Why Single Mothers need to be Accountants:  
The ‘Third Shift’ of Bureaucratic Labour under Welfare Reform

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Many Australian women labour under the ‘double shift’ of employment in the workplace and domestic responsibilities. For single mothers, however, the phenomenon of the ‘third shift’ is becoming increasingly prevalent. With the advent of the 2006 welfare reforms, new workforce ‘participation’ and ongoing bureaucratic requirements take up an increasing amount of single mothers’ time and effort. Moreover, the complex, overlapping and inconsistent requirements of Centrelink and the Child Support Agency (CSA) mean that what little money is earned by single mothers is often soon eroded. Income, the ages of children, shared care rates and child support fluctuations are all monitored and tested by the government, functioning effectively to keep many of these families’ incomes on the poverty line. In this article I offer ‘an introduction to accountancy’ for single mothers, examining some of the accountability that is required of single mothers if they are to receive ever-diminishing income support payments. This ‘third shift’ is shown to add to the burden of labour borne by single mothers without necessarily providing the pathway out of poverty the reforms promise.

INTRODUCTION

The welfare reforms introduced on 1 July 2006 represent the most significant downgrading of income support in the Australian social security system since the Social Security Act was introduced in 1947. The reforms are based on the belief that employment provides the best pathway out of poverty. Towards this end they enforce compulsory job searching requirements for those people who have previously been marginalised from the labour market, including sole parents, people with ‘minor’ disabilities and the long-term unemployed. In this article I explore some of the implications of these changes for single mothers and their families.1

Single parent families are one of the most common family types in contemporary Australia, now constituting 22% of all Australian families with children under 15. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) recently counted 542,600 single parent families in Australia, and 87 % of these families are headed by women (ABS 2007, pp. 1–2). Single parent families are also widely acknowledged as being among the poorest in the

1 See Australian Council of Social Services 2006; Carney 2006 and National Association of Community Legal Centres 2007 for analysis of the broader impact.
country, with government pensions and allowances the largest single source of income for 61% of these households (ABS 2007, p. 4). They frequently survive on incomes on or close to the poverty line (ABS 2007, p. 4; ACOSS 2006, p. 2; Bray 2001; Lloyd et al. 2004; Weston & Smyth 2000).

Women constitute the overwhelming majority, and the poorest cohort of, single parents. Men who parent alone may also face many challenges but their circumstances are different: they are generally older and caring for teenagers rather than younger children; they tend to have higher incomes and generally haven’t moved in and out of the paid labour market as much as women who parent alone (ABS 2007, p. 2; Gray et al. 2003). In spite of these important distinctions, dominant contemporary work, welfare and family discourses tend to situate discussion in the de-gendered terms of ‘parenting’ or ‘sole-parenting’. A strong case has been argued for identifying the specific needs of single mothers, as these women are in danger of being rendered invisible through such de-gendered language and policies pertaining to income and child support (Branigan & Keebaugh 2005; Stanley & Permezel 2005). Therefore, I confine my arguments in this article to discussion of the plight of single mothers under welfare reforms, rather than the broader population of sole parents. It is predominantly women who devote most time, cost and labour to parenting following relationship breakdowns.

In spite of the care and responsibility involved in being a mother, the welfare reforms act to entrench single mothers in the role of worker, the goal of the reforms being to move single mothers away from ‘welfare dependence’ and into employment. In the argument to follow, I examine the extent to which the reforms fail to adequately address the barriers that single mothers face in being able to use employment as the sole route to financial independence for their families. I problematise the notion of giving primacy to paid employment as the only pathway to financial success for single mothers and their families, questioning whether it adequately considers the complex needs and realities of their lives. I argue that many single mothers already work and are still poor, and that the welfare reforms simply add a ‘third shift’ of bureaucratic labour to their burden.

**Mothers are Entrenched as Workers under the Reforms**

As already mentioned, 61% of sole parent households rely on government pensions or allowances for the majority of their income (ABS 2007: 4). The main income support payment for single mothers is Parenting Payment (Single) or PPS, which is administered by Centrelink. Income support payments for single mothers were first introduced in 1975, ¹ and were paid at the same rate as the aged pension until the reforms, when they shifted in most cases to the lesser rate of the Newstart job-seeker allowance.

