

# Women and the Australian Social Security System: From Difference Towards Equality

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## Women and the Australian Social Security System: From Difference Towards Equality

by  
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# **Women and the Australian Social Security System: From Difference Towards Equality**

Sheila Shaver

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## **Abstract**

A long-term shift in Australian social security has been underway since the 1970s, redefining its basis from a logic of gender difference to one of gender equality in entitlement to benefits. This shift has come in association with more wide-ranging change in the relation between state and market in the lives of men and women. A slowly diminishing wage gap between men and women, together with an increase in women's participation in the labour market, have begun to reduce income inequality between the sexes. A similar pattern is evident in increasing part-time employment among female sole parents. A new relation between state and market is emerging in which the family support functions of social security are less important than its role in providing a gender-neutral safety net. The shift to a logic of gender equality in social security means that redress for social and economic inequalities now depends more fully than in the past on changing gender relations in domestic life and paid employment. For many women these spheres remain the source of significantly unequal opportunity.

# 1 Introduction

A nation's social security system does much to define the character and politics of its welfare state. Social security systems provide income support in vulnerable periods of the life cycle and cushion the vicissitudes of the capitalist economy. Their provisions in both respects are critical for personal well-being. Social security also has important non-economic functions. Ideologically, social security benefits serve to define those circumstances in which individuals are excused from the obligation to support themselves in paid work. They thus provide social representations of the legitimate exceptions to the possessive individualism of earned income of the market. Politically, social security forms a framework of redistributive relationships between taxpayers and beneficiaries. As a form of citizenship it defines and establishes a system of reciprocities and dependencies between social groups.

It is now more than fifteen years since feminist scholarship began to focus attention on the way in which gender relations are embedded in social security systems.<sup>1</sup> A substantial body of research now covers this field, including a significant corpus of work on Australian social security. Over the years we have built up a picture of the Australian social security system as critical to women's economic survival, just as it is implicated in their poverty. There has been widespread agreement among feminists that social security benefits have been both an important source of independence for women and a key institution in their social and economic disadvantage.

The model widely shared in feminist analysis focuses on the role of Australian social security in regulating the sexual division of labour in paid and unpaid work. On one side, income support mediates the relation between the individual and the labour market, 'decommodifying' labour by establishing a welfare alternative. On the other, income support mediates the relation between the individual and the family unit, providing an alternative to the dependencies of kinship and marriage. In both cases the

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1 The date is taken from Elizabeth Wilson's seminal *Women and the Welfare State*, published in 1977. Australia's own classic, the collection edited by Cora Baldock and Bettina Cass and titled *Women, Social Welfare and the State in Australia*, first appeared in 1983.

framework of income support also carries assumptions about the character of the income unit and the way in which income is shared within the family group. Thus social security shapes options and conditions individual choices in both public and private life. Central to these options and choices are the roles and expectations of men and women expressed in social security provisions.

Feminist critique has pointed to the way in which social security has tended to define women as primarily wives and mothers, and in redistributing resources from workers to dependants also to redistribute from men to women. For much of its history Australian social security has been geared to the support of an asymmetric family of male breadwinner and his at least partially dependent spouse. Such policies both presumed and reinforced a sexual division of labour in which men were primarily engaged in paid employment while women gave priority to the domestic labour of wifedom and motherhood. Women were doubly disadvantaged, for their commitment to home and family limited them to marginal roles in the labour market while their inability to earn reinforced their economic dependence within marriage. Thus social policies were directed both to supporting the married couple household and to providing for women, mainly those with dependent children, outside it. We have regarded these policies as supporting male dominance to the extent that they privileged the breadwinner family form, that they entrenched women in the low-paid areas of a gender-segmented labour market, and that they took for granted the availability of female labour in social care.

Some years ago both Lois Bryson (1983) and I (Shaver, 1983) developed arguments of this kind about Australian social security, noting its normative support for the male breadwinner family, its systematic reinforcement of the sexual division of labour, and its failure to respond to the increasing poverty of women through the 1970s. Looking back, it is interesting that both chapters gave considerable attention to ways in which social security treated men and women differently, with gender featuring explicitly in the terms of eligibility for a number of benefits. These included income support provisions for sole parents, pensions for the wives of pensioners, and even a tax rebate for a daughter-housekeeper.

It is important to remark, then, that Australian social security has in fact changed a good deal over the last two decades. I want to suggest that a

long-term shift in social security has been underway since the 1970s, in which the system has come increasingly to treat men and women in the same way and hence to offer them the same structure of choices between work, welfare and family dependency. This shift, now well advanced, is redefining the underlying basis of social security from a logic of gender difference to one of gender neutrality in rules and conditions of entitlement to benefits.

This shift has come as part of a more wide-ranging change in the relation between state and market in the lives of men and women. A slowly diminishing wage gap between men and women, together with an increase in women's participation in the labour market, have begun to reduce income inequality between the sexes. A new relation between state and market is emerging in which the family support functions of social security are less important than its role in providing a gender-neutral safety net. A family basis remains, however, in the predication of Australian social security on the married couple unit. The group for whom the shift from difference to equality in social security entitlements has been most significant is sole parents. There are signs that female sole parents, too, are increasing their engagement in paid work, including part-time work in combination with the pension.

