

Child support and the F word — Power to Persuade

Women's Policy Action Tank

Poverty in Australia appears to be [entrenched for many marginalised groups](#), and this is a concern which is regularly raised in the lead-up to the Federal election – [is Australia “fair”?](#) However, one policy area on which there is resounding silence is child support. In today's federal election series, [Kris Natalier](#) (@KrisNatalier) of Flinders University and Terese Edwards (@Terese_NCSMC) of the [National Council for Single Mothers and their Children](#) argue that child support reform is urgently needed to reduce poverty levels and improve financial and psychological wellbeing for some of Australia's most disadvantaged families.

The Australian community has jumped from the [Federal Budget 2019](#) announcements into the thrust of a national election. The Federal Budget is a blueprint of the priorities and economic plan of the government. The election is a contest of ideas, a marker of the issues and ethics that citizens and their leaders claim to be important. Each continues the deafening silence around child support.

In a political context where the 'F' word – fairness – is regularly trotted out, powering the claims and critiques of the major parties, the absence of public discussion around child support needs to be challenged.

The Australian child support system touches on [more than 1.5 million separated parents](#) and [approximately 1.2 million children](#). Child support debt stands at [1.6 billion](#). High proportions of women report they [do not receive payments in full and on time](#). These numbers are a cautionary estimation and under-estimation because the DHS does not include details for customers who have a [private arrangement](#) (i.e., transfer of child support with no involvement by the Department of Human Services). There are also concerns about payers' [under-reporting of income and non-lodgement of tax returns](#).

Such issues overwhelmingly impact on single mothers – one of the [most economically vulnerable and socially marginalised groups](#) in our society (see also [ABS data on household type and poverty](#)). In an election and budget context where fairness is often invoked, silence about child support muffles debate about the gendered nature of poverty.

Here we highlight the tensions in the treatment of child support and three issues that have been accorded recognition in public and political commentary around the Budget and election.

Child support and poverty

The recent Budget and now election campaigning have focused concerns about poverty, primarily centred on Newstart and Youth Allowance rates - for example [the high-profile #RaisetheRate campaign](#) and a [commitment to undertake a review by the leader of the Federal opposition](#)).

Single mothers are a group who experience high rates of poverty. And while child

support is not a key driver of this, when paid reliably and at reasonable amounts, it has the [capacity to reduce poverty](#) and [assist single mothers to return to employment](#). Additionally, it intersects with the social security system to determine welfare payments. When child support is not consistently paid, the [complexity and unresponsiveness](#) of the system leaves many women with less money, irrespective of the amounts recorded ‘on the books’.

Arguing for increases in the amount of government transfers with no connection to child support payment issues risks over-simplifying and de-gendering the structure and experiences of poverty.

Child support and surveillance

[The punitive approach of ParentsNext](#) has informed commitments to “voluntary participation” (the Greens) and an “overhaul of the program” (ALP). It has also amplified continuing concerns about Robo-debt: that surveillance of poor people, and poor women in particular, is harsh and disproportionate.

Conversely, child support reporting issues remain in the shadows, with little to no public scrutiny. There are [over 200,000 child support customers with an outstanding annual return](#), eroding the efficacy of the scheme and with the potential of reducing child support assessments and the money transferred to single mothers.

Many single mothers describe [a lack of responsiveness to their reports of irregular, late or no child support payments](#). Compliance options are either not used or applied too late to mitigate the financial harm.

Over-surveillance of poor single mothers is the flip-side of the minimal oversight and accountability afforded to payers of child support – and both sides of the coin erode women’s financial stability and capacity to mother.

Child support and domestic violence

The [Federal government has announced \\$328 million](#) to fund prevention and response strategies directed towards violence against women and children – including the [much critiqued couples counselling](#). The ALP has raised the possibilities of [‘flexible support packages’](#), to address the financial hurdles of leaving violent relationships.

However, [child support can be a strategy of economic abuse](#), whereby men withhold payments as a means of controlling women’s financial security and agency. A commitment to addressing domestic and family violence needs to extend beyond cohabitation and its immediate aftermath, and beyond obvious physical violence, to addressing the systems that facilitate abuse in taken for granted ways.

Where there’s a will there’s a way

The issues we raise here can be addressed through the implementation of specific policies.

1. Child support should be paid in full and on time. Recovery action should be taken as soon as the child support payment is late. Existing compliance options should be applied and new strategies introduced – for example, child support debt is reflected in credit ratings.
2. The [legal loopholes that allow child support to be minimised and or](#)

[avoided](#) need to be closed. One easy fix is to ensure that annual tax returns are lodged within the required time period.

3. A trial of government guaranteed child support should be introduced, as recommended by the [2015 Parliamentary Inquiry report](#). Women who have escaped family violence could be the ideal pilot group for this trial.

Applying these policies necessitates a shift in understanding the ‘problem’ of child support. Our experiences as advocates and researchers lead us to conclude that child support is seen as private, unresolved conflict between former partners who cannot get along rather than a policy failure that is perpetuating poverty and increasing surveillance and control over women and children. We are concerned, too, that its invisibility reflects assumptions that call into question the claims of single mothers as individuals and as a stigmatised and devalued category of people. Advocating for fairness – in any budget and in the current electioneering – requires facing up to how gendered processes structure and ignore poverty beyond the usual sites for critique and concern.

*This post is part of the [Women's Policy Action Tank](#) initiative to analyse government policy using a gendered lens, and this piece is part of our *Federal Election series 2019*. [Photo credit for the voter's box in our logo: Flaticon](#). View our other policy analysis pieces [here](#) and follow us on Twitter [@PolicyforWomen](#)*