



## Sole Mothers in Australia: Supporting Mothers to Seek Work

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**Publication details:**

Working Paper No. 71  
SPRC Discussion Paper  
0733414656 (ISBN)  
1447-8978 (ISSN)

**Publication Date:**

1996

**DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/203>

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**SOLE MOTHERS IN  
AUSTRALIA:  
SUPPORTING MOTHERS TO  
SEEK WORK**

by Marilyn McHugh  
and Jane Millar

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SPRC Discussion Paper No. 71  
*November 1996*

ISSN 1037 2741  
ISBN 7334 1465 6

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Tony Eardley  
Editor

## **Abstract**

The rapid increase in the numbers of sole parents in Australia - and their high risk of poverty - has meant that these families have become a focus of increasing concern. This paper explores the issue of sole motherhood and employment, with a particular emphasis on examining the relationship between social security policies and current discourses on the role of women in Australian society, including the perspectives of sole mothers themselves.

The paper is part of an edited collection (Duncan and Edwards, forthcoming), covering nine countries ranging from Ireland (where the vast majority of sole mothers are not employed and where the expectation of policy is that such women should stay at home to care for their children) to Sweden (where almost all sole mothers are in employment and where public policy is explicitly designed to support them) and the USA (where most sole mothers are employed despite low levels of public provision for working mothers). Other countries in the collection include the UK, Japan, Germany and France.

As other comparative work has shown, variations in sole mothers' employment rates across countries cannot be readily explained (Bradshaw et al., 1996). The distinctive approach adopted in this book is that the national case studies each explore the processes by which sole mothers combine paid work and mothering. The paper brings together an analysis of the dominant political and popular discourses about motherhood; of the nature of the state welfare regime; of the constraints and opportunities of local labour markets; and of the formal provision and support offered by social security, child support and child care policies. This provides a context for understanding how different groups of sole mothers negotiate their social identity as mothers and as workers.

# 1 National Context

The labour market participation rate for sole mothers<sup>1</sup> in Australia currently stands at just over 50 per cent, a figure that has not changed since the late 1980s. Compared with many other countries this is not a particularly high level of economic activity. It is also lower than the participation rate for Australian married mothers, which currently stands at just under 60 per cent. On the basis of these figures, Australia could be characterised as a country where sole mothers are as likely to be 'mothers' as they are to be 'workers'. The nature of the income support available to, and received by almost all, sole mothers seems to reflect this. The 'sole parent's pension', first introduced in the early 1970s, provides a weekly benefit payable as long as there are children under the age of 16. There is no 'work test' attached to the benefit and the support it offers is therefore conditional on the mothering, rather than the employment, role. A sole mother with one child received a benefit equivalent to about 35 per cent of average male earnings (ABS, 1994a). Thus the benefit levels, while not generous, do allow women to be full-time mothers.

However, this benefit is only part of the support offered to sole mothers in Australia. In the late 1980s the introduction of new policies designed to give sole mothers access to employment training and to financial support from ex-partners reflected a changing view both of the role of sole mothers and of the obligations of policy towards them. Instead of replacing male earnings, as the sole parent's benefit was largely intended to do, recent policy has been geared towards encouraging sole mothers to take paid work and towards enforcing the financial obligations of fathers. Australia can be characterised as a country in transition where the answer to the mother/worker issue is apparently changing, with a shift in focus from supporting sole mothers at home to offering more support for employment. This chapter analyses changing patterns of employment for sole mothers in Australia and the material, policy and social context in which these changes have taken place. The focus is on recent change and

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1 The issue of terminology raises many problems and the labels used to describe mothers living without current partners are far from neutral, but reflect current views and attitudes (Millar, 1994). Here we have followed typical Australian usage and so refer to all these women as 'sole' mothers.

on policy development and changing attitudes over the past 15 to 20 years in particular. This has been a time of rapid change, in both family structure and employment patterns. In addition, as in many other countries especially in the English-speaking world, the mid-1980s was a period when social security and income maintenance systems were under government review, not least as a result of concerns about projected future costs. The Australian Social Security Review, established by the Labor Government in 1986, focused in particular on the implications for state benefit provisions of changing employment and family patterns (Cass, 1986). The Review is thus central to recent policy changes, including provisions for sole parents, and is discussed further below. First, however, we describe the growth in sole motherhood and the changing patterns of women's employment trends.

### **1.1 Sole Mothers: Numbers and Characteristics**

As Table 1 shows, the proportion of families headed by a sole parent has roughly doubled over the past 20 years, from nine per cent in 1975 to 18 per cent in 1994. As is usually the case, the vast majority of these sole parents are women. There is little information available on the ethnic background of sole parents, but a recent survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (ABS, 1995a) found that about 29 per cent of those families were headed by a sole parent, a rate much higher than the rate for families in general. However, patterns of family and kinship structures in Aboriginal communities are not generally centred on the nuclear family (Collard et al., 1994) and thus the concept of a 'sole parent', which is defined in relation to a 'couple', is unlikely to carry the same meaning as for non-indigenous Australians. Based on data from the mid-1980s, Cass, Wilkinson and Webb (1991) found that the incidence of sole motherhood tended to be higher among English-speaking Australian-born women than among non-English-speaking overseas-born women. They estimated that only about 10 per cent of all sole mothers came from the group of overseas born women compared to 14 per cent of all Australian-born women with dependent children.

The main routes into sole motherhood are through marital breakdown, widowhood, breakdown of cohabitation, and breakdown of non-

**Table 1: Sole Parent Families in Australia: 1974, 1985 and 1994**

Year	All sole parents	Percentage of sole mothers	Percentage of all families with children
1974	183 000	86 per cent	9
1985	316 000	89 per cent	14
1994	424 000	88 per cent	18

Sources: Millar and Whiteford, 1993, Table 1; and ABS, 1994, Catalogue No. 6224.0, Tables 24 and 25.

cohabiting sexual relationships. Marital breakdown is the most common way to become a sole mother, with the divorce rate at about 12 per thousand marriages (ABS, 1995b), and with about two-thirds of all sole mothers being divorced or separated women. This figure remained fairly constant throughout the 1980s, although over the same period the proportion of never-married mothers increased (from about 19 per cent to about 25 per cent) while the proportion of widows fell (from about 14 per cent to about eight per cent). Births outside marriage increased from nine per thousand in 1971 to 23 per thousand in 1991 (ABS, 1994b). Never-married mothers now make up about a quarter of the total. The available statistics do not indicate the extent to which these never-married women are ex-cohabitants or not. In general, however, they are not very young women. Teenage sole motherhood remains relatively uncommon with only about three per cent of sole parent pensioners being teenagers (Walshe, 1994)<sup>2</sup>. In general sole mothers are slightly older than married mothers, and the average age of sole parent pensioners has increased from 28 in 1975 to 33 in 1994 (ABS, 1995b).

Table 2 shows the marital status of sole parent pensioners from 1980 to 1994. This provides a fairly reasonable estimate of the changing marital status of all sole parents, since the majority (over three-quarters) do receive some pension income. This shows that the proportion who are unmarried has remained fairly constant, at 17 to 18 per cent of the total.

<sup>2</sup> The rate of teenage births has fallen from 55.5 births per 1000 of the population in 1971 to 21.9 in 1992 (Walshe, 1994).

