

NCSMC

National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc.

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Committee Secretariat
Standing Committee on Family and Human Services
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
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Dear Secretariat,

Please find attached the submission of the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family.

This submission specifically addresses the second term of reference in relation to single mothers. In particular, we would like to draw to the committee's attention how experiences of violence impact on single mothers' transitions from welfare to paid employment. We note that this is an area that is largely unexplored and urge the committee to consider the need to rectify this.

NCSMC would welcome the opportunity to make oral submissions to the Secretariat in support of this submission.

If you have any need for further information with respect to the issues raised, please contact myself or the Executive Officer, Jac Taylor.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Elspeth McInnes
Convenor

About NCSMC

The National Council of Single Mothers and their Children Incorporated was formed in 1973 to advocate for the rights and interests of single mothers and their children to the benefit of all sole parent families, including single father families.

NCSMC formed to focus on single mothers' interests at a time when women who were pregnant outside marriage were expected to give up their children for adoption by couple families and there was no income support for parents raising children alone. Today most single mothers are women who have separated from a partner. Issues of income support, child support, paid work, housing, parenting, child-care, family law, violence and abuse continue as concerns to the present day.

NCSMC has member organisations in states and territories around Australia, many of which also provide services and support to families after parental separation.

NCSMC aims to:

- Ensure that all children have a fair start in life;
- Recognise single mother families as a viable and positive family unit;
- Promote understanding of single mothers and their children in the community that they may live free from prejudice;
- To work for improvements in the social economic and legal status of single mothers and their children.

This submission will focus primarily on the second term of reference:

Making it easier for parents who so wish to return to the paid work force.

NCSMC wishes to highlight that existing legislation does not allow single mothers on income support to choose the circumstances of return to work as they are compelled to undertake certain activities as part of their "mutual obligation". It would appear that the Australian Government intends to significantly increase these obligations, making choice even more limited. Thus, NCSMC wishes the committee to note the double standard that currently applies where single mothers face compulsion to undertake paid work, compared to couple mothers who may choose their involvement.¹

Parental separation and violence

Single-parent households comprise more than one in five households with dependent children in Australia and comprise one the fastest growing family forms (Wise, 2003). Most single parents are

¹ Refer to Appendix A for NCSMC's Guiding Principles to further welfare reform.

mothers, with nine out of 10 children living with their mothers after parental separation (ABS 1999). The rise in single-parent households is primarily attributable to the rising rate of separations between parents, and violence is implicated as a strong driver of relationship breakdown. Recent Australian research into the reasons for divorce found that, after general communication breakdown, violence and addictions were the most common reasons women gave for ending the relationship (Wolcott & Hughes 1999).

This reasoning is supported statistically in the ABS (1996) survey of women's safety, which found that single women with an ex-partner were the most likely to have experienced violence, and the ex-partner was the most probable assailant. The population survey found that 23% of adult women who had ever partnered had experienced violent assault by a current partner or former partner, but single women who had previously been partnered were at highest risk of experiencing assault, with 42% reporting violence at some time during their relationship (ABS 1996, p. 51). Family court data indicates that 66% of separations involving children have violence or abuse (Family Law Pathways Report 2001).

The data reported in the submission are drawn from a doctoral research project undertaken in South Australia in the 1990s (McInnes 2001), which compared the family transition experiences of single mothers who left violent relationships with those who did not have to content with violence.² Interviews were conducted with 36 single mothers, which included separated and divorced mothers and women who had given birth outside of an established partnership. Of the 29 women interviewed who became single mothers as the result of relationship break down, 18 reported that their relationship ended due to violence. Abuse was self-defined by respondents and always included physical violence and sometimes included sexual, social, financial and emotional abuse. The violence typically formed part of the relationship dynamic in which the mother and children lived in constant fear and anxiety, rather than a single explosive event.

Labour market participation

Only 4 of the mothers interviewed had never participated in the paid workforce, and 28 of the 36 women were either undertaking paid work or study at the time of interview. Thus for the majority, paid work and/or study formed an integral part of their identity and daily experience.

