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Submission to Senate Inquiry into the ParentsNext Program

About Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic)

Domestic Violence Victoria (DV Vic) is an independent, non-government peak body organisation whose membership consists of over 80 state-wide and regional specialist family violence agencies across Victoria. DV Vic is the key stakeholder organising, advocating for, and acting on behalf of the specialist family violence sector. In this role, DV Vic holds a central position in the Victorian family violence system and its governance structures. DV Vic provides policy advice and advocacy to all levels of Government about family violence response and systems reform with an aim to ensure that all women and children can live fulfilled lives, free from fear and violence.

ParentsNext

Although ParentsNext is framed as working with highly disadvantaged parents, with a focus on indigenous parents, the evaluation report identified that 94.9 per cent of participants in the program were women.¹ One in every four women will experience family violence in their lifetime² and an Aboriginal person is 7.3 times more likely to experience family violence than a non-Aboriginal person.³ As a result, ParentsNext is likely to work with many mothers who have experienced family violence. It is critical that this program does not exacerbate experiences of violence or hinder women's ability to recover.

Equal economic participation and financial security is critical to women's financial independence and their ability to make genuine choices in their lives, including the ability to leave a violent relationship. While ParentsNext is framed as a pre-employment program designed to help mothers enter the workforce, DV Vic does not support the ParentsNext program in its current iteration on account of 1) the program's compulsory nature, 2) the Targeted Compliance Framework and 3) the fact that the program does not address structural barriers that exclude women, particularly mothers and victim survivors of family violence, from equal participation in the workforce.

¹ "ParentsNext Evaluation Report" (Canberra: Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business, 2018), https://docs.jobs.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/final_parentsnext_evaluation_report.pdf.

² "Family, Domestic and Sexual Violence in Australia" (Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018, 2018), <https://www.aihw.gov.au/getmedia/d1a8d479-a39a-48c1-bbe2-4b27c7a321e0/aihw-fdv-02.pdf.aspx?inline=true>.

³ State of Victoria, *Victorian Royal Commission into Family Violence: Report and Report and Recommendations*. Parl Paper No 132, Vol 5 (Victoria: 2014-16), 11

Compulsory participation

By compelling women to participate in ParentsNext, the Australian Government is removing women's agency to make decisions about what is best for them and their families and perpetuating harmful gender norms that have traditionally cast women as poor financial managers, given financial control to men and which have historically created barriers to women's equal participation in the workforce.⁴ Paradoxically, these sentiments are the very reason women face economic disadvantage today. Yet, despite these structural reasons for women's economic disempowerment, punitive, mutual-obligation income support policies, such as ParentsNext, continue to imply individual responsibility for failing to be engaged in the workforce.

Similarly, by focusing the program on Aboriginal families, the Government is replicating past government policies that have systematically disempowered Aboriginal communities from taking control of their lives, such as indentured labour, stolen wages and the forced removal of children.⁵ The ParentsNext Evaluation cites high-unemployment and low labour force participation as a reason for focusing the program on Aboriginal communities.⁶ However, it implies that high-unemployment in Aboriginal communities is a result of a deficiency within Aboriginal communities instead of recognising that high unemployment and low labour force participation are results of a range of complex structural factors including colonisation, dispossession of land and ongoing racism and discrimination. Combined with the gender-based discrimination, Aboriginal women are some of the most disadvantaged people in our society. It is unfair to seek to control their lives more through this program.

Regaining individual agency and control over their life is integral to recovery for victim survivors of family violence. Family violence is about the abuse of power and control. Most family violence victim survivors will have experienced a combination of psychological, financial, emotional, social, physical and sexual violence that is designed to erode their confidence, self-worth and ability to leave the relationship and be independent. For Aboriginal women, these factors are combined with experiences of institutional and individualised racism, discrimination and intergenerational disadvantage. Forcing mothers with these experiences to participate in the ParentsNext program is the antithesis of empowering them to take control of their lives and in fact replicates the control experienced in an abusive relationship.

