National Council of Single Mothers & their Children Inc

5th March 2012

Committee Secretary

Senate Standing Committees on Community Affairs

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Australia

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Dear Secretary,

The Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Income Support and Other Measures) Bill 2012.

The National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc (NCSMC) welcomes the inquiry into the Bill. It is our expectation that the received submissions along with the scrutiny of the inquiry will demonstrate that the Bill will increase financial hardship to vulnerable Australian families.

Who we are:

The National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc is an organisation for single mothers since its conception in the early 1970`s. The council has become a platform whereby both community and government can communicate; it has lead the way in obtaining a range of beneficial outcomes for families; has actively sought to reduce systemic prejudice; continually challenges existing norms, and over many years has achieved improved opportunities and outcomes for single mothers and their children.

One of our greatest strengths is our expertise and commitment in working with and for the advancement of women and children due to the disadvantage experienced as a result of poverty, violence, exclusion and gender inequality. NCSMC has advocated for equality of opportunity, financial security and access to justice, legal and human rights.

The Labour Government has had notable success in identifying and responding to Australians who had not shared in the benefits, who contend with financial hardship and are impacted by multiply deprivation. NCSMC points to the focus on child poverty which occurred in the late 1980`s and that it resulted in significant changes to the Family Tax Payment system and a quantifiable gain in reducing child poverty in Australian.

In more recent years NCSMC acknowledges the Harmer Review and it subsequent increases, and for the claimants who benefited from the increase, it was the most significant in recent decades. NCSMC further supported the government's response to the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and in particular the targeted bonus payments that made a significant difference not only to the receiving individuals but it reduced the impact of the GFC. This is important for financially vulnerable single mothers, as history has confirmed that recession and other economic down turns have a steeper and more enduring impact for these families.

However, NCSMC is dismayed that the government would seek to introduce a bill that that will result in a reduction of income to families and young people who can least afford it and who are already struggling on a day to day basis. It is estimated that the proposed changes will result in 100,000 single parents and young people with less income over the next four years.[1]

NCSMC challenges the notion that financial hardship will serve as an incentive to find employment and or a pathway to further education. Contenting with financial hardship translates to insecure housing tenancy, poor health outcomes; it removes the capacity to own a car and often results in late payment and or disconnection of utilities.

NCSMC shared the concern of various advocates and academics when the *Welfare Reform* was announced and then implemented by the former Coalition Government. We further note that it was members of the then opposition Labour government that openly voice their concern and supported our advocacy. At that time NCSMC took relief in the stated commitment to maintain eligibility for parents who were already on the higher rate of Parenting Payment (single) commonly referred to as the 'grandfathered protections'.

[1] The Bill refers to the *Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (income Support and Other Measures)* Bill 2012.

Under this Bill the Government would remove the 'grandfathered protections' for single parents affected by the 2006 *Welfare to Work* changes. Currently, this group can remain on the higher rate of Parenting Payment (Single) until their youngest child turns 16. This bill will mean that after a child's 12th birthday they will be moved onto Newstart Allowance (principal carer). This effectively means a cut in income of $58 a week.

NCSMC welcomes an investment in services to assist mothers to complete or further their education. However, the threat to withhold income support payments should they not provide a *reasonable excuse* as deemed by Centrelink; appears harsh, arrives without evidence and is counterintuitive to the principle of support and assistance. NCSMC further objects to the imposition of compulsory requirements at such a young age of the child, a time when the focus should be upon the development of a secure and primary attachment with the mother. The extensive inquiry into Family Law illustrated the impact for babies and young children when their needs are not the principle focus within a parenting routine. We further note how this policy approach is a contradiction to the attitude as expressed for paid parental leave.

In support of this submission NCSMC would be available and pleased to speak before the committee.

Warm Regards,

Terese Edwards

Chief Executive Officer

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What we welcome

Additional support will be provided to parents to assist them to get ready for work and find employment. Additional programs and supports to assist parents to enter the workforce include:

- professional career advice for parents available from Job Services Australia;
- access to wage subsidies program (if they have been out of work for over 24 months);
- extra funding for training linked to Certificate 11 qualifications and above;
- additional funding over four years for new and existing Communities for Children programs that are targeted primarily at supporting parents.