Single mothers who separated from violent relationships were less likely to be in paid work, but more likely to be studying, than other mothers at the time of interview. Of the 20 survivors of childhood and/or adult violence, 70% were mainly reliant on income support. Two-thirds of the

mothers who were mainly reliant on income support were studying at the time of interview and three out of four single mother students had left violent relationships. This fits with existing research that found that divorced women who had been exposed to severe abuse were less likely to be in the paid workforce than other divorced women (Sheehan and Smyth 2000).

The differences between single mothers' paid work and study status according to their exposure to violent relationships indicates that analysis of single mothers' economic participation cannot be reduced to infrastructure needs such as childcare. Women's exposure to gendered violence and their responsibilities for care of children combine to qualitatively change their access to the paid workforce.

Gender and working parents

Australia's paid workforce is highly gendered, where women's work is predominantly clustered in low-paid part-time service work (Baker and Tippin 1999; Edwards and Magarey 1995; Pocock 1995; Sharp and Broomhill 1988). Women's increased participation in paid work has not produced a proportionate decline in their share of domestic and family work relative to men (Bittman & Lovejoy 1993; Hochschild 1997). Thus gender remains a clear determinant of workforce participation, reflecting women's unpaid caring responsibilities, and the higher rewards of work available to men.

Current family policy increases the risks of unemployment for single parents. Current family policy pays higher rewards to mothers in **couple** families withdrawing from the workforce, through the non-means tested payment of FTB B to single income families. When mothers are not partnered they become subject to new participation requirements to maintain access to a subsistence income support payment. Current family policy is thus incoherent and inconsistent by paying some mothers to stop work and requiring other mothers to start work. The best protection against unemployment for single mothers is to enable all parents, couple and single, to make structured transitions in and out of the workforce as caregiving needs require over the life course. This means consideration of initiatives such as maternity leave and paternity leave, quality affordable child care services, retraining packages and subsidy entitlements for caregivers returning to work.

² All identifying information has been removed to protect the privacy and confidentiality of respondents.

Single Mothers and Paid Work

A study comparing return to work programmes for low income mothers across Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom concluded that the variation in levels of workforce activity required of mothers affected the level of difficulty experienced by families, but did not essentially change the degree or scope of poverty of single mother households (Baker and Tippin 1999). Along with responsibility for dependent children, low paid work in insecure jobs in a gender-segmented labour market prevented single mothers from gaining access to economic independence. Only well-paid, secure full-time jobs would enable parents to support their children on a single income, without any reliance on income support.

In the *Economic Consequences of Marriage Breakdown* study, McDonald (1986) found that being in the workforce at the time of separation was the most important factor influencing post-separation workforce participation of mothers with dependent children. Women who had undertaken paid work during the marriage, particularly after the birth of the second child, were the most likely to continue paid work participation. Women with professional occupational experience had a higher workforce attachment, and better access to secure working conditions. Reporting these findings, Funder (1989:82) noted that decisions taken during the marriage about the gender division of paid work and child rearing responsibilities strongly influenced women's post separation employment prospects.

Recommendations:

- *NCSMC recommends that government policy be reviewed to address inconsistencies that "encourage" single mothers, on the one hand, to enter paid work, and couple mothers, on the other, to stay at home.*
- *NCSMC recommends that family support policy be reviewed to introduce paid maternity leave and paternity leave, quality affordable child care services, retraining packages and subsidy entitlements for caregivers returning to work.*

Factors such as the women's level of education and history of paid work also affect their likelihood of paid work participation. A relatively high wage was needed to compensate for work costs and the loss of income support, as well as rent increases for mothers living in public housing. Research in Australia into sole parents leaving the income support system, has confirmed that access to well-paid employment with family-friendly workplace conditions and appropriate affordable childcare was the most sustainable path out of poverty for single mothers (Chalmers 1999:45; McHugh & Millar 1996; Wilson *et al.* 1998).

Factors identified in previous research as producing the highest incidence of reliance on income support were:

- Being out of the paid workforce at time of separation;
- Not being involved in the decision to separate;
- Having an income lower than the benefit level paid;
- Having less than Year 12 schooling; and
- Not re-partnering within five to eight years (Funder 1989:85).