Although the ParentsNext Summary and Participation Requirements list family violence as a suitable reason for an exemption from the program,⁷ no mention of how potential participants are assessed, what type of evidence is required, or how long the exemption will be granted for is provided in either the ParentsNext Discussion Paper, the ParentsNext Evaluation Report or on relevant departmental websites. Anecdotal reports of women's experiences of the program suggests that victim survivors are being required to participate in the program to the detriment of their recovery⁸ despite the current exemptions. We are also

⁴ Nilmini Fernando, "Financial 'Teachable Moments' for Women Affected by Family Violence" (WIRE, November 1, 2018), p 11 <https://www.wire.org.au/assets/Uploads/WhenIsTheRightTimeToTalkAboutMoney.pdf>.

⁵ Irene Watson, "In the Northern Territory Intervention, What Is Saved or Rescued and at What Cost?," *Cultural Studies Review* 15, no. 2 (2009): 45–60–45–60, <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v15i2.2037>.

⁶ "ParentsNext Evaluation Report."

⁷ "3.5.1.167 ParentsNext Summary & Participation Requirements (PP) | Social Security Guide," accessed January 29, 2019, <http://guides.dss.gov.au/guide-social-security-law/3/5/1/167>.

⁸ Beth Goldblatt, "More than Unpopular. How ParentsNext Intrudes on Single Parents' Human Rights," *The Conversation*, accessed January 29, 2019, <http://theconversation.com/more-than-unpopular-how-parentsnext-intrudes-on-single-parents-human-rights-108754>.

concerned about reports of women being required to tell their story multiple times to obtain these exemptions.⁹ For many women there can be intense feelings of shame associated with family violence. Many women never disclose their experiences at all. Being forced to disclose their deeply personal experiences to a complete stranger to justify their circumstances and why they should qualify for an exemption is disrespectful, a violation of their privacy and can be re-traumatising. We urgently call for compulsory component of ParentsNext to be discontinued immediately for non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal parents alike.

Targeted Compliance Framework

The ParentsNext eligibility criteria stipulates that mothers with children as young as six months may be required to participate in the program and that their parenting payments will be discontinued if they do not comply. Mothers with small children are some of the most time-poor members of our society, with caring duties estimated to be 51 hours a week when a baby is born and housework hours approximately 30 hours per week after a child starts school.¹⁰ It is punitive, illogical and unrealistic to require mothers to commit to yet another set of demands to maintain their income at a time when they are already likely to be struggling to meet the demands of motherhood. It also completely devalues the role of parenting and the value it brings to children and their development, society and the economy.¹¹

Research into the impact of other Welfare to Work policies on single mothers found that mutual obligation schemes had not helped participating women find employment, undermined their self-worth, and actually increased their financial insecurity instead of improving it.¹² It makes no sense to expand failed policies to mothers with even younger children. Requiring mothers to participate in prescribed activities to maintain their income support payments is setting them up to fail and has already resulted in women and their children being cut off from their support payments.¹³

For victim survivors of family violence, being cut off from parenting payments is particularly dangerous. Economic abuse and the lack of financial resources are some of the main barriers to women leaving an abusive relationship. Similarly, the risk of poverty and homelessness after leaving, particularly when there are children involved, is the main reason women return to the perpetrator.¹⁴ For many women, fear for their children's safety and the impact family violence is having on them provides the impetus to leave. Cutting mothers' parenting payments for not meeting the requirements of ParentsNext only adds stress to a

⁹ Luke Henriques-Gomes, "Single Parents Forced to Attend 'story Time' or Lose Centrelink Payments," *The Guardian*, November 5, 2018, sec. Australia news, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/nov/06/single-parents-forced-to-attend-story-time-or-lose-centrelink-payments>.

¹⁰ Juanita McLaren and Susan Maury, "Parents Vexed? ParentsNext Is Poorly Designed to Support Mothers into Work," Power to Persuade, accessed January 29, 2019, <http://www.powertopersuade.org.au/blog/parents-vexed-parentsnext-is-poorly-designed-to-support-mothers-into-work/18/10/2017>.

¹¹ Marian Sawyer and Miranda Stewart, "Gender Innovation: The Global Movement for Gender Budgeting," BroadAgenda, November 8, 2018, <http://www.broadagenda.com.au/home/gender-budgeting-why-we-need-it/>.

