

Australia's child support system facilitates economic abuse — Power to Persuade

Women's Policy Action Tank

We have previously posted analyses of how [Australia's child support system is detrimental to women's financial security and wellbeing](#), and how the [welfare system meets the definitional criteria for economic abuse](#). In today's post, [Kris Natalier](#) (@KrisNatalier) shares findings from her [recent research](#), which indicates that the Australian child support system perpetuates power inequalities and ongoing economic abuse.

Australia has high rates of separated fathers who [do not comply with the terms of their child support agreements and assessments](#). This is typically discussed as a design or implementation flaw in the Child Support Program. But after [interviewing many women](#) who have struggled with their former partner's non-compliance – often for years and with devastating financial and emotional impacts – I argue that we need to rethink the meaning and dynamics of non-compliance. It can be a form of [economic abuse](#).

[Men's deliberate non-payment](#), partial payment or late payment of child support, under-reporting income, non-lodgement of tax returns or minimising taxable income (I describe all of these as withholding child support) are potential strategies of economic abuse. These behaviours do not indicate a failing system – they are a reflection of its logic that buttresses men's financial discretion.

Linking child support and economic abuse

In many instances domestic and family violence is [an expression of power](#). When we recognise this, it becomes clearer that actions described as 'a bad break-up' or 'protecting my money' may be forms of abuse.

Economic abuse occurs when a partner or former partner controls someone's access to and use of economic resources^[i] (Adams et al. 2008). In cohabiting and separated heterosexual relationships, men are more commonly perpetrators.

This abuse undermines economic security and material resources. Its impacts are not only financial: economic abuse erodes women's autonomy and their sense of self.

Withholding child support includes a diverse array of practices but they all limit a former partner's access to and use of financial resources. They undermine economic security and control. Withholding child support reflects social scientific definitions of economic abuse.

Managing child support in Australia

In Australia, more women than men receive child support. Compared to separated and divorced fathers, mothers have lower incomes and are more likely to receive welfare payments. To receive their full welfare entitlements, recipients must lodge a [child support agreement or assessment](#) with the Department of Human Services – Child Support (DHSCS) (unless domestic and family violence is a risk). There are [options](#): people can use Child Support Collect (in which the

DHSCS calculates, collects and transfers money) or Private Collect (parents lodge an agreement but transfer money with no DHSCS involvement).

The official amount of child support impacts on the amount of welfare payments. If less child support is paid, a recipient can report the discrepancy and change the calculation. However, this option is unwieldy and not widely advertised. Single mothers are also clear that the DHSCS are not very responsive when they raise their former partners withholding child support.

The intersection of welfare and child support means that mothers' finances are shaped by their former partner's decision to pay or withhold child support. Many cannot opt out of this situation. Their attempts to report withholding child support do not often lead to sustained change.

So, despite the rules, the DHSCS normalizes and reinforces fathers' discretion over when and how much child support they pay or withhold. In so doing, it builds their power over their former partner's access to economic resources. This embeds the potential for economic abuse.

How women interpret withholding child support

In recent interviews, 29 out of 37 women described a former partner withholding child support.

Women interpreted this as an attempt to control their access to and use of money. For example, Isobel^[ii] explicitly labelled her former partner's refusal to regularly pay \$5 a week as economic abuse:

“You know, I have got myself out of that relationship, we don't share a roof but he still has that financial power over me... He has just been - these government departments give them that power to have this. That's why they've changed the definition of family violence to include economic you know. He's just ruthless.”

Many women recounted how a former partner's withholding child support intensified their economic insecurity even when the amounts were low. It limited the money available to them and undermined their capacity to plan and manage their household budgets.

The effects were not only financial: they eroded women's autonomy and their sense of self as a mother. Viva described the corrosive effects of poverty and disempowerment:

“You start to doubt, you do, you start to doubt yourself, you start to doubt your validity, you start to doubt your femininity, you start to doubt your sexuality, you start to doubt your motherhood skills.”

Women linked their former partner's behaviours to state policy and DHSCS practices. They described three things that reinforced men's financial discretion and the potential for economic abuse.

First, women's reliance on welfare payments meant they were not able to limit their former partner's control by opting out of child support. Mary described reaching the end of her tether over her former partner hiding income to minimise child support assessments:

“I rang them up and I got really annoyed and I said to the lady a couple of months ago, I said, “Don't even bother. Don't bother taking the \$15. Seriously what is the point? You tell me what \$14.99 can do me a fortnight for two

children”... She said they have to because it’s a claim. It’s a claim. I legally have to claim it and I have to go through the Child Support Agency [DHSCS] legally now if you claim Centrelink [welfare payments].”

Second, DHSCS compliance processes were not pursued by government workers, or were ineffective.

Third, workers normalised men withholding child support. Evie echoed many women’s experiences when she reported DHSCS staff responses to her former partner’s irregular and partial payments:

‘I’ve had a number of people, probably maybe four or five different staff say, “You should be just counting yourself lucky if you get anything at all”’.

Withholding child support is a systemic issue

Individual men decide to withhold child support and perpetrate economic abuse. Individual women suffer. Individual DHSCS workers are more or less effective and diligent in pursuing non-compliance. But this is a systemic issue. The possibility of economic abuse is intensified through child support policy and DHSCS practices that support and normalise men’s financial discretion and power. Kelly and Tania summed this up:

“Child Support, they’re ineffective, nothing happens. They’re set up to respect the other person’s [the payee] rights. They are. They’re set up to respect the other person’s rights in the face of unbelievable unfairness (Kelly).”

“I’ve met plenty of men who, and women who, have separated from the partners of their children, and the men are very responsible, and they look after the kids, they have the kids, they financially care for the kids. So the system works if the fathers are decent. But if the fathers are not, you know, they’re not going to hold any responsibility for their kids, then there’s nothing that holds them accountable (Tania).”

Recognising this as an institutional issue can shift our focus to the role of the state in regulating and facilitating rather than preventing child support-related economic abuse.

This is challenging. If withholding child support is a question of affordability or perceived fairness, then tweaking the formula used to assess contributions might fix the issue. Dismantling the logic of the system – especially when it intersects with family law and welfare systems – is a much larger undertaking.

Any response must also be sensitive to the knowledge that withholding child support is not always economic abuse. Men on low incomes can struggle to pay child support. Punishing them can perpetrate classed and raced economic disadvantage. For example, poor Black men have been disproportionately incarcerated in U.S. states where fathers can be jailed for not paying child support.

However, policy responses must begin with a shift in understanding the nature and impact of child support non-compliance. It is not only an administrative challenge or a problem between parents – it reflects gendered power and privilege and can be a form of economic abuse facilitated by the state.

Endnotes

[i] Adams, A. E., Sullivan, C. M., Bybee, D., & Greeson, M. R. (2008). Development of the scale of economic abuse. *Violence against women*, 14(5), 563-588.

[ii] Names have been changed.

This post is part of the [Women's Policy Action Tank](#) initiative to analyse government policy using a gendered lens. View our other policy analysis pieces [here](#) and follow us on Twitter [@PolicyforWomen](#)