**Table 2: Marital Status of Female Sole Parent Pensioners: 1982 to 1995**  
(Percentages)

Year	Unmarried	Ex-married	Widowed	Total
1980	18	68	14	100
1982	19	71	10	100
1984	19	72	9	100
1986	19	74	7	100
1988	20	75	5	100
1990	20	76	4	100
1992	18	79	3	100
1994	18	79	3	100
1995	18	80	2	100

Sources: 1980 - 1993: Department of Social Security (DSS), *Annual Reports* (various years); 1994 and 1995: DSS, Management Information Section, Canberra.

Widows have fallen from 14 per cent of pension recipients in 1980 to just over two per cent in 1995. Formerly married women make up the vast majority of the total throughout.

As Table 3 shows, sole mothers tend to have smaller families and older children than married mothers. The one-child family is especially common among sole mothers: half have just one child compared with a third of married mothers. At the other end of the spectrum, sole mothers are also more likely to have larger families: 16 per cent have three or more children compared with only seven per cent of married mothers. About 38 per cent of sole mothers have a youngest child of under four (under school age) compared with 50 per cent of married mothers and sole mothers are correspondingly more likely to have teenage children (31 per cent compared with 23 per cent). These characteristics reflect the fact that the group defined as 'sole mothers' includes women whose previous experiences of partnership, marriage and motherhood are likely to have been very different. Nevertheless, two main groups predominate and their family and individual characteristics are important in understanding how they are likely to be placed in relation to the labour market. The first, and largest group, are the older, divorced or separated

**Table 3: Sole and Married Mothers, Number of Children and Age of Youngest Child: 1994**

	Sole mothers percentage	Married mothers percentage
Number of children		
One	50	34
Two	34	59
Three plus	16	7
Total	100	100
Age of youngest child		
	percentage	percentage
0 - 4	38	50
5 - 9	31	27
10 - 14	31	23
Total	100	100

Sources: Number: Bradshaw et al., 1996, Table 2.10.

Age: ABS Catalogue No. 6224.0, Tables 13 and 25.

women with two or three children of school age, including adolescent children. For these women, marriage and motherhood have been a central part of their adult lives<sup>3</sup> and have already had a significant impact on their employment patterns. The second largest group are the younger, never-married, women who usually have just one child, often of pre-school age. These women, in addition to acting as sole parents, are also experiencing the impact that the birth of a first child has upon women's employment, regardless of her marital status.

## 1.2 Mothers and Employment

As in most of the industrialised economies, Australia has seen a rapid increase in the numbers of women, particularly married women with children, joining the labour force. In 1966, about 31 per cent of married women were economically active. By 1992 this had doubled to 61 per

<sup>3</sup> The average age at first marriage is 27 for women, which has risen from 21 in 1974 (ABS, 1994b). The divorced and separated sole mothers who are in their mid-to late thirties now would probably have married at about age 24 (ABS, 1994b) in the early 1980s.

cent (Cass, 1994a). However, it was in the 1980s in particular, under a Labor Government which placed a high policy priority on job creation, that women increased both their participation rates and their share of total employment (Cass, 1994a and b; Brennan, 1994; McCreadie, 1994). Brennan summarises the key trends:

The expansion of job opportunities for both men and women between 1983 and 1989 was one of the major achievements of the Hawke government. More than 1.5 million new jobs were created in those years and 56 per cent of them were filled by women ... women accounted for 46 per cent of full-time employment growth and 77 per cent of part-time employment growth ... the total number of women employed rose by 600,000 or 27 per cent, and women's rate of workforce participation rose from 42 to 51 per cent ... women were also recorded as having declining rates of unemployment ... and the number of women classified as hidden unemployed or discouraged job seekers was also substantially reduced ... women were undoubtedly the star performers in the Australian labour market ... (Brennan, 1994: 169)

The growth in women's employment brought more women of all types into the labour market but some of the largest increases were found among married mothers of pre-school age children. In just four years between 1984 and 1988 the participation rate for these women rose by almost one-third (32 per cent) compared with one-fifth (19 per cent) for all women with children. Although these women have lower employment rates than women with older children, nevertheless almost half of these mothers are now active in the labour market and as many as 20 per cent of all married women in the labour market have children aged under four (Brennan, 1994). Thus for married women with children, including those with young children, throughout the 1980s there was a relatively steady rise in participation rates. However, this has not continued through into the 1990s when, as Table 4 shows, there has been no continuing increase in participation rates.

**Table 4: Labour Force Participation Rates of Sole and Married Mothers: 1970s to 1990s**

Year	Sole mothers percentage	Married mothers percentage
1975	48	na
1980	43	46
1985	41	51
1990	52	61
1994	52	61
With youngest child aged 0 - 4		
1985	28	37
1990	37	48
1994	31	48

Sources: 1975 and 1980 from Social Security Review, 1986; other years from ABS, 1994, Catalogue No. 6224.0.

Table 4 also shows that the pattern of employment participation over time has been slightly different for sole mothers compared with married mothers. From the 1970s into the 1980s sole mothers' participation rates actually fell and only started to rise again in the mid-1980s. Rates then rose faster than for married mothers but from 1989, when the participation rate reached 52 per cent, there has been no further increase. For sole mothers with young children (under five) participation rates have again fallen in the 1990s.

Table 5 compares the current employment rates of sole and married mothers in more detail. Sole mothers divide into two more or less equal groups, with 52 per cent defined as economically active and 48 per cent outside the labour force. For married mothers the split is closer to 60/40 than 50/50, with 61 per cent of married mothers economically active and 39 per cent not. Among the economically active, there are also differences between sole and married mothers: similar proportions work full time (23 per cent and 24 per cent respectively) but many fewer sole mothers are in part-time employment (20 per cent compared with 32 per cent) and more are unemployed (nine per cent compared with four per cent).

**Table 5: Employment Rates of Sole and Married Mothers: 1994**

Employment status	Sole mothers percentage	Married mothers percentage
Full-time <sup>(a)</sup>	23	24
Part-time <sup>(b)</sup>	20	32
Unemployed	9	4
Not in labour force	48	39
Total	100	100

Notes: a) Full-time workers: employed persons who usually work 35 hours or more per week  
 b) Part-time workers usually work under 35 hours per week.

Source: ABS, 1994, Catalogue No. 6224.0.

Of course, it is not really the case that sole mothers can be divided into two equal-sized but distinct groups: the workers and the mothers. This may be the impression that the cross-sectional statistics give but, in reality, if we could track employment patterns over time, this would reveal movements into and out of employment. This movement is connected, at least in part, with family responsibilities. Lifetime employment patterns for Australian women tend to follow the line of full-time employment up to birth of first child, usually followed by a break in employment while there are pre-school age children, a return to part-time employment while caring for school children, and full-time employment when children reach their teenage years (Cass, 1994b)<sup>4</sup>. There are no longitudinal data to track these movements in detail but Table 6 shows this through a cross-sectional analysis of employment rates in relation to age of youngest child. The table reveals both similarities and differences between sole and married mothers. For both there is a clear rise in labour market participation as children grow older

4 The Commission of the European Communities (1993) describes three main patterns of lifetime participation for women: (1) single-peak curve, with most women giving up employment with marriage and/or children; (2) twin-peak curve, with most women giving up employment during childrearing years but returning thereafter; (3) inverted U, with continuous high levels of employment throughout. Australia would fall into the second category.