We further support the relief for the estimated 92,000 parents who are in receipt of the Newstart Allowance (principal carer). These parents face punishingly high taper rates and low earnings thresholds which result in minimal benefits from engaging in paid work.

What is Missing

1. The policy has been developed without consultation with Australian citizens; most notably the absence of engagement with teenage mothers, single mothers, single mother service providers, key peak-bodies and alliances. This prohibits a real discussion and an opportunity to share information. NCSMC would like to discuss the merits of a C*apacity Load* and note how this may assist in better identifying and supporting women who are in a situation and have the capacity for sustainable engagement either in further studies and or employment. However, there were no opportunities for dialogue in the policy formation and we are now attempting, albeit late, to gain a formal role in the established monitoring processes.

2. NCSMC has congratulated the government upon making positive gains in responding to violence and note the implementation of a National Plan and the extensive inquiry into family law including the adoption of new legislation. The findings of the Family Law inquiry should not be ignored, in particular Australia's inability to protect and support women and children subjected to violence and abuse. Violence, its impact and influence remains silent within this agenda and therefore the most likely outcome is a policy that does not meet its

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intent but may also produce further harm. Furthermore, the reluctance to name violence and its interrelationship with teenage pregnancy and single mothers' ignores the reality. Therefore, it remains NCSMC`s fear that this approach will not only fail these mothers but also future mothers and their children.

3. More women who are subjected to domestic violence will have increased contact with Centrelink and this may occur when the child is much younger. NCSMC has already identified that Centrelink has been less than diligent in upholding the Domestic Violence Exemptions and we would seek that this issue is rectified (as illustrated on page 18 & 19).

4. The capacity to suspend or revoke such scarce income only compounds financial hardship which erodes the mother of hope, confidence and capacity; all of which is counterintuitive to the policy intent.

5. The Harmer Review did not include Parenting Payment Single, Newstart or Youth Allowance. NCSMC claims that the adequacy of these incomes needs to be fully realized and rectified, prior to moving more mothers onto the Newstart allowance. It is implausible to expect a mother who is experiencing financial hardship to find the disposable income to meet the cost of commuting and participating in further education.

6. Australia is yet to establish a national anti-poverty plan despite an increase in poverty including child poverty. The knowledge that single mothers encounter multiply deprivation and the gap between *the haves* and *have nots* continues to grow confirms that a national and coordinated approach with clear targets and strategies is warranted. Ensuring that there is adequate income to meet the necessary and basic cost of living, that there is secure and affordable housing and access to essential services should be central to the plan. NCSMC argues that this would provide the foundation and leverage to then work towards increasing education and employment outcomes.

7. Government should be a leader and actively seek to reduce prejudice and discrimination. Policies that 'target' particular population groups with a punitive approach, sends a

concerning signal to those who are directly impacted as well as the broader community. A view that teenage pregnancy is at an epidemic proportion that requires such strong consequential deterrents is disingenuous. Australia is not out of step with international standards and has a lower birth rate that the Untied States, United Kingdom and New Zealand with birth rates falling significantly from 1971 to current. A systemic evidence based approach to further reducing teenage pregnancy would be welcomed and that it needs to arrive free from assumptions and prejudice.

8. The policy formation should be strength based approach with flexibility to respond to individual circumstances and needs. A more sophisticated, practical and respectful system would ensure that the assistance and support is provide without the fear of income suspension and that we further note that this penalty arrives without evidence and may result in some damaging outcomes.

9. Too often the failure of a policy is blamed upon the individuals rather than the policy itself. NCSMC is concerned that even where the single mothers have secure housing, adequate income and a reliable support network that the pressures and demands upon her to develop a well thought out plan is questionable when parenting a six month old baby. This plan will then be actioned when that baby turns one. The teenage mother will need to do this knowing that a failure could result in a suspension of income. The realities of meeting a schedule and or completing assignments during periods of sleep deprivation, responding to an upset or unsettled baby/ toddler is an unreasonable demand. In order not to avoid the suspension and or removal of income the mother must explain this to Centrelink and trust that they will accept her information and not enact the increased level of power to suspend, revoke or manage her income.

10. There is an enforced, costly and prescribed parenting approach for income claimants which will exceed any other Australian family. Parents with preschool age children would have to provide evidence to Centrelink of 'responsible parenting', for example, by having their children enrolled in structured and costly activities such as child care or play groups. 'Responsible parenting', will be assessed by Centrelink.