At the time the reforms were introduced on 1 July 2006 there were 450,000 single parents on Parenting Payments across Australia. Of these 110,000 (around 45%) had jobs and 130,000 (around 55%) were jobless. Two hundred and forty thousand had school age children only (i.e. their youngest child was over five) (ACOSS 2006: 1). The

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¹ See Swain and Howe (1995) and West (1991) for engaging accounts of the activism and advocacy that led to the introduction of income support payments for single mothers.
central changes for single mothers’ income support under the reforms can be summarised as follows:

- Sole parents are now required to actively seek and/or undertake 15–25 hours paid work per week.
- While seeking paid work, sole parents are required to register with an employment service (most typically Job Network) and enter into a ‘participation agreement’ to undertake activities that are likely to result in paid work. These may include compiling job search diaries; completing a set number of job applications a week; attendance at resume writing, interview skills and other short courses; and work for the dole programs (unpaid work/training schemes). All these activities are imposed through individually tailored contracts signed at the point of application for payments. Failure to sign a contract can result in payment not being granted.
- Sole parents will no longer be entitled to PPS when their youngest child turns eight. They will mostly be moved to Newstart, which is $222 per week instead of $250, resulting in a $28 per week lower payment. Table 1 below compares PPS and Newstart payments on various financial dimensions.
- Sole parents who claimed PPS prior to 1 July 2006 are entitled to stay on this pension until their youngest child turns 16, unless they go off income support (e.g. due to earnings from paid work or reconciling with their child’s father) for more than 12 consecutive weeks.¹
- New recipients of PPS will also not be able to return to it if they go off it for 12 weeks. They will be moved permanently to the lesser Newstart payment.
- The previous breaching regime has been replaced with a suspension-based system. If a sole parent does not comply with their participation requirements, their payment will be suspended until they re-engage.
- An eight-week non-payment period will apply for repeated participation failures, such as refusing a reasonable job offer or voluntarily leaving a job.²
- Sole parents placed on an eight week non-payment period who are deemed ‘exceptionally vulnerable’ will be offered case management where certain expenses (such as rent and food) may be paid by Centrelink directly to the relevant third party.

(ACOSS 2006; Centrelink 2007; NCSMC 2006; NACLC 2007)

The welfare reforms focus on enforced participation in the labour market in the belief that the opportunities and advantages offered by employment will lift single mothers and their families out of poverty. There are, however, two critical realities for which that this approach fails to adequately account. Firstly, many single mothers are already active in the labour market yet their families continue to live in, or close to, poverty.

¹ Chalmers (1999) found that 46% of those who left the sole parent pension in 1996 did so because they partnered, yet 39% returned to the sole parent pension within 12 months. In her (2006) study of instability among low income families, Rawsthorne established that the majority of women in such circumstances had re-partnered with their child’s father.
² However, sole parents who are offered jobs but are not able to secure appropriate schooling or outside school hours care at the times they are expected to undertake this work, or if cost of this child care makes the paid work financially unviable, should not have to accept these jobs or be punished for not doing so. Similarly, where a job requires travel time of more than 60 minutes between home and work (and vice versa), sole parents should face no punishment for refusing to accept these jobs. Where travel costs are likely to exceed 10% of their gross wage, the job also does not have to be accepted (NCSMC 2006).
Secondly, single mothers face considerable barriers to increasing their labour market participation due to their parental responsibilities.

**Table 1 Comparison of Parenting Payment Single (PPS) payments vs. Newstart payments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of payment</th>
<th>Parenting Payment</th>
<th>Newstart Allowance (with child)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current payment amount</td>
<td>Up to $512.10 per fortnight</td>
<td>$455.30 per fortnight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income test (amount you can receive before reducing your payment)</td>
<td>$152.60 + $24.60 each additional child pf</td>
<td>$62.00 pf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taper rate (the percentage the government takes off your earnings)</td>
<td>40 cents in the dollar</td>
<td>Over $62 – $250: 50 cents in the dollar Over $250: 60 cents in the dollar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut-out point (for single parent with one child)</td>
<td>$1447.35</td>
<td>$852.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indexation</td>
<td>Average Weekly Earnings</td>
<td>Consumer Price Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax offset (amount you can earn before tax is payable)</td>
<td>Allows private earnings of $288 p/fortnight</td>
<td>Allows private earnings of $62 p/fortnight</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(These figures were correct as at November 2006)
Table produced by the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children (NCSMC 2006)

**Single Mothers are Already Active in Paid Work**

Single mothers are already extremely active in the Australian labour market, engaging in full-time employment at a rate almost comparable to that of partnered mothers.