**Table 6: Employment Rates of Sole and Married Mothers, by Age of Youngest Child: 1994**

	Sole mothers percentage	Married mothers percentage
<b>Youngest child 0 - 4</b>		
Employed full time	10	15
Employed part time	15	29
Unemployed	6	5
Not in labour force	69	52
<b>Youngest child 5 - 9</b>		
Employed full time	22	25
Employed part time	23	37
Unemployed	10	5
Not in labour force	44	33
<b>Youngest child 10 -14</b>		
Employed full time	30	34
Employed part time	24	34
Unemployed	9	4
Not in labour force	37	28
<b>Youngest child 15 -20</b>		
Employed full time	42	38
Employed part time	21	32
Unemployed	12	2
Not in labour force	25	28

Source: ABS, 1994, Catalogue No. 6224.0.

and an increased likelihood of full-time, as opposed to part-time, work. Thus 72 per cent of married mothers with a youngest child aged 15 to 20 are economically active compared with 48 per cent of those with a youngest child under five. Those with children 15 plus are more than twice as likely to have full-time jobs as the mothers of the under fives (38 per cent compared with 15 per cent). Similarly, for sole mothers 75 per cent of the mothers with a youngest child of 15 to 20 are economically active compared with 25 per cent of those with a youngest child under five. The sole mothers with older children are four times as likely as those with young children to have full-time jobs (42 per cent compared with 10 per cent).

The broad pattern is thus similar for the two groups of women. However, it is also clear that there are some important differences. Unemployment is more of a problem for sole mothers, especially those with older children<sup>5</sup>. Part-time work is much less common for sole than for married mothers, whatever the age of their children. This gap in the extent of part-time working accounts for much of the overall differences in employment rates: if sole mothers had the same rates of part-time working as married mothers then the two groups would have almost exactly the same participation patterns. It is this fact, then, that requires investigation - what is acting to keep sole mothers out of the part-time employment market? High effective marginal tax rates (EMTR - a measure of the proportion of income that is lost to income tax and means tests when a sole mother increases her income) are often suggested by social policy analysts as a disincentive to enter part-time work. In an overview of the distribution of EMTRs faced by actually or potentially employed persons across the Australian population, it appears that sole mothers have the highest proportion of individuals with EMTRs of over 60 per cent (Polette, 1995).

Employment rates and income levels are closely correlated. The overall employment rate of just over 40 per cent for sole mothers means that about six in ten of these families have no income from employment but are reliant upon state benefits, usually entirely but sometimes in combination with other income, for example child support payments. By contrast, among married couples with children, only 24 per cent have no employment income and almost half (47 per cent) have two earners. Thus, not surprisingly, as Table 7 shows, family income tends to be much lower for sole-parent families than for couples. About 41 per cent of sole parents have income in the lowest quintile compared with 17 per cent of couples with children. Only six per cent of sole-parent families are in the highest quintile compared with 22 per cent of couples. If there are no earners in the family, then the sole parents and the couples have rather similar income distributions. However, where there are earners, the sole-parent earners are worse off than the single-earner couple and are very substantially worse off than the dual-earner couple.

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5 The ABS figures in Table 6 refer to registered unemployment and so their levels are at least in part a function of the rules governing such registration. Unemployment rates in recent years are discussed in more detail below.

**Table 7: Income Quintiles by Family Status: 1992**

Quintiles	All couples	All couples	No earner sole	No earner couple	One-earner sole	One-earner couple	Two-earner couple
Lowest	41	17	57	54	16	8	4
Second	26	19	23	27	33	27	7
Third	17	21	11	10	25	30	20
Fourth	10	21	6	5	16	19	32
Highest	6	22	3	4	9	15	36
(-000s)	(596)	(3884)	(289)	(732)	(246)	(947)	(1844)
Percentage of family type	(100%)	(100%)	(54%)	(21%)	(46%)	(27%)	(52%)

Source: ABS, 1994b, Catalogue No. 4420.0, Table 12.

The difference between single-earner sole parents and single-earner couples is due to the fact that the former are mainly women while the latter are mainly men. Women's full-time weekly average earnings are equivalent to about 83 per cent of men's (McCreadie, 1994). In dual-earner couples, the addition of the woman's wage, even if she is in part-time work, makes a significant addition to the total family income. For part-time work, women's earnings add an additional 24 per cent to family income, while for full-time work this amounts to an additional 40 per cent (Cass, 1994a). As Cass points out, women's earnings reduce both within-family income inequalities (by giving women direct access to a greater share of family income), and between-family wealth inequalities (by giving more families the opportunity to become home owners). Nevertheless, the growth of the dual-earner family has meant an increasing gap between the incomes, and thus living standards, of sole-mother families and those of two-parent families.

Poverty rates among sole mothers are particularly high. Numerous studies demonstrate that sole-parent families are far more likely to be in poverty than other family types, with their poverty rate at least three times that of couples with children (ABS, 1992). For example, 44 per cent of sole parents were estimated to be in after-housing poverty in 1990 compared with 14 per cent of two-parent families. Sole parents are much more likely (44 per cent compared with 18 per cent) to be living in rented accommodation than couple families. In Victoria and Queensland around

one-quarter of emergency relief applicants were sole parents (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 1994; Thornwaite, Kingston and Walsh, 1995). On an international basis, sole parents are considered a vulnerable population and among a group of 13 OECD countries Australia, along with Canada and the USA, was found to be among the least effective in reducing poverty levels of sole parent families by tax and transfer policies (Forster, 1993).

## **2 Discourses Around Sole Motherhood in Australia**

Sole motherhood does not seem to have attracted the negative construction in Australian policy that has been increasingly characteristic of the UK or the USA. This is apparent, for example, in the evolution and objectives of the recently introduced 'child support' legislation. As Millar and Whiteford (1993) point out, both Australia and the UK have sought to enforce much higher levels of child support from separated parents, by changing the way in which such payments are calculated and collected. However, the Australian legislation was developed in the context of debates about child poverty and the best way to support sole parents. The UK legislation, by contrast, emerged in a context of debate over 'irresponsible' parenthood and the need for government to enforce parental obligations which, it was suggested, would otherwise be ignored.

It may be that lack of overt hostility to sole mothers reflects both a lack of a racial dimension to the issue and a more general lack of interest in the concept of the 'underclass' in Australia (Mann, 1994). Issues of both race and fear of a growing underclass have fuelled the strong negative constructions of sole, or more accurately, single motherhood in the USA (and, to a lesser extent, in the UK). There has been some debate over whether benefits have encouraged sole motherhood. For example, Swan and Bernstam (1987a and 1987b), noting the rapid increase over time in take up of sole parent pension, argue that the availability of welfare payments for sole mothers has encouraged the growth in their numbers. This is despite the evidence that it is the breakdown of relationships and divorce which are the main routes into sole parenthood for Australian mothers and the fact that their dependence on benefits impoverishes women and children and leads to poverty. In addition, a small but vocal

number of post-divorce men's groups with concerns over family law issues lobby government sub-committees on issues of access, custody and the perceived inequities of the child support scheme and are featured on talk-back radio shows and reported in the media. To date their success in effecting policy change has, however, been minimal.