11. In 2006 single mothers were informed that they did not have to undertake work if their net total earnings was less than $25.00 per week. NCSMC is convinced that this policy may have been 'forgotten' and would like a review of how widely and frequently it is known and then applied. We further propose that this amount be increased.

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The Social Security and Other Legislation Amendment (Income Support and Other Measures) Bill 2012

The Bill implements the income support measures that form part of the broader reforms in the *Building Australia's Future Workforce Package* announced in the 2011-12 Budget which aims to encourage more participation in work and other activities, better align the treatment of different recipients, and make the system fairer.

The Bill includes amendments to the *Social Security Act 1991* (the SS Act) and the *Social Security (Administration) Act 1999* (Administration Act) related to the following *Building Australia's Future Workforce* (BAFW) measures:

- Changes to the eligibility criteria for youth allowance (other) and newstart allowance;
- Incentives for single parents and parenting payment reforms; and
- Streamlining services for job seekers – alignment of daily penalty amounts.

These measures were announced to come into effect on 1 July 2012 in the case of the changes related to youth allowance (other) and job seeker compliance penalties, and on 1 January 2013 in the case of the parenting payment and related changes. Additionally, the teenage mother's announcement which is now more commonly referred to as young mothers can into effect on 1st January 2012 which is part of the *Building Australians Future Workforce Package.*

Impacts for single parents form 1st January 2013

Currently, some single parents who have been receiving Parenting Payments since before July 2006 can remain eligible for this payment until their youngest child turns 16. NCSMC understands that these claimants will be relatively secure as they are fast becoming a smaller group.

Single parents who have been receiving Parenting Payment since before July 2006, will see eligibility for PPS will cease when their youngest child turns 12 or 13 in 2013, or 12 in subsequent years.

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A less understood outcome is as from 1 July 2011 any new children born in these families will be treated the same as children whose parents started receiving Parenting Payment from July 2006.

The effect of these changes will be that, over time, the same rules will apply to all Parenting Payment recipients. NCSMC believes that restoring equity should have been achieved through reversing the Collations` Welfare to Work reforms' and transition sole parents back to the Parenting Payment Single, a much more progressive solution.

NCSMC cites the estimates by Welfare Rights who state that in 2012-13 there will be 10,038 single parents who will face a cut in their income. Over the four years to 2015 almost 28,000 (27,856) single parents will be moved onto Newstart Allowance (principal carer). The current rate of social security payment for a person in receipt of PPS is $320 a week. However, the rate of payments for a principal carer on Newstart is just $263 per week an immediate payment reduction of $58 a week or $3,016 a year.

The government will provide relief as at 1 January 2013 due to the implementation of a lower taper rate of 40 cents in the dollar will apply to single principal carer parents on Newstart Allowance. This will replace the current Newstart Allowance (NSA) taper rate of 50 cents in the dollar for income between $62 and $250 and 60 cents in the dollar for income above $250 a fortnight.

Information on these changes claims that "single parents on Newstart Allowance will be rewarded for engaging in work with a more generous taper rate".[2] Single Mothers who lose their 2006 grandfathered status maybe confused as any claims of "generous" treatment are not correct.

The impacts for single mothers who are moved from Parenting Payment (Single) to Newstart Allowance (principal carer) is outlined below:

1. A reduction of $58 per week;

[2] Australian Government, *Building Australia's Future Workforce, Better Futures for Jobless Families*, p. 2, 10 ay, 2011.

2. Payments are impacted at $62 per fortnight (NSA) as opposed to $174.60 on (PPS) per fortnight;
3. Lose access to the Telephone Allowance which is paid at $96.80 per annum or $145.60 per year for home internet providers;
4. Lose eligible for the extra child free income area of $24.60 per fortnight for each additional child.

Additional Information

A large proportion of single parents on Parenting Payment undertake employment, either full or part-time. Around 32 per cent of PPS recipients report earnings from employment, but less than half this amount (about 16 per cent) of Newstart Allowance recipients report any earnings. The evidence suggests that (a) having a modest income provides the required foundation to maintain work and (b) harsh taper rates undermine work incentives.

