

Multiple Barriers to Obtaining Child Support: Experiences of Women Leaving Violent Partners

Rebecca Patrick, Kay Cook and Ann Taket

Background

In Australia single mother families represent 83% (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2001) of single parents with dependant children, constitute 91% of parents who are entitled to child support payments (Keebaugh 2004) and of which 58% rely on welfare payments (ABS 2003)

There is a strong body of evidence that single parent families, particularly female-headed families, are one of the most socially and financially disadvantaged groups in the world (Keebaugh 2004; McInnes 2004; ABS 2003; Linqvist 2001; Smyth & Weston 2000). In Australia, single mothers and their children are frequently surviving on incomes derived from welfare and low paid part-time work and are subsequently living below the poverty line (Branigan & Keebaugh 2004). Recent estimates illustrate that single mothers earned an average of \$304 per week which falls short of the average cost of raising two children at \$315 per week ;(Branigan 2005; ABS 2006).

Australia's Child Support System was established in 1988 with the dual purpose of decreasing poverty amongst women and children and reducing spending on welfare (Child Support Agency 2002). However, according to the Australian Child Support Agency's (as cited in Branigan 2004) data, 40% of single parents receive no child support and a study by Wolffs & Shallcross (2000, p. 29) found that "only 28% of payees [who had child support assessments of \$260 per year] reported always receiving benefits on time". Further

40% of payers pay the minimum of \$5 per week or less and the Council for Single Mothers and their Children estimates that at least 80% of single mothers are responsible for between 66%-97% child related costs (Keebaugh 2004). One of the outcomes for single mothers is that they are forced onto welfare and are financially disadvantaged because child support payments are frequently late or non-existent.

An additional issue for some women in receipt of child support is domestic violence. According to Domestic Violence Victoria (2004) family or domestic violence is an abuse of power usually perpetrated by men against women and children and is characterised by a pattern of controlling behaviours including physical, sexual, financial and psychological abuse. In Australia it is estimated that 34% of all women that have ever been partnered have experienced partner violence (Mouzos & Makkai 2004). In a study commissioned by the Federal Attorney-Generals Department it was found that "in more than half of the cases of Family Court of Australia and Family Magistrates Court contained allegations of adult family violence and/or child abuse (Maloney et al 2007, p.1)". Data compiled by Butterworth (2003) from the Australian Mental Health and Wellbeing survey (ABS 1997) found that 20-25% of Australian lone mothers receiving welfare reported experiencing some form of physical or sexual violence. Overall the risk of lone mothers having experienced physical or sexual violence was three times the risk of other mothers. These statistics do not take into account other forms of violence such as psychological, financial nor do they account for unreported domestic violence. In Australia it is reported that only 23% of women disclose domestic violence (ABS 1996). Thus the figures are likely to underestimate the percentage of lone mothers who have experienced domestic violence.

Research by McInnes (2004, p. 1) suggests, "that whilst being a target of violence increases the risk of poverty, being a perpetrator of violence does not have a relationship to wealth status. In fact the use of violence can extract wealth and extra resources for the perpetrator." The key point of relevance here is that the impact of poverty compounds the impact of violence and violence creates and extends poverty for women and their children of violence"(McInnes 2004, p.1). The outcome is that women with children leaving violent relationships face a myriad of personal, social and economic barriers. Violence further impoverishes women in that it affects their ability to work, forces them into welfare dependency and reduces their

Rebecca Patrick

Associate Lecturer
School of Health and Social Development
Deakin University

Dr Kay Cook

Lecturer
School of Health and Social Development
Deakin University

Professor Ann Taket

Head of School
School of Health and Social Development
Deakin University

ability to negotiate child support from violent ex-partners and the state (McInnes 2004).