## **2 Gender and Citizenship in Australian Social Security**

Discussion of the treatment of men and women in Australian social security needs to be understood in comparative perspective. The primary form of income security in most comparable countries is contributory social insurance, with eligibility attached to labour market participation and benefits above a basic minimum linked to labour market performance. In such countries the structure of contributions and benefits is usually based on male norms of sustained, full-time work over a long working life. These arrangements systematically disadvantage women, whose working lives more typically include periods out of the labour force or in part-time work. Scandinavian writers such as Hernes (1987) have called this the 'citizen worker' model, and noted that in the Nordic countries it has been accompanied by other provisions to support the 'citizen mother' in the



demands on her to perform caring work. British and American writers have noted the development in those countries of 'two-track' welfare systems in which contributory insurance is underpinned by less generous and often stigmatising social assistance provisions for those excluded by the insurance paradigm, the largest group of whom are typically female sole parents (Fraser, 1987; Nelson, 1984, 1990; Land, 1976; Lewis, 1983).

Australian social security, in contrast, is a tax/transfer system in which benefits are funded from general revenue rather than contributions. Here social citizenship is contingent not on labour force history but on need, as evidenced in means tests of income and assets. There is no direct link between an individual's contribution and his or her entitlement to benefit, which, with some exceptions<sup>2</sup>, is a social right attached to membership in the Australian community.

Because entitlement is independent of employment history, social citizenship in Australia addresses the income needs of men and women more equally than is the case in most other countries. At the same time, however, the Australian social security system gives less autonomy to individual partners in marriage than is the case under social insurance, where husbands and wives have separate entitlements. The means tests which are central to Australian social security apply to the incomes and assets of the couple, making the social rights of marital partners conditional upon the resources and personal circumstances of one another. The means test on joint income assumes that husbands and wives pool their income, though it has been shown that wives do not necessarily have access to 'family' income (Edwards, 1984). The test on joint income has the further effect of disadvantaging the second earner in the couple, who is likely to be ruled out of eligibility for benefits such as unemployment compensation by the income of the first.

The key structures of Australian social security are the categories used to define the life contingencies for which benefits are provided, and the allocative rules used in the determination of eligibility within categories. Virtually all pensions, benefits and allowances have both class and gender dimensions built into these categorical and allocative specifications which

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2 These exceptions mainly concern groups of immigrants with limited social security entitlements.

link eligibility for income security with the surrounding structures of family, labour market and economy.

During the last two decades a long-term change has been underway in the categorical dimension of Australian social security. The framework of benefits has been moving from categories based on the assumption that the needs of men and women are different to the expectation that the sexes should be treated in the same way. In the same period the allocative basis of entitlement has moved from a mixture of universal and selective (means tested) determinations to an almost wholly means-tested system. Thus while the gender-specific features of social security have diminished, the class basis of means-tested allocation has been strengthened. In the same process the effects of basing the means test on the income of the marital couple have been strengthened. It has been suggested that these effects explain the high rates of unemployment among the wives of unemployed men (Pech, 1991).

### **3 From Difference Towards Equality in Australian Social Security**

The conceptual contrast between difference and equality is problematic, masking comparisons on a number of grounds (Meehan and Sevenhuijsen, 1991: 2). These terms are particularly difficult in the context of social policy. 'Difference' refers to a qualitative distinction in the way in which the character and roles of men and women are conceived in assumptions underlying public policy, and does not connote inequality in the status of men and women so much as incommensurability. 'Equality', in contrast, implies that there are sufficient similarities in the circumstances, outlooks and abilities of men and women for the opportunities and outcomes experienced by them to be directly compared.

Yet though the logical distinction is fundamental, the historical developments of the last twenty years have in fact taken this form. Such developments have been twofold. For one part, changes in the social security system have seen the incremental replacement of categorical criteria of eligibility based on different and complementary roles for men and women with gender-neutral definitions applying to both sexes. Thus there has been a change away from a logic of gender difference in

Australian social security toward one of gender sameness. For another part, the movement toward a wholly means-tested system has meant that men and women are increasingly treated in the comparable terms of income and assets gained in the wider society of the market. Given the twofold character of these developments, it makes sense to speak of an historical shift, still incomplete, from difference towards equality in Australian social security.

The principle of gender difference in categorical entitlements to income security was established in the founding period of the Australian welfare state. It was, interestingly, little marked in the age and invalid pensions whose introduction celebrated Federation. The age pension provided a subsistence income to men at age 65 and women at age 60 as a 'right of labour service', though such 'right' was subject to a test of means (Shaver, 1991). The entitlements of men and women differed only in age of eligibility. The invalid pension followed the same model without gender distinction.

The effective beginnings of gender difference in social security came shortly before World War One with the establishment of the 'baby bonus' or maternity allowance. Introduced in an ideological climate of 'race suicide', the measure had a natalist character equating childbearing with nationalism and the (white) woman's duty as citizen. This was a one-time grant upon the birth of a child. It had several features significant for the present discussion. The benefit was attached to motherhood, and was payable to both married and unmarried women. Unlike age and invalid pensions, it was not subject to any test of means. Finally, it was paid directly to the mother in the belief that she was the most reliable guardian of the well-being of the child.