The inadequacy of Newstart Allowance will be further exposed as it is subject to less beneficial indexation arrangements. Whereas the Age Pension and related pensions are indexed to the best possible outcomes from a formula that includes 27.5 per cent of Male Total Average Weekly Earnings, the Pensioner and Beneficiary Cost of Living Index, and the Consumer Price Index (CPI), Newstart Allowance is only indexed to the CPI. Therefore, parents on Newstart will experience lower cost of living adjustments at future indexation points (March and September each year). NCSMC points out that the less favourable indexation arrangements are now used for Family Tax Payments which means that the available income to support low income families will continues to decline whilst cost pressure continue to escalate.

The living standards of families on Newstart Allowance will be further undermined into the future because Newstart Allowance income free area (at $62 a fortnight) is not indexed, unlike the income free area for the pension income free area which is adjusted in July each year.

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Financial Hardship

The Bill and its ramification may occur despite the knowledge that the financial circumstances of single mother households and the increased risk of poverty and deprivation are well documented. The Social Policy Research Centre identified certain population groups that consistently face higher than average risk of poverty and stated that among family types, single people and lone parents were at the highest risk[3]. ACOSS who completed research into deprivation and multiple deprivation stated that whilst 19% of the Australian population experienced multiple deprivation, sole parents face a much higher risk of multiple deprivation with 49% of all sole parents experiencing multiple deprivation. This level of deprivation was significantly higher for sole parents than any other family type.[4] Furthermore, children residing in a household headed up by a mother are 25 to 30% more at risk of child poverty signalling an entrenched level of disadvantage which requires a gendered and systemic solution and one that exceeds this narrow policy approach.[5]

However, the understanding of the impact and cost of violence upon victims and their family, both in the immediate and long-term is less known. McInnes in her research found that single mothers' access to non-market income and assets after separation was extremely limited, however survivors of violence were likely to experience deeper, longer-term economic disadvantage than other single mothers and that the income support system was single mothers' primary source of non-market income[6]. Currently, there are 333,000 sole parents who are claimants of the Parenting Payment Single (PPS) and 95% are female. It would be reasonable to expect that single parent families be afforded the same protection from financial hardship and vulnerability. Unfortunately, this is not the case and despite the comparable financial needs and circumstances of the single parent claimant to that of the single aged pensioner there is an increasing disparity. Australia now has a

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[3] Saunders, P. & Matheson, G. (1990) *Sole Parent Families In Australia*, Discussion Paper No. 23, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney.

[4] The Australian Council of Social Services, 8th December 2008, *Who is missing out? - Hardship among low income Australians*

[5] The Australian Council of social Services, December 2008. *Who is missing out?- Hardship among low income Australians.*

[6] McInnes, E., (2001), *'Public Policy and Private Lives: Single Mothers, Social Policy and Gendered Violence'*, Thesis Collection, Flinders University of SA.

complex and inequitable social security system that can have some single families surviving on $263 per week whilst a single aged pensioner will receive the modest amount of $374.40 per week.

Furthermore, single parent families are subjected to the same cost pressures as other social security claimants such as housing, transport, food, utilities and health cost. Therefore, the full suite of allowances and benefits should be reviewed to enable universal access such as the much required Utilities Allowance which provides financial assistance of up to $500.00 per annum for essential and often costly services such as electricity and gas.

It is estimated that there are now 37,811 Australian sole parent families who are claimants of Newstart allowance and within the past 12 months one in four claimants was a victim of domestic violence.[7]

Teenage Mothers and Violence: International Perspective

NCMSC contends that Australia must have an understanding of the coexistence of teenage pregnancy and violence and that this issue is appropriately identified. Safety and protection for the young mother and her child(ren) should be the primary objective for this family and that this takes precedence over compulsory educative obligations. Australia requires a national and coordinated approach which aims to identify, respond, prevent and educate rather than an incidental, chance or piece meal approach. It appears that young mothers who have, or are still subjected to violence, are often isolated and alone manage the impacts which may include homelessness, isolation, poor health, unsafe situations and or behavior, as well as financial hardship. NCSMC views that this concern should drive policy and shape the provision of resources and assistance.

