

## **Chapter 4**

# **Factors contributing to marriage and relationship breakdown**

The Committee in its terms of reference has been asked to report on 'the range of community views on the factors contributing to marriage and relationship breakdown'. In this chapter, the Committee reviews both the factors raised in submissions, and the research and academic commentary on the issue.

### **Community views about marital breakdown**

Evidence on this subject was received from a diverse range of organisations including many federally funded service providers, church organisations, government bodies, legal centres, and associations representing a diverse range of community interests. In addition, individual submissions were received from academics, marriage celebrants, counsellors, marriage educators through to private citizens documenting their individual experiences of marriage breakdown.

A common theme of these submissions is that the causes of marriage breakdown are complex, diverse and interactive and that no single factor can be isolated as the most significant or important reason for marriage breakdown. It is also evident that the views vary depending on the background and status of those who hold them, so that professionals in relationship development may hold theoretical understandings that differ widely from the personal experiences of individuals within the community.

Given the diversity of views presented to the inquiry, the Committee sees value in providing a summary of the most common themes presented in submissions. These themes can be broadly categorised into socio-economic, cultural and inter-personal factors.

### **Unemployment and work related problems**

A discernible and quite striking trend noted in submissions was the importance attached to unemployment and other work related issues as factors contributing to marriage and relationship breakdown. Many submissions, particularly from welfare organisations suggested that the pressures placed on family life from unemployment are great and have a strong impact on the well being of relationships.

Unemployment not only has the effect of causing financial hardship but also lowers self esteem, creates isolation and limits the ability of families to lead fulfilling lives in the community. Similarly, at the other end of the spectrum, other families, due to financial pressures and fear of losing employment, are working longer hours with a

consequent reduction in time for family. This in turn places additional stress and pressure on family life.<sup>1</sup>

Comments included:

Poverty associated with lack of adequate employment is a pressing issue. Unemployment, underemployment and the changing nature of paid work from full time permanent toward casual employment all contribute to reduced financial security, lowered expectations, isolation and disharmony for some families. Families are faced with increasing pressure from this changing nature of paid work. These uncertainties limit the ability of families to purchase homes, have access to credit or lead fulfilling lives in the community. This pressure has a strong impact upon the well being of their relationships.<sup>2</sup>

Many families struggle with poverty, unemployment or the uncertainty and fear of unemployment. Children growing up in such families frequently have lower expectations of stable economic futures.<sup>3</sup>

Financial strains are a major factor in family breakdown. Families are spending less time together and the inability of various family members to communicate effectively with each other is an outcome of this. This is exacerbated by some employers who refuse to recognise that workers have family responsibilities.<sup>4</sup>

The difficulties which couples face in dealing with social pressures can exacerbate relationship problems. For example, the economic demands of long periods of unemployment can prove too great for some. Work practices which are 'family unfriendly' can reduce the ability of couples to resolve differences. The pace of change, combined with high levels of uncertainty about the future of jobs etc. can be very destabilising.<sup>5</sup>

### **High risk factors**

In many submission it was argued that the existence of certain factors in marriages place relationships at a high risk of breakdown.

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- 1 Submissions on this theme came from: Women's Action Alliance, p. S395; Kids Helpline, p. S269; Mr and Mrs John O'Neil p. S804; Ballarat Children's Homes and Family Services, p. S161; Australian Association of Social Workers, p. S684; Family Mediation Centre p. S379; Queensland Government, p. S635; Community Mediation Service Tasmania, p. S916.
  - 2 Family Resources Centre, *Submissions*, p. S370.
  - 3 Family Services Australia, *Submissions*, p. S690.
  - 4 Shop Distributive & Allied Employees Association, *Submissions*, p. S143.
  - 5 Adelaide Central Mission, *Submissions*, p. S175.