In Australia, the provision for domestic violence in child support policy is known as an Exemption from serving a Child Support Order. The purpose is to reduce the risk of ongoing abuse and violence against women and children that arises from seeking child support. In those U.S. states with similar policy contexts to Australia, the child support debt keeps accruing whilst there is a waiver in place but once it has expired the ex-partner is liable for full payment. Whereas in Australia, the exemption produces an unintended policy outcome; without a child support order the violent ex-partner does not have to pay child support. Without an accrued debt there is little motivation for violent ex-partners to pay, and in effective, they are financially rewarded for previous abuse. The welfare recipient is entitled to other supplemented welfare but they miss out on the income for child support that can be contributed to their child's health and welfare.

The inherent problems with Australian child support policy are in spite of the fact that the scheme has been subject to ongoing reform since its inception. The current package of reforms (phased in during July 2006 – 2008) consisting of: increased minimum payments (\$5 to \$6); recognition of contact costs and reduction in maximum payments for non-resident parents; more active enforcement of liabilities; and a new formula for calculating payments (Child Support Agency 2006) do not promise to alleviate the problems for single mothers on low incomes, nor those who have experienced domestic violence. For more information about the current reforms and exemption policy visit the Australian Child Support Agency website [www.csa.gov.au]

In Australia, there is a paucity of research that examines the barriers to regular receipt of child support payments and even less understanding about the multiple barriers faced by women who have experienced domestic violence. This paper reports on a qualitative research study conducted in one state of Australia highlighting the stories of women who have experienced domestic violence and their journey through complex child support and welfare institutions. The definition of domestic violence used in the paper reflects the broad definition used by the research participants and the critical and feminist ethnographic traditions employed to conduct the research study. Finally, this paper highlights the barriers posed by violent ex-partners, the institutions and the policy environment.

Methods

The study sought to explore how policies and practices shape the experiences of single-parents when seeking and using child support from violent ex-partners. As the research topic focused on the social organization of the everyday life experiences of participants, ethnographic traditions, particularly critical and feminist ethnographic traditions, (Carspecken 1996; Smith 1987; Spradley 1979) guided

the collection and analysis qualitative data. These critical research traditions have a distinct emancipatory purpose which is reflected throughout the presentation of data.

Participants

Nineteen single parents with children who had experienced domestic violence and received welfare benefits were interviewed for this study by the first two authors of the paper. These interviews were conducted at the onset of reform process (July-September 2006) and as discussed previously brought about changes to minimum payments and a revised formula for calculating assessable income, etc. It is important to note, that the data that was collected related primarily to the experiences of participants prior to the reforms. Hence it is conceivable that the reforms would not have impacted on the issues raised in this paper and the indeed the concerns raised by the participants are still problematic in spite of reforms.

All of the participants were recruited in the state of Victoria, Australia through either Domestic Violence Victoria (the peak body organization for family violence services for women and children), advertisement in Melbourne metropolitan local papers, and community health and welfare agencies. The advertisement sought single parent participants who received a Centrelink payment, were eligible to receive child support and who had experienced domestic violence.

While not specifically requested, all of the respondents to the call for participants were women. Of these women all had:

- experienced varying forms and degrees of heterosexual relationship violence including physical, sexual, emotional, mental, and financial abuse from their ex-partner;
- reported some form of ongoing abuse, violence, harassment and/or fear of violence post separation.

fifteen women had at least one child under the age of 12. Seven women had teenage children. five women reported caring for and supporting step-children during and after their relationship. All reported being welfare dependant at some point post separation. Fourteen were solely welfare dependant at time of interview. Two women combined part-time work (up to 15 hours) with welfare and three participants were working 30 or more hours per week and as such had had their welfare benefits terminated. All of the participants were between the ages of 18-60 years of age and were currently residing in metropolitan Melbourne. The length of time since separation from their ex-partner ranged from 3-15 years.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through in-depth ethnographic interviews (Spradley 1979) which sought to explore the structure, organization, meaning and experience of participants' everyday lives. A loose

interview guide was used during each interview which began with the question, 'Tell me what it has been like to seek child support from your ex-partner'. No other standard questions were posed, but rather, follow-up questions were guided by the topics raised by participants, and issues of relevance raised by participants were followed up in subsequent interviews. Typically, participants first discussed the logistics of seeking and collecting child support to issues of the adequacy of arrangements, the financial, social and emotional consequences of their circumstances and possibilities for future reform.