However, given the current policy approach it appears that Australia will continue to fail these families both in the immediate and long term. Additionally, whilst our resources and focus remains misguided a progressive response will be overlooked in favour of a simplistic solution. Currently,

[7] The Australian council of Social Services, paper 175 May 2011, *Beyond stereotypes Myths and facts about people of working age who receive social security.*

advocates need to draw much from overseas knowledge such as the United Kingdom and the United Sates where both countries have identified violence as a significant factor within the context of teenage pregnancies. It is also noteworthy that the research identified that the extent of the issue is still not fully realized and that there remains a need to become more informed. Notwithstanding this, NCSMC believes that we can be guided by Britain who highlighted the concern in the *Social Exclusion Unit Report* and the subsequent implementation of a national aim to reduce domestic violence for teenage mothers[8]. It was clear in completing a literature review that both countries are far more advanced than Australia in naming violence for young women as a significant issue and key factor within the context of teenage pregnancy.

Teenage Mother's Experience

NCSMC included research from the area of Leeds in the United Kingdom. This research was undertaken when local caseworkers identified that a high proportion of the teenage mothers were in a violent and abusive relationship.

- 50% of young women completing the questionnaire said they know another teenage mother who has experienced domestic violence.
- 43% of teenage girls believe that it is acceptable for a boyfriend to be aggressive towards his partner.
- 16% of young women reported being hit by their partners.

Young women completing the questionnaire had a number of fears about disclosing domestic violence:

- That it may lead to an escalation of the violence.
- That it would lead to their children being removed from them.
- That they would not be believed or taken seriously or that they would not be treated sympathetically.

[8] Include, Pg 2, *Teenage Mothers' Experiences of Domestic Violence Identifying good practice for support,* Women's Health Matters, United Kingdom

- That they would be judged, especially they would be thought of as bad mothers [9]

It is concerning to note that these teenage mothers identified through the questionnaire that they held fears regarding the disclosure of domestic violence. This occurred although their engagement was free from direct consequences such as the undertaking of stated obligations and without the fear that a refusal and or breach could result in their income been suspended, managed or revoked. This outcome raises serious questions regarding the possibility of young Australian women disclosing their experience of violence to a government agency that exerts significant power and control over their lives. It is plausible to expect that these young mothers will also feel that they may be judged, thought as bad mothers, thought to be 'finding an excuse' as to why they have not upheld their obligations, not doing enough to 'satisfy' the government and or not believed. Given the high stakes; the possible loss of income, it would be understandable for the young mother not to complicate or further risk her situation through the disclosure of violence.

Violence and Teenage Pregnancy

NCSMC has included research from the United Sates which focuses upon the cause and correlation of violence and teenage mothers. This information and knowledge appears to absent from the Australian debate and policy formation. Some of the key findings confirm:

- A significant correlation exists between childhood sexual abuse and teen pregnancy.
- An estimated 60% of teens 'first pregnancies' are preceded by experiences of molestation, rape or attempted rape.

[9] Include, Pg 2, *Teenage Mothers' Experiences of Domestic Violence Identifying good practice for support,* Women's Health Matters, United Kingdom

- One study found that between 30 to 44% of teen mothers were victims of rape or attempted rape.
- Up to 20% of girls become pregnant as the direct result of rape.[10]

The United States national campaign: *Why does it mater: Teenage Pregnancy and Violence* echoes similar finings.

- Teen pregnancy is linked with various types of violence, including intimate partner violence and sexual abuse, and often leads to other risky behaviour.
- Teens who are pregnant are at increased risk of experiencing domestic violence.
- Girls in high school who reported experiencing dating violence were four to six times more likely to have ever been pregnant than peers who had not experienced dating violence.
- One in five teen girls who have ever been in a relationship says that their boyfriend threatened harm or self harm when they tried to end the relationship.
- Approximately 50 to 60% percent of adolescents who become pregnant have a history of childhood sexual or physical abuse.
- Adverse childhood experiences such as physical abuse, verbal abuse, and witnessing intimate partner violence are linked with having sex at an early age.
- Women who experienced frequent verbal or physical abuse during childhood were almost three times more likely than those who rarely experienced verbal or physical abuse during childhood to have had sex before the age of 15.
- Women who report that their mother was often hit during their childhood were two and a half times more likely than those who report that their mother was rarely or never hit during childhood to have had sex before age 15.7.
- Several studies have also found that teens are at increased risk of physical abuse during pregnancy as compared to older women.
- In a survey of young mothers on welfare in the United States, two-thirds of those who reported intimate partner violence also reported birth control sabotage (i.e. their partner would not let them).[11]

