

Submission to the Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committees regarding the Social Security Legislation Amendment (Fair Incentives to Work) Bill (2012)

This amendment proposes to align income support payments to parents, regardless of whether they are under the “grandfathered” arrangements or not. Consistency is a good principle. Another way to achieve consistency is to restore income support for all sole parents until their youngest child is 16 years old.

The purported goals of this legislative change are to create incentives and support to enter the labour market and to address long term welfare dependency.

I am a single parent and raised my daughter on her own since she was two and I was 23. She is now grown up, well adjusted and financially independent. I work full time in a rewarding job with a reasonable level of responsibility. We pay taxes, care for others, and are responsible members of society.

I will however, never forget the hardship we suffered during her childhood. I do not wish I ton any other and for that reason I am opposed to this change. We lived in a cold, draughty, damp house, which was cheap(er) to rent, our clothes were second hand, she was picked on at school because she didn't live in the 'right' kind of house or wear the 'right' kind of clothes, she hardly knows my parents as I couldn't afford the petrol to drive 60kms to see them.

Her father would turn up periodically to claim his parental rights by attempting to abduct her. This included assaulting me, in my own home and in public places. For part of her childhood we lived in hiding. To go back a step, I realised at the fairly tender age of 21 that I was in an abusive relationship. My then partner is not respectful towards women (ie if he is not having sex with them, he is not really interested in speaking to them). As I thought to the future I concluded that this would have a harmful effect on our daughter to raise her in this environment. He was also not financially providing for her, never had done and never did. So I decided to leave and try to create a better and healthier life, which is how I became a single mother at 23.

I started work when she was in primary school. I cleaned houses, privately, in the informal sector. It was the only work I could find where I could leave at the drop of a hat in case he had turned up again, or if she got sick. Much of my time was also taken up in counseling, (there was many years of recovery after the numerous assaults and threats), court (to determine that she was actually living with me and he could not just turn up and take her away whenever he felt like it), and study (for a better future). As well as housework – no shortcuts when there's no money, all food was prepared from scratch and for heating I had to go to the bushland fringes and cut my own wood. The car was often broken down and so that meant walking or buses which also took longer.

My study led to me working in a better paid job, however still casual, and still informal with no employment contract. But again, the flexibility went both ways and I was able to be available for my caring responsibilities. As there was no other carer available, I felt that weight of responsibility very heavily. I felt very trapped because I knew we needed more money, which meant me working more. But I was too scared to put myself in an environment where my work would demand that I prioritise them over her. Some kind of a gut feeling as a mother, you know you have to look after your child first and everything else comes second. I felt abused by society in that I was asked to neglect her in order to prioritise paid work, but that I would also be (rightly) condemned for neglecting her.

As she started high school I moved into the formal economy and started a secure part-time job, relevant to the area I had been studying. That year I bought the first set of new (not second hand) bed-sheets I had ever bought in her life. It was an interesting process by which I entered the workforce and brings me to my comments on the process of entering the labour market and ending long term welfare dependency. The process was simple but profound – I was offered a job (think about it).

A small part of my work these days includes designing programs for marginalized people (including single parents) to enter the workforce. What I observe is that many single parents already work, and work more as their children get older, and move off government support as their child-raising responsibilities permit.

On the other hand, there is a group of people who are dependent on welfare for a long time, perhaps over several generations. These people may or may not be single parents. They do however have barriers to work. I am very concerned about this group of people. They have low literacy levels, often undiagnosed disabilities, and the usual health problems that accompany low-socio economic status.

The current system of pushing these people to “get a job” is ineffective because employers don’t want them. We saw that when Tony Abbott suggested that the unemployed be shipped off to the mines, a few years back, in WA. The mining companies very quickly said they did not want swathes of unskilled, unemployed people thank you very much.

My argument to you is that it is the employers who are the problem, not the long-term unemployed. Along my career path, one of my jobs included operating a employment program for people with serious psychiatric disabilities. We took an approach that should be used a lot more – we ran an enterprise and were able to offer a job to anyone who wanted to work.

Imagine if there was an obligation to provide jobs for people. For single mothers there would be jobs that fitted in around their caring responsibilities. For the long-term unemployed they could start out at entry level employment and study and work their way to where they wanted to be. The only requirement would be that someone wanted to work, and the job would be available.

Unfortunately the situation now is that many people who want to work are not wanted by the labour market. The flexibility to accommodate caring responsibilities is not there.

This proposed amendment, and the previous decisions to erode the sole parents pension, are big sticks being taken to vulnerable people. It was bad enough when I was in that situation. I cannot imagine how the single parents of the future are going to survive, let alone raise well adjusted children.

I will leave it there.