Three participants were interviewed twice, with a further sixteen participants interviewed only once. Participants who were not followed up for a second interview were those whose initial interview did not provide substantial material for analysis, such as those women not currently receiving welfare; or those women interviewed at the conclusion of the data collection process as all areas of relevance to the emerging analysis were covered in the one interview. For those women who participated in two interviews, any points of contradiction between participants as well as the emerging analysis were discussed in the second interview. These discussions further refined the categories and topics discussed below.

Analysis techniques first involved a basic thematic analysis (Esterberg 2002) to explore the primary areas of experience. These areas of experience included the process of seeking child support, the reality of living on welfare and child support payments including late, irregular, and non-existent payments, the notion of shared responsibility and the stigma of being a welfare mother. This process also resulted in the identification of several 'rich points' (Agar 1999) which were followed-up in detail.

A rich point is a disjuncture between the source (participant's) and the target (researcher's) perspectives, or 'problems in translation, that appear after the research process begins' (Agar 1999, p. 691). These rich points highlight key issues that underpin understanding of the participant's experience. The following analysis and discussion stem from the identification of the key rich point regarding exemptions, which underpinned many of the women's experiences. This rich point was noticed due to inconsistency between the researchers' expectations regarding the process of seeking child support and the participants' experience with Centrelink, the Child Support Agency and ex-partners

Findings

The women in the study identified a range of issues that illustrate the complexities of their lives after leaving a violent relationship: finances, welfare, health, housing, childcare, food, support and employment. These issues form part of the complex of problems that constitute multiple barriers to the receipt of child support. It is not within the scope of this paper to discuss all of the barriers, however, the paper endeavours to present descriptive realities in relation to

three of the barriers associated with seeking child support including those related to the ex-partner, the institutions (in particular, the two key agencies, Centrelink and the Child Support Agency), and the policies (in particular the experience of using the Exemption policy provision). These are considered in turn below.

Experience of seeking child support from ex-partner

All of the participants discussed difficulties associated with obtaining child support from their ex-partner. The women reported utilising a range of Child Support agreements with their ex-partner including private agreements, child support agency mediated agreements and family court orders. The common themes and outcomes were that of receiving no payments or minimum amounts, irregular payments and significant arrears.

He hasn't paid since she was a little girl.
Lisa

His assessment is to pay \$16.25 a month for 3 kids.
Zoe

I've been to the child support agency and they tell me that I'm owed about \$13,000.
Libby

The participants in the study identified a range of loopholes in the system and avoidance tactics that their ex-partners used to forgo their child support obligations. These included quitting their job, declaring bankruptcy, working cash-in-hand, minimising their income under their own or family business, failing to complete returns, hiding income / assets in bank accounts and investments, filing for an exemption on the basis of incapacity to pay, for example owing to drug & alcohol or health issues; or finally being un-contactable i.e. going overseas. Further, family court and custody battles were perceived as another tactic for avoiding /delaying child support payments. This participant's statement sums up the overall sentiment of the women in the study;

They have proper jobs but they say oh, they don't have a job or they're not working or if they're doing a business, they put on other people's names, or they don't pay tax.
Karen

The tactic of harassment and abuse underpinned the participants' experiences of seeking child support. All of the women reported some form of post-separation violence and they surmised that the manipulation of child support responsibilities was part of an ongoing attempt to maintain power and control over the women.

He threatened to take the kids off me if I went for child support and then he kicked the car door in.
Janet

The participants felt that false allegations made against them by their ex-partner (for example that the woman was cheating the welfare system or child protection issues) constituted avoidance and ongoing forms of abuse and harassment. The women felt that this was an example of how the ex-partner and the system colluded to perpetuate the barriers to the receipt of child support

They [Centrelink] cut my payments off whilst they investigated. He told them I had a new fellow. With three children, two with disabilities, when do I get time for a new fellow, it's a joke? But they said we know but we have to investigate it and you never make it up, they don't give you back-pay or anything.