For example it was suggested that marriages often break down largely as a result of problems associated with alcohol, drugs and gambling. Apart from the economic drain they cause, such addictive behaviours, often bring associated problems of domestic violence.<sup>6</sup>

Illness was also cited as creating destabilising stresses within families. For example, children with a disability, or chronic or life threatening or psychiatric illness within families were also reported as having a negative impact on marital stability. As the Tasmanian Premier's Office said, statistics indicate that the potential for relationship breakdown is likely to follow the birth of a child with severe disabilities or the sudden death of a child or infant.<sup>7</sup>

Adelaide Central Mission suggested that another group of families which is particularly vulnerable to relationship breakdown is the group of blended families where there are children from previous marriages. Couples often lack understanding of the complexity of issues they need to deal with, and have unrealistic expectations. These marriages are statistically at high risk of breakdown.<sup>8</sup>

Marriage and relationship breakdown in the family of origin was also cited in some submissions as placing marriages under more stress. People who spend their developing life experience in a dysfunctional family may not be equipped to establish and maintain a healthy, happy, ongoing relationship.<sup>9</sup>

## Cultural themes

In terms of cultural issues, a strong theme coming through submissions is that the redefinition of gender roles has had a major impact on marriage and the family. In the wake of the Women's Movement, women now have a radically new view of their role and status in society and many men are still uncertain how to respond to this

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6 Submissions on this theme came from: Kids Helpline, p. S269; Sunnybank Family Support, p. S215; Tasmanian Premier's Office, p. S734; Ballarat Children's Homes and Family Services, p. S161; Catholic Society for Marriage Education, p. S934; Australian Association of Social Workers, p. S684; Adelaide Central Mission, p. S175; Centacare Australia, p. S841.

7 Tasmanian Premier's Office, *Submissions*, p. S735. Other submissions that referred to illness include: Australian Association of Social Workers, p. S684; Family Mediation Centre, p. S379; Ballarat Children's Homes and Family Services p. S160; Centacare Australia, p. S841.

8 Adelaide Central Mission, *Submissions*, p. S176. Also in Family Services Council, *Submissions*, p. S740; Ms McLucas, *Transcript*, p. 766.

9 Marriage/Relationship Education NT, *Submissions*, p. S794; Mr and Mrs John O'Neil *Submissions*, p. S804; Centacare Australia, *Submissions*, p. S841.

change. Submissions on this theme came from a diverse range of groups and included the following comments:<sup>10</sup>

Economic factors and the rights of women to choose to work have changed the dynamics of relationships over the past 20 years ... Role models provided by parents are not always relevant roles for the current generation where more women need to work.

The influence of the feminist agenda of equality has made the style of relationships change. The traditional roles of earlier generations have become more diverse with several styles of relationships. Conflict and breakdown may occur when one or the other partner changes and the other does not understand how to renegotiate their role within a relationship.<sup>11</sup>

The rapidly changing status of women and the resultant demands on men being aspects of social changes to which many people have not adjusted, particularly in relation to concepts of marriage.<sup>12</sup>

The current patterns of marital breakdown is caused by the fact that the basic personal and cultural norms of gender are changing ... However there is little preparedness on men's part, ... for a conscious accommodation to changes on the part of so many women.<sup>13</sup>

Changing roles of both men and women have challenged expectations of marriages and lead to uncertain and unrealistic divisions of labour within families.<sup>14</sup>

The greater participation of women, then married women and finally married women with dependent children in the paid work force has had widespread ramifications for fertility, expectations of marriage and the roles of men and women in relation to their family responsibilities.<sup>15</sup>

Some proponents of radical feminism have been quite hostile to the institutions of marriage and family . . . feminism sees divorce as a liberation from an oppressive institution, not a break up of a sacred trust.<sup>16</sup>

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10 Other submissions came from; Home Start Australia, p. S820; The Australian Institute of Family Studies, p S21; Family Services Council, p. S748; Sunnybank Family Support Inc, p. S215; Australian Association of Social Workers, p. S684; Mr Tim Jane, p. S12.