The principle of gender difference was given systematic expression with the elaboration of the social security system during World War Two. Though the introduction of child endowment had more to do with restraining male wages than with rewarding motherhood (Cass, 1983; Watts, 1987, ch. 3), the benefit followed the established contours of the maternity allowance. This was a regular weekly payment acknowledging the extra costs of children, not including the first. The payment was free of means test and was made directly to the mother in normal circumstances.

The widow's pension, in contrast, followed models set by the age and invalid pensions and the New South Wales widow's pension. Introduced as a wartime symbol of social justice, it recognised that in caring for their children these women were performing a 'national service' (Shaver, 1987: 420-1). The pension was available to married women, *de jure* or *de facto*, whose husbands had died or deserted, and who had not remarried. It differed from the maternity allowance and child endowment in being available not only to women responsible for the care of one or more dependent children but also to widows and deserted wives aged 50 or more. It also differed from those benefits in being subject to a test of means. Widowed or deserted men in similar circumstances were not eligible.

Unemployment benefit took similar impetus from the wartime moment, becoming also the key symbol of Labor's commitment to full employment and the welfare state. However, while the widow's pension had been modelled on the situation of the woman without support, unemployment benefit was shaped for the male breadwinner. A separate measure had provided allowances for the support of dependants of age, invalid and widow pensioners, and these carried over into the new measure. As Bryson (1983) has noted, these allowances enabled the breadwinner to maintain the status of family provider even when unable to earn. Men and women were equally eligible, but only wives might qualify as dependent spouses. A parallel sickness benefit followed the same model.

Thus by the end of World War Two Australian social security had developed a mildly but nevertheless significantly gendered character, with different expectations applying to women than to men. The main measures of age and invalid pensions and unemployment and sickness benefits provided for circumstances in which a worker was not expected to earn an income from employment. This was the Australian version of the 'citizen worker' model, in which men and women were similarly eligible for income replacing earnings from employment. But there were further provisions for the 'citizen mother' in payments designed specifically for women and based on the assumption that they were normally supported by a male breadwinner. These covered the dependent wives of men on pension or benefit, and income in lieu of earnings for women whose husbands had died or deserted them. Two universal payments to assist families with the cost of children were directed to women as mothers in normal circumstances.

In these assumptions of difference Australian social security reflected wider expectations about the roles of men and women in social and family life. The same assumptions imbued the institutional foundations surrounding social security, including the family wage and the sexual division of labour in the home. The distinction between citizen-worker and citizen-mother was less marked than in social insurance systems elsewhere because of the residual character of Australian social assistance, in which neither men nor women were rewarded for performance in paid employment.

The break with the principle of difference began in the 1970s. It came as part of a wider pattern of social and institutional change, one facet of which reflected women's demands for greater equality. The same period saw the move to 'equal pay' in wage determination, federal support for child care and divorce law reform making women responsible for their own support after marital break-up.

The shift from the principle of difference to equality in social security was most visible in reforms in provision for sole parents beginning under the Whitlam Government and continuing in the Fraser period. The first change extended sole parent provision to make single and deserting mothers eligible for Commonwealth pensions on the same basis as women who had been married. This extension weakened the tie between support of sole parenthood and the conventional family form. The break with difference became clear with the opening of sole parent pension to fathers as well as mothers in 1977, enabling men as well as women to claim the right to public support as full-time carers of their children.

The mid-1970s marked the end of the long period of expansion in the range and breadth of Australian social security. The move toward equal treatment of men and women in the years since has taken place in a wider context of rationalisation of the system. The maternity allowance, having fallen in real value over a long period, has been abolished. Benefits directed to the support of children have been increased, but also more closely linked to economic need. Pension supplements providing additional assistance to the parents of dependent children have been increased substantially. Child endowment, renamed family allowance, has been made subject to means test, and enhanced by the addition of family allowance supplement providing additional support for children of low-income parents. The handicapped child allowance is paid in respect of a substantially

handicapped child being cared for at home. Both of these latter payments have followed the model initially set by child endowment in being normally directed to the mother.

In the course of such changes there has been a consistent trend from difference toward sameness, with definitions of entitlement to benefit being revised to largely eliminate overt distinctions between men and women. A carer's pension, for example, provides income support to either a man or a woman kept out of employment by the need to provide full-time care to an adult. Payments to the dependent spouse of a pensioner or beneficiary have been made available to both male and female marital partners.<sup>3</sup> The dual structure of widow's and supporting parent's pensions was replaced by a single sole parent's pension covering all sole parents caring for dependent children. Child Support provisions cover male and female non-custodial parents equally.

The most far-reaching step away from the old principle of difference has come not with a move toward gender neutrality but with the restriction of support for widows and sole parents of both sexes. The 1987 changes in entitlement to sole parent pension now terminate support for sole parents when the youngest child turns 16. The same changes also began to phase out support for older women without dependent children, the class B widow's pension, never extended to men. Besides assisting women widowed or separated late in life, this provision had bridged the gap between eligibility for sole parent support and the age pension, enabling sole parents to continue as pensioners throughout adult life. While some women will continue to be eligible for another decade, the basic framework of social security now requires that sole parents of both sexes return to the labour force as soon as their youngest child is deemed to have reached an age of independence.