Sam

Experiences with the institutions

The participants spoke at length about how the two key agencies - Centrelink and the Child Support Agency - performed in the process of seeking child support. They identified a range of barriers in the multi-step process of receiving child supports.

A recurring theme was the nature and extent of paperwork involved in obtaining Child Support as well as welfare payments. The women described problems with the volume of paperwork, the length and complexity of forms and range of documentary evidence required to prove entitlements.

Between Centrelink and Child Support, it was just like more and more papers and proving yourself.

Janet

Inaction on behalf of the Child Support Agency to follow-up on non-payments was another source of frustration for the participants. The following case highlights the issue.

I've rung them a couple of times, because he agreed to pay just straight into my bank, and I agreed to that, and that never happened and I've rung back a few times and told them [CSA] that he was not doing it and they did nothing. All they do is ring him and ask him why and that's it, and they reckon that it's better off this way than having the child support case against him and going through them. They haven't been much help at all.

Lisa

The participants highlighted a number of inadequacies within systems and procedures, such as timeframes for processing claims. The women described how the wellbeing of their family was jeopardised owing to the length of time it took to process claims for child support and welfare payments.

It was like a lot of phone calls and a lot of pleading and nothing got done and we weren't getting any payments, I had bills to pay and I was very stressed.

Angela

For these women the overarching sentiment was that, The system is not here for us.

Deb

Reports of the two key agencies staff attitudes and beliefs varied from positive, for example 'very helpful' and 'doing their best' to negative such as 'useless' and 'they make you feel guilty'.

This participant's experience was positive,

They were very supportive and they said 'No, if you've got an [intervention] order just give us a copy'. They were great, they were really supportive and just said 'Look, we won't hassle him for money'.

Beck (Exemption recipient)

Conversely, feelings of stigmatisation on the basis of being a single mother and/or welfare recipient were a concern for the participants. They felt that they were being 'looked down upon'.

Nobody wants to help, and I think when people know that you're a single parent with three kids, they do look down on you. You do get treated differently.

Sam

The Child Support Agency's lack of investigatory powers - understood by the participants as either a lack of administrative resources, lack of will and commitment of staff, and lack of legal/legislative power - was another source of frustration. The participants struggled with the Child Support Agency's inability to follow-up on income evidence such as that provided by the women about their ex-partners employment and assets.

It's frustrating because I know my ex works and I've reported him two or three times to Centrelink and to the Child Support agencies. Nothing every gets done. No one investigates it, and he never gets caught.

Cath

Finally, the participants also identified the problem of a lack of coordination and communication between agencies. They felt that many of the problems associated with obtaining child support were the lack of linkages between the two key agencies - Centrelink and Child Support Agency but also the Australian Tax Office, Family Court and employers. The outcome was that women were frequently passed back and forth between agencies, repeating their stories, filling in extra forms and mediating communication processes that were the responsibility of agencies.

You do get passed back and forward, and the dole is saying, well, it's up to child support and child support is saying, well, it's up to the court and the court is saying well no, it's actually child support, they've got the power to get the money off him.

Sam

me from seeking child support from him.

Beck

Others decided that it easier to privately negotiate rather than go through the exemption process. That is, it was considerably easier to deal with their violent ex-partner than to deal with the government agencies.

The way they explain it to me - - I don't remember it exactly but it sounded quite difficult to do that. I don't know whether you had to make a stat dec or it just sounded like this big hassle to get around, and even then you weren't guaranteed that they weren't going to turn around and go, no, you've still got to get the child support. It was easier just to speak with my ex.

Hannah

The central concern for other women was that they feared their ex-partners actions if they got an exemption and / or documentary evidence such as an intervention order against them. They were uncertain about the ramifications, including predicted retribution from ex-partner, despite the fact that the exemption was a confidential process. Apparently the women were reluctant to further jeopardise the relationship with their children's father not only because of the fear of violence but for the risk of losing informal support and protecting their children's interests.