11 Marriage/Relationship Education NT, *Submissions*, p. S792.

12 Marriage Educators' Association of Australia, *Submissions*, p. S286.

13 Men's Contact and Resource Service, *Submissions*, p. S22.

14 Family Services Australia, *Submissions*, p. S690.

15 Family Court of Australia, *Submissions*, p. S975.

16 Strengthening Australia's Families, *Submissions*, p. S265.



### ***Ambivalence towards marriage***

A cultural theme coming through many submissions was that modern negative images of marriage undermine marital stability.<sup>17</sup>

Dr Moira Eastman, from the Australian Catholic University, presented the most scholarly submission on this theme when she referred to society's ambivalence towards marriage. She argued that one of the most important contributors to marriage and relationship breakdown is ambivalence (and possibly even hostility) towards the concept of marriage especially in academia, the government, bureaucracy, social services, public policy and the media.<sup>18</sup>

In Dr Eastman's opinion, perhaps the strongest evidence of ambivalence to marriage (and family) is that in at least two major policy areas, the positive contributions made by marriage and family are not acknowledged. One area of this 'silencing' is the domestic economy and the other is the contribution of marriage and family to health.

She referred to the fact that despite its significant contribution to the national economy, the domestic economy is 'neglected, disregarded, slighted and put out of the collective mind'. Similarly, marital status is a *significant* factor impacting on health, outweighing in impact the factor of smoking or not smoking. Despite this evidence, national health strategies ignore the role of marital status, family stability and family processes in creating or undermining health.<sup>19</sup>

Dr Eastman also argued that one reason for marriage's marginal status is that there are many 'myths of marriage' or widely accepted negative beliefs about marriage such as: marriage is good for men and bad for women, marriage contributes to health and well-being for men but makes women sick and unhappy, that marriage is a hitting licence; that violence and abuse are typical within marriage; that marriage was originally designed to facilitate both the maintenance of class inequality and the oppression of women and that to propose to reduce the amount of family breakdown is actually to attack, demean and stigmatise those who have experienced marriage break-down.<sup>20</sup>

These views culminate in some overarching beliefs one of which is that current trends towards high levels of marriage/relationship breakdown cannot and should not be reversed. To attempt to reverse them is to force people back into violent and demeaning relationships. It involves placing a

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17 Certified Male, *Submissions*, p. S708; Strengthening Australia's Families, *Submissions*, p. S266; Marriage/Relationship Education NT, *Submissions*, p. S792.

18 Dr Moira Eastman, *Submissions*, p. S897.

19 *ibid.* S899–S901.

20 *ibid.* S911.

stigma on the unmarried, separated, divorced and those in de facto marriages. Another overarching belief is that 'support' of marriage is of concern only to those of the extreme right – especially Christian fundamentalists or other minority groups who for various reasons are unable to listen to the facts that show that marriage is an essentially unjust, unsafe and even violent social arrangement.

Dr Eastman concluded that:

There is absolutely no evidence to support the above negative beliefs about marriage and family and the evidence to refute them is extremely strong and constantly growing (Eastman 1996). But unless the prevalence of these negative views of marriage is taken into account, and unless the government understands that there is a scholarly critique of these views, and becomes informed of this critique and on the basis of that information makes policy that supports families *and marriages as an essential component of family life*, then the cultural forces will overwhelm any purely 'educative' approaches that may be developed.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Individualism***

Several submissions suggested that many couples enter marriage believing that individual rights and needs should override the good of the marriage partnership. Such couples, it is argued, have been poorly trained or equipped for a lifetime of commitment.<sup>22</sup> They often have unrealistic expectations of the challenge of marriage and the media images of blissful relationships contribute to high expectations without necessarily the concurrent skills.<sup>23</sup>

Mr David Blankenhorn, President of the Institute for American Values, told the Committee that there has been a generational change in attitude to the meaning of marriage and marriage commitment and a strong move towards commitment to self and individualism. From his research in the US Mr Blankenhorn would argue that this is the principal reason for the weakening of marriage as an institution.<sup>24</sup>

Other submissions suggested that with an increased life expectancy, couples committing to life-long commitments are looking forward to very much longer years

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21 *ibid.* S912.

22 Women's Action Alliance, p. S395; Mr Tim Jane, p. S14; Mr and Mrs John O'Neil, p. S804; Lifeline, p. S787; Ballarat Children's Homes and Family Services, p. S160.

23 Kids Helpline, *Submissions*, p. S269; Marriage Educators Association of Australia, *Submissions*, p. S286; Mr and Mrs John O'Neil, *Submissions*, p. S804.

