

27 May 2022

Prime Minister

Hon Anthony Albanese

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House of Representatives

Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Prime Minister,

Congratulations on becoming Australia's 31st Prime Minister. We heard and felt the immense pride when you spoke on Saturday night. We listened as you talked about your journey, the love, and the respect that you hold for your mother. Furthermore, you reached out and planted hope when you uttered the words, "No one left behind" and cheered when you reaffirmed the commitment for the "Uluru Statement from the Heart."

My name is Terese Edwards and I have the honour of being the Chief Executive Officer of the National Council of Single Mothers & their Children Inc for over a decade. Our organisation has championed single mother families since 1973. My world is full of amazing women, women who fiercely love and protect their families - women who fully or mostly raise their children by themselves.

We are diverse and our pathway into single parenting is varied but there are common themes. Mostly single parents are women and sadly too many are affected by gender violence which extends, commences, or escalates in separation. Financial hardship is not a choice but a constant presence. Unpaid care, both the direct and indirect costs, remain invisible within policy setting and under a conservative Government it was erased from the Child Support Scheme (CSS). The CSS does not reflect the system as created by the Brian Howe AO who still talks passionately about its enactment and laments its demise.

The policy settings which can be interpreted as unnecessarily cruel can be rectified, especially those that challenge and reduce our autonomy and financial security such as the cashless debit card and income management regimes. More recently we have entered a period of postcode policy. Blame is upon our shoulders whilst flawed policy can limit our capacity and resources.

Findings and actions from reputable bodies such as the recent [recommendations](#) made by the Joint Parliament Human Rights Committee on a pre-program known as ParentsNext was ignored. However, we now have an opportunity to reimagine the program beyond its current manifestation of compulsion and suspension. Moreover, the previous government, rather than working with us or accepting recommendations from the United Nations as they [investigated the](#) allegation that Australia has violated single mothers' Human Rights, sought for the complaint's dismissal.

Findings did not alter the policy course – it just continued.



To engage with a new Government, The National Council of Single Mothers, and their Children (NCSMC) created a survey to give voice and present single mothers' perspectives, asking them to rank statements from *not important* to *extremely important* with regards to their daily lives. It is a privilege to have this data which can be employed for more detailed policy discussion but there were some key findings from the 300+ single mothers. It may not surprise you that it is 'extremely important' for single mothers to provide the environment in which their children can have their own dreams, that they want to feel proud, and that every day they step-up and do their best, often when the other has stepped away. To this point, we are impatient for a new culture and policy deliberations, one which ceases the stigma and prejudice. It is time for the policy stick to be benched, we have felt it at every federal budget for well over a decade. It is accumulated pain.

Other Findings

- 66 % of respondents and or their children had experienced domestic violence
- Close to 80% live with housing issues such as constant housing stress, sleeping rough and or homelessness.
- 42% sole parent have a disability or parent a child with disabilities.
- 39% of families were affected by the \$1.7 B outstanding child support (which is underreported)

Simply put, 92% just want their family to feel safe, and resent the expectation to just 'get over' gendered violence; it is personal, it is traumatic, and it takes time and specialist services to escape and or recover. A paltry 26 weeks of reprieve of mutual obligations points to the failings of our social security system. It is the only protective mechanism in our 'safety net' and the process is gruelling and requires the re-telling of trauma and a burden of proof. **A more effective and sustainable option would be an automatic 12 month-exemption.**

Family laws allow the abuser to control where victim-survivors can live, using the court as a weapon, and was regarded as an extremely important issue by 83% of those surveyed. NCSMC believes that if the Australian community knew that men with a substantiated violence order can keep their victim-survivors accessible to them and their networks that they would share our call for immediate change. **We are now hopeful that the Family Law Amendment (A Step Towards a Safer Family Law System) Bill 2020**, a private bill sponsored by Graham Perrett MP could become legislation.

There was a strong response and endorsement for a [Royal Commission into Family Violence](#) whereby the findings and recommendations have the power to unearth protracted, intersectional and national safety issues. Furthermore, 93% of our survey respondents strongly endorse that the [National Plan to Reduce Violence Against Women and Children](#) states 'financial insecurity' as a dedicated priority area. It remains a concern that there is not a domestic violence payment, and even if impacted by gender violence, women can be thrown onto the unemployment benefit rather than be granted an exemption that would enable the retention of the more appropriate Parenting Payment. It is our disgrace that in a year **7,700 women return to their abuser whilst 9,000 survivors end up homeless.** Moreover, access to the **Parenting Payment for women who are not Australian's citizens is deeply problematic**, especially if they are court ordered to remain in Australia. I was so troubled by the effect

of this policy that I recently entered into correspondence with the New Zealand Prime Minister as all domestic efforts have failed.