The number of children in the family also affected a mother's labour market participation with participation in work declining as the number of children rose (Funder 1989). In McInnes 2001, 72 percent of the sample had one or two children, and four out of five of these were working or studying. None of the respondents with three or more children were in the paid workforce at the time of interview, although seventy percent of these were studying.

Paid work and caring responsibilities

In the study by McInnes 2001, parents felt torn between their parenting and earning roles. The dual demands of being the only available parent and income earner made participation in paid work a balancing act for many women. While mothers expected to work and earn their own income as their children grew older, a lack of alternative care meant they could not easily work outside standard office hours.

If you have a partner it's much easier to stay back at work. Childcare finishes at five thirty and you have to be there to pick the child up. I always had to leave early to pick her up ... I missed out on hours of work. I was only paid by the hour (Juanita, 41, 1 child).

It would be very difficult doing shift work. There's jobs that I've had that I wouldn't be able to do now, like when I was working with young disabled people 8 hour shifts over a 24 hours period seven days a week and I just wouldn't be able to get child care (Ann, 40, 1 child).

I couldn't possibly see how I could keep a night-time job. Childcare was something that wasn't available at night in those days... My mother was prepared to have the children but only if I took them to her house. She had no room set up for them. I had to pick them up at 11 o'clock at night, take them out and put them in the car, and drive home (Kerry, 31, 2 children).

Respondents stressed that being able to meet their children's needs came first, and their ability to undertake paid work had to fit in around these needs. However, they did sacrifice their own needs especially in relation to recreation and leisure time, leading to increased isolation and stress.

Work made me really very isolated because I was losing my energy ... I was coming back at about seven o'clock in the evening and ... trying to cook something for her. She was screaming because.. she spent between ten and twelve hours in a day-care centre so she was miserable (Sasha, 42, 1 child).

When I first came back, because I was so tired and getting so little sleep, I was bursting into tears all the time and I found it very hard to look professional... I've had to go home during the day and have sleeps because I was just so knackered (Ann, 40, 1 child).

Where mothers had made the transition into paid work some found themselves having to return to income support due to illness, lack of child care, lack of transport and stress.

I can't nurse any more ... I've got registration however I'm not able to work any more as a nurse because I have to take care of everybody including my ex. I had to accommodate my life to suit his life because he refused to do it (Sasha, 41, 1 child).

Recommendation:

NCSMC recommends that 'welfare to work' policy must enable easy and fast transition between paid work and income support to ensure single mothers are able to meet their children's needs.

Despite their efforts to find ways to work, single mothers' workforce participation remained subordinate to the demands of family for a number of reasons:

- There was no other present parent to share care for children;
- Mothers barely saw their children when they worked full-time;
- Working full-time meant risking exhaustion;
- Children needed their remaining parent's attention.

For those mothers who had experienced violence, their family demands were higher due to the continuing impact of trauma on their own and their children's health. Taft (2003) notes that there are strong links between intimate violence and damage to women's mental health, including depression, anxiety, substance misuse, suicidality and post traumatic stress disorder.

Child Care

The single mothers in the sample (McInnes 2001) drew on both formal and informal sources of care, with the most advantaged mothers being able to draw on a wider range. Informal sources included relatives, friends and the other parent and had the advantage of being both flexible and cost free. For women who had experienced violence their choices were far more limited as they were often isolated from both informal and formal sources of care.

Consistent with other research (Swinbourne *et al.* 2000; Wijnberg & Weinger 1998), the women in the sample with close relationships with family found this the best form of alternative care. But not all women could rely on family support, especially migrant women. Women who had experienced

childhood violence could not rely on family, and those who had experienced violence as an adult had been forced to move away from their ex-partner and were thus isolated from family.

Only 13 mothers (36%) in the sample (McInnes 2001) had regular contact with their ex-partner. A study of labour force capacity of sole parents who shared care with the other parent found that mothers who shared care in a regular, co-operative, flexible and satisfactory arrangement with the other parent were considerably more likely to be in paid work than single mothers who did not share care (Dickenson *et al.* 1999). However, where mothers did depend on ex-partners for care while they undertook paid work, ex-partners were able to continue to exert control over mother's activities, echoing other research findings that partners decided whether to 'allow' mothers to work in couple families (Eureka Strategic Research, 1998:68). Full time work by mothers could also create barriers to regular contact with the non-resident parent. When mothers were working full-time, weekends were their only opportunity to spend leisure time with their child, competing with non-resident fathers' time. Access to care by the other parent was not possible for the women whose ex-partners were absent, and not in the child's interest when the other parent was abusive. Survivors of violence thus had less access to this source of care.

