

The Impacts of the Supporting Mother's Benefit

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Abstract:

The Supporting Mother's Benefit was legislation introduced in 1973 by the Whitlam government. It was a welfare payment given to mothers that who didn't qualify for the existing Widow's pension. This was a turning point because it provided women with the means to choose to raise their children without a father figure.

In the early 1970s, Australia's Female Liberation Movement began to win sweeping advances for women's rights because of a range of policy reforms (Williams, 1998). One of these reforms was the Supporting Mothers' Benefit which was awarded to never married mothers and other types of mothers who were not eligible for the Widow's Pension. Before 1973, the process of getting a pension or any financial aid from the state was immensely complicated and near impossible. The Widow's Pension provided the largest amount of welfare and concessions, and was only available to women who had been divorced, deserted or widowed. Unmarried women who were raising their children alone faced difficult choices, often involving the traumatic relinquishment of their child for adoption or working long hours to support her family. (Sheen V, 2014). The introduction of the Supporting Mother's Benefit was a significant event in the Female Liberation Movement because it provided women with further control over their bodies and their lives especially in relation to their children. This reduced the number of adoptions, social stigma towards single parents and helped abolish the legal concept of illegitimacy.

The Supporting Mothers' Benefit was introduced to reduce the number of adoptions. In the Western world, adoption was the solution to the growing problem of illegitimate children and single motherhood (Gair, 2012). As shown in figure 1, in the late 1960s and early 1970s the amount of legal adoptions peaked. The practice of adoption was intensely traumatising. Birth mothers often experienced a high incidence of grief which often intensified over time. (Gair, 2012). The lack of financial support played a role in helping convince women to relinquish their child. Swain and Howe (1995) argued

Figure 1 Number of children legally adopted in Australia, 1968–69 to 2004–05

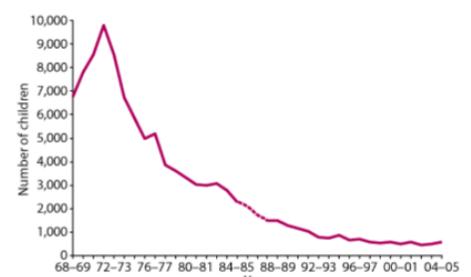


Figure 1. Source: Australian Institute of family Studies (2011).

that the success of adoption was built upon the grim prophecies that depicted single women raising their children as being condemned to living in poverty and despair. This was often true as Brenda Richards (2012), who was a single parent in the 1960s and 1970s explained: "I was renting in Camberwell and the roof was falling in. I'd been working days at the Tom Pipers' factory in Port Melbourne and waitressing in the Australia Hotel in the city at night. I had a single mother nearby looking after the children. I was exhausted and had to find somewhere to live as the house I was renting was to be demolished. I didn't have anywhere to go." Linda Stevens, another single mother, demonstrates the persuasive nature of this depiction when she was told to adopt her child because they "would grow up in the gutter and she would be forced to become a prostitute in order to support [them]" (Committee of Origins, 2012). Figure 1 demonstrates that after 1973, the year of the introduction of the Supporting Mother's benefit, the number of adoptions dramatically decreased. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' investigation into one parent families in 1996, the number of single parent families increased from 175,900 in 1971 to 221,469 in 1976. This shows that the introduction of the Supporting Mothers' Benefit reduced the amount of adoptions; providing women with the opportunity to choose and the means to care for their children. Therefore this benefit changed the trend of adoption and was a significant event for women.

Prior to 1973, unmarried mothers faced severe social stigma. 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 (McHugh and Millar, 1995). Women who had children out of wedlock were perceived as stupid or selfish. This was demonstrated by single mother Dawn, who reported that a nurse she was talking to had said that "unmarried mothers were kept in a separate ward at the hospital where she did her training. She said this was a good idea too because they were stupid, poor types of girls, apt to upset everyone else. (Committee of Origins, 2012)" This affected their economic position because access to financial support was incredibly difficult as it was seen as futile waste of money because single mothers were stupid or morally corrupt. Rosemary Kiely, who became a single mother, in the 1960s recalled asking her social worker about her options for support. The social worker stated "There are no benefits for women like you. You've broken all the rules and you get nothing"

(Kiely, 1984). This dismissive attitude towards single mothers by the public was shared by governments prior to the Whitlam Government, resulting in the lack of adequate financial assistance for those women wanting to raise their children alone. Therefore this negative perception of unmarried mothers condemned them to a life of poverty (Higgins, (2011). Professor Shurlee Swain stated that unmarried mothers were shunned, shamed and set apart because of the patriarchy or more specially the patriarchal control over women's bodies. She further explained that women who had children outside of wedlock were breaking two main rules of the patriarchy. By raising the child alone, they denied a man from having control over the next generation, at the same time taking control of their own lives and bodies. This threatened the patriarchy's power over women, hence these women had to be punished by shaming and excluding them from "polite" society.