- Single mothers have a 49% participation rate in the paid labour market (28% part-time and 21% full-time)
- Partnered mothers have a 63% participation rate (37% part-time and 26% full-time) (Gray et al. 2003, p. 3)

The Australian Institute of Family Studies estimates that this participation rate may actually be significantly higher, that up to 60% of single mothers may be undertaking paid work in any year in the form of multiple episodes of casual work, which will not be truly represented in these figures (Gray et al. 2003, p. 3). McInnes has also argued that single mothers have been the most economically active of all income support claimants, estimating that over 70% were involved in either study or paid work over a 12 month period in 2005, without any enforced compliance or punishments (McInnes 2006, p. 5).1

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1 In the current policy environment, partnered mothers are rewarded for mainly staying home with their children (with FTB payments and tax rebates) while single mothers are penalised for the same thing (McInnes 2006, p. 2).
Compelling single mothers to increase their labour force participation beyond this level, however, does not take into account the extent to which the competitive labour market fails to offer the flexibility to simultaneously work and meet the needs of families. Probert has noted that recent trends of work intensification, long hours and unpaid overtime make juggling family and career even more difficult (Probert 1999, p. 61). She argues that contemporary labour markets are dominated by ‘masculinist’ career patterns within which reducing workforce participation to part-time or casual levels diminishes career prospects and the likelihood of promotion, and reduces superannuation and long service leave entitlements. Probert employs Manne’s definition of ‘hypercapitalism’ as the underlying force driving work conditions and social culture in a direction ‘inimical to a flourishing family life’ (Manne 1999 cited in Probert 1999, p. 61). Participation in such a labour market is difficult for any woman with a family to care for, let alone those who are the only ones available to manage their family and domestic lives.

There are other significant structural barriers constraining single mothers’ ability to negotiate paid work. These include the common industrial relations provision of four weeks annual leave (when school holidays are 12 weeks long); lack of access to affordable long day child care, after school care and school holiday programs; lack of proximity to public transport or ability to afford a car and petrol; limited extended family support; and paid working hours and leave conditions that do not fit in with childrearing responsibilities. For women in rural and regional areas the combined impact of distance, travel time and availability of work can make paid work logistically impossible (see statistics on rural single mothers, ACOSS 2006). Similarly, accessing a place in a child care centre can be an extraordinary challenge. Many centres have two-year waiting lists that require parents to book in early and be on multiple lists in order to get a place. When a place becomes available it rarely dovetails neatly with a job offer. If a place comes up while the mother is still job seeking, there is the added quandary as to why she might put a small child into the care of others unnecessarily.

The welfare reforms go some way towards addressing some of these needs, including a significant investment in both after school hours care and on a new careers counselling service, yet it is unclear where, and how extensively, these will be offered.

A further barrier is that the majority of single mothers are engaged in the bottom end of the labour market, with positions in the hospitality, retail and service sectors. In 2006, 60% of single parents in receipt of PPS had only completed education up to Year 10 (NACLC 2007, p. 8). While under the previous system they would have been entitled to income support to complete a diploma at a Technical and Further Education Institute (TAFE) or a degree at a university, under the reforms training is to be limited to short courses of study or training (NACLC 2007, p. 8). This lessens these single mothers’ chances of improving opportunities for their families and establishing a career path for themselves.