A third source of alternative care was neighbourhood networks, providing the convenience of locality. Like family, friends were an important resource out of hours, or when children were sick and could not attend school or childcare. Relocation after separation created barriers to women sustaining the neighbourhood friendships that had developed before their relationships ended. Women fleeing violence were often forced to move away from their neighbourhoods. Those who were able to remain in their homes during and after the separation were more likely to have access to neighbourhood support networks that could replace or extend family support.

Most commonly, formal child care was used. Less flexible and more expensive, it was more reliable for mothers to meet work and study commitments. Survivors of violence and migrants were more reliant on formal childcare services. However, child care usually had to be booked in advance, creating difficulties for women who worked casual hours and were unsure of their child care needs. Cost limited mothers' use of child care. Mothers who had experienced abuse of themselves or their children were often distrustful of childcare. Overall, survivors of violence experienced relative disadvantage in access to all sources of alternative care.

Despite the limitations, high quality affordable, accessible childcare was important to reducing isolation among survivors of violence, migrant mothers and others who did not have ready access to informal care sources. The data indicate that accessible, affordable, safe child care remains

fundamental to enabling single mothers to participate in paid work, particularly for migrant women and those who have survived violence. Identification and awareness of the needs of parent and child survivors of violence could provide considerable support to women seeking to improve their workforce opportunities.

Recommendation:

NCSMC recommends that government fund affordable, accessible, appropriate, quality child care places, in numbers sufficient to meet demand.

Workforce motivations and barriers

Poverty Traps

Gaining financial rewards from work was important to justify the additional cost and effort of workforce participation for mothers, however, poverty traps undermined respondents' motivation to work. Respondents in this research (McInnes 2001) calculated the impact of market earnings on their income support payments and felt there needed to be greater financial incentives to enter the workforce, particularly for those living in public housing, when earnings also increased rent.

I was earning maybe one hundred and fifty extra but I had to cut it down to part-time and it just wasn't worth it. Housing Trust put your rent up. Social Security takes away money and I was about five dollars better off (Bonny, 28, 3 children).

My rent went up over sixty dollars a week when I started working and when I complained about that they said 'you are already in subsidised housing what are you complaining about' (Laurel, 38, 3 children).

The combination of low-paid, insecure jobs with high effective marginal tax rates in income tests on public rental rates and income support payments, provided no economic benefit to families in public housing to compensate for the time pressure and the financial and family costs of going to paid work. Poverty traps did not as severely affect single mothers in private rental housing or homebuyers as earnings did not directly increase their housing costs. Survivors of violence and mothers without wage income capital assets were more likely to be living in public housing, and were thus more severely affected by poverty traps than other mothers. The paradox of poverty traps is that mothers with higher income earning capacity and assets are less severely affected than mothers living in deep poverty, in public housing, with poor income prospects.

Recommendations:

- *NCSMC recommends the removal of quadruple income test (Youth Allowance, Family Tax Benefit, Child Care Benefit and Child Support).*
- *NCSMC recommends federal and state governments cooperate to address the public housing rental / market earnings poverty trap.*

Access to transport

A key dimension of poverty and isolation among single mothers was their access to private transport. The study or workforce prospects of single mothers without access to private transport were limited, compared to those who held a driver's licence and could afford to run a car (McInnes 2001). Getting children to child care or school on public transport and then getting to workplaces, often required mothers to rouse children at dawn. Women living in non-metropolitan areas were at an even greater disadvantage due to limited services.

I would have had to drop him at somebody's house at five in the morning, having got myself up and the baby up - it would have to be a house close by... I would have to have him there including weekends when there was shift work and it's harder to find child care on rotating shifts (Judith, 34, 1 child).