With this development, the provision for a distinctive life cycle pattern shaped by motherhood has been effectively removed from the social security system. These changing expectations have been underlined by the introduction of the Jobs, Employment and Training (JET) scheme to assist

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3 Except in the case of the age pension, where the wife's pension continues to be available to a female spouse only. The non-pensioner husband of a female age pensioner may receive a carer's pension if his wife requires full-time care.

sole parents to re-enter the workforce as early as possible in their tenure of the pension.

As it applies to the provision of basic income support, a gender-neutral model of citizen worker has largely overtaken earlier provisions framed in terms of difference and a distinctive role for women as dependent on a male breadwinner in Australian social security. The shift to gender-neutrality is as yet incomplete in that women still qualify for the age pension at an earlier age than men, but in virtually all other respects men and women qualify for benefit under the same rules. Assumptions of difference remain, however, in the provision of supplementary income directed to the support and care of children, where normative expectations remain in the direction of payments such as family allowances to the mother.

There has, however, been no move away from the basis of Australian social security in the family unit of married couple and dependent children. Applying to the joint income of husband and wife, the means test continues to assume that marital partners (whether *de facto* or *de jure*) are responsible for the support of one another and pool their income in the conduct of day-to-day economic life. The shift from difference to sameness permits husbands and wives greater flexibility in doing so, and in that sense supports normative expectations of increasing equality within marriage. Unlike many other countries, however, partners have no access to income support in unemployment, sickness or disability which is not conditional upon the income and assets of the other. The family basis of Australian social security is an expression not of gender expectations but of its foundations in social assistance and the limitation of income support to circumstances of demonstrated need.

## 4 Gender and the Labour Market

The shift from gender difference to equality in Australian social security has been paralleled by wider changes in the employment and income of men and women. Patterns of participation in paid employment among men and women, while still significantly different, have been becoming steadily more similar. The increase in women's labour force participation has now been sustained over more than two decades. As Figure 1 shows, while only

**Figure 1: Labour Force Participation Rates, 1966-91**

slightly more than one adult woman in three was employed in 1966, more than one in two now works for pay. In recent years the rate of female workforce participation has been rising more rapidly among married than single women, having overtaken the rate among single women in the mid 1980s. The rate of labour force participation by men has been falling over the same period, from 84 per cent in 1966 to 74 per cent in 1991.

Much of women's increased workforce participation has come in part-time work. While the proportions of both men and women in part-time work have increased in the last decade, the rate of growth in part-time work has risen more rapidly among women than men. As shown in Table 1, while



**Table 1: Employed Persons in Full and Part-time Employment, Australia, August 1979 to August 1992 (Percentages)**

	Males		Females		Persons	
	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Part-time
1979	94.8	5.2	64.8	35.2	84.1	15.9
1980	94.8	5.2	64.3	35.7	83.6	16.4
1981	94.5	5.5	64.3	35.7	83.5	16.5
1982	94.0	6.0	63.8	36.2	82.9	17.1
1983	93.8	6.2	63.6	36.4	82.5	17.5
1984	93.9	6.1	63.2	36.8	82.3	17.7
1985	93.8	6.2	62.7	37.3	81.9	18.1
1986(a)	93.3	6.7	62.1	37.9	81.1	18.9
1987	92.6	7.4	60.8	39.2	80.0	20.0
1988	93.0	7.0	60.5	39.5	79.9	20.1
1990	92.0	8.0	60.0	40.0	78.7	21.3
1991	90.8	9.2	59.1	40.9	77.5	22.5
1992	89.5	10.5	56.7	43.3	75.6	24.4

Note: a) Estimates from August 1986 are based on a revised definition introduced in April 1986. See Technical Notes for further information.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force Australia*, Cat. No. 6203.0, 1979-1992.

about one quarter of all employees now work part-time, the percentage working part-time is more than four times as high among women as among men.

At the same time, men and women are becoming more similar in the industrial sectors in which they work (Table 2). The last ten years have seen a shift from employment in production toward service industries in Australia, with employment in production falling from 38 per cent of workers in 1979 to 32 per cent in 1989. Because women's employment has long been concentrated in the service sector this change has affected men more than women.

There is less convergence in the occupations in which men and women are employed. Because of a change in the way occupations are classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), these data are available only for the

**Table 2: Employment in Production and Service Sectors, Australia, 1979 and 1989 (Percentages)**

	1979			1989		
	Men	Women	Persons	Men	Women	Persons
Production <sup>(a)</sup>	47.05	20.95	37.77	41.77	17.52	31.86
Services <sup>(b)</sup>	52.95	79.04	62.23	58.23	82.47	68.13
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Notes: a) Production sector consists of agriculture, mining, manufacturing, energy and construction.  
 b) Service sector comprises wholesale and retail, transport and storage, communication, finance services, public administration, community services and recreation.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force Australia*, Cat. No. 6203.0, August, 1979 and 1989.

past five years (Table 3). Over this time there has been little movement in the occupational distributions of either sex. As in the past, the largest numbers of male workers are found in trades, and working as operators and labourers. The largest numbers of women are employed as clerks, in sales, and as labourers. The principal changes in occupational distributions over the period reflect wider sectoral changes and affect men and women in similar ways. While there has been a small decline in the proportions of men and women working in trades and clerical occupations, there has been a small increase in the proportion of both sexes working in sales.