In closing, it is our shame that our social security system for single mothers is the bleakest it has been since 1973. **Once the youngest child reaches eight years of age, she is no longer classified as 'parenting' but 'unemployed.'** The policy just made families poorer and more vulnerable to high rents, with no way of keeping up with cost pressures or having the necessary means to raise children fairly. School fees, uniforms, and fundamental needs of growing kids are all ignored as families live hand to mouth on Jobseeker payments, already proven to be under the poverty line. This policy outcome was never about jobs or about helping single mothers as the unemployment payment was never designed for sole parents. It does not help women to juggle the demands of heading up a family and gaining paid work. Jobseeker has fierce rules, with the payment reduced as a meagre \$75 is earned within a week. We knew this before the policy was enacted and the harsh outcomes was confirmed in [research](#). Whilst all single mothers became poorer, women who had low paid work, were and remain the hardest affected.

We trust that this is the start of our dialogue and are seeking a small roundtable to discuss single mother concerns as the intersectional barriers that face single mothers transcends one portfolio. **We especially want Treasury at the meeting to advance child support which is also taxation avoidance.** It is my ambition that you treat this letter with a high sense of priority, to reflect upon the voices of women who shared their very personal statements. Below is a small sample from the received which reached 600 plus. We are not short of solutions and possibilities; it is the denial of our wisdom that has created a pandemic of powerlessness.

Warm Regards,



Terese Edwards

CEO of the National Council of Single Mothers & their Children

Women`s Voices

Domestic violence has contributed to me being fully reliant on a disability pension. I studied and worked hard for many years to support my children but now am unable to work and feel ignored and unsupported. I have experienced homelessness with two little girls` due violence and through no fault of my own and government agencies did nothing. They say a country is only as good as how it treats its most vulnerable, and Australia should be ashamed.

My children should not live in poverty because I have a disability

My ex-partner chose to give up his very well-paid job to avoid child support. Not once - 3 times. Take child support debt from super. Help ensure children are not placed in such vulnerable situations.

As a carer of a child almost turning eight, I will lose over \$100 a week (my food money). I am an emergency foster carer also and will be forced to look for work. Who would you like to look after the almost fifty thousand vulnerable foster children in care while forcing the quality carers you have into work and paying us nothing? As a foster carer, I cannot get a loan, I cannot earn extra money and I cannot pay my bills. At least with the coronavirus supplement I was able to save for heating last year.

Can't get a toe in the rental market at all, lost category 1 for public housing during pandemic because my disability meant I couldn't engage in the review. Hearing impairment means I can't do phone calls and visual impairment made (at the time) it impossible to find their details which were buried in email program on phone. Now have iPad and found the homelessness services details but they're not returning my emails

There are too many gaps in the child support system, and me and my beautiful, kind, and heartbroken daughter have fallen through. I have been able to get on my feet again because of the support of my parents, but I work in homelessness services and meet far too many mums who do not have that privilege.

I was making good progress with my son prior to the change to parenting payment (8 years). He was improving at school and getting all the extra assistance I could find for him. That change to my payment changed our lives for the worse. I had to work longer hours. I could not take him to so many appointments. Firstly, because I could not afford them and secondly because I had to work.

Children turning eight does not suddenly remove the responsibility of those children.

Firstly, I have felt unsafe my child's whole life. I am isolated from my hometown and my family, I cannot go home as I constantly looking over my shoulder, family law facilitates my ex's coercive control. I have had to move again after my ex stole my car and my furniture that was in storage whilst my child and I were homeless for 11 months. To keep my child and I safe I had to walk away, too scared for it to go through courts as I need to keep my child away from the coercive control

Overdue child support payments need to be tied to credit reports. It is not useful for the parent with the child to just see the money as an amount owed to them for years. I would like to use the money owing to my daughter for her school fees. Child is twelve. Child support has been late or only partial

payments for about 11 years. It really needs to be used when the child needs things not when the child has grown up.

We are not unemployed, we are unpaid workers, each doing the job of two people. We are painted by society as single mothers waiting for a handout and not mothers whose ex-partners do not provide support for their kids and dropped their responsibilities. I am sick and tired of the victim blaming

I left an abusive marriage more than 2 years ago, and I am still waiting for safe and affordable housing.