I had to take her in the morning on the bus, then catch another bus, with the pusher, with her bottle, her nappies, everything, to the child care. I then had to walk down to the day care centre, then come back and walk to my classes and then back to pick her up. Whew! I was walking. It was a slavery (Sasha, 42, 1 child).

I was catching buses. I didn't have a licence. I was leaving home at quarter to six in the morning to be at work by seven and I wasn't getting home till five thirty at night (Judith, 34, 1 child).

Women's life histories of income status, relationships, culturally scripted gender roles and motherhood formed part of the context in which some had not been able to learn to drive. Some women had grown up in low income households without a car, others had lived in relationships in which only men were drivers, and therefore controlled women's mobility. Gaining a driver's licence meant gaining freedom to move.

Recommendation:

NCSMC recommends that government provide funding to single mothers on income support to cover the cost of driving lessons and purchase of driver's licence.

Post Separation Violence

Despite the widespread belief that leaving the relationship stops domestic violence, a number of survivors of violence reported continuing harassment, stalking, threats and physical attacks by their ex-partner (McInnes 2001). Mothers who had to maintain contact with a violent ex-partner for child contact found that management of their ex-partner's violence changed, but did not necessarily stop after separation. Their actions were still constrained and conditioned by the need to manage and reduce the risk of further violence against themselves and their children.

I still have to appease his moods. Even though we are apart I have to be careful about what the children might say on the phone to him so as not to rock the boat ... in order to protect myself, to protect the children (Mabel, 36, 6 children).

There was often conflict at exchange at access so we have been through the Family Court and had restraining orders put in place and conditions of access and that sort of thing (Tara, 36, 2 children).

In cases of continuing contact between children and abusive fathers, both mothers and children were unable to work on recovery from their trauma, remaining hostage to the potential and actuality of ongoing violence. Mothers whose children had been abused by their father were presented with a no-win situation in which they had left the relationship to protect their children from abuse, yet they were required to cooperate with presenting their child for contact with the alleged perpetrator.

Recommendations:

- *NCSMC endorses the Family Law Council (2002) and Every Picture Tells a Story Report (2004) recommendations that a national child protection service be established, improving the quality of child abuse investigation and evidence available to the Family Court.*
- *NCSMC recommends that the Family Law Act be amended to privilege child(ren)'s safety in determining his/her best interests.*

Education and Work Histories

Those in the sample (McInnes 2001) with little education had mainly held low paid, part time jobs such as cleaning, retailing or food and hospitality services. The mothers with post-secondary qualifications were more likely to be mainly reliant on market income than those who had no post-school qualification. Forty-five percent of the sample had not finished Year 12. Of these mothers many had held jobs with no training, no security and relatively low pay. For women who grew up with an abusive parent, leaving home and schooling was a way to escape the abuse.

Women who had not succeeded at school did not expect that they would be able to handle study as an adult. Success at education as adults prompted women to re-evaluate their capacities and goals.

Gendered expectations about women's working lives, the demands of marriage and family, as well as experiences of violence were the main factors which had shaped single mothers' education and work histories. Many respondents had left education as young women believing they would eventually be supported by their partners, or to escape abuse from their family. Husbands' views on mothers' workforce participation, as well as the demands of children, restricted women's work during the partnership, and left many single mothers with a low income earning capacity after the relationship ended.

Gaining new or updated workplace skills was an important step for single mothers who wanted to return to work. Study and training courses provided women with new opportunities; however,

women were interested in careers which would support themselves and their children, rather than short-term low-paid job options.

Single Mothers and Study

Combining parenting and studying generated similar conflicts to those between paid work and parenting demands. Students were more able to be flexible to meet family demands, but student workloads were often organised around the lifestyles of young adults without dependants. Mothers often experienced time and family stress while studying. Not only did the demands of children and study conflict, but educational institutions made few allowances for the needs of carers.

On the first day of orientation we had someone come in to talk about time management and he proceeded to tell single parents why they shouldn't be at university. That was my introduction...we all felt really bad. He told us you can't be a good parent and study (Anita, 38, 2 children).

Despite the lack of flexibility and recognition of single mothers' family needs by some education institutions, access to higher education was greatly valued by women in the study. Department of Family and Community Services data shows that sole parents were the income support group with the highest rate of participation in education (Landt & Peck 2000).

