

Single mothers, poverty and policies

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[Life Course Centre](#) Webinar: Families Under Extreme Stress: “Normal” Stresses and Additional Challenges Arising from COVID -19
15 October 2020



Overview

1. Single mothers– [Trampolines, not traps](#)
2. Infrastructures of inequality
3. Policies that affect parents, affect children: work and care, social security and child support
4. Poverty is a policy choice- some ways forward



Infrastructures of inequality

In 1994, social policy scholar and sociologist Bettina Cass observed that:

‘women continue to be caught between expectations to care and to work but **without the necessary social infrastructure** to enable them to do so’ (Cass 1994).

More than twenty-five years later, the challenges that Cass identified persist—and for single mothers the contradictions are intense. Low income, single mothers continue to be caught in the binds of poverty and insecurity, with limited choices and opportunities.





- In Australia four out of five single-parent households are headed by women.
- At 35 per cent, single-parent families have the highest poverty rates among family types.
- Children in single-parent families are more than three times as likely to live in poverty (44%) as children in couple families (13%) (ACOSS & UNSW 2020).



Policies that affect parents affect children



With inadequate resources, inflexible employment and unresponsive policies, single mothers are increasingly caught in a 'triple bind' (Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado 2018) between work, care and social security.

Trampolines not traps

- Qualitative study- 2019
- Interviews with 27 low income single mothers with children under the age of 16 in Victoria
- Most of the sample were aged 30 or older, with 30% older than 45.
- Over half had experienced family violence
- Most had young children: 19 had children under 8 years (the age at which eligibility for Parenting Payment Single ceases)
- Two-thirds of the interviewees (18) had paid work.



Constrained choices in balancing work and care

- The lack of appropriate child care was a stumbling block for many of the women in this study
- Mismatch between inflexible hours of care and changing hours of work : Those who worked nonstandard hours were unable to swap their child care days and having to pay for days of non-attendance. If mothers were late picking up their children they 'got stung' with late fees
- Confusion persists about the childcare subsidy: Many of the women didn't understand their entitlements or how the subsidy worked
- Activity testing: women were caught between inconsistent work hours and insufficient hours of subsidised child care

“Being casual and you still have to pay for day care, even if they're not there. So that makes it hard. They have to be booked in just in case I get a shift, which is horrible. So I've got to pay that huge bill even if I'm not working (Judith)



Social insecurity: contradictions and confusion

- Women were caught between inflexible work and inflexible social security arrangements.
- Compulsory participation requirements attached to income support payments do not consider different or fluctuating employment conditions of mothers
- Fear of making a mistake and risking suspension or cancellation of payment was widespread, as was fear of inadvertently incurring a debt
- Minimising contact with Centrelink was a common tactic because they found encounters with Centrelink unpredictable and threatening, which is why many preferred the Centrelink Express app.

“After three weeks of waiting for my parenting payment to be processed] I still had not received a cent. I sat at the desk speaking to this man and I just cried because I went, ‘I am beyond broke, I’m having to borrow money off my family to pay for things like nappies. I had to use the last of my fuel to drive here because I spent four hours on the phone yesterday to no avail.’
(Melissa)



Unfair child support system

- For the women in this study, child support payments tended to be low and uncertain—as little as \$16 a fortnight for two children
- Some former partners avoided paying fair child support by exploiting loopholes in the system such as nonlodgement of tax returns, or undertaking cash-in-hand work to reduce their taxable income)
- Non-payment or threat of non-payment was a form of control. The shadow of violence also meant that some women ignored late or non-payment
- Women were reluctant to pursue a reassessment or a review as the onus of proof fell on them. It also exposed them to risks associated with forced interaction with their former partners and the possibility of incurring a debt to Centrelink.

“He owes me about \$2500 plus the \$450. So I get them [child support agency] to ring him and that causes anger in him and sometimes it's just not worth it (Janice)



Impacts

- Stress- always thinking about money– which affected their health and wellbeing
- Exposed to risks- insecure often unaffordable housing– for some in areas where they felt unsafe
- Everyday decisions become risky
- Doing without to make ends meet

“ I make sure my son eats at all times. He gets what he needs to be happy and survive, but there’ll be times when I do the grocery shopping and it’ll be nappies, food for my son, formula for my son, and then I might get myself a bag of noodles for the week. (Melissa)



The children missed out

- As much as possible, the women we spoke with made decisions that would benefit the children, even if it came at a personal or financial cost
- Not having enough money meant the children missed out, despite their mothers' best efforts
- Mothers worried about their children being singled out, bullied and stigmatised by their peers with negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing

“I think even my eldest this year has, sort of, started to see that we are a little bit different. We are a single parent family, for a start, but we don't do everything that all of the other kids do, and all of her friends do. That is hard to see. You don't want your kids to be hearing they are any different, or they are missing out, so I found that quite hard.
(Nicole)



Building Infrastructures of equality

Our recommendations focus on

Inclusive work

- Family friendly workplaces
- Investment in decent jobs
- Flexible learning

Economic security

- Social security and tax policies to support moves in and out of paid work

Social equity

- Family law and anti-violence policies that protect the rights of women and children

Social infrastructure

- Quality care services



Building infrastructures of equality

Create incentives to support women's workforce participation

- Increase the amount single parents can earn from paid work before their income support is affected to ensure that their financial security is not jeopardized.
- Extend eligibility for benefits such as the Pensioner Concession Card for mothers moving off income support (currently 12 weeks) until they are established in employment
- Develop enabling and voluntary programs to support single mothers to undertake training or education to increase their job prospects before returning to the workforce



Building infrastructures of equality

Develop an equitable social security system

- Deliver a permanent and adequate increase to the base rate of social security payments
- Remove the Targeted Compliance Framework from people in receipt of Parenting Payment Single and jobseeker allowance
- Establish an independent commission to review and set the rates of income support payments, including the conditions that apply to these payments.
- Institute independent ethical oversight of automated processes



Building infrastructures of equality

Universal access to quality childcare

- Invest in universal access to quality child care and early learning to enable women's workforce participation and to enhance their children's opportunities.
- Address the very high effective marginal tax rates that affect single mothers who wish to increase hours of work.
- Extend eligibility for benefits such as the Pensioner Concession Card for mothers moving off PPS (currently 12 weeks) until they are established in employment.

Reform child support and family law

- Improve child support compliance and increase payer accountability.
- Remove legal loopholes and review child support formula to recognise women's care/work responsibilities and low earning