Domestic violence is not ok - change what you are doing so it actually changes something to help the victims in this country before too many more die. Help us get back on our feet and to provide a safe and secure future for our babies so they do not live the same cycle we have - change the cycle - you have the power do to something and you do not - it is not enough, and it is not ok

Worked my whole life and have become homeless at 48 with an 11yr old son

Being able to afford for me under-fives to go to social and sporting activities like soccer, rugby tots, kindy gym, dance, etc. would be really nice.

The child support system needs a complete overhaul, our children are important. It takes two to make the child so why is only one parent footing the bill for majority of their care? Why are our children going without? Why do we have to live in poverty because the other parent payments are not followed up? Children are the future, make them a priority!

Parenting payment Single needs to be reinstated to the youngest child turns sixteen or more currently until your youngest finishes year 12. Sole parents have a job of two parents, and they are struggling below the poverty line. My child recently turned eight, I work part time (earning \$1860 gross f/n). I must do the school run morning and afternoon, I lost parenting payment (\$250f/n) due to my child's age and my family payment was reduced by \$100 because my child turned 8 yrs when my expenses have not changed. I am struggling to make ends meet daily

Constant threats of being forced onto the Cashless Debit Card that will limit my autonomy and self-determination, infringe upon my consumer and human rights are causing my family stress and to fear for our future.

Prime Minister, please raise the rate. Food is becoming a luxury. I am exhausted.

Every parent that is part of the Child support system both payer and payee should be made to lodge yearly tax returns, my ex-husband has not lodged for the 10 years since we split up due to him being the perpetrator of DV. Myself and my children were traumatised and took years to recover. I have pretty much always worked at least a casual job but barely scraped through, my children missed out on so much growing up. I am now lucky enough to have a full-time job but my eldest is eighteen now, we needed help years ago.

I am a solo parent with 100% custody, \$8/week child support for two children, work 20hrs a week over 5 days and a carer for my mother. I would be better off on Centrelink benefits but want to show my children what good values are. I was stood down from my usual job during covid for almost 2 years. I received job keeper and have not felt this financially comfortable for over 20 years!! I must live with my mother as I can't afford rent and don't own a house. We cannot get ahead!!

We need to work more than 25 hours a fortnight to make money without rent taking it all

More help for New Zealand citizens with Australian kids. There is no single parenting payment. It's wrong.

As a working single parent - I have a good job and still can't afford to buy a house. I can't get my child into after school care as there are not enough places and it is booked out at the kid's school.

My children are very bright and talented (my sons IQ is 150). The struggle to get ASD assessments in a timely and helpful manner whilst experiencing the blight of poverty.

I think my caring responsibilities should be considered volunteer work. Managing a household and taking care of children is bloody hard work.

Would love to have enough money for food that I didn't have to attend food pantries just to eat every week.

Want to be able to pay my rent, pay my bills and buy a full grocery shop every fortnight. I don't want to have to afterpay supermarket shopping so my kids can eat.

As a single parent of 3 children that have disabilities, our life is hard. We fled a domestic violence situation and our lives got thrown in the chaos. We were put in a too hard basket, and I had to find and fight for every resource. I was already a carer, but it took close to 9 weeks to receive a full payment. In that time, were evicted from our house for non-payment, lived off donated food and worst of all I had to stop purchasing lifesaving medications for my children. We applied for housing and what might seem like a fairly straightforward process for most, ended up being a 3mth ordeal. They would not except our application because we had to get Dr reports and forms done. We have been on the priority housing list for over 3yrs and still waiting. We currently pay \$620 a week in rent while living on the Carers Payment. I receive no child support even though the children have been in my care every day without a break for the last 4 years.

Employment is not always an option when the school is calling the parent once or twice a week to pick their child/ren up early from school, and then add caring for sick children. Single parents stay on Parenting Payment until their youngest child is in high school, at least. Trying to work full time - or even part time - whilst paying for childcare and having to take time off whenever your kids have a sniffle, is insanely difficult. At least if your kids are teenagers, you can leave them home alone if you need to.

If experiencing family violence and/or ongoing post separation abuse lets us keep the single parent payment

I have been on the social housing wait list since I was 19. I am, 45 now. I want my own home.

How do I continue to live off \$30 week, my life since my daughter turned 8 (lost PPPS)? I work part time. I get \$37 child support per fortnight while her dad works part time and does cashies.

Please please listen to the National Council, it is possible. Thank you