Half of the respondents (McInnes 2001) were enrolled in a post-secondary course at the time of interview. Two-thirds of these were enrolled in university and the remaining third in TAFE courses. Further education was seen as a way to improve their earning capacity in the longer term. The data showed a trend for the level of education to increase with age. Many respondents who had returned to study as a single mother discovered they were able to succeed educationally. Success at education was important to recovering a positive sense of identity and achievement, as well as expanding social networks and decreasing isolation. However, poverty remained a barrier to single mothers' participation in education, and survivors of violent relationships often lived in deeper relative poverty, with less access to assets from the relationship and less access to child support.

In summary, respondents' motivations to begin studying were linked to their desire to achieve longer term career goals. Success in education offered a positive sense of self-esteem and achievement sufficient to persist through barriers including lost earning opportunities, costs of studying, risks of not getting a job on completion and the stress on the family. When the family experienced increased stress due to illness or other crises, mothers preferred to defer studies to attend to family demands.

Recommendation:

NCSMC recommends government promote and encourage single mothers on income support to undertake higher education, by subsidising places at institutions, allowing study as an approved activity, and ensuring the continuation of the Pensioner Education Supplement.

Summary of Research Findings

The impact on work and study arising from violence emerged in the research (McInnes 2001) as an issue for women in the workforce. Violence against women and children is commonly constituted within a welfare paradigm of social policy providing crisis housing and financial relief, while the legacy of violence on survivor's work and education opportunities has received comparatively little attention (Danziger *et al.* 2000). The poverty, health impacts, isolation and loss of trust arising from violence affected survivors' access to paid work and study and their use of alternative care resources.

Single mothers' opportunities to develop market earnings were underpinned by a range of prerequisites which could not be assumed within the cumulative gendered effects of prolonged poverty, experiences of violence and responsibility for dependent others. Such prerequisites for labour market participation included:

- Physical safety for parent and child(ren);
- Emotional and physical health of the parent and child(ren);
- Secure housing;
- Access to transport;
- Access to appropriate child care resources;
- Access to suitable training / education;
- Access to network with employment opportunities.

Violence negatively impacted on single mothers' workforce and study opportunities in a number of complex ways, mediated by other factors:

- Survivors of violence often experienced increased family demand due to the physical, emotional and financial stresses of past and continuing violence, thereby reducing their sustained availability for other activities.
- Survivors were more restricted in access to alternative forms of care. Survivors were often isolated from family and friends through having to move or go into hiding. They could not safely call on their ex-partner to provide care, and their experiences often made them more distrustful of childcare.

- Survivors were more likely to have been housed in public housing, and were thus exposed to deeper poverty traps compared to those in privately rented or purchased housing.
- Survivors were less likely to have access to private transport, due to poverty, and never obtaining a driver's licence.
- Survivors of violence as children had often left home and education to escape, placing them at risk of long-term disadvantage in the labour market.
- Survivors of violence carry the costs, including impaired physical and mental health of both child and adult targets, which impact on their capacity to participate in paid work and education. There are the increased financial and time costs of attendance at health services, medications, and disability aids. Many survivors of violence also face increased legal costs to try to protect themselves and their children using the state and federal courts. There is also the cost of the loss or damage to housing and possessions arising from the destruction of property, forced abandonment of home, debts arising from the relationship and forgone claims to property of the relationship.

Policy approaches assisting mothers to seek work need to take account of the extra demands on survivors of violence and the responsibilities of providing care. Constructing mothers as gender-neutral agents in the labour market cannot adequately account for the gendered dimensions of the distribution of unpaid care, poverty and violence. Thus increased compulsion on single mothers to participate in workforce activity can be expected to create increased burdens on the most vulnerable families and do little to address the drivers of relative disadvantage among single mothers.

Policy reforms such as increased financial rewards for paid work, increased access to affordable, quality, flexible child care and increased assistance with transport and education cost are necessary to supporting single mothers to improve their income-earning opportunities. Recognition of the impact of gendered violence on single mother's poverty and their subsequent working opportunities indicates the need to dramatically improve legal responses to financially compensate mothers and children for violence against them, and the support their safety and recovery after separation.