Meanwhile the wage gap between men and women has been steadily diminishing over the last decade and longer. As Figure 2 shows, the average weekly earnings of employed women have risen from about 80 to about 83 per cent of those of men in the period since 1981. Thus while women's gains result primarily from their increasing participation in paid work, they also reflect some increase in relative rewards for the work they do.

The most striking change in the comparative situations of men and women over the last decade is found in the shares of gross income going to each.

**Table 3: Employment in Occupations, Australia, 1986 and 1991  
(Percentages)**

	1986			1991		
	Men	Women	Persons	Men	Women	Persons
Managers	14.0	6.3	11.0	14.3	6.7	11.0
Professions	12.0	11.9	12.0	13.7	13.2	13.5
Para-professions	5.5	6.4	5.9	5.8	6.8	6.2
Trades	24.9	4.3	16.8	23.1	3.6	14.9
Clerks	7.4	32.6	17.3	6.9	31.7	17.3
Sales	8.4	22.0	13.8	9.3	23.0	15.1
Operators	10.9	3.4	7.9	10.6	2.8	7.4
Labourers	16.9	13.1	15.5	16.2	12.1	15.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force Australia*, Cat. No. 6203.0, August, 1986 and 1991.

**Figure 2: Female Average Weekly Ordinary Time Earnings (Full-time Adult) as a Proportion of Male, 1981-1991**

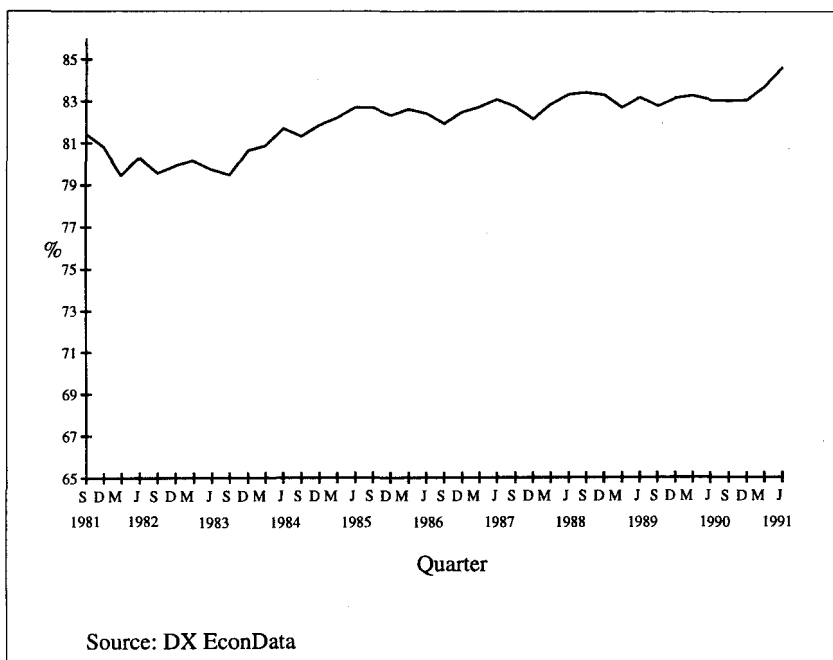


Table 4 compares the distribution of income between the sexes in each decile of income in 1981-82 and 1989-90. Women remain disproportionately concentrated in the lower middle deciles of the income distribution, but there have been marked changes in women's favour at both extremes. While women make up an overwhelming majority of income recipients in the lower deciles, the disproportion in the bottom two deciles was greatly reduced over the eight-year period. At the same time, women have also significantly improved their comparative position in the top three deciles.

One important consequence of these changes is that income is now more evenly distributed among women than in the past. Women's gains at the extremes of the income distribution are reflected in a significant decline in the Gini coefficient measuring income inequality, which fell from .495 in 1981-82 to .471 in 1989-90. This is quite a large change, especially in view of the relative insensitivity of the Gini coefficient to changes at the extremes of the distribution. Men's incomes became more unequally distributed in the same period, the coefficient rising from .362 to .394. Thus while women's incomes are still markedly more unequally distributed than those of men, the two are moving closer together than in the past.

The figures presented in Table 4 refer to all individuals, including in the distribution those men and women who have no income at all. Since many such persons are women who are entirely dependent on their husbands, it was thought appropriate to include them in the analysis. However this measure also includes men and women in a range of unusual circumstances. An otherwise comparable distribution was calculated excluding all persons with zero or negative income, i.e. the distribution of income among income recipients only. The results, not shown here, showed a closely similar pattern of change. The main difference between the two measures of income distribution was that the exclusion of zero incomes had more impact on the figures for 1981-82 than for 1989-90, suggesting significantly fewer women with no income at all in the later period.