24 Mr David Blankenhorn, *Transcript*, p. 858.

of marriage than that of their great-grandparents. This brings with it added stresses and the greater likelihood that couples may outgrow one another.<sup>25</sup>

### **Communication**

On an interpersonal level, the most common factor cited as causing marital breakdown was poor communication skills.<sup>26</sup>

The Community Mediation Service of Tasmania suggested that with the majority of counselling sessions in their experience, it is clear that many individuals are not able to clearly and assertively state their needs to avoid the build-up of resentment or anger which becomes destructive to the marriage.

Partners frequently express that their emotions have not been acknowledged; the teaching of listening skills appears to be important. It is expressed that partners would like to be listened to without a defensive/aggressive response. There appears to be a lack of social/relationship skills in dealing with problems in relationships: parties need assistance in developing negotiation skills to relate effectively.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly Family Services Australia suggested:

Marriages and relationships are directly effected by the couple's ability to communicate. Where communication is poor, couples experience emotional isolation, uncertainty, neglect and sexual difficulties and sometimes seek intimacy outside the primary relationship.<sup>28</sup>

### **Parenting**

A lack of parenting skills was cited by some social welfare groups as placing stress on families. Organisations such as Marymead and Home-Start Australia argued that the child rearing years are some of the most stressful and couples approach parenting with little or no preparation. There are often few supports to deal with this and no longer are extended families available to support young parents.<sup>29</sup>

It was also suggested that the time when children reach adolescence is a very demanding time for many parents, and relationships may be under threat due to these associated pressures. One submissions further suggested that the trend toward

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25 Family Services Council, *Submissions*, p. S750; Family Services Australia, *Submissions*, p. S690.

26 Submissions on this theme were received from the Family Mediation Centre, p. S379; Australian Association of Social Workers, p. S684; Marymead p. S29; Lifeline, p. S787; Mr and Mrs John O'Neil, p. S804; Centacare Australia, p. S841; Bethany Family Support, p. S627.

27 Community Mediation Service Tasmania, *Submissions*, p. S915.

28 Family Services Australia, *Submissions*, p. S691.

29 Marymead, *Submissions*, p. S29; Kids Help Line, *Submissions*, p. S269; Home-Start Australia, *Submissions*, p. S820.



adult children remaining longer in their family of origin and third generation unemployment also created added stress on families.<sup>30</sup>

### **Domestic violence**

Domestic violence was cited in many submissions as a major reason for marriage breakdown. Evidence from the Domestic Violence Resource Centre<sup>31</sup>, the Women's Action Alliance<sup>32</sup>, the Northern Suburbs Family Resources Centre Inc<sup>33</sup>, Kids Helpline<sup>34</sup>, Lifeline<sup>35</sup>, Women's Legal Service (Qld)<sup>36</sup>, Family Services Australia<sup>37</sup>, Ballarat Children's Home<sup>38</sup>, the Australian Association of Social Workers<sup>39</sup> and the Queensland Government<sup>40</sup> all suggested that they had practical experience to indicate that domestic violence wreaked devastation upon many families. These submission agreed that violence is a major contributor to the breakdown in relationships.

Comments included:

At the Domestic Violence Resource Centre, we are daily confronted with the devastation wreaked upon families by violent individuals.<sup>41</sup>

The cycle of violence that often repeats from one generation to the next and which puts marriage under threat from the outset.<sup>42</sup>

Violence and the abuse of power are evident in all types of families with many men viewing their partners and children as their property. There is plenty of evidence that violence is a major contributor to the breakdown in relationships.<sup>43</sup>

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30 Family Resources Centre, *Submissions*, p. S369.

31 *Submissions*, p. S865.

32 *Submissions*, p. S395.

33 *Submissions*, p. S370.

34 *Submissions*, p. S269.

35 *Submissions*, p. S787.

36 *Submissions*, p. S780.

37 *Submissions*, p. S690.

38 *Submissions*, p. S184.

39 *Submissions*, p. S684.

40 *Submissions*, p. S635.

