support reduction for that." I pay all the school fees. I pay medical. I pay just everything, everything for him. If he has lessons or anything like that, and my dad helps me out a bit with that, but all those extra costs that are important for children to grow and develop and be part of the community rather than being the poor kid that's sort of left out. [Xena]
What doesn’t work? Fathers’ capacity to pay

*How is it possible that my children’s father has not done his income tax since 2008? How come he’s been able to get away with that but I have never been able to get away with not filling out forms, not doing my tax? I’ve been diligent to the point of being in tears.* [Beatrice]
What doesn’t work? Fathers’ capacity to pay

_He did nothing whatsoever. He then, subsequently he declared an income of [less than $200] for the whole financial year. So, yeah, I thought there was a mistake, and I rang Child Support and said “How can this be? How can anyone survive on that?” And apparently, they said well, that’s what, the tax office sent them the assessment and they have to accept that. He was always reluctant to pay, so he owed them for a long, long time. And the amount he’s, he was required to pay was such a pittance. It’s just laughable [Leanne]_
What doesn’t work? Fathers’ capacity to pay

In a workplace, people, employees and staff know how much they’re going to earn. They know what their contracted amount is, they know what their income level is. I mean, you build your whole life around what your budget is, right? And then, all of a sudden, you get a letter in the mail from the Child Support Agency that says, ‘Oh, now it’s going to be this much’. Hang on, hang on, how can I change my life, you know? I’ve booked, we’ve enrolled in classes, we’ve done this, we’ve done that, we’ve made commitments for, at least the term, or the year, or whatever, to, just, lose it like that, it’s profound. The impact is profound. [Brenda]
What doesn’t work? Misrecognition of domestic violence

We had an issue of violence in our house. It wasn't physical. It was emotional and financial. It sucks you down so that … I wonder how many people are in this bracket where the CSA says, "Well, raise a complaint against him and put forward what you know." If you've got that background of intimidation and threats and they're going to take you off and all this kind of stuff, it does disable women and men too, obviously, if they've been on the receiving end. It's kind of hard when the system isn't actually sounding like a good system. It's putting all the onus on you and if you come from that experience where you know that if you do sort of try and stand up and get them to pursue something. Yet they're saying, "Well, you should put it in but we can't promise anything and most of the time nothing will happen", yet you know that by sticking your neck out with such a weak system supporting you you're likely to actually end up on the receiving end. [Wendy]
What doesn’t work? Misrecognition of domestic violence

They still have – you know I have got myself out of that relationship, we don’t share a roof but he still has that financial power over me. [Isobel]
What doesn’t work: Compliance

So that then started years and years of non-payment, partial payment, debt accumulation, and me still having to support our child by myself, pretty much. And from Child Support’s perspective, it wasn’t really, they didn’t really follow up very much, they didn’t really chase up payments, I had to be constantly asking them what was going on and when they were going to collect it (Ida).
What doesn’t work: compliance

They made it clear that they're most likely not able to collect the money, that was, pretty much, what I was told (Penelope)

I've had a number of people, probably maybe four or five different staff say, "You should be just counting yourself lucky if you get anything at all." (Wendy)

“Oh you’ll never get what you want, you should just give up.” “Oh don’t you think you’d feel better if you just walk away from this?” (Ida)
What doesn’t work: compliance

And because he refused to pay there was nothing really I can, I can’t talk to him, I can’t make him pay. And Child Support [DHS-CS] was very disappointing because they said they couldn’t do anything. … They just could do nothing because they said, “Do you have any, uh, any information about where he works?” I said, “No, he’s self-employed. I don’t know who his customers are.” … We are not private investigators.
What doesn’t work: compliance

One consultant at the CSA even suggested I get a private investigator. The onus to prove what [former partner] is doing is on me. Any time I have any information about money he might be earning, something he may be selling, a holiday, I’m required, or it’s suggested, I ring Centrelink and ring CSA and let them know. [Beatrice]
What doesn’t work: communication

You can tell the same story every time you ring up, even though they seem to be typing away and you give your reference number into an automated system, and then when you get on to a human, which can take a long time, can take sometimes 20 minutes or something, and if you’re working or you got kids it’s not easy to sit on the phone for that long. Plus it costs money. So you give all your information to an automated thing and then you get on to a person they ask you all the same questions, and you tell them your story, which can be quite convoluted. And then if you have to ring up again you’ll go through the same thing, and sometimes I will say to them, “But haven’t you written this down? Isn’t it in my file?” and they never seem to be able to find whatever information has been sent through. And I once sent through quite a long document, what was it about? That’s right, it was a court, a custody document, and I sent that through and it was 12 pages I remember. And there was no record of that ever being received. So it can be quite frustrating, yes.

[Hannah]
What doesn’t work: communication

I rang them one time and I got a very insensitive person on the telephone who, I just said “There is no father” and “What do I do about that? How do I get around this?” And she’s like “You can’t tell me you’re the Virgin Mary so there must have been like someone. You’re going to have to bring this up with Centrelink. You’re going to have to deal with this with Centrelink.” So they sent me back to Centrelink and I just thought “I can’t deal with this. [Elle]
What doesn’t work: communication

No, no, nothing’s worked well for me. Even the people at Child Support have no skill in communication and you know, the two women I spoke to were really hard and harsh and aggressive; they weren’t compassionate at all. It just made it awful. It was awful talking to them. I just, I think Child Support have got a lot to answer for and on a lot of levels, like the people they employ at the minimum should have communication skills and training in negotiating through really strong emotions that the women are going through. [Sarah]
Conclusions

- Child support has become siloed from the social processes that shape women’s lives
- What do women want changed?
  - The child support formula to better reflect the costs of children
  - Change the approach to compliance
  - Improve information sharing between departments
  - Meaningful and accessible supports to clients
  - DHS-CS staff professional development
  - Clarify DHS-CS information
Thank you

And thank you especially to the women who participated in our interviews and told their stories