In their study of low income women’s experiences of social exclusion in Australia, Cook and Marjoribanks found that some of their research participants viewed winning the lottery as a realistic strategy to move out of poverty. For the authors, ‘this suggests that for at least some low-skilled workers, getting out of poverty by winning the lottery is just as likely as it is through working’ (Cook & Marjoribanks 2005, p. 17).
Single Mothers are Already Active in Unpaid Work

In addition to their paid work activities, single mothers tend to be extremely busy with the unpaid work of sole domestic and parental responsibility. Over thirty years of feminist and labour studies research has clearly indicated the double shift that most women labour under as they combine paid work with the bulk of the unpaid labour of housework and parenting (in relation to Australia specifically, see for example, Bittman et al. 2004; Grace 2001; Pocock et al. 2004; Pocock 2006; Probert 1999). Bittman and Wajcman have studied time use across a number of nations, finding that even when married women and men both work full time, women retain on average 72% of the unpaid domestic work (2000, p. 174). Grace found that women with young children undertake more than a full working week’s unpaid labour, regardless of whether they are employed or partnered (Grace 2001, p. 47). Cook and Marjoribanks argue that conceptualising welfare recipients as ‘people of workforce age’ is problematic from a feminist perspective, as such categorisation relies on a narrow definition of work that fails to acknowledge the value of unpaid and caring work that is still largely undertaken by women (Cook & Marjoribanks 2005, p. 17).

A small but significant body of work has identified an intensification of this labour for single mothers. For single mothers, caring responsibilities create a range of barriers to increased labour force participation and sometimes even to consistently maintaining paid work. In many cases they have little assistance with caring for their children from their ex-partners, they commonly face high ‘care-replacement’ costs (in particular, long day care, after care and school holiday care), and often face the additional burden of the stress of parenting alone (Dodson 2007; Edin & Lein 1996; Gordon 1994; McInnes 2006). The next section will explore the ways in which the welfare reforms require single mothers to work an additional third shift of bureaucratic labour.

The Bureaucratic Burden of ‘Risk Management’

One of the major disadvantages of the new system is the increased complexity of calculating one’s entitlement to income support payments. Single mothers, who have no choice but to engage with the income support system due to their poverty, face a complex web of income tests, reconciliation processes and reporting requirements. These bureaucratic demands add an additional pressure that can create debts, generate financial insecurity and consume large amounts of their increasingly precious time.

The ages and needs of children create complexity and may intensify income precariousness. As outlined earlier in this article, the age of children is used as a trigger for Centrelink to activate job search activity agreements with single mothers. However, a child’s needs do not necessarily diminish or even decrease in direct correlation with their age. While mothers, partnered and single, tend to return to work in greater numbers as their dependent children grow up, the ability of each individual mother to access paid work relies on her own child(ren)’s specific parenting needs. Children recovering from a recent divorce and possibly from related family violence or family law proceedings, children with disabilities and children with other special needs may require more intensive parenting at different times. Children commencing secondary school may need a parent around during this transition and children of all ages need care during the school
holidays. Single mothers, like all mothers, juggle such pressing responsibilities against their opportunities for paid work.

Under the welfare reforms, provisions have been made for temporary, case-by-case exemptions in situations of child disability, domestic violence, stressful relationship breakdowns and additional care responsibilities (Centrelink 2007, p. 5). Nevertheless, these are only temporary; even the parent of a child with a permanent disability must apply each year for an exemption from the activity test for up to 12 months. Furthermore, even if they are granted an exemption, they will still not receive the higher rate of PPS, but must remain on Newstart (NACLC 2007, p. 7). The onus is on low income single mothers to argue, at best, for a time-limited exemption from a job network provider and Centrelink rather than be able to make these work–life decisions on the basis of their children’s needs at different points in time.

**Reconciliation Adds to Income Precariousness**

Centrelink carries out an annual reconciliation process at the end of each financial year to ensure that income support recipients have received the correct payments over the preceding 12 months. What single mothers must declare or ‘prove’ includes: estimated earnings on a Centrelink designated day; taxable income at end of year; child support payments, including non-agency payments (e.g. children’s school fees and medical expenses); assets; any lump sums or regular financial gifts (even from family); children’s ages; care rates for each child and any change in the pattern of care; the hours of child care used for work purposes; and the status of any relationship with any non-relative adult male in the house as, unless proved otherwise, it is assumed the male is supporting the woman and her child(ren) financially.