Recommendations:

- *NCSMC recommends that government, in considering policies to encourage transitions from welfare to paid work, prioritise rights to safety, healing and recovery for all victims of violence, beyond the current scope of crisis intervention.*

- *NCSMC recommends that government does not overlook the imperative to consider the impact of violence when developing policy to encourage the transition from welfare to paid work. In doing so, further research specifically addressing this area will need to be undertaken.*
- *NCSMC recommends that government consider how it could improve the legal responses to victims of violence to financially compensate them for the violence suffered, and help in their healing and recovery.*
- *NCSMC recommends that government fund the provision of training and education of professionals, volunteers and helpers who come into contact with victims of violence. This needs to include prevalence, characteristics, dynamics and consequences of violence/abuse in families, how to recognise it and what to do about it. Workers need to know how to go about prioritising responses to achieve safety, and supporting healing and resilience for victims.*
- *In addition to the above recommendations, NCSMC recommends that government implement the following policies in recognition of the unpaid care work single mothers undertake:*
 1. *Increased national investment in access to retraining and education packages for parents and carers who have foregone wages to meet care commitments.*
 2. *The development of wage subsidy packages to build workforce attachment and skills for parents and carers who have foregone wages to meet care commitments.*
 3. *A national flexible system of maternity leave and parental leave to support parents and carers who have foregone wages to meet care commitments in the early period of children's lives, with pathways back to employment emphasising parental choice and flexibility.*
 4. *Affirmative action in the workplace to support women's and mothers' access to permanent employment with career paths and skills acquisition.*
 5. *Increased investment in family support services, with pathways to employment and education services for parents and carers who have foregone wages to meet care commitments.*

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Guiding Principles – Sole Parents & Welfare Reform

Overview

NCSMC recommends that the Australian Government does not increase participation requirements for Parenting Payment recipients for the following reasons:

- Sole parents are the most active income support recipient population undertaking paid work, employment assistance programs, study and training;
- Demand for employment assistance programs, training and child care places far exceeds supply;
- No evaluation data is yet available to determine the success or otherwise of the Australians Working Together legislation as implemented as at 30 September 2002, and 30 September 2003.

NCSMC recommends that the Australian Government implements the following reforms:

- Invest in the well being of Australian sole parent families by increasing the number of places available in employment assistance programs, training and child care;
- Facilitate the uptake of such places by providing sufficient funding to allow sole parents to fill these places;
- Provide evaluation data so the success or otherwise of the existing Australians Working Together legislation can be determined. This should include, but not be limited to, data with respect to parents and others on:
 - Movement from benefit to paid work (including casual, part time, and full time)
 - Access to services, including return to work programs (eg JET, TTW), training education, and child care;
 - Breaching rates

Consultation

To ensure proper consultation takes place, NCSMC recommends the following consultation process takes place:

- Public meetings to be held in each state/territory;
- A Discussion Paper is drafted by DEWR and released for public comment (by written submission and with reasonable time line);
- Following this, an Options Paper is drafted and released for public comment (by written submission and with reasonable time line).

Assistance / Supports [Services in DEWR language]

- Retention of current Parenting Payment (pension) levels and income test (with taper rate at 40 cents in the dollar) for existing Parenting Payment recipients and new applicants;
- There should be acknowledgement that further assistance and support is needed (both access to and funding of) to address the structural disadvantage faced by sole parents;
- Access to affordable, accessible, appropriate, quality child care, including before and after school, vacation, night-time & weekend care;
- Provision of funding for appropriate and long term substantive training and/or education, including the retention of the Pensioner Education Supplement (PES), as well as expansion of PES to those receiving Parenting Payment Partnered (PPP);
- Access to and funding for appropriate transport, noting that sole parents have a double transport burden (children to school and parent to work);
- Access to funding for job search costs; (noting that these costs were never factored into current pension amounts, as raising children alone was considered sufficient activity);
- Access to appropriate employment / return to work programs, with appropriately trained staff (eg TTW, JET, PSP) – these programs need to be responsive to needs of sole parents and their children, flexible, friendly and not based on compliance;
- Access to and funding for health or other therapeutic services (parents and children) needed to enable a parent to engage in participation requirements;
- Access to wage subsidy programs that lead to real jobs (paid work experience);
- Access to family friendly workplaces;
- The RTW/JET child care subsidies should extend to all PP recipients undertaking labour market related activity;
- Participation supplements, and/or well publicised, dedicated funds within Job Seeker Accounts and RTW/JET budgets to assist with the direct costs of job search, employment and education and training.