**Table 4: Shares of Gross Annual Income by Decile, Australia, 1981-82 and 1989-90 (Percentages of all persons)<sup>(a)</sup>**

Decile	1981-82		1989-90	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
1	10.75	89.25	16.78	83.22
2	27.17	72.83	34.17	65.83
3	36.45	63.55	36.84	63.16
4	37.50	62.50	38.08	61.92
5	42.84	57.16	41.50	58.50
6	50.58	49.42	49.87	50.13
7	58.67	41.33	57.97	42.03
8	72.64	27.36	68.34	31.66
9	79.65	20.35	73.56	26.44
10	87.05	12.95	83.27	16.73
Gini Co-efficient	.362	.495	.394	.471

Note: a) Personal incomes of all individuals including those having nil income. Incomes of less than zero have been treated as zero.

Source: Unit Record Files, ABS Income and Housing Survey, 1982 and ABS Survey of Income and Housing Costs and Amenities 1990.

## 5 Sole Parents and Social Security

As indicated above, the shift from difference to sameness in social security has had its clearest effects on provisions for sole parents. The shift has been most obvious in the extension of pension support to men, and most definitive in setting an end to the distinctive life cycle arrangements enabling women to claim pension support throughout middle age. A number of important changes can be seen by comparing numbers, age distribution and income levels of sole parent pensioners in 1982 and 1990, years for which both pensioner and income composition data are available.

Table 5 shows the numbers and ages of male and female sole parent pensioners in these two years. There is a marked increase in the numbers of male sole parent pensioners over the two years, the number almost doubling over the eight year period. This reflects a trend of longer standing in both

**Table 5: Ages of Sole Parent Pensioners by Sex, Australia, 1982 and 1990  
(Numbers and Percentages)**

	Female		Male		Persons	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<b>1982(a)</b>						
Under 30	83,436	41.1	915	15.4	84,351	40.4
30-39	72,296	35.6	2,508	42.3	74,804	35.8
40-49	34,525	17.0	1,654	27.9	36,179	17.3
50 and over	12,562	6.2	846	14.3	13,408	6.4
Total	202,819	100.0	5923	100.0	208,742	100.0
<b>1990</b>						
Under 30	98,054	41.3	1844	16.3	99,898	40.1
30-39	95,200	40.1	5193	45.9	100,393	40.3
40-49	38,880	16.4	3272	28.9	42,152	16.9
50 and over	5447	2.2	996	8.8	6,443	2.6
Total	237,563	100.0	11,305	100.0	248,866	100.0

Note: a) For 1982 Sole Parent Pensioner includes recipients of supporting parent benefit and widow's pension Class A.

Source: Department of Social Security *Annual Reports*.

the number of unpartnered men caring for children and the proportion claiming income support in this task (Lemert, 1992: 22). Male sole parents remain, nevertheless, a small proportion (less than 5 per cent) of all sole parent pensioners.

There has also been notable change in the age distribution of sole parent pensioners over the period. The effects of the 1987 changes terminating pension eligibility when the youngest child reaches the age of 16 are visible in changed age profiles of pensioners of both sexes, showing sharp falls in the numbers aged 50 and older (Table 5). It is important to recognise, however, that these figures understate the number of older women receiving income support. Many of those whose eligibility as sole parents was terminated have transferred to the class B widow's pension or another pension. Many others entered the labour force and became eligible for

unemployment benefit, now job search allowance. A Department of Social Security evaluation of the 1987 changes (Thompson, 1988) found that only about one woman in five left the pension and benefit system in the initial period after the changes.

Perhaps the most important change of all is that the labour force participation of sole parents also appears to be increasing. Participation in paid work by female sole parents has been rising steadily since 1983. Using data from the 1986 ABS Income Distribution Survey, Ross and Saunders (1990) compared their rates of full- and part-time work with those of married mothers having children of the same ages. They found that female sole parents are as likely to be employed as married women with similar family responsibilities, but that if they do work they are more likely to do so full-time. It now seems clear that certain groups at least of sole parent pensioners are increasingly moving to supplement their pensions with part-time employment.

One indication is to be found in a growing proportion of pensioners receiving the pension at reduced rate. As Table 6 shows, there has been a dramatic increase in the proportion of female sole parent pensioners having sufficient non-pension income to reduce their pension entitlement. The increase in the proportion on reduced rate pension is much smaller among male sole parents. The Social Security Review (Raymond, 1987: 57) found that male sole parents were more likely than either female supporting parent or Class A widow pensioners to be fully dependent on the pension.

This change is the result of a number of factors. Some part of this reduction is likely to be an artifact of the 1987 changes and the transfer of those older women least likely to be in paid employment to the widow's and other pensions. The operation of Department of Social Security Review Teams has probably caused the disclosure of previously undisclosed earnings. It is also possible that some part of the change is due to increased income from other sources including maintenance arrangements under the Child Support Scheme, to be discussed below. But these qualifications, while important, do not account fully for the changes in the income of sole parents and their families.

