


welfare to work:
a challenge to family
values

The Premier's Council for Women
New South Wales
2007



Background

In July 2007, the New South Wales Minister for Women, the Hon Verity Firth MP, requested that the Premier's Council for Women (PCW) investigate the impact of Welfare to Work on women in NSW.





Welfare to Work

- Welfare to Work is an initiative of the Australian Government to move people on welfare into work. It introduces minimum work requirements for:
 - parents/principal carers whose youngest child is aged 6-15 years,
 - people with disability who are assessed as capable of working 15-29 hours per week,
 - people who have been unemployed for a long time, and
 - people aged 50 to 64.



Women affected by Welfare to Work

Women who may have previously received the Parenting Payment or Disability Support Pension, now receive the lower Newstart Allowance and are required to seek work. The PCW sought the views and experiences of women affected by this new scheme.

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Who we talked with

Discussions were held with Chinese-speaking women, rural women in Hay, women living in the Macarthur region of southern Sydney, Arab-speaking mothers, and women living in Auburn. A survey was also distributed across the State to capture additional perspectives.



How women feel (1)

Many women want to work but find this conflicts with being able to continue their family responsibilities. They felt strongly that Welfare to Work was a form of discrimination against women based on income.

“Welfare to Work punishes poor women and our children.”

“Women not on welfare can choose to stay home with their children.”




How women feel (2)

“The scheme ... simply adds pressure to an already pressured life trying to bring up my three kids on my own with no support or family nearby.”

“There are no provisions for mothers to have school holiday breaks.”

Findings



Work issues
Training issues
The Social Security System
Work experience
Volunteering
Public transport
Childcare
Housing
Health and wellbeing

Work issues

- Some women had bad experiences with job agencies; one woman said that she was asked to do cleaning jobs although trained as an accountant.
- Mothers feel a sense of frustration about being forced into work that did not fit their family commitments. They have responsibility for getting children to and from school. It is very difficult to find part-time positions close to their children's school that fit within school hours.
- Many Culturally & Linguistically Diverse (CALD) women find it very hard to get jobs because of their poor English, despite their qualifications.



Training issues

Many TAFE short courses are less than 15 hours a week, making it difficult for participants to comply with the Welfare to Work minimum of 15 hours of study.

Additional TAFE funding has not been allocated for the English Classes and short courses needed to fulfil the program's training expectations. CALD women have had difficulty enrolling in TAFE English classes to meet the 15 hour requirement.

Women are keen to undertake training to meet work obligations but would prefer this to be linked to an actual job offer.

The Social Security System

- Centrelink has not properly informed women about the scheme.
- Women moving off benefits face increased living costs such as pharmaceutical and travel costs.
- Mothers with young children find it difficult to go to the job agency regularly to wait for 2-3 hours.
- Centrelink needs better resourcing both in terms of staff numbers and training as staff are often viewed as inconsiderate to clients.
- The program does not appear to be geared to meeting women's needs effectively and efficiently.



Work Experience

Many women felt they needed work experience rather than training and would like the program to arrange work experience opportunities for job seekers.

Volunteering is very popular as it is seen to provide the basis for work experience.




Volunteering

Women were very positive about the concept of mutual obligation, but felt that the value of volunteering was not recognised; this is a shortcoming of the program.

Many women wanted volunteer work to be considered as work participation.

The scheme has no resources for arranging and logging volunteer contributions so unless women are volunteering in big organisations (such as hospitals) they cannot get credit for their time with Centrelink.



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Public Transport


Timely public transport is vital for women responsible for conveying children to and from school without affecting work commitments.



Childcare

Lack of childcare is a major issue, especially access to before and after hours care for lower High School students. Many women find that what is available is inadequate, expensive, variable in quality and difficult to access.

Due to the high cost of before and after school care, and transport costs, many women feel they receive very little increased income despite taking up paid employment.



Housing

Women in public housing are frightened they may lose the 'family home' if they start earning more than their current income even though they have foregone other income supports such as benefits cards for pharmaceuticals. They can lose their eligibility for rental housing - especially if their older children are living at home while earning an income.



Health and wellbeing

Women report an increase in stress levels because they are so busy and this is having negative effects on family relationships.

There is no consideration of the impacts on already stressed/disadvantaged family life of the added stress of having to do more than one casual job to meet Centrelink requirements.



Four avenues for action

Volunteering - we can improve our society by recognising volunteering in schools and hospitals as fulfilling the mutual obligation of participants in this program.

Centrelink performance - it is clear that the agency is under-resourced and under-trained to deal with this program and its clientele.

Welfare to Work the inequities and coercive aspects must be removed. How can mothers find jobs that provide time for school holiday breaks? How can women re-enter the workforce without some work experience to acclimatise them to this different world?

TAFE training for the workforce is a serious commitment of this program. TAFE courses need to be tailored to the program providing workplace skills linked to the labour market to facilitate re-entry



In conclusion

The women we spoke with want to give back through work or volunteering but they feel that their own worth to society is diminished by Welfare to Work. In their words:

“At present there is no positive recognition given to the role of mothers/carers.”

“Women’s work” of mothering is so undervalued in our society. It is terrible and dehumanising for women and kids in sole parent families.”