Looking further back, in their account of unmarried motherhood in Australia between 1850 and 1975, Swain and Howe (1995) argue that unmarried mothers were not only economically deprived but were also stigmatised by society, at a time when 'the survival of single mothers and their children depended on their silence' (1995: 5). They argue that the 1970s marked a time of change, reflected in a growing self-awareness and self-help movement among the women themselves, and in legal and policy reform. These included the abolition of the legal status of 'illegitimacy' in 1975, extensive and radical changes to family law, including no-fault divorce resolution, and the extension of the supporting parent's benefit to unmarried mothers (see below for further discussion of the latter). Compared with earlier times, the unmarried mothers of the 1960s and 1970s were older, more middle-class, better educated, and more likely to view themselves as people with rights and choices. They were both willing and able to begin to confront the practical difficulties of sole motherhood and to push for policy and legal change. The establishment of 'National Councils for the Single Mother and her Child' in many states at this time reflected these changes and these, and other groups, were central to policy change:

The decade from 1965-75 had shown that women were able to influence family policy and to lobby the state to provide the income maintenance that they needed to achieve independence. Their right to have a family without a husband had been given public recognition. (Swain and Howe, 1995: 206)

However, this does not mean that there is general acceptance of a right to unconditional public support for sole mothers. Instead Walshe (1994) argues that there is a long-standing expectation that sole mothers are more 'deserving' of state support if they also make efforts to support themselves. She suggests that the Councils for the Single Mother and her Child won support for more positive policies for sole mothers in the

1960s and 1970s by stressing: 'the best interests and welfare of the ex-nuptial child ... whether the single mother's pregnancy was deliberate or accidental ... whether single mothers were willing to support themselves through employment' (Walshe, 1994: 57). Attitudes hardened again during the economic recession of the 1980s but today the policy emphasis on encouraging employment is better able to:

mirror community attitudes that suggest that parents should be responsible for their children and be willing to help themselves ... it seems that sole parent families are seen to deserve support most when they are willing to help themselves. (Walshe, 1994: 65)

This is also part of changing views about the duties and responsibilities of mothers more generally. As described above, over the space of a relatively short period of time, mothers - married and sole - have entered the Australian labour market in significant numbers and there are now about 1.5 million employed mothers, out of a total workforce of 13 million. The impact of this has been somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, women's additional role as paid worker has not lead to any significant re-distribution of domestic labour within the family and men continue to leave the bulk of domestic work to their partners. Time-budget studies show that a husband whose wife has a full-time paid job does no more than a man whose spouse does no paid work; that the average time spent by husbands in unpaid work is less than half that of their partners; and that men have not increased their hours of domestic work as more women have entered paid work (Bittman and Lovejoy, 1993; Rimmer and Rimmer, 1994; ABS 1988 and 1993). At work, many employers continue to resist making provisions for their workers as parents as, for example, the continued opposition by employers associations to family and parental leave and maternity benefits shows (McCreadie, 1994). On these two fronts, therefore, practical support from partners and from employers to help women to combine their caring roles and their employment roles seems to have been less than forthcoming.

On the other hand, among women themselves, and in their capacity to influence public policy, there have been some significant advances. Cass (1994a) argues that the impetus for the rise in female labour market participation in the 1980s came very much from women themselves:

... job growth and child care services provided opportunities necessary for women to realise their aspirations with somewhat less struggle than their forebears. Public policies did not create these aspirations but they did create the climate in which women could redefine their identities and spheres of activity. (Cass, 1994a: 116)

Survey evidence on women's attitudes shows that the majority strongly support the view that women should have the right to combine motherhood and employment. However, that is not to say that these roles are seen as equally important. Rather the order is very much 'mother and worker' and not 'worker and mother' since, for the majority, the needs of children for care are placed above access to employment. Thus there is support for mothers to stay at home with young children but to go out to work as children grow older.

This can be seen more generally in attitudes to women's employment over the life cycle. A nationwide survey of over 2000 respondents found that the majority of Australians think that women should work full time (84 per cent) after marrying and before there are children. When there is a child under school age many (65 per cent) feel that women should stay at home, though one-third (31 per cent) support part-time work. Even after the youngest child starts school, most (73 per cent) thought mothers should only work part time and less than a fifth (16 per cent) felt full-time work appropriate. After children had left home around two-thirds see full-time work and one-third part-time work as the ideal for women (Evans 1995). King and McHugh (1995) and King, Bradbury and McHugh (1995) report similar findings for two particular groups of women: the wives of men receiving disability pension and the wives of men receiving unemployment benefit.

Women themselves have played a central role in defining their needs and in influencing social policy in a way that makes Australia unusual compared with many other countries. The Australian 'femocrats', women with feminist agendas operating within bureaucracy and government, were a particular force during the 1980s (Dowse, 1983; Sawer, 1990; Watson, 1992). Bettina Cass, influential herself as chair of the Social Security Review team, argues that, while assumptions about women's

financial dependency on men have shaped Australian policy in the past, and continue to do so, nevertheless:

... assumptions of women's dependency are being challenged in several ways: (1) women's increased labour force participation, (2) assertion of their market rights, (3) growth of women's employment in the public sector, and (4) more feminists in decision-making roles in government women's bureaus ... As a result, some public policies, albeit uneven in their development and implementation, are promoting the idea that women should assume the responsibilities and earn the equal rewards of labour force participation. (Cass, 1994a: 111)

Brennan (1994), in her analysis of the development of child-care policy in Australia, makes a convincing case that feminist activism in the bureaucracy and in national and local politics was the driving force behind the development of child-care policy during the 1970s and 1980s. Further, she argues that the fact that women played such an important role in shaping policy in this area has led to a system of child care which, while not as comprehensive as found in the Nordic countries for example, has expanded very rapidly and which meets about two-thirds of the demand for work-related care (with a government commitment to meeting all such demand by 2001). Child care is now defined as a central element of the 'social wage' and the rights of both parents and children to have access to child care are well established<sup>6</sup>.

It is clear that women as mothers *and* workers is now the dominant construction in policy. Much of the Australian debate around the International Year of the Family in 1994 centred on issues of how to develop policy further to integrate employment and caring roles for

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6 As a cost saving measure the Howard-Costello Budget in August 1996, abolished operational subsidies for community long-day child-care centres; reduced the income ceiling for eligibility for Childcare Assistance; froze the level of Childcare Assistance; and capped Childcare Assistance at 50 hours a week. The abolition of subsidies could result in a fee increase of up to \$25.00 per week making it difficult for low-income families such as sole-parent families to afford to use long-day care centres.

parents (Inglis and Rogan, 1994; Wolcott and Glezer, 1995). Farrar (1994) argues that much of current policy reflects a reconstruction of the relationship between the state and families. Discussing policy measures such as the new Parenting Allowance (see below), the expansion of child care provision and moves to introduce family leave, he suggests that 'here, perhaps, we are seeing a redefinition of the maternal role, one which no longer rests on women's presumed role within the family as carers' (Farrar, 1994: 22). He points out, however, that other policies - especially policies of 'community care' and the cuts in support to young people - are actually increasing dependency on the family for certain groups. Cass (1994a) too points to the ambiguities of policy: in many areas moving away from a construction of women as dependent wives but still resisting a reconstruction of the meaning of 'independence' as it applies to men: 'Women cannot be economic, political and social citizens until men accept their full social obligations and responsibilities for care-giving work' (Cass, 1994a: 121).