**Table 6: Sole Parent Pensioners on Full and Reduced Rates, Australia, 1982 and 1990 (Numbers and Percentages)**

	Female		Male		Persons	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
<b>1982 (a)</b>						
Full rate	169,640	83.6	5,119	86.4	174,759	83.7
Reduced rate	33,179	16.4	804	13.6	33,983	16.3
Total	202,819	100.0	5,923	100.0	208,742	100.0
<b>1990</b>						
Full rate	141,934	59.7	9,120	80.7	151,054	60.7
Reduced rate	95,647	40.3	2,185	19.3	97,832	39.2
Total	237,581	100.0	11,305	100.0	248,886	100.0

Note: a) For 1982 Sole Parent Pensioner includes recipients of supporting parent benefit and widow's pension class A.

Source: Department of Social Security *Annual Reports*.

Data from the ABS surveys of income distribution provide further evidence of increasing participation in paid work by sole parent pensioners. Table 7 shows the labour force status of female sole parents in 1982 and 1990. The figures show a sharp drop in the number of sole parents not in the labour force over the period. There is a rise in the proportion of female sole parents in both full- and part-time work, notwithstanding the sharp increase also in those who are unemployed.

The same pattern can be seen in the sources of income of female sole parents. Table 8 shows the proportions of sole parents in three age groups having income from sole parent pensions, from wage and salary payments, and from a combination of the two. While the proportion of women in the youngest age group having pension income increased over the period, the proportions of sole parents with wage and salary income increased markedly in all age groups. Perhaps the most telling figures are those for women having both pension and earnings income in the week of the survey. A rise is found in all age groups including women aged 45 and over, who are least likely to have employment income in addition to their pensions. The



**Table 7: Labour Force Status of Female Sole Parents, Australia, 1982 and 1990  
(Percentages of Female Sole Parents Aged Under 60)**

Labour Force Status	Sole Parent Pensioner	Other Sole Parent
<b>1982<sup>(a)</sup></b>		
Full-time	2.1	54.9
Part-time	12.5	14.8
Unemployed	5.5	3.9
Not in labour force	79.9	26.5
Total	100.0	100.0
<b>1990</b>		
Full-time	4.2	54.6
Part-time	22.7	21.1
Unemployed	18.1	7.8
Not in labour force	55.0	16.5
Total	100.0	100.0

Note: a) For 1982 Sole Parent Pensioner includes recipients of supporting parent benefit and widow's pension class A.

Source: Unit Record Files, ABS Income and Housing Survey, 1982 and ABS Survey of Income and Housing Costs and Amenities 1990.

**Table 8: Sources of Current Income of Female Sole Parents, Australia, 1982 and 1990 (Percentages of Female Sole Parents Having Income from Each Source)<sup>(a)</sup>**

Age	Pension or Benefit Recipient	Wage or Salary Recipient	Recipient of Pension/Benefit and Wage Income	Recipient of Maintenance
<b>1982<sup>(b)</sup></b>				
Under 35	73.4	25.0	7.4	18.5
35-44	64.9	38.8	12.6	27.6
45-59	68.9	34.6	10.0	14.9
<b>1990</b>				
Under 35	85.9	31.4	20.2	26.6
35-44	69.6	53.8	28.7	31.5
45-59	61.6	44.5	11.9	14.3

Notes: a) All female sole parents aged under 60, including those having nil income.

b) For 1982 Sole Parent Pensioner includes recipients of supporting parent benefit and widow's pension class A.

Source: Unit Record Files, ABS Income and Housing Survey, 1982 and ABS Survey of Income and Housing Costs and Amenities, 1990.

increase is much greater among younger sole parents, with the proportion combining pension receipt and employment more than doubling among women aged 35 to 44.

Table 8 also shows the proportion of female sole parents receiving income as maintenance payments from the non-custodial fathers of their children in each of the two years. The Child Support Scheme was introduced in 1988, with Stage 2 and the determination of maintenance by formula taking effect from 1989. Thus these figures contrast the proportion of female sole parents receiving maintenance before the Scheme with the situation very shortly after its introduction. The new arrangements have had most immediate effect on births and separations taking place after the introduction of the scheme, and are most clearly reflected in the incomes of younger sole parents. While the proportion of sole parents receiving maintenance remained barely above one quarter, this figure had increased markedly among women aged below 35. There had also been a marginal increase in maintenance paid to those aged 35 to 44, but very little change for women aged 45 and over.

Finally, Table 9 shows the composition of total income received by each of three age groups of female sole parents in 1982 and 1990. Figures in this table refer not to individuals but to the share of total income of the group coming from each source. The pattern varies markedly among age groups, in that while it appears that younger sole parents came to depend more on the pension over the period older sole parents had increasing income from wages and salaries.