A clear benefit with the introduction of the Supporting Mothers' Benefit was a decrease in the social stigma associated with single-parenthood for women. Jill Roe (1983) stated that the benefit "stripped away another sex-related stigma... thereafter motherhood sufficed regardless of marital status." As shown through the decrease in adoptions, the Supporting Mothers' Benefit provided women who found themselves pregnant outside of wedlock with a viable option. In the years following, articles and testimonies of women who had been mistreated began to circulate and conversations commenced about unmarried mothers (Committee of Origins, 2011). The financial support created the space and time for single parent support and activist groups to form and become active, such as the National Council for the Single Mother and her Child, which started in 1973 (Carson and Hendry, 2012). The increase of freedom that the Supporting Mothers' Benefit gave clearly began to reduce the amount of social backlash and the separation of the women who dared to retain their children. Therefore this benefit was an important moment in reducing the level of social stigma related to unmarried mothers.

The Supporting Mothers' Benefit indirectly encouraged Victoria, a notoriously slow state in encouraging welfare payments for single mothers, to institute the Status of Children Act in 1974, which abolished the term "illegitimate" from the law of Victoria (Carson and Hendry, 2012). Pre 1974, all children born outside of wedlock would be stamped with the title of

filius nullius; son of nobody (Carson and Hendry, 2012). This meant that those children would suffer several legal restrictions (Charlesworth, 2012). Illegitimate children had no legal claim to their father's names and therefore no right to financial support nor to inheritance. As they were kin to nobody, they had no legal right to know both of their natural parents (Carson and Hendry, 2012). According to Stephanie Charlesworth, these legal restrictions came down to the representation of the relationship between the parents and the child in the law. As mentioned above because the child was "kin to nobody" they had no right to financial support from either parents. This means that nothing could compel ex-nuptial fathers to acknowledge, care for and maintain their children (Charlesworth, 2012). If the mother chose to keep her child, the father had no obligation to provide money. The mother could argue her case in the Magistrates' Court but had to answer intrusive questions about the sex-life between her and the father. This was expensive and embarrassing for all parties in the matter (Council of Single Mothers, 2018). Also with the lack of paternity testing, proving the identity of the father, if he chose to deny it, was also a difficult and potentially traumatising ordeal. The changing social environment arising from the introduction of the Supporting Mothers' Benefit contributed to the abolition of the legal term "illegitimacy" (Charlesworth, 2012).

Therefore the Supporting Mothers' Benefit had a widespread effect on society which operated on different levels. By providing unmarried, pregnant women with access to financial support, more women kept their children thus reducing the adoption rate. Those families were removed from poverty. The Supporting Mothers' Benefit led to an important change in society towards the single mothers and their children, decreasing the social stigma they had suffered previously. This benefit recognised that all mothers, regardless of marital status, were important to the child and had equal right to raise their children, irrespective of the men in their lives. This new environment led to other amendments to dated law such as the concept of "illegitimacy". In conclusion the establishment of the Supporting Mothers' Benefit was a turning point in Australia's history, which led to reversal of previous discriminatory laws and encouraged our society to be tolerate and supportive of different types of families.