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[10] Femsite, 2008, *The Link between Teenage mothers and violence*, United States

[11] National campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy: *Why does it mater: Teenage Pregnancy and Violence,* United States

Australia's Knowledge

A predominate focus in Australia is upon the teenage mother and her social and economic circumstances. Whilst these are important elements it is only one small part of the picture and missing from our understanding is the circumstances and influences that have lead to teenage pregnancy, and in particular the correlation between violence and pregnancy. The focus upon economic circumstances and its subsequent living conditions may provide insight as to why Australia's policy response has leapt straight to a participation agenda. The objective to improve the long term financial gains for young single mothers, in fact all single mothers, is a welcomed pursuit and one that would typically have the full endorsement of the NCSMC. However, the current policy is simplistic in its approach, its execution is harsh, it is free from evidence and it completely lacks a systemic and gendered perspective.

Research does confirm that pregnancy in itself can be both a cause and contributor of further disadvantage. Teenage mothers, even for those who may have had a supportive and strong network prior pregnancy are at risk of experiencing alienation from their peers and family. Furthermore, a pregnancy can place a great deal of strain on young relationships with 60% of young mothers reporting that they do not have a male partner at the time of birth. The reality for many young mothers is one of loneliness and financial dependence and hardship. Unfortunately, there is also still a stigma in society attached to being a teenage mother and this stigma can affect the way a teenage mother feels about her parenting abilities, motherhood in general and even herself as a person. Negative attitudes towards young mothers can erode their self-esteem and feelings of self-worth and capacity. Such stigma can be amplified through government policy and response[12]. NCSMC was contacted by a service in Queensland, the morning following the 2011 Federal budget *Teenage Mothers* announcements; they reported a teenage mother and her child were spat on whilst waiting for a train. NCSMC was and still is inundated by concerned mothers who shared their dismay of the perpetuation of prejudice views and populist myths which they believe is fueled through the media but leveraged from the government announcement.

[12] Women's Health, Fact Sheets 2011, *Teenage Pregnancy*, Queensland

Pregnancy and Violence in Australia

The *Women's Safety Australia* study found that women who had experienced violence by a previous partner found that 42% had experienced violence during the pregnancy; with half of these women stating that violence occurred for the first time while they were pregnant.

- 29.7% of women presenting to an antenatal clinic at a Brisbane hospital disclosed that they had experienced abuse over their lifetime and that 80% of abusers were current or ex partners

A number of studies clearly show enormous health consequences for women experiencing violence during pregnancy. For example abused pregnant women experience:

- Higher rates of serious mental disorder, harmful drug and alcohol abuse.
- Higher rate of genital tract infection, pap smear abnormalities and anemia.

Domestic violence its occurrence and incidence is notoriously underreported including pregnancy and violence but two studies that focused upon this matter identified that:

- 23.5% were subjected to severe levels of violence, such as being pushed, shoved and slapped.

Whilst a second study found that:

- 13.2% of women had been kicked, bitten and hit with a fist.[13]

Studies do indicated that both adolescent women and Indigenous women are at increased risk of experiencing violence during pregnancy and it is both of these population groups that are targeted within these Bills.

[13] Jane Mulroney, 2003, Australian Statistics on Domestic Violence, Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse

Australia's Failure to Protect Mothers

NCSMC remains a strong advocate and has openly endorsed policy that seeks to advance the safety for women and children. However, the matter of domestic violence and how this will be managed remains invisible within the Participation Agenda. There is a large body of evidence that confirms that women face high levels of risk during pregnancy, following birth, during and post separation. Furthermore, women with children are three times more likely to be subjected to domestic violence than women without children. This high risk period coincides with the new and increased participation obligations.

Data compiled by Butterworth (2003) from the Australian Mental Health and Wellbeing survey found that 20-25% of Australian lone mothers receiving welfare reported experiencing some form of physical or sexual violence and overall the risk of lone mothers having experienced physical or sexual violence was three times the risk of other mothers. It is important to note that these statistics do not take into account other forms of violence such as psychological, financial nor do they account for unreported domestic violence. In Australia it is estimated that only 23% of women disclose domestic violence and that younger women were more at risk than older women, with 7.3% of women aged 18-24 years having experienced one or more incidents of violence from a current partner in the previous 12 month period. This compares to 1.2% of women aged 55 and over. Irrespective of the age of a woman we do know that the figures underestimate the percentage of lone mothers who experience domestic violence[14].