### **3 The Australian Welfare Regime**

The Australian social security system is almost unique among the industrialised countries in never having adopted the social insurance approach, in which access to benefits is dependent on contributions made (Mitchell, 1991; Castles, 1985; Bryson, 1992, 1995). Almost all benefits in Australia are income-tested and asset-related. Australia is, therefore, something of an anomalous case in terms of the criteria that are usually adopted for classification into 'welfare regimes', since these often depend upon weighting 'insurance' benefits above 'assistance' benefits. However, Castles and Mitchell (1990) and Mitchell (1991) argue that the Australian focus on income-related benefits and central wage controls means that the impact of policy is generally redistributive and thus a view of Australia as a welfare 'laggard' or 'liberal' welfare regime is misleading.

Cass (1994a) argues that the Australian system, whereby entitlement to benefits is based on a combination of current status (e.g. unemployed, elderly and sick) and of family income level, has created something of a contradiction for women. On the one hand, benefit entitlement is not tied to previous labour market participation and so women have never been

excluded from claims because of their different, i.e. non-male, employment patterns (as happens in the UK and many other countries with social insurance schemes, Millar, 1989; Lewis, 1992). On the other hand, the means-tested nature of the benefits is based on the construction of the family as a single unit, in which men and women share their income, and this has tended to exclude married women from receipt of benefits in practice, unless their partners were also claimants. Thus women have always had rights to claim benefits as individuals but their actual receipt of state support was very dependent on their family status. In addition, the centralised Australian approach to wage bargaining and industrial relations was also based on the concept of the ‘family’ as a single unit. In the *Harvester* decision of 1907 the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation decreed that basic wages for unskilled workers should be set by the income needs of a man with a dependent wife and three children (Bryson, 1992; McCreadie, 1994). Thus the concept of a ‘male breadwinner’ earning a ‘family wage’ was made quite explicit in both social security policy and in wage bargaining in the public and private sectors. In this sense, then, Australia could be characterised as a ‘strong breadwinner’ welfare state, to use the Lewis (1992) classification; or as a country with a ‘gender contract’ based on a ‘housewife’ role for women (Duncan, 1995).

However, in recent years, there has been a significant shake-up of the social security system, specifically with the intention of making the structure of benefits fit better with family and labour market change. Recent policy has thus moved away from this ‘family’ based approach, particularly with a series of changes introduced by the Commonwealth government in 1994-95 (although the groundwork for these changes was arguably laid by the mid-1980s social security reviews). The ‘Parenting Allowance’ was introduced in 1995<sup>7</sup> and has two components. The basic

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7 There was a stepping stone to this, in the form of the Home Child Care Allowance (HCCA) introduced in September 1994, to replace an income tax rebate paid to men with a dependent spouse and child. The HCCA was paid directly to the partner of a couple (usually the wife) at home with dependent children (under 16 years of age). There was a means test, relatively generous, on the claimant’s income but not on that of her partner. This meant that, although couples were not financially better off, it was the woman, and not her spouse, who was the actual recipient of the payment. The HCCA was incorporated into the ‘Parenting Allowance’ in July 1995.

payment is made to any parent at home with children and with minimal personal income. The additional payment is made to certain benefits recipients, in particular women married to unemployed men. These women, if they are childless and aged under 40, are no longer eligible for benefits simply as 'dependent wives' of their partner. Instead they have to establish their own eligibility (including being available for work) and make their own claim. Those with children and older women are exempt from this and can receive either a 'Partner Allowance' (older women) or an 'Additional Parenting Allowance' (mothers). For all women, one of the most significant aspects of these changes is that women now receive their benefit entitlement themselves rather than as an addition to the man's benefit. Age and marital status still play a part in determining how women will be treated in social security but women receive their benefits directly rather than through their partners. Since it is usually the woman who also receives Family Payments in respect of children this means that, in unemployed families, the woman will be the one with the greater share of joint income<sup>8</sup>. The benefit system has thus made some significant shifts towards treating women as individuals rather than as dependants of their male partners, within the context of a means-tested system. Benefits for sole mothers have also recently been reformed.

### **3.1 Social Security Support for Sole Mothers**

The first Commonwealth pensions for widows were introduced in Australia in 1942 (Raymond, 1987). They were specifically intended to enable widows with dependent children to stay at home and care for their children rather than go out to work, and for widows aged over 50 on the grounds that they would find it difficult to enter the labour force. The status of 'widow' was defined very broadly, to include also 'deserted' wives, divorced women and de facto widows (if they had been cohabiting for at least three years). Divorced and deserted women first had to seek maintenance from their former partners and they also had to wait six months before they could make a claim. State welfare assistance could be claimed during that time. In 1973, the introduction of 'supporting

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8 What effect, if any, this will have on intra-family equity or, to put it more plainly, on who will make the decisions about money management, will be of interest to social researchers in the future.

mother's benefit' extended eligibility to unmarried mothers, deserted de facto wives, prisoners' de facto wives and other separated women who were not eligible for the widow's pension. In 1977 this became 'supporting parent's benefit' as sole fathers were brought into the scheme. From 1980 the six month qualifying period was withdrawn. The widow's pension and the supporting parent's benefits were subject to the income and asset tests and paid at the same rate, so that in effect all sole parents received the same levels of state support. There were no work tests or requirements, so sole parents could receive state financial support for as long as required provided that they had a child aged under 16 or who was a full-time student under 25.

The Social Security Review, set up in 1986, paid particular attention to sole parents and especially to issues of employment, producing a number of papers on barriers to work (Frey, 1986) and employment prospects (Jordan, 1989) and an 'Issues' paper that set out policy recommendations (Raymond, 1987). This paper starts by placing the issue of support for sole parents firmly in the context of increased employment among women:

Over the past 20 years there has been a marked shift in attitudes towards the participation of married women and women with children in employment ... In the past it had been assumed that women should become financially dependent on their husbands when they married and their careers should be devoted to the rearing of children. It was this philosophy which was behind the introduction of the widow's pension in 1942 ... In recent years, however, with the rapid growth in the numbers of sole parent pensioners there has been concern on a number of fronts that there should be increased incentives and opportunities for sole parents to participate in the labour force. There has been a view that sole parents, like married mothers, should participate in the labour force, particularly if their children are of school age. (Raymond, 1987: 3)

The recommendations put forward thus focused on how to improve employment incentives and opportunities, including the introduction of a single sole parent benefit for all sole parents and an increased level of family allowance for children in sole-parent families. Alongside the review of social security provisions the Government also set up a special committee to look at the operation of child maintenance. As a consequence three major changes were made to support for sole parents:

- 1988: the Child Support Act was passed, with the aim of increasing child maintenance payments from separated parents.
- 1989: the Sole Parent Pension was introduced, replacing the Supporting Parent's Benefit and Widow's Pensions for widows with children.
- 1989: the JET (Jobs, Education and Training) scheme was introduced, intended to offer support and training to help sole parents into employment.

These measures added up to a new 'package' of support for sole parents in which employment incentives play a significant role. The sole parent pension consists of a basic amount payable to any sole parent with at least one child aged under 16<sup>9</sup>. This is set at the same level as the single rate of the Age Pension. Sole parents are also entitled to payments for their child or children. These are the basic family payment (of a flat-rate amount per family) and an Additional Family Payment. The latter includes an amount per child (which varies with age) and a Guardian Allowance in recognition of the additional costs that they face. Assistance with housing costs and medical and pharmaceutical costs may also be available. Separate income tests are applied to maintenance income and to earned income. In 1994 there were about 314 000 sole parents receiving the pension, 94 per cent of them women, and it is estimated that about 72 per cent of all sole parents receive a pension. About 22 per cent of sole parents pensioners also have some earnings (up from only nine per cent in 1983). All sole parents claiming the Sole Parent Pension are required to take action, through the Child Support

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9 The maximum age of qualifying children had been reduced from 24 to 16 in 1987.