Source	Annotation:
<p>Baldock C. Cass B. (eds). (1983). <i>Women Social Welfare and the state</i>. Sydney. NSW. George Allen and Unwin.</p>	<p>This book explains the economic dependency of women and what policies reinforce/subtract from that.</p> <p>This book is certainly useful as it contains educated information about policies and the Supporting Mother's Benefit. However, it is written from one very distinct perspective. Therefore, I will definitely use this resource however I will be mindful of it's one-sided nature.</p>
<p>Carson D and Hendry F. (2012). <i>Single But Not Alone the First 40 years of the Council of Single Mother and their Children</i>. Melbourne, Australia: Printbround group.</p>	<p>This book is an incredibly valuable biography about a single parent activist group whom was very involved with the benefit. This information is useful as this group is very knowledgeable about the issues and contains many primary sources, however this book only has one perspective. This means that will is incredibly useful, it also evidences one side of the story.</p>
<p>Charlesworth S. The Impact of the Victorian Status of Children Act 1974 on the Legal and Social Rights of Children born to Unmarried Parents. http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/UTasLawRw/1985/6.pdf</p>	<p>This report discusses the Status of Children act and how it changed society. It also links the benefit to this act. This is a very useful source as contains objective, analytical information. However, this source was written much later, therefore could be prejudiced with new norms rather than norms then.</p>
<p>Council of Single Mothers and their Children Inc. (2018, Autumn). Celebrating Single Mothers Now and Always. <i>Stronger Together</i>. 1</p>	<p>This magazine contains information about past practices and stores from former single parents. It's useful because it gives a concise and knowledgeable history however it is also not useful because the information is documented mush later than when it happened, therefore it could be inaccurate.</p> <p>However I will use this information as it is similar to my other pieces of information.</p>
<p>Council of Single Parent and their Children Inc. (2018, Autumn). Thankyou Lena. <i>Stronger Together</i>. 10.</p>	<p>This magazine contains information about past practices and stores from former single parents. It's useful because it provides anecdotal evidence, however is also not useful as the information is restricted to one person, not a broader group of people.</p> <p>However I will use this information as it is similar to my other pieces of information</p>
<p>Committee of Origins. (2011) History Timeline of Adoptions in Australia. file:///C:/Users/HAR0040/Downloads/sub_170b_origins%20timeline.pdf pg 29.</p>	<p>This is a timeline that discusses how the issues of adoption was approached and perceived throughout Australia's history. This is a very useful source as it contains primary sources and it</p>

	written very objectively. However, as it is a collection of news articles, it may not contain all the articles on the matter, therefore does not explain the whole story.
Fitts S, Kiely R, Richards, B. (1984) CSMC 1969-1984 Beginning. The Scarlet Letter. 11.1.	This magazine article is very useful as it contains anecdotal evidence about single parents in the 1960s. However, it only contains three very similar perspectives and not a range of single parents discussing the issues. Therefore, whilst it's useful and I will use it, it is limited in its use.
Gair S. (2012). Rewriting Australia's History of Forced Adoption. Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/re-writing-australias-history-of-forced-adoption-5142	This source is an in-depth investigation into past adoption practices. While it's useful because of the level of detail it conveys, it is written to persuade the reader of a certain perspective. Once again this source is a useful but limited resource.
Higgins, D. (2011). Unfit Mothers or Unjust Practices. Retrieved from https://aifs.gov.au/publications/family-matters/issue-87/unfit-mothers-unjust-practices	This source is a government report on a past adoption practices. This is a useful resource because it contains relevant information about the topic which has clearly been fact-checked, therefore I will use this.
McHugh M Millar J. (1995). Sole Mothers in Australia: Supporting women to Seek Work. Pg 13-14 https://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/media/SPRCFile/dp071.pdf	This is a report about what policies need to be set in place in order to support sole mothers to seek work. This is slightly useful because it contains some important and relevant information, but this report is discussing a completely different issue. Therefore, I will use some of the important gleaned from this report but not all of it.
Neville-Turner J. (1995) Adoption or Anti-adoption? Time for a National Review of the Law. Retrieved from http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/JCULawRw/1995/2.pdf	This is a report about past adoption practices. This report does contain relevant information therefore it's a useful resource. However it only contains one perspective on the issue therefore it's useful but limited.
Unknown. Social change and Unmarried Mothers (2018) retrieved from http://forcedadoptions.naa.gov.au/content/social-change-and-post-war-unmarried-mothers-topic-3	This a report on unmarried mothers and their state in the world. This contains relevant information therefore it's a useful resource.
Sheen V. (2014). Retrieved from https://theconversation.com/gough-whitlams-life-and-legacy-experts-respond-33228	This is an online article about the importance of Gough Whitlam's legacy. This explains some of the significance of the Supporting Parents' Benefit, however only one perspective is portrayed. Therefore this source is useful but is limited in its use.
Unknown. Illegitimacy.(2018). Retrieved from https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/guide/nsw/NE00981	This source contains basic information about illegitimacy. It possesses little, but useful information. However, the source of the resource is not trustworthy. Therefore, I will use this source if the information is backed up elsewhere.

<p>Unknown (1984). New Adoption Bill. The Scarlet Letter. 12. 7.</p>	<p>This source contains several facts about the amendments to the Adoption bill and contains several primary sources. It is also written from one perspective. Therefore it is useful but limited.</p>
<p>Williams K. (2002). Retrieved from https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/womens-liberation</p>	<p>This contains some information about the Women's Liberation Movement. This is useful, however the source of the resource may not be the best therefore it may not be accurate.</p>