He was so off track, he was gone in his ugly revenge world that an intervention order would of just made him worse.

Sam

The problem with the exemption for women that were deemed eligible by Centrelink was that the ex-partner escaped responsibility for payment of child support. For these women the exemption provision was perceived as a barrier to financial stability. These women determined that there would be greater financial benefit from income tested child support payments from their ex-partner than the exemption calculated welfare payments. Two women used the exemption to begin with and then realised that there was a significant economic disadvantage for them and their children as their ex-partners child support payments would exceed the payments above the FTB base rate as provided under the exemption option.

You can go for the exemption, but really it doesn't cover half as much as what the kids cost. I mean, I suppose there are pros and cons in everything. With the pay you get from Centrelink, you're better off not getting the exemption, and just keeping the child support.

Penny (Exemption recipient)

The participants that did apply for an exemption did so because of a range of reasons: the advice provided by the key agencies; to ensure Centrelink payments; and/or to minimise the risk of further abuse. A key finding was that exemptions were a short-term solution to child support arrangements and useful for decreasing immediate

Experiences with the Exemption Policy

The current system in Australia requires single parents on welfare to seek child support in order to be eligible for Family Tax Benefits payments above the base rate. In cases of domestic violence, the resident parent can seek an exemption from serving the child support order. People at risk of domestic violence are identified through both Centrelink and the Child Support Agency, however, Centrelink is responsible for the administration of these exemptions.

Of the 19 participants, seven women were granted an exemption. A key finding of the study was that the exemption can be difficult to access and that the exemption presents further barriers to a woman's ability to receive child support. The participants in the study either feared, or were at risk of, ongoing violence post-separation and hence were eligible to apply for an exemption from serving a Child Support Order. The following outlines the range of reasons and hence barriers to uptake of the exemption option.

The women were unaware or not informed of the exemption for domestic violence. These women were either not provided with information and advice about exemptions or could not recall the option being put forward by staff of either Centrelink or the Child Support Agency.

I wish I would of know about the exemption, I definitely would of gone for it!

Cath

Those participants that were aware of the exemption provided a range of reasons for why they did not proceed with an application or dropped out of the process. These women felt that the information provided to them about the process and outcome of an exemption was vague and difficult to understand. Others were deterred by the amount of paperwork involved and the documentary evidence that they were required to submit (i.e. intervention order) to support their application. The women felt that the process was unnecessarily complex, such as needing to frequently reapply or unnecessarily intrusive, for example having to undertake invasive interviews with a social worker. Another concern was the process was not necessarily guaranteed and that one could go through the process and still the exemption may be declined.

I had to embarrassingly go to a social worker at Centrelink and tell them all my personal business to say why I could claim child support from that man. So, after all of those interviews and you know revisiting the pain, they exempted

threats or fear of violence during the initial period of separation transition. After this period private or family court agreements were recommended by the key agencies despite the fact that the fear of violence continued.

The exemption freed me from further violence or threats or abuse from seeking money from my ex-partner. The good side of that exemption was that at least I was getting some support from Centrelink.

Mia (Exemption recipient)

Financial outcomes for women and children

All of the participants reported the ongoing financial struggles of being a single parent and/or welfare recipient. Those participants that were dependant on welfare maintained that, even with careful budgeting, welfare payments did not cover the essentials and that they frequently ran out of money. The women also reported episodes of debt including credit cards, loans through institutions or family/friends and unpaid bills. They talked about the constant financial juggle and trade offs to ensure the health and wellbeing of their children.

It's very difficult because you are constantly struggling. People say oh you're on a pension so you're well off but it's not a lot of money, especially with three kids.

Sam

The women also expressed frustration at the fact that they carried the burden of financially providing for their children while their ex-partner neglected to pay child support, lived a comfortable lifestyle and then used extravagant gifts as a means of manipulating the children.

He brought him a laptop recently and a motorbike, all on the dole, he buys him a lot of stuff but he never paid maintenance, he is a Disneyland dad.

Cath

In terms of the financial value of child support payments opinions varied from; being perceived as essential to help cover the basics of food, health and education;

I have the child support and it help a lot.