At the core of the complex and often confusing bureaucratic requirements made of single mothers is the fact that they are required to engage with three quite different bodies of legislation. Family assistance rules (Family Tax Benefit [FTB] and Child Care Benefit) operate on annual taxable income and involve ‘reconciliation’ (and possible debts) at the end of each annual reconciliation period. Parenting payment (and Newstart), instead, work on concepts of gross income and an annual or actual rate of income over the fortnightly payment period, with ongoing obligations to report all relevant ‘changes of circumstances’ within 14 days. Child support operates on assessment periods of 15 months or more, and is calculated either by reference to a statutory formula, or by consent or administrative order as a ‘variation’ from that formula. Each of these systems provides for ‘splitting’ of payments/obligations between parents in the event of shared care. Retrospective establishment of care proportions at odds with the basis of payment, or establishment of incomes at variance with that used to calculate prior social security or family assistance payments generates a debt. It is managing the ‘risk’ of such a debt that gives rise to the ‘third shift’ burden of bureaucratic administration borne by single mothers.

This risk can be like Russian roulette for single mothers. At best, it may result in a Centrelink payment being made after the end of the financial year, when struggling families would benefit from having it earlier. At worst, it may result in a significant debt to Centrelink at the end of the financial year. There is not only an arduous level of
accountancy involved in reconciliation; it actually increases the precariousness of how much income can be relied upon for a family’s needs.

Calculating Care Rates Increases Complexity and Precariousness

At a time when increasing numbers of Australian children are growing up in blended families and across dual residences, Centrelink rules assess children by percentage rates. Reforms to Family Law based on ‘shared parental responsibility’ and shared care arrangements, which in their ideal form are about creating constructive relationships in the best interests of children, are in danger of becoming another tool to generate government savings. For single mothers, the new care testing provisions add a new realm of bureaucratic labour — proving you are parenting — and ideally doing so according to a percentage rate. Only one of the separated parents is eligible for PPS. Even if parents share care equally, only one may be designated as the primary parent and receive the payment (see, for example Schembri vs Centrelink, cited in Keebaugh 2003).

FTB can be split between separated parents when non-resident parents undertake a minimum of 10% of the care of their children (36 nights a year). This redirection of a percentage of the money that had previously been directed to single mothers undermines adequate support of these women and their children (Keebaugh 2003, p. 164). However, as Denham argues, ‘reducing a resident parent’s contact from 100% to 80% does not result in a proportional reduction in their cost of caring. Indeed costs may remain constant or increase’. (Denham cited in HSCFCA 2003, p. 144).

This split care rate is reconciled at the end of the financial year, accounting for what was projected against what actually occurred. If a child unexpectedly spends some extra nights or a couple of weeks of the school holidays with their father, the mother may end up with a Centrelink debt. It is hard to fathom how this complex web of policy can be in the best interests of positive shared parenting for low income families. It has the potential, rather, to add to the precariousness of their financial situation and make it virtually impossible to calculate in advance how much money a family will have to live on.

The Bureaucratic Burden of Child Support Calculations

Many single mothers are also reliant on, and accountable to, the CSA. The Child Support Scheme was established in June 1988 as a public policy response to the identified problem of economic inequities following divorce. As a central part of this process, the CSA was established as the bureaucracy that would apply a formula to estimate the amount of child support that a non-resident parent or ‘payer’ was liable to pay to a resident parent or ‘payee’. The formula is based on the number of children of the former relationship requiring support, as well as the non-resident parent’s capacity to pay (Weston & Smyth 2000, p. 11). On the basis of the report of the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support, the Australian Government is currently reforming the CSA in an attempt to focus more on the needs and costs of children. These changes are being rolled out in three stages, from July 2006 to July 2008. (See Parkinson 2006 for a full explanation of the changes to the Child Support Scheme.)
For the purposes of the argument here, I will give a necessarily brief overview of the additional bureaucratic burden caused by the CSA systems at the time the welfare reforms were initiated. There is little indication to date that the reforms have reduced the burden.