Agency, to obtain child support. The proportion of pensioners receiving child support has increased from 26 per cent in 1988 to just over 41 per cent in 1994 (DSS, 1994).

The JET scheme has been central to the objective of improving employment opportunities. This is a national voluntary program for sole parent pensioners which provides assistance with education, training and finding work and with child care placements. The scheme is jointly administered by the Departments of Social Security (DSS), of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), and of Human Services and Health (DHS). JET advisers in DSS interview clients (sole parent pensioners) for an assessment of education, training and employment needs. Clients may then be referred to JET contact officers at the Commonwealth Employment Service who advise of available employment and training programs or registration for employment. Three groups of sole parents are specifically targeted in the JET scheme - those with a child aged six or more who have been on the pension over 12 months; those within two years of losing pension because their youngest child is turning 16; and those who are teenage sole parents<sup>10</sup>.

Department of Social Security statistics (DSS, 1995) show that between 1989 and 1994, 157 700 sole parents participated in the JET scheme and 45 700 (29 per cent) found paid employment. Employment outcomes in 1994 from the JET program indicate that the proportion of JET clients with earnings was significantly higher (31 per cent) than for the sole parent pensioner population as a whole (22 per cent). The average earnings figure of \$222 per week for employed JET clients was higher than the \$159 for the total sole parent pensioner population. Of all JET clients, approximately one half (46 per cent) have participated in a training course. Between 1989 and 1994 approximately 39 500 (25 per cent) JET clients undertook an education course at either school, technical college or university. JET clients also took up 73 500 labour market program placements between 1989 and 1994 (Jordan, 1994). Over 80 per cent of JET placements in these training schemes were in three

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10 In addition a series of pilot projects has targeted the most socially disadvantaged sole parents: those who have been more than five years on pension (long-term dependency) and parents with either Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islands backgrounds or who are non-English speaking (Zanetti, 1994).

specific programs: Jobtrain, which places people on 8-10 week training courses (41 per cent); Skillshare, which offers community-based training for long-term unemployed people (23 per cent); and Jobstart, which is wage subsidy payable for up to 26 weeks (16 per cent)<sup>11</sup>.

While the JET scheme is regarded by the DSS as a great 'success' (DSS, 1995), the problematic nature of defining success is worth consideration. Nominating the standards against which the 'success' of policy outcomes are to be judged needs to be clarified. For example, there is the problem of whether the improvements in the participation in education, training and employment can be actually attributed to the program. As Shaver et al. (1994) point out, given the voluntary nature of JET, it is possible that these results reflect self-selection in take-up, with the program being used most readily by those sole parents most likely to become employed in any case. Jordan also cautions against

the practice of reporting of employment and further education or training as positive outcomes of participation in the program where the one is or can be the intended final result and the other no more than a stage in a process whose outcome is still unknown. (Jordan, 1994: 70)

Success could be seen as the employment the sole mothers gained through JET, but the types of employment and hours worked by the JET sole parents are not discussed in the DSS evaluation report (DSS, 1995). Alternatively, the extent to which overall employment rates for sole mothers have risen could be seen as indicative of the success, not just of the JET scheme, but of the general drive to encourage and support more paid employment. As Table 8 shows, in the five years from 1989 to 1994, full-time employment among sole mothers has fallen slightly and part-time employment has remained at about the same rate. Unemployment,

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11 Labour market training in the August 1996 Federal Budget was cut drastically, with \$1.4 billion to be progressively slashed from current labour market programs. DEET had targeted sole parent clients for special help since 1985. From August there will be no disadvantaged categories, nor special assistance to those 'most in need' and all places for labour market programs will be rationed. The consequences for future participants in the JET Scheme could be disastrous.

however, has risen significantly, from about five per cent of all sole mothers in 1989 to nine per cent in 1994. This gives an unemployment rate of almost 17 per cent of those economically active, much higher than the rate of nine per cent (December 1994) for women in general (ABS, 1995c). In addition the average duration of unemployment among sole mothers has risen from 39 weeks in 1989 to 61 weeks in 1994 (ABS, 1989 to 1994). Thus it could be that the initial effect of the policies aiming to encourage labour market participation have been successful in getting sole mothers to search for work but their chances of actually finding it clearly remain problematic. The next sections explore some possible reasons for this.

**Table 3.8 Sole Mothers' Labour Market Participation Rates: 1989 - 1994**

Year	Full-time	Part-time	Unemployed	Total in labour force
Percentages				
1989	25	21	5	52
1990	26	19	7	52
1991	24	19	7	51
1992	23	20	9	52
1993	23	20	9	52
1994	23	20	9	52

Source: ABS (various years), Catalogue No. 6224.0.

## 4 Labour Market: Opportunities and Constraints

The labour market that women in Australia face is gender segregated. Nationally, although women have increased their participation in employment (as described above), the employment experiences of women remain very different from those of men. Women are concentrated in a limited number of occupations and industries and gender segregation in employment appears to be becoming more entrenched (Brennan, 1994). Women are also much more likely than men to work in part-time jobs. Part-time employment growth was very significant in the 1980s, with the number of part-time jobs rising from 1.1 million in 1983 to 1.6 million in 1994, from 17 to 23 per cent of all

jobs (McCreadie, 1994) and part-time work tends to be concentrated in those occupations that provide 'women's jobs' (Cass, 1994a). Three-quarters of all part-time workers are women. However, not all women are equally likely to have part-time jobs. Rather it is women with family, especially child-care, responsibilities who are most likely to work part-time. In 1993 about 10 per cent of all employed men worked part time, compared with 42 per cent of all employed women and 60 per cent of employed women with children; and men's average weekly hours of work have risen from 36.7 in 1980 to 40.5 in 1990 (Cass, 1994b).

Gender segregation also shows up in the JET program, in which there is a tendency to provide training in 'women's jobs'. An evaluation of JET conducted by the Department of Social Security (DSS, 1992) found that the previous workforce experience of JET clients was predominantly in the areas of work traditionally undertaken by women: work with limited skills, low pay, little career prospects and poor job security. Over half of the sole mothers were either undertaking labour market programs in office skill courses or were in subsidised employment in clerical occupations. Others were in training courses for retail work and the hospitality trade. Sole mothers completing courses, as well as those who did not require training, entered employment in traditional female occupations - office, hospitality, retail and factory sectors - occupations offering low wages, low status and insecure and casual employment (DSS, 1992).

A field work survey with 243 older sole mothers (Shaver et al., 1994) provides information from a group of women who are one of the target groups of the JET scheme: women whose youngest child was about to turn 16 and who were about to lose entitlement to the sole parent pension. The study found that approximately three months before they were to lose their pension some 22 per cent had no knowledge of JET and a further seven per cent were aware of the program but had had no contact with it. Women of non-English speaking backgrounds were generally the least well informed. About half the women in the sample had undertaken some form of education or training in the last five years, with by far the largest number in computing, office skills and business training (accounting for more than half of all courses taken). The next largest group had training in the service sector: courses included nursing

assistant, pharmacy assistant, child and aged person care, first aid, family planning, community organisation and hearing and sign language for the deaf. Only a small number completed courses in the 'non-traditional' areas of car maintenance and bricklaying. Several women took language courses, mainly to learn spoken and written English.