41 Domestic Violence Resource Centre, *Submissions*, p. S865.

42 Women's Action Alliance, *Submissions*, p. S395.

43 Family Resources Centre, *Submissions*, p. S370.

Where issues of power are dominant, the result is often violence, trauma, sexual abuse or social isolation affecting mainly women and children.<sup>44</sup>

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44 Family Services Australia, *Submissions*, p. S690.

## Ease of divorce

The relative ease with which marriage can be dissolved was a theme in submissions from the Women's Action Alliance<sup>45</sup>, the Festival of Light<sup>46</sup>, the Family Law Reform Association NSW<sup>47</sup> and Strengthening Australia's Families.

The Festival of Light argued:

The enormous increase in marriage breakdown in Western societies has followed the introduction of 'no fault' divorce in the last few decades. We believe the most important factor is the changed 'community mindset' on marriage induced by the Family Law Act. Under this law, couples enter marriage knowing that one of them can at any time walk out, with no legal sanctions, and with half the assets of the partnerships. They also know that this will happen to nearly 50 per cent of all couples marrying today. Any 1990s marriage begins in the worst possible way: with an expectation that divorce is possible, permissible and reasonably likely to happen. It is an expectation that when marriage problems occur, divorce is an acceptable way to go. It is a recipe for marriage failure.<sup>48</sup>

Similar comments were:

Since the introduction of the Family Law Act in 1975, the traditional family has been rocked to its foundation. The ease by which a divorce can be obtained has led to a 'trendy' image of walking away from problems, instead of having the commitment to address them.

With a 'no-fault' system in place, a guilty party in a relationship has no fear of being financially disadvantaged. They can still be assured of their share of the family property and in many cases, custody of the children as well.<sup>49</sup>

Society's attitude towards marriage has changed dramatically over the last 20 years....

The introduction of the 'no fault' principle and of the requirement for a 12 months separation only to determine eligibility for divorce has changed the essential nature of the marriage contract from one which was intended to be a permanent life-time relationship to one which, of its nature, is inherently temporary.<sup>50</sup>

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45 *Submissions*, p. S395.

46 *Submissions*, p. S347.

47 *Submissions*, p. S235.

48 Festival of Light, *Submissions*, p. S347.

49 Family Law Reform Association NSW, *Submissions*, p. S289.

50 Strengthening Australian Families, *Submissions*, p. S266.

On a similar theme, Peter Vogel, from Certified Male, suggested that separated fathers also believe that if divorce were not so easily obtained, they and their wives might have made a more serious effort to resolve their difficulties rather than giving up on the relationship so readily.<sup>51</sup>

This submission went further suggesting that many men believe the perceived pro-mother bias of the Family Court counsellors and judges causes their wives to give up on the marriage too easily because of their confidence in favourable treatment by the courts.<sup>52</sup>

The Family Court in its submission countered these arguments saying that the 1975 legislation did undoubtedly make divorce more accessible as a response to marriage breakdown. However, in the Court's opinion, the abolition of the requirement to prove fault involved an acceptance by the legislators that behaviour was a *symptom* rather than a *cause* of marriage breakdown.<sup>53</sup>

## **Isolation**

The increasing isolation facing Australian families was also considered to place marriages under stress. It was suggested that the demise of the local shopping centre, the lack of community support services in many localities, poor transport systems, unemployment and the lack of extended family support networks are all factors which contributed to the social isolation of families.<sup>54</sup>

The Adelaide Central Mission expressed a view common to many submissions arguing:

Lack of community supports in a society where the extended family and the neighbourhood have diminished in importance mean that families do not have additional resources to help them adapt. It is our view that there is an interplay between a strong community and a strong family.<sup>55</sup>

## **Migration issues**

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51 Certified Male, *Submissions*, p. S709.

52 *ibid.*

53 Family Court of Australia, *Submissions*, p. S976.

54 Family Services Council, *Transcript*, p. 23; Australian Association of Social Workers, *Submissions*, p. S684; Queensland Government, *Submissions*, p. S636; Catholic Society for Marriage Education, *Submissions*, p. S934; Marymead, *Submissions*, p. S29.

55 Adelaide Central Mission, *Submissions*, p. S175.

Migrants were another group identified as having special problems that may place stress on marriages and relationships.