Child support payments are extremely unreliable. Child support is of minimal assistance for many, as 41% of single parents receive no child support. According to the CSA, mothers constitute 91% of parents who are entitled to child support. Of these mothers, only 4% have incomes over $50,000 per annum and 75% raise children on incomes below $20,000. Related information on child support payers\(^1\) demonstrates that:

- 40% pay $5 or less a week
- 16.2% pay between $5 and $40 a week
- 22.3% pay between $40 and $100 a week
- 21.4% pay over $100 a week child support

(HSCFA 2003, pp. 14, 127, 128)

Nevertheless, in order to even be entitled to receive payments the CSA requires an additional layer of reporting and accountability from both its ‘payees’ and its ‘payers’. Payments that are made directly by the ‘payer’ parent (‘non-agency payments’) rather than through the CSA, require women to make a list of and obtain receipts for expenditure items to which they contribute, such as children’s school, dental and health costs. Women must also document any ‘change in circumstances’ for both themselves and what they know of the lives of their children’s other parent. Some women walk away from the money because it is too hard to fulfil these bureaucratic requirements, or as detailed earlier, may incur an overpayment from Centrelink if child support payments come in late.

**Welfare Reforms may Increase Poverty**

As outlined earlier, single mother-headed families are amongst the poorest in Australia. In May 2005, the year before the welfare reforms were introduced, the total family income of a jobless single parent with two primary school-age children was just $415 a week. This average single parent family will spend half their income on rent, bills and food, compared with under a third of other families’ budgets (ACOSS 2006, p. 2). The welfare reforms are proving to have unintended consequences that may lead to further hardship for single mothers and their families. Initial modelling undertaken by the National Centre for Economic Modelling (NATSEM) has demonstrated that payment of income support has become increasingly financially disadvantageous for women (Harding et al. 2005). Their case study shows how much the government benefits financially by the income lost to single mothers.

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\(^1\) ‘Payer’ is a CSA term for the parent who is liable to pay child support. A ‘payee’ is the CSA term for the parent entitled to receive child support.
COMPARING THE TWO SYSTEMS — A CASE STUDY BY NATSEM

- Helen, a single mum with one child, works 15 hours a week and is paid $13 per hour. This totals $195 per week in private earnings.
- Under the previous system she would keep $144 of her $195.
- Under the new system she will keep $81 per week, and the government will take $114 p/w through reduced Newstart and increased income tax.
- Helen’s take-home weekly income under the previous system would be $529, compared to $437 per week under the new system, thus her family is $91 worse off each week.
- NATSEM concludes that ‘the Federal Government will be the major beneficiary of this sole parent being required to undertake 15 hours of paid work a week’ (Harding et al. 2005, pp. 13–17).

The Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) has estimated that over the first three years of welfare reform 77,000 parents will go onto lower payments such as Newstart. Whilst ACOSS has expressed its support for the federal government’s objective of helping single mothers into employment, after their analysis of the likely effects of the reforms they found that to be better off under the changes a single parent would have to be employed full time and earning over $700 a week. ACOSS points out that very few single parents earn this much. They found, therefore, that the reforms contained significant work and study disincentives for single parents (ACOSS 2006, pp. 1, 12–13).

Under the welfare reforms the government expects single mothers to accept a job if it will make them $25 a week better off, after child care and transport costs, regardless of how many hours they may have to work to make this amount. The National Association of Community Legal Centres estimates that: ‘If a parent accepts a job of 15 hours a week which leaves them with just $25 after their extra costs are taken into account, they would be, in effect, working for just $1.66 per hour’ (NACLC 2007, p. 4).

McInnes also argues that the reforms increase poverty as well as levels of both paid and unpaid labour:

Single parents in Australia with school aged children are being forced into the paid workforce with the promise that they should be at least $25 per week better off after childcare and transport costs, income tax, rent increases and payment reductions. Coincidentally, the weekly difference between Parenting Payment Single and Newstart Allowance rates is $27.75. The net effect is that parents are to be forced into paid work to make up the cut in income support payment, while their children are forced into childcare. Single parents can be required to work for net one dollar per hour, for 25 hours per week, just to hold onto the same income they were eligible for before their youngest child’s 8th birthday. The savings from cutting payments are instead re-directed to the job network system of control and coercion. (McInnes 2006, p. 9)

The government has consistently argued that the reforms are not geared to cut social security spending. ACOSS comments that if this is so, ‘then the proposed cuts to future...
payments are unnecessary. They will not help single parents get jobs and they will only make them poorer' (ACOSS 2006, p. 9).