For those who found employment, this was heavily concentrated in the areas of office work and sales and service jobs, but there were also a substantial number in unskilled work. Not all who found employment were secure and financially better off. Employment for these women can be a tenuous state: women lost jobs as well as found them and most of the jobs the women held were on a casual basis, with more than half carrying no entitlement to paid sick leave. Some women were patching together two or more such positions. There was also underemployment, with women unable to get as much employment as they wanted or needed. Nearly a year after cessation of pension almost a third of the sample still had no paid work and more than half the women in the study reported lower incomes after the transition from pension than before.

These findings, and those of the DSS evaluation of JET, seem to bear out the concerns expressed by McHugh (1989), in a review of the employment patterns of sole and married mothers as JET was introduced. She concluded that sole mothers would most likely find positions in low status occupations characterised by predominantly part-time employment and a low level of income. So while these outcomes were probably to be expected they hardly provide a satisfactory or successful outcome for sole mothers, when little is achieved but a movement from dependency on a minimal but secure income support from benefits to minimal income from an insecure labour market job with all the associated costs involved. One of the emerging reasons that JET clients return to claiming sole parent pension is that they face great difficulties in remaining in jobs that lack family-friendly work conditions, especially paid leave to care for sick children (Zanetti, 1994).

Access to JET schemes was found to be particularly difficult in rural areas. JET works via the coordination of officials in the DSS and DEET, with women referred to the employment service after an interview with a DSS JET Adviser. In country areas the distance between the two can be 100 to 200 kms. Access for sole mothers and liaison between staff are

highly problematic and place additional constraints on the type of education, training or employment options available<sup>12</sup>. In general, rural areas suffer higher levels of unemployment and have much more restricted job opportunities for women than urban areas. While there is immense diversity in rural areas in Australia, in many of the smaller towns populations are declining and economies stagnating. In the eighties and nineties, policies of regional centralisation, amalgamation of government services, reduced commodity prices, and the introduction of high-tech farming have adversely affected employment opportunities for both women and men in many small to medium size rural areas and led to increasing levels of unemployment (Dawson, 1994). Continuing cutbacks and removal of government services from small to medium rural towns have resulted in a decline in women's traditional jobs in hospitals and schools and other service areas and a reduction in essential health, medical, community and child care services crucial in assisting low-income families such as sole mothers.

Job opportunities for those able to afford to relocate are occurring in larger service centres in country areas. In the last two decades there has been an increase in the rates of rural married women's labour force participation, particularly in part-time work that fits with domestic, child-care and farm responsibilities. Many farmer's wives have been forced by current economic conditions to seek employment, often travelling considerable distance to their closest town to take poorly paid, casual work, to help support their families. However in some areas employment opportunities are non-existent (Gibson, Baxter and Kingston, 1990).

For women, especially sole mothers, attempting to find or return to paid work there are barriers specific to non-urban areas. Distance, transport costs, isolation, and lack of educational resources (there are no tertiary or technical educational institutions in many small to medium rural towns) discourage women from external studies. For Aboriginal women seeking employment, prejudice is also still a feature in country towns. Among the most disadvantaged in rural communities are sole parents. In the

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12 Direct access through employment offices was made available to sole parent pensioners in 1994 (Davis-Goff, National Director of JET, personal communication), but that does not necessarily solve the travel problem.

eighties, Dempsey (1992) found over 60 per cent of separated, divorced or widowed women were in the lowest income bracket and, overall, this group had the lowest average annual income.

Frey (1986), in her study based in three different areas, showed how local labour market variations affected the employment possibilities for sole mothers. She found that the types of jobs non-employed sole mothers thought that they could get were not generally the types of jobs that were available locally, 'probably indicating a lack of knowledge of local job market opportunities' (Frey, 1986: 10). She also found significant differences in employment patterns and education and training levels across the three areas (a rural farming and tourist area, an outer suburb of Sydney, and an area of inner-city Sydney). Each of the three areas presented different types of employment opportunity. In the first there was high unemployment and the few vacancies available were casual part-time jobs in the service sector. In the second, most available jobs were in Sydney itself and therefore required quite substantial travelling times each day and also child care that could cover such long hours of combined travel and work. In the third area, jobs were relatively plentiful but were full-time jobs, usually requiring high levels of skills and experience. Thus the three labour markets were very different but each, in their own ways, illustrate the difficulties facing sole mothers. In all three areas, however, it was child care that the women highlighted as a key problem: getting care that was affordable but flexible enough to cover irregular working hours, before- and after-school care, school holidays, sick children, and travel times raised problems in all three areas. Transport was also an important issue, not only in the rural area but also in the two Sydney areas. Problems with transport, and with housing, were also found by Cass, Wilkinson and Webb (1991) in their study of non-English-speaking sole mothers living in Sydney. These women were from three main groups, Vietnamese, Turkish and Spanish speaking, and the majority were not employed. They faced 'formidable barriers' to employment, including their 'perceptions of their responsibility to care for their children', especially in a society in which they felt they did not have a secure base. That non-English-speaking sole mothers have particularly high levels of use of the JET scheme (DSS, 1992) is probably also indicative of their greater need for help in gaining access to paid work.

## **5 Sole Mothers' Views of Employment and Community Attitudes**

The skills that sole mothers have, the benefits they can receive, and the job opportunities open to them are all important factors in the access of sole mothers to employment. But these are still only part of the picture and it is also important to consider the extent to which there is family and community support - both practical and attitudinal - for employment. Jordan suggests that there remains much ambivalence in this respect:

Women have become less likely to prefer the option of staying out of employment, and the community less likely to support it, but neither women, their families, nor the institutions of the community have fully adjusted to those historic changes. (Jordan, 1989: 12)

Everingham (1994), in her study of mothers in one area of New South Wales, shows how mothers in different areas tend to construct similar ideas and expectations about their 'mother/worker' roles and that these shared expectations themselves act as constraints upon what is considered acceptable. Thus the women in the 'suburban' area (mainly middle-class and married) tended to see paid work as something that was very much second to, and fitted around, their mothering obligations. Paid work thus meant part-time work. Women in the 'kinship' area (working class, including more sole mothers) tended to view paid work as incompatible with motherhood and most were full-time mothers. Women in the 'alternative' area ('counter-culture', middle class and mix of partnership status) were less likely to hold one particular view and women here included both full-time workers and at-home mothers. This would suggest that within the overall group of 'sole mothers' there is likely to be substantial variation in attitudes to mothering and employment.