Domestic Violence Exemptions

Centrelink is the key government agency that manages domestic violence exemptions and the child support partial exemptions. Evidence confirms that the granted participation exemptions are not reflective of the occurrence of domestic violence. Cook et al stated that in 2008 approximately only 3% of women were granted a domestic violence participation exemption[15] . Unfortunately, the situation has not improved despite new legislation, a commitment to raise awareness and a national

[14] Butterworth P, Family Matters No.64 Autumn 2003, *Multiple and server disadvantage amongst lone mothers receiving income Support*, Australian Institute of Family Studies

[15] Patrick R, Cook K, and McKenzie H, Vol. 42, No. 7, December 2008, *Domestic Violence and the Exemption from Seeking Child Support: Providing Safety or Legitimizing Ongoing Poverty and Fear,* Social Policy

plan to reduce violence against women and children. Questions on notice; Budget Estimates 2011-12 confirms that as recent as 25th March 2011, there were 61,590 participation exemptions with a mere 53 granted for; *having suffered a domestic violence/ relationship breakdown*. This represent 0.086% of the total of participation exemptions granted with the only other category that received a lower level of participation exemptions was for *undertaking jury duty* (less than 20)[16].

In the event that statistics were available for child support *partial exemption*, it is anticipated that a similar unexplained low level would also be the most likely finding. In fact there is no information available through the Child Support Agency website and its documentation regarding the *partial exemption*. Women, their networks or service providers must already have a level of awareness; know of its availability and the correct avenues to seek such an exemption.

The inadequate management of domestic violence needs to be seriously addressed and certainly prior to an extension which would then impact on more women who have been subjected to violence. Below are some of the established issues that women encounter when seeking a participation exemption for *domestic violence*:

- An inconsistent approach which is controlled by agency staff that do not have the expertise to respond to domestic violence.
- Wilkins argues that the degree of help that women receive from welfare service providers is affected by the attitudes and values of public bureaucrats as they exercise discretion in policy implementation.
- Thompson's research which focused upon violence and power relationship stated that the non-payment of child support by violent ex-partners and the poverty of single-parent victims of abuse are also socially condoned through the enactment of the current policy.
- In addition to the financial penalty, for some women the exemption also failed to protect them from ongoing forms of harassment and abuse.
- The qualitative research highlighted a women experience, which despite the success for an exemption, the process of seeking an exemption was too personal and intrusive and therefore the reason as to why she decided not to proceed.

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[16] Welfare Rights, *Rights Review*, pg 6 September 2011, Sydney

- A key factor in deciding to seek an exemption was the support and trust of agency staff.
- Empirical research suggests that the marital status of parents prior to separation can be a deciding factor in the likelihood of obtaining child support for single parents.
- Single parents are required to abide by these processes and systems in order to be eligible to receive assistance and support; however, they are limited in terms of the amount of information divulged to them, for example regarding the exemption option.
- Many of the participants spoke of getting differing information from not only the Child Support Agency but also Centrelink. This included the need to ask the 'right' questions in order to get the desired information.
- Some of the women felt that the frequent reassessments were barriers to applying, as it was not worth the time involved.
- Concerns that the process was not guaranteed; that one could go through the entire application process and the exemption may still be declined[17]

NCMSC is also concerned that there is inadequate information provided to women of what may be the consequence if they disclose domestic violence in the context of the Income Management policy. This needs to be remedied as in addition to the violence, such disclosure can have them captured due to their 'vulnerability' all of which results in a women contending with violence and the adverse impacts of income management.

In conclusion, NCSMC is seeking that the Committee's highest deliberation is to consider the financial impact of this Bill and recommend that the impacts are too harsh for vulnerable families.

[17] Patrick R, Cook K, and McKenzie H, Vol. 42, No. 7, December 2008, *Domestic Violence and the Exemption from Seeking Child Support: Providing Safety or Legitimizing Ongoing Poverty and Fear,* Social Policy