The Stress on Single Mothers of the Third Shift

The bureaucratic burden of the ‘third shift’ may cause a great deal of stress for low-income families. Rawsthorne (2006) has researched the causes of instability among low income families receiving income support. She found that women moving between benefits tended to be extremely diligent about their ‘third shift’ labour and that this created an additional burden of stress:

Moving from one benefit type to another was a source of anxiety and stress for most participants. They were all very mindful and diligent in reporting to Centrelink any change in circumstances, although they knew this could result in protracted dealings with Centrelink. A number spoke of delays in payments, cumbersome administration and sudden changes in status (with little notice). Most were keenly aware of the importance of their relationship with Centrelink and were at pains to ‘do the right thing’. (Rawsthorne 2006, p. 27)

Stanley and Permezel (2005) have also written of the stress induced by the third shift. They cite correspondence from a single mother to the advocacy organisation, the Council of Single Mothers and their Children, to illustrate the potentially negative effects of the reforms:

The additional stress of living under the constant threats and harassment from Centrelink combined with the strain of juggling work and family demands could result in an epidemic of mental illness in the parents. The children will be overtired, underfed and stressed whether in approved care or home alone. The families’ nutritional status may decline as exhausted parents resort to take away food. Parents will be too tired to supervise homework and the children’s education will suffer. Stressed and exhausted parents will not have the emotional strength to provide high quality nurturing, bonding and emotional support for the children. (Stanley & Permezel 2005, p. 5)

McInnes (2006) describes the reforms as ‘mean, deceitful and counter productive’:

Mean in that mothers are expected to undertake paid work for practically no return. Deceitful in that Centrelink clients have been subjected to months of misinformation about requirements, and deceitful also in that the government line is that it is not cutting payments — just changing the conditions of eligibility. The forced labour policy is counter productive in that the social fall out of stressing vulnerable families will be distributed to crisis services at even greater cost. (McInnes 2006, p. 12)

The positioning of single mothers as workers under the welfare reforms not only fails to offer women clear pathways into employment, it also burdens them with bureaucratic
‘busyness’. This can lead to increasingly precarious and unreliable income support payments as well as to stress on women, their families and services.

CONCLUSION

I have argued throughout this article that most single mothers in Australia are reliant not simply on work or welfare but on an increasingly precarious mix of the two. This relates to a range of circumstances, including their primary caring responsibilities, reliance on poorly paid casual and part-time work, low levels of educational opportunity, lack of access to child care and a desire to be at home with children when needed. The welfare to work reforms simply flip single mothers from the category of parent to worker and deal with them thereafter through the employment focused bureaucracy of Centrelink’s Newstart system. Unfortunately, such policy development fails to account for the contemporary reality that many single mothers have simultaneous commitments to both the paid workforce and the family.

For those single mothers who would like to have the choice to be able to increase their paid workforce participation, the reforms must be expanded and developed alongside significant changes in industrial relations. These need to encourage the development and uptake of truly flexible, family-friendly work conditions; include systems to protect parents from the long working hours that are becoming increasingly common; improve both pay and security for casual workers; offer universal paid maternity leave; and establish good quality, affordable on-site child care and school holiday leave provisions. From the point of view or industrial relations, new cultural norms and policies must be established that systemically recognise the work of caring for children and the corresponding value this adds to our society’s human and social capital. The government needs to develop industrial relations policies that fully engage with and are supportive of a correspondingly coherent family policy.

A critical outcome of the reforms has been increased complexity and invasive scrutiny that may undermine single mothers’ ability to understand their entitlements and pursue their rights. Single mothers whose youngest child is over eight will soon become either invisible or extremely difficult to account for as they are merged with all other Newstart recipients. Once single mothers are rendered invisible statistically, it will be even more difficult to identify their needs and to further analyse the effects of the reforms on these families.

For the welfare reforms to genuinely offer single mothers and their families a pathway out of poverty through employment, they must respond to the complex realities of these families’ lives. Given the stress experienced and labour expended on the third shift, the welfare reforms may serve to further increase the incidence and severity of child poverty in single mother-headed households across Australia.

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