Karen

Others dismissed the payments as insulting, as the amounts are not relative to the cost of raising children, nor their ex-partners income.

I find it insulting to accept \$3.30 per month.

Cath

Discussion

As Peterson and Nord (1990 p 540) assert the regular receipt of child support is a multi-step process. They point out that the applicant must progress through a series of stages - eligibility, assessment, agreement, and payment - and that along the way many women do not progress to the next stage. For women who have experienced domestic violence their progression through the system is even more problematic. Findings of this study and similar qualitative investigations conducted in America by Pearson and Griswold (1997) and Postmus (2000) highlight multiple barriers associated with the violent ex-partner, the system and specific policy exemption provisions for survivors of domestic violence.

By definition domestic violence is characterised by deliberate attempts to exert power and to control over another person, be it physically, psychologically, financially (Krug et al 2002; Domestic Violence Victoria 2004)) The manipulation and minimisation of child support post separation can be considered an extension of these forms of domestic violence. In an Australian study conducted by Branigan (2004) on financial abuse of women in intimate relationships, 28 of the 30 people in the study reported their ex-partners were either: minimising their taxable incomes; converting their assets into nonassessable items such as property; salary sacrificing to decrease taxable income; voluntarily becoming unemployed and purchasing assets such as property in other peoples names (Branigan 2004 pg 30). This is consistent with American studies that found low proportions of women from abusive relationships receive regular child support payments because their violent ex-husbands can successfully evade paying (Kurz & Hirsh 2003; Pearson & Griswold 1997). These reports and the findings of our study indicate that violent ex-partners create barriers to child support at various stages, in particular at the assessment, agreement and the payment stages.

Branigan (2004 pg 36), highlights the significance of ongoing financial abuse through the minimisation of child support when she notes "the number of men manipulating their child support responsibilities contributes to a corresponding number of women and children living in poverty". Postmus (2000) frames the problem of post separation violence and child support minimisation as sabotaging a survivor's effort to become self-sufficient. These authors assert an important link between financial abuse through child support and the outcome for women and their children as poverty and dependence on welfare. The findings of our study expand upon this providing further insight to the fact violence continues well beyond separation and serves to erode women and their children financially and emotionally.

According to Lindquist (2001) whilst child support offers many benefits to recipient women and their children, it also presents further risks to women who have experienced domestic violence that are caught up, either voluntarily or unwillingly, in the child support system. Despite the limited number of studies here and abroad, a range of barriers inherent to child support systems has

been identified. American researchers Kurz and Hirsh (2003) point to inefficiencies in the systems such as understaffing and large case loads as being one problem with the child support system. Pearson, Theonnes and Griswold (1999) report highlights application procedures and documentation requirements as key barriers for women escaping domestic violence. Postmus (2000) argues that the attitudes and perceptions of welfare workers such as judgement and stigmatisation of welfare recipients and survivors of domestic violence can inhibit the process of seeking child support. Further, Postmus (2000) describes an inherent lack of flexibility and linkage of child support and welfare requirements is particularly problematic for survivors of domestic violence. In the Australian context, these barriers appear to be problematised further by a lack of investigatory powers or enforcement as evidenced in this study and also in Branigan's (2004) research. Perhaps the more 'active enforcement of child support liabilities' promised in the current reform package shall in part resolve these issues. However at this stage, information about actual implementation and proposed outcomes are lacking qualification.

Keiser and Soss (1998) frame the underlying problem of the child support system as being associated with bureaucratic discretion. They maintain that, as in all social welfare programs, the implementation of child support policy and indeed the use of exemptions is systematically affected by state politics, administrator values, funding and resource demands placed on the agencies. At the agency level, as Brehm and Hamilton (as cited in Keiser & Soss 1998 p 1138) argue, "the administrator's failure to implement exemption provisions may be because they are unaware of them or because they fall outside the normal processing of clients". Time and resource constraints coupled with the vast array of rules and procedures lead to discretionary decision-making; this perhaps in part accounts for the experiences of the women in our study. In support of these claims Wilkins (2002 p 78) argues that the problem is "exasperated by the attitudes, values and predispositions of public bureaucrats as they exercise their discretion in policy implementation". Wilkins' (2002) interpretation is that the public bureaucrats' demographic characteristics in turn affect the distribution of policy benefits on the basis of shared demographics (sex, race, income etc). This may in part explain the experiences of the participants in our study who identified staff attitudes and a sense of being stigmatised on the basis of being a single mother, victim of domestic violence and/or a welfare recipient.