Incentives / Removal of Disincentives [Work Incentives in DEWR language]

- Retention of pension income test (taper rate at 40 cents in the dollar), and this taper rate should also apply to PPP recipients to encourage part time paid work;
- Removal of quadruple income test (Youth Allowance, Family Tax Benefit, Child Care Benefit and Child Support);
- Progressively remove anomalies that result in reduction / loss of family income once youngest child turns 16;
- Addressing major disincentives to repartnering (ie marriage like relationships);
- Addressing uncertainty brought about by forced participation (eg focus on meeting obligations demands less focus on children's needs, ability to transfer from paid work to pension);
- Breaking down disincentives; including cost of child care, cost of working (especially initial costs of work entry)
- Activities must lead to "real" jobs;
- Public housing rent increases / disincentives
- Concessions cards – need to retain access for some time as it provides access to state (eg transport, telephone) concessions; and these concession cards should be available to PPP recipients as well.

Requirements [Work obligations in DEWR language]

Should the Australian Government not accept NCSMC's recommendation and choose to pursue an increase in participation requirements, at a bare minimum the following protections should be legislated:

- The legislative protections underpinning the participation requirements introduced in *Australians Working Together* should be retained, including:
 - (1) any requirements should be averaged over a number of weeks rather than a fixed number of hours per week
 - (2) parents should have the option to participate in education and training that would improve their future job prospects and income
 - (3) parents should be exempted from participation requirements where they have:
 - ◇ a child with a disability,
 - ◇ a sick child, or
 - ◇ where a critical event in the family's life (e.g. divorce proceedings, threat of domestic violence) would make compulsory participation unreasonable at this time.
 - (4) decisions on breaches of participation requirements or agreements should continue to be made by the delegate of the Minister pursuant to social security legislation
 - (5) an accessible, fair and prompt Social Security Appeals system should remain in place, and payments should continue or be resumed while appeals are being considered
 - (6) existing arrangements to waive penalties on compliance and use suspensions rather than breaches to encourage attendance should continue
- The following additional protections should be introduced:
 - (1) The legislation should specify that any participation requirements must be *reasonable*, taking account of children's needs, parents' education employment and training history and goals, and barriers to participation such as disabilities
 - (2) The breaches system should be reformed in accord with the Pearce Report: including a reduction in maximum non payment periods to a maximum of eight weeks
- no requirements apart from interviews should be imposed for the first twelve months after the recipient receives Parenting Payment
- The current participation requirements for sole parents on income support whose youngest child is 13 should not be increased;
- The legislation should protect the legal obligations / primary responsibility of parents to provide care to their children without risk of loss or reduction of income support, or other penalty (this would include missing appointments, leaving the work place, failing to attend training, etc when children/domestic needs arise – both in the short term and over the longer term);
- The legislation should protect the rights of child(ren) to have access to parental time as needed;
- Where accessible, affordable, appropriate, quality child care is not available , there should be no requirement to participate;
- Parents should not be required to engage in activities outside of school hours (including school holidays);
- The number of dependents (children, elderly parents, etc) in a parent's care should be recognised as limiting their capacity to participate;
- Time limits should be placed on travel requirements consistent with current AWT legislation, ie a maximum of 45 minutes each way (this includes travel to/from child's school and parent's work);

Monitoring

To ensure the well being of single parent families it will be essential to closely monitor the implementation of any new welfare reform measures. This should include, but is not limited to:

- Ongoing and regular publication of data;
- Ongoing and regular consultation with sole parents and organisations involved with sole parents;
- Independent evaluations of impact of any new reforms;
- A transparent and easily accessible complaints process;
- A transparent and accessible appeals process