The available evidence is somewhat limited. Jordan (1989), interviewing sole mothers in Melbourne, concluded that, for the vast majority of the sole mothers, there was a preference for employment because 'the welfare of their families probably suffers more from insufficient encouragement than from unreasonable pressure to work', (Jordan, 1989:

65), but that many sole mothers nevertheless found it difficult to take up work. Some suffered problems of ill-health (themselves or their children) and many lacked any qualifications or training. In addition, a significant minority of the mothers (about 27 per cent) were so socially isolated that their capacity to access training, child care, or jobs was very limited. These included in particular women from non-English-speaking backgrounds who also, as migrant women, lacked family and neighbourhood networks of support. More generally, Jordan points to a problem of low aspirations:

Limits are imposed by their own vision of feasible futures. Many can see no further than part-time work in secondary occupations ... It is one thing to help them to act on their present intentions, another for them to redefine their place in the world. (Jordan, 1989: 111)

Older sole mothers are also likely to be wary about a full-time employment role. A recent study of sole mothers who were about to lose their entitlement to benefits due to their youngest child turning 16 years of age (Shaver, et al., 1994) showed that these sole mothers tended to see themselves as mothers first and workers second - despite the fact that they were facing the necessity of having to seek paid work. When first interviewed (just before their sole parent pensions were withdrawn) two-thirds of the women described themselves as either a 'mother' (44 per cent) or a 'homemaker' (20 per cent), compared with one-fifth who described themselves as 'paid worker' (12 per cent) or 'unemployed' (five per cent). Interviewed again 12 months later (when they were no longer receiving benefits as sole parents), two-fifths continued to describe themselves as either 'mother' (24 per cent), 'homemaker' (10 per cent), or 'homemaker/mother' (eight per cent) while one quarter described themselves as either 'paid worker' (15 per cent) or 'unemployed' (12 per cent). At both interviews about one in five (17 per cent) described themselves as having joint roles. Thus, for these older mothers, the dominant image was that of 'mother/homemaker' and not 'worker' or even 'mother/worker'.

## **5.1 Child-care Constraints and Opportunities**

Child care is one of the most important single problems for sole mothers seeking work. In 1993 about half (49 per cent) of all children under 12 were involved in some form of child care (ABS, 1994c). Of these, informal care was more common than formal care (38 per cent using the former compared with 19 per cent using the latter and eight per cent using both). There was little variation in use of child care across States although usage rates were slightly higher in the Australian Central Territory (i.e. Canberra and the surrounding region). Children were more likely to be in some form of child care if their parents were employed: 76 per cent of employed sole mothers use child care, compared with 62 per cent of two-earner couples and 35 per cent of one-earner couples. Employed sole mothers were more likely than couples to rely on a combination of formal and informal care (28 per cent compared with 18 per cent of two-earner couples), perhaps indicating their need to juggle care from different sources.

As discussed above, child-care provision has expanded rapidly over the past 20 years. In 1993, there were more than 200 000 Commonwealth subsidised places with around 300 000 children attending each week (Brennan, 1994). Much of the demand for work-related care is met but there are problems in accessing care for those who want it for other than work-related reasons. In addition Brennan points to a shift from the non-profit community-based sector to the private sector. Most new places, especially for pre-school children, have been in the private sector, especially in the urban areas of New South Wales and Victoria. Community-based services do remain the largest single sector but the growing importance of the private sector may mean that the child-care needs of employed parents become increasingly separated from issues of the best interests of children and the sort of care provision that best meets their needs. A final concern that Brennan expresses is the move away from locating new services in areas of greatest need to a more market-oriented approach. Commercial operators can receive Commonwealth financial aid wherever they choose to set up. Such providers may also be reluctant to take very young children and babies, so that community-based services end up providing more of this, relatively expensive, area of care.

Access to child care for women on JET schemes has been a particular problem for those in rural areas (ACOSS, 1991). Centre-based child care, which is regarded as offering a more stimulating environment for children, is less likely to be available to mothers in rural or semi-rural areas. For JET mothers with school children there are problems in gaining places for after-school care and fee relief is not adequate to cover costs. Affordable school vacation care is not always available and mothers commented that the 'better' ones fill up quickly. Even with fee relief the costs for excursions connected to care programs plus the basic fee are beyond the reach of most sole mothers. Mothers with older school-age children reported resistance from their children in attending both forms of care.

Wolcott and Glezer (1995), reporting on the Australian Living Standards Study, point out that child care is one of main reasons that both married and sole mothers give for not being employed outside the home. Of the sole mothers, over half said that they were not in work because their children were too young or they preferred to care for their children themselves (57 per cent) and one-fifth (21 per cent) said that child care was a problem. Finding jobs with suitable hours close to home may have helped in this, but such jobs were very difficult to find. Overall Wolcott and Glezer conclude:

there appear to be more similarities than differences between sole mothers and married mothers when participation in paid and unpaid work is examined. Being female and being a mother creates common denominators that contrast with being male and a father when work and family decisions of both sexes are compared. (Wolcott and Glezer, 1995: 131)

## **6 Conclusion**

Australian women have done much to create and sustain new roles for themselves over the past two to three decades, and in particular women with children are participating in paid employment in increasing numbers. The impacts are, however, somewhat contradictory: women are more financially independent but they are still lower paid than men, they

mainly work in 'women's jobs', and they continue to bear responsibility for domestic work and child care. For sole mothers there are also many contradictions. As this chapter has described, sole mothers form almost one in five of all families with children, they are mainly white English-speaking women, ex-married, with one or two children. They are heavily reliant on state benefits, either as their sole source of income or as an addition to low earnings and/or child support. They have a much higher than average risk of poverty. About half of all sole mothers have paid work and half do not. Barriers to work include lack of adequate and affordable child care, lack of suitable employment in the right locations, and lack of transport. However, policy towards sole mothers has increasingly stressed employment and sought to encourage and sustain this through a mixture of financial incentives and work training. The JET scheme is one of the most comprehensive and accessible employment training schemes for sole mothers anywhere although, as we have seen, it is difficult for the scheme to break away from gender segregation in the labour market and so sole mothers tend to be trained mainly for service-type jobs. The women themselves are not all alike in their attitudes to motherhood and to paid employment. Some, especially the older women, see themselves as primarily mothers and are reluctant to enter paid employment. Community attitudes sometimes support them in this. For others, their problem is how to be both mothers and workers when the support infrastructure needed for this is, although much improved, still short of meeting need.

There have been some far-reaching changes in the approach to social security benefits in Australia in recent years, with deliberate attempts to shift away from family-based and gender-differentiated provisions to more individually-oriented systems. How far this can be successful in the context of family-based means tests is not yet clear but the Australian experience may have resonance elsewhere: how far is it possible to combine individual entitlement with more targeted systems of support? For sole mothers, a strong policy commitment to encouraging employment seems to have been met by a positive response among many sole mothers themselves. Sole mothers are ready and willing to work when there are suitable employment options that can accommodate their caring responsibilities. It is of course pointless to encourage employment if jobs are not available. The moves to increase levels of child support

received by sole mothers may help to open up part-time job opportunities for them, if they can put together an adequate income through a combination of part-time employment, social security benefits and child maintenance.

At the start of the paper we suggested that Australia was a country in transition: from a situation where the main thrust of policy was to support sole mothers to stay at home to one where the focus is on encouraging sole mothers into employment. However, the future of sole parent families mainly reliant on income support is bleak. At a time of continuing high national unemployment of over eight per cent (1996) and with a new Liberal administration focusing on cutting back and tightening public spending in all areas there is unlikely to be any relief through additional income support measures for sole mothers. Unless there are improvements in the economy resulting in substantial job growth the poverty of many sole parent families will continue, compounded by the constraints that caring places on their labour market participation. The picture from Australia reflects the ways in which policy, discourse and attitudes interrelate: there is cause for pessimism, especially in the failure to tackle continuing and widening inequalities in both labour market opportunities and income levels; but also cause for optimism, especially in relation to women's capacity to influence and construct policies that meet their needs.

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