Single mothers need education, not welfare cuts

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Unpopular Government cuts, introduced last year that have pushed more than 100,000 sole parents onto lower support payments, has left many families reeling with single mothers experiencing particular disadvantage.

The government rationale for transferring sole parents whose children turn eight onto the lower Newstart allowance, is to encourage more back into the workforce.

But if the government wants to help these families out of their precarious positions and low paid employment, we need to see long-term policies focused on improving access to education and training, not simply cuts to support payments.

The big picture

According to the ABS, in 2005 almost 22% of Australian families with children under 15 years of age were one-parent families, with 87% of these families headed by women.

More than six out of ten families relied on government pensions and allowances as their principle income source.

More than twice as many Australian single parents as partnered parents report not being able to pay utility bills on time and seek financial assistance from families and friends or from welfare or community groups.

Women almost everywhere are more likely to live in poverty than men because of lower labour force participation and lower earning capacity.

This is because women are more likely to work in part-time, poorly paid or poverty-level wage industries known as “pink collar” work and they tend to be the primary carer of children.

But economic disadvantage is only one of many factors to limit the life chances of single mothers and their children.

Single mothers are also more susceptible to: housing insecurity; limitations to mobility; debt accumulation; poor mental and physical health; disability; low levels of social support; experiences of physical, sexual and psychological violence including domestic violence; and experiences of child abuse.

Political stigma and hard policy

This all makes the lot of a mother raising a child or children alone a hard road indeed. None of which is helped by hard-nosed, bi-partisan government responses to single parents on welfare that both add further stress to family life, as well as further entrenching the popular idea that single mothers are welfare addicts or cheats.

Former prime minister John Howard proclaimed a “carrot and stick” approach to moving single mothers off welfare and into the workplace, casting these women as disobedient children.

While current prime minister Julia Gillard is less vocal, Labor’s policies amount to the same thing. Between the brow-beating women receive from welfare authorities and the welfare-mum stereotypes perpetuated in tabloid media, there is little dignity in being a single mother in contemporary Australian society.

Pink collar work

Forcing mothers into vulnerable low paid employment might alleviate government budgetary burdens in the short
term but there will be longer term social repercussions if efforts are not made to break the poverty cycle.

Education is, and has always been, the key.

Compared with partnered parents single parents tend to have lower educational levels. The ABS reports that in 2006 15% more single parents than partnered parents had left school before year 12 while twice as many partnered parents than single parents held a bachelor degree or higher qualification.

However, the same report also states lone parents in 2006 were more likely to be studying than partnered parents, mostly part-time, and mostly at a TAFE or higher education institutions.

Clearly, they are taking independent measures to improve their lives, despite what some would have us believe. So how do we support these efforts?

Increasing financial support is one way of helping mothers take up education and training opportunities. But this would need to be comprehensive and substantial.

For example, schemes like the current Pensioner Education Supplement at $62.40 per fortnight would hardly cover the cost of getting to university each week.

While the once-off Education Entry Payment of $208 will purchase a few text books, it certainly won’t cover twice-yearly amenities fees.

While the cost of child care alone averages at $80 per day, the maximum in Child Care Benefits that can be claimed is $195 per week.

All this means that single mothers face chronic financial stress if they want to improve their education.

But more than financial support, government policy should be about providing or assisting other organisations such as WIRE; to establish programs that provide advice, resources and information on such matters as how to access entry levels at secondary and post-secondary institutions, educational pathways, coaching and mentoring.

Improved resources must be coupled with these kinds of effective programs in order for single families to break the cycle of disadvantage.

**Education is the key**

The need for women’s access to education has long been established, especially in development literature. There is a strong correlation between access to education and increasing levels of female productivity and income levels. This research shows that when women gain access to education they also become more aware of opportunities, more self-confident, open-minded and competitive.

A recent publication on mature age women returning to study showed that further education not only puts women in a more competitive position in the workforce, but they also see significant improvements in self-esteem, self-awareness, and social skills.

All in all, given the disadvantages single mothers’ experience and the potential transformative effects of an education, it’s not hard to see that supporting access to education is better a policy position.

Ultimately, shifting women on to Newstart will only continue the interminable cycle of low paid work, unemployment and poverty.

Educating single mothers won’t necessarily break the back of systemic problems but support and encouragement in gaining higher levels of education and training could and likely would improve the lot of some of the most disadvantaged people in Australia — single mothers and their children.