In 1982 the supporting parent benefit and class A widow's pension made up 47 per cent of the income of sole parents aged under 35, and in 1990 the sole parent pension 52 per cent. The proportion of wage and salary income in the income of this group fell correspondingly, from 36 to 33 per cent. This is quite a marked shift. However the pattern was the reverse for other age groups, among whom the proportion of the sole parent pension in total income fell. This fall was greatest among sole parents aged 45 to 59. For this group pension income declined from 29 to 22 per cent of total income, with wage and salary income rising from 48 to 53 per cent. Some part of this decline reflects the phasing out of support to sole parents after the sixteenth birthday of the youngest child, and there is a corresponding

**Table 9: Female Sole Parents, Income Composition by Age, Australia, 1982 and 1990 (Percentage of Current Income of Age Group Received from Each Source)<sup>(a)</sup>**

Age group	Sole Parent Pension	Other <sup>(c)</sup> Cash Benefits	Wages and Salaries	Maintenance	Other <sup>(d)</sup> Income	Total Income
<b>1982<sup>(b)</sup></b>						
Under 35	46.6	3.0	36.2	3.6	10.6	100.0
35-44	29.0	2.1	46.9	7.0	15.0	100.0
45-59	28.7	4.9	47.7	2.0	16.7	100.0
<b>1990</b>						
Under 35	51.5	3.6	33.1	4.6	7.1	100.0
35-44	27.4	3.8	49.8	6.8	12.2	100.0
45-59	22.1	5.6	52.7	4.4	15.2	100.0

- Notes:
- a) Based on personal incomes of all female sole parents aged under 60, including those having nil income. Incomes of less than zero have been treated as zero.
  - b) For 1982 Sole Parent Pensioner includes recipients of supporting parent benefit and widow's pension class A.
  - c) Other Cash Benefits refers to income from pensions and benefits not specific to sole parents.
  - d) Other Income includes family allowance payments .

Source: Unit Record Files, ABS Income and Housing Survey, 1982 and ABS Survey of Income and Housing Costs and Amenities 1990.

increase in the share of other government cash benefits such as job search allowance in the income of this age group. This increase is relatively small, however, and much smaller than the increase in wage and salary income.

Other changes in income composition over the period were more modest. The contribution of maintenance to income remained small for all groups. Interestingly, while Table 8 showed an increasing number of young sole parents receiving maintenance, the share of maintenance in total income increased only slightly. In contrast, the contribution of maintenance to the income of the oldest age group more than doubled, not because it was much increased but because the contributions to income of the group from sole parent pension and other income fell.

Sole parents have been more directly affected than any other pensioner or beneficiary group by the shift from gender difference to gender neutrality in the framework of Australian social security. For many of these women, too,

the change in social security provision from the citizen mother to the citizen worker model has been paralleled in their own entry into the labour market. Labour force participation rates of all sole parents have been rising since the early 1980s, and by 1990 almost half of all female sole parents were in the labour force. Evidence from a range of sources now suggests that sole parent pensioners are also joining the work force, combining the pension with part-time employment.

## 6 Conclusion

Social security both reflects and shapes wider patterns of behaviour in family and employment. The shift of its basic framework away from difference toward sameness in its treatment of men and women is undoubtedly a response to wider changes in social values and economic circumstances. Of primary importance among these is women's claim to a more equal role in paid employment, a development which has now been sustained over several decades.

The principal consequence of this shift is to make women's economic circumstances, like those of men, increasingly dependent upon their success in the labour market. Women's capacity to find and sustain employment in the adverse economic conditions of the present is greatly varied, and the shift from difference toward equality in social security entitlement finds some groups of women particularly vulnerable. The issues here stem from the limitations of equal treatment through a gender-neutral social security system in the context of greatly unequal circumstances in the society beyond the safety net.

The most dramatic effects of the shift from difference toward equality are being felt by older women without male partners, who in the period of difference were entitled to the support of social security in middle age. These women must now re-enter the labour force with the support of job search allowance. In this they share many of the circumstances of older men without employment, but their life expectations as women have left many with few work skills and little or no labour force experience. The shift from difference to equality has broken faith with the social expectations upon which these women have based their lives.

The shift from difference toward equality is instigating a new relation between state and market. In the formative period of social security the framework of benefits supported a sexual division of labour centred on the male breadwinner, with the married woman defined as normally and primarily dependent upon him. The social security system continues to have a firm basis rooted in the use of the married couple as the unit to which means tests are applied, continuing to provide for the support of dependent family members. However, the social security system now provides much greater scope for couples to reverse or share breadwinning responsibilities. Implicit in the emerging gender-neutral safety net is an assumption of more flexible and potentially more equal marital partnership.

The reality of this assumption depends less on social security itself than on changing gender relations in domestic life and paid employment. For many women these spheres remain the source of significantly unequal opportunity. The shift from difference to equality in social security both assumes and requires effective redress of women's inequality in other spheres, both at home and on the job.

It is important to remember that the origins of difference in Australian social security lay in gendered notions of citizenship linking motherhood with women's duty to the nation. Race lay at the core of this conception. It is curious, then, that as gender difference is passing out of the social security system differentiations of social security entitlement associated with immigrant status are recurring in it. This is not a new story. The process of removing many of the most overt and racist exclusions from social security began only in the early years of World War Two and required a generation to become effective in practice. Lately, however, there has been a proliferation of distinctions in social security entitlement associated with particular categories of visa and resident status. This phenomenon heralds a new kind of difference in social security entitlement, a layering of inequalities in social citizenship at the margins of the Australian nation and its people.

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