Extending this argument, Branigan (2004) asserts that complex bureaucratic systems may inadvertently support the perpetuation of abuse and indeed the system may become the abuser. Keiser and Soss (1998) argue that owing to legal and social factors, public administrators tend to hold significant power over their clients. This power can be exercised through limiting access to policy provisions, such as the case in our study whereby the women were not informed of the exemption option. Discretionary power may also be applied

in the determination of claims including the types and quality of evidence accepted for an exemption and the amount of assistance provided by the agency contact. As Sheehan and Smyth (2000) (cited in Branigan 2004pg 10) assert "substantial power imbalances exist between separating couples with a background of domestic violence, this often means women are less willing and able to fight for their entitlements". This, coupled with the discretionary use of power over benefits within the welfare and child support system, means that women and their children frequently miss out on the protection from violence and economic hardship that are inherent aims of the policy. Unfortunately it does not seem that the current suite of reforms to the Australian Child Support Scheme provides specific solutions for these problems.

Finally, beyond the challenges of the violent ex-partner, the system's inadequacies and policy implementation anomalies are the actual exemption policy itself. An exemption from child support effectively means that a violent ex-partner escapes financial responsibility for their children. Australia's policy is different to that most parts of the United States, in that the child support debt continues to accumulate whilst an exemption is in place (Lindquist 2001). In Australia, an exemption means that a child support order is either not drawn up or withdrawn and without one the ex-partner does not pay during that period. Add this to the problem that the women in the study did not receive regular or substantial amounts of child support when an order was in place then the violent ex-partner, '*gets off scot-free*' (Cath) and the women '*struggle to put food on the table and a roof over our head*' (Mia).

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of this and similar research studies on violence, child support and poverty indicate that the receipt of child support is a multi-step process plagued with multiple barriers. The lives of single women and their children who have experienced violence are subject to complex child support and welfare provisions. The issues highlighted in this paper represent only a small part of the broad spectrum of individual, family, community, institutional and societal level barriers faced by women escaping violence. What is required in Australia is further research into the range of contributing factors at the various levels including investigation into the adequacy of the system to respond to women who have experienced domestic violence. Specifically, evidence about the impact of bureaucratic processes, agency staff attitudes and values could make a significant contribution to policy reform agendas. Australia requires quantitative data, similar to that available in the United States, about child support and exemption policy outcomes in terms of poverty and ongoing violence.

Policy re-formulation is required, above and beyond the current reforms, to avoid perverse incentives such as the financial incentives attached to the ongoing perpetration of violence or abuse as a means

of avoiding child support obligations. A reassessment of the exemption provision and its implementation is urgently required. This study and associated research has highlighted that child support policy is not consistently alleviating the problem of poverty for women who have experienced domestic violence. Indeed the link between welfare, child support and the exemption further problematises the achievement of the two key policy goals: a decrease the poverty of women and their children; and, a reduction in government spending on welfare.

Finally, as Wilkins (2002) saliently points out, child support policy is to a large extent a gendered issue; it is of significance to women and men albeit for different reasons; gender inevitably influences practices and processes of the system; the active representation of fathers and women's rights in the form of lobby groups; and because child support policy was born out concern for the poverty of women and their children. The added dimension of domestic violence and subsequent feminist explanations of patriarchy and power in explaining domestic violence, means that child support policy for women experiencing domestic violence is a gendered policy area and cannot be seriously critiqued or researched without reference to these theories.

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Published quarterly: February, May, August, November
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