¹² "The Appropriateness and Effectiveness of the Objectives, Design, Implementation and Evaluation of Jobactive" (Melbourne: Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand, October 10, 2018), <https://www.goodshep.org.au/media/2194/gszanx-jobactive-submission-1018-final.pdf>.

¹³ Goldblatt, "More than Unpopular. How ParentsNext Intrudes on Single Parents' Human Rights"; Henriques-Gomes, "Single Parents Forced to Attend 'story Time' or Lose Centrelink Payments."

¹⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, "Specialist homeless services data collection 2011-12." (Canberra: 2012)

situation that is already extremely stressful and makes victim survivors more likely to return to the perpetrator to avoid poverty and/or homelessness.

Making women choose between living in poverty and returning to an abusive relationship should never be the outcome of a government policy and is against the objectives of ParentsNext. Participating in ParentsNext should not be tied to the receipt of parenting payments. ParentsNext's Targeted Compliance Framework should be discontinued immediately.

Structural Barriers to Employment

Economic abuse is estimated to be prevalent in as many as 50-90 percent of all family violence cases.¹⁵ One study found that approximately one in every six women in Australia will experience economic abuse in their life time.¹⁶

In addition to overt acts of financial abuse and control like preventing a victim from working or undertaking education, refusing to give victim survivors access to money and forcing them to take on a perpetrator's debt in their name, research has identified a range of 'covert tactics' that perpetrators use to sabotage a woman's employability. This may include harassment or attacks at the workplace or orchestrating women's quitting or firing from jobs by rendering them unable to work due to physical and mental injuries.¹⁷ These covert tactics, plus the trauma some victim survivors experience as a result of family violence, can have a lasting impact on a woman's employability long after the violence has ended. The outcomes of economic abuse are that victim survivors are less likely to be in paid employment or education and are more likely to be reliant on social security benefits.¹⁸

Discriminatory attitudes among employers, lack of job availability (particularly in regional areas), lack of flexible work arrangements, the need to balance caring roles with employment and the cost of child care are well established systemic barriers to women's employment. Women who experience additional forms of discrimination (due to race, disability, age, sexuality or socio-economic status) are even less likely to be in paid employment.¹⁹ ParentsNext does nothing to address these structural barriers. Instead it only creates additional stress and runs the risk of leaving women and their children in poverty.

¹⁵ Owen Camilleri, Tanya Corrie, and Shorna Moore, "Restoring Financial Safety: Legal Responses to Economic Abuse" (Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand and Wyndham Legal Services Inc., 2015), https://www.goodshep.org.au/media/1220/restoring-financial-safety_legal-responses-to-economic-abuse_web.pdf.

¹⁶ Jozica Kutin, Roslyn Russell, and Mike Reid, "Economic Abuse between Intimate Partners in Australia: Prevalence, Health Status, Disability and Financial Stress," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 41, no. 3 (2017): 269-74, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.12651>.

¹⁷ Fernando, "Financial 'Teachable Moments' for Women Affected by Family Violence." p 48

¹⁸ Camilleri, Corrie, and Moore, "Restoring Financial Safety: Legal Responses to Economic Abuse."

¹⁹ Somali Cerise et al., "Accumulating Poverty? Women's Experiences of Inequality over the Lifecycle" (Sydney: Australian Human Rights Commission, September 2009), https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/document/publication/accumulating_poverty.pdf.

Conclusion

Economic independence and wellbeing for women and their children are critical to reducing women's disadvantage and enabling women to make decisions about their life, including when to enter the workforce. However, as it is currently structured DV Vic does not believe that ParentsNext is helping women achieve economic independence. The program should be voluntary, and participation should not be tied to income support payments.

Some mothers, including some who have experienced family violence, may benefit from of the services offered through ParentsNext. However, its current punitive and compulsory nature is more likely to do harm to victim survivors and their children than good. Structural factors that inhibit women's, particularly Aboriginal and migrant women's, participation in the workforce need to be addressed alongside programs like ParentsNext which take an individualised approach.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into this Senate Inquiry. If you would like to speak to us further about the issues in this submission, please contact,

Kate Mecham
Policy Advisor
Domestic Violence Victoria

Alison Macdonald
Policy Manager